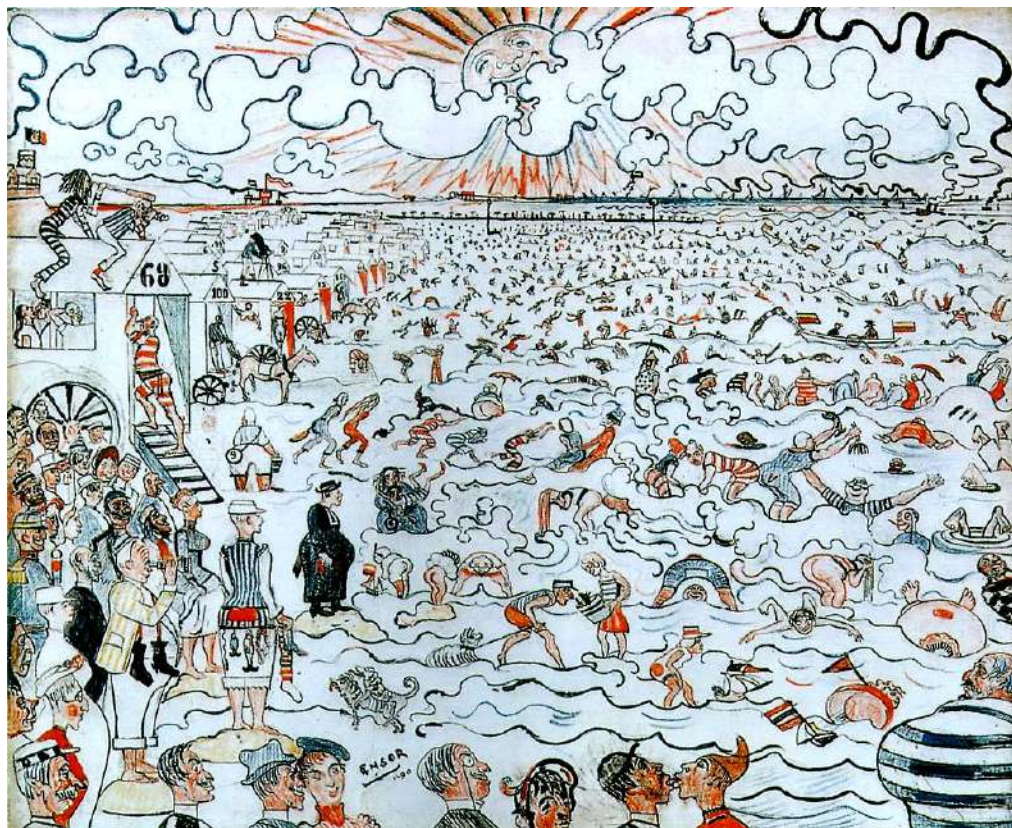




# James Ensor: Art in the Realm of the Social

BY SUSAN M. CANNING

*Art in America*, February 2000

*An exhibition celebrating James Ensor's art prompts the author to examine the populist sympathies and anti-authoritarian passions that impelled these famously idiosyncratic works.*

**The Baths at Ostend, 1890, black pencil, colored pencils and oil on wood, 14 3/4 by 17 7/8 inches. Collection Galerie Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp.**

A little over 100 years after he painted the work for which he is best known, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), the Belgian artist James Ensor has returned triumphantly to Brussels. A retrospective organized by the Royal Museums of Fine Arts to mark the 50th anniversary of the artist's death, this is the last of a series of exhibitions, following those of Rene Magritte and Paul Delvaux, conceived to showcase modern Belgian art. Almost 400 paintings, drawings, prints, photographs and documents are on view, offering the public a rare opportunity to examine Ensor's career and contribution to modernism.

Ensor, who was born in Ostend in 1860 and died there in 1949, started painting when he was 16 and continued well into his 80s. Curated by Gisele Ollinger-Zinque, head of the museum's modern art department, the Brussels exhibition, like most earlier exhibitions on the artist, focuses on the relatively short period between 1880 and 1900. These 20 years were indeed his most productive, with Ensor exploring a wide range of subjects and techniques besides painting notably etching and large-scale drawing. But Ensor continued to paint during the subsequent 50 years of his career, and that period is surveyed via groupings of still lifes, landscapes and portraits presented in the middle of the exhibition and by approximately 20 paintings hung in the last two rooms. Documentary photographs, drawings and letters placed in vitrines on a mezzanine level complete this comprehensive overview.

A retrospective that recognizes Ensor's importance as a major contributor to the discourse of 20th-century modernism is long overdue. But the experience of seeing Ensor's work in the very chambers of the official art he had long been intent on overthrowing seems somehow ironic. From the very outset of his career at age 21, when he first began showing his paintings at both official and alternative exhibitions, Ensor was a dynamic figure in the emerging Belgian avant-garde. He viewed his artistic activity as oppositional, an ongoing critique of what he considered to be an outmoded academic tradition supported by the reactionary cultural policy of a conservative Catholic party which shared the government with the Belgian king, Leopold II.

In the current exhibition, however, Ensor is presented as a classic modernist, who desired only to paint the colors and atmospheric effects of his surroundings. The artist's social subjects, his political critique and scatological imagery, his masks and skeletons, even his penchant for sarcastically commenting on current events or comically roasting his colleagues, all are presented as peripheral and tied more to Belgium's rich tradition of satire and Ensor's own English/Flemish ancestry than to any critical intent. In this context, Ensor's early radicalism is viewed as a temporary and minor aspect of an artist whose mature ambition was to be successful.



***The Pisser*, 1887, etching on copper, 5 ¾ by 4 inches. Collection Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp.**

But to showcase Ensor's career in purely esthetic terms is to ignore the critical awareness that began to be expressed when he dropped out of the Brussels Academy after three years of half-hearted study and published the diaristic account "Three Weeks at the Academy," a witty upending of his professors and the tired traditions of the official art school. Ensor went on to address the contemporary social milieu, first with images of the working class and domestic interiors. These were followed by drawings and paintings that critique contemporary events and issues, and that employ caricature and satire and, in the late works, a rococo theatricality. While this exhibition presents one kind of narrative of Ensor's art and life, in the same show another artist can be discovered: the one who, at the age of 28, declared the political intent of his art by painting *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, a 14-foot-wide canvas in which Christ (a self-portrait of the artist) arrives in the Belgian capital under a large red banner that proclaims "Vive la Sociale" (Long Live the Social).

Ensor was just 17 when he arrived in Brussels, the capital of a Belgian state only 50 years old, to study art. At the Royal Academy, he fell in with a group of students who were drawn to contemporary naturalist and Impressionist theory. There Ensor met the artist, poet, critic and playwright Theo Hannon and, through him, Theo's sister Mariette, a botanist, her husband, Ernest Rousseau, a professor and rector of the Universite Libre, and their son. At the Rousseaus' salons on the rue Vautier, Ensor was introduced to other writers, artists, scientists and social activists, many of whom were interested in exploring the ways that art, literature and science could address the social problems faced by Belgium's working classes.

Like other young artists of his generation, Ensor began his career by submitting his paintings to the official salon and to artist-run exhibition societies such as La Chrysalide and L'Esson. By 1883, however, L'Esson had become associated with the royal patronage of Leopold II and conservative exhibition policies. That year, Ensor and other dissenting members left to form Les XX, a new exhibition society devoted to showing a broad range of modern art by Belgian artists and those invited from other countries. By the time the group held its first salon in 1884, Ensor was already a leader in the city's avant-garde.

**Beyond their ostensible subject, Ensor's images of middle-class interiors establish the artist's own social status and convey his acknowledgment of the validity of the feminine sphere.**



**Right: *Afternoon in Ostend*, 1881, oil on canvas, 42 by 52 inches. Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerp. Photos this page courtesy Musees Royaux de Beaux-Arts de Belgique.**

**Left: *Woman Eating Oysters*, 1882, oil on canvas, 81 by 41 inches. Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.**



As the 40 or so self-portraits on view in Brussels confirm, throughout his life Ensor used self-representation with a wide rhetorical range to explore his own social and artistic being. Beginning with the self-portraits of the early 1880s, he eagerly embraced the role of avant-garde artist, often portraying himself in the requisite black suit and cravat of the bohemian bourgeois, standing before an easel with palette in hand in a dark, lamp-lit studio. These paintings impart an immediacy to Ensor's presence that tends to accentuate his prominent ego and rebellious stance. In *My Portrait* (1884) the artist points his index finger, Albrecht Durer style, at his dramatically lit face, while in another self-portrait from the same time he scowls at the observer from a dark interior as he writes the socialist slogan "Pas fini" (Not finished) in a sketchbook. His 1887 etching titled *The Pisser* depicts Ensor from the back, dressed as a gentleman and wearing a top hat, urinating on a wall scrawled with the words "Ensor Is a Fool." These images offer the viewer Ensor's self-definition: a mocking yet romantic artist whose dress, expression and gesture proclaim his oppositional stance and his confident belief in his own critical subjectivity.

But as his artistic and political consciousness developed, Ensor sought out even more visually radical forms of dissent. Self-portraits of the later 1880s show the artist disguising himself as a fish or a skeleton, or taking on roles such as that of Christ or a woman, as he increasingly turns to masking and travesty, strategies associated with the anti-authoritarian, outsider tradition of the carnivalesque. *Self Portrait with Flowered Hat* (1888) documents Ensor's preliminary experiments with this alternative approach. Reworking an 1882 self-portrait, Ensor adds an elegant mustache and a hat decorated with flowers and a feather, thus linking his own image to Rubens's famed 1638-40 self-portrait in Vienna. Paying homage to another Flemish artist, for whose approach to color and evocative gesture he felt an affinity, Ensor proclaims the legitimacy of his own artistic position while sarcastically replying to contemporary critics who had derisively labeled him the Rubens of Modernity.

Like Rubens, Ensor was fond of painting the sensuous world of appearances, and one delights in the opportunity this exhibition affords to appraise his skill as a painter of color and light. The first rooms in the retrospective stress Ensor's stylistic development, chronologically tracing the early career through portraits of the artist, his family and friends, interiors and working-class scenes, and a large number of landscapes and still lifes. Providing ample evidence of Ensor's deep involvement with current esthetic theory, his willingness to experiment with technique and his interest in depicting nearly everything and everyone that surrounded him, these paintings indicate that Ensor learned more from his interaction with his contemporary milieu than he did in the classroom.

**The Drunkards, 1889, oil on canvas, 45 by 65 inches. Credit Communal de Belgique/Gemeentekrediet van Belgium.**

With titles like *Afternoon in Ostend*, *Russian Music* (originally *Chez Miss*) and *Bourgeois Salon* (all 1881), Ensor's first exhibited works were impressive salon-scale paintings intended to advance his nascent career while demonstrating his mastery of the tenets of Belgian Impressionism. Joining traditional Northern interiors with the color, light and shadow of modern life, these canvases portray not only the social rituals of the domestic sphere but also the subtle interplay of gender and class that could be found in the parlors of contemporary bourgeois Belgian homes.



These interiors are populated mainly by women. In *Bourgeois Salon* two women sit at a table, absorbed in their domestic activities, while in *Russian Music* a woman plays a piano as an elegantly dressed visitor listens attentively. Other paintings show single female figures knitting, sitting, waiting to go out, enjoying a meal or lying in bed in a darkened room. These are the rooms of Ensor's family home at 23 rue Vlaanderendreef in Ostend. Decorated with the tasteful furnishings appropriate to his parents' status as shop owners, the soft color harmonies and sunny interiors promise material comfort and repose.

Ensor's sister and mother were his frequent models. In *Afternoon in Ostend* they sit at a large round table, acting out a tea ceremony. Dressed for the occasion in a bonnet with a yellow ribbon tied in a large bow at her chin, Ensor's sister, Mitche, leans forward as if in anticipation. His mother, Catherine, perhaps a more reluctant participant in her son's scheme, holds a teacup and turns away, her head cast in shadow. The room is the parlor, where guests are received and the private space of the home takes on a more public function. Ensor attends to the sunlight that is absorbed by the red-green color patterns of the rug, reflected by the fixtures on the mantel and captured by Mitche's yellow ribbon and the shiny teapot on the table. This shimmering diffused light encourages the viewer to not only look but also enjoy the possessions and leisurely life of the bourgeoisie.

Compared to *Afternoon in Ostend*, which documents the gendered realm of the domestic interior, *Woman Eating Oysters* (1882), rejected that same year by the Antwerp salon, is more daring in its examination of the intersection of feminine space, pleasure and social propriety. Once again the artist presents a casual scene from modern life. A table draped with a white cloth is the centerpiece of a dazzling display of Ensor's ability to paint reflective surfaces and the color-saturated ambiance of a light-filled interior. Heavily criticized for its loose execution and "poorly drawn" composition when exhibited at the 1886 Salon of Les XX, *Woman Eating Oysters* continued to be a controversial painting even after Ensor had become an internationally acclaimed artist. More than likely this critical disapproval was abetted by the suggestive and unusual nature of the subject: a woman alone, enjoying a meal of oysters. In Ensor's time, such a bold representation of female appetite and self-indulgence was seldom seen.

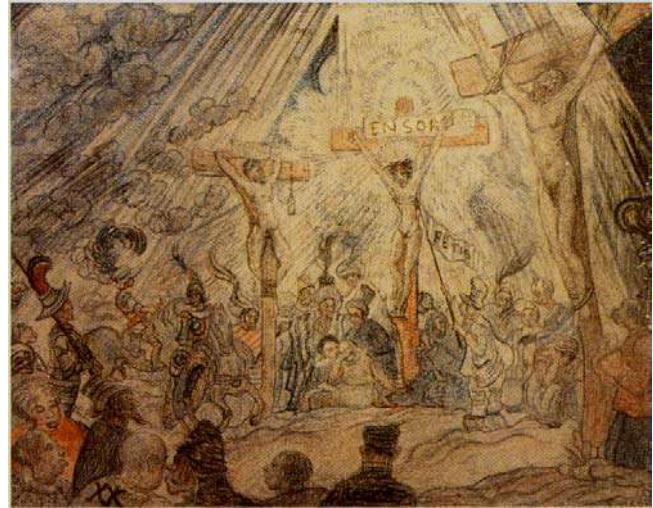
By exhibiting paintings like *Afternoon in Ostend* and *Woman Eating Oysters* in public salons, Ensor was underlining the significance of both his personal experience and such private spaces in general. Beyond their ostensible subject, these images of middle-class interiors establish the artist's own social status and convey his acknowledgment of the validity of the feminine

sphere. But instead of using these scenes to launch a discussion of the artist's representation of women, the Brussels exhibition, in its wall texts and catalogue, reprises the familiar interpretation of Ensor as a lifelong misogynist who was alienated from his female-dominated environment.

Although he was educated in the same Victorian notions of gender relations as his male artistic contemporaries, Ensor does not seem to have shared their interest in representing nudes, of which he painted very few, or in showing women in passive or supportive roles. Instead, like his contemporaries Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, Ensor empathetically recorded a female-dominated realm in these early works. Moreover, as this exhibition documents, throughout his life Ensor painted sympathetic portraits of the women who sustained him, including relatives, Mariette Rousseau, his close friend Augustfi Boogaerts, and poet and art critic Emma Lambotte. These portraits counter notions of the artist's misogyny and instead indicate Ensor's compassionate interest in the experiences of women.



**Ensor associated a redemptive, revolutionary role with both Christ and the artist, a conviction he shared with Belgium's Socialists and with many other artists, such as van Gogh, Gauguin and Redon.**



*Below: Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889, 1888, oil on canvas, 99 by 169 inches. J. Paul Getty Museum. Los Angeles.*



In other works, Ensor moved beyond the confines of his immediate social milieu to explore working-class themes. But compared to his domestic views, several large studies of workers posed in his studio often seem awkward and the subjects ill at ease, reflecting perhaps both the sitters' discomfort and the distance imposed by Ensor's own middle-class upbringing. Yet both the generous size of those drawings and the large-format easel paintings that he showed at Les XX with titles such as *The Lamp Lighter* (1880), *The Poachers* (1882) and *The Drunkards* (1883) record Ensor's growing social engagement and his decision to concentrate more specifically on proletarian subjects in the mid-1880s.

Ensor's interest in working-class themes reflected his direct contacts with socialist and anarchist theory. At the Rousseau home, he had met activists associated with the newly founded Belgian Socialist movement, including Edward Anseele, Edmond Picard, Camille Lemonnier and Emile Verhaeren, and possibly the French geographer and anarchist Elisee Reclus. Verhaeren, who, along with Picard, played an instrumental role in developing a cultural platform for the Belgian Workers Party, also contributed literary and artistic criticism to *L'Art Moderne*, a journal closely tied to Les XX. Picard in particular believed that artists should play an important role in social transformation, raising social consciousness by their choice of contemporary subject matter and leading other like-minded artists to form a new, more harmonious social state. Under the influence of Verhaeren and Picard, *L'Art Moderne* published articles on social art and extracts from socialist and anarchist writings, including Prince Kropotkin's *Word of a Revolutionary*. During their 10 salons, Les XX openly associated themselves with anarcho-socialism, hanging red flags outside their salon and even printing their 1888 catalogue with red-orange ink as a sign of their rebellious and non-conventional position.<sup>2</sup>

These contacts educated Ensor in socialist theory and the strategies of anarchist action, though he never joined any socialist organizations. Compared to socialist collectivity, anarchist theory offered Ensor the model of the free individual as the agent of social changes. Pending the achievement of an ideal order, each individual must struggle against all forms of authority by means of "propaganda by the deed."<sup>3</sup> Ensor manifested these beliefs in his art, creating, in a sense, anarchist "bombs" intended to disrupt the status quo and to confront and antagonize his contemporaries.



*The Strike, 1888, pencil and colored pencils on paper pasted onto cardboard, 13~ by 26~ inches. Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten.*

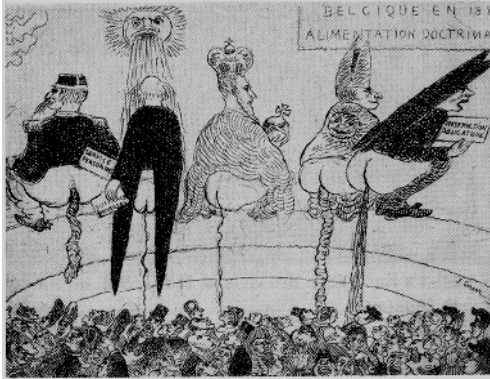
**Ensor manifested radical political beliefs in his art, creating, in a sense, anarchist "bombs" intended to disrupt the status quo and to confront and antagonize his contemporaries.**

By 1885, Ensor had begun to search for fresh ways to visually embody this growing social consciousness. He undertook a series of large-scale drawings that use religious allegory to illuminate social issues. Collectively titled "The aureoles of Christ or the sensitivity of light," these drawings were first exhibited at the fourth salon of Les XX in 1887. Reunited for the Brussels exhibition in a semicircular room, they were shown along with an ill-advised light box that reproduced in smaller, inadequate scale and poor color *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (which was not lent by the Getty Museum), of which several of the drawings in the series were forerunners.

Startling in their size and complexity, "The aureoles of Christ" link Christ's public life, death and resurrection to current social concerns. One of the earliest drawings in this series, *Alive and radiant: The Entry into Jerusalem* (1885), envisions Christ's arrival in the midst of a large and rowdy street parade. Banners, placards and signs that blend biblical narratives with references to contemporary commercial enterprises, colloquial expressions and even allusions to Les XX and Belgian Impressionism swirl around Christ, who is seen on a donkey in the middle ground. In the foreground, a vast crowd composed mainly of the proletariat marches in front of a military band led by a drum major whose face is recognizable as that of the French positivist Emile Littré. At the top, banners combine revolutionary and socialist slogans with greetings for Jesus, King of the Jews. With its architectural frame and broad boulevard, and its reference to mass demonstrations (which had been occurring with more frequency in Belgium

as coal and textile workers agitated for safer working conditions, higher pay and shorter hours), Christ's triumphal entry happens amid a cacophony of commercial, political and artistic discourses in an urban center not unlike Brussels of that day.

When he exhibited *Alive and radiant: The Entry into Jerusalem* at Les XX, Ensor joined a contemporary debate on the relevance of religion in a modern secular society. In this predominantly Catholic country, religion was central to daily life and to politics, especially after the Catholic party came to power in 1884. At the same time, the question of Christ's divinity and social mission was heatedly argued by social reformers like Littre, who had advanced David Strauss's views of Christ's message of social collectivity by translating the German author's *The Life of Jesus* into French. By joining Littre's image with Christ and a workers' demonstration, Ensor accented the social currency of Christ's ministry. The distinctly personal manner of this and other drawings in the series announced the artist's new strategy for social critique, a strategy of freely associating realistic detail and historical and topical references with personal invention.



**Right: The Dangerous Cooks, 1896, oil on wood, 15 by 18 inches. Private collection. Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten.**

**Left: Doctrinaire Nourishment, 1889, etching on copper (second plate), 6% by 9% inches. Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.**



It is no surprise that Ensor first realized the critical potential of his imagination in his drawings, where he often combined realistic depiction with subjective fantasy. Ensor was, in fact, almost always drawing, whether his subjects were sleeping family members, visiting friends, ordinary objects or illustrations from his favorite books. Existing together on the pages of his sketchbooks, these fragments of observation were the raw material for random connections and chance associations more surreal than objective, as *Hippogriffe* (1880-85/86-88) demonstrates. The drawing is at once a realistic depiction of a clock and vases on the family mantel and—via subsequent reworkings and juxtapositions—a freely invented hybrid world in which the real and the contrived are given equal weight. Unfortunately, in the exhibition all of the drawings were presented together, and separated from related paintings, in four rooms with controlled lighting. This arrangement made it difficult to understand the full historical context in which the drawings were made and how the artist used drawing to develop his ideas.



**The Intrigue, 1890, oil on canvas, 35% by 59 inches. Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten.**

Between 1886 and 1889, Ensor's religious subjects addressed socially relevant issues such as the relationship between Church and State and the social mission of Christ. Other recurring themes—the temptations of the physical world, the desire for recognition and success, the quest for redemption, the existence of the spiritual within the material world—indicate Ensor's growing identification with Christ, an association that first appears in *Crucifixion* (1886). In this drawing, Ensor envisions his own calvary as one of torment by a conservative critic and betrayal by members of Les XX, who look

on from the left-hand corner. Although he had been a leader of the group when it formed in 1883, his influence had waned as other artists gained importance and as French art began to dominate the group's salons after 1886. Yet even as this image speaks to Ensor's alienation from this once-supportive milieu, it also points to the redemptive and revolutionary role that Ensor associated with both Christ and the artist, a conviction he shared with Belgium's Socialists and with many other contemporary artists, including van Gogh, Gauguin and Redon.<sup>4</sup>

With *Christ's Entry into Brussels* in 1889, Ensor faced the Belgian public directly. As Christ, he arrives in Brussels engulfed by a parade where travesty and inversion hold sway. The crowd, pressing in from all sides, is no longer the marching proletariat of *The Entry into Jerusalem*, but rather the masked and garish faces of the bourgeoisie, the clergy and the military; in other words, Belgium's ruling classes. Centrally positioned, Ensor/Christ raises his arm in blessing and represents the autonomous spiritual individual in contrast to the conformist masses. Employing distortion and caricature, multiple perspectives, pure unmixed color and textual references, Ensor confronts his contemporaries with masked reflections of their own superficiality and hypocrisy. No longer confined to realistic depiction, Ensor joins visionary fantasy to the marginalized discourses associated with the lower classes, including carnivalesque inversion, scatological and satirical humor, caricature, parody and wordplay.



**Flowered Skulls, 1909, oil on canvas, 24 by 31 inches.**  
Sprengel Museum, Hanover.

The critical and transgressive potential of this type of invention can be seen most dramatically in a series of drawings that Ensor made in 1888 and 1889. In *The Strike*, Ensor combines actual events (a strike by Ostend fishermen to protect their fishing rights and its bloody suppression by the civil guard) with his imagined revenge by the townspeople, who defecate and vomit on the brutal agents of state authority. *Belgium in the nineteenth century* is even more confrontational. Here soldiers viciously attack a crowd of women and children who are demonstrating for socialist causes. Positioned hierarchically above the crowd like a god, King Leopold looks through a lorgnette but seems not to notice the violence below. To encapsulate Leopold's patronizing and patriarchal attitude toward the "lower" classes beneath him, Ensor has the king

ramble, "What do you want? Aren't you satisfied? A little patience. No violence. I'm sure I can see something, but I do not know wherefore. I cannot make it out very well. ..."

*Doctrinaire Nourishment*, the most notorious of the satirical works from this period, illustrates how Ensor used the very process of etching (which he first took up in 1886 and used extensively throughout the remainder of 1880s and the '90s) to advance his radical sentiments. The artist capitalizes on the corrosive etching process in each successive state until, embellished with watercolor and gouache, the finished print embodies the scatological essence of its message. No one who saw this etching, and the artist's other pungent drawings, at Les XX's 1891 salon could miss the transgressive nature of the image, which depicts representatives of Belgium's ruling order (the Liberal party, the Catholic party and King Leopold II), their buttocks exposed, defecating on an eager and hungry crowd as the sun, a symbol of the natural order of things, vomits.<sup>6</sup>

These images exemplify the fiercely oppositional strategy that now characterized Ensor's social and political critique. Unencumbered by stylistic restraint, the paintings, prints and drawings present a visionary social realm, freed from the conventions of naturalist description.



**Flowers and Masks, ca. 1928, oil on canvas, 21 by 26 inches.** Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Ensor applied this strategy to a broad range of satires and critiques, abandoning the sweeping social spectacle of *Christ's Entry into Brussels* in 1889 for more specific targets. Much of his attention was given to topical subjects and the derision of middle-class values. The paintings mocked the judicial system (*The Good Judges*, 1891), medicine (*The Bad Doctors*, 1892), the military (*Ensor and General Leman Discussing Painting*, 1890; *Music in the Rue Flandre*, 1891) and the art world. In *The Dangerous Cooks* (1896), Edmond Picard and Octave Maus (secretary of Les XX and at the time of this painting the chief organizer of the group that succeeded it, La Libre Esthetique) cook up a meal of the heads of Ensor's former colleagues for a party of critics who sit at a table in the next room. In the center, Maus holds a platter containing a herring surmounted with Ensor's head and labeled "Art Ensor." Turning to verbal play—when spoken, the label sounds like "hareng saur" or pickled herring, a fish Ensor often used as a disguised self-portrait—Ensor asserts his own central importance in the art world of Brussels. At the same time, in order to comment on his changed relationship with his contemporaries, friend and foe alike, he uses

absurd juxtapositions of animal and human forms and portrays the repulsive behavior of the writers and critics who vomit up this creative stew.<sup>7</sup>

*The Intrigue* (1890) adopts the masks, featured so dramatically in *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* and soon to become a familiar motif in Ensor's work, in a grotesque inversion of the earlier domestic interiors. A garishly dressed middle-class couple promenades on a shallow stage-like space that presses forward toward the viewer. Flatly painted in strong, bright colors and theatrically lit from below, the couple's puppet-like bodies and masked faces seem emptied of substance, the deceit of their grins and affected poses mimicked by the propped-up masks that surround them. Transformed into a still life which makes visible the artifice of its arrangement, *The Intrigue* becomes a mirror that reflects the vanity of the audience's own vacuous pretension.

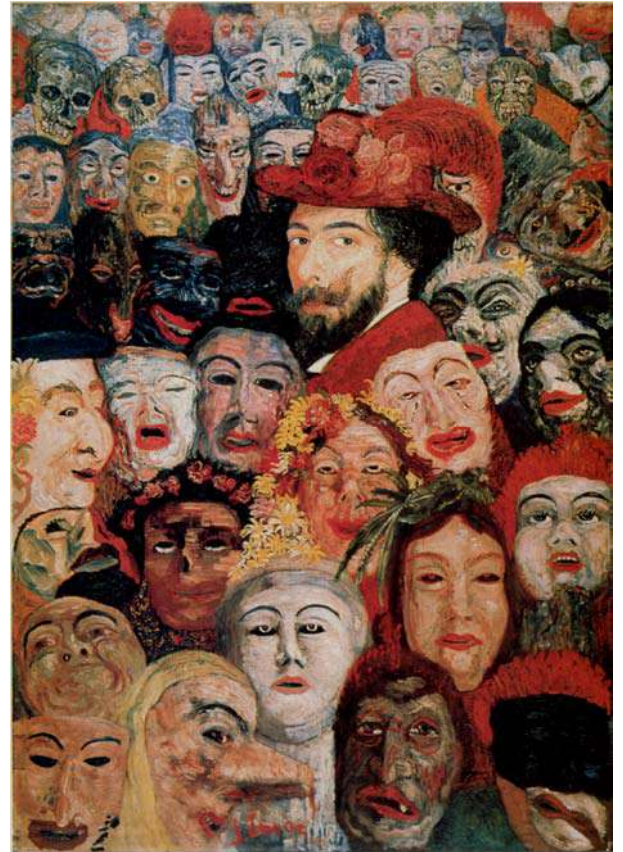
**Ensor with Masks, 1899, oil on canvas, 46 by 31 inches. Menard Art Museum, Aichi. Photo courtesy Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten.**

Quite different in tone and execution is *The Baths at Ostend* (1890), which applies a wide-angle lens to the crowds who flocked each summer to the beaches near Ensor's home. Although the people he lampoons are the very ones who supported his family's souvenir shop, Ensor represents them as a teeming mass of bug-like bodies, all limbs, swollen bellies and orifices, performing a vast array of hedonistic and often obscene acts as gawking rows of more modestly attired bourgeois look on. He draws on the shifts in scale found in contemporary posters promoting tourism in Ostend and on prints that satirized swimsuit fashion and tourism.<sup>8</sup> The expansive space and high horizon in this work (and several others produced between 1889 and 1892) joins upon a whimsical line to create a sweeping panorama that grows more humorous with close inspection. Parodying more decorous depictions of contemporary leisure, Ensor fills the pictorial space with all manner of undress, ribald play, farting and barely concealed sexual contact, immersing the observer in a wayward and sexualized space.

Such rude, scatological and theatrical elements are associated with the itinerant entertainers of popular culture and position Ensor as the outsider or fool who makes visible the folly and corruption of the powerful.<sup>11</sup> But it is in his own willingness to assume other personas, to act out his critique in travesty, that Ensor's art becomes more subtly insubordinate. In *The Call of the Siren* (1893), Ensor mimics the cartoons found in the popular press that show modest young ladies emerging from their changing cabins to take a dip in the ocean. But here it is Ensor who assumes the female role, modestly covering his body while his female friend, Augusta Boogaerts (the "siren" of the title), beckons him to come into the water. Having earlier highlighted the feminine sphere in his domestic interiors, Ensor now assumes a mock feminine identity, exposed and vulnerable on the steps of his cabin. Cross-dressing in *Mr. and Mrs. Rousseau talking to Sophie Yoteko* (1892), Ensor/Yoteko and Mariette Rousseau present flowers to a smiling Ernest Rousseau in a subversive burlesque of patriarchal order.<sup>9</sup>

Whether as woman, Christ, fool or avant-garde artist, Ensor adopted the perspective of the outsider in order to critique the priorities and values of society. But with international recognition and acclaim, the oppositional intensity of his work diminished, and Ensor's satire grew broader, often displaying a rococo sensuality or the air of farce. During the last five decades of his life, he continued to paint portraits of his friends and splendid still lifes, while also reworking the subjects of his most activist period into self-conscious parodies. He authored numerous essays and speeches, and created the libretto, sets and costumes for an ironically humorous ballet, *La Gamme d'amour*, that was performed in 1920. Ever attentive to his career, the artist carefully oversaw the exhibition and sale of his work, and started and supported artist-run exhibitions.

In 1899, when he was nearly 40, Ensor painted a self-portrait in which he is surrounded by masks, grotesque figures and skeletons (*Ensor with Masks*). Reprising the earlier portrait that linked him with Rubens's artistic legacy, he looks out from the crowd while proclaiming his own part in the burlesque. Once again, the artist announces his marginality, though he was, by then, successfully exhibiting and selling his art. Over the next 50 years, Ensor continued to play the role of the outsider and isolated visionary, misunderstood or overlooked by his contemporaries, even as he was awarded the Order of Leopold, made a baron and granted honorary degrees, and even as more and more artists and dignitaries visited his home, where he would receive them at his harmonium, with the manifesto of his social agenda, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, hanging on the wall behind him.



1. Many discussions of Ensor's misogyny construe his representations of his sleeping mother, aunt or grandmother as predatory, and point to the fact that he never married and to unconfirmed reports after his death that he was either a virgin or a poor lover. One of the catalogue authors, for example, describes the "claustrophobic" atmosphere of Ensor's family home, the "vampirish somnolence" of his female relatives, and an artist who was "held captive by a feminine domesticity that he cultivated into a form of misogyny." (See Michel Draguet, "The looks of 'PietJe de Dood,'" in *Ensor*, Wommelgem, Blonde, 1999, p. 46.) In the exhibition, a wall text, misleadingly positioned next to one of Ensor's portraits of his lifelong friend Boogaerts, quotes a poem he wrote toward the end of his life in which he compared women to manure. While Ensor did make this analogy, the circumstances in which it was written are unclear. Most certainly he was not referring to Boogaerts, as his many admiring portraits attest. His use of scatological referents, even in relation to women, may relate to his anarchistic tendencies. For more on this subject, see my "The Ordure of Anarchy: Scatological Signs of Self and Society in the Art of James Ensor," *Art Journal*, fall 1993, pp.47-53.
2. For more on Picard, Verhaeren and the cultural agenda of the Parti Ouvrier Belge (P.O.B.), see Paul Aron, *Les Ecrivains belges et le socialisme*, Brussels, Labor, 1985. Jane Block discusses Les XX's anarchist-socialist connections in *Les XX and Belgian Avant-Gardism*, 1868-1894, Ann Arbor, UMI, 1984, pp. 37-39. See also my "'Soyons Nous': Les XX and the Cultural Discourse of the Belgian Avant-Garde" in *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, Stephen H. Goddard, ed., Lawrence, Kans., Spencer Museum of Art, 1992, pp. 28-54.
3. Elisee Reclus, *Correspondance: 3 Septembre 1889- Juillet 1905*, ed. Paul Reclus, Paris, Alfred Costes, 1925, p. 122.
4. When the P.O.B. inaugurated its Maison du Peuple in Brussels in 1899, it acknowledged the association between Christ and Socialism by hanging Antoine Wiertz's painting of Christ preaching, *Le Jusle*, in the main reception room. For more on the ties between Belgian radicalism and evangelical Christianity, see Aron, *Les Ecrivains belges*, pp. 41-42.
5. In addition to the banner with the words "Long Live the Social," the military band carries a placard that reads, "Doctrinal Flourishes Always Successful." At the far right, another sign declares "Long Live Jesus King of Brussels."
6. In 1925, when Ensor was made a *commandeur* in the Order of Leopold, he apparently tried to buy back copies of this print. Evidently he was concerned that, nearly 40 years after it was made, this image might still offend.
7. The critics seated from left to right include Edouard Fetis; Eugene Demolder, who published the first monograph on Ensor in 1892; Camille Lemonnier; Max Sulzberger; and Emile Verhaeren, who in 1908 also wrote a monograph on Ensor. Ensor's old friend Hannon, who has a severe case of diarrhea, runs up the stairs at the left. The artists on the shelf are the painters Georges Lemmen and Theo van Rysselberghe, while Maus's cousin Anna Boch, with the body of a chicken, hangs on the wall. Guillaume Vogel's head is being fried by Picard, while the sculptor Charles Van der Stappen becomes a piglet and the painter Henry de Groux a lobster.
8. On Ensor's use of popular prints and other imagery in this work, see Patrick Florizoone, *De Baden van Oostende*, Brussels, Pandora, 1996. Testifying to the painting's appeal, details from *The Baths at Ostend* appear on one side of Belgium's new 100-franc note. A self-portrait by Ensor and masks are printed on the other.
9. "Sophie Yoteko" seems to be an invented name. Given Ensor's propensity for puns and verbal play, there may be an as-yet-undeciphered significance to the words.

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