

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: 'ME AND MY CIRCLE': JAMES ENSOR IN  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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At the time of his death in 1949, Belgian artist James Ensor (b. 1860) had already garnered decades of acclaim for his bold, expressionistic use of color and outlandish scenes that frequently featured his favored motifs of masks and skeletons. Such images, produced largely in the 1880s and 1890s, are to this day considered Ensor's most 'creative.' Although he generated a remarkably large and diverse body of work between the turn of the century and the end of his life, these later images are left largely unconsidered in scholarship on the artist. Here, by approaching Ensor's twentieth-century body of work as an inextricable piece of the artist's entire oeuvre, and by juxtaposing the 'early' and 'late' Ensors, I will examine how the altered artistic path Ensor took in the twentieth century is symptomatic of larger changes occurring in his life.

'ME AND MY CIRCLE': JAMES ENSOR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

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# Table of Contents

Disclaimer.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Illustrations.....	v
Introduction.....	1
‘Me and My Circle’: James Ensor in the Twentieth Century.....	6
Conclusion.....	42
Epilogue.....	47
Bibliography.....	49

## List of Illustrations\*

- Fig. 1** James Ensor's visiting card  
**Fig. 2** Ensor's funeral notice, 1949  
**Fig. 3** *The Assassination*, 1890  
**Fig. 4** *The Bad Doctors*, 1892  
**Fig. 5** *The Frightful Musicians*, 1891  
**Fig. 6** *The Red Apples*, 1883  
**Fig. 7** *Still Life with Duck*, 1880  
**Fig. 8** *Chinoiserie with Fans*, 1880  
**Fig. 9** *Pears, Grapes, and Nuts*, 1889  
**Fig. 10** *Flowers and Vegetables*, 1896  
**Fig. 11** *Chinoiserie*, 1908  
**Fig. 12** *Seashells, Roses and Vases*, 1917-8  
**Fig. 13** *The Banquet of the Starved*, 1915  
**Fig. 14** *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony*, 1887  
**Fig. 15** *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony*, 1909  
**Fig. 16** *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiseries*, 1885 / 1890  
**Fig. 17** *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiseries*, 1910  
**Fig. 18** *Belgium in the Nineteenth Century*, 1889  
**Fig. 19** *Doctrinaire Nourishment*, 1889  
**Fig. 20** *The Good Judges*, 1892  
**Fig. 21** *My Dead Father*, 1888  
**Fig. 22** *My Dead Mother*, 1915  
**Fig. 23** *My Dead Aunt*, 1916  
**Fig. 24** *Ecce Homo or Christ and the Critics*, 1891  
**Fig. 25** *Calvary*, 1886  
**Fig. 26** *The Onrush of the Disciples of Christ*, 1925  
**Fig. 27** *Calvary*, 1940  
**Fig. 28** Ensor playing a flute on his rooftop, c. 1881

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\* All works are by James Ensor, unless otherwise specified.

**Fig. 29** Ensor at his harmonium

**Fig. 30** *Portrait of the Artist*, 1879

**Fig. 31** *Self-Portrait in a Flowered Hat*, 1883 / 1888

**Fig. 32** *My Skeletonized Portrait*, 1888

**Fig. 33** *My Portrait in 1960*, 1888

**Fig. 34** *Me and My Circle*, 1939

**Fig. 35** *Me, My Color, and My Attributes*, 1939

## Introduction

The Belgian artist James Sidney Ensor died on November 19, 1949. He was 89 years old. “He was given a king’s funeral. The whole city [of Ostend], the whole of Belgium, accompanied him to the grave,” wrote Paul Haesaerts, the artist’s friend and biographer.<sup>1</sup> Ensor had presaged his own funereal procession in his visiting card, on which he depicted slender, silhouetted figures bearing a coffin emblazoned with his name and the title “*Artiste-Peintre*.” (fig. 1) A single mourner, head hung, brings up the rear of this melancholic procession; in front, waiting for it to pass, a man bows, and tips his hat in respect. In reality, the painter’s coffin was followed not by a single man but “an absurd tide of humanity,” reminiscent of the motley crowd of Ensor’s most famous work, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels*. “Ambassadors in their cocked hats,” “church dignitaries in red and lace,” “mustachioed generals in showy uniforms” mingled alongside schoolboys and brown-clad local fishermen at the funeral. On the occasion of his death, Ensor’s hometown of Ostend published an announcement, broadcasting to the public the demise of one of their town’s most well-known native sons: “Baron James Ensor . . . [O]ur illustrious fellow citizen . . . brought a great burst of artistic renown to the city of Ostend; his name will shine with an eternal light.”<sup>2</sup> (fig. 2)

Such fanfare and tribute could hardly have accompanied the passing of an unpopular man. Toiling ceaselessly through early years of abuse by critics and colleagues alike, Ensor, by the time of his death, had garnered international acclaim for his

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes regarding Ensor’s funeral from Paul Haesaerts, *James Ensor* (New York: Abrams, 1959), 230.

<sup>2</sup> “Baron James ENSOR . . . Notre illustré concitoyen . . . a donné un grand éclat à la renommée artistique de la ville d’Ostende : son nom brillera d’un lustre éternel.” Translations my own unless otherwise noted. From photograph of Ensor’s death notice in Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein (eds.), *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 317.



expressive use of color and preference for unusual and grotesque subject matter that frequently crossed the line into the genuinely bizarre. The recognition that Ensor could be – and ultimately was – one of the greatest visionary artists of his generation came gradually, and not truly until the early years of the twentieth century. Still, many fruitful years lay ahead of him, and as Ensor’s body of work continued to grow, so too did his fame.

Despite his prodigious and varied output between the turn of the century and the end of his life (during which time he produced approximately 840 paintings, 4,000 drawings, and over 100 etchings), the paintings, drawings, and prints Ensor produced in the last two decades of the nineteenth century are to this day considered his most ‘creative.’ The work that emerged during the latter half – really, the latter two-thirds – of his career is almost constantly given short shrift, both in scholarly writing and in exhibitions of the artist’s work. This period is explained away as a time in which Ensor’s genius floundered, never again to regain its former potent expressiveness.

The negative appraisals of Ensor’s later work began while the artist was still alive. The prominent Symbolist poet Emile Verhaeren, one of Ensor’s acquaintances and the author of a 1908 monograph on the artist, “relegated him after 1900 to a mere self-copyist.”<sup>3</sup> Paul Haesaerts and his brother, Luc, wrote in 1931 that Ensor “entered the scene shortly after 1880; he retired shortly after 1890.”<sup>4</sup> Firmin Cuypers later stated that after World War I, “Ensor became an infinitely different artist from that we have been interested in until now. His great period was finished. He could not begin again. So, he

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Brown, *James Ensor, 1860-1949: Theatre of Masks* (London: Barbican Gallery, 1997), 14. See also Emile Verhaeren, *Sur James Ensor* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> “Ensor entre en scène peu avant 1880, il se retire peu après 1890.” Luc and Paul Haesaerts, *Flandre* (Paris, 1931), 209, in Francine-Claire Legrand, *Ensor: La mort et la charme – un autre Ensor* (Antwerp: Bibliothèque des amis du fonds Mercator, 1993), 10.

changed his world.”<sup>5</sup> Retrospectives held during the last forty years of Ensor’s life featured many of his later works, though critics and reviewers of these exhibitions generally dedicated their attention to his paintings from the previous century.<sup>6</sup>

Recent Ensor retrospectives have fallen short with respect to the artist’s twentieth-century work, presenting few to no examples of his paintings or works on paper from the latter half of his life. In 1999, the Ensor exhibition held by the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique highlighted more twentieth-century works than any previous exhibition. Later, in 2005, the retrospective put on by the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt proved again significant in this regard, continuing the work of the Brussels exhibition in addition to including a number of drawings and Ensor’s two greatest lithographic albums from the twentieth century, *Scenes of Christ’s Life* and *La Gamme d’Amour*. Still, the Brussels and Frankfurt exhibitions are the exception rather than the rule when considering Ensor’s exhibition history. Despite their best efforts, such attempts at comprehensiveness do not necessarily do the twentieth century works justice with respect to their earlier counterparts. Although a number of these intriguing later works – paintings, prints, and drawings – are present in such shows, the work produced in Ensor’s so-called “creative years” noticeably dominates these exhibitions; in the case of the 1999 Brussels retrospective, little attention is paid in the accompanying catalogue to Ensor’s later oeuvre. Unfortunately, in even more recent exhibitions, the selection has tended

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<sup>5</sup> “Après la guerre de 1914-1918, Ensor devient un artiste infiniment différent de celui auquel nous nous sommes intéressés jusqu’ici. Sa grande époque est achevée. Il ne peut pas recommencer. Alors il change de <milieu>.” Firmin Cuypers, *Aspects et propos de James Ensor* (Bruges: A. G. Stainforth, 1946), in Legrand, 10. Translation my own.

<sup>6</sup> Despite Ensor’s growing popularity in the twentieth century, his exhibitions were still quite limited geographically. Belgium, France, and Germany played host to nearly every show; the major retrospectives were held in Brussels (Galerie Georges Giroux, 1921 and 1945; Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1929), Paris (Jeu de Paume, 1932; Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1939), and Ostend (Kursaal, 1931), as well as London (National Gallery, 1946).

back towards Ensor's earlier imagery almost exclusively. In the latest major retrospective of his work, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2009 (the first exhibition of the artist's work in the United States in several decades), only nine of the 123 works on view post-dated the year 1900.

Given the unflattering, though largely unexplained, assessments of Ensor in the twentieth century, the dearth of scholarly consideration dedicated to his work during this period is hardly surprising. In 1993, Francine-Claire Legrand published the first and only study dedicated to Ensor's output in the twentieth century. Since the publication of this monograph, no further project has been undertaken to delve into this long and fruitful period in Ensor's artistic life. Legrand provides an excellent foundation; however, a single study can hardly compensate for a lack of many decades' worth of scholarly examination. In its attempts at breadth, Legrand's book necessarily sacrifices some depth. Little discussion is dedicated to clarifying how Ensor's twentieth-century work connects with the imagery he created earlier in his career. Events and changes in Ensor's own life, as well as those that were occurring within a rapidly evolving Belgian nation, decisively shaped his vision and the artist he was to become. Additionally, as is only natural, Ensor's tastes and interests evolved throughout the course of his life, leading him both to new artistic solutions, and to experiments in creative realms outside the visual arts.

The decision to separate Ensor's work using the year 1900 as a line of demarcation is not an arbitrary one. Thematically, and even stylistically, the division is difficult, for there are exceptions at every moment in his oeuvre: the smooth, pastel palette he used with such frequency in the twentieth century shows signs of appearing in the 1890s; the motifs he favored heavily beginning late in the 1880s – masks, skeletons –

remain visible until the end of his career. More significantly, the year 1900 serves consistently in Ensor scholarship as the marker of his perceived decline. This holds true not only in recent studies, but also in accounts from Ensor's own lifetime.<sup>7</sup> In the future, successful arguments may be made for Ensor's work post-1903, when the artist was knighted, or post-1915, when his production of paintings slows markedly as he faces family turmoil and continues to concentrate efforts on his ballet, *La Gamme d'Amour*. I have chosen the year 1900 here not only for ease of discussion, but also for its status as an established vantage point from which to examine the 'early' and 'late' Ensors.

I am not, however, arguing for a qualitative distinction between the two. The artist's twentieth-century work is not weaker or worse than that of the prior century, merely different. A lack of significant scholarly consideration of Ensor's later work leaves a gap in our understanding of the artist; the altered artistic path Ensor took in the twentieth century is symptomatic of larger changes occurring in his life. This is not to say that in the latter half of his life, Ensor abandoned his previously favored motifs. Quite the opposite – these two bodies of work, though distinct, relate closely to one another. Here, by approaching Ensor's twentieth-century body of work as an inextricable piece of the artist's entire oeuvre, and by juxtaposing the 'early' and 'late' Ensors, I hope that a deeper view of the artist will emerge. Ultimately, Ensor's pluralism of styles sets him apart from his contemporaries, and indeed, from many who would succeed him.

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 3, and the statement by Emile Verhaeren, as referenced by Carol Brown.

## **‘Me and My Circle’: James Ensor in the Twentieth Century**

James Ensor was born in Ostend in 1860 to James Frederic Ensor, an English engineer, and Maria Catherine Haegheman, an Ostend native. Ensor’s mother and her family ran a small souvenir shop whose merchandise – Carnival masks, chinoiseries, found objects, and other curiosities – would long inspire Ensor’s work. Ensor embarked on his career as an artist early, when in the late 1870s he enrolled in painting classes at the Ostend Academy. He had already received some artistic instruction in years prior under local Ostend artists Edouard Dubar and Michel van Cuyck, from whom he took lessons while still a student at Ostend’s Collège Notre-Dame. Under their tutelage, he learned the techniques of naturalism, painting landscapes and local scenes. Ensor remained at the Ostend Academy for a year, before moving on to the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels in 1877. There, he became acquainted with several other students and members of their own social milieu, including Ensor’s future colleagues in Les XX, Fernand Khnopff and Willy Finch, as well as Théo Hannon, Hannon’s younger sister, Mariette, and her husband, Ernest Rousseau. The Rousseaus in particular would prove great and long-lasting friends of Ensor, welcoming him into the philosophical discussions they held at their home and introducing him to members of their intellectual circle.

Despite the connections he formed in Brussels, Ensor was not inspired artistically at the Royal Academy. He derided the well-worn academic methods taught there, and grew increasingly dissatisfied as a student. His vision did not live up to the expectations of his professors, and he detailed fictional accounts of their distaste for his work in a brief written piece, “Three Weeks at the Academy.” One professor, perhaps presciently, notes

that Ensor's painting is nothing, save color – “but that is not sufficient.”<sup>8</sup> Ensor eventually abandoned his studies in Brussels, and, in 1880, moved home to Ostend, taking up once again in his attic-studio in the family residence at 23 Rue de Flandre.

Even at the height of his vigorous creativity, Ensor changed styles “like he changed his shirt.”<sup>9</sup> His catalogue of paintings from the 1880s and 1890s is so diverse as to read potentially as the work of several different artists. Still lifes, Flemish landscapes, and interior scenes featuring friends and family members dominated Ensor's oeuvre from his late teens and early twenties.<sup>10</sup> These pictures are characterized by a distinctly loose, impressionistic handling of paint and a dark, moody palette, punctuated by occasional flashes of brightness. Visually and in subject matter, this very early body of work is the most disparate from the garish colors and grotesque imagery that today denote the “quintessential” Ensor. The mask, that crucial signifier of sinister humor in Ensor's art, made its appearance in an 1883 canvas titled *Scandalized Masks*, that, while bizarre, is grounded in reality. The painting apparently depicts Ensor's mother walking in on his alcoholic father; the two just happen to be disguised by misshapen Carnival masks from the Ensor family shop. The skeleton, another favored motif of the artist's, first appeared two years later, in 1885. These two subjects, though rarely utilized by Ensor in the 1880s, permeate his work from 1889 onward.

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<sup>8</sup> “Il y a de couleur, mais ça ne suffit pas...” James Ensor, “Trois Semaines à l'Academie,” in James Ensor, *Mes Ecrits, ou, les Suffisances Matamoresques* (Brussels: Labor, 1999), 50-53.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Schmitz, “‘You Words without Rhyme and Reason, I Love You, I Love You’: The Deregulated Language of James Ensor,” in *James Ensor*, edited by Hollein and Pfeiffer (2005), 155.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, like their twentieth-century counterparts, these early images are also frequently given short shrift in Ensor studies, marking only the initial points along his road to becoming a visionary artist, and not necessarily as a compelling set of images warranting separate study.

Not until the late 1880s did Ensor truly begin to experiment, both stylistically and with a broad, oftentimes disquieting array of subject matter. Ensor's greatest artistic achievement of this decade, and as it would turn out, of his entire life, is the monumental *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), a visual (and visually dissonant) opus. From this moment forward, Ensor embraced the strange and fantastic images to which his vision led him. His paintings are no longer drab and overwhelmed by browns, blacks, and dark greens and blues, as are so many of his images from the early 1880s; he has finally, truly, embraced color. His early preference for thick, hazy impasto is still visible occasionally during this period, though it has mostly given way to a smoother application of paint. Forms tend to be crisper and more clearly drawn than their earlier counterparts. Thematically, selections from his oeuvre in the 1890s run the gamut from the relatively mundane to the frankly horrifying. He continues to produce interiors, portraits, and still lifes. Seemingly commonplace, the scenes are enlivened by the artist's injection of traditionally 'Ensorian' oddities – a trio of skeletons spying on two lonely fishwives sitting in a bare room, a mask peering animatedly into human goings-on. But there are also those scenes so remarkably out-of-the-ordinary they can exist only within the human imagination. *The Assassination* (1890; fig. 3), for one, portrays several strangely masked and costumed figures holding a man to a table as others cut his organs out of his body.<sup>11</sup> *The Bad Doctors* (1892; fig. 4) depicts negligent, murderous physicians – one of whom is

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<sup>11</sup> Ensor created an etching exploring this theme in 1888. He may have possibly been inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's 1845 story *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, in which a hypnotist places a man on the brink of death into a hypnotic state. (Harper Montgomery and Sarah Suzuki, Museum of Modern Art, New York) Ensor would have had access to Poe's stories thanks to Charles Baudelaire's 1847 translation of the American's writings. Ensor wrote to André de Ridder in 1928 that he "dreamed above all before Poe." He also painted a landscape titled *The Domain of Arnheim*, after the author's short story, in 1890; Emile Verhaeren purchased it in 1892 (see Robert Hoozee, "James Ensor's Vision of Nature," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. [2009], 110.)

draped in the entrails of his shrieking patient – who scramble and fight with saws and syringes as Death looks on, amused.<sup>12</sup> A group of filthy, half-plucked animals forms an unlikely band in a panel titled *The Frightful Musicians* (1891; fig. 5). The characters that inhabit Ensor's bizarre images from the 1890s are monstrous, whether in their disconcertingly grotesque appearance or in the nonchalantly sadistic behaviors in which they engage.

After leaving the Royal Academy, Ensor began submitting his work to be shown at the exhibitions of a number of artistic organizations in Brussels. In this endeavor, he met with varying degrees of success. Several of his dark, earliest works hung in the salons of “L’Essor,” “La Chrysalide,” and “Le Cercle Artistique,” well-known artistic societies that produced exhibitions in Brussels, as well as Antwerp and Ghent. In 1883, Ensor became one of the twenty founding members of “Les XX,” a progressive group committed to advancing the avant-garde in Belgian and European art. Artists from other countries were frequently invited to show at *Vingtiste* salons; Whistler, Gauguin, Rodin, Redon, and Seurat – among many others – participated.<sup>13</sup> Ensor's own contributions to his group's exhibitions often met with critical derision – if they had not already been rejected outright. Despite billing itself as revolutionary, “Les XX” did not welcome Ensor's shocking and macabre imagery.<sup>14</sup> “Disparagement beats down on me like hail. My umbrella is always to hand; I'm abused, I'm insulted, I exist, I'm mad, I'm simpleminded, I'm nasty, wicked, incapable, ignorant, a ‘creampuff’ gone rotten,” wrote

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<sup>12</sup> This work is thought to be a commentary on the physicians at the medical school and university hospital in Brussels. See Ingrid Pfeiffer (2005).

<sup>13</sup> One of Ensor's grievances with “Les XX” and his colleagues in it stemmed from their inclusion of several of the non-Belgian artists invited to show. He notoriously disliked the work of the Neo-Impressionists.

<sup>14</sup> Ingrid Pfeiffer, “James Ensor Seen as a Whole – An Attempt at a Resumé,” in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 21.



Ensor, looking back several years later.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, such disparagement proved too much for Ensor's deeply self-conscious personality. "Les XX" disbanded in 1893, and a few of its former members channeled their energies into the creation of a new society, "La Libre Esthétique." Ensor was not among them. As the turn of the century approached, he made no further efforts to maintain relationships with his former colleagues or submit work to their salons. He would spend hardly any time now in Brussels, retreating once and for all to Ostend, and his own visionary world.

In the twentieth century, Ensor's imagination flew unfettered. He continued until the end of his life to explore a great diversity of subject matter and motifs, as he had done early in his career. His mind and hand embraced the prosaic, the unfathomable, and everything in between. The range of subjects that had interested him had always been remarkable in its breadth, and this did not change. What did change, and markedly so, was Ensor's technique and palette. Ensor declared his commitment to exploring the world of "pure color" in 1889, years before this idea would consistently manifest itself in his painting.

A development was apparent in my way of working. To achieve rich and varied tones, I had always mixed my colours. Unfortunately, these mixtures sometimes caused discoloration and several paintings subsequently darkened. I thus changed my tack and began to work with pure colors. Logically, I looked for powerful effects – especially masks with their bright colors.<sup>16</sup>

Ensor's color reaches the height of its expression in his paintings in the twentieth century. Though his preferences for certain themes and motifs varies radically during this time, his

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<sup>15</sup> "Discours prononcé au banquet offert à Ensor par *La Flandre Littéraire*," 1920, in *Mes Ecrits, ou les suffisances matamoresques*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> Translation from Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, "Me and my Circle," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (Musée royal des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1999), 18.

lightened palette – heightened with liberal use of white – and soft, apparently effortless application of paint remain constant throughout.

Although most famous for his affinity for bizarre and oftentimes shocking scenes, Ensor maintained throughout his career an avid interest in painting decidedly more traditional subject matter. His still lifes are a vital genre within his oeuvre, comprising more than half of the artist's total drawings and a third of his paintings.<sup>17</sup> Ensor's sources of inspiration for these still lifes frequently came from the novelty items sold in his family's Ostend souvenir shop – Carnival masks, stuffed animals, toys, seashells, porcelain, and other inexpensive curiosities. The objects he preferred appear repeatedly in his compositions. Rather than simply inanimate odds and ends, these items are more akin to characters in an artistic production, interacting with their colleagues in meaningful silence.<sup>18</sup>

Ensor's still lifes prove useful in exemplifying the stylistic differences between the 'early' and 'late' Ensor. He never seemed to tire of the genre, leaving behind for study a rich array of images made at various moments throughout his life. Additionally, unlike much of his more fantastic imagery, whose frequently brash and intentionally outrageous subject matter tends to dizzy the viewer, Ensor's still lifes are, quite literally, more down-to-earth. Flowers, shells, fruits and vegetables, and fish are commonly the focal points. Fans and other chinoiserie gathered from the Ensor family shop also recur with regularity. Masks are occasionally present, but here serve more as tabletop ornaments than menacing personages. Ensor's focus on the natural, rather than the

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<sup>17</sup> Sabine Bown-Taevernier, "Still life as a stylistic exercise," in *Ensor*, exh. cat. (Brussels: Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1999), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ingrid Pfeiffer, "James Ensor Seen as a Whole – An Attempt at a Resumé," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 37.

extraordinary, allows the viewer's concentration to alight on the vibrancy these paintings possess, rather than the pointed messages they contain.

Muted colors and thick impasto typify Ensor's earliest still lifes. He sketches his forms hazily, in the signature impressionistic style that characterizes his work from the early 1880s. Some, such as *The Red Apples* (1883; fig. 6), are distinctly Cézanne-esque. The subjects he chooses are, for the most part, banal; in one typical scene, cabbages, onions, leeks, and a dead bird lie on a wooden table, awaiting preparation (fig. 7). When he does choose comparably out-of-the-ordinary items, he takes up a slightly more vivid palette; the tonality of a painting of chinoiserie and fans is largely porcelain-blue, rather than Ensor's customary browns and grays, and is marked by brilliant flashes of orange-red and white-yellow (fig. 8).

Ensor's still lifes evolved as the 1880s turned into the 1890s, and his artistic vision truly began to take shape. No longer tempered by heavy black paint, he has begun to embrace the light. Fruits are now touched with highlights of white impasto (fig. 9). Blues are vibrant, pinks are used freely, and the backdrop for these arrangements is usually a smooth pastel hue, overlaid thickly with white. The same types of natural objects – fruits, flowers, and vegetables – still mingle with one another in tabletop setting, but Ensor dedicates more attention now to drawing and detailing the nuances of different forms – the petals of a flower, leaves on a head of lettuce, ridges of a tomato (fig. 10).

Ensor scholar Sabine Bown-Taevernier separates the artist's still lifes into four periods, based on the artist's concern for light and form.<sup>19</sup> His works in this genre after

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<sup>19</sup> These categories are, roughly, "light and its impact on objects, 1880-1884"; "light and distortion, 1884-1887"; "matter, form and colour have absorbed the light and are left at the mercy

1896 do not fall into Bown-Taevernier's neatly organized categories, nor do they merit one of their own. According to her assessment, after this year "the inanimate object that Ensor's imagination and skill had brought to life so brilliantly now gradually slipped back into apathy and silence."<sup>20</sup> In fact, Ensor's twentieth-century still lifes are some of the most striking in his oeuvre. His embrace of pure color is now complete, and his painting technique has developed from a once-dense impasto into a softer, more even application of paint. A 1908 image, titled *Chinoiserie* (fig. 11), is nearly an exact complement to Ensor's earlier *Chinoiserie with Fans* of 1880. Ensor reused many of the same ephemeral objects and souvenirs from his family shop over and over again throughout his career, and several of the chinoiseries from his nineteenth-century panel may have found their way into this new composition. Unlike his earlier scene, however, the masks, figurines – even the characters inhabiting the fan and mounted prints – seem to come to life. They are animated from their former existence as merely decorative curiosities. In the still lifes from this period, Ensor frequently seems to be more concerned with the expressions of particular tonalities than with the composition of the items present. *Chinoiserie*, for example, is an arrangement in blue; *Seashells, Roses and Vases* (fig. 12), painted nearly a decade later, is a study of yellows.

The evolution of Ensor's color, technique, and drawing are certainly the most noticeable changes in his art from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. A turn from an early page of his catalogue of paintings to one from only two decades later reveals the work of what could be two wholly different men. A look at the artist's enormous breadth

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of the painter and his imagination, 1887-1889"; and "the acuteness of the look and the acerbic spirit, 1890-1896." Sabine Bown-Taevernier, "Still life as a stylistic exercise," in *Ensor*, exh. cat., 1999, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

of twentieth-century work reveals that it is not only these stylistic changes that set the 'early' Ensor apart from the 'late'. The subjects and motifs Ensor favored in the latter part of his life, though still culled from his rich imagination, are oftentimes astonishingly unlike that of his earlier oeuvre. Scenes dealing with 'softer' subjects – music, ballet – proliferate, alongside an ever-growing number of still-lives and interiors. It was at this time also that Ensor cultivated a deeper interest in the *fête galante* scenes of Jean-Antoine Watteau. Although he had copied several scenes by the Rococo master in his younger days, Ensor in the twentieth century created a number of original paintings inspired by Watteau's *fêtes galantes*.<sup>21</sup> Some of these images, such as *The Garden of Love*, of which Ensor painted numerous variations, call to mind Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera*; others serve as a stage on which Ensor recreates his own *Commedia dell'arte*, featuring the melancholy clown Pierrot.

The presence of such scenes is not to say – as some have attempted to – that Ensor had gone soft in his (relatively) advanced age. Ensor did not altogether stop producing the fantastic imagery that exemplifies his work of the 1890s. He still painted scenes of the grotesque or outrightly ridiculous, but the numbers of such images are tempered. One vivid example of Ensor's continued interest in the patently absurd and purely fictional is his painting *The Banquet of the Starved*, completed in 1915 (fig. 13). Though its subject is wholly original, the scene echoes several of Ensor's earlier compositions. Like *The Good Judges* (1891; fig. 20) and *At the Conservatory* (1902), a row of odd characters sits before the viewer, partaking in some outrageous activity. Here, a meager banquet - two carrots; an unappetizing-looking, wilted bird; a single oyster; and

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<sup>21</sup> Francine-Claire Legrand, *Ensor: La mort et la charme – un autre Ensor*, 67.

the skate from several of Ensor's previous works, among other sparse foodstuffs – sits on the pristine white tablecloth. Directly over the central figure's head, Ensor has included one of his previous paintings, depicting skeletons fighting over a pickled herring. The jaws of both skeletons are clenched tightly, grasping voraciously at the herring, which has far more meat on its tiny bones than either of them possesses. The skeletons are quite literally an image of the 'starved'. They are also, despite Ensor's reanimation, dead. Although they no longer have any need for food, they attempt to tear the fish from one another's teeth as though their lives depended on it. Despite the altogether different approach, which marks the painting as one of Ensor's later, *The Banquet of the Starved* maintains the pointed irony that typified the Ensor of the previous century.

*The Banquet of the Starved*, as well as a number of other paintings Ensor executed in the twentieth century, draw in part upon their earlier Ensorian counterparts for inspiration – both in composition and in spirit. Ensor's continued reliance on the world of motifs that had served him so well in the past has led some to make an erroneous judgment of his later work. In some past evaluations of his oeuvre, scholars cite the replicas and variations the artist made in the twentieth century of previously completed paintings serve as evidence of an allegedly waning creativity. A sampling of some of the comments made by various scholars reveals the pervasiveness of this belief. Diane Lesko, who dedicated her monograph solely to Ensor's purported "creative years," noted that after 1900, Ensor "stole copies of his great work."<sup>22</sup> Jacques Janssens, in his own study, noted that "[a]t the age of forty [he] had said all he had to say, had done everything. . . .

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<sup>22</sup> Diane Lesko, *James Ensor: The Creative Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 146.

Nothing that he painted thereafter would add a penny's worth to his glory. He would simply repeat himself, copy himself, plagiarize himself."<sup>23</sup>

The paintings Ensor adapted from earlier, original compositions are often billed as 'copies' or even, so severely, as 'plagiarisms', as though Ensor's genius at this time were so weak that he could do nothing but make lackluster forgeries of his own work. First, as Ingrid Pfeiffer rightly points out, an important clarification must be made: these works are not copies, as a copy, by its very definition, is always the work of another person.<sup>24</sup> Ensor can most accurately be said to have made 'replicas' of some pieces, and 'variations' of others, a practice artists before and after him have undertaken without such ruthless criticism. Though Ensor prided himself on following his vision wherever it took him, his mind had always, as Pfeiffer fittingly puts it once again, flown freely but firmly within his own artistic "cosmos" of motifs, designs, and ideas.<sup>25</sup> So deeply entrenched was the artist in his own universe of peculiar motifs that it seems only logical that Ensor would cycle through such images, returning to certain themes and subjects repeatedly. Thus, to deride the Ensor of the twentieth century is in a way to deride his counterpart of the 1880s and 1890s – his bodies of work from each of these periods are so closely in conversation with one another as to be nearly inseparable.

In truth, only a small number of works in Ensor's oeuvre are near-identical replicas of the same composition. His paintings *Ensor and Leman Discussing Painting*, first of 1890, and then of 1910, for one example, illustrate the point: the second iteration is an almost literal facsimile of the first, and the two could easily be mistaken for one

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Janssens, *James Ensor* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1978), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Ingrid Pfeiffer, "James Ensor Seen as a Whole – An Attempt at a Resumé," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

another. Interestingly, Ensor did not only reproduce images conceived and first executed during his so-called “creative” period. Replicas and variations on works he completed for the first time in the early years of the twentieth century also exist.<sup>26</sup> In other cases, Ensor drafted a composition on paper before returning to it several years, or even decades, later to rework the image in paint.<sup>27</sup>

Ensor’s variations on a composition are much more numerous than his replicas. Among the most notable are his paintings *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony*, a subject he first illustrated in 1887, and took up once again in 1909 (figs. 14 & 15). No doubt inspired by his forebears in the Flemish tradition, Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) and Pieter Brueghel (c.1525-1569), as well as Jacques Callot (c.1592-1635), Ensor undertook a favorite motif of his predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>28</sup> In both early and later images, Ensor utilizes the same composition and represents the same fantastic personages. Saint Anthony, the ascetic monk, dressed in a red hood, rests on the banks of the Nile. A book is open in front of him, but the cadre of tempters to his right distracts him from his reading. Overhead, creatures flutter and sputter about, and the passenger of an anthropomorphic hot-air balloon expels its contents.<sup>29</sup> A new hoard of demons, poised to

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<sup>26</sup> The painting *Pierrot and Skeletons*, first completed in 1905, and later reprised on two occasions in 1907, serves as just one example.

<sup>27</sup> Ensor followed his colored etching, *The Fantastic Ballet* (1889), with a painting nearly three decades later.

<sup>28</sup> The subject of the temptation of Saint Anthony was a favorite among late-nineteenth century painters, who were no doubt inspired by Gustave Flaubert’s vivid 1874 prose-poem. Fernand Khnopff also showed his painting, *Temptation of Saint Anthony after Flaubert*, at the Les XX salon of 1884. Additionally, Eva Linhart notes that Ensor may have been studying Callot’s etching of the same subject (c. 1616) in the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I in Brussels. *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (Hatje Cantz, 2005), 254.

<sup>29</sup> This anthropomorphic balloon is very reminiscent of similar imagery by Odilon Redon from the late 1870s, including his drawings *The Eye-Balloon* (1878) and *Sad Ascent* (1879). Ensor surely saw Redon’s work when the French artist exhibited in the salon of “Les XX.” Redon also



ruthlessly torment Saint Anthony, materializes from the mass of bright, frenzied brushstrokes in the upper right.

Despite their nearly-identical arrangement of figures, Ensor's 1887 and 1909 iterations of *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony* provide an example of his predilection for adjusting his paintings stylistically. The 1887 panel is smaller in scale than its twentieth-century counterpart, and lacks its brightness and clarity. The coloring of the two scenes is dramatically different. Reds, oranges, and browns, all mixed heavily with black, dominate the panel, creating a duo of dark passages on either side of the scene that encroach upon the central area of light and threaten to overtake it completely. The 1909 adaptation is vibrant in comparison. The application of paint in this latter image produces a smoothly-rendered haziness; in passages of the earlier painting, it appears as though so much paint has been applied to the panel that it has dripped down the surface. The sketchy handling makes this first attempt appear as if it had been executed with an unsteady hand.

The subject of Saint Anthony tempted by Satan resonated personally with Ensor and is perhaps a reason why he chose to reproduce this particular painting.<sup>30</sup> Throughout his life, Ensor was drawn to themes of torment and persecution. He associates himself here with Anthony, whom demons and spirits attempt to lead astray from the path to salvation. Ensor felt that his own struggles at the hands of unfeeling critics were akin to

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took up the subject of Saint Anthony shortly after reading Flaubert's work; he produced three different series of images dedicated to *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* in 1888, 1889, and 1896.

<sup>30</sup> Ensor continued to be so captivated by the subject that he embarked upon a third, wholly original composition depicting the torments of Saint Anthony in 1932, over two decades after the completion of his previous scene. He also completed a drawing titled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* in 1887, the same year as his first painting of the *Trials*. This drawing is entirely unlike any of his other depictions of the subject, with even more minutely-detailed figures. It was never adapted into a painting.

those torments faced by the saint – though, like Anthony, he did not allow them to prevent him from following his artistic vision. Ensor’s stylistic choices from one *Saint Anthony* to the next underscore a change in the tone of the message he was interested in conveying. The coloring and technique of the 1887 panel impart a jarring, ominous feeling to the scene. Saint Anthony may never emerge from the sinister vortex that threatens to engulf him. Conversely, the creatures that inhabit the later painting are absurd, almost comical. They taunt Anthony, but appear too ridiculous to stand a chance at overtaking him. Painted after Ensor and his work had begun to gain some critical and popular recognition, the second version can be read as an allusion to Ensor’s changing status. Though demons, in the form of critics and hecklers, may continue to pursue Ensor, their judgments will ultimately prove ineffectual. The artist will prevail, regardless of the tortures inflicted upon him.

Other paintings Ensor refashioned in the twentieth century likely had alternative reasons underlying their execution. In another striking variation, titled *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiserie* (c. 1910; figs. 16 & 17), Ensor reiterates a prior, twenty-five-year-old composition. A skeleton sits in an armchair in a cozy interior, leisurely examining an album of Japanese prints.<sup>31</sup> Several more Japanese images hang on the wall behind him; one, as identified by Xavier Tricot, is a scroll painting depicting a crane surrounded by peonies.<sup>32</sup> Ensor maintained the same technique in both the early and later versions, laying down paint in a loose, impressionistic manner. However, the coloring – as one would expect of the late Ensor – is decidedly different. An overwhelmingly murky palette has given way to the pure color of Ensor’s later works, allowing previously unseen

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<sup>31</sup> Despite the painting’s title, it is likely Japanese (not Chinese) prints that are referenced and on view here. See Xavier Tricot, in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 162.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

details and strokes of the brush to emerge anew. Each image that hangs on the wall is freshly and vividly illuminated, as though the moment in which the scene unfolds has been transplanted from twilight to the height of midday.

The macabre whimsy of *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiserie* does not resonate as deeply with Ensor's personal struggles as an image like *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony* likely did, leading Tricot to speculate that Ensor's later reproduction of *Skeleton*, and other paintings like it, may have been economically motivated. Tricot notes that in the first decade of the twentieth century, Ensor produced a number of variations on several pre-1885 works, due to an increasing demand for his early "realist" scenes. Ensor had no problem pre-dating these paintings and selling them as original compositions, despite the fact that they had been already executed, albeit usually in a much darker palette.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiserie* occupies a unique position as both one of Ensor's 1880s "realist" interiors *and* one of his early attempts at the darkly humorous scenes that characterize his work from the 1890s. Ensor altered the original panel in 1890, five years after he initially completed it. While the 1880s version showed what was no more than an ordinary man studying a book of prints, an increasingly morbid Ensor transformed him into the animated skeleton that inhabits the image to this day.

Ensor maintained a preference for the motifs and themes that had served his vision so well in his younger years. He reworked compositions when he saw fit, adjusting his palette and technique to create updated translations of earlier paintings. His motivation, in the case of specific images, may have been economic; he believed those

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Rather than send his cherished original paintings out of the country to exhibitions, Ensor frequently made copies and sent them instead. Indeed, there is some confusion even today regarding the dating of several of Ensor's works, due to his affinity for pre-dating.

paintings whose earlier iterations he had sold would be more likely to be snapped up again. These second or third attempts, however, were rarely literal replicas; a new buyer must enjoy the new color and light with which the twentieth-century Ensor imbued his paintings. Financial motivation notwithstanding, a more likely reason for Ensor's fondness for making variations was that the themes and messages contained within certain images still held significance for him. Scenes that visually reference his own struggles to overcome the censure and derision he faced early in his career materialize over and over again in Ensor's work. The variations he later made of such scenes evoke a sense that, despite the newfound admiration his work found in the twentieth century, the artist had not forgotten the difficulties of his past.

Ultimately, the Ensor of the twentieth century cannot and should not be taken to task for "plagiariz[ing] himself," for this is not what he did. According to Rudolf Schmitz, Ensor "re-invented himself every day, for seven decades. At least, this was the way he saw himself."<sup>34</sup> Given Ensor's propensity throughout his career for experimentation with different styles, techniques, and themes, some periods of his output should rightly seem more potent than others. In fact, Ensor's paintings after 1900 demonstrate a not wholly illogical evolution of style. Though a look through his catalogue may at first glance suggest otherwise, Ensor's nineteenth- and twentieth-century bodies of work do not differ as wildly from one might conclude without further examination. Nevertheless, they are divergent enough that a discussion of the visual direction in which Ensor's art evolved would be incomplete without a consideration of just why he embarked on such a path in the first place.

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<sup>34</sup> Rudolf Schmitz, "You Words without Rhyme and Reason, I Love You, I Love You': The Deregulated Language of James Ensor," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 157.

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The question addressed above, of *how*, stylistically and thematically, James Ensor's work changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries raises many questions – questions concerning the causes of this man's evolution as an artist over this period of time. Changes in Ensor's personal life, his interests, and his tastes played a vital role in the artistic choices that he made during the twentieth century. Ensor was deeply introspective and profoundly self-conscious, as both a man and an artist, and these attributes often earn him a classification as a narcissist. "I will tell all the beautiful legend of the I, the universal I, the unique I, the pot-bellied I and the great verb To Be: I am, we are, you are, they are!" he wrote famously.<sup>35</sup> Given the rich assortment of images Ensor's imagination conjured on its own, the artist saw little reason to venture beyond the world of the "I" – to fly outside of his artistic "cosmos." His own visions, past and present, remained the most formative influences shaping his work in the twentieth century. However, in order to complete our understanding of the changes that occurred in Ensor's art during this time, we must explore how the artist's life, and by extension his work, unfolded against the backdrop of upheaval and commotion that formed the fabric of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Europe. Together, the evolving personal and historical circumstances in which Ensor found himself in the latter part of his life serve to explain the new avenues of his artistic production.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Belgium transformed radically in many respects. The nation we know today was ruled at various moments in its history by the Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs, the French, and the Dutch, from whom it finally

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<sup>35</sup> James Ensor, *Mes Ecrits* (1926), 22; *Ensor*, exh. cat. (1999), 18.

wrested its independence in 1830.<sup>36</sup> While its neighbors France and present-day Germany were locked in a power struggle that would ultimately erupt into the deadly and demoralizing conflict that was the Franco-Prussian War, Belgium at this time was still at work forging a national identity. A debate raged over the privileging of the French language over Flemish, an issue that went to the very heart of the identity crisis. Although Flemish was spoken by the majority of the population, French enjoyed near-official status and was the preferred language in public and governmental affairs. Learning French came to be seen as a mode of social advancement, as the French-speaking minority controlled the greater part of the country's wealth.<sup>37</sup>

In response to the ever-growing supremacy of the French language in both private and official spheres, a Flemish movement was formed to advocate for a greater recognition of Flemish language and culture in Belgian public life. Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, the movement became increasingly politicized, calling for laws that required the use of both French and Dutch in courts of law and on public notices.<sup>38</sup> The proponents of the Flemish cause met with varying degrees of success in such endeavors. Though French maintained its status as the nation's dominant tongue, the struggle between the two languages remained (and remains to this day) a hotly-contested issue in Belgium.

Concerns over language aside, political and social tensions escalated as the nineteenth century progressed. Industrialization had taken hold early in Belgium – the

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<sup>36</sup> Alexander Murphy and Carl Strikwerda, "Brussels and the Belgian Avant-Garde in Historical and Geographical Perspective," in *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, edited by Stephen Goddard (Lawrence, KS: ), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Between 1846 and 1910, the percentage of Brussels' population claiming French as their first language rose from 32 to 48.7; the percentage of those claiming Dutch fell from 66.7 to 45.5. Ibid, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

earliest of any continental European country – and brought prosperity to the newly independent nation. The population of Brussels exploded. Means of transportation both within the city and from other European and Belgian towns expanded, and King Léopold II pursued lofty plans to transform the capital into a thriving metropolitan center. Such development, however, came at a cost. While the bourgeoisie celebrated its newfound wealth, a depression struck the laboring classes, cutting wages and increasing the challenges of daily life.<sup>39</sup> Resentment between the upper-middle class elites and working classes grew as the social and economic gap widened.

The political scene in Belgium in the 1880s was even more turbulent. The strong Liberal party and right-wing Catholic parliamentary leaders clashed over a number of issues, including the secularization of education; the Catholic establishment ultimately won the battle, and wrested control of the government. Furthermore, the issue of universal male suffrage – which was far from realized at this point in Belgian history – fractured the Liberal party in two. Left-wing Progressives encouraged rights for workers and the lower classes, while the Liberal establishment leaders (or *doctrinaires*) and the Catholics continued to resist.<sup>40</sup> The fissures and shifting alliances within Belgian politics gave rise to a host of experimental socialist and anarchist movements. In 1886, the Belgian Workers' Party, the country's leading Socialist group, organized a massive and violent strike that was only quelled after the intervention of some twenty thousand troops.<sup>41</sup> To cap it off, Belgium's monarch, Léopold II, had ventured into the colonial fray, staking his imperial claim in central Africa in the early 1880s. Léopold's abuse of

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<sup>39</sup> Patricia Berman, *James Ensor: The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Strikwerda & Murphy, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Berman, 54.

power in his governance of the Congo Free State proved an additional cause of controversy in Belgium's already-fragile political state, although the most deplorable actions of the king's colonial regime would not even be revealed until the early twentieth century.

Ensor's work during the final decades of nineteenth century reflects the upheavals challenging the Belgian nation at this time. A number of his paintings and works on paper are rife with commentary and critique on his country's current political and social crises. The aptly titled drawing *Belgium in the Nineteenth Century* (fig. 18), completed around 1889, unambiguously illustrates his perspective on Belgium's national crises. In it, King Léopold II occupies the sky as though he were God, looking down upon the largely indistinguishable Belgian masses through his lorgnette.<sup>42</sup> The disenfranchised men in the crowd declare their demands via a red banner – “national military service,” “free education,” and “universal suffrage.” They are rebuffed by legions of soliders bearing arms. Léopold communicates his ineffectuality in the rings that surround the heavenly realm in which he resides – “What do you want? Aren't you happy? A little patience, no violence. I can see something but I don't know why it is – I can't make it out very well.”<sup>43</sup> In a similarly-minded work from the same year, Ensor presents an even more grotesque view of the corruption and inadequacy plaguing the Belgian state. *Doctrinaire Nourishment* (fig. 19) shows Léopold, among other church and state officials, on a pedestal, defecating into a gathered crowd. Several members of this crowd await the putrid streams with opened mouths, ready to receive “nourishment” from their leaders, who hold signs urging “*Service personnel*,” “*Suffrage universel*,” and “*Instruction*

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<sup>42</sup> Berman, 54.

<sup>43</sup> “Que voulez-vous? N'etes vous pas contents? Un peu de patience, pas de violence. Je vois bien quelque chose mais je ne sais pour quelle cause. Je ne distingue pas très bien.”



*obligatoire.*” Patricia Berman notes that feces, not true social reform, becomes the substitute for the placards held in the hands of the collected officials – placards emblazoned with the familiar pleas urging universal suffrage and free education for all.<sup>44</sup>

A number of other images Ensor created during these tumultuous years of the nineteenth century demonstrate that the artist had absorbed the effects of such turmoil and commotion, and was using them not only as a means of social and political critique, but as a vehicle for communicating his own persecution at the hands of an uninformed society. Ensor represents himself in the 1891 painting *The Good Judges* as a lawyer fervently attempting to defend two men whose lives rest in the hands of a court of ignorant, ill-mannered judges (fig. 20). The men Ensor defends are likely meant to represent two Flemish workers, who in 1860 were accused of and later executed for a murder they did not commit.<sup>45</sup> Their trial was conducted in French, the official language of the Belgian courts, though the defendants did not speak it. Here, Ensor the lawyer literally sweats as he attempts to persuade the court of its error. The judges are not swayed, however; they doodle and pass notes, failing to even hear his appeals. Above Ensor’s head, a plaque illustrates the scales of justice weighed down heavily to one side. Once again, Ensor’s demands to be recognized and appreciated have fallen on deaf ears.

Such potent, critical imagery is not unusual in Ensor’s nineteenth-century work, though it is decidedly less common in that of the twentieth. This may suggest that Belgium had righted itself from the upside-down years of the nineteenth century and reached a state of economic, political, and social stability. Such an assessment would be

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<sup>44</sup> Berman, 57. Berman also notes, citing Auguste Taevernier (*Catalogue illustré de ses gravures leur description critique et l’inventaire des plaques* [Ledberg-Ghent, 1973], 199), that in the late 1920s, around the time Ensor was made a baron, he attempted to purchase and destroy as many impressions of this print as he could locate.

<sup>45</sup> Berman, 66.

far from the truth. The Belgian nation, like all European nations, continued to undergo significant transformation in the early decades of the twentieth century. Despite its attempts to remain outside the escalating conflict of the Great War (its neutrality had been officially recognized by the Great Powers in 1839), Belgium was dragged into the dispute in August 1914 after refusing to permit Germany to attack France through its territory.<sup>46</sup> The battles waged on Belgian soil – most significantly at Ypres – wreaked havoc on the landscape. The war severely shook the economic foundations of the small nation. The price of food soared. Workers across the country lost their jobs; some were deported. In the face of these challenges, however, the Belgians remained stoically positive, and united under their dynamic leader, King Albert.<sup>47</sup>

Ensor lived through the two greatest conflicts the European continent had ever seen. He remained in Ostend throughout both the First and Second World Wars, the latter of which occurred primarily in the final decade of his life, and by which point he had stopped working almost entirely. The Great War, however, occurred squarely inside the prodigious years of his later career. Despite this fact, admittedly little is known about Ensor's activities during this period. Normally a diligent correspondent, he wrote almost no letters to friends or colleagues during the years of the war. His artistic output during these years diminished; he continued to paint, but the number of works he completed is certainly not as substantial as the subsequent or previous decades.

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<sup>46</sup> Herman Balthazar, "Belgium Since World War I," in *Modern Belgium*, edited by Marina Boudart, Michel Boudart, and René Bryssinck (Palo Alto, CA: The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1990), 73.

<sup>47</sup> Several organizations, namely the National Assistance and Nutrition Committee, helped the nation significantly. The Allied supporters of Belgium assisted the country as well in remaining afloat; Herbert Hoover founded the Commission for Relief in Belgium in October 1914. Balthazar, 73-4.

In the early months of 1914, works by Ensor were shown in the final annual exhibition of “La Libre Esthétique” in Brussels. He was arrested by the Germans the following year, after the publication of a caricature he made depicting Kaiser Wilhelm II as a vulture; several German artists lobbied successfully for his release.<sup>48</sup> After the outbreak of war, Ensor’s friends and colleagues tried to persuade him to leave Belgium for England, but the artist staunchly refused. He remained at home in Ostend for the war’s duration. Such a refusal to abandon the place of his birth highlights the value Ensor must have bestowed on the environment that continued to inspire his work. Belgium, and Ostend more specifically, was the home of all that he held most dear. The presence of his family (however much annoyance they might have provided), the yearly Carnival, the sea, and the light were each crucial to his past and future work.

The written and visual evidence does not suggest that the chaos occurring in Europe at this time took a strong emotional toll on Ensor’s psyche. He found time to address a particularly interesting note to Franz Hellens, an art critic and the contributor of a recent essay on the artist to the journal *L’Art Moderne*; in the letter, Ensor inquired of Hellens why no one had presented him with an invitation to participate in the show of “La Libre Esthétique,” though somehow his work had ended up on display. Just after the war’s outbreak, he wrote to Emma Lambotte, one of his closest confidantes, that family problems most troubled him.<sup>49</sup> After the death of his father in 1887, Ensor was the only remaining male in his family. Upon returning to Ostend, he shared the family home with his mother, Maria Catherine; his mother’s sister, Maria Ludovica, affectionately known

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<sup>48</sup> *James Ensor*, exh. cat., (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 316.

<sup>49</sup> “Les ennuis et les chagrins me démoralisent . . . Toujours les mêmes chagrins donnés par ma famille.” James Ensor, 17 July 1914. *Ensor: Lettres à Emma Lambotte, 1904-1914* (Brussels: Centre international pour l’Etude du XIXeme siècle; Tournai: Renaissance du livre, 1999), 312.

as Aunt Mimi; his own sister, Mitche; and his niece. Ensor's thoughts were frequently absorbed with the women that constantly surrounded him, and he must have considered the nuisances of his family members detrimental to his productivity.

In the end, however, the women in his family would prove another source of artistic inspiration. Despite his tenuous relationship with his mother, Ensor was dealt a tremendous personal blow when she died in 1915. Her passing was followed only a year later by the death of Aunt Mimi, and Ensor made several drawings and a painting of each of them on their deathbeds (figs. 21, 22, & 23). These images are wholly unlike those he made after the death of his father nearly thirty years earlier. His father rests peacefully, in a state of now-permanent repose; his mother, highlighted entirely in white, looks ghostly and odd, hands clutching a crucifix and mouth gaping wide. Her deathbed is relegated to the background of the scene, while a still life of bottles and vials of medicine occupy a tray in the foreground. The arrangement cuts the viewer off abruptly from the scene, as though one must be stopped before approaching death more closely. Conversely, Ensor's portrait of his dead aunt gives one the impression of nearly lying next to the deceased. Aunt Mimi lies upon a mountain of bedding, her white nightdress blending in seamlessly with the bedclothes. Ensor juxtaposes the lightness of her figure against a solid, pink-red backdrop, rendered almost entirely with vertical brushstrokes. Despite her obvious age, Aunt Mimi looks more serene than her sister. These deathbed scenes of his mother and aunt are among the few paintings Ensor made in this year; his others are primarily still lifes and repeated scenes from his 'fantasy ballet'.

Despite the turmoil Ensor faced during these years, it was at this time that his professional standing took an about-face. The changes in Ensor's status as an artist would

have the greatest effect on his psyche and his subsequent artistic development – he was, after all, a man deeply immersed in the ‘I’. In 1903, by Royal Decree, he was made a *Chevalier* of the Order of Léopold. Two years later, he was invited by the Franck brothers to become a founding member of their new group, *L’Art contemporain*. The Brussels publisher G. Van Oest & Cie released a monograph dedicated to the artist in 1908; Emile Verhaeren, who had first been introduced to Ensor at the Rousseau home over two decades earlier, authored it.<sup>50</sup> Publication of various monographs, volumes of writings, and lithographic albums followed. Increasingly prestigious honorary titles also followed; by Royal Decree, Ensor was promoted first to *Officier* (1919) and then to *Commandeur* (1925) in the Order of Léopold. In 1929, Belgian King Albert I made Ensor a hereditary baron – the same year that artist was declared an *Officier* in the French *Légion d’Honneur*.<sup>51</sup>

As Ensor’s reputation grew, so too did the opportunities to show his work in exhibitions at home and abroad. The Galerie Georges Giroux in Brussels marked the occasion of the artist’s sixtieth birthday with the first major retrospective of his work. In a 1929 exhibition at Brussels’ Palais des Beaux-Arts, his monumental masterpiece, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, went on view to the public for the first time.<sup>52</sup> He presented paintings at the Belgian pavilion at the 1926 Venice biennial and in a group exhibition at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1932. Several more major solo retrospectives of Ensor’s work were organized in 1930s and 1940s, as his career was winding down. These included a second retrospective at the Galerie Giroux, as well as a

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<sup>50</sup> *Ensor*, exh. cat. (1999), 337.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 338.

<sup>52</sup> *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 317.

monumental show sponsored by the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, and a 1946 monographic exhibition at the National Gallery in London.

Approbation in the form of publications, exhibitions, and honorary titles continued unabated until the end of Ensor's life in 1949 (and still onward, after that). He could now boast of a society founded in his name, dedicated to making his work more broadly known.<sup>53</sup> His early worries about being ill-thought of – or worse, forgotten altogether – diminished significantly. As his reputation improved over the course of the twentieth century, Ensor must have felt a certain security in his vision. His will to freely pursue his own artistic course was emboldened by the sense that his place within the history of art was to some degree assured. Ensor's changing outlook on his status as artist, and the now overwhelmingly complimentary attitudes of his peers and public, led him to approach certain tried-and-true subject matter from a fresh perspective. Much of the artist's work from the twentieth century elucidates this new point of view, utilizing previously-conceived motifs and themes to present the image of another Ensor.

Throughout his career, Ensor gravitated frequently towards religious subject matter, despite his personal lack of religious affiliation and his general distaste for the Catholic establishment that so closely guided the political and social scene of Belgium in the nineteenth century. Although he depicted a number of scenes rooted in biblical history, including the discovery of Moses and the aforementioned interpretations of the temptation of Saint Anthony (as well as several others), scenes from the life and death of Christ are the most common religious imagery in his oeuvre, and recur in both his paintings and works on paper. As a young artist unjustly berated and tormented by critics

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<sup>53</sup> This was the "Friends of James Ensor" society, founded in 1948. Ibid.

and the public, Ensor identified closely with Christ. He considered the visionary artist to be on par with God, a trope Symbolist artists frequently utilized in their work. Christ – like the artist – is martyred as he attempts to communicate a message that will ultimately lead to the salvation of humanity.

Ensor oftentimes deliberately represented Christ in his likeness; these images are essentially self-portraits, thinly veiled. *Ecce Homo or Christ and the Critics* (fig. 24) portrays a worn, bloodied Christ, crowned with thorns. One of his ‘critics’ handles him via a noose-like rope around his neck, while another ominously caresses his shoulder. The features of ‘Christ’ here – characterized by the hair and beard – are unmistakably and deliberately Ensor. Even Ensor’s masterpiece, *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889*, allows its artist to play the title role. Not Christ, but Ensor himself rides into the midst of the painting’s riotous Carnival crowd. Despite the banners proclaiming his entry, he is paid no actual attention. His appearance serves only as an excuse for the assembled crowd to take up their various banners and tout their own personal and political agendas; despite their posturing, they could care less about Christ’s suffering or his message of salvation.

Of these images of Ensor-cum-Christ, the drawing *Calvary* (fig. 25) of 1886 is certainly the most explicit statement of the artist’s true feelings at this moment in his career. Christ appears nailed to the cross, though the plaque above his head reads not the traditional abbreviation *INRI*, or *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, but rather, starkly, *ENSOR*. The crucified Ensor is pierced in the side by a man carrying a spear adorned with a flag marked *FÉTIS*, a reference to the critic Edouard Fétis, who decried Ensor’s work on more than one occasion. Spectators in the crowd occupy the forefront of the

image, their backs turned to us as they watch the proceedings, allowing the viewer to note the 'XX' on one observer's shirt. As the critics take part in Ensor's humiliation and ultimate death, none other than a colleague from *Les XX*, the artist's group Ensor himself helped to form, watches with unaffected interest.

While Ensor's sensitivity to the critical persecution and public scorn heaped upon him during the 1880s and 1890s contributed directly to his visual self-identification with Christ, his religious imagery from the twentieth century represents different feelings. Executed largely after his work had begun to win him praise, these images embody an ambivalent new stance with respect to the status of Christ, and by extension, Ensor himself. One of Ensor's most important later lithographic series, *Scenes of Christ's Life*, portrays the persecuted Christ in a notably different manner. Ensor first completed the thirty-two images that comprise this series in 1912 and 1913; the Galerie Giroux later reproduced and released them as a limited edition album of lithographs on the occasion of Ensor's sixtieth birthday in 1920. In a departure from Ensor's earlier imagery, the Christ portrayed in this collection of scenes is no longer mercilessly tormented. He is depicted, as the title indicates, at different moments throughout his life: from the mundane (his baptism and circumcision), to the remarkable (walking on water, exorcising demons, rising from the dead). Other figures, when they are present, possess humorous, exaggerated features and expressions. Both Christ's antagonists and his own disciples are given the same absurd treatment, with lolling eyes and oversized noses. This equanimity on the part of Ensor reinforces the point that the figures are not necessarily meant to be represented as his tormentors, but rather a cross-section of the ridiculous theater of humanity that characterizes everyday life. His antagonists participate not in a vehement



torture of Christ, but, as Eva Linhart says, in an “affectionate teasing.”<sup>54</sup> At this moment, Ensor’s goal is no longer to “legitimize his claim to genius.”<sup>55</sup> Rather, he seeks a simple yet expressive way to translate the compelling events that comprised Christ’s life.

The evolution of Ensor’s iconography of Christ – a figure with whom he had traditionally associated himself – reflects the changing nature of the artist’s status in society in the twentieth century. Still, Ensor did not embrace the positive recognition of his work wholeheartedly. To some extent, he remained wary of the motives of those who had perhaps been less than complimentary in the past. Critics – to say nothing of the capricious public – had a knack for changing their artistic preferences impulsively, and Ensor must have wanted to ensure that he did not emerge looking foolish should the interest in his work become nothing more than a temporary fad. This hesitation on Ensor’s part to fully accept his newfound reputation – combined with his naturally self-deprecating, ironic nature – meant that he continued, from time to time, to realize images in which exist relics of his former, anguished Christ/self.

An infrequently considered 1925 panel, titled *The Onrush of the Disciples of Christ*, is one such image (fig. 26). Here, an irritated-looking Christ is surrounded in all directions by bodied and disembodied figures. His apparent ire overshadows any agony that one might expect from a crucified man. His eyes remain firmly fixed on the viewer, as if his stern expression will communicate the ridiculous circus that rages around him. Despite the number of faces in the crowd, few turn their gaze upon the man whose death they have supposedly come to witness. Those on the ground rush past, towards some point outside the frame. The title of this painting conveys everything. The followers of

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<sup>54</sup> Eva Linhart, “Scenes of Christ’s Life, 1921” in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 60.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Ensor, quick to offer approval and jump to his defense now that his reputation has skyrocketed, rush off as he is martyred on the cross. They ultimately care not about his message or artistic genius; they happily pursue the next best thing, before he is even fully gone.

Ensor re-conceived and reinterpreted his approach to Christ at various moments in his later life. The resulting images are largely original in their conception, rather than literal replicas or adaptations of previously pictured scenes. A reworking of Ensor's earlier drawing, *Calvary*, proves a unique exception. Hardly referenced in examinations of Ensor's work, the later *Calvary* dates from 1940, the penultimate year of the artist's career (fig. 27). Ensor recreates the scene in oil this time, retaining most of the details of his previous image, save an important few. There is no longer a plaque above the crucified Christ's head, let alone one that reads *ENSOR* with such determined clarity. Rather than a flag bearing the name of one of Ensor's sharpest detractors, the spear piercing Christ's emblazoned on his back remains – perhaps out of residual malice towards the group on Ensor's part, but perhaps equally likely out of little more than mere coincidence. Here, the lack of identifying elements possessed by the earlier drawing, associating Ensor explicitly with Christ, cannot but be read as a sign of the artist's acceptance of his altered role in society.

The Ensor of the twentieth century was, simply, an older man. The youthful exuberance that produced the virulent paintings of the 1890s had calmed. Some scholars have seen this lack of unsettling, jarring imagery in Ensor's later work as evidence that the artist had lost for good his creative power, exhausted by the feverish intensity of his earlier output. Given the depth and breadth of his production in the twentieth century,

however, it does not hold that Ensor had lost his artistic energy once and for all. Rather, he had matured, and his opinions and sensibilities had matured, or had at least been tempered, accordingly. He embraced a new energy, in accordance with his own changing nature.

Ensor's tastes and interests certainly shifted beginning in the early years of the new century. The artist spent more time than he had ever before in the pursuit of other arts – musical, theatrical, even linguistic – while still continuing his career as a painter. In 1906, Ensor's close friends Albin and Emma Lambotte presented him with a harmonium, and he immediately threw himself headlong into this new artistic endeavor. He began composing a ballet entitled *La Gamme d'Amour* (The Scale of Love), which, though he officially completed the music in 1911, Ensor continued to contribute to it various respects until well into the 1920s. Its two acts tell the story of the young suitors Fifrelin and Miamia, whose romance is protested by Miamia's puppet-maker father, Grognelet. All ends well, however, as the lovers emerge victorious and the townspeople take to the street in a raucous Carnival parade.<sup>56</sup>

*La Gamme d'Amour* is comprised of six musical pieces – including, in part, a rigadon, a quick waltz, a slow waltz, a march, and a mazurka – all to be played on the piano.<sup>57</sup> Ensor composed not only the music but also created the sets and costumes for his theatrical debut. Two initial paintings from 1912 illustrate the designs he had in mind for the scenery, while a complete portfolio of lithographs depicting the characters in costume, as well as the set designs, was included in an album released on the occasion of his retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1929. The décor for the ballet

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<sup>56</sup> Katharina Dohm, in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 242.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Wangermée, “La Gamme d’amour and Ensor’s music,” in *Ensor*, exh. cat. (1999), 57.

– particularly the second act, which takes place on the streets and in the square of a town not unlike Ostend – evokes images of the boisterous Carnival-season crowds to which Ensor gravitated in the 1880s and 1890s, and which he continued to depict in the later years of his career. An assortment of personalities wind through the scene. From Ensor’s lithographs, one can spot a burly, monocle-wearing man, decorated from head-to-toe with honorary medals; a wide-eyed figure, drooling or vomiting (or perhaps both); and an elderly creature with a nose so long it drags along the ground, among a number of equally-bizarre others. Skeletons scramble across the rooftops, and far in the upper right, a man sits in the shadows on a chimney playing a flute – Ensor’s inclusion of a self-portrait, modeled after a photograph taken of the artist in 1885 (fig. 28). Ensor’s design for the setting and characters of *La Gamme d’Amour* demonstrates a continued fondness for his previously favored motifs. The rowdy nature of the masses; the pervasiveness of words, signs, and advertisements in public life; and the fascination with the grotesque and comical features of the mask all find their way into the sophisticated medium of the ballet, albeit in a more whimsical, less menacing fashion than in many of Ensor’s earlier images.

Dubbed *Poppenliefde* (Romance of the Marionettes) at the time of its first performance, *La Gamme d’Amour* was not staged as a full ballet until March 1924, when it was put on at the Koninklijke Opera House in Antwerp. Previously, several local orchestras held performances of the ballet’s individual pieces shortly after Ensor had completed them; conductors Pietro Lanciani and Léon Rinskopf each presented a concert featuring Ensor’s waltz, in August and September of 1907, respectively.<sup>58</sup> Ensor himself

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<sup>58</sup> Lanciani was also the first to transcribe and orchestrate Ensor’s waltz for *La Gamme d’Amour*. Wangermée, 57.

did not hear the full score of his ballet until the spring of 1918, when it was performed by the students and teachers of Ostend's music school.<sup>59</sup> After its initial staging in Antwerp, *La Gamme d'Amour* moved to Liège, where its performance was preceded by a banquet held in Ensor's honor and attended by the artist himself.<sup>60</sup>

Ensor's commitments to *La Gamme d'Amour* consumed a great deal of his time. It rarely seemed far from the front of his mind, and his letters from the teens and twenties contain various business dealings and personal discussions related to the progress of the ballet's composition and later performance. The composition of *La Gamme d'Amour* was not Ensor's first venture into the musical milieu. Though his love of composing and playing music did not emerge suddenly in his middle age, these were certainly the years in which it flourished. Ensor had been fond of music throughout his younger years, learning the piano as a boy and also possessing the ability to play tunes on a small pipe, as evidenced by his rooftop portrait. As a pianist, Ensor enjoyed improvising and is said to have had an almost superstitious preference for the black keys over the white, despite the distinctly un-melodious results these compositions likely produced. His receipt of the Lambotte's gift in 1906 thrilled him; he wrote to them almost immediately after the harmonium's delivery in March, his excitement palpable in his words. In 1917, Ensor repositioned the gifted harmonium to a place in his sitting room directly in front of his monumental painting, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (fig. 29). He would frequently hold spontaneous concerts, improvising for visitors, friends, and generally anyone who would listen.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 59.

Robert Wangermée interprets Ensor's relocation of his harmonium to a prominent place near his most renowned work as a possible message by the artist, meant to convey that his musical work "was on a par with his art" (a notion that Wangermée challenges shortly thereafter).<sup>61</sup> The location of Ensor's prized instrument in front of his masterpiece garnered surprising responses from his close friends and other visitors, for whom Ensor would play. Emma Lambotte wrote that the artist's studio "[was] enchanted, it vibrates and moves... The moment the first chords sound, the masks and the people in the paintings begin to dance. The brass bands in Christ's procession strike up and began to move as if in a film. We are bathed in both music and light. The notes break free, jostle, laugh and giggle, while crying all the time."<sup>62</sup> Ensor consciously situated his harmonium in a place of pride, surrounded by completed paintings and favorite objects from which he drew inspiration. Despite his profound love of music and the time he devoted to *La Gamme d'Amour* and his other compositions in the latter half of his life, Ensor, by all accounts, never achieved a level of talent that went much past mediocre.

Whether or not Ensor considered his musical endeavors to have a deeper philosophical connection with his visual art, there is no doubt that he had a deep affection for music and for composing. His affinity for music and his taste for strange and (what he considered to be) melodious compositions deeply affected his artistic output in the twentieth century. Of his last handful of paintings, most of which are indistinct still lifes,

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<sup>61</sup> Wangermée, 54. Later in his essay, Wangermée expresses doubt about Ensor's abilities as a composer, stating that a revision of *La Gamme d'Amour*, modified by Ensor to incorporate several new interludes, "was, in truth, very vague and lack[ing] any great interest" (58).

<sup>62</sup> Emma Lambotte, *James Ensor intime*, transcript of the conference address given in 1945 at the Galerie Giroux (James Ensor Archief, Slijpe). Translated by Robert Wangermée, *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (1999), 56.

a panel titled *The Spirit of Music* stands out. Energy and light explode from a clarinet-like instrument, while a female figure leads a march with her baton. In the same vein, a penultimate self-portrait, completed in November 1939, shows not Ensor the artist but Ensor the musician, surrounded by the symbols and trappings of a great composer. At the end of his life, it seems that he considered himself more a musician than a painter.

Ensor's artistic output extends beyond simply the visual and musical realms. Like his music, Ensor's writing grew increasingly important to him in the twentieth century. His extant writings take the form of letters, reminiscences, and reactions to derogatory critiques of his work. He also penned a great deal of public speeches; these, in particular, characterize his writing of the twentieth century. As Ensor's reputation grew, so too did the invitations extended to the artist to display his work and address his audience. He relished the occasions on which he played guest-of-honor, and regaled his listeners with elaborate, lively orations.

As Rudolf Schmitz points out, the artist did most of his linguistic composing during the second half of his life, perhaps an implication that his writings signify "a kind of retrospective stylization of the self."<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, a look at Ensor's writing from any moment in his life reveals the colorful, harmonious – and, more often than not, senseless – manner in which the artist constructed his own language. "[T]o ho, bini, ia, gaga, gat tse; ia, gaga, gat tse. Bit, scie, hi, hi, hi, piou, nis ti you, bi, bi, ni, ia gaga gat, tse, hiha gaga gat, tse, tso, tse, tsa, tsu, tsi, tsi, tsi, ri kiki!" he wrote in the preface to the 1921 edition of *Mes Ecrits*, directing the reader to repeat the gibberish expressions aloud.<sup>64</sup> Such words call to mind onomatopoeic Dadaist creations, "phonetic poetry à la

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<sup>63</sup> Rudolf Schmitz, "You Words without Rhyme and Reason, I Love You, I Love You": The Deregulated Language of James Ensor," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 149.

<sup>64</sup> James Ensor, *Mes Ecrits* (Liege, 1974), 11.

Schwitters, Tzara, and Huelsenbeck.”<sup>65</sup> Accepted rules of grammar and syntax were of little consequence to the artist as he constructed his prose. Ensor conceived his language, nonsensical though it may be, as an artful composition, akin to one of his paintings, and possessing the same melodious qualities as his music. His body of writing is vast, varied, and, ultimately, much like his visual art – alternately intense and absurd, frequently bizarre in both form and content, but never failing in sensual interest.

Ensor’s deep affinity for music and language and his intense pursuit of these new artistic endeavors inform his visual art from the twentieth century. Significantly, at this moment in his career, Ensor came closest to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total work of art. Many Symbolist and Expressionist artists aspired to this ideal, first mentioned by composer Richard Wagner in his 1849 essay, *Die Kunst und die Revolution*. The sensual experiences produced by interactions between the arts – visual, musical, theatrical, linguistic – were never far from Ensor’s mind. “I prefer my painting when it speaks to me musically,” he revealed to his audience on the occasion of the Liège premiere of *La Gamme d’Amour*. Visitors to Ensor’s home and studio recalled synaesthetic experiences elicited by the artist’s improvisations on the harmonium. The Haeserts brothers, Paul and Luc, told of hearing during one of these impromptu concerts “strident yellows, sinister reds, loquacious greens and paradise pinks.”<sup>66</sup> Ensor’s sole composition for the stage, *La Gamme d’Amour*, combined his love of theater, music, visual art, and lyrical language into an attempt to intersect the arts and transport his audience to a new spiritual plane.

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<sup>65</sup> Schmitz, 149.

<sup>66</sup> “. . . des jaunes stridents, des rouges patibulaires, des verts loquaces, des roses paradisiaques” L. and P. Haesaerts, *Flandre. Essai sur l’art flamand depuis 1880*, I, *L’impressionnisme* (Paris : Edition des Chroniques du Jour, 1931, p. 273). Translation by Robert Wangermée, in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (1999), 56.



## Conclusion

In the body of Ensor studies, one scholar has attempted to account seriously for the changes in Ensor's art in the twentieth century by way of some psychological rationalization. Doctor H. T. Piron, in a 1968 study, undertook a psychoanalytic examination of Ensor and the effects his repressed memories and impulses played in shaping his art. He suffered from severe anxiety, Piron attested, caused by his early traumas at the hands of critics. Ultimately, the doctor concluded, Ensor's "failure to become a father and his inability to earn a living" resulted in a "loss of virility and a castration complex," which contributed in turn to a lack of potency in his later artistic output.<sup>67</sup> Rather than embark upon a speculative psychoanalytic evaluation like Piron, a different avenue might be explored in the hopes of gaining insight into Ensor's twentieth-century psyche. Ensor, as would be expected from a man so deeply concerned with the "belle legend du Moi," was a prolific author of self-portraits. As considered earlier, many of these images are only visual references to the artist himself; he does not award them the explicit designation of a self-portrait. Ensor generally shied away from discussing these representations of himself; Laurence Madeline suggests that his self-portraits were so intimate that they served "as windows onto his state of mind," reaffirming Emile Verhaeren's comment in 1908 that "[u]p close, one could discern his psychology just by analyzing his self-portraits from different eras."<sup>68</sup> Ensor's self-portraits do indeed serve to illuminate the way Ensor regarded himself, not only in the years before 1908, when

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<sup>67</sup> Diane Lesko, *James Ensor: The Creative Years*, 146. From H. T. Piron, *James Ensor, een psychoanalytische studie* (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1968).

<sup>68</sup> Laurence Madeline, "Ensor Is Eternal: The Painter and His Image," in *James Ensor*, exh. cat., edited by Anna Swinbourne (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 114. Also see Emile Verhaeren, *Sur James Ensor* (Brussels: G. Van Oest, 1908 / reprint, Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1990), 74.

Verhaeren published his monograph, but in the subsequent decades as well. As such, these images provide the necessary means for conclusion.

Ensor's earliest self-portraits fit seamlessly into the style, palette, and technique of his other early works. The artist depicted in the 1879 *Portrait of the Artist* is a young, brooding man, who pauses to turn from his easel to the viewer. The scene is overwhelmingly dark, punctuated only by flashes of orange in the artist's lip, his palette, and a spot on the back wall (fig. 30). Over the next decade, Ensor's self-portraits gain more clarity. Perhaps his most famous, the 1883/1888 *Self-Portrait in a Flowered Hat*, portrays the artist contemplating the viewer from within a sort of circular frame (fig. 31). The first iteration of this portrait, completed in 1883, is relatively unremarkable; five years later, however, Ensor added his fanciful flowered hat, decorated with a huge, rose-colored plume. The self-consciously whimsical image pays homage to Rubens, one of Ensor's Flemish forebears, and someone to whom he looked for inspiration on more than one occasion.<sup>69</sup>

Ensor's self-portraits from the 1880s grew increasingly macabre as the decade progressed. In a duo of images, inspired by a photograph taken in front of the Rousseau home, Ensor literally transforms himself into a skeleton. His hair, clothing, and pose remain the same, but his facial features – save for a pair of eerily lifelike eyes – have degraded into bone (fig. 32). A portrait in the same vein from around the same time, cleverly titled *My Portrait in 1960*, depicts a skeletonized Ensor reclining on a bed (fig. 33). He is entirely bone, save for some jaunty strands of hair and his intact shoes. Such

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<sup>69</sup> A self-portrait drawing of 1884 shows Ensor in a similarly arresting pose, holding his thumb and forefinger in front of his chest in a deliberate fashion. The gesture calls to mind Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait of 1500 (Madeline, 114), as well as Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1513-16; Madeline, 114) and renderings of another Flemish artist, Anthony Van Dyck, in several of the portraits he painted.

scenes illustrate an Ensor striving to preserve his artistic legacy. Unlike most of his self-portraits, Ensor chose to produce these images as engravings; he hoped that prints, with their ability to be reproduced endlessly, would save his name from obscurity.<sup>70</sup>

As the 1880s gave way to the 90s, and Ensor's work began to trend towards the absurd and bizarre, his self-portraits followed suite. Representations of Christ are omnipresent, though a more grizzled and tormented Christ than one is accustomed to seeing in Ensor's previous imagery.<sup>71</sup> Just as he had earlier assumed the 'costume' of the flowered hat, Ensor in the 1890s takes up a number of different guises. In his strangest role yet, Ensor depicts himself as a pickled herring, fought over by reanimated skeletons (a guise he reprises again in *The Dangerous Cooks*, in which 'art Ensor' – a play on 'hareng saur' – is served up to a table of nauseous critics).

Such bizarre self-portraits, in which the artist dons morbid or grotesque disguises, are not present in Ensor's twentieth-century oeuvre. Rather, he seems to have accepted portraying himself as himself (with a few exceptions). His legacy secured and his interests lying elsewhere than the virulent subject matter of his past, Ensor embraced depicting himself in a more light-hearted manner. Still, as was his nature, he was never adverse to a bit of gentle humor and self-deprecation.

The praise heaped on Ensor in the latter half of his life seemed to affirm what he knew all along regarding his visionary genius. His years of torment and anguish at the

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<sup>70</sup> Stephen Goddard, "Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Belgium," in *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, 82. Based on a letter from Ensor to Albert Croquez in 1934, regarding his taking up of the medium of etching in 1886. "Pictorial materials still worry me (in 1886). I dread the fragility of painting, exposed to the crimes of the restorer, to insufficiency, to the slander of reproductions. I want to survive, to speak to the people of tomorrow for a long time yet. I think of solid copper plates, of unalterable inks, of easy reproductions, of faithful printing, and I am adopting etching as a means of expression."

<sup>71</sup> Images such as *Ecce Homo or Christ and the Critics* (1891) and *Man of Sorrows* exemplify these works.

hands of boorish critics and an ignorant public had finally been vindicated. Nevertheless, even a decade before his death, the artist could not help perpetuating the image of himself as the object of ridicule, even if of a decidedly mild-mannered sort. In the painting titled *Me and my Circle* (fig. 34), completed in 1939, Ensor lays down what would be one of his last self-portraits. In this image, he is the Ensor of old age, eyes reddened slightly and his trademark beard turned white. Around him flit familiar bulbous-featured faces, directing their attention fully to the artist. One places a hand on the artist's shoulder, its fingers almost plucking the wiry corsage from Ensor's chest. Above, a head in yellow, with a parrot perched atop, tickles Ensor's ear with his pointed tongue. Several small figures address the artist as well – one spews a tiny stream into his other ear, as another descends from above, appearing the crown Ensor with a sort of beaded halo. Ensor himself seems both amused and oblivious to the proceedings; though his lips betray a smile, he never breaks the viewer's gaze.

A remarkably similar self-portrait accompanied *Me and My Circle* in Ensor's output the same year. *Me, My Color, and My Attributes* presents the same Ensor – gray-haired and -bearded, looking firmly out of the panel, lips in a knowing smile (fig. 35). A duo of half-clothed women descends from the heavens, crowning the artist once again; eccentric and strange-featured figures look on, one reaching his exceptionally long nose towards Ensor. Ensor does not acknowledge their gazes. His eyes are fixed on his audience, willing us to surrender to the lyrical beauty of the work and the elements that made it possible. Surrounding the artist are his 'color' and 'attributes' – shells laid out on a table before him; the sea, turquoise-green behind; and the light, vomited by the sun and directed on either side of the artist's head in white, pink, and blue streams.

Ensor's title for this panel is telling. As the end of his life approaches, he has accepted his status as an artist. His onlookers, mask-like and misshapen, are expected, welcomed even, as part of his 'circle'. Their attempts at mockery amount to little more than harmless teasing – masks like mosquitoes, buzzing in the artist's ear. Such teasing is hardly an attack of the virulent nature that Ensor was accustomed to in the waning decades of the previous century. Ultimately, Ensor's critics and his frequently less-than-adoring public played a vital role in determining his identity as an artist. Despite their frequent torments, his detractors are among those who willed him to follow his unusual vision, shaping his art. *Me, My Color, and My Attributes*, completed near the end of Ensor's life, is a final homage to that which made Ensor Ensor. The painter and his work are now forever fused, each "part of a harmonious whole."<sup>72</sup>

Ensor's self-portraits reflect the evolution of the artist's outlook with regard to his personal and professional status, while still remaining true to the circle of artistic motifs, themes, and ideas that were so crucial to his career. Ensor maintained his loyalty to this 'circle' throughout his life. This is not to say, however, that Ensor shunned experimentation. The mask is an apt motif for Ensor to have dedicated himself to – here was an artist who enjoyed few things more than the assumption of different styles, themes, and media. His attraction to art was its ability, as he saw it, to allow one to follow one's own vision. Ultimately, however, Ensor returned time and again to his own artistic "cosmos," which evolved over time, much like the man who conjured it. The 'early' and 'late' Ensors – so often separated – are both entrenched in this cosmos; an understanding of the true Ensor is incomplete without an examination of his *entire* body of work – not

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<sup>72</sup> Sabine Bown-Taevernier, in *James Ensor*, exh. cat. (2005), 52.

only that leading to the nineteenth century's end. Despite the frequent neglect of the latter decades of Ensor's career, the work that he produced during this time should not be overlooked. Ensor's paintings, prints, and drawings of the twentieth century serve, as Madeline suggests of the artist's self-portraits, as windows into the changing attitudes of an extraordinary and complex man.

## **Epilogue**

James Ensor is not unique in the history of art. Perhaps the artist whose trajectory most closely echoes his own is Edvard Munch, whose artistic career shares not only the same timeline, but also embraces similar themes and imagery. Born only three years after Ensor, Munch also "arrived" as an artist in the early 1890s; most deem the paintings he produced around this time to be his most powerful, the most quintessentially "Munch." Like Ensor, Munch shared a fondness for creating variations of the same image. The German Expressionists held both men in high regard as forerunners of their own aesthetic. Additionally, and most notably for the current discussion, scholarship on Munch's work during the latter half of his life is far less common than that emphasizing his earlier career, although the artist continued to paint until his death in 1944.

Ensor and Munch aside, artists throughout history – Michelangelo, Titian, and Rembrandt, to name but a few – have faced similar treatment by scholars, critics, and the public. Late styles are praised, denigrated, or simply left unconsidered. The argument presented here finds its place within a larger dialogue. The "old-age style" is an art historical paradigm; but, is it one we should seek to revise? Is it unique to particular

artists, or is it an indication of some larger phenomenon?<sup>73</sup> How can we test its validity?<sup>74</sup>

The answers prove as varied as the individuals to whom they apply. Only when we consider all the forces – personal, social, political – at play can we truly begin to understand, accept, or refute the notion that “in the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See David Rosand’s consideration of the 1985 College Art Association symposium on late styles in “Style and the Aging Artist,” *Art Journal*, vol. 46, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 91-93.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” 1937. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002): 567.

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