

## EXHIBITION: The temptations of James Ensor Works from 1888 to 1940

Samuel Vanhoegaerden Gallery is pleased to show at Brafa 2020 an extraordinary collection of works by James Ensor gathered for the first time



James Ensor, *Ballerines muées en marguerites*, huile sur toile, 1936

### James ENSOR, genius and founder of modern art

James Ensor is one of Belgium's most important artists, belonging in the same list as Van Eyck, Rubens, Bruegel and Magritte. His works are of great rarity (he painted only around 850 works) and a large portion of them have already found a place in the world's largest museums. Ensor's importance cannot be overestimated. His name appears in all works on modern art and he was groundbreaking in his manner of painting. James Ensor paved the way for the emergence of Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, among others, and even today, artists like Pierre Alechinsky and Luc Tuymans are indebted to his work.

Over the years, the art market has increasingly realized just how decisive Ensor was for art history, and he is increasingly appreciated internationally. Already during his lifetime, and to this day, exhibitions of his works continue to be held in the world's most important museums (the latest including the MOMA, the Getty Museum and the Musée d'Orsay) and research into his work continues to expand. The market for his paintings and drawings is slowly drying up as these works find their way to museum collections, and with the few available paintings remaining family-owned.

James Ensor's work is timeless and continues to amaze and delight every generation. His works are sought by collectors of classical, modern and even contemporary works, for their unique painting style and their rarity on the international art market.

This exhibition is therefore an excellent opportunity for an overview, offering a choice of works that has not been seen for years on the Ensor art market, thanks to 10 years of collecting and saving drawings and paintings. The exhibition aims to bring the artist closer to the general public and, in addition to the paintings and drawings, includes photographs and documents made available by the Ensor archive. These are accompanied by a new book/catalogue with more than 100 illustrations that should provide a better insight into the world of James Ensor.

Thirteen paintings (canvases/panels) will be shown along with more than twenty drawings, which are also extensively described and studied in the book. All this with the support and cooperation of Belgian and international Ensor experts (including Herwig Todts, Patrick Florizoone and Susan M. Canning). This is necessary because a number of previous unseen works are shown in which we can discover new insights into certain themes in Ensor's work.

It is not since the mid-80s that a collection of this size and importance has been displayed and offered for sale in a gallery. The compilation of this expo already started in 2010 and finally got its stage in 2020 (just over 70 years after the artist's death in 1949) during the BRAFA 2020 art fair.

Additional information:

(Xavier Tricot collected all the material available on Ensor's paintings and published, for the first time in 1992 and again in 2009, an illustrated overview of 852 paintings. This makes it an indispensable source of information both for the study of Ensor's biography, and for the knowledge of Ensor's painted oeuvre.

Exhibition from 23 January to 2 February 2020 during the BRAFA Art Fair in Brussels  
Open to the public from 26 January.

## Biography James Ensor

James Ensor was born in Ostend in 1860, where his mother ran a small shop selling souvenirs, curios and masks, which later became a major source of inspiration for many paintings and drawings. From his early teens, Ensor knew he was a very talented draughtsman and he was soon looking beyond the imposed learning system.

'In 1877 I entered the Brussels Academy. In 1880 I left, having had more than I could take of that myopic loft, saturated with antiques, and drunk and tired of compliments reeled-off from the mouths of vulgar professors...'

During these academic years, he did, nonetheless, show considerable interest in the old masters, whose influence that would remain present in much of his oeuvre. In his numerous letters, pamphlets and speeches, he regularly quotes Flemish masters like as Bruegel and Rubens, but also Rembrandt, Goya, Turner and Watteau.

'Rembrandt m'a plu d'abord beaucoup, mais mes sympathies sont allées beaucoup plus tard à Goya et Turner. Je fus charmé de trouver deux maîtres épris de lumière et de violence. Les inventions extraordinaires de Jérôme Bosch et Pierre Brueghel me plurent extrêmement aussi. Je trouvais les œuvres supérieures à celles des autres maîtres de l'école flamande'.

(Rembrandt first of all pleased me a lot, but much later my sympathies went to Goya and Turner. I was charmed to find two masters enamoured with light and violence. Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Breugel's extraordinary inventions also pleased me enormously. I found these works superior to those of the other masters of the Flemish school) (letter from Ensor, c. 1894/1895 to Flemish art critic and poet Pol de Mont)

In 1883, the Les XX group was founded. This was of great importance to Ensor. Lawyers and art connoisseurs Octave Maus and Edmond Picard were the driving force behind this group, which distanced itself from the official bodies and academia, and sought to contribute actively to the renewal of modern art. These salons were an important opportunity for Ensor to exhibit his paintings and he sold various works there. There, too, he encountered incomprehension from his colleagues, but drew inspiration from this struggle, giving him the impetus to renew his oeuvre.

‘... surrounded by hostilities within the group of twenty, and criticized to such an extent that I start painting masks with pleasure. Since then, the taste of the mask has never left me ...’ (letter 6 Oct. 1899 to Dujardin)

Throughout his career, Ensor emphasized in his letters and lectures people's criticism of his work, which served only to strengthen his myth.

‘In 1881, ever since my first Chrysalide salon and full of peaceful intentions, I upended all the usual painters' decorum. I got a shower of criticism: since then I have never let go of my umbrella. They curse and accuse me, I'm crazy, bad, malicious, incompetent, ignorant ... a simple 'cabbage-head' has become a corrupting influence, my interiors are flat ... A hellish struggle has erupted ...’ (Extract from a lecture by Ensor in 1922)

1886/87 marks a turning point in Ensor's work. During these two years his oeuvre undergoes a spectacular change. He adapts his iconography by adding masks, grotesques and fantasy creatures. We see this for the first time in his masterly drawing *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* from 1886/87, now in the Art Institute of Chicago. His painting style evolves from a rather sombre palette to very personal, colourful and genial brushwork. This new style, that we can view as a precursor of Fauvism, Expressionism and Surrealism, will serve as a guide in the constant evolution of art history. It is in this new style that Ensor began his most important masterpiece *The Entry of Christ into Brussels* in 1888. Today this monumental painting (2.58 x 4.31 m) has its permanent place in the Jean Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, from where it will never again be lent.

‘The Entry of Christ into Brussels is a cornerstone of the Getty Museum collection. It is also a groundbreaking work of modernism and a milestone in Western art history,” explains Getty Museum director Timothy Potts “Most visitors think that Impressionists like Monet and Post-Impressionists like Seurat form the avant-garde of the nineteenth century. Well, they will be surprised to see the much more radical and modern works of Ensor: a real and very special iconoclast’.

Ensor's position at the end of the nineteenth is explained as follows by Alfred H. Barr, art historian and first director of the MoMA in New York: ‘At that point in his career, Ensor was perhaps the most daring of all living artists. Gauguin was then producing semi-Impressionist works, and it was not until the following year, in 1888, that Van Gogh broke free from Impressionism under the burning sun of Arles’. Another

statement by this art critic that gives us an insight into the importance he attached to Ensor's oeuvre was; 'Ensor is known only by initiates, but he is the bravest and boldest painter of his time'.

The painting group Les XX was dissolved in 1893, but Ensor obtained another platform for exhibiting his works with the creation of a new group, La Libre Esthétique, again by art lover Octave Maus. In that period, the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels was the first museum to purchase a painting by Ensor (The Lamp-Lighter, for the sum of 2500 francs), and despite the criticism of his works, there were some early enthusiasts, such as the Ernest Rousseau-Hannon family, Emile Verhaeren and Eugène Demolder, who began collecting his works.

His fame grew and from 1900 he also took part in most exhibitions in Europe. Demand for Ensor's paintings continued to grow, thanks in part to his good relationships with the Lambotte family and François Frank, who soon became great admirers of his oeuvre. It was François Frank who, with the donation of his collection to the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, laid the foundation for the largest Ensor collection in the world.

From 1910 Ensor received major solo exhibitions, among others in Rotterdam and Antwerp. The respect with which he was held by his fellow painters grew over the years. Some, like Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde, Vuillard, Kandinsky and Heckel even travelled to visit him in Ostend.

In 1911 Ensor began his extensive Gamme d'Amour ballet project, for which he developed texts, drawings, paintings, music (from 1907) and the décor. This ballet was not performed until 1920, during his exhibition at the Georges Giroux Gallery in Brussels, at which the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels purchased six new works.

At the fifteenth Venice Biennale in 1926, Belgium was represented by James Ensor, with publications about him following. He was given various exhibitions abroad (Hanover, Berlin, Dresden and elsewhere) and a large and important retrospective at the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels in 1929. There, for the first time, he exhibited his sensational painting The Entry of Christ into Brussels, and in the same year he was also ennobled with the title of baron. Ensor was increasingly gaining the respect and fame he merited. In the 1930s a first major exhibition in Paris followed at the Jeu de Paume, with almost 180 works. His home town of Ostend also paid homage to Ensor with a big celebration and an exhibition with his works in dialogue with, among others, Picasso, Dalí, Miro and Max Ernst. Museums began to include Ensor in their collections and in the 1940s the Albertina Museum in Vienna purchased a set of 26 drawings and 59 etchings. Still during Ensor's lifetime, the Georges Giroux Gallery held a large retrospective (in 1945), which was repeated by the National Gallery in London (in 1946). Ensor was therefore appreciated during his lifetime and his work exhibited internationally.

The painted oeuvre of Ensor is actually rather small, consisting of around 850 works, of which only a hundred or so were produced between 1886 and 1900. Most of these are now in museum collections, with only around fifty (usually smaller) works from this period still in private ownership. Ensor's post-1900 work remained unloved for a long time, but is now also finding its way into important private collections and museums.

When James Ensor died on 19 November 1949 in Ostend, he was able to look back on an attractive career, being held in great respect for his contribution to modern art. Since then, his importance has been confirmed to such an extent that his work can be placed on a par with the very greatest in international art history. Ensor's vision of his original themes and his painting style continued to evolve into his later years and, as with his first works, the public needed time to appreciate this evolution. Ensor's strength was to remain modern and progressive, independent of all trends and '-isms' that came and went through the 65 years that he painted.

Samuel Vanhoegaerden

### [Biography Samuel Vanhoegaerden Gallery](#)

Founded in 2000, the Samuel Vanhoegaerden Gallery specializes in paintings and sculptures dating from 1945 until today. It has organized solo shows devoted to the Belgian artists Panamarenko, Christian Dotremont, Bram Bogart and Fred Eerdekens and has published a catalogue on each occasion. It has also exhibited work by international artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, Alexander Calder, Hans Hartung and Sam Francis.

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