LOOKING FOR JAMES ENSOR

The Belgian artist's prodigiously eclectic oeuvre, on view in an exhibition originating at MoMA and opening this month at the Musée d'Orsay, shows him to be at once an influential avant-gardist, anarchic malcontent, traditionalist and religious visionary.

BY RICHARD KALINA

ANYONE IN SEARCH OF A CLEAR STORY line should probably stay away from James Ensor. His work reveals no rational development, stylistic consistency, focused set of concerns, or even any overriding, organizing obsession (though he did have an abiding interest in light and a well-honed self-regard). If you want, however, an artist whose diverse ambitions seem strangely in tune with today's prodigiously eclectic art world, Ensor's your man. The Belgian artist (1860-1949), the subject of a full-scale exhibition of paintings, drawings and prints recently at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was part influential avant-gardist, part anarchic malcontent, part religious visionary, and part artistic traditionalist and homebody—pretty much all at the same time. His work has generally been cast as proto-Expressionist, placing him in the same camp as Edvard Munch, although Ensor's art is much more peculiar and unsettling. Many are familiar with his major painting, the vast and teeming *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888)—owned by the Getty Museum, which does not permit it to travel—and some know the mask and skeleton paintings, but much of his considerable output has remained unavailable to the larger public, housed in private collections and Belgian institutions.

The show, organized by MoMA curator Anna Swinbourne, with the assistance of Jane Panetta and outside scholar Susan Canning, concentrates on Ensor's work from the 1880s and '90s. His themes were all settling into place by then, animated by a taste for esthetic exploration, a need to respond to the social unrest around him and a desire to assert himself in a world—especially an art world—which he believed grievously misunderstood him. When that world began to accept him (his work became widely collected and exhibited when he reached middle age, and he was made a baron by the king in 1929), his production fell off. He concentrated on making rather anemic variants of older work, composing music and improvising on his harmonium (using only the black keys, since he was afraid of the white ones), and receiving the plaudits accorded to a proverbial, albeit quirky, big fish in a small pond.

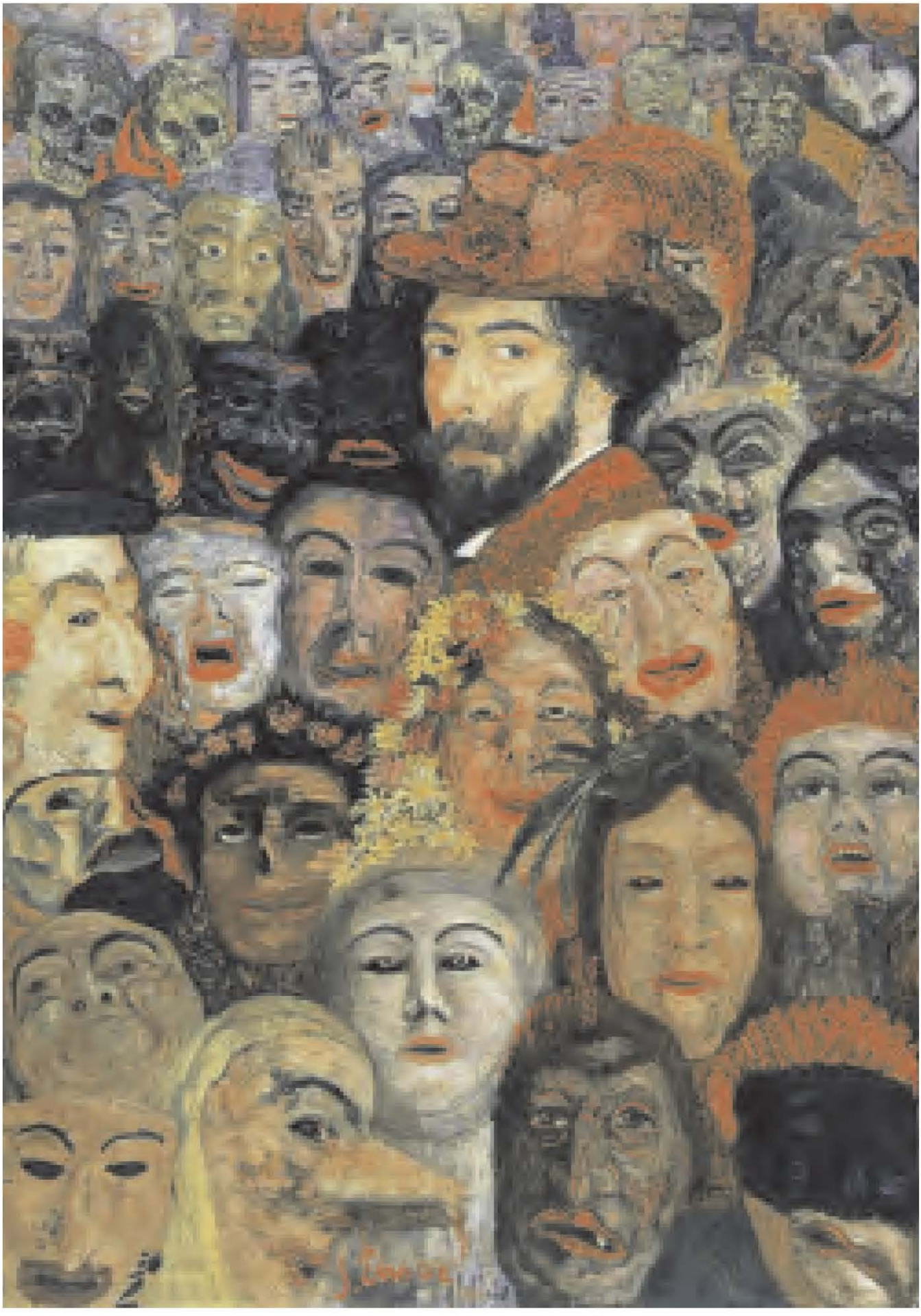
ENSOR WAS BORN IN the prosperous seaside resort town of Ostend, the only son of an alcoholic but emotionally supportive English engineer and his Flemish wife, whose family owned a curio shop stocked with the sort of arresting items—particularly grotesque carnival masks—that came to populate Ensor's art. Although he studied at the beaux-arts academy in Brussels and made frequent trips to that city, most of his life was spent in Ostend. (During the period covered by the bulk of this show, he lived above the family's shop and had his studio in the building's attic.) He left Belgium on only a handful of occasions.

Ostend was a town that seemed to have two settings—lively, even frantic, during the summer months and the pre-Lent Carnival, and somnolent the rest of the year. Those moods are expressed in Ensor's drawings and

Opposite, James Ensor: *Self-Portrait with Masks*, 1899, oil on canvas, 47¼ by 31½ inches. Menard Art Museum, Komaki City, Japan. All works this article © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SABAM, Brussels.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"James Ensor" is at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris [Oct. 19, 2009-Feb. 4, 2010].



Rooftops of Ostend (Grand View of Ostend), 1884, oil on canvas, 58¾ by 81⅛ inches. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

paintings. On the spirited side are the works depicting marching crowds, large groups of frolicking bathers, fireworks displays, and figures wearing fanciful masks and costumes. On the subdued end are the loose, nearly abstract cityscapes like *Rue de Flandre in the Snow* and *Boulevard Van Iseghem in the Rain* (both 1880), which give us the precise feel of Ostend's dim, chilly streets in the off-season, or the impressively large and vigorously palette-knifed *Rooftops of Ostend (Grand View of Ostend)*, 1884. That painting, with its strip of russet rooftops huddling under a huge, lowering sky, practically breathes the town's damp air and radiates its diffused light. Those residents who could manage it stayed indoors during the gray winter days by the North Sea. Ensor's paintings of family members eating, reading or otherwise taking their ease perfectly convey the shadowed, cozy, multipatterned interiors typical of late 19th-century bourgeois households—the kinds of rooms we see in Vuillard's work of roughly the same period. *A Colorist* (1880), *Afternoon in Ostend* (1881) and *The Oyster Eater* (1882) all fit comfortably into the mainstream of the period's Impressionist-inflected domestic portraiture. They are carefully and traditionally composed, but amply scaled and painted with great brio, using palette knives as well as brushes. There are strong tonal contrasts, and a mix of fully worked and sketchily rendered areas. This is seen to excellent effect in *The Oyster Eater*, a work measuring nearly 7 by 5 feet. It shows Ensor's sister Mitche (with whom he lived most of his life) seated at a table set with a glowing assortment of food and drink, tucking into a plate of oysters. The painting was rejected for official exhibition on a number of occasions and, when finally shown, roundly criticized—ostensibly for its unfinished quality but also, in all likelihood, for its indecorous display of appetite. Women in polite Belgian society were not supposed to take such obvious pleasure in eating. Who knew where that might lead?

It was a moralizing time, and unseemly behavior was deemed pathological. Certain activities and proclivities, drinking to excess chief among them, were seen as social illnesses, and heritable ones at that. Not surprisingly, the working classes were considered particularly susceptible. Drunkenness followed by bankruptcy, shame and death was a downward spiral feared by many, and it turned out to be the fate of Ensor's father (although in his case, bankruptcy was apparently the triggering factor). Ensor, however, was scarcely a prig. He loved and admired his cultured, multilingual parent, an affection evident in the warm, light-filled *Portrait of the Artist's Father* (1881), which shows the subject immersed in reading. Ensor's take on social issues was complex. While his family's circumstances put them on the lower rungs of the middle class, their financial position, as was the case of many in businesses dependent on the unstable tourist trade, was tenuous.

ENSOR WAS CONCERNED ABOUT HOW HE WAS TO BE SEEN BY HIS CONTEMPORARIES AND BY HISTORY. WHICH WERE THE MASKS HE WORE BY CHOICE, AND WHICH IMPOSED ON HIM BY OTHERS?

Above, *The Drunkards*, 1883, oil on canvas, 45¼ by 64⅞ inches. Dexia Collection, Brussels.

Left, *The Oyster Eater*, 1882, oil on canvas, 81½ by 59⅛ inches. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

Below, *Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves*, 1889, oil on canvas, 29½ by 23⅝ inches. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.

The Drunkards (1883), for example, is not the patronizing genre piece it might have been in other hands. One working-class drinker sits awkwardly at a table, clutching his leg, staring out at us; another is slumped over, head cradled in his arms. There is a bottle and glass between them, and bankruptcy notices are pasted on the wall. The room is softly lit, and we can sense Ensor's sympathy for the men and their plight.

If the ensemble depicted in *The Drunkards* seems theatrical, it introduces a sustained mode in Ensor's work, one clearly evident in *The Scandalized Masks* (1883). Again, we have a simple room with two people, a table, a half-empty bottle and a glass. But for the first time in Ensor's paintings, the characters, a man and a woman, are masked. The man presents the more comic figure. Seated at the table, he looks up with a befuddled air at the woman, a sinister presence who stands in the doorway wearing dark glasses and clutching a flute as if it were a club. The scene, with its sense of discombobulated menace, feels like something out of a Samuel Beckett play.

Ensor's attic studio was the setting for many of these odd tableaux. If the well-appointed rooms of his family portraits signify domesticity of a rather stifling kind, the uncarpeted floors and plain walls of his studio, as seen in his mask and skeleton paintings, tell us that something else is going on. *Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves* (1889) is not the same sort of well-meaning Realist morality play as *The Drunkards.* In this painting, a group of emaciated figures with masked or skeletal heads, dressed in bedraggled clothes, gathers around a cold stove in a vain attempt to warm themselves. An artist's palette lies on the floor next

to a violin, and other props are scattered about. The figures and their surroundings are painted with a beautiful tremulousness in a range of soft pinks, azures and coppery greens, enlivened with areas of bold crimson. There is a story here, quite possibly an allegory of the poverty and lack of recognition that is the artist's lot. But it is told indirectly, as puppetry—a form of street theater and oblique social commentary common in Belgium at the time.

Even more peculiar and amusing is *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* (1889). This painting (also set in the studio) features a masked, parasol-toting female figure, shown in profile and wearing shawls; a long, vaguely snot-like ornament dangles from her grotesquely extended nose. She gazes at a scattered miscellany: skulls, masks, shoes, musical instruments, figurines, a candle, a green Chinese-style wall hanging. The props, many taken from the family's shop downstairs, could be elements of either a still life or a play. In his masked or caricatured mise-en-scènes Ensor is sometimes very clear about whom he is depicting (family member, friend, enemy, public figure, biblical character), but just as often he is purposely ambiguous.

WHILE WE UNDERSTAND that Ensor had a particularly intimate link to the mask, it is important to note that masquerade is a typical late 19th-century European theme, one ideally suited to the Symbolism so prevalent in the culture. This was a time of great ferment during which, many artists and writers believed, humanity's true essence was hidden. That essence, they felt, could be approached most closely through the deeper world of symbols. The mask has traditionally functioned as a complex carrier of meaning. For Ensor, it seems also to have allowed for boundaries to be blurred, and for certain questions to be raised: Where does the real end and the fanciful or imaginary begin? What is the difference between a person caricatured or exaggerated and a person in a costume or disguise? What is the border between the self and the world? How does one present oneself to others? How truthful is that presentation, and how can it be properly and safely controlled? For his entire career Ensor was greatly concerned about how he was to be seen, by his contemporaries and by history. Which were the masks he wore by choice, and which imposed upon him by others?

This preoccupation was reflected in a constant stream of self-portraits. I cannot think of anyone among his contemporaries who

Left, *The Dangerous Cooks*, 1896, pencil, gouache and oil on board, 7⅞ by 9¾ inches. Private collection.

Opposite, *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse*, 1889, oil on canvas, 42¼ by 51½ inches. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

was so invested in self-representation. Certainly van Gogh and Gauguin produced masterful paintings of themselves, but they were reasonably straightforward productions. Ensor portrayed himself, in paintings, drawings and prints, not only in more or less traditional guise, but also as a dandy in a flowered hat, a woman, Pierrot, a skeleton (on numerous occasions), a bug, and—a favorite of his—a pickled herring (in French, "hareng saur" sounds like "art Ensor" a pun spelled out in *The Dangerous Cooks*, 1896). Ensor also presented himself as a jaunty head nearly engulfed in a sea of masks, a man tormented by demons, a frightening Japanese Noh mask and a fool pissing against a wall. He became a coy man-maiden being coaxed into the water by a hearty-looking woman in a black bathing suit, a supplicant of the Virgin Mary, a John the Baptist-like figure with his head on a plate (ready to be eaten by the critics), and, seemingly whenever possible, he cast himself as Jesus Christ.

Religious themes were a touchstone of Ensor's art, although he was not known to have been particularly pious. He was scarcely alone in this: religion was a fertile ground for many modern artists with a Symbolist bent. Ensor's desire to imbue his art with extra resonance while pursuing ambitious formal strategies is evident in two large works from 1887. The luminous, Turneresque *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* shows two small figures on the run from a vaguely delineated but presumably angry God, while *Tribulations of St. Anthony* gives us the red-robed early Christian ascetic set in a scumbled, watery landscape and surrounded by loosely painted demon tormentors and various temptations of the flesh.

In addition to providing spiritual associations, religion served as a vehicle for Ensor's pointed social commentary. Belgium was (and remains) a thoroughly Catholic country (it is said that there are two sects in Belgium, Catholics and people who have had a fight with a priest), and the social upheavals that were taking place there in the latter decades of the 19th century had many church-related dimensions. (It should be noted that Belgium had been an independent country only since 1830.) The Catholic Party and its supporters were conservative, royalist, traditional and powerful. There was, however, another take on Christianity prevalent at the time, in which the story of Christ was seen as an analogue to the era's social transformations. In this view, Christ was not an emblem of church authority but essentially a humanist, the martyred savior of mankind. Espoused by the French positivist philosopher Emile Littré, this scenario played well in the progressive, anarchist circles of Ensor and his colleagues in Les Vingt (or Les XX), an avant-garde group he co-founded in 1883 (other members included Jan Toorop and Henry van de Velde).

While Ensor's most famous painting, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, is not in the show, two major works on paper are: *The Lively and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* and *The Rising: Christ Shown to the People* (both 1885). These very large pieces (the former is nearly 7 by 5 feet and the latter measures approximately 5 by 3½ feet) are not preparatory drawings for the painting per se, but rather serve more broadly to develop its pictorial organization and its themes. For Ensor, drawing and printmaking were scarcely the handmaidens of painting; they functioned as important expressive and exploratory mediums on their own. Drawing allowed Ensor to satisfy his penchant for complexity, layering and elaboration. He would often paste drawings together and rework them to create larger and more ambiguous compositions. He also went back to earlier drawings and added new, seemingly unrelated material—as in *Hippogriff* (1880-83/1886-88) and *The Flea* (1880-83/1888)—turning a relatively straightforward depiction into something compellingly disjunctive. Typically crayon, graphite and chalk were used in various combinations, sometimes with additions of colored pencil, watercolor or gouache. While Ensor was attracted, as were many artists of his time, to a flowing arabesque, his

Above, *The Baths at Ostend*, 1890, black crayon, colored pencil and oil on panel, 14¾ by 17⅞ inches. Fondation Challenges, The Netherlands.

Opposite, *The Lively and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*, 1885, black and brown crayon, with collaged paper, mounted on canvas, 81 by 59⅛ inches. Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.

"James Ensor" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York [June 28-Sept. 21, 2009] before traveling to the Musée d'Orsay, Paris [Oct. 19-Feb. 4, 2010]. It is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Anna Swinbourne, Susan Canning, Jane Panetta, Michel Draguet, Robert Hoozee, Laurence Madeline and Herwig Todts.

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line was generally compact, expressive and tightly wound, well suited to the massing of shadow and the description of ornamental or anatomical detail. Ensor considered himself the modern master of light, and, consciously looking to Rembrandt's etchings, he balanced areas of darkened, clumped figures against glowing zones of illumination, creating compositions full of dramatic tonal variation.

The Lively and Radiant sets a biblical theme in the tumultuous present. The tiny figure of Christ is nearly lost in a surging crowd (Littré is pictured prominently in the lower right). Boldly declarative banners strung overhead scream out "Hip, Hip Hurrah," and offer salutes to Jesus, King of the Jews; the butchers of Jerusalem and Les XX, among others. You can practically hear the din. (*Christ's Entry into Brussels*, which Ensor stages on the centenary of the French Revolution, is even noisier, with additional shout-outs to Colman's mustard, the Flemish separatist movement and assorted socialist figures.) In the late 1880s, large marches, strikes and demonstrations were frequent in Brussels and other parts of Belgium; momentous events seemed imminent. Crowds were a political fact of the day, and Ensor's work is full of them. Masses of people fill the foreground of the small etching *The Cathedral* (1886); they flee from Death in *Death Pursuing the Human Flock* (1887), fight each other in numerous drawings, turn into clowns in *White and Red Clowns Evolving* (1890), bathe in the sea and engage in a variety of naughty acts in *The Baths at Ostend* (1890), and get literally shat on *en masse* by the leading political, religious and military figures of the day in *Doctrinaire Nourishment* (1889).

The last two drawings show us another side of Ensor: the bawdy one. Raunchy humor is very Belgian (Brussels is, after all, the city of the famous Manneken Pis—the statue of the local boy who, in one version of the legend, won an important battle by pissing on enemy troops), and Ensor's work has its full complement of bodily-function gags. Along with many of his friends, Ensor participated in the proto-Dadaist Zwanze movement (the French equivalent was Fumisme), which used mockery, practical jokes and irreverent performance to send up official culture and social niceties. Furthermore, as a Flemish artist, Ensor was consciously heir to the "excessive inventions" (as he put it) and the ribaldry of Bosch and Bruegel. Ensor's social commentary was not confined to the explicitly political: he lambasted doctors, musicians, artists and art critics as well.

Ensor, who had an extraordinarily high opinion of himself and his talent, was a man easily offended. He was greatly concerned with his place in the history of art, and his relations with his artistic contemporaries (particularly with the members of Les XX) were touchy in the extreme. His feelings about Rubens—a fellow Flemish painter—were complex, but about Rembrandt more straightforward. Dürer was referenced (the hand gesture in Ensor's 1884 *My Portrait* echoes that of Dürer in his Christlike *Self-Portrait* of 1500); Turner and Goya (like Bosch and Bruegel) were admired, and a host of other artists were copied, from Hals to Hokusai. His peers, however, presented more of a problem. He disparaged Monet and actively opposed Whistler's election to Les XX, but he faced a major setback at the group's 1887 exhibition, where, in addition to Ensor's large drawings, Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* was shown. Ensor's work was not particularly well received—its religious subject matter seemed old-fashioned—while Seurat's experimental divisionism generated great excitement, and even emulation, among Ensor's fellow avant-gardists. For someone who saw himself as *the* painter of light, Seurat's scientific approach to the subject, which appealed to his contemporaries' modernist sensibility, was terribly galling. (It is thought that Ensor had Seurat's grandly scaled statement in mind as he worked on his own huge painting, *Christ's Entry into Brussels*, which he completed the following year.)

WHILE ENSOR MIGHT not have allied himself with or benefited from the great formal and technical advances of Post-Impressionism and Cubism, he ought to be considered as more than an offbeat precursor of such Expressionists as Klee, Nolde and Beckmann. His protean quirkiness, his unabashed theatricality and his search for an elusive self put him close to the contemporary sensibility. Stir in his engagement with social issues and his cutting, often bawdy wit, stoke the mix with a sense of outraged morality, and you have an even more up-to-date voice. It finds echoes in the work of artists ranging from Paul McCarthy to Neo Rauch. But what we don't see now are these qualities combined with an earlier age's acute sensitivity to the nature of paint and line, and to the subtle variation of light on both highly articulated domestic interiors and on the built and natural landscapes—expressed, of course, with classically based technical skill. Ensor succeeded within the quite separate disciplines of painting, drawing and printmaking, and could vary his techniques, often radically, depending on what he wished to convey. The result, as this beautifully organized and scholarly exhibition confirms, is an art that both captures its period and transcends it. ○


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