



This page, left: James Ensor, *Doctrinaire Nourishment. Plate I, State II, 1889*, etching with watercolor and gouache on Japan paper, plate: 7 x 9 3/4". All works © 2009 Estate of James Ensor/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SABAM, Brussels. Right: James Ensor, *The Scandalized Masks, 1883*, oil on canvas, 53 1/4 x 44 1/4". Opposite page, from left: James Ensor, *Skeletons Fighting over a Pickled Herring, 1891*, oil on panel, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2". James Ensor, *Tribulations of Saint Anthony, 1887*, oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 66".



## James Ensor

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK  
Max Kozloff

AMONG THE FOUNDERS of modern Western art, James Ensor created work that stands out as an indictment of bourgeois society—to a point of scathing derision. While many advanced artists kept their distance from the subject of the tawdry capitalist present, he took it on. This was in the Belgian seaside resort of Ostend, in the 1880s, where Ensor painted in a studio above his family's curiosity shop. There—still in his twenties—he developed an insolence of pictorial statement comparable to his anarchist sympathies in politics. Figures of authority were his special *bêtes noires*, while Jesus/Ensor, a personage who makes occasional appearances in his paintings and drawings, comes across as a rather fluorescent character. How much there was to condemn in the Belgian order of the day: King Leopold II's rape of the Congo, the exploitation of wretched miners as well as other workers, the corruption of the judiciary. And not least, in Ensor's mind, the stupidity of art critics. He turned dignitaries into skeletons or fat asses, defecating on the populace. No one will have left the marvelous Ensor retrospective at MOMA, which fixed on his most creative period, the last two decades of the nineteenth century, without being impressed by his keen sense of the ridiculous, reinforced by a macabre tone. Paintings are, of course, silent, but if they could somehow be heard, his

would be scored for bones that click and fannies that fart.

Ensor started out as an academically trained painter of the bourgeois interior. Along with more luminous still lifes and seascapes, his muddy images of teatime were spackled by a palette knife, which did more to slab over than to define the genteel motif. It was as if the brown coats of surface paint concealed some eventfulness that could not yet be visualized. And then, in a canvas of 1883, the door to a room opens and there enters a little old lady wearing a blind person's sunglasses. Her face is covered by a mask equipped with a long snout, like the mask on the plebeian man who greets her at a table. The fantasia for which Ensor would come to be known had its debut in this painting, *The Scandalized Masks*.

Visionary as his art proved to be, it was grounded by observation of its social domain. It's just that his account of the environment specialized in malignancies behind the scenes. According to Ensor, polite discourse is a facade that misdirects citizens away from any reckoning with the fatuity and brutality of their myths. In the world he depicted, there are no manners worth mentioning, only masks, which are symbolic faces advertising their work as disguise. Even when prettified by greasepaint, masks imply the wearer's decay. As for the black eyeholes of these objects, they reveal that there is only nothingness or death behind. This is an extreme judgment, to be sure, but one that Ensor played up by means of acidic color and a festive tone. He exploited the relationship between carnival masks and the traditional overloading of caricature to the nth degree. Ensor had an anthological temperament, a desire to mob the field with atomized bodies or crazy faces. He was quite capable of including himself as a goateed dandy with a plumed hat, unfazed amid a gaggle of those sappy physiognomies. But his is the only one with human flesh and a self-regarding expression. The others display false smiles.

In such a chorus of ghouls, the artist asserts a frivolous tone that is also morbid. In fact, his images are haunted by the theme of our mortality and therefore the

existential predicament of our fate. Ensor suffuses this theme within displays of popular art, the entertainments of tourists, pious rituals, billboards, and mass rallies. They have an unnatural, pumped-up vivacity, rendered through the artist's appropriation of vernacular styles. In the process, his surfaces came to have a tortured look, for the scraped and shredded matter of his figures seems torn from their fields, which are agitated in their own right. As his subjects are often implicitly cacophonous, his visualization of them might be outright cacographic. In the upper-right area of *Tribulations of Saint Anthony*, 1887, a mess of red scribbles looks suspiciously like graffiti. In single sketchbook drawings, unrelated afterthoughts obtrude imperfectly over very different beginnings, compromising them both with effects of gratuitous double exposure. When he drew raucous crowds, the artist threaded them with thousands of little hairy lines that squiggle into one another. Ensor was no fan of legibility.

At the same time, in the edginess of this art, a distinction is made between what is celebrated and what was actually there to celebrate. *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* of 1888–89 (the great early summa of his work, which could not travel to MOMA's show) and the drawing *The Cuirassiers at Waterloo*, 1891, are among the many works that demonstrate Ensor's gift for historical travesty. He populated the horizon with swarms of miniature dolls, dupes, and pseudo rocking horses, animated with delusions of grandeur. Without knowing it, Ensor anticipated the mind-numbing, pathological ideologies of the twentieth century. Yet here was a cavalier painter who merely took it into his head to imagine the past as a flea market of dead legends. The spectacle can remind you of J. M. Barrie's remark: "I'm not young enough to know everything."

Ensor's presumption that thuggery lurked in human behavior was hardly a discovery. He was nevertheless the first modernist pioneer to temper his images with a post-Enlightenment outlook. He startles us not because his work is antiheroic but because it is antiprogressive, alien



to any sense of positive change. We are doomed to repeat our follies in an endless cycle, without a future and without pathos or tragedy. Where many other, forward-looking artists slipped loose from their cultural legacy, he rehabilitated his. How remarkable that his dismal teaching is founded on larcenies from art history, visualized by results that are at once fustian, burlesque, and savage. Ensor is an anomaly, a thoroughly contemporary mind who makes his case by means of backward glances.

He was surely familiar with medieval Dances of Death. There can be no doubt of his acquaintance with Renaissance "sacred conversations," on which he modeled skeletal parodies. This artist from Ostend, who read Rabelais and Poe, gives the impression of having been raised on Bosch and Bruegel, Goya, James Gillray, Daumier, and

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late Turner, too. It is not far-fetched to speculate that he was aware of nineteenth-century "spirit" photography. And from contemporary broadsides and handbills, as well as cartoons, he took a great deal. Rather than smoothly blending into one another, these sources bump around at unexpected meetings in vague terrains. For an artist who liked displacement as much as Ensor did, a look of deliberate appropriation was a virtue, not a defect.

Can anything on this lunatic carousel be taken seriously? Does it even make sense? Surely its mix of high culture and low doggerel is less of a challenge to us now than it would have been to viewers in its own era. Ensor paved the way for our understanding of art as a portmanteau of quotations, in dissonant or incongruous relation to one another. No one can be certain of his diction, or the tongue he spoke, or what his intentions ever were. Paradoxically, he who aimed to expose hypocrisy hides

behind the pictorial language of others and winds up as an oracle of deceit.

To the extent that his sources can be recognized, they are also degraded. He keeps them in low company, for the sheer fun of it. But Ensor does not finally channel us into any such inconsequential, endgame state. As Holland Cotter wrote of the MOMA show in the *New York Times*: "It will appeal to anyone trying to negotiate an insider-outsider perch, anyone obsessed by violence and light, anyone who knows that loony is relative, that art is reality seen from a high, small place, that the distance from a joke to a shock to a prayer is short." That reference to a "joke" is worth talking about. The atmosphere evoked in Ensor's paintings is certainly jocose, but it seldom tickles laughter. Certainly he had a comedian's bad taste, in ample supply. Yet his sense of ridicule overruled his talent for levity. The ridiculous can actually be built into artistic conventions, such as opera's. Ensor used ridicule not only to expose the absurd or implausible, but as a weapon armed by moral outrage. We know that a social doctrine or practice is bad because he simply assumes that it deserves his mockery. And then he goes on to assert that this is a general state of affairs.

When it is trained on such a large plateau, wholesale scorn must work as metaphor. Though he brought them up from the downstairs novelty shop, Ensor regarded skulls, masks, and clown costumes not as particular, physical objects but as metaphors of our condition. The skull is a hallowed symbol of human vanity. In Ensor's hands, that symbol became a trademark of his nihilist worldview, repeated through multiple sets of works. But this itself is a ridiculous procedure.

Suppose you see a platoon of Santa Clauses advancing toward you; they would debase the notion of a single giver of gifts, or even of one final Redeemer. The very number of Santas advertises their fakery. Similarly, a windfall of skeletons blows away the supposed nastiness of Ensor's mind-set. There is a too-muchness to his representations that prevents them from being understood as anything



other than send-ups of unhappy thoughts. And any suggestion of real horror is belied by the harum-scarum charades derived from carnival, which he liked because they sometimes mimed a reversal of class roles and could be blasphemous.

The way of his artifice led inevitably into ironic statement. That is, he can be taken to show what he *didn't* mean, leaving the residual image as an admonishing presence. When, in *My Portrait in 1960*, 1888, he depicted himself as a corpse turned to dust, or when he inferred conversations between individuals beyond the grave, it was above all to project the fantasy of his ironic imagination. Ensor would push for this cause, even at those times when it was based on a rational premise. No wonder that he became a virtuoso of shifted genres and muffled references. The whole point of the masks was to stress that deception was at issue, not to uncover something that might be called the truth. Despite its aggressive handiwork, his art reveals an evasive turn of mind. Very well charted by the exhibition's curator, Anna Swinbourne, this attitude was exceptional among the leaders of Post-Impressionism.

How many artists who came after Ensor were or could have been inspired by the fertility of his contradictions! His estrangement from the prevailing social order is echoed in the fury of Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and, above all, José Clemente Orozco. His involvement with a sinister animism of matter was enhanced by Jean Dubuffet, Francis Bacon, Leon Golub, and Cindy Sherman. His macaronic escapades were furthered in the Klansmen of Guston, Paula Rego's allegories, the satiric pandemonium of Robert Colescott's paintings, Red Grooms's and Paul McCarthy's installations, and why not R. Crumb's comic strips? Whatever its internal structure—insincere depravity, Halloween ethics, you name it—the genome for this strain traces back to the master of *The Scandalized Masks*. In real life, he never begat offspring, but in art he spawned an endless, sardonic legacy. □

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