

# NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Ensor Unmasked

By Marjorie Welish 7/08/09 12:29am

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In Bosch and Breughel, the failings of humankind inspired great images; and following their example, the Belgian painter James Ensor (1860-1949) brought the human caricature up to date. Ensor paints as if to be human is to be grotesque; yet for all our extravagance, gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, wrath, pride, we humans remain compelling objects. Mesmerized by this state of affairs, he painted it over and over, primarily through masks that paradoxically reveal rather than conceal what is most true: our morally compromised human natures.

The essential portrait we have of Ensor is now contextually elaborated, however, in a thoughtful retrospective of the artist's work in diverse mediums, just opened at the Museum of Modern Art. Supplementing what we think we know about Ensor are many drawings and prints, from the incidental to the epic, complicating our sense of the artist. How Ensor brought caricature into the modern era becomes apparent through his impatience with academic realism and his avidity for the Symbolist expressiveness he helped invent.

Unchanged is our sense that Ensor's period of greatest creativity occurred in the 1880s and 1890s. And although by then a style of flattened affect reached far and wide, from Beardsley to Toulouse-Lautrec, Ensor's caricature insists on a fanciful charm peculiar to him. Since the Museum of Modern Art does fewer and fewer historical shows these days, note that this exhibition—obviously not thrown together—brings us a generous sample of his process through working drawings and sketches as well as through prints done after paintings that let us view the studio practice “up close and confidential,” to suggest a technical and cultural range for his caricatural drawings, which is the preponderance of Ensor's art. To show his mentality through supplementary works is to the credit of the curator, because ultimately, the exhibition is perhaps more thoughtful than the artist.

To make the case for considering the artist in context, a curatorial team headed by Anna Swinbourne organized the show thematically, with one bay secreted within the show where an annotated chronology and images tactfully perform their educational function. Trained first in Ostend, then Brussels, Ensor returned to Ostend in 1880, where, apart from traveling to Brussels and Paris, he remained for the rest of his life. It says something about Ensor's artistic ambitions that a few years after he and others formed the group Les XX, they invited Cezanne, Signac and Van Gogh to exhibit with them—this, in 1890! This is very precocious, considering that these artists' canvases remained unintelligible even in 1910, when the art critic Roger Fry exported these Post-Impressionists (as he called them) to England. But Ensor was hip to them.

Maybe a little too hip. Ensor had a penchant for reworking his paintings to make them a la mode. Self-Portrait with Flowered Hat (1883/1888) is one of several instances exhibited here displaying changes to the image—the flowered hat itself and tendril-like brushwork across the face—to up the ante on dandyism, and tease us with anti-conventional stances. Ensor brings the caricature into the realm of the avant-garde—sometimes through these add-ons that reveal his ambition to be a modern artist, but at his best through an understanding of Symbolist brushwork itself.

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Tribulations of St. Anthony (1887) is most extreme. Despite the figurative grotesquerie, which is more nuisance than threat, it is a painting of nothing—no thing as such but atmosphere—a moody, indeterminate matter expressive of an interior mental state conjured through paint and paint alone. This Symbolism of the 1880s is what Ensor, along with the notable Edvard Munch and Ferdinand Hodler, helped to create. No wonder why when Alfred Barr, the inaugural director of the Museum of Modern Art, acquired this painting in 1940 (to save it from being destroyed in the war, no doubt), he called Ensor “the boldest living painter,” topping even those Surrealists driven to create images of psychological doctrine. Remember that Abstract Expressionism had not yet come about.

The relevance for Abstract Expressionism is here in Ensor, however. Take a look at The Intrigue (1890), and try to deny that Philip Guston did not learn a lot from Ensor's mask as a pictorial device; or more specifically, that Guston had not learned to exploit the incongruity of the grotesque mask and the painterly gorgeousness of which the mask is constituted. More specifically still, plant yourself in front of this painting and, looking at the lower left section, try to deny that the abrupt passage from pink to green that should suggest the innocence of spring is rather a taste of the very carnivalesque bitterness at which Guston becomes so adept. In other words, Abstract Expressionism dropped the masks, and yet retained the articulated complexity of expressive content the mask provided: a mask for things besides the face, conveyed through symbolic associations and in the facture of the brushwork. And if some modes of Abstract Expressionism used subject matter to drive home a point, it is through the likes of Ensor that such pictorial pointers become unnecessary.

In the end, one must assess Ensor as more of a painter than a complete artist. His art was thematically repetitive, and more and more circumscribed as his life wore on, but it is his sensibility in paint that saves him from being merely a caricaturist. His great paintings of the spirit, which peak with the deservedly celebrated The Entry of Christ into Brussels (1888), are well worth traveling to see for their harrowing syntheses of form and content on behalf of critical social commentary. Here, in this exhibition, large preparatory drawings for The Lively and the Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (1885) and The Rising: Christ Shown to the People (1885) must suffice. They are fascinating but only hint at what Ensor's paint will do.

*[“James Ensor” is on display at the Museum of Modern Art through Sept. 21, and then at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, from Oct. 1, 2009, to Feb. 4, 2010.]*

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