JAMES ENSOR
WILDEST DREAMS

BEYOND IMPRESSIONISM

Royal
Museum of
Fine Arts
Antwerp

Edited by
Herwig Todts

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PRESTEL
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KMSKA

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FOREWORD

Dear reader,

We should begin by paying credit where credit is due: it was Kaat Debo, director of MoMu, who first came up with the idea of making 2024 an 'Ensor Year'. This is, after all, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the artist's death.

Several Antwerp institutions – the fashion museum (MoMu), the photography museum (FOMU), the Plantin-Moretus Museum/Print Room and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) – immediately put their heads together to explore James Ensor's work from a variety of angles. The embryonic idea was then presented to EventFlanders. The Antwerp museums were firmly committed to a project that would resonate internationally and so, with the prompting of EventFlanders, Ostend too was drawn into the commemorative year. News of the two cities' plans was then picked up in Brussels, which likewise hitched its wagon to the train. 'Ensor Year 2024' was now a fact.

Beginning with a spring prelude in Ostend, followed by an intermezzo in Brussels, the apotheosis now occurs in Antwerp, with four top exhibitions in a single city.

KMSKA is treating visitors to a whirlwind of an exhibition, with the title *In Your Wildest Dreams – Ensor Beyond Impressionism*. The event is the culmination of the many years of research that the museum has invested in its Ensor collection.

During the years in which KMSKA was closed for large-scale refurbishment and expansion, we organised Ensor exhibitions all over the world, significantly raising the international profile of the artist and his work. The present exhibition adds a further layer by presenting the accumulated knowledge in a broader perspective.

We are especially indebted for the steadily growing body of research into our Ensor collection to the former KMSKA curators and directors Walther Vanbeselaere, Marcel de Maeyer and Lydia Schoonbaert. The last few years have been devoted entirely to deepening this knowledge. Museums are better placed than any other institutions to apply the latest technical art history and conservation science on the broadest possible scale. They are the custodians, after all, of the objects of research – paintings, drawings, images and so forth – and possess the art historical expertise, the infrastructure and the know-how to inform the public and trigger its interest in new scientific findings and insights. The Ensor Research Project was set up in 2013 to perform a critical examination of Ensor's creative process. KMSKA curator Herwig Todts immediately got his teeth into this groundbreaking research, with Annelies Rios-Casier bolstering the team as a young researcher from the University of Antwerp.

In collaboration with the university's AXIS research group, Ensor's painting style has been documented step by step on the basis of precise physical and technical data. KMSKA's paintings collection formed the core of the research, but works by Ensor in other museums – including Mu.ZEE in Ostend, the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent (MSKG), the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (KMSKB-MRBAB) in Brussels and a number of private collections – have been (and will be) examined by X-ray, infrared, ultraviolet and MA-XRF imaging. This research is being carried out in parallel with more traditional art historical techniques. The Ensor Research Project allows a fresh approach to Ensor and his work, which in turn provides the impetus for the exhibition *In Your Wildest Dreams: Ensor Beyond Impressionism*. It is only natural when we come face-to-face with works such as *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* from the Art Institute of Chicago or *The Intrigue* from KMSKA's own collection, to wonder who precisely was the man behind these disconcerting images. Ensor's art has been co-opted all too often to illustrate the story of a tormented, eccentric loner.

The focus of this book and of the exhibition, by contrast, is firmly on the artist's creative trajectory, which immediately results in several corrections to Ensor's standard biography. This was a highly knowledgeable and ambitious artist who was eager to compete with his European contemporaries, and who became one of those late nineteenth-century gamechangers himself: a forerunner of twentieth-century art; an artist who took great pleasure in breaking the artistic rules, but who from time to time also rewrote those same rules. It was Ensor, after all, who discovered that the caricatural distortions of popular carnival masks could become an instrument of an Expressionist *unmasking*. Yet it was his unorthodox relationship with established museum art, his European contemporaries, unknown Old Masters, exotic models, contemporary popular culture and cartoons, as well as his literary and musical compositions and his public appearances, which made him even more the kind of artist we know today.

The exhibition presents – often for the first time – works by Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Emil Nolde, Auguste Renoir and Edvard Munch alongside those of Ensor, not to mention paintings by all sorts of lesser-known artists, including Eugène Laermans, Henry De Groux, Ernst Josephson and Witold Wojtkiewicz.

Our warmest gratitude is due to all the lenders who have helped make this fascinating story possible. It goes without saying that the entire KMSKA team also deserves immense praise for keeping everything on track. We would especially like to thank Herwig Todts, whose incisive research has placed not only James Ensor but KMSKA as a whole on the international map.

We hope that visitors will discover a new, surprising and different James Ensor in this book and in this exceptional exhibition, both of which are fully committed to knowledge *and* experience, to facts *and* emotion, with no hint of contradiction between them: just as it was, perhaps, in the mind of James Ensor.

Happy reading!

Luk Lemmens,
KMSKA chairman

Carmen Willems,
KMSKA managing director

pp. 8–9: DETAIL OF FIG. 19
James Ensor,
The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse, 1889


ENSOR

Ensor’s Art in a New Perspective

Herwig Todts

Eugène Demolder (1862–1919) recognised as early as 1892 that diversity and variation were more important to Ensor than specialisation, prompting the artist, as it were, to try out all manner of genres: dreamy seascapes, still lifes, ‘a series of stylish ladies’, ‘naturalistic studies that are a touch primitive’, alongside comical subjects, masks, crowds, pure caricatures and jocular ‘diableries’.[1] It was likewise Demolder – lawyer, author, son-in-law of Félicien Rops and the artist’s close friend – who organised Ensor’s first solo exhibition in 1894, while the twenty-four-page brochure he published in 1892 was the first in-depth study devoted to the Ostend painter and remains a valuable source for understanding his work.

Art historians, critics and enthusiasts have a tendency, of course, to reduce the activity of artists to the essentials, as a result of which they can easily lose sight of its varied character. From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, galleries and museums became the primary destination for works of art rather than religious buildings or the palaces of aristocrats and governments. At the exhibitions held at these new venues, artists increasingly set about distinguishing themselves from one another through their choice of subject, design, and material and technical execution. In this way, artistic production has grown considerably more diverse over the past two hundred years. Even against this backdrop, however, we can only conclude that Ensor’s activity was exceptionally versatile. As Demolder noted, Ensor the visual artist was not a specialist: whether as a painter, draughtsman or etcher, he explored a variety of subjects in a range of styles and techniques. From 1884 onwards, moreover, he also published journalistic articles and wrote art-critical satire and speeches. He was also known as an unorthodox musician: Ensor’s flute was always in his pocket and in 1883 he was already amusing his friends with his imitations of Wagner on the piano.[2] He composed the light-hearted ballet *La Gamme d’amour* in 1911, complete with scenario, keyboard music, costumes and stage sets. In 1892, together with his young friend Ernest Rousseau Jr, he performed in the dunes in a mini-photonovella about travellers lost in the desert; and in 1931, he, Léon Spilliaert and Félix Labisse actually appeared in Henri Storck’s short film *Idylle sur le sable*. We might well call *My Favourite Room* (1892) an allegory of Ensor’s notion of artistic practice.[3]

How and why did Ensor’s virtually post-Modern versatility come about? His biography is regularly invoked as the only significant motivation for his surprising artistic journey, but this has resulted in a misleading view of his art. Following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Fraenger, there is a tendency to identify ‘psychograms’ all over the place.[4]

James was the son of a Belgian mother and an English father, James Frederic Ensor,[5] who studied medicine in Heidelberg for at least a year. The remainder of his library in the archives of Mu.ZEE in Ostend testifies to his broad intellectual interests. The artist’s father came from a prominent and wealthy family who were frequent visitors to both the Belgian capital and coast. It was during the second half of the nineteenth century that Ostend, with its modest fortress and harbour installed under Austrian rule, was transformed on the initiative of the Belgian government, the city council and the king into the fashionable ‘Queen of Belgian Resorts’. By 1900, Europe’s *beau monde* came together at the town’s esplanade, Kursaal, Wellington race track and expensive hotels.[6] Emile Verhaeren described Ostend as ‘the loveliest of these temporary capitals of decked-out vice and jaded luxury’.[7] Ensor’s father might have been among that early cohort of resort-goers. At any rate, having married the modest Ostend girl Catharina Haegheman, James Frederic settled in the town, where the couple ran the souvenir and curiosity shop established by her parents. The business, in Ensor Sr’s name, failed in 1875, but the family had better luck with a new gift shop for tourists. They also rented

FIG. 1
James Ensor,
My Portrait with Masks, 1936,
oil on panel,
29.5 × 26.5 cm,
private collection

FIG. 2
James Ensor,
My Favourite Room,
1892, oil on canvas,
80 × 100 cm, Tel Aviv
Museum of Art

FIG. 3
James Ensor,
Sloth, 1888–1889,
chalk and pencil on
paper, 22 × 29.5 cm,
private collection

rooms to summer visitors, occasionally including friends and acquaintances of the artist. The latter – born James Sydney Ensor in 1860 – was expected to do his fair share for the family business, in the summer season in particular, and all the more so after the death of his father left him the '*chef de la branche de la famille Ensor habitant Ostende*'.[8] In a sense, therefore, Ensor was a highly versatile yet essentially part-time artist throughout his life.[9]

His father never achieved a social position commensurate with his privileged background and was rumoured to have turned to drink, earning him the contempt of his wife and her family and making him the laughing stock of Ostend nightlife. Ensor Sr is all but absent from the letters that James and his younger sister Marie or Mitche (Mietje) wrote to their friends, the Rousseau family in Brussels, merely sending them his regards once in a while. By the beginning of 1885, he had become a wandering drunk, whom the police found in the street one day, badly beaten by local louts. It is hard to determine to what extent he was still really part of the family at that point. Ensor wrote that same year that he had bumped into his father, who sent his best wishes. James Frederic was occasionally admitted to hospital and was eventually found dead in an Ostend street on 13 April 1887.[10] Some historians point to the year in which Ensor's father died as crucial to the development of his art.[11] As we will see, Ensor actually changed his artistic course in 1886, shortly after the third Salon of Les XX, at which he thoroughly familiarised himself with the work of the French Impressionist Claude Monet and that of the arch-Symbolist Odilon Redon. The letters that James and Mitche had been sending to the Rousseaus since 1883 also paint a different picture of the relationship between the Ensors. Aside from their father's woes and recurring complaints about the health of their mother, the latter's sister his aunt Mimi, Mitche and James himself, they appear to have been a close family. Mitche wrote with interest about the paintings and drawings her brother was working on, and in January 1888, on the eve of the fifth Salon of Les XX, Mimi helped her nephew prepare his large drawing, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, for the exhibition. The three women also sat regularly for his drawings and paintings. It was only in the 1890s, when Ensor's sister left her husband, Alfred John Taen Hee Tseu, and moved back in with her mother and brother, bringing her daughter Alexandrine with her, that Ensor began to express annoyance at the squabbling of his housemates and the behaviour of his niece. The question arises, therefore, as to whether or not relations within the family had a decisive influence on the artistic choices made by Ensor.[12]

Ensor attended primary school in Ostend, but he stated in his 1935 radio interview with Karel Jonckheere that in 1873 his father had sent him to the Ostend artists Michel van Cuyck (1797–1875) and Edouard Dubar (1803–1879) to learn how to paint.[13] In 1876, his parents moved to a rented house on the corner of Vlaanderenstraat and what is now Van Iseghemlaan, where Ensor would live until taking up residence in 1917 in the house he inherited from his uncle Léopold Haegheman (the current Ensor House). In the spring and summer of 1876, he painted dozens of small nature studies, to which he remained very attached and which he carefully preserved. Contrary to what is still claimed, he did not execute them on surplus packaging material from the shop,[14] but worked instead on prepared cardboard – available in a variety of standard sizes and widely used by outdoor painters at the time.[15] We do not know how he made the acquaintance of modern pleinairism or realism – the idea that art can and should be nothing more than the representation of a visual experience – but this was also a prominent movement in Belgium. To develop a mode of painting that shows nothing more nor less than reality, avant-garde artists in Belgium took their lightweight painting gear and tubes of paint and headed for the coast, often by train, to capture their love for the incessantly shifting beauty of the everyday: the dunes, the beach, the sea and the sky. There is a tendency, incidentally, to overstate the quality of Ensor's youthful works. While his sensitivity to light and colour is apparent from the outset and his designs are frequently touching, they remain schoolish and somewhat clumsy.[16]

Ensor attended the Brussels Academy between 1877 and 1880, an institution that enjoyed a much more solid reputation than the equivalent colleges in nearby Bruges and Ghent, or the academy in Antwerp – the self-proclaimed 'metropolis of commerce and arts'. Ensor's fellow students in the capital included Fernand Khnopff, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Willy Finch and other future members of the avant-garde. He also met the poet and art critic Théo Hannon there and the latter's sister, the self-taught physicist Mariette Hannon, who married Ernest Rousseau, a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.[17]

Having completed his studies, Ensor began work in 1880 in his studio in the attic of his parental home in Ostend where, for the first few years, he was occasionally joined by his colleagues Willy Finch, Guillaume Van Strydonck and Théo Van Rysselberghe. Although he would live in Ostend until his death in 1949, the artist spent several days and often several weeks in Brussels almost every year, where he played an active part in the capital's cultural and fashionable life. From time to time, he thought of moving to Brussels for good, as did his mother and sister. Ostend's rail link was one of the better ones in the country, and with the exception of the odd trip to Amsterdam and Zeeland (1883 and 1895), Paris (1884, 1885, 1889), Lille (1885) and London (1892), Ensor never got further than occasional plans to visit Spain or Italy.[18]

FIG. 4
Willy Finch,
Ostend Fisherman,
1880, black chalk on paper, 70 × 60 cm,
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai

FIG. 5
James Ensor,
Ostend Fisherman,
1880, black chalk on paper, 70 × 60 cm,
private collection

The Belgian art world was thoroughly modernised in the final decades of the nineteenth century, following the example of France. Art lovers, critics and collectors had previously been obliged to wait for the big summer exhibitions in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent to discover new talents and artistic trends. These neutrally conceived, three-yearly shows continued to be held for many years, but they steadily ceded their importance to the smaller, more exclusive exhibitions that artists and their champions organised themselves from the 1870s onwards. The foundation of the Société libre des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1868 was followed by the creation of a whole series of new artists' societies in quick succession. Les XX (1883–1893) gave Belgium one of the leading European avant-garde forums, while in 1893, Octave Maus founded La Libre Esthétique, an exhibition association run by himself rather than by artists. Starting in 1912, Galerie Georges Giroux in Brussels followed the example set by Les XX and La Libre Esthétique by promoting the avant-garde in the shape of temporary exhibitions, accompanied by publications, lectures and concerts.

We know from Ensor's letters, notes, articles and memoirs, and from the reminiscences and testimony of his friends and detractors, that he laid claim to a unique place at the heart of the Belgian avant-garde right from the beginning. He made his debut in 1881 at the progressive Brussels arts association, La Chrysalide, and was swiftly and universally acknowledged as one of its leading lights. The critic Gustave Lagye mocked him in 1884 as 'the giant of Les XX, the Rubens of modernity, the leader of our neo-painters… an innovator who alters the way things are seen and places them in a hitherto unsuspected light! With his strong hand he brutalises the beauty of yesteryear… dishonours it, blackens it, drives it out of the bosom of the Academy…. Bravo Ensor! Ensor forever! To him, nothing is small. His clumsiness is gigantic….'[19]

In his article, Lagye described the still life with *Chinoiseries* as 'accessories to express the trifles of our time'[20] and mentioned *A Colourist*, *The Lady in Distress*, *The Drunkards*, *The Masks* ('modern travesty… sublime horrors of the grand modernity')[21] and, as the 'apotheosis', *The Lamp-Lighter*, which he summed up in the following terms: 'Hosanna! Christ has risen! This lamp-lighter is the light bearer of the future. Monsieur Ensor has birthed him, not without pain, and the late Manet, invited to be the godfather, sent his imprimatur from his final resting place.'[22] Ensor posted a handwritten copy of the article to his Brussels friends, adding the note, 'this colossal stupidity will delight you'.[23] In August, a few months later, he published a first satire on the world of art in *L'Art moderne*, with the title '*Trois semaines à l'académie. Monologue à tiroirs*' [Three weeks at the academy. An episodic monologue]. The article poked fun at academic teaching, the classical ideal of beauty and the incompetence of the professors, while hinting at his preference for pleinairism: 'Are you doing landscapes? Landscapes are a joke!'[24]

La Chrysalide was disbanded after the exhibition in 1881 but several former students of the Brussels Academy also showed their work at the exhibitions organised by L'Essor. The works that Ensor and several other young artists wanted to show at the official Triennial Fine Arts Salons were repeatedly rejected, and so, in 1883, he and several of his supporters quit L'Essor, which they felt was far too conservative, and founded the society Les XX ('Les Vingt' or 'The Twenty'). They asked the lawyer Octave Maus (1856–1919) – editor of the prominent avant-garde journal *L'Art moderne* (1881–1914) – to act as the group's secretary. Les XX organised ten exhibitions between 1884 and 1893, at which members showed their work alongside guest artists from Belgium and abroad. So it was that the country made the acquaintance, in rapid succession, of the French Impressionists Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, the Symbolism of Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh, and the neo-Impressionism of Georges Seurat, which was taken up enthusiastically in Belgium by Willy Finch, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Henry Van de Velde, Georges Morren and Georges Lemmen.[25]

Ensor, like all modern artists, was the creator of what Oskar Bätschmann has termed 'exhibition art'.[26] The works that drew the critical ire of Gustave Lagye in 1884, for instance, had been made with a specific view to public display. On 11 February 1883, Ensor's sister Mitche wrote to Mariette Rousseau asking her to stop sending flowers, as her brother enjoyed painting them so much that he was neglecting 'the big painting for the exhibition at the Cercle [artistique de Bruxelles]'. The work in question turned out a few weeks later to be a treatment of '*des Pochards Schnikqueux Scandalisés'*. The importance of hard liquor like the northern French *schnick* to ordinary people's lives was central to the two paintings that Ensor showed at the first exhibition of Les XX: *The Masks* – later called *The Scandalized Masks* (although 'Scandalous' would be a more appropriate adjective) – and *The Drunkards*. In iconographical terms, both works are in keeping with the popular trend in those years of depicting working-class people full length in paintings of a size and gravity that could vie with established history painting – Demolder's previously quoted '*naturalisme […] un peu sauvage*'. One of the most important exponents of this pictorial variant of literary naturalism was Jean-François Raffaëlli, who was also known in Belgium and was even a candidate to join Les XX in around 1888.[27] The similarity between Ensor's *Drunkards* and Raffaëlli's 1881 work *The Absinthe Drinkers (Les déclassés)*, seems more than coincidental.[28] In the early years of his career, however, Ensor's views on still life and seascape, as well as his pictorial technique itself, were closer to the art of Gustave Courbet. By October 1885, when Ensor saw *After Dinner in Ornans* (1849) first hand at the museum in Lille, Courbet had already been the hero of the Belgian avant-garde, of artists such as Louis Dubois, Périclès Pantazis and Edouard Agneessens (whom Ensor would continue to venerate until his old age) for over thirty years.[29] He wrote enthusiastically to his friend Dario de Regoyos as well as to Ernest and Mariette Rousseau: 'I just returned from Lille. I saw the museum. It astonished me. There are magnificent landscapes there by Jordaens. Courbet stupefied me, his *After Dinner in Ornans* is a masterpiece – no exaggeration – worthy of Rembrandt. Millet and Corot pale in comparison. They are a million miles away from Courbet. Speaking of Courbet, I do not want to see any more Courbets at Brussels art dealers. The scoundrels shamelessly make them themselves and the poor painter simply has to put up with it. I am glad to have seen him in Lille. I know him well now. He was a great artist.'[30]

All the same, it was with Edouard Manet, the revolutionary *par excellence*, that Gustave Lagye associated the 'offensive' paintings exhibited by Ensor. For many years, Manet remained the point of reference for anyone seeking to understand the revolutionary character of Ensor's debut. So much so that Emile Verhaeren found it necessary in 1908 to proclaim the originality of Ensor's art compared to that of Manet. Furthermore, he declared, *The Oyster Eater* of 1882 was the first 'bright' (i.e. Impressionist) painting in Belgium and confirmed Ensor's independent position.[31] The artist painted it in the spring of 1882 and submitted it, together with a still life and the as-yet unidentified *In the Land of Colour* to the triennial exhibition in Antwerp. But the jury rejected the work, prompting Ensor to protest vainly to its members: 'Gentlemen, you were wrong to refuse *The Oyster Eater*. It is not too late to put this right. I am counting on your impartiality!'[32] According to Ensor, the painting was also subsequently rejected by his colleagues at L'Essor. It was eventually canonised in 1908 after it was proposed that the work be acquired for the museum in Liège, even though the city council decided after several months of deliberation not to buy it. The painting was then purchased by the Antwerp collectors Albin and Emma Lambotte. They hoped to see it hanging in the Louvre one day, but they were later obliged to sell it, along with a substantial proportion of their Ensor collection, to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1927.[33]

As an up-and-coming member of the avant-garde, Ensor numbered himself among '*les impressionnistes*' and '*la jeune école*', terms he used in a draft of a letter to 'C. W.' (Cher Willy [Finch]?) concerning the first exhibition in which Ensor would participate at La Chrysalide. He submitted *Un Salon (Impression)* – later titled *The Bourgeois Salon* in 1881 – for the exhibition.[34] In October 1884, in the months leading up to the second Salon of Les XX, both Willy Finch and Ensor wrote to Octave Maus, the group's secretary, that they were firmly opposed to inviting the established artists Alfred Verwee and Alfred Stevens to show at the 1885 exhibition. At the same time, they insisted that a number of Impressionists be invited, suggesting Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Caillebotte and Forain.[35] The slightly older, progressive portrait painter Isidore Verheyden showed his *Portrait of James Ensor* at the third Salon of Les XX. Ensor – whom friend and foe

FIG. 6
Isidore Verheyden,
Portrait of James Ensor, 1886, oil on canvas, 154 × 86 cm, collection Mu.ZEE – City of Ostend

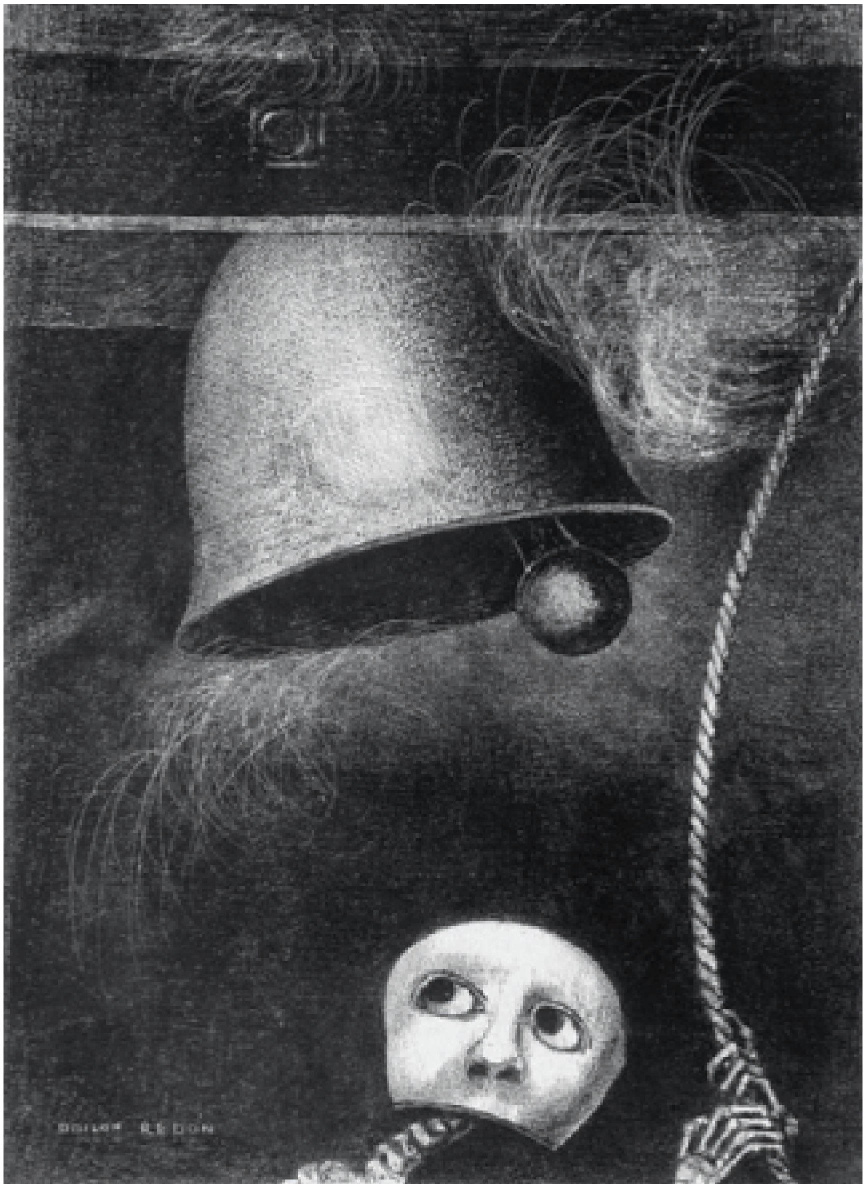
FIG. 7
James Ensor,
Ensor at his Easel, 1890?, oil on canvas, 59.5 × 41 cm, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp – Flemish Community Collection

alike considered to be Belgium's most important Impressionist – submitted no fewer than twenty works. He mainly, though not exclusively, selected works from 1881 and 1882: scenes from the lives of stylish young *bourgeoises*, including the famous *Oyster Eater*, five still lifes, five city and sea views and an unidentified naturalistic *Design for a Decorative Frieze for the Court of Assizes: 'Les Misérables'.* Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir were both represented at the exhibition with a broad selection of their work. The critic Louis Solvay defended the art of the Belgian Impressionists, while simultaneously confirming the still somewhat traditional character of Belgian pleinairism: 'While Manet and his followers sought the truth of the effect more in the extremes and intensity of light, here we see Monsieur Ensor and others succeed chiefly in a calmer annotation… our own are better able to take account of everything in the atmosphere that lends tonality its harmony and value.'[36] All the same, French Impressionism had an overwhelming impact on art in Belgium, even if it attracted the rather misleading label of 'luminism'.[37]

It is not easy to track Ensor's painted output in 1886. On 17 April, he wrote to his friends in Brussels: 'I am numb and utterly exhausted from painting.… It absorbs me absolutely and does not allow me a moment's rest. It is a constant torment. I work at least nine hours a day. When I am finished, I am tired and good for nothing… the latest paintings are not bad.' He added that he had painted two seascapes and a self-portrait. (Might the latter have been *Ensor at His Easel*, the self-portrait customarily dated 1890?)[38] In the handwritten '*liste de mes œuvres'* that Ensor provided to Emile Verhaeren in 1908, he made no mention of seascapes or a self-portrait, but he did list eight other titles: *Etudes de Lumière* (possibly the umbrella title that Ensor liked to use after 1900), several still lifes, *Skeleton and Pierrots* (as yet unidentified) and *Children at Their Morning Toilet*.[39] We do not know whether the latter had been completed by the end of 1886 – he overpainted the basin in which one of the children washes their feet – but the artist did not exhibit the work until 1888.
He was fully occupied in 1886 by several very large drawings that were entirely in line, in terms of both composition and style, with the art of Rembrandt.
The influence of the latter's heavily impastoed realism was already visible, of course, in early works by Ensor, including the 1883 *Self-Portrait*, to which he added a flowered hat in 1888. Ensor also studied how Rembrandt characterised the figures in his etchings as well as the exotic costumes in *Judas Flinging the Pieces of Silver into the Temple* (1880 and again in 1891). He borrowed other drawings and etchings

FIG. 8
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Healing the Sick* (*the 'Hundred Guilder Print'*), 1647–1649, etching on paper, 27.8 × 38.8 cm, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels

FIG. 9
Odilon Redon, *To Edgar Allan Poe: A Mask Sounds the Death Knell*, 1882, lithograph, 44 × 30.5 cm, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels



from Rembrandt too. But the most striking and fundamental aspect that Ensor drew from his illustrious predecessor was his use of overwhelming and dramatic light, which simultaneously alternates with mysterious shadow contrasts. In his influential 1926 article '*James Ensor. Die Kathedrale'*, Wilhelm Fraenger described the way the artist captured light in a tangle of hatching that shapes and models as 'a tissue of light' ('*ein Lichtgewebe*').[40] It might only have been in the course of the year that Ensor decided to exhibit five drawings and a grisaille under the collective title *Visions: The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensibilities of Light*.

Given Ensor's interest in the Impressionism of Monet and Renoir, the achievement of this astonishing series of large drawings came entirely out of the blue. A key to understanding them is nevertheless found in the catalogue for the exhibition at Les XX in February 1886. As far as *L'Art moderne* – mouthpiece of the Belgian avant-garde – was concerned, neither Monet nor Renoir, but Odilon Redon was held out as 'the most contested foreign artist at the exhibition'.[41] Redon showed his famous jet-black lithographs and drawings at Les XX and, like his French counterpart, Ensor too conceived his black-and-white works as a series, to which he likewise gave the title '*Visions*'. He also took inspiration from the stories of Poe and the etchings of Goya, once again like Redon. At first sight, the French Symbolist's art seems far removed from Ensor's, yet it was clearly under Redon's influence that the Ostender decided to abandon the representation of reality as the ultimate goal of visual art once and for all.[42]

Oddly enough, most Ensor experts have never explicitly considered what philosophical and ideological views were held by the author of an entire series of ambitious religious compositions. Ensor's father was buried in the Anglican church in Ostend, but the artist himself was interred at his beloved church in Mariakerke, although his funeral service was held at the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul on 23 November 1949. Ensor had grown familiar with Roman Catholic doctrine during his time at school. It is obvious from all his writings that the artist was far from a militant free thinker, but – like most of his friends in Brussels and Ostend – he was certainly not religious either. He was an amused, if occasionally acerbic, outsider. It is true that there are more than a few works in which Ensor chose to identify himself with Christ (as did Gauguin), including *Calvary* (1886?) and *Ecce Homo* and *Christ Among the Critics* (1891).[43] Equally, however, it would be impossible to argue that every time Christ appears in Ensor's oeuvre, he was intended as the misunderstood artist's alter ego.

It is not until *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* (1887) that Ensor linked Redon's hallucinatory images with the technique and palette of Monet. While Ensor used brown tones to represent the barren plain across which the first human couple flee, the beige and grey shadows – the intermediate tone that he used in the underdrawing (including that of *The Oyster Eater*) to model volume and space in the traditional way –