

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

JAMES ENSOR AS A RELIGIOUS PAINTER

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## INTRODUCTION

James Ensor's long career as an artist, lasting from 1880 to 1942, falls into three very unequal divisions. The first early period, brief but harrowing for him, was one of complete rejection and critical neglect. The next, lasting from the mid 1880's to the end of the century, was one of almost frenzied activity and growing acclaim. The third period which continued to the end of his life as an active painter, was a strange paradox of ever lessening activity and ever increasing fame. Academician, Knight of St Leopold, Baron, "Grand Old Man of the Arts," he seems to have become no more than a mummified reputation, ending with seven years of total artistic silence, living in Ostend attended by his faithful manservant in a house that had become a shrine, a place of pilgrimage, but that was no longer a studio, a place of artistic creation.

There is a further paradox that forms the central theme of the essay that follows; the nature of his reputation as a social satirist, a political painter, a quasi-revolutionary, scourge of the bourgeoisie, of the hypocritical respectability of 19th century Belgium, of the solid prosperous middle-classes that appear with fat blearing faces under silk top-hats and ribboned bonnets in so many of his paintings and etchings. This is, to the present writer, an intense and even tragic paradox because if the critics had looked deeper, beneath the satirical, political surface, they would have seen

not another Daumier, but a deeply religious painter in the long and great tradition of Flemish paintings of Hieronymous Bosch and Lucas Cranach. Like them, he did indeed criticize the hypocricies and complacencies of his day. Like them, he too set out to shock "epater la bourgeoisie", but also like them he set out to do much more than that. Where the satirist is simply negative, telling his audience what is wrong with his world, the religious painter makes a discovery, and in his paintings reveals his creed.

My argument in this essay will be to illustrate by examples that this was James Ensor's intention and also, his achievement - and achievement that justifies and more than balances the long, sad, half century of decline that occupied the latter half and more of his long life.

### JAMES ENSOR AS A RELIGIOUS PAINTER

Painted in 1888, the Entry of Christ into Brussels (fig. 1) was James Ensor's biggest, his most famous and also the artist's own most treasured painting. The tumultuous scene represents the tragi-comic swelling tide of a carnival in which all the different characters involved in a human tragedy rub shoulders together. A long frieze painted diagonally across the top part of the composition bears the following proclamation in huge capital letters; 'VIVE LA SOCIALE' (LONG LIVE THE SOCIALIST STATE) while other banners waving along the crowd are daubed with such inscriptions as "Long Live Jesus King of brussels" or "Doctrinal Fanfares are always successful".

With slogans such as these, one would at first sight wonder whether are not the artist intended this painting as a 'fighting' piece of work, as something of a political manifesto. Certainly, critics like Gindertael include the polirical elements as extremely significant and make much reference to Ensor's friendships with certain socialists and radicals - the poet Emile Verhaeren, for example Ginderael claims that

"Ensor shared the democratic sentiments of his poet friend at the same period".<sup>1</sup>

He pays lttention to the fact that the Entry of Christ into Brussels was painted at the height of the class struggle that followed the setting up of the Parti Ouvrier. But if Ensor is making a political comment then it is an unusually

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1. Roger Van Gindertael, Ensor, p 68.



Figure 1. The Entry of Christ into Brussels (1885).



Figure 2 The Alive and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (1885).



obscure one. The references to contemporary politics which do appear in the banner do nothing to clarify Ensor's political position and further, with the inclusion and exclusion of slogans in other related works: The Alive and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (fig. 2) drawing, (1985) and The Entry of Christ into Brussels, etching (1898) (fig. 3). One cannot conclude anything other than that Ensor's intention was to display these flag bearers with major irony.<sup>2</sup> The workmen, mountebanks, musicians in the painting are presented as toy soldiers and rag puppets crushed into a throng beneath their warcries and unaware of their own absurdity in their delirious excitement.

Because surrounded by so much uproriarious detail, other critics have dwelt on the near lost figure of Christ claiming that Ensor identified himself strongly with Christ relating his own role of the rejected and criticized artist with that of the neglected messiah.<sup>3</sup> Kaplan decrees that Ensor's interpretation of religious subjects was "purely personal" and that in his paintings Ensor expressed his own feelings and made general comments about the nature of mankind usually

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2. Slogans common to these two works include "Phalange Wagner Fracassant" (Wagners shattering phalanx) showing the conservative and hostile nature of the crowd; Charcutiers de Jerusalem (Pork Butchers of Jerusalem) - Pork butchers would have not had much business in biblical Jerusalem; and in the drawing, prominent in the crowd is French Lexicographer Emile Littre, a well known positivist, would have been opposed to Religion. Thus obviously these elements are among those expressing the insincerity of the crown.
  3. Kaplan, "Religious Subjects of James Ensor 1877-1900", p 202.

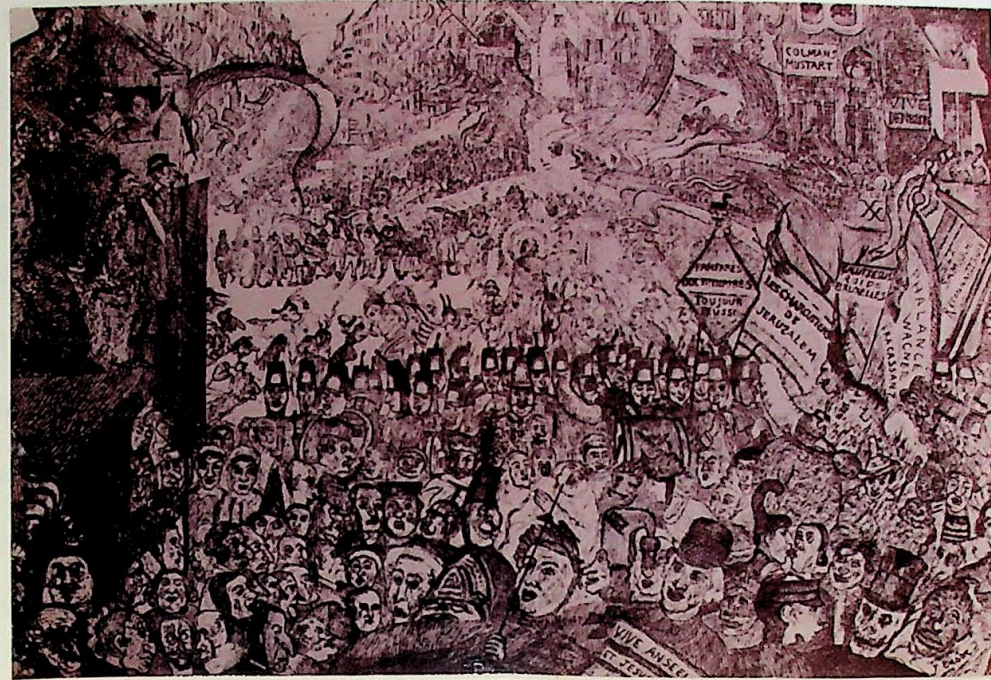


Figure 3. The Entry of Christ in Brussels (1898).



Figure 4 After the Storm (1988)



Figure 5. The Dark Lady (1881)

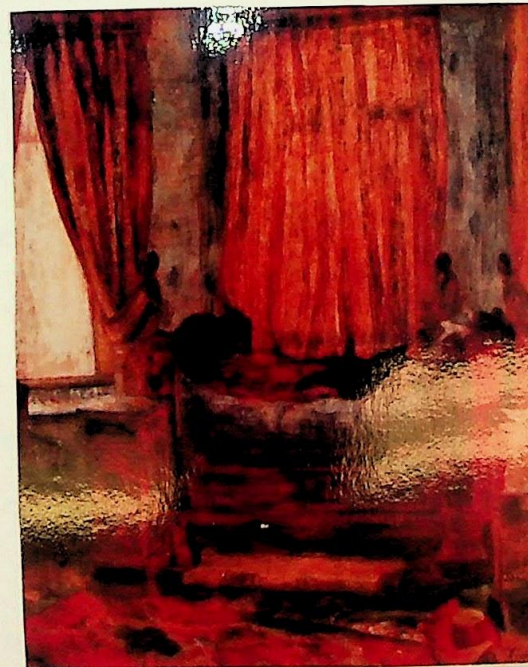


Figure 6 Lady in Distress (1882)

should not be experienced only as materialistic fact. They endeavour that we also see spiritual life in the outer world. Events in the world of his paintings and here in the carnival parade must be seen as living processes, not merely sequences of outer, arbitrary cause and effect. Ensor achieves a synthesis of that which is spirited and material for man. Man only becomes unsure of himself when he comes up against the outer sense perceptible world. Thus we have this outer world of the Belgium socialist, Ensor-rejecting public depicted with the mythic Christ.

Thus the Entry of Christ into Brussels does include what Gindertael calls

"An allegorical illustration of the popular revolt"<sup>4</sup> and very likely the scorn felt by Ensor towards his unfriendly critics was also a contributory factor in the inception of the painting. But to see them as the major themes in Ensor's work or as the whole meaning in the Entry of Christ into Brussels is to blind us into thinking that his paintings have a direct simplicity the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Ensor's intention is an inscrutable one. I would argue that because of his essence of spirituality the meaning of the episode is not so much inside like a kernel but outside enveloping us. We find the meaning therefore in the way that

"misty halos sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine".<sup>5</sup>

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4. Gindertael, p 68.

5. Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p 33.



Figure 7. The Colourist (1880)



Figure 8 Bourgeois Salon (1880)

The secret casket of Ensor's genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel. By blending the real Belgian march scene with the unreal hideous paces of the characters and with the extra real mythic figure of Christ. Ensor reveals the substance of the paintings truth - in spiritual quality. The hypocritical social order, the outer experiences of the world still exists on some level as Ensor's criticisms of his society, but they are also and more vitally the dynamic by which men and women, the individuals of that same society became aware of their own existence. It is this aspect of spritual selfconsciousness which makes Ensor a painter of religious essence. The everyday experience of the Belgium of the 1880's may have kept one blinded to the world of the spirit in the way that the crowds, spiritually barren, are left tapping about in the dark and almost ignore Christ in the subject matter of the painting but the quality of spirit exists nevertheless - with the presence of Christ in the painting and with the poetic atmosphere which exudes from the painting through Ensor's brilliant technical skills, a skill which curiously combines the elements of horror and beauty in an inscrutable and spiritual reality.

We know that the plastic and technical aspects of creating paintings is important to Ensor, because as well as the symbolic meaning behind the mask, it represents for Ensor

"freshness or tone, sumptuous decor, large and unexpected gestures, high-pitched expression, exquisite boisterousness."<sup>6</sup>

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6. Gindertael, p 111.



Figure 9. Russian Music (1881)



Figure 10 Judith and Holoferns (1880)

So why does he treat ugly subject matter in such a beautiful way. Grégoire le Roy suggests in 1922 that Ensor was mistaken in his treatment of the The Entry of Christ into Brussels

"it may be that this type ultra-improvised expression, this type of highly intellectualized art, does not come within the realm of beauty."<sup>7</sup>

The seeming paradox of the use of brilliant and beautiful colour in the treatment of a subject that is essentially grotesque illustrates an aspect of Ensor's relationship with beauty and horror.

Even from Ensor's account of his childhood, it is apparent that from a very early age he was influenced by this curious mixture of the Beautiful, and the Grotesque which surrounded him in his childhood environment. Ensor's very childhood memories vividly combine both these qualities

"One night when I was asleep in my cradle, in my illuminated room with windows wide open on the ocean, a big sea bird, attracted by the light, came swooping down in front of me and jostled by cradle. Unforgettable impression, wild fear, I can still feel the hard shock of that fantastic black bird, greedy seeker of light. I was also deeply moved by the mysterious stories about fairies, ogres, and malevolent giants - marvellous tales these, driveled interminably by a good old Flemish maid who was wrinkled, doped, pepper and salt grey and silver. I was even more fascinated by our dark and frightening attic, full of horrible spiders, curios, seashells, plants and animals from different seas, beautiful chinaware, rust and blood coloured effects, red and white coral, donkeys, turtles, dried mermaids and stuffed Chinamen."<sup>8</sup>

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7. Ibid. p 78, quoted from Grégoire le Roy, Ensor, Brussels: G. Van Oest, 1922.

8. Frank Patrick Edebau, "James Ensor and Ostend", John David Farmer, Ensor, p 9.



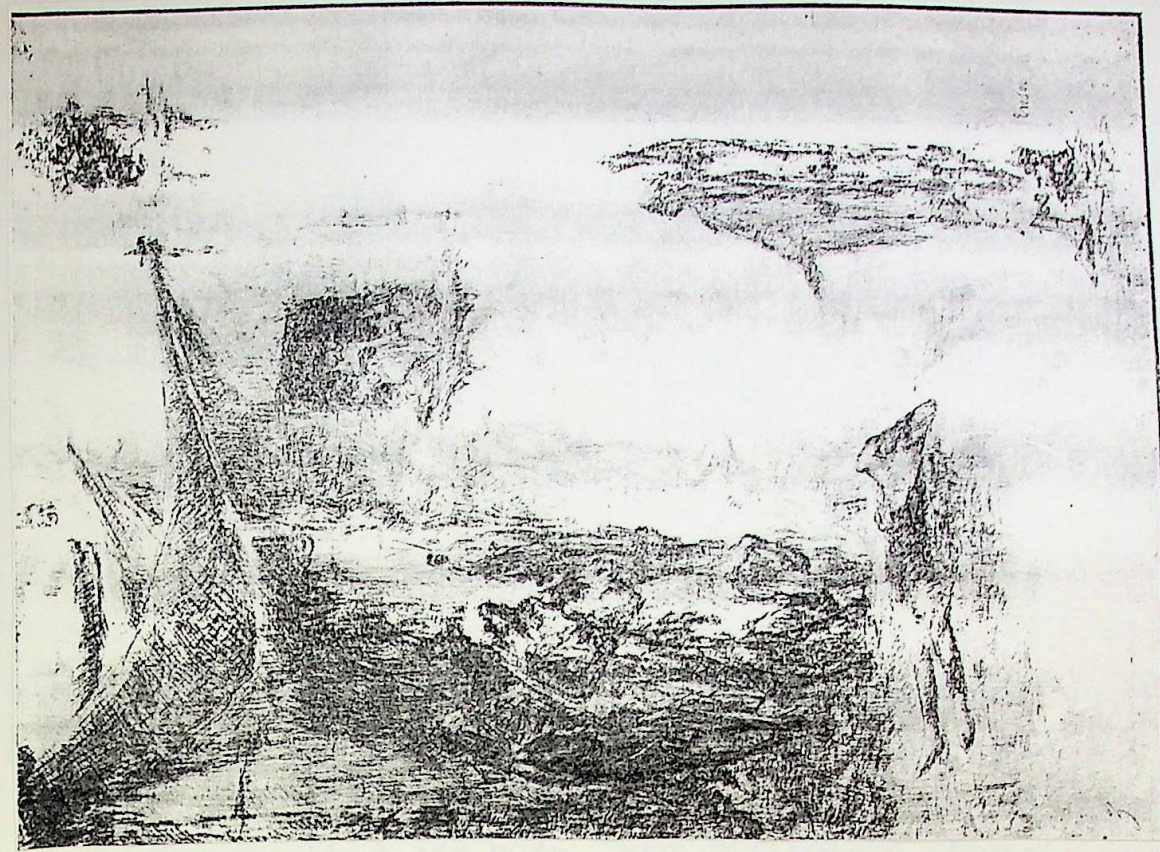


Figure 11 The Death of Jezebel (1880)



Figure 12 The Blue Flask (1880)

But in the early stage where he starts to paint seriously, from his years in the Brussels academy until 1885, he deals with these poetic - spiritual aspects separately: Firstly the Beautiful is clearly and separately dealt with in Ensor's atmospheric sea and landscapes.

Ensor was a painter whose art developed and took shape in contact with the splendid countryside around Ostend and the never failing spectacle of the sea. He lived in Ostend for the greater part of his life and clearly abided by Rembrand's maxim

"Wherever you are born, your birthplace offers more beauty than you will ever be able to paint during your whole life."<sup>9</sup>

Behind his childhood house, stood the ramparts which protected Ostend from the surging North Sea. The peculiar atmosphere of the seaside town on the Belgian coast, the capricious climate, the mists, the rhythm of the waves; all these were more than mere subsidiary influence on Ensor's painting. In fact this painter's response to Nature and Beauty stimulated and nurtured his artistic response. Nature therefore, was never forgotten but was indelibly impressed upon his mind and senses and it is this poetic experience which is of primary significance in the work of Ensor.

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9. Farmer, p 11.

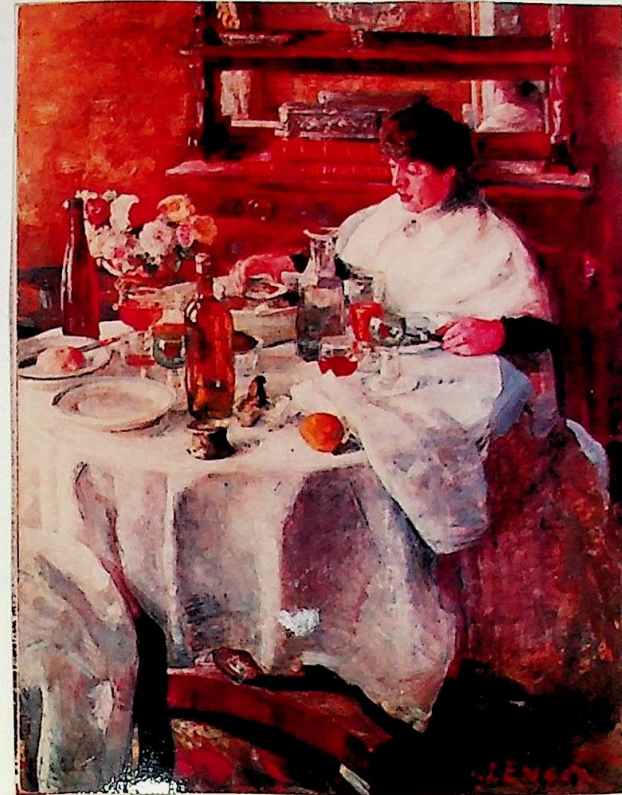


Figure 13 Woman Eating Oysters (1882)



Figure 14 Tramp Trying to Keep Warm (1882)

"Medicinal sea, worshipped mother, I would like to offer one fresh, sample bouquet celebrating your hundred faces, your surfaces, your facets, your dimples, your rufescent underparts, your diamond-studded crests, your sapphire overlay, your blessings, your delights, your deep charms...Let us be great and deep like the sea."<sup>10</sup>

"Pure sea, which inspires energy and constancy, with an unquenchable thirst for blood-red sunsets. Yes I owe a lot to the sea."<sup>11</sup>

Ensor's own recollection of this time sounds more poetic than narrative; his poetic description of the awe he felt at the spectacle of his natural environment, exudes a spiritual quality. At the instance of his own birth:

"I was born at Ostend on April 13, 1860, on a Friday the day of Venus. At my birth Venus came toward me smiling and we looked long into each others eyes. She smelt pleasantly of salt water."<sup>12</sup>

While Ensor was still at school, he became aware of his vocation as a painter. He was an unattentive pupil at school, and he preferred to read in the calmer atmosphere of the family home rather than attend lessons, or to wander over the dunes, gazing in wonder at the iridescent North Sea from the tops of the reed-covered hillocks. Inevitably, these scenes of his beloved home, along with views of the green Flemish plain were the subjects of his first attempts at painting. Ensor's father encouraged these attempts by employing some local watercolourists to teach him and encourage his natural aptitude. He did not pay much attention to those tutors however and he later recalled:

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10. Gindertael, p 21

11. Ibid, p 13.

12. Ibid, p 9.

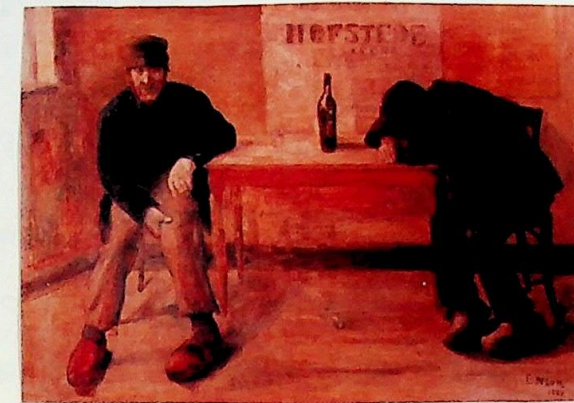


Figure 15 The Drunkards (1883)



Figure 16 The Rower (1883)

"At the College Notre-Dame, my kindly teachers educated me in a mild and gentle manner. My taste for painting developed at the age of thirteen, when two elderly Ostend painters pickled in brine and oil, Van Cwyck and Duber, initiated me by their teaching into the disappointing stereotypes of their gloomy, narrow-minded and stillborn trade. But at the age of eleven, I was painting views of the countryside and Ostend from life; I still find these minor and unpretentious works, painted in parafin oil on pink cradboard, quite charming."<sup>13</sup>

Simultaneously, just as Ensor is depicting these beautiful atmospheric scenes, he also paints quite separately the disturbing; in paintings, such as his tense interiors, and in his treatment of the lonely, and grief stricken figures.

This is hardly surprising when we remember the shadowy atmosphere of the Ensor home. The lowered blinds and heavy curtains let in little light and the shadows cast by the trembling flame of the batwing gasburners were transformed into demons by the tortured imagination of the sensitive child. In later years, the childhood demon were transformed into real torments as Ensor's family life was particularly stressful at this time. Soon after his return from the academy, he became aware of trouble within the family circle. There was the constant threat of stormy argument. His mother was constantly complaining about his father, who, because he was an Englishman and an eccentric one at that, was not accepted by the Ostend clan, and could not find a decent job. This forced Ensor's father to be financially dependant on his wife, and this situation was so painful to him that he eventually became an alcoholic.

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13. Gindertael p 25.

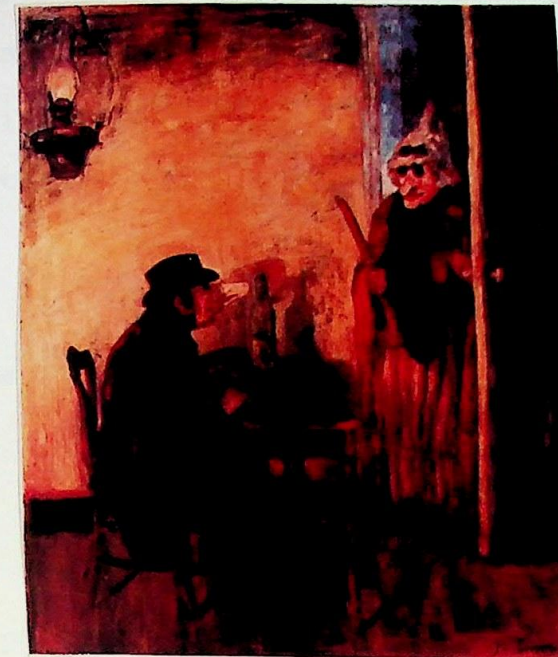


Figure 17 Scandalized Masks (1883)

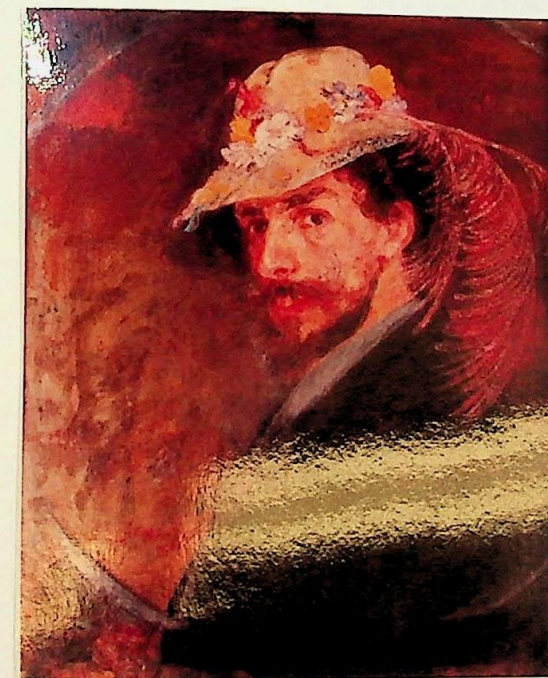


Figure 18 Ensor in a Flowered Hat (1883)

Ensor perhaps inherited a reserve of strength from his independent and unconventional father, whom he regarded as "a superior man, finally preferring to be drunk rather than be like the rest of us",<sup>14</sup> and he was extremely prolific in his painting despite the trouble and stress of these years, but he later recalled "Yes, I have worked hard, especially in 1880, 1881, and 1882. But the pain, uncertainty and daily worries were not good for my work".<sup>15</sup>

During this stage of his development, though he had not yet reached point of moving beyond the limits of reality to give a free reign to his imagination, and though the elements of Beauty and Horror were still separate, he was clearly concerned in much of his work to spiritualize his subject matter, and to distil the expression of a feeling from his perceptions and emotions. In After the Storm (1880) (fig. 4), the surface is heavily worked, and the boats were only put in when Ensor is happy that the atmosphere is right. But the best examples of this is the work in which the intense emotion is expressed at its most dramatic are the interiors.

These paintings are referred to as Ensor's "dark period". His use of black, subtly emphasised, gives his compositions their emotional resonance. In "Dark Lady" (1881) (fig. 5) the seated figure waits in an empty room, and the dark costume she wears, made to look black silhouetted against

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14. Farmer, p 10.

15. Ibid, p 19.





Figure 19 Rooftops of Ostend (1885)



Figure 20 Adam and Eve Driven out of Paradise (1887)

the light background of a window, symbolizes lonliness. In the painting Lady in Distress, (fig. 6) in a room dappled by patches of golden light filtering through the drawn curtains, languid, and crushed by grief, Ensor's sister lies in a bed, almost invisible. The drama and horror of the situation is stressed by the use of black, dominant in the figures clothing, and a sense of the psychological problems of the unstable and unhappy Mitche is transmitted.

As well as the dark canvases of this period, Ensor was also painting more colourful interiors. Some of these paintings include The Colourist (1880) (Fig. 7), Lady in Blue (1880) (fig. 8), and Afternoon in Ostend (1881). These scenes are more peaceful and calm, and the subject matter, generally members of his family doing ordinary everyday things, provides a pretext for subtle play on rich tonal harmonies which enable him to create the warm and confined atmosphere of a comfortably well-off domestic interior. The treatment of these paintings, with their still-dark totality, evoking the dimness of rooms lit by Ostend's north light, show that the focus of Ensor's attention is on the immaterial poetic qualities in the scene; atmosphere, emotional situations, rather than the substantial qualities of what is before him. This can even be said of the still lives, Still Life (1882) and especially the Blue Flask (fig. 12), in which intelligence can be detected in his placing of the objects and the expression qualities of light breaking up form. A common element in the treatment of the still life subjects, and in that of the interiors with figures, is the extraordinary



Figure 21 The Mystic Death of a Theologian (1885)

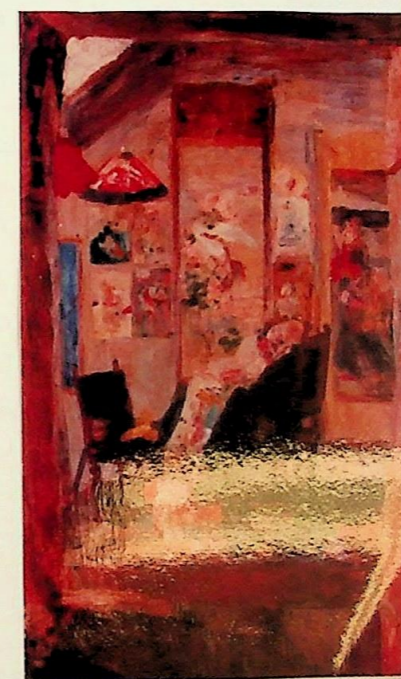


Figure 22 Skeleton Examining Chinoiserie (1885)

objectivity and lack of treatment with which they are endowed. This lack of sentimentality is true of Russian Music (fig. 9) (1881), one of Ensor's most finished works of this period. As a set piece of this type, is in contrast with the genres established code, and this aspect, as well as the painterliness of the treatment, doomed it to critical failure, because it could not satisfy the public's desire for narrative exposition.

As Ensor's description of his childhood is more poetic than narrative, so too is his painting. Even at this time the critics ignore the spiritual aspects of Ensor's work in search of the more commonly acceptable emotional and often trite sentimentality.

The painting Listening to Schumann (1883) by one of Ensor's contemporaries Fernand Khnopff, is a treatment of the same subject matter, in which a woman in an obviously emotional state, listens to someone playing Schumann on the piano. This painting gained critical acclaim where Ensor's failed, precisely because of its sentimental feeling, and the slick, polished treatment of the scene.

During this "dark period" Ensor also dealt with some religious themes, in both oil sketches, and drawings. Ensor chooses unusual biblical subjects, though they are not entirely strange to the traditional art of the low countries. Judith and Holofernes (1880) (fig. 10) is a subject treated many times by Lucas Cranach, and Judas flinging pieces of

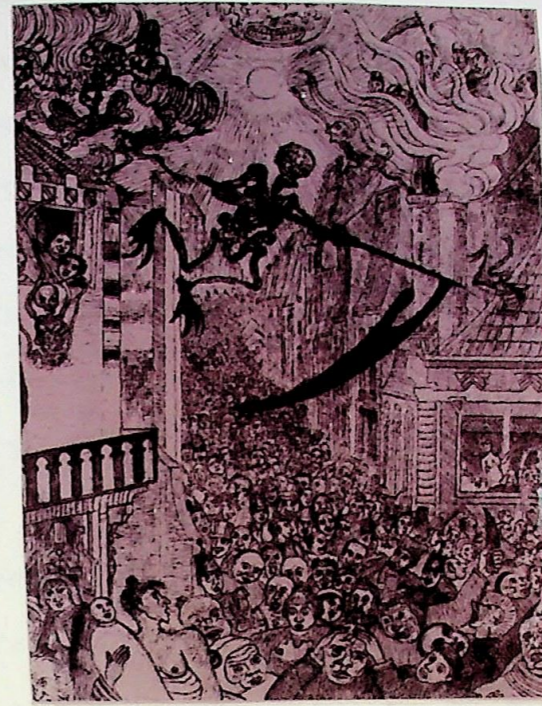


Figure 23    Death Chasing Mortals (1896)



Figure 24    The Deadly Sins Dominated by Death (1904)

silver into the temple is a rarely painted religious subject, but they are both symptomatic of Ensor's personal interest in the odd and peculiar. Both paintings are roughly treated with large strokes of the brush and palette knife, with the emphasis placed upon the atmospheric qualities of the relationships between light and dark. This sense of drama through light is very much influenced by Rembrandt. The curious tiny creatures visible in Judith and Holofernes add a strange Horror and menacing dimension to the painting, but the mistake has been made of seeing these as a foreshadowing of the masks, and strange creatures common in his later work. These were added to the original painting at a much later date, no earlier than 1887, and were probably influenced by the biomorphisms viewed through the microscope of his friend Mme Rousseau. The creatures add a spiritual dream like quality and hallucinatory dimension to the painting, and this quality is seen in a drawing of 1880, Death of Jezebel (fig. 11) though he creates the sense through unusual spacial juxtapositions, and inaccurate treatment of perspective.

The small window with women leaning out is inconsistent with the rendering of the architecture, and adding to the mysterious illusory quality of the drawing is the appearance of the prophet not present in the Biblical scene, who predicted the death of Jezebel. These very imaginative representation of religious subjects are a foretaste of the genius of imagination for which Ensor acclaimed.

In our efforts to see how the spiritual quality, even in Ensor's earliest painting, is predominant, we have now traced



Figure 25 Skeleton Painter in his Atalier (1896)



Figure 26 My Portrait in 1960 (1888)

the evolution of his work to the end of this initial period. Not yet having reached the heights attained in his Great Period, the predominant exponents of the spiritual i.e. the elements of Horror and Beauty are still seen mainly through his technical exposition of the subject rather than through the spiritual self consciousness characteristic of a painting like the Entry of Christ into Brussels painted in his mature period. This technique was revolutionary in that it did not conform to popular taste as laid down by the academic art establishments.

In 1881, Ensor took part in his first exhibition after leaving the Academy. The exhibition was the first show of the group La Chrysalide in Brussels. Ensor exhibited some of his Ostend interiors, including Bourgeois Salon (fig. 8). The work was reviewed in L'Art Modern by Jean Francois Partaels, who was the director of the Acedemy during Ensor's stay there, and it was a mildly favourable one:

"Among the new arrivals, James Ensor seems full of promise and has attracted attention. His sketches reveal an attentive observation to the effects of light and air, a finesse in producing certain tonalities; and an extraordinary lack of banality for a beginner. There are the makings of a painter here, but there is also scorn for drawing, modelling and perspective. M Ensor should not fool himself: Talent is not complete without the science of form".<sup>16</sup>

This cryptic comment on Ensor's work is his first mention in print. The reference implies that Ensor has shown little respect for the accepted classical rules on form

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16. Farmer, p 20.



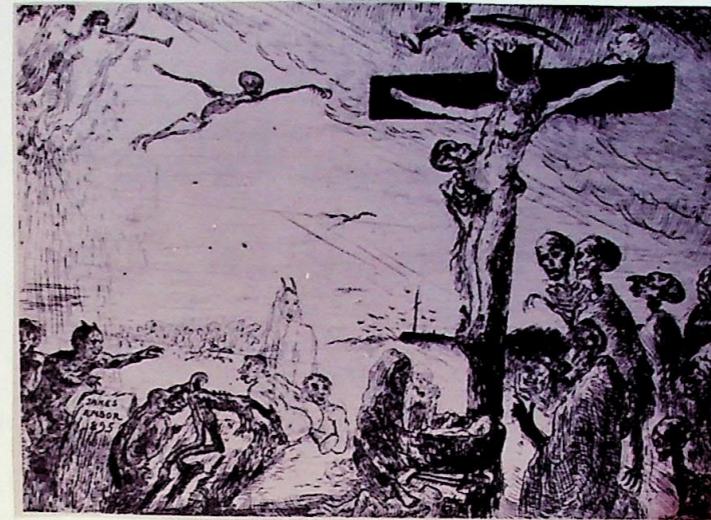


Figure 27    The Sad and Broken: Satan and his Fantastic  
Legions Torment the Crucified (1886)



Figure 28    The Cathedral (1886)

adhered to by academicians and thus judges Ensor's technique as being rebellious, arrogant, even blasphemous in its outright disregard of accepted modes of painting. It is true that even at a very early stage, Ensor showed a headstrong independent nature. We have already heard how he regarded his teachers as 'pickled in brine' and incompetent. He remained unruffled by the narrow mindedness of tutors while resigning himself, true to his own instinct and self confident about his own work. In 1877 at the age of seventeen, Ensor went to study at the Academy des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

"At the age of seventeen, I started at the Brussels Academie. I had been accepted at my first attempt for a course of life classes where I was to be ruled with a rod of iron by my three teachers whose accents clashed and who never agreed on anything. These three men were Joseph Stallaert, Alexandre Robert and Jeff van Severdanck. Our self-important and fiery principal, Jean Portaels who was very highly thought-of, settled all artistic questions in a peremptory manner. Some of my fellow-students, Khnopff, Duyck, Evrard, Crespign ... were bored with their work and did not enjoy it."<sup>17</sup>

Ensor promptly asserted his independence at the Academy,

As soon as I started at the Academie I was overcome with boredom. I was told to paint the bust of Octavius the most August of the Roman emperors, from a brand new plaster cast. The snow white plaster made my flesh creep. I turned it into bright pink goose flesh and made the hair red, horrifying the other students, though their initial alarm was followed by catcalls, grins and punches. The teachers were so taken aback by my impudence, that they didn't dwell on the fact and from then on I painted freely from living models. So that I should learn to respect academic Art, I drew and wiped down all the plaster casts every evening and I carried off the second prize for drawing from classical busts, And so for three years I drew from classical models in the evenings and painted from life in the mornings; at night I invented or set down my dreams."<sup>18</sup>

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17. Gindertael, pp 25-26.

18. Gindertael, p 26.

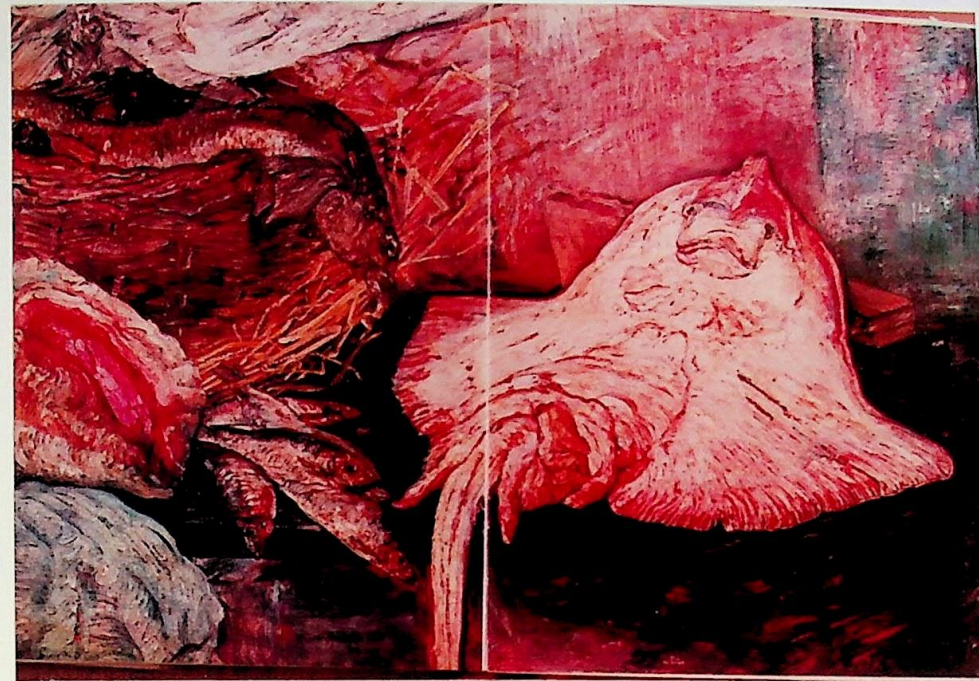


Figure 29 The Skate (1892)



Figure 30 The Astonishment of the Wouse Mask (1889)

This was a time when he was beginning to become aware of his own personality

"I have never understood why my teachers were so disturbed by my anxious experiments. I was guided by a secret instinct and by an understanding of the atmosphere of the sea that can be inhaled in the sea breezes, in the pearly haze, drawn up from the waves heard in the winds....The fantastic somersaults performed by the clouds, with their throngs of fanciful creatures, the dancing mirages, the rasping cries of the seagulls, the high pitched scales of love sick mermaids, the long wails of the storm filled me with imaginative joy, with inordinate recklessness. The wonderful lines on the ornamental cabbages and their triumphant shapes haunted me just as much as the harsh line in Davics work, or Delacroix's broken lines of Rubens, his master, and the august and the virginal figures in the fine painting by Ingres in the museum made me shout aloud in a burst of enthusiasm."

We can see from these accounts, that though he rejects the stuffiness of academic art, he is still prepared to learn the lessons put forward by its teachers when he chose to.

The official academic art in Belgium had been geared to either Classicism or Romanticism, and though Ensor viewed his academic training with distaste he nevertheless felt amazed and elated admiring the paintings of Ingres and David, as much as these in Delacrois and Rubens.

Ensor is most famous for the rebellious and innovatory elements in his work, and the incident of the goose pimpled Roman Bust is an excellent example of these elements at work. His impatience with the moribund teaching methods seem to liberate his imagination and in his work, he creates a



Figure 31 Skeletons Trying to Keep Warm (1889)



Figure 32 Intrigue (1890)

monument to this adverse reaction. While Ensor's treatment of the bust is very imitative, and in his genuine reaction to the snow-white plaster and the stuffy idea of the exercise itself the image is a reactionary one and not one to which he is drawn to solely by his own natural instinct. Instead, he is drawn towards the atmosphere of the sea, the haunting cries of the mermaids, and the sirens. Another positive aspect of this incident is that it revived his palette momentarily from the dark tones typical of his early paintings.

Despite the precociousness that his talent displayed, the only practical acclaim that he was to receive in his years there, was second prize for drawing from classical busts. He left the academy full of contempt for classical training.

"In 1880 I walked out of that establishment for the near-blind, without further ado, already saturated with antiques, satiated, lashed by the compliments rapped out by my foul mouthed teachers."<sup>20</sup>

Modern day criticism takes this early period of his career to establish the fact that he is talented by emphasising his technical innovation, and also to establish the fact that he was a rebel, and using these facts as a platform they go on to suggest that Ensor eventually directs this rebellious nature against Bourgeois society, and unthinking conventional artistic values, in a socially satirical and rhetorical way.

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20. Farmer, p 10.



Figure 33 The Temptations of St Anthony (1887)



Figure 34 Children Dressing (1886)

Ensor's critics are concerned merely with the setting, environment etc. the 'external' causes. This 'extrinsic' study attempts to interpret his painting in the light of its social contexts and antecedents, seeing the main determining factors in political, social, and even psychological conditions. Ensor was peeved by convention, and hurt by the the critics dismissal, but for Ensor, a conscious artist, these factors served not as an end in themselves, but to tighten his sense of reality, and to sharpen his powers of observation. They do figure, yes, but as preparatory factors. In themselves they do not express the spirituality which is the quintessence of Ensor's work.

Ensor's vision is an imaginative one. He holds a direct grasp on the spiritual essence in his work in his vividness, power and depth of imagination. It is this unique imaginative quality which makes his work innovative, not the reverse case as the critics see it.

We have seen, with the incident of the goose pimped Roman bust, that Ensor began his artistic career as a rebel. At the heart of this rebellion there is an imaginative urge to follow a natural instinct of discovery which inevitably leads to exploration outside the bounds of conventional artistic values (and eventually of course to rejection by his contemporaries). This means that the central aspect to be noted in his early work the interiors and the seascapes is





Figure 35    Doctrinal Nourishment (1889)



Figure 36    The Gendarmes (1892)

the religiousity of sentiment, not with the mere superficial breaking of tradition. The importance of the breaking with tradition for Ensor is in the effect he can achieve with innovatory methods, and this effect is essentially to do with the spiritual. It is possible to understand the Academy's impatience with Ensor in this early stage; the work, painted in predominantly dark and earthy colours, blacks, ochres, dwells on colour, and mood, bypassing the compositional precision that they required and thus concentrating on expressive effect. He also escapes from any form of the regional tradition of Flemish naturalism in the luxuriant shapes and sensual subject matter of Still Life with Duck, and The Blue Flask (fig. 12), but a degree of intellectual subtlety has been attained in the treatment of the objects.

The mild religiousity of this early work was treated then, as it is still by modern critics, with quiet neglect. This reaction is typified by Portaels review in *L'art modern* of the Chrysalide exhibition, 1881.

In 1882, Ensor's palette was becoming increasingly brighter, and his subjects were becoming far more personal and unconventional. Ensor painted his most vibrant work to date "Women Eating Oysters" (fig. 13) which has been termed the first of Ensor's works in the luminous colouristic mode characteristic of his maturity. It is a brilliant study of reflected and filtered light, but it was flatly refused by the judges of the Antwerp salon in 1882, again by L'essor, an art



Figure 37 The Good Judges (1891)



Figure 38 The Bad Doctors (1895)

club set up to defend Realism, in 1883, and in 1884 it was refused, because of its lack of form, along with his entire submission to the Brussels Salon. So by this time, quiet neglect had turned to out and out rejection. André De Ridder writing about these years for Ensor in his biography of 1930

"The general public's rudely awakened from their peaceful life were alarmed and promptly turned away from him; the critics, whose preconceived ideas and safe doctrines were shattered by his work, were hostile; and, what is more, even the fellow artists at whose side he was struggling were hostile. He put up with all that. He may well have suffered from these snubs, but he never resigned himself to accepting them passively, still less to the idea of giving up the task he had undertaken.:<sup>21</sup>

Only Emile Verhaeren, writer of one of the earliest monographs of Ensor (1908) recognised the true qualities of "Woman Eating Oysters" (fig. 13). In *La Jeune Belgique* 1883-84 he writes:

"The jurors must know that in closing the door to a talent and a colourist like James Ensor they are making themselves look ridiculous".<sup>22</sup>

Here we begin to see the role critical rejection plays on Ensor's work, notably with regard to his imaginative response. It is clear in the development of Ensor's work that with the increase of adverse criticism, his imagination is given more and more of a free reign, as though the rejection acted as a liberating force, freeing him from his uneasy and tenuous links with established artistic values. The argument proposed by modern day criticism suggests that Ensor's

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21. Gindertael, p 59.

22. Farmer, p 21.

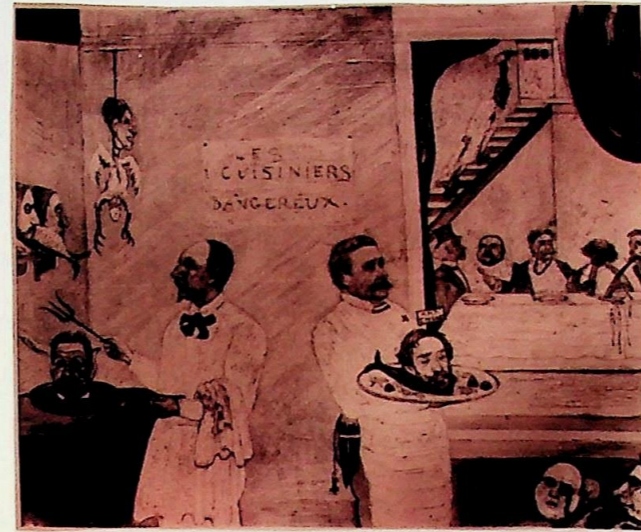


Figure 39 The Dangerous Cooks (1896)



Figure 40 The Pisser (1887)

rejection gave birth to new concerns in his art, of a socially critical, and self pitying nature, and that the weight of the work in his great period concentrates on mockery of the bourgeois values that have rejected him, and his self-identification with the tortured image of Christ. This writer feels that this view misses the central idea of Ensor's work. It is true that the criticism and disinterest hurt and angered Ensor, who could often be a combative and abrasive character, but this rejection, rather than creating as the modern critics tell us, the reactionary work of an embittered and neglected artist, it actually confirms his distrust of the hypocrisy and narrow mindedness of the current art establishments, and of the art loving bourgeoisie, and it strengthens his trust in "the secret instinct of discovery" by which he is guided. In short, if the critics were going to reject his work anyway, Ensor was suddenly free to do whatever he pleased, however he pleased to do it. After all, it was he himself who said

"With my pursuers close upon my heels I gleefully locked myself up in the solitary land of bantering mirth in which the mask, wholly made up of violence, light and brilliance, holds sway,"<sup>23</sup>

From 1883 onwards, his paintings became far more personal and unconventional. 1882 and 1883 see the last of Ensor's essentially realist canvases, and the introduction of working class people. Ensor loved Ostend's poor people, he admired their acceptance for a tragi-comic lifestyle, and often spent time painting and drawing them depicting some of the terrible aspects of their lives in his work. Tramp Trying

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23. Farmer, p 21.



Figure 41 Demon Teasing Me (1888)

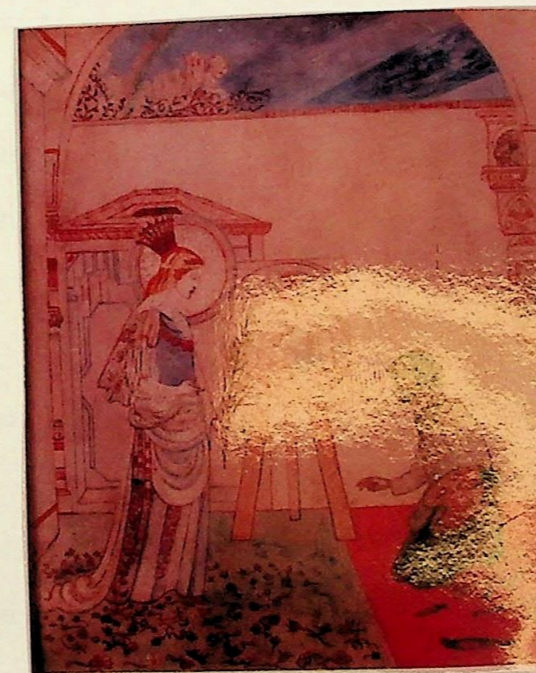


Figure 42 The Consoling Virgin (1892)

to Keep Warm 1882 (fig. 14), The Drunkards 1885 (fig. 15), and The Rower 1881 (fig. 16), and Lady in Distress 1882 (fig. 6), though they are painted in a cruder and more expressive style which gives them a shocking impact, rendering them too unsavoury for public showing.

John David Farmer, in the catalogue to the major exhibition of Ensor's work at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1976, describes The Drunkards (fig. 15) as a "competant excursion into psychology and social commentary" but since Ensor's figures from the middle class interiors bear similar expressions of hopelessness, it is more likely that these are paintings devoted to human grief. Ensor's most significant work of 1883 is Scandalizd Masks (fig. 17). In a spartan and dimly lit room, two figures face each other, completely static, weaving carnival masks. The female figure appears dominant and threatening, whereas the male figure cowers, seated at a table, with a bottle. It would seem most likely that the subject matter of this painting is symbolic of the tense relationship between Ensor's mother, and his dependant and alcoholic father. This is Ensor's first use of the mask in a painting and this motif is inextricably associated with his later idiosyncratic work. Masks were sold at his mother's shop during carnival time, and here Ensor inventively uses this familiar object in a symbolic and sinister way to convey a sense of horror beneath the surface reality of the scene.





Figure 43 Christ Calming the Storm (1924)

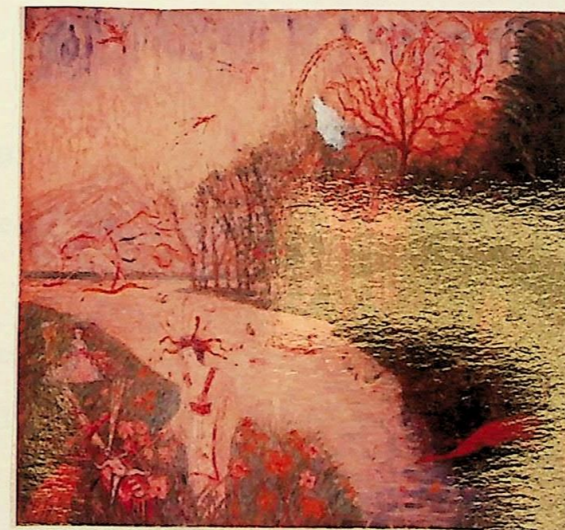


Figure 44 The Finding of Moses (1924)

Walter Vanbeseleare, Curator of the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp, in a preface to a large retrospective exhibition of Ensor's work held in the Musée Nationale d'Art Modern, Davis 1954, wrote a penetrating and sensitive study of the artist, and accurately points out Ensor's interest in that which exists beyond the surface of banality:

"Guided by his infallible instinct for discovery, he suddenly turned in 1883 to area that he had not yet touched on; these were much vaster, more worrying and richer in phantasmagoria than all the hidden mystery he had discovered in the real world about him. In his Christ Walking on the Water, or in The Oarsman (fig. 16) Ensor is a flowered Hat (fig. 18) or Scandalized Masks (fig. 17) and also in Portrait of Vogels at the Easel, his imagination shies away from anything resembling direct observation and aims instead for murky regions where light and shadows embrace with never-failing tenderness, or else collide with indescribable brutality; but in the end they remain irresistible forces, attractive or repellent forces born of the abyss."<sup>24</sup>

It is this quality of spiritual self-consciousness which marks the later work of 1883 in those areas which had never been touched on and in a manner which had never before been more vital, more powerful, more mysterious.

In 1884, the Artistic Circle exhibited the work of Ensor, Vogels, and Storm de Gravesande, and although the exhibition caused the adherents to academicism to shriek out loud, the ethereal qualities of Ensor's and Vogel's sketches were defended in this note:

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24. Gindertael, p 47.



Figure 45    The Rebel Angels Struck Down (1889)

"It is not reality, with its rigorous form, its precise details, its imperious attention to the line; it is rather a dream of nature, something like a lazy description of far-off things, like gently rocking music".<sup>25</sup>

This defense of Ensor is an accurate and a sharply observant account, for it acknowledges and stresses the reality of the spiritual 'otherness' (Blake) which is at the heart of Ensor's work, of the spiritual self-consciousness which were seen in The Entry of Christ into Brussels (fig. 1), in the work of his 'great period', and to some extent in all of Ensor's painting.

1885 sees a radical change in Ensor's artistic vocabulary. Two radiant landscapes held this change; Rooftops of Ostend (fig. 19), and Hotel de Ville, in which the gilding qualities of light break up the city's familiar silhouettes, making them hazy and indistinct, announce Ensor's interest in the expressive qualities of light.

"Light ought to be the vehicle for all grand aspiration"<sup>26</sup> he said in a letter of 1894 or 1895. Through his use of light in these works, Ensor is able to "shake off for ever the bonds of realism and make the decisive leap that still separated him from true creative freedom".<sup>27</sup> It is not clear when Ensor became familiar with Turner's work, but his influence can be

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25. Philippe Roberts-Jones, From Realism to Surrealism, Painting in Belgium from Joseph Stevens, to Paul Delvaux, p 44.

26. Farmer, p 22.

27. Gindertael, p 58.

seen in Ensor's work, especially in the expressionistic canvases of 1887, Adam and Eve dream out of Paradise (fig.20), Beach Carnival. Vanbeselaere says that Ensor noticed in Turner's painting,

"...the progressive detachment of his vision, which is closely related to his 'method of reproducing reality', and observed how he caught the very essence of the impressions produced by reality in a series of independent pictorial creations... Not only did Ensor encounter in Turner's work an imaginary universe related to the one whose confines he had himself been exploring for so many years, he also found a range of luminous colours seventy-five years older than those used by the French Impressionists. He was going to be able to use these to depict his visions of his own imaginary world."<sup>28</sup>

1885 was a year of restless experimentation, and the diversity of his work is so immense that no general description fits the period. He made drawings after other artists work as a study of technique. Above all he studied Rembrandt, especially his power to create drama through light, and this helped him to develop an effective graphic technique. Rembrandt also greatly influenced Ensor's treatment of religious themes, which play an increasing role in his art from 1885 onwards.

This is the point in Ensor's art from where modern day critics trace the strong religious content in his work, and argue that Ensor's self-identification with Christ is a dark analogy alluding to his own persecution at the hands of the critics, and convention. Doctor and psychiatrist, Dr. Herman Piron wrote a psycho-analytical study in which he stated:

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28. Gindertael, p 58.

"It is impossible to understand Ensor's development unless we take into account the tensions undergone by his personality and the fact that ultimately the figure of Christ had a decisive meaning for Ensor in that he unconsciously identified himself with Him."<sup>29</sup>

This sums up the popular opinion, although most critics take it that Ensor consciously identified himself with Christ.

The critics analysis of Ensor's work is misleading since it encourages the illusion that his paintings have a simple *raison d'etre*, and seeing only one aspect of his work they fail to recognize that Ensor's painting, like any work of art, is not a simple object, but a highly complex organization with multiple meanings and relationship. The age-old aesthetic terms, "revolt", "reaction", "convention", "social criticism", describe only one single aspect of his work, and, like scientific data, can know nothing of the poetic, the spiritual essence of Ensor's art, leaving one with the impression that the nature of his work can be cited in simple, conceptual terms. But as spiritual art it contains a positive factor; the moulding of Ensor's fantasies into a new kind of reality, the reality of the painting. Images are not merely pulled from the memory like rabbits from a hat, but are perceptual's sensory, spiritual in essence.

So it is true that in Ensor's religious subject matter, Christ represents the nobler side of man's nature, that very quality that Ensor saw society destroying, but neither the

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29. Gindertael, p 127.

common critical view, nor the more socially critical one considers a deeper positive spiritual meaning.

1885 is the year in which Ensor begins to articulate the ideas, and the images which are the essence of his Oeuvre. There are three images which appear with the most frequency; Christ, the skeleton, and the mask.

The Mystic Deah of a Theologian (fig. 21), a drawing started in 1880, and reworked in 1885/86, is a subject Ensor invented himself. This carefully worked out drawing contains an interest in linear detail, as well as grotesque and sinister imagery. The grotesque, and the bizarre elements which feature so prominently from the mid '80's onwards, are an integral part of Ensor's imagination. Those elements of his peculiar vision can be traced back to the influences of his childhood. In the house where Ensor lived, his mother kept a curiosity shop in which one could find stuffed animals, seashells, coral, odd fish and other dried sea-plants, together with assorted beach articles such as toys, buckets and spades, and numerous other exotic things, including of course, carnival masks. The unusual nature of the objects that surrounded him in his mother's shop and the somewhat moody and tense atmosphere of the family home, deeply influenced the development of his sometimes bizarre sensibility, and heightened sensitivity.

Ensor as we have already seen was acutely aware of the world of contrast even from childhood. In his paintings so

far he has consistently dealt with both the disturbing and sinister aspects of his environment along with the beautiful, and hopeful aspects. All along he has kept these separate, on the one hand painting lonely figures in gloomy situations, and on the other, at the same time, painting still lives bathed in light, and seascapes. Now both of these modes start to come together in the same pictures. In a small drawing entitled Suzanna and the Elders (1882) a theme taken from the Apocrypha, Ensor places innocence and evil side by side; as the nude Suzanna bathes she is spied upon by a group of old men. In Scandalized Masks (1883 (fig. 17)), the frightening scene is cleverly set off by the use of masks which are normally associated with frivolity and cheer: this is a complex contrast between fun and frivolity on the one hand, and serious, sombre issues on the other.

The Mystic Death of a Theologian (1885) (fig. 21), is one of a very important series of drawings dealing with Christ and the Crowd. The Flood: Jesus shown to the people is executed in a similar way. Christ is represented with a radiance typical of Rembrandt's depiction, and He is central to the picture. But the crowd is treated with more depth and attention to detail, and thus it rief for ones attention. Christ's priority is stressed by the almost obscene nature of the crowd, whose attention is directed away from Him.

The Alive and Radient: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (fig. 2), a drawing of 1885, continues the study of Christ surrounded by the crowd. Christ has rays of light



streaming from him in this depiction, but again the detail of the dark mass of people in the foreground detracts attention from Him. Though the procession is in honour of Him, the people do not seem especially interested in Him, and look in all directions away from Him. The banners referring to contemporary social and art movements, and the appearance of a contemporary French lexicographer set the scene in modern times, stressing that mankind remains essentially the same throughout the ages.

Critics would have us believe that Ensor's work was all the time based on the particular - on particular occurrences, happenings in the outer sense perceptible world. Thus they constantly allude to the social tension in the Belgium of the 1890's, but I would argue that such determinism ties these paintings down to being mere period pieces, which they are not. Their universality is always apparent in the quality of spiritual self-consciousness - that which makes men and women aware of their own existence. The quarrel between the universal and the particular has been going on since Aristotle proclaimed art to be more universal, and hence more philosophical than history, which is concerned only with the particular. But it is surely true that each work of art is both general and particular, or even both individual and general, so why should we deny this of Ensor's art. It is precisely the spiritual concerns which make this statement true of Ensor.

The banners of this drawing, The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (fig. 2), express the insincerity of the crowd;

"Pork Butchers of Jerusalem, "Long Live the Socialist State", "Doctrinary Fanfares always succeed", "Phalanx Shattering Wagner". This is the crown of The Entry of Christ into Brussels, (1888), and it is easy to see in this painting the Christian Legend which was still alive in the popular heart of Flanders, its easy to see the social upheaval in the Belgium of the 1880's, but it not these that make it universal; the universality in this painting is held in the spiritual attitude of the crowd, a crowd that has stayed the same through time.

An important painting of 1885, Skeleton Examining Chinoiserie (fig. 22) is also a study in which the mortal exists with the immortal. Skeletons abound in his paintings from now on, and are seen playing billiards, musical instruments, presideing over mortals in scenes, and joining in carnival festivities. The skeleton in Ensor's work is a straightforward symbol of death, or mortality, and sometimes evil, and it is often used by Ensor to introduce the stark reality of death into otherwise more frivolous scenes. In some situations, for example, when it is mixed in with the carnival crowd, it suggests that death is another serious issue ignored, or taken very lightly, by the crowd, who continue to enjoy themselves. In other instances, for example Death Chasing a Flock of Mortals, (1896) (fig. 23), the skeleton as death brings home to the foolish crowd the harsh reality of its nature. In this way, Christ and death are related and presented as real, and substantial, and that these intrinsicities are ignored by the masses. A skeleton grins

amongst the swarming crowd of The Entry of Christ into Brussels (fig. 1), whereas Christ looks slightly horrified at the spectacle of the mass gathering. The skeleton as Death presides over the seven deadly sins in the etching The Deadly Sins Dominated by Death (fig. 24), Ensor also mocks himself by reminding himself of his own mortality. In a number of portraits, he paints a skull, in place of his own features in Skeleton Painter in his Atalier (1896) (fig. 25), and in a humorous etching My Portrait in 1960 (1888) (fig. 26), he portrays himself as a frizzled skeleton wearing a pair of slippers. The skeleton is a symbol of evil in the drawing of 1886, The Sad and Broken: Satan and his Fantastic Legions Tormenting the Crucified (fig. 27), and here the absolute opposites, good and evil, co-exist. Some skeletons fly through the air towards the crucified figure of Christ, while others tear at his flesh. Another drawing of 1886, Christ Led into Hell, depicts Satan as a skeletalized figure seated on his throne.

The third, vital image Ensor uses is the mask. This represents a false facade of insincere facial expression. Ensor uses the mask to unmask humanity, and to reveal an inane and hysterical mob-mentality. One of his first etchings, The Cathedral (fig. 28), done in 1886, depicts his view of a depraved humanity. The cathedral is a massive and monumental structure, and it towers above the carnival like, dissarrayed, and grotesque looking mass of people. In Ensor's earliest depictions of the crowd, there are always elements of the

crowd that are detached from the scene at hand. In The Merry: The Adoration of the Shepherds, drawing, 1886, this element takes the form of crude sub-scenes that are inappropriate to the traditionally depicted mood of the scene. One member of the group around the Holy Child cuts a goose's neck, the violence of which is suprisingly startling, and a dog scratches at fleas. this attitude of detachment is the nature of the whole masked crowd in The Entry of Christ into Brussels (fig. 1).

Ensor discovered in the mask a way of reproducing, the reality of events and perceptions of his own life, by an imaginary transformation of real and familiar objects. The mask provides a way in which the beautiful and the grotesque can be delt with in the one image; the former through the plastic means of painting in a way which is inspired by his observation from natute; the latter in a symbolic way through images which are inspired by the mental torments and phantarmagoria which were his constant companions.

"O the animal masks of the Ostend carnival: bloated vicuna faces, misshappen birds with the tails of birds of paradise, cranes with sky-blue bills gabbling nonsense, clay-footed architects, obtruce sociolists, with mouldy skulls, hairless vivisectionists, odd insects, hard shells giving shelter to soft beasts."<sup>30</sup>

"From 1883 onwards, masks had a profound effect on me... with my pursuers close upon my heels I gleefully locked myself up in the solitary land of bantering myth in which the masks, wholly made up of violence, light and brilliance, holds sway. The mask mean to me: freshness of tone, sumptuous decor, large and unexpected gestures, high-pitched expression, exquisite boisterousness."<sup>31</sup>

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30. Farmer, p 26.

31. Gindertael, p 111.

Walter Vanbeselaere referring to the relationship between the psychological, and the plastic concerns, he suggests that whereas in naturalist canvasses of the same period, such as The Skate (1892) (fig. 29):

".... the concrete date are imbued with the passion of a pair of eyes that are greedily struggling to gain a firm and all embracing grip on reality ... on the other hand, the world of the mask, in which he externalizes all the obsessions that haunt him and leave him with a disordered imagination, is continually swept by reminiscences of the concrete reality that he - a true northerner - cannot shake off. His masks act, move, stand upright - at all times and in all places they are living people.

In Asdonishment of the Wouse Mask (1889) (fig. 30), an old lady out for a walk is draped in an indescribably sumptuous Indian shawl in autumnal colours. In Skeletons Trying to keep warm (1889), (fig. 31) we are deeply moved by the sordid and pathetic spectacle of the stove. In Intrigue (1890) (fig. 32) the procession of masks moves towards us with the persuasive power of a snapshot that has caught a moment of real life."<sup>32</sup>

The world from which Ensor joyfully locked himself up was a world that understood him less and less. By 1885 he had already offended a few dogmatic academics, but in that year he started to upset almost everyone, using imagery that still seems shocking today. By now his work had been rejected by all the official salons, but since 1883, was exhibiting with the group "Les XX", of which he himself was a founding member, and which was the pinnacle of the avant-garde in Belgian art of the 1880's. However, while exhibiting with XX, he was still subjected to humiliating reviews, and in 1888, though the group had been set up to warmly welcome independent and innovative artists, a cabal stirred up by his fellow artists

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32. Gindertael, p 121

in the group forced him to withdraw all the paintings he had submitted that year. These paintings included the following; Adam and Eve driven out of Paradise (fig. 20), The Temptation of St Anthony (fig. 33), Children dressing (fig. 34), Old Piece of Furniture, and in 1889, his most celebrated work The Entry of Christ into Brussels was rejected.

So who are the faces in Ensor's crowds? They could be those of the critics, whom he saw as "anxious, hostile, scowling and full of hatred"; they could be of his fellow citizens who greeted him with jeers, and sarcastic remarks because they couldn't understand why he wouldn't 'do an honest days work'. This is the main reason why most of Ensor's landscapes are painted out the window of his studio - to avoid the hostility of his neighbours, who were local dignitaries and tradesmen and contemporary criticism puts a lot of store in the fact that he was rejected by bourgeois society and by the conventional and unconventional art establishments. Ensor's mockery of the bourgeois, and their values supports the view of Ensor as a socialistic, 'anarchistic rebel'.

The Belgium of the time suited the middle class pretty well, but the lot of ordinary working class people, who were condemned to a life of poverty and illiteracy, was hardly an enviable one. The last 20 years of the nineteenth century was one of marked change in the social climate; Agricultural progress had been achieved and a rapidly developing industry was under way, but this had not put a stop to exploitation of the proletariat. After 1867, when Marx's *Das Kapital* was

published, and after the dissemination of Marxist theories at the annual congress of the International Workmens Association, held in 1868, the Belgian Workers Party was set up in 1885. This new party was seen by many as a new force, Social Democracy, to fight the Catholics and the Liberals, who had up to now shared the running of the country between them. The struggle which had now begun, to improve the mateial situation of the working class, was to take the share of social disturbances, strikes, and harsh repression. There is little or no evidence that clarifies Ensor's social and political view, but the critics point out that many of Ensor's friends and associates were liberal thinkers; Emile Verhaeren, Friend of Ensor, poet and author of monograph on Ensor in 1908 was very moved by the social and humanitarian preoccupations of his age, and favoured a form of socialism that was more generous and idealistic than doctrinaire. Ensor enjoyed the company of the Rousseau's and frequented their home during his stay in Brussels, and afterwards. Ernest Rousseau was the rector of the Universite Libre de Brussels, and his house was often the meeting place of Liberal spokesmen, and other free thinkers, so it is fair to assume that Ensor may have strengthened his radical notions there.

The critics arugment is not irrelevant; Ensor often picked up his brush and used to make a direct social comment, and exhibited no shyness in doing so. Concise and direct vilification is aimed at the Belgian government in Doctrinal Nourishment (fig. 35). It is an unabashed citation of stupidity and baseness. The chief figures of Church and

State, and military feed the populus below on their own excrement, and the people seem eager for what they receive! In Belgium in the XIX Century, the King seated above an unruly mob, being forcibly quelled by soldiers, asks them "What do you want? aren't you content? A little patience, No Violence." A more devious and grave comment on an actual social event, The Gendarmes (1888) (fig. 36), is a painting of strike victims of Ostend who were shot by the armed forces. One gendarme guarding the corpses wipes the blood off his sabre, while another displays a few pieces of money in his hand, in the background is a hysterical crowd. Other works which are ironical and sometimes savage attacks on social groups include The Good Judges (1894) (fig. 38) and Bad Doctors (1895) (fig. 38). Dangerous Cooks (1896) (fig. 39), is the most specific polemic against the critical establishment. The cooks are the critics, who prepare a selection of artists heads for more critics, the waiting dinner guests who include Eugène Demolder and Verhaeren, both writers of monographs on Ensor. Octave Maus, who was the leading member of "Les XX", carries Ensor's head on a platter. Another work in this vein is, the etching called The Pisser (1887) (fig. 40), where a figure pisses on a wall on which Ensor's critics have written "Ensor is mad". These are all examples of Ensor's adoption of a linearistic and characteristic mode, which gave free rein to his boldest vein of creative imagination and most spirited satire. All of these works began as etchings of the subjects were copied as paintings afterwards, and so belong to Ensors Oeuvre Grave, which comprises of about 133 engravings. The greater part of



this work is of religious and grotesque subject matter. The spiritual content is obvious. The scenes played out by devils, skeletons, imps and strange beasts are not strange to the Belgian tradition of "diableries", and may of the works evoke Bosch, and Breughel.

It would be erroneous merely to classify Bosch as a symbolic painter in the modern sense; what Bosch painted was the content of his spiritual imaginative vision; it was the result of direct inner pictorial experience, not an abstract, calculated representation of theoretical ideas or dogmas. Bosch shows content of inner imagination; he painted out of a direct inner experience of vision which arose through a particularly vivid creative faculty - imaginative visions which grasp essences rather than outer forms. Ensor does the same thing using a reverse method: his imaginative experience formed itself into terms experienced by the individual in the ordinary life of Belgium. In Bosch then, we see that the inner picture contains the essential content rather than the outer happenings, whereas in Ensor, it is the outer happenings that form the content of his work. The essence of Ensor's work is as spiritual as that of Bosch, as uniquely imaginative, and as concerned with a whole reality, i.e. a reality which includes a spiritual self-consciousness as a part of itself. But perhaps most importantly, what Ensor and Bosch have in common in their work is the didactic element.

The critics argument concentrates on the exterior aspects of his work; Ensor the innovator. Ensor the rebel,

Ensor the satirical commentator. They are concentrating here on the surface content, investigating the effects on his work of social and personal events, concluding that the surface imagery is directly related to these events. This argument leaves no room for the spiritual didactic that exists, and obviously so, in his work, and it excludes a great many works which cannot fit into this argument.

There is an abundance of work dealing with death, Christ and the crowd. Christ and the Beggars, Christ Descending into Hell and Death Chasing a Flock of Mortals (fig. 23). The critics main point with regard to Ensor's use of Christ is that Ensor uses Christ as an allegory to the more positive aspects of humanity, and where Christ is being tormented by demons and devils, and being ignored by the crowd, this is an analogy of Ensor's own tormented situation at the hands of critics and narrow mindedness in general. As an illustration of this argument, they relate Christ Tormented by Demons (1895) and Demons Teasing Me (1888), (fig. 44). Farmer sums up the popular view of Ensor's treatment of religious subjects in his essay:

"The Sad and Broken: Satan and His Fantastic Legions Torment the Crucified Christ (fig. 27) is a powerful heresy: a skeleton climbs the cross to feed on Christ's body, while wraiths and monsters whirl about below. Now the source of light emanates not from Christ but from a host of angels in the sky. The face of Christ is totally obscured by the lack of light and the hands of a molesting demon. It may be that Ensor alludes her to his own persecution in a dark analogy with that of the savior, for in an 1895 etching of the same scene, the face of Jesus bears Ensor's own features. There seems to be no precedent for the manner in which these themes were attached; in art, the Passion had never before been so closely correlated with outrage. An unorthodox spirit of deep pessimism is transmitted through he powerful techniques that Ensor had to invent for his

purpose. Since he never expressed any allegiance to organized religion, it seems likely that his Christ was intended to represent the nobler side of man's nature, that very quality that Ensor saw society destroying."<sup>33</sup>

It is practically impossible for an artist not in some way to reflect the period in which he works; for his painting not to make some statement about his times, or his beliefs. This is also true of critics; they are open to the same influences.

These are days of awareness regarding social, and human rights issues and these are days in which the questioning of religious dogma and tradition is not considered heretical. In the last 100 years, the teaching of Christian religion has changed dramatically. The idea of evil and horror are played down in most of the religious teaching in modern times, and popular teaching would appear very wishy washy compared to that of even a century ago.

The flowery and comfortable image that the modern christian churches convey make Ensor's depiction of the idea of death, and spiritual horror seem more unsavoury to us today than they would have to ordinary people living in Bosch's day, when people were familiar with the idea of sin and evil. The critics skip over the idea that Ensor might have intended to portray some startling spiritual realities to do with the inevitability of death, and the seriousness of peoples self willed ignorance and hypocrisy in their religious beliefs.

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33. Farmer, p 24.

The critics ignore the subject matter in painting, such as Adam and Eve cast out of paradise (28), Rebel angels struck down (1889) (fig. 45), The Finding of Moses (1924), (fig. 44), Combat of Demon, Christ calming storm (fig. 43), The Consoling Virgin (1892) (fig. 42), and instead concentrate on the treatment technically of the works. In The Consoling Virgin (42) one cannot fail to see the obvious sincerity of the artist in his relation to the Virgin. Ensor kneels before her humbly and accepts her blessing. There is strong evidence that Ensor wished to speak to "the man of tomorrow". He had a message to communicate:

"Yes, my intention is to go on working for a long time so that generations to come may hear me. My intention is to survive and I think of the solid copper plate, the unalterable ink, easy reproduction, fruitful prints, and I adopt etching as a means of expression".<sup>34</sup>

Just as in his early work, where in The Drunkards (fig. 15), Scandalised Masks (fig. 17) he derides and denounces the negative aspects of the world, and in his more naturalist work he by contrast celebrates his immediate surrounding, delighting in the sensuous forms of objects, and in the material world of landscapes and sea-scapes - so too in his great works he contrasts the horror of evil and the ignorance of the people with the benevolence and hope of humanity manifest in Christ in The Cathedral (fig. 38) or the Entry of Christ into Brussels (fig. 1), he wishes to convey the realities of Christ, and of death, and of evil. In Death Chasing a Flock of Mortals (fig. 23), the hysterical carnival

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34. August Taenernier, James Ensor, Etchings, p 31.

crowd are surprised by death, and they can find no shelter or  
hiding place - skeletons fly into roof windows leap from  
rooms, fly through the air, and mix with the frenzied crowd.  
As if to mock his own folly and pursuit of worthless "fame",  
he prints himself as a skeleton artist, and thus takes his  
place amongst the crowd.

## CONCLUSION

Art, and art criticism are two distinct activities: one is creative, and the other, if not precisely a science, is a species of knowledge, or of learning. Difficult problems are raised by this relationship and there often appears a dichotomy between 'scholarship' and 'appreciation'; a paradox which makes no provision for the true study of art. The problem is how to deal with art intellectually. Some critics attempt to emulate the general scientific ideals of objectivity, impersonality, and certainly in the collecting of neutral facts; others, to pay close attention to casual antecedents and origins and by the assignment of determining causes to economic social and political conditions; still more use the biological approach, tracing the evolution of art, and finally there are those who pay close attention to the formal technique. But while these scientific methods prove their value within a strictly limited area, they often fail to give due credit to the essential value and individuality of a work of art. Such is the case with the critical appraisal written of Ensor to date.

The law applied to Ensor turns out to be only such psychological uniformities as action and reaction, or convention and revolt, which even if they were, beyond doubt could not tell us anything really significant about Ensor's painting.

If Ensor's work is social criticism, it might as well be an historical document with a simple functional purpose. The total meaning of his art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for Ensor's contemporaries and critics. Ensor's art is both historical and eternal. Any discussion on his art would have to distinguish questions concerning his descent and sociological question as well as attention to technical detail. The danger is of believing that an explanation of some of the parts gives a true impression of the whole.

Ensor's paintings convey truth, and, necessarily also historical and social truths, but his work is no substitute for sociology or politics, nor will it function as some kind of trite cathartic diary. Ensor's conception of the world is able to grasp the spiritual aspect of mankind. His paintings are therefore more than arbitrary cause and effect, but contain also the vital aspect of spiritual self-consciousness. Social, personal thought is permeated with spiritual awareness. One is vital to the other. Both spiritual sensibility, and concrete concerns of Ensor's painting, and of the world can and do exist simultaneously.

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