

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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092151 - 52

FOR WEDNESDAY RELEASE

LARGE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF WORK BY JAMES ENSOR, FAMOUS MODERN BELGIAN PAINTER, TO GO ON VIEW

The first comprehensive exhibition in the United States of the work of the great Belgian artist James Ensor (1860-1949) will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from September 26 through October 28. Sixty-two of Ensor's major paintings from Belgium as well as a large group of drawings and etchings have been assembled with the assistance of the Belgian Government, and will also be exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the City Art Museum of St. Louis and the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art after leaving New York.

The Institute of Contemporary Art through its Director, James S. Plaut, initiated negotiations for the exhibition with representatives of the Belgian Government and Belgian museums, and has been responsible for all arrangements incident to bringing the exhibition to America. His Excellency, Baron Silvercruys, Belgian Ambassador to the United States, will attend the Members' preview of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art on September 25. The exhibition has been installed in the third floor galleries of the Museum by Miss Margaret Miller of the Museum staff. The catalog accompanying the show is by Miss Libby Tannenbaum, Assistant Curator in the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions. The first monograph on the artist to be published in English, the book includes 128 pages, 109 plates, 8 in color, and a preface by Paul Fierens, Director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.

Ensor a Pioneer Painter

James Sydney Ensor was a painter of the fantastic, the poetic, the grotesque, who foreshadowed the important 20th-century movements of expressionism and surrealism. He was born in Ostend in 1860, the son of an expatriate Englishman and a Belgian mother. The young artist was encouraged by his mother, who kept a curio and souvenir shop in the ground floor of the family home. At the age of 17 he was sent to the Brussels Academy to study for 3 years. All early

success in being accepted as an exhibitor in the Salons of Brussels and Paris came to a sudden end when Ensor was 22 years old and his use of bright colors as well as his style became too advanced for the juries. For years to come doors were closed to him, and he worked in isolation.

In 1888 he painted his most famous work, "The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889," a huge canvas, $8\frac{1}{2}$ by 14 feet, filled with the masks and skeletons that are his best-known themes. This was also rejected and was never exhibited until 41 years later.

In 1896, a friend organized a one-man show of his work in Brussels, and in 1898 he exhibited in Paris. It was not until the early years of the 20th century that his work received wide recognition. In 1903 he was honored by his government with the Order of Leopold. German collectors began to purchase many of his prints.

During the first world war, he remained in Belgium throughout the German occupation and received many visits from German artists. In 1921, a large retrospective exhibition of his work went on view in Antwerp, and the first collection of his writings was published. Other important exhibitions followed, and in 1929 he was made a Baron by the King of Belgium.

He again remained in Ostend during the second world war despite heavy bombings which destroyed some of his works.

Ensor died two years ago at the age of 89 in the same Ostend home where he had continued to run the souvenir shop and to live in the crowded quarters above it. Numerous exhibitions in Europe and in England made him a well-known figure abroad, but until now he has been relatively little known and his work little seen in this country.

Following are the Belgian Museums that have generously loaned works by Ensor to make possible this exhibition:

Cabinet des Estampes, Brussels
 Musée Charlier, Brussels
 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Ghent
 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Liège
 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai
 Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp
 Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels
 Ostend Museum of Art

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In his preface to the catalog, Mr. Fierens summarizes Ensor's unique historical positions:

The course of his lifetime spanned the two centuries which, as we see more and more clearly, contradict and complement each other. The nineteenth century believed in the corporal and the sensory; and its pictorial art was inclined to the representation of what met the eye. But the twentieth century proposed once more the great question of the spirit. There arose artists of pure intellect (with whom, of course, Ensor had no affinity). There arose artists of free imagination, poet-painters. A good while before the turn of the century...Ensor was the prophet of the unrealistic lyricism of today.

Famous in Europe, though until now relatively little known in this country, Ensor perhaps just narrowly missed becoming an American. Shortly after the artist's birth in 1860, his father, who was an Englishman, came to the United States looking for work as an engineer, but returned to Ostend discouraged by the outbreak of the Civil War.

The exhibition opens with three small paintings of the beach and dunes of the North Sea coast at Ostend where Ensor was born and lived throughout his long life. These were painted when the artist was only sixteen. His precocious talent was encouraged by his mother who kept a souvenir shop in Ostend, in the hope that he would produce "hand-painted" pictures to be sold in the shop, and from 1877 to 1880 he was sent to study at the Academy in Brussels. His first works met quick success, and two of them were shown at the Paris Salon of 1882. But the brightening of his palette from academic sombreness to richer and more luminous color shocked his contemporaries, and in 1884 all of Ensor's entries were rejected by the Brussels Salon with the comment, "There will certainly be much worse canvases in the exhibition, but we cannot admit these tendencies."

These attacks tended to reinforce Ensor's isolation from the mainstream of his own generation. In his studio in Ostend, he painted little for the next few years, but produced quantities of drawings and etchings. Printmaking led him to the study of many masters of the past, particularly the 17th century Jacques Callot, whose fantastic work appears to have

influenced Ensor decisively.

In the years 1887-1888 Ensor made a complete break with 19th century tradition. Four of the most revolutionary paintings of these years are shown in the central gallery of the exhibition with a group of related prints and etchings.

Of these The tribulations of St. Anthony, purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, is the earliest in date. Its rich improvised imagery remarkably foreshadows the fantastic art of the 20th century, and its exuberant, freely slashed color anticipates by a quarter of a century the abstract expressionism of Kandinsky.

The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889, painted two years after Seurat's La Grande Jatte, was the subject of violent controversy in Belgium art circles. Never publicly exhibited until 1929, its legend was spread by two generations of painters who saw it in the artist's studio at Ostend, which it left briefly for exhibition only twice until his death two years ago. Writing about this painting, Miss Tannenbaum notes:

The very size (about 8½ x 14 feet).... indicates the phenomenal boldness and energy which went into the creation of his major paintings during the next five years.... Faces quickly brought to life in a single sweep of a thick brush dipped into vivid color, multiply in a composition vibrant with pure, clear and even harsh brilliance. The enormous canvas represents the whole contemporary Brussels world as it might come out into the streets to render gala homage to the entering Savior.... The painting vibrates with the imminent crucifixion.

Here Ensor makes full use of the pageantry of the carnival which was still elaborately celebrated in Belgium at that time.

Masks Confronting Death in the same gallery heralds a whole series of carnival pictures of the next five years. After the death of his father in 1887, death is present in Ensor's work as a continuous haunting reminder.

From the central gallery of the exhibition continues with a large group of prints (through which Ensor exerted much of his influence) to the paintings of the 90s whose diversity of style recall Ensor's own remark

The artist must invent his own style, and each new work demands its own."

In 1896 a friend organized a one-man show in Brussels, and as a result of this exhibition, The Lamp Boy, painted in 1880 when the artist was twenty, was acquired by the Brussels Museum. In 1898 there was a large and successful exhibition in Paris, and after the turn of the century Ensor's most difficult time was past. Early in the 1900s, rich collections of his prints were formed in Germany where they influenced the course of German expressionism. As his fame grew, Ensor was increasingly honored in his own country, and in 1929 at the time of a large retrospective in Brussels, he was made a baron by the king.

Unlike most artists of his generation, Ensor lived to witness his own success. The large 1914 canvas in the last gallery of the exhibition sets the stage for his ballet, The Game of Love, Flirt des Marionettes, for which Ensor composed the scenario and music as well as the decor. Success had its own elements of carnival, and the artist, who now gayly assembles a fragile race of fantastic puppets and portrays himself as a piper, found then ironic but delicious.