

MoMA PRESENTS AN EXHIBITION OF THE PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, AND PRINTS OF JAMES ENSOR, A MAJOR FIGURE OF THE BELGIAN AVANT-GARDE

Exhibition Illustrates Ensor's Prolific Output and His Experimentation with Style, Subject Matter, Medium, and Scale, Focusing on Work of the Late 1800s

James Ensor

June 28–September 21, 2009

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor

NEW YORK, June 23, 2009—The Museum of Modern Art presents *James Ensor*—the first exhibition at an American institution to feature the full range of his media in over 30 years—from June 28 through September 21, 2009. James Ensor (Belgian, 1860–1949) was a major figure in the Belgian avant-garde of the late nineteenth century and an important precursor to the development of Expressionism in the early twentieth. In both respects, he has influenced generations of later artists.

Ensor's daring, experiential work ranges from traditional subject matter such as still life, landscape, and religious symbolism to more singular visions, including fantastical scenes with masks, skeletons, and other startling figures. He made work in a wide range of styles and dimensions, from large-scale paintings and drawings to tiny prints of only a few inches. The exhibition elucidates Ensor's contribution to modern art, including his innovative and allegorical use of light, his prominent use of satire, his deep interest in carnival and performance, and his own self-fashioning and use of masking, travesty, and role-playing.

Approximately 120 of Ensor's paintings, drawings, and prints are included in the exhibition, most of which date from the artist's creative peak, 1880 to the mid-1890s. The exhibition is organized chronologically, and within that chronology are thematic groupings such as Ensor's self-portraiture, or his satirical works. A number of works, including the first two drawings from his monumental Aureoles series of 1885–86, *The Lively and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* and *The Rising: Christ Shown to the People*, have never before been seen in the United States.

The exhibition is organized by Anna Swinbourne, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, with the assistance of Susan M. Canning, Professor of Art History, College of New Rochelle, and Jane Panetta, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art. It is on view in The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor.

Ms. Swinbourne explains, "The diversity of Ensor's work has enabled him to slip cunningly out of the grasp of anyone seeking to seize and place him, whether in an artistic movement or a historical continuum. This is part of the appeal that, then and now, has seduced viewers of his

work as well as artists—who have come to revere him as an ‘artist’s artist,’ a title bestowed only on the most deserving.”

The first painting on view in the exhibition is *The Scandalized Masks* (1883), an example of the evocative paintings of masks in portraits and fictive dramas for which Ensor is best known. Ensor lived in Ostend, Belgium—a fashionable resort known for its beaches, spas, and casino—from his birth in 1860 to his death in 1949. He left Ostend only for a brief period, from 1877 to 1880, to attend the Académie royale des beaux-arts, a prestigious training ground for young artists. Ensor was surrounded by masks throughout his life. He saw them for sale in his family’s souvenir shop in Ostend, and worn by revelers in the annual Carnival celebration. The bawdry puns and silly pratfalls of traveling vaudeville acts in Ostend, and even his grandmother’s eccentric penchant for dressing up in strange costumes, all nourished Ensor’s appreciation for farce and disguise.

Early works in the exhibition, such as *The Lamp-Lighter* (1880), were made soon after Ensor’s schooling in Brussels. Ensor masterfully combined the genres of still life, portraiture, and interior scene in a painting considered among his best of the period, *The Oyster Eater* (1882). This life-size image shows his sister Mitche absorbed in a meal of oysters at a table decorated with flowers, dishes, and linens. Every element of the painting illustrates Ensor’s interest in the power and qualities of light. *The Oyster Eater* made its first public appearance at the 1886 exhibition of Les Vingt (Les XX), an avant-garde art society cofounded by Ensor in 1883 as an alternative to the official academic Salon. Ensor regularly exhibited in Les Vingt annuals, and the group would prove critically important for his artistic development.

Ensor’s overarching interest in light soon came to dominate his artistic vision, inspiring him to develop a drawing technique that would make objects seem suffused by light. Discovering that this formal innovation had expressive potential, he soon made light a subject in itself, an agent of symbolic intention, conveying ideas and evoking mood. He perfected his drafting techniques in *Visions: The Aureoles of Christ, or The Sensibilities of Light*, a series of six drawings from 1885–86. The series indicates a switch from Ensor’s depiction of reality-based subjects toward more imagined, fictionalized scenes. The most accomplished of these drawings, *The Lively and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* (1885), presents a biblical event in a contemporary, urban setting resembling Brussels, and is especially notable for its large dimensions. At nearly seven feet high, it is a scale that, at the time, was almost always reserved for painting.

A restless and incessant experimenter with a variety of mediums and techniques including collage and hand-printed etching, Ensor even revisited works completed years earlier, adding colors and images that often radically transformed the originals. For example, Ensor revisited his *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat* of 1883, adding a plumed hat and other elements that make the new image resemble a self-portrait by the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens.

He also depicted himself in his works repeatedly, in keeping with his own sense of subversive play, while divulging the influence of theater and popular culture on his work. In *Self-Portrait with Masks* (1899), he portrays himself as a young artist—in the same pose as *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat* (1883/1888), finished 11 years before. His steady regard, outsize dimensions, and red hat set him apart from the masked crowd, to which he turns his back. Proclaiming his allegiance with masquerade and performance, Ensor opts for a public image that is overtly and completely contrived.

Ensor had a number of lifelong obsessions that were prominent subjects in his work—masks, light, himself, and death. Skulls or full-body skeletons appear in his works repeatedly and in a variety of ways. In *Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves* (1889), a group of skulls draped in fabric absurdly and vainly seek heat from a dead stove. Ensor used the image of death to depict people he despised, such as the two skeleton-critics ripping apart a witty, metaphorical version of himself in *Skeletons Fighting over a Pickled Herring* (1891). And death was even a theme of Ensor's self-portraits, as with *My Skeletonized Portrait* (1889) and *The Skeleton Painter* (1895 or 1896). These two works were based on photographs: he transformed his pictured naturalistic countenance into skeleton versions of himself. Ensor's use of photography as pictorial source material and his practice of collage were consistent with his experimental nature, as they are both techniques that placed Ensor ahead of his time.

A study room includes a wrap-around chronology on its walls that affords viewers the opportunity to learn more about the life of Ensor and his diverse range of interests. Beyond his career as an artist, he was involved in music, choreographed a ballet, and was an avid writer. This multitude of interests translates directly into the diversity of Ensor's artistic oeuvre.

The exhibition concludes with satirical works focusing on contemporary political and social issues of Ensor's time, which use grotesque exaggeration and base humor to make their point. Influenced by folk tradition, satirical journals, *actualités*, and burlesque theater, these pieces make Ensor's radical individualism and political perspective patently clear. Examples are *Doctrinaire Nourishment* (1889), a scatological image of the king and other figures of Belgian authority excreting feces onto a group of citizens, and *The Wise Judges* (1891), a harsh criticism of the country's judicial system. Ultimately, the exhibition presents Ensor as a socially engaged and self-critical artist involved with the issues of his times and with contemporary debates on the nature of modernism.

SPONSORSHIP:

MoMA wishes to sincerely thank our lead exhibition sponsor, Flanders House, the new cultural forum for Flanders (Belgium) in the United States.

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CURATOR BIO:

Anna Swinbourne is Assistant Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art. She joined the Museum in 1999. Ms. Swinbourne organized *Demoiselles d'Avignon at 100* (2007). She worked with Chief Curator Emeritus John Elderfield on *Manet and the Execution of Maximilian* (2006), and with former Chief Curator Kirk Varnedoe on *Van Gogh's Postman: The Portraits of Joseph Roulin* (2001). Ms. Swinbourne has conducted extensive research on the Museum's Painting and Sculpture collection and has authored numerous texts about these works, most recently in *MoMA Highlights since 1980* (2007). Additionally, her essay "Youthful Ambition: Picasso's Barcelona Portraits of 1900" is included in *A Fine Regard: Essays in Honor of Kirk Varnedoe* (2008), edited by Patricia G. Berman and Gertje Uitley.

PUBLICATION:

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue edited by Anna Swinbourne. It includes essays by Anna Swinbourne; Susan M. Canning, Professor of Art History, College of New Rochelle, New York; Michel Draguet, Director, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels; Robert Hoozee, Director, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent; Herwig Todts, Curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; Laurence Madeline, Curator, Musée d'Orsay, Paris; and Jane Panetta, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art. It is published by The Museum of Modern Art and is available at the MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org. It is distributed to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P) in the United States and Canada, and Thames + Hudson outside North America. Hardcover: 208 pages, 152 color illustrations. \$60.00.

PROGRAMS:

After Hours with Ensor

Wednesday, July 15, and Wednesday, September 9, 6:00 p.m.

11 W. 53 Street

Meet at the film desk in The Ronald and Jo Carole Lauder Building

An after-hours discussion about the exhibition will be held in the *James Ensor* galleries with Anna Swinbourne. Space is limited to 25 people.

Tickets (\$10; members \$8; students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5) can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the film desk, or in the Education and Research Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

Gallery Talks

Each Wednesday through Monday, 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

Museum lecturers and staff lead talks in the collection and special exhibitions galleries.

On Wednesday, July 22, and Wednesday, September 2, Susan Canning, Professor of Art History, College of New Rochelle, New York, gives talks on the *James Ensor* exhibition.

Free with Museum admission.

Visit moma.org/thinkmodern for information on upcoming Gallery Talks.

AUDIO GUIDE:

A MoMA Audio program highlights works in the exhibition and includes commentary by Anna Swinbourne; Sabine Taevernier, Independent Art Historian and President of the Ensor Advisory Committee; Robert Hoozee, Director, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent; Herwig Todts, Curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; and painter Terry Winters. The audio program is available at the Museum free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg; and as a podcast on www.moma.org/audio and iTunes. MoMA Audio is a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide, Inc.

WEBSITE:

The exhibition website, www.moma.org/jamesensor, features approximately 120 works, which visitors may zoom in on to explore details. Audio and texts explain the significance of certain works. An expanded chronology of Ensor's life is included, as are excerpts from the essays in the exhibition catalogue. The site was designed and developed by Shannon Darrough, Senior Media Developer, Department of Digital Media, The Museum of Modern Art. The site will launch on June 28, 2009, in conjunction with the public opening of the exhibition.

TRAVEL:

James Ensor will travel to the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, where it will be on view from October 19, 2009 to February 4, 2010.

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at www.moma.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019
Hours: Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m.
Closed Tuesday
Museum Admission: \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free for children 16 and under. Free for members.
Admission includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs.
Free admission during Target Free Friday Nights 4:00-8:00 p.m.
The public may call 212/708-9400 for detailed Museum information. Visit us online at www.moma.org.