

James Ensor 1860 - 1949

Paris Art Studies

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1860 – Born 13 April in Ostend, the main beach resort of 19c Belgium. Son of James Frederic Ensor, English engineer, and Maria Catharina Haegheman who runs a souvenir shop in Ostende. Ensor will grow up surrounded by the toys, porcelain mementoes and the carnival masks of his mother’ shop. His unmarried grandmother Marie Louise is a domestic servant.

1871 – Attends Notre-Dame college in Ostend where he is a mediocre student.

1873 – His father encourages him to study drawing with two local painters Edouard Dubar and Michel Van Cuyck.

1875 – Ensor installs a studio on top floor of new family home with view of sea and Ostend rooftops. His father is declared bankrupt.

1876 – Studies drawing and painting at Ostend Academy. Paints marines.

1877-1880 – Studies at Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Brussels under Robert, Stallaert and Van Severdonck. Meets and befriends young painters Willy Finch, Ferdinand Khnopff and Dario de Recoyos and writer and critic Théo Hannon. Hannon’s sister Mariette is the wife of Ernest Rousseau, a science professor, later Rector of the Free University of Brussels. The couple will become close friends and warm supporters of Ensor. They will introduce him to the intellectual and artistic luminaries of Brussels, notably the artist Félicien Rops and his first great collector Eugène Demolder. Ensor begins voicing his contempt for the Belgian bourgeoisie.

1880 – Returns to Ostend which he will seldom leave except for visits to the Rousseaus and the occasional journey to England, Holland and France. Beginning of “dark period” (until 1884) of realistic pictures of Ensor’s immediate environment: portraits of family, marines, and street scenes of Ostend.

1881 – First exhibition with Chrysalid group in Brussels.

1882 – Exhibits 7 paintings with L’Essor group favouring Realism and two in Paris Salon.

1883 – Last exhibition with L’Essor. Becomes a founding and dominant member of new avant garde group, closer to French Impressionism, the XX with Knopff, Finch, van Rysselberghe, Vogels, Stryndock and from 1885 Toorop. Visits Holland.

1884 – Shows 6 works in first Salon des XX. Exhibits also in literary and artistic Cercle of Brussels. His works are however refused at the official Brussels Salon. Visits Lille and its musée des Beaux Arts.

1885 - 87 – Visits England where he discovers the art of Turner. The influence of Turner and Rembrandt will gradually lead him away from the realism of his beginnings. He produces more and more drawings on the Light of Christ of a, now, Symbolist sensibility. Falls out with other members of the XX, particularly with his rival Knopff over the admission of the American painter Whistler who Ensor accuses of having plagiarized his painting. He also disagrees with the Neo-Impressionist leanings of the XX after Seurat’s exhibition of the Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte in Brussels in 1887. He grows more isolated and is also much affected by his father’s death in 1887.

1888 – Paints his most celebrated picture, Christ’s Entry into Brussels. Beginning of his “mask” period. Shows 20 works with the XX, though The Temptation of St Anthony is rejected. Fishermen’s violent riots in Ostend inspire him to draw The Strike.

1889 - 91– His paintings grow more grotesque and critical of contemporary society. Christ’s Entry into Brussels is rejected by the XX in 1889.

1892 – His sister Mitche marries a Chinaman, Ten Hee Tseu who will abandon her before the birth of a daughter, Mariette- Alexandrine whom Ensor will call la Chinoise.

1893 – Shows in last exhibition organized by the XX. Greatly discouraged, he tries to sell entire contents of his studio for 8500 francs. No buyer appears. Found a Fine Arts Circle in Ostend which will organise 2 exhibitions. The Dresden museum buys a series of his prints.

1894 - 95 – Shows with new art group in Brussels, L’Esthétique Nouvelle founded by Octave Maus after the dissolution of the XX which Ensor regrets. He will continue showing with the new group which aligns itself with the French Impressionists until 1899. First solo show in Brussels organized by Eugène Demolder.

1896 – the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels buy their first Ensor Le Lampiste, an early Realist work from 1880. The print cabinet buys several prints. He paints many still lives in an iridescent light bur his creativity declines. He now copies many of his early works in brighter colors.

1898 - 99 – First solo show in Paris organized by the modern literary and artistic review La Plume meets with little success. Shows 52 prints in Ostend.

1900 – Shows Le Coloriste at Brussels Salon.

1902 – Publication of first monograph on his art by Vittorio Pica.

1903 – Meets Dr Lamblotte who with his wife the writer Emma Lamblotte will become fervent collectors. Is made officer of the order of Leopold by Belgian authorities.

1905 – Emma Lamblotte introduces him to important art patron, François Franck, founder of a modern art association in Antwerp where Ensor will now regularly exhibit. In 1921 the Antwerp museum will buy 8 of his paintings.

1907 – Shows at Paris Salon d’Automne and at the Venice Biennale.

1908 – Publication of major monograph by Emile Verhaeren.

1910 – Visited by German Expressionist artist Emil Nolde who admires his masks. Solo shows in Antwerp and Rotterdam.

1911 – Composes music for a ballet (La Gamme d’amour) and designs costumes and decors.

1913 – Publication of first catalogue of his oeuvre in Hanover. Rik Wouters sculpts his bust.

1915 – Death of his mother at 80. Ensor paints her on her deathbed.

1916 – Death of his aunt who also lives in family home. Ensor remains alone with his sister Mariette and a couple of servants, the Mollets, who have been with the family since 1897.

1917– Moves to house inherited from his uncle, at 27 rue de Flandre, which after his death will become a museum.

1920 – Major show in Giroux gallery in Brussels. His oeuvre is now fully recognized and admired and will be frequently shown and published. His painting however grows weaker - he paints the interior of his studio and dreamy nymphs.

1921 – Major show in Antwerp. Giroux gallery publishes 32 lithographs of the Life of Christ executed between 1912 and 1920.

1924 – Première of his ballet La Gamme d’amour at Flanders Opera in Antwerp.

1925 – Publication of catalogue of his graphic work by Loys Delteil.

1929 – Important retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels includes for the first time Christ’s Entry into Brussels. Ensor is made a baron. Is visited by Kandinsky.

1932 – Important exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.

1940 – 5 paintings and all his prints destroyed in fire of Ostend museum caused by German bombing in May.

1945 – Death of his sister Mariette.

1946 – Retrospective exhibition at National Gallery, London.

1949 – Ensor dies on 19 November in Ostend.