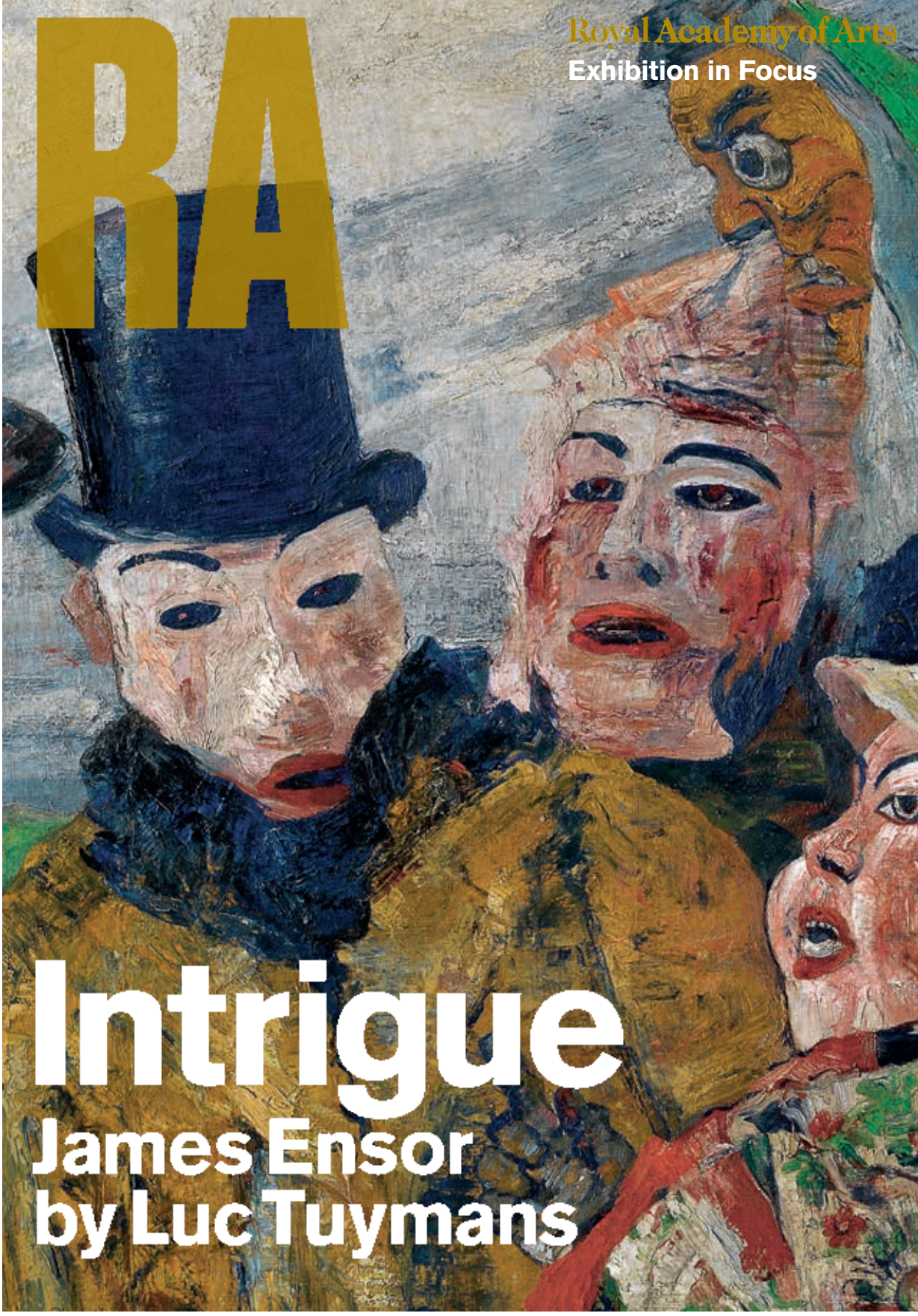

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

Exhibition in Focus

Intrigue

James Ensor by Luc Tuymans

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Tom Jeffreys
For the Learning Department

Intrigue: James Ensor by Luc Tuymans
The Sackler Wing of Galleries
29 October 2016 to 29 January 2017

FRONT COVER **Cat. 73, The Intrigue,** 1890 (detail)

Royal Academy of Arts

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Introduction

James Ensor (1860–1949), Belgium's most celebrated artist of the modern age, is best known for his bizarre, unsettling and often darkly humorous paintings of masked figures and energetic carnival scenes. But Ensor's work went beyond an idiosyncratic focus on magic and masks, having developed from early landscapes, still-lifes and interior scenes, it later explores worlds of the imagination, spirituality, caricature and political satire.

Ensor loved to experiment. His painterly style was often loose and free – in places, almost manic in its intensity. He was one of a number of artists whose work marked a radical shift from the realistic tradition that dominated the art of the mid-nineteenth century. Initially, Ensor's work was too strange and new to be accepted by the artistic establishment, but in the first decades of the twentieth century his reputation blossomed. In 1929, he was made a baron by King Albert I of Belgium, and in 1933 he was awarded the prestigious *Legion d'honneur*. Ironically, by the time he received such recognition, Ensor's visionary inventiveness had begun to fade and he was painting far less frequently.

Ensor was born in the small seaside city of Ostend in northwest Belgium, where he lived almost all his life. He was inspired by the sights of the town, its coastline and the North Sea light, its carnival summers and long dark winters. But Ensor also pushed beyond what came before him, exploring religious allegory, political satire and personal mythology. At his best, Ensor was inventive and original, his career marked by radical shifts in style and subject matter. In addition to painting, Ensor also produced drawings in crayon, pencil and charcoal as well as numerous etchings and drypoint prints. He once wrote to art critic André de Ridder, 'The artist must invent his style, and each new work demands its own.'

Ensor had a profound influence on later artistic movements, such as German Expressionism and French Surrealism. Emil Nolde (1867–1956), Paul Klee (1879–1940) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) all acknowledged their debt to Ensor. So it is fitting that the Royal Academy invited artist Luc Tuymans, a fellow Belgian, to curate this exhibition. Tuymans represented Belgium at the 2001 Venice Biennale and has been the focus of several retrospective exhibitions at major institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Tate Modern, London; and Haus der Kunst, Munich. Like Ensor, Tuymans is a figurative painter whose works often explore contemporary social and political issues through intense and unsettling portraits. Tuymans first encountered Ensor's work as a teenager and has remained an admirer ever since. He chose to focus on the most celebrated and innovative period in Ensor's career – from the mid-1880s to the mid-1890s.

Life in Ostend

James Ensor was born in 1860, in Ostend, a small coastal city in northwest Belgium with a population of 16,000. In the early nineteenth century, Ostend had a bustling port and fishing harbour, but its economy depended largely on tourism. In 1834, King Leopold I of Belgium made his summer residence in Ostend and, as the town became more refined, the ensuing decades saw the middle classes flock there from across Europe, especially from England, to enjoy its sandy beaches and atmosphere of freedom and conviviality. As a seaside resort, Ostend was a place of seasonal extremes: packed with a whole variety of people in summer, but eerily quiet in the long, dark winters.

In Ostend, James's father, James Frederic, an erudite Englishman, met Marie Catherine Haegheman, whose family ran a successful souvenir shop selling shells, masks, china, stuffed animals and other assorted curios. This shop had a major influence upon Ensor's later work, and even in his early years, the city was a frequent source of inspiration.

In the 1870s, Ensor studied drawing under two Ostend artists, Edward Dubar (1803–1879) and Michel van Cuyck (1797–1875), and spent a year at the Ostend Academy. He painted scenes of what was around him: sand dunes, seascapes, and the domestic interiors of his family and their middle-class friends. 'From the start,' says Luc Tuymans, 'Ensor was a very gifted draughtsman.'

In 1877, Ensor moved to Brussels to study at the Académie royale des Beaux-Arts where he met the painters, Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), Willy Finch (1854–1930), and Dario Regoyos (1857–1913). But Ensor never felt comfortable at the Académie, where his work was considered too strange and radical.

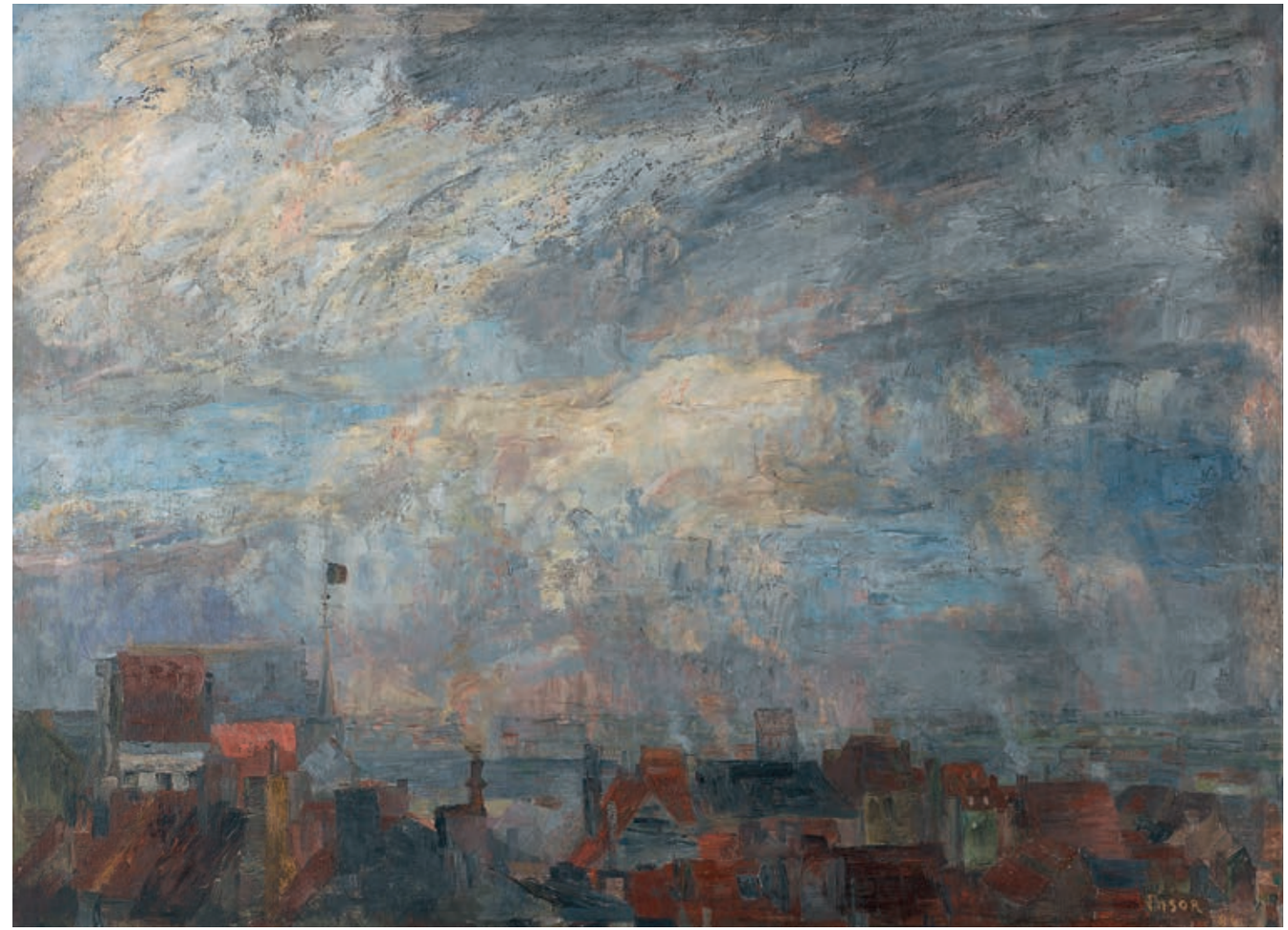
In 1880, he returned to Ostend, where he remained for the rest of his life. Other than a few trips to England, Holland and France and frequent visits to Brussels, Ensor stayed in Ostend, living with his parents, his sister Mitche and his aunt Mimi, at 23 Vlaanderenstraat.

Cat. 24 Ensor's studio was in the attic on the fourth floor of the family home. From its windows he could see across the rooftops, a view he painted in *Large View of Ostend*, 1884. Ensor used a palette knife to create different effects. The rooftops are sharply delineated in glowing tones of red and brown, the hard edge of the knife giving a precise line to the architecture. For the sky, Ensor used the flat side of the knife to smear blues and whites in horizontal and vertical lines.

During the 1880s, Ensor painted a number of similar compositions, works characterised by a dominant sky that fills most of the canvas. Despite being the nominal title of the painting, the rooftops form only a small part of the composition, rendering the swirling mass of clouds Ensor's true subject.

What kind of mood does Ensor evoke through his depiction of the sky? How has he achieved this?

In a painting with so few specific details, why do you think Ensor chose to include the Belgian flag flying from the church spire?



Cat. 24
Large View of Ostend (Rooftops of Ostend),
1884
Oil on canvas,
149 × 206.5 cm

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen, inv. 2706
Photo KMSKA © www.lukasweb.be - Art in Flanders vzw. Photography: Rik Klein Gotink / © DACS 2016

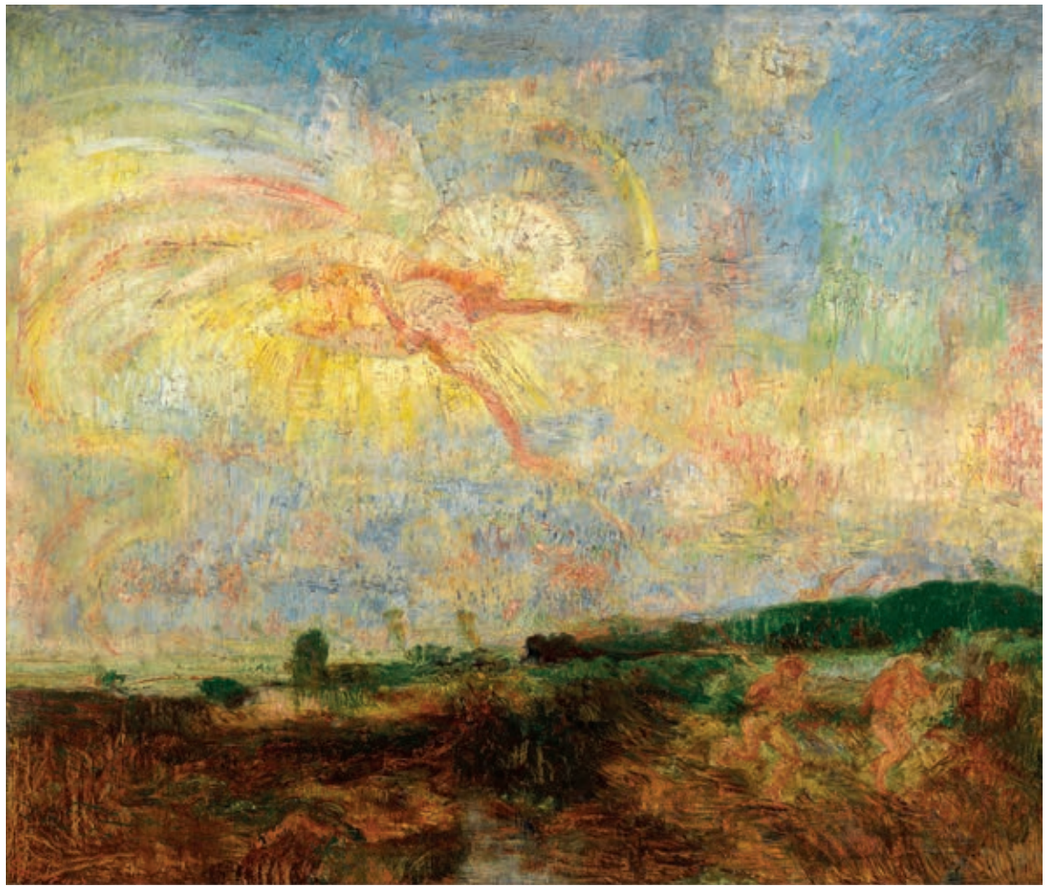
'The beach is extraordinarily animated. It is a strangely mottled world. Swells in well-cut flannels rampant on a field of sand. Mussels heaped upon mussels. Attractive little pieces teasing soft crablike creatures. Slender Englishwomen stride angularly by. Bathers carrying their pachydermic shapes on broad flat feet. Toadlike peasant women. […] A rapacious tribe that sickens all sensitive souls and litters the lovely, delicately toned beach.'
James Ensor, *The Beach at Ostend,* 1896

Into the light

In the 1830s and 1840s, English artist J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) revolutionised the painting of light. Before Turner, artists largely saw light as a tool by which to make flat forms look three dimensional through the contrast of light and dark or to draw attention to focal points within the composition of a painting. But Turner, who travelled three times to Belgium to paint, made light a subject in itself. In so doing, he paved the way for the French Impressionists such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919). Turner's work had a profound influence upon Ensor and in 1887 he is thought to have visited England to see the actual paintings.

The painting of light became an important challenge for Ensor. For him, the capture of light in art allowed it to convey 'passion, anxiety, struggle, pain, enthusiasm or poetry'. Just as Turner had increasingly focused on air and light in his compositions, for Ensor, too, discernible subjects became less important. He saw light as the opposite of line, which he described as 'the enemy of genius'. His paintings of this period are characterised by a shimmering luminosity and scant attention to detailed depictions of reality.

'And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.' *The Bible, Genesis, 1.14–15,* King James version



Cat. 26
Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise, 1887
Oil on canvas,
206 × 245 cm

Cat. 26 The influence Turner's works had on Ensor is clear in works such as *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise*, 1887. Whereas Turner's nominal subjects were often drawn from the realities of the industrial revolution (ships or steam trains, for example), Ensor has here co-opted a scene from the Bible. He sometimes used Bible stories to make controversial comments on contemporary society and politics – as in the drawing series *Halos of Christ*, 1885–86, in which Jesus is seen as a champion of the dispossessed individual. But here, Ensor took the expulsion of the two humans from the Garden of Eden as a starting point from which to focus on the painting's true subject, light. Ensor sketched Adam and Eve as fleshy figures running off at the bottom-right of the composition. Eden is represented by barely more than a suggestion of plants and trees, a dark patch of scrubby ground and hints of a lake or river. Two thirds of the composition is sky.

God appears just off-centre. Ensor's depiction suggests that God and the sun are one, that God is the source of light in the painting. Rays of yellow radiate below Him. Above, an arc of yellow paint echoes his white halo. God becomes the sun, becomes light itself. His outstretched arm narrows towards a pointing finger and further into a bolt of light.

During this period in his career, Ensor often worked very fast. He added new layers of thick paint while the previous layer was still wet. Instead of mixing colours on a palette, he combined them in wet layers directly on the canvas. The result is a richly textured painting surface and a sky alive with colour: pinks, greens, blues, fiery orange and bright white.

Why do you think Ensor chose to depict this particular religious scene?

What does the painting suggest about Ensor's attitude to God?

Playing the part

In the late-1880s, Ensor moved away from landscape and interior scenes and became increasingly interested in painting portraits. One of the people he painted most frequently was himself. He often appeared as a self-portrait in his larger compositions: as the lone bastion of sanity amid a crowd of fools (*Self-Portrait with Masks*, 1899), as a living skeleton (*The Skeleton Painter*, 1896), even as Jesus Christ (*Christ and the Critics*, 1891). But Ensor's fascination with role-play and identity was not confined to his paintings. A series of surviving photographs shows the artist with his life-long friend Ernest Rousseau, re-enacting one of Ensor's recently completed works, *Skeletons Fighting for the Body of a Hanged Man*, 1891. Holding pieces of bone, Rousseau and Ensor playfully act out this macabre struggle for a decomposed body. As in his art, Ensor delights in playing the provocateur and causing controversy. He positions himself as a rebel even as he craves recognition from the artistic establishment.

Cat. 7 Ensor started the painting *Self-portrait with Flowered Hat* in 1883 and took care to ensure that some elements adhered to the artistic conventions of the age: the artist wears a suit of sombre black, his face half-turned towards the viewer. With his dark, curly hair and pointed beard, he appears to be a typical young artist of the 1880s. The suggestion of an oval frame added in each corner reinforces the work's appeal to the long-held conventions of portraiture. This painting was inspired by two works by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640): a portrait of a woman with two children, which hangs in the Louvre, and a self-portrait.

Ensor added the outlandish cream-coloured hat at a later date. Adorned with yellow, pink and violet flowers, the hat sports some large reddish-pink feathers curving down from the brim to the artist's shoulder. The flamboyant headwear could be seen as a further reference to Rubens, who himself wears a wide-brimmed black hat in a number of his own self-portraits. Ensor was a great admirer of Rubens, so he may have intended to pay him homage or perhaps to stake a claim for his own greatness. But, clearly, Ensor was also having fun. By choosing such a decorated hat, he reveals his fascination with dressing up and his willingness to laugh at himself, while at the same time, poking fun at the pretensions of his fellow artists.

Throughout his career, Ensor was acutely aware that being an artist was about more than creating art, it was also a role to be played. A photograph from 1881 shows the 21-year-old Ensor whimsically playing the flute on the rooftops of Ostend. In his later years, he became a highly recognisable, eccentric figure around the town. He would visit the same café, the Falstaff, every night; he helped to organise the carnival and became known for playing the harmonium – a type of organ popular in the nineteenth century – at length to prospective collectors before showing them his paintings. In his work, Ensor depicted himself variously as a madman, a skeleton, Christ, Judas, and a pickled herring. He was always playing roles. In *Self-portrait with Flowered Hat*, Ensor played to perfection the role of an eccentric artistic genius.

Imagine this self-portrait without the flowered hat. How does it change the way you understand the artist?

Why do you think Ensor had himself photographed re-enacting a scene from one of his own paintings?

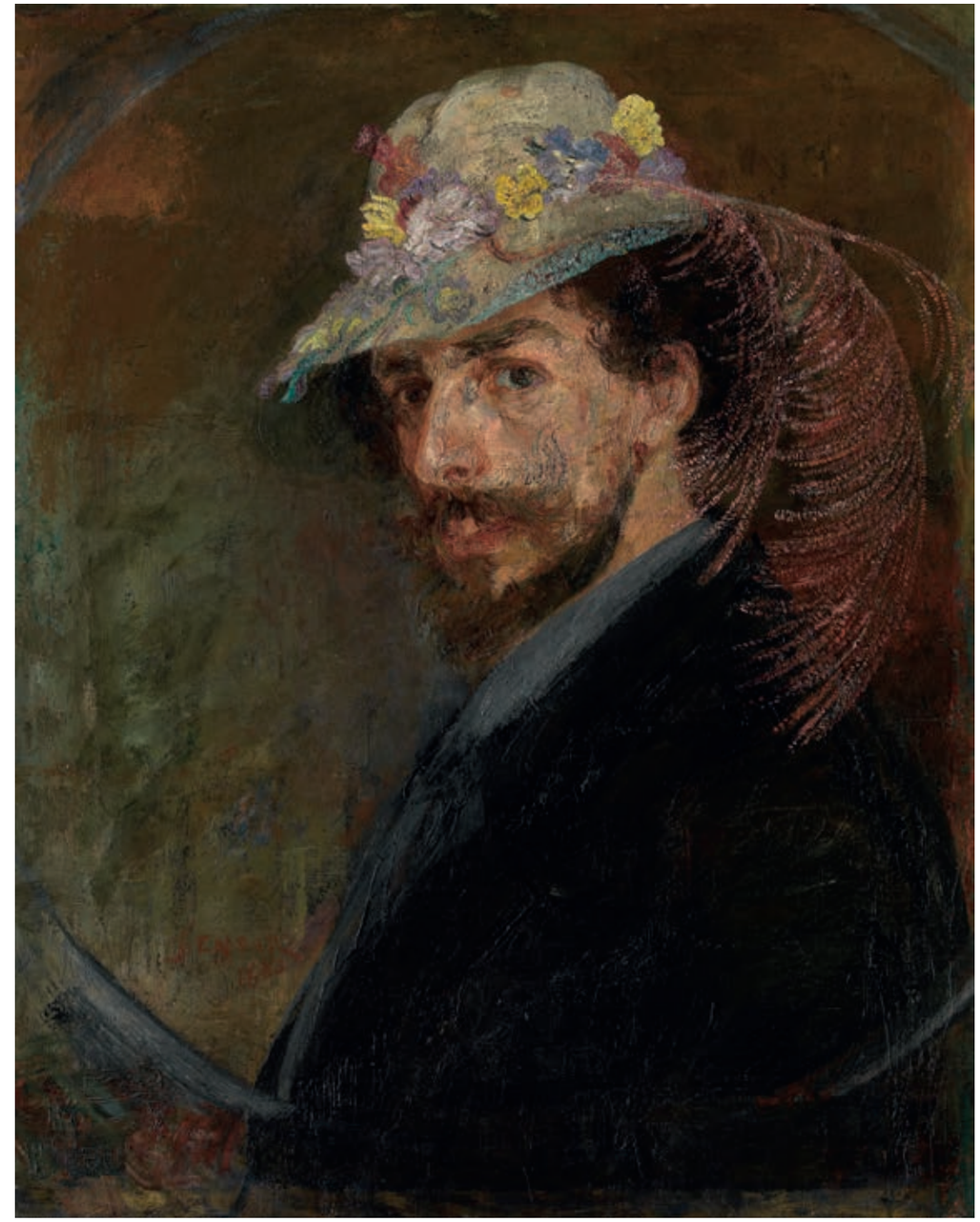
Cat. 7
Self-portrait with Flowered Hat, 1883
Oil on canvas,
76.5 x 61.5 cm

MuZEE, Ostend
Photo MuZEE © www.lukasweb.be - Art in Flanders vzw. Photography: Hugo Maertens / © DACS 2016

Fig. 1
Unknown photographer
Ensor and Ernest Rousseau Jr in the Dunes,
Ostend, date unknown
Black and white photograph

Photo courtesy Letterenhuis

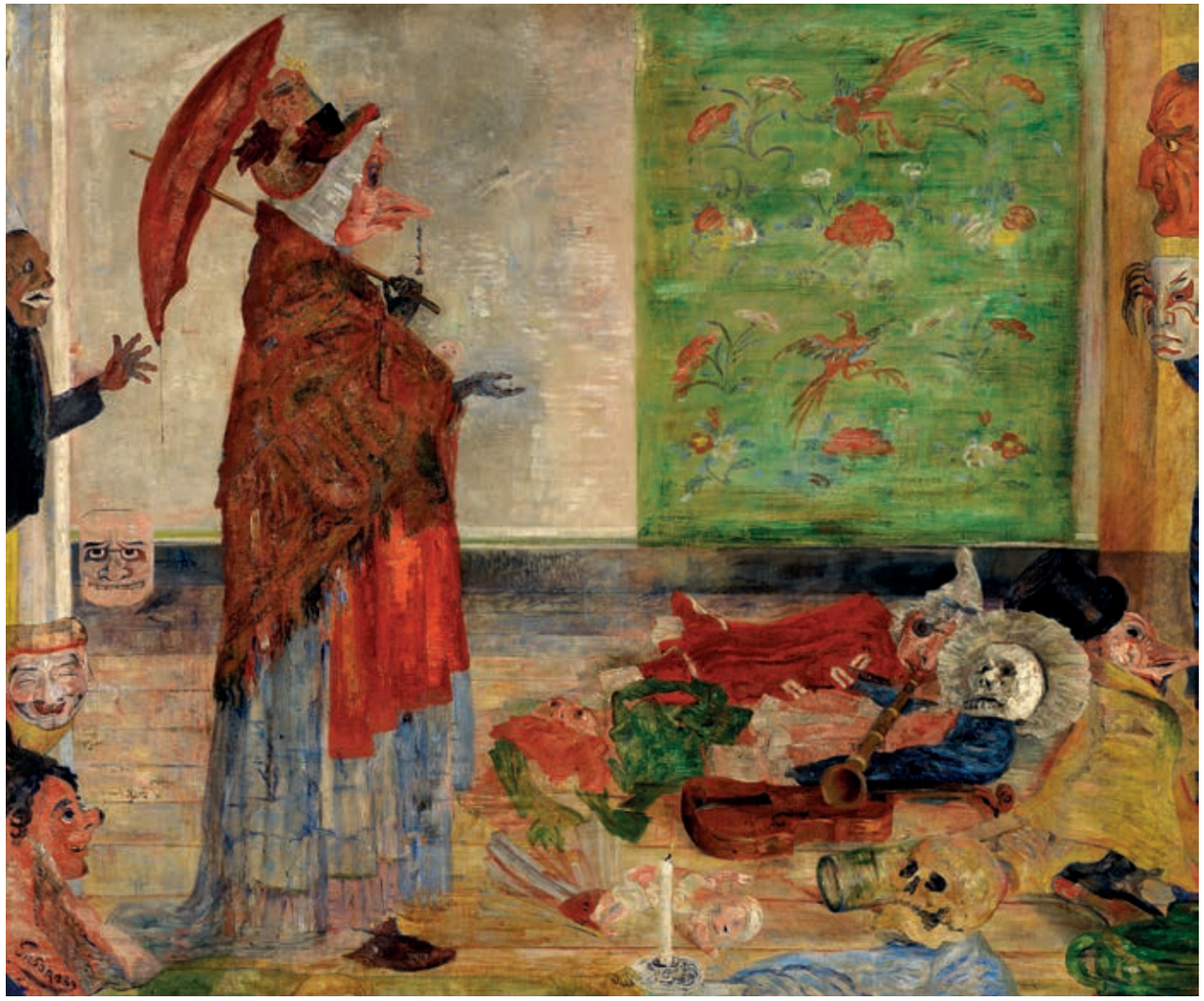
'It would be surprising if Ensor, who loved his art above all else, and consequently loved the person who created it, that is, himself, had not reproduced his own image *ad infinitum*.'
Emile Verhaeren,
James Ensor, 1908



Magic and masks

In 1883, Ensor co-founded Les Vingt (Les XX), a group of artists who produced publications and organised an annual exhibition of art in Brussels. Ensor was inspired to found the group, along with lawyer Octave Maus (1856–1919) and others, after his painting, *The Oyster Eater*, 1882, was rejected by the Antwerp Salon. In the mid-1880s, Ensor abandoned the realism of his domestic interiors, such as *The Oyster Eater* and *Bourgeois Salon*, 1880, which depicted dark spaces full of carefully arranged objects and furniture. Through Les XX, he had been introduced to a new movement known as Symbolism, and in particular the works of French artist Odilon Redon (1840–1916). Symbolist artists sought not to depict an observable reality, but to produce images of spiritual and imaginative power. As an artistic movement, Symbolism was strongly influenced by literature, especially the writing of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) and Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) who lived for two years in Belgium and was very critical of its people, food and art.

Cat. 45
The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse, 1889
Oil on canvas,
109 × 131.5 cm



'Hounded by those on my trail, I joyfully took refuge in the solitary land of fools where the mask, with its violence, its brightness and brilliance, reigns supreme. The mask meant to me: freshness of colour, extravagant decoration, wild generous gestures, strident expressions, exquisite turbulence.'
James Ensor, *Discours au Kursaal d'Ostende,* 1931, in *Mes écrits*

The movement was developed during the 1860s and 1870s by Paris-based poets Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), both of whom Ensor may have met when they gave lectures to Les XX.

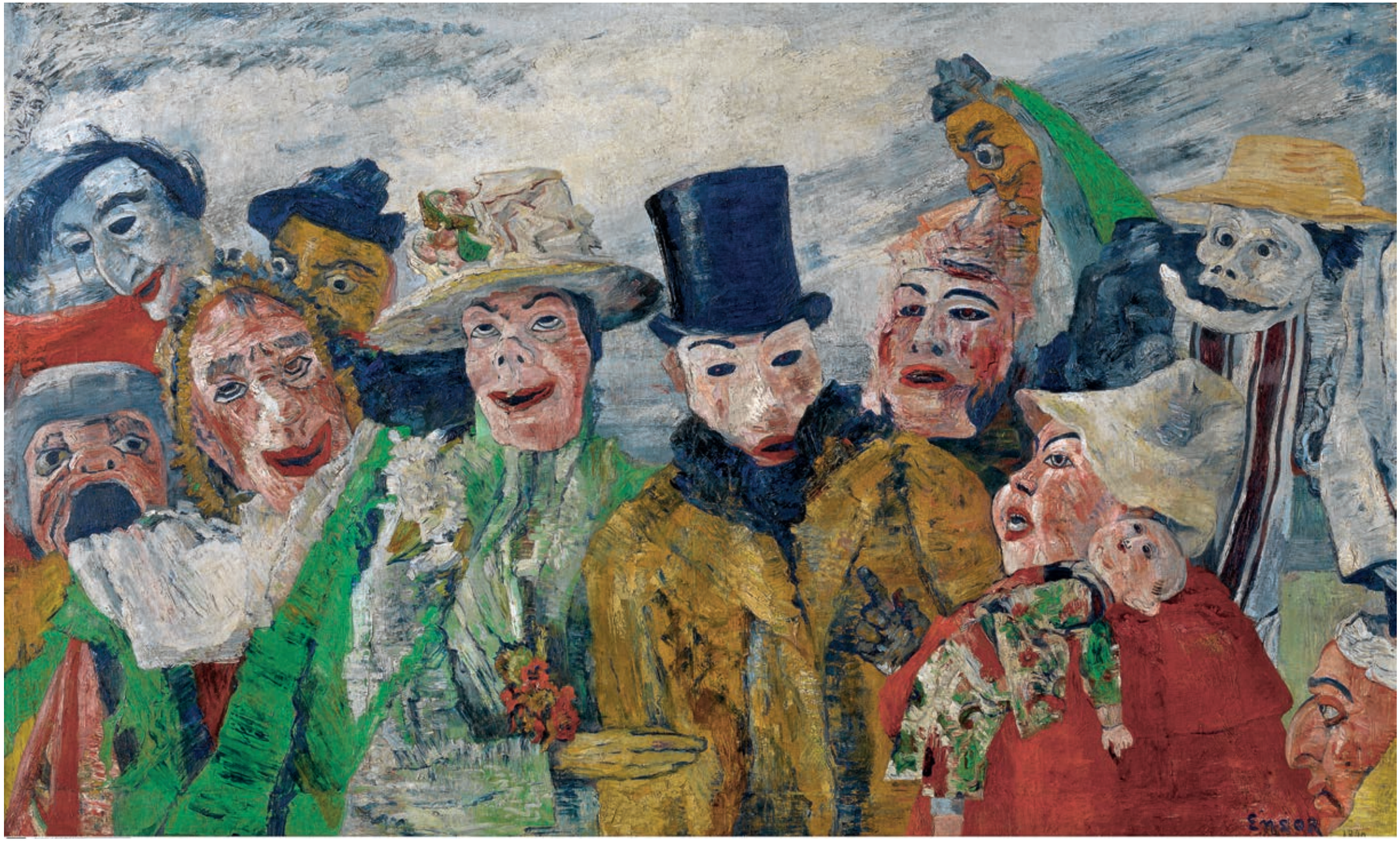
Ensor was also a wide-ranging reader and prolific letter-writer. He inherited his love of literature from his father, who had a large and richly varied library. As well as Poe, Ensor named writers such as Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), and Johann Goethe (1749–1832) as influences on his work. Flaubert attacked the hypocrisy of the middle classes, Balzac was intrigued by the occult and the spiritual, while Goethe like Ensor was fascinated by disguise. Ensor also admired the works of Spanish artist Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the Dutch painter Rembrandt (1606–1669), both of whom depicted their subjects with a psychological intensity that went beyond what the eye could observe. Inspired by this potent combination of artistic and literary legacy along with the new development of symbolist art, Ensor embarked on a series of radical new works.

Cat. 45 *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse*, 1889, is one of Ensor's most celebrated paintings. It depicts an old woman wearing a mask that exaggerates the size of her nose. She is wearing a blue dress, a richly embroidered stole, a bonnet and black gloves, and is carrying a parasol. On the floor of a space inspired by Ensor's own attic studio are scattered clothes, musical instruments, masks and skulls. In the foreground stands a lit candle. Hanging on the wall is a green tapestry, possibly Japanese in inspiration, featuring birds and flowers. Masked figures enter the scene from both sides of the painting.

The identity of the woman remains a mystery but she is most often thought to be Ensor's mother or grandmother. Debate surrounds the meaning of the word '*Wouse'* in the painting's title. In English, 'wouse' referred to a romantic partner, a husband or wife. There is a Dutch village called Wouwse situated close to the border with Belgium. 'Wouse' may have been a piece of Ostend slang whose meaning is now lost, or perhaps Ensor simply made it up. What we do know, is that this was a pivotal work for Ensor. In it he entered the realms of fantasy – or, rather, the no man's land between fantasy and reality. Many items in the painting are believably real: the clothing, the interior, the objects on the floor. But certain elements, especially the half-cropped figures and the semi-transparent masks, are harder to attribute to an objective reality. It is in this work that Ensor begins to recognise and exploit the power of the mask, both as a real object and as a vehicle for the creation of new characters and imaginary worlds. The mask can disguise and protect, conceal the identity of the wearer, yet also reveal aspects of their personality.

What, if anything, can we learn about the woman's identity or personality from her clothing and her mask? Can we be sure that she is wearing a mask?

Why do you think Ensor chose to include both a skull and a mask that looks like a skull in this painting?



Cat. 73
The Intrigue, 1890
Oil on canvas, 90 × 149 cm

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. 1856
Photo KMSKA © www.lukasweb.be - Art in Flanders vzw. Photography: Hugo Maertens / © DACS 2016

The carnival crowds

Cat. 73 At the heart of this exhibition at the Royal Academy is *The Intrigue*, 1890, one of Ensor's most important paintings. Luc Tuymans has identified it as arguably Ensor's greatest work, which is why, as the curator and an artist himself, he has named the exhibition after this work. 'For me as a kid it was a very fearful thing to look at. It is a very frontal and confrontational picture of a group of people. […] The fact that the subjects are lined up was for me very fascinating: it's a horizontal painting, it stretches out in your imagination, and builds. Although it all looks festive it remains intriguing.'

The painting takes its name from a popular game played during the annual Shrove Tuesday carnival, for which Ostend became famous in the nineteenth century. The carnival marked the last day before the arrival of Lent, traditionally a sombre period of restraint in the Christian calendar. Crowds of locals and tourists would dress up in elaborate costumes and don masks that they had made or purchased from shops like the one owned by Ensor's family. Wearing these costumes and masks, they took to the streets.

The game of Intrigue involved masked men and women making their way from café to café throughout Ostend. Those who were not wearing a mask would have to pay for their drinks. The game continued until the identity of every one of the masked people had been correctly guessed. By presenting a party of figures in masks and elaborate outfits, Ensor gave full licence to his love of dressing-up. He also gave the contemporary Ostend viewer a role in the game: could they guess the identities of these figures?

In such a public setting the mask therefore takes on a different function to that in *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse.* For the solitary individual in a domestic setting, the mask may have enabled a kind of personal freedom. But public groups of masked figures massed together opened up the possibility of something larger: political power.

Masks grant anonymity. In the late nineteenth century, anonymity provided by dressing up and covering one's face engendered a degree of freedom from the social conventions that governed everyday life at the time. Ostend's carnival became known as an occasion of sexual experimentation and licentious behaviour.

It was not only the annual carnival that saw Ostend come to life in this way. After the long winters, when tourism was minimal, the summer season was launched each year with a ceremony known as the Benediction of the Sea. During this ancient ceremony, local fishermen sought protection from God and prayed for bounteous catches in the year ahead. A large procession took place through the city. Its starting point was right beneath Ensor's studio on Rue de Flandre. Like the Shrove Tuesday carnival, the Benediction of the Sea became an increasingly lively and unruly public event.

Ensor's masked crowds clearly give a nod to Ostend's carnival tradition. But often in Ensor's work, crowds also have a political connotation: it can be hard to tell the difference between carnival, protest or a full-blown riot. For example, in *The Strike or Massacre of Ostend Fishermen*, 1888, Ensor recreates a contemporary event in which the local herring fishermen rose up against their rival English fishermen on 23 August 1887. The uprising was suppressed by the police and civic guards, resulting in shootings and several deaths. In contrast to the event's outcome, the composition of Ensor's drawing echoes that of a stage-set, and some of the soldiers look like actors or even wooden toys.

In his etching *The Cathedral*, 1886, Ensor juxtaposes an unruly crowd of individuals with lines of regimented soldiers. Having lavished time and effort on each individual in the crowd, Ensor does not simply depict a mass of generic figures, he shows us a crowd made up of a myriad different personalities. It is this that gives Ensor's work its political power. It suggests that the authorities of the Church and state may treat citizens as an anonymous mass, but the artist will not. *The Cathedral* has been identified as a turning point in Ensor's work. In the ensuing years, Ensor became increasingly biting in his critique of contemporary politics.

'Oh, the animal masks of the Ostend Carnival: bloated vicuna faces, misshapen birds with the tails of birds of paradise, cranes with sky-blue bills gabbling nonsense, obtuse sciolists with mouldy skulls, peculiar insects, hard shells giving shelter to softer beasts.' James Ensor, quoted by Paul Haesaerts in *Quand James Ensor peignait 'L'Entrée du Christ à Bruxelles'* in *L'oeil: revue d'art mensuelle,* 1965

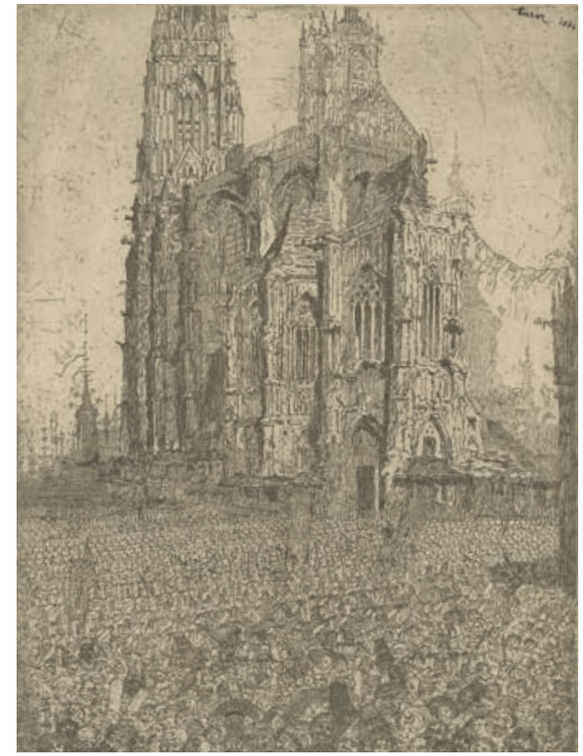


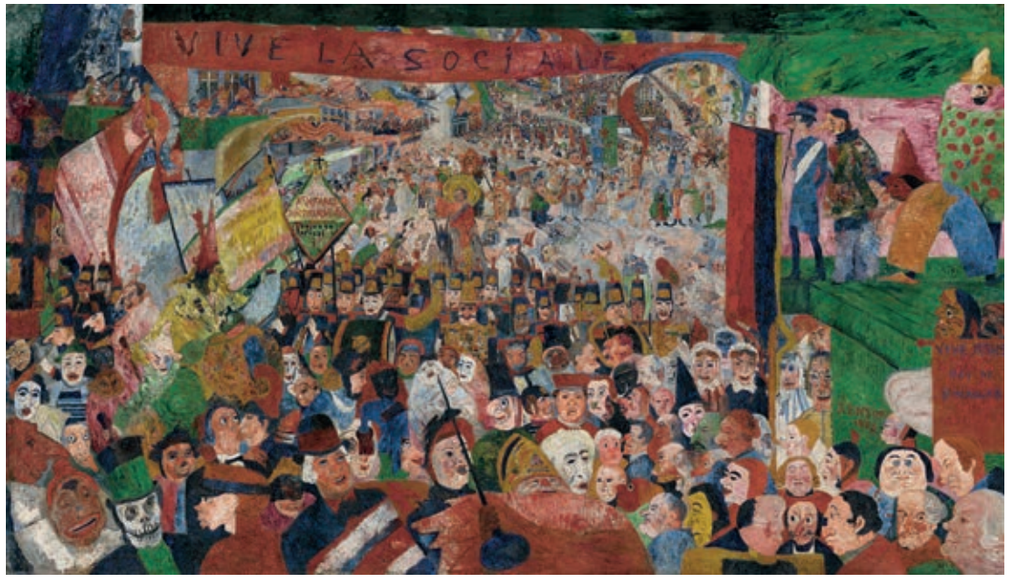
Fig. 2
The Cathedral, 1886
Etching, 47.4 × 35.7 cm

MoMA

How has Ensor exaggerated the scale of the cathedral? Why do you think he would do that?

Religion and politics: Ensor's satirical worldview

Cat. 56 From the 1890s onwards, Ensor's political weapon of choice was satire. In paintings, drawings, etchings and prints, he sought to attack what he saw as the major social and political injustices facing Belgium at the time. In the late nineteenth century Belgium was a strongly Catholic country, where religious knowledge among the general population was much higher than it is today. Religion was a powerful force in politics, too. The Church and state were very closely linked, especially after 1884, when the Catholic Party won elections and became the major force in the Belgian government. In the ensuing years, Ensor explored religious subject matter not as a retreat from contemporary politics, but specifically to engage the public with his form of social criticism. Ensor was keenly aware of the works of English



satirists, such as James Gillray (1756–1815) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), and in his own work he drew upon that same tradition of caustic caricature.

In the 1880s, Ensor produced numerous works exploring religious themes. In 1885, he began work on a series of six drawings known as *The Halos of Christ*. They depicted Christ's interactions with society: his appearance before the shepherds, his humiliation by the crowd, his crucifixion and resurrection. As well as making use of religious imagery, Ensor increasingly attacked the very notion of institutionalised religion, royalty and the professional classes, such as doctors and art critics. As suggested in works like *The Cathedral*, 1886, Ensor saw the Church as a tool of oppressive political authority due to its excessive influence upon the government.

The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889, 1888–89, is one of Ensor's most important works. It combines all the themes and ideas that ran through his work: religion, carnival, caricature, political satire, personal vendetta, and distinctively individual characters who together form a crowd. The work revisits a scene from the Bible in which Christ enters Jerusalem on a donkey shortly before the Last Supper. Many artists have depicted the same scene – from Giotto (*c.*1267–1337) in the fourteenth century to Rubens (1577–1640) and van Dyck (1599–1641) in the seventeenth century. But Ensor's handling of the scene is unique. Whereas other artists had placed the emphasis on Christ, Ensor focused on the crowd. Instead of a past event, Ensor imagines a future coming of Christ and how he might be received into a contemporary city. A crowd has gathered to welcome Christ but

Fig. 3
The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889, 1888–89
Oil on canvas,
252.5 × 430.5 cm

J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Photo courtesy The J. Paul Getty Museum / © DACS 2016

'As seen by him, life is a never-ending, changeless satire in which man is relentlessly lashed by his wit. From here to choosing the mask as the true, authentic face of mankind is only a short distance. His irony sometimes degenerates into crude farce.'
Anonymous (probably Emile Verhaeren), quoted in *James Ensor: Theatre of Masks,* ed. Carol Brown, et al, Lund Humphries, 1997

are separated from him by lines of soldiers. The composition contrasts the regimented lines of the military, in their identical headwear, with ordinary people – a diverse and fascinating crowd, many of whom are wearing a mask. Raised up on the right, assembled dignitaries and performers look down upon the scene.

The original four-metre-wide painting now hangs in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The Royal Academy exhibition includes one of a number of etchings that Ensor made of the same subject. He did this one in 1895 during an especially prolific period for the artist as a printmaker. At the time, printmaking was often used to disseminate images and ideas to a wider range of buyers than those who could afford expensive oil paintings.

While the overall effect of the two compositions is consistent, the work does show how Ensor adapted his subject matter to fit the demands of a particular medium on a vastly different scale. While each print is just 35 centimetres wide, the original painting measures more than four metres. The composition of the etching is a mirror-image of the painting. This is to be expected, given that Ensor worked directly onto a copper plate, which would then have been inked up and pressed onto the paper, thereby printing an inverse image of the composition he had etched into the copper.

By 1889, Ensor's critiques had become increasingly biting and caustic. In his etching, *Doctrinal Nourishment*, 1889, Ensor shows King Leopold II of Belgium, along with a soldier, a judge, a bishop and a nun, all defecating on a crowd of people. This may have been influenced by *Gargantua*, 1831, a lithograph by French artist Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) in which minions pass money up a ramp to the

Cat. 56
The Entry of Christ into Brussels, 1895
Copper plate etching,
24.7 × 35.6 cm

Musea Brugge, Groeningemuseum, Bruges
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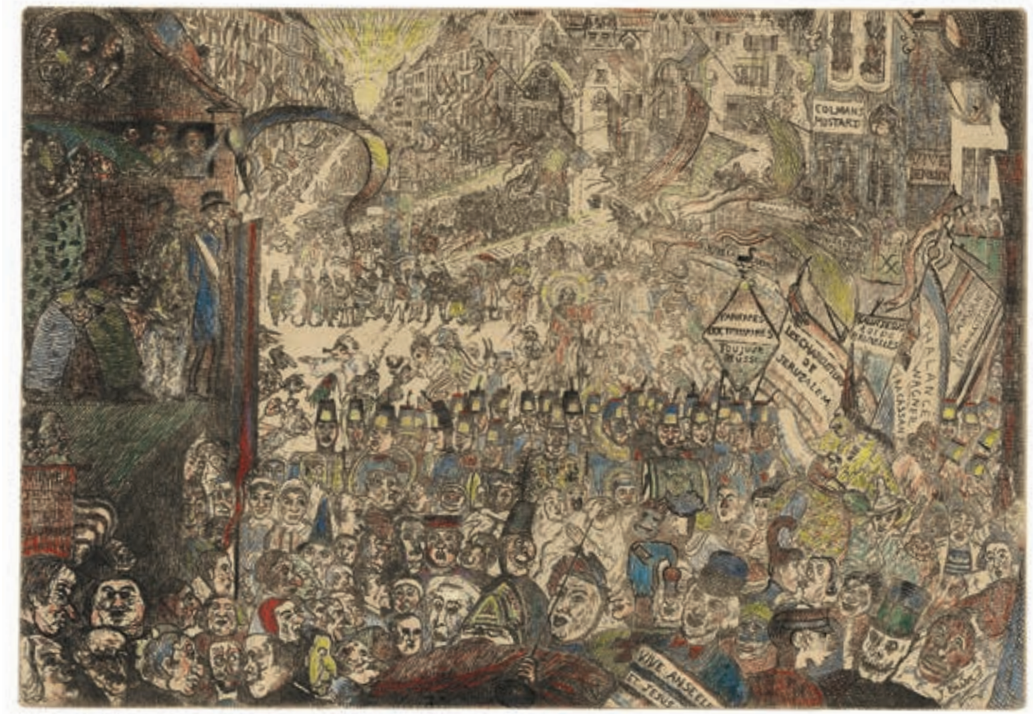

French king, Louis Philippe I. The money goes into his mouth and is defecated out the other end.

The Massacre of Ostend Fishermen, 1888, saw Ensor tackle social injustice at a local level; now, like Daumier, he was denouncing it at the national level too. In addition to politics, Ensor was also consumed by feelings of artistic rejection. Ensor's early career had been plagued by setbacks. He was rejected by the Antwerp Salon in 1882 and by the Brussels Salon in 1884. *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* was even rejected by Les XX and not exhibited in public until 1929. Ensor frequently channelled his sense of rejection into his work. In *Skeletons Fighting over a Pickled Herring*, 1891, Ensor portrays himself as a pickled herring. This symbol cropped up in a number of his works: the Belgian phrase for a popular dish, *hareng sour*, sounds similar to 'Ensor'. Here, he is being eaten by two influential art critics of the period, Edouard Fétis and Max Sulzberger.

By the time Ensor painted *Skeletons Fighting over a Pickled Herring*, 1891, he had achieved some significant successes. In addition to showing at the annual Salon des XX, his works had also been exhibited at the Paris Salon des Beaux-Arts and he'd had the first solo exhibition of his etchings at the Galerie Dietrich in Brussels. Even so, those early rejections still rankled and Ensor longed for greater recognition. By portraying himself as a humble herring, Ensor shows his feelings of powerlessness, his frustration at not having a more effective influence on the wider reception of his works. In this depiction, Ensor aligns himself with the faces in the Brussels crowd, blocked from Christ by those in authority.

Why do you think Ensor produced so much of his political satire as drawings or prints rather than paintings?

How has Ensor changed the composition of *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* from the painting to the print? What effects do these changes have?

In sickness and ill health

Dogged by ill health throughout his life, Ensor detailed his suffering in letters to his friends. Over more than 25 years, Ensor maintained a frequent correspondence with Ernest Rousseau, his wife Mariette and their son. He sent the family over 350 letters, mostly in the 1880s and 1890s, and mostly to Mariette, who was a scientist, specialising in fungi, and the sister of Ensor's former classmate Theo Hannan.

From 1884 onwards these letters contain a litany of pain and suffering. Ensor experienced serious dental and stomach problems. In 1887, he was bedridden for four weeks. He frequently coughed up blood. Ensor's whole family seemed prone to bouts of ill health. In one letter, he gives an especially harrowing description of his experience of a tapeworm and the attempts to get rid of it. 'I'm sick. A new illness: a tapeworm. […] the stomach aches have become atrocious. I've vomited blood and worn myself out terribly.'

'The dentist extracted one of my teeth but only got half of it out. The neuralgia continues. Mitche [Ensor's sister] is paralysed with rheumatism. My mother suffers gall bladder attacks. In our house all you hear is groaning.'
James Ensor, letter to Mariette Rousseau, 1886

Ensor is especially critical of his doctor's inability to correctly diagnose and treat the tapeworm. His letter continues, 'I called the doctor, he made me take a very bitter liquid that made me dizzy and gave me bad diarrhoea, but the tapeworm didn't budge. Today he made me drink several ounces of castor oil. Then the savage creature showed itself. I just lost two metres of it, but that isn't enough. We have to start again tomorrow. […] The thing is frighteningly large and has unprecedented stamina. How could the doctor not have guessed what was wrong with me!'

If that is painful for us to read today, for Ensor it must have been excruciating.

Cat. 49 After his recovery, Ensor re-imagined the ordeal in *The Bad Doctors*, 1892. That same year, a major cholera epidemic swept through Belgium. The failings of the medical profession had long been a subject for satire and, following such suffering, public confidence in doctors was especially low.

The work depicts a pale-skinned victim sitting on a bed of straw-yellow and blood-red. He is restrained by a leash attached to the wall and wears what looks like a nightcap. From the patient's round, distended belly, a doctor hauls out a segmented tapeworm, which at first glance looks like a spinal cord or intestine, almost as if it is part of the victim's body. Four other doctors, clad in black suits or white butcher's aprons, add to the sense of struggle and chaos. One has his hands raised in horror. Another holds the head of the tapeworm on a spike. Lengths of the worm entangle the doctors' legs and lie across the floorboards, along with scattered medical notes and a bloodied handsaw.

This undoubtedly gruesome painting straddles the themes of gore and farce. As with *The Good Judges*, 1891, and *The Assassination*, 1888, the figures are laid out before us in a tableau. The perspective of the floorboards and a red curtain in the top-right corner reinforce the impression that we are witnessing a macabre theatrical performance. Two ghastly figures cry out from the gallery. The Grim Reaper enters stage left. Unlike most of the doctors, the victim seems to have caught sight of Death's outstretched hand. This is a classic moment of dramatic irony in which the audience – in this case, the viewer of the painting – is aware of a development that has yet to be revealed to the characters. Surrounded by incompetent strangers, the victim is about to die a grisly death.

How does Ensor create an atmosphere of chaos and confusion?

Why would Ensor emphasise the theatrical elements of this scene?

Why might Ensor go into such detail about his personal health in his letters to Mariette?

Cat. 49
The Bad Doctors, 1892
Oil on panel, 50 × 61 cm

Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels
Photo collection de l'Université libre de Bruxelles
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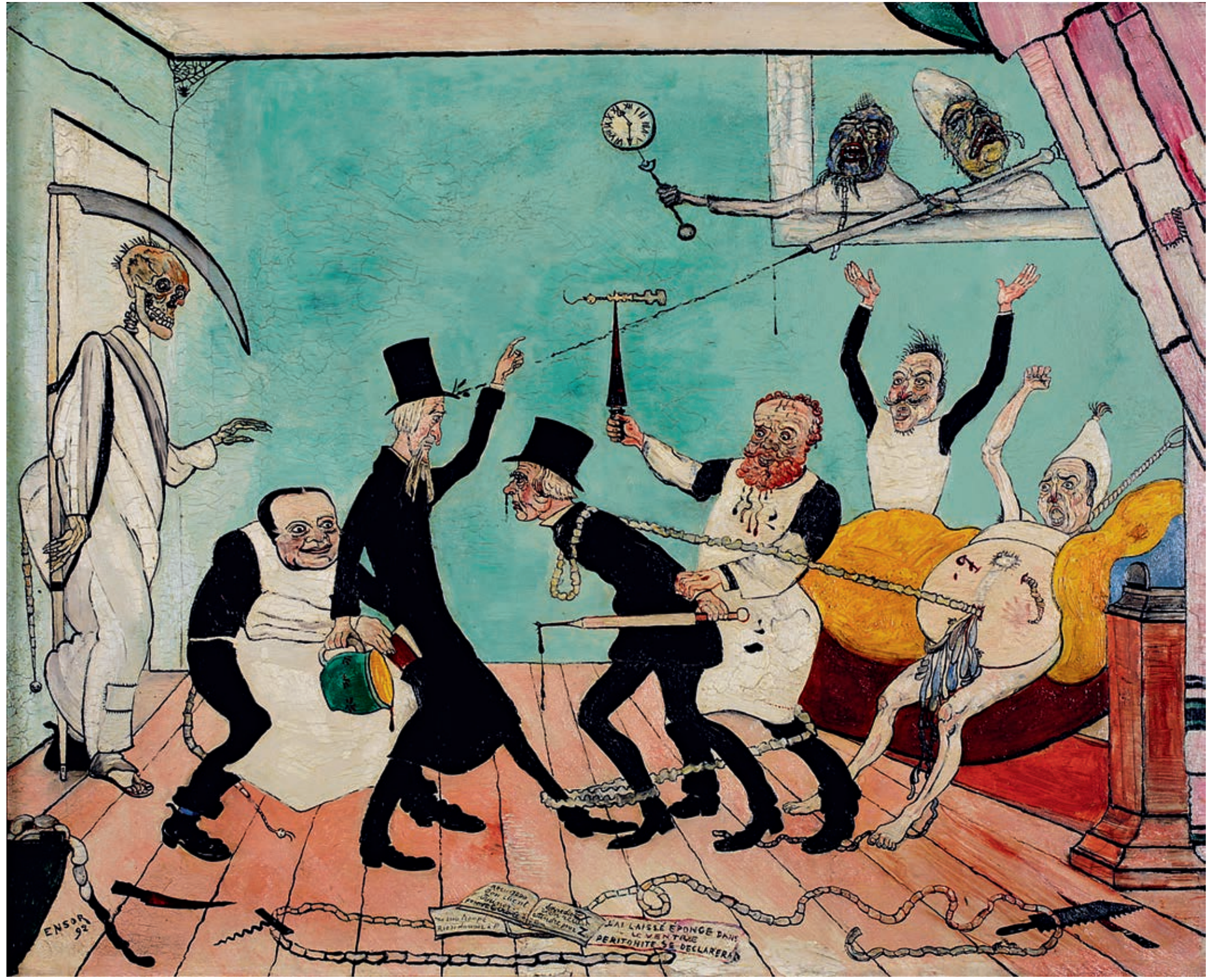


Ensor and his contemporaries

Cat. 48 In *The Dangerous Cooks*, 1896, Ensor captures some of the complexities and contradictions of his relationship with both the artist group Les XX and the wider art world. Having co-founded Les XX in 1883, Ensor swiftly emerged as the leader of a more radical faction of it. In 1886, the other members had sought to invite American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) to join the group, but Ensor successfully opposed them. The following year, after Emile Verhaeren had been impressed by the work of French artist Georges Seurat (1859–1891) in Paris, they invited Seurat to exhibit at their Brussels Salon. Ensor was furious. He loathed Seurat's pointillist style, which he considered overly theoretical, methodical, systematic and cold. This time Ensor was overruled. Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, was exhibited in Brussels, where it received great attention and praise.

In 1893, Octave Maus, secretary of Les XX and the major influence behind the annual exhibition, disbanded the group despite resistance from Ensor. Three years later, Ensor painted *The Dangerous Cooks*. The painting takes us backstage where two chefs are preparing to serve a pair of strange dishes to the assembled diners in the adjoining room. Octave Maus serves up Ensor's head on a pickled herring. Beside Maus, Edouard Picard, editor of *L'Art Moderne*, the journal of Les XX, is frying up the head of Les XX member, the impressionist painter Guillaume Vogels (1836–1896). Hanging above the cooker is a chicken with the head of Anna Boch, an advocate of Seurat's pointillism. Among the prominent art critics sitting at the table are Edouard Fétis and Max Sulzberger from *Fighting over a Pickled Herring*, 1891. The figure climbing the stairs is Ensor's friend, Theo Hannan.

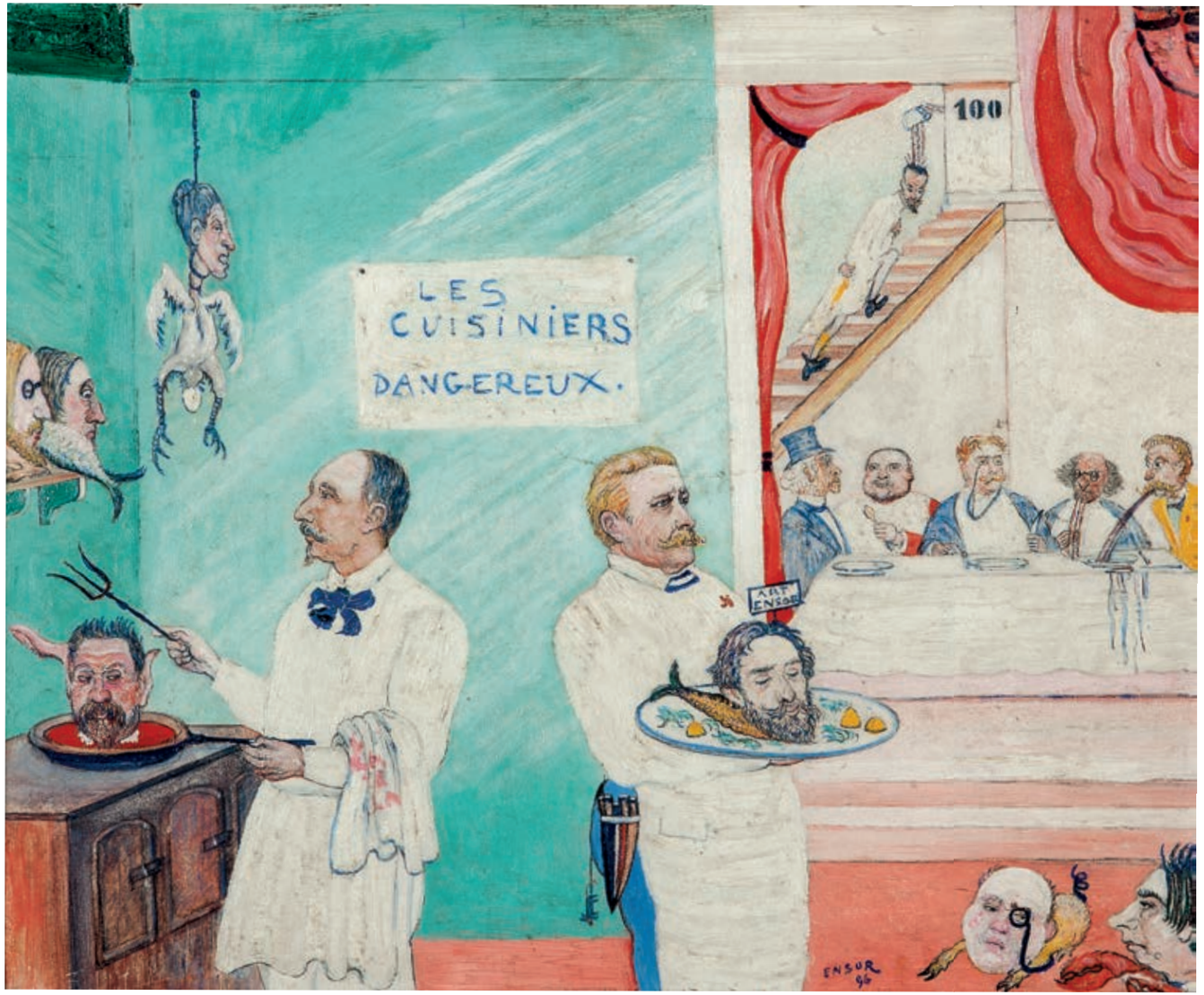
The Dangerous Cooks is characteristic of Ensor, not simply in its mix of styles, its bawdy humour, and its virtuoso brushwork, but also in the way the artist channelled his personal and professional frustrations into his work. Angered by the enthusiasm Les XX had shown for Seurat, Ensor responded with the vast *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, 1888–89, generally considered to be his masterpiece.

How important is it to know the identity of each character in the painting? Does it change how we understand the work?

How does Ensor give us an insight into the different personalities of the characters in this painting?

Cat. 48
The Dangerous Cooks,
1896
Oil on panel, 38 × 46 cm
Private collection / © DACS 2016

'My art tends towards the literary. My pictures tend towards the outskirts of painting. But why generalise? It is possible to realise one thing or another, according to the impressions gained from one point of view or another. But it is too difficult to make a general rule.'
James Ensor, quoted by J. P. Hodin, *A Visit to James Ensor*, in *Far and Wide*, September 1948



Till death do us part

Skulls and skeletons have long formed part of Western visual iconography, and were used as a common motif during the fifteenth-century Flemish renaissance, when they served a moral and religious purpose in paintings. The nineteenth century saw a revival in artistic depictions of death, in part prompted by the republication in 1833 of the *Danse Macabre* woodcuts, 1538, by Hans Holbein (*c.*1497–1543). English satirist Thomas Rowlandson was especially influenced by Holbein, and in turn Ensor was influenced by Rowlandson. Ensor's depictions of himself as a skeleton – as in *Death and the Masks*, 1888, and *My Portrait as a Skeleton*, 1889 – owe an art-historical debt to Rowlandson's *Death and the Portrait*, 1814.

Cat. 10 *The Skeleton Painter*, 1896, is one of a number of Ensor's works that focus on death. Early examples include *Skeleton Looking at Chinoiseries*, *c.* 1888–90 while skulls and skeletons were a recurring motif even when death was not the central subject of a work. In *The Skeleton Painter,* Ensor continues his interest in self-portraits and playing the role of the artist. As his satirical attacks on art critics suggest, Ensor was very concerned about the reception of his work. Here, by depicting himself as a skeleton, Ensor suggests that while his own life may be short, his work, which adorns the walls of the studio around him, will outlast him. The work therefore encapsulates the Latin aphorism, *Ars longa, vita brevis* – 'Art is long, life is brief'.

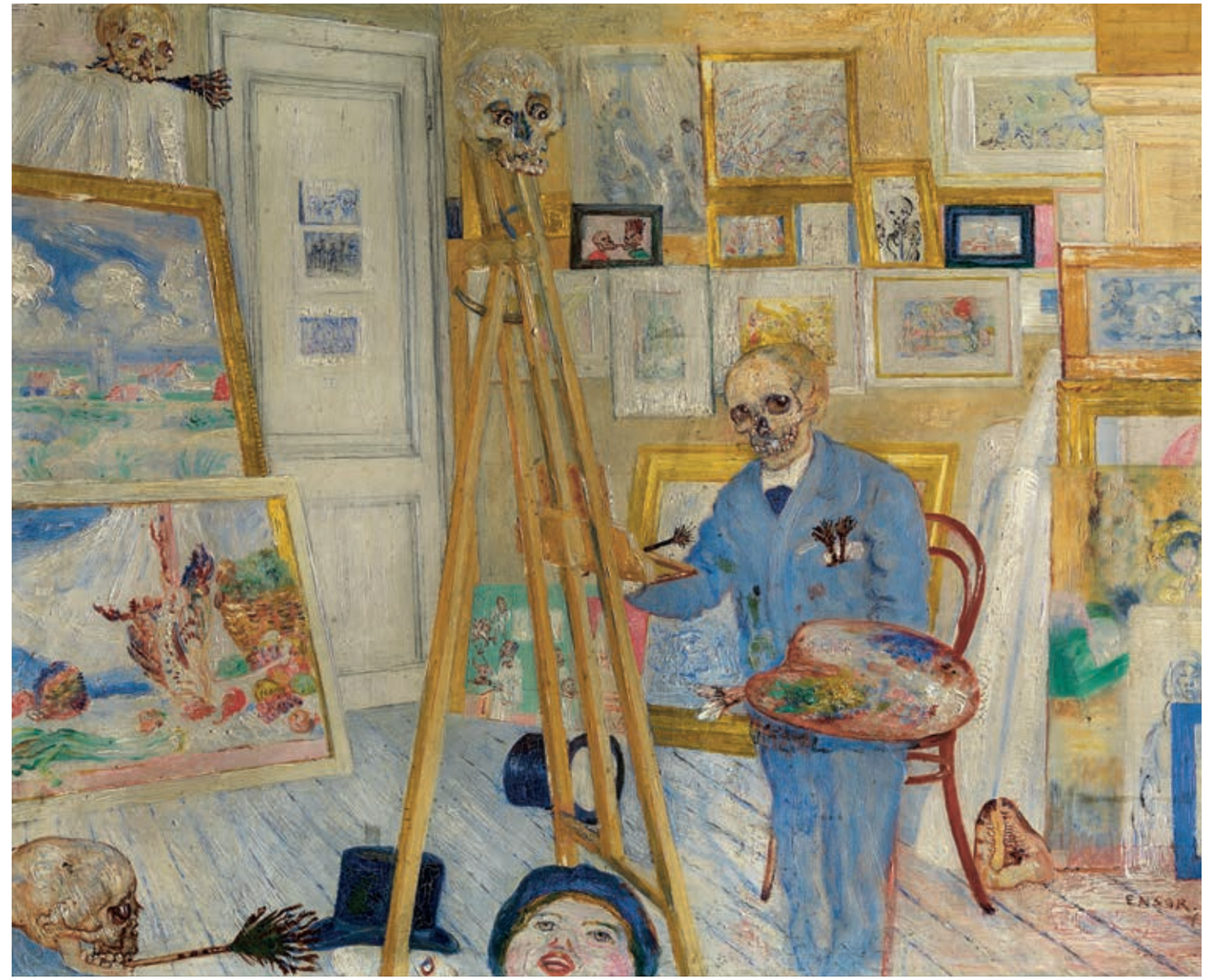
Ensor's fascination with death was not only a product of his engagement with art history. On 14 April 1887 at half past one in the morning, the artist's father was found dead. Some time earlier, he had been set upon by a group of local men and badly beaten. Ensor described what had happened in one of his letters to Mariette. Again, he does not flinch from the detail. 'My father's injuries are very serious, his head is literally sliced up with razor cuts and [he has] a very deep wound at the nape of the neck. Despite the atrocity of the attack the guilty may go unpunished. […] I don't know what will happen. […] The affair has caused a lot of fuss in Ostend, the bandits who did this to my father are from a good family. Earlier they passed our house roaring with laughter, the brutes! That's the Ostend public for you.'

The death of his father was a significant loss for Ensor. Not only did he lose his most constant source of love and support (among his family, only his father appreciated his art), but he was filled with a burning sense of injustice at what had happened. To make matters worse, Ensor's grandmother also died that same year. From the late 1880s onwards, skulls and skeletons proliferated in Ensor's work, though they had long been a noticeable presence. For Ensor, death had never felt far off – in life as in art.

Conclusion: Success and decline

By the mid-1890s, James Ensor had reached the peak of his powers. He had produced paintings, drawings and prints that brought together a bewildering range of styles, subjects, and artistic influences. The art establishment was beginning to warm to him. In 1893, the Brussels Cabinet des Estampes purchased a large collection of his etchings. In 1894, he had a one-man show at the Comptoir des Arts Industriels La Royale in Brussels. In 1899, the Albertina in Vienna purchased around 100 of his etchings, and in 1901, the Municipality of Ostend also purchased 100 etchings.

Yet, at this point in his career Ensor suddenly seemed to lose the intensity that had characterised his best work. In the year 1895, he painted almost nothing and when he did return to work, the fire of creativity seemed to have gone out. Although



Cat. 10
The Skeleton Painter,
1896
Oil on panel, 37.3 × 45.3 cm

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, inv. 3112
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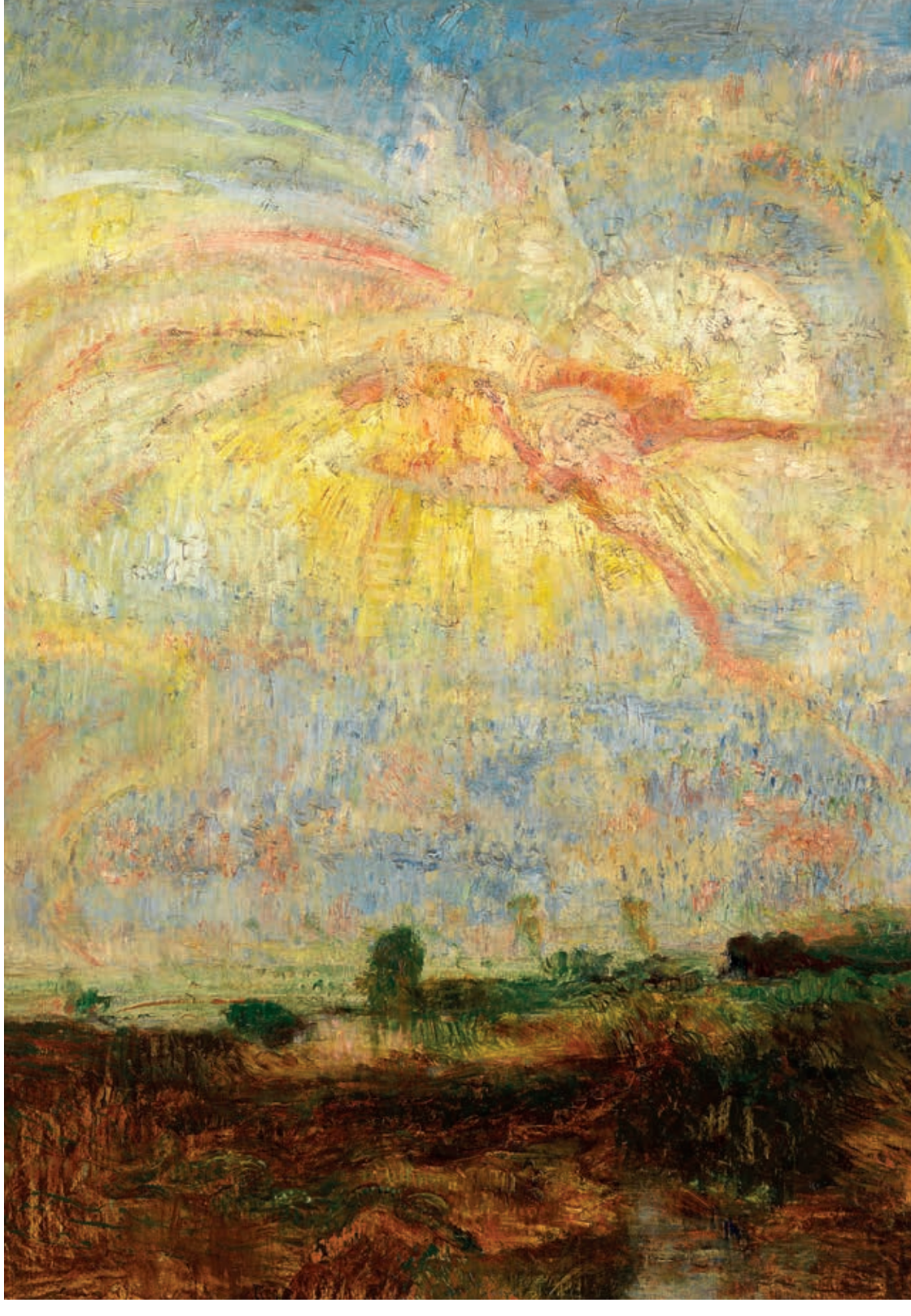
Ensor produced the occasional great work in his later years, for the most part the quality of his work declined. His later paintings of carnivals and masked figures have the feel of pastiche. Many explanations have been given for Ensor's apparent decline: perhaps he had achieved all he wanted; perhaps success deprived him of his driving force; or perhaps he had simply tired of painting – he certainly devoted far more time to writing and music. But nobody knows for sure. Fittingly, this exhibition at the Royal Academy focuses on that period of intense productivity and experimentation during the 1880s and 1890s for which Ensor will remain best known.

As Ensor painted less and less, his fame continued to grow. A monument to the artist was built in Ostend, major exhibitions were held at the Musée National du Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1932, and at the National Gallery in London in 1946. Ensor was proclaimed a 'prince of painters', and people such as Albert Einstein, Wassily Kandinksy (1866–1944), and Emil Nolde (1867–1956) came to visit him in Ostend. Ensor's influence as an experimental pioneer of modern art continues to this day. By the time of his death in 1949, Ensor had become the kind of establishment figure that he had so scorned as a young man.

'That's the irony in a sense,' says Luc Tuymans. 'Ensor started to repeat what he regarded as his own identity, his style, over and over again. And this must have been horror. He must have been aware of it to a certain degree. In the end, he became a baron and he wore his medal. That was in the last days of his life.'

Cat. 26 detail
Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise, 1887

'I have no children, but light is my daughter, light one and indivisible, light, the painter's bread, light, the painter's crumb, light, queen of our senses.'
James Ensor, *Lumière une et indivisible,* 1932, in Mes écrits



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This guide is given out free to teachers and full-time students with an exhibition ticket and ID at the Learning Desk and is available to other visitors from the RA Shop at a cost of £5.50 (while stocks last).