



KMSKA

IN YOUR
WILDEST DREAMS
ENSOR BEYOND IMPRESSIONISM

KMSKA

ROYAL MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS ANTWERP

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The Ensor year 2024 would not be complete without an exhibition at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) in the autumn of 2024. *In Your Wildest Dreams. Ensor Beyond Impressionism* offers an all-round exploration of James Ensor as a trailblazing artist. In addition to delving into Ensor's wondrous realm of turbulent visions, masks and satire, the exhibition will also show Ensor alongside the work of international artists who inspired him and with whom he set out to compete. Because if there was one thing Ensor wanted, it was always to be the best; even if those rivals had names like Claude Monet, Edvard Munch or even Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya.

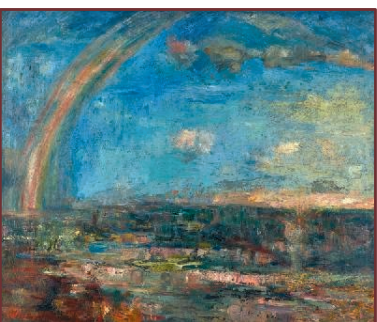
The KMSKA boasts the largest and most varied Ensor collection anywhere in the world and is also home to the Ensor Research Project – the leading centre for the study of this modern master. All of which makes the museum the ideal venue for for this once-in-a-lifetime tribute to one of the fathers of modernism. The exhibition will centre on two crucial aspects of Ensor's art: how a Belgian avant-garde painter set about going 'beyond Impressionism' to give visual form to our 'wildest dreams'.



James Ensor played a pivotal role in the Belgian art of the past 200 years. Towards the end of the 19th century, together with a small group of other European avant-garde artists like Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), he liberated painting from Romantic bombast, respectability and dreary realism. Following in Ensor's footsteps, you follow how he unleashed his creativity to become a rebellious gamechanger. Who determines the rules of art himself. In doing so, he resolutely steps away from the classical European ideal of beauty and from Impressionism, which initially fascinated him so much.



Ensor certainly did not lack ambition. The goal he set himself was nothing less than to become Belgium's leading avant-garde artist. He sought to achieve this by introducing French Impressionism into his work, yet his concrete knowledge of the school was vague at first. Not that this stopped Ensor from developing his own version of Impressionism in the years 1880–85. Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916) compared the young James to Edouard Manet (1832–1883). As far as the celebrated author was concerned, Ensor's art was no less revolutionary than that of Manet. In reality, however, his early work was inspired more by the realism of Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) and Jean-François Raffaëlli (1850–1924). Ensor was also clearly an admirer of Rembrandt (1606–1669).



Ensor introduced his 'Impressionist' work to the world in 1886 at the winter Salon of the avant-garde group 'Les XX'. He was now able to compare works of his own, such as *Bourgeois Interior* (1881), *The Oyster Eater* (1882) and *Rue de Flandre in Sunlight* (1881) with those of established French Impressionists like Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro. It prompted an immediate change of direction. *In Your Wildest Dreams. Ensor Beyond Impressionism* views this pivotal moment as the true beginning of Ensor's varied oeuvre. After this preliminary phase, he steadily found his own, experimental voice as an artist.

☞ ***Often floating by headwind, I set sail to wonderful lands.***

IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS

NOT IMPRESSIONISM?

James Ensor painted *The Oyster Eater* in 1882 with the goal of demonstrating the innovative character of his work on an ambitious scale. He showed the painting at Les XX in 1886, where the artist hoped it would confirm his revolutionary reputation compared to the art of Monet and Renoir. In the 1900s, critics and artists rediscovered *The Oyster Eater* as Belgium's first *Impressionist* painting, yet it only takes a moment's comparison of Ensor's work with that of Manet and Monet to realize just how different *The Oyster Eater* was. Ensor knew it too. All the same, showing his work at Les XX was a fruitful experience for him. Monet's landscapes, which Ensor was able to study there, offered him a bright, Impressionist colour palette of a kind he had not previously used, together with a new technique. In the work of Odilon Redon (1840–1916), meanwhile, he discovered a dark and fantastic visual language.



FRESH MILESTONES

In 1887 Ensor painted *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* (KMSKA) and drew *The Temptation of St Anthony* (Art Institute of Chicago): two key works from the beginning of his new artistic adventure. Like the Impressionists, he applied his paint unmixed from tube to canvas, while bidding farewell to earth-coloured shadows. Unlike them, however, he gave the colours an expressive power entirely of his own, with the most refined of shades. Up to now Ensor had been an artist who consistently broke the rules: now, as a true game-changer, he set about rewriting them. The time for restraint was over. Time for Ensor to go wild.

It was also at this point that he began to cultivate his preference for decidedly strange compositions: a grotesque, comical and frightening iconography that he used to conjure up images at once hilarious and hellish, of the kind you normally see only in your wildest dreams. As the end of the 19th century approached, a new vision of good and evil, lust and passion was developing, into which Ensor's fascination for humanity's more nefarious side blended seamlessly.

As part of the Ensor Research Project, KMSKA has reconstructed the process by which *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* was created. In it, we see Ensor seeking to shrug off the constraints of Impressionism – the art of those he called 'superficial daubers'. He drew visual motifs from a whole range of sources: a composition by John Martin (1789–1854), elements from palaeontological publications, Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, Rubens' *Fall of the Rebel Angels* and Rembrandt's *Annunciation to the Shepherds*.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Ensor's straightforward interest in the free rendering of unfathomable visions links him to artists like the Swede Ernst Josephson (1851–1906).

IMPRESSIONISM AFTER ALL?

Even though Ensor continued to explore different approaches to content and form throughout his life, he retained a persistent interest in the possibilities held out by Impressionism. His late still-lives in particular are closely related to the aesthetic of Auguste Renoir.

Through *The Oyster Eater* and other early works, Ensor himself went on to inspire younger artists in Brussels, including Rik Wouters (1882–1916). They followed his example to reconcile structure and colour in their work. Around 1910, Ensor responded in turn by creating a series of 'reprises' of his earlier work, applying the style of his younger colleagues as originally inspired by himself, thereby completing the circle.



ENSOR BEYOND IMPRESSIONISM



HELL AND ITS ENTICEMENTS

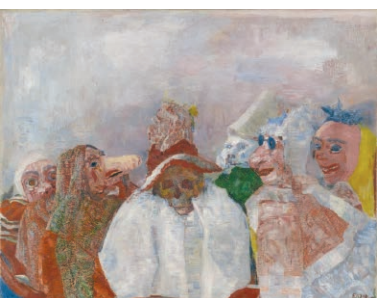
The decadent iconography so beloved of the European Symbolists inspired Antonin Alexandre in 1892 to open the 'Cabaret de l'Enfer' (Cabaret of Hell) next door to the 'Cabaret du Ciel' (Cabaret of Heaven) in Montmartre. Popular culture like this would have a major impact on monumental artworks in a way that has not previously been studied. In the *Beyond Impressionism* section of the exhibition, we explore the links between the Cabaret de l'Enfer and Henri Degroux's *Christ aux outrages* and Ensor's *Fall of the Rebel Angels*.

Renewed secular interest in St Anthony inspired Ensor to produce a whole series of paintings and drawings in which the hermit is shown struggling with the very same temptations of which the modern bourgeois man dreamed. The exceptionally complex, quasi-Surrealist collage-drawing *The Temptation of St Anthony* (Art Institute of Chicago - cover image) seems like the monumental fruit of a creative high. It anticipates Ensor's grotesque imagination in all sorts of elements and countless details. A separate part of the exhibition is devoted to analysis of the drawing and how it came about.



MASKS GALORE

And invariably Ensor manages to surprise on account of his contrasts between the comic and the sinister, the sophisticated and the wild, cosy bourgeois salons and scary skeletons, in a world steeped in wry satire. Ultimately, it all leads to Ensor's most eye-catching contribution to the birth of modernism. He began to paint canvases featuring imaginary mask-creatures. Ensor was by no means the only artist to explore this motif in the late 19th century: in this respect too, he resembled like-minded artists such as Emil Nolde (1867–1956). For other artists, though, masks were often a decorative element or an enigmatic way to conceal a person's identity. In Ensor's work the mask actually reveals the human being's true nature. This was his invention, which he applies very radically and found its way into more mask paintings than by any other artist.

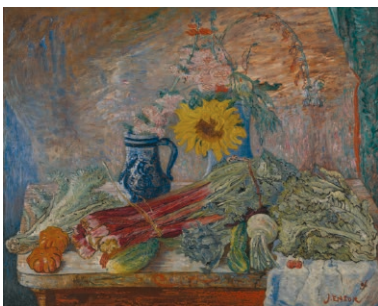


ENSOR, DEADPAN HUMOURIST

James Ensor's work and that of the European Symbolists has been viewed as the product of tormented personalities, with the result that the comic element in Ensor has been overlooked. In reality, his art is steeped in the late-19th-century satirical humour beloved of sophisticated circles in Brussels and Paris. Ensor's view of humanity alternates between light-hearted and pessimistic, yet it is just as frequently lyrical and very funny. *In Your Wildest Dreams* firmly shows Ensor from his most satirical side.



ENSOR RESEARCH PROJECT



Working away in his attic room in a small town on the Belgian coast, James Ensor seems to have been far removed from the world of international art. All the same, his work reflects the artistic and cultural upheavals that were rapidly taking place around the end of the 19th century. The affinities between Ensor's painting and that of Ernst Josephson and Emile Nolde have not been sufficiently explored from a cultural and historical perspective, even though it is precisely this international context that can help us better appreciate the specific qualities of Ensor's art. It is therefore one of the underlying principles of *In Your Wildest Dreams*, as well as the KMSKA's Ensor Research Project, which will also feature in the exhibition.



Drawing on key works like *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* and *The Temptation of St Anthony* the exhibition zooms in on the historical, creative and technical genesis of Ensor's changes of artistic course.

The KMSKA is also focusing on the artist's creative process in *Ensor at Work*. As part of the Ensor Research Project, the museum is producing technical research images and digitizing personal documents to help answer a whole range of questions:

- How did Ensor use materials and techniques over time?
- How did he build his compositions?
- How does his work resemble and differ from that of his contemporaries?
- How did Ensor blend historical and modern influences?

The answers to these questions offer a broad audience a deeper experience of Ensor's work.



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

→ James Ensor's work is more relevant than ever: 'in your face' yet also inward-looking and inscrutable; revealing and concealing; superficially sweet and coarsely authentic; comical, weird and malevolent.

James Ensor died in 1949, the 75th anniversary of which falls in 2024. That makes it the perfect occasion to celebrate Ensor, not only in Antwerp but also in his native Ostend. Celebrations in the latter are due to begin towards the end of 2023, with Antwerp picking up the baton at KMSKA, MoMu, FOMU and Museum Plantin-Moretus. Ensor will be everywhere!

ENSOR 2024 is a wide-ranging artistic and cultural project, in which the familiar approaches will be avoided to show that Ensor was so much more than the 'mask painter' he called himself.

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