

# A Thematic Description of James Ensor's Graphics

## James Ensor's etchings

With an extremely multifaceted production of paintings, drawings and graphics, James Ensor was one of the innovators of late 19th century art. Ensor increasingly distanced himself from visual reality and created his own symbolic world with demons, masks and caricatures.

Like his paintings, Ensor's graphics attest to an exceptional virtuosity. His etchings reveal the sure hand of a draughtsman who experiments with lines so as to express his feelings. Ensor hoped to be able to address a broader public through his etchings and to achieve a greater recognition as an artist. Through his personal interpretation, Ensor can be regarded as being one of the precursors of both expressionism and symbolism.

In Europe, there was a renewed interest in the technique of etching during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term 'original etching' was being applied for the first time, so as to differentiate from the 'reproduced etchings' that professional etchers made of old masters' paintings so as to duplicate and distribute their work. Original etchings were new creations.

Ensor had also discovered the etching technique as a means of expression. The highpoint of his production was during the period 1886 to 1889. The artist produced a total of approximately 130 etchings in which he treated various subjects with boundless imagination and humour such as self-portraits, portraits of family and friends, city scenes, sailors, landscapes, religious scenes and the Seven Deadly Sins along with fantastic depictions involving masks, demons and skeletons.

## Technique

Ensor utilised the various possibilities that graphics entail. He applied the techniques of both etching and drypoint to his work. Both are forms of engraving where the drawing is incised into the copper plate and is filled with greasy ink, after which the plate is wiped so that the ink only remains in the drawn lines. The plate is then laid on a sheet of paper and is printed. The difference between an etching and a drypoint lies in the way in which the drawing has been applied to the plate. For an etching, the plate is covered with a varnish in which the drawing is made. When the plate is placed in an acid bath, only the parts where the plate is exposed - the lines - are eaten away. In drypoint, the lines are directly scratched directly into the plate. They cannot be corrected. The drypoint forces both sides of the line upwards and creates a rough burr that traps the ink. During the printing process, a line is created that looks less pure and more 'velvety'. This effect is consciously applied by artists.

Almost all of Ensor's etchings exist in a series of different versions, where he had often made changes to the depiction.

*Every etching in this show is accompanied by a caption indicating the version in question. 'Version: 3/4' means the etching exists in four known versions and the exhibited print is the third in this series.*

## Themes

Self-portraits, and portraits of family and friends

Ensor found his inspiration in what he observed in his immediate environment: the sea with the harbour and fishermen, the beach with the seaside visitors, the streets of Ostend and Brussels, and also his family and friends.

Ensor's relatives were a favourite subject along the furniture and other objects in his parents' house. He watched them sitting in chairs reading, sleeping, drinking coffee, taking a nap, receiving guests and embroidering. Lighting played an essential role in these realistic scenes.

In Brussels, Ensor's friend Theo Hannon introduced him to Ernest and Mariette Rousseau. Ernest Rousseau - who had married to the much younger Mariette Hannon - was Professor of Physics at the University of Brussels. The house of this freethinking pair had become a meeting place for all kinds of artists, writers and musicians. Ensor, who frequently visited the family, became a part of this leading intellectual and artistic milieu. The features of the various members of the Rousseau family can be found - sometimes in disguise - in a number of works.

The Rousseaus were to become the most important collectors of Ensor's work.

Ensor also appears in his own work, and is disguised as an Arab, Christ, a Pierrot, an insect or herring, a burlesque hoodlum, a carnival reveller or a skeleton. However, in much of his work he is depicted as himself, as an object to be studied. Ensor sometimes used photographs for these self-portraits, although he mostly used a mirror. He took full advantage of the mirror's mysterious qualities by applying subtle and somewhat disorienting effects. For instance, an object placed in front of the mirror, is not shown in reflection and has simply 'vanished' from the image.

Several times Ensor portrayed himself as a skeleton or with a skull. These images draw on the *memento mori* iconography of Western grave sculpture. Symbolist artists were extremely interested in this kind of iconography, but Ensor appears to have been the only artist who unequivocally identified with death.

In the etching *Demons teasing me* (1895), the artist is surrounded by hideous, devilish creatures that threaten him. This depiction reflects the modern, romantic image of the artist being tormented by both internal and external factors.

In the etching *Peculiar Insects* (1888), Ensor portrays himself as a beetle and Mrs. Rousseau as a dragonfly. Here, he was openly referring to their relationship.

City scenes, marines and landscapes

Almost a third of Ensor's graphics consist of landscapes, and of harbour and city scenes. Most of them were etched before 1891. The artist probably incised the

landscapes into the varnish *en plein air*. These etchings often offer little by way of topographical information. The only clues about the places in question are contained in the titles. Fascinated by the vast expanses of water and sky, Ensor was more interested in depicting the light than the form. The light consists of an interplay of masts, sails and facades, which is rendered in subtle, delicate lines and strokes. Ensor also used local landscapes as a basis for fantasies such as the etching *Forest at Groenendael* (1888).

Yet Ensor's enduring source of inspiration was his city of Ostend, which - in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - had developed into a fashionable seaside resort and spa. From his studio in the attic of his parents' house, he repeatedly drew and painted what he observed downstairs in the Vlaanderenstraat or the Van Iseghemlaan. In 1887, he started etching street scenes in Ostend and Brussels along with occasional copies of his earlier paintings. Ensor also depicted scenes from the room on the Anspachlaan in Brussels where he had stayed during the winter of 1887 to 1888. Sometimes his much-loved band is shown marching through the streets. Views of the old parts of the city were in vogue at that time. Even Whistler - whose etchings Ensor must have seen during this period - exhibited London scenes at *Les XX* artists circle.

In 1890, Ensor created a sizable painting after *The Large Dockyard in Ostend* (1888). Particularly after 1890, the transition from print to painting was to play an increasingly important role in his production process. As an intermediary step, the artist favoured treating the etchings with gouache, watercolours and coloured pencils so that they were transformed into small paintings. Sometimes the original graphics were completely obscured.

## Masks, demons and skeletons

Ensor's most striking contribution to Western modern art is undoubtedly his grotesque, masked creatures. They appear not only in the paintings but also in his etchings. The artist had grown up amongst masks: his mother sold masks in her small shop for the annual carnival in Ostend. Ensor deployed masks in his work as a way of symbolising the wearers' psychological and moral characteristics. Here, he was harking back to the distortions that he had already used in his caricatures. His etchings contain grotesque motifs such as monsters and fantasy creatures reminiscent of the figures that feature in medieval illuminated manuscripts or the world of Hieronymus Bosch. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were a part of the caricaturist's repertoire, and were extremely popular amongst artists because of their primitivism. Ensor incorporated all these elements in a unique way into his etchings, and created his own universe of masks that is populated by 'mask people' devoid of individuality.

Along with the masks, skeleton motifs began to play an important role in Ensor's imagination after 1886. The artist also identified with Death in several of the drawings, prints and paintings. This morbid fascination refers to a fear of a loss of identity and creativity, which escalated through the failure of both the artistic world and his family to appreciate his genius.

Ensor was a great admirer of Edgar Allen Poe's *Histoires extraordinaires* and was familiar with the 1856 French translation by Charles Baudelaire. A number of works such as *Hop-Frog's Vengeance* (1898) and *King Pest* (1895) were inspired by Poe's stories of the fantastic.

Ensor became extremely involved with the theme of 'the masses' from 1890 onwards. The print *Death Chasing the Flock of Mortals* (1896) relates to other examples of Ensor's mass depictions such as *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (1898). The crowd's hilarity turns into panic as they are pursued by Death. Amongst these people, who consist of individuals from all social classes, a number of mask-like faces can be clearly discerned.

### The Seven Deadly Sins

Ensor published *Les sept pêchés capitaux* in 1904 in the form of an album with a preface by his friend Eugène Demolder. In the various depictions, Ensor applied the grotesque and humorous iconography that he had been developing since 1886. The sinners are beset by monsters, devils, skeletons and carnival revellers. A number of these scenes take place in a 'domestic environment' so as to indicate that depravity is a part of everyday life. Along with an illustration of each Deadly Sin, the album contains a frontispiece where the Deadly Sins are dominated by a winged skeleton. The artist was to repeat the image of this etching some years later in a painting.

### Religious subjects

The imagery of Ensor's religious pieces is strongly reminiscent of Rembrandt's work, on which they were frequently based. Ensor made several copies of etchings by the 17<sup>th</sup> century master. In Ensor's first etching *Christ mocked* (1886), the Eastern figures and dramatic lighting are particularly suggestive of the work of Rembrandt. However, Ensor dealt with religious themes in a highly individual way. He depicted Christ naked whereas traditionally he appears to the people in a purple cloak and the crown of thorns. Ensor was to identify with the Christ figure in his later prints.

Apart from Rembrandt, Ensor also copied the work of other artists. This individual copying of existing work is described as a 're-creation process'. Through Ensor's interpretation, it is sometimes virtually impossible to discern the original source.