

Dadaist phase. Together with Kurt Schwitters he organised a sensational Dada in Holland travelling exhibition, showing work by leading Dadaists from the Swiss and German phases as well as the Parisian one. The latter city would become the most important centre of Van Doesburg's activities in the final phase of his life. During that period he was mainly concerned with architecture. A late high point in his work, and in the exhibition, is his plans for, and very concrete contributions to, the Aubette Building renovation project in Strasbourg, which he was invited to join by Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Taut but dynamic – *De Stijl* at its very best.

Right up to the end of his life Van Doesburg continued to try to form new groups that would be as influential as *De Stijl*. But his dogmatic image really did not help him in this. When he realised in the early thirties that modern art needed more breathing-space, he tried to launch the Abstraction-Création group with, among others, Arp, Giacometti and the *Stijl* protagonists – now restored to favour – Mondriaan and Vantongerloo. A month after the formation of the group Van Doesburg died of a heart attack. He had not changed the world, but his artistic fingerprint is still to be seen today, looking as fresh and sharp as ever.

Geert Buelens

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Gladys Fabre & Doris Wintgens Hötte (eds), *Van Doesburg & The International Avant-Garde. Constructing a New World*, Tate Publishing, London, 2009.

Book to accompany the exhibition with the same title, Tate Modern, London, 4 February-16 May 2010.

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James Ensor

A New Catalogue of the Paintings

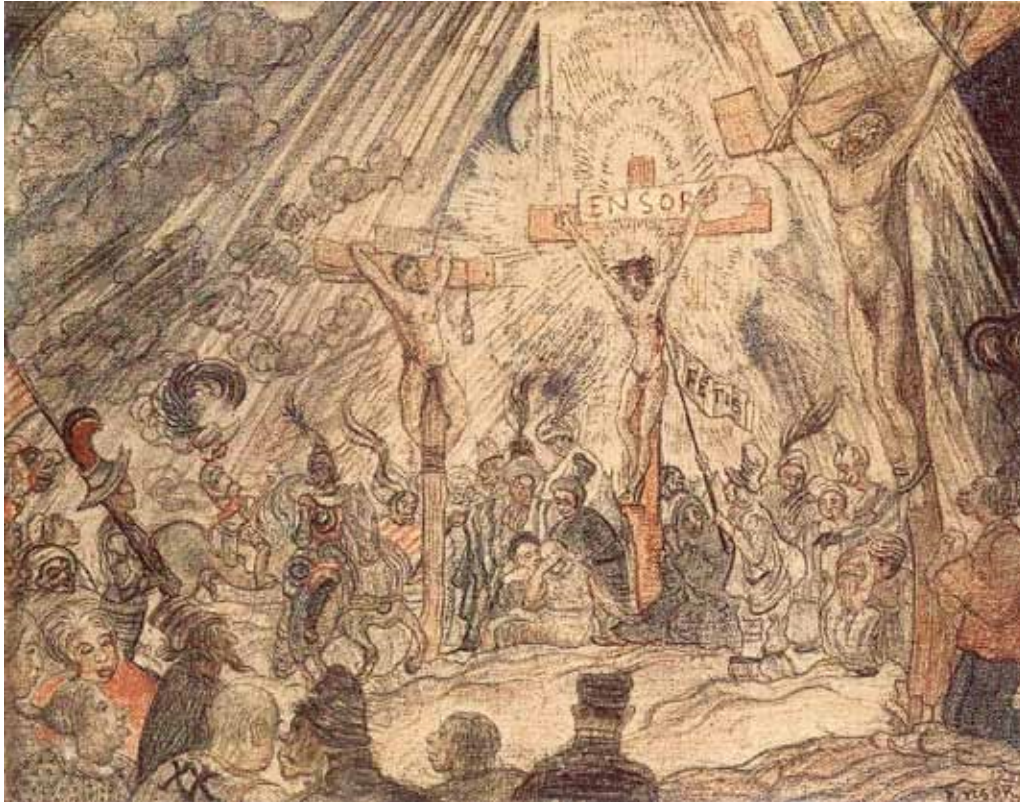
Modern art has no frontiers any more. Down with glowering curmudgeons, selfish, syrupy cheese-makers... Long live art that's free, free, free.

James Ensor, 1900

James Ensor (1860-1949) is one of the most influential and admired artists in the history of modern art. In the two final, fertile, decades of the nineteenth century – the period that coincided with the rise of the Post-Impressionist and Symbolist movements – Ensor was one of the most experimental artists working anywhere in Europe. With one eye turned to the “Old Master” traditions of Flanders and Holland, and the other probing contemporary social mores and popular culture, Ensor created a body of work that broke new ground. His best-known works, from the mid-1880s onward, transmogrify caricature and other forms of popular culture into images of skeletons, masked figures, and religious scenes intertwined with contemporary politics, all rendered in hyper-charged, luxuriantly textured paint. Merging the lurid and the sublime, his paintings are both hilarious and visually seductive. Major retrospective exhibitions of his work in Belgium, Germany, France, and the United States have recently underscored his reputation as a master of technique, social criticism and visionary invention.

For these reasons – Ensor's fame, influence, contemporary resonance and social topicality – the new systematic catalogue of his paintings by Xavier Tricot is most welcome. Tricot first published a two-volume catalogue raisonné of Ensor's painting in 1992, illustrated almost entirely in murky black-and-white.¹ This new one-volume catalogue raisonné is illustrated largely in colour. Although many of the illustrations are diminutive – there are as many as seven to a page – they offer exponentially better references than those in the previous catalogue.

The new book is divided into three parts: a chronology, the catalogue of works, and a reference section. Tricot's most ambitious revision of the 1992 catalogue is a detailed introductory chronology en-



James Ensor, *Calvaire*, 1886.
Crayon in different colours on paper,
172 x 222 mm. Private Collection.

titled 'Biography.' This dense year-by-year account of Ensor's life and career runs to some 200 pages and is copiously illustrated with documentary photographs and full-page (and double-page) colour reproductions of his best-known paintings. The chronology also incorporates lengthy quotations from contemporary criticism and Ensor's own correspondence and other writings, drawn from Tricot's previous compilations of Ensor's work.² Such a narrative is well beyond the scope of most comparable publications.

The catalogue section provides reference photographs and basic information about each of the 857 paintings (physical data, date, lightly revised exhibition

and bibliographic details, provenance, and any notable circumstances). Tricot collaborated with Ensor specialists Robert Hoozee, Herwig Todts, and Sabine Bown-Taevernier who formed a committee to authenticate works by the artist. The new catalogue raisonné therefore benefits from a revised version of the attributions offered in the 1992 volumes (838 paintings).

The reference section that follows comprises lists of solo and group exhibitions, a list of the paintings' original titles (information already incorporated in the catalogue entries), a bibliography, separate indices to the French and the English titles, and a concordance of the present and 1992 editions. Ensor scholars would have benefited from one further inclusion: between 1929 and 1942 Ensor maintained a catalogue of his later work that he illustrated with small drawings in coloured pencil, crayon, and other media, which is

James Ensor, *Les masques scandalisés*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 135 x 112 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.



now in the Art Institute of Chicago. The reproduction of the notebook pages, with Ensor's sketches of his own paintings, would have been a salutary addition to this volume. However, about three dozen of these small sketches do appear in the catalogue to illustrate paintings for which no black-and-white illustrations could be located (explanation p. 215). Without clear reminders, the casual reader of this catalogue raisonné might confuse the tiny coloured pencil sketches, which Ensor made as reference tools, with the works in oils that they summarise. The systematic reproduction of Ensor's notebook will have to wait for a catalogue raisonné of his drawings. Users of the current catalogue should be on the lookout for the substitution of drawings for painted works from the 1930s.

James Ensor has been the subject of a vast, romanticised art-historical literature. He was born into

a Flemish family that operated curio shops in Ostend containing the stuff of his artistic imagination, in his words: 'sea shells, lace, rare fish stuffed, old books, prints, weapons, Chinese porcelain, an inextricable muddle of heteroclitic objects continually upended by several cats, parrots with deafening cries, and a monkey...' (p. 14). Because he spent much of his life in his hometown of Ostend and never married, he is frequently characterised as a reclusive outsider. In Ensor's time, however, Ostend was a thriving cosmopolitan seaport, commercial hub, and tourist destination. As the artist's correspondence attests, and as embedded in Tricot's biographical chronology, he both maintained a large social network and covered his tracks through his own mythologising.

A contrary spirit and a prankster, Baron James Ensor offered quips, riddles, and ribaldry to shape his

reception and legacy. He began to paint as an adolescent, receiving private instruction from what he termed 'oily, pickled, old Ostend painters' (p. 15). Between 1877 and 1880 he studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, which he later described as a stultifying institution against which he could rebel. Ensor also copied reproductions of works by 'old masters' such as Rembrandt, Jan Steen, and Eugène Delacroix. The self-mythologising Ensor nevertheless stated in his later writings that he was innocent of inspiration from other artists: 'I evolve freely and not exposed to influences, I ignore the great Gallic schools, the Frankish, the German, the shabby, the Photo-specific, and the success of the painters of the moment from the land of madness.'³

A painter of accomplished if traditional landscape and genre scenes in the 1870s, Ensor began to render light as a palpable substance in his landscapes of the 1880s. Beginning in the mid-1880s, he created paintings and drawings of extraordinary originality, piquant humor, and philosophical insight. At the same time, he became a founding member of the progressive artists' society *Les Vingt*. His best-known work, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* (1888; illustration), with its vortex-like structure and legions of masked figures, is without peer in its ambitions toward a new language and politics of painting at the cusp of the 1890s.

In 1886, Ensor took up printmaking and stated, in that year, '...thanks to lady engraving, I pick up my palette with fine aplomb and fresh, pure color dominates me once more.' (p. 68). It is, of course, beyond the scope of Tricot's catalogue to incorporate prints or drawings. However, by Ensor's own testimony, his hetero-dexterity with media nourished his painting.⁴ To elucidate this point, Tricot might have substituted some of Ensor's most important drawings and prints for the full- and sometimes double-page colour plates of the paintings accompanying the chronology (already reproduced in the catalogue section). By reducing the number of full-page colour plates in the chronology (some of which lack adequate colour correction), the single-volume catalogue might have accommodated larger illustrations for the painting entries.

In his later years Ensor was equally productive, if less inventive. However, when considering his own

work to be included in an exhibition in 1908, Ensor wrote, 'Some of my works of 28 years ago seem very modern, these works can stand any neighbors without ill effect, even very recent creations by our innovators of today...' (p. 164). Tricot's indispensable catalogue confirms that, one hundred years later, the works, and the artist, maintain their audacity.

Patricia G. Berman

Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor: The Complete Paintings*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009.

NOTES

1. Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor; Catalogue Raisonné of the Painting*, Antwerp: Pandora Publishers, 1992 [trans. Jenny Martin and Louise Rogers], v. 1: 1877-1902; v. 2: 1902-1941.
2. Tricot is the author of, among others, *Ensoriana* (a volume of criticism and interpretation, Ostend, 1985), and *James Ensor, lettres* (collection of correspondence; Brussels, 1999).
3. James Ensor, 'Discours (2me) de Monsieur le baron James Ensor,' [1935] in *Ensor, Mes écrits*, Liege: Editions nationales, 1974, 224.
4. See for example M. Catherine de Zegher, ed. *Between Street and Mirror: The Drawings of James Ensor* (exh. cat.), New York: The Drawing Center, 2001; and Anna Swinbourne, ed., *James Ensor*, (exh. cat.), New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.