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James Ensor and *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* in Context: Interpretive and Anticipatory Dialogues

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Abstract

James Ensor's work as a painter materialized both a physical and proverbial departure from contemporary schools of late nineteenth century painting. Ensor (1860-1949) extended his brush into the unfounded aesthetic territories of explosive brushwork and patchy colors, while he simultaneously analyzed the morality of Belgium politics, the Catholic Church, the bourgeois, and the art establishment. This study seeks to formally and ideologically contextualize Ensor's life and his 1888 masterpiece *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, and, in doing so, extrapolate Ensor's influence on the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century. A pictorial and aesthetic kinship is deduced between Ensor and early Expressionism, while his satirical contemplations of morality and Belgium's sociopolitical system are prevailing tendencies inherent to Dada and New Objectivity.

1. Introduction and Context

James Ensor once said of himself: "I think that, as a painter, I am beyond classification."[1] Existing in a sphere attached to no particular school of painting, Ensor developed a painterly prose so austere, so original, that the Belgian artist has been considered an anticipatory figure in the development of modernist movements of the early twentieth century.

Born James Sidney Edouard Ensor in Ostend, Belgium in 1860, the artist lived and worked in his native city for the majority of his life, leaving only for school in his youth and later in life for exhibitions.[2] Though Ensor's work has now been extensively studied and reevaluated, the artist's career success—at least in the first half of his life—was subject to a harsh, critical reality, filled with rejection and misunderstanding. His brimful, heavily symbolic canvases are filled with swathes of contemplative religious, political, social, and aesthetic criticisms and are amalgamated with spontaneous brushwork and unorthodox applications of patched colors. Such transgressions, avant garde in the most literal sense of the term, were deemed unpalatable by European artists, collectors, and critics in the late nineteenth century.[3]

Whether attacking contemporary painting conventions or satirically depicting a Belgian politician as a gluttonous reveler faced with a grotesque mask, Ensor did not shy away from transcribing his own provocative articulations onto the canvas. The manifestation of such aesthetic rousing, nearly anarchistic, characteristics are most elaborately consummate in Ensor's seminal work, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, 1888 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* 1888. Oil on canvas, 252.7 cm × 430.5 cm. The Getty Center, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/811/james-ensor-christ's-entry-into-brussels-in-1889-belgian-1888/

Ensor's most audacious and significant painting illustrates a teeming, chaotic Mardi Gras parade marching down a grand Brussels boulevard, crowned under an inscribed large red banner exclaiming: "Vive la sociale," or, "long live the social."[4] The processional crowd, extending from the farthest reaches of the upper right corner to the entire bottom edge of the canvas, is introduced by masked and caricatured persons aggressively proceeding toward the viewer in the foreground. In the near background, just past a Belgian military marching band and in the center of the canvas, a donkey-astride Jesus Christ—a self portrait of Ensor himself—follows after the large, punctuated crowd of masks with sparse companionship or attention. Ensor's messianic figure is followed by a crowd that fades into infinity in the top right corner of the canvas.[5]

Noted art historians Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Hanson in their 1984 monograph *19th Century Art* refer to *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* as "an astonishing assault on any conventions of beauty."[6] Riotous, coruscating colors from dense, frenetically applied paint in the foreground mob is juxtaposed by the sparse, comparatively tame and organized collective of paraders-turned-dissolving-dots which vanish into the infinite collapse of the top right corner of the canvas. A calamitous relationship between foreground and background, only exacerbated by a spectator-filled platform on the lower right and the crowded balconies bordering left of the processional crowd, provides a confused composition that maintains no formal unity. Delineated light, accomplished through vigorously loose yet calculated brushwork, is amplified by vibrating pure colors. The painting, standing roughly 8' x 14', is full of symbols. Allusions to Ensor's family, to painterly contemporaries, to Pointillism, to politicians and political ideologies, to the Church, and to the nature of individual identity. Semiotics aside, however potentially clear in appearance, Ensor perhaps confounds these symbols to capture the chaos of society; that is, the spectacle of society. All at once humorous, sinister, dreamlike, and unapologetically intelligent, *Christ's Entry*, full of contradictions and confrontations, is the paramount exemplar of Ensor and his influential aesthetic vocabulary.

Contemporary cultural theorist and critic Stefan Jonsson supposed in 2001 that, "while [*Christ's Entry*] is one of modernism's most important achievements, it is also one of its least understood."[7] Much to Jonsson's point, and while considering both *Christ's Entry* and Ensor's great originality in the context of the modern art historical canon, interpretations of their influence suffer from a similar type of misunderstanding. Within *Christ's Entry* lives both Ensor's decidedly personal and expressive aesthetic tendencies as well as his sardonic sociopolitical contemplations, yet these conventions have been most typically conflated in terms of scholarship.[8] It is upon further analysis of Ensor's work and most critically of *Christ's Entry*, while also keeping in mind succeeding modernist movements, that Ensor's

influences can be understood in two specific capacities. The first is the aesthetic and figurative kinship between Ensor and the beginnings of Expressionist painting of the early twentieth century. The second is a radical, ideological language of sociopolitical and moral criticism, born first in *Christ's Entry* and then later in the more politically motivated movements Dada and New Objectivity. It is impossible, however, to distinguish these influential apparatuses without contextualizing the Belgian artist's life as it relates to his work. Ensor's life, and its interrelatedness to his work, is imperative to understanding *Christ's Entry*, and further its and Ensor's influences.

2. Ensor: Life and Context

James Sidney Edouard Ensor was born on April 13, 1860, to Maria-Catherina Haegheman and James Frederic Ensor. His came from an upper-middle class British household—whose nationality the son James held until he sought Belgian naturalization in 1929—while his mother was born in Ostend to a working class family. Ensor, the father, a polymath in his own right, was educated in both London and Bonn in the fields of medicine and engineering, and was also a talented multilingual musician. Ensor was raised by lace traders who were never formally educated and struggled to provide for the family. Haegheman later owned and operated a nostalgia shop with her sister, carrying an array of carnival masks, souvenirs, costumes, seashells, and other novelties—objects that would appear later in Ensor's paintings. Once married in Ostend, the father failed in his professional life and fell victim to abusive alcoholism, spending little time in the shop and instead drinking in local cafes. Their son lived and maintained a studio practice in for the entirety of his life.[9]

The young James Ensor helped operate the shop with his mother, aunt, sister, and grandmother while the father was largely absent. It was not until Ensor's frustration in primary school, plagued by poor grades, that a significant relationship was established between the father and son. Recognizing his son's artistic enthusiasm and talent, the father organized drawing lessons for his eleven-year-old son in 1871 with several local artists, including the locally renowned Ostend caricature artist, Edouard Dubar.[10] Ensor's father was, at this point, a notorious Ostend drunk who remained largely out of work. However, the father's family inheritance afforded a private arts education for a sixteen-year-old Ensor, who was enrolled in the Ostend Academy in 1876. It is important to note here, for the purpose of symbolic representation in his work, that Ensor's father would prove to be the only family member supportive of his son's artistic aspirations.[11]

The following year, Ensor enrolled at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where he studied for three years. It has been speculated that, while in Brussels, Ensor's intellectual curiosity blossomed, studying alongside the likes of Théo Hannon, Fernand Khnopff, and Willy Finch. During this time, Ensor is introduced to the anarcho-communist theories of geographer Elisée Reclus, which would prove not only to be formative in the sense of Ensor's later support of Belgium's socialist uprising in the decade that followed,[12] but also subjectively central to Ensor's cultural logic found in his later work—consummate in *Christ's Entry*.[13] While social and intellectual developments were enjoyed by Ensor, his attitudes towards the traditional doctrines of the Académie were not so enthusiastic. Later reflecting on his education, Ensor noted:

> I was forced to paint from a colorless plaster cast of a bust of Octavian, the grandest of all Caesars … I painted it a pink, chicken-meat color and the hair reddish yellow, to the amusement of the students – an amusement that brought furrowed brows and harassment in its wake. Finally the irate professors capitulated in face of my audacity. From that point on they let go my own way, and I was able to paint from live models.[14]

Ensor lasted just over two years at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts, whereafter he moved back to Ostend and transformed the attic of his family's souvenir shop into a studio.[15]

Upon his return home, Ensor began to paint his self-perceived mundane surroundings, as evinced in *Afternoon in Ostend*, 1880 (Fig. 2), among others.

Fig. 2 James Ensor, *Afternoon in Ostend* 1880. Oil on canvas. 132 cm x 108.5 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, Antwerp. https://www.kmska.be/en/collectie/highlights/NamiddagInOostende.html

The artist's sister and mother are depicted in a bourgeois salon, almost apathetically, yet introspectively, looking away from each other over tea. Dark browns, reds and greens consume the dimly lit, pseudo-Impressionist canvas, inferring disinterest on behalf of both the painter and his subjects. Shifty light emitted from a window on the right edge of the canvas seeps past the seated figures into a muddy, dull impasse of color and subject—exemplary of Ensor's early style, and insofar the marker of the Belgian moving away from public, passive bourgeois imagery and towards that of pictorial private introspection.

Ensor traveled back to Brussels in relative frequency, perhaps in spite of his lackluster home, in the few years following his time at the Académie to visit friends, including physicist and radical intellectual Ernst Rousseau, his wife Mariette Rousseau, and their son Ernst Rousseau Jr.[16] Besides time at the Académie and the select few trips to Brussels thereafter, with later trips abroad to view his own retrospective exhibitions, James Ensor lived in Ostend for the entirety of his life.[17] Not only did he remain in Ostend, he maintained his family's shop and residence as home and office. It should be noted, however, that Ensor moved directly across the street from his family home in 1917, where he would remain until his death in 1949.[18]

In 1883, after Ensor re-established himself in Ostend, he formed the avant-garde collective *Les XX* or *Les Vignt (The Twenty)*, with contemporaries Willy Finch and Fernand Khnopff, from which he would later be expelled.[19] The eleven founding artists shared a common conviction: to advance and promote progressiveness through artistic revolution.[20] Foundational amongst these original members was also a collective veneration for anarcho-communism.[21] This affinity developed into fervent support of Belgian socialism. As Stefan Jonsson understands, the avant garde group rejected Belgium's "authoritarian constitutional monarchy, [the] liberal industrial bourgeoisie notorious for its hostility to art and thinking, and a church that controlled the system of education all the way up to the university."[22]

Moreover, *Les XX* was overseen and partially organized by Octave Maus, a lawyer and art critic, who assumed the role of secretary.[23] Exhibitions organized and curated by *Les XX* featured the founding members of the group as well as vanguard artists Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet, Henri Tououse-Lautrec, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Vincent van Gogh. Concerts, lectures and discussions were as integral to the exhibitions as the painters and paintings themselves.[24] *L'Art Moderne*, a journal founded by Maus and *Lex XX* affiliated writer and art promoter Edmond Picard in 1881, was the group's promotional vehicle for their arts and radical leftist political ideas.[25]

Due to a divergence in artistic agreement, in confluence with the rising popularity and success of Belgian socialism, *Les XX* dissolved after only ten years of existence. Partially responsible for this schism was Octave Maus' advocacy for the formation of new groups to advance the avant-garde and to avoid stagnation.[26] Maus also began to move the group away from the once Belgian provinciality of *Les XX's* origin towards an international outlook, insofar as championing French artists like Seurat.[27] Ensor's tenure as member of the group was subject to rejection, a near complete lack of critical appreciation or tolerance, and virtually no commercial success.[28] Though heavily involved in the theoretical membrane of the groups' repertory, images exhibited by Ensor in the various *Les XX* salons were seldom received favorably. Deemed hysterically radical by both critics and members of the group for their pictorial grotesqueness and a near complete assault on conventions of aesthetic order, Ensor and his works were eventually ostracized from *Les XX*.[29] Eugène Demolder, a friend of Ensor, described his disposition in 1892: "[Ensor] is one of those fellows who possesses such great originality that the crowd cries out in disgust in front of his works, like a hungry pack of dogs howling at the moon."[30] In this context, and with the help of words from Thomas Hobbes, "man is a wolf to men."[31]

Georges Seurat's 1886 canvas *An Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (Fig. 3)—almost certainly the preeminent example of Pointillism—was exhibited at the 1888 *Les XX Salon*, much to the chagrin of Ensor's place in the group. The tightly dotted canvas was rendered an overnight masterpiece by *Les XX*, due in part to its technical separation from the Impressionist and Realist schools, but more specifically for solidifying Pointillism as a new material precedent in European art.[32] While Seurat was deemed by Maus as the "Messiah of the New Art," Ensor did not have any work shown at this salon until two weeks after its opening.[33] This further isolated Ensor in the fringes of his own collective, and would greatly inform the reactionary conception of *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*.[34] As Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight in 2009 would infer, Ensor was the "anti-Seurat."[35]

Fig. 3 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* 1884-1886. Oil on canvas. 207.5 × 308.1 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
https://www.artic.edu/artworks/27992/a-sunday-on-la-grande-jatte-1884

La Libre Esthétique followed *Les XX*, a new avant-garde exhibiting collective, which carried with it the intrinsic ethos of *Les XX* and a nearly intact roster, albeit without James Ensor— he opposed the termination and re-establishment of the existing group. Ensor understood this affair as a betrayal, as drawn clearly from a letter written

to Octave Maus in 1886: "You defend Knopff so firmly. Solid bonds of friendship, presumably of a familiar kind, apparently unite you with [Knopff]… The future will decide and accord to each the place he deserves… I have confidence in myself; the successes of others do not trouble me."[36] Nonetheless, he did exhibit with the newly formed *La Libre Esthétique*, only to be treated with the same criticism and rejection as experienced previously.[37]

The latter half of Ensor's *Les XX* years can be characterized in part by financial hardship, critical misunderstanding, rejection, and perhaps mental instability—aligned with Ensor's success, or lack thereof. These tribulations must be considered when contextualizing the satirically charged, pessimistic, and dark modes of work produced by Ensor around this time.[38]

As observed by Susan M. Canning, art historian and professor of art history at The College of New Rochelle, Ensor relied heavily on the use of scatalogical imagery in both paintings and etchings during this period to co-opt his "anarchistic anti-authoritarianism and criticism of contemporary Belgian society."[39] Fecal representation aside (to be discussed later), Ensor sought to list his studio and its entire body of work for sale in exchange for just a few thousand francs as per the severity of his financial straits. He did not find a buyer, thus the sale was unsuccessful.[40]

The year 1895, however, marked something, if just a modest beginning, of success for the Ensor and his work: the 1880 canvas *The Lamplighter* (Fig. 4), with an assortment of drawings and etchings, was sold to the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels; and he staged a first solo exhibition, curated by Eugène Demolder, in Brussels. Four years later, the Paris-based avant-garde art journal *La Plume* dedicated an entire issue to him.[41] In 1904, Ensor began to establish himself both financially and critically when Emma Lambotte, an author, bought several works and coincidentally exposed him to new admirers, including François Franck. Franck, an Antwerp businessman and art patron, bought and collected many of Ensor's paintings and, thus furthering the exposure of Ensor's work.[42]

Fig. 4 James Ensor, *The Lamplighter* 1880. Oil on canvas. 151.5 cm x 91 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=58623

The rest of James Ensor's life was quiet—with the exception of refusing to leave Ostend during both World Wars, and being arrested in the process for publicly insulting Kaiser Wilhelm II—as he largely did not paint. Instead Ensor focused on writing, lecturing, composing, and local piano and harmonium performances. Celebrated retrospectives in Antwerp, Brussels, Paris, Hanover, Berlin, and London would take place between 1920 and 1946. Ensor was named a Knight of the Order of Leopold in 1903; in 1929 he was bestowed the title of Baron by King Albert; in 1931 a monumental statue of the artist was erected in Ostend; in 1933 he was named to the Legion of Honor. James Sidney Edouard, Baron Ensor, died on November 19, 1949.[43]

It is perhaps redundant at this point to suggest that the life and work of James Ensor operated symbiotically, but worthy of consideration in this survey. Considering accounts from contemporaries and biographers alike, Ensor's character and temperament can be identified within his body of work: an aggressive, confrontational, sarcastic, erratic, insecure, distrustful, obsessive and reactionary individual fascinated by the pictorial grotesque.[44] His canvases are imbued with self-indulgence and social criticism his canvases, as most assertively and perhaps chaotically announced in *Christ's Entry*. Ensor here confronts several internal and external conflicts. Abandonment and rejection from *Les XX* is declared through formal *ad hominem* attacks on Seurat and Pointillism, while the artist himself—the messianic, donkey-astride figure—is ignored. However, the previous notion can here be considered a traditional, typical interpretation of *Christ's Entry* of the latter half of the twentieth century. Stefan Jonsson, in his 2001 *Representations* journal "Society Degree Zero," perhaps the most important Ensor scholarship of this century, suggests that Ensor's Christ is "part holy sage, part village idiot, and part union organizer."[45] Much as Ensor's Christ had near completely been interpreted as a portrait of Ensor himself as a tragic hero prior to Jonsson in 2001, the way in which *Christ's Entry* is investigated and contemplated must consider Ensor's life and its Belgian context; insofar as the personality and historical impetus of the work must be both conflated and separated, just as with the aesthetic and ideological functions.

3. Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889

James Ensor's 1888 masterpiece *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, simply stated, is a deeply nuanced and difficult painting. It is both an antedated, anticipatory history painting as well as a personal mural. It contains no formal unity, yet is somehow tied together by orbital ideas that share no distinct nucleus. It is a modernist *cause célèbre*, a psychological portrait and a political portrait; a proclamation of internal and external conflict. Before further interpreting the near infinite conceptual possibilities within *Christ's Entry*, it is first critical to understand, or merely attempt to understand, the functional and formal components of the picture.

Ensor's *Christ's Entry* is a *fin de siècle* portrait of Belgium's urban society. Brimful both in a visually literal sense and in terms of its cultural, historical, and political implications, the extraordinarily detailed image tells the story of a processional Mardis Gras carnival parade in 1889, posterior to Ensor's contemporary Belgium of 1888 when the work was executed. The composition of the work, largely controlled by the procession, can initially be identified in two parts: first, the foreground's sea of grotesque masks and faces to which the viewer's eye is initially drawn; and second, the fleeting background mass of the canvas' upper half, focussed on Christ in almost the exact center, that vanishes into the background towards the upper center-right of the picture.

The foreground crowd, imposing and dense, is composed of patchy applications of almost entirely unmixed pure and chromatic pigments.[46] Contrasting pink faces, red hats, gowns and noses, blue suits, gold hair, black cloth, and green accents are rendered protrusive artifacts left by thick and gestural applications of paint. Ensor's processes of applying paint, it should be noted here, were accomplished through employing brushes, palette knives, kitchen knives, his own fingertips, paint tube openings, and cloth.[47] A corpulent bishop in the bottom, exact middle-center of the picture, leads the crowd, who Jonsson has identified as late-nineteenth century public intellectual and socialist reformist Emile Littré. This mob, it should be noted, is decidedly filled with bourgeois sensibilities that will be more formally espoused later in this study.[48] Immediately following the initial processional mass is the military band, which, for the purpose of coherence, can be considered a part of the greater foreground mob. The masks and faces of these foreground figures, gazing in opposing directions along this horizontal plane of the mob, do not maintain the same degree of contrast as the colors in which they are painted. Instead, the masks and faces are lumped together as if they are one in the same—again, for the purpose of clarity, Ensor's masks will be contextualized in greater detail in a forthcoming segment of this study.

The background scene, a transmuted extension of the diagonal procession beginning in the foreground, is set in by the heterodoxical organization around Ensor's Christ figure. The haloed Christ, surrounded immediately by one of the picture's only recognizable points of open ground, is encircled by a sparse group of masked revelers over pink ground. The frontal, lower portion of this circular huddle around Christ maintains masked figures seemingly in reverence to

the messianic presence before them, while the upper portion behind Christ is the last group of discernable bodies before the procession fades into a sea of infinite painted dots. As the crowd vanishes into increasingly smaller dots of paint, bordered and guided by the boulevard's facades on either side, only observable are the flags and ribbons poking out of the collapsing space.

Aside from the great diagonal axis synchronic with the procession and the foreground, the scenes on either side of the lower mob create another axial convention; this time, again, horizontal. The right-adjacent green platform of the center-right accommodates four figures, immediately to the right of an elevated, vertically oriented Belgian flag. The leftmost three figures, two of whom masked, gaze past the crowd below towards the opposite side of the procession. Seemingly, their line of sight is fixated on a host of placards that line the middle-left border of the procession. Only one inscribed placard amongst the horde remains legible, which reads *Fanfares Doctrinaires Toujours Réussi*, or, "Doctrinaire Fanfares Always Succeed" —the other placards were originally inscribed, but later covered by Ensor.[49] This horizontal plane is further accentuated by the corresponding vivacious green pigment of the platform and the semi-rectangular block directly above the heads of the platform's standing figures, which maintains the same green pigment. Between the patches of green and behind the onlooking figures lies a symmetrical, rectangular patch of electric pink gestural strokes. The convergence of the green and pink shapes then provide right angles, and, by turn create a horizontal axis that extends perfectly leftward across the canvas. At the center of this plane is the Messiah and his donkey.

As theorized by Jonsson, the perspectives in *Christ's Entry* distinguish its pictorial conventions: a bourgeois crowd and spectacle of power in the foreground; worker's demonstration in the collapsing background of the procession; and Christ's Passion in the center.[50]

4. Styles and Subjects

In its entirety, James Ensor's body of work is overwhelmingly disjunctive; that is, it lacks a single concrete style or technical aesthetic. From roughly 1880 to 1900, the artist's range of subjects and styles can be identified most accurately. The subjective themes of the carnival as spectacle, deliberate mockery of other artists and styles, biblical allegories, sociopolitical and socioeconomic critiques are all presented. Formally, the delineation of light through shaky line, grotesque applications of paint, conflicting mixes of soft and hard gestures, dense and sparse planes of space, and bright, unmixed and contrasting pigments generally constitute Ensor's style.[51] However, it is in the mask and the caricature that Ensor's styles and subjects are conflated, and yet exist as separate conventions simultaneously.

4.1 The Mask

Analysis of these subjects and styles must begin with the most informative to look to the ever-present mask; the ubiquitous Ensor motif. Taking many pictorial forms, the masks serve as threat, enemy, lampoon, self, society, humanity, and the unknown. In a very Freudian contextual sense, the masks imbue Ensor's truthful understanding of both his personal and peripheral reality, as opposed to the supposed material values of the physiognomic human face. Literally and subjectively representative as they are, the masks too exemplify Ensor's idiomatic aesthetic language through a decorative element. Discussing the masks, an elderly Ensor noted:

> 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 color, extravagant decoration, wild generous gestures, strident expressions, exquisite turbulence.[52]

The first illustration of the mask is in the 1883 painting *Scandalized Masks* (Fig. 5).[53] Colors here move to dark unmixed blues, reds, greens and yellows in a confrontational scene. A working class bar serves as the setting of this contentious episode between a seated male figure with a carnival mask and a standing female figure, also masked. Art historian Libby Tannenbaum theorized that the two figures are symbolic and representative of the artist's grandmother and father.[54] Those masked are engaged in confrontation, as the female figure on the right waves a stick in the direction of the seated male figure, as he leans towards her. A bottle lies next to the masked man, in what can be deduced as a deeply personal allusion to his father's acute alcoholism.[55] As noted by Robert Rosenblum's 1977 lecture on Ensor at the Guggenheim Museum, the introduction of the mask marks Ensor's departure from mere pictorial introspection of his comparatively tame work before a deeply psychological, supernatural space.[56]

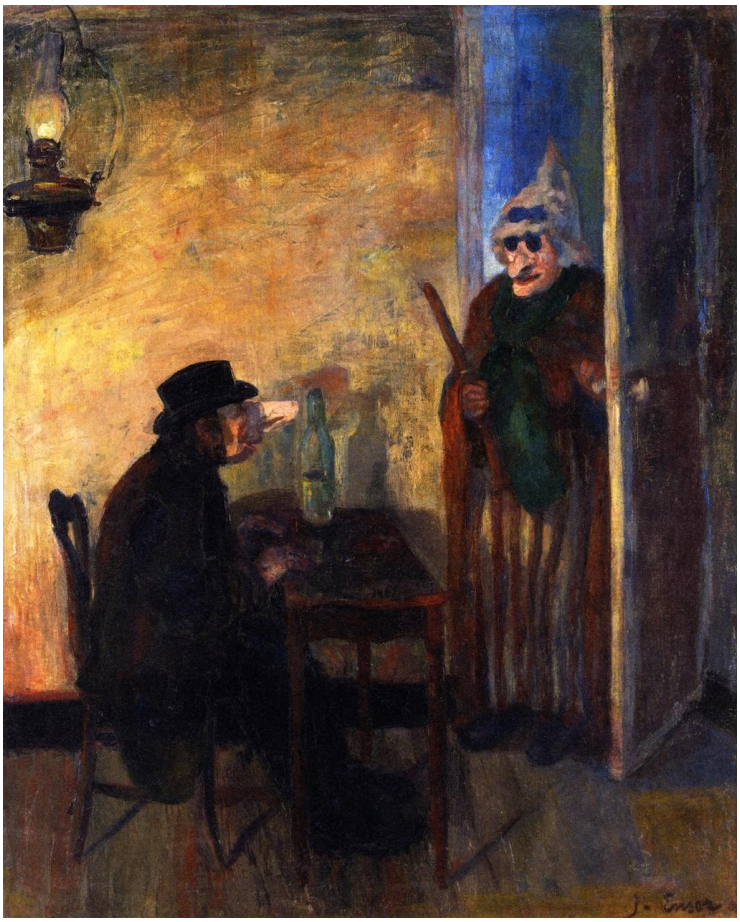

Fig. 5 James Ensor, *The Scandalized Masks*, 1883. Oil on canvas. 135 cm x 112 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=58646

Particular masks in Ensor's paintings can be identified in a broad range of his works—masks were among the most abundant props in the artist's studio, lent mostly from the novelty shop on the ground level of the Ensor's Ostend home below the studio. For example, the mask worn by the female figure in *Scandalized Masks* is found later in the 1889 picture *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* (Fig. 6), where the clarinet playing figure on the lower right of the painting bears the same facial vesture.[57] This exact mask can be identified more than once in the foreground crowd in *Christ's Entry*. The loose strokes of paint that complete Ensor's masks are as illustrative of Ensor's gestural eccentricity as they are of the mask's lack of individual agency.

Fig. 6 James Ensor, *The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* 1889. Oil on canvas. 131 cm x 109 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, Antwerp. https://www.wikiart.org/en/james-ensor/the-astonishment-of-the-mask-wouse-1889

For Berman—much the same as for art historians Rosenblum, Canning and Becks-Malorny—Ensor's masks are elaborately weaponized, and much is this the case in those of *Christ's Entry*. The mask by this standard is a savage, obvious satirical device that parodies and lampoons military leaders and bourgeois decorum. However, beyond their apparently endless objective references, the masks are a deeper, perhaps psychological study of modern human artifice. Ensor suggests in the masks a lack of difference between the mask and the human face; that is, as discussed most elaborately by Jonsson to this date, the masks "fail to appear in their natural guises, for they have none…[the human] identity is in itself a mask, fabricated, wrinkled, and scarred through countless encounters with others."[58] The masks in *Christ's Entry* suggest both a synthesis of one's own agency with the collective agency of the crowd, but they also suggest the complete and total abandonment of individual identity. For example, featured in the center of the picture is General Pontus, head of the Belgian military (Fig. 7) before the military band.

Fig. 7 Detail, James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* 1888. Oil on canvas, 252.7 cm × 430.5 cm. The Getty Center, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/811/james-ensor-christ's-entry-into-brussels-in-1889-belgian-1888/

Although overtly a snide attack on the Belgian, his face maintains the characteristics of other surrounding masks and is rendered indistinguishable. Similarly, the Congolese mask in the lower left side of the composition (Fig. 8) blends into the foreground crowd and is almost drowned in surrounding density. Within the African mask reside two possible contexts: a protest to King Léopold II's contemporaneous colonial expansion into the Congo, the new Congo Free State, or more simply a mask Ensor might've seen at the Universal Exposition in Antwerp three years prior to painting the work.[59] The latter notion is unlikely to be the lone impetus however, as Ensor was certainly privy to media coverage of the West African colonial expansion project. [60] Léopold is not included in *Christ's* Entry, but the overwhelming presence and emphasis on the elite class, Catholic Church, and military found in the foreground crowd bespeaks Léopold's allied brass and the idea of the King's mask; he has no clear identity, and, rather, is an idea.[61]

Fig. 8 Detail, James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* 1888. Oil on canvas, 252.7 cm × 430.5 cm. The Getty Center, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/811/james-ensor-christ's-entry-into-brussels-in-1889-belgian-1888/

Origins of the masks, it should be noted, are conspicuous in that he is a native of Ostend, one of the primary axes of Belgium's storied Flemish carnival tradition. Carnival, the Christian celebratory festival just before Lent, serves as a sort of riotous party before obligatory abstinence.[62] The family shop, as noted previously, sold papier-mâché and harlequin masks and taxidermied animal heads among other novelties, while carnivals attracted the largest clientele. The "Ball of the Dead Rat," the largest of events during Carnival in Ostend, was the amalgamation of masked participants parading the streets.[63] Ensor wrote of the masks worn during Carnival: "[the masks are] clad in tenderness, spiced with prettiness, purple, azure blue, mother-of-pearly, shell-like, oysterish, embossed, striped, turboty, bearded, coddy, floundery, rascally, embued with imagination, they are exuberant to their heart's content."[64]

Carnival and carnivalesque imagery in Ensor's work propose an internal allegory in the context of greater supernatural revelations of the modern, phenomenal world around him; a supernatural and inexplicable time of change. Self-awareness amidst modern urbanity is juxtaposed by the forces of the natural world, reimagining both the crowd scene and the domestic setting.[65] Again contemplating these carnival scenes, Ensor wrote:

> Ah, one must see the masks, beneath our great opal skies, and when they are daubed with cruel colors, they develop, miserable … pitful in the rain, what a lamentable disorder, terrified characters, at the same time insolent and timid, grumbling and yelping, high squeaky voices or raging, macabre animal heads …. I have experienced this and my heart has palpitated and my bones have shaken and I have felt the enormity of the distortions and anticipated the modern spirit; a new world took shape.[66]

To avoid redundancy, it is clear from Ensor's words here that his masks were not conjectural spasms, but rather a means of editorializing and contemplating contemporary urbanity, modernization, materialism; all of which in an increasingly chaotic society free of any organization.

4.2 The Mask, the Caricature

The masks of Ensor function as caricatures. They borrow the aesthetic devices of traditional caricature—exaggeration, distorted space, depth manipulation—and, in *Christ's Entry*, operate within a conceptual macro and overt micro model. Here they operate as a number of greater caricatures, but most apparently so in the foreground mob. Masked by bourgeois sensibilities and the the spectacle of authority and social elitism, the mob is a caricature of duplicity all

around him. Understood generally in Ensor scholarship, the pictorial mask reveals subjective, internal truths through a veil of conceal; it shrouds physical fact and either declares authentic identity or completely strips it away. The caricatures are a metaphorical, moreover metaphysical, and satirical dances of Ensor's own epistemological release.

Nuances of the masks as caricature and narrative driven devices are additionally elicited in the 1890 painting *The Intrigue* (Fig. 9).[67] Confrontational in nature, the image shows a married couple, masked, in the center of the image, surrounded by creeping masked figures. The bride on the left-center hooks her arm around her suitor, bouquet in hand, while the groom, grasped by his bride's hand, looks down to his right at an antagonizing woman, holding a corpse like baby while pointing her finger at him. A moribund presence enters the picture from the far right in a skeletal mask, while the remaining figures either stare closely at the couple or look away with ambivalence. Albeit obscure, the context and intent of this pictorial situation can be attributed to mockery and possibly odium.

Fig. 9 James Ensor *The Intrigue* 1890. Oil on canvas. 90 cm x 149 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, Antwerp. https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/james-ensor-luc-tuymans

Both flat and protruding blues, reds, greens and browns are married with fragmented brushwork, which in confluence delineate light almost entirely. The masks are painted with loose but deliberate strokes, while planes of densely applied paint provide form to bodies and clothing. Ensor's repressed sexuality, as interpreted by Canning, is settled within this supernatural scene.[68] A precarious consideration on behalf of Ensor, *The Intrigue* perhaps speaks to rejection and alienation. As argued by Ensor historian Libby Tannenbaum, the picture examines his sister Mitches's unsuccessful marriage with Chinese-German art dealer Tan Hée Tseu. This theory is uncertain, however, as his sister was not married until 1892, when the painting is dated to 1890. It would be irresponsible, however, to not consider the ambiguous dating of *The Intrigue* as intentional on behalf of the artist.[69]

Alternatively, *Christ's Entry* uses the caricature *to* mask and obscure the collectivity of the crowds in the context of this massive pictorial social narrative. The work technically seeks to blur the lines of genre between a satirical brand of newspaper caricature and historical painting—particularly that of the Northern European tradition of eclectic processional painting—on a larger scale. That is, Ensor parodies Belgian society as he sees it, full of masks and deception in something of a phantasmagorical event: the metaphysical intersection of religion, Belgian politics, identity, and the future.[70] The conflation of religious, social and political discourses into a single image can be articulated as Ensor's ability to understand all environing phenomena.

As understood by Jonsson, the socialists of Belgium—with whom Ensor was affiliated—and contemporaneous with the creation *Christ's Entry*, aspired to achieve similar success to the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871 in the

midst of economic depression and heightened class inequality.[71] While the ruling conservative Catholic Party of the Belgian government was massively unpopular amongst the working class and the avant garde factions alike, and, while the socialists gained popularity both at home and abroad in the midst of global socialist revolt, they collectively likened their political apparatus to the redeeming power of Christ.[72] When a famed progressive march in 1886 left several Belgian workers killed by the Belgian military, Edmond Picard, in a lecture, related the deceased to martyrs.[73]

So, in considering these historical and political contexts, Ensor's Christian symbols in *Christ's Entry* operate broadly as a visual dichotomy, both as a reference to the historically processional and mythical powers of Christian redemption in addition to contemporary events and political ideas. Christ here, then, is a caricature: of revolution, an afterthought following the foreground bourgeois crowd, and a signifier of the interrelatedness of the individual and society.

While Jonsson points out the paradoxically utopian, heterogeneous visual nature within *Christ's Entry* as part of Ensor's effort to tear down all existing conventions of art, society, and self—indeed partially true—he at the same time strips Ensor of his own agency within the work. While it is also true that, according to Jonsson, Ensor in *Christ's Entry* "subverts hierarchies … dissolves identities … [and] violates order," Ensor decidedly places his own identity in the canvas.[74] Considering Ensor's rejection from *Les XX* and as it relates to the green balcony in the upper left of the picture (Fig. 10), inscribed with the *Les XX* logo while also hosting a vomiting spectator, a personal alignment of disdain is recognized.

Fig. 10 Detail, James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* 1888. Oil on canvas, 252.7 cm × 430.5 cm. The Getty Center, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/811/james-ensor-christ's-entry-into-brussels-in-1889-belgian-1888/

In very much the same sense, the dotted reaches of the processional crowd in the upper right almost mimic those of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. These individualized scenes, or caricatures, are entirely Ensor's responses to indignation.

The origins of Ensor's relationship with caricature can be drawn to his training with Ostend caricature artists in his youth, as mentioned previously. Scholars have drawn parallels between Ensor's caricatures the popular "grimaces" of his time, or organized illustrations of faces within the context of a social hierarchy, which depicted human facial features in relation to their corresponding class or social status.[75] These "grimaces" came after a time in which prominent physiognomic scholars Johann Caspar Lavater published *Essays on Physiognomy* in 1778 and Pieter Camper published *Essay on the Natural Varieties that Characterize the Physiognomy of Men* in 1791, which indexed facial features, sometimes zoomorphic in nature, in relation to socioeconomic and ethic identity. "Grimaces" were circulated in mass through newspapers, magazines, and other widely distributed publications beginning in the eighteenth through the twentieth century, analogous to European urbanization and colonial expanse.[76] Evidently,

Ensor's masks are aesthetically and politically influenced by the "grimaces," and particularly to the narrative of the caricatured masks.

Berman points out that some of the facial constructions of Ensor's caricatures, in their grotesque and distorted physicality, were conceivably influenced by contemporary anti-Semitic imagery of late nineteenth century socialist groups. Conflated with growing anti-capitalist attitudes in Europe, especially within the rise of socialism, capitalist Jews were thought to be complicit in the subversion of the working class. As evinced in the writings of *Les XX* affiliate and socialist Edmond Picard in *L'Arte Moderne* editorials and later expanded literary musings, Jewishness was considered a part of "the Social question." Far-left publications additionally featured cartoons critiquing capitalism, with an emphasis on attacking individuals with distorted facial features, stereotypical of Jewishness: large, hook-like noses, low brows, and protruding lips. [77] On the low front center-right of *Christ's Entry*, a face with such stereotyped facial characteristics exists to the right of a distorted face possessing a phallic nose (Fig. 10). Berman notes that these pictorial methods "were conventional signs of contemporary anti-Capitalist critiques throughout Europe."[78]

Fig. 11 Detail, James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* 1888. Oil on canvas, 252.7 cm × 430.5 cm. The Getty Center, Los Angeles. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/811/james-ensor-christ's-entry-into-brussels-in-1889-belgian-1888/

Recalling his painterly Northern forbearers, Ensor's *Christ's Entry* bestows masks tantamount to the caricatures painted by fifteenth and sixteenth century Flemish/Netherlandish masters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Both Bosch (1450-1516) and Bruegel (c. 1525-1569), known for their fantastical, pessimistic and satirical religious and social pictures, were Ensor's sanctified heroes of pictorial revolution – indeed even beyond caricature. Nonetheless, Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, c. 1510-16 (Fig. 12), as noted by Berman, bears similarities to the caricatures in *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*.[79] A sea of grotesque portraits consume Jesus Christ, center, on his way to crucifixion in Bosch's image. One of the grotesque portraits (Fig. 13) in the upper right of Bosch's canvas loans itself to Ensor's grotesque profile of a Jewish man in *Christ's Entry* (Fig. 11). Compositionally, the foreground procession in *Christ's Entry* echoes the stacked and layered portraits of *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Shifted orientations and chaotic, argumentative sub-narratives between figures in both works, along with formal similarities with regard to caricature, suggest that Ensor immersed both the art historical and religious content of Bosch's sixteenth century work and placed it within a contemporary political context in *Christ's Entry*.

Fig. 12 Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross* 1510-16, Oil on panel. 74 cm x 81 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Jheronimus_Bosch_or_follower_001.jpg

Fig. 13 Detail, Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross* 1510-16, Oil on panel. 74 cm x 81 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Jheronimus_Bosch_or_follower_001.jpg

Fig. 16 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Dance* c. 1569. Oil on panel. 114 cm x 164 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b5/Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Peasant_Dance_-_WGA3499.jpg

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Peasant Dance*, c. 1569 (Fig. 17), also informs Ensor's use of caricature and mask to reflect moral sentiments of contemporary society. Although formally distant in terms of aesthetic relationship, the distorted faces and manipulation of space with regard to human proportion seek to contemplate the state of the Dutch/Flemish peasantry. While the crowd of contorted-bodied revelers is induced by the presence of alcohol, a portrait of the Virgin Mary hangs completely neglected on a tree in the upper right part of the image. Bruegel's image abandons piety and rather is altruistic in its approach to displaying the moral compass of Northern European peasantry without fundamental Renaissance idealism. If *The Peasant Dance* is an altruistic caricature of Bruegel's comprehension of his contemporary peasant class, it can be discerned that Ensor's *Christ's Entry* is a caricature of contemporary cosmopolitanism through the eyes, moreover and head and heart, of the artist.

5. Influences

James Ensor's formal and conceptual, precursory visual language can be organized into two categories: the formal, with aesthetic discourse with German Expressionist painter Emil Nolde; while the conceptual pertains to Ensor's theoretical mentorship over Otto Dix and Marcel Duchamp. (in progress)

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