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'Endlessly nuanced dreams'

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James Ensor's "Calvary" (1886), pencil, crayon and oil on paper (© 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SABAM, Brussels)

Art

The last great religious painting of the 19th century was not publicly exhibited until a major retrospective was held for James Ensor at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels in 1929 and King Albert I of Belgium bestowed on him the title of baron.

Ensor?s monumental ?The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889,? which he had completed in 1888 (it is over 8 feet high and 14 feet wide), was at once a contemporary interpretation of Christ entering Jerusalem/Brussels (with Ensor playing Christ), a critique of contemporary Belgian society, and a bawdy depiction of the annual Carnival scene. Irresistible on all three levels, it remains among the greatest socioreligious paintings of the 20th century as well.

Under a large red banner proclaiming his socialist allegiance, the artist groups the master of ceremonies and three clowns on a reviewing stand to the right, a great cluster of multicolored flags to the left, and an immense throng in the center pouring through the streets towards the viewer. Just left of center and deftly highlighted by a field of luminous white, Jesus appears in the middle distance, riding on a donkey behind a marching band before which surges every manner of Brussels dwellers -- a magistrate, a kissing couple, a skeleton wearing a top hat, more clowns, leering older women, witches and roustabouts, folks in contemporary dress and Carnival regalia -- all led by a beefy bishop wielding a baton.

This is indeed modern life painted as a carnival, as we read in the fine catalogue that accompanies the show of some 120 paintings, drawings and prints by Ensor that Anna Swinbourne has organized at New York?s Museum of Modern Art -- the first full overview of the artist in the United States for over 30 years. It remains on view through Sept. 21.

Ensor was born in the fashionable coastal resort town of Ostend, Belgium, in 1860. His father was a refined Englishman whom he adored, as we see in a loving portrait of James Frederic Ensor reading by a window (1881) and then later in a drawing of him on his deathbed (1887). Ensor?s mother?s family owned a souvenir and curiosity shop in the town, where the artist grew up amid a mélange of laces and shells, stuffed animals and masks -- and was fascinated by his eccentric grandmother.

Ensor enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels in 1877 and studied there for the next three years, making several close friends, including Théo Hannon, through whom the young artist met the Rousseau family of Brussels and was welcomed into their intellectual circle. Returning to Ostend in 1880, he set up a studio in the attic of the family shop and remained in the city, apart from visits to Brussels and trips to London, Paris and Holland, for the rest of his life.

Ensor?s early paintings center on domestic scenes, still lifes and Ostend views (with a special sensitivity to the changeable North Sea light). His draftsmanship is assured, the palette quite somber.

Influenced by the realism of Courbet and Manet, he adopted a style known as ?tachiste? (from the French *tacher* , to mark or stain), with heavy paint application, visible brush strokes and rich, earthy tonalities. His early promise is clear in ?A Colorist? (1880), a delicate manifesto in which a young woman painter sits by a window while patches of color seem to sing through the room in the objects around her.

Within a few years Ensor made great strides: a painting of his beloved sister Mitche eating oysters vividly combines portraiture, still life and domestic interior (1882). ?The Red Apples? (1883) evokes Cézanne, and ?The Scandalized Masks? (1883), with its two enigmatic figures confronting each other in an indeterminate room, marks the first appearance of masks in his work.

?The mask means for me,? he wrote, ?freshness of color, sumptuous decoration, wild unexpected gestures, exquisite turbulence.?

In 1883, with a group of friends and fellow students, he cofounded ?Les Vingts? or Les XX, an independent group of artists who exhibited their work before the opening of the official salon. It lasted until 1893, when some of its members, to Ensor?s dismay, declared their allegiance to neo-Impressionism.

His watershed year was 1885, when the painter set to exploring light and its capacity to render intangible and interior reality. In a series of six drawings of episodes from the life of Christ, he discovered that by creating a vibrating drawn line he could suggest light suffusing the material contours of objects. Some of the drawings were enormous, in particular ?The Rising: Christ Shown to the People? and ?The Lively and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem.? The latter has to substitute for ?The Entry into Brussels,? which is in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and never travels.

The style he developed in painting also greatly influenced Ensor?s marvelous drawings and prints. And when both his father and maternal grandmother died in 1887, his world of fantasy became even more macabre. He had used masks to portray archetypical human scenes, as in ?The Intrigue? (1890) or ?The Strange Masks? (1892). Now he added skulls and skeletal figures that gave the traditional vanity theme a fierce new satiric bite -- as in ?Masks Confronting Death? (1888) or ?Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves? (1889).

Just when you think that these stock symbols are running thin, Ensor surprises you with breathtaking landscapes such as the radiant ?Tower of Lissewege? (1890) or ?Christ Calming the Storm? (1891), a swirl of pink and aqua merging into red and blue and then to green, brown and yellow, all gorgeously combining the religious theme, a seascape -- and sheer abstraction.

What is still more likely to sustain your attention throughout the show, though, is the remarkable series of self-portraits in which this master of controlled delusion and willful fantasy presents himself in turn as a dandy affecting the pose of a Rubens, more earnestly in the guise of Albrecht Dürer, urinating against a wall bearing the graffito ?Ensor is a mad man,? crossdressing as a young woman, frequently as a skeleton and, most significantly of all, in a variety of guises as Christ.

Perhaps most compelling is his ?Self-Portrait with Masks? (1899), a beautifully painted but deeply ambiguous picture in which Ensor turns toward us from a sea of masks and painted faces, wearing Rubens? plumed hat again but now defying us to judge between artifice and reality, performance and true personality.

From the turn of the 20th century until his death in 1947, honors came increasingly to this great irreverent individualist. That he painted so little significant work during those years continues to be puzzling.

What the Museum of Modern Art?s haunting show makes startlingly clear is that this visionary by the sea who loved Francisco de Goya and J.M.W. Turner as well as his great countrymen Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel was repaid by achievement worthy to be compared with them.

In a late speech to Belgium?s Royal Academy, he aptly said: ?Driven by often contrasting winds I went in

search of adventure in fabulous lands. This brought me to the delights of horizons populated by endlessly nuanced dreams.?

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