Herwig Todts

Ensor, James Sydney Edouard (b. 1860 Ostend, Belgium – d. 1949 Ostend, Belgium)

Until the outbreak of the First World War James Ensor worked during the summer season in the souvenir shop that his family operated in the Belgian seaside resort of Ostend. Actually his artistic career took place a train ride from home, in Brussels, the political, financial and cultural capital of the country. There he attented from 1877 to 1880 the Academy of Fine Arts, he participated in the exhibitions of Les XX, La Libre Esthétique and the Galérie Georges Giroux. He took part in the cultural life and the nightlife of Brussels and there he met literary friends, artlovers and his mistress Augusta Boogaerts.

Ensor believed that the capital sin of producing aesthetic banality can only be combated successfully by constantly exploring new subject matter, genres, techniques, materials, styles and even artistic disciplines (he wrote articles and composed music). Ensor explored the possibilities of a specific artistic project usually by radicalising an existing model. This desire to experiment with Realism, Symbolism, Impressionism, Rembrandt’s light, the grotesque repertoire of Hiëronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya, the farces of Pieter Brueghel and so on, has produced iconographic and stylistic incoherent drawings and paintings that have a surreal character. Occasionally it seems that he even uses line, form, brush strokes and colour, almost autonomously. Ensor turns his most remarkable discovery, the mask, into an ambiguous motif, usually an instrument of unmasking.

Since the 1960s scholars have investigated the subversive function of Ensor’s combination of social and political satire, religious subject matter and a highly private iconography.

References and further reading

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