

# ENSOR'S ENDURING INFLUENCE



For contemporary artist Allison Schulnik, it was love at first sight. "I think I immediately knew this was one of my favorite paintings of all time. The intricacy and detail is so fascinating. I knew I had never seen anything like it and nothing would ever compare to it."

That painting is James Ensor's masterpiece *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), a cornerstone of the Getty Museum's post-Impressionist collection.

Measuring 8 x 14 feet, the work's massive size makes an arresting impression for visitors entering the gallery. With rude outbursts of raw color and crude, thick accretions of paint, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* holds a satirical mirror up to Belgian society. In the center is Christ, whose face Ensor based on his own, riding a donkey into modern Brussels. Surrounding him is a crowd so caught up in the boulevard's carnival atmosphere that he is barely noticed amidst the parade of characters with garish masks and facial expressions that surge forward to the edge of the canvas.

Jostling inscriptions on banners, placards, and flags imitate the sloganeering of official civic and religious events as well as mass political demonstrations. "VIVE JESUS / ROI DE / BRUXELLES" (Long live Jesus, king of Brussels) strikes the celebratory tone of religious processions and triumphal royal entries, while "VIVE LA SOCIALE" (Long live the Social) refers to the burgeoning socialist and workers' movements of the time. A fierce individualist, Ensor signals his cynical distance from all party politics—and

*Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, 1888, James Ensor. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SABAM, Brussels



Bone China, 2009, Laurie Lipton. Charcoal and pencil on paper. © L.Lipton

from dogmatic thinking in general—through a placard that reads “FANFARES DOCTRINAIRES / TOUJOURS RÉUSSI” (Dogmatic fanfares always succeed).

Through September 7, Ensor’s masterwork will be on view alongside more than one hundred of his paintings, drawings, and prints in the exhibition *The Scandalous Art of James Ensor*, offering a vivid picture of how the artist arrived at the painting that is considered the pinnacle of his career. Even among his Impressionist contemporaries, with whom he was often at odds, Ensor was considered avant-garde. He began his career by working in a conventional, naturalist style, but by the 1880s his work became increasingly satirical, bizarre, and fantastical. *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889* represents an elaborate assembly of scathing social commentary paired with a breakthrough painting style that features grotesque figures in stunning colors.

“To this day, Ensor’s art continues to baffle in its psychological complexity, internal contradictions, and sheer eccentricity,” explained exhibition curator Scott Allan. “In a few short years, a breathtaking trajectory took the artist from academic naturalist to something so biting, defiant, and bizarre that it still defies categorization and eludes rational analysis.”

A decisive moment in Ensor’s career came in 1883 when he became a founding member of Les XX (The Twenty), an association of avant-garde artists. He quickly emerged as the leader of a more radical faction of the group that drew criticism for the stylistic daring of their work. Just as Ensor secured his position as a leader of a new generation of Belgian modernists, he saw his preeminence threatened by a number of competing trends that Les XX was showcasing in its exhibitions—like Georges Seurat’s Neo-Impressionism—and which were

quickly drawing admirers. Abhorring all manner of artistic fads, Ensor jettisoned his earlier naturalism and dramatically changed direction over the course of the mid-to-late 1880s, ultimately resulting in *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889*.

Chief among Ensor’s indictment of the “dogmatic fanfares” that Les XX had started to champion was his disdain for the optical theories and systematic “pointillist” technique of Neo-Impressionism. In *Christ’s Entry into Brussels*, Ensor depicted his contempt by including figures vomiting and defecating over a double X on a balcony. The painting might even be considered Ensor’s defiantly expressionistic riposte to Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884), which Les XX exhibited to much fanfare in 1887. Ensor’s work makes clear his deep pessimism, and his Symbolist approach attacks religion, imperialism, and nationalist pageantry.

### An Artist’s Artist

Long considered an “artist’s artist,” Ensor continues to be admired and studied today by contemporary artists such as Schulnik and Laurie Lipton whose work follows his vision of a topsy-turvy, menacing world. We asked them to tell us about Ensor’s enduring legacy, his influence on their work, and their reactions to *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889*.

Lipton begins by describing how the work reveals its dissonance through careful observation:

“From a distance the painting looks like a childlike carnival in sweet pastel hues. The closer you get, the more the tones begin to clash, the perspective tilts every wrong way, and the people become the stuff of nightmares. Everything is ‘off’ in this picture; the composition, the color, and the crowd. I feel the urge to grab a pencil and correct the unwieldy vanishing points and cockeyed horizon line.”

### The Madness of Crowds

The crowds in the painting are often described as “claustrophobic” and “uncomfortable.” Lipton describes how Ensor elicits these reactions through technique:

“As an artist who is very aware of the technical aspects of creating three-dimensional space on a flat plane, the painting makes me as uncomfortable as a person with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder would be with a framed picture hanging lopsided on the wall,” she explains. “His use of skewed perspective and the feeling that everything is crushed up against the front of the painting gives the viewer the sense of being trampled by the horribly inhuman procession.”

### An Artist in Isolation

Ensor proudly adopted the mantle of defiant outlier and persecuted genius, spending a large part of his life isolated in his studio located above his mother’s novelty shop filled with the macabre masks that were sold for Carnival. Schulnik observes that self-awareness and self-understanding are key, and both are bred through temporary isolation.

“I think connecting with yourself is an important thing for an artist to do. It’s the only way to be authentic, and the only way to ever hope to connect with another human or entire audience for that matter,” she says. “It’s a slippery slope between an artist’s isolation and complete self-absorption, which seems unhealthy. No one said artists were healthy though. Clearly Ensor lived for his work and it shows.”

For Lipton, distance from the world at large can fuel creativity and innovation.

“I think it is necessary for an artist to dig deep within to find their unique vocabulary/iconography. Total immersion in the self and subjectivity

allows for a crazy kind of objectivity about the world around you. You can’t see something clearly if you’re too close to it.”

### Artistic Influence

For Lipton and Schulnik, Ensor was a source of inspiration as they launched their own careers. The proof of Ensor’s influence on Schulnik is in the paint.

“Ensor has been such a huge influence on my work. I’m often, whether consciously or subconsciously, stealing from him. He left such a wealth of ideas and textures to be mesmerized by. His use of unbridled caricature, rebellious satire, and brilliantly exaggerated, at times cartoon-like subjects, are unsurpassed. I am often building upon human frames, but reveling in brushstroke and overly accentuated details, like he did.”

Lipton’s work evokes Ensor’s characters, and she felt a connection to the artist early on. Many of her pieces are direct tributes and responses to Ensor’s work.

“When I first saw Ensor’s work as a teenager, I immediately felt a kinship and knew exactly what he was trying to do. I was struggling to find a method of expressing myself that wasn’t Surrealism or realism. I was trying to express very deeply felt emotions, and Ensor gave me the key to the type of iconography necessary to do so.”

As artists continue to study Ensor’s work, their understanding of him evolves and reveals the work’s contemporary resonance.

“Maybe he was an escapist masked as a political cartoonist, bored with reality, and celebrating a no-holds-barred, wild-man vision,” surmises Schulnik. “But something tells me he was far smarter than myself, and loved exposing truths. Illusion and exaggeration are far more truthful sometimes. I know I’m more comfortable with illusion.”

*This exhibition was co-organized with the Art Institute of Chicago, where it will be on view from November 23, 2014 to January 25, 2015.*



Alison Schulnik surveys the work in her Los Angeles studio.