



James Ensor (Ostend 1860 - Ostend 1949)

The assassination

Circa: 1888

1888

Etching in black on *simili*-Japan paper

17.8 x 23.8 cm (7 x 9 ³/₈ inches)

Signed in plate: J. Ensor / Signed with title and dated in pencil lower left: J Ensor / 1888

The scene shows a man held down on a table by four other in large, feathered hats, as one of them slits his throat. To the right an old woman is leaving the room. In 1886 the writer Iwan Gilkin published his story 'L'assassinat dans un café' in *La Jeune Belgique*, an arts magazine to which Ensor subscribed. In 1887, at the annual exhibition of Lex XX in Brussels, Henry De Groux (1866-1930) showed his painting *The murder*, inspired by the novel *Kees Doorik* by the Belgian writer George Eeckhoud (1854-1927). Ensor knew both painter and novelist personally. In Ensor's work *The murder* becomes a scene of unimaginable horror. A version in oil exists (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, USA, inv. 91.001.014) painted in 1890 and very different from the etching.

No states are known to exist. Only a few rare prints were taken on laid Holland paper and then touched up with water-colour (yellow and red). The plate bears an undated signature in small letters low to the right. (Taevenier, 1973).

Exhibitions

- Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 1998-B-38 (hand-coloured etching).

- New York, MoMa, inv. no. 328.2002.

- New York, MoMa, inv. no. 160.1999 (etching with gouache, colored pencil and crayon additions).

Literature

- Delteil, L., *Le Peintre graveur illustré : H. Les, H. de Braekeleer, J. Ensor*, vol. XIX (Paris: 1925), no. 38 (ill.).

- Croquez, A., *L'Œuvre gravé de James Ensor - Catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Maurice Le Garrec,

1935), no. 38 (ill.).

- Taevenier, A., *Graphic works of James Ensor. Illustrated catalogue of his engravings their critical description and inventory of the plates* (Ghent: Erasmus Ledeborg, 1973), no. 38 (ill.).
- Elesh, J.N., *James Ensor The Complete Graphic Work* (The Illustrated Bartsch, vol. 141) (New York: Abaris Books, 1982), no. 38 (ill.).
- Cooke, L., A. Taevenier et. al., *James Ensor. Etchings from the collection of 'Gemeentekrediet België'* exh. cat. (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1978), 26, no. 31 (ill.).
- Alechinsky, P. e.a., *Ensor*, exh. cat. (Blondé/KMSKB: Wommelgem/Brussels, 1999), 308, no. 319 (ill. of water-coloured etching coll. MSK Ghent inv. 1998-B 56).
- Becker, J. & Hirner, R. C. Ottnad e.a., *James Ensor (1860-1949). Visionär der Moderne*, exh. cat. (Bonn: VG Bild-Kunst, 1999), 133 (ill.).
- Gillis, E., *James Ensor. A collection of Prints* (C. G. Boerner, 2002), 68, no. 33 (ill.).
- Tricot, X., *James Ensor. The complete prints* (Roeselare: Defiac, 2010), 100-103 (ill.), 287, no. 48a (provenance Galerie Atelier/F. Aerts, Ostend).

Artist description:

Ensor's father, James Frederic Ensor, born in Brussels to English parents, was a cultivated man who studied engineering in England and Germany. Ensor's mother, Maria Catherina Haegheman, was Belgian. Ensor himself lacked interest in academic study and left school at the age of fifteen to begin his artistic training with two local painters. From 1877 to 1880, he attended the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where one of his fellow students was Fernand Khnopff. Ensor first exhibited his work in 1881. From 1880 until 1917, he had his studio in the attic of his parents' house. His travels were very few: three brief trips to France and two to the Netherlands in the 1880s, and a four-day trip to London in 1892.

During the late 19th century much of his work was rejected as scandalous, particularly his painting *Christ's Entry Into Brussels* in 1889 (1888–89). The Belgium art critic Octave Maus famously summed up the response from contemporaneous art critics to Ensor's innovative (and often scathingly political) work: "Ensor is the leader of a clan. Ensor is the limelight. Ensor sums up and concentrates certain principles which are considered to be anarchistic. In short, Ensor is a dangerous person who has great changes. He is consequently marked for blows. It is at him that all the harquebuses are aimed. It is on his head that are dumped the most aromatic containers of the so-called serious critics." Some of Ensor's contemporaneous work reveals his defiant response to this criticism. For example, the 1887 etching "*Le Pisseur*" depicts the artist urinating on a graffitied wall declaring (in the voice of an art critic) "Ensor est un fou" or "Ensor is a Madman."

But his paintings continued to be exhibited, and he gradually won acceptance and acclaim. In 1895 his painting *The Lamp Boy* (1880) was acquired by the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, and he had his first solo exhibition in Brussels. By 1920 he was the subject of major exhibitions; in 1929 he was named a Baron by King Albert, and was the subject of the Belgian composer Flor Alpaerts's *James Ensor Suite*; and in 1933 he was awarded the band of the Légion d'honneur. Even in the first decade of the 20th century, however, his production of new works was diminishing, and he increasingly concentrated on music—although he had no musical training, he was a gifted improviser on the harmonium, and spent much time performing for visitors. Against the advice of friends, he remained in Ostend during World War II despite the risk of bombardment. In his old age he was an honored figure among Belgians, and his daily walk made him a familiar sight in Ostend. He died there after a short illness, on 19 November 1949.