

James Ensor (Ostend 1860 - Ostend 1949)

The gendarmes
Circa: 1888
1888

Etching in black on *simili*-Japan paper

Plate: 17.9 x 23.8 cm

Sheet: 34,7 x 48 cm

Signed in plate lower left: Ensor; signed and dated in pencil lower right: Ensor 1888

The reason for this etching was the fishing uprising against the English fishermen in Ostend in 1887. Two dead fishermen lie on a table, guarded by gendarmes. The etching “De gendarmen” is associated with the painting “The last tribute to the counts of Egmond and Hoorne” by Louis Gallait (Tournai, Museum of Fine Arts), one of the most important icon paintings from Belgian Romanticism. From the painting, Ensor took over the bed with the two lying figures. The placement of the bystanders in the print also seems to refer to the romantic painting. The direct reason for the etching, however, was the fishermen's uprising against the English fishermen in Ostend in 1887. In the print, Ensor clearly sided with the oppressed, and protested vehemently against the terror of the armed gendarmes. Ensor's view is thus diametrically opposed to the somewhat emotionless tribute that Gallait brought to a pinnacle of Dutch history. The print “De gendarmen” refers to the drawing “De staking”, also known as “The massacre of Ostend fishermen”, from 1888 (Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 1888). In 1892 Ensor further elaborated the theme of “De gendarmen” in a painting (Ostend, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 1950/160).

Exhibitions

Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK.MP.09512.

Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 1998-B-55-2.

Literature

Delteil, L., Le Peintre graveur illustré : H. Les, H. de Braekeleer, J. Ensor, vol. XIX (Paris: 1925), no. 55 (ill.).

Croquez, A., L'Œuvre gravé de James Ensor - Catalogue raisonné (Paris: Maurice Le Garrec, 1935), no. 55 (ill.).

Taevenier, A., Graphic works of James Ensor. Illustrated catalogue of his engravings their critical description and inventary of the plates (Ghent: Erasmus Ledeberg, 1973), no. 55 (ill.).

Elesh, J.N., James Ensor The Complete Graphic Work (The Illustrated Bartsch, vol. 141) (New York: Abaris Books, 1982), no. 55 (ill.).

Tricot, X., James Ensor. The Complete Prints (Roeselaere: Defiac, 2010), 126, 289, no. 60b (ill.).

Cooke, L., A. Taevenier et. al., *James Ensor. Etchings from the collection of 'Gemeentekrediet België'* exh. cat. (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1978), 34, no. 42 (ill.).

Becker, J. et.al., *James Ensor. Visionär der Moderne. Gemälde, Zeichnungen und das druckgraphische Werk aus der Sammlung Gerard Loobuyck* (Albstadt: Galerie Albstadt, 1999), 104 (ill.).

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 grafitied 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.