



**James Ensor (Ostend 1860 - Ostend 1949)**

## **The Gamblers**

Circa: 1895

1895

Etching in black on simili-Japan paper

11.4 x 15.5 cm (4 1/2 x 6 1/8 inches)

Signed in plate lower left: Ensor; signed and dated in pencil lower right: James Ensor 1895

The etching "The Gamblers" is based on the chalk drawing of the same name from circa 1890 (private collection). The theme with a clearly satirical and caricatured character is characteristic of Ensor's work from the early 1890s. Ensor also gave the performance the title "Le ponté déconfit": this is a player against the bank, who apparently amidst this casino visitors are on the losing side. There is also a free version of this print in lithography that was published in the September 1896 issue of the magazine *La Ligue Artistique*. The viewer gets, as it were, an overview of the Ensorian vision of man behind the gaming table. The only real person, as the central figure, is the player who desperately wonders why he has no better cards. Money plays the main role here. The cashier's attitude, on the left, doesn't leave much to the imagination. The collection, almost monstrous, tronies and the stern figure of some sort of police officer behind the player only make it worse. The player is one of the most convincing human figures in Ensor's etching. Has he seen that man at a gaming table in the local casino or is it all imagination? The fact is that this type of figures returns later in Flemish expressionism, with Frits Van den Berghe.

## **Exhibitions**

- Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 1998-B-93.

## **Literature**

- Delteil, L., *Le Peintre graveur illustré : H. Les, H. de Braekeleer, J. Ensor*, vol. XIX (Paris: 1925), no. 92 (ill.).
- Croquez, A., *L'Œuvre gravé de James Ensor - Catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Maurice Le Garrec, 1935), no. 92 (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. 93 (ill.).

- Elesh, J.N., James Ensor The Complete Graphic Work (The Illustrated Bartsch, vol. 141) (New York: Abaris Books, 1982), no. 94 (ill.).
- Tricot, X., James Ensor. The Complete Prints (Roeselaere: Defiac, 2010), 191, 294, no. 99b (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), 107 (ill.).
- Cooke, L., A. Taevenier et. al., James Ensor. Etchings from the collection of 'Gemeentekrediet België' exh. cat. (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1978), 47, no. 70 (ill.).
- Van de Velde, R., James Ensor 1860-1949, exh. cat. (Antwerp: Galerie Ronny Van de Velde, 2005), no. 25 (ill.).
- De Geest, J., dans: "l'Art du jeu" (Annemie Buffels, direction générale), 75 ans de Loterie Nationale (Fonds Mercator, 2009), p. 178-179.
- De Geest, J., dans: "Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen. La collection de la Loterie Nationale" (Openbaar kunstbezit in Vlaanderen, 2015).
- Muchembled, R., dans: "L'enchantement du jeu" (Annemie Buffels, direction générale), Loteries en Europe (Loterie Nationale, 2004), p. 45.
- Bateau Lavoir, Paris, 1978, no. 92.
- Strasbourg/Basel, 1995-96, no. 106.

### **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.