James Ensor

The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889

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XAVIER TRICOT

WITH THE SUPPORT OF BART VERSLUYS

In memory of
Martine Franck and
Henri Cartier-Bresson

pp. 6-7
Martine Franck
The Salon bleu
Ensor's house
Ostend, 22 April 1998

The Entry of Christ into Brussels is a world one would like to study at leisure, providing countless resources to those who take it upon themselves to explore it. This is certainly one of the boldest, strangest and most disconcerting works that a modern artist has ever undertaken.

WALDEMAR-GEORGE, 1926


VIVE LA SOC

Analysis of the painting

Significance of the subject

While there can be absolutely no doubt as to the subject of the work, the painting appears to be more than just the depiction of Christ's Joyous Entry into Brussels. The true meaning of *The Entry* lies precisely in what transcends the subject of the painting. By changing the location and time of Christ's Joyous Entry into Jerusalem, Ensor has given his subject a radically new and contemporary interpretation. Are multiple interpretations of the work possible? If so, which? Should the work be interpreted in an allegorical, tropological or anagogical way? Does the canvas have purely art-historical value or should it rather be seen as a social manifesto? The references to Christianity, to contemporary art and to pictorial traditions, to the political and socio-economic situation of Belgium in the 1880s, and to the carnival make the canvas a sort of *Weltanschauung*. The work's anachronism and contextualizing mean that it cannot be disconnected from the era in which it was painted. To obtain a better understanding of this pictorial *Summum*, each facet will be examined one by one.

Ensor's older contemporary Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) had the same original approach in many of his religious subjects. *Vision after the Sermon* (National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh), from 1888, and *The Yellow Christ* (Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo), from 1889, are two examples of this. Older masters like Pieter Bruegel in *The Census* (RMFAB, Brussels), from 1566, and Paolo Veronese in *The Wedding at Cana* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), from 1563, also place scenes from the life of Christ in their contemporary context. What makes *The Entry* so unique is the portrayal of Christ's joyous entry in a burlesque, grotesque, politically and socially charged, and 'anachronistic' context. Here the trivial-worldly aspect is matchlessly coupled with the sublime and religious. By providing a 'secular' dimension to the subject, Ensor turns the religious event into a contemporary manifestation and a pictorial manifesto.[1] This idiosyncratic approach was already used in popular theatre in the Middle Ages. In his masterpiece *Mimesis* from 1946, German philologist Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) writes:

> The everyday and real is thus an essential part of medieval Christian art and especially of the Christian drama. In contrast to the feudal literature of the courtly romance, which leads away from the reality of the life of its class into a world of heroic fable and adventure, here there is a movement in the opposite direction, from distant legend and its figural interpretation into everyday contemporary reality. […] It is most likely that a good deal of this sort of thing was already in evidence at that period, for, in general, it is the period of a reawakening of popular realism. The subliterary survival of the tradition of the antique mime and the more conscious, more strongly critical, and more forceful observation of life, which, beginning with the twelfth century, seems to have set in among the lower classes too, led at that time to a flourishing development of the popular farce, whose spirit may well be assumed to have soon found its way into the religious drama as well. […] In any case, the extant documents of Christian dramatic literature indicate that the realistic and in particular the grotesque and farcical element became increasingly current […].[2]

When Ensor was working on *The Entry*, Neo-Impressionism was in its heyday. Seurat's masterpiece *Un Dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* (The Art Institute of Chicago), from 1884-86, was exhibited at the salon of *Les XX* in Brussels in 1887, where it was a huge public success.[3] Challenged by the popularity of his French colleague and somewhat annoyed by the attitude of Octave Maus (1856-1919), the secretary of *Les XX* who defended French painting and Neo-Impressionism in particular, Ensor gradually felt the urge to react against the *embourgeoisement* of the avant-garde. Moreover, Ensor hated Neo-Impressionism and denounced it in many of his letters and writings. In his pamphlet *Réflexions sur quelques peintres lanceurs d'éphémères* from 1911, he states:

> *Let's condemn the dry and repugnant processes of the Pointillists, already dead for light and for art. They apply their dotting, coldly and methodically, without feeling, between their correct, cold lines, arriving at only one side of light, its vibration, without being able to render its form. Being too restricted, the process makes it impossible for the artist to expand his research. Art of cold calculation and narrow vision, how outmatched already in vibration!*[4]

As a 'fairground painting', *The Entry* was a savage and brash response addressed to Seurat's restrained and lofty picture. Ensor reproached his Belgian contemporaries for being overly influenced by French painting in general, and by the Barbizon School and Impressionism in particular. On the other hand, he also criticised the English Pre-Raphaelites for turning their backs on their own English tradition, and allowing themselves to be influenced by the Italian Pre-Raphaelite Renaissance. Although avant-gardist, James Ensor's texts and speeches exhibit an almost chauvinistic respect for national pictorial traditions which he sees his contemporaries departing from without justification. In his pamphlet *Une réaction artistique au pays de Narquoisie* (1900), he writes:

> *Flemish art since Breughel, Bosch, Rubens and Jordaens is well and truly dead. Flemish or rather Belgian art since 1830 consists of reflections and shadows. Our major Belgian painters trace their ancestry abroad. This is a fact we have to recognise.*
> *Descendants of Courbet: Louis Dubois, Boulenger, Alfred Verhaeren, Baron, Bouvier and all the Belgian landscape painters, not excepting the very recent ones, Gilsoul, Courtens, etc.*
> *Descendants of David, the revolutionary painter: Navez, De Keyser, Wappers, de Biefve, Wiertz himself, an admirer of Rubens but an academic painter and very inferior colourist.*
> *An attractive successor of Veronese and Titian: Eugene Smits.*
> *Pure reflection of Delaroche: Louis Gallait.*
> *Descendants of Manet: the Belgian and Flemish Impressionists, big and small.*
> *Emulating Signac: Théo van Rysselberghe.*
> *Heir to Bastin Lepage, Burne Jones* [sic], *Holbein and Kate Greeneway* [sic]*:*
> *Fernand Khnopff.*
> *Sort of Courbetised* [sic] *Watteau: Alfred Stevens.*
> *Descendants of Dutch artist Pieter de Hoogh: Henri de Braekeleer.*
> *So much for the entire Belgian school with no possible exceptions. Only Eugène Delacroix, the most Rubensian of all French painters, is not mirrored in Belgium. Indicative index!*
> *The Fleming is no longer a colourist. Flemish art is no longer: it's dead, really dead, it's impossible for it to be other than dead. Why, with ridiculous obstinacy, resurrect this great bloodless corpse?*[5]

Georges Seurat
A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884
Oil on painting
207.5 x 308 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
Inv. no. 1926.224 (1926)

Composition and perspective

On examining the canvas, we are immediately struck by its compositional complexity. The whole composition can be divided in three sections (A, B, C). Consisting of a colourful parade stepping frontally towards us, appears to be structured row upon row, like a mosaic. The viewer's eye wanders restlessly across the composition and is, as it were, sucked into a vanishing point right at the top of the canvas, hidden behind the red banner, spanning almost the entire width of the canvas, to the right of the letter 'E' in the word *SOCIALE*. The vanishing point of a second, less obvious perspective lies between Christ's head and the letter 'C' in the word *SOCIALE* .[6] Unobtrusive and almost lost in the crowd, we notice Jesus seated on his donkey, to the left above the centre of the canvas. The figure of Jesus seems to form the apex of an imaginary trapezium whose base spans the entire width at the bottom of the canvas, consisting of the band and the large group of masked characters. The right side of the composition is taken up by a green dais on which the 'mayor' or 'master of ceremonies' and three clownish figures observe the procession from a height.[7] The dais is separated from the procession by a high banner or standard consisting of three vertical red, blue-black and yellow stripes. Strikingly, the red stripe is much broader than the yellow and the black-blue stripes. The frequent use of pure red, blue and green (in particular to the right) further reinforces the mutual contrasts. The fact that Ensor could hardly distance himself, literally, from his canvas, given the limited space of his studio, perhaps explains the distorted relationships between the figures and the unbalanced perspective that reinforce the strangeness of the composition. The head and tail of the procession appear to be higher than the middle section. In this way it seems as if the procession is going down a hill before climbing another one in the foreground. Whether Ensor deliberately took account of the topography and geography of Brussels remains an open question. Rue de la Régence in Brussels, which runs from Place Royale to the Palace of Justice, and Rue Royale, which runs from Place Royale to the Église royale Sainte-Marie, exhibit this phenomenon. As Patricia Berman has shown in her study of the work, the street plan of Brussels changed considerably in the second half of the nineteenth century under the impulse of Leopold II.[8] Wide, straight boulevards were constructed with impressive prospects. The north of the city was connected to the south by Boulevard Anspach, Boulevard Lemonnier and Boulevard du Nord (today Boulevard Adolphe Max). These wide, straight boulevards became the scene of great processions and corteges.[9]

Henry de Groux: *Christ Mocked*

While James Ensor was working on *The Entry*, Henry de Groux (1866-1930) was painting, in 1888-89, his *magnum opus*, titled *Le Christ aux outrages* [Christ Mocked], now located at the Palais du Roure in Avignon. The monumental work represents Christ as *Ecce Homo*, and was first exhibited at the *Salon Triennal* in Brussels in 1890. From 1891, De Groux lived and worked in Paris, where he became friends with French Christian philosopher Léon Bloy (1846-1917). The painting was refused at the Salon du Champ de Mars in 1892, but eventually exhibited in a *remise* [outbuilding] where it caused an uproar. The image of a shy, almost clumsy Christ facing an agitated mass including women, children and dogs, shocked conservative art critics and the community at large. Belgian art critic Jules Du Jardin (1863-1940) writes about De Groux's Jesus figure in *À Propos d'art* (1892):

> To give form to his idea and make it tangible, Henry De Groux took as the type of the martyr the sweet and pity-rousing figure of Christ, while fixing in his work a certain colouring which makes it resemble many paintings of the sixteenth-century masters.[25]

Apart from their interest in the figure of Christ, Ensor and De Groux were also fascinated by the pictorial representation of the 'masses' as a phenomenon. In Ensor, it appears as a procession which, as it were, absorbs the Jesus figure. In De Groux the mass is depicted as pushing towards the Jesus figure. Fascination with the dynamics of the masses was a social phenomenon in the second half of the nineteenth century. Strikes and marches in major European cities increased the awareness that an unbelievable revolutionary force emanated from the mass.[26] Christ's head in *Christ Mocked*, depicted expressionistically, if not almost caricaturally, must have shocked many people of its day. Ensor did not forget this Jesus head, when in 1891, he painted his *Man of Sorrows* [Tricot 331] (KMSK, Antwerp). Where in De Groux we

Henry de Groux
Christ Mocked, 1888-89
Oil on canvas
293 x 353 cm
Palais du Roure, Avignon

James Ensor
The Man of Sorrow, 1891
Oil on panel
22 x 18 cm
Royal Museum of
Fine Arts, Antwerp
Inv. no. 3320 (1990)


ENSOR
1891

James Ensor
Doctrinal Nourishment
(Second Plate), 1889
Etching on paper
176 x 245 mm
Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent
Inv. no. 1998-B-80 (1998)

James Ensor
Belgian in the 19th Century
1889
Etching on paper
172 x 233 mm
Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent
Inv. no. 1998-B-81-1 (1998)


BELGIQUE
XIX SIECLE
QUE VOULEZ VOUS? N'ETES VOUS PAS CONTENTS
UN PEU DE PATIENCE
PAS DE VIOLENCE
POUR QUELLE CAUSE
JE VOIS BIEN QUELQUE CHOSE MAIS JE NE SAIS
JE NE DISTINGUE PAS TRES BIEN
SERVICE PERSONNEL
INSTRUCTION OBLIGATOIRE
SUFFRAGE UNIVERSEL

James Ensor
The Strike, 1888
Coloured pencils on paper
67.5 x 34 cm
Royal Museum of
Fine Arts, Antwerp
Inv. no. 2970 (1963)


IN DE ZEE
VOGEL
ESTANINET

Two study drawings for *The Entry into Jerusalem*

Two study drawings in relation to the subject of the large drawing *The Entry into Jerusalem*, from the series *The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensitivities of Light*, are actually known. One of the two drawings, from the former Ernest Rousseau collection, is located at the J. Paul Getty Museum (inv. no. 89.GD.42) in Los Angeles. The drawing, in black pencil and Conté crayon, measures 22.5 by 16.6 cm.[12] This study drawing contains some inscriptions we find in the large drawing from the series of *The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensitivities of Light*: SALUT JÉSUS ROI DES JUIFS [Hail Jesus, King of the Jews], LIBERTÉ EGALITÉ FRATERNITÉ, VIVE LA SOCIALE on the banners at the top of the composition, LES XX on a loose-hanging banner to the left of the composition, NAZARETH, and other illegible sketchy inscriptions on the signs carried by the procession behind Christ. The composition is very close to the Ghent drawing *The Entry into Jerusalem* (A). On the reverse of the drawing, we recognise a sketch presenting Christ on the way to Calvary.

The other drawing, in Conté pencil, measures 22.1 x 17.3 cm, and is located at the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts (inv. no. 1985-M). On one sheet of paper Ensor combines two sketches representing *Christ Presented to the People* (to the left of the composition), and *The Entry into Jerusalem* (to the right of the composition), both subjects from the series of *The Aureoles of Christ*. It contains the inscription *XX* (twice). This study appears to have been drawn after the large drawings (in 1887?) and is therefore not a preparatory study for the drawings of *The Aureoles*.[13]

James Ensor
The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (recto), *Christ Bearing the Cross* (verso), 1885
Graphite and Conté crayon on off-white wove paper
22.5 x 16.5 cm
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Inv. no. 89.GD.42 (1989)

James Ensor
Christ Presented to the People and *The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*, 1885
Conté pencil on paper
22.1 x 17.3 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent
Inv. no. 1985-M (1985)


REGINA
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The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889
leaving Ensor's house
7 June 1939
Photograph Maurice Antony