ENSOR’S ENDURING INFLUENCE

For contemporary artist Alison Schuh, 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 accumulations 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 boulevards’ carnival atmosphere that he is barely noticed amidst the parade of characters with carnival masks and Gestures that surge forward to the edge of the canvas.

Jostling inscriptions on banners, placards, and flags imitate the stoppage of official civic and religious events as well as mass political demonstrations. “VIVE JESUS OUR KING OF 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...
quickly drawing admirers. Abhorring all manner of artistic fads, Ensor detested 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 rejection of the “dogmatic tenets” 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 expressionist 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.

Artistic Influence
For Lipton and Schultink, Ensor was a source of inspiration as they started their own careers. The proof of Ensor’s influence on Schultink 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 techniques to be mined. 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.

Ensor’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.

The Madness of Crows
The crowds in the painting are often described as “claustraphobic” and “uncontrollable.” 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 uncontrollable 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 stacked up against the front of the painting gives the viewer the sense of being trampled by the horrid immovable procession.”

An Artist in Isolation
Ensor proudly adopted the mantle of certain outsider 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.

Schultink 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. It’s also 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 showed.”

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/lyricography. 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.”

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 skewed horizon line.”