James Ensor's The entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889, a study of its style, its sources, and its significance

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JAMES ENSOR'S THE ENTRY OF CHRIST INTO BRUSSELS IN 1889, A STUDY OF ITS STYLE, ITS SOURCES, AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa

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Chairman: Assistant Professor Robert Knipschild
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two. Sources of Ensor's Style: The Development of his Personal Expression in <em>The Entry</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three. The Iconography of <em>The Entry</em>: A Reflection of Ensor's Personal Vision</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four. The Relation of <em>The Entry</em> to Seurat's <em>A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte</em></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five. Ensor's Expression and his Contemporary Artists</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six. Ensor's Expression and his Social Environment</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footnotes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Reproductions</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Thesis Paintings</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1</td>
<td>The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889, by James Ensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1-a</td>
<td>Detail from The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1-b</td>
<td>Detail from The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2</td>
<td>Carnival on the Beach, by James Ensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3</td>
<td>Intrigue, by James Ensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4</td>
<td>Tribulations of St. Anthony, by James Ensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 5</td>
<td>Battle of the Golden Spurs, by James Ensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 6</td>
<td>The Garden of Worldly Delights, by Jerome Bosch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 7</td>
<td>The Land of Cockayne, by Pieter Bruegel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 8</td>
<td>Napoleon at the Battle of Eylau, by Baron Jean Gros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 9</td>
<td>Landscape with Castle Steen, by Peter Paul Rubens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 10</td>
<td>Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus, by J. M. W. Turner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF FIGURES
(Continued)

| Fig. 11. | Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grand Jatte, by Georges Seurat | 103 |
| Fig. 12. | Landscape Near Anvers, by Vincent Van Gogh | 104 |
| Fig. 13. | Eye Like a Strange Balloon, by Odilon Redon | 104 |
INTRODUCTION

Of the relatively few great artists working outside of France in the late nineteenth century, perhaps the most original is the Belgian painter, James Ensor. Ensor employed boldly distorted form and heightened color to further a personal expression rather than to objectively mirror the world of nature. In an attempt to examine Ensor's innovations and contributions, we shall here focus upon his largest painting, The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889, which is in many respects the most comprehensive statement of Ensor's aesthetic and philosophical beliefs.

Through the focal point of this painting, we may consider Ensor's imaginative departures from reality as they relate to the past, their immediate environment, and to the whole of art history. Moving from the specific to the more general in this manner it is hoped that we may touch upon (however implicitly) such larger questions as the relationship of an artist's individual creative personality to his aesthetic and social environments—both past and present.

To this end, we shall employ a methodology which considers larger aspects of art history in close relation to specific works of art. By means of a thorough understanding of stylistic evidence present within the work itself, it is hoped that we may avoid the pitfalls of a too general approach which often neatly categorizes artists, their influences, and their contributions.
This overly general approach along with a certain amount of cultural chauvinism characterizes much of what has been written on Ensor to date. An example of this may be seen in Paul Haesaerts' recent (1959) monologue on Ensor which although rich in reproductions and chronological data is inconclusive in its critical analysis of the artist. Haesaerts stresses Ensor's excellence and his contributions to twentieth century art movements rather than probing the artist's relation to his own time and culture. Works on Ensor by Belgian writers dating back to the contemporaries of his youth exhibit a similar lack of critical analysis of Ensor—the most famous Belgian painter since Rubens. Other writers, greatly influenced by French contributions to art history, tend to negate Ensor's contributions and importance.

Much of the confusion surrounding that which has been written on Ensor stems, in part, from the writers' insufficient understanding of Ensor's work and its relation to the milieu in which it was created. This lack of understanding is most evident in the brief and general magazine articles on Ensor which attempt to categorize this complex artist under broad headings and succeed, for the most part, in only further confusing the actual nature of his oeuvre. Paul Fierens' monograph on Ensor also shows, in general, very little understanding of the importance of Ensor's relation to his time and culture. The excellent monologue by Libby Tannenbaum, on the other hand, is an example of how, with sufficient understanding of the
relation between Ensor's oeuvre and his aesthetic milieu, a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the artist may be obtained.

Studies of an even more specific nature would seem to be required if we are to gain an even greater insight into the person of this many faceted artist. It is hoped that this study, based upon a concentrated analysis of Ensor's most important painting, will help to more fully explain the precise nature of Ensor's genius, his relation to certain of his contemporaries, and his contribution to the development of art history.

Equally important is the presentation, in this study, of a methodology which is believed to facilitate a more accurate understanding of art history in general through analyses of specific works of art. In the organization of this study lies an example of this approach to larger issues through specific works. Beginning with a stylistic examination of Ensor's oeuvre, we shall first take up The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889 and consider it in detail as a succinct example of Ensor's expression. In the following chapters we shall examine historical influences and show how Ensor through distortions of form and color has modified this historical theme. In considering Ensor's relation to Seurat and other post-impressionist painters, we shall again note the many differences in his use of form and color from that of his contemporaries—differences dictated largely by his individual personality as it was influenced by his time and culture. In the final chapter we shall attempt to ascertain
the degree to which Ensor's personal expression was influenced by this social and cultural environment.
CHAPTER ONE

The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889: A Formal Analysis

Any attempt to describe The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889 must begin with some mention of the overpowering size of the work. Painted in 1888 in Ensor’s town of Ostend, Belgium, it measures 101 5/16 inches by 169 1/2 inches. The large size as well as satirical content prevented the painting from being publicly exhibited until 1929—some forty years after it was painted. Ensor first attempted to show The Entry at the 1889 exhibition of Les XX, an avant-garde Belgian art society. This group rejected it amid an uproar remarkable for even the European art world of the late nineteenth century which had seen repeated controversies over painting culminating in the impressionist furors of the Seventies.

As the whimsical title would suggest Ensor’s The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889 shows a huge crowding procession—a wild tumultuous mob—coming toward the viewer. From miniscule figures and pinpoint faces in the distance to the larger than life, grimacing, grinning, glaring figures in the foreground, the entire mob seems to rush forward almost overflowing the front of the painting. This on-rush is channeled on the right by a platform from which more posturing figures watch the procession. Banners, placards, pennants, and flags flutter above the crowd. Lost in this whole mad melange of humanity,
a Christ with Ensor's features rides a donkey behind a packed phalanx of a brass band. A carnival atmosphere of the garish and gaudy prevails, conveyed by glaring reds, clashing greens, yellows, and blues.

Upon closer examination we see Ensor's use of carnival masks and leering grotesque faces to express all the pomposity and pettiness of the human mob. The rabble exposed and satirized by Ensor encompasses all the stations of bourgeois life; lovers, church officials, bloated profiteers, puerile judges, the greedy, the deceitful, the gross, the wanton, the fat and facetious members of society, all wildly scampering and furiously yelling and parading themselves as they welcome their savior to their town.

A rather loose yet subtly complex composition is employed to unify the vast areas of the painting. Attention is held in the center of the canvas by a large, broken, segmented yet entwined pushing movement from the top to bottom where it is only partially contained by larger flat forms along the front and bottom of the picture plane. This animated central area is broken and given some order by strong horizontal movements which partially divide it into layers or segments moving upwards and backwards. These secondary movements create a tension with the vertical triangle of the center which is partially halted by the figure of Christ and then repeated above by the minute forms seemingly streaming from infinity. This subtle repetition of the triangle both emphasizes the upper background and aids to break the verticality of the center area.
The gushing movement of this central triangle is partially contained and given direction by the smaller, relatively quiet areas which roughly frame it. The red banner at the top arrests the progression toward infinity and brings the eye back to the picture plane. The large green areas on the right channel the movement toward the center, while breaking it and emphasizing its feeling of tumbled disorder. The figures in this green area both animate it and integrate it into the crowd preventing it from jumping forward and detracting from the motion of the central area. The vertical red and blue banner on the right directs the eye upward and tempers the diagonal movement of the crowd much in the same way as do the diamond-shaped flags and darker areas at the left of the painting. The broken and triangular forms of these banners on the left blend well with the central area and prevent a too obvious framing effect. The central area is subtly framed by these quieter areas which direct our eye along the primary lines of movement toward the upper center of the painting.

The horizontals of the massed ranks of the band, the vertical banners on the left and right, and the flag overhead form a rectangle around and further emphasize this upper center area. This prevents our eye from being completely overwhelmed by the interesting and complex movements of the foreground area as well as bringing forward the background area effectively preventing any illusion of infinite depth. Sharp detail and a heightened color are also employed to pick out the background. Such visual "signposts" are needed in a work of this size
and complexity. They are here well assimilated into the composition and effectively emphasize the feeling for the picture plane and pull the work together.

The heavy impasto texture of the paint and the loose, free brushwork also cause the painting to function on the surface plane. Even relatively stable areas such as the green platform and canopy on the right are animated by a great surface restlessness. The banner at top is enlivened by the lettering and the sketchy quality of the brushwork. The attention to detail in the background further unifies the work and is a necessary element and not merely anecdotal as some critics of Ensor maintain. This detail is rendered loosely in high key color and rich impasto textures creating an exciting flickering movement much suited to the feeling of the crowd which he attempts to portray.

Color is of supreme importance to the unification of this huge painting. Ensor uses the basic colors, red, blue, yellow, and green, to organize and unify *The Entry*.

Large areas of green break and contain the major movements of yellows and red which come forward. The recessive nature of the greens creates a violent tension between advancing and receding colors and effectively conveys the sense of pushing and pulling action. These greens are integrated into the other areas by flecks of yellow and red in them which prevents their going back too far and creating "holes" in the composition. Broken areas of green intersperse the
reds, yellows, and blues of the center animating and unifying this disjointed area.

While green is used principally to control and unify, Ensor employs his reds to animate and direct the composition. The broken reds in the center give a violent animation to the area while the thrusts of red on the sides pick up the movement and flutter it across the top where it is directed down on the right by the vertical red of the banner. This juxtaposition of the directing, demanding reds and the quieter controlling greens heightens the pulsating fighting quality of the work. This conflict is carried on throughout the painting by the use of smaller broken areas of each color which struggle with each other through the central area of whites, pinks, yellows, and oranges.

Rich dark blues are used to animate and delineate both the sharp forms of the center and the larger areas of greens and reds. Along with their function of underscoring and directing the major and secondary movements, the blues contrast and "fight" the yellows much as the reds do the greens. Thus in the hats of the bandsmen great animation is achieved by the close juxtaposition of the blues and yellows. Blue-blacks and deep bluish-browns are also employed to enliven the work as well as to direct the secondary movements.

An interesting note regarding Ensor's free use of color is the fact that Ensor had a housepainter prepare several large cans of bright basic colors for him which he used to paint The Entry. This is extremely interesting as it gives us an insight into the freedom
that permitted Ensor to express himself along the gamut of his personal passion for intense brilliant color. In the painting we can see the use of the basic colors to unify this unwieldy and wildly straining painting. The colors are subtly unified with one another. The strangely harmonious relationship of the greens to the blues and yellows, which is felt despite their violent contrasts, quite possibly stems from the combination of the two to form the one. Much the same feeling comes through in the reds and greens and does much to pull this powerful and brilliant color statement together.

In The Entry, line along with mass and volume is generally subordinate to planes of color and light. Where it is needed to direct and strengthen a movement, however, line is employed in much the same manner as is the blue in relation to the other colors. Again unification as well as animation is given by a formal element. As with the blue color, the best example of this is in the hats of the bandsmen where rough shapes and blobs of color are delineated by strong, slashing lines. To the left of the band, the diamond shapes of the banners and placards are accentuated by red and green lines. Further instances of line used to direct can be seen at the top of the vertical banner on the right where a dark line arrests the upward movement and directs it into the center; also emphasizing the direction of the figures on the platform moving their gaze into the painting. In the central foreground, the bishop or parade marshal's baton carries our eye upward into the packed rows of people preventing the horizontal movements of
the bottom foreground from becoming too strong. Here again we see Ensor's use of a formal element in an extremely intuitive, personal manner.

An analysis of Ensor's *Entry* shows this large strident painting to have been executed with a consummate regard for the importance of formal elements. In *The Entry*, formal elements are employed to unify and direct while at the same time to intensify and accentuate the relationships of form and color within the painting. Not only has Ensor used brilliant color and distorted forms to heighten the formal expression, but a further examination of *The Entry* emphasizes the degree to which he changed and distorted previous conceptions of form and color as well as theme and iconography to further his personal expression.
CHAPTER TWO

Sources of Ensor's Style: The Development of his Personal Expression in The Entry

In our examination of Ensor's The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889 we have remarked upon his use of distorted form and color in order to create a personal statement. It is important to consider further Ensor's departures from traditional concepts of painting if we are to better understand the precise nature of his expression. Toward this end, it is necessary to take up elements of Ensor's style and examine them in relation to their historical as well as contemporary antecedents.

Ensor has often been linked to such early Flemish and German masters as Jerome Bosch, Peiter Bruegel, and Mathias Grunewald and is generally regarded as having evolved from the Flemish or Northern Tradition of painting. There can be little doubt that The Entry with its profusion of detail and didactic message is well within this tradition. However, there are other influences which along with Ensor's peculiar creative personality serve to modify this tradition and transpose The Entry into a unique statement by a nineteenth century artist.

In the work of many Northern artists there is a common didactic element. Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, or Albrecht
Durer's engraving *Knight, Death, and the Devil* of 1513 tell a story in terms of much literal as well as symbolic detail. While much of these artists' symbolism is standard and was understood by their contemporaries, such a work as Bosch's *The Garden of Worldly Delights* adds to an allegorical comment upon life and religion, a strange and personal sense of fantasy. This puzzling and disturbing quality in Bosch is close to the spirit of *The Entry* where the artist's fantasy creates grotesque and distorted images to convey a message of moral and social criticism.\(^\text{12}\)

There is a distinct religious theme to the works of the above artists. Whether overtly, as with Grunewald, or more personally in the strange moralistic imagery of Bosch, it is predominately a religious expression which characterizes the art of the north. Even where this religious expression is not explicit it is still present as in Durer's *Self-Portrait* of 1500 where there is a conscious resemblance to Christ in the features. Ensor did several self portraits of himself as Christ and the figure of Christ in *The Entry* bears Ensor's features.\(^\text{13}\)

Peiter Bruegel, while basing his social comment upon country scenes and episodes from the life of the peasants, creates a definitely moralistic statement with religious overtones.\(^\text{14}\) In his *Blind Leading the Blind* of 1568, Bruegel gives a biblical title to a secular theme, implying a certain sense of satire and criticism not unlike that found in *The Entry* where Ensor employs a traditionally religious theme to attack social evils.
In Bruegel as with Ensor there is present the strange love of the fantastic which runs through Flemish painting from Bosch to the Surrealists and contemporary Belgian painters. We see this in Bruegel's Triumph of Death or more obviously in the strange painting Dulle Griet where we see distinct echoes of Bosch in the strange and distorted grotesque figures and incredible animals. Here Bruegel's fantasy is much more socially oriented, less rigidly iconographical, and more literal than is Bosch's. In this respect it is again closer to Ensor's expression in The Entry.

Bruegel and Ensor are close in their use of monumental compositions with a profusion of detail and involved movement. In Bruegel's Wedding Dance of 1566, crowds of figures move tumultuously through a landscape of deep space. In Hunters in the Snow of 1565, Bruegel depicts great depth by including many distant planes of fields and frozen ponds covered with tiny figures of skaters. Ensor continues this tradition in The Entry with his use of the large crowd of many small figures which, streaming back into deep space, surges toward the viewer.

One of the most important of Ensor's links with traditional Flemish painting is this use of myriad figures in a vast landscape. This element is one that ties Ensor's development out of the northern tradition to influences of early nineteenth century painting. Among the early painters in this line is Peter Paul Rubens with whose works Ensor was familiar. In his LaKermesse Rubens builds a tension between
the spirited activity of the foreground crowd and the deep space of the background similar to that of The Entry.  

Albrecht Altdorfer not only creates vast and distant landscapes crowded with figures but also builds an expression of involved fantasy. In his Alexander the Great Defeating Darius (1529) with its eerie mountain peaks, unearthly clouds, and twisted fingers of land and water, we see the workings of a strange mind. All rational sense of size and space is destroyed by the huge inscription hanging in the sky. Later Flemish and Dutch paintings such as Jacob Van Ruisdael's View of Haarlem, while much more rational than Altdorfer's work, relate directly to Ensor's early seascape paintings with their low horizon and interest in the cloud-filled, seaside skies.

Closer to Ensor's time, the large battle scenes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with their crowds of figures and deep space seem to have some relation to The Entry. Certain similarities are present between The Entry and Baron Gros' Napoleon on the Field of the Battle of Eylau (1808) where the handling of the distant panorama of ranked troops and tiny soldiers is not unlike that of the packed crowds of Ensor's painting. In this large work as well as in other such pageants by David, Charlet, etc. we see an organization of forms on a grand scale which, although pedestrian in execution, relate to The Entry. Ensor in his oeuvre repeatedly took up the theme of Napoleon and altered it, creating a vehicle with which to lampoon all ceremony and war.
Also important in an examination of Ensor's joining the Flemish landscape tradition and influences of nineteenth century battle scenes with his personal sarcastic humor are his etchings and drawings of imaginary battles and conflicts. Such an etching as *The Battle of the Golden Spurs* (1895) with its vast landscapes crowded with fantastic creatures harkens back to Bosch and Bruegel while the subject is related to such works as Gros' *Battle of Eylau*. Ensor ridicules war in the title and vents his fantasy in the fantastic creatures which he creates. His constant desire to shock is seen both in his ridiculing of the concept of war as glory which was prevalent during the nineteenth century and in the inclusion of irreverent and offensive detail in the scene. A comparison of this work to the etching *Beach at Ostend* shows the extent to which Ensor based his barbed fantasy upon actual scenes from his locale.

Other influences of the nineteenth century appear in Ensor's work. Some of the seascapes of around 1884 are related to the "open air" landscape painting of Boudin and Jonkind. Of even greater importance was the impact of photography upon the work of Ensor. There is a definite cropped feeling in *The Entry* which is a quality associated with the snapshot composition of a photograph. Unlike the early nineteenth century battle scenes or the Flemish landscapes which were compositionally whole and self-contained, *The Entry* seems abruptly cut off or cropped in the same way that much of Degas' work appears to be. This is especially evident at the bottom where many figures are
abruptly truncated and the crowd seems to pour out of the frame. In
the lower right corner, one head has been cropped on two sides very
much in the manner of a photograph. This use of a cropped edge results
in a high viewpoint from which we seem to look down upon a moving
crowded scene. This sense of motion—of a momentary scene—is a new
element in such a large painting of a vast subject. It no doubt
results from Ensor's contact with the new nineteenth century aesthetic
of a more camera-like realism which finally culminated in impression-
ism.

Ensor has been called a Belgian impressionist. However, when
he did heighten the intensity of his color it was not in the searching
inquiry of Monet or Pissaro but in an expressive flowering of his
personal lyricism. As we have seen in the analysis of The Entry, Ensor
uses an intuitive application of broken color to create a strident
unity of moving forms. The glowing light which at once unifies the
painting and at the same time intensifies its contrasts is largely a
result of Ensor's use of loud, brilliant but subtly interrelated
colors.

This brilliant color which unifies and causes The Entry to
throb with a kind of organic light of its own is a great change from
the earlier work of Ensor. Prior to about 1882, his paintings were in
the Belgian tradition of a dark heavy realism. His Afternoon at
Ostend is an excellent example of the use of rich earth colors to
effectively express the feeling of the heavy, dark middle class
interiors with their ornate furniture and windows and tables draped
with heavy cloth to keep out the light and heat. These early works,
while somewhat more polished and sophisticated, have, in their heavy
forms and loving familiarity with the subject matter, a certain
similarity to the works of Van Gogh prior to 1886. Ensor's portraits
of his aunts and mother, as well as Russian Music, from this sombre
period are in the heavy realistic vein of Courbet and Millet. There
is Courbet's concern for lower-class subject manner in many of Ensor's
subjects, as well as Millet's rich deep color, which we see here
imbued with a glowing warmth and a consciousness of the effect of light
upon color and objects. In Somber Lady of 1881, Ensor increases the
key of his light and color to set off the dark silhouette of the seated
woman.

One of the earliest works heralding Ensor's new use of more
radiant color is the Portrait of the Painter in a Flowered Hat, which
he painted in 1883. The pose and use of a hat motif are definitely
reminiscent of Rubens' Self Portrait of 1623-24. We may assume that
Ensor had seen and appreciated the sensuous color of the earlier
Flemish master since many of Rubens' works were in the Brussels and
Antwerp Museums. It is in the sense of Rubens and not Monet that
Ensor's use of color and light proceeds. Here we see not a concern
for the manner in which light falls upon and defines the changing
colors and planes of the face but a whimsical playing with the colors
of the bright and joyous little flowers and feathers in the hat itself.
These decorations become a vehicle for the playful expression of the painter rather than any rational study. This light and fanciful manner continues in the Carnival On the Beach (1887), Flowers and Vegetables (1896) and the Ostend Rooftops of 1898. There is never the studied breakdown of color and form of the impressionists but rather a joyful reveling in the possibilities of intense light and brilliant color much in the manner of Turner.

This free and intuitive use of color reaches a peak in his blazing canvases of 1887-90 where it serves to express Ensor's personal fantasy and to vent his rage at his environment. Tribulations of St. Anthony (1887), Christ in Agony (1888), and the Fall of the Rebellious Angels of 1889 all have the same power of expressive color as The Entry of 1888 and illustrate the degree to which Ensor was consumed by the power of light and color during this period in particular. To the end of his life his works, while often of much lesser quality than these, maintain this feeling for light and color.

A comparison of Ensor's work to that of Turner emphasizes the fact that Ensor's viewpoint as well as use of color is closer to that of the English master than to the impressionists. Turner, like Ensor, defines forms chiefly by use of brilliant light and high-key color. Also like Ensor he emphasizes these forms and to a degree conveys the "story level" of his subject by means of incisive line. This use of line is often close to that of Ensor in The Entry and points to a certain similarity in the thinking of the two artists.
Turner's fanciful exploration into the possibilities of light and color are always based upon carefully observed phenomena. He always begins with a mood or moment of nature and then improvises upon this, allowing his fantasy free rein within the limits of the nature of the situation. Ensor, while working with the vivid splashed color of *The Entry*, still uses line to succinctly illustrate the profusion of anecdotal detail which relates the scene to his particular time and place. Turner, when enraptured by the billowing flames and clouds of *Fire at Sea*, directs the viewer's attention by means of line to the men and boats which provide the reason for the fire—the excuse, so to speak, for the flights into the brilliant fantasies of the flames.36

Ensor and Turner are often quite close in their use of space despite the fact that their expression takes a markedly different form. Both employ a panoramic view and a use of deep space which is offset by a concern for the surface plane of the painting. In *Dido Building Carthage* of 1815 or *Petworth Park: Tillington Church in the Distance*, Turner stops a dramatic progression toward infinity by use of brilliant surface washes and an intense interest in the background areas which bring them back to the picture plane in much the same manner as *The Entry* with its emphasis upon background detail. This device which Ensor uses is very northern in character and goes back to Bosch and Bruegel. It is illustrative of Ensor's basing his personal fantasy upon minute details of everyday life. Ensor's *Entry* has a literal, storytelling "readability" about it while Turner's more lyrical,
poetic, and abstract expression is conveyed in terms of much more abstract elements such as mist, color, light, etc.\textsuperscript{38}

Ensor made a drawing of a \textit{Sailboat after Turner} in 1877 which is quite obviously based upon Turner's \textit{Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus}.\textsuperscript{39} This is very important not only because it proves that Ensor knew Turner's work but also because it points to a similarity between the diverse nature of the two artists' fantasy. \textit{Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus} is one of Turner's most imaginative paintings. It is also one of the more literally descriptive of his works. It is possible that Ensor responded to this combination of the fantastic and the literal, the imaginative and the descriptive, in Turner as much as he did to the technical brilliance which obviously caught his interest. \textit{Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus}, in its more anecdotal nature, concern for detail (note the emphasis upon the figures on board the ship) is much closer in expression to Ensor than are most of Turner's more evocative, abstract and less literal works.\textsuperscript{40}

While there are undeniable similarities of interest and approach between the work of Ensor and Turner it is well to keep in mind the fundamental differences in their personalities which make the work of each unique. Ensor always remains more literal, descriptive, and anecdotal in the expression of his more obvious fantasy than does Turner. The element of satire, so strong in Ensor's painting, appears seldom if at all in Turner's oeuvre. While both share a common love of the fantastic, the expression of this fantasy (while perhaps closer
than it would at first appear) is markedly different. Ensor, in­fluenced by the moralistic northern tradition, feels called upon to make an obvious comment. He very literally presents his message in terms of incidents within the painting while Turner withdraws into a world of more subtle, evocative poetry. Ultimately, it is these differ­ences which become most important in an attempt to discern the pre­cise nature of an artist's expression.

Much the same thing may be said of Ensor's relation to such past masters as Rembrandt and Daumier. Ensor was aware of the work of both these artists and took certain elements from each but infused them with his own peculiar spirit, transposing them to create a unique statement of his own.

There are in Ensor's oeuvre several drawings after Rembrandt. In the Old Woman with Other Figures of 1878 we see an obvious study after the work of Rembrandt which draws heavily upon his use of light and dark as well as linear-built masses to define forms and structure the drawing. An entirely different mood is created, however. There is not the ponderous, eternal and tragic beauty which is found in similar drawings by Rembrandt. Instead there is a play­fulness apparent in the figures which crowd around the old woman. Absorbed in conversation and laughing among themselves, they leer and grimace at the viewer. The whole effect is of an anecdotal moment which has been captured and not one of a lasting tableau. In the Ensor drawing there is also a much more whimsical, restless use of line
which dissolves the table into fanciful shapes and lends an animated playful quality to the scene. In this use of line is reflected Ensor's fundamental sense of whimsey and his love of crowding busy detail into his drawings and is a quality which differs markedly from the rich simplicity of Rembrandt's work. 42

Influences of Daumier were modified by Ensor into a more obvious, savage, and vindictive expression. Although Daumier indulged in satire it was almost always based upon a rational structure. Ensor cared little about establishing a coherent frame of reference for his diatribes against society. His work becomes much more cartoon-like than Daumier's, more personal and detailed, less universal in its power. Ensor delighted in detail and loved to shock the viewer by including that which was scurrilous or scatalogical in his work. He was ever willing to sacrifice aesthetic standards to better indulge his venom or his fantasy to a much greater degree than was Daumier. 43

By considering Ensor's relation to such artists as Turner, Rembrandt, and Daumier, we see Ensor, while taking elements from each, constantly infusing his own expression into his borrowings—creating a new statement of his own. Toward the expression of this personal statement Ensor not only altered the many influences upon him but made major innovations of his own.

In terms of stylistic elements, Ensor has made many significant innovations. Most notable of these is his use of the mask to penetrate the depths of the human personality while at the same time
allowing him to vent his tremendous power of expression. In one sense, we can see the mask as a vehicle for Ensor's love of the act of painting and drawing. A whole sea of masks, faces grinning or scowling, grimmacing and sneering, confront us in The Entry. These faces are drawn with savage distortions of line isolating each one as some grotesque and exaggerated facet of the ever-changing human personality. The succinctness of his expression is unparalleled here as we see paint twisted into leering mouths and greedy eyes. Vivid color is used freely and with joyous abandon by Ensor as he splashes on a vermillion smear for a mouth set off against a livid white face or brilliant blue tunic. Such expressive use of color for itself alone would hardly have been possible in representing a purely human visage. Hence, the mask serves as a foil for Ensor's masterfully expressive use of paint and color. Of the mask, he writes

"I have joyfully confined myself to the solitary country of mockery which is dominated by the mask of force, light, and vividness. The mask said to me, fresh colors, sumptuous decors, grandiose unexpected gestures, overly sharp expression, exquisite turbulence."

The first appearance of the mask in Ensor's oeuvre seems to be in the Mask Gazing at a Negro Montebank of 1879. Many paintings, prints, and drawings employing the mask as either a major or an accessory motif followed. The mask appears in Haunted Furniture and adds to the general sense of terror and the unknown. In Scandalized Masks (1883), Masks Confronting Death (1884), Entry of Christ Into
Brussels in 1889 (1888), Old Woman with Masks (1889), and Intrigue (1890) we can see the mask used in a variety of ways to express many different ideas. The mask becomes an involved and diffuse symbol for Ensor. At times the symbol of ridicule, fun, attack, satire, hatred, and anger, the masks have varying psychological, sociological, and fantastic significances. Through his use of the mask, he was able to probe the personalities and skewer the hypocrisies of the people of his society. Ensor uses the mask motif to go beneath the exterior facade of the face so that paradoxically, the mask becomes the face—the true face of the wearer reflecting all the cruelties, the superciliousness, and greed of the human animal. In the faces of the parade marshal and two female figures behind him, we have a most penetrating observation and surgically accurate description of the facetious nature of man.

Ensor's use of the mask evolves from a more naturalistic conception toward an increasingly fantastic realization of the mask motif. At first, the mask paintings are in a realistic vein such as Scandalized Masks (1883) which is a basically naturalistic scene in which the masks are definitely masks yet give the painting its sense of fantasy. Strange Masks (1892), or Intrigue (1890) illustrate the use of the mask as an organic object. The mask itself becomes the head and is treated more and more expressively and with less concern for a strictly visual reality. The figures too become less structural and more fantastic along with the rest of the painting which is increasingly concerned with formal expression rather than visual reality.
We have seen that Ensor's stylistic evolution from a dark, heavy realism, rooted in the Belgian tradition, toward a lighter more brilliant use of color was directed more by his own intuitive nature than by any direct adaptation of the impressionist aesthetic. Ensor's formal distortions increase as his fantastic nature asserts itself and he distorts form to further a personal expression as well as to heighten formal relations. This distortion—an adaptation or modification of stylistic influences from the past and contemporary worlds to further his own expression—is paralleled by Ensor's peculiarly personal adaptation of the iconographical theme of Christ's Entry Into Jerusalem.
CHAPTER THREE

The Iconography of The Entry:
A Reflection of Ensor’s Personal Vision

In terms of iconography Ensor’s Entry reflects his irrational and fantastic personality as it is played upon by his cultural environment rather than any direct continuity of an historical theme. For, although a recurrent motif in western art, with Ensor the entry of Christ becomes something notably different—something distinctly Belgian and peculiarly Ensorian in feeling.

Historically, the entry of Christ into Jerusalem has been a representation of the triumph of Jesus and the beginning of the Passion. Among the many artists who represent this theme in their oeuvre are: Giotto, Tintoretto, Dürer, Altdorfer, Tiepolo, Rubens, and Poussin.

In Giotto’s Entry of Christ into Jerusalem from the arena chapel frescos at Padua, Christ approaches from the left astride the donkey. The crowds are symbolized by several figures in front of him and the disciples are to his rear. There is a mood of exultation here—of worship for the savior—shown partly by the boy who climbs a tree for a better view or perhaps to secure a palm branch with which to offer hosannas. The palm branches as well as other iconographical elements are also present in most later works. There is a general feeling of flatness and the figures are presented quite close to the picture plane.
In Albrecht Dürer's version of the same theme in 1509-11, many similar elements are present. Again there is the proximity of the figure to the picture plane. Again it is a small group around the savior who once more enters from the left. There is no boy in the tree, but palm branches are in evidence. Significantly for us, there is the reverent exalting of Christ almost approaching an awe of his person. Jesus is the principal figure in the iconography of the event and the crowds and buildings of the city are, for the most part, represented by token or symbolic forms.

Rubens presents a view of the city of Jerusalem in his version which gives the scene a considerably more open quality, but again there are the traditional palm branches, figure who spreads his garment for Christ, etc. In general, these examples serve to illustrate the continuity of a formal and fairly rigid iconography of the event. In few, if any, of the representations of Christ's entry into Jerusalem is there a note of satire or social comment. It remains largely for literature to inject this element into the theme.

In many ways Ensor's version of Christ's entry is closer in spirit to literary interpretations of the scene than traditional renditions of the scene in art. The imaginative and philosophical handling of the theme brings to mind Dostoevsky's famous chapter "The Grand Inquisitor" from The Brothers Karamozov (published in Russian 1879-80 and translated into the French as early as 1888), where Christ returns to earth and is imprisoned by the church authorities as a
dangerous and seditious person. The caustic comment of Dostoevsky finds echo in the biting burlesques of Ensor who was intelligent and rather widely read and who may well have pondered the social and philosophical implications of "The Grand Inquisitor." A more direct influence upon Ensor's subject may have been Balzac's story "Christ In Flanders" written in 1831 which Ensor read and by which he was deeply impressed. This story was set in Ensor's town of Ostend and graphically illustrates the effects of the Belgian culture upon the artist.

In Balzac's tale, Christ is readily taken to be a kindly and competent burgomeister. He minglees easily with the people—especially the poor and working classes—and has many of their traits. Ensor's Christ, too, is thronged by crowds of the people. He is buffeted and nearly submerged by the mob which presses forward to greet him. This rough familiarity of the people for Christ is not found in many traditional versions of the entry and seems to be a characteristically Belgian concept of deity. In Belgium, Christ is often seen as a common fellow able to engage heartily with the people as one of them and not as a king or deity. To the Flemish people, whose close familiarity with religious elements, permits them a ready mingling of the sacred and the profane, this is proof of Christ's omnipotence. This mixture of the religious and secular is seen in Ensor who combines the profane pagentry of the Ostend carnivals with the traditionally religious subject of Christ's entry. This whimsical commentary, though sacrilegious to some,
is readily comprehensible and enjoyable to the Belgian temperament.

Other similarities in Ensor's Entry to Balzac's story point to the importance of the Belgian culture. Fierens sees a "robust materialism" and "coarse good humor" in Ensor that is undeniably present in Balzac's tale of the Belgian Christ. There also seems to be in both a Belgian gloominess as well as a healthy gaiety undergirded by a subtle feeling of terror.55 This similarity becomes even more pronounced if we consider Balzac's story as a popular allegory of and for the common people. The Jesus of Balzac is in many ways the Christ of Ensor and Ensor's painting can be seen as a popular, albeit a very personal, allegory. It is certainly closer to being a popular allegory than a religious celebration as the theme of the entry of Christ has largely been in works of the past. The importance of the Belgian culture cannot be overlooked in a study of Ensor. It has been said that "Flanders palpitates in Ensor as Spain breathes in Goya"56 and this seems to be, at least in part, true. In his handling of subject matter, sensuosity of paint and color, and general philosophies, Ensor reflects the feeling of the Belgian—especially the Walloonian—spirit.

This Belgian spirit, infused with Ensor's own feelings toward Christ is present in the religious elements of The Entry. Far from being anti-religious, The Entry is an expression of Ensor's personal spirituality. Ensor had a strong affinity for Christ furthered, no doubt, by his sense of isolation from a society incapable of understanding and seemingly bent on crucifying him. Christ, too, suffered
in such a society and had Ensor's sympathy as well as his love. Ensor rejected traditional Christianity and yet maintained a great love for Jesus whom he saw as "a luminous presence swallowed up in the legions of the mad." He admired Christ for his freedom and courage, his humanity and serenity, and "celebrated him with all his verve, not in a mystic spirit, but a lyrical one, and always with reverence." 57

Ensor's personal religion seems to be, if anything, a lyrical humanism somewhat similar to that of Van Gogh. 58 Ensor is a lonely being, stifled by his society. His religion manifests itself in his railings at the hypocrisy and deceit, the crassness and viciousness in life. Championing futile causes and jousting playfully at the world with a sense of pathos permeating many of his works, he is able to jibe at himself as well as society. This quality illustrates his powerful lyricism and his concern for mankind in both the universal and personal sense.

In part then, this religious feeling of Ensor manifests itself in the social comment found in The Entry. 59 Much as in Balzac's "Christ in Flanders" there is present an overt social criticism. Filled with a love of his town and nation, Ensor was involved in its political questions. He wrote against the inroads of factories upon the beautiful dunes. In his paintings he cries out against the excesses of a complacent, materialist society. This is closely tied to the developing socialist ideas of the late nineteenth century as well as to Ensor's personal concept of religion. To many, Christ is the great socialist
and Christianity with its concept of world brotherhood based upon love for mankind is the essence of socialism. Christ was killed because of His love of man much as Ensor felt his own society was trying to kill him. Ensor, through his work, was able to fight his society with scorn and ridicule, the very weapons which they employed against him. Ensor's social philosophy is a very personal, very religious thing, but it is intrinsically tied to the elements of anarchism and socialism that were taking form in reaction to the materialist society of the last half of the nineteenth century.

In The Entry, we have a graphic presentation of Ensor's religious feelings. The Christ on the donkey, while similar to the traditional image of Jesus, has Ensor's features. In other works as well, this artist has portrayed himself as a Christ figure. Ensor's symbolism while cloaked in the trappings of traditional religious images actually serves to indict the type of society that tormented both Jesus and Ensor. By the use of masks and contemporary slogans juxtaposed with the religious format, Ensor shows that the same forces which crucified Jesus menace the artist. Again the masks assume great importance. The cryptic faces of jealousy and greed seem to be the eternal face of all that is fallible and bestial in man. In this manner they serve as another means to unify the Christian format with the personal, expressive handling of the subject. They create a universality which gives a validity to the satire and elevates it to the realm of art.
Intrinsic to the universality of the masks, is a barbed particularity. Ensor has added, again in the masks, many obvious references to his own contemporaries. There was probably more than one official of Brussels who was able to discern a rough approximation of his own self in one of the masks. In this respect, the bishop's mitre becomes a contemporary symbol of the wealthy church. The colors of chauvinistic Belgium are everywhere. Such insignificant details as the uniforms of the bandsmen, and the medals of the General, all had a reference to his social milieu. For the most part unrecognizable as particulars today, these touches of mad whimsy and cynical criticism infuriated Ensor's contemporaries and added to the controversy of the work.

To see Ensor's development of the theme of social criticism in The Entry, we have but to look at the large drawing Hail Jesus, King of the Jews which he made in 1885. In it there is a central procession which streams toward us as in the Entry of 1888. This drawing, however, is much more literal and less well organized. It is 73 3/4 by 55 1/8 inches and is taller than it is wide. There is not the horizontal movement here that we see in the painting but rather a vertical organization which revolves about the center of the page and minimizes the streaming feeling of the procession. Jesus, the central figure, becomes more important than he is in the later version since here the composition moves outward from Him much more obviously.

In the details and the banners we can see evidence of Ensor's
much more literal symbolism. That which is suggested by the masks and movements in the painting is here rendered in a less subtle manner and with a more literal than aesthetic result. While the masks carry for the most part the criticism and satire in the painting, in the drawing we see it in the slogans and mottoes of the banners and signs. Such slogans as Pork butchers of Jerusalem," "Belgian Bigots Band," and "Nazareth," represent the political groups in the parade while "Les XX" and "The Belgian Impressionists" signs are also in evidence. Ensor rails at his society more openly and obviously in such a sign as "doctrinaire fanfares are always successful" but it is somehow less effective. An example of the overly literal quality to the slogans is the "Movement L'Amand" banner which symbolizes the church (Amand being the missionary saint who brought Christianity to Flanders). This becomes both too literal and worse, too esoteric—giving the drawing more the nature of a commentary than a work of art. The mitre of the bloated bishop in The Entry is far more effective in depicting the corrupt church.

Another interesting point is that in the earlier drawing, there is much less distortion. Features and forms are decidedly more naturalistic than in the later painting which again emphasizes Ensor's continual development toward a more fantastic expression. We have seen this progression toward the more imaginative—the more expressive—statement influencing greatly Ensor's departure from accepted structures of form and color in The Entry. In like manner, Ensor's imagination,
conditioned by his Belgian culture and reacting to the crassness of his environment, led him to distort the traditional theme of the entry of Christ into Jerusalem into a satirical indictment of his society as well as a protest of the sensitive individual against the mass society.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Relation of The Entry to Seurat's A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte

Because of the very real similarities of size and scope as well as time and place which exist between The Entry and A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte, the question arises as to the extent and nature of any influence which Seurat's large painting may have had upon the creation of The Entry. Ensor was greatly impressed by the Grande Jatte when he saw it in the 1887 exhibition of Les XX and no doubt this interest precipitated, in part, his undertaking The Entry in that year. An examination of the Grande Jatte in relation to The Entry, however, reveals such differences in conception and execution between the two works as to preclude any pat theories that Ensor merely adapted Seurat's technique to his more northern expression. These differences show rather two distinct artistic personalities reacting in dissimilar manner to the artistic and social currents of their time. While the Grande Jatte may well have galvanized Ensor into creating a comprehensive statement of his aesthetic principles, the statement itself and the manner in which it is made is distinctly Ensor's own and is in many respects an antithesis to Seurat's rational aesthetic.

Despite certain similarities of a staged space and rather theatrical positioning of figures, Seurat's Grande Jatte, when compared to Ensor's Entry is seen to be much tighter, more controlled and as
carefully executed as it is carefully planned. Both artists were dealing with vast areas of surface and both were attempting to create a feeling of immense depth. With Seurat, the movement is in, rather than moving out, as with Ensor. An analysis of Seurat's composition in the Grande Jatte shows an extremely calculated positioning of objects and elements to control, direct, and move the eye of the viewer. From the subtle repetition of forms such as the left profile of the female head, bust, and bustle, to the recurrent use of the umbrella, there are many elements which act as visual guideposts such as we have seen used by Ensor to direct and unify his painting.

The over-all impression of La Grande Jatte, as opposed to The Entry, is that of simplification and balance. A sense of quiet and architectural immobility is created by the patterned shapes of figures and other compositional elements. This feeling prevails over the softly moving, flickering color and broken dot technique of paint application largely because of the stressing of the classical horizontals and verticals which are only slightly modified by an intricate and ingeniously planned system of curved shapes. In the foreground there are several distinctly horizontal movements of the bottom of the lady's skirt, reclining figure, and some of the patches of shade. As the eye moves back into the composition this feeling of horizontal stability increases with the series of horizontal movements which terminate in the sweeping white of the line of the opposite shore which thrusts across the upper background terminating the movement into deep space
and bringing the eye back to the picture surface. A decided columnar movement of vertical elements exists most obviously on the right-hand side of the painting. This is repeated rapidly by the trees in the upper right-hand corner effectively drawing the eye up and into the picture while again asserting the picture plane in a vertical sense. More vertical movements occur in the figures and trees of the middle background animating the horizontal sweep of the background. The diagonal elements, so stressed by Ensor in his *Entry*, are limited primarily to the bank of the shore in the *Grande Jatte*. This effectively opposes the verticals of the figures on the right and serves to draw the viewer back into space. It is used in the same manner as the curved lines and shapes of the bustles, bodices, and parasols to direct and relieve the ponderous simplicity of the horizontal and vertical movements.

An interesting similarity between both Ensor and Seurat's use of perspective becomes evident upon closer examination. Seurat, by a series of figure profiles, light and dark areas, trees, etc. establishes a powerful feeling of depth which prevents the painting from being merely a very beautiful decorative pattern. Ensor employs a series of planes for this purpose, too, although it is much less obvious due to the cluttered and tumultuous forms in *The Entry*. The massed ranks of the paraders with their horizontal and alternating color patches of light and dark areas serve essentially the same purpose as Seurat's planes of light and shade in the central middle
ground of *La Grande Jatte*. Too, Ensor's use of the banner at the top to arrest the movement and restate the picture plane seems akin to Seurat's use of the whole horizontal of the shore. Indeed, with some imagination one can see a similarity in the over-all composition of the two works. Ensor's platform on the right corresponds in position and movement to Seurat's male and female foreground figures, while on the left Ensor uses the flags and the edge of the procession to create a diagonal similar to Seurat's shoreline.

A closer examination of even the similar elements in the composition of both works shows a great difference between the two. The subtle use of lines and shapes of the banners and placards to direct and guide the movement in *The Entry* becomes somewhat more obvious in its subtlety with Seurat. The repetition of the shapes of bodice, bustle, and parasol, while charming and effective, are easily apparent as compositional devices. With Ensor, the distorted forms, brilliant color and shocking content are so overwhelming that it is after much study that one becomes aware of the compositional devices. An example of this is the similarity of the pivotal figures (Jesus in Ensor, and the mother and child in Seurat) which in both paintings form the center of a great compositional X shape. Ensor's Christ is almost indistinguishable among the mass of the crowd, but Seurat's central figure has two distinct steps leading to it in the profiles of the standing woman and the seated girls. From the left, the dog's curving tail leads the eye from the reclining figure to the mother and child.
These differences do not detract from either artist but serve to point up the fact that each was striving for different goals to be reached by different formal means. Seurat has given a very rational, yet poetic, treatment to a balanced and harmonious theme. His forms also reflect his concepts, personality, and manner of working. "Not only was each step to be taken slowly but each was to be explicitly tested." He made literally hundreds and hundreds of drawings and oil studies of the scene during the two years (1884-86) in which he worked on La Grande Jatte. Ensor has, on the other hand, created an intensely expressive statement, rapidly executed, and much more immediate in its appeal as well as conception. The difference between Seurat and Ensor is the fundamental difference between the rational and the imaginative individual. Ensor of the fantastic imagination is never more lucid than in The Entry. Every brush stroke—every distortion—testifies to his trenchant jocular sense of burlesque and irony. Similarly in the motionless eternal Grande Jatte we have a succinct expression of Seurat's conception of painting as basically a scientific and rational act both balanced and harmonious.

This difference is no doubt partly due to the different backgrounds of the two men. While Seurat becomes the epitome of the classical French tradition, Ensor continues the more emotional romantic tradition of the north. Ensor's Entry does exist somewhat loosely within the northern landscape tradition of the past. He was aware of the general tradition of the north and deeply steeped in his Flemish
culture. Ensor, like Bosch and Bruegel, is painstakingly aware of the observable world about him. He selects natural objects from the real world and transforms them, by imagination and juxtaposition, into elements of dream and nightmare. This is in definite contrast to Seurat who (as shown by the many preliminary sketches for the Grande Jatte) transforms objects from the natural world into more intellectually pleasing, harmonious shapes.

Very briefly, Seurat's Grande Jatte is related to the classical French tradition of Fête Champêtre. Leslie Katz has noticed its relation to Watteau's Embarkation for the Isle of Cythera which "was also composed by assembling direct studies of individuals and groups in a landscape setting." The informal subject matter of the Grande Jatte has its predecessor in Daumier whose theme of the urban masses appealed to Seurat.

Seurat, like Ensor, evolved his mature statement after first working in a more conservative manner. Millet and the Barbizon painters have been seen by W. I. Homer as having had an early influence upon Seurat. He also notes an obvious relation to Vermeer in a comparison of Seurat's Mother of the Artist (1873) and Vermeer's Lacemaker. This is important in view of the fact that both Seurat and Vermeer exhibit a similar conception of forms as highly abstract shapes. This, coupled with the influence upon Seurat of Puvis-de-Chavannes points up the fact that the Grande Jatte developed out of a tradition of a highly abstract concept of shapes and of very
intellectual relationships between form and subject matter.

Both Ensor and Seurat developed their concepts of color in and around the milieu of impressionism. Seurat attempted to inject a more scientific approach to painting into the impressionist's concern with the effects of light upon objects in nature. In contrast to Ensor's more free, intuitive use of color, Seurat relied heavily upon his explorations of the scientific color theories of Chevreul, Helmholtz and others. Prior to this, many painters had been interested in theories of color and Seurat carried this interest to a scientific conclusion of sorts. While pointillism was more than technique to Seurat it was to him "...a stern intellectual method of directing his sensations in front of nature by analysis and a final synthesis."

The contrast between Seurat's methodical, intellectual approach to painting and Ensor's free, intuitive handling of form and color (as discussed in the first several chapters) could hardly be greater. The salient fact of Seurat's development—reflected in the Grande Jatte—is that, unlike Ensor (who increasingly gave rein to his fantasy), he continually sought a more rational, scientific approach to painting. It is this basic difference in conception which is graphically seen in the dissimilar handling of form and color in The Entry and the Grande Jatte. While Seurat divided his color carefully and applied it according to a fairly rigid and preconceived theory, Ensor heightened color and piled and slashed the paint about responding to the actual act of painting as well as his expressive whimsey. This
basic difference between the two artists' concept of and approach to painting overshadows in importance whatever impetus Ensor undoubtedly received from seeing Seurat's *Grande Jatte* in 1887.

While the basic difference in expression between Seurat and Ensor is easily seen in the contrasting evolution and use of form and color in *The Entry* and *Grande Jatte*, there is in the content of the two paintings further evidence of the two artists' basically dissimilar outlook. As we have seen earlier, Ensor makes a bitter, devastating, yet whimsical attack upon society in *The Entry*. Seurat, by comparison, is basically in harmony with his environment. His method of working reflects his acceptance of the scientific principles of his day. In the *Grande Jatte* he depicts quite calmly the bland recreation of a complacent society. It is interesting that Seurat, whose work like Ensor's had been ridiculed by the public, could react as calmly as he did to his environment. Perhaps it was due to his absorption with aesthetic problems that Seurat was able to transcend in part the society which so severely criticized his work. At any rate, there is in the *Grande Jatte* no trace of the violent reaction to the artist's social environment which so consumed Ensor in *The Entry*. It is a comment and not a criticism that is offered in the *Grande Jatte*--a comment made in most intellectual terms rather than the emotional criticism of Ensor. While Seurat's comment is intellectualized to the point of being unimportant as criticism, Ensor's criticism is overtly emotional to the degree that it interferes somewhat with the aesthetic
The Entry. Such widely divergent views of their environments as expressed in The Entry and the Grande Jatte serve to further illustrate the distance between the basic ideas of the two artists.

This examination of the two paintings illustrates not only fundamental differences between the thinking of Ensor and Seurat, but also offers proof of the fact that any great artist alters a technique with his own creative personality. In The Entry and the Grande Jatte, both artists have distorted form and color for personal expression rather than to reflect nature. In contrast to Seurat's more rational evolution of forms, Ensor has become increasingly freer and more expressive in his use of translucent, broken color along with a personal symbolism to develop his imaginative and fantastic vision. His background and immediate environment have done much to direct his love of the fantastic into a satirical expression which reaches its zenith in The Entry. In the differences between The Entry and the Grande Jatte, evolving as they did within a relatively similar context of time and place, we may see the influences of the individual creative personalities of the two artists. It is these essential differences of outlook and expression (shaped by their personalities and environments) which become important to an understanding of the artists and their work.

While Ensor was directly moved by Seurat's Grande Jatte into creating a large comprehensive statement of his own aesthetic beliefs—the statement is distinctly his own and his expression is, in this case, shaped more by his peculiar vision and individual response to society than by
any external influences from Seurat and the rational, planned Neo-Impressionist aesthetic.
CHAPTER FIVE

Ensor's Expression and His Contemporary Artists

We have seen that, while impressed by Seurat's Grande Jatte, Ensor's expressive Entry was more directly influenced by his own creative personality conditioned as it was by his time and culture. A consideration of Ensor's expression in relation to other post-impressionist painters further emphasizes the importance of Ensor's particular fantastic vision directed as it was against a hostile society.

Of Ensor's contemporaries, none gave themselves so wholly to fantasy as did Odilon Redon who created in his strange jewel-like paintings and soft charcoal drawings a dream world of poetic form. Both Ensor and Redon were on the imaginative left in a period which ranged from Seurat to Van Gogh and was diverse enough to encompass the vision of both Gustave Moreau and Toulouse-Lautrec. Because of the element of fantasy present in the oeuvre of both men the question arises as to the relation between them. As with Seurat, Ensor had seen Redon's work but again, the similarities between the two artists are shown by a considered study of specific works to be of less importance than the differences. These essential differences in outlook and personality create in the work of the two men a basically dissimilar expression—realization of which increases our understanding of the work of both artists.
Redon's oeuvre is strange, evocative, and has a somnambulistic quality about it that caused Huysmans to write that it seems easily likened to "fantasy of sickness and delirium." This is readily seen in Redon's many drawings, lithographs, and paintings of flowers in which submerged, conjoined, or juxtaposed are soft, haunting, spectre-like heads and figures. This sense of a dream-like disassociation is present in his lithographs and drawings such as Pegasus Captive or Eyes in the Forest where elements of standard iconographical themes are incorporated into a vision of haunting delicacy and disturbing psychological juxtapositions. Through all of Redon's work there runs a feeling of contemplative psychological unrest which mounts at times to a distinct but unexplained horror.

These associative fantasies (often heightened by such evocative titles as The Breath that Impels Beings is also in the Spheres or The Eye like a Strange Balloon Moves Toward Infinity) are firmly rooted in a careful observation of nature. Redon depicts a nature almost microscopically observed in its most silent and secret aspects such as the hidden delicacy of night flowers or inscrutable mystery of germination. Redon has repeatedly attested to his reliance upon nature.

"I have always felt the need to copy nature in small objects, particularly the casual or accidental. It is only after making an effort of will to represent with minute care a grass blade, a stone, a branch, the face of an old wall, that I am overcome by the irresistible urge to create something imaginary...my originality consists in bringing to life in a human way, improbable beings and making them
live according to the laws of probability
by putting as far as possible the logic of the
visible at the service of the invisible.\textsuperscript{79}

While reflecting in his statements and work the contention of Baudelaire
that as an artist paints what he sees rather than what he dreams, art is
diminished, Redon also had a high admiration for such artists as Corot
and Courbet. He sensed in their work a poetic expression based upon an
observance of natural forms. In his early, \textit{Near the Harbor: Brittany}
of 1880 there is a trace of Corot's architectonic grasp of form while in
the \textit{Portrait of Mme Redon} of 1882, Redon echoes yet heightens the
poetic, searching, introspection of the earlier master's portraits.

Both Ensor and Redon anchored their fantasy upon a close
knowledge of nature; too, both exhibit a common concern for formal ele­
mments in the expression of a personal vision. Upon careful consideration
of these similarities, however, essential differences become evident
which point to a basically different expression which results from the
different character of each artist's personal vision.

In commenting upon a possible relationship between the work
of Redon and Francisco Goya, John Rewald has written

"There is no anger, no revolt, no sarcasm,
no wish to ridicule existing institutions
behind the creations of Redon: they are an
exploration of an enigmatic beyond for its
own sake, for the sake of their purely
plastic portents.\textsuperscript{80}

This psychological, personal quality of Redon's fantasy contrasts
greatly with Ensor's use of his fantastic vision to attack, satirize,
and ridicule his society and its institutions. In none of Redon's oeuvre is there anything approaching the social criticism present in The Entry just as with Ensor there is never the psychological contemplation completely disassociated from any physical, social environment which appears in almost all of Redon's oeuvre.  

Again John Rewald in mentioning this difference between the two artists remarks of Ensor that his

"...imagination remained pedestrian and never quite spread its wings wide enough to take off from the ground. His subject matter, for all its singularity, always kept close to the anecdotal and his paintings seemed to illustrate incidents cleverly contrived by the artist. The special nature of his inventiveness kept his imagination within the bounds of the grotesque and there was none of the element of the inescapable that seemed always to guide Redon's hand and that endowed even his naturalistic bouquets of flowers with a mysterious charm."  

Much of this difference can be explained by the dissimilar outlook and type of imagination of the two. Ensor is distinctly in the northern tradition which from the middle ages has expressed itself largely in terms of the anecdotal. In Ensor we see the anecdote raised to a level of universality and social criticism by the artist's power of formal expression. If the work seems cleverly contrived by the artist it is because it is contrived by Ensor. The Entry is a monument to the expressive and satirical genius of a man who is able to deliver such a personal assault upon the world by means of an avowedly religious
motif. The work of the two men reflects the basic difference in their philosophies. Redon would be considered a surrealist in twentieth century terms while Ensor approaches an expressionism. Ensor would never agree with Redon that "Nothing is achieved in art by will power alone. Everything is done by docile submission to the unconscious." With Ensor it is the fantasy and inventive power of the artist turned against an unbearable society rather than any "docile submission to the unconscious." The very nature of satire demands a certain more literal approach and The Entry is indicative of Ensor's political and social awareness of society as well as his literary and religious consciousness.

This basic difference in the expression of Ensor and Redon may be seen in each artist's handling of the graphics' medium and more specifically in their interpretation of the temptation of St. Anthony theme. Since Ensor's graphic work largely dates from 1886, the year in which Redon's lithographs created such a stir in Brussels, we may assume that his contact with Redon's work showed Ensor the possibilities for expressive fantasy within the print medium. What similarity there is between the graphic work of Ensor and Redon lies in their common use of the print media to express a personal fantasy. This, then, is a generic similarity rather than any specifically similar expression. For, in terms of formal elements, iconography, and content, Ensor's graphic expression differs markedly from that of Redon.

Ensor differs from Redon in his use of formal elements--most
notably composition—to express himself. Redon consistently employs a centralized shape whether that of a head, group of flowers, spider, etc. around which the other compositional elements work. Ensor by contrast is repeatedly open and expansive in his compositions which are at the same time crowded with a confused clutter of forms which, far from moving inward, often disperse themselves to the point of a disjointed confusion. (See Cataclysms of 1888) Line is used by Ensor to create an active moving rhythm while Redon employs it largely to sharpen and selectively emphasize aspects of his thoughtful and often motionless forms. The strange clouded space of Redon is at once immediate and distant. As in a dream one feels a disrupted sense of space and time sequences. Ensor, while achieving a sense of nearness and remoteness in the spatial structure of his graphic work (see The Capture of A Strange City of 1888), does so in very literal descriptive terms unlike the implied and half-suggested "psychic space" of Redon.

We have here mentioned only a few of the extensive formal differences in the graphic work of Redon and Ensor. Suffice it to say that these formal differences parallel the disparities in concept and content which we have discussed in the work of the two men. As a further example of the differences between Ensor and Redon we may briefly consider the theme of the "Temptation of Saint Anthony" and the response of each to it.

Redon completed three series of lithographs and one of
woodcuts dealing with the theme of the temptation of Saint Anthony. He was directly inspired by Flaubert's book on this subject and intended the prints to serve as illustrations for it. In the series of 1888-89, we again see the centralized composition and introspective balance of formal and literal elements characteristic of Redon's work. As Jean Seznec writes in his article "The Temptation of St. Anthony in Art," Redon has

"...recaptured some of the spiritual aspects of the theme. Here at last are mystery and anguish and terror—not physical but metaphysical terror."88

This quality of a psychological terror may be seen in Redon's Death of 1889. Here as Rewald states

"the image he invented was completely devoid of irony. Out of a sweeping spiral emerges a sinister figure in the throes of agony rather than one exuding a macabre sarcasm."89

This is a personal departure by Redon from the traditionally much more literal Saint Anthony iconography which stresses a much more physical assault upon the saint.90

Ensor, in his Tribulations of St. Anthony (1887), shows a much more traditional conception of the theme, modified by his own personal expression which was directed against his society. Here we see the traditional vast landscape and descriptive fantasy of the northern artist. Ensor, however, has imbued the theme with a feeling for the humorous, the ridiculous. This is shown by his changing the title from temptations to Tribulations of St. Anthony. This implies
that the trifling assaults of the crowd merely bothers the saint (or artist) rather than menace him. Ensor, while having

"...the same uncanny genius (as Bosch and Bruegel) for creating swarms of monsters that fill the land and sea and obscure the sky..."

nonetheless expresses in the Saint Anthony painting basically his own obsessions.

"Ensor seems to have had the vision of a world polluted by sin; he detected the bestial ugliness of the multitude, the gruesome character of the modern grotesque. His cruel bitter humor made him select masks and skeletons as his favorite toys. But his technique, too, is extremely personal. The audacity of his imagination is matched by the high key of his color and the boldness of his brush."91

Thus we see in the different interpretations of the Saint Anthony theme as well as other graphic work of Ensor and Redon examples of the fundamentally dissimilar character of each artist's fantasy. Redon's mysterious, flowing, almost unconscious sense of fantasy contrasts to Ensor's sarcastic, bitter, yet whimsical use of the fantastic to ridicule his society. While Ensor's fantasy is literal, descriptive, and directed toward an external end, Redon's more inscrutable imagination seeks no comprehensible goal, offers no comment, but instead exists unto itself for the sake of itself.

In the reaction of their fellow artists to the work of Ensor and Redon we may see a ramification of this difference in their expression. Redon was virtually lionized by the Symbolist writers and
painters. He enjoyed their widespread admiration and discussed at lengths with them questions of art and aesthetics. Bernard, Gauguin, Serusier, and the other Nabis admired his art. Denis remarked that

"Redon has been one of my masters and one of the friendships of my youth... he was the ideal of the Symbolist generation—he was our Mallarmé!"

and further we find

"It was Redon who, with his series of lithographs and admirable charcoal drawings, determined in a spiritual sense the evolution of art around 1890. He is at the origin of all the aesthetic innovations, or renovations, of all the revolutions of taste which we have witnessed since then."92

Given the mystery, the occult imagery, and obscure personal symbolism of Redon's work, it is easy to see why the Symbolist writers appreciated it so. Heavy with meaning, precious, yet often so vague as to be unintelligible to all but the artist himself, Redon's work, at times, approaches a pictorial equivalent to that of Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Wilde.

In contrast to Redon, Ensor, while embraced by such avant-garde Belgian Symbolists as Verhaeren and Picard, often as not offended even his fellow artists by his too literal attacks upon contemporary values and activities. While poets and painters could at times applaud his innovative fantasy, they could not help but truckle at his often crude and sometimes macabre sense of iconoclasm and ridicule. We have noted earlier the reaction of Les XX to Ensor's attempt to exhibit
The Entry in 1889. The rejection of Ensor, by the men of Les XX, is indicative of the intellectual climate that could accept Redon or Seurat but not tolerate Ensor. Redon's works, as we have seen, were close to the Symbolist literature while Seurat's paintings were essentially attempts to reduce painting to a science. Personal symbolism and a rational aesthetic were at least understandable to the Brussels public, but Ensor, with his irrational fantasies barbed and directed at society itself, was intolerable. The Entry could not be dismissed as mere dreams or daubings of color; it was offensive on moral and political grounds as well as strange and irrational in its aesthetic.

There existed around 1890 a general spirit of revolt against the accepted canons of art and literature. This spirit was manifested in Symbolism, the Nabis, and other movements, and was effected, in fact, by such groups as The Societe des Artistes Independents and Les XX. It would seem, however, that even this revolt took certain common forms as we have seen. In general, the avant-garde attempted to replace old rules with new ones. To be sure the aesthetics developed were new and much needed ones and while they did stress the importance of the artist's individual vision and expression, they all attempted to establish a new tradition in place of the old. The fact that the avant-garde groups were much given to theoretical aspects of painting, and held long discussions on aesthetics, indicates a felt need to justify this revolt. How this affected the painting of the day may be seen in the relationship of Gauguin to Emile Bernard. Both men believed that
abstract emotions could be best expressed by equivalents in line, form, and other intrinsic elements of a painting rather than through literary associations. Bernard went much further toward theory and formulated certain canons around which rallied Gauguin and the other Symbolist painters. Color and form, along with perspective and composition, were altered to achieve a decorative, as opposed to naturalistic expression of their personal feelings. Maurice Denis and Paul Serusier carried on these ideas stressing that the purpose of art was an "evocation of an idea without expressing it." The essential similarity between all the differing theories of Neo-Impressionism, Symbolism and the Nabis was the belief that there are certain aesthetic principles in all art and the implied (although never explicit) belief that adherence to certain canons of expression was bound to produce a work of art.  

Ensor was a painter and not a theorist. While he existed in the center of these social, political, and aesthetic developments, he maintained an isolation from them despite the fact that he was deeply and personally involved with his contemporaries of the avant-garde. His Entry while subject to many influences remains a unique statement. The fact that his contemporaries could not accept it shows the distance between Ensor and themselves. Ensor, unlike the others, joined no group holding a central theory. He seldom theorized and, while reacting to many of the same stimuli as his fellows, drew largely upon his fantasy conditioned as it was by his Flemish background and early life to express himself.
His writings, while showing the stylistic influences and a certain affectation of the Symbolist poets, contain no theories. For the most part they are as illogical as his painting. As in his "On Women" of 1925 his writings are often vindictive and attack institutions or are choice bits of barbed humor such as his "Three Weeks at the Academy." These seem to be attempts at verbal equivalents to the grotesque and personally emotional statements of The Entry. However, nowhere in his writings are there any serious manifestoes on style and no attempts to establish formulae of painting. While he was opposed to Impressionism as "an art of cold calculation and narrow observation" the closest he ever came to expressing any theory of painting was his famous statement that

"reason is the enemy of art, artists dominated by reason lose all feeling, their powerful instinct weakens, their inspiration is impoverished, their heart loses its vital spirit ...All rules, all canons of art belch death."96

In many ways Ensor is unique in this personal isolation. Van Gogh drew much from his intense relationships with other artists as did Gauguin, Seurat, Signac, Bernard, and Denis. Indeed, Ensor stands out more sharply from his contemporaries because of this spiritual isolation from both contemporary aesthetic currents and the vapidity of the bourgeois life. While the others may have railed at society and established new canons of art, Ensor seems to be virtually alone in his attempts to forsake all forms of regimentation and theory and to draw upon his strange fantasy for his art and expression.
It is true that during the late nineteenth century, the truly creative artists were increasingly isolated from society as a whole. These artists were aware of this isolation as well; Cezanne worked and lived in seclusion, Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh were driven further and further from the accepted regimens of society, while Gauguin attempted to escape his hostile society by fleeing to the South Seas. In this respect, these artists were similar to Ensor and this emphasizes the powerful effect of his spiritual and cultural environment on any creative artist. However, these artists and others banded together aesthetically in the face of this hostile society while Ensor joined no formal movement and followed no group aesthetics. Instead, after his early battles with members of Les XX and disappointments at the hands of the critics, he retired to Ostend where he lived alone drawing upon his mind and the objects of his home for inspiration.

This is not to say that there are no influences of Symbolism and Neo-Impressionism to be found in Ensor's work. It is rather to emphasize the fact that he took from these influences certain elements, transposing and adapting them to further his personal expression. An example which we have seen is Ensor's use of the broken color of Seurat to further his own more intuitive expression. Ensor's masks and skeletons, while obviously symbolic, are more spontaneous, personal, and literal than the more intellectual use of forms and symbols which characterizes much of the Symbolist paintings. Ensor took what he could use from the currents surrounding him, but never adhered to the
theories behind the innovations of these groups—just as he joined Les XX for purposes of exhibition and not to share in any group aesthetic.

Ensor remained interested in the work of the younger artists and intellectuals. He also kept in touch with developments in, to him, the mad world, but he never seemed to feel the need to belong to any group endeavor that characterized so many of the younger men and most of the twentieth century art movements. Instead he delighted himself with his creations and pretended to care little for the acclaim that finally came. Playing the clown, he referred to himself as

"...The old man gone grey in harness, bent under the yoke of exaggerated tributes"

and saw himself as

"that poor bovine baron who will soon be chewing the cud of choice infusions and the bitter sap of faded laurels."\(^{97}\)

Again in Ensor's own words we have a succinct summary of his relation to his social milieu:

"Ah why satisfy the vile desire of the crowd, a desire without nobility, a curiosity that weights heavily upon us, the super-sensitive. Let us resist communion with the mob! To be artists, let us live in hiding!"\(^{98}\)

In these words we see feeling common to artists of the 1890's that "society is the enemy of man and formal art is the enemy of the artist" but in Ensor this becomes a personal credo in an all pervading sense and not merely the battle cry of artists in revolt as it was for many
of his contemporaries. Ensor's revolt against accepted canons of art never sought to replace these discarded standards with new ones. Rather, he carried the revolt to the individual to its end and judged his works solely by personal standards.
Ensor's Expression and his Social Environment

In our consideration of the departures from tradition, the distortions of form and color which allow Ensor to increase his personal expression in The Entry, we have seen, consistently, the importance of his psychological self—his creative personality—to his work. We have attempted to show how because of his unique personal statement Ensor's work differs from, but is never entirely separate from, the work of his contemporaries and past traditions. In the second and third chapters we have stressed the importance of the Belgian culture in directing Ensor's development toward the fantastic, the satirical, and the anecdotal which is expressed in The Entry. Of equal importance in the channeling of Ensor's personal fantasy into the social criticism intrinsic to The Entry was the influence of his contemporary society against which he reacted so strongly. Since any artist is inextricably bound up in his physical and aesthetic environment, a knowledge of this matrix is necessary for an understanding of his work. The immediacy of Ensor's Entry to the social milieu of his day as well as his affinity in some respects to other young writers and artists of his time demands an examination of the context in which The Entry was created. 99

Many of the developing social movements of the last half of the nineteenth century found their fullest development in Belgium. In
many ways the small, highly industrialized, recently independent country of Belgium became a microcosm of the social and cultural changes that were reshaping Europe. Change was rampant as an imperial industrialism brought about more and more material wealth and comfort. Liberalism tended to be submerged under increasing nationalism and mercantilism. Religion was changing in an "era of machinery and materialism" which increasingly became less spiritual and more fatalistic. Science was glorified and commercialism seemed justified by social interpretations of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.  

In art, too, the impressionists had culminated the development away from the romanticism of the first part of the century, through realism to a scientific naturalism. It is in the flourishing of this style that we can see the large degree to which the spirit of science and rational materialism had penetrated the arts. During the last two decades of the century, however, a cultural reaction to this glorification of the material set in. Drawing upon many elements, among them the romanticism and rococo of the past as well as the natural forms of leaves and plants, the new movement had a variety of names and manifestations in the many different countries in which it appeared. *Fin de Siècle, Jugendstil, The Decadence, Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau* are a few of the different names for it. In all its variety of names and aspects, however, it was a new cultural spirit opposed to many of the past forms of art and the materialism which they served. This new style flourished greatly in Belgium no doubt at least
partially because of the chauvinistic desire of the Flemish people to assert their cultural identity. Belgium, relatively recently an independent nation, was jealously involved in Europe's struggle for riches, colonies, and power. Their wholehearted embracing of the art-nouveau movement may be seen as a means to assert their cultural integrity.

The widespread manifestations of the art-nouveau spirit are described by Holbrook Jackson in his book *The Eighteen Nineties*. He refers to the last decade of the nineteenth century as

"...an epoch of experiment with some achievement and some remorse...the old battle between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, materialist and mystic, Christian and Pagan, but fought from a great variety of positions....The one certainty is that society is the enemy of man and formal art is the enemy of the artist."\(^{102}\) (My underlining).

Oppulent, decadent, and craving novelty, the fin de siècle spirit swept the eighteen nineties. Conventions were attacked and "to shock the bourgeoisie" became a strong force behind the works and lives of Wilde, Beardsley, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Hauptmann, and Maeterlinck. Ensor, too, illustrates this tendency in *The Entry*. Here we see all the social institutions of a rich, materialistic society ridiculed. In the works of these men we can see that the popular connotation of art nouveau as an "Art For Art's Sake" movement of aesthetes completely divorced from considerations of the "real" world is mistaken. The great writers and artists were equally concerned with problems of life and society.\(^{103}\) This concern manifests itself (like so many other aspects of art nouveau) in a variety of forms. The anti-social behavior
of an Oscar Wilde or the renunciation of society by a Gauguin is a direct result of a contact with and a concern for society. In The Entry we can see a similar interest in the artist's society.

These innovations in art and literature were met by the public and the critics with an outrage similar to that which greeted The Entry in 1888. While the public was offended by Seurat and some of these poets, they were infuriated by Ensor. Not only were his works crude departures from the real into the fantastic but worse, there was this intolerable ridicule and condemnation of all the very basic social structures.

Ensor's unique psychological self is in many ways conditioned by his time and culture. His refusal to enter into the vapid life of the bourgeoisie, his flaunting of their demands and often good-natured, at times vicious pricking of their values appears as a direct reaction to the mores of his time. Here again the influence of Flanders seems to be present where Ensor's retreat from life into his fantasy is tolerated as an amusing eccentricity and not condemned as a neurosis. Indeed, at times this seems the only "normal" reaction possible in a society who is so quick to jeer and ridicule as did Ensor's in 1890. Ensor, the recluse of Ostend, fits into the tradition of Belgian artists who remain close to their birth places all their lives and paint about universality in terms of the familiars and commonplaces of everyday life.

Ensor not only has changed the theme of the entry of Christ
to a distinctly Flemish concept, but he has modified the subject much further into an expressive personal statement of his own ideas and his reaction to his environment. The Entry not only exists as a work of art in itself, but also as a document by which we can examine Ensor, the artist, and his society.

To Ensor, this painting was the mob of society, cruel and incapable of understanding either Christ or the artist. He had been bitterly disappointed by the critics' reactions to his earlier works. Even his early brilliantly executed still lifes and interiors were met with unmerciful abuse. He has written:

"The first time I exhibited at LaChrysalide, although my intentions were peaceful, I upset pictorial convention. The critics vied with one another in tearing me to pieces... I was abused, insulted, proclaimed a madman, a fool; I was called nasty, bad, incapable, and ignorant. A simple cabbage somehow became obscene; my placid interiors, my bourgeois salons, hotbeds of revolution." 105

In The Entry of Christ Into Brussels Ensor has expressed his contempt for the mediocrity and stupidity of mankind as well as for the opinions of his detractors. The venomous rage of a man subjected to the abuse of a society devoid of any feeling is transformed in The Entry into a lyrical as well as cynical statement by the delightful fantasy of the artist's mind as he conjures up his myriad grotesques and exaggerations of the face of society.

Ensor is closely tied to the new developments in literature and music as well as art. Like the Symbolist poets and other writers of
the time who withdrew into obtuse and personal symbolism in an attempt to reject and condemn their official culture, Ensor has created his own world of fantasy in The Entry. However, as we have seen, he directs this fantasy with skill and reckless humor against the offenses of his society.

The Entry like other great works of the time goes beyond mere railing at the general philistinism. It becomes a statement of a man's personal vision encompassing all of life as well as the society of man. Jackson perceives the spirituality to which the great artists of the eighteen nineties aspired and says that underneath

"all the cynicism, and petulances and flippancies of the decadence, the febrile self-assertion, the voluptuousness, the perversity were, consciously or unconsciously, efforts towards the rehabilitation of spiritual power."106

While Jackson here refers specifically to the literary works of the so-called "decadent period" of the eighteen nineties in England, there are many parallels between the literary manifestations of the fin de siècle spirit and the work of Ensor.

Ensor has certain characteristics in common with such a writer as Oscar Wilde, for example. In his writings as well as his paintings, Ensor is endowed with the personal delicacy and unique style which was so eagerly sought by the art nouveau artists. A comparison of the writings of Ensor and Wilde shows the concern of both for the "right word"—the most choice expression.107 Ensor, however,
can be associated but loosely and spiritually with the period. He represents but one lyrical aspect of a strange and many-faceted age. It is true that in many ways Ensor seems to epitomize the feeling of the era—opposed to society, eccentric, many-sided in his talents and endeavors, given to personal satirical, almost mystical expression, Ensor is at home in the epoch. Yet in a strange way he is closer to the spirit of The Blue Bird of Maeterlinck than to Wilde's Dorian Grey. This affinity for the hauntingly sad lyricism of Maeterlinck becomes increasingly evident after intensive study of The Entry just as the painting's kinship with the art nouveau emerges only after lengthy consideration of the work and the society. There is a magical quality to Ensor which must be sensed along with his lyrical personal expression that makes him unique. Perhaps in his later years (after 1900 when his creative powers waned) when he becomes more consciously eccentric, more obvious in his work, then he even more closely approaches the dandyism and decadence which is a part of the art nouveau. In his work from 1880-1900, however, he is unique, lyrical, and follows delightfully his own whimsical fantasy.

This kinship with the avant-garde literati of the day is seen in his close friendship with many of the Belgian Symbolists. Ensor's earliest champions against the attacks made by the critics were men such as Eugene Demolder, Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, Edmond Picard, and Georges Eekhoud, who defended him even when many of his fellow painters rejected his work. This regard for Ensor by the Symbolists is
understandable in the light of some of the reasons for the evolution of the Symbolist movement. The trend of French nineteenth century literature toward naturalism parallels the developments in painting. The growing importance of positivist philosophy and a concern for social problems after 1850 developed into a realist literature which sought to maintain an objective view of life. From the realist novels of Flaubert, this concern for objectivity led to an attempt to bring science and literature closer together. Zola's novels in their feeling for accurate descriptions and concern for the physical aspects of bourgeois life are somewhat similar to the paintings of Manet and some of the early impressionists. It was against this materialism in literature that the idealist reaction to Symbolism took place. Philosophy had begun to tell man there was no absolute reality. Imaginative and fantastic literature seemed as valid an answer to this materialism as post-impressionism was to science in art.

Ensor's anecdotal quality would place him, more specifically, closer to the Belgian Symbolists. There has always been, in Belgian literature, a tendency toward a very pictorial expression. Emile Cammaerts, a friend of Ensor and one of the organizers of Les XX in 1884, remarks that Belgian authors often seem to write with a brush. Camille Lemonnier (prominent younger poet and close friend of Ensor) is said by Cammaerts to have "gloried in this painterly quality (of his writing)...and prided himself on his close connection with the painters whose work he translated into prose."
These writers were among Ensor's closest friends. They defended him in many of the obscure and esoteric journals of the day and organized exhibitions of his work such as the one held in 1898 under the auspices of LePlume in Paris. While this exhibition was virtually ignored by the press and public, the special issue of the magazine devoted to Ensor received some attention. Although the issue could hardly be considered a success, it is significant because of the importance of some of the contributors. Besides Demolder, Lemonnier, and Maeterlinck; Emile Verhaeren, Edmond Picard, Camille Mauclair, Octave Maus, Blanche Rousseau, Georges Lemmen, Maurice des Ombiaux, Christian Beck, Jules du Jardin, Pol de Mont, and Louise Delattre, all prominent writers, contributed to the issue.\textsuperscript{109}

These and other avant-garde writers not only appreciated Ensor's work but were themselves among the artist's close friends. This is important when we consider that virtually all of Ensor's Belgian literary contemporaries were aware of and actively involved in political issues of the day. There existed a close relationship between the Socialist-Anarchist political groups and the Belgian literati.\textsuperscript{110} Both felt keenly the outrages of the established order and both attempted to better man's condition and free him both physically and spiritually from the bondage imposed by a corrupt society.

Many of the Symbolist poets and painters were anarchists or socialists. Although they varied as to the nature and extent of their allegiances, Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, Luce; the poets Verhaeren,
Merrill, Mauplain, and Mallarmé; and the critics Faneon, Mirbeau, Alexandre, and Geoffroy were some of the many intellectuals who were caught up in the anarchist movement. Ensor spent the years 1877-80 in Brussels where he was a frequent guest in the home of Ernest Rousseau, a professor of physics and the Rector of the University of Brussels, where a brilliant group of men holding the most divergent opinions gathered. Besides Rops there were Eugene Demolder and the Reclus brothers—both "notorious anarchists"—as well as Hector Denis, the Socialist leader and the Rousseau's son, Ernest, with whom Ensor became fast friends. Ensor was twenty-one years old at this time—a highly impressionable age for a young man to be in such heady political company against the background of class struggle, strikes, and anarchist bombings which swept France and Belgium during the eighties and nineties.

While Ensor himself was not a member of any particular Socialist or Anarchist organization, his concern with Socialist ideals and his criticism of the bourgeoisie are important manifestations of his time and culture modified by his own creative personality. If we define anarchism as essentially the "affirmation of the rights of the individual" and in an aesthetic sense see it as leading to "the rejection of old rules and doctrines and insistence on the sole authority of the creative mind" then we may more fully comprehend Ensor's philosophic rapport with the movement.

The particular form which Ensor's social expression takes in
The Entry, however, is largely the result of the influence of his own creative personality. In the whimsical and fantastic elements we see Ensor's unique self influenced, if at all, by an art for art's sake aesthetic where the artist is "free from all laws beyond those imposed by the form of his art itself." Ensor is always aware of, yet never dominated by, his environment. While The Entry is a synthesis of aesthetism and social criticism—two principal currents of intellectual thought at this time—it is brought about and given its unique form by Ensor's personal and whimsical sense of satire and fantasy.

It can never quite be said of Ensor that his environment ever entirely dominates his individuality. He always maintains a bizarre independence (often, it is true, seemingly for its own sake and, it would seem in later years, to the detriment of his art). While his society exerted many pressures upon Ensor, driving him to attack it, Ensor's reaction to his social environment was distinct and personal. Conditioned by his time and culture; existing apart from yet within its overall feeling, the expressive social criticism of The Entry stands as the reply of the individual to the rudeness and insensitivity of the mass. In this respect, while literal and anecdotal, reflective of but not imprisoned by its time and culture, The Entry takes on a universality which transcends its time and place, and elevates it to the status of a great work of art.
CONCLUSION

In this study we have taken a specific painting, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* by James Ensor, and considered it inasmuch as it is representative of the personal expression of the artist. We have examined its formal elements in a particular attempt to understand Ensor's innovative use of distorted forms and heightened color to further a personal expression. The past tradition and contemporary culture of Belgium have been shown to have had a substantial influence upon the direction taken by Ensor's personal expression. His innate fantastic vision was imbued with a sense of ridicule and caustic social satire as a result of his contact with his social environment. It is this quality of social criticism which, coupled with his distinct and fantastic vision, distinguished Ensor's expression from that of his contemporaries such as Seurat and Redon.

It is hoped that by such a study as this, based upon a searching and thorough examination of actual objects of art, a more clear understanding of a particular artist may be possible. By this method, too, we can more precisely assay the nature of an artist's innovations. Further, through an understanding of an artist's background and relation to his contemporary historical, aesthetic, and social trends, his contribution to the development of the art of a period may be more definitely established.

The essence of creativity in an art historical sense would
seem to be that any artist draws selectively upon elements of the past as well as elements from his contemporary cultural matrix and then synthesizes these influences with his own personal contribution to form a new and different artistic expression. These assimilations from the past are very important and provide a continuity to the history of art. An artist may be aware of these past traditions either through a conscious study of past masters or through a more intuitive awareness of the whole of past art. An artist's work will be influenced (again consciously and unconsciously) by his cultural environment, the manner in which he has been taught to think and see, as well as by the value systems of his society. In a great work of art, all the many influences upon an artist are in some manner altered or transformed by the creative personality of the artist. It is only after the absorption and the synthesizing of these influences with the artist's personal contribution that any new and unique work results.

We have seen Ensor consistently modifying all possible stylistic influences with his own creative personality. Elements of the northern landscape tradition as well as compositional and perspective influences of Callot and Seurat have been made unique by Ensor's bold use of color and rapid slashing brushwork. This color is an adaptation of the impressionists' scientific color and broken-stroke brush technique to a very personal, more intuitive use of intense color and a lyrical handling of paint. Emerging from the darker works of his early period, influenced as they were by the realists and traditional
Flemish painting, Ensor added an all-pervading light and an unfettered fantasy in *The Entry* which transposes yet never severs it from past tradition.

Ensor stands as evidence that the creative artist draws selectively upon the past and imbues his selections with his own personality. We can see this in the many sketches, wash drawings, and water colors which Ensor made "in the manner of" such artists as Rembrandt, Turner, Degas, Daumier, and others. In every instance he has infused into these studies his own lyrical feeling for the fanciful, the macabre—giving a weird trancelike stare to his "Woman at a Cafe Table After Degas" or a haunted phantom quality to the figures which emerge around the sketch of "The Old Woman After Rembrandt." Even in these exercises—supposed copies of other masters—he has created a peculiarly Ensorian quality which is unmistakably his own.

It is this quality about Ensor—his ability to select and transpose influences, creating from them new and unique statements—which we see most succinctly in *The Entry*. It is precisely this quality which along with the universal nature of his protest (the eternal protest of the individual against the outrages of the mass) has created in *The Entry* a monumental and lasting work of art. A work which, though in the tradition of the anecdotal and while protesting the excesses of a specific society, still transcends time and place. Ensor's *Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889* expresses in paint his credo increasingly
valid to artists of our time

"...why satisfy the vile desire of the crowd, a desire without nobility, a curiosity that weighs heavily upon us, the super-sensitive. Let us resist communion with the mob! To be artists, let us live in hiding!"
FOOTNOTES


2. See John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, and John Rewald, *Post Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, for examples of this orientation toward the French culture. These works by Canaday (p. 423) and Rewald (pp. 178-20) illustrate the influence of this orientation upon the authors' analyses of Ensor's *The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889*.

3. See "Ensor's Obituary," *Burlington Magazine* 92: 27, January 1950 and "Poet of the Absurd" by A. Werner, *Artz*, 34: 42-7, April 1960 for examples of the best of these general articles. Articles in such mass media as *Time* and *Life* are, of course, even less accurate.

4. Paul Fierens, *James Ensor*. See in particular his analysis of *The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889*, (pp. 21-22) where he insists that there is no element of social criticism present in the painting. Fierens calls attention to the artist's unique sense of fantasy but does not relate it to the very real note of social criticism which sharpens and directs Ensor's fantasy into the particular form it takes in *The Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889*.

5. See Libby Tannenbaum, *James Ensor*. In this work the author combines a thorough, sensitive, and first-hand examination of the oeuvre with painstaking research into the life of the artist to give us the most accurate study of Ensor available to date.

6. For reasons of brevity and clarity, this painting shall be referred to hereafter as simply *The Entry*.


8. Paul Haesaerts, *James Ensor*, pp. 363-364. Ensor's works had, almost without exception, been met with hostile public opinion whenever he exhibited. In 1881, Ensor exhibited with La Chrysalide, a liberal art society. This show, organized by Eugene Demolder, included works by the young Belgian painters, Paul Dubois, Louis Artan, Guillaume Vogels, (Cont.)
Felician Rops, Pericles Pantazis, and several others. The following year Ensor submitted his *Woman Eating Oysters* to the Brussels salon, but it was rejected and when he and Vogels exhibited at the show of the Cercle Artistique, another supposedly avant-garde group, a petition was circulated among the members demanding that he withdraw. L'Essor, yet another progressive art society, accepted Ensor's early painting, *The Lamp Boy* in 1883, but rejected his *Woman Eating Oysters*. After he joined Les XX as a charter member in 1884, there was even more heated criticism of his work and in that year all of the works he submitted to the Brussels Salon were refused.

9. Ibid., p. 364. Les XX had previously shown works by such controversial painters as Odilon Redon and Georges Seurat, and consistently presented the most advanced work in Europe and while the Brussels public was incensed by Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* which the group had shown in 1887, the young artists of Les XX were quite impressed by it. Ensor had (according to his long-time friend, Eugene Demolder) exhibited a large drawing of the same subject matter as *The Entry* at the 1887 exhibition of Les XX which Paul Haesaerts believes may have been the *Hail Jesus, King of the Jews* which Ensor completed in 1885. He had been severely criticized for this drawing not only by the outraged public but by his friends and fellow artists as well. As a result of this uproar, the large painting, *Entry of Christ Into Brussels*, was rejected in 1888 and, rumor has it, that Les XX was told that it would have to vacate its premises if they exhibited it. So offended were Ensor's fellow artists that he came within one vote (his own) of being expelled from the group.


11. See any of the general articles on Ensor in the bibliography. In this study, while acknowledging Ensor's roots to be in the Flemish Tradition, we shall be more concerned with bringing to light other, more immediate influences upon the development of his personal expression.

12. A more detailed account of the nature of Ensor's comment, along with his use of personal symbols to convey his message, may be found toward the end of this chapter and in the following chapter.
13. See Ensor's *Man of Sorrows*, or *Ecce Homo or Christ and His Critics*, of 1891. (Reproduced in Haesaerts, pp. 199, 201.) Vincent Van Gogh also portrayed himself as Christ in several works. See his *Pieta After Delecroix* of 1889-90.

14. See Bruegel's *The Land of Cockayne* (1567) where we have, in the sprawled and helpless figures of the soldier, farmer, and scholar, an obvious comment upon the sins of gluttony. Ensor like Bruegel and other Northern artists depicts the sins of man in allegories. His 1902 series of the "Seven Deadly Sins" is definitely related to such works as *The Land of Cockayne*. With Ensor, the message is transformed into something unique. Cartoon-like, the series is savagely and incisively drawn with the intent of shocking and offending as well as inveighing against vice and evil.

15. For a brief account of this current in Flemish art see "Floating Rocks and Flaming Tubas" by John Canaday, *Horizon*, 4: 3, January 1962, pp. 76-87.

16. See Paul Fierens, *La Peinture Flamande De Bruegel Au XVIII Siecle*, pl. VII.


18. While the same love of improvisation which brought into being the fantastic creatures of Bruegel exists in *The Entry*, Ensor's distortions seem much less intellectual by comparison. Rapidly executed, one feels they derive as much from Ensor's response to the medium and the act of painting as they do from his conscious desire to create a strange and fantastic iconography.

19. In Bosch's *Garden of Worldly Delights* we also get this sense of many separate figures, groups, and episodes which are combined to create a restless crowded movement in a vast and distant landscape setting.

20. Op. Cit., Fierens, *La Peinture Flamande De Bruegel Au XVIII Siecle*, pl. XXV. Many other painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries illustrate this theme and can, in a sense, be viewed as distant spiritual ancestors of Ensor. Van Hemessen, David Teniers, and Antoine Sallaert (Flemish painters of genre, history, and religious processions and events) are good examples. See Edouard Michel, *Les Grandes Maîtres Flamandes*, pp. 180, 186; plates 8, 110, 111.
21. See Ostend Rooftops of 1884. (Reproduced in Haesaerts, p. 253.)

22. See Raymond Escholier, Gros ses Amis et ses Eleves, pl. 11.

23. See Napoleon at Waterloo and The Remorse of the Corsican Ogre of 1890. (Haesaerts p. 319 c.c. 143, 144); The Cuirassiers at Waterloo or Napoleon's Last Stand of 1891 (Haesaerts p. 229); and Napoleon's Farewell of 1897 (Haesaerts p. 124).

24. See Haesaerts p. 123 for reproductions of these two etchings. This combination of influences which Ensor absorbed and transformed into a unique expression may be seen in much of his graphic œuvre as well as such paintings as The Entry. See for example: The Cathedral (1890), Red and White Clowns Evolving (1890), Christ in Hell (1891) etc. etc.

25. Ensor was fond of photography and often worked from snapshots as well as reproductions of other paintings. His engraving Peste Dessus, Peste Dessous, Peste Partout was directly inspired by a photograph of Ensor and his friends on an excursion to Bruges taken in 1889. (See Haesaerts p. 344.)

26. Ensor was familiar with Degas' work. See Haesaerts p. 134 for a reproduction of a sketch by Ensor of a "Woman at a Cafe Table after Degas."


28. Also painted in 1881, Russian Music is now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels. Ibid., p. 377.


30. See Peter Paul Rubens, The Paintings and Drawings, plate one, portraits. This painting, now in Windsor Castle, is noted by Haesaerts who compares it to Ensor's Portrait of the Painter Surrounded by Masks of 1899. In this comparison, he reverses the Rubens to accentuate the similarity of pose to Ensor's work. (See Haesaerts' James Ensor, p. 339.) Regarding the relationship between these paintings, we suggest that an even closer link between Rubens and Ensor may have been the engraving of Rubens' 1624 Self Portrait made by Paul Pontius which is now in the National Gallery, London. (See Max Rooses Rubens, Vol. II, p. 384.) Pontius has reversed the original in his painting and the sharper more linear execution of the print (cont.)
is much closer to Ensor's 1899 portrait which is a caricature of the earlier (and much closer to Rubens) Portrait of the Painter In a Flowered Hat of 1883. Given Ensor's interest in printmaking and the wide circulation of engravings made from paintings, it is entirely possible that he saw Pontius' engraving rather than the original Rubens. This theory is supported by the fact that in his 1883 Portrait of the Painter In a Flowered Hat, Ensor painted an oval "frame" onto the canvas in a manner similar to the windowed effect of the border of Pontius' print.


Brussels Museums
- Abduction of Hippodamia
- Fall of the Titans
- Miracle of St. Benedict
- Martyrdom of St. Ursula and her Companions
- Adoration of the Magi
- The Woman Taken in Adultery

Antwerp (Cathedral)
- Elevation of the Cross
- Descent from the Cross

Antwerp (Museum)
- The Prodigal Son
- Triumph of Car
- Adoration of the Magi
- Rockox Altar Piece
- Christ on the Cross, "Le Coup de Lance"
- Christ on the Cross, "Le Christ a la Paille"

32. Carnival on the Beach is now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels; Flowers and Vegetables is in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp; and Ostend Rooftops is in the collection of P. Pecheere-Wauters, Brussels. (Haesaerts' James Ensor, pp. 378, 380.)

33. Tribulations of St. Anthony is in the Museum of Modern Art, New York City; Christ in Agony is in the private collection of M. Mabile, Brussels; and The Fall of the Rebellious Angels is presently in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. (Ibid., pp. 378-379.)
Toward the latter half of his long life, Ensor painted over many of his early works and made copies of his earlier themes. While most of these were decidedly inferior to the original versions and generally reflect the slackening of his creative power after age fifty, they give an insight into the importance of light in the mind of Ensor. He painted later versions of most of the interiors from his somber period in brilliant translucent tones as if to repudiate his past point of view. In his own words:

"Light is my daughter, Light the one and indivisible, Light the painter's bread, Light the Queen of our senses. Light, Light, enlighten us! Inspire us, show us new ways to joy and happiness!...Painting and light become indistinguishable: What painting says to me is—sun, sky, daylight, light, always light." (Haesaerts, p. 100.)

As shown by his paintings, Ensor's concept as well as use of color and light was quite different from that of the impressionists who, while "they had openly renounced even the pretense of recreating reality...had selected one element from reality—light—to interpret all of nature." (See Rewald, History of Post-Impressionism From Van Gogh to Gauguin, p. 272.) Ensor, as we have seen in The Entry, uses light to express his delightful sense of satire and fantasy rather than, as did Renoir, to explore the effects of light upon the subject.

This lyrical feeling for light along with Ensor's characterization of impressionism as "an art of cold calculation and narrow observation" (See "Poet of the Absurd" by A. Werner, Arts 34: 42-7, April, 1960.) would place his concept of color closer to the ideas of the post impressionists than to the impressionists and definitely to the more expressionistic Van Gogh than to the more theoretical Bernard or Denis. For although Ensor, like the post impressionists, used color independent of its natural or even rational appearance, he never adapted any system to his innovations nor did he evolve any theories concerning them. In contrast to Seurat, Ensor, like Van Gogh, drew much from the actual physical effects of the rich color and thick paint which he piled onto his canvas intuitively and in answer to the whimsy of his mind and eye.

An excellent example of Turner's use of line in this manner is the large painting Fire At Sea (circa 1834) which is now in the National Gallery, London.
36. How close Ensor, in his use of thin washes and brilliant glazes, is to Turner may be seen in several of his early seascapes. Ostend Rooftops of 1884 (Haesaerts, p. 253) is similar in its composition, as well as paint handling to many of Turner's seascapes. Despite the same importance given to the vast and colorful sky, Ensor remains more literal than Turner. This is especially evident in his early work where he structures the painting in terms of the rooftops and buildings of the shore. In the 1887 Carnival on the Beach (Haesaerts, p. 103) the use of mist and color-laden light is very close to Turner but again the work is more descriptive--less evocative--than most of Turner's (See for example: Yacht Approaching the Coast of 1842 or The Lake from Petworth House of 1829.) Ensor always "spells out" the scene for the viewer even though the scene itself and the characters within it are often completely imaginary and utterly without reason.

37. See John Rothstein Turner, pls. 21, 25 for reproductions of these two paintings.

38. A consideration of the titles which Turner gave to most of his works would indicate that he felt some tie to the more specific or anecdotal (or perhaps merely a need to placate the public). The familiar painting Snowstorm (1842) has as its complete title: Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water and Going by the Lead. To this was added the note that "the author was in this storm the night the Ariel left Harwich." Turner was sixty-seven years old at this time and had himself lashed to the mast of the ship to better observe the storm. According to Ruskin he was furious when the critics derided the painting as "Soapsuds and white-wash." See C. Lewis Hind, Turner's Golden Visions, pp. 202-203, and John Rothstein, Turner, pl. 12.


40. Some evidence suggests that Ensor's and Turner's expression may be closer to each other than is readily apparent. While it may be stretching the point, and is certainly beyond the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning however briefly. Man comes off rather badly in Turner's work. Man's greatest monuments pale before even the least significant of nature's glories and he is constantly at the mercy of nature's powerful (cont.)
forces. Ensor, too, views man with scorn. Cruel, stupid, hypocritical and gross, man and the society he creates is seen by Ensor as threatening all that is fine or precious in the world. Ensor sees man as being far inferior to nature (see his essay "Beauty in Danger—The Dunes" Haesaerts, p. 361) and for him man is best as he approaches a natural state—free and unfettered by society. This similarity of viewpoint is emphasized by a comparison of Ensor's 1891 Christ Calming the Waters and Turner's Snowstorm. Turner shows insignificant man at the mercy of nature while Ensor expresses the rampant power of nature checked only by Christ (to Ensor a personal symbol of the sensitive suffering individual). Despite the fundamental disparity of expression a certain philosophical similarity, then, would seem to exist between Ensor and Turner which might possibly offer a fruitful area for further study.


42. This characteristic becomes more and more evident in Ensor's drawings of the 1880's and reflects his increasing preoccupation with a fantastic expression. He was to repeatedly juxtapose and superimpose many faces and grotesque masks within and on top of his drawings giving to them an air of playful mystery or haunted whimsy. For examples of this development showing Ensor's progression from a more rational crowding of realistic detail into the drawings to an increasingly irrational and fanciful use of imaginary faces and strangely juxtaposed figures see:

- Man with a Pan (1880) Haesaerts, p. 139.
- Woman Sewing (1881) Haesaerts, p. 143.
- Attributes of the Studio (1882) Haesaerts, p. 140.
- Haunted Mantlepiece (1885) Haesaerts, p. 144.
- Portrait of My Mother (1885) Haesaerts, p. 145.
- Ensor and His Family (1886) Haesaerts, p. 142.

43. An example of this is Ensor's The Judges of 1891 (Haesaerts, p.196) which, while obviously derived from Daumier, is much more literal, detailed, and cartoon-like. This tendency is abundantly shown in Ensor's graphic work of this period—especially in the many works which attack society or the artist's personal enemies. It may be seen as a reflection of Ensor's desire to shock the public, his embittered opinion of society, and his awareness of works in the northern tradition which delighted in explicit and often offensive detail.
44. Felician Rops, a Belgian painter and engraver, who made sharp satirical engravings and etchings in the manner of Daumier and Gavarni, and who introduced Ensor into the circle of La Chrysalide in 1881, has been seen by some as influencing Ensor's use of the masks and skeletons. (See Ensor's Obituary, Burlington Magazine 92:27, January, 1950.) It is true that some similarities to Rops' subject matter and loose brushwork appear in some of Ensor's later works. However, Ensor, in such a work as Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves, transforms Rops' concern for rich stuffs and materials as seen in The Skeleton at the Ball into a statement of humor and horror made in terms of warm vibrant color and whimsical juxtaposition of the real and unreal. Rops' imagination becomes almost pedestrian by comparison to such a fanciful and satirical painting by Ensor as The Animal Musicians of 1891. It is more probable that, while Rops may have provided him with an example of the mask used as subject matter, Ensor's particular use of this motif was more influenced by his sense of fantasy as it was played upon by his Belgian culture.

45. "A Visit to Ensor" by Benno Elkan, Apollo 43: 77-8, April 1946.

46. Op. Cit., Haesaerts, p. 163. As Haesaerts remarks, this painting, while in itself of minor importance, is significant in that it contains the first of many masks.

47. Haunted Furniture was destroyed in World War II. It is reproduced in Haesaerts' James Ensor (p. 317) and in Tannenbaum's James Ensor on page 55.

Scandalized Masks is now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels; The Entry is in the collection of Col. L. Franck, C.B.E., London (currently on loan to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp); Old Woman with Masks is in the R. Lenten collection, Ghent; and Intrigue is in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. Ibid., pp. 163, 377-79.


54. See "Christ In Flanders" by Honore de Balzac and Paul Fierens' James Ensor, pp. 21-22.

55. Ibid., Fierens.


59. Paul Fierens, after noting Ensor's close relation to his Belgian culture, sees The Entry as largely a result of Ensor's following his delightful fantasy with few, if any, social or religious overtones. (See Paul Fierens' James Ensor, pp. 21-22.) It would seem, however, that Ensor's very Flemish character, which Fierens develops at length, argues that there is a very real social criticism here, albeit in the artist's own terms. The fact that Ensor created such works as Fishermen's Strike at Ostend or Gendarmes Firing at Fisherman, or The Strike in 1892 and that in 1914 he made several drawings of "The Germans in Belgium" (see Haesaerts p. 319 for reproductions of these works) would seem to refute the contentions of Fierens, Canaday, and others who see Ensor as a fantasist and recluse whose work shows little relation to the political and social currents of his day.


62. Hereafter to be referred to as the Grande Jatte.

63. However, to dismiss The Entry as did Henry van de Velde, the lead-spokesman for the art nouveau movement, as being merely an attempt by Ensor to create a sensation by painting a picture even larger than Seurat's Grande Jatte seems to be a somewhat shallow observation. This is indicative of even his fellow artists' reaction to the work of Ensor, however, and it is interesting to note that shortly after van de Velde had seen Seurat's work he, himself, adopted the neo-impressionist method, perhaps explaining in part his opposition to the (cont.)
dissimilar aesthetic of Ensor. See John Canaday Mainstreams of Modern Art, p. 424. On page 178 of his Post Impressionism From Van Gogh to Gauguin, John Rewald also refers to this barb of van de Velde in a manner which would indicate that it may have been merely verbally attributed to van de Velde.


65. Jacques Callot—especially in his large panoramic scenes and satirical drawings—has been seen as an influence upon Ensor. (See Libby Tannenbaum, James Ensor, p. 67. Paul Haezaerts, James Ensor, p. 42, p. 191.) These scenes by this seventeenth century French printmaker do have a distinct northern feeling similar to Ensor and in their attention to details recall much of the anecdotal detail in Ensor's Entry. (See Edwin T. Bechtel, Jacques Callot, plate 19.) In Callot's print, From the Intermedes, there is even a rough compositional similarity to Ensor's Entry.


67. A comment on the relationship of Ensor's Entry to the work of another northern artist—Vincent Van Gogh—may help to emphasize Ensor's northern character. Ensor's painting is often very close to the restless, vibrantly colored canvases of Van Gogh. Both are rapidly and tortuously executed in heavy, luminous paint, piled and twisted into a restless impasto. In the raw power of expression, there is an obvious similarity—a more subtle one may be seen in the feeling for perspective. In Van Gogh's Landscape with Plowed Fields, which he painted in 1889, there is a sweeping perspective which encompasses the entire foreground and sweeps dramatically to a group of trees. The drama of the composition is increased not only by the brilliant, exploding sun, but also by the rich and heavy impasto of the paint surface which directs and gives an intrinsic motion to much of Van Gogh's work as well as continually asserting the picture plane. This juxtaposition of infinite depth with a dynamic and powerful surface plane characteristic of both artists illustrates a similarity of formal elements between them.

There is a deeper psychological similarity present which is partly accounted for by the Flemish background and extremely sensitive personalities of the two. Meyer Schapiro has written that Van Gogh's "conception of space (is) as something lived intensely..." and that for him "...both nearness and remoteness are stirring qualities and his impulse (cont.)
is to give them both a live expression."

(See p. 31, Vincent Van Gogh, edited by Milton S. Fox and Meyer Schapiro.)

Much the same is true of Ensor who, in the vast panoramic remoteness of The Entry gives us at the same time extremely close, anecdotal, and personal insights into the nuances of human emotion and behavior. In the depiction of Christ—the symbol of the great intangible religion—in the very real, very sordid surroundings of Brussels, we have an example of the Flemish tendency to conceive of the abstract in terms of the anecdotal and the eternal in terms of the very personal. Van Gogh, too, in his self-portraits depicts the eternal pained and defensive questioning of the sensitive man through all ages—rudely assaulted by the forces of the world. Interestingly, his most effective expressions of this eternal are in terms of the most personal painting—the self-portrait.

The same desire for the tangible object upon which to anchor their fantasy occurs in both Ensor and Van Gogh. Again Schapiro says of Van Gogh

"...the object as a part or extension of ourselves is extremely close to us, and sometimes appears magnified although not really enlarged, because it fills the canvas and projects toward us on the picture plane; the solidity of the pigmentation increases this effect. Correspondingly, distance is a genuine effect, mysteriously involved in compulsive feelings of longing or flight; this distant world is dramatized by an active movement toward the horizon as pronounced as the projection towards us of tangible objects."

Ensor expresses this same longing (for an escape, if you will) not only through the formal elements of the perspective, which takes us far back and away to such a distance that the blare and noise of the screaming procession becomes impotent, but through his fantasy as well. This fantasy that expresses itself through the very real, the very tangible, is in The Entry seen in the thick heavy paint surfaces and textures. Here Ensor clings to the absolute reality of painting—the paint itself. In his earlier work, Haunted Furniture, (executed in 1885 this painting was destroyed in World (cont.)
War II. See Haesaerts cc. 127 for a reproduction of it) we have a more literal expression of this as the twisted forms of the strange faces emerge from the very real ornamentation of the heavy solid furniture in the parlor that was, to Ensor, so very familiar. The theme calls to mind Van Gogh, when we see the faces as the forces of the cruelty and meanness of the world about to be revealed to the sensitive child.

68. See "Seurat, Allegory and Image" by Leslie Katz, Arts, 32:7, April 1958, pp. 40-47. It is informative to note that Ensor, while also aware of the Embarkation for the Isle of Cythera to the extent that he actually painted a version of it in 1888, (see The Garden of Love, reproduced in Haesaerts, p. 325 c.c. 182 with a color detail on p. 83) has utterly transposed the mood and subject into a whimsical and satirical statement of exuberant and vivid color far closer to that of The Entry than to either Watteau or Seurat.


70. Ibid., The Lacemaker is hung in the Louvre and must have been seen by Seurat on his trips there as a student.

71. Ibid., Homer notes the great compositional similarity which exists between Puvis' The Happy Land (Salon of 1882) and Une Baignade which Seurat completed in 1884 and relates this to a visit which Seurat made to Puvis' studio.


74. This is by no means meant to imply that Seurat's work is coldly scientific for, as the critic Felix Faneon has commented of Seurat "...while science may have aided his sensitive eye, the study of physics books could never in itself be responsible for an artist's creating a masterpiece." (See Faneon's article "L'Impressionnisme Aux Tuilleries" which appeared in the September 19th issue of L'Art Moderne for the year 1886. This article is mentioned by W. I. Homer in his article "Notes on Seurat's Pallette," Burlington Magazine, 101:192-5, May 1959.)
76. For this reason the Grande Jatte seems to me, in the long run, the more aesthetically enduring work. Too, it is a work which much more subtly may yet show something of its creator's reaction to his society. It is possible to see in the detached quality of the figures and their segmented groupings within the painting a reflection of the increasing isolation of the individual from society which occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the artificial, staged atmosphere of the scene, as well as elegant parading of the figures, we may see a reflection of the bourgeoise French society so ably dissected by Zola. Lovgren notes that Seurat has given the woman in the foreground of the Grande Jatte a monkey on a leash—'the inclusion of this —"for centuries a symbol of vice and profligacy"—as well as other such scandalous references to flirting, etc. points to a comment made by Seurat upon his society. (See Sven Lovgren, The Genesis of Modernism: Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and French Symbolism in the 1880's, p. 54.)

77. Redon was among the guest artists (including Monet and Renoir) who exhibited in the 1886 exhibition of Les XX. Redon was "savagely maligned" by the critics who particularly attacked his lithographs and their evocative captions. Ensor, who at this time emerged from his "somber" period into his lighter, more imaginative style of 1886-1900, had also been severely criticized and undoubtedly felt a close sympathy for Redon whose work he admired. Interestingly enough, the Belgian poet, Verhaeren, and the lawyer, Edmond Picard,—two early champions of Ensor—became ardent friends and admirers of Redon. (See Rewald, Ashton, and Joachim, Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Rudolphe Bresdin, p. 33.)

78. Ibid., p. 31.

79. Ibid., p. 23.

80. Ibid., p. 24.

81. Ensor's fantasy was conditioned from childhood by a form of social oppression. The element of fantasy which we see in The Entry was intensified by a childhood spent in dreaming and playing among the grotesque masks, chinoiseries, dolls, ships, and fantastic costumes in the souvenir shop which his parents kept. Among these intriguing and varied objects, James took (cont.)
refuge from the stultifying atmosphere of a bourgeois family dominated by his mother and aunts. This stuffy, middle-class life from which he withdrew is reflected in his early interiors such as Haunted Furniture in which he peopled the drawing rooms and parlors of his home with strange and menacing figures and faces. In these paintings and drawings (See most notably the Haunted Mantlepiece and Portrait of My Mother of 1885—Haesaerts' James Ensor, pp. 144-45—as well as Haunted Furniture) we may see the much more literal, descriptive, and critical nature of Ensor's fantasy. Here he records with endless detail his love of filling the page with improvisations based upon the ornate decorations of a specific time and culture—not at all like the strange timeless and eternal environments of Redon's paintings.

83. Ibid.
84. This consistency in Redon's work is apparent in the illustrations which accompany "The Engraved Work of Odilon Redon" by Claude Roger-Marx, Print Collector's Quarterly, Vol. 22, April 1935, pp. 166-88. This illustrates the recurrence of a motif which while deceptively simple moves inward upon itself in a complex formal parallel to the introspective, mysterious, and metaphysical statement of Redon's works.
85. Haesaerts' James Ensor has a series of illustrations (pp. 120-128) which excellently show Ensor's predilection for confused, tumultuous, moving compositions.
86. Ibid., p. 120.
89. Op. Cit., Rewald, Ashton, and Joachim, p. 35. Rewald attributes the hopeless anguish and abysmal sadness of this series to Redon's sorrow over the death of his infant son in the summer of 1886. It would seem significant that here a personal anguish is transmitted through the St. Anthony theme which is an emotional yet private departure from the traditional message of the subject.
90. It is true that with such northern artists as Schongauer, Grunewald, Bosch, and Bruegel an element of fantasy is introduced which continues throughout the history of the theme (See Seznec's article). This fantasy from Schongauer to Ensor, however, is by and large a descriptive fantasy. While these artists wax free with their descriptions of imaginary monsters who launch real, physical attacks upon the saint, it remains for Redon alone to delve so deeply into the subtleties and universality of psychological horrors which menace everyone to a greater or lesser degree.


92. Ibid., pp. 35-36.

93. Les XX was organized in Brussels in 1884, the same year in which the important Societe de Artistes Independents emerged in Paris. These groups were composed of artists as diverse as Redon and Seurat in the Independents, and Ensor and van Rysselberghe in Les XX. The Independents were organized in opposition to the official salons and unlike the Impressionist salons which were relatively homogenous groups, they admitted all artists. The first exhibition opened in May 1884 and consisted of works by some four hundred artists. Later in the year, the group was reorganized into a permanent organization of independent artists. (See Rewald's Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin, pp. 32-36.) While the critics and public scoffed and jeered at the new innovations in painting, just as they did at the works of the Symbolist writers, the Belgian intellectuals saw much that was valid in the new work and hastened to defend it. Les XX was similar to the Independents in its goals. However, it limited its membership to twenty members and provided for an equal number of guests at the annual exhibitions. The charter members were, besides Ensor, Chainaye, Charlet, Delwin, Dubois, Finch, Goethals, Knopff, Lambeaux, Pantazis, de Regoyas, Schloebach, Simons, Vanaise, Van Rysselberghe, Van Strijdonck, Verhaert, Verstraete, Vogels, and Sytsman. (See Haesaerts' James Ensor, p. 363.) By inviting such men as Rodin, Chase, Sargent, and Whistler to exhibit works in the first show and subsequently Monet, Renoir, Redon, and Montecelli in 1886, they were able to present the modern work without having to allow "everyone" to exhibit as the Independents did. (Rewald, Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin, pp. 100-101.)
Peter Selz, The Art Nouveau, pp. 49-54. This idea seems plausible enough in the context of the times. However, the failure of van de Velde, van Rysselberghe and the other followers of Seurat to produce anything approaching his quality of work illustrates the fallacy of a too rigidly theoretical approach to art. A comparison of the work of Paul Gauguin, who was a painter first and then a theorist, and that of the theorist Emile Bernard further illustrates this fact. In his Breton Peasants Gathering Seaweed of 1889, Gauguin shows a much greater understanding of form, a more powerful draftsmanship, and a greater sensitivity for composition than does Bernard in his Breton Women Under Umbrellas of 1892. By comparison, Bernard's painting is loosely organized, more obviously stylized, and definitely more literary in its symbolism.

Op. Cit., "Poet of the Absurd" by A. Werner


Ibid., p. 220.

Ibid., p. 227.

There is in Ensor's development as an artist a definite parallel to the historical trend of late nineteenth century art which saw a development of art away from romanticism and into the realism of Courbet and Millet (which was considered shocking at first because of its replacement of classical ideals and figure types with socialist ideas and peasant types) to the most complete realism of impressionism which attempted to record objectively the physical world in which the painter lived. After impressionism, however, there were the various developments known as post-impressionism which moved away from a natural depiction of the world and toward that of the artist's personal interpretation. After 1880 many artists began to distort both form and color for a greater personal expression.


Henry F. Lenning, The Art Nouveau, p. 15. The new expression in European art and life shall hereafter be referred to as art nouveau. This is a use of the term in the largest possible cultural sense and not to be construed as the more limiting name of the specific, stylistically determined art form. For in reality, art nouveau, by whatever name it was called, was a culture-wide phenomenon occurring in the very thought and life as well as the arts and literature of Europe.

103. Ibid., p. 33.


105. Op. Cit., Haesaerts, pp. 109-110. Many of Ensor's comments are from his autobiography which was written much later in his life. It will be noted that they exhibit the stylized and over self-conscious quality of most of his later painting. These comments are worth including, however, as they illustrate in graphic form Ensor's personality. This flamboyant yet sensitive, striking manner of expression is characteristic of most of his literary work and exists in a somewhat different and sometimes modified form in all of his paintings.


107. In Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Grey we find such passages as

"He would often spend a whole day settling and re-settling in their cases the various stones that he had collected, such as the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the cymophane with its wire-like line of silver, the pistachio-coloured peridot, rose-pink and wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet with tremulous four-rayed stars, flame-red cinnamon stone, orange and violet spinels and amethysts with their alternate layers of ruby and sapphire. He loved the red-gold of the sunstone and the moonstone's pearly whiteness, and the broken rainbow of the milky opal."

(See Oscar Wilde, The Portrait of Dorian Grey, pp. 157-158.)

While in Ensor's writings we find a more free, less self-conscious expression of greater spontaneity:

"Ah but I love to draw beautiful words like trumpets of light...I adore you, words who are sensitive to our sufferings, words in red and lemon yellow, words in the steel blue color of certain insects, words with the scent of vibrant silks, subtle words of fragrant roses and seaweed; prickly words of sky-blue wasps, words with powerful snouts, words of spotless ermine, words (cont.)"
spat out by the sands of the sea, words
greener than the cyrene fleece, discreet
words whispered by fishes in the pink ears
of shells, bitter words, words of fleur-de-lis
and Flemish cornflowers, sweet words with a
pictorial ring, plaintive words of horses being
beaten, evil words, festive words, tornado and
storm-tossed words, windy words, reedy words,
the wise words of children, rainy, tearful words,
words without rhyme or reason, I love you! I
love you!"
(See Haesaerts James Ensor, p. 194.)


110. One of many examples of this close cooperation is the establish­
ment of the Section d'Art in 1891 by the Belgian Workers Party.
This group had as its leaders the poet Emile Verhaeren and
literateur Edmond Picard (both close friends and champions
of Ensor). Among other intimates of Ensor on the organizing
committee were the painter Ferdinand Khnopff, the writer
Georges Eekhoud, and critic Octave Maus. (See Eugenia W.
Herbert, "The Artist and Social Reform, p. 31.)

While a detailed examination of the relation between art
and politics—especially between Ensor and his contemporaries—
would be an excellent approach to the question of the influence
of environment upon an artist, such a study is unfortunately
beyond the scope of this paper. The reader is referred to
Mrs. Herbert's excellent book which deals in detail with the
artists in France and Belgium and their relation to social
reform during the years 1885 to 1898.

111. Despite the fact that the degree of involvement of the neo­
impresionist and symbolist painters varied greatly (from
Pissano who was well read in the theories of Marx and
Kropotkin to Seurat whose sense of social comment was, as we
have shown, much more implicit) it is not hard to understand
their involvement. In the words of Marcel Aymé

"to accept a revolution in the art of poetry
and to enjoy its novelty is to familiarize
oneself with the idea of revolution per se
and frequently also with the rudiments of its
vocabulary."

(See John Rewald, History of Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh
to Gauguin, pp. 154-155.

113. Op. Cit., Rewald, p. 155, and Herbert, pp. 9-11 for descriptions of the political and social climate of these times.

114. This definition is basically that of E. W. Herbert (see The Artist and Social Reform, p. 82.) Mrs. Herbert stresses the important influence of this movement upon many of Ensor's contemporaries. Maeterlinck (whose several similarities to Ensor--especially a common personal mysticism--we have noted) actually joined a Socialist group in 1889 as did many others of the Brussels circle. (See p. 99.)

115. Ibid., p. 49. Taken far enough, this doctrine itself illustrates a form of anarchism.


117. Ibid., p. 227.
REPRODUCTIONS
Figure 1.
Figure 2.

Figure 3.
Figure 4.

Figure 5.
Figure 8.

Figure 9.
Figure 12.

Figure 13.
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