

JAMES ENSOR
AND THE GRAPHIC
EXPERIMENT

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Note to the Reader

This publication offers an in-depth look at a selection of James Ensor's graphic work. The technical description of the prints is based on new research that builds on previous catalogues raisonnés of Ensor's prints, including Auguste Taevernier's 1973 illustrated catalogue of Ensor's graphic works, from which the titles are translated from French. Ensor dated his etchings, including the hand-coloured and later prints, according to the original printing dates.

The graphic techniques have been identified by Ad Stijnman, printmaker and expert on historical printmaking processes. The supports of the prints are mentioned when they are not paper, followed by specifications of the etching plate and the size of the plate edge. For the cataloguing of the (new) states, we made grateful use of the unpublished catalogue by Gerard Loobuyck, a specialist on Ensor's prints. Additional details, such as the use of coloured printing inks and hand-colouring, are accurately noted. The collection where the print is kept and its inventory number is followed by the T number, which refers to the Taevernier catalogue.

A glossary explaining technical terms and concepts can be found on page 124.

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In 2024, Museum Plantin-Moretus is devoting special attention to the work of James Ensor. But what does Ensor have to do with Antwerp? And what links Ensor to this particular institution, dedicated to the printing house ran by nine generations of the Plantin and Moretus family, started by Christopher Plantin? The family provided their luxurious printed matter with illustrations of the very highest quality. Today, the museum collects graphic work by important artists from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, including more than 200 works on paper by Ensor.

By 1550, Antwerp had become the artistic capital of the Southern Netherlands, the “most modern” market in Europe and a trading and export hub for luxury goods, including prints. The work of Antwerp print publishers Hieronymus Cock and Philips Galle is still considered among the best in printmaking today. They published works by Hieronymus Bosch, Frans Floris, Pieter Bruegel and Maerten de Vos, which were distributed to the far corners of Europe and the Spanish Empire. In this, Christopher Plantin played a crucial role. He purchased countless prints from major Antwerp publishers and shipped them, along with his books, to his international clients. In those far-flung corners of the world, they served as inspiration for local artists.

Prints were an early form of mass communication. Peter Paul Rubens saw the immense value of prints in positioning himself as a great inventor of dramatic compositions. A painting could only be seen in one place; an engraving reached hundreds of recipients. This graphic work was certainly not dismissed

by Rubens as a second-rate product. Making copper engravings was a highly specialised craft, and Rubens worked only with the best engravers, so that the prints would approach the incomparable pictoriality of his paintings. Like Ensor, Rubens was fascinated by the way black and white could capture light: moonlight on the surface of water, a rainbow, or torrential rains.

While engraving is the work of trained craftsmen from start to finish, artists can draw on the prepared surface of an etching plate themselves. For his famous *Iconographie*, the internationally renowned portrait painter Anthony van Dyck drew portraits of statesmen, scholars and artists, among others, directly on the etching plate. He then had the background finished by an engraver. The most important etcher of the seventeenth century was, of course, Rembrandt. His talent to capture light and shadow, substance and drama in an etching is still unrivalled.

Ensor looked to the examples of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, primarily Bruegel and Rembrandt. He also approached his graphic work as an independent medium within his oeuvre, focusing on landscapes, portraits, cityscapes, drolleries, masks, still lifes and more. In doing so, he continued a great and long tradition of an art form in which the Low Countries have always been strong, and which deserves more attention, both for the oeuvre of all those great masters and for future engravers and etchers. The Print Room of the Museum Plantin-Moretus contributes to this end with projects such as *Ensor's States of Imagination*.

DETAIL FIG 32
Pride, 1903
Etching (copper),
93 × 146 mm
State III/III, hand-coloured
with opaque watercolour
Collection P.F.
T. 122



Thanks to the experimental nature of his prints, James Ensor is widely regarded as one of the most important etchers of his time. Even seventy-five years after his death, his prints continue to amaze. The study of Ensor's printed oeuvre is like a fascinating puzzle, one that has challenged us in recent years and repeatedly forces us to look more closely. Carefully studying lines, choices and technical experiments in his graphic work has brought us closer to fathoming his creative spirit.

This book accompanies the exhibition *Ensor's States of Imagination* at Museum Plantin-Moretus. Both emerged from the collaboration of experts driven by a shared fascination with graphic art. The germ of this project was planted by curator and Ensor specialist Herwig Todts of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, and Virginie D'haene, curator of Old Prints and Drawings at Museum Plantin-Moretus, with the aim of revealing Ensor's creative processes as a printmaker.

The exhibition was realised in collaboration with guest curator Izanna Mulder, who specialises in the study of printmaking. She also developed the concept for the book. In addition, an advisory committee of Ensor specialists and experts in the art of printmaking, consisting of Patrick Florizoone, Daan van Heesch, Gerard Loobuyck, Ad Stijnman, Sabine Taevernier and Herwig Todts, played a crucial role. Their contributions and

diverse expertise brought new insights and significantly increased the depth and scope of this research project. Vanessa Paumen coordinated the publication, and Ann Op de Beeck was responsible for the exhibition design.

In addition to our own collection, we were able to tap into the largest and most remarkable (private) collections in Belgium for our research and the exhibition. This not only contributed to the visual splendour of the exhibition, but also offered us a rare opportunity to study preliminary drawings, etching plates and unique prints side by side for the first time. Bringing this material together allowed us to visually track the various stages of the production process and led to a better understanding of Ensor's material choices and techniques, his collaboration with specialised printers, and the influences of his artistic predecessors and contemporaries.

This publication reflects the wealth of new perspectives and insights. The authors describe Ensor's etching process, highlight the techniques he employed and reflect on the goals he pursued. In addition, attention is paid to how contemporary art critics and authors received, disseminated and interpreted his graphic work. This book complements the exhibition and will hopefully provide a lasting source of inspiration for those fascinated by James Ensor, as well as an impetus for further reflection and research into his graphic oeuvre.

DETAIL FIG. 6
The Deadly Sins
Dominated by Death, 1904
Etching (copper),
84 × 134 mm
Hand-coloured with
opaque watercolour
Private collection
T. 126



“One must focus on certain etchings by Mr James Ensor to discover the true artist he is.”¹

In May 1939, James Ensor (1860–1949) donated one of his etchings to the newly established Antwerp Print Room.² It was a modest but significant addition to the collection of prints by Ensor that would in time become one of the spearheads of the modern collection at the Museum Plantin-Moretus.

The foundation of that collection had been laid by Max Rooses (1839–1914), the first curator of the Museum Plantin-Moretus, which opened its doors in 1877. Although Rooses discreetly presented himself as a generous donor of both old and modern prints and drawings to his institution, when developing the collection he maintained a strict focus on artists born, trained or active in Antwerp. Nevertheless, works by non-Antwerp artists were occasionally added to the collection from 1939 onwards under the direction of his successors, through donations by artists or their heirs and as part of larger collections.³ The museum’s Ensor collection took shape largely thanks to generous donations from the Fester and Speth families, important entrepreneurs and art promoters in Antwerp’s cultural landscape after 1900. It now comprises a total of 15 drawings, four lithographs and no fewer than 184 impressions of 100 different etchings, including some extremely rare and unique (first) states⁴ and hand-coloured versions.

This rich variety of prints inspired the exhibition *Ensor’s States of Imagination*, which illustrates the creation process behind James Ensor’s prints through a wealth of remarkable objects, including etching plates, double proofs and counterproofs, unique impressions on luxury supports such as textile and parchment, and numerous etchings in various states, some reworked or coloured by hand. This companion publication also explores the role that Ensor’s artistic predecessors and contemporaries, as well as publishers and collectors, played in the creation, reception and interpretation of his printmaking, thus offering a new perspective on his experimental and idiosyncratic approach to this medium: from the light effects of pure line etchings, some of them reworked with drypoint, to experiments with sophisticated etching techniques such as aquatint in his painterly landscapes.

Etching is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of various techniques. Although drawing on an etching plate is as simple as drawing with pen on paper, obtaining the intended pictorial effects requires a great deal of experience and technical skill. Artists have traditionally been intrigued by the work of their predecessors, and through experimentation try to fathom how they achieved certain results. Ensor was a great

DETAIL FIG. 9
*Devils Thrashing Angels
and Archangels*, 1888
Etching (copper),
250 × 293 mm
State II/II, hand-coloured
with transparent
watercolour
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.09469
T. 23



admirer of Rembrandt (1606–1669) and studied his use of subtle halftones in the etching process.⁵ The quest for improvement led to critical reflection on his own choices, such as the material he used in his very first etched portrait, *The Scandinavian Botanist Frise* [sic] (fig. 39). For example, the artist decided that if he was not satisfied with the grey tones after printing, he would redo the etching on copper instead of zinc, hoping to approach Rembrandt's results. Such considerations show how Ensor constantly challenged himself, but also how unpredictable etching is, as it is never clear what the print will look like until a proof is actually made.

To appreciate this kind of achievement by a printmaker, it is essential to understand the different "states" of a print; etching an image into the metal is really only the beginning of the process. Any adjustment to the plate after any proof, whether to rework a worn line or make artistic changes, results in a new state. The

reasons for these changes are many. Sometimes the artist wants to further develop or elaborate an image. At other times it is necessary to correct or remove certain elements. Thus, in the context of etching, a state refers to the different stages of a plate during the printing process. In exploring the different states of a print, we are able to catch a glimpse of Ensor's own "states of imagination", in which he experimented and transformed his artistic vision. As etching plates evolved through different states, Ensor's creative process also evolved in pursuit of perfection and expression. In some cases, an initial print or state acted as an icon of transition, in which figures or parts of figures underwent a transformation in the following state – as seen in the depiction of a jetty suddenly transformed into the hull of a boat (figs. 1 and 2). In other works, such artistic manipulations changed the identity of the figures depicted, enriching Ensor's works with different layers

FIG. 1
Steamboats, 1889
 Etching and drypoint
 (copper), 73 × 112 mm
 State I/III, with plate tone
 Collection P.F.
 T. 64

FIG. 2
Steamboats, 1889
 Etching, drypoint,
 and aquatint (copper),
 73 × 112 mm
 State II/III, with plate tone
 Collection P.F.
 T. 64



of meaning. By transforming a serious and traditional depiction of a portrait into a macabre and symbolic representation of death in the second state, Ensor presented an ironic view of his own identity in *My Portrait as a Skeleton*.⁶

The editions of Ensor's prints were not systematically numbered, and depending on supply and demand, the artist later made new impressions of certain plates. This essential characteristic of a print, its reproducibility, often leads to confusion: how can a print be considered a special or original work of art when there are so many impressions? The answer to this question lies in understanding the unique context in which each print is created. Although a plate can be printed multiple times, factors such as the ink used, the type of paper, the printing technique, and any modifications to the plate can result in (subtle) variations (see e.g. figs. 23 and 24). In addition, the etched lines, or in the case of drypoint the raised burrs that hold

an abundance of ink in the first impressions, are subject to wear and tear, and the quality of the print decreases with repeated printing. Factors like these, and the fact that Ensor did not indicate whether an impression was a proof or a final version, underline the importance of thorough assessment of each sheet by an expert eye, paying attention to the quality of the print, the type of paper and the unique context in which it was created.⁷

Coloured inks and aquatints

Ensor's first graphic experiments date from 1886, and by 1904 he had assembled an impressive collection of 129 zinc and copper plates, most of them in etching and drypoint. The etching techniques allowed for the expressive possibilities of drawing and lent themselves extremely well to the study of light, something that fascinated him at the time. The prints reflect all elements of his painted oeuvre, such

as humour, sarcasm, politics and religion, but it is above all in the landscapes of Ostend and its environs that Ensor repeatedly showed his passion for experimentation (figs. 33, 34 and 35).

A comparison between depictions of clouds illustrates Ensor's development and ingenuity as a printmaker. In his earliest works, skies were formed by sketchy outlines, often applied directly to the plate without later corrections. Over time, however, Ensor refined his technique, which resulted in more vivid forms, such as the tumultuous clouds over *Boats Aground*, which, thanks to a shorter biting time, acquired finer lines in contrast to the landscape (fig. 3). The horizontal cloud formation on the left in *The Bridge in the Wood at Ostend* testifies to Ensor's technical skills, despite the risk of too little etching ground between the closely drawn lines (fig. 4). Achieving this requires precision in determining the correct biting time, because the acid under the remaining etching ground can affect the plate in unpredictable ways.

Experiments with aquatint and other tonal etching techniques added a new dimension to Ensor's work from 1888 onwards. Such graphic experimentation was apparently inspired by Hokusai's (1760–1849) masterful implementation of *bokashi*, a printing technique in which gradation in colour and tone is created by variations in the amount of ink applied to the woodblock. This is evident in the jagged shapes of the threatening sky in *The Thunderstorm*, an echo of Hokusai's depiction of the atmospheric effects around Mount Fuji from 1835 (figs. 5 and 79).

Although each impression is a unique product of the collaboration between artist and printer – and Ensor did not always stand over the press to catch the first impression of ink on the paper – he was very closely involved in the printing process. For example, he gave instructions on the degree of plate tone, asked for specific types of paper and sometimes requested the use of special supports such as parchment.⁸ While the nuances of black printing inks were generally a matter left to the printer's expertise, it was Ensor who asked the printer to use significantly different colours, such as the vermilion of *The Cathedral* and *The Skaters* (figs. 104 and 16).⁹ Some characteristics of Ensor's graphic oeuvre can be attributed to the printing practices of the successive printers with whom he collaborated. Thanks to the expertise and findings shared by the scientific committee of the exhibition and this publication, we have in many cases been able to identify these characteristics, such as specific paper types, sizes and differences in printing quality.



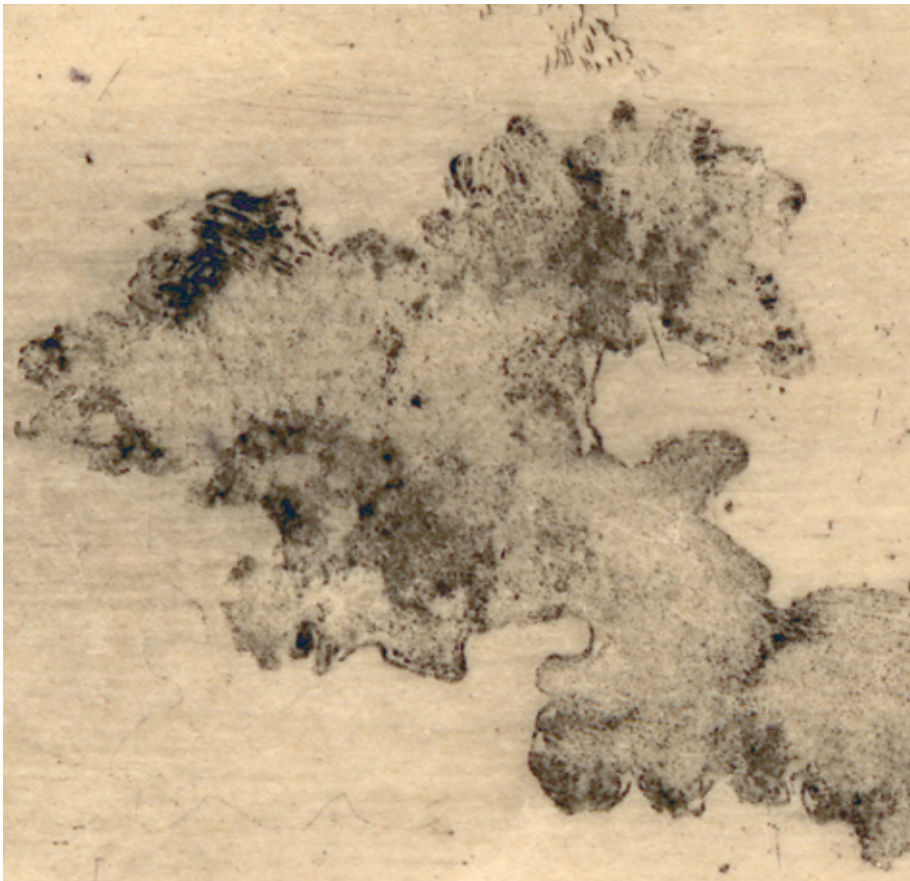


FIG. 3
Detail of fig. 85,
Boats Aground, 1888
Etching (zinc),
176 × 237 mm
State I/II
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.09476
T. 49

FIG. 5
Detail of fig. 55,
The Thunderstorm, 1889
Etching (copper),
75 × 116 mm
State II/II
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.01184
T. 70

FIG. 4
Detail of fig. 34,
*The Bridge in the Wood
at Ostend*, 1889
Etching (copper),
99 × 139 mm
State II/II
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.04894
T. 69

Afsetters and illuminators

In addition to using different colours of printing ink for his monochrome colour etchings, Ensor also used different types of supports as colour elements. In some early cases this involved lightly tinted blue or green paper, but later etchings were printed on coloured satin.¹⁰ Printing etchings on textiles dates back to the seventeenth-century etching pioneer, Hercules Segers (1589/90–1633/40), who was more experimental in the use of colour in his prints than any artist of his time.¹¹ Back then, prints were usually printed with black ink on white paper with the aim of producing identical impressions. If necessary, a professional colourist was paid to colour the work by hand. Segers was able to create an immense variety of colour combinations with just one plate by using coloured printing inks and paint, and coloured paper and textiles.

Ensor also coloured his etchings by hand. He used a variety of materials to do this, including transparent watercolour, chalk and coloured pencil. This practice, which, like printing etchings on textiles, dates back to the early days of graphic art, was a continuation of the tradition of medieval miniature art, which involved colouring with watercolour or gum paint. Artists who engaged in colouring printed images in the sixteenth century were called *afsetters* (meaning “illuminators”), a term closely associated with the flourishing printing house of Christopher Plantin (1520–1589).¹²

The increasing production of prints and maps made Plantin’s printing house a fertile breeding ground for graphic innovations. The copper engraving gradually replaced the woodcut, and its more detailed rendering gave the coloured prints a more refined character. Professional *afsetters*, who coloured engravings and maps using a brush and watercolour, flourished in this environment. For example, for many years, Christopher Plantin’s accounts mention Mynken (Willemyn) Lieftrinck († 1593) and Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598), who would later become known as a cartographer and inventor of the modern atlas.¹³



FIG. 6
The Deadly Sins
Dominated by Death, 1904
Etching (copper),
84 × 134 mm
Hand-coloured with
opaque watercolour
Private collection
T. 126



FIG. 7
The Deadly Sins
Dominated by Death, 1904
Etching (copper),
84 × 134 mm
Hand-coloured with
transparent watercolour
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.04975
T. 126

PP. 18-19: FIG. 8
My Portrait in 1960, 1888
Etching (copper),
64 × 114 mm
Hand-coloured with
transparent watercolour
Private collection
T. 34





FIG. 9
*Devils Thrashing Angels
and Archangels*, 1888
Etching (copper),
250 × 293 mm
State II/II, hand-coloured
with transparent
watercolour
Museum Plantin-
Moretus, Antwerp,
inv. PK.MP.09469
T. 23





J. Envor m.

Envor

Costly colouring was chosen for special editions in Plantin's time, such as prints intended for royalty. However, the technique was adapted when it came to prints in editions that had to be produced quickly. In such cases, the paint was often applied quickly, more thinly and less precisely. The pursuit of a decorative look was considered more important than a precise finish.¹⁴ In Ensor's hand-coloured etchings, we encounter a similar phenomenon. The extensive use of opaque watercolour blurred the boundaries between printmaking and painting in the most exceptional cases (fig. 6), while others were subtly embellished with transparent watercolours (fig. 7–9). The higher price Ensor asked for his coloured exemplars highlights both the value of the craft and the artistic statement that went with it.¹⁵

In one case, even the meaning of Ensor's prints changed as he used different colours in the same composition.¹⁶ There are also

examples in which colouring was used to make certain details clearer. For example, the backs of the horses and riders in his *Roman Triumph* only take shape in the coloured version (figs. 47, 48 and 10). These coloured details not only served as visual aids, but also proved to be unforeseen protection against forgeries. Modern fraudsters who ignore these motifs and colour them in wrongly are thereby exposed.¹⁷ It gives the connoisseur a means of recognising and distinguishing later forgeries on the market from Ensor's authentic work.

As described in the above quote, allegedly by Emile Verhaeren, one can discover James Ensor's true artistry only by studying his printmaking. In this publication, we hope to guide the reader in discovering the subtleties of Ensor's prints. Recognising the artist's signature in his etchings is a skill that requires time and attention, but it offers an enriching experience that brings us closer to Ensor's artistic intentions.



FIG. 10
Roman Triumph
(detail), 1889
Etching (copper),
170 x 230 mm
State II/II, hand-coloured
with transparent
watercolour
Private collection
T. 78

- 1 “Il faut se rabattre sur certaines eaux-fortes de M. James Ensor pour découvrir l’artiste vrai qu’il est.” Anonymous 1889, p. 57.
- 2 The inventory of the Print Room lists James Ensor as the maker and donor of the etching, but without mentioning the title. In a letter from Ensor to Ary J. Delen, curator of the Print Room, the artist writes: “Je vous ai adressé une épreuve de la pointe-sèche L’Ombre sur la maison, n° 132.” [I have sent you a proof of the drypoint *The Shadow on the House*, n° 132.] It is important to note that there is no print by Ensor in the collection with that title. Letter from James Ensor to Ary J. Delen, 23 May 1939, quoted in Ensor and Tricot 1999, p. 111. The correspondence between the two men is held in the Letterenhuis in Antwerp, under the reference number E. 335/B; 43333/2.
- 3 De Nave 1988, pp. 11–14.
- 4 A glossary with explanations of technical terms and concepts is provided at the back on p. 124.
- 5 “...en tout cas nous le ferons imprimer et je recommencerais si ce n’est pas bien, mais sur le cuivre. Je ne veux plus travailler sur le zinc qui est trop vite mordu par l’acide. On ne peut obtenir aucune finesse grise ou demi-teinte qui font si bien dans celles de Rembrandt.” [In any case, we’ll have it printed and I’ll start again if it’s not right, but on copper. I no longer want to work on zinc, which is too quickly bitten by acid. You cannot obtain any of the grey finesse or halftones that look so good in Rembrandt’s etchings.] Huys and Tricot 2021, p. 222, no. 1886-11 – inv. 119.688/1.
- 6 *My Portrait as a Skeleton*, 1889, etching and drypoint, 116 × 75 mm, states I/II and state II/II (T. 67).
- 7 A letter from James Ensor to Ary J. Delen, 23 May 1939, illustrates his concern to preserve certain exemplars: “Je ne possède qu’une épreuve du no. 133 *Procession à Ghistelles, un essai à conserver à l’atelier.*” [I have only one proof of n° 133, *Procession at Ghistelles*, a test to be kept in the studio.] Ensor and Tricot 1999, p. 111.
- 8 “Je vous prie de tirer les épreuves le plus tôt possible, des épreuves sur parchemin détaillées dans l’une de mes lettres et de faire remettre [?] ensuite chez monsieur Rousseau.” [I would ask you to print the proofs as soon as possible, the proofs on parchment detailed in one of my letters, and then send them [?] to Mr Rousseau.] Letter from James Ensor to one of his printers, probably Joseph Bouwens, in which he asks for his print to be printed on parchment. Although the letter is not dated, it could be from 1888–89, based on the title *Les sorciers emportés* [*Wizards in a Squall*], which is not yet definitive, and the clarification with sketches. Collection P.F. See also Florizoone 2002a, p. 11, which mentions that when working with the printer Jean-Baptiste Van Campenhout in the 1920s, Ensor specifically asked to print on very white paper, such as Japan Imperial or Pearly Japan. For plate tone, see e.g. the letter from James Ensor to Mariette Rousseau-Hannon, 16 May 1888: “Le portrait de Mr Ernest ne sera pas bien tiré. Il faut que Bouwens fasse la tête très claire, tout le fond et la main dans la demi-teinte et l’habit très noir.” [The portrait of Mr Ernest will not be well printed. Bouwens must print the head very lightly, the background and the hand in halftone, and the suit very darkly.] Huys and Tricot 2021, p. 243.
- 9 Huys and Tricot 2021, p. 280, no. 1889-22 – inv. 119.732.
- 10 Gillis and Florizoone 2002, p. 73, 103.
- 11 An example of artistic reinterpretation is the way Rembrandt, a great admirer of Hercules Segers, manipulated one of his etching plates. He reworked a plate depicting Tobias and the Angel into a scene depicting Joseph and Mary on their way to Egypt (Rembrandt, *The Flight into Egypt*, on a plate by Hercules Segers, c. 1652, etching, burin and drypoint, state IV (6), 214 × 284 mm, Museum Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, inv. 41). Although James Ensor visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (then in the Trippenhuis) with Guillaume Vogels (1836–1896) on 10 October 1883, where both works by Rembrandt and prints on textile by Segers were held, there is no direct evidence that he saw Segers’s work.
- 12 For an in-depth analysis of hand-coloured prints in the early modern period, see in particular Dackerman 2002.
- 13 For Mynken Liefwinck and her role as business manager in printing, colouring and selling engravings, see Imhof 2020.
- 14 Goedings 2015, pp. 61–73.
- 15 See James Ensor’s letters to Cléomir Jussiant (1872–1961) between 11 and 30 September 1927 in Ensor and Tricot 1999, pp. 462–467.
- 16 See the contribution by Izanna Mulder, “The Print as Unique Object”, for a deeper analysis of Ensor’s use of colour. For concrete examples of how the use of colour changes the meaning of his works, see figs. 31 and 32.
- 17 Florizoone 2002a, p. 13.



THE PRINT AS UNIQUE OBJECT

On the Creation of Ensor's Special Impressions

Izanna Mulder

"I am haunted by notions of survival... I fear the fragility of painting," wrote James Ensor, looking back on his early days as a printmaker. "I want to survive, and I think of solid copper plates, stable inks, easy reproductions, and I take etching as a means of expression."¹ Ensor also played with impermanence in his etchings. In the first state of *My Portrait as a Skeleton* (fig. 13), the artist looks directly at the viewer. As in the photograph on which the etching is based (fig. 12), he leans casually against a windowsill. After the first impression, however, Ensor drew several new lines on the etching plate, so that in later prints his face has turned into a skull (fig. 14). This playful handling of the medium is typical of Ensor's graphic work.

Some of Ensor's prints are, contrary to the essence of the medium, unique works of art. Not only did he play with different states, as in *My Portrait as a Skeleton*, he often coloured his prints as well, making each one a unique work of art. Sometimes, in collaboration with his printers, he also printed on unusual papers, and even on satin. The individuality in his painting for which Ensor is praised is thus reflected not only in the subjects depicted in his prints, but also in the creative processes that made them.

The study of how Ensor's graphic works were created highlights not only his personal working methods, but also the context in which

he made his prints. Indeed, in this undertaking Ensor depended on others, such as his friends Mariette Rousseau-Hannon (1850–1926), who acted as an intermediary between Ensor and his printers, and Théodore (Théo) Hannon (1851–1916), Mariette's brother, who taught him the craft. And of course, his printers also played a role in the process, as their inking and printing influenced the final impression.

Graphic art in young Belgium

The second half of the nineteenth century saw several developments in Belgium that were important for the artistic milieu in which Ensor moved. Reforms in higher education resulted in wider access to universities and larger groups of students. Many of that younger generation wanted to spread the avant-garde ideals that were already gaining a foothold in France as well as Belgium. Hence, a great many progressive artists' associations and periodicals emerged during this period.² One of the most important groups was Les XX (Les Vingt), which was founded in 1883 by several young artists, James Ensor among them, and aimed to make Brussels the centre of contemporary art. Members of Les XX read progressive French journals, visited Paris and organised annual salons to which both domestic and foreign artists were invited.³

DETAIL FIG. 16
The Skaters, 1889
Etching and aquatint
with roulette (copper),
175 × 232 mm
State I/II, printed in red ink
Collection P.F.
T. 65

Around the same time, an etching revival⁴ was underway in Europe and the United States. In France and England in particular, enthusiasts formed etching societies and published manuals, so that the etching technique evolved from a reproduction method to a genuine art form. Artists everywhere explored the possibilities offered by different printing techniques. They experimented with the possibilities of the etching plate itself and were often closely involved in the printing process.⁵ Young Belgian artists in particular took up the medium as an expression of their progressive outlook – perhaps fittingly, given the relative youth of the Belgian state itself, which was founded in 1830. Moreover, the new railway network made it easier for them to reach France and England and put them in touch with artistic developments abroad.⁶ Ensor also visited Paris, in 1885 and 1889.⁷

A process of collaboration

Throughout his career, Ensor's etchings were the result of a collaboration between himself, his printers and his circle of friends. Ensor probably first encountered the etching technique under the influence of Théo Hannon, whom he

had met in 1879.⁸ By then, Théo was already an experienced etcher; he had learned the craft from the well-known printmaker Félicien Rops (1833–1898) in the 1870s. He was also a member of the Société internationale des Aquafortistes, based in Paris and founded by Rops in Belgium in 1869, whose aim was to elevate printmaking.⁹ When Ensor started making prints in the mid-1880s, he probably learned the finer points of the discipline from Théo.

Several of Ensor's fellow students at the Royal Academy of Arts in Brussels also took up the medium during the same period. It is likely that Ensor immersed himself in the technical possibilities of etching with Willy Finch (1854–1930), one of the other founders of Les XX and, like Ensor, from Ostend. The two often spent time together, and it is quite possible that they went out into nature with their copper plates and etching needles (fig. 11).¹⁰ Despite their friendship, Ensor belittled Finch, calling him his "imitator" and even referring to his etchings as "mediocre".¹¹

Théo introduced Ensor to his sister Mariette Rousseau-Hannon; Ensor later wrote that it was "the most important meeting of my life".¹²



FIG. 11
*Skulls and Willy Finch
 in the Dunes, 1888*
 Black chalk and pencil
 on paper, 215 × 265 mm
 Mu.ZEE, Ostend,
 inv. SM000671a

FIG. 12
 Anonymous, *James
 Ensor at Rue Vautier 20,
 Ixelles, 1888*
 Photo
 Mu.ZEE, Ostend –
 Fonds Xavier Tricot



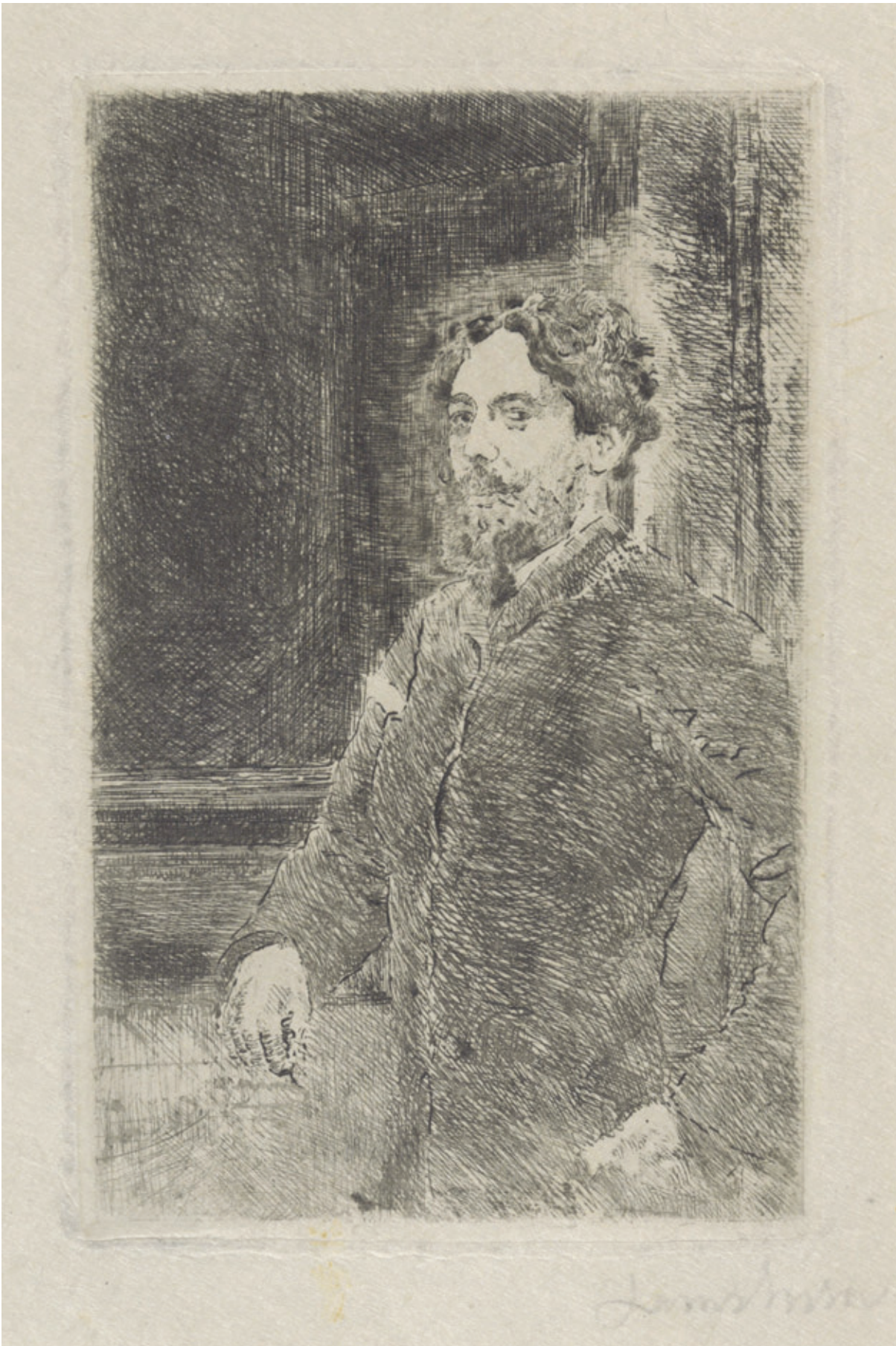


FIG. 13
*My Portrait as a
Skeleton*, 1889
Etching (copper),
116 x 75 mm
State I/II
Mu.ZEE, Ostend,
inv. SM001412a
T. 67



FIG. 14
*My Portrait as a
Skeleton*, 1889
Etching and drypoint
(copper), 116 × 75 mm
State II/II
KBR – Royal Library
of Belgium, Brussels,
inv. S.IV 29323
T. 67

Ensor returned to Ostend after his studies, so when he had to be in Brussels he often stayed with the Rousseaus. The letters Ensor sent to Mariette show that they were indeed close. In the 1888 drypoint *Peculiar Insects*, the artist even hinted at an impossible love: referring to Heinrich Heine's poem "Die Launen der Verliebten" ("The Whims of the Amorous"), in which a beetle is in love with a fly, he depicted himself as a beetle and Mariette as a dragonfly (fig. 15).

Mariette was involved in Ensor's etching practices from the beginning. He described to her in detail his attempts to master the techniques. Mariette also contributed in other ways: she bought copper plates in Brussels, had Théo apply the etching ground, and then sent them to Ostend, where Ensor drew on them.¹³ She then acted as an intermediary when Ensor asked Théo to etch his plates. Also, she often took the plates to the Brussels printer Joseph Bouwens (1823–1895) with specific instructions regarding ink colour and paper type.¹⁴ For example, Ensor stressed that certain etchings, such as *The Skaters*

and *The Cathedral*, would acquire a pleasing effect if the plate was printed with red ink (figs. 16 and 104).¹⁵ In 1889, he wrote to Mariette that he trusted her in this process because she had always looked after his etchings well, "without distraction or carelessness and with perfect intelligence".¹⁶

In his first two years of making etchings, Ensor did not have an acid bath, so it was Théo who applied the etching ground to his plates and later etched the drawn plates.¹⁷ The extent to which the lines were bitten, and would therefore become thicker or thinner, obviously had a major impact on the final impression. Ensor trusted Théo blindly in this respect. "Let Théodore do as he pleases. I like him very much," he wrote to Mariette. "What he does will always be good enough for my bad etchings."¹⁸

At some point Ensor started etching his plates himself, but he continued to work with printers in order to print them. When he met Joseph Bouwens, the latter was already a renowned printer at home and abroad. Théo knew Bouwens through Félicien Rops, so it



FIG. 15
Peculiar Insects, 1888
Drypoint (copper),
114 × 154 mm
State III/V
Museum of Fine Arts,
Ghent, inv. 1998-B-46
T. 46

FIG. 16
The Skaters, 1889
Etching and aquatint
with roulette (copper),
175 × 232 mm
State I/II, printed in red ink
Collection P.F.
T. 65



is possible that Ensor had come into contact with the printer through them.¹⁹ Dutch artist Philip Zilcken (1857–1930) described how, in 1883, he had difficulty finding a good printer in The Hague but succeeded in Brussels, with Bouwens, “who was able to make good impressions”.²⁰ Carel Storm van ’s-Gravesande (1841–1924), a compatriot of Zilcken’s who had met Ensor in Bouwens’s studio, was more critical of the printer: “Bouwens has a lot of goodwill but is lazy and works slowly.”²¹ In addition to Bouwens, Ensor called on other printers. From the mid-1890s, for instance, he had his plates printed by Jean-Baptiste Van Campenhout (1864–1927), who had worked in Bouwens’s printing house and took it over in 1892, and by Léon Evely (1849–1937), who also worked with Bouwens.²² It is difficult to ascertain exactly which printer was responsible for which impression, as Ensor had impressions made by several printers, and also reprinted his old plates regularly.²³

As with his great example Rembrandt van Rijn, a number of Ensor’s prints were printed on unusual supports. For example, there are prints on parchment, satin and even coloured satin (figs. 17 and 18). Prints on textiles are not at all numerous in the history of printmaking. There are examples of supposedly sixteenth- and seventeenth-century etchings printed on silk or linen, although many of them are probably from the eighteenth century. In addition, some nineteenth-century artists sporadically printed on satin.²⁴ Presumably Ensor was unable to study prints on textile himself due to their rarity, but his printers would certainly have told him about the main developments in printmaking.²⁵ It is not entirely clear which printer was responsible for Ensor’s prints on satin, but it may have been Evely. In an 1895 letter to his friend Eugène Demolder (1862–1919), Ensor suggested that Demolder submit several etchings on satin for an exhibition of etchings.²⁶ At the time, Evely had sixty-one



FIG. 17
Flemish Farm, 1888
Etching (copper),
73 × 112 mm
Impression with plate
tone, printed on pink satin
Collection P.F.
T. 42

FIG. 18
*The Music in Rue de
Flandre, Ostend*, 1890
Etching (copper),
116 × 75 mm
State II/II, printed
on red satin
Collection P.F.
T. 83



plates by Ensor in his possession.²⁷ In 1955, antiquarian Paul Van der Perre (1895–1970) stated that Evely's estate contained two of Ensor's prints on satin.²⁸

A hunt for rare prints, which were quite popular among collectors, had sprung up in the nineteenth century in several countries in Europe, starting with France. Artists and their printers capitalised on this by printing small editions, for example, or on special paper, thereby making their prints into unique pieces.²⁹ This obviously served financial ends – after all, artists and publishers could charge a higher price for scarce or unusual prints. Ensor's prints on special supports, as well as his prints in coloured ink, and even a counterproof (fig. 21) were entirely in step with the times. Due to the diverse supports and inks, each impression has a very different character. (figs. 19, 20 and 22)

A personal path

Ensor wrote in his letters to Mariette that he was especially fond of shades of grey, but also how difficult he found etching them.³⁰ “Without effort, it doesn't work! Especially in etching,” he wrote. “Experience is lacking and does not come without effort and repeated attempts.”³¹ Indeed, more than with drawing and painting, he said, a copper plate could be used “for a variety of investigations and processes”.³² And he would only be able to successfully publish the prints, he wrote, after having mastered the difficulties of etching.³³

In 1890, Ensor wrote – perhaps not entirely correctly – to the poet Valère Gille (1867–1950) that he knew nothing about the profession of etching: “I can draw and engrave well and then chance takes over. I cannot conform to all the fine, meticulous tricks of the trade.”³⁴ Yet, in a creative process, it is precisely chance that often makes the results so characteristic. Creation does not entail working towards a definite goal, but is a process of trial and error, failure and trying anew, and in this way mastering techniques.³⁵





FIG. 19
*Village Fair at the
 Windmill*, 1889
 Etching and drypoint
 (copper), 135 × 174 mm
 State II/II, printed on
 ivory satin
 Collection P.F.
 T. 72

FIG. 22
*Village Fair at the
 Windmill*, 1889
 Etching and drypoint
 (copper), 135 × 174 mm
 State II/II, hand-coloured
 with transparent and
 opaque watercolour
 Private collection
 T. 72

FIG. 20
*Village Fair at the
 Windmill*, 1889
 Etching and drypoint
 (copper), 135 × 174 mm
 State II/II, printed in red ink
 Collection P.F.
 T. 72

FIG. 21
*Village Fair at the
 Windmill*, 1889
 Counterproof, 135 × 174 mm
 State II/II
 Collection P.F.
 T. 72

COLOPHON

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Ensor's States of Imagination* at the Museum Plantin-Moretus from 27 September 2024 to 19 January 2025, curated by Izanna Mulder (guest curator) and Willemijn Stammis (Curator of Modern Collections, Museum Plantin-Moretus).

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Concept
Izanna Mulder

Texts
Izanna Mulder
Willemijn Stammis
Ad Stijnman
Herwig Todts

Editing
Izanna Mulder
Willemijn Stammis

Image editing
Vanessa Paumen

Copy-editing
Vanessa Paumen
Cath Phillips
Willemijn Stammis

Translation
Irene Schaudies

Coordination
Sara Colson, Hannibal Books
Vanessa Paumen, Museum Plantin-Moretus

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EXHIBITION

Iris Kockelbergh, director
Izanna Mulder, guest curator
Willemijn Stammis,
project coordinator
Vanessa Paumen,
project assistant

and the entire team of
Museum Plantin-Moretus
Vrijdagmarkt 22,
B-2000 Antwerp
www.museumplantinmoretus.be

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89, 93, 102
Vienna, The ALBERTINA Museum,
figs. 77, 95

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James Ensor
*The Deadly Sins Dominated
by Death* (detail), 1904
Etching (copper), 84 × 134 mm
Hand-coloured with trans-
parent watercolour
Museum Plantin-Moretus,
Antwerpen,
inv. PK.MP.04975
T. 126

Back cover:
James Ensor
*Death Chasing the Flock
of Mortals* (detail), 1896
Etching (copper), 235 × 175 mm
State II/III, hand coloured
with transparent watercolour
Private collection
T. 104