

Mock

Two essays on James Ensor's grotesques

Humanity

Bart Verschaffel



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James Ensor's grotesques
and the *History of Caricature*
by Jules Champfleury

Frame and figure in
the work of James Ensor

The Old Masters...

When Emile Verhaeren visited Ensor's studio at the turn of the century, he found the painter in the midst of 'a mound of disparate objects' that was interspersed with 'books on the floor, piles of prints on the chairs', all of which fed his imagination.¹⁸ Yet books and prints inspire an artist in a totally different way to the bizarre objects and curios from a souvenir shop. But which books and prints? There were books at home: Ensor's father was well-read. Very little remains of Ensor's library, unfortunately, and the books that do survive were mostly published after 1900. Verhaeren wrote that after leaving the academy Ensor read a series of authors that 'befitted his exceptional nature': Poe, Balzac, Rabelais, Ariosto, Dante, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and *Stories from the Thousand and One Nights*.¹⁹ In his speeches and autobiographical texts, Ensor referred to Goethe, Milton, Shakespeare, Schopenhauer, Leopardi and Hugo... And according to Verhaeren, his *pictorial* references were Rembrandt, Delacroix, Chardin, Watteau and Ingres.²⁰ Ensor also mentioned – but in his later letters and writings – Rubens, Leonardo,

Michelangelo, Turner, Cellini, Patinir and Hals: all illustrious members, therefore, of painting's Hall of Fame. And from the satirical genre he lists Brueghel, Bosch and Goya, together with several less-renowned artists who nevertheless stand amongst the greats of the grotesque tradition: Jacques Callot, Salvator Rosa and Honoré Daumier.²¹ All of this gives rise to the impression that Ensor gradually gathered an extensive knowledge of literary and artistic culture and was inspired by the most celebrated of all painters. In 1951, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (KMSKA) in Antwerp acquired a collection of drawings that was subsequently published by Lydia Schoonbaert in the KMSKA yearbook and a number of related articles. We know from these drawings that the young Ensor, working in early 1880, certainly made a wide range of studies after eminent masters such as Rembrandt, Hals, Daumier, Delacroix and Hokusai, and also of works by contemporaries such as Charles Hermans.²² According to the director of the KMSKA, Walter Van Beselaere, Ensor carefully stashed the drawings away 'in

18 Emile Verhaeren, op. cit. (cfr. note 4), p. 16: 'un emmêlement d'objets disparates'; 'livres gisant à terre, estampes empilées sur des chaises'.

19 Emile Verhaeren, op. cit., p. 85: 'que sa nature d'exception lui désignait'.

20 Emile Verhaeren, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

21 Emile Verhaeren, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

22 Lydia Schoonbaert, *Addendum Beschrijvende Catalogus 1948. Een verzameling tekeningen van James Ensor (I-IV)*, in: *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1968–1972; 'Gazette des Beaux-Arts' en 'Studio' als inspiratiebronnen voor James Ensor, in: *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1978, pp. 205–221.

order not to arouse misunderstanding'. Schoonbaert's publications formed the impetus for further detailed analyses of Ensor's inspiration sources and visual references, and/or related artistic works, and the manner in which Ensor learned from them.²³ While subsequent research has indeed brought interesting parallels to light, illuminated general thematic or stylistic correspondences and proposed *possible* links, it has yielded surprisingly few concrete sources or correlations. The exception being, however, the British caricaturists: Hogarth, Gillray and, in particular, Rowlandson and Cruikshank. Although Ensor praised Hogarth in public, he never openly mentioned any of the other British caricature artists himself. Several contemporary critics made the connection, nonetheless, and Pol de Mont, writing in 1898, described Ensor as 'a nephew of Gillray and Rowlandson'.²⁴ There has been renewed interest in this theme within the field of Ensor research

and Xavier Tricot has indicated, with reference to individual graphic works or series of prints, some noteworthy thematic parallels, including the artist's satirical works depicting the behaviour of the bourgeoisie at the seaside, the allusions to political and social issues, the theme of the skeleton and the figure of Napoleon... Tricot believes that Ensor became aware of this tradition via a number of British nineteenth-century publications, maybe *An Historical Sketch of the Art of Caricaturing* (1813) by James Peller Malcolm, *A Book of Caricatures* (ca. 1862) by Mary Darly or the *History of Caricature and Grotesque Art* (1865) by Thomas Wright. Yet there is no evidence that Ensor either knew or utilised these works.²⁵ The situation is completely different, however, when it comes to the first French-language art-historical survey of the caricature and grotesque by the French writer and art critic Champfleury (pseudonym of

23 By, amongst others, Patrick Florizoone and Herwig Todts. Xavier Tricot drew upon this research for a critical appraisal in his resumptive web publication 'Ensor and the Old Masters'. His assessment makes it sufficiently clear that Ensor – pace Verhaeren – was obviously indebted to the past. Herwig Todts, 'Make Way for the Old Ones! Respect Defunct Schools!' *Ensor and the Art-Historical Canon*, in: *James Ensor* (exhib. cat.), New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2009, pp. 118–129; see also: Todts, *James Ensor, Occasioneel modernist. Een onderzoek naar James Ensors artistieke en maatschappelijke opvattingen en de interpretatie van zijn kunst* (doctoral thesis, UGent, 2009); Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor and English Art*, in: Carol Brown (ed.), *James Ensor: Theatre of Masks* (exhib. cat.), London, Barbican Art Gallery, 1997, pp. 100–117; Patrick Floorizoone, *Negentiende-eeuwse historische thema's en onbekende bronnen in het oeuvre van James Ensor*, in: *Ensor-Grafiek in confrontatie*, Ghent/Antwerp, Snoeck/Pandora, 1999. Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor en de Oude Meesters*, James Ensor Online Museum, sources, web publications (no date): jamesensor.vlaamsekunstcollectie.be/nl/bronnen/webpublicaties/james-ensor-en-de-oude-meesters.

24 Pol de Mont, *James Ensor Peintre et aquafortiste*, in: *La Plume*, no. 232, 15 December 1898.

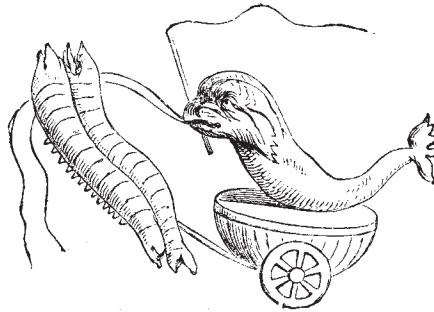
25 Champfleury was familiar with the work of Wright and certainly took over themes and illustrations.



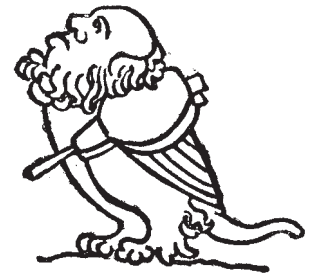
Diablen rossant anges et archanges, 1888. Etching, 33,3×38,6cm. MSK Gent.



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- 1 HCMA, p. 111
- 2 HCA, p. 87
- 3 HCMA, p. 172

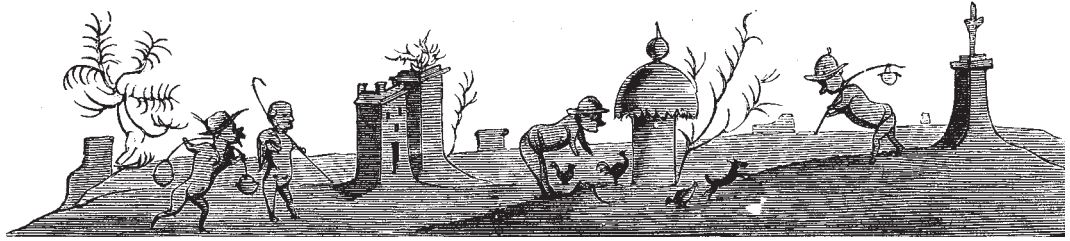
Diabes rossant anges et archanges, or Devils Thrashing Angels and Archangels (1888). It was previously noted that Ensor has used Callot – more specifically for the archangel on top of the drawing – to compose his personal version of this traditional theme. He seems, though, to rely even more on Champfleury. The central scene with the terrified face with the gaping mouth, threatened by a skeleton, is taken from a drawing by Holbein, ‘The bishop and Death’ (1). The fish that pins up with his saw-tooth the twin girls in the upper left corner is taken from an antique animal caricature on an engraved stone (2), and the bearded man-bird right below, which Ensor repeatedly draws elsewhere again, is a medieval miniature that comes out of an illuminated manuscript (3).



Clowns blancs et rouges évoluant, 1890. Pencil, ink and gouache on paper, 24,1×29,7cm. KMSKB Brussels.



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- 1 HCA, p. 181
- 2 HCA, p. 173
- 3 HCA, p. 168
- 4 HCRE, p. 169
- 5 HCMA, p. 249

Clowns blancs et rouges évoluant, or Red and White Clowns Evolving (1890). Several clown figures, in addition to the composition and drawing style, are borrowed or reworked from Pompeian friezes and Greek vases decorated with pygmies fighting, all of which can be found in the HCA (HCA 163, 165, 168, 169, 173, 177, 181). For example, the helmets and the tumbling figure at the bottom left (3). The figure of the 'pygmy' returns in Ensor's later works, while the handle in the shape of a monkey can also be found in the book (HCA 326). The Empress Catherine doing the 'splits' and the bishop with a jester's stick are taken from other sections of the *Encyclopédie* (respectively 4 and 5).



Ensor et Leman discutant peinture, 1890. Oil on panel, 12×12cm.
Private collection. Tricot, C.R. no 310.



1 HCMA, p. 310

Ensor et Leman discutant peinture, or Ensor and General Leman Discussing Painting (1890). For this drawing, which exists in several versions, Ensor used an illustration by Holbein from *In Praise of Folly* (1). It depicts a cuckoo on a branch facing an ugly, cuckolded husband, the latter of whom consults Folly about his attractive appearance. Ensor used this image as an under drawing for the confrontation between himself and Leman, with the 'wife' watching over the proceeding.



Les chanteurs grotesques, 1891. Oil on panel, 16×21cm.
Private collection. Tricot C.R. no 336.



Vieille femme avec masques, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 54×47,5cm. MSK Gent.
Tricot C.R. no 305.

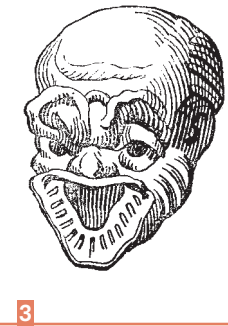


1 HCA, p. 321

Les chanteurs grotesques, or *The Grotesque Singers* (1891). Here, Ensor turns to the image of an antique oil lamp (1), using the face for one 'singer' and the hat for the other. The same lamp also served as a model for the large, overpowering mask to the right of the old woman's face in *Old Woman with Masks* (*Vieille femme avec masques*) (1889), and elsewhere.



L'intrigue, 1890. Oil on canvas, 90×150cm. KMSKA Antwerp. Tricot C.R. no 308.



- 1 HCM, p. 229
- 2 HCA, p. 116
- 3 HCA, p. 45
- 4 HCA, p. 260
- 5 HCA, p. 212
- 6 HCM, p. 43

L'intrigue, or The Intrigue (1890). In the various versions of this famous 'mask' work, Ensor unites a number of faces from disparate sources, the majority of which can be traced back to Champfleury. The central character with the top hat, who probably represents Death, is borrowed from Traviès (1); the two heads in the background to the right are taken from antique theatrical masks (2, 3), as is one face in the background to the left (4) and one abutting the edge of the canvas left (5). The left-hand face with the black quiff, which also features in the earlier work *Skeletons Fighting for the Body of a Hanged Man* top right, and which regularly appears in the mask paintings, is a not a mask but a caricature: he is taken from Daumier's portrait sketch of a judge, M. Persil, who was known for clamping down on the Democrats and press freedom (6). In a version of this painting from 1898, the antique theatrical mask that Ensor almost certainly used in *The Scandalised Masks* (*Les masques scandalisés*) (1883) is also clearly recognizable (HCA 15).



Les cuisiniers dangereux, 1896. Oil on panel, 38×46cm. Private collection. Tricot C.R. no 381.



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- 1 HCRE, p. 235
- 2 HCMA, p. 104

Les cuisiniers dangereux, or *The Dangerous Cooks* (1896). Ensor drew from multiple sources for this drawing, which conveys the attitude of the critics-curators Maus and Edmond Picard towards the artists of Les XX. Xavier Tricot rightly refers to related works by Rowlandson and Gillray, but does not pinpoint the exact plate that Ensor used to such great effect, and which is precisely the one illustrated in Champfleury: Gillray's *Petit souper à la parisienne* (1).³⁹ Depicting 'sans culottes' feasting after a day of plunder and murder, the print forms both the basis for the overall organisation of the scene and for the selection and placement of multiple pictorial elements, including the details of the head on the dish and the man who swallows an arm. The scene taking place to the left, with Picard as the 'cook', is a reworking of an illustration of a choir stall featuring a sculpture of a woman amputating an ear of a devil (2).

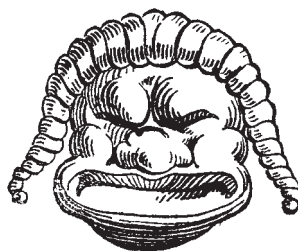
³⁹ See Xavier Tricot, *op. cit.*



La mort et les masques, 1897. Oil on canvas, 78,5×100cm.
Musée d'art Moderne Liège. Tricot C.R. no 386.



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- 1 HCA, p. 223
- 2 HCA, p. 14
- 3 HCMA, p. 95

La mort et les masques, or Death and the Masks (1897). Ensor re-uses the comical figure of Pappus (1) to impersonate Death, the head in the right-hand corner (again 2) is most probably after a figure of a devil (3). The singing lady on the left who leans backwards often appears in Ensor's work, and may have been inspired by a singer in an anonymous British political cartoon (HCRE 266).