Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889, James Ensor

Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889

James Ensor
Belgian, 1888
Oil on canvas
99 1/2 x 169 1/2 in.
87.PA.96

Questions for Teaching

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What details do you notice?

What is happening in this scene? (*Chaos, celebration, Mardi Gras parade, etc.*) How do you know? (*Flags, banners, people on balconies, people marching in the street, etc.*)

Identify the types of characters in the **foreground** of the painting. (*Figures from church and the military, merchants, people in costume, politicians, etc.*)

Identify the types of characters in the **middle ground** of the painting. (*Figures from the military, members of a marching band, and clowns.*)

How do you know who the characters are? (*We can guess who the figures in the crowd are by looking at their clothing and accessories.*)

What do you notice about the characters? (*They are brightly colored, heavily painted, and cartoonish, with exaggerated facial expressions and masks.*)

What are the characters doing? (*They are talking, playing music, and engaging in other activities.*) What are they ignoring? (*They are not noticing Christ entering Brussels.*)

In this painting, Ensor portrays society as a chaotic mob. Identify examples of characters that are being criticized or made fun of in this painting. How can you tell? (*The artist paints certain individuals with garish colors, with masks, or as clowns or caricatures.*)

Background Information

James Ensor took on religion, politics, and art in this scene of Christ entering contemporary Brussels in a Mardi Gras parade. Ensor used palette knives, spatulas, and both ends of his

Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889, James Ensor

brush to put down patches of colors with expressive freedom. He made several **preparatory drawings** for the painting, including one in the J. Paul Getty Museum's collection.

In this painting, Ensor portrays society as a mob, threatening to trample the viewer—a crude, ugly, chaotic, dehumanized sea of masks, frauds, clowns, and **caricatures**. Public, historical, and allegorical figures along with the artist's family and friends made up the crowd. The haloed Christ at the center of the turbulence is in part a **self-portrait**: mostly ignored, a precarious, isolated visionary amidst the herdlike masses of modern society. When Ensor painted the work, Belgium was being transformed from a sleepy town to a modern city under the rule of **Leopold II**, whose lucrative slave labor in the Congo Free State helped to finance new architecture and infrastructure. Between 1860 and 1890, the economy was shifting from agriculture to industry, Belgian cities faced overcrowding, and the poor of Brussels were pushed into the western fringes of the city. Ensor's Christ functioned as a political spokesman for the poor and oppressed—a humble leader of the true religion, in opposition to the atheist social reformer Emile Littré, shown in bishop's garb holding a drum major's baton leading on the eager, mindless crowd.

After rejection by *Les XX*, the artists' association that Ensor had helped to found, the painting was not exhibited publicly until 1929. Ensor displayed the work prominently in his home and studio throughout his life. With its aggressive, **painterly** style and merging of the public with the deeply personal, the massive canvas was a forerunner of twentieth-century **Expressionism**.

About the Artist

James Ensor (Belgian, 1860–1849)

Except for three years studying history and religious painting at the Brussels academy, James Ensor, a Belgian painter, printmaker, and draftsman, lived in Ostend, Belgium, all his life. He began his artistic career as a **portrait** painter but soon became involved with a group of painters, designers, and sculptors called *Les XX* (The Twenty), whose goal was to promote new artistic developments throughout Europe. Although Ensor was considered the group's leader and founder, he had sharp differences of opinion with other group members. Art critics treated the group harshly, and *Les XX* disbanded after a decade.

In the mid-1880s, Ensor suffered from an ulcer and from a personal crisis: his family forbade him to marry the woman he loved. He returned to painting religious subjects and plunged to the depths of despair when he decided to sell the contents of his studio in the 1890s. After the turn of the century, Ensor finally won acclaim and respectability. He was knighted and given the title of baron. The 1908 publication of a book about his life and works confirmed his standing and reputation. In later years, he wrote music, designed sets for ballets, and continued to paint until his death at eighty-nine.