

JAMES ENSOR

Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas
(The Sermon of Saint Babylas)
1892

PATRICK DEROM GALLERY



James ENSOR (1860-1949)
Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas, 1892

Oil, gouache and chalk on a primed panel
46 x 38 cm

Signed and dated, centre left, on the plaque on the pillar ENSOR/1892

Inscribed on the back : *James Ensor/rue de Flandre no.27 Ostende/1892/H.046-L.038*

Certificate of authenticity from the Ensor Advisory Committee,
signed by Sabine Tavernier, dated 10th October 2024

Provenance

The Studio of James Ensor
The Marcel Mabilie Collection, Brussels, bought in 1945
Private collection

Exhibitions

Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Tenth annual exhibition, Les XX, 18th February – 26th March 1893, no.3

Ghent, Cercle Artistique et Littéraire, Les XX, 2nd – 17th April 1893, no.3

Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, James Ensor, 19th January – 17th February 1929, cat. no.200

Brussels, Galerie Georges Giroux, Hommage à James Ensor (A tribute to James Ensor), 13th October – 4th November 1945, no.72

London, National Gallery, The works of James Ensor, 27 February – 31 March 1946, cat. no.35

Charleroi, Cercle Artistique et Littéraire, XXIII, Salon annuel des Beaux-Arts (23rd Annual exhibition of fine art), Rétrospective J. Ensor, 19th March – 4th April 1949, no.31

Bibliography

Catalogue de la dixième exposition annuelle des XX (Catalogue of the tenth annual exhibition by Les XX), Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, February 1893, p.22.

Emile Verhaeren, *James Ensor*, Brussels, 1908, p.117. (under “Le prêche 1891”)

Gregoire Leroy, *James Ensor*, Brussels, 1922, p.183. (under “Le prêche 1891”)

Paul Desmeth, *Artistes de Belgique : James Ensor (Belgian Artists: James Ensor)*, 1926, ed. L. J. Kryn, Brussels, p.20. (under “Le prêche 1891”)

François Fosca, *James Ensor*, Éditions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 1929, p.9.

Georges Willems, *Hommages à James Ensor (Tributes to James Ensor)*, Éditions de la Galerie Georges Giroux, Bruxelles, 1945, p.23.

Leo van Puyvelde, *The works of James Ensor: an exhibition organized by the Arts Council of Great Britain*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1946, p.10.

Florent Fels, *James Ensor*, Éditions Pierre Caillier, Geneva, 1947, pl.38 (ill.)

Cercle artistique et littéraire, Charleroi. 1921-1949. 23rd Exhibition. From 19th March to 4th April, 10 am to 1pm and 2pm to 7pm. Salles de la Bourse, Charleroi, Delacre, 1949, p.18 and p.20 (ill.)

Paul Haesaerts, *James Ensor*, Brussels, 1957, no.301, p.152 (ill.)

Julius Kaplan, “The Religious subject of James Ensor 1887-1900”, in *Revue Belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'art*, vol.3, 1966, p.206.

Catalogue des dix expositions annuelles Bruxelles (Catalogue of the ten annual Brussels exhibitions), Centre international pour l'étude du XIXe siècle, 1981, p.289.

Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor. Catalogue raisonné of paintings*, Antwerp, 1992, cat. no.347

Patrick Florizoone, “Thèmes historiques du XIXe siècle et sources inconnues dans l’oeuvre de James Ensor : Où il est question de copie, d’interprétation et d’originalité” (Historic themes of the 19th century and unknown sources in the work of James Ensor: copying, interpretation and originality), in *James Ensor : Art Graphique d' Ensor en Confrontation*, Éditions Snoeck/Pandora, Antwerp, 1999, p.37.

Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor, sa vie son oeuvre (James Ensor, his life and work). Catalogue raisonné of paintings*, Brussels, 2009, cat. no.359 (ill.)

Susan M. Canning, “Ensor’s flandricisms and the cultural politics of Belgian identity”, in *Oud Holland*, Vol. 133, No. 3/4, 2020, p.213.

JAMES ENSOR (1860-1949)

Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas, 1892

James Ensor was born in Ostend in 1860 to an English engineer father and a Flemish mother who ran a shop selling souvenirs, shells and carnival masks. He studied at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts and quickly established himself as one of the most original figures of Belgian modernity, becoming a founding member of the group Les XX. Alternating between realism, symbolism and satire, his unique world view blended religion, fantasy and the grotesque into an acerbic criticism of bourgeois society. He received recognition late in life, was made a baron in 1929, and died in Ostend in 1949.

There are generally considered to be two distinct phases in Ensor's early work: a dark, or realist period (1879-1882), followed by a bright period characterised by phantasmagorical irrealism, which reached its peak between 1887 and 1893. In reality, these phases and styles overlapped. However after 1886, the role of light gradually evolved from that of simple assistant to become the real substance of his work. Light softened outlines and banished the boundary between dreams and reality, becoming the expression of his heightened subjectivity.

Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas was completed in 1892 during this period of full artistic maturity when Ensor explored Flanders' spiritual and pictorial traditions. This phase is characterised by a transition from his early realistic and conventional works towards a more expressive style, influenced by symbolism and the development of the expressionist movement (fig.1 and 2).

The work was first displayed at the last exhibitions by Les XX, initially at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, for the tenth annual exhibition, then at the Cercle Artistique et Littéraire, Ghent.¹ This tenth and final exhibition by the Les XX group was considered a major artistic event by Octave Maus², who urged the participating artists to show exceptional works:

*I would also draw your attention to the exceptional artistic stature which the 1893 Les XX exhibition will confer. All members must be represented by works of excellence, in order to establish, beyond any possible dispute, the superiority of emerging art.*³

This exhibition marked the end of an era. The group broke up later that year, despite Ensor's opposition, and La Libre Esthétique was subsequently created. The decision to present *Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas* at this final exhibition therefore had both a strategic and symbolic significance, the same reasons which justified its presence at Ensor's retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in 1929, then at the National Gallery, London, in 1946.

¹ in *L'Art Moderne*, 26th March 1893, p.162

² Octave Maus was an art critic and founder of the Les XX group

³ Draft letter from Octave Maus to the members of Les XX, 1893, Copyright M.R.B.A.B., Fonds Octave Maus / Sous-fonds Les XX 1893, inv. 6305

Fig. 1
James ENSOR
Soudards pénitents dans une cathédrale
(*Penitent soldiers in a cathedral*), 1893

Oil and ink on canvas
120 x 105 cm
Private collection

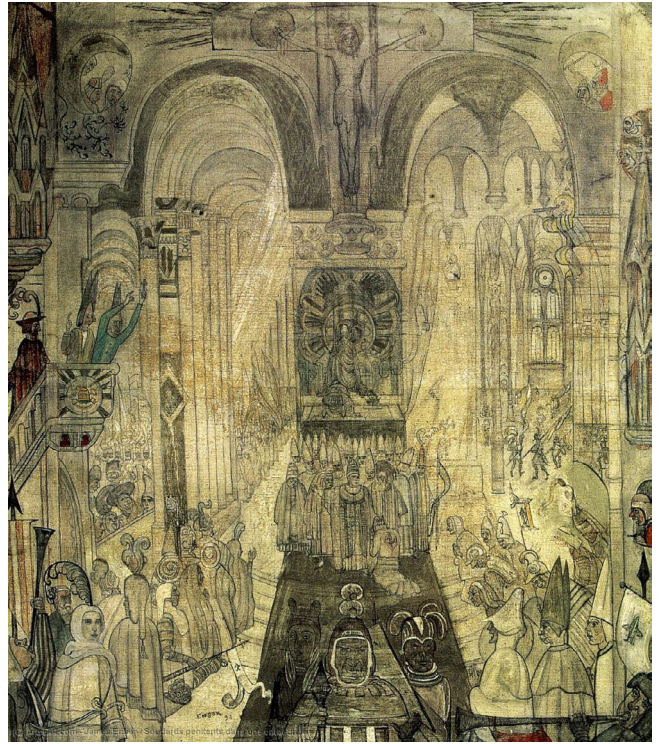


Fig. 2
James ENSOR
L'exécution (The Execution), 1893

Oil, ink and pencil on a primed panel
40 x 32.5cm
Private collection



Fig. 3

Joseph Correns (1814-1907)

Troisième chute de Jésus sous la croix
(*Jesus falls for the third time*), 1849

Below :

Detail of *Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas*



The work has not been shown in public for 76 years, since April 1949. James Ensor died several months later, in November of the same year. The title refers to Saint Babylas, a 3rd century bishop and martyr, known for his courageous faith in the face of persecution and for his role as a preacher. The saint is not necessarily represented in the painting; his name evokes the idea of a sermon and the presence of a religious discourse. The work depicts a priest preaching from the baroque pulpit while the faithful gathered around him watch spellbound, showing great expressivity and dramatic intensity.

The scene takes place in Saint Andrew's Church, Antwerp (Sint-Andries), recognisable by its baroque pulpit. This wooden narrative sculpture illustrates the apostolic vocation of Saint Andrew, while in Ensor's painting it becomes the setting for a sermon. The artist also includes two paintings from the Way of the Cross⁴ which are still kept in the church: at the right of the composition, the ninth station, *La troisième chute du Christ (Jesus falls for the third time)* (fig.3), and on the far left, *Jesus descendu de la croix (Jesus descends from the cross)* (fig.4)⁵ These works represent two key moments from the Passion of Christ, the events which precede his crucifixion and death.

James Ensor tackled religious subjects throughout his career and from 1885, the Christ figure actually became one of the main themes of his ever-evolving work. The painter presented Jesus differently depending on the situation, conferring varying meanings on him: the embodiment of light, the misunderstood prophet or the suffering artist. Rarely has a painter from the second half of the 19th century made the Christ figure his own in such an intriguing way. Ensor's characteristic identification with the Christ figure has been studied repeatedly by art historians. Ensor saw in the figure of Christ an ideal archetype he could measure himself against, compare himself to and ultimately identify with. Jesus thus became Ensor's alter ego.⁶

⁴ The Way of the Cross, usually made up of fourteen stations, invites the faithful to meditate and pray on Christ's suffering and sacrifice.

⁵ The 14 paintings representing The Stations of the Cross were created (1844-1857) by Karel Wauters, Jules Romain Pecher, Lambert Mathieu, Jan-Baptist Van Rooy, Alexander Markelbach (2), Edward Dujardin, Karel Verlat (2), Antoon Van Ysendyck, Jozef Correns, Petrus Kremer, Louis Hendrix and Jan Baptist Van Eycken.

⁶ Xavier Tricot, "The Figure of Christ in Ensor's Oeuvre", in James Ensor : *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, Pandora Publishers, 2021, p.141.

Ensor may have been inspired in making the work by an engraving of the pulpit by Georges Farlet, published in *Le Magasin Pittoresque* (31st May 1891) (fig.5), a magazine he consulted regularly to widen his pictorial repertoire.⁷ It is equally likely that he used photographs for reference, (a practice documented for other works by the artist), in order to reproduce the architectural perspectives and sculptural details accurately (fig.6). This combination of sources – engravings, photographs and direct observation – illustrates Ensor's method for combining different sources of information.

Through *Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas*, Ensor reinvents a modern medievalism, where the religious past becomes a mirror of the present. This work illustrates his fascination for gothic architecture, ecclesiastical scenes, and faces masked by faith.⁸ By conveying both the spiritual grandeur and the moral decadence of his age, Ensor transformed the Flemish tradition into a critical tool. This long-forgotten painting demonstrates the complexity of an artist who was able to turn the sacred into a theatre of modernity.

⁷ Patrick Florizoone, "Thèmes historiques du XIXe siècle et sources inconnues dans l'oeuvre de James Ensor : Où il est question de copie, d'interprétation et d'originalité", (Historical themes of the 19th century and unknown sources in the work of James Ensor: copying, interpretation and originality) in *James Ensor : Art Graphique d'Ensor en Confrontation*, Éditions Snoeck/Pandora, Antwerp, 1999, pp.36-37.

⁸ Susan M. Canning, "Ensor's flandricisms and the cultural politics of Belgian identity", in *Oud Holland*, Vol. 133, No. 3/4, 2020, p.209

Fig. 4

Karel Verlat (1824-1890)

Jésus descendu de la croix

(*Jesus descends from the cross*), 1852

Below :

Detail of *Le Prêche de Saint-Babylas*



Fig. 5
Pulpit of Saint Andrew's Church, Antwerp
Engraving by Georges Farlet
in *Le Magasin Pittoresque* (31st May 1891), p.153



Fig. 6
Photograph of the pulpit of Saint Andrew's Church, Antwerp
c1880, albumen print, 22 x 28cm



www.patrickderomgallery.com
info@patrickderomgallery.com
+32 2 514 08 82

PATRICK DEROM GALLERY

Rue aux Laines 1,
1000 Brussels, Belgium