

PRESS RELEASE
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JAMES ENSOR: TO DIE FOR IMMORTALITY

The Museum Montanelli has received the unique opportunity to present a loan of a unique collection of 52 drawings, engravings, and lithographs by that “visionary of modernity”, predecessor to expressionism and surrealism, Belgian painter and graphic artist James Ensor (1860-1949). The collection, which for more than 100 years has been in the possession of the Saarland Cultural Heritage Foundation at the Saarland Museum in Saarbrücken, Germany, represents central themes of Ensor’s work and documents his influence on the art scene during his life and over the subsequent decades.

The exhibition opens 17 October 2014 and runs until 1 February 2015.

James Ensor was not a religious person. And yet, 38 of Ensor’s 52 prints held in the Saarland Museum’s collection contain motifs addressing Christian themes – and in 35 instances he directly addresses the life of Jesus Christ. Ensor saw the life of Jesus as a parable, as a way of seeing himself as an artist and a way of exploring the world’s cultural, political, and social characteristics. His likenesses of Jesus often possess features reminiscent of his own, and in one case Christ on the cross is labeled with the text “ENSOR”. When an artist decides to take such a step, he is not working in the services of religion but is building his own legend. In his works making use of the motif of Jesus, Ensor again and again portrays the utter incomprehension that the Savior faced, including the infinite injustice he incurred at the hands of secular power. Ensor emphasizes the suffering that Jesus took on as part of his mission on Earth. On his paintings, too, Jesus manages the impossible – overcoming death – despite all the hardship and suffering that he must endure. But in order to do so, he first had to die. Since time immemorial, myths and meditations upon art have worked with the topos that life is short but art is eternal. Understandably, this view is based on the conviction that the artist’s life continues in his work – and on the desire for this to be true. In fact, Ensor expressed this hope in words: “I want to survive, to speak for a long time to men of the future. I reflect upon the durability of copper, the permanence of printer’s ink, simple techniques of reproduction – and as a form of expression I choose etching.” These words contain an explanation for why, in 1886, he suddenly begins to engage in printmaking and paintings cease to be the focus of his artistic endeavors. Ensor is convinced that etchings are a suitable medium for ensuring his “further life”, life after death. On the other hand, however, the many

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different motifs and allusions celebrate his own death. On one of his self-portraits, etched on the basis of a photograph, he deforms his own face. After making the first print, which depicted him (as in the photograph) as a self-assured man against a black background, he decided to rework the plate and to replace his face with a skull. In this creative process, Ensor simulates his own death while at the same time revealing his distinctive artistic force. Even on the new version, however, his living likeness still shines through the skull. On another etched self-portrait from 1888, Ensor presents a faithful likeness dated with the year 1960, the year of his 100th birthday – a game with time that is either historical manipulation or a sign of Ensor's status as a prophet. The portrait makes him look like someone who has spent the past several years in a tomb. There is no meat on his bones and his hair has suffered significantly, although his shoes are still in good shape. On the one hand, Ensor here caricatures the yearning for eternal life, while on the other he has accomplished it. His likeness will live on in precisely that medium that he chose for this purpose: as an etching.

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