

# JAMES ENSOR

**A Portrait of the Old Master as a Young Man**  
**12 March- 16 May 2026**



From March 12 to May 16, 2026, Tim Van Laere Gallery Antwerp presents a solo exhibition of the renowned Belgian artist James Ensor (1860–1949), curated by Ensor specialist Herwig Todts and Tim Van Laere.

The exhibition *James Ensor, a Portrait of the Old Master as a Young Man* focuses specifically on Ensor's late, surprisingly vital oeuvre. Rather than depicting an artist repeating earlier successes, it presents an old master who remains playful, curious, and experimental; a creator who, well into old age, resisted what he called "Saint Routine." Close study of his later work reveals an artist who stayed youthful in spirit and continued to experiment tirelessly with "les manières les plus opposées." In his studio, he revisited colorful seascapes, and failed etching prints inspired sinisterly whimsical compositions. Shells and porcelain figurines become small, seemingly innocent theatrical scenes. Tiny masked creatures appear here and there, both performing for an audience and participating in dramatic tableaux. Ensor painted these scenes, as he described it himself, with his left eye on the *mise-en-scène* and his right eye on the colors of his palette. Even his portraits became, above all, experiments in color, where painterly freedom takes precedence over likeness. This exhibition thus reveals an Ensor who continued to innovate until the very end; a master who never ceased to remain young. Alongside this vibrant late work, the show presents a compact but powerful ensemble of large, relatively unknown charcoal drawings from 1880–1882, stemming from Ensor's early *avant-garde* period.

Ensor emerged around 1880 as an artist firmly claiming his place within the *avant-garde*. From the outset, he believed that artistic renewal required the constant exploration of diverse "manières": different subjects, techniques, and even contradictory styles. He remained faithful to this experimental credo throughout his life. He treated light, color, and form freely and independently, detached from visible reality. His work often anticipated modernism, yet his love for a broad range of expressive media - painting, drawing, etching, literary performances, satirical art criticism, and keyboard music - aligns even more closely with the pluralism of postmodernism.

Tim Van Laere Gallery positions itself explicitly as an artists' gallery, where the artist is always the priority. The gallery builds long-term relationships with its artists, actively supporting them in the development of their artistic trajectories, while remaining mindful of their place in art history. In addition to groundbreaking solo exhibitions, the gallery regularly organizes group shows in which contemporary artists enter into dialogue with modern masters. Ensor's work has already been presented twice in this context, in the exhibitions *Everything and more* (2013), *We Will Begin by Drawing, We Shall Continue to Draw, and Then We Shall Draw Some More* (2015) and *Swim the Mountain Climb the Sea* (2022) at Tim Van Laere Gallery Antwerp.

Tim Van Laere has had a personal and profound affinity with Ensor's work for many years. What began as admiration grew into a long-cherished dream: realizing a solo exhibition presenting Ensor as an artist whose work transcends time; undiminished in freshness, experimentation, and influence. This vision resonates with numerous artists represented by the gallery, whose work shows clear traces of Ensor's legacy, including Rinus Van de Velde, Ben Sledsens, Carroll Dunham, Jockum Nordström, Bram Demunter, Kati Heck, Tal R, Eline Vansteenkiste, and Marcel Dzama. This shared fascination brought Tim Van Laere into contact with Herwig Todts, with whom he co-curates this exhibition.

Tim Van Laere: "My father took my brother and me to exhibitions from a very young age, including those of James Ensor. His work has always been a source of inspiration and a benchmark. Through many conversations with the artists I work with today, I've realized that Ensor is just as important to them. Many people want to categorize art in order to understand it better, but I believe that great art transcends time and space. Art should not be confined, it should be approached as an open dialogue. I truly believe that if Ensor were alive today, he would feel completely at home at Tim Van Laere Gallery."

Herwig Todts is responsible for the concept and selection of the exhibition in consultation with Tim Van Laere. He is Honorary Curator at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) and is internationally recognized as one of the leading authorities on James Ensor. In 2024, he curated the exhibition *In Your Wildest Dreams: Ensor Beyond Impressionism* at the KMSKA. He has also served as curator or co-curator of numerous Ensor exhibitions at institutions such as the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Art Institute of Chicago, MoMA New York, the Royal Academy of Arts London, Musée d'Orsay Paris, Bozar Brussels, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Ordrupgaard Copenhagen, Kunstmuseum Basel, and museums in Singapore, Shanghai, and Tokyo. Additionally, he has published an impressive number of authoritative books on Ensor, including *James Ensor: Wildest Dreams, Beyond Impressionism* (2025), *Verrukkelijke turbulentie* (2024), and *James Ensor, Occasional Modernist* (2019).

In recent years, Ensor's work has been highlighted in major solo exhibitions that underscore his enduring relevance and versatility. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp presented the extensive retrospective *In Your Wildest Dreams: Ensor Beyond Impressionism* (September 28, 2024 – January 19, 2025), one of the largest Ensor shows of this century, emphasizing his experimental vision, humor, and groundbreaking visual language, bringing together internationally acclaimed loans with the museum's rich collection. For this exhibition, the KMSKA loaned two works from its collection, and there are also loans on display from Museum M and Museum Dhondt Dhaenens. In 2009, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York held a major retrospective, showcasing around 120 of Ensor's works.

Ensor's work is part of numerous major museum collections worldwide. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp holds the largest and most varied collection of Ensor's works, including dozens of paintings, drawings, and prints documenting the evolution of his style. In Belgium, his work is also represented in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Brussels), Museum M (Leuven), Museum Dhondt Dhaenens (Deurle), Mu.ZEE (Ostend), and the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR, Brussels). Internationally, his work is included in prominent collections such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, New York), The Art Institute (Chicago), The Metropolitan Museum (MET, New York), Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), Musée d'Orsay (Paris), J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles), Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (Cologne), Neue Pinakothek (München), Tel Aviv Museum of Art (Tel Aviv), Israel Museum (Jerusalem), The National Museum of Western Art (Tokyo), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), and Tate Britain (London).