



James Ensor

Scènes de la vie du Christ.

(Bruxelles), Galerie Georges Giroux, 1921. 25,1 x 31,7 cm, original greyish-brown paper portfolio with printed artist's name and title, containing : folded sheet (4)pp. with title,colophon, table of contents, 32 coloured lithographs (frontispiece and 31 numbered prints), each 17,6 x 23 cm, mounted on blank sheets, each preceded by a protective tissue with printed title. Fine condition.

First edition. One of 250 numbered copies on "hollande van Gelder" (copy no. 83), signed on the colophon page. - Taevernier 139.

All great, truly new art is historical. It is not simply beholden to the past, but creates new, lasting images by consciously reacting to moribund forms and, unconsciously, by breathing new life into not wholly exhausted elements. The artist's hand has a more profound connection to the past than does the art-historical memory.

Scènes de la vie du Christ gives us much to consider. For his most all-encompassing graphic project, Ensor chooses an out-of-fashion theme; he reaches back to the late-medieval combination of religious themes and carnival humour, party and catastrophe; a grandiose excuse for genius - under constant assault from the stupid and wicked - to identify itself with the figure of Christ. The scenes are far from the classically monumental, and comprise rather an unfolding dream sequence in the full glare of daylight, in lines and colours that make everything at once fluent and - ah, ambiguity! - more decorative as well. This is why Ensor opts for an ornamental statement of profile and silhouette (angels of Fra Angelico?). The brutal and wily contrasts between high and low culture, the monsterly protagonists (relatives of the gargoyle 'spitters' on Gothic cathedrals) referring to the crisis of Ensor's time, while also expressing great nostalgia for the lost truthfulness that is the driving force for much modern art. Ensor's oeuvre is part of that broad movement which, from the 18th century, reacts against classicism and wishes to take up the baton of pre-academic Truth and Naturalness. Blake, Turner, the Romantics who rediscover folk art, the art nouveau movement ... Ensor's era produced abundant reasons to expose the classical ideal of beauty as a pretty lie, which explains the parallels with the Roman image world of monsters and fantasy creatures, of despairing grimaces hoping to keep the coming catastrophe at bay. Moreover, as pendant to the nightmare (for example, the Great War) we are given an eclectic dream full of dear and exotic, delicate and bizarre elements. Anti-machine morals and aesthetics, where wonder and drama go hand in hand.

Here we have Ensor in free flight. With much, very much, red, blue, yellow and green, there are echoes of the impressionists and the Nabis, but we are far from their order and calm. A near insane portrait of the Holy Family; a baptism that turns into a communal bath in the sea; overfull scenes with all manner of

marionettes, or an Elizabethan theatre where audience and extras and players are confounded in the throng; unbiblical fireworks and carnival. Daumier, Delacroix, and above all Ensor himself. He repeats themes from his own work in the manner of itinerant artists from long ago who painted centuries-old motifs in the places that offered shelter along their route. Christ Walking on Water, Christ Calming the Waters, The Entry of Christ into Brussels, Christ Mocked. Ensor makes it no secret - these scenes track his own biography. And as in *Les auréoles du Christ* ou *Les sensibilités de la lumière*, the grandiose cycle from 1885-87, he here wishes to summon up the true light. Art triumphing over darkness. Ensor states this best himself: "Our vision is modified as we observe. The first vision, that of the vulgar herd, is the simple line, unadorned, unconcerned with colour. The second stage is when the better-trained eye discerns values of the tone and their subtleties; this stage is less well understood by the vulgar herd. The last stage is when the artist sees the subtleties and multiple plays of light, its planes, its gravitations.

These progressive explorations modify the original vision, and the line suffers and is relegated to a secondary role. This vision will be little comprehended. It requires long observation and attentive study.

The vulgar herd sees in it only disorder, chaos, and inaccuracy."