

# 'IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS'

## James Ensor and the Magic Lantern

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Until 19 January 2025, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) is presenting *In Your Wildest Dreams: Ensor Beyond Impressionism*, an exhibition commemorating the 75th anniversary of the passing of the Belgian artist James Ensor (1860-1949). Throughout 2024, various Belgian museums are celebrating his *oeuvre* through ambitious exhibitions. In Antwerp, the focus is on Ensor's fascination with masks, skeletons and caricatures – elements he used to express his non-conformism and frustrations. Additionally, it delves into the significant influence of popular culture and particularly his inspiration from puppet theatre and magic lantern shows.



James Ensor, *The Intrigue*, 1890 (Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp)

### ENSOR'S WORLD

Ensor is celebrated as one of the most idiosyncratic and influential figures in modern art history. He combined sharp social critique with a distinctive visual style, incorporating grotesque masks, theatrical scenes and sardonic humour. His work surprises with its contrasts: the comic and the sinister, the refined and the wild, cosy bourgeois salons and eerie skeletons, all immersed in a world of bitter satire. His paintings and drawings capture the pulse of the thrilling late 19th century.

A prominent example of popular culture's impact on Ensor's work is his fascination with the magic lantern, a key inspiration for his artistic vision. Ensor was captivated by this travelling projection device which provided not only visual inspiration but also a means to explore the deeper, sometimes sinister, facets of human nature. In a letter to his friend and writer Eugène Demolder, he expressed this vision:

"In my head, I have plans for sweeping epics, surreal confusion, a marmalade of giants, a never-ending parade of figures from the magic lantern, sharp, vague, succeeding one another at high speed."

The masks, skeletons, devils, and ghosts that populate his paintings and drawings – often grotesque, clownish and frightening – seem to come directly from the world of the magic lantern.



The exhibition showcases how Ensor's art was deeply intertwined with the cultural landscape of his time, reflecting the social and political upheavals, technological innovations and mass spectacles that characterised the late 19th century. By highlighting this symbiotic relationship, the exhibition reveals how Ensor's imaginative visions were not only a product of his artistic genius but also a response to the popular entertainment and visual culture that permeated everyday life.

As part of the exhibition, representing the magic lantern angle, I have provided an installation featuring a chamber theatre with continuous video projection, further immersing visitors in the world that inspired Ensor. Additionally, it included several live performances, offering a dynamic exploration of the themes that shaped Ensor's work. (See <https://kmska.be/en/evenement/inyourwildestdreams>)



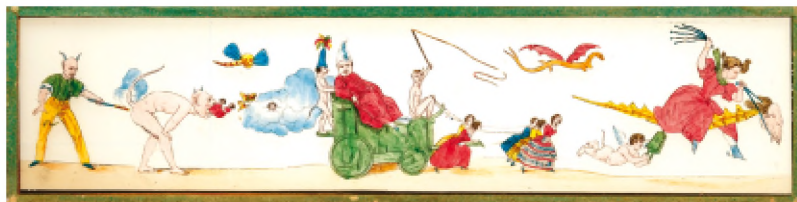
### BRINGING THE MAGIC LANTERN AND ENSOR'S VISION TO LIFE

It was an honour to contribute to this unique exhibition. Following a lecture-performance with Kurt Vanhoutte, Professor of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Antwerp, I was approached by Herwig Todts, Senior Curator of Modern Art at the KMSKA. He introduced me to Ensor's distinctive relationship



with popular culture and the magic lantern. As the curator of a major Ensor exhibition scheduled for the following year, he invited me to consider how we might integrate the magic lantern into this showcase. As a result, I designed an installation, and with our Galante Show, we brought live performances to the Museum.

The exhibition guides visitors from room to room, exploring various themes within Ensor's work. In the Magic Lantern Room, visitors are greeted by a magic lantern and an impressive, wall-sized projection of a French phantasmagoria slide depicting a beckoning satyr's head. This environment immerses the viewer in the mysterious and humorous ambience of the magic lantern that also characterises Ensor's work.



The installation and live performances create a unique atmosphere that highlights Ensor's connection to the popular culture of his time and demonstrate how the magic lantern was not merely a visual tool but also a way of revealing the deeper, sometimes sinister aspects of human nature. My aim is not only to bring Ensor's world closer but also to connect a wide audience with the magic of the magic lantern.

During our *Laterna Magica* performances at the KMSKA, the audience could immerse themselves in a world of the macabre and grotesque, akin to the universe of Ensor. The projections display magicians, demons and skeletons that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination in a ghostly manner. In one of the scenes, we see a skeleton rising from its grave and even holding its own head – a true classic in the realm of the magic lantern.



Remarkably, when Christiaan Huygens chose an illustration for his first sketch of a slide image, he opted not for an astronomical or scientific image but found inspiration in a 1528 engraving from Hans Holbein's 'Dance of Death'.

The slipping slides on display add a playful twist, with heads and figures magically swapped. For example, a man suddenly acquires the head of a boar, and a devilish figure emerges from a cake. These images pay homage to the peculiar and provocative spirit of the 19th century, a time when the strange, absurd and macabre were deliberately celebrated, challenging the sensibilities of the respectable citizen.

In a series of panoramic 'diablerie' slides, we showcase devils, satyrs and other demonic characters in absurd, playful scenes that parody human folly, greed and vanity. These animated caricatures portray the flaws of human nature. The bony creatures populate bizarre and playful scenes, blurring the line between satire and the macabre. The effect is both humorous and eerie – a mix of entertainment and caution for the audience.

Our presentation adds an extra layer through the live musical accompaniment: I chose *Maple Leaf Rag* by Scott Joplin, a ragtime composition from the very end of the 19th century. This contrasting, lively rhythm underscores the interplay between the visuals and a frivolous, ironic tone that both entertains and prompts the audience to reflect.



A half-open curtain invites visitors into a chamber theatre setting where they can discover the magic of the *laterna magica* and experience the humour and playfulness of Ensor's world. On the theatre screen, visitors watch a short, looping video montage of a magic lantern presentation that I created specifically for this project. We realised the technical and design aspects of the installation in collaboration with the Dutch firm Tinker, specialists in experiential communication who handled the exhibition's scenography.

In June 2024, during the Magic Lantern Society's special meeting at the Magic Lantern Museum in Scheveningen, I presented a preview of the projection (see *TML* 40). For Society members, the video, as it appears in the installation, is available on the Society's *YouTube* channel (<https://bit.ly/3ZDFKcL>).

By incorporating the magic lantern into the exhibition, visitors are invited to experience the magic and visual richness of Ensor's work, bringing the grotesque and theatrical elements of his paintings to life.

