

Francis-Noël Thomas

Rogier van der Weyden and James Ensor: Line and Its Deformation

THE GRAND AND BOMBASTIC BUILDING ON THE LEOPOLD DE WAELPLAATS in Antwerp that has housed the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Royal Museum of Fine Arts) since 1890 closed on October 3, 2010, for a major interior reconstruction that is not expected to be completed before 2017. During this reconstruction, some of the museum's better known nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings have been exhibited as far from Antwerp as Japan; some of its rare fifteenth-century panel paintings were exhibited last year in the beautifully preserved sixteenth-century Rockox House, just a twenty-minute walk from the museum.

There is something to be said for seeing nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings and fifteenth-century paintings in separate and respectively congenial settings, but the 1890 building did more than provide wall space for paintings that had little in common with its architectural ethos and belonged to separate and sometimes antagonistic cultural worlds. The museum went beyond exhibiting individual paintings, even individual styles of painting; it exhibited antagonistic concepts of painting.

When it was inaugurated in 1810, the museum absorbed what had been the collection of the city's Academy of Fine Arts. In 1841 that collection was supplemented by a bequest from one of the earliest and greatest collectors of Early Netherlandish painting, Florent van Ertborn, a former mayor of Antwerp. In the 1920s, it began to collect contemporary painters, notably James Ensor.

Van Ertborn's collection was assembled at a time when the Early Netherlandish masters were out of fashion, their work unknown to all but a tiny public. Panels from what is now one of the most famous European paintings of the late middle ages, the Ghent Altarpiece (1432), were kept out of sight by nineteenth-century bishops of Ghent, who were scandalized by the life-size nude representations of Adam and Eve.

When I first went to Antwerp, it was expressly to see paintings that were part of the van Ertborn bequest, although I knew nothing about the bequest at the time and had never heard of Florent van Ertborn. I had fallen in love with the Early Netherlandish paintings I had seen in American museums and in printed images illustrating books on the subject. I knew very little of the history of the painters' reputation. It seemed so evident to me that Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden were among the greatest of European painters that I would have

found it difficult to believe when I first encountered their work that they could have gone through a long period of obscurity and neglect. I was not aware that in the first years of the nineteenth century Friedrich Schlegel had had a similar experience; the German philosopher and poet was dazzled by the paintings and amazed that they had been practically unknown for roughly two centuries, until some of them were exhibited in the new Musée Napoléon in Paris, where he saw them—booty looted by the French army from sites in the southern Netherlands that are now part of the Kingdom of Belgium.

For students of Early Netherlandish painting, the highlights of the van Ertborn collection are two small panels by Jan van Eyck—the *Madonna of the Fountain* (1439) and *Saint Barbara* (1437), an exquisite uncolored underpainting that looks like a drawing, both in their original frames—and two paintings by Rogier van der Weyden—a portrait of Philip de Croy, half of a diptych whose other half now hangs in the Picture Gallery of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and an altarpiece known as *The Seven Sacraments*, a classic exemplar of fifteenth-century Christian iconography and a virtuoso specimen of the fifteenth-century art of painting as, fundamentally, colored drawing. These are the paintings that brought me to Antwerp.

Since my initial visits to the Antwerp museum were focused on the van Ertborn bequest and especially on Rogier van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments*, I was unaware that a major collection of the works of James Ensor (1860–1949) was to be found just one floor below. I'm not even sure that I knew who James Ensor was the first few times I was in the museum, but Antwerp and the museum played important roles in establishing Ensor's reputation. Beginning in 1905, an Antwerp exhibition society, L'Art contemporain/Kunst van Heden, many of whose members were collectors, promoted Ensor's work, organized touring exhibits, and funded the museum's purchase of some of his paintings. Important paintings by Ensor that had originally been in private Antwerp collections were given to or purchased by the museum, until by 1924 it had amassed the largest and best collection of Ensor's work to be seen anywhere—a collection that continued to grow with acquisitions of Ensor's work up to and after the painter's death.

It was entirely fortuitous that the Koninklijk Museum housed these two collections, but the works of Rogier van der Weyden and James Ensor offer more than a simple contrast; they are like matter and dark matter—a direct confrontation of two opposed concepts of painting that informs for twenty-first-century viewers two radically distinct cultural worlds and those two worlds' relation to the divine.

Rogier (1399–1464)¹ was born a subject of the French crown in Tournai,

1 In general, in the fifteenth century, modes of address were significantly different from our own. I have followed traditional scholarly usage in referring to Rogier van der Weyden as Rogier. The Dutch or French equivalent of Master Rogier of Tournai or Master Rogier of Brussels would have been the formal way to refer to him in his own lifetime. The Genoese humanist Bartolommeo Fazio in his *Book of Illustrious Men* (*De Viris Illustribus*)

then an isolated Francophone royal domain surrounded by Dutch-speaking territories, all of which were in the possession of the Valois Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, in the painter's working lifetime. Rogier left Tournai, where he first worked as a master painter, to become a citizen of Brussels in the Dutch-speaking duchy of Brabant just five or six years after Philip established his court there in 1430—greatly expanding the market for luxury goods of many sorts including paintings.

The former Tournai master worked for many clients including some who patronized Jan van Eyck at the court of Philip the Good, notably Philip's chancellor, Nicolas Rolin, and Philip himself. He was also the official painter of the city of Brussels from about 1435 until his death in 1464. His four large panels, the *Examples of Justice*, painted for the Hôtel de Ville in the Grand-Place, were famous showpieces until they were destroyed in the French bombardment of August 1695. It is likely that other privately owned paintings by Rogier were lost along with them—the 1695 bombardment of Brussels destroyed between four and five thousand buildings with their furnishings, tapestries, and paintings.

Brussels was rebuilt in just five years. The rebuilt center closely follows the original medieval layout and even now retains a distinctive character replete with hints of the past, such as the splendid late Gothic church of Notre-Dame au Sablon, although the ducal court, Rogier's workshop, and even the fifteenth-century Dutch language that Rogier adopted when he moved to Brussels—he had been Rogier de le Pasture² in Tournai—left only traces, more or less faint. If the eighteenth century saw Brussels restored, it also marked an erosion of the reputation of the early Netherlandish masters even before their physical traces were quite effaced. Their names survived, but their work remained almost completely unknown to the general public until the landmark 1902 exhibition in Bruges, *Les Primitifs flamands et l'Art ancien* (Flemish primitives and old art), which highlighted Jan van Eyck; his mythical painter-brother, Hubert; Hans Memling; and Gerard David. Rogier was not represented by any of his major works, although his name was prominently included on the poster for the exhibition—the Antwerp museum refused to lend its paintings. The Oxford art historian Francis Haskell remarks in *History and Its Images* (1993), “it is impossible not to wonder whether the whole balance of the exhibition might not have been decisively altered had the sublime *Seven Sacraments* been [lent].”

In his own lifetime, Rogier had a reputation to rival Jan van Eyck's not only in the Burgundian Netherlands but in Italy as well; that reputation would not be restored as early as 1902, but two of his greatest twentieth-century scholars, Georges Hulin de Loo and Max J. Friedländer, came into prominence on the

published in 1456 refers to Rogier as Rogerius Gallicus and to Jan van Eyck as Joannes Gallicus. In the fifteenth century, Jan van Eyck was sometimes referred to in Italy as Giovanni da Bruggia, the Italian equivalent of John of Bruges.

2 In the fifteenth-century French of Picardy and Tournai, both the masculine and the feminine definite article were written “le” but had distinct pronunciations.

occasion of the exhibition. By the mid-twentieth century Rogier was routinely considered to be a greater painter than Hans Memling or Gerard David.

89

The ducal court of Philip the Good in Brussels has, in a fashion, now been succeeded by the headquarters of the European Union, and the luxury craft of the Early Netherlandish masters has been succeeded by the popular art of the comic strip, or *bande-dessinée*, the signature graphic art of Brussels—and of Belgium—today. This “ninth art” was given impetus by the Brussels draftsman Georges Remi, who in 1929, as Hergé, gave the world the boy-reporter Tintin and helped establish the *bande-dessinée* as a culturally significant art form. What Hergé inspired now has its own museum (Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée) in a splendid building originally designed as a wholesale textile house by the art nouveau architect Victor Horta, just a ten- or fifteen-minute walk from where Rogier’s studio once stood. Hergé’s work set a tone for graphic art that went beyond the strict limits of the *bande-dessinée*. It was a lithograph by the contemporary Belgian draftsman and print maker Ever Meulen—who never drew a strip but whose single-image posters and prints are entirely in the tradition of the *bande-dessinée*—that first prompted me to visit the ground floor of the museum in Antwerp where, in three small galleries devoted to the paintings of James Ensor, I came to see Rogier in a new context.

Ever Meulen’s 1985 lithograph called *Art dans le Métro/Kunst in de Metro* shows a group of passengers waiting on the platform for a subway train just pulling in to the Kunstlaan/Avenue des Arts station. The figures on the platform—adapted from twenty-nine Belgian or pre-Belgian painters and draftsmen—include Philip the Good’s chancellor, Nicolas Rolin, as represented in a famous painting by Jan van Eyck now in the Louvre (*La vierge d’Autun*), and Jan’s wife, Margaret, from a portrait now in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. Others have been appropriated from Pieter Breugel the Elder, René Magritte, Hergé, Paul Delvaux, James Ensor, and Ever Meulen himself, as well as from some lesser-known nineteenth- and twentieth-century Belgian painters such as Fernand Khnopff and Frits van den Berghe.

A friend recognized the fifteenth-century Burgundian chancellor, Nicolas Rolin, waiting on the subway platform in a copy of the Ever Meulen lithograph hanging in a favorite café in Chicago and called my attention to it. About a third of the painters from whom Ever Meulen appropriated the figures on the subway platform were unknown to me then; a few of them remain so. I had by then become familiar with the name James Ensor, but I could identify the three figures borrowed from his macabre 1890 painting, *The Intrigue*, only because there is an illustration of it in the Michelin Green Guide for Belgium. The Green Guide is also where I learned that *The Intrigue* is in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp. The three grotesque figures appropriated by Ever Meulen from this painting were the most incongruous and the most sinister

of all the passengers on the platform, not just anachronistic but brazenly and provocatively false—their faces masks that begged to be removed but inspired a certain reluctance to see what might be under them.

On my next visit to Antwerp, I encountered not just *The Intrigue* but a group of fifteen of James Ensor's paintings in several distinct registers: masks and grotesques—of which *The Intrigue* is probably the best known—domestic interiors in which a stifling conventional decor quietly and inexorably absorbs the proper bourgeois figures, and, to my considerable surprise, two religious paintings of striking power and originality, *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* and *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*.

There was a quotation from Ensor in Flemish and in French dated October 6, 1899, printed on a wall near *The Intrigue*.

The quotation, as I subsequently learned, was from a résumé-like letter to Jules Du Jardin, a Belgian artist and critic whose attention Ensor was trying to engage:

People have placed me—mistakenly—among the Impressionists, *plein air* painters, with a predilection for light tones. The form of light, the deformations to which it subjects line have not been understood before me. . . . I believe myself to be an exceptional painter.

When Ensor wrote this letter he was trying to get over the almost complete indifference that had been accorded his first Paris exhibition a year earlier and was still seeking credit for his work on light, which Laurence Madeline of the Musée d'Orsay says inspired “the most complete incomprehension” (“*V'incompréhension la plus totale*”). In 1899, his self-appraisal could have been taken to be mere self-promotion, but now that he is widely recognized as an exceptional painter, his claim to be the first to understand how light deforms line—while not, strictly speaking, accurate—can no longer be regarded as simply an empty boast. Seeing the selection of Ensor's work in Antwerp for the first time, I had no doubt that I was encountering an exceptional painter, but I was also encountering a modern challenge—intended, direct, and violent—to the art of Rogier van der Weyden—a historical confrontation between linear form and what Ensor called “the form of light.”

When Florent van Ertborn was assembling his dazzling collection of paintings, art history as an academic subject could hardly have been said to exist, there were no photographic aids for the study of painting, and the relative handful of people knowledgeable about Early Netherlandish painting were mostly dealers, collectors, or connoisseurs who could afford to travel. Although Rogier enjoyed something approaching European-wide fame in his lifetime and for more than a hundred years afterwards, had Hulin de Loo and Max Friedländer died young, he might have remained in obscurity. Despite the attention of these scholars, Rogier would continue for some time to be undervalued even after the “Flemish Primitives” began to be better known to a broader public.

Rogier van der Weyden, supremely skillful and unmistakably distinctive, wrote nothing that has survived. He had no need to—he enjoyed early and constant success—and it would have been culturally impossible for him to write about his painting in the way that Ensor wrote about his. In Rogier’s handful of generally accepted portraits, we see the work of a highly accomplished master who remains otherwise almost anonymous. He can do practically anything with line and color, and when he looks at a subject, he looks with exceptional discipline and attention. What he presents is deeply persuasive, and yet his paintings are the result of a ruthless imposition of linear form on visual experience. Rogier’s vision is serious and unhesitating, without ambiguity, without room for revision, without a hint of uncertainty. Max Friedländer called it a vision driven by “absolute conviction” and “perfect self-assurance.” Does the painter think what he sees is true? Does he know that he is imposing linear form on what he sees, that his absolute conviction is itself a deformation?

However we answer those questions, the effect of Rogier’s vision and its expression in his religious painting gives his figures exceptional dignity and a sense of emotional depth. He refined an already established iconography by subtle innovations in gesture and posture that suggest the imagination of a choreographer. His religious figures in standard scenes—annunciations, crucifixions, lamentations—show restrained but profound emotion; these figures seem to have a history, and they are seen with preternatural clarity. What Julien Green said about self-knowledge—“with all the sincerity in the world, we can say of ourselves only what we are permitted to see, and we are permitted to see almost nothing”—cannot be said about the figures in Rogier’s narrative paintings; we see almost everything about them from the pathos of their humanity to their communion with the sacred. Rogier’s religious paintings are a window on the sacred world even as they represent with dazzling specificity the textures of the human world. He is a painter who subordinates personal expression to theological concepts in the same sense that J.S. Bach is a composer who subordinates personal expression to theological concepts. Both are inventive, neither is servile, but both work innovatively in an established institutional tradition of religious art.

In a painting such as the famous *Descent from the Cross* (<http://go/rogier>) in Madrid—but also in the equally superb if simpler private devotional *Lamentation* in Brussels—Rogier subtly adopts the visual metaphor in which the exterior beauty of body, facial expression, gesture, and clothing, accessible to natural vision, stands for spiritual beauty, not accessible to natural vision. His compositions project a sense of grace, order, lucidity, perfection. The paintings suggest that emotion and meaning can be seen. There is a realism of detail but never disorder or uncertainty in scenes that are placed in a brilliantly imagined world, a world of clarity and grace where the sacred touches the human.

My initial impression that Rogier and James Ensor defined two extreme positions in the history of European painting was reinforced in 2009 when they were each the subject of a major exhibition, Rogier at the newly dedicated

museum, M, in Leuven, Ensor first at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and then at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. A year later when the Antwerp museum was closed many of its Ensor paintings were exhibited at the ING Cultural Center in Brussels in a show called *Ensor Ontmaskerd* (*Ensor Unmasked*—although the official English title of the show was *Ensor Revealed*).

James Ensor in New York and Paris and *Ensor Unmasked* in Brussels, which was a sort of coda to it, inevitably attracted more visitors and more attention than the show devoted to Rogier in Leuven called *The Master of the Passions*, but the Leuven show offered a rare opportunity to see a representative selection of his surviving work in one place, for there is no one museum that can demonstrate Rogier's range and power in the way the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp had demonstrated Ensor's. Rogier's surviving paintings are distributed among more than twenty museums in Europe and the United States, stretching from Vienna to Los Angeles. Since none of them can be authenticated from contemporary documents, there are endless disputes about which of the forty or fifty paintings now associated with him are "workshop" productions and which are works done with his direct participation, maddening and unresolvable archival problems, and all the usual doubts, lacunae, and uncertainties brought about by the losses and displacements that inevitably occur during the course of five and a half centuries.

Despite the absence of some important items, *The Master of the Passions* was probably the most comprehensive gathering of works by Rogier and works associated with him ever assembled. It included panels that have never before been lent and drawings rarely exhibited even in the museums that own them. Its only rival is *Rogier van der Weyden/Rogier de le Pasture* presented in 1979 as part of the official celebration of the millennium of Brussels.

Rogier's surviving work includes two large altarpieces besides *The Seven Sacraments: The Last Judgment* in Beaune and *The Descent from the Cross* in Madrid. Neither was lent for *The Master of the Passions*. It was the absence of *The Descent from the Cross*, now in the Prado, that the organizers most clearly regretted; it was represented by a specially made, high-definition video. This painting probably established Rogier's reputation outside his native city of Tournai and was widely quoted and imitated for a century or more. It was made for the chapel of the crossbowmen's guild in Leuven, Our Lady Outside the Walls (a building that no longer exists), where it remained until Mary of Hungary, Charles V's sister and regent of the Spanish Netherlands, acquired it in the mid-sixteenth century. She, in turn, seems to have given the painting to her nephew, Philip II of Spain, who kept it in the monastic chapel of San Lorenzo in the Escorial, and personally wrote out instructions to a painter who was about to do some restoration work, directing that none of the faces be touched.

To see this assemblage of Rogier's work was to understand its psychological appeal to a culture permeated by late medieval Christianity. His sacred figures are visually and emotionally accessible, icons come to life.

The Descent from the Cross was painted at a time when there was still an

active rivalry between painters and sculptors. When he worked in the shop of Robert Campin in Tournai, Rogier had probably polychromed or gilded figures carved in wood, metal, and stone that were then assembled in a *caisse* or box to represent a traditional scene. His *Descent from the Cross* shows ten figures carefully grouped and contained in a painted version of one of these *caisses* or boxes that imitates their distinctive inverted T shape. The figures are like statues come to life, separately imagined but choreographed as a group. *The Descent from the Cross* is a demonstration that painting can achieve subtleties of expression that go beyond what could be found in the carved and painted altarpieces that were probably more familiar than painted altarpieces in the fifteenth century, but, like the carved altarpieces, painted altarpieces were an assemblage of separately conceived images.

The cycle of sacred scenes that are the subject of Rogier's religious paintings includes several based on the infancy narratives from the Gospel of Luke, but the psychological power of Rogier's paintings is more readily suggested by a passage from the Gospel of John:

Among the Greeks who came up to Jerusalem to adore God during Passover, some went up to Philip [one of the disciples with a Greek name] . . . They made this request: "We would like to see Jesus." Philip goes to tell Andrew [another disciple with a Greek name], and both go to tell Jesus. (Jn. 12: 20-22).

What follows in this scene has no immediately apparent relation to the Greeks who asked to see Jesus, and there is no further reference to them. What begins as a mundane narrative seems to dissolve in the prophetic words of Jesus, words that seem to be addressed to the disciples—or to the reader—rather than to "the Greeks" who asked to see him.

Within the culture of the fifteenth-century Burgundian Netherlands, Rogier's major religious paintings could have served as a direct answer to the Greeks' request to see Jesus—and the Jesus the Netherlandish audience of the fifteenth century sees in Rogier's paintings is seen in minute and intimate detail, in a setting they know, in a physiognomy they can recognize as their own, surrounded by landscapes and objects reassuringly familiar. It is iconography with one foot in the human world and the other in the sacred world, very much like those narratives in the Gospel of John that begin with a slight and commonplace event and end in what Longinus called "the sublime"—whose effect is "not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves."

We know little about Rogier's formation as a painter. In his time, subject matter was largely conventional; painters were formed to be masters of material things—paint, wood, gesso—and of technique—especially three-dimensional drawing and coloring with fine layers of ground minerals dissolved in walnut and linseed oil. Painters were valued for their ability to make physical objects. The ideas they represented in images belonged to an intellectual tradition, not to an individual. In the Burgundian Netherlands in the fifteenth century, the distinction between ideas, which are not physical objects and belong to theology,

and paintings, which are physical objects and belong to an established craft of representing ideas in images, still had currency. The distinction goes back to the Second Council of Nicea, which in the year 787 declared that only the technical aspect of a religious painting belongs to the painter, whereas the ideas expressed and even the conventions of iconography belong to theologians. In principle, the painters, who deal in physical objects, are craftsmen; the theologians, who deal in ideas, are artists. In practice, some painters crossed the frontier between craft and art, as Rogier seems to have done in *The Seven Sacraments*.

We know much more about the formation of James Ensor in which such a distinction no longer played a part. There is nothing surprising about a painter being responsible for both the physical object and the ideas represented by that object in Ensor's time; the surprising thing about Ensor is that he painted religious images at all. It was part of being a modern painter to find a subject matter and to create a place for painted images—an art that no longer had the institutional patronage or the secure cultural role it had in the fifteenth century.

Ensor was self-consciously “modern.” He sometimes used religious subject matter or parodies of religious subject matter in paintings or drawings that are not religious at all and are, in some cases, gleefully sacrilegious. Perhaps the most obvious of these is *The Entrance of Christ into Brussels in 1889* (1888), the enormous painting (99.5" × 169.5") that now serves as the climax to the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Brentwood. This painting expresses Ensor's disdain for the world to which he belonged—a world that failed to see the modernity of his vision of light and its power to dissolve the material into the spiritual. If Jesus were to make his entrance into Brussels in 1889, he would be submerged in a frightening and mindless mob. The figure of Christ riding a donkey—which would satisfy no one's desire “to see Jesus”—is all but lost in the disorderly flood of figures, some grotesque, some sinister, that pours out of the picture space towards the viewer. In this painting, Jesus stands for Ensor, the first painter to understand the form of light and the deformation to which it subjects line, a painter whose striking modernity is completely missed by an ignorant mob of avant-garde painters and critics who see him as an anachronism compared to Seurat and Pissarro. Laurence Madeline, who organized the Paris version of *James Ensor*, seems inclined to hold Ensor at least partly responsible, since “novelty crops up oddly under the contradictory mask of anachronism.”

The Entrance of Christ into Brussels in 1889 is Ensor's response to the tepid reception of his series of six large drawings shown for the first time in 1887 at the annual exposition in Brussels of “Les XX,” an avant-garde group of which he was a founding member. These large-format programmatic drawings under the general title *Visions: the Glories of Christ or the sensibilities of light* were meant to demonstrate how the deformation to which light subjects line dissolves the shape and organization of objects in space—dissolves the world that exists in this space, demolishing the idea that anything can be distinct from the space in which it exists. The relation of the sensual world to the divine does not escape this dismembering of the order of things.

No wonder Ensor did not want to be confused with the Impressionists. His attack on the appearance of the world represented in painting was far more extensive and consequential than theirs. For Ensor's dissolution of appearances is not confined to our perception of the world; it attacks the world's substance as well. He can dismiss the Impressionists with the breathtakingly sarcastic characterization "*plein air* painters, with a predilection for light tones," because as far as he is concerned they merely dabble in dissolving our certainties; unlike them, he had the courage to follow his aesthetic principles to their conclusion.

Christ walking on the sea (1885) (<http://go/ensor>), now in the Folkwang Museum in Essen, was the great surprise of *James Ensor*. Like the series of drawings and unlike *The Entrance of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, it is a serious and original religious work. Its subject is not treated by any of the early Netherlandish masters so it has no established iconography. In Ensor's treatment, the subject becomes a virtuoso demonstration of the deformation of line and the collapse of any sense of a figure placed in a setting but distinct from that setting. Once you are aware of the painting's title, your first reaction is to wonder, where is the figure of Christ walking on the sea? The sky and the sea are apparent, but you must search for the figure walking on the sea who is defined by light and once found can easily be lost. Ensor painted this picture before he exhibited the series of drawings *Visions: the Glories of Christ or the sensibilities of light* at the 1887 exhibition of "Les XX," where his reputation among his avant-garde colleagues was compromised, and which in turn inspired his *Entrance of Christ into Brussels in 1889*. *Christ walking on the sea* did not provoke the same charge of anachronism as *Visions* presumably because it wasn't exhibited. Ensor belonged to a pillar of nineteenth-century Belgian society that was ostentatiously secular and found traditional religious subjects repugnant and "retrograde," as Anna Swinbourne says in her *James Ensor* catalogue essay, but this is a religious painting whose Christ is only as defined as the sea, neither more nor less. It is anything but retrograde. It is religious art appropriate to a society that retains only intermittent vestiges of traditional religion.

Seeing *Christ walking on the sea* explained why my first encounter with this younger tenant of the Koninklijk Museum brought Rogier so forcefully to mind. Rogier's style, as difficult to describe as it is effective in operation, is founded on principles the absolute opposite of Ensor's. What makes Rogier's style so difficult to express in words is its apparent simplicity and naïveté. Even the title of the 1902 exhibition in Bruges that returned the Early Netherlandish masters to the attention of a wide public, *Les Primitifs flamands et l'Art ancien* (Flemish primitives and old art), expresses this underestimation of their work and worth.

The apparent simplicity of Rogier's aesthetic decisions tends to underestimate the force of will and depth of intelligence needed to accomplish his ends: representing the sacred world in a way that is at once distinctive and familiar. The world that Ensor addressed no longer drew on absolute conviction that sacred reality is independent of human experience.

Liliane Brion-Guerry, in her extraordinary study *Cézanne et l'expression de*

l'espace (Cézanne and the Expression of Space, 1966), says that “the vision of space is elaborated, modified and renewed like the culture that gave it birth—the culture whose hesitations, certitudes, complications, somersaults it, in turn, expresses.” We can say as much for the absolute conviction of Rogier’s painting, in which light follows line, and for the disquiet and uncertainty of Ensor’s painting, in which line is deformed by light, each given birth by the cultural moment it expresses. The juxtaposition of linear form and what Ensor calls “the form of light” represents the beginning and the end point of a cultural somersault from clarity and simplicity to uncertainty and complexity, a cultural somersault I first encountered at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp.

The author would like to thank Marc Cogan for his detailed and illuminating responses to earlier drafts of this essay.