



Belgian Modern Masters

Ensor, Magritte and fellow individualists

25–29 September 2024 (MK 440)

5 days • £2,130

Lecturer: Desmond Shawe-Taylor

Avant-garde of a hundred years from c. 1870, one of the most fascinating episodes in European modern art.

House museums and monographic galleries a particular feature, with some fine broad collections as well.

2024 is the James Ensor Year, and the tour catches exhibitions related to that most extraordinary and brilliant artist.

Belgium's location was of the highest geopolitical importance long before the foundation of the modern nation in 1830. Being at the crossroads of national and cultural cross-currents helped foster economic prosperity; at the end of the Middle Ages this was the richest territory in Europe outside Italy, and in the 19th century Belgium was in the forefront of industrialisation. But that advantage could be tragically upended, as it was, twice, in the 20th century, when wars raged across the country.

Back to upsides: cultural diversity, and being well plugged into international movements in literature, music and art. A fascinating feature, however, is that Belgian artists developed their own voice. Avant-garde art in Belgium in the eighty years from around 1880 is one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of modern European art, though not among the best-known, perhaps because of habitual individualism.

Early on, Symbolism was a major strand, with Spilliaert, Ensor and Félicien Rops among the practitioners. Though for his inventiveness and sheer variety of expression, James Ensor (1860–1949) is in a class apart. Phases of his work through his long life are classifiable as Symbolist, Expressionist, Surrealist or simply as individual. He drew on Flemish tradition, incorporating masks, macabre skeletons and fantastic creatures in the tradition of Bosch and Brueghel. The 75th anniversary of his death is being commemorated in several exhibitions.

Belgium had their own Fauvres, among whom was painter and sculptor Rik Wouters. Then Expressionism – and Animism, a milder form – took the lead, though in contrast with the German variety it was dominated by rural and peasant themes. The works of Constant Permeke (1886–1952) are often considered an embodiment of Flemish identity, but it is fair to



Muziek in de Vlaanderenstraat, by James Ensor, publ. 1891. © KMSKA.

place him in an international context alongside Picasso. His works are earthy, immensely powerful and frequently beautiful, and it is a mystery why they are not better known outside his native country.

Many Belgian artists went through an Abstract phase, and some stayed the course all their lives, but it is Surrealism for which Belgium is better known. René Magritte led the pack, rejecting the interests of his French peers in automatism and the subconscious and concentrating on the problems of representation and conceptual thought. Not quite a Surrealist, Paul Delvaux (1897–1994) was a painter of dream-like scenes of women, classical architecture, trains and skeletons.

A striking feature of this tour is the number of artists' houses seen. Worldwide, few are more evocative than Magritte's in Brussels, despite – or because of – its suburban ordinariness. Delvaux's home was in the rural village of St. Idesbald-Koksijde. The home and office of Victor Horta, the leading architect of his time and progenitor of Art Nouveau, is one of the most remarkable of artists' houses of any era.

Sculpture blossomed in Belgium to a remarkable degree from the end of the 19th century. Constantin Meunier (1831–1905) is

now – but not then – the best known because of his forceful, sympathetic and realistic renderings of working people.

Itinerary

Day 1: St Idesbald-Koksijde. Leave London St Pancras by Eurostar at c. 11.00 and, disembarking at Lille (France), drive across the border to the village of Idesbald-Koksijde. Here is the home of semi-Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, adjacent to galleries with a vast collection of his works. Continue to Ostend; first of two nights here.

Day 2: Ostend. A seaside resort and a significant artistic centre, Ostend is home to Mu.ZEE, an excellent collection of 20th-century Belgian art. The house where James Ensor lived for much of his life has been carefully restored, while its neighbour has a documentary museum, original works and temporary exhibitions. At the Venetiaanse Gaanderijen (Venetian Galleries), formerly the beach house of the Belgian royal family, there is an exhibition of Ensor and contemporaries, *Ensor's Imaginary Paradise*.

Day 3: Jabbeke, Brussels. The collection of the Permeke Museum in the village Jabbeke occupies the artist's home and studio. Continue to Brussels for lunch and check-in at the

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hotel. Walk round the corner to the Magritte Museum where a large number of his paintings are shown on three floors in a building adjacent to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts. Some free time, with the option of visiting the Old Masters galleries here. First of two nights in Brussels.

Day 4: Antwerp. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp houses excellent collections of both historic and modern Flemish paintings, and today an Ensor exhibition *In Your Wildest Dreams*. His wonderful universe of wild visions, masks and satire is shown alongside work by international artists with whom he felt in competition including Monet, Renoir, Degas, Bosch and Goya. Ensor wanted to be sharper and more radical. Return to Brussels to visit the suburban flat where Magritte lived for 25 years.

Day 5: Brussels. The Musée Meunier is installed in the beautiful house-cum-studio built by painter and sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831-1905). The exhibits are largely late works when he focused on the social and industrial aspects of Belgium. The leading Belgian architect of his time and the principal proponent of Art Nouveau, Victor Horta designed his own house and office. Scrupulously restored, it one of the most remarkable of artists' houses of any era. The Eurostar arrives at London St Pancras c. 4.00pm.

Lecturer

Desmond Shawe-Taylor. Distinguished art historian and museum administrator whose posts have included Surveyor of The Queen's Pictures and Director of Dulwich Picture Gallery. He studied English Literature at Oxford and took an MA in History of Art at the Courtauld Institute. He has written extensively on English eighteenth-century portraiture and other subjects, and curated a series of exhibitions at the Queen's Gallery in Edinburgh and London, dealing with Dutch and Flemish 17th-century art.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,130 or £1,960 without Eurostar. Single occupancy: £2,390 or £2,220 without Eurostar.

Included: Rail travel (Standard Premier) on Eurostar; hotel accommodation; travel by private coach; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 3 dinners

with wine, water and coffee; admission to museums and galleries; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Leopold Hotel, Ostend (leopoldhotelostend.com). Characterful 4-star boutique hotel recently stylishly refurbished within walking distance of the museums. **NH Collection Grand Sablon, Brussels** (nh-collection.com). Modern, comfortable 4-star hotel behind a historic façade, excellently situated in a lovely square four minutes to the Fine Arts Museum. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is quite a lot of walking and standing around, and the tour would not be suitable for anyone with difficulties with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Average distance by coach per day: 44 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.