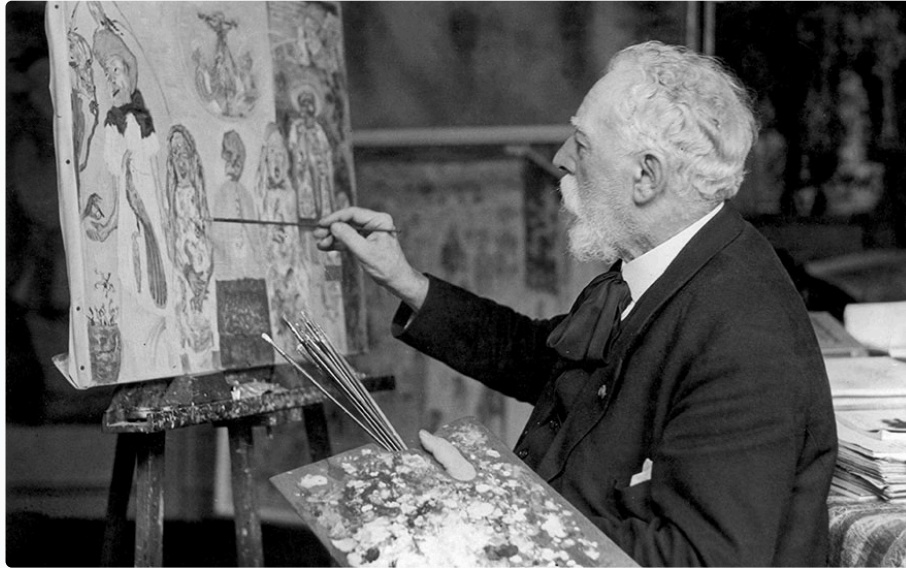


# James Ensor and the Lithographic Passion: A Curatorial Study of *Scènes de la vie du Christ* (1921)



# James Ensor: The Enigmatic Prince of Painters



James Ensor (1860–1949), the "Prince of Painters" and the recluse of Ostend, remains one of the most enigmatic figures of the European avant-garde, a man whose work sits at the volatile intersection of nineteenth-century Symbolism and the burgeoning Expressionism of the twentieth century. By the time *Scènes de la vie du Christ* was published in Brussels by the Galerie Georges Giroux in 1921, Ensor had largely transitioned from the radical insurgent who co-founded Les XX into a celebrated, albeit still misunderstood, national treasure. This portfolio, a suite of thirty-two colour lithographs, represents the definitive synthesis of Ensor's long-standing preoccupation with the figure of Christ—a figure he utilised throughout his career as a surrogate for the persecuted artist, a vessel for light, and a vehicle for biting social satire.

For the bibliophile and the serious collector of modern graphic art, the 1921 Giroux edition is an artifact of profound significance. It is not merely a collection of prints but a carefully orchestrated book-object that reflects the high-water mark of Belgian interwar publishing and the technical prowess of the printer J.-E. Goossens. The work captures a specific moment in Ensor's late career when his earlier, more aggressive painterly style had softened into a calligraphic, luminous mode of drawing that was perfectly suited to the lithographic stone. This study examines the intellectual origins, bibliographical framework, and material reality of the work, with a particular focus on a distinguished copy on Japan paper, bound in a unique artistic binding by the celebrated French *relieuse* Monique Mathieu.

## I. The Work: Theology, Satire, and the Masked Saviour

To understand *Scènes de la vie du Christ*, one must first situate it within the broader landscape of Ensor's private mythology. Throughout his life, Ensor maintained a complex, often adversarial relationship with traditional religion, the military, and the Belgian bourgeoisie. Despite his self-proclaimed status as a "bad Catholic," he was obsessively drawn to the figure of Christ. For Ensor, Christ was an "inescapable symbol"—the ultimate visionary who stands isolated and ignored amidst a "herdlike" and grotesque modern society.

### The Christological Evolution

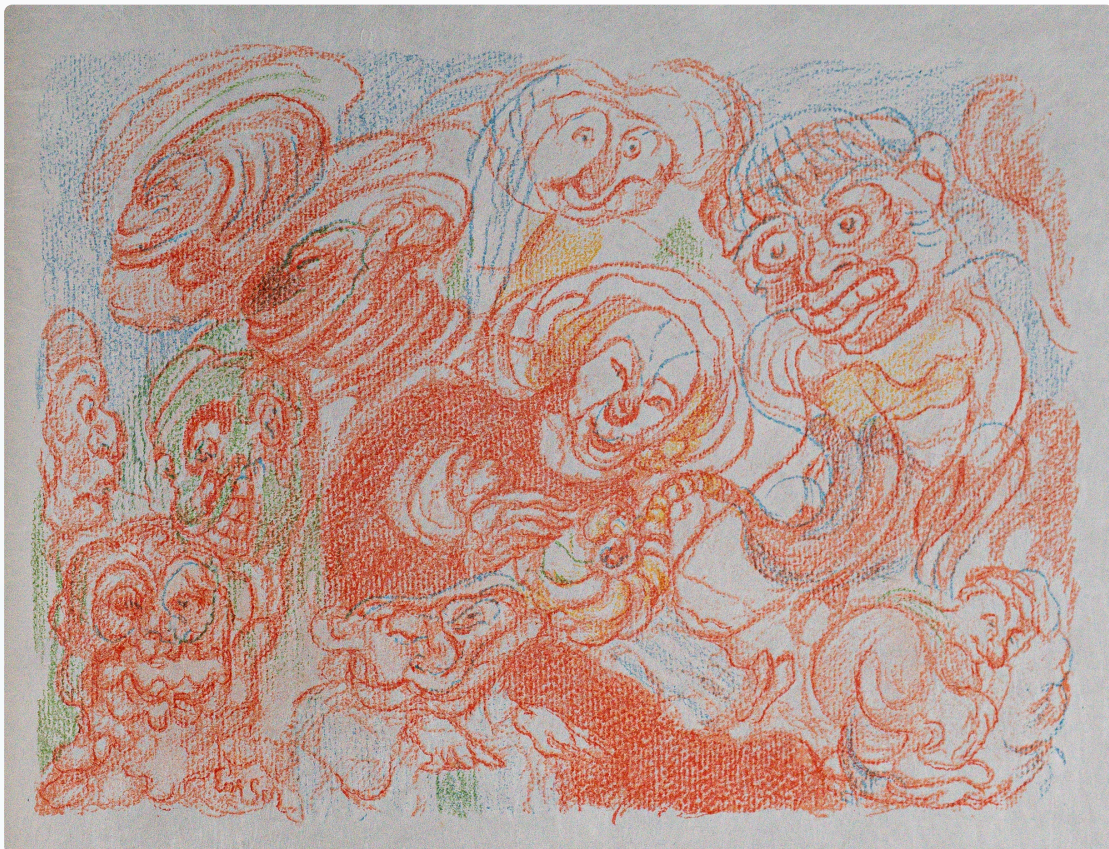
Ensor's engagement with the life of Christ was not an isolated event in 1921 but the culmination of several decades of experimentation. His earliest significant religious works, the *Visions: The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensibilities of Light* (1885–1886), were large-scale drawings that explored how light could convey emotional and spiritual states. In these works, Ensor moved away from the literalism of religious narrative toward a more abstract, "Turner-esque" investigation of luminosity. By the late 1880s, this evolved into the politically charged *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, where the Messiah is nearly lost in a sea of carnival masks, frauds, and clowns.



The 1921 portfolio draws directly from these early themes but refines them into a cohesive narrative sequence. The images are based on a set of thirty-two coloured pencil and wax crayon drawings executed between 1910 and 1915. These drawings, which remained together in the collection of the Antwerp patron François Franck for nearly a century, represent Ensor's most comprehensive graphic statement on the life of Jesus. When the Galerie Georges Giroux approached Ensor to publish the suite to mark his sixtieth birthday, the artist saw it as an opportunity to fix these "hallucinatory" visions in a permanent, distributed form.

## The Mask and the Grotesque

A central feature of the 1921 suite is the omnipresence of the mask. In Ensor's world, the mask is often truer than the face; it reveals the inner cruelty, vanity, or stupidity of the wearer. In plates such as *The Adoration of the Magi* or *The Last Supper*, the sacred figures are surrounded by a "repertoire of caricature-like figures" and "distorted perspectives." This juxtaposition of the divine and the grotesque serves to de-sanctitise the biblical narrative, bringing it into the realm of the carnivalesque and the deeply personal.



The most poignant example of this personalisation is Plate XIXa, *Christ Delivered to the Critics*. Here, Ensor explicitly identifies himself with Christ, portraying the artist-as-Messiah standing before a panel of Belgian art critics who have gathered to judge him. In this single image, the entire portfolio is transformed from a religious cycle into a manifesto of the misunderstood avant-garde artist.

## II. The Edition: Bibliographical Profile of the Giroux Portfolio

The publication of *Scènes de la vie du Christ* was a major event in the Brussels art world. The Galerie Georges Giroux, founded in 1912, was a vital centre for modern art in Belgium, hosting exhibitions of the Futurists and the local avant-garde. The 1921 Ensor retrospective and the accompanying portfolio

# Bibliographical Profile of the Giroux Portfolio

Feature	Bibliographical Specification
Artist	James Ensor (1860–1949)
Title	<i>Scènes de la vie du Christ</i>
Publisher	Galerie Georges Giroux, Brussels
Printer	J.-E. Goossens, Brussels
Date	1921
Format	Oblong quarto (approx. 252 x 310 mm to 255 x 315 mm)
Contents	1 Frontispiece + 31 Colour Lithographs (Total 32 plates)
Paper	Van Gelder (Hollande) or Japon (Japon)
Limitation	285 numbered copies total
Binding (as issued)	Loose sheets in printed wrappers and a folding chemise/portfolio

## Limitation and Paper Variants

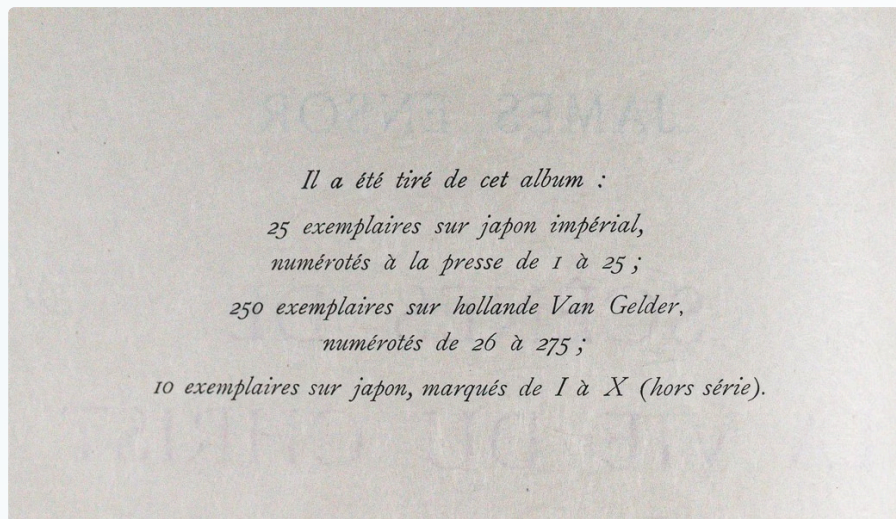
The edition was strictly limited to 285 copies, though within this number, there is a clear hierarchy of bibliophilic prestige.

### The Ordinary Issue

250 copies were printed on Van Gelder (often referred to as Hollande) wove paper. These copies were generally signed by the artist on the justification leaf, although some unnumbered or unsigned copies are known to exist in the trade.

### The Deluxe Issue

A smaller portion of the edition was struck on Japon paper. There is some minor discrepancy in auction records regarding the exact number of these copies. Christie's has cited "a further 35 impressions on Japon" beyond the 250 on Van Gelder, while other bibliographical descriptions specify "10 copies hors série on Japon," all signed. It is probable that the 35 Japon copies include both the numbered deluxe issue and several hors commerce or artist's proof copies intended for the publisher and Ensor's immediate circle.



The choice of paper significantly affects the visual impact of the lithographs. The Van Gelder paper, with its sturdy texture, provides a traditional feel suitable for a high-quality art book. The Japon paper copies, however, possess an inherent translucency and a subtle sheen that enhances Ensor's "sweeping lines" and his ethereal treatment of light, making them the most sought-after state for collectors.

## The Technical Execution by J.-E. Goossens

The printer J.-E. Goossens was a preeminent figure in Brussels art printing, known for his work with avant-garde journals and deluxe editions. For the *Scènes de la vie du Christ*, Goossens employed a colour lithographic process that was remarkably faithful to Ensor's original drawings. Unlike traditional lithography, which can often appear flat, the Goossens prints retain a "crayon-like" quality, capturing the "fluid" and "scumbled" texture of Ensor's wax crayons and coloured pencils. Each of the 32 plates was printed with careful attention to Ensor's palette of pale pinks, acidic yellows, and deep, sea-like blues.

The plates were then protected by captioned tissue guards (*serpentes légendées*), which provide the title for each scene and reinforce the work's character as a formal, curated album. The portfolio was originally issued *en feuilles* (in sheets) within a printed wrapper and a cardboard folding chemise, a format that allowed the owner to either keep the suite as a book or frame individual plates for display.

# III. Artistic Analysis: The Narrative of Light and Shadow

## The Narrative Arc of the Thirty-Two Plates

The thirty-two plates of the portfolio form a narrative arc that traces the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Assumption of the Virgin. Within this sequence, Ensor revisits many of the masterpieces of his earlier career, translating oil on canvas into the more intimate medium of the lithograph.

### Plate Analysis and Thematic Highlights

The following plates represent the key moments in Ensor's visual retelling of the life of Christ, each demonstrating his unique synthesis of the sacred and the grotesque, the luminous and the carnivalesque.

#### Annunciation to Baptism

The opening plates establish Ensor's ethereal treatment of light and his calligraphic line, setting the spiritual tone of the entire suite.



#### Ministry and Miracles

The central plates explore Christ's public life, rendered in Ensor's signature palette of pale pinks, acidic yellows, and deep sea-like blues.



#### Passion and Resurrection

The closing plates culminate in the Passion narrative, where Ensor's grotesque figures and mask aesthetic reach their most poignant expression.



# Key Plates: Titles, Themes, and Artistic Significance

Plate	Title	Narrative and Artistic Significance
Frontis piece	<i>Frontispice</i> (1915)	Introduces the themes of masks and death that haunt the entire series.
I	<i>L'annonciation</i> (1912)	A scene of ethereal light, where the angel is rendered in sweeping, calligraphic lines.
III	<i>Le massacre des Innocents</i> (1913)	Displays the "brutality of late Gothic Flemish painting" reminiscent of Bruegel.
V	<i>La Sainte Famille</i> (1914)	The Holy Family appears as if in a "frenzied hallucination" with caricatured faces.
VII	<i>Le baptême du Christ</i> (1912)	A study in the "sensibilities of light," featuring a haloed Christ in a luminous landscape.
XII	<i>Le Christ apaisant la tempête</i> (1910)	Based on an 1891 oil; a "Turner-esque" vision of abstract light and turbulent waters.
XV	<i>L'entrée à Jérusalem</i> (1912)	A smaller, more intimate variation of the 1888–89 masterpiece.
XVI	<i>La Cène</i> (1911)	A grotesque treatment of the Last Supper, featuring Ensor's signature "snouts" and masks.
XIXa	<i>Le Christ livré aux critiques</i> (1910)	Ensor's self-portrait as Christ, mocked by art critics.
XXIV	<i>La descente de croix</i> (1912)	A "quiet and serene" composition that emphasises the tragedy of the broken body.
XXVIII	<i>L'ascension</i> (1913)	An "intense" composition where Christ is absorbed back into a sun-like source of light.

# Two Plates Examined in Closer Detail

## 1) The Artist as Martyr:

### *Le Christ livré aux critiques: A Razor-Sharp Autobiographical Pamphlet*



In this lithograph James Ensor's biting irony reaches its zenith. While the series ostensibly deals with religious themes, this specific work functions as a razor-sharp autobiographical pamphlet. Ensor utilises the biblical motif of "Christ before the High Council" as a template to depict his own tumultuous relationship with the Belgian art world.

#### **A Claustrophobic Composition**

The print is characterised by a suffocating visual language. Ensor has filled the frame almost entirely with a compact cluster of busts and heads. These portrait heads are stacked in rows, creating an oppressive mass that forces the viewer to experience the group's collective hostility. In the top left, the name "ENSOR" is organically integrated into the composition, serving as a claim to his own narrative of suffering. The background, filled with ornamental, curling line motifs reminiscent of stylised clouds or halos, lends the scene a strange, almost carnivalesque aura.

#### **The Christ Figure: Between Humiliation and Triumph**

On the right side of the image, we find the figure of Christ, standing slightly apart from the group. This is an unmistakable self-portrait of the artist. Adorned with a crown of thorns and marked by traces of blood, he holds a long staff at an angle. While this staff refers to the "mocking reed" (the reed given as a parody of a scepter) from the Passion stories, Ensor renders the form with graphic exuberance: the spiked, radiating tip suggests a powerful ceremonial instrument or a giant paintbrush rather than a symbol of weakness.

# The "Sanhedrin" of Art Criticism

The true weight of the work lies in the identification of the judging crowd. The "High Council" here consists not of biblical scribes, but of the crème de la crème of the Belgian intelligentsia of the time. Based on historical identifications (such as the well-known "Plan" or key of the composition), we can identify these figures:

## The Back Row

Includes writers such as Franz Hellens and Émile Verhaeren, flanked by critics Dumont-Wilden and Ary Delen.

## The Middle Row

The influential Edmond Picard, symbolist poet Iwan Gilkin, and Auguste Van Zype form a central blockade.

## The Front Line

Features direct opponents such as Théo Hannon, the powerful founder of Les XX Octave Maus, and the politician/critic Jules Destrée.

## Symbolic Violence: The Role of Fétis

A crucial element in the drama of the print is the figure of Édouard Fétis. As Ensor's conservative arch-nemesis, he is depicted making an aggressive knife gesture. This motif transforms art criticism from an intellectual act into a form of symbolic violence: the critic as an executioner who does not interpret the living work of art but rather dissects it. The attitude of the mass is ambiguous; they appear simultaneously entangled in their own internal dynamics and united in their condemnation of the solitary figure on the right.



## A Monument to Rancour and Genius

*Le Christ livré aux critiques* is more than a religious lithograph; it is a monument to Ensor's rancor and his genius. By portraying himself as the suffering Christ surrounded by a grotesque cluster of powerful critics, Ensor elevates his personal vendettas to a universal drama of the misunderstood visionary. It is a masterly synthesis of graphic exuberance and scathing social critique.

## 2) An Echo of the Masterpiece: *L'Entrée à Jérusalem* (The Entry into Jerusalem)

Within the series *Scènes de la vie du Christ* (1921), *L'Entrée à Jérusalem* (The Entry into Jerusalem) forms a crucial anchor point. For James Ensor, this theme was inseparably bound up with his own artistic identity, since it directly refers back to his absolute masterpiece of 1888, *Christ's Entry into Brussels*. Where *Le Christ livré aux critiques* depicts an intimate and claustrophobic trial, *L'Entrée à Jérusalem* unfolds as a large-scale spectacle. Here, Ensor returns to one of his most enduring motifs: the crowd. Although the lithograph ostensibly represents the biblical entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey, Ensor transforms the holy city into a modern, chaotic Brussels or Ostend.



Feature	Description
Composition	A dynamic diagonal structure; the crowd streams from upper left to lower right, creating a sense of unstoppable movement.
Horror vacui	Characteristically for Ensor, the pictorial field is completely filled ("fear of emptiness"). There is no true resting point, except for the figure of Christ himself.
Atmosphere	A bitter mixture of religious devotion and a popular fairground or carnival celebration.

# Iconographic Analysis: The Crowd, the Prophet, and the Masquerade

## The Central Figure: The Solitary Prophet

Christ sits on a donkey at the centre of the writhing crowd. As in other works from this series, Jesus—Ensor's alter ego—is the only figure with a serene, almost absent expression. He is physically present within the crowd, yet spiritually entirely isolated. This underscores Ensor's conception of the artist: someone applauded by the masses without ever truly being understood.



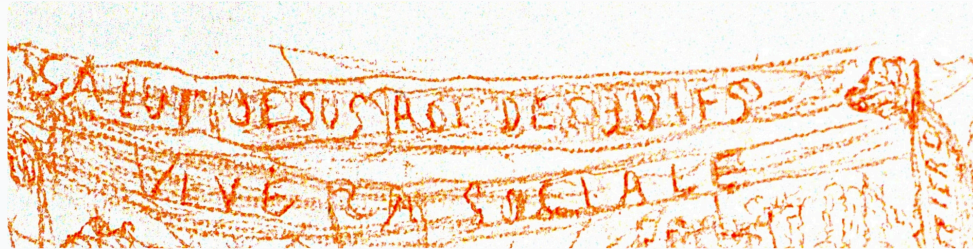
## The Crowd as Masquerade

The faces surrounding Christ are not individuals, but a "sea of heads." Here Ensor deploys his characteristic mask aesthetic. The figures have hollow eyes and grinning mouths. The people's "adoration" therefore feels false and threatening; the viewer senses that this same crowd will, a few days later, cry out, "Crucify Him!"



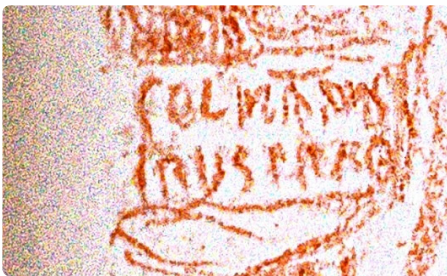
# Text and Banners: Irony, Commerce, and the Grotesque

Several banners and flags appear in the lithograph. As in his 1888 masterpiece, Ensor once again introduces a number of slogans into the composition, using them to underscore the irony and contradictions of modern society. He brings together religious acclamation, social-political language, commercial imagery, and grotesque satire. The large banners at the top read "**VIVE LA SOCIALE**" and "**SALUT JESUS ROI DES JUIFS.**" These inscriptions reveal not only Ensor's singular vision of religion, politics, and society, but are also historically valuable in that they offer insight into the social and political tensions of early twentieth-century Belgium.



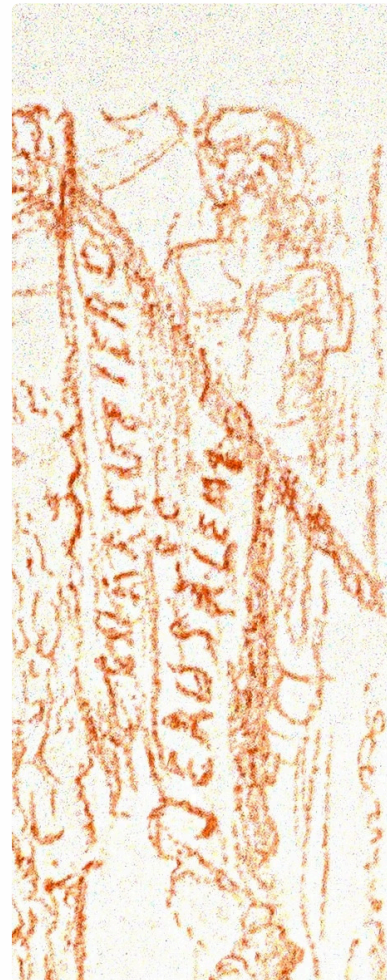
## "COLMAN'S MUSTARD"

On the left we see "COLMAN'S MUSTARD." This is a reference to the well-known British mustard brand. Ensor, whose father was English, frequently incorporated English brand names and commercial slogans into his work. In doing so, he criticised the emerging consumer society and the commercialisation of even the most sacred moments.



## "CHARCUTIERS DE JÉRUSALEM"

On the right appears "CHARCUTIERS DE JÉRUSALEM." This is a characteristically Ensorian macabre joke. While Christ, the "Lamb of God," enters the city, he is welcomed by the butchers. The word *charcutier* also evokes associations with flesh and blood, foreshadowing Christ's Passion. At the same time, it makes the scene recognisably local and bourgeois, like a civic procession in Ostend or Brussels.



- In a single image, Ensor thus creates an absurdist anachronism: **Religion – Politics – Commerce – The Everyday / The Grotesque**. The result is a portrait of a society in total confusion: it cries out for social justice and acclaims a new king, while at the same time buying mustard and going to the butcher.

# Comparison, Technique, and Conclusion: *L'Entrée à Jérusalem*

## Comparison with *Le Christ livré aux critiques*

Where the print with the critics focuses on the intellectual condemnation of the artist, *L'Entrée à Jérusalem* centres on the superficial adoration of the masses. In both cases, Ensor arrives at the same conclusion: the crowd—whether critics or ordinary people—is unreliable and blind to the true essence of the visionary.

### *Le Christ livré aux critiques*

Intimate and claustrophobic. Focuses on the intellectual condemnation of the artist by the Belgian intelligentsia. The crowd is a compact, hostile mass of named individuals.

### *L'Entrée à Jérusalem*

Large-scale spectacle. Centres on the superficial adoration of the masses. The crowd is an anonymous "sea of heads" deploying the characteristic mask aesthetic.

## Artistic Technique

Note the fine, nervous hatchings in the lithograph. Ensor succeeds, through colour contrasts, in creating an extraordinary intensity of light, as though the sun of Jerusalem—or the headlights of a modern city—were reflecting across the crowd.

## Conclusion

*L'Entrée à Jérusalem* is the ultimate expression of Ensor's fascination with the ambiguity of the public. It is a triumphal procession with a bitter aftertaste. For the collector or researcher, this sheet is essential because it forms a bridge between Ensor's early radical paintings and his later, more reflective graphic work.

# The Role of Light as Protagonist

In *Scènes de la vie du Christ*, light is not merely a functional element of the composition; it is the central protagonist. Ensor believed that **"the light is the sky, the light is the soul, the light is the thought."** In plates like *Le Christ marchant sur la mer* (Plate XIV) or *Le Christ apaisant la tempête* (Plate XII), the figures of Christ and his disciples are almost secondary to the radiant, vibrating energy that fills the sky. This "inspired vision of light" is what distinguishes Ensor's religious work from that of his contemporaries; he treats the biblical narrative as a series of optical phenomena, where the divine is expressed through the spectrum.

The technical achievement of the Goossens lithographs lies in their ability to replicate this luminosity. By using multiple stones and a sophisticated layering of inks, the printers were able to achieve a sense of depth and transparency that mirrors Ensor's use of wax crayon, particularly on the absorbent surface of the Japan paper.

## IV. The Present Copy: A Bibliophilic Intersection

The copy under examination is a significant artifact that represents a rare meeting between Ensor's early twentieth-century avant-garde vision and the high-point of late twentieth-century artistic bookbinding.

### Material State and Provenance

This copy is printed on Japan paper, the deluxe state of the edition. It is notable for being non-justified and unsigned by the artist on the justification leaf. While most copies of the edition of 285 were numbered and signed, unnumbered copies on Japan paper occasionally appear in the market, often originating from the publisher's own archives or as proofs gifted to collaborators. The absence of a signature, in this case, does not detract from the copy's value; rather, it highlights its status as a potentially "hors série" or unrecorded variant within the Japan paper issue.

The copy has been preserved with its original wrappers and spine, which have been bound into a unique artistic binding. This preservation is critical for the bibliophile, as it allows the original bibliographical context of the Giroux edition to remain intact within the new, elevated structure of the *reliure d'art*.

# The Binding by Monique Mathieu (1992)

The most distinctive feature of this copy is its binding, executed in 1992 by the renowned French binder Monique Mathieu (b. 1927). Mathieu is a figure of immense importance in the history of the "livre d'art," known for her ability to create bindings that are not merely protective covers but abstract interpretations of the book's contents. The binding was a collaborative effort involving some of the most skilled artisans in the field:



## Monique Mathieu

Conception and design.



## Claude Ribal

Gilder and specialist in mosaic and gold-tooling.



## Eric Lipinski

Master bookbinder responsible for the structural execution.



# The Binding Described and the Work's Lasting Legacy

Binding Element	Description
Exterior Material	Caramel box leather.
Decoration	Relief decoration in box leather on different levels, featuring mosaic plates of bluish-grey shagreen and blue-grey marbled calf.
Inlays	Deep incisions in the box leather with abstract forms in shades of brown and blue.
Doublures	Coral-coloured box leather.
Endleaves	Sandy-coloured suede ( <i>peau velours couleur ficelle</i> ).
Signature	Signed "M. Mathieu - 1992 - C. Ribal - Lipinski".
Housing	Half-caramel box leather chemise with titled spine and a matching slipcase.

Mathieu's choice of colours and materials—the "caramel box," "bluish-grey shagreen," and "coral doublures"—subtly echoes the palette of Ensor's lithographs. The use of relief and deep incisions creates a tactile surface that mirrors the "brutality" and physical complexity of Ensor's grotesque figures. This is not a binding that seeks to illustrate Ensor, but one that seeks to inhabit the same emotional space.

## ***Exhibition History: Bibliotheca Wittockiana***

*The importance of this copy is further solidified by its exhibition history. It was a centrepiece of the major retrospective of Monique Mathieu's work held at the Bibliotheca Wittockiana in Brussels during 1992–1993. In the exhibition catalogue, this Ensor copy was listed as number 85. The Bibliotheca Wittockiana is the preeminent museum for bookbinding and the book arts in Belgium, and inclusion in its exhibitions is a clear indicator of a copy's artistic and historical merit. For the collector, this provenance provides a documentary trail that links the physical object to the scholarly and curatorial world, ensuring its status as a "known" and significant copy of the work.*

## V. Synthesis: The Book as Artefact and Testament

James Ensor's *Scènes de la vie du Christ* (1921) remains a towering achievement in the history of the illustrated book. It is a work that captures the fundamental paradox of Ensor's life: he was a man who sought the silence and light of the sea in Ostend, yet was perpetually haunted by the masks and noise of the crowd. By using the life of Christ as his subject, he was able to reconcile these two forces, creating a series of images that are at once deeply spiritual and savagely satirical.

For the modern collector, this work represents the intersection of several key histories:

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### The History of the Avant-Garde

The portfolio marks Ensor's transition from a radical youth to an established master of the twentieth century.

02

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### The History of the Book-Object

The 1921 Giroux edition, with its technical mastery by Goossens, is a prime example of the *livre de luxe*.

03

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### The History of Modern Binding

The specific copy bound by Monique Mathieu elevates the work into a unique piece of modern sculpture, proving that the book remains a vital medium for artistic expression.

**In the 1921 lithographs, Ensor gave form to what he called the "sparkling scenes" of Christ's life, using the medium of the print to ensure that his "inescapable symbols" would survive the passage of time. This copy, with its luminous Japan paper and its magnificent 1992 binding, stands as a fitting testament to Ensor's legacy—a work where the grotesque and the divine are bound together in a radiant, enduring light.**