# Metal soaps on paintings by James Ensor (1860-1949)

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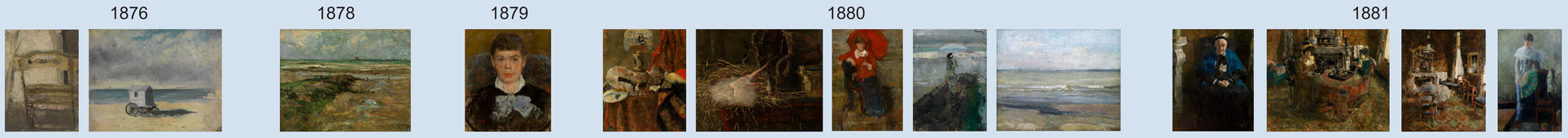
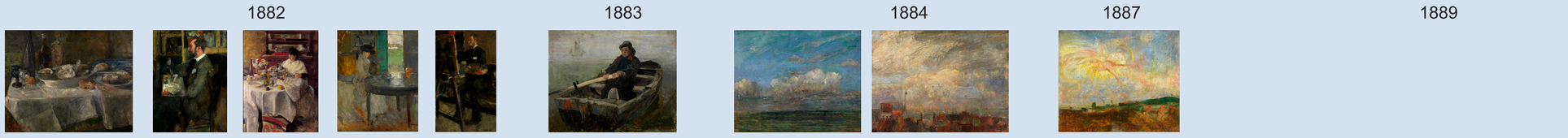
The Ensor Research Project was launched in 2013 in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA). Its primary purpose is to gain a better insight into the technique and studio practice of James Ensor. The museum has, with its 38 paintings and numerous etchings and drawings, the largest collection of the Belgian artist in the world. Currently, the study has expanded into other collections.

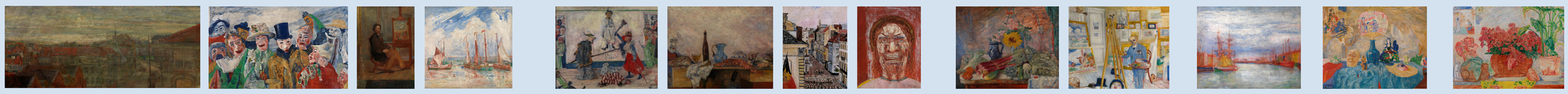
1876 1878 1879 1880 1881



1882 1883 1884 1887 1889



1890 1891 1896 1900-1904 1906 1920-1930



Part of the research entails the conservation history of the works and with it the mapping of deterioration processes. A substantial number of paint layers show changes that can be linked to metal soap formation.

**Protrusions**

Skeletons fighting for the body of a hanged man, 1891 (INV.1857) ©KMSKA

**Crater-like holes**

Mask looking at crustaceans, 1891 (INV 1958) ©KMSKA

**Efflorescence**

Lady with a fan, 1881, (INV 2833) ©KMSKA

**Case study**

A very distinctive form of protrusions was first observed on ‘The astonishment of the mask Wouse’(1891) during conservation treatment. These rounded shapes are tightly packed together and can be found in several areas and colours on the painting.

Macro

The astonishment of the mask W ouse, 1889 (INV 2042) ©KMSKA

So far, they have been spotted on three paintings from the period 1889 – 1891. At a first glance they seem to consist mainly of an oily substance, but under higher magnification, it becomes clear that some of these protrusions contain colour as well, as can be seen in ‘Skeletons fighting for the body of a hanged man’ (1891)

In some cases the oily substance has dried out, leaving the underlying paint layer severely damaged –the paint is torn into islands and seems to have shrunk in the process, showing the underlying ground layer.

Skeletons fighting for the body of a hanged man, 1891 (INV.1857) ©KMSKA

The fall of the rebel angels, 1889, (INV 2176) ©KMSKA

Preliminary analysis results seem to point in the direction of metal soaps, but further research is necessary to try to understand this form of deterioration and why these specific works are affected by it.

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