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THE RESTORATION TREATMENT OF THE ASTONISHMENT OF THE MASK WOUSE

In September 2012, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp made a start with the conservation and restoration treatment of one of James Ensor's most iconic and captivating paintings: *Astonishment of the Mask Wouse*, signed and dated 1889

¹. In this article, restorer Laure Mortiaux explains how the restoration project has yielded new insights into Ensor's technique and provided clues about the material history of the painting and the various treatments that it – like most of the pieces by Ensor in the KMSKA collection – has undergone.



James Ensor, Astonishment of the Mask Wouse, oil on canvas, 109 x 131 cm, KMSKA, inv. 2042

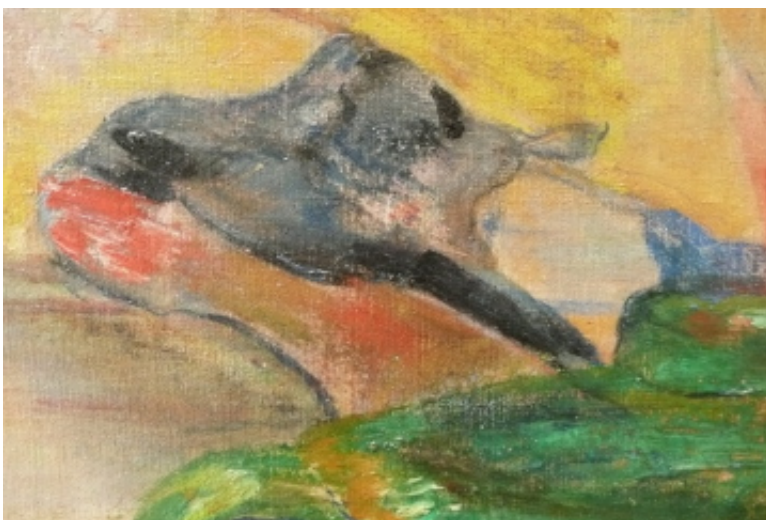
Astonishment of the Mask Wouse dates from **James Ensor's** most creative period, between 1885 and 1890. As we can see in the photograph of the artist's studio, it was painted around the same time as *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (252.5 x 430.5 cm, oil on

canvas, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum).



James Ensor in his studio, working on Christ's Entry into Brussels alongside Astonishment of the Mask Wouse, Anonymous, (1888 or 1889). Ostend, Mu.ZEE, Fonds X. Tricot

The painting was executed with oils on industrially prepared linen. The canvas is mounted on a pine stretcher that would appear not to be original. Ensor's pictorial technique is quite straightforward. The strokes are applied quickly and nervously, using spatulas, palette knives and various sized brushes to exploit the possibilities of oil paint fully. Thin, semi-transparent tones, through which the ground sometimes remains visible, are alternated with impastos of varying thickness. Different planes are juxtaposed. First, he applied the backgrounds in very liquid paint. Then, using a variety of stiff brushes, he added the figures in a series of nervous strokes of varying direction.





TOP LEFT: Detail of the thin, semi-transparent, pictorial layer – TOP RIGHT: Detail of impastos BOTTOM: Detail of a mask superimposed on the background

A number of alterations that Ensor made in the course of the painting process become visible in an infrared image of the painting.



Detail of an infrared image revealing a pentimento: the shape of a shoe is clearly discernible under the bluish pink dress of Wouse

The colour scheme, which was analysed by **Geert Van der Snickt** ² using XRF (X-Ray Fluorescence), is characteristic for this particular stage in Ensor's career, when the artist rarely blended his paints and preferred to use pure tones, like vermilion, chrome yellow, cobalt blue, emerald or Scheele's green, white lead and earthy pigments.

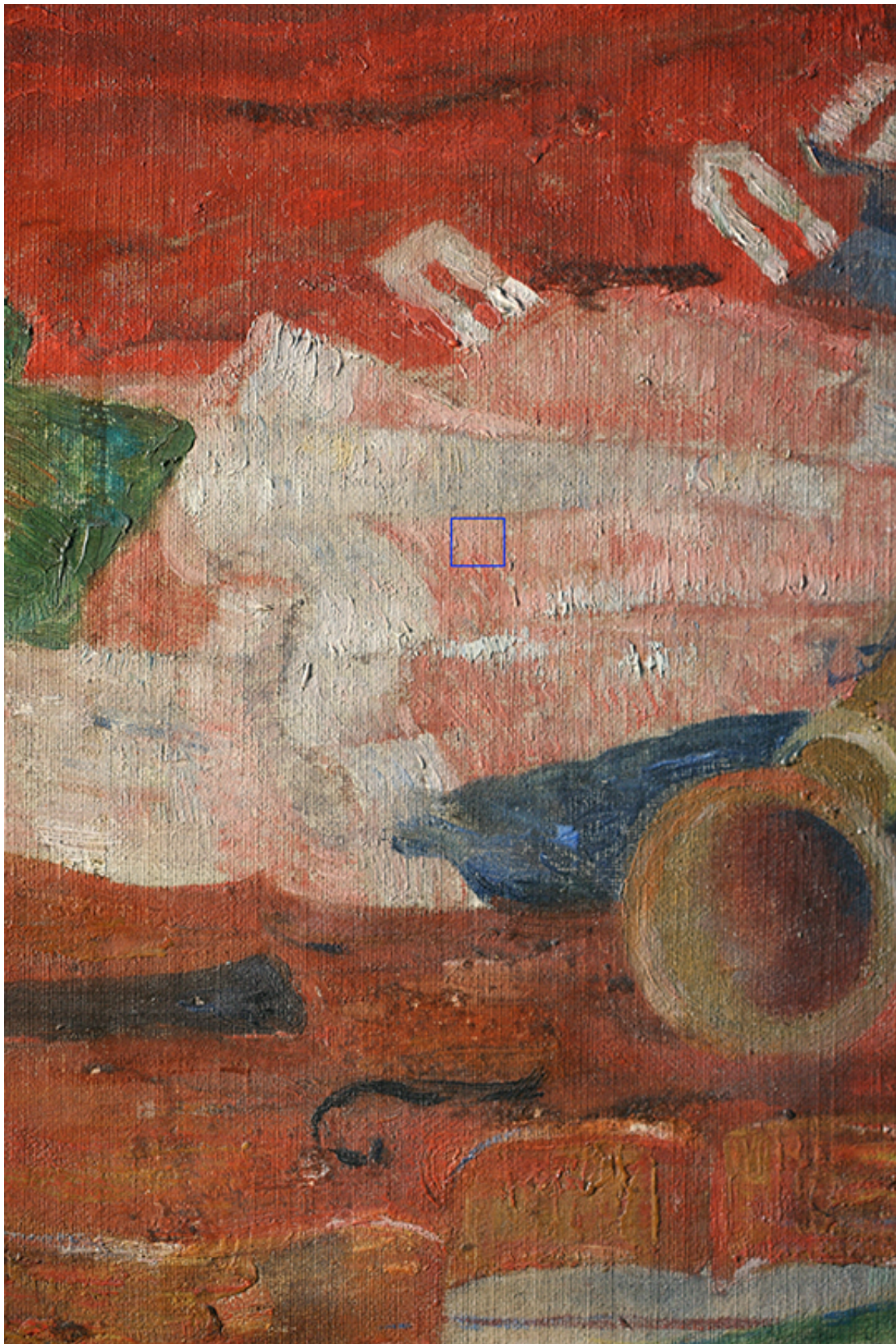
It appears that the majority of Ensor's paintings from this era were originally left unvarnished. In most cases, as with this particular painting, a layer of varnish was only added later, during subsequent restoration treatment. Under a microscope, one can see very clearly how the varnish has penetrated into the craquelure. No traces were found of older varnish layers. *Astonishment of the Mask Wouse*, which has been in the KMSKA collection since 1926 ³, underwent previous restoration in 1956 ⁴. On that occasion, it was

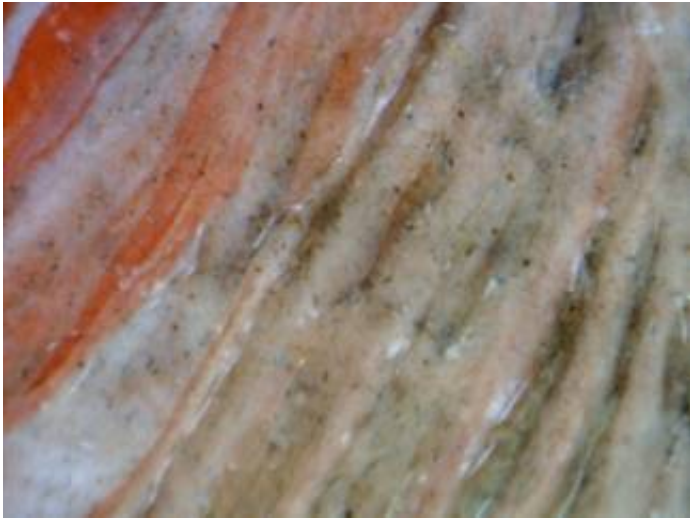
recanvassed onto linen, impregnated with a wax-resin mixture, and varnished. The relining or doubling process caused some damage to the pictorial layer, including compression of the impastos as a result of flat ironing and some accumulation of wax residue along the edges. There was also evidence of scratching – possibly caused by the use of a scalpel – and cropping at the edges, as well as a number of repaired tears and some retouches... Since the previous treatment, some new lacunas and scratches had appeared, as had traces of wear. The thick and shiny varnish layer, which was applied rather irregularly after relining in the 1950s, had yellowed quite strongly, so that it had come to conceal Ensor's typically subtle colouring and the depth of the composition.

Under the varnish, one could discern an evenly applied grey underlayer, similar to those observed in other Ensor paintings, including *The Intrigue*⁵, *Theatre of Masks*⁶ and *Fall of the Rebellious Angels*⁷. It is not entirely clear yet whether it is dirt or an original paint layer. In a [recently published online article](#), **Herwig Todts** cites Ensor on the use of rainwater to mimic the effect of varnish⁸. Might the application of a wet sponge on the painted surface explain the presence of this grey layer?

Similar questions arose during the examination of the paint layer under a microscope: scattered across the surface of the painting (particularly around the impastos), one notices transparent spherical aggregates that adhere strongly to the pictorial layer. Perhaps they are an indication of damage to the pictorial layer as a result of previous restoration treatment: they may have been caused by a reaction to water or by the introduction of heat during relining. Or they may be a residue of a subsequently applied substance. Is there evidence of degradation of the paint layer? Could the aggregates be metal soaps?

Preliminary examination under a microscope suggests that these protrusions might indeed have been caused by lead or zinc soap aggregation, a phenomenon that experts attribute to a chemical reaction in the paint layers or the ground, which contains a mixture of lead white or zinc white and oil. The accumulations of soap grow in volume until they eventually break through the pictorial layer. At this stage in our study, further information on these aggregates is still lacking though. The hypothesis of the presence of metal soaps is currently being tested on samples taken from the affected zones.





TOP: James Ensor, *Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* (detail) – BOTTOM LEFT: Macro photograph of the underlying grey layer, seen through the varnish layer – BOTTOM RIGHT: Macro photograph of the spheres/aggregates, after removal of the varnish

The first stage of the restoration treatment involved the removal of the varnish by means of a mixture of organic solvents. Some colours, particularly the red areas (vermilion + red lacquer (?)), were found to be sensitive to these products. The sensitivity of the red paint in the highest parts of the impastos was probably due in part to the pigment having been insufficiently covered in binding agent and in part to these areas having been crushed with a flat iron during the earlier relining. While the red pigments are sensitive by nature, this characteristic would appear to have been aggravated by the recanvassing procedure. In view of this sensitivity and the thickness of the varnish layer, the painting was cleaned using a technique involving solvent compresses. Thanks to this process *Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* has regained its original depth.



Details during varnish removal

The wax residues and old retouches, which ran across the original, were removed by scalpel under a microscope. The lacunas and worn areas were filled and retouched in order to enhance the readability of the work. This process was undertaken with due respect for the material history of the painting.



LEFT: Detail of a tear after removal of old retouches - CENTRE: Detail during filling of lacunas - RIGHT: Detail after retouching

As the analyses have not been concluded yet, the nature of the grey layer and the transparent aggregates is still undetermined. However, as the grey layer is quite even and unobtrusive, it will be retained for the time being. If further analysis shows it to be a dirt layer, it may be removed at a later stage. Considering the possible presence of metal soaps in the paint layers, care was taken not to apply water (and/or heat) during the restoration treatment ⁹.



James Ensor, Astonishment of the Mask Wouse (after treatment)

Laure Mortiaux

Information and comments

If you would like to share your knowledge or exclusive information with the Ensor Research Project, or to comment on any of the articles published as part of this ongoing project, please leave your personal details using our [online form](#).

¹ Tricot, X., James Ensor. Oeuvrecatalogus van de schilderijen, Mercatorfonds/Pandora, Brussels, 2009. (n°289)

Provenance : Paul Desmeth Collection, Elie Burthoul Collection, Joseph Burthoul Collection.

Tricot, X., Wie verschuilt zich achter het masker in De verwondering van het masker Wouse?, webpublication, <http://jamesensor.vlaamsekunstcollectie.be/nl/onderzoek/webpublicaties/wie-verschuilt-zich-achter-het-masker-in-de-verwondering-van-het-masker-wouse>. Tricot asks whether the protagonist, Wouse, is an alter ego for Ensor's authoritarian mother, his aunt or his grandmother. He also draws attention to an eponymous character in the novel Joseph Andrews by Henry Fielding (1701-1754), the shrew Mrs. Tow-wouse.

² Van der Snickt, G., James Ensor's pigments studied by means of portable and synchrotron radiation-based X-ray techniques: evolution, context and degradation, PhD Thesis, University of Antwerp, 2012. pp. 332-333.

³ 22 March 1926 : purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp from the G. Giroux Gallery in Brussels.

⁴ Restoration by C. Bender, letter dated 25 March 1956, RES 348, KMSKA Archives.

⁵ The Intrigue, oil on canvas, 1890, KMSKA, n°1856, restored in 2005.

⁶ The Theatre of Masks, oil on canvas, 1890, KMSKA, n°1855 restored in 2009.

⁷ The Fall of the Rebellious Angels, oil on canvas, 1890, KMSKA, n°2176 restored in 2013.

⁸ Todts, H., Ensor over het gebruik van vernis, http://www.kmska.be/nl/Onderzoek/Ensor/ERP_vernis.html

⁹ Keune, K., Op.cit., 2005, pp. 178-179. (<http://dare.uva.nl/pt/record/161024>)



Museum offices

Lange Kievitstraat 111-113 bus 100, B-2018 Antwerpen

T +32 (0)3 224 95 50

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