

gazes back and forth is an element which absorbs the spectator immediately inside the world of this work of art.

To put it briefly, whether art can save the world is still the question. The vision of Charlier is anyhow that art can at least save the world of art, for this art world is his never-ending source of inspiration. All the rest stays an open question. This work shows us how close the sacrality of art and the profane element of money can be interwoven with each other in our way of thinking. This makes it a perfect work to hang here in room 15 of the Museum of the National Bank of Belgium, just on the spot one tries to make the complex dialogue between money and culture more tangible.

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Art or money. The world of Jacques Charlier



J. Charlier, *Ensor, ou le sens des images*, 55 x 100 cm, Acryl and oil on canvas, Museum of the National Bank of Belgium, Inv. No. A001731, 2002.

Can art save the world? This is a question which already made many generations of artists, curators and spectators think deep. The question stayed in spite of all this attention unanswered, and maybe it is even better so. *Ensor ou le sens des images* makes however, as it seems, fun of this whole discussion. Is it possible that the specific view of the Liegeois artist Jacques Charlier is to blame?

Jacques Charlier was born in 1939 and belongs nowadays to the prominent contemporary artists in Belgium. He picked up the craft as a self-taught man. For that he systematically collected art books and studied interesting artists. By doing so, his work is mainly influenced by Duchamps, Broodthaers and Magritte. His massive and almost impenetrable oeuvre -which he himself calls his activities- is not limited to just one style, genre or medium. For example, Charlier is at the same time musician, photographer, film maker, performer, painter and writer. He characterizes himself as "wholesaler of Belgian humor in all categories".

He criticizes paradoxically themes from the art and the art world itself, using a large ironic view. In this way Charlier asks questions about as well the perception of the image, as the originality of a work of art. His sardonic look incorporates also a large measure of black humor and often typically Belgian themes. Throughout the years he developed with intent no personal style, so he could keep on time and time again shattering the aura of art.



K. Ponsaers and B. Grégoire, 100 Belgian francs, 76 x 139 mm, div. printing methods, 1995.

Ensor ou le sens des images shows an ultramarine silk-screen print of the last 100 franc note. The background is completely painted gold. The method seems to derive directly from the Pop Art. At the right there is a large inscription in black saying 'Each minute Belgian art changes the world'. According to Charlier, this slogan refers to "the crazy side of Belgium, where I don't know how many artists live per square meter who don't interest anybody. I consider it a privilege to live in a country that doesn't exist and that doesn't have a national identity". The idea of connecting words to images is a very Belgian phenomenon. Magritte's world-famous 'ceci n'est pas une pipe' is not far away. Charlier himself states "If I emphasize the text in relation to the image, it's actually to stress the meaning, like adding sound 'off' to a film". Charlier signed the work in the lower right corner. By doing so he does not place his own signature at the side of the preprinted signature of Ensor. Is this his way to honor the portrayed master? Or does he want to stress the fact that this is a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', together with the masks, shells and ominous figures of that other artist, Ensor? Until now, there is very little written about this work of art. One can thus not expect real answers in existing literature. Besides that, answers are not really present in the work of Charlier. He rather prefers asking the questions.

Ensor ou le sens des images is a piece of art that seems to combine a great deal of themes from the oeuvre of Charlier. For example, a kind of *Belgicism* is present in the work of Charlier. The connection between words and images was already mentioned earlier.

In addition it is interesting to ask oneself why the artist in 2002 (the year of the introduction of the euro coins and banknotes) still chose for the Belgian franc, which had passed out of use. When considering this profoundly, a jumble of cross-references inside this piece of art is discovered. The slogan states that Belgian art is the subject, therefore it references on the one hand of course to this Belgian work of Charlier himself, but also on the other to the Belgian history of art, here represented by Ensor. In this respect, the used Belgian money just adds power to the slogan. Furthermore then, one can wonder why Charlier used this specific note of only 100 Belgian francs. If he really wanted to portray "the big money", why than did he not choose a larger amount? Because on all the Belgian franc notes of this genre there can be found Belgian artists (with the exception of 10,000 BEF). Probably he either chose for the mystery of the art of Ensor, or he just took the most used banknote (with 395,681,200 specimens since 1995).

Furthermore there is known that this work is part of a series, in which the picture stayed the same, and only the used colors changed. The gold background of this version of *Ensor ou le sens des images* thus evokes additional associations. Gold is seen in most cultures as a valuable good. On top of that, gold was in many countries used during a long time as a counter value for the issuing of banknotes and coins. Because gold can thus also be seen as money, the fore- and background talk about the same subject. On the other hand the background (together with the ultramarine print) is a reminiscence of the Byzantine icons, where the pictured god acquires a touch of sacralization by the non-profane golden scenery behind him. Is it possible that Charlier tries to tell us here that we worship gold and/or art too much? Is this again another argument against the world of art from within this world?

Finally, Charlier likes questioning the individual. This is visible here in the fact that he depicts an object with the depiction of yet another artist. Is Charlier looking at us as spectators through the eyes of Ensor? Or does he here want to point out to the public the importance of its own gaze? That gaze, that is so fundamental in the contemplation of art. This circle of



J. Charlier, *Multiple timbre-poste*, 49 x 39 cm, Silk-screen on paper, collection of the National Bank of Belgium, Inv. No. A001669, 2000. – This is another clear example of the *Belgicism* in the work of Charlier; a stamp with the personification of Belgium and the symbols of her three regions: the lion, the iris and the cock.