

Ainsi mon âme, seule, et que rien n'influence: Elle est comme en du verre, enclose en du silence Toute vouée à son spectacle intérieur . . .

—Georges Rodenbach

If it be true that 'the sense of mystery is the outstanding feature of Symbolism in its pure state'¹ Fernand Khnopff, more than anyone else, is this *fin-de-siècle* movement incarnate—and not by virtue of his work alone but of the figure he deliberately cut and presented to his fellow-men. He had plenty of admirers even in his life-time, especially in England. There, no doubt, his closeness to the Pre-Raphaelites was felt; but all his paintings, with their muted colour, like his pastels and his drawings, are steeped in a queer sort of atmosphere of slightly perverted dreams combined with yearnings for a world of higher things. One rediscovers him today in another climate altogether—as part of a general movement at the end of which there looms Surrealism.

Khnopff was born in Belgium in 1858, at the château of Gremberghen near Termonde; but it was Bruges where he spent his childhood—a city which was not yet spoiled by tourists and whose atmosphere unquestionably tinged his outlook. More than once in later life he sought to render his impressions of it—strange ones too, coloured as they doubtless were by Rodenbach's novel *Bruges la Morte*. One such effort is a very fine drawing, *La ville abandonnée* (Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Fig 1), with its empty square and gabled buildings in the background, flanked by an infinite expanse of glassy sea that silently overflows the paving stones. Each stone with its peculiarities is drawn with care, and the whole derives a sort of supernatural truth from such attention to minutiae.

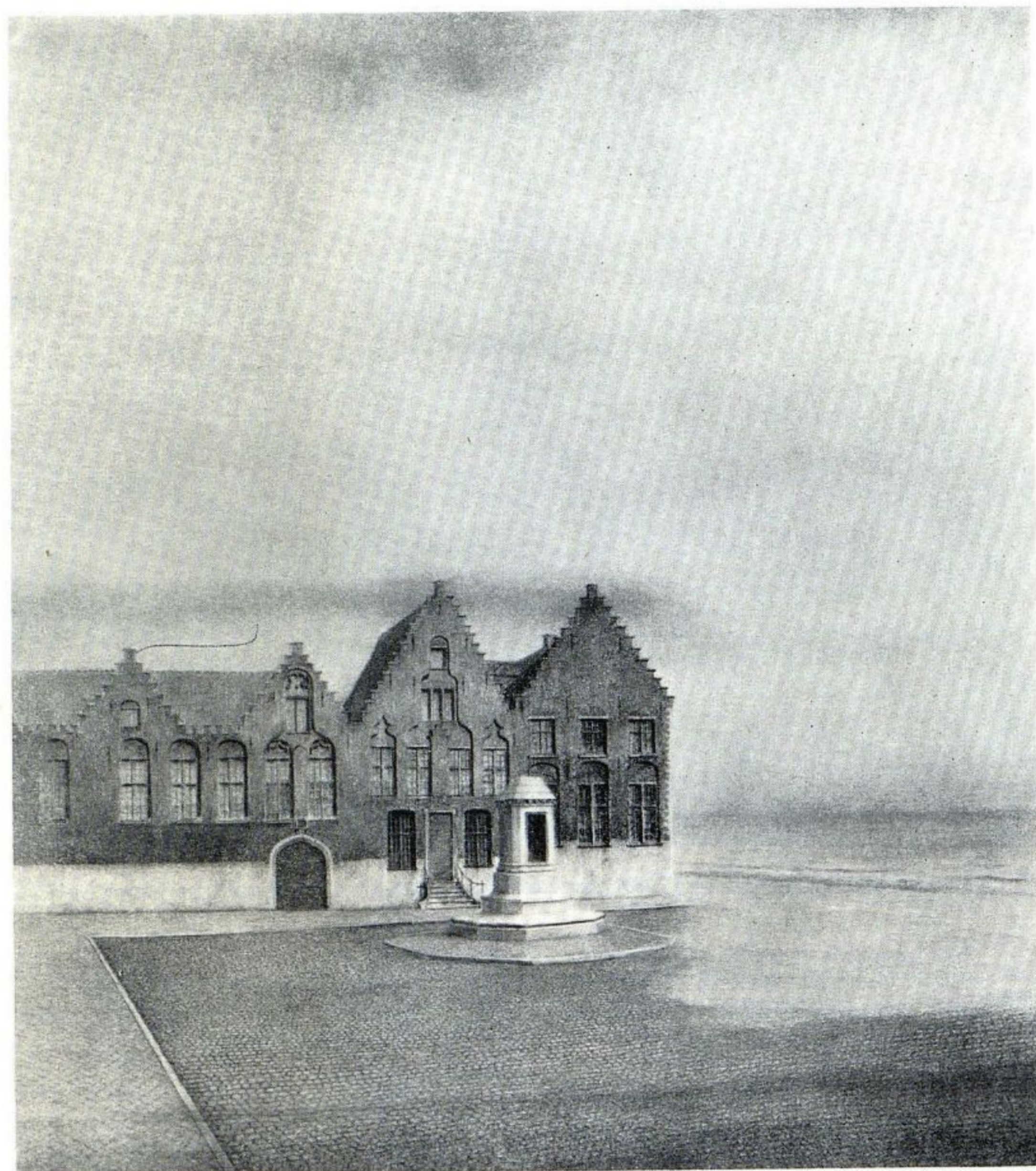
After a period of studying law at the University of Brussels he got his father, a senior magistrate, to let him follow his vocation as an artist. The teacher he chose was Xavier Mellery, a man who harboured schemes for mural decoration à la Puvis de Chavannes, but who was also an excellent draughtsman who could convey emotional states by subtle degrees of monochrome. What is more, he often left the trodden path of edifying allegory and dealt with the invisible by means of simple, intimate scenes through which he endeavoured to express the 'ineffable mystery of life'—to use a favourite expression of the time.

In August 1877 Khnopff was in Paris². Delacroix made an immense

Fernand Khnopff— Perfect Symbolist

FRANCINE-CLAIRE LEGRAND

Translated by Angus Malcolm



1. *La ville abandonnée*. Charcoal, black crayon and pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 76×69 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels
Illustrations to this article are of works by Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) unless otherwise stated

impression on him and he bought one of his hero's sketches for the ceiling of the Salon de la Paix in the Hôtel de Ville. He kept it all his life. Another discovery was the work of Gustave Moreau, which confirmed his taste for the theatrical as well as his leaning towards a certain preciousness³. He saw Burne-Jones's work, and Millais's too, at the Exposition Universelle of 1878.

A few years later Khnopff was back

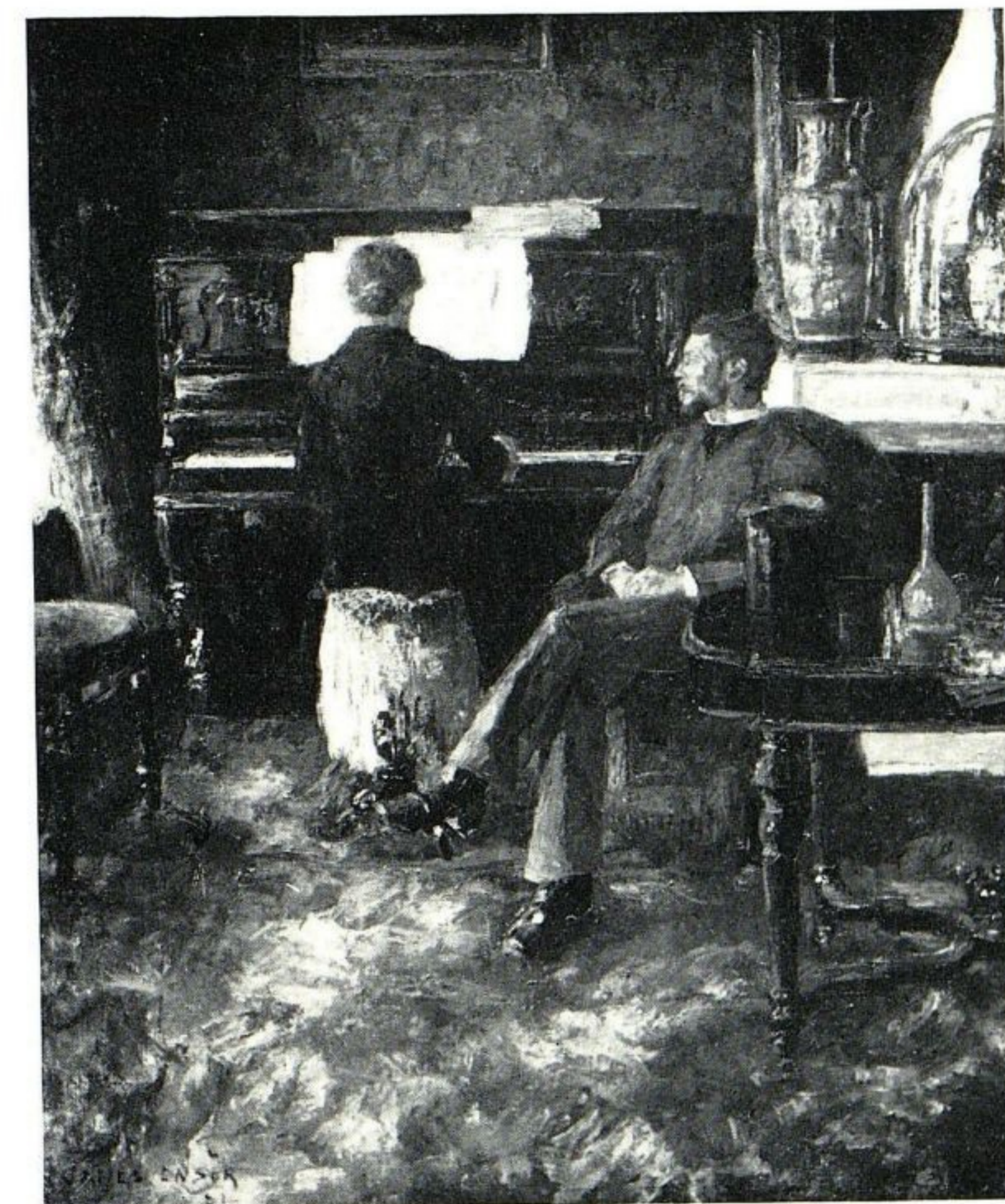
in Brussels and he began to send his work to the exhibitions organized by the group who called themselves L'Essor, along with other young men who were later to be famous—among them James Ensor and Theo van Rysselberghe. He caused a stir in 1882 with a picture he called *Une Crise*—spoiled by clumsiness of composition but very romantically conceived (it showed a young man, Werther perhaps

or Hamlet, aimlessly pacing the top of a cliff) and something altogether new in that no story attached to the phantom figure in its misty setting. Nothing is stated: all is suggestion, solitude, despair and pride—the riddle of Fate. The following year he caused a sensation at the Cercle Artistique with *En écoutant du Schumann* (Fig 3). 'This painting', *L'Art Moderne* announced, and its word was law in modernist circles, 'is undoubtedly the best if not the most interesting.'⁴ Ensor's picture, *La musique russe* (Fig 2), painted two years earlier, was not even mentioned; yet the subject is the same and the two have many points in common. Ensor's example even led Khnopff to use soft and tremulous brushwork, quite unlike his normal practice. The painting of the carpet, for example, is unmistakably Ensorian. The points where Khnopff and Ensor differ, none the less, are eloquent. The music in Ensor's painting forms a link between the figures: in Khnopff's it actually divides them. The pianist is virtually invisible, and the woman in the centre, so far from watching her play, sits apart with her back turned, deep in a reverie of her own. Thus the theme of solitude reappears—and in a setting that might well have seemed to rule it out. With Khnopff it was almost an obsession: it is always cropping up.

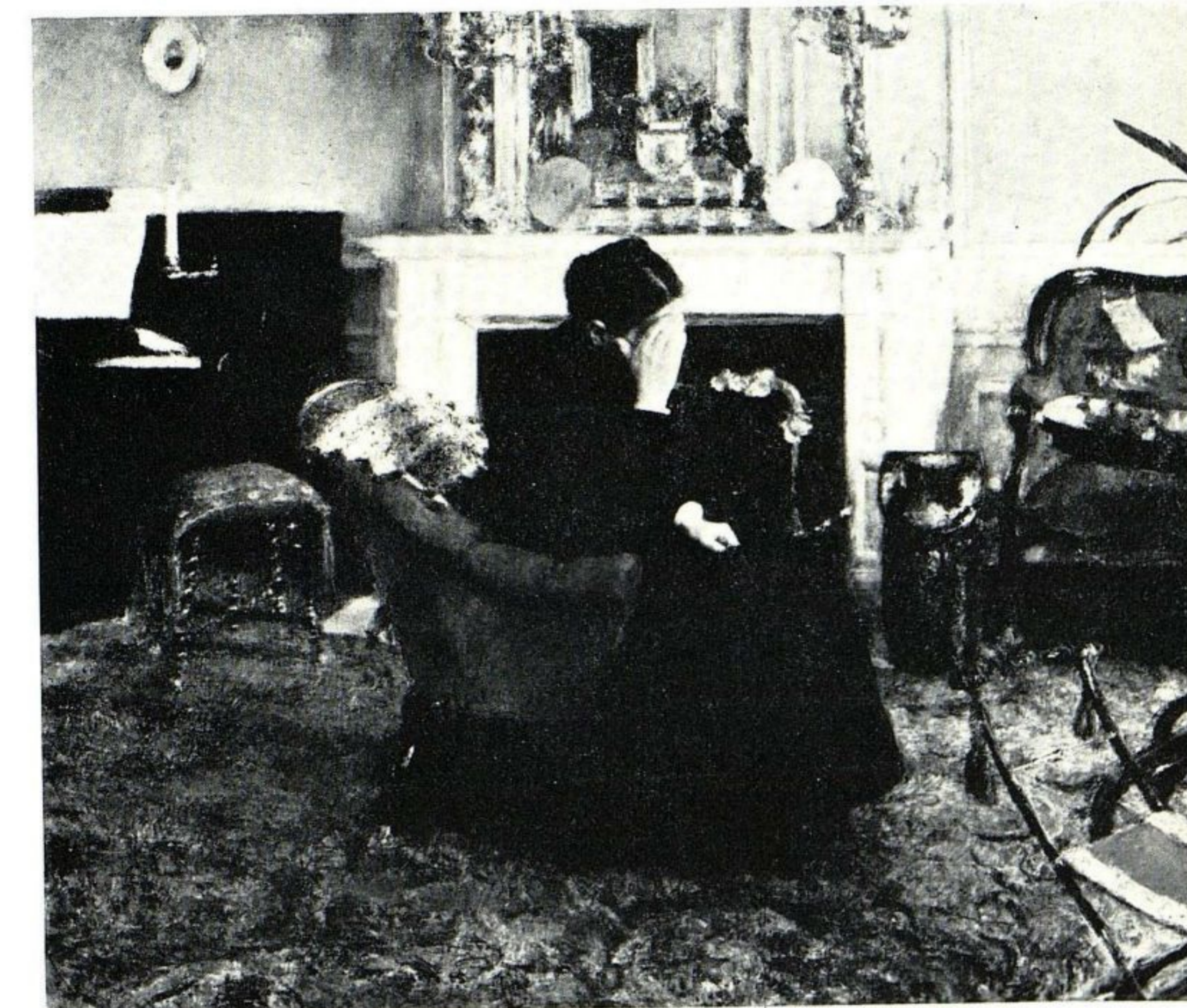
To Ensor it was very galling that a work which was almost a plagiarism of his own should be so praised, and in 1886 an article on Khnopff, also in *L'Art Moderne*⁵, made him explode. He felt neglected: the honour paid to a rival whom he thought contemptible was more than he could stomach and he wrote savage letters to both the editors—letters that have come to light among the papers left by Octave Maus⁶—revealing a lot of the writer's anguish. Ensor compares himself to Claude Lantier, the hero of Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre*, which had recently appeared and made a great impression. Lantier is the unappreciated pioneer, the failure, who ends the novel by committing suicide; and he compares Khnopff with a former friend of Lantier who has hit the fashionable world as a painter and is in fact a common plagiarist:

It is not in Claude to envy Fagerolles his success. Posterity will judge and assign to each his proper place. Did I ever aim at immediate success? It is written that the humble shall be exalted. I have confidence in myself: I feel my strength. The success of others leaves me undisturbed.

These are proud assertions; but the fact that Ensor wrote at all gives them the lie. Yet the incident throws some



2. *La musique russe* by James Ensor (1860–1949), 1881. Oil on canvas, 133×110 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels



3. *En écoutant du Schumann*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 101.5×116.5 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels