
Tissot, James [Jacques-Joseph]

(b Nantes, Oct 15, 1836; d Château de Buillon, Doubs, Aug 8, 1902).

Willard E. Misfeldt

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T085236>

Published online: 2003

French painter, printmaker and enamellist. He grew up in a port, an experience reflected in his later paintings set on board ship. He moved to Paris c. 1856 and became a pupil of Louis Lamothe and Hippolyte Flandrin. He made his Salon début in 1859 and continued to exhibit there successfully until he went to London in 1871. His early paintings exemplify Romantic obsessions with the Middle Ages, while works such as the *Meeting of Faust and Marguerite* (exh. Salon 1861; Paris. Mus. d'Orsay) and *Marguerite at the Ramparts* (1861; untraced, see Wentworth, 1984, pl. 8) show the influence of the Belgian painter Baron Henri Leys. In the mid-1860s Tissot abandoned these tendencies in favour of contemporary subjects, sometimes with a humorous intent, as in *Two Sisters* (exh. Salon 1864; Paris, Louvre) and *Beating the Retreat in the Tuileries Gardens* (exh. Salon 1868; priv. col., see Wentworth, 1984, pl. 45). The painting *Young Ladies Looking at Japanese Objects* (exh. Salon 1869; priv. col., see Wentworth, 1984, pl. 59) testifies to his interest in things Oriental, and *Picnic* (exh. Salon 1869; priv. col., see 1984 exh. cat., fig.), in which he delved into the period of the Directoire, is perhaps influenced by the Goncourt brothers. Tissot re-created the atmosphere of the 1790s by dressing his characters in historical costume.

During the Franco-Prussian War Tissot participated valiantly in the defence of Paris, but his abrupt move to London in 1871 has been interpreted as an attempt to escape reprisals for associating himself with the Paris Commune. A more plausible explanation for the move might be his desire for better professional opportunities than existed in a war-ravaged city. His acquaintance with Thomas Gibson Bowles (who owned the magazine *Vanity Fair*, for which Tissot had been drawing caricatures for some time) gave him an important entrée into social and artistic circles in London.



James Tissot: Tea, Oil on wood, 26 x 18 7/8 in. (66 x 47.9 cm), 1872. (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1998, Accession ID: 1998.170); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110002751>

In 1872 Tissot began exhibiting regularly at the Royal Academy, where he had first shown in 1864, and continued to do so until 1881 (except for 1877–9). His early London paintings are in the Directoire manner, as exemplified by an *Interesting Story* (exh. RA 1872; Melbourne, N.G. Victoria), but he soon shifted to scenes of fashionable West End life (*Too Early*, exh. RA 1873; London, Guildhall A.G.), of lovers parting (the *Last Evening*, exh. RA 1873; London, Guildhall A.G.), of festive social occasions (*Ball on Shipboard*, exh. RA 1874; London, Tate) and of elegant young people at their leisure (*The Thames*, exh. RA 1876; Wakefield, A.G. and *Tea*, 1872; New York, Met.). These paintings appear to fall within the English narrative tradition but are often infused with a languorous atmosphere whereby his subjects seem emotionally detached and pensive. This confluence of narrative and non-narrative, or emotive, aspects makes his subject-matter open to different interpretations. His technique remained impeccably craftsmanlike and traditional, particularly in depicting the details of women's fashions.

Around 1875 Tissot met Kathleen Newton, a beautiful divorcee, and their relationship represented Tissot's only period of real family life as an adult. Mrs Newton and her family dominated the subject-matter of his paintings, particularly those concerned with domestic life and travel, as in *By Water (Waiting at Dockside)* (watercolour study, c. 1881–2; London, Owen Edgar).

In his London works Tissot avoided his previous superficial japonaiserie in favour of more pronounced Oriental qualities, for example *The Gardener* (c. 1879; untraced, see 1984 exh. cat., fig.). At the same time his skill as a painter reached its peak, and his interest in printmaking, particularly etching, was renewed (e.g. *Summer*, etching, 1878; London, BM).

In the late 1870s Tissot also began producing cloisonné enamels, partly inspired by his interest in Japanese metalwork and partly by artists such as Lucien Falize and Ferdinand Barbedienne. The majority of his enamel work took the form of small objects and plaques, a fine example of which is the oval jardinière *Lake and Sea* (bronze mount, 240×620×310 mm, c. 1884; Brighton, Royal Pav.). A popular and successful artist in London, Tissot considered himself to be fully modern, as shown by the title of his last important exhibition at the Dudley Gallery in 1882, *An Exhibition of Modern Art*.

Kathleen Newton's death from tuberculosis in 1882 affected Tissot deeply and marked an important transition in his artistic development. He returned to Paris and held a large one-man exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie in 1882. In 1885 his exhibition entitled *Femme à Paris*, held at the Galerie Sedelmeyer, included a series of 15 large paintings presenting modern woman in her various occupations. This was part of an ambitious venture, which, had it been finished, would have combined painting, printmaking and literature in a truly novel scheme. During the 1880s he became popular as a portrait painter and began to experiment with pastel (e.g. *Berthe*, 1882–3; Paris, Petit Pal.).

While working on one of the *Femme à Paris* paintings Tissot claimed to have had a religious revelation; this resulted in *Christ the Comforter* (c. 1884; St Petersburg, Hermitage), a large painting showing Christ comforting two downtrodden pilgrims in the ruins of the Cour des Comptes in Paris. Tissot also became interested in spiritualism and in 1885 was convinced that Kathleen Newton had materialized at a séance in London, an event he recorded in a mezzotint after a lost painting: *The Apparition* (1885; priv. col., see 1984 exh. cat., no. 151).

His religious experience led him to devote his remaining years primarily to illustrating the Life of Christ and the Old Testament. Tissot felt impelled to depict the Palestine of Christ's day and he made several trips to the Holy Land to do research. His series of 365 gouache illustrations for the *Life of Christ* (New York, Brooklyn Mus.) were executed at the Château de Buillon, which he had inherited from his father in 1888 and shown to enthusiastic crowds in Paris (1894 and 1895), London (1896) and New York (1898) and then toured North America until 1900. They were published in 1896–7 and in several later editions. Tissot left his Old Testament paintings (New York, Jew. Mus.) unfinished, but they were subsequently completed by other artists and the engravings published in 1904. These two religious series were the most notable visual summation of the Catholic revival in late 19th-century France.

Tissot was initially remembered as an illustrator of the Bible but his depictions of fashionable 19th-century life and his charming genre scenes are now regarded as his most significant work. In a distinctly personal way his work reflects nearly every important artistic development of his time and reveals the interaction between academic and avant-garde developments in art.

Bibliography

James Jacques Joseph Tissot (exh. cat., ed. D. Brooke; Providence, RI Sch. Des., Mus. A., 1968)

W. Misfeldt: *James Jacques Joseph Tissot* (diss., U. Washington, 1971)

James Tissot: Catalogue Raisonné of his Prints (exh. cat. by M. Wentworth, Minneapolis, MN, Inst. A., 1978)

W. Misfeldt: *The Albums of James Tissot* (Bowling Green, OH, 1982) [many previously unpubd works]

J. James Tissot: Biblical Paintings (exh. cat. by G. Schiff, New York, Jew. Mus., 1982)

M. Wentworth: *James Tissot* (Oxford, 1984) [generously illus.]

James Tissot (exh. cat., ed. K. Matyjaskiewicz; London, Barbican A.G., 1984)

C. Wood: *Tissot* (London, 1986)

See also

Helleu, Paul-César

More on this topic

Tissot, James (1836–1902) <<http://oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.001.0001/acref-9780198662037-e-2596>> in Oxford Reference <<http://oxfordreference.com>>

Tissot, James <<http://oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00183260>> in Oxford Art Online <<http://oxfordartonline.com>>

Tissot, Jacques Joseph [known as James Tissot] (1836–1902), artist <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-68966>> in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography <<http://oxforddnb.com>>

External resources

Tissot, James: *Hide and Seek*, c. 1877, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) <<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=56405+0+none>>

Tissot, James: *The Ball on Shipboard*, c. 1874, Tate (London) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tissot-the-ball-on-shipboard-n04892>>

Tissot, James: *Portrait*, 1876, Tate (London) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tissot-portrait-n04271>>

Tissot, James: Holyday, c. 1876, Tate (London) <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tissot-holyday-n04413>>

Tissot, James: The Gallery of HMS Calcutta (Portsmouth), c. 1876, Tate (London) <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tissot-the-gallery-of-hms-calcutta-portsmouth-n04847>>

Tissot, James: Portsmouth Dockyard, c. 1877, Tate (London) <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tissot-portsmouth-dockyard-n05302>>

Tissot, James: Sans Dot, 1885, Mackenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina (Regina, SK) <http://www.mackenzieartgallery.sk.ca/discover/items/2351/sans-dot>>

Tissot, James: Women of Paris: The Circus Lover, 1885, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA) <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/women-of-paris-the-circus-lover-33605>>

Tissot, James: On the Thames, a Heron, 1871-2, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, MN) <http://collections.artsmia.org/art/2239>>

Tissot, James: Comtesse d'Yanville and her Four Children, c. 1895, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, MN) <http://collections.artsmia.org/art/5426>>

Tissot, James: Seaside (July: Specimen of a Portrait), c. 1878, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1980.288>>

Tissot, James: Spring Morning, 1875, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1995.252>>

Tissot, James: Portrait of Mrs Catherine Smith Gill and Two of her Children, 1877, Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool) <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/collections/19c/tissot.asp>>

Tissot, James: Young Women Looking at Japanese Articles, 1869, Cincinnati Art Museum (Cincinnati, OH) <http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/explore/collection/collections/?u=6888811>>

Tissot, James: 12 works, Muse d'Orsay (Paris) http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/resultat-collection.html?no_cache=1&S=0&zsz=1&zs_r_2_z=3&zs_r_2_w=Tissot%2C%20James&zs_ah=oeuvre&zs_rf=mos_a&zs_mf=20&zs_sf=0&zs_send_x=1&zs_liste_only=1>