

Visual Narrative

TISSOT'S *LIFE OF CHRIST*

by Gail Leggio

The society painter James Jacques Tissot (1836–1902) made his reputation documenting worldly fashions and pastimes in Paris and London. A friend of Edgar Degas, whose *Portrait of James Tissot* (1867–68) is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tissot was a denizen as well as a chronicler of the contemporary urban milieu. His lively, crisply painted scenes of stylish young people enjoying themselves—in a manicured park, aboard an ocean liner—are modern without being avant-garde. His portraits, while not as formally bold or insightful as those of James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, have considerable dash. *Frederick Gustavas Burnaby* (1870), in London's National Portrait Gallery, depicting a young officer lounging in his well-appointed rooms, is a delight. Tissot is a master of *mise-en-scène*.



In 1885, Tissot was completing a series called *La Femme à Paris* when he visited the Church of Saint-Sulpice to research a backdrop. A nominal Catholic, the painter had never been particularly pious, but at Saint-Sulpice he experienced what he called a vision, sparking a ten-year project. Traveling to Egypt, Syria and Palestine, he created a visual narrative of New Testament scenes in 350 watercolors. His archeologically grounded images would have a lasting impact on Christian iconography. From their partial debut in Paris in 1894, they were a success. A paid-entry exhibition of the complete series

The Youth of Jesus, 1886–94

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toured London, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. The Tissot Bible, with the artist's own commentaries, was published in French, British and American editions at various price points. In 1900, the fledgling Brooklyn Museum (then called the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences) purchased the set, most probably at the urging of Sargent. This fall, the Brooklyn Museum is presenting 124 of the watercolors in "James Tissot: *The Life of Christ*" (the complete set is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue).

The catalogue includes fascinating details on Tissot's working methods and on the acquisition process, in an essay by Judith F. Dolkart, organizer of the exhibition: "*The Life of Christ* Comes to the 'Acropolis of Brooklyn.'" Civic pride played a major role in that process; most of the \$60,000 negotiated price was raised by public subscription. The campaign was spearheaded by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper. In a letter to the *Eagle*, the Rev. Lyman Abbott, a Congregationalist pastor, summed up the spiritual benefits to the community:

To me the collection is invaluable because far better than any other artist, ancient or modern, M. Tissot has told the story of Christ's life on earth. Other single pictures as illustrations of single events transcend any single picture in the collection, but no one I think...has so told the story from the birth to the resurrection.¹

Lyman was astute enough not to make exaggerated claims for Tissot's tiny watercolors. (Some are roughly 6-by-4 inches; the largest, 8-by-17 inches.) Nothing in the series approaches the formal beauty and theological complexity of Giotto or Rembrandt. But Tissot's strong suits—a great eye for detail, compositional savvy and a refined color palette—are persuasive and admirably suited to his purpose. What Tissot was aiming at was visual storytelling that would speak, as Lyman remarks, "to any one living in this modern life."²

Tissot's modernity was rooted in late-nineteenth-century notions of geographical, archeological and ethnic authenticity, but it was the artist's fresh concept of a dynamic Jesus that made the narrative compelling. A good place to begin exploring these issues is *The Youth of Jesus* (all works 1886–94). During his travels, Tissot sketched the topography, architecture and costumes of the Middle East, an exercise he referred to a "pencil reporting from the life of Christ." According to one account, he thought of himself as on assignment "for an illustrated paper in Rome under Tiberius."³ Research on-location was crucial to his project, which he saw as revolutionary. "For a long time," he wrote, "the imaginations of the Christian world have been led astray by the fancies of artists; there is a whole army of delusions to be overturned, before any ideas can be entertained."⁴ Tissot brings the same eye for detail he used for his Parisian scenes to the Middle Eastern street of *The Youth of Jesus*, with its stony steps, shadowy doorway figures and arches. Compositionally, the arches provide a naturalistic frame for the adolescent Jesus, slender yet strong, who

carries on his shoulder a wooden plank, a realistic activity for a carpenter's son but also a prefiguration of the Way of the Cross.

Tissot was not the first artist to travel to the Holy Land in search of Biblical authenticity. The earnest Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) worked on a number of paintings there in the mid-1850s and 1860s, including *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple* (1854–55), an Orientalist scene based on the widely held belief that “Islamic architecture...derived from ancient sources.”⁵ Holman Hunt piles up detail relentlessly; his figures lack breathing room, and the pictures are made even less appetizing by his lurid color palette. *The Scapegoat* (1854–55, 1858) depicts a caprine Man of Sorrows at the Dead Sea. Initially, the artist worked on site but, unable to finish, dragged about a series of expiring goats with specimens of salt and mud from Oosdoom to make a surface for the poor beasts to walk on in a tray. Holman Hunt strove to combine two Victorian pre-occupations, spirituality and historical realism, and the strain shows, especially in Biblical pictures such as *The Shadow of Death* (1870–73). The setting is the carpenter's shop, and the young Jesus stands in a blast of sunlight, his arms raised so that his shadow mimicks crucifixion. A round window behind his head registers as a halo. While Holman Hunt claimed the picture was “*historic* without a single fact of any kind in it of a supernatural kind,”⁶ it looks staged, in part because the pose of the figure seems unnatural. Tissot's young Jesus, in contrast, emerges with easy grace from a realistic space. Typological painting, full of foreshadowings in ordinary things, a staple of traditional iconography, was revived by Victorian realists, often to good effect, as in John Everett Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849–50).⁷ Tissot retains a typological element in *The Youth of Jesus* but presents it in a fresh context that makes it look modern.

Of course, Tissot and Holman Hunt had different purposes and used different means: we approach a salon-style history painting with one set of expectations, a series of intimately scaled watercolors with another. Tissot traveled, sketched and photographed extensively in the Middle East, and his command of the terrain is clear in the expansive *Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*. But he painted in his Paris studio. As David Morgan, in his lively catalogue essay, remarks: “It was a kind of visionary memory that transformed these ‘documents’ into pictures.”⁸ The figure of Jesus posed unique problems, and Tissot knew he needed to balance his wealth of ethnographic detail with the universality of a redeemer. His solution was to combine convention and innovation. Tissot's young Jesus wears colorful, patterned Middle Eastern garb; once he has begun his ministry, he wears traditional white, which not only has symbolic value but also makes the figure stand out in crowded compositions. In *The Calling of Saint Peter and Saint Andrew* and *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, for example, the foregrounds are filled with bustling mundane activity, yet the white-robed Jesus in the background draws the eye. In *The Procession in the Street of Jerusalem*, Jesus, riding a donkey, is a small figure in the middle distance, but



The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, 1886–94 BROOKLYN MUSEUM, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

his white robes provide a focal point, and Tissot neatly frames him with stone arches and surging crowds.

The question of how Jesus should be depicted was also entangled with contemporary controversies about his nature. Ernest Renan's revisionist *Le Vie de Jésus* (1863) had argued for a historical view of an ethical thinker, rather than a divine being. Even members of the clergy had come to criticize the soft, pretty and passive "holy card" image of Jesus, which, as the influential American preacher Henry Ward Beecher remarked, was "of no direct historic value."⁹ Tissot's Jesus is a dynamic figure taking an active role in his world. The sheer number of incidents depicted suggests a rounded, almost novelistic character. But there is also a nice balance of masculine strength and introspection in more contemplative images, such as *Jesus Goes Up Alone onto a Mountain to Pray*. In this vertical composition, two-thirds of the picture is taken up by sinuous, rocky steps. At the top, Jesus stands silhouetted against a blue night sky, pinpointed with stars and graced by a crescent moon, which he seems to command with his outstretched hand. The backlighting on his pleated and folded white robe—a fine drapery study—suggests transfiguration.

Tissot does not avoid depicting the supernatural directly. When angels make a appearance in the midst of ethnographic settings, the artist draws on the visual vocabulary of contemporary Symbolism. In *The Annunciation*, Mary sits, wrapped in voluminous white robes, on a floor covered with Eastern rugs.



Jesus Goes Up Alone onto a Mountain to Pray 1886–94

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In medieval, especially Flemish, Annunciations, such carpets are luxury goods decorating castle throne rooms. In Tissot's picture, they are more like the improvised floor of a Bedouin tent; Mary's room is simple, with woven mats as the only other decoration and whitewashed walls. The angel, floating in from the left-hand corner, is an extraterrestrial apparition, a diaphanous six-winged seraph in blue. In *Jesus Ministered to by Angels*, the angelic presences are even more disembodied. Hidden in starlit darkness, they manifest as a halo of bluish hands around the recumbent figure.

The most striking of Tissot's angelic apparition pictures may be *The Grotto of the Agony*, in which Jesus lies crushed by his troubled thoughts, watched over by full-figure angels holding translucent globes with images of his coming Passion. The conceit may derive from Edward Burne-Jones's *The Days of Creation* (1872–78), in which statuesque angels hold crystal globes depicting “not literal scenes of creation, but a series of visions which inform us of miraculous events.”¹⁰ Burne-Jones's images, which started out as subjects for Dalziel's *Illustrated Bible Gallery* and stained-glass cartoons, are primarily decorative. Tissot uses a similar compositional strategy in *Angel Holding a Dial Indicating the Different Hours of the Acts of the Passion*. But in *The Grotto of the Agony*, the interaction between the very human Jesus and the phantasmagorical, blue-tinged, translucent angels has the dramatic energy of a hallucination. The angels here are beneficent spirits, but their immediate task is not comforting. They suggest, or at least point forward to, the sinister watchers in W.B. Yeats's “The Magi”: “the pale unsatisfied ones” who hope “to find once more, /Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,/ The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial

floor.” The spiritualism of the fin-de-siècle, which was one of Yeats’s well-springs, is a recurring theme in the visual arts. The American Symbolist Elihu Vedder, most famous for his 1884 illustrations of Edward Fitzgerald’s *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, made many of these apparitional images. In Vedder’s *Memory* (1870), a shadowy face manifests in a cloudbank above ocean waves; in *Star of Bethlehem*, three tiny wise men cross a vast desert landscape, while a vague crowd of cloudy witnesses look on.¹¹

If Tissot’s ectoplasmic angels reflected contemporary fashion, one aspect of his *Life of Christ* was remarkably forward-looking—his proto-cinematic staging of events. His audience already had a more accurate picture of the Holy Land, thanks to the visual information gathered and disseminated by Orientalist painters, archeologists and photographers. Tourism was becoming more widespread, and slide lectures supplemented the experience of travelers. Soon, early cinema would be tackling Biblical subjects in efforts that were sometimes cautiously embraced by the clergy, sometimes condemned.¹² Most of the very early films are static and stagy, lacking the fluidity and formal ingenuity that D.W. Griffith would bring to the medium. But Tissot’s scenographic skills—which allowed his audience to experience events vicariously by recreating plausible characters and action on authentic locations—would have enormous influence on film, specifically on the Biblical epic genre. Tissot’s



The Sojourn in Egypt, 1886–94 BROOKLYN MUSEUM, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

manipulation of point of view is particularly striking: he gets great “shots.” *Bird’s-Eye View of the Forum: Jesus Hears His Death Sentence* conveys the grandeur of the empire and anticipates the epic overview of crane shots from *Intolerance* to *Gone with the Wind* and nearly every ambitious film set in Roman antiquity. *Pilate Washes His Hands* takes the viewer backstage, watching the governor’s act from behind, through a screen of guards. Perhaps the most startling of these images is *What Our Lord Saw from the Cross*, looking down, from Jesus’ perspective, on a circle of mourners and soldiers. This vertiginous composition looks very modern, but Tissot’s source was the visions of a stigmatic nun, Anna Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), recorded by the poet Clemens Brentano and published in 1833 as *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Tissot’s dynamic camera angles and details—the ropes and pulleys used to raise the cross, for example—appear in scores of films, such as *Ben Hur* (1959) and *King of Kings* (1961).¹³ The popular iconography of Christianity, as it evolved through the twentieth century, owes a good deal to Tissot.

Tissot offers detailed simulacra of ancient life in two horizontal scenes. In *The Magi Journeying*, the three colorfully robed mounted figures come toward us across a vast desert, their entourage trailing off behind them toward the distant mountains. In contrast, *The Sojourn in Egypt* shows the Holy Family disembarking in a bustling port city, perhaps Alexandria, amid a forest of masts. The vertical *The Daughter of Herodias Dancing*, crowded with ornate palace furnishings and lounging royalty, anticipates the Babylonian scenes from Griffith’s *Intolerance*. The row of guards in the background looks like an Assyrian bas-relief, but Tissot’s eclectic sources also include medieval depictions of an acrobatic Salome. Tissot’s dancer, like figures in the sculptural façades of cathedrals and stained glass, is executing a hand-stand. The artist’s parable illustrations are more portrait than narrative and seem less original, although the embrace of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, set in the shadows under a stone arch, is touching. Perhaps Tissot felt he had already addressed the story in his five-etching set *The Prodigal Son* (1882), a modern-dress version in which the rebellious protagonist runs off to Japan and consorts with geishas. In *The Life of Christ*, the story-driven scenes are generally more effective than the portraits, although *The Magdalene Before Her Conversion* and *The Repentant Mary Magdalene* are interesting because Tissot used as his model his deceased mistress, Kathleen Newton. A number of currents come together in Tissot’s project: visual storytelling as a viable aesthetic, notions of realism and authenticity, the evolution of Christian iconography. It has now been more than twenty years since these remarkable watercolors have been exhibited, although they were on nearly continuous display from 1901 into the 1930s. This is a good opportunity to re-examine this culturally important series. “James Tissot: *The Life of Christ*” is on view October 13, 2009–January 17, 2010, at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11238. Telephone (718) 638-5000. On the web at www.brooklynmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Judith F. Dolkart, "The Life of Christ Comes to the 'Acropolis of Brooklyn,'" in *James Tissot: The Life of Christ, the Complete Set of 350 Watercolors* (Brooklyn Museum in association with Merrell, London and New York, 2009), p. 40.
2. Ibid.
3. Judith F. Dolkart, "James Tissot, Prodigal Son," in *ibid.*, p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 17.
5. *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery/Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 158–60. For an interesting discussion of Hunt's geopolitics, see Nicholas Tromans, "Palestine: Picture of Prophecy," *Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, ed., Katherine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2008), pp. 135–58.
6. Ibid., pp. 121–23.
7. See George P. Landow, *Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art and Thought* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).
8. David Morgan, "American Holy Land: Tissot's Bible in the National Context," in *James Tissot: The Life of Christ*, p. 55.
9. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 51.
10. Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 113.
11. See *Perceptions and Evocations: The Art of Elibu Vedder*, Introduction by Regina Soria, Essays by Joshua C. Taylor, Jane Dillenberger, Richard Murray (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979).
12. See Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).
13. Fr. Michael Morris, O.P., *Reel Religion: A Century of the Bible and Film* (New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2009). The exhibition showcased Morris's fascinating collection of international film posters.

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