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Christmas Present and Christmas Past

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TWO DECADES, THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM UNVEILS JAMES TISSOT'S MONUMENTAL SERIES *THE LIFE OF CHRIST*. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



James Tissot, *Jesus Looking Through a Lattice*, 1886–94, opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper.

IN THE SPRING of 1894, when James Tissot exhibited 270 paintings from his series *The Life of Christ* at the Salon de Champ-de-Mars in Paris, one critic declared that the artist could have been “the reporter for an illustrated paper in Rome under Tiberius,” so vivid were these seemingly eyewitness accounts of biblical events. Executed with a meticulous technique that combined opaque and translucent water-based paints, the complete series would eventually comprise 350 images, notable not only for their detail and precision but for their narrative richness. Taken as a whole, Tissot’s *Life of Christ* documents virtually every significant incident of the New Testament, from the journey of the Magi to the Resurrection.

Although it is unclear whether Tissot had any specific commercial goal in mind when he began *The Life of Christ*, he ultimately published the series to great acclaim—and

at enormous profit—in the form of an illustrated Bible that appeared in a variety of editions in France, England and the United States beginning in 1896. The collectors’ version, printed in full color on sumptuous paper by the Paris firm of Lemercier & Cie., boasted a price tag of \$1,000, a sum equal to roughly three years’ income for the average American household of the period. A less expensive, mass-market edition, distributed by Doubleday & McClure, brought the Tissot Bible within the reach of families on a budget.

Capitalizing on the fame of the reproductions, Tissot reaped an additional windfall when he decided to sell the original paintings. The Brooklyn Museum acquired the complete set in 1901 for \$60,000—the most expensive purchase in the institution’s history up to that point. The necessary funds were raised through a public subscription, heavily promoted by *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. To a community that had called itself “the borough of churches” since before the Civil War, when Henry Ward Beecher’s abolitionist sermons had filled the pews at the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn Heights, the cultural importance of *The Life of Christ* was a matter of self-evident fact.

Truths obvious to one generation are not always so clear to the next. Although highly regarded at the time of the purchase (and still fairly well known today through prints and reproductions), *The Life of Christ* has not been on display at the Brooklyn Museum in more than 20 years. The current exhibition, *James Tissot: “The Life of Christ,”* which presents 124 of the most important pieces from the series, will help make amends for that oversight, giving visitors a fresh opportunity to appreciate Tissot’s technical prowess and broad ambitions. The show also opens up new perspectives on the vagaries of taste and reputation, on the mercurial concept of pictorial realism and on the ever-evolving



It was also shared by other artists of the era, including the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt, who made similar Middle Eastern excursions.

Perhaps deriving inspiration from the then-nascent disciplines of ethnography and cultural anthropology, Tissot was especially eager to find authentic physical and physiognomic types to serve as models for Jesus and the apostles. He made numerous drawings of Yemenite Jews, whom he describes in his notebooks, somewhat jarringly, as the “purest examples of the Jewish race.” Many of the people from these preliminary studies reappear, with few discernible changes of pose or expression, in the finished paintings.

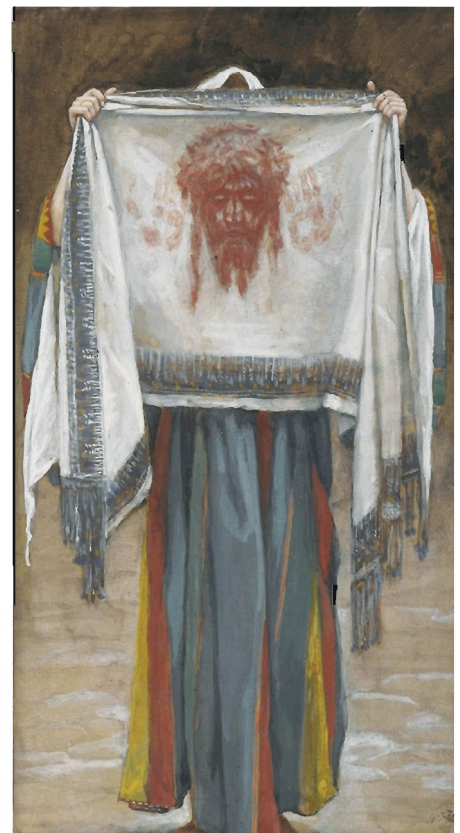
And yet, for all of Tissot’s scrupulous research, it would be quite difficult for anyone to suggest today that *The Life of Christ* is not dated, in a rather obvious manner, by the stylistic tendencies of its own period—in particular the conventions taught and codified by the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where Tissot had studied under the great

methods that artists employ to make the timeless seem timely.

Tissot himself said that his aim in *The Life of Christ* was to present Jesus with the highest possible degree of historical accuracy. “Tissot’s mission,” says curator Judith Dolkart, “was to unveil Jesus and remove all of the misunderstandings that he felt had been layered upon the image of Christ by other artists.”

Giotto, Raphael, Tintoretto and most of the other Renaissance masters had erred, in Tissot’s opinion, by depicting Christ as if he were their contemporary, posed before Italianate architecture. Much like Mel Gibson, who sought verisimilitude in his movie *The Passion of the Christ* by commissioning a script in Aramaic and Latin, Tissot traveled to Palestine to research his subjects and settings for years on end, steeping himself in the customs of the region.

“Tissot believed that the Holy Land had remained essentially unchanged since biblical times,” says Dolkart. She notes that this misconception was not Tissot’s alone.



From top: *What Our Lord Saw From the Cross; The Holy Face.*

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From top: *The Raising of the Cross*; *The Annunciation*.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Looking at the series of paintings, one senses that Tissot didn't merely believe that the Holy Land was unchanging and eternal; he also thought that it was uniformly well-lighted, scrupulously clean, harmoniously composed and swathed in endless layers of lushly patterned textiles. Tissot's biblical scenes are of a piece with Jean-Léon Gérôme's Roman gladiators and Lord Leighton's portrayals of the Greek myths. All are set in a fantasized antiquity born of the 19th-century imagination.

Inevitably, every artwork must bear traces of the time and place in which it was made. But the search for an unassailably accurate image of Christ, unmediated by any force but truth, has occasionally led people to ignore this simple fact. In a com-

position called *The Holy Face*, for instance, Tissot depicts the story of St. Veronica. Upon encountering Christ on the road to Golgotha, Veronica wipes the sweat and blood from his divine brow with her veil, only to discover that a perfect likeness of his face has miraculously been left on the cloth. The incident is commemorated in Catholic tradition as one of the Stations of the Cross and has been depicted over the centuries by artists ranging from Hans Memling to Philippe de Champaigne.

Veronica and her veil, however, are not to be found in any of the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament. Moreover, there is no written description of her that dates back to before the 11th century. Although still venerated by some branches of Christianity, Veronica is considered by many others to be pure fiction, likely invented out of an earnest desire on the part of the faithful to behold the face of the Lord—the ultimate motive behind so many depictions of Jesus. As it happens, even Veronica's name suggests a measure of wishful thinking. It derives from the Latin *vera*, meaning truth, and the Greek *ikon*, meaning image.

That Tissot chose to include *The Holy Face* in his illustrated Bible, despite the complete absence of Veronica from the printed text, is not altogether surprising. As a Catholic he had been raised on the Stations of the Cross and probably gave the matter little thought. Nonetheless, his American audience, which was overwhelmingly Protestant, did register a few murmurs of disapproval with regard to this and other aspects of *The Life of Christ*—such as its emphasis on the violence and extreme physical suffering visited upon Jesus—that were viewed by some as primarily Catholic in orientation.

But, as with Gibson's film, which was generally well received in the Evangelical community despite adhering more closely to medieval tradition than to the text of the Bible, Tissot's *Life of Christ* ultimately overcame its perceived doctrinal shortcomings. In the minds of the American public at the turn of the 20th century, it became the very image of biblical reality. ❧

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