

James Tissot, The Anglophile Frenchman

Background notes

Krystyna Matyjaszkiewicz – 20th November 2019



James Tissot, *Frederick Gustavus Burnaby, 1870*, National Portrait Gallery



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1. Paris and London, 1855-1870

Jacques-Joseph Tissot (1836-1902), who was calling himself James by the time he went in 1855 to study art in Paris, numbered among his friends and acquaintances modern-life and historicising artists, including Degas, Manet, Morisot, Meissonier, Stevens, Whistler, and British artists studying in Paris, such as Du Maurier. He also knew writers, musicians, composers, actors, and producers; popular songs and literature were to be a continuing inspiration. Tissot's earliest influences came from Flemish and German paintings and prints, but he was especially drawn to British pictures, and was among the earliest collectors of Japanese art.



Edgar Degas, *James Tissot in an artist's studio*, c. 1868, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Robert Bingham, *James Tissot*, c. 1868, from an album owned by Meissonier, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

Tissot's first sales and exhibits in Paris were paintings inspired by those of the 19th century Belgian artist Henri Leys, and by his Northern Renaissance predecessors, notably Cranach, Dürer and Holbein. The theme of many was Marguerite, the tragic heroine of Goethe's play *Faust*, around whom Gounod focused his reinterpretation in opera, on which were based Tissot's pictures. These were viewed by contemporaries as 'Pre-Raphaelite' works.

Portraiture became an important strand of Tissot's work, influenced by Ingres (with whom Tissot's early tutors, Lamothe and Flandrin, had worked), but especially by British 18th century 'conversation piece' groups and individual portraits by Gainsborough, Reynolds, Romney and Lawrence. Tissot was familiar with their paintings from exhibitions but also mezzotint reproductions, which were very popular in Paris.



James Tissot, *Portrait of the Marquis and Marquise de Miramon and their Children*, 1865, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

A frequent visitor to England, Tissot was drawn especially to the River Thames. 'Don't forget the Docks', he urged Degas, who in 1868 had been invited by Manet to make a brief cross-Channel visit. 'Above all don't forget to go to Richmond and Windsor. You'll be in the most beautiful countryside and the most British in England ... And to Greenwich too, by boat, and take a cab through the City,' Tissot advised, regretting that he could not join them.

2. London 1871-1882

Declaration by France of war with Prussia in 1870 led to rapid military defeat, followed by the siege of Paris. Starved into capitulation, the city surrendered in late January 1871. Peace terms, requiring France to give up Alsace-Lorraine and pay 5,000 million francs reparation, were humiliating. In March, *Garde Nationale* troops in Paris refused to give up cannon they had bought themselves; violence ensued and new revolutionary leadership - the Commune - was installed. After two months of civil war, the Commune was brutally

suppressed, Tissot witnessing summary executions of hundreds of compatriots, including women. When he came to London in June for the opening of the International Exhibition, friends urged him to come and work in England. Commissions for portraits and *Vanity Fair* caricatures provided immediate income, and Tissot worked meanwhile on submissions to the Royal Academy and 1872 International Exhibition. The critical and popular success these gained led him to continue making pictures, many of which were set in Thames-side taverns or on board ship.

In May 1872 the leading art dealer, Thomas Agnew & Sons Ltd, began buying Tissot paintings, from September acquiring them direct from the artist or acting as agent for private collectors. By January 1873 Tissot had sufficient earnings and assurance of future sales to buy a London house at 17 (now 44) Grove End Road, St John's Wood, with substantial gardens and outbuildings, to which he added a large studio with adjoining conservatory. His earnings in 1872 were more than double – and in 1873 five times – that of his best Paris year (1869). At Cowes, Isle of Wight, Tissot mixed with the fashionable set of the Prince and Princess of Wales, capturing a private 'grand afternoon party' in *The Ball on Shipboard* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874. Later that year newspapers reported him working on a portrait of ex-Empress Eugénie and her son, the Prince Imperial.



James Tissot, *The Ball on Shipboard*, 1874, Tate Britain

Jealousies among fellow artists in Britain were inevitable. There was also concern among some Royal Academicians and critics that British art was being contaminated by French ideas, and native artists were being disadvantaged in exhibition and sale opportunities. ('French' ideas included lack of finish, a different palette of colour, and 'vulgar' or ordinary, everyday modern-life subject matter.) When Tissot behaved like a Royal Academician by showing to the press his paintings for the 1875 exhibition before submission, he was rebuffed publicly through rejection of his Eugénie portrait and at least two other works. Rejections from the RA exhibition that year caused a major outcry.



Charles West Cope, *The Council of the Royal Academy selecting pictures for exhibition, 1875, 1876*, Royal Academy, London

Rejection brought Tissot closer for a time to Whistler. The two of them were considered among 'the leaders of new thought ... likely to be rejected as being too extreme' in Royal Academy elections for new Associates in 1876, when Lawrence Alma Tadema and Edwin Long were on a 'conciliation list' and duly appointed. Academy rejection also brought Tissot closer to Edouard Manet, whose work Tissot bought in 1875 and sought to promote. Finding new outlets for exhibition and sale became a priority for Tissot, leading him to conduct business with British dealers other than Agnew, and to the making of etchings. He began experimenting with sculptural work in bronze and cloisonné enamel, having affinity to French contemporary sculpture but very innovative. In May 1882 Tissot exhibited his cloisonné pieces with recent paintings and a full set of his etchings in a one-man exhibition at London's Dudley Gallery.

Life, meanwhile, had taken a different turn for Tissot with his meeting and falling in love with a young divorcee of Irish background, Mrs Kathleen Newton, who in 1877 had come to live with Tissot. 'Mavourneen' – Irish for 'my darling' – was the title he gave an etched portrait of 'Kitty', his *ravissante Irlandaise* with long blonde hair and blue eyes, who became his principal model. Cohabitation was very frequent at this time but disapproved of by many people, and social circles accepting of such a couple were fewer. Rumours would later circulate about Tissot's *mystérieuse*. Her death from tuberculosis, aged just twenty-eight, in November 1882, plunged the artist into deep despair and precipitated his return to Paris.

3. Paris 1882-1902

As soon as Tissot arrived back in Paris he sought to find a suitable venue for exhibition of the few London pictures he hadn't yet sold, alongside his experimental cloisonné enamels and all his etched work. Reconnecting with old Paris friends, he discussed with the novelist Alphonse Daudet an idea to create a series of fifteen stories by different authors on the theme of 'Woman in Paris', which would be published with etched images by Tissot. His large paintings of *La Femme à Paris* (1883-85) were intended to advertise the series in Paris and London, and attract subscribers. French critics thought the models looked too English.



James Tissot, *Political Woman or L'Ambitieuse*, 1883-85 Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York

The London dealer Arthur Tooth & Sons exhibited the series in his gallery, sold several to American collectors and bought the others except for 'Sacred Music', a painting that was either not completed or meant too much to Tissot to sell it. While making studies for that painting in the church of St Sulpice, Paris, Tissot had a vision of Christ and decided to travel to the Holy Land. Very moved and inspired by following in the footsteps of Jesus, Tissot embarked on illustrating the life of Christ, a project that took many years and all his energy. It brought him worldwide fame that eclipsed his earlier work as a painter of modern life.

Suggestions for further reading

Buron, Melissa, ed., *James Tissot. Fashion and Faith* (San Francisco, 2019): exhibition catalogue with essays and chronology giving much new information on the artist.

Christiansen, Rupert, *Tales of the New Babylon. Paris 1869 to 1875* (Minerva, 1994): excellent, very readable account of life in mid-19th century Paris.

Corbeau-Parsons, Caroline, ed., *Impressionists in London: French Artists in Exile 1870-1904* (Tate, 2017): describes why and how French artists including Tissot, as well as musicians, writers and others, found themselves in London, and their reception.

Hamilton, James, *A Strange Business. Making Art and Money in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Atlantic, 2014): readable overview of issues relating to making, exhibiting and selling work.

Loyrette, Henri, ed., *Nineteenth Century French Art* (Flammarion, 2007): describes and illustrates work of lesser-known artists as well as major names, putting the latter in context.

Matyjaszkiewicz, Krystyna, "Tissot, Jacques Joseph (1836-1902)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2011: biographical accounts of Tissot and Mrs Kathleen Newton.

Thomson, Belinda, *Impressionism. Origins, Practice, Reception* (Thames & Hudson, 2000): erudite discussion of issues that affected the lives and work of Tissot's Paris friends and contemporaries.

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