

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

James Tissot: "The Life of Christ"

October 23, 2009–January 17, 2010



James Tissot: “The Life of Christ”



James Tissot (French, 1836–1902). Artist's self-portrait in *Portrait of the Pilgrim* (detail), 1886–96 Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Thomas E. Kirby, 06.39

About the Artist

In 1885, James Tissot (French, 1836–1902) visited the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris while conducting research for a series of images devoted to the costumes, occupations, and pleasures of Parisian women. Tissot later recalled it was during this visit that he experienced a vision that led to his religious conversion and provided the impetus for a dramatic shift in his artistic focus. Leaving behind his luxuriously appointed homes, scandalous romances, and regular exhibitions at the Paris Salon, Tissot renewed his ties to the religion of his youth and dedicated himself to what eventually became a ten-year project formally titled *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a series of 350 watercolors illustrating the New Testament from the birth of Jesus to the Resurrection. In 1886–87 and 1889, Tissot traveled to Syria, Egypt, and Palestine in order to document the topography, architecture, and customs of the Holy Land. The result was more than a hundred detailed pen-and-ink sketches that were later integrated into his finished compositions in watercolor of the Gospel narrative. In 1898, the compositions, each accompanied by related Gospel verses, were first published in four volumes known as the “Tissot Bible.” In addition to this publication, Tissot arranged for the series of watercolors to be exhibited at various venues in London and the United States.

The Life of Christ and the Citizens of Brooklyn

In January 1900, the Brooklyn Museum (then known as the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences) announced its intention to purchase the complete series by public subscription. Championed by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the purchase of *The Life of Christ* quickly became a matter of pride for the citizenry of Brooklyn and was accomplished within a few months as the public made donations ranging from a few cents to gifts of thousands of dollars. In 1901, the series was reframed and mounted in gold mats and went on view in its new home under this inscription: “The Life of Christ by James Tissot presented by the citizens of Brooklyn, 1900.”



Description of *A Street in Jaffa*, 1886–87/89

A solitary figure stands in a narrow street lined with tall architectural structures interrupted by various passageways, stairs, and windows. The arched window of an upper story reveals a shallow interior space, partially blocked by objects stacked on the windowsill. The tall stone walls across the street from the figure have two shuttered

windows; one is open and the other is closed. The figure is positioned with arms bent and hands meeting in front of the chest and looks out at the viewer. The composition is dominated by the strong vertical lines of the walls.

Questions for Viewing *A Street in Jaffa*

What do you notice about this artwork?

Describe the mood. How did the artist create this effect?

Tissot made this sketch during his journey to the Holy Land in an attempt to record the “direct impression of antiquity.” Despite the passage of time, he thought it would be “easy to rid it of the thin layer of modernity that covered it.”¹

What do you think Tissot may have seen while sketching this street scene during his visit that may not have existed during antiquity?

Why would he wish to exclude it from his sketch?

Tissot was interested in recording the landscape, architecture, and residents of the Holy Land. Why do you think he chose to sketch this street scene?

1. James Tissot, quoted in Tissot, *Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures Illustrating the Life of Christ* (see Resources below).

Cover (detail) and p. 5: James Tissot. *Saint Joseph Seeks a Lodging in Bethlehem*, 1886–94. Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper. Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by public subscription, 00.159.23

Page 6: James Tissot. *A Street in Jaffa*, 1886–87/89. Pen and ink on paper mounted on board. Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by public subscription, 00.159.384



Description of *Saint Joseph Seeks a Lodging in Bethlehem*, 1886–96

Ten figures are engaged in different actions and face different directions in a narrow and bustling passageway flanked by tall stone architectural structures. All of the figures are dressed in long, draped clothing and have covered heads. A central figure is seated on a donkey; her

head tilts forward as she gently holds part of her white garment close to her face. The figure next to her lifts his left hand to gesture toward a female figure standing at the top of a stairway, who raises her arms with her palms outward.

Questions for Viewing *Saint Joseph Seeks a Lodging in Bethlehem*

What's going on in this painting? What else do you notice?

Which figures do you think are the main characters? What choices did the artist make to emphasize their importance?

Where do you see evidence of curiosity? Exhaustion? Indifference?

Where do you see evidence of people communicating with one another? What nonverbal examples can you find?

What evidence of labor can you find? What different kinds of labor are people engaged in?

How are the other figures responding to the central couple?

Questions for Comparing and Contrasting *A Street in Jaffa* and *Saint Joseph Seeks a Lodging in Bethlehem*

What aspects of these two artworks are similar? What differences can you find? Which artwork do you think Tissot created first? What do you see to support your opinion?

Tissot integrated details from his sketch *A Street in Jaffa* into the painting *Saint Joseph Seeks a Lodging in Bethlehem*. Why do you think he chose to include these specific elements?

This painting illustrates a passage from the New Testament, Luke 2:3–5: “And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David); to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.”²

What references from the text can you find in the painting? What has been left out?

According to the text, Joseph and Mary are traveling together to the town of Bethlehem. What evidence can you find that indicates they are not at home?

Activities

Text + Imagination = Image

What role does imagination play when creating a visual image based on a written text? Ask several participants to illustrate the same text passage. Be sure not to share your ideas until each illustration is complete. Compare and contrast the illustrations. Take note of their similarities and differences. What factors led to each of the shared or diverse characteristics?

Switching Places

What does architecture contribute to our stories? Tissot claimed that the nineteenth-century architecture he observed in the Holy Land could be used as a primary source for his research about biblical times. Sketch an architectural structure that is part of your daily life. Write a personal story that incorporates details about that architectural structure. Now switch sketches with a partner. Revise your story to include this new location. What changes did you need to make?

2. James Tissot, *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ: Three Hundred and Sixty-five Compositions from the Four Gospels with Notes and Explanatory Drawings* (New York: The McClure-Tissot Company, circa 1889), vol.1, p. 16.

Launch a Public Subscription

The Brooklyn Museum was able to purchase Tissot's watercolor series *The Life of Christ* because of funds raised through sums of money given by hundreds of Brooklynites. This process is known as a public subscription. Consider purchasing a work of art for your school community by raising money from its students, parents, and teachers. How would you choose which artwork to buy? How would you encourage others to contribute?

Resources

Dolkart, Judith F., David Morgan, and Amy Sitar. *James Tissot: “The Life of Christ”* (New York and London: Merrell, 2009).

This image-rich catalogue includes essays by the curator and other scholars. It includes a detailed description of the public subscription process that led to the purchase of *The Life of Christ*.

Tissot, James J. *Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures Illustrating the Life of Christ* (New York: The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1901–2). This catalogue accompanied the first long-term installation of *The Life of Christ* at the Brooklyn Museum after its purchase. It contains excerpts from Tissot's own writings.

James Tissot: “The Life of Christ” is organized by Judith F. Dolkart, Associate Curator of European Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition was made possible, in part, with a generous award from the National Endowment for the Arts.



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