

LA FEMME À PARIS

The paintings in this gallery represent a climactic moment in Tissot's career. Upon returning to Paris in 1882, after eleven years in London, he embarked on an ambitious series of large-scale "Pictures of Parisian Life," each depicting an archetype of the modern Parisian woman. These paintings, with their exquisitely detailed renditions of modern fashion and society life, are representative of the style most closely associated with the artist. Tissot originally envisioned a project—which was never realized—that would include short stories from contemporary writers to accompany each painting. He also created print versions to make the compositions available to a wider audience. In 1885, fifteen of the completed works were exhibited in Paris and London. During research for an unfinished painting in the series, Tissot experienced a life-changing religious vision, after which he shifted focus, producing primarily biblical illustrations until his death, in 1902.

TISSOT'S FIRST PARIS PERIOD

THE PAINTER OF MEDIEVAL AND MODERN LIFE

As a young man, Tissot attended Jesuit schools in Belgium and France. He moved to Paris in 1855, and in this early phase of his career focused on making historical works anchored by moral themes, including paintings based on the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragic play *Faust* (1808). These pictures demonstrate a strong affinity with the highly detailed style and medieval subjects seen in the work of the Belgian artist Henri Leys (1815–1869), whom Tissot met in 1859.

Tissot's tutors in Paris, the painters Hippolyte Flandrin (French, 1809–1864) and Louis Lamothe (French, 1822–1869), were both former students of the Academic French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), and this training manifested in the artist's precise depictions of clothing and objects, a tendency that endured throughout his career. This first Paris period ended with Tissot's departure to London after the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871).

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

JAPONISME, AESTHETICISM, AND FASHIONABILITY

Tissot developed a penchant for producing enigmatic compositions, featuring suggestive titles and subjects with inscrutable expressions. His skill at portraying complex scenes with technical virtuosity became a hallmark of his style and contributed to his popularity and commercial success.

Some of Tissot's works show the influence of Japonisme; he experimented with elements clearly indebted to Japanese art, such as compositional asymmetry. Japonisme was associated with the broader movement of Aestheticism, which championed "art for art's sake" over explicit narratives. In 1853, after more than two hundred years of trade isolation, Japan began to export goods such as prints and porcelain to the West. Many artists, including Tissot and his friends Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) and James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903), amassed significant personal collections, and objects likely owned by Tissot can be spotted in his paintings.

PORTRAITS

Tissot's debut in Paris occurred in 1859 at the Salon, the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts and one of the most prestigious art events in Europe. His critical breakthrough occurred at the Salon in 1864, with two portrait-like paintings featuring unidentified models, *Portrait of Mlle L. L...* and *The Two Sisters; Portrait*. With their modern dress and settings, these two large-scale canvases departed from the smaller, more traditional works Tissot had previously submitted to the Salon, and even more so from the early medievalist scenes featured in the previous gallery.

Tissot's fascination with meticulously rendering elegant clothing, especially ladies' dresses, may be attributed to growing up around his family's textiles business. Portraits of wealthy patrons demonstrate the artist's profitable social connections. There are also a number of likenesses to people in Tissot's inner circle, such as his companion, Kathleen Newton, who posed for many of his paintings in the 1870s.

VANITY FAIR

LONDON IN THE 1870s

The “vanity fair” of London in the 1870s inspired Tissot to create modern variations on the *fête galante*. In this genre, popular in the eighteenth century, elegant men and women are depicted engaging in leisure activities and flirtation. The artist’s subtle sense of humor reveals itself through shrewd observations of social faux pas, as seen in *Too Early*, which portrays the premature arrival of guests at a ball.

Tissot’s childhood in the port city of Nantes, France, may have inspired a career-long fascination with nautical settings. Rivers and the sea not only provided a perfect backdrop for provocative scenes of romance and quiet moments of contemplation, but also the intricate settings and costumes allowed the artist to showcase his virtuosic skills.

Tissot’s London home in the bohemian suburb of Saint John’s Wood appears often in his work from this period. The property featured a lush conservatory as well as a garden and pond surrounded by an impressive colonnade, modeled on the Parc Monceau in Paris.

THE PRODIGAL SON

Toward the end of his residency in London (1871–1882), Tissot revisited a subject from his first Paris period in the 1860s: the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son. The paintings in this quartet, updated to modern times, are often interpreted as semi-autobiographical—the eponymous young man resembles Tissot, and his adventures in foreign lands resonate with Tissot’s own journey from Paris to London and back again.

Tissot’s companion, Kathleen Newton, as well as her children and nieces feature frequently in compositions from the 1870s. These intimate scenes reflect the contentment of daily domestic life. Several of the works, however, hint at Newton’s declining health from the lung disease tuberculosis—sometimes called “consumption”—suggested through her listless poses or pale skin and flushed cheeks. Although a diagnosis was not always fatal, there was no cure for tuberculosis at the time of Newton’s death, in 1882. After her funeral, Newton’s children remained in London with her sister, and a distraught Tissot returned to France.

'TWIXT TWO WORLDS

During the last two decades of his life, Tissot professed his faith in Catholicism as well as Spiritualism, a popular movement that promoted the ability of the living to communicate with the dead. The artist claimed to have seen the spirit of his deceased companion, Kathleen Newton, at a séance with the medium William Eglinton. Around this time, Tissot also experienced a religious vision in the Parisian church of Saint-Sulpice, prompting him to visit the Holy Land three times and inspiring a new project: hundreds of scene-by-scene illustrations of the New Testament, eventually published and exhibited as *The Life of Christ*.

Tissot's biblical watercolors brought him more fame and commercial success than ever before. Viewers flocked to see them at exhibitions in Paris, London, and throughout the United States. In 1900, the Brooklyn Museum acquired the entire New Testament series through public donations. In 1902, Tissot took ill and died suddenly at age sixty-six while working on illustrations of the Old Testament. His religious works have had an enduring impact in popular culture, especially in film. His depiction of the Ark of the Covenant, for example, served as inspiration for the ark in the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.