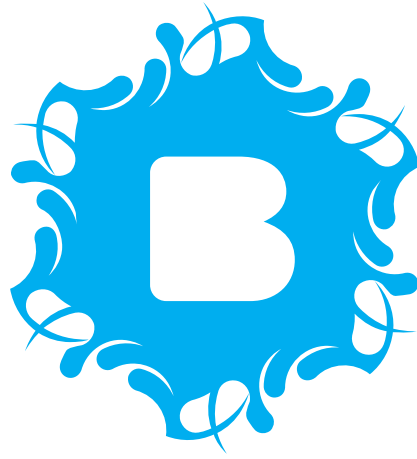


Press Release



May 2009

Exhibition of Selected Watercolors from Brooklyn Museum Holdings of James Tissot's *Life of Christ* on View October 23, 2009–January 17, 2010

The exhibition *James Tissot: "The Life of Christ"* will include 124 watercolors selected from a set of 350 that depict detailed scenes from the New Testament, from before the birth of Jesus through the Resurrection, in a chronological narrative. On view from October 23, 2009, through January 17, 2010, it marks the first time in more than twenty years that any of the Tissot watercolors, a pivotal acquisition that entered the collection in 1900, have been on view at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition has been organized by Judith F. Dolkart, Associate Curator, European Art, and will travel to venues to be announced. It will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue of the complete set of 350 images, to be published by the Museum in association with Merrell Publishers Ltd, London.

Born in France, James Tissot (1836–1902) had a successful artistic career in Paris before going to London in the 1870s, where he established himself as a renowned painter of London society, spending eleven years there before returning to Paris in 1882. He then began work on a set of fifteen paintings depicting the costumes and manners of fashionable Parisian society women. While visiting the Church of St. Sulpice in the course of his research, he experienced a religious vision, after which he embarked on an ambitious project to illustrate the New Testament.

With the same meticulous attention to detail that he had applied to painting high society, he now created these precisely rendered watercolors. In preparation, he made expeditions to the Middle East to record the landscape, architecture, costumes, and customs of the Holy Land and its people, which he recorded in photographs, notes, and sketches, convinced that the region had remained unchanged since Jesus's time. When he returned to his Paris studio he drew upon his research materials to execute the watercolors, concentrating on this project to the exclusion of his previous subject matter.

Unlike earlier artists, who often depicted biblical figures anachronistically, Tissot painted the many figures in costumes he believed to be historically authentic. In addition to the archaeological exactitude of many of the watercolors, the series presents other, highly dramatic and often mystical images, such as *Jesus Ministered to by Angels* and *The Grotto of the Agony*. Tissot's detailed chronological approach to recounting the life of Christ, combining Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John into one continuous narrative, is known as a "harmony" of the Gospels, a departure from the traditional reading that takes each of the separate books in turn.

Brooklyn Museum

200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238-6052
T (718) 638-5000 F (718) 501-6134
www.brooklynmuseum.org

The exhibition includes a wide range of works from the series, from sweeping historical scenes such as *Reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Herod* and *Reconstruction of Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre Seen from the Walls of Herod's Palace* to a remarkable tableau of Golgotha as seen from the vantage point of Jesus himself, entitled *What Our Lord Saw from the Cross*. Many of the images are small, some measuring little more than 6 by 4 inches; the largest are slightly more than 8 by 17 inches. Several of the works, such as *The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*, *The Procession in the Streets of Jerusalem*, and *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*, include large crowds of people, all the more notable because of the detail packed into images of such small scale. Others depict a single, strong figure such as Herod, Jesus shown at various stages of his life, and Mary Magdalene, whose features were modeled after Tissot's deceased mistress, Mrs. Kathleen Newton. Also on view in the exhibition is a small sketchbook containing pencil and wash drawings done during a trip to Jerusalem.

Tissot began the monumental task of illustrating the New Testament in 1886 and first presented selections at the Paris Salon in 1894 (before the series' completion), where they were received with great enthusiasm. Press accounts on both sides of the Atlantic reported emotional reactions among the visitors: some women wept or kneeled before the works, crawling from picture to picture, while men removed their hats in reverence.

Following the completion of the series in 1896, Tissot arranged paid-entry showings in London and in the United States; a successful multi-city tour visited Manhattan, Brooklyn, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

In 1900, at the suggestion of John Singer Sargent, the President and Trustees of the Museum's precursor, the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, decided to purchase the series at the negotiated price of \$60,000. Part of the sum was raised through a pledge of \$13,000 from the Trustees but the bulk by public subscription, spurred on, in part, by exhortations published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper urging its readers to contribute. The purchase was a significant acquisition for the Institute; the sheer number of watercolors increased by several times the art collection of the fledgling museum and was viewed as having great potential to attract visitors and new members.

Because the Museum's landmark building on Eastern Parkway was still in the process of being constructed, with only the West Wing open, the Tissot watercolors were first shown in a Montague Street gallery; the walls were adorned with flowers and palms, and a boy soprano sang devotional music. For a sixteen-day period, the Institute extended its exhibition hours from 9 a.m. until 10 p.m.

In May 1901 the 350 watercolors, newly mounted in gold mats and reframed, went on view for the first time on Eastern Parkway; records seem to indicate they remained on nearly continuous display until the 1930s. Since then, in part because of conservation concerns, they have only rarely been shown, and then only small portions of the series, most recently in late 1989 through early 1990.

Press Contact:

Sally Williams, Public Information Officer (718) 501-6330, sally.williams@brooklynmuseum.org

Adam Husted, Media Relations Manager (718) 501-6331, adam.husted@brooklynmuseum.org

Marcus Romero, Associate Publicist (718) 501-6354, marcus.romero@brooklynmuseum.org

GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$10; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$6. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B71, B41, B69, B48.

On-site parking available.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.