James Tissot (French, 1836–1902) is best known for his highly detailed paintings of contemporary fashion and astute observations of society life. Yet, throughout his career, he also created significant religious works, including hundreds of biblical illustrations. James Tissot: Fashion & Faith is the first major reassessment in two decades of Tissot’s multifaceted output, offering new perspectives on the artist by exploring how his compositions provide rich insight into the vibrant cultures of nineteenth-century Paris and London.

Tissot was born in the port city of Nantes, France, to an entrepreneurial family that worked in the textiles trade. In 1855, he moved to Paris, where he found early success creating genre scenes and portraits. Tissot’s 1859 debut at the prestigious Paris Salon launched a thriving career on both sides of the English Channel. He moved to London in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and lived there for eleven years before returning to France. Like his Impressionist contemporaries, Tissot was fascinated by modern life; his most iconic paintings turn a perceptive, often humorous eye on social customs. In 1874, however, he declined an invitation from his friend Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917) to exhibit with the Impressionist circle, rejecting any formal affiliation with them.

In 1876, Tissot met a woman named Kathleen Newton, who became his companion and muse. A transformative religious vision three years after her untimely death inspired him to dramatically shift the focus of his work. For the remainder of his career, he dedicated himself to illustrating the Bible, traveling to the Holy Land three times for research. Although they are among his least well-known works today, these biblical watercolors brought Tissot great fame and commercial success in the last two decades of his life. This exhibition celebrates the breadth of Tissot’s achievements, presenting a dynamic portrait of an artist who is prime for reconsideration.

“Our industrial and artistic creations may perish, our customs and our costumes may fall into oblivion, a painting by Mr. Tissot will be enough for the archaeologists of the future to reconstruct our era.”

—Élie Roy, art critic, 1869