

## **James Tissot (1836-1902)**

In 1886 Tissot claimed to have had a vision of Christ comforting the poor while sketching in a church in Paris (St. Sulpice), and from that moment on decided it was his calling to record visions as he received them. He had little interest in religious themes in the first half of his career, preferring to paint images of Parisian and Victorian society that embodied a critical social narrative (see *On the Thames, A Heron*, c. 1871-72). His interest in spiritualism in the mid-1880s solidified into more traditional faith. From this point until his death in 1902, he devoted most of his artistic energies to enormous biblical illustrations. In Paris in 1895, he exhibited a complete set of New Testament illustrations, totaling 365 in number. By 1901, he exhibited 95 Old Testament subjects.

The question is asked whether he was just trying to exploit a new market—his original watercolors and reproductions of them sold very well—or were they the result of genuine religious convictions. He wasted no opportunities to promote his biblical images, even sending out letters to individuals to let them know that the original edition was almost sold out and he was notifying them especially instead of making a public announcement.

He was, as always, interested in authenticity, and traveled to the Middle East several times, starting in mid-1880s, to record what he saw: animals, landscape, people. He believed that the people, their clothing, and customs had changed little from biblical times (but this was a superficial Western viewpoint). His travels supported his desire to paint “from life” as he had always done. His series toured Paris, London, and several cities in the U.S. The press claimed the works were inspiring religious revivals and that weeping visitors would move through the exhibits as if on a pilgrimage. His epic scenes and researched costumes have since caught the attention of Hollywood filmmakers, who imitated them: the Ark of the Covenant/Tabernacle in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was modeled on a Tissot reconstruction.

*Journey of the Magi*, c. 1894

One of a number of oil paintings based on his Bible illustrations. The yellow robes identify the Magi as soothsayers and astronomers, who have discovered a meteor or comet and set out individually to follow what they have recognized as a sign that the Messiah has come. According to Tissot, this is the moment just after the caravans met and joined near Jerusalem. The background shows the volcanic hills near the Dead Sea. The three camels are symbols of humility (and therefore like Christ); the three men who ride them represent representatives of other religions who are unified in their willingness to pay homage to the infant Jesus. He has given the men facial characteristics of contemporary Arabs with varying skin tones; his use of brilliant colors and painstaking attention to detail make this one of his most striking biblical images.