

TISSOT'S ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE GOSPELS.

WITH PICTURES BY JAMES TISSOT.



ONE of the most interesting features of this year's Champ de Mars Salon is the special exhibition, which fills two tastefully decorated rooms on the ground floor, of M. James Tissot's pictures illustrating the life of Jesus. It consists of 280 water-colors, either entirely finished or in an advanced state, and 100 pen-and-ink drawings, which are to be used for a future illustrated edition of the four gospels; or rather, to be more exact, only those portions of the scriptures which explain the pictures, and, in fact, gave birth to them, will form the text of the volume, accompanied by notes by the artist.

Seven or eight years ago artistic Paris talked for a day of the departure of Tissot for the Holy Land, in order to seek new inspirations. Tissot was then fresh in the public mind as the author of a series of etchings depicting the passions, charms, and seductions of feminine life at the French capital, and many an artist smiled skeptically at this apparent contradiction. Yet Tissot had already shown more than once that his talent had a bent in the direction of religious subjects. For had not his *début* at the Salon, in 1859, been the portraits of four saints, destined for a provincial church where his father and mother lie buried, and was not his contribution to the great retrospective Salon of 1883 the "Prodigal Son,"—four pendants reëxhibited at Jackson Park last summer,—which, it must be admitted, however, are biblical in little else than name? Then, too, at the very moment when he was engaged in packing his trunk for Palestine he had in his studio a carefully hidden canvas, scarcely dry, which was so penetrated with a subtle spiritual and Christian spirit that its timid author dared not exhibit it in public. It now forms the center of the Tissot collection at the Champ de Mars, where it is exposed for the first time. I refer to a large oil-painting called "The Voices Within," wherein are represented a poor man and his wife, who, fallen into deep despair in the midst of poverty and ruin, finally take new heart and courage through the consolation of Jesus, who appears to them, comforts them, and shows them his pierced hands. "That was the starting-point of my new dispensation," said M. Tissot, pointing to this picture the first time I saw it; "but I had a long and hard struggle before I could bring myself to begin it. More than one night did I lie awake for hours, till my head was burning through the mental

strain, struggling against the admission into my heart of the new light that was dawning upon me. But when I finally felt myself conquered, and was penetrated through and through by the grand mystery of a God turned man in order to save humanity, I could no longer escape from it. So, of course, this large painting must go to the Champ de Mars, for it is really the father of all this big brood of little ones."

With such thoughts in his mind and such awakenings in his heart, in the autumn of 1886 Tissot started for the holy sepulcher with all the enthusiasm of the crusaders of old. He saw, questioned, and meditated. He made scores of vivid sketches, and wrote reams of thoughtful notes. The first visit was repeated. During this second sojourn he utilized instantaneous photography, which was then first becoming known in France, and was thus able to bring back with him quantities of characteristic types, scenes, and landscapes. Almost all of the striking pen-and-ink drawings made during the first visit can be seen at the Champ de Mars, while the details furnished by the photographs have been reproduced in many of the water-colors.

The farther he wandered in Palestine, the more he saw there, and the deeper he studied his object, the stronger grew Tissot's conviction that his precursors in the field of biblical illustration had not caught the true spirit of their theme, had not struck the right note. He returned to France determined to catch the true spirit and to strike the right note. Once within the walls of Paris again, he buried himself in his handsome, secluded home, situated at the head of a quiet lane within a stone's throw of the Bois de Boulogne, and gave himself up entirely to his thoughts, his books, his collections, and his art. He pored over musty old commentaries on the Bible, studied archæology, mastered the Talmud, devoured books of Eastern travel, read the history of the Jews and Arabs, and went over the scriptures again and again in the Vulgate and in the French and English translations. Nor did he neglect the Apocrypha. In a word, before taking up his brush, Tissot saturated his mind with his subject, and gave full rein to an imagination now thirsting for the occult and mysterious. Society lost its charms for him. He who had been a *mondain* now became almost a recluse. He even abandoned the picture exhibitions which follow one another in such rapid succession throughout the Parisian season. You look almost in vain



"MARY MAGDALEN (BEFORE HER CONVERSION)."

for Tissot's name in the catalogues of the last ten years. He has been wholly absorbed by his new work, to which he has devoted all his time and strength.

The thorough manner in which Tissot studied before beginning to paint is shown by his note-books, which I have run over, and from which I shall make a few typical extracts. On the fly-leaf of the first of these blank-books the artist has written the title of the proposed volume: "Life of our Lord Jesus Christ. By a Pilgrim of the Holy Land." This title, and especially the latter half, reveals the spirit in which this modern palmer entered upon his task; while this note at the bottom of the page, "Begun on October 15, 1886," tells exactly how many years he has so far devoted to it. But it does not tell when the task will be completed. M. Tissot informs me that he expects to finish



TYPE OF A JEW OF YEMEN.

the last illustration by the end of 1896, though he may need a few additional months in order to rewrite, and give the final form to, his notes and the texts. Thus will M. Tissot have devoted more than a whole decade to the accomplishment of a lofty idea, which in itself is no mean merit in this day and generation, the motto of which seems to be, What is worth doing at all is worth doing quickly.

The artist's notes are in the form of personal observations made in Palestine, references to learned works, etc. Let me give a few specimens of these notes. They reveal the working of the artist's mind, show the growth of the work, and explain the meaning and reason of this or that conception.

Here is Tissot's note on the "Stairway of Fifteen Steps" in the Temple: "These steps were very low. It took three of them to make the height of an ordinary step. The whole flight was a meter and twelve centimeters high. A tradition of the time says that when Mary, at the age of three, was first taken to the Temple, she ran up these fifteen steps at one bound. This is quite possible when we bear in mind these measures, but it would have been impossible if the steps had been of the usual height. The painters who have treated this tradition—among them Tintoretto—have all fallen into this error; they have made their steps too high."

In the note on "The Voice in the Desert" we find this souvenir of the artist's Palestine journeys: "In these rocky valleys the voice resounds in an astonishing manner, and to-day one still hears the melancholy shouts of the shepherds hailing one another. Their voices are echoed from hill to hill at a great distance."

Sometimes the artist indulges in a little philosophizing, as when he writes, in a note to "The Possessed in the Synagogue": "It is curious to compare the case of this possessed person with instances of that ecstasy which is seen in our day in Protestant mysticism, and which, taking possession of those present, forces them to preach and to prophesize in the churches and in the public squares. It is the same phenomenon which, since the scenes at Munster down to those of the present day, has become epidemic in northern Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the United States, and England."

This note on the prevalence of the number forty in Bible history is suggested by the picture—which is, by the way, powerfully rendered in a most original and independent manner—entitled "Jesus Tempted in the Desert": "Ostrich eggs are suspended in Eastern sanctuaries, and are often highly ornamented. They are a symbol, a synthesis, of many mysteries. They were chosen because it is said that the ostrich sits on her eggs for forty days, thereby recalling the forty days of the Saviour's fast, which was also the length of Moses's sojourn on Mount Sinai, and of Elijah's on Mount Horeb; the forty days of the flood, Goliath challenging the Israelites during forty days, the forty years' wandering of the Jews in the wilderness, the presentation of Jesus at the Temple forty days after his birth, his excommunication by the synagogue forty days before his passion, the ascension forty days after his death, etc."

"The Angels Ministering unto Jesus" is an excellent example of the new and realistic life which Tissot has introduced into religious painting. Christ is reposing at full length on his back, while in the misty air about him appear the faces of many angels, whose arms are stretched toward him, and whose finger-tips

touch his body. Here is the note: "The angels go to the Saviour, and mysteriously renew his strength, not in the form of eatables and drinkables, but by bestowing upon him that spiritual force which fortifies him for the mission he is about to undertake."

The collection of illustrations may be divided into four classes. Some of them are simply pictorial translations of the Bible texts. Others give form to old traditions, which, though closely allied to the text, are, nevertheless, pure traditions. A third category, the most original of the whole, is the product of the artist's imagination alone, stimulated by inspiration resulting from long study of, and meditation on, the career of Jesus. And lastly—and this class is found chiefly among the pen-and-ink drawings—we have reproductions of historic spots, landscapes, etc., of the Holy Land as it appears to-day. These were made on the spot, as has already been said, and so have a value aside from their artistic merits.

Tissot's work possesses another interest of a general nature. It is, in a measure, a return, in spirit at least, to the methods and aspirations of the early masters in their treatment of religious subjects, and is in direct discord with the present tendency of French art, which is either to ignore sacred history and sacred themes altogether, or to treat them in an irreverent and sensational manner. Tissot, as we have seen, is a pious believer, and a faithful son of the Roman Catholic church. It would be impossible for him to present the Saviour as he has been presented several times in the Salons of recent years, as, for instance, to cite but one example, by M. Jean Béraud on two or three occasions.

"If I had not been supported by faith," says Tissot, "how could I have withstood the fatigues of such a task, and, above all, have found such profound consolation in my labors?"

Emphasis must be laid on the fact that Tissot, in the enthusiasm of a neophyte, has not simply gone back to the antiquated treatments of religious subjects. Herein lies, perhaps, the chief merit of his collection. His originality may often border on profanity, but never crosses the line. His innovations in the handling of old familiar themes frequently take the breath away when the beholder is of the cloth. An ecclesiastic who has carefully studied the collection declares that in his rendering of the Passion Tissot has introduced numerous details that had never before occurred to the clerical



WOMAN OF THE ENVIRONS OF JERUSALEM.

mind, and yet that none of these new departures is contrary to orthodoxy, and in no respect mars the emotion produced by the scene.

Tissot's series of "portraits" of the apostles is a mixture of archæological, ethnological, phrenological, and historical data welded together by reverence, art, and talent. They are sure to startle—that of St. Peter, for instance—a priest at the first glance, but the work will win respect and admiration at the second. For Tissot has a reason for all, even for the color of a garment, the form of a hood, or the style of the fastening of a sandal. One of the visitors has remarked concerning this remarkable gallery of saints, that the artist has not flattered his subjects. There is nothing wonderful about these poor fishermen, he says, nothing in their plain attire or every-day physiognomy to awaken awe. "But you feel that these are indeed the men whom Jesus inspired." In a word, Tissot's creations are pure realism tempered by sincere faith.

Perhaps the boldest of the pictures of pure imagination is that which he has named "What Jesus Saw from the Top of the Cross." In the first place, you see no cross. The spectator



"THE VOICE IN THE DESERT."

stands where the Christ should be, and this, in the words of the note, is what meets his eyes: "At the foot, weeping and burning with divine love and repentance, is Mary Magdalen; his mother, with her look of ineffable tenderness; Saint John, buried in profound devotion; and many holy women bathed in tears. A little farther back are the blasphemers, the haters, and the timid. Staring him in the face is the sepul-

cher which is to receive his body that very night. Farther back are timorous disciples, who approach that they may have a final glance at the Master before night hides all from view. The fainting Lord can just hear the murmur of the distant city, and the low blare of the trumpets at the Temple regulating the crowd according to the order of the sacrifices."

Theodore Stanton.