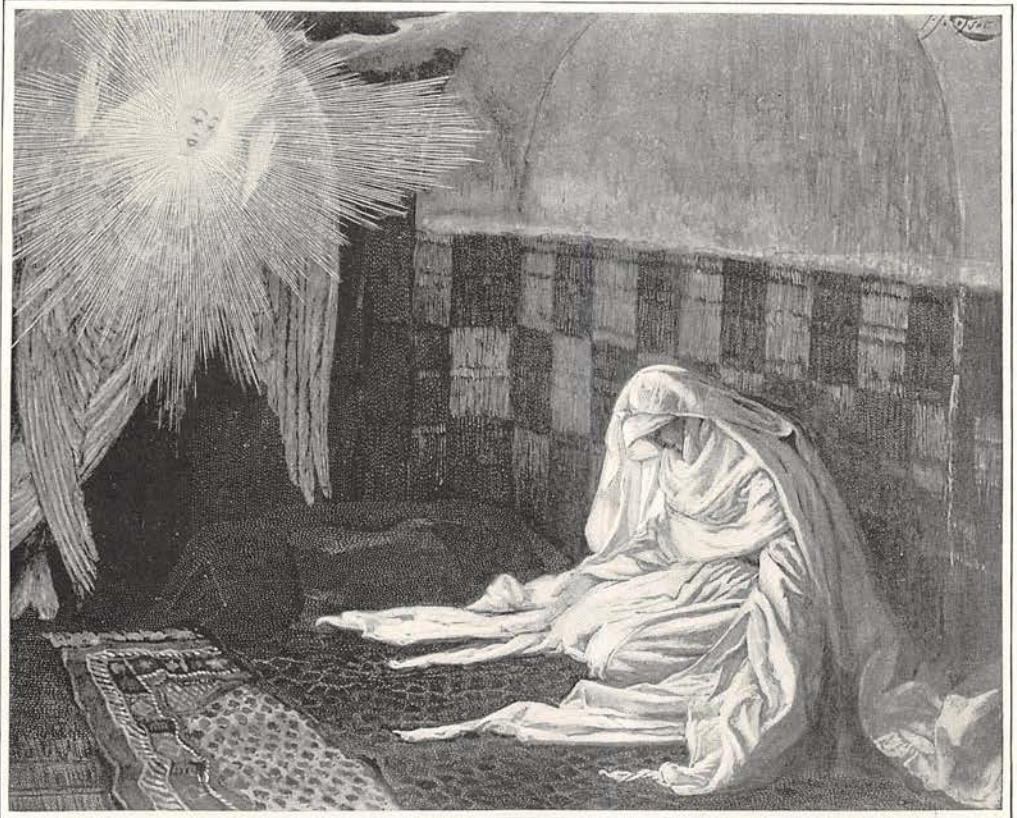


TISSOT'S «LIFE OF CHRIST.»



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

“THE ANNUNCIATION.”

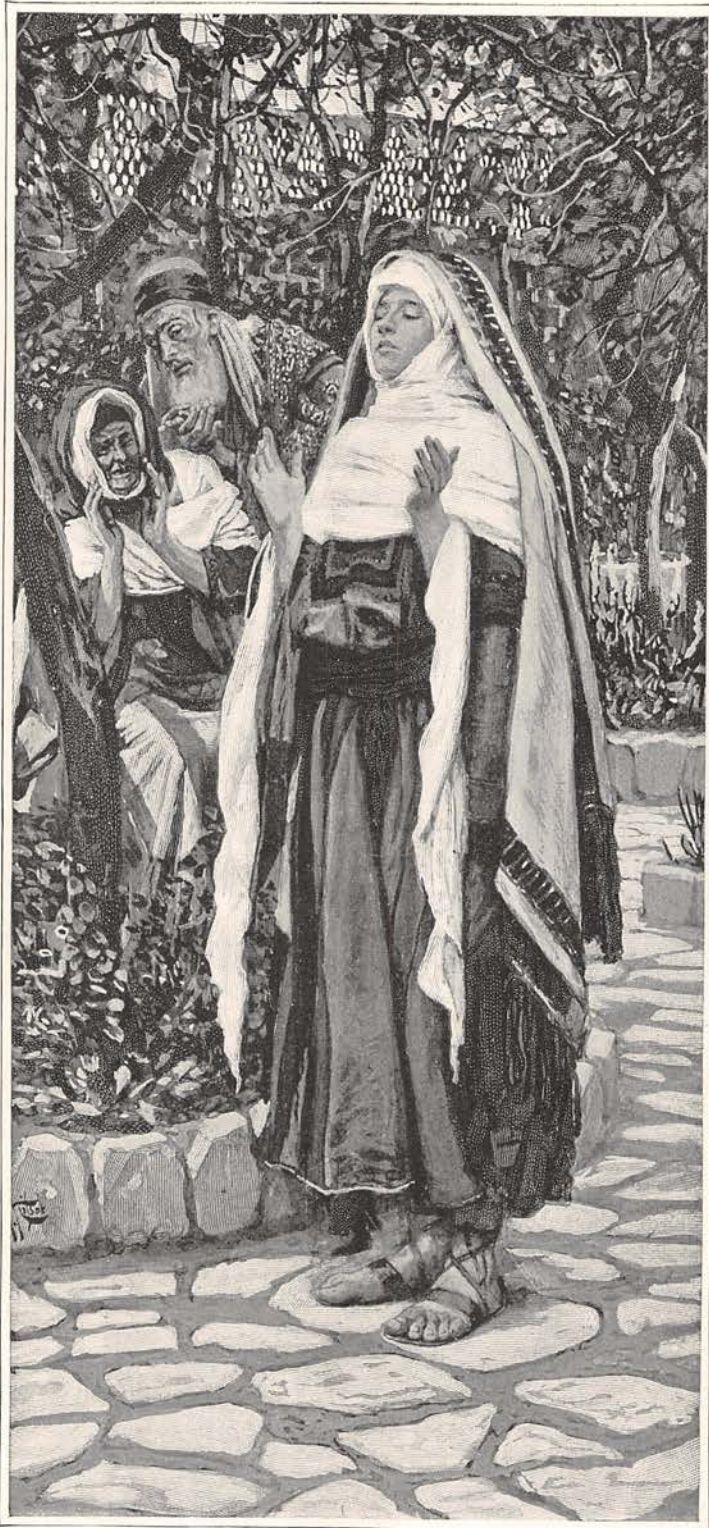
IN the Paris of to-day a great religious work has been slowly accomplished, untouched by the insidious influences about it. In the production of this work, which externalizes his full development as man and artist, M. Tissot has been impelled by a desire to use his art for the purpose of presenting a truthful idea of the figure of Christ and the personages of his time—to disengage the whole, as far as possible, from the mass of conventional legend and inaccuracy which surrounds that period, and through which we are accustomed to view its events.

With this idea he made, in 1886, the first of two journeys to Palestine, beginning a serious study of its topography, and of the various races which have from time to time taken root there,—their manners, customs, dress,

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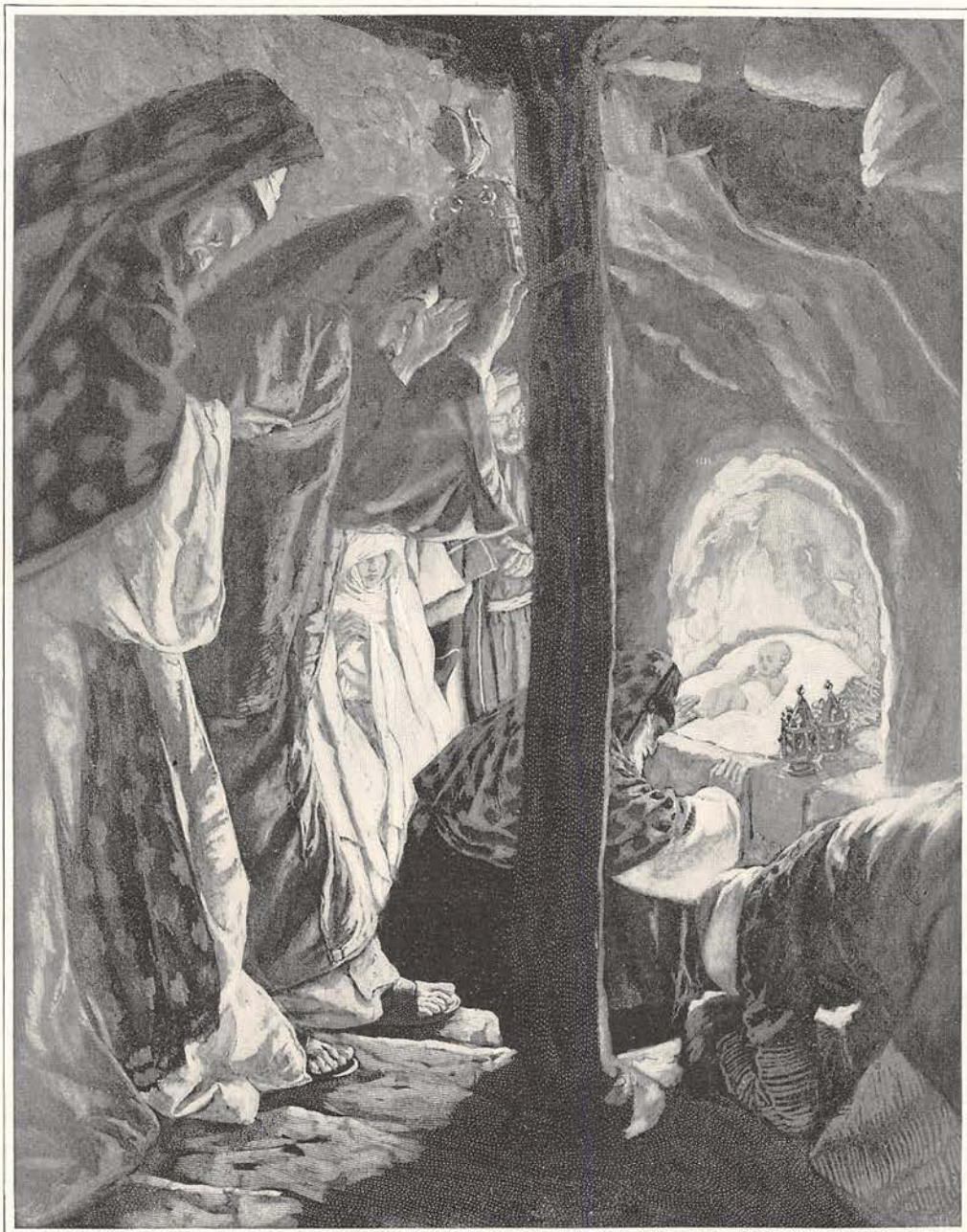
gestures, architecture, government,—endeavoring to sift through the overlying mass of foreign influences (Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Latin) the true elements of the old Jewish civilization, and essaying, as far as possible, to enter into the mental and moral attitudes of that race of Judea so unique in its design and destiny.

With this end in mind it was necessary to reproduce with some degree of exactitude the external setting of the events recorded in the Gospels, and he has thus reconstructed the architecture of that period with great minuteness, proportioned after dimensions and descriptions given in old historical and religious works. He rebuilds for us the ornate temples and houses of the Herods, and the simpler and more harmonious lines of older structures. We see, too, the little Syrian villages, with their narrow, winding streets



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«MY SOUL DOTH MAGNIFY THE LORD.»



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

"THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI."

and square, low dwellings, lighted through the door; and faithfully pictured are the varying types of the Syrian landscape, the smiling hillsides of Galilee, the severer beauty of Samaria, and the barren and melancholy wastes of Judea.

A devout Catholic, M. Tissot had, among other opportunities for study, the privilege of

entering old monasteries and churches, generally inaccessible, where, jealously guarded from profane eyes, are to be found ancient and curious manuscripts, carvings, and relics which throw new light on the history of that time and the early centuries of the Christian era. Apart from what would seem almost special powers of intuition where his work is



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

"THE SOJOURN IN EGYPT."

concerned, M. Tissot has been greatly aided by a study of the Talmud, Josephus, the early fathers of the church, and the works of the celebrated ecstasies, among the last those marvelous volumes of Katrine Emmerich, almost unknown and now out of print, which are among the most curious revelations of the human mind. In connection with his work M. Tissot has made a new translation of the Latin text of the Vulgate. To those occupying themselves with the history of that period, and specially to the student of mystic lore, the detailed catalogue of the pictures, accompanied by explanatory notes, will prove of the highest interest, as M. Tissot is deeply versed in that symbolism which made the smallest of the Jewish rites and customs pregnant with meaning. He has thus a significance for everything, from the jewel on the breast of the high priest to the color and shape of the garments of the participant at a feast.

It would be difficult to overestimate the documentary value of M. Tissot's great work apart from its high esthetic merit. Scene

after scene is restored with what would seem almost the power of a seer. Each act is set in its peculiar and fitting environment of place and condition, and the great drama unrolls itself before us with a strange reality. In the minute exactitude of the portrayal one may follow the events with something of the intensity of an eye-witness. The diversity of types represented is most interesting in its ethnologic and historic fidelity, being drawn directly after those found there to-day, and which are presumably the same now as then, enduring through the inevitable changes of governments and customs the centuries have brought in their train. One sees the Jew, the Pharisee, the scribe, the Greek, the Egyptian, the Arab, the Roman, the aristocrat, the slave, each type made familiar by the Gospels, standing out distinct, unmistakable even to the casual observer. The Syrian woman, too, has been faithfully pictured in her dark-eyed loveliness and languid grace, reaching her highest perfection in the beauty of Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalen. Specially interesting from this point of view is the picture



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

"JESUS WORKING WITH JOSEPH."

of the sanhedrim, where every possible modification of the Jewish type is represented in that famous assembly which so lightly pronounced the sentence that has brought down on it the malediction of all succeeding ages.

M. Tissot's work, colossal in its proportions, will consist of a great number of pen-drawings in the text, and some three hundred and fifty compositions in aquarelle, comprising portraits of the principal personages in

the life of Christ, symbolic representations of certain phrases or passages of the New Testament, and scenes from private and public life or representations of Jewish customs and manners. These pictures are all small, and so exquisitely finished, so flawless in drawing, and so instinct with vitality, that a glass only brings out new beauties. Many have wondered why M. Tissot should have selected such small sizes for his work; but he, like some of the old masters, whose

pictures have been on a comparatively small scale, has felt that he could best obtain his desired effects in this way. Apart from his intimate knowledge of the subject, and his technical skill, which is fully adequate to the portrayal of even the most delicate and elusive of human emotions, he seems at times, in the subtle suggestiveness of his imagination, to be able to give some hints of things transmundane. In this latter quality he may here and there recall William Blake, in his most intuitive moments, though, unlike that artist, he is never naïf. In its whole, however, the work resembles that of no other master, belongs to no school. Sure of his art, unflagging in industry, tireless in the pursuit of truth, he has represented to us this old life of the Gospels as none other has done, clear, distinct, impressive, the mists of time lifted, the veil of legend pushed aside, those men and women revealed to us breathing and human, busied about many things, with petty griefs and joys, yet raised forever, as they are, out of the ranks of common history of peoples and countries by having had the Son of Man among them.

Throughout the whole the figure of the Christ gives an impression of apartness, something strong and serene exhaling from his presence. He is always represented in a white garment. Alone on the mountain, tempted of the devil, whose gigantic figure, ominous and black, covers half the sky, he stands calm, distinct, almost luminous, untouched by the shadow of evil. Again, amid the deep purple and red gowns of the disciples, his figure stands out with an immaculateness strangely touching. In the picture of the «Angels Ministering unto Jesus,» where they renew his strength with aliments not of this world, divinely and mysteriously fortifying him for his task, there is a certain awfulness of light and whiteness. Thus throughout the representations, even in crowds and apparent physical nearness, his figure is kept apart and untouched. In «The Last Supper» there is an exquisite blending and relating of dark rich tones, crimsons and purples and deep yellows, and a symmetrical and masterly arrangement of line. Some artists and historians of the customs and manners of that time represent several of the participants of a feast reclining on the same couch or divan, lying down on the left side, which enabled them to stretch out their right hands for their food. M. Tissot has chosen to represent short sofas or chairs, covered with richly colored rugs. The rest of the room, scarcely defined, serves simply as a dim background. There seems

to be an incandescence in the figure of the Christ, and the apostles are represented with an accuracy that takes minute account of the differences of character, of employment, of district, of purpose, each standing out distinct and individual.

Tissot, like Renan, supposes the family and friends of Jesus to be in rather better worldly circumstances than they are usually represented, which, while it gave him an opportunity for the portrayal of fine raiment and rich interior, would seem, nevertheless, to be accurate, as it was customary among the Jews to have an occupation of some sort, no matter what the condition of the family. This was not necessarily indicative of poverty. It will be remembered that Paul, upon whom a careful and costly education had been bestowed, was also a maker of tents.

Not the least curious and interesting of the series are the so-called «portraits» of the personages of the Gospels, in which every possible distinguishing characteristic has been carefully studied and portrayed.

There are various representations of Mary, from her earliest youth, through maturity and old age; and in these M. Tissot, while bringing his highest art and powers of imagination to bear, has in no way departed from the historical records of the Jewish customs of those times. Thus, in the picture of the «Annunciation,» there are no conventional furnishings of the room, no accessories of a purely imaginative kind, such as are found in all the pictures of the great masters on this subject. The room is bare of furniture, as were the sleeping-rooms of the Jews; the narrow carpet, serving as bed, is unrolled, and one end slightly raised for the head; the Virgin, in a deep blue gown, is on her knees, with clasped hands and slightly bowed head; and in a corner of the room is the angelic messenger. The portraits of the apostles were among the first of the series, and differ slightly in manner from the later pictures, which have a certain patience in the working out of the details that is not noticeable in these. The portrait of John is perhaps the most beautiful, as, young, puissant, inspired, he stands with up-turned face and slightly outstretched hands, clad in a white and green robe, the shape and color alike significant.

There is Mary Magdalen before her conversion, brilliant and jewel-laden, but still with something of dawning spirituality in her eyes; later the penitent woman, though never represented as she has been generally conceived, with uncovered face and flowing hair, but veiled to the eyes, as was the invariable cus-



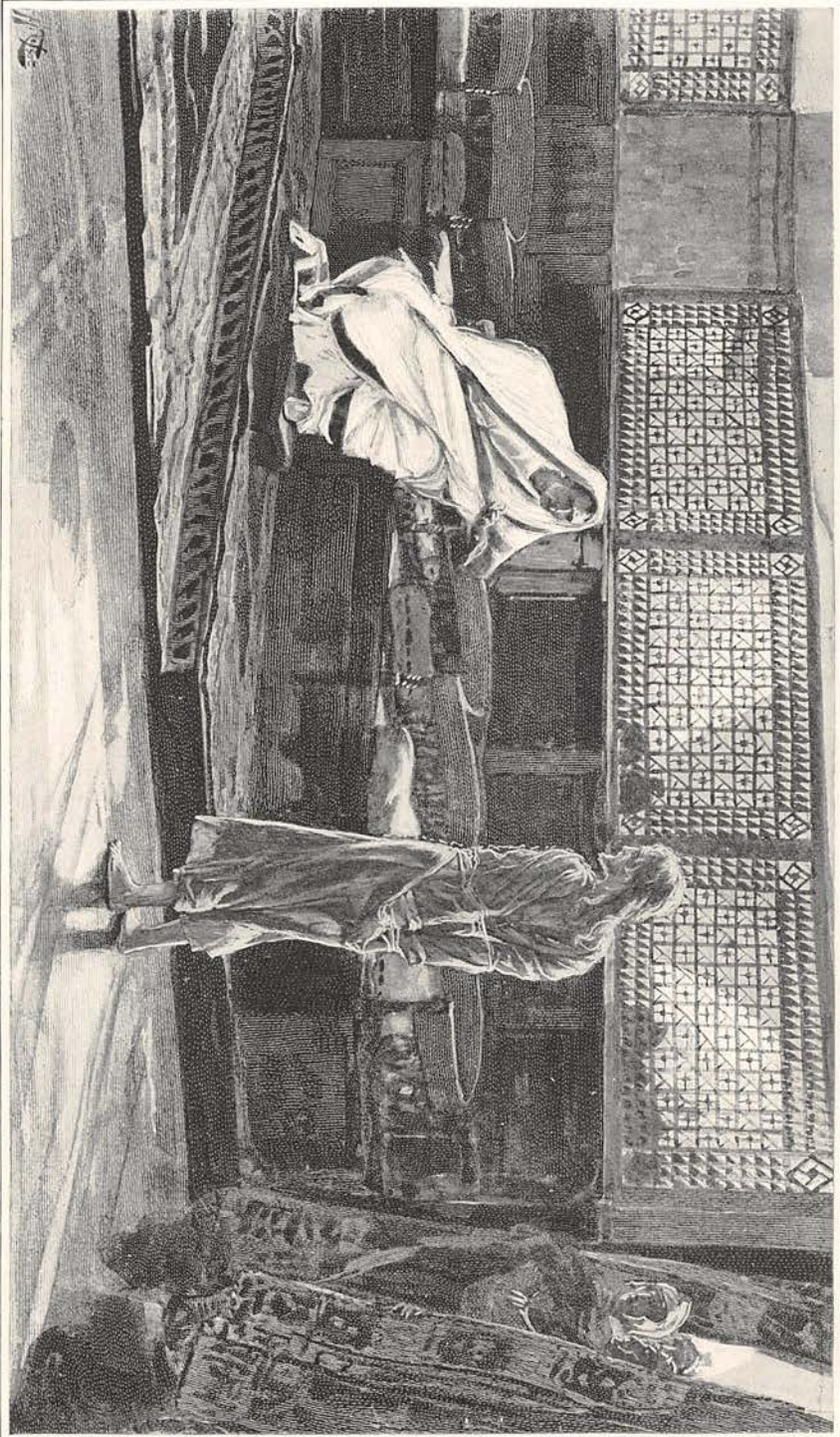
FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN.»



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«JESUS EXHORTS THE APOSTLES TO REST.»



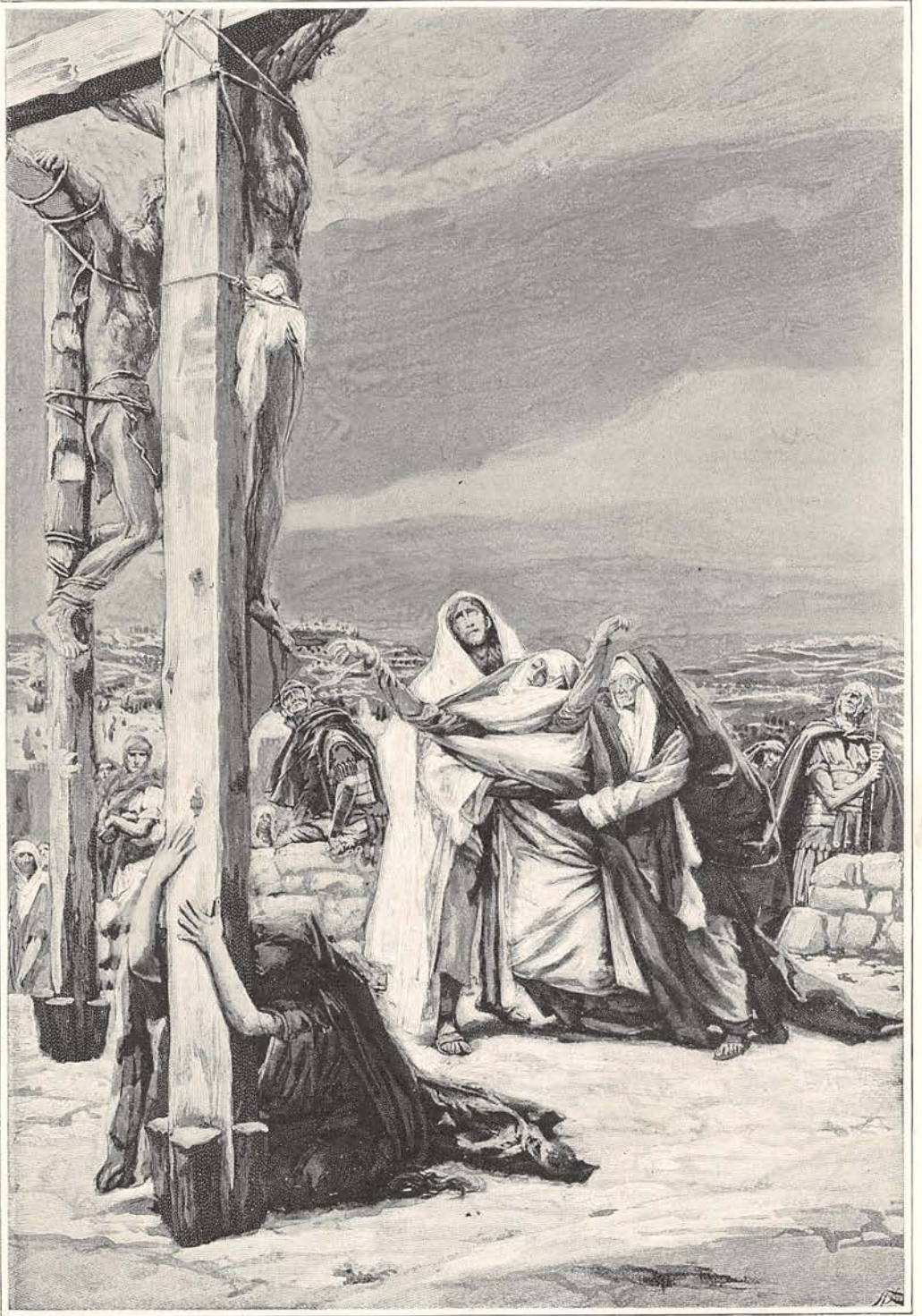
FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«JESUS BEFORE PILATE.»



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«THE PEOPLE LEAVE CALVARY.»



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«MATER DOLOROSA.»

tom of the Jewish women of that day. Many beautiful scenes and places are represented, as, for instance, the garden and house in Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived, and where, soothed and comforted by an understanding and adoring friendship, Jesus so often came. Directly in front was the Mount of Olives, while the holy city spread itself out below. This spot, with its palms and olive-gardens, which is the only part of the environs of Jerusalem that is other than melancholy and almost barren, M. Tissot has selected for one of his most beautiful pictures, that of «Christ Resting at the House of Lazarus.»

The picture of Lazarus after his resurrection is also most interesting,—touching, as it does, on a deep mystery. It is said of him that, though genial and benevolent before his death, and loving to mix with his kind, after his return to life he lived in a somber chamber apart, his spirit having had who shall say what glimpse of the other world during those hours that he lay in the tomb, and unable ever afterward to adjust itself to the common life of mortals. There is, again, a whole series of pictures illustrative of certain phrases, as, for instance, «Where Two or Three are Gathered together in My Name.» Here one sees several persons praying, and invisible to them is the Christ, bending over and encircling them with his mantle, the ends of which he holds in his outstretched hands, while light and warmth radiate from his presence.

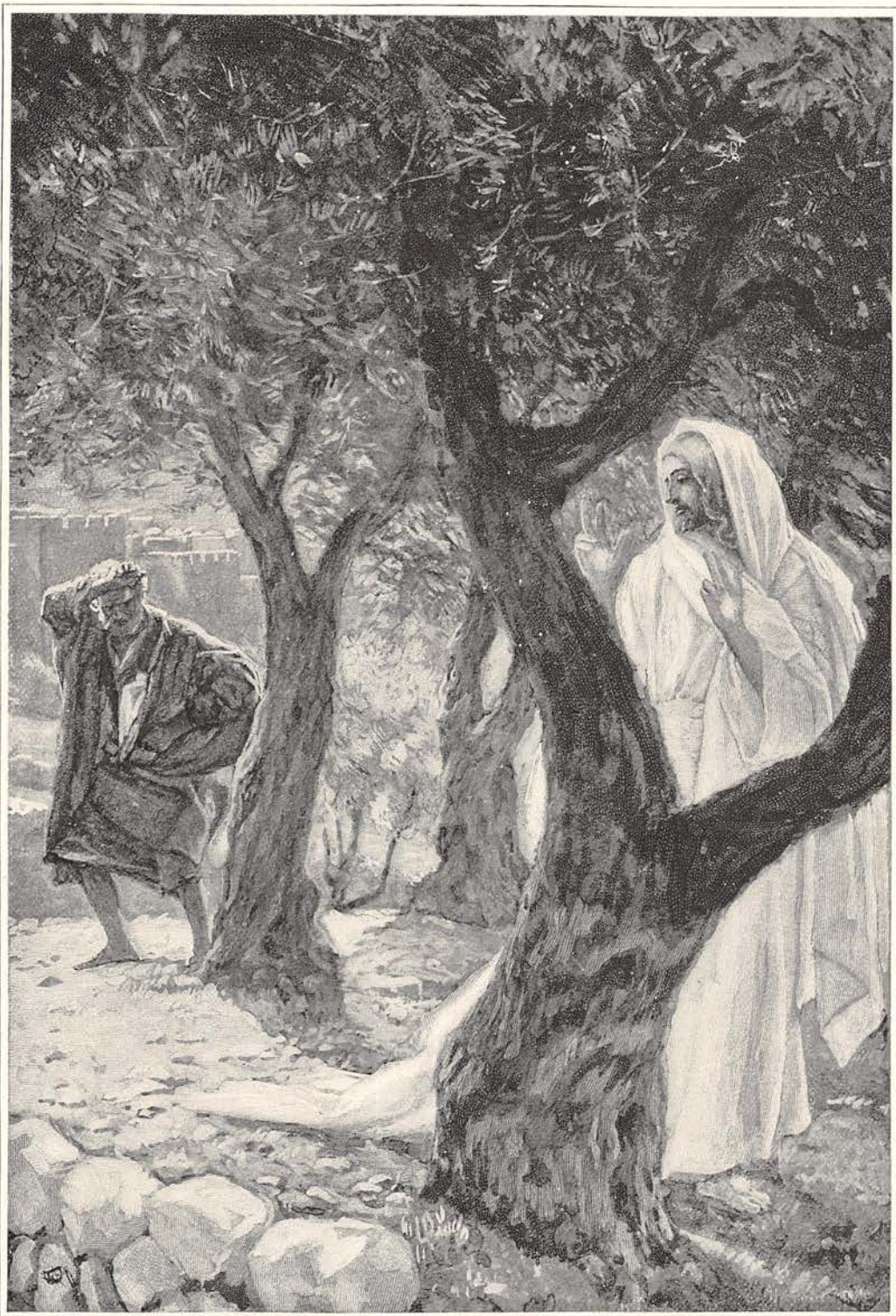
The scenes of the Holy Week are so terrible in their reality, so extraordinary in their conception and working out, that any attempt at description must be entirely inadequate. No one having once seen the representations of the «Flagellation,» the «Agony in the Garden,» «What Jesus Saw from the Cross,» can ever forget them; they cut too deep a mark in the memory. No hour of that last week is left undepicted, M. Tissot's great love of his subject and his ardent imagination revealing themselves fully in this supremely difficult theme for human interpretation.

Of the art of Tissot the younger generation of painters knows little, for during the last ten years he has been represented in the annual exhibitions only at long intervals, and then by nothing other than an isolated portrait. In the early part of his career in France, and during his ten years' sojourn in England, he was known by pictures of a purely worldly character—ball-room scenes, garden parties; portraits of fashionable women like Lady Londonderry and the celebrated Lady Walde-

grave, of men of rank and distinction,—among them the Prince Imperial and the brilliant, ill-fated Captain Burnaby,—with many other of the celebrities of twenty years ago. His powerful etchings, so well known, and by which alone he realized a fortune, have an additional value from the fact that they were always carefully printed by the artist himself, on his own press. He is also a skilful workman in enamels, bronzes, and in the art of the goldsmith, the many beautiful objects which fill his magnificent studio testifying to his great versatility, as well as to lifelong habits of unflagging industry. He has his own furnaces, where he carefully superintends the casting and all practical details of this last-mentioned sort of work, considering, as did Benvenuto Cellini and the master workmen of his time, that the mind which conceives must be one with the hand that executes, and that to deliver a design, no matter how completed, into the hands of merely mechanical workmen is inevitably to detract from its ultimate excellence.

To what combination of circumstances, fatigue of the world, or spiritual renewal, the abrupt change in M. Tissot's art was due, the world may never know. Suddenly, in the full tide of worldly prosperity and success, he withdrew himself, and in retirement, almost solitude, devoted himself to the development of this idea of a truthful, historical, and ethical portrayal of the life and times of Christ, bringing to it the patience and devotion of a monk of the middle ages, combined with the most refined skill of the nineteenth century.

Until recently this work was entirely unknown, save to the comparatively few who were fortunate enough to have access to his studio. In the spring of 1894, however, he exhibited about two thirds of the series in the salon of the Champ de Mars, where two large rooms were reserved for the unique display of his pictures. The rooms were colored rather soberly in dull reds, blues, and yellows, and the decoration was after the type of ornamentation of the time of the Herods. The various divisions of the work were indicated by pillars, and one thus followed the development regularly, step by step. The effect on those who visited the exhibition was both curious and interesting to observe, and testified amply to the emotional power of the work. People were seen to go away weeping; women made the tour of the rooms on their knees. Many came from the provinces in groups, with return tickets. It partook, indeed, toward the end, of the character of a



FROM THE PAINTING BY JAMES TISSOT.

«THE APPARITION.»

pilgrimage, seeming a new source of light and strength for pious souls. This quickening was visible not alone among professing Christians, but innumerable were the letters received by M. Tissot from that large class of people who, while unable to accept the Gospels as divinely inspired, unreligious in the common sense, are ever responsive to the noble and the good in whatever guise it comes to them, and to whom the pictures had possibly suggested new spiritual possibilities. This special effect it will be interesting to note when, later on, the work shall be seen in its entirety, not in France alone, but in our own land, here as elsewhere quickening, consoling, and enlightening.

Before bringing to a close these few and inadequate lines on a great subject I feel impelled to call to the reader's attention the relative value of M. Tissot's work and the work of other painters on religious themes, and also the spirit which animated him—that of ardent desire to serve religion by presenting to the world, through the medium of his art, the true external history of his great subject, and, as far as in him lay, to develop and illumine its inner sense.

Of all the countless representations of Christ across the ages and through the prism of various arts and temperaments, few were both conceived in faith and wrought out by skill. We have had the one and we have had the other, but they are generally and unhappily distinct. There were the naïf and ardently sincere creations of Fra Angelico, of Memling, and a few others of their time and way of thought, who were inspired by love of the Christ to essay some externalization of him in their own environment; but these were far from that truth to life which is the most distinguishing mark of the perfect creation. We have, again, the purely intellectual compositions of Raphael and his school, but these forever remain compositions, not adequate embodiments of spiritual things; and being thus academic and conventional, lack something in quickening power. There were the luxuriantly colored and fleshy Christs and Madonnas of Rubens and his followers, and of the great Venetian school; but there one will seek vainly for the enkindling spark of Christian ardor. It is the skilful artist, the combiner of form and color, who arouses our admiration, and instinctively we feel that he used these subjects for love of his art, and not for love of them.

To-day there are other conditions. We have come into new ways of thought and a greater and more general facility of expres-

sion; but the limitations of the older masters seem yet the heritage of the artist, while to them new errors, and perhaps greater in that they pretend to truth, have been added. Painting on religious themes seems again peculiarly the mode, and wonders of technic are held up for our admiration—that technic which dares all; which unfortunately is all; which portrays with equal readiness any subject from a crucifixion to a public-house interior, asking only that its skill shall manifest itself. And side by side with this means as an end, decrying it, but no better than it, we have the vague school of the mysticists, the symbolists, the dreamers, who, closing their eyes to nature, try to convey their meaning by strange distortions of the truth. The element of vagueness in the works of these, in whatever department of art they may select, is their keenest reproach, and is never found in any truly fine production. The great creations of the human mind, whether musical, artistic, or literary, have always been precise, even when highly imaginative in conception, and their dividing-lines are strongly marked, clear-cut, and exact.

Ruskin says somewhere that it yet remains for mankind to produce a work at once entirely skilful and entirely sincere. M. Tissot would seem to have more nearly accomplished this than any one else of modern times, unless we except the finest conceptions of Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Holman Hunt; but even they have never given us a consecutive series on this greatest of subjects.

M. Tissot's talent has during ten years turned itself to the exclusive consideration of this idea, which he has worked out with a breadth, a continuity, a steadfastness, little known in this age of many small things; and the result has been that he has produced a work of inestimable value not only to the scholar, the artist, and the priest, but to thoughtful people of all classes.

I remember once seeing a letter from Meissonier, freethinker and man of the world, written a short time before his death, in which he speaks of the «*trouble d'ame*» into which the examination of the pictures had thrown him.

The greatest value of this work would seem, after all, to lie in its direct and quickening relation to life; and is not this, indeed, the highest possible value of any work? Its production was alone made possible by the rare combination of the master's hand, the scholar's mind, and the soul of the religious enthusiast.

Edith Coies.