



Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Much of the exhibit centers on James Tissot's longtime lover, Kathleen Newton, shown above in "October."

A story of true love over art

French painter James Tissot's personal history showcased in Legion of Honor exhibition

By Charles Desmarais

The newest exhibition at the Legion of Honor, "James Tissot: Fashion & Faith," will surely be a popular success, for many good reasons. Tissot (1836-1902) was a skillful painter who left us intimate glimpses into the styles and customs of wealthy France and England in the 19th century, whose art at certain points had affinities to the early works of the French Impressionists. And the show itself — impeccably displayed, accompanied by a beautifully produced, book-length catalog — is an exacting work of scholarship, the product of many hands and years of research, led by Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco curator Melissa E. Buron.

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Tissot stresses love over ambition

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But if the historical analysis is first-rate — down to a transcription of the artist's sales notebook, a "Pigment Analysis" chart and an exhibition checklist that details the micro-history of ownership for every individual work — the art itself is often an intellectual letdown.

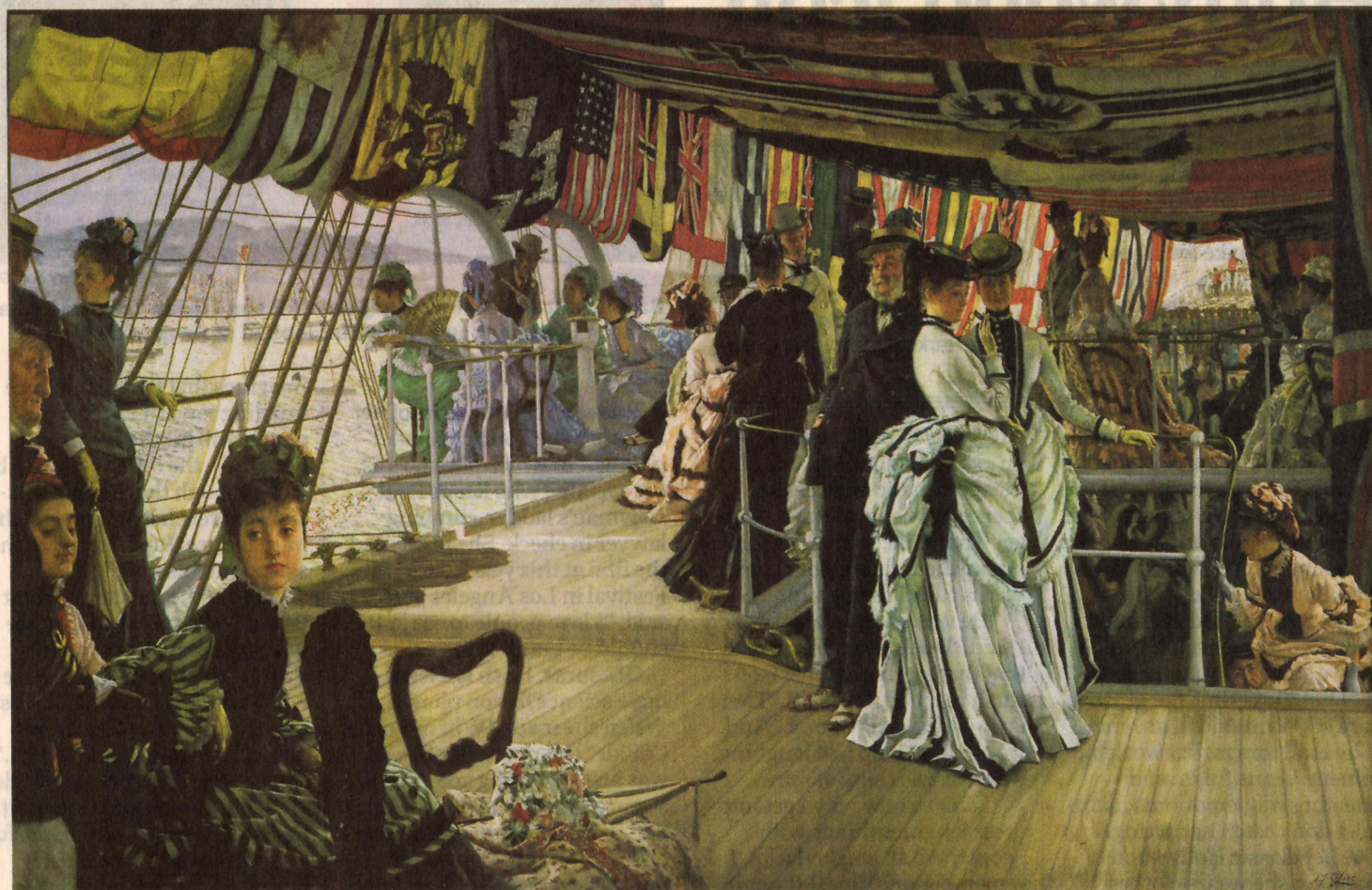
One leaves the Legion show with a deep sense of disappointment in an artist who had every advantage — innate skill, early success, inherited wealth and social contacts, a friendship with the Impressionists that saw Edgar Degas inviting him to join one of the most important exhibitions in all art history — but who failed to take the chances and set himself the challenges that might have made him great.

With some stunning exceptions, Tissot mostly put that technical skill to producing illustrational bromides. He used his social access to construct a cozy world for himself, and for his collectors and fans. And he turned down the invitation to take part in that first Impressionist exhibition of April 1874, in favor of a lucrative career anchored by sentimental narrative paintings and commissioned portraiture.

One of those stunners, in fact, is a work Tissot called "Portrait of Mlle L.L..." (1864). A nearby wall label surmises that the artist, by including the word "portrait" in some titles, intended that viewers would understand they could buy his services.

The picture, together with another strong work of the previous year, "The Two Sisters: Portrait," were shown at the all-important Paris Salon of 1864. They were praised by one critic as "genuine paintings ... whose greatest merit consists in the sincerity of their modern feeling." We can see that quality in "Mlle L.L..." in the lack of pretension in the sitter's pose, the frankness of her gaze and the casual, slightly sloppy details of the postcard crookedly slipped into a mirror frame, the well-used books and sheaf of papers on the table beside her.

"The Ball on Shipboard" (circa 1874) and other works of about the same time share a liveliness and freshness of observation — full of color, human gesture and subtleties of light that could never be



Tate Britain



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Tissot's "Portrait of Mademoiselle L.L..." (1864).

captured by even the best of photographs — that we might see in an early Impressionist-period Monet or Renoir. It could even make you think of

iconic boating party pictures by those two artists, except for at least one essential difference: Tissot's high-fashion figures are of a social class far

James Tissot's "The Ball on Shipboard" (1874) displays a colorful liveliness and freshness of observation.

"James Tissot: Fashion & Faith"

9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m.
Saturday, Oct. 12-Feb. 9. \$13-\$28. Legion of Honor, 100 34th Ave., S.F. 415-750-3600. <https://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

removed from, for example, the T-shirted revelers in Renoir's famous "Luncheon of the Boating Party" (1881).

Tissot experienced a life- and career-changing transformation from high society documentarian to Bible illustrator that could give exhibition viewers whiplash if they didn't know what they were in for. The watercolors of religious scenes are quite terrific, as illustrations go; they inspired numerous filmmakers, as the exhibition catalog details, from the obscure Alice Guy-Blaché to D. W. Griffith to "Ben Hur" director William Wyler. It is not a stretch to think of the paintings' influence, also, on such popular culture mainstays as children's books and the "Classics Illustrated" comics genre.

The catalyst for Tissot's momentous shift in subject and style, we are told, was the death of his longtime lover, Kathleen Newton, in 1882 at

the age of 28 (Tissot was 46). The loss must have been soul-crushing, and it sent Tissot first to spiritualists and then on a series of treks throughout the Holy Land.

A substantial part of the exhibition is devoted to the artist's major paintings of her, in formal settings and relaxed, on her own and with her two children. We see her as the embodiment of nature and of life in works like "October" (1877), which opens the exhibition with a bang, and with illness-shrouded eyes sunk deep in their sockets in "Summer Evening" (1881-82) and other paintings made toward the end of her life.

She was extraordinarily beautiful, and she inspired some of the most alluring works in the show, full of luxurious color and virtuoso technique. The story they tell is one not of artistic discovery and invention, but of love. For many viewers, that will be all they need.

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