



TISSOT
still on top

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In recent years attention has been paid to a number of 19th century academic artists whose work became overshadowed by the Impressionist movement. James (Jacques-Joseph) Tissot (1836–1902) had a traditional training in France, yet he was friends with many artists that were influenced by Impressionist ideas, and indeed can be seen to have assimilated their focus on modern subjects, particularly in the period when he worked in London between 1870–82. In 1998 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki's Tissot painting *Still on Top* c1874 was stolen. Returned in a severely damaged state, the painting has gradually been restored over the last two years. This exhibition celebrates the return of the painting to the Gallery's walls, and considers the way in which Tissot managed to incorporate the narrative tradition admired in Academic circles alongside the Impressionists' focus on scenes from everyday life.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tissot: Still on Top is a fascinating account of the convergence of art history and contemporary conservation science. From its theft to its return and throughout the meticulous process of its restoration, *Still on Top* has become one of the best known paintings in New Zealand. The story of how the structural and visual integrity of this much-damaged painting was made good is a compelling one.

In helping us to describe its wider context we have relied heavily on Simpson Grierson Law, a Sustaining Sponsor of more than ten years standing. This publication and the exhibition it describes were made possible because they share an exceptional commitment to the Gallery's collections. My thanks go to them for enabling us to return the painting to the public domain in such an appropriate and comprehensive way.

Curator Mary Kisler and conservator Sarah Hillary take us first into the wider social and historical context of Tissot's work then narrow the focus down the barrel of a microscope. They reveal the detailed research and analysis that is the foundation of internationally groundbreaking conservation practice. In the process they add more layers of history, interpretation and meaning.

My thanks go lastly to those public institutions that have generously lent works to the exhibition: the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, to which the exhibition will tour; the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia. Their loans enable us to return *Still on Top* to the Gallery's walls in a vastly enriched setting that deepens our understanding of this great Victorian work.

Chris Saines, Director

James Tissot: the London years



When James Tissot fled to London as a political refugee in 1870, he left behind a city that had been torn apart socially and politically, firstly during the Franco-Prussian war, and then the Siege of Paris. The move to England brought to an end the historical subjects that had been a major focus of his early work.¹ Tissot had studied in Paris under Louis Lamothe, a pupil of Ingres, and so his training was essentially academic, although he was also an associate of Manet and Degas. Therefore he was cognisant of the Impressionists' aim to capture a single moment in time as well as the Realists' focus on everyday subject matter. He was ready, in other words, to explore modernity through his art, through the 'spaces, social events, people and objects of contemporary urban life'.² Like his friend James McNeill Whistler, Tissot initially depicted scenes focused around the river Thames. Having grown up in Nantes, Tissot was familiar with the bustle of ports and could depict the complexities of nautical rigging with ease. Along with the ships, taverns and warehouses of the river, the city itself became the backdrop against which he began to explore 'modern conversations' between the sexes.

Whatever the setting, for many French and English artists the 19th century fascination with the depiction of women overlaid contemporary attitudes to femininity that is best summed up by Baudelaire, who wrote:

*She is the glitter of all the graces of nature condensed in a single being; she is the object of the most intense admiration and curiosity that the picture of life has to offer to the contemplator. She is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and enchanting. . .*³

Unlike his Impressionist compatriots many of Tissot's representations of women contain a psychological undercurrent. Displayed as objects for the spectator's pleasure, within the image itself there is often a sense of tension between the figures; women studiously look away from their companions, and there is a slightly awkward sense that we are interrupting something. In Dunedin Public Art Gallery's *Waiting for the Train (Willesden Junction)* c1872 [see fig. 1] a young woman stands on the platform clutching various items – parasol, book, flowers, bag, travelling blanket – that mark her as modern, just as the railroad itself was seen as a symbol of contemporary civilization. She gazes back at the spectator, but her very mode of travel suggests that the glance is fleeting – as if she is part of a narrative enacted beyond our view. By contrast, the woman in bed in Whistler's etching [see fig. 2] is shown absorbed in her reading. She squints at her newspaper; the mood is intensely private. The curtains of her bed cut off our view, her one cast-off slipper serving as a further barrier to the spectator. In contrast to *Waiting for the Train* there is no suggestion that this is a momentary glimpse from a longer narrative.

From the beginning of his stay in London, Tissot's Anglo-French style was greeted with a mixed response, some English critics sensing a satirical and sarcastic element to his works. The *Illustrated London News* was not alone in talking about 'French satire' and the 'Gallic sneer', nor the *Times* about 'cynical sincerity' when they described his painting as 'French rather than English, alike in the ideas it suggests and the skill it shows'.

In 1874 Tissot reinforced the English fear of the *flâneur* or dandy,⁴ by buying a house in Grove End Road, St John's Wood, a suburb of London with a dubious reputation, where men of means set up their mistresses in suburban splendour behind high brick walls. Furthermore, he set about creating a home that served as a theatrical backdrop for his paintings. A pond with a colonnade was built in the large gardens in a style which mirrored his former residence in Paris. A ship's window was added to the studio enabling him to continue his interest in nautical themes, and a conservatory was furnished in the European manner. As Darby notes, like the railroad, the iron-framed Victorian conservatory was seen as a symbol of technical innovation, but it also served as a metaphor for the period's ambivalent attitude to the politics of gender. Middle class women were contained and nurtured like opulent hothouse flowers within the confines of suburban life, yet an overheated environment could also contain the threat of fecund excess and decay.⁵

Fig 1
James Tissot (1836–1902)
France, England
Waiting for the train (Willesden Junction)
c1872, oil on panel, 594 x 343mm
Dunedin Public Art Gallery



Fig 2
James McNeill Whistler
(1834–1903) America, England
Reading in Bed, 1858, etching
119 x 81mm, purchased 1956





Fig 3

James Tissot (1836–1902)

France, England

Still on Top, c1874, oil on canvas

876 x 533mm, gift of Viscount

Leverhulme, 1921



Fig 4
Gosotei Utagawa Toyoshige
Toyokuni II, (1777–1835) Japan
The courtesan Zensei No Yosohoi writing
woodcut, 373 x 255mm
Mackelvie Trust Collection



Fig 5
Keisai Eisen, (1790–1848) Japan
The courtesan Yatsuhashi
woodcut, 380 x 266mm
Mackelvie Trust Collection

While both garden and conservatory were sites where elegant women were displayed, for working class men they were places of employment. Tissot's recognition of this division between labour and display is foregrounded in the Gallery's *Still on Top* c1874 [see fig. 3]. Set in the garden at Grove End Road, it depicts two stylishly dressed women, one of whom is wearing the black and white dress that appeared in several other works of the time. The two women, assisted by an elderly man wearing a red Communard's cap, are occupied in laying out and raising a series of flags.⁶ The title of the painting remains enigmatic. While it has been assumed by some to refer to the White Ensign of the Royal Navy, this is barely visible at the top of the painting. Keeping in mind Tissot's reputation for parody and irony, the presence of the Communard's cap (on whose side Tissot had fought during the Siege of Paris,) and the minimal visibility of the British flag, may in fact undercut any strong statement of British superiority. Equally, *Still on Top* demonstrates his astute observations of the manners and fashions of his times and reveals a subtle social commentary on Victorian life.⁷ *Still on Top* is one of the few paintings by Tissot that show women engaged in an activity, rather than displayed in a passive pose. In contrast to the elderly assistant they are formally dressed, and seem oblivious to everything except the task in hand. Yet if there is a social or political meaning to the painting, it remains oblique.⁸

Japanese prints became an important influence in 19th century European art. Many of these delicate works on paper initially arrived as packing materials protecting desirable pieces of porcelain and other decorative items shipped from the Far East, but they rapidly became collected as objects of beauty in themselves. Tissot had possibly been introduced to Japanese art by the printmaker Felix Braquemond, and while in Paris had acquired a number of decorative art objects that appeared in some of his early paintings. Many artists were particularly influenced by the way in which Japanese prints suggested a three-dimensional space while using single blocks of colour, as well as their dedication to recording nature. Some of Tissot's paintings were drawn directly from Japanese prints, and indeed there are fortuitous similarities between the composition of *Still on Top* and two Japanese prints in the Gallery's Mackelvie Collection, Toyokuni II's *The Courtesan Zensei No Yosohoi writing* and Kesai Eisen's *The Courtesan Yatsuhashi* [see figs. 4 & 5]. In the latter print we see the woman viewed from behind, the flowing cloth of her obi and kimono echoing the flounces and furbelows

of the black and white dress in Tissot's painting. Similar resonances are found in Toyokuni's courtesan, whose spread kimono and patterned cloths translate into the fabric of flags and garments of Tissot's kneeling assistant.

In 1876 a more general interest in the depiction of women's place in Victorian society took on a new aspect with the introduction of Mrs Kathleen Newton into Tissot's household. His developing obsession with Mrs Newton eventually subsumed all other interests to become the overriding focus of his art. Wentworth describes the early paintings of the London period as a recreation of Watteau's 18th century *fête champêtre* themes,⁹ that is, celebrations of leisure and social manners transposed from the French countryside to a suburban setting. Although not specifically biographical, in that an image of a woman contains a complex layering of meanings that are greater than those attributed to the individual model posing for the work, a number of works in the latter period focus on ailing women with delicate constitutions. These depictions mirrored a similar decline in Mrs Newton's health. The Gallery also owns a drypoint etching by Tissot, *Soirée d'été* (Summer evening) 1881 [see fig. 6] in which a pretty woman reclines in a wicker chair in front of the pond at Grove End Road. She is dressed in ruffles and lace, and yet the viewer is distracted from what Baudelaire refers to as 'the muslins, the gauzes, the vast and iridescent clouds of stuffs in which she wraps herself',¹⁰ by the dark shadows under her eyes. Even more striking is her mittened hand, curled like a bird's claw in her lap. In spite of the lush vegetation in the background, there are intimations of mortality in this garden idyll.

Tissot's stay in London drew to an abrupt end with Mrs Newton's premature death from consumption the following year at the age of 28.¹¹ After her funeral he fled back to Paris, and eventually turned to religious imagery and the occult in an attempt to make contact with Mrs Newton's spirit. Just as he had reworked his French garden once in England, so he eventually recreated his London studio and conservatory in his family estate, l'Abbaye de Buillon. Ironically, he encountered a similar lack of support for his later work from the French critics, who mistrusted his increasingly anglicised style. He was a man doomed to be out of time and out of place, and only in recent years has his academic technique and complex and often ironic subject matter been more fully appreciated.

Mary Kisler, Mackelvie Curator, International Art



Fig 6
James Tissot (1836–1902)
France, England
Soirée d'été (Summer evening)
1881, drypoint, 228 x 396mm
purchased 1972

Still on Top: an examination of materials and technique

Tissot received a traditional academic training from his teacher Louis Lamothe. Fundamental to this approach was the skilled drawing of the human figure which required accurate copying from engravings and plaster casts before drawing from life was even attempted. The process of painting was also strictly defined because a high degree of finish was required. A reddish-brown paint known as *sauce* sealed in the preparatory drawing on the canvas or panel and highlighted the shadows. This was then followed by the highlights in white and the halftones from light to dark. After drying, the painting was scraped down until smooth. Finally, a gradual transition of tones using more transparent colours was applied.¹² The training with Lamothe prepared Tissot for entry into the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and later exhibition at the Salon.¹³

Although the Gallery's *Still on Top* c1874 is decidedly academic in its centrality of the figures and careful detail, there are some marked differences from traditional academic painting practice. The brushwork is clearly visible and less attention is given to smooth gradations of tone. The muddy earth colours recommended for the building up of form have been replaced with simple layers of pure colour – red, white, green, and yellow. Sample cross-sections from the painting reveal very few layers of paint with no marked distinction between preparatory and finishing layers. There is little evidence of underdrawing and it can be assumed that this was limited to a simple outline.

By the 19th century artists were no longer expected to prepare their own paints and canvases as these could be obtained from speciality suppliers, known as colourmen. *Still on Top* is painted on a commercially-prepared linen canvas and is secured to an



Fig 7. Detail of the standing woman's face showing canvas texture and red glaze.



Fig 8. Detail of lace on the kneeling woman's dress, showing rapid brushwork and thin paint application.

Fig 9. Detail of the flags in the lower centre showing impasto.

expandable stretcher, both typical of the products available at the time. The canvas had been sized with animal glue before a double ground, or two preparatory layers, of lead white paint was applied. This type of preparation was described as *lisse* or smooth because the texture of the weave was filled to provide a smooth surface ready for painting. Despite this, it is still possible to see the canvas texture in many areas of the work due to the thin layers of paint [see fig. 7]. Wooden panels, which facilitated an even smoother finish, were also commonly used by Tissot as in the case of *Waiting for the Train* (*Willesden Junction*) c1872, which was prepared by English colourman Rowney and Co.¹⁴

As a result of his academic training, Tissot initially relied heavily on carefully studied drawings and oil sketches for his composition. By the early 1870s, however, he preferred to use single figure studies in gouache drawn over pencil or black chalk. According to Wentworth, 'these gouache studies establish expression and pose with an accuracy that required little more than their careful transfer to canvas.'¹⁵ Later, like many other artists of the period, Tissot discovered the benefits of photography as a compositional aid.

Tissot's handling of oil paint in *Still on Top* is skilled and confident.¹⁶ Using small brushes the paint has been applied quickly to the surface in thin layers, or worked up into a light impasto to emphasise the sensual quality of the cloth [see figs. 8 & 9]. A fundamental element of the composition is the decorative use of bright contrasting colours in the arrangement of flags and dresses in the foreground, while objects in the distance merge into a greenish-grey tonality.



Fig 10. Cross-section taken from the white flag at the top. Visible are two ground layers, the lower layer of vermilion red and a top layer of white paint with scattered coloured particles including emerald green.



Fig 11. Detail of the path by the standing woman's dress, showing scumpling of beige paint over red.

The pigments available to artists in the 1870s were considerably different to those in previous centuries. Advances in chemistry had a dramatic effect on the growing metallurgical industries of France and Germany, and, as a consequence, a majority of the pigments introduced to painting in the 19th century were synthetic inorganic materials (metals and their compounds).¹⁷ For the Impressionists, the new colours provided a welcome escape from the constricting dictates of the Académie Française, and the invention of collapsible metal tubes for oil paints made painting out-of-doors a practical reality. Despite his conservative training, Tissot maintained an association with artists of a more independent approach, and so it is not surprising to find that many of the new pigments favoured by the Impressionists can also be identified in *Still on Top*. These include emerald green, viridian, cobalt blue, French ultramarine and chrome yellow.

The range of green colours at the beginning of the century was rather unsatisfactory because of poor colour, tinting strength or permanence. However emerald green, a new pigment based on a compound of copper and arsenic was invented in Germany in 1814. It is a strong blue-green colour, not easily imitated by mixtures of other pigments and it became extremely popular despite its high toxicity. Cheap to make, it was also used for printed wallpaper colours bound in glue, or alternatively as a pesticide.¹⁸ Emerald green was used in the foliage of *Still on Top* in combination with viridian, cobalt blue and chrome yellow, and scattered particles can also be seen in the layers of white [see fig. 10].¹⁹ In the shadows are higher concentrations of viridian, a pigment also identified in the dark greens of *The Widower* 1876, from the collection of

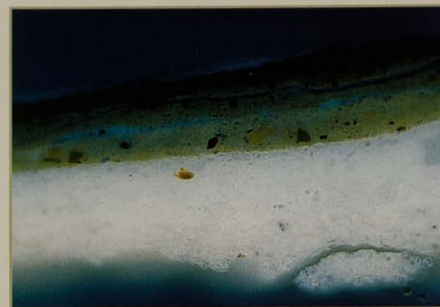


Fig 12. Cross-section from the foliage in the upper right. Between the layers of green paint, a thin layer of varnish fluoresces under ultraviolet light.

the Art Gallery of New South Wales.²⁰ A strong deep cold colour, viridian is chromium-based and became generally available in France in the 1860s.

Natural ultramarine made from the mineral lapis lazuli was traditionally the best blue pigment but it was very rare and expensive. In 1802 a French chemist, L J Thenard, invented cobalt blue which is an extremely stable, pure colour that lacks the green undertones of many other blues. J B Guimet in Toulouse later developed an artificial substitute called French ultramarine in the 1820s. This was more intensely coloured than the natural version but an excellent alternative that was cheaper than cobalt blue.²¹ Both of these pigments were found in *Still on Top* in the blue of the flags and clothing, as well as in the mix of colours that make the greens of the foliage.

Traditional pigments also play an important role and an abundance of lead white and vermilion can be found in *Still on Top*. Chrome yellow, which was developed in the second decade of the 19th century, was found in combination with traditional earth yellows (ochre or sienna). The foliage mix also contained verdigris, umber and ivory black.

Tissot employed the technique of scumbling to full advantage. Thin layers of opaque paint are feathered over the surface so that underlying colours are partially visible. In the path, red colour below the sandy brushwork creates a warm shadow [see fig. 11]. Transparent glazes are utilised in the dark foliage and areas such as the close details of the face [see fig. 7] where a thin layer of red provides a healthy blush. Although glazes traditionally include a resinous component none were identified in samples taken from *Still on Top*.²² Evidence of egg white temporary varnishes have been found, and the

artist certainly applied resinous varnishes between paint layers as can be seen in the cross-section illuminated by ultra-violet light [see fig. 12]. Wetting out, or saturation of the paint layers during painting, was a common practice in the 19th century.

Wentworth writes that by the end of the 1860s Tissot had abandoned the enamel finish of his earlier works and developed a technique more in keeping with the depiction of modern life.²³ A system of small brushstrokes and use of dry pigment is described. Although there are no records of Tissot's purchase of art materials at the time of the painting of *Still on Top*, items bought between 1878–80 from Robersons, an English colourman, record a preference for extra stiff colours.²⁴ It is probable that a higher pigment to medium ratio and the addition of wax thickened the paint allowing a sharper definition of brushwork and a drier rather than oily finish. Despite the 'dry' appearance described by Wentworth the painting appears to have been varnished in the traditional manner. During the recent examination of the painting discoloured residues of an aged mastic resin were found in the interstices of the impasto. Tissot purchased both copal varnish and mastic from Robersons in 1878, presumably for varnishing or glazing.²⁵ The varnish layer was removed and a dammar resin applied before the painting came to the Gallery in 1925.

The conservation treatment of the Gallery's *Still on Top* could only begin once Tissot's painting techniques and materials had been fully investigated, so that informed treatment decisions could be made. To have a painting damaged in such a manner creates challenges for conservators in every sense. The conservation treatment has proved to be an exercise in painting archaeology, but hopefully the results of this detective work will prove of benefit to other conservators and curators working in the field.

The Gallery would like to thank Erica Burgess, part-time conservator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and conservator in private practice, for her significant contribution to the research into Tissot's materials and techniques.

Sarah Hillary, Principal Conservator



Notes

James Tissot: the London years

1 After the Siege of Paris by the Prussians, Tissot had fought on the side of the Communards against the French Government, making him *persona non grata* once order was re-established.

2 From Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life', quoted in Margaret Flanders Darby, 'The conservatory in St John's Wood', *Seductive Surfaces: The Art of Tissot*, ed. Katharine Lochnan, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999) 161.

3 Baudelaire, quoted in Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, (London and New York, Routledge, 1989) 150.

4 See Woolf, 'The Invisible Flâneuse', for further definitions.

5 Darby, 'Seductive Surfaces', 167.

6 The Flag Research Centre in Winchester, Massachusetts, identified many of them in 1967. The white flag with the black cross is the German (Imperial) naval ensign of the era and the yellow flag with the royal standard with a multicoloured triangular border is the royal standard of Austria-Hungary, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, the Tsar of Russia and the British merchant fleet are also represented.

7 As the son of a milliner and a draper, Tissot had a particular knowledge of the structure of fashionable garments, ably demonstrated both in this and many other paintings of the period.

8 Tissot painted another version of the same scene, *Preparing for the Gala*, which has a geometric flower bed in bright colours placed between the spectator and the figures. In this second painting the pond and colonnade can be seen in the background.

9 Michael Wentworth, *James Tissot*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 4.

10 Baudelaire, quoted in Anne Kirker, 'A drypoint by James Jacques Tissot', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly* 52, 1972, 5-6.

11 Kathleen Newton's identity remained a secret for over 50 years. During Tissot's lifetime, she was simply referred to as 'la mystérieuse'. See Wentworth, *James Tissot*, 126ff for a full disclosure of her identity and relationship with Tissot.

Still on Top: an examination of materials and technique

12 David Bomford, J Kirby, J Leighton & A Roy, *Art in the Making: Impressionism*, (London: National Gallery, in association with Yale University Press, 1991) 12.

13 The Salon was the name given to the annual exhibitions held by the French Academy. These were the premier public exhibitions in Paris up until the 1880s.

14 John Timmins, Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Letter to S Hillary, 28th April 1999.

15 Michael Wentworth, *James Tissot*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 105.

16 Samples of the paint medium were identified by Bronwyn Ormsby at the University of Northumbria in 1998 using GC-MS. A majority of the samples were found to be linseed oil although poppyseed oil was found in the white (which was common practice as it was less prone to discolouration).

17 Bomford, *Art in the Making*, 53.

18 E W Fitzhugh ed, *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of their History and Characteristics* vol 3, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 223.

19 Erica Burgess and Sarah Hillary, Auckland Art Gallery, Conservation Report, 1998. Also subsequent analysis using polarised light microscopy by S Hillary. Emerald green was also found mixed with yellow in the brilliant green grass of *Uncle Fred*, a small painting on panel of Tissot's garden at Grove End Road. Technical report of *Uncle Fred* by James Tissot undertaken by UCL Painting Analysis Ltd for Hamish Dewar, private conservator London. Sent to S Hillary 12th February 1999.

20 Paula Dredge, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Email to S Hillary, 28th April 1999.

21 Bomford, *Art in the Making*, 56-8.

22 Burgess and Hillary, Conservation report, 1998.

23 Wentworth, *James Tissot*, 64.

24 Robersons Archive, Hamilton Kerr Institute. Letter to E Burgess, Cambridge, 16th January 1998.

25 Letter to E Burgess, 16th January 1998.

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