

“Tea”

1872

James Tissot (French, 1836–1902)

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James Tissot (French, 1836–1902)
Oil on wood; 26 x 18 7/8 in. (66 x 47.9 cm)

If pointed contrast from Gericault's *Evening, Landscape with an Aqueduct* was what I was after, then James Tissot's representation of upscale social class, elegance, and an allusion to emancipation offered just that. The rendering simply named *Tea* was one of the most exquisite masterpieces gracing the wall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at least in my mind's eye. The composition was that of a well-dressed, young woman leaning over a table about to pour tea. Pretty mundane, you think? Perhaps, but I found this relatively small painting from 1872 to be remarkably photo real. I was immediately drawn to it because of its extraordinary features. While Gericault's painting captured subject matter of tremendous drama with serious undertones, incorporating heavy brush strokes derived from a dark, dramatic palette, the palette in *Tea*, to coin a popular phrase in today's society, underwent an extreme makeover.

Unlike *Evening*, the subject matter in *Tea* was trivial, lighthearted, and rather ostentatious. And to help me gain a deeper understanding of the artist and in so doing, his work, I examined Tissot more in depth. I discovered he possessed a great fondness of the elite and the contemporary social habits of French females of his time. Youthful and successful whether living in London or Paris, he possessed the extraordinary skill to blend traditional technique with subject matter of the time. In addition, a significant change during that time was the emancipation of women, a point that could be significant to the painting.

I learned that, having read the journalism of Baudelaire, Tissot frowned upon subjects the likes of history painting. He instead chose to call attention to the more mundane aspects of life such as fashion and social practices, which are

rife in *Tea*. Given the idea that neoclassical art stressed the rational and traditional, and paid attention to line, detail, settings, and costumes, this rendering embodied all those facets. Now, having all these particulars in my knowledge “bank” made writing about the painting all the more meaningful.

I did not find a woman poised to pour *Tea* to be romantic in the classical sense of the word. There was no intense emotion in her expression. In fact, there was practically no emotion found in her face at all. On the contrary, I found the woman being entrusted to the viewer to be a bit static.

She was also, supposedly, Tissot's mistress, a young Irish woman named Kathleen Newton and described as being "beautiful but rather vacant." I agree. This same woman was also said to be the model in several of his other paintings, albeit, I have only witnessed those on the Internet. The fact that she was Irish may have had some bearing on her light complexion. To elaborate on its overall tone, one would say imagination and freedom from boundaries were not the prevalent sentiments in this painting. There was only a sense of the romantic from a flirtatious standpoint, which was a topic Tissot seemed to treasure and portray extremely well.

The viewer can be considered “romanced” by a sense of sweetness, formality, beauty, and the trappings of wealth and comfort via *Tea*. Short and to the point was his practice of naming his works, i.e. *Ball, Concert, Tea, Printemps, Quiet, Seaside*, among others. Of course, it is vitally important for the viewer to absorb even the minutest details to fully appreciate the piece.

This woman was decidedly youthful with a fair complexion. I sensed no deployment of drama, conflict, challenge, or tension here. There was, however, an assault, if you will, on my dreamer side, or my fantasy-loving alter ego.

The composition cried out to the side of me that allowed me to fantasize. The finer things in life became a reality for me while viewing *Tea*. What would it have been like to boast a lifestyle in which I could dress in elegant frills? How

would I feel having been sent into a daydreaming state even for just a few glorious moments minus the burden of my usual weighty concerns? The sensory impact of the setting was the ultimate in pleasantry for me. It refreshed me and transported me to another time and place. There was a moment when it had occurred to me that she and I could even have shared similar thoughts until I realized the "vacant" facet. I then imagined myself momentarily being the focus of her attention, as if I were standing facing her engaged in sociable chat.

The composition undeniably expressed style and class, she being very well dressed leaning in, ever so slightly, over a well-appointed table to pour hot water for tea. Her form stood before a greatly detailed window through which a lake or river setting (in France?) may be seen. While there was clarity and detail in the background scenery, I believe Tissot intended that venue to hold just enough importance, forcing the viewer to give the woman a greater share of the main focus. I can admit to having stirrings of curiosity as to whether she was about to pour the tea for herself or for someone else, lending her behavior to the role of someone subservient. Indeed, she could have just merely been acting on behalf of her accepted, subservient female role. But then that contradicts the emancipation aspect of the time. Or does it really?

She was poised pleasantly from head to knee, the extent of what the viewer is allowed to see. Even through opulent beauty, a veritable feast for the eyes, her expression remained vacant. This was also thought to be the result of the social climbing women had reached during the time, yet had not fully acclimated to otherwise. I pictured a young woman climbing the social ladder, not yet used to such trappings, yet not ready to let go of mundane habits. Including her undetermined gaze, she was painted with absolute clarity and remarkable precision. Tissot seemed unrelenting in his dedication to meticulousness. Indeed, I can honestly say this work took my breath away.

Contrasts in color, along with impeccable shading gave the painting a strong sense of authenticity. I felt as if I were part of the scene. The woman was dressed decidedly lavish. A black and white pleated garment decorated with small yet bright flowers on a fabric painted to appear soft, was fashioned with billowy ruffles in repetitive layers. It sat under a contrasting black, corseted apron sharing similar repetitive pleating and accentuated her bodice. A large black bonnet ornamented in bright yellow piping and yellow ribbons delicately flowed from the hat, garlanded her head, and framed her alabaster skin. Of course, this accessory seemed very stylish for the time and added certain panache to the painting.

You hardly notice the young woman appeared to have hair gathered up, or the soft, delicate curls which barely touched her fair forehead. Separating her face from her body and interrupting the flow of costume to flesh, a black choker swaddled her neck bringing attention to her expression. Bearing a casual smile, her mouth unpursed, lips open slightly, and her gaze could be, once again, noticed as being calm. Maybe the question on her mind was *should I or shouldn't I? Or I can't believe this [trappings] is happening to me!*

Her skin tones were utterly natural, giving credence to the reality of this piece. This woman rarely saw the sun. Her gesture was deliberate, yet not overpowering. Her right arm reached as her left arm perched the table before her, fingers spread, stabilizing her leaning form. Following up the ample line of her arm, black lace caressed her hands. The lace lent a trace of eroticism to her sexuality and boldness to the mood of the painting. This was accomplished by the use of the dark color as well as leaving her fingers exposed. Yet, she grabbed hold of the teapot, prepared to pour. Was this painting meant for male or female consumption?

Considering the onset of emancipation, my ideas were shifted. The full array of an afternoon tea confirmed that Tissot had followed through in his

expression of the finery that he so enjoyed. Its oval base rested on four slender, decorated supports. The supplemental pieces all flattered the ensemble. Other neighboring pieces reflected the same style and class as the teapot. Teacups and other accessories were brightly trimmed in black and gold and placed on a serving dish also with elegant supports. The full sequence before the figure was carefully depicted in contrasting colors. With the utmost in precision and skill, Tissot demonstrated a distinct knowledge of the use of shading. He was able to portray not only the arrangement in the foreground in precise terms, but also the multiple, distinct, and separate lines of the background blinds. Even the details of the city behind the blinds are blended to perfection, and therefore mesh in perfect harmony therein.

Finally, the subtle reflection of the sun through the open window, as it cast its magic over the scene, left me with a far deeper appreciation, fascination, and reverence for the talent of artists who comprise art history.