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EST. 1817

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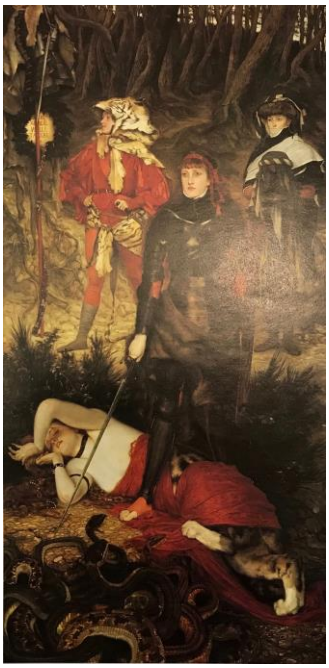
James Jacques Joseph Tissot (Nantes 1836-1902 Doubs)



Triumph of the Will – The Challenge

Signed "J J Tissot" (lower right)

Oil on canvas

85 x 43 in. (216 x 109 cm.)

Painted *circa* 1877

Provenance

The artist, until his death in 1902.
Mlle Jeanne Tissot, until her death in 1964;
her sale, Château de Buillon, 8-9 Nov 1964.
Private collection, Besancon.
Anonymous sale; Christie's Monaco, 15 June 1986, lot 119.
Private collection.
Anonymous sale; Sotheby's, London, 9 June 1993, lot 25.
Purchased by the previous owner in 1994.

Exhibited

London, Grosvenor Gallery, East Gallery, 1877, no. 22.

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Literature:

J. Ruskin, Fors Ciavigera Letter 79, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, Vol XXIX, p. 161.
J. Laver, *Vulgar Society - The Romantic Career of James Tissot*, 1936, pp. 37-8, 69.
W. E. Misfeldt, *James Jacques Joseph Tissot: A Bibliocritical Study*, Ann Arbor, University Microfilms 1971, pp. 168-70.
M. Wentworth, *James Tissot*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984, pp. 136-8, 140, 141, 202.
K. Matyjaskiewicz (Ed.), *James Tissot* (Catalogue to Exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1984-5), 1984, p. 115, no. 85.
C. Wood, *Tissot*, 1986, p. 95 (study illus. p1.93).
C. Newall, *The Grosvenor Gallery Exhibitions: Change and Continuity in the Victorian Art World*, 1995, pp.26 & 129.

Tissot's *The Challenge* was intended as the first of a cycle of blockbuster allegorical and "ideal" paintings to be entitled *The Triumph of the Will* or *A Poem in Five Parts*. The other four paintings in the series, *The Temptation*, *The Rescue*, *The Victory*, and *The Reward* were perhaps worked on, but were never completed. Quite what didactic purpose was intended for the entire cycle is unclear; even the iconography of *The Challenge* was subject to different interpretations when the painting was seen at the first Grosvenor exhibition in 1877. The figure of *Will* is shown as a dark-haired woman, wearing armour and carrying a sword and a shield; she is attended by two female pages, representing the virtues of *Daring* and *Reserve*. *Will* strides forward, stepping over the recumbent figure of *Vice*, which is half-woman, half-cat, and beside which a writhing mass of snakes is seen. At the left hand side appears a standard, upon which is inscribed the motto "*Noscere, Audere, Volle, Tacere*" (to Know, to Dare, to Will and to Be Silent; referred to as "The Four Powers of the Magus").

Stung by criticism of the somewhat mundane subject matter of his paintings, and deeply struck by Burne-Jones's "ideal" art, in 1877 Tissot ceased exhibiting at the Royal Academy (he did not exhibit there again until 1881) and sent ten works, including the present one, to the newly opened Grosvenor Gallery, founded by Sir Coutts Lindsay, which was less conventional than the Royal Academy and a hotbed of aestheticism that favoured poetic subjects. Indeed, the Grosvenor Gallery was the most progressive exhibition space of the Victorian age. The paintings

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and works of art shown there challenged artistic convention and were the cause of virulent debate about the means and purpose of modern art, while the very existence of a gallery which attracted so much fashionable attention and which lent such prestige to the artists who exhibited there served to overthrow the stultifying influence of the contemporary Royal Academy.

Amongst his fellow exhibitors were the high priests of meaning, Laurence Alma-Tadema, Edward Coley Burne-Jones (whose reputation was to a degree made there), John Everett Millais, Frederic, Lord Leighton, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, George Frederic Watts, Edward Poynter and Albert Moore. The Grosvenor Gallery provided a sumptuous setting of green and crimson brocade, architectural elements from diverse sources, and lavish antique furniture.

The Challenge is an exceptional painting in the context of Tissot's oeuvre. He seldom attempted uplifting or morally edifying subjects, preferring representations of the life that he and Kathleen Newton (whose son Cecil George was said to be the model for *Daring* in the present composition) lived together in St John's Wood, or scenes of the Parisian and London *demi-mondes*. It seems that the artist conceived of this type of subject as a response to the criticism that had previously been made of pictures of his at the Royal Academy that they were trivial and vulgar. Furthermore, Sir Coutts Lindsay, the proprietor of the Grosvenor Gallery, set store by works which took serious subjects - hoping that by this means his newly-established gallery would gain a reputation as the headquarters of what the Victorians called High Art. George Frederic Watts and Edward Burne-Jones responded to Lindsay's invitation to exhibit at the Grosvenor in 1877 by sending eminently serious works; the former exhibited his bleak allegory *Love and Death*, while the latter sent a galaxy of mythological and symbolical paintings. Tissot had few works at hand to match these themes - a painting of Faust's *Marguerite* from an earlier period was sent under the new title *Meditation*. Otherwise he depended on the partly completed *The Triumph of the Will* to foster his reputation as an artist with moral and aesthetic ideals to offer. As Michael Wentworth wrote of the present painting, "The complicated symbolism of this bevy of superwomen and serpents is Tissot's [only] aesthetic...homage to 'high' art" (M. Wentworth, *James Tissot*, 1984, p.137).