

Henry Ossawa Tanner

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Fig. 55 Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner (1835–1923).

In 1889, two years before Henry Ossawa Tanner went abroad to study art, the American critic Mariana Van Rensselaer commented on the orientation of American artists: "Of late . . . our art has grown to mature stature, and is now amenable to the severest tests of merit. A whole generation of young American painters believe in the necessity of scientific training, and appeal to European criticism and to cosmopolitan standards of success."¹ The attitude detected by Van Rensselaer accelerated the migration of American artists to Europe. Unlike their predecessors who had been drawn to Italy, England, and Germany to study and live, Tanner and other late-nineteenth-century artists gathered in France, then the center of the international art world. Europe's creative freedom, generous patronage, and well-developed exhibition system contrasted sharply with America's conservative atmosphere and limited opportunities. Gradually and without premeditation, many American artists became expatriates, responding to their natural desire to work where they were most productive and appreciated.² Henry Ossawa Tanner's decision to remain abroad was a far more deliberate act. His perception of the inhospitable art scene in the United States was further heightened by his experiences with racial prejudice, leading him to realize that he could not fulfill his potential as an artist while fighting discrimination. A disavowal of his country's social conditions, his decision was also a personal affirmation of creativity as the basis of his life.³

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born on June 21, 1859, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of English, African, and Indian ancestry. His middle name was a tribute to John Brown, the martyred white abolitionist who had clashed with pro-slavery forces in Osawatimie, Kansas, in 1856.⁴ His father Benjamin Tucker Tanner [fig. 55], college-educated and seminary-trained, was a highly respected minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; he was made a bishop in 1888. A distinguished teacher, author, and editor, he frequently dealt with religious and racial issues in his publications. The artist's mother Sarah Miller Tanner [fig. 56] was a former slave whose mother had sent her children north on the Underground Railroad never to see them again after they were dispersed to Pittsburgh and other locations. Sarah shared her husband's interest in education and conducted a neighborhood school in the



Fig. 56 Sarah Miller Tanner (1840–1914?)

family's Pittsburgh home. Both parents instilled in their seven children a deep pride in being fourth-generation Americans.⁵ The Tanner children were well educated and several led successful professional lives although none achieved the international stature of their oldest brother Henry. Carlton Tanner, for example, served as the minister for large African Methodist Episcopal congregations in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Tanner's sister Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson studied at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and, in 1891, became the first woman and the first black licensed to practice medicine in Alabama, where she established a nurses' school at the Tuskegee Institute.

Between 1860 and 1866 the family moved frequently while Tanner's father worked with various churches and schools in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. Tanner's childhood during the Civil War was scarred by such incidents as a Confederate soldier's rough treatment of his father, an experience the youth could not reconcile with his religious beliefs. In 1866 Tanner's father became a minister in Philadelphia, a rapidly growing city that rivaled Boston and New York, but retained an essentially conservative outlook. In 1860 one-third of Pennsylvania's black population lived in Philadelphia, and the public school system which Tanner attended remained segregated until 1881.⁶ The education-oriented Tanners probably attended the Centennial Exposition in 1876, where Edward Mitchell Bannister's award-winning painting, *Under the Oaks*, and Edmonia Lewis's sculpture, *Death of Cleopatra*, represented the accomplishments of Afro-American artists.

Young Tanner, however, had already⁷ decided to become an artist around 1872 after watching a landscape painter at work in Fairmont Park. By his own account, he "secured from a common paint shop some dry colors and a couple of scraggy brushes. Then I was out immediately for a sketch. I went straight to the spot where I had seen the artist the day before. Don't you suppose a boy, trying to hold a canvas between his knees and mix dry colors upon a pasteboard palette, might be liable to get things mixed? Well, I did. . . . But that I was happy, supremely so, there was no doubt."⁷ Inspired by an article in an art journal stating America's need for a great marine painter, he copied seascapes he saw in art galleries and shop windows along Philadelphia's prosperous Chestnut Street.⁸ At age thirteen, however, Tanner "renounced marine painting to become an American Landseer" [Sir Edwin Henry] when his friend James Hess, an equally precocious artist, informed him of the scarcity of animal painters in America.⁹

While still in school, Tanner approached members of Philadelphia's white art community about taking drawing and painting lessons in their studios. The results were disheartening. Some artists refused to accept him because of his race. Others proved to be inadequate or insensitive teachers. One repeatedly discouraged him from pursuing his interest in attending the Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, the country's oldest art school. His parents, too, disapproved. Tanner's father, recognizing the difficult life an aspiring black artist would confront, wanted his son to follow him in the ministry, a highly respected career in the black community, or to learn a useful trade after he completed his schooling. Respecting his father's wishes, seventeen-year-old Henry began working in a family friend's flour business, painting in his spare

time. The job proved too strenuous for Tanner's fragile health and his parents finally agreed that he should be permitted to study art. Thereafter, they encouraged his artistic efforts and provided financial assistance to the extent that the large family's limited means allowed.

Although poor health prevented Tanner from receiving formal training immediately, he continued to work independently during the 1870s. While recuperating in the Adirondacks and Florida, he sketched and painted landscapes. At home he sketched at the Philadelphia zoo and made clay models of people and animals, exercises he continued for several decades. He developed a close friendship with landscape painter C.H. Shearer, whose accounts of studying in Munich and Düsseldorf inspired the young artist's interest in foreign travel. Shearer's kindness and encouragement also helped the shy and vulnerable young man overcome the pain inflicted by his encounters with racial discrimination.

In the fall of 1880 Tanner at last enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, where he completed at least two years of training.¹⁰ His teacher was Thomas Eakins, who had studied in Paris with Jean-Léon Gérôme at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Appointed Professor of Drawing and Painting in 1879, Eakins had made radical changes in the school's method of instruction. Contrary to the prevailing method—drawing from casts of classical sculpture and copying paintings—Eakins emphasized drawing and painting from life. Both men and women worked from nude models and dissected cadavers to increase their knowledge of anatomy and discipline their powers of observation. Eakins was an inspired teacher and he reviewed his students' work regularly. Tanner was so impressed by Eakins that he was fearful of changing a study his teacher had praised. Throughout his career, Tanner recalled Eakins's subsequent exhortation: "What have you been doing? Get it better, or get it worse. No middle ground of compromise."¹¹

Fig. 57 Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1897, cat. no. 39.



In 1897, when Tanner painted portraits of his father and mother [fig.57,cat.no.39], he followed the strong modeling and psychologically penetrating approach of his teacher's portraiture. Even after leaving the Academy, Tanner remained in contact with Eakins. *Portrait of Henry O. Tanner* [fig.58] (Hyde Collection), painted during Tanner's visit to Philadelphia in 1902, was a complimentary measure of Eakins's respect for his former student.

Tanner left no accounts of his relatively brief experiences as the only Afro-American among the Academy's approximately two hundred students. According to the memoirs of his fellow student, the American illustrator Joseph Pennell, Academy officials canvassed the students in the Antique and Life classes about admitting a young black man. It is likely that Pennell referred to Tanner when he wrote:

He came, he was young, an octoroon, very well dressed, far better than most of us. His wool [hair], if he had any, was cropped so short you could not see it, and he had a nice mustache. He worked at night in the Antique, and, last of all, he drew very well. . . . He was quiet and modest, and he "painted too," it seemed, "among his other accomplishments." We were interested at first, but he soon passed almost unnoticed, though the room was hot. Little by little, however, we were conscious of a change. I can hardly explain, but he seemed to want things; we seemed in the way, and the feeling grew. . . . to cut a long story short, one night his easel was carried out into the middle of Broad Street and, though not painfully crucified, he was firmly tied to it and left there.¹²

After leaving the Academy in 1882, Tanner struggled to establish himself as an artist for the next six years. Philadelphia was a city essentially disinterested in art and, according to one observer, offered artists few opportunities.

When in Boston any fellow paints a picture or writes a book he is approached and fostered for Boston's sake and Boston's name. We of Philadelphia steer quite wide of this amiable if hasty encouragement. We seem to distrust our own power to do anything out of the common; and when a young man tries to, our minds close against him with a civic instinct of disparagement. A Boston failure in art surprises Boston; it is success that surprises Philadelphia.¹³

In this atmosphere Tanner exhibited and sold his work infrequently and undoubtedly encountered additional restrictions as an Afro-American artist. He tried to support himself by selling drawings and prints to New York magazines. *Harper's Young People* published his wood engraving, *Little Girls with Deer* [fig.59], based on sketches made at the Philadelphia zoo.

In 1888 Tanner moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he opened a small photography studio.¹⁴ Discouraged by his experiences in Philadelphia, he decided to pursue a business that would provide the means and free time to paint. Tanner owed his familiarity with photographic techniques to Eakins, who considered the camera a necessary and legitimate tool for artists. The reasons for choosing Atlanta are unknown, although the city's large black



Fig. 58 Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Henry O. Tanner*, 1902, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York.



Fig. 59 Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Little Girls with Deer*, 1888, wood engraving, 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Location unknown.

population and its reputation as a center of higher education for Afro-Americans may have influenced his decision. The venture failed, however, and Tanner, distressed to the point that he could not paint, closed the studio. A trip to North Carolina revived him, and he made numerous sketches of the black people living in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Nevertheless, he remained in Atlanta through 1890, teaching drawing to members of the Clark University faculty. He secured this position with the assistance of its trustee, Bishop Joseph Crane Hartzell, a prominent Methodist Episcopal clergyman and the first of Tanner's several white benefactors. Bishop Hartzell and his wife purchased many of his paintings to help finance the artist's first trip to Europe.¹⁵

On January 4, 1891, Tanner sailed for Europe, intending to study in Rome. After spending a week in Paris, however, he quickly changed his plans. If at first he "felt what it was to be a stranger in a strange land,"¹⁶ he soon found cultural, social, and artistic variety that provided a freedom and camaraderie unavailable to him in America's segregated society.

Unlike his teacher Eakins, Tanner could not attend the government-operated Ecole des Beaux-Arts which no longer admitted foreign students. Instead, he enrolled in one of the most popular private schools in Paris, the Académie Julien, which he attended throughout the 1890s [fig.60]. Students there pursued their work fairly independently, paying for the studios and models provided by the academy in exchange for weekly instruction and appraisal by visiting instructors from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Tanner's principal teachers were Jean Joseph Benjamin-Constant and Jean Paul Laurens, both widely admired for their large genre, historical, and biblical scenes executed with the detailed realism and sharp colors of French academic painting. Serious-minded and shy, Tanner was surprised by the academy's crowded conditions and unruly atmosphere: "Never have I seen such a bedlam—or men waste so much time. Of course, I had come to study at such a cost that every minute seemed precious and not to be frittered away."¹⁷

In America Tanner had not resolved the direction, content, or style of his art. Trying his hand at painting portraits, animals, seascapes, and landscapes, he seems to have favored a realistic style similar to that of many of his contemporaries. Once in Paris, his approach became more personal. He combined insights inspired by Eakins with those gleaned from the variety of subjects and styles characteristic of French art during the 1890s.

Genre themes—increasingly significant among American painters and venerated in France—preoccupied him until 1895. The chronology and number of Tanner's works in this vein are uncertain, yet it is clear that they involve varying degrees of sentiment and social commentary, depending primarily on the themes and activities depicted. Tanner's earlier genre paintings of black subjects include the undated *Savings* (Spelman College), *Old Couple Looking at a Portrait of Lincoln* [fig.61,cat.no.36], ca. 1892–93, *The Banjo Lesson* [fig.62,cat.no.37], 1893, and *The Thankful Poor*, 1894 (private collection).¹⁸ These paintings depict rural Afro-Americans engaged in commonplace situations, probably based on his drawings of black people in North Carolina. *Old Couple Looking at a Portrait of Lincoln* is a sketchily rendered anecdotal piece. To twentieth-century eyes, the couple's admiring pose might suggest a stereotype, yet Lincoln's veneration by nineteenth-century Afro-Americans

Fig. 60 Students at the Académie Julien, 1890s; Tanner fourth from left in back row.



cannot be denied. In the more accomplished *Banjo Lesson*, Tanner poignantly suggests family ties as well as a heritage transmitted from generation to generation. His sensitive modulation of light defines the painting's structure and mood, evidence of his attentiveness to Eakins's teaching and his newly acquired knowledge of Dutch painting. Tanner especially admired Rembrandt's ability to paint with humanity and feeling and the artist's use of light to convey the essence of the real world.¹⁹

Tanner's black genre works were pioneering efforts among Afro-American painters who had previously concentrated on portraits of historical black figures or works such as Edward Mitchell Bannister's *Newspaper Boy* [pl. VI, cat. no. 20], in which the subject's racial identity is understated (if not uncertain). Moreover, Tanner's humble yet dignified Afro-American scenes offset considerably the patronizing stereotypes of blacks typically created by white American artists, among whom Eastman Johnson, Winslow Homer, and Richard Norris Brooke provided noteworthy exceptions. Tanner's visit to Philadelphia in 1893, however, convinced him that he could not fight racial prejudice, and after painting *The Thankful Poor* in 1894, he abandoned black subjects.²⁰

Although Tanner turned initially to his American experience for genre subjects, he also painted the peasants of Brittany in such works as *The Bagpipe Lesson*, 1895 (University Museum, Hampton University), and *The Young Sabot Maker* [fig. 63], 1895 (private collection). Each is a variation on the subject of *The Banjo Lesson*. Tanner may have considered their mutual theme universal, yet his ability to convey human dignity is more strongly felt in his sober, almost spiritual portrayal of the elderly black musician and his young charge. *The Young Sabot Maker* is, however, more technically advanced in its spatial relationships and naturalistic handling of the figures. Tanner sketched his study for the painting [fig. 64, cat. no. 38] in oil, a practice recommended by Eakins as the most rapid and powerful means of capturing the overall construction and movement of figures as well as the color and balance of a composition. Tanner's progress did not go unnoticed: *The Young Sabot Maker*

Considered the “dean of American painters” living in Paris. Tanner preferred the city’s open atmosphere where race was not the barometer of his subject matter and achievement.³³ Afro-American leaders, however, repeatedly urged him to return to the United States and join them as a spokesman precisely because of his early black genre paintings and his international renown. Family friend Booker T. Washington asked Tanner to resume painting scenes of Afro-American life as a means of providing both white and black Americans with a more accurate and dignified image of the race. During the 1920s Alain Locke tried to enlist his assistance in championing the concept of the “New Negro,” an Afro-American in the process of rediscovering and asserting his rich culture in the eyes of the world.³⁴ Tanner never disclaimed or discredited his heritage, yet he perceived attempts to elevate him to the role of exemplar as variations on the separatism he had so conscientiously tried to avoid. Tanner was self-effacing and shied away from circumstances which distracted him from his art; he saw painting as his mission—a culmination rather than an initiation of a tradition.

Notes

1. Mariana Van Rensselaer. “Frederick Arthur Bridgman.” in *American Art and American Art Collections*, vol. 1. ed. Walter Montgomery (Boston: 1889). 177.
2. For a discussion of the American expatriate movement. see Michael Quick. *American Expatriate Painters of the Late Nineteenth Century*. catalogue of an exhibition organized by The Dayton Art Institute, 1976.
3. The author’s understanding of Tanner’s decision was greatly enhanced by discussions with his grandniece, Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter, who is currently researching the artist’s life.
4. Information provided by Dr. Minter. John Brown was hanged in 1859, the year of Tanner’s birth.
5. For a history of the family, see “The Tanner Family,” *The Negro History Bulletin* X, no. 7 (April 1947): 147–52, 167. Dr. Minter graciously provided the story of Sarah Tanner’s passage to freedom. Information about Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson was verified and expanded by both Dr. Minter and Adele Alexander, Washington, D.C.
6. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957, revised edition), 67; Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: An American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 12. Mrs. Mathews’s book is currently the principal published source of information on Tanner’s life.
7. Henry O. Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life, I” *The World’s Work* (June 1909): 11662. Copies of the article can be found in the Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
8. Tanner mentioned, but did not identify, the art journal and article. However, he attached great significance to it. Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life,” 11663.
9. Ibid.
10. Walter Simon, “Henry O. Tanner: A Study of the Development of An American Negro Artist, 1859–1937,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1961), 66, states that the records of the Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts indicate Tanner’s attendance at the school between 1880 and 1881. Jessie Fauset, “Henry Ossawa Tanner,” *The Crisis* 27 (April 1924): 2557, cites Tanner as stating that he studied with Eakins for four or five years.