HENRY OSSAWA TANNER

CONCEPT

Henry Ossawa Tanner is remembered for painting African Americans in a dignified way and for his expressive treatment of Biblical scenes. His numerous prestigious awards helped to elevate the status of his fellow African American artists. Tanner will always have a special place in the hearts of those honoring African American masters because he was one of the first to achieve international recognition for his art work. His determination and direction in life is a story in itself.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

In 1859, Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a college-educated teacher and minister and Sarah Miller Tanner, a former slave who had escaped the South. Although born in Pittsburgh, he spent most of his youth in Philadelphia. He told of an awakening interest in art when he was about thirteen. He was walking in the park with his father. While there, he observed for the first time, a professional artist.

The next day Tanner took fifteen cents and bought some dry colors and a couple scraggy brushes and went straight to the spot he had observed the artist and began sketching. His deep interest and passion for painting continued and as he matured and began planning his future profession, an art career was likely.

Tanner began his formal art education at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest professional art school in the United States, in 1880. Tanner stayed at the academy only two years. He left Philadelphia for Atlanta in 1888 to become an independent artist and a business man, producing and selling photography. Experiencing the racial prejudice and patronizing attitude of many Southerners

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was difficult; however, he was willing to overlook it in order to earn enough money to go to Europe for further art training. Not only was acquiring an education in Europe prestigious and the knowledge useful, but Europe also had a reputation for "color blindness."

Unfortunately, he was unable to raise the funds to move to Europe, and as a result, he took a position teaching art at Clark College. While in Atlanta, Tanner met Bishop and Mrs. Joseph Crane Hartzell, white patrons who enjoyed his art and were very supportive. They arranged an exhibition of Tanner's work in Cincinnati, and when none of his works sold, bought the entire exhibit. With this money he was able to travel to Europe in 1891. He intended to study in Rome, but after brief stays in Liverpool and London, he arrived in Paris and loved the art and artists enough to stay.

Paris became his home for the next forty-five years. He enrolled in the Académie Julian with well-known teachers Jean-Paul Laurens and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant. It was here that he painted *The Banjo Lesson (*1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894), two paintings that reflect respect and dignity for the African American. He won an honorable mention in the Paris Salon in 1895 for his painting *Daniel in the Lion's Den*. This same painting was awarded a silver medal at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900 and a silver medal at the Pan American exhibition in Buffalo in 1901. The French government bought *Resurrection of Lazarus* for exhibition at the Luxembourg Gallery and, eventually, had it installed in the Louvre. Rodman Wannamaker, a Philadelphia merchant, loved the painting and funded Tanner's trip to Palestine. It was on this trip that he painted *Escape to Egypt*.

His use of dramatic lighting in his paintings between 1890 and 1905 are prime examples of modern chiaroscuro. Another distinguishing mark of a Tanner was his skillful use of multiple glazes.

Brief visits to the United States convinced Tanner that he didn't want to deal with racial discrimination. Although he certainly had many friends and benefactors who were white, he could not deal with the segregation of his home country. He married a white opera singer from San Francisco, Jessie Olssen, whom he had met in Paris, and letters, pictures, memories from friends, and their only son, Jesse, highlight their wonderful relationship and marriage. Tanner, for years, was a loyal member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was friends with W. E. B. DuBois, a leading voice for African American issues during the Harlem Renaissance. Tanner died in 1937 and was buried in France next to his wife, Jessie.

ABOUT THE ART

The Flight into Egypt is one of many of Tanner's biblical scenes. Others include *Daniel in the Lion's Den, the Annunciation, The Raising of Lazarus, Nicodemus,* and the *Two Disciples at the Tomb.* However, unlike his earlier biblical scenes that were painted in variations of brown tones, *The Flight into Egypt* has layers of pastel colors that could speak about pre–dawn in a very cool winter atmosphere. Again, unlike the figures in *The Three Women at the Tomb* which took up most of the composition, *The*

Flight into Egypt's main characters (Mary, Joseph, the babe in arms, and the donkeys) take up a relatively small space. The middle and the background predominate, thus giving a feeling of lonely retreat--an escape. Also, unlike many of his other paintings, Tanner here does not use intense chiaroscuro, and yet a sense of reality is seen and felt.

Many of his other paintings have low key tone, however *The Flight into Egypt* is high key, pre–dating Tanner's later series of paintings of the Moroccan landscape. Seen in the foreground is one of the techniques that Tanner used, a very time-consuming, layer upon layer technique of laying in color as transparent glazes. The result was a vivid, fresh color that was more than just a tint (color mixed with white). Tanner's colors were vibrant in hue as well as high key. Thematically *Flight into Egypt* is a very personal work. Both the Holy Family and Tanner left their homelands to avoid impending persecution.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Imagine being on a ship to Paris and meeting Henry Ossawa Tanner. Write a story describing a conversation with Tanner about his goals, his reasons for leaving Atlanta, and your response.

SCIENCE

Tanner used scientific information about color to create moods that were specifically related to the tone or "key" of the values (light/light, medium/light, medium, medium dark, dark/dark) he used. He used browns and lower key colors in his earliest paintings, whereas he used a higher key after he traveled to the Middle East and North Africa. Make a chart organized by values observing the difference an extra drop of white makes. Using the color blue, add one drop of white to the first sample, two drops of white to the second sample, three drops of white for the third example, and so on. Note the change toward a higher key and the difference in intensity of hue if any. Discuss how alternate ways of mixing colors (starting with a different hue of blue and thinning the transparent paint to a glaze so it would both raise the intensity and key).

MATH

Make a grid over a copy of *Flight into Egypt*. Count every square in the foreground that is half a square or more. Do the same for middle ground and background. When there is an overlap, count the square for the category most represented. Write the result as a ratio.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Make a timeline of major events in Tanner's life and find corresponding events happening in either Europe or America or both, such as World War I and the Great Depression. You will need at least five events.

Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1907–12, Fanny Bryce Lehmer Endowment, 2002.47