

## REVIEW ESSAY

### HENRY OSSAWA TANNER: *MODERN SPIRIT* EXHIBITION, PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA

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The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) is located in Philadelphia within walking distance of City Hall. Founded in 1805 by painter and scientist Charles Willson Peale, sculptor William Rush, and other artists and business leaders, PAFA holds the distinction of being the oldest art school and art museum in the United States. Its current “historic landmark” building opened in 1876, three years before Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937) enrolled as one of PAFA’s first African American students. Tanner would later become the first African American artist to achieve international acclaim for his work.

Today, PAFA is comprised of two adjacent buildings—the “historic landmark” building at 118 North Broad Street and the Samuel M. V. Hamilton Building at 128 N. Broad Street. The oldest building was designed by architects Frank Furness and George W. Hewitt and has been designated a National Historic Landmark, hence its name. In 1976 PAFA underwent a delicately managed restoration process to ensure that the architectural and historical integrity of the building was maintained.

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PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 79, NO. 2, 2012.  
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The Lenfest Plaza opened adjacent to PAFA on October 1, 2011, and was celebrated with the inaugural lighting of “Paint Torch,” a sculpture by internationally renowned American artist Claes Oldenburg.

In early 2012 PAFA assembled the largest retrospective of Henry Ossawa Tanner’s work to be showcased in North America. The exhibition, entitled “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit,” is both reflective and celebratory. The exhibition’s title is extracted from a quote in a May 1900 edition of *Cosmopolitan* where Tanner is described as “not only a biblical painter but . . . has brought to modern art a new spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This review of the “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit” exhibition serves the dual purpose of providing historical insight into the artist’s influences and a review of some of the exhibition’s notable pieces.

### The History of the Tanner Family

Henry Ossawa Tanner’s father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was a former slave who later became an influential African Methodist Episcopal bishop. Born on December 25, 1835, in Pittsburgh to Hugh and Isabel Tanner, Benjamin exhibited a strong work ethic at an early age. By age nine, he was delivering newspapers to assist in supplementing the family’s income. In 1852 Benjamin was accepted into Avery College, a training school for African Americans in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. It was at Avery College that Benjamin Tanner met fellow student and future wife Sarah Elizabeth Miller, a runaway slave who was the daughter of a white slave master.

Benjamin Tanner joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1856 and married Sarah Miller two years later. The next several years proved to be both challenging and exciting for the young couple. The Tanner welcomed their first son, Henry Ossawa Tanner, in 1859 while Benjamin Tanner completed his education at the Western Theological Seminary in 1860. It was also in 1860 that Benjamin Tanner was ordained as a deacon, made an elder in the AME Church, and relocated his family to Washington, DC, to create an AME church. While in Washington, Benjamin Tanner established the first school for freedmen in the United States Navy Yard and managed several freedman schools in Maryland.

Four years later, in 1864, Benjamin Tanner was appointed to lead the founding church of the African Episcopal Methodist faith—Mother Bethel AME in Philadelphia—and again relocated his family for his call to

ministerial duty. The Tanners moved into a large home at 2908 Diamond Street in North Philadelphia and became immediately embedded in elite Philadelphia African American society.<sup>2</sup> Sarah Miller Tanner kept busy as well. She would give birth to seven children and would later become a founding member of the Mite Missionary Society of the AME Church, one of the United States' first societies for African American women.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Tanner remained at Mother Bethel for nearly twenty years. During this period, his attention turned toward influencing the press to promote African American solidarity in addressing racial injustice. He was elected secretary of the AME General Conference in 1868 and appointed editor of the *Christian Recorder*, which became one of the largest African American-owned periodicals in the United States. Ten years later, Benjamin Tanner received a Doctor of Divinity degree from Wilberforce College.

In 1884, the same year that Christopher James Perry Jr. founded the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Benjamin Tanner launched the *AME Church Review*. The apex of Benjamin Tanner's career happened in 1888 when he was consecrated a bishop. Bishop Tanner published highly regarded religious works, including *An Apology for African Methodism* (1867) and *Outline and Government of the A.M.E. Church* (1883). He continued to lead various AME churches throughout his career until his death on January 14, 1923, in Washington, DC.<sup>4</sup>

Given the religious, social, and professional status of the Tanner family, it is not surprising that Bishop Benjamin and Sarah Tanner initially discouraged Henry Ossawa Tanner in pursuing a career as an artist. The Tanners firmly believed that education was an essential element for success for African Americans. Henry also had to live in the proverbial shadow of his brilliant older sister, Dr. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson (who enrolled in the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania as the only African American student in her class). She earned an MD with high honors in 1891, becoming one of the first black women physicians in the United States. She then became the first woman of any race to be licensed to practice medicine in Alabama. Her career milestones there included working at Tuskegee University as a physician, pharmacist, professor, and founder of a nurses' training school.<sup>5</sup>

However, a career in ministry or medicine was not Henry Ossawa Tanner's destiny. He was determined to make his own way in the world, pursuing his passion as his profession.

## Henry O. Tanner: The Rise of a “Modern Spirit”

Born on June 21, 1859, in Pittsburgh, Henry Ossawa Tanner was given a middle name that honored abolitionist John Brown's raid on the proslavery community of Osawatimie, Kansas, three years before. His family was affluent, educated, and surrounded by African Americans of similar backgrounds. The Tanners relocated several times during young Henry's life but settled in Philadelphia for twenty years after the elder Tanner was appointed pastor of the historic Mother Bethel AME Church.<sup>6</sup>

At age thirteen, Henry was walking with his father in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park one day and came across an artist painting a large tree. Captivated by this visual stimulation, he cajoled his parents out of fifteen cents to purchase some dry colors and brushes.

In 1876, more than 10 million visitors descended on Philadelphia for the Centennial Exposition, considered the nation's first World's Fair. At this event, officially referred to as the “International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine,” Henry Tanner was introduced to artistic styles from around the world, much of which was exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA).<sup>7</sup> It was after the Centennial Exposition that Henry Tanner emotionally wrestled with the idea of enrolling in PAFA for three years while continuing to paint images of animals at the Philadelphia Zoo.

Against his parents' wishes, Henry Tanner enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1879 as one of the school's first African American students. He studied on and off for six years under the tutelage of Thomas Eakins, who taught Tanner new approaches to drawing anatomy. Tanner quickly became one of Eakins's favorite students. But, in spite of Eakins's attention and support, Henry Tanner never graduated from PAFA. The writings of some of Tanner's classmates suggest that he encountered numerous racially motivated verbal and physical attacks from white PAFA students.

Henry Tanner left Philadelphia in 1888 and moved to Atlanta to set up a studio and teach at Clark Atlanta University, a black college. By 1891, Tanner had grown weary of the racism that prevented full acceptance of his work in America. During this period, most American artists painted African American subjects either as grotesque caricatures or sentimental figures plagued by poverty. These stereotypical portrayals of African Americans did not gel with Tanner's sensibilities as a member of an affluent family. He sought to represent African Americans with dignity and wrote: “Many of

the artists who have represented Negro life have seen only the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior."

In 1899 Tanner married Jessie Olssen, a white opera singer from San Francisco. The couple's only child, Jesse Ossawa Tanner, was born in New York in 1903. Frustrated by exclusion he endured in America, Tanner permanently moved his family to France in 1904. Tanner rarely spoke of his disenchantment with racial discrimination in the United States. One of the few instances when he addressed this painful topic is in a letter he wrote in 1914 to Eunice Tietjens explaining why he did not desire to return to the United States: "This condition has driven me out of the country, but still the best friends I have are 'white' Americans and while I can not sing our National Hymn, "Land of Liberty," etc. deep down in my heart I love it and am sometimes sad that I cannot live where my heart is."<sup>8</sup>

Over the next thirty years, Tanner would make brief visits to America for exhibitions and to see his relatives. During World War I, he worked for the Red Cross' Public Information unit and sketched images from the battle lines. The French government made him a knight in the National Order of the Legion of Honor in 1923 for his artistic contributions.<sup>9</sup>

While celebrated internationally, Henry O. Tanner posed a sociocultural problem for some members of the African American community. His refusal to allow himself to be solely branded as a "colored artist" drew both criticism and praise. He was featured on the cover of the NAACP's *The Crisis* in August 1925 as one of "six negro leaders," yet was challenged repeatedly for not using his fame to elevate issues of African American disenfranchisement. His response was that his work was "preaching with his brush."<sup>10</sup>

Tanner died in France on May 25, 1937, after a long illness. Even posthumously, he continued to make history. The Smithsonian Institute exhibited his work in 1969. The U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp in his honor in 1973. Sixty years after his death, his painting *Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City* (ca. 1885) entered the permanent art collection of the White House as the first painting by an African American artist to be purchased through the White House Endowment Fund. This piece is among several special works exhibited at PAFA for the "Henry O. Tanner: Modern Spirit" exhibition.

Through intermarriage of the African American Philadelphia elite Bustill-Mossell-Tanner-Alexander families, Henry O. Tanner is related to actor-scholar Paul Robeson, Nathan Francis Mossell (the first African

American graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School), and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (the first African American woman to earn a PhD in America and to be admitted to the University of Pennsylvania Law School). Living descendants of Henry O. Tanner include Lewis Tanner Moore, Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter, Mary Brown Cannaday, Jacques Tanner, Martine Delgoulet, Anthony Delgoulet, and Jessie Delgoulet, all of whom contributed art work and oral history to the “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit” retrospective.

### “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit”—The Exhibition

The PAFA concluded lending agreements with more than fifty private collectors, museums, and educational institutions, including Mother Bethel AMC Church, and two historically African American colleges (Fisk University and Spelman College), in order to develop an extraordinary exhibition that is a vibrant celebration of Henry Tanner’s life. Given Tanner’s personal and professional background, it would be a natural assumption to anticipate several works depicting refined images of African Americans and African American urban life. However, this is not the case. Only a few pieces (less than 10 percent of the entire exhibition) feature African American subjects such as *Study of a Negro Man* (ca. 1891–93), *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), *The Thankful Poor* (1894), *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* (1897), *Benjamin Tucker Tanner* (1897), and *Portrait of Booker T. Washington* (1917).

*The Banjo Lesson* is considered by many to be Henry Ossawa Tanner’s most popular work. The image features an older African American man instructing a child how to play the instrument. This piece was created in 1893 and is in sharp contrast to other artistic representations of African Americans during the same period, where they were largely depicted as comedic caricatures or grotesque figures. The warm lighting effect of *The Banjo Player* evokes the warmth of a loving, paternal relationship. Although the background portrays a family of meager means, the depiction of the relationship between the subjects and the subjects themselves is refined and elegant. Similar to *The Banjo Lesson*, *The Thankful Poor* also stresses through lighting its primary subjects. The artist emphasizes that what is relevant is their thankful attitude rather than the apparent surrounding poverty.

The 1897 work *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* appears to serve several purposes. Again, an African American subject is portrayed in an elegant and

dignified manner. The play of light on the subject in the center softens and refines the image of the mother, making her glow in a warm and welcoming manner. The inspiration of this piece is apparently *Whistler's Mother*. However, some scholarly speculation suggests that Tanner's intention behind this piece was part jubilation and part gloating. By placing himself in the same realm as another prominent American artist—James McNeill Whistler—Tanner is both reveling in his success and at the same time possibly chiding his parents who initially protested his career path. An affectionate inscription in the lower right corner of the portrait reads “To my dear mother, H. O. Tanner.”

The most breathtaking landscapes of the exhibition feature at least two images from Tanner's visit to Highlands, North Carolina: *Mountain Landscape, Highlands, North Carolina* (ca. 1889), and *Highlands, N.C.* (ca. 1889). Two lush oil on canvas renderings of *Georgia Landscape* (ca. 1889–90) and *Florida* (ca. 1894) capture the essence of a dusky heat in wetlands. Other pieces that vividly capture the color and movement of nature include *Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City* (ca. 1885), *View of The Seine, Looking Toward Notre Dame*, *A View of Palestine* (ca. 1898–99), and *The Seine—Evening* (ca. 1900). These works were created with such rich imagery that they appear to be replicated from color photography.

The exhibition is dominated by images from two prevailing themes Tanner used throughout his life—religion and “Oriental Africa.” These two themes show how his family members, and especially their deep religious convictions, are manifested in Tanner's work. Viewers will also notice that Tanner deliberately places the true essence of people and individual expression at the center of his religious artistic discourse. Tanner presented religious themes and individuals in a contemporary style (see *The Resurrection of Lazarus*—fig. 1). Historically, religious art has portrayed subjects as saintly beings to edify the audience. However, Tanner elected to highlight their more human aspects.

*The Annunciation* (1898—fig. 2) is by far the most striking piece in the exhibition. The glowing light representing the angel Gabriel is vibrant enough to appear to be powered by modern-day electricity. What is also compelling is how Tanner chose to capture the awe and burden of Mary upon receiving the news that she would give birth to Christ. She is shown as a disheveled youth, alone and weary—and without a saintly halo.

Tanner opted to create several pieces highlighting the life and times of Mary. The stories in each of the works are simple and complex with an emphasis on relationships and realistic human expression. In *The Visitation*



FIGURE 1: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 95 x 121.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France, Inv. RF1980-173. Photo: Hervé Lewandoswki: Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

(*Mary Visiting Elizabeth*) (ca. 1909–10) Elizabeth is clearly startled—as anyone would be with an unexpected late night/early morning visitor sharing the news of an immaculate conception. In *Mary* (1910), the primary subject is partially illuminated with Christ resting on the floor. A slight halo over Christ's head can be detected through close inspection of the piece. *Christ Learning to Read* (ca. 1911) highlights a tender moment between mother and son with an emphasis on the emotional connection between Christ and Mary. *The Three Marys* (1910) captures a range of emotion felt by the three women visiting Christ's tomb. Stress, fear, and trepidation are vividly displayed, making this piece another item to view closely and carefully.

In many of the pieces, Tanner's so-called oriental imagery is apparent. Tanner was the first professional African American artist to travel to and display “Oriental Africa” in his work. Some paintings, including *Nicodemus* (1899), *Interior of a Mosque, Cairo* (1897), *Near East Scene* (ca. 1910), and



FIGURE 2: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, 1898. Oil on canvas, 57 x 71.25 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

*Entrance to the Casbah* (1912), evoke a feeling of invitation into a new world rather than emphasizing intangible mysticism regarding another culture.

Tanner was routinely criticized by some members of the early twentieth-century African American intelligentsia for not defining himself through a racial lens. Yet, new scholarly examination of his thematic emphasis on North Africa and the Middle East suggests some alignment with the “New Negro Movement” in America.<sup>11</sup> As the New Negro Movement sought to claim North Africa as the cradle of African American civilization, much of the writings from this group were speculative and somewhat romantic from individuals who never traveled abroad. Tanner’s work in portraying so-called oriental subjects created intellectual pathways that aided in removing the “otherness” of non-Western-based religious practices and people.

The ability to draw viewers into thought-provoking discourse and examination about “new worlds” is why “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit” is one of the more intellectually stimulating exhibitions to be showcased in

Philadelphia in many years. Curator Dr. Anna O. Marley has succeeded in creating an exhibition that is remarkably pedagogical, yet approachable in tone. What visitors can extract through the complexity of Henry Tanner's work is an artist whose pioneering approach to culturally competent representation was and continues to be fundamentally modern.

## About the Exhibition

"Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit" is at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia from January 28 to April 15, 2012, before embarking on a national tour that includes Houston, Texas, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$12 for senior citizens and students, \$10 for youths (ages 13-18). Tickets must be purchased in advance online via PAFA's website ([www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org)) and printed prior to arrival to view the exhibition. Admission to the exhibition is free on Sundays. Questions regarding admission to the exhibition can be directed to 1-800-537-7676, ext. 6113 or PAFA's general telephone number is 215-972-7600.

Supplemental educational materials for the exhibition include the first comprehensive scholarly catalog of Henry Tanner's work, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, edited by curator Dr. Anna O. Marley, and a children's book created by author and illustrator Faith Ringgold.

## NOTES

1. Vance Thompson, "American Artists in Paris," *Cosmopolitan* 29 (1900): 19.
2. Dewey Franklin Mosby, "Tanner, Henry Ossawa," *African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), available online : <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0001/e0547>; Marsha M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); William Seraile, *Fire in His Heart: Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner and the A.M.E. Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Kwame A. Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004).
3. Rae Alexander Minter, "The Tanner Family: A Grandniece's Chronicle," in *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, ed. Dewey F. Mosby (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New York, Rizzoli, 1991), 27.
4. See sources cited in n. 2 above.
5. Jessie Carney Smith, "Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson," in *African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), available online at <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0001/e0740>.

6. See sources cited in n. 2.
7. P. Linda Gross and Theresa R. Snyder, *Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005).
8. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 143
9. "Henry Ossawa Tanner Takes Special Place in Red Cross History," February 3, 2012, available online at <http://www.redcross.org>.
10. Richard J. Powell, "Tanner and Transcendence," in *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, ed. Anna O. Marley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
11. Adrienne L. Childs, "Tanner and Oriental Africa," in *ibid.*