

EXHIBIT REVIEW

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, January 28–April 15, 2012; Cincinnati Art Museum, May 26–September 9, 2012; and Houston Museum of Fine Arts, October 14, 2012–January 6, 2013. Curated by ANNA O. MARLEY.

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit. Edited by ANNA O. MARLEY. (Berkeley, CA: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in association with University of California Press, 2012. 304 pp. Illustrations, index. Cloth, \$75; paper, \$39.95.)

THERE ARE ELEMENTS in the life story of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937) that sound almost like Hollywood stereotypes: a strict minister father forces his son to labor in a flour mill but cannot thwart the boy's urgent wish to become a painter; a generous patron finances his flight from provincial America to cosmopolitan Paris, where he mingles with artists and contracts a near-fatal disease; success at the Paris Salon underwrites his marriage and a country house in Brittany; newer trends in painting bypass the frustrated and forgotten painter, who dies in relative obscurity.

But scratch the surface and Henry Ossawa Tanner reveals himself as no cliché: his parents were supportive of his career; he drank coffee instead of wine at those Parisian cafés; his marriage was happy; and his reputation, although it waned, has returned. In the last forty years, scholars and museum audiences—inspired by the civil rights and Black Arts movements to include African Americans in the history of American art—have paid Tanner a great deal of attention. Tanner's unique position as an African American painter in an era that saw few black artists achieve career stability, let alone international success, made him an

important subject for recent books and exhibitions, most notably a major show mounted at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1991.

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit, which opened at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) this spring and travels to the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts over the course of 2012, enables and encourages viewers to think more deeply than ever before about this complex, elusive, and important painter. Five spacious rooms at the Pennsylvania Academy offered dozens of paintings—many of them never or rarely shown before in public—and the accompanying catalogue, edited by PAFA curator Anna O. Marley, gathered a dozen essays on aspects of Tanner's life and work. The essays, which include a lengthy biographical overview by Marley along with shorter thematic contributions from both distinguished scholars and new voices, range from close analyses of individual paintings to broad essays situating Tanner's work in art history, religious history, and African American studies. The book looks good, too; Tanner was preoccupied with color and light, and no previous publication on the painter has conveyed that so richly.

"Modern Spirit" is the right subtitle for this exhibition, which covers the biographical bases but is primarily interested in advancing new thematic interpretations of the artist's work and life. It presents Henry Ossawa Tanner as a forthrightly modern painter—far from the kooky, preachy prude who is often presented in art historical literature. And it conveys Tanner as profoundly spiritual, both in his studio and in his global travels. That Tanner's cosmopolitan, forward-looking spirituality comes here into view owes much to our own zeitgeist, but the portrait of Tanner that emerges is one he would have recognized as a fair likeness.

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Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh in 1859 to parents so enamored of abolitionist John Brown that they named their son after the city of Osawatimie, Kansas, where Brown's violent raids had just taken place. His father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a leading figure in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, soon moved the family to Philadelphia, where Tanner enrolled at Roberts Vaux Consolidated School for Colored Students. In 1879, after the dreadful stint in the flour mill, Tanner earned a place in the classes of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he studied with its legendary (and sometimes notorious) instructor

Thomas Eakins. Tanner's early paintings on view in the exhibit—solemn, introspective, detached portraits, painted in rich tones of black and brown, demonstrating painstaking attention to the human physical form—show the mark of his teacher's lessons. His fellow students taught more brutal lessons: some agitated for his exclusion from art classes on the grounds of race; one even recounted with gruesome humor an assault that ended with Tanner tied to his easel and unceremoniously dumped on Broad Street in front of the academy for daring "to assert himself."¹

Professional success eluded the young Tanner, who tried to make it as a magazine illustrator only to collect more rejection slips than sales receipts; in 1889 he decamped for Atlanta, hoping to work by day as a portrait photographer and to paint at night. The venture was not a success. Thankfully, he met Bishop Joseph Crane Hartzell and his wife, Jennie Culver Hartzell, white missionaries and benefactors of Atlanta's Clark College. When the photo studio failed, Jennie Hartzell arranged an exhibition in her hometown of Cincinnati. When that failed too, she bought all Tanner's paintings for \$300 and sent him on his way to Europe.

Tanner meant to go to Rome but fell in love with Paris instead—enrolling in the prestigious Académie Julian, soaking up the works of Rembrandt and Velázquez, and wandering the French countryside haunts of Jean-François Millet and the Barbizon school. His was hardly *la vie bohème*: Tanner objected to Sunday art classes and to the rampant wine drinking he observed; little wonder that he lived in a less artsy neighborhood of Paris and kept himself largely removed from the social side of the Parisian art world. A battle with typhoid fever didn't help.

In the 1890s, with his health and his professional position still very much precarious, Tanner traveled back and forth across the Atlantic—sometimes in search of commissions, other times to visit doctors. Like so many other Americans, he spent part of the summer of 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair, where he delivered a speech on "The American Negro in Art." After 1896, his career took off. That year the Paris Salon honored *Daniel in the Lion's Den* (1896), a massive and moody painting that has since been lost but which was displayed in the PAFA exhibition as a replica screenprint; the next year he scored again with *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896). By 1906, with his reputation established

¹ Joseph Pennell, *The Adventures of an Illustrator: Mostly in Following His Authors in America and Europe* (London, 1925), 53.

and his career on the rise, Tanner was financially solvent, and for the rest of his life his personal and professional commitments rested firmly with France. That he met and in 1899 wed Jessie Olssen, a white woman, must have in part explained his hesitation to return to an America that stigmatized their marriage. Even from abroad, Tanner's reputation continued to circulate in the United States; sales were steady, the summer sun was warm, the studio was spacious, and the accolades were regular.

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As a compilation of biographical information, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* and its catalogue offer relatively few new facts or sources—most were uncovered during preparation for major biographies and exhibitions that debuted in the 1990s.² Rather, the show provides an exciting set of interpretations that helps us understand Tanner in new ways, most particularly through his ambivalent navigation of the categories of race and nation, his relationship to religion and spirituality, his role as an observer and interpreter of the Middle East, and his engagement with technology and modernity.

Previous scholars have almost uniformly placed race at the center of Tanner's story, and rightly so—throughout his life Tanner was repeatedly recognized as a black artist, both by those sympathetic to and threatened by this fact. By the turn of the twentieth century, he was a symbol of black success and a screen onto which African Americans could project their own hopes; Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois agreed on little, but both paid visits to Tanner in Paris. Even if commentators in Tanner's lifetime insisted that the French "are denational in all that concerns art," Tanner nevertheless faced obstacles in America and Europe that were real and enduring and that contributed to a sense of alienation from American culture and politics that a life lived mostly abroad only accentuated.³ Recent scholars have puzzled over how to make sense of an artist celebrated as a racial trailblazer who nonetheless rejected being labeled as a "Negro artist" and only rarely painted scenes with visibly African American subjects.

² See Dewey F. Mosby, Darrell Sewell, and Rae Alexander-Minter, *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (New York, 1991); Dewey F. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures: The Art and Life of Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Kansas City, MO, 1995); and Marcia M. Mathews's pathbreaking biography, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago, 1969).

³ Helen Cole, "Henry O. Tanner, Painter," *Brush and Pencil* 6 (1900): 97.

The essays in the exhibit catalogue advance this conversation beyond where it stood in the early 1990s. Tyler Stovall offers an archivally rich account of Tanner's place as a father figure of the expatriate black community in Paris, and Alan Braddock contributes a provocative reading of Tanner as a prefiguration of contemporary post-racial ideologies. Even so, the contributors to the book could have done more to put race and nation in dialogue. What do we make of a man who explained in a 1914 letter that racial prejudice "has driven me out of the country, but . . . while I cannot sing our National Hymn, 'Land of Liberty,' etc., still deep down in my heart I love it and am sometimes sad that I cannot live where my heart is"—an American honored at the end of his life by a group of African American artists as a "Foreigner of Great Distinction"?⁴

If race has always been a central theme in scholarly studies of Henry Ossawa Tanner, religion has figured inconsistently in the literature—an odd fact given Tanner's devotion and the vast quantity of reflectively spiritual works he produced over his lifetime. But, as historians of American art have begun to take nineteenth-century religious painting more seriously, this is a propitious time to see Tanner's work anew.⁵ Modernism's insistently secular outlook made religious paintings—and devout painters—marginal to textbook accounts of art history; regardless of method, content doomed religious art to the dustbin of history. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, by contrast, shows us how much we can learn by engaging with Victorian religiosity rather than brushing it aside in the race to Picasso.

Several of the essayists—most notably Richard J. Powell, Marcus Bruce, and Hélène Valance—labor to unearth Tanner's religious beliefs and to trace the visual vocabulary of his devotion. Although raised in the A.M.E. Church, Tanner moved in his adulthood toward belief in what Marcus Bruce calls "a unity in human aspirations and revealed faith" (112). But, like the Sunday school teacher that he was, Tanner continued to impart his wisdom by retelling the stories of the Bible.

That undertaking generated a visual record unlike any other in religious painting of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

⁴ Tanner, quoted in Marcia M. Mathews, "The Art of Henry O. Tanner," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 69/70 (1969/70): 453; American Negro Academy, quoted in Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 46.

⁵ Sally M. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 581–603.

Tanner took an intense engagement with biblical narrative and married it to the embrace of the everyday that he had learned from Thomas Eakins and the Barbizon painters. If Millet and Eakins used ordinary people to tell grand human drama, Tanner took the drama of a scriptural text and filled it with ordinary people. Romantic and mysterious and mystical—especially in his later years, when he painted a lot of spooky, blue-green scenes nearly devoid of recognizable human forms—Tanner is best understood as a broadly religious painter rather than a literal or didactically biblical one. “Biblical scenes, religious subjects, and religious discourse,” Bruce explains, offered “a way to capture, hold, and invite viewers into a new way of seeing, a reconsideration and reflection upon a familiar human activity using a religious language they knew” (113). Tanner’s theology—and his artistic practice—were deeply populist.

It is thus that we gain a new perspective on *The Annunciation* (1898), one of Tanner’s greatest works and the centerpiece of the exhibition. The painting draws viewers in by showing the divine content in a decidedly mundane room of dimly lit stone and rumpled carpets, and it dazzles with a shimmering patch of light representing the archangel. But what grabs us is the look on Mary’s face: a breathtaking, heart-wrenching mix of humility and terror. This is perhaps the only painting of the Annunciation in which Mary truly looks like an unmarried teenage girl who has just been told that she is pregnant.

To execute these religious paintings, Tanner needed to know what biblical landscapes looked like, not to document with a photographer’s precision but to gather the visual atmosphere of the place. All the more reason he must have been thankful that Rodman Wanamaker, heir to a Philadelphia department store fortune, ponied up the money that allowed Tanner to travel to Palestine on two trips in 1897 and 1898–99. The handling of those journeys in *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* suggest the third major innovation of the exhibition and its catalogue: a fresh new perspective on Tanner’s engagement with the world.

The midcentury art-historical scholarship that created American art history grappled with the question of what was “American” in American art; the works of Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent didn’t have it, scholars having deemed expatriation incompatible with the American grain. Tanner, though, was granted an exception: racial prejudice and discrimination justified his journey, making him an exile and not an expatriate. Our twenty-first-century Tanner is a more cosmopolitan fellow.

Whereas earlier scholarship had strived to show him as an American abroad, this exhibition and volume interpret travel and cultural exchange as more generative than escapist. Art historians no longer need to interpret expatriation as betrayal—certainly Tanner didn't see it that way.

Instead, Tanner—and, presumably, Rodman Wanamaker—believed he was an indispensable visual interpreter of the physical and cultural landscapes of the outer fringes of the Ottoman Empire, that place that Tanner and his contemporaries called the Holy Land. It was a biblical landscape and an exotic one, although Tanner would have blushed at the lurid harem paintings of his French counterparts. Tanner's Middle Eastern paintings went about their exoticism differently; American Orientalism took its own unique path, guided by Protestantism and its fascination for the Bible's facticity and informed as well by the absence of America's formal colonial territorial control in the Middle East.⁶

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit makes an unabashed argument for Tanner's spirituality. But the case for his modernity is more elusive. Walking through the exhibit, it is clear that something happened to Tanner's style around the year 1904. Indeed, that year, Tanner's friend and patron Robert C. Ogden wrote worriedly to Booker T. Washington that Tanner had started painting "pictures which are very mysterious in spirit, very abstruse in art, full of delicate sensitivity, and altogether too transcendental for popular appreciation" (117). For many viewers, that verdict on Tanner's late work still stands.

In the second half of his career, Tanner continued his commitment to religious subjects but experimented radically with color; he abandoned the blacks and browns he had learned at the Pennsylvania Academy with Eakins and adopted blues and greens that lend his works an ethereal and even eerie quality. The new paintings owed much to the "nocturnes" of James A. M. Whistler, whom Tanner greatly admired; they surely also reflected the innovations in vision (particularly nighttime vision) that accompanied the widespread use of electricity in American cities.⁷ Regardless of its inspiration, there is much in Tanner's late work to

⁶ For more on Tanner and other American artists' engagement with the "Holy Land," see John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), esp. 208–18; and Holly Edwards, ed., *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

⁷ See Alexander Nemerov, "Burning Daylight: Remington, Electricity, and Flash Photography," in *Frederic Remington: The Color of Night*, ed. Nancy K. Anderson (Princeton, NJ, 2003), 76–95; and David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

demonstrate his innovation and his engagement with protomodernist movements such as symbolism, a relationship that previous scholarship has almost completely overlooked. As Robert Cozzolino notes, until now, “there has been little attempt to come to terms with the strangeness of [Tanner’s] compositions and their emotional intensity” (124). After *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, we have a much better sense of what Tanner himself described in a 1909 essay as his “artistic sense of the weird.”⁸

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Somewhere along the way, Henry Tanner—the pathbreaker, the race hero, the dean of American painters abroad—got lost. World War I destroyed his beloved country cottage and severely tested his faith. When his wife died in 1925, he lost much of his will to paint; the postwar modernist fervor sapped much of collectors’ will to buy his works. The 1920s did not entirely abandon Tanner; black artists traveling in Paris made pilgrimages to his studio, and writer Jessie Fauset interviewed him for the NAACP’s magazine *Crisis* in 1924. But he was largely dismissed by the modernists whose work he helped foster—a disavowal at least as much about secularism as about abstraction. And as an expatriate, he was dismissed or overlooked by the nationalism of twentieth-century art criticism—or oversimplified, his complicated life reduced into a simple tale of racism and emigration. In the end, Henry Ossawa Tanner remains remarkably elusive: Was he a reluctant exile or an enthusiastic Francophile? A proud race man or a self-hating Uncle Tom? A protomodernist or a preachy reactionary? It will always be difficult to get a handle on the real person, but the more time we spend with the art, the closer we are likely to get. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* offers an invaluable guide.

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⁸ Henry Ossawa Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life,” *World’s Work* 18, no. 2 (1909): 11661–62.