

Henry Ossawa Tanner

A quiet man transcends racism to bring art back to religion



Jesus and Nicodemus, 1899

As February is Black History Month, it is fitting that the 'Imaging the Word' column this week highlights the artistic contribution of an African-American painter—in this case, one of my favorite painters, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937).

Typically, when people interpret African-American art today, they do so through the primary lens of racial identity, often glossing over overt Christian themes, expressions of *religious* identity. But this is to do black artists an injustice. For, among the black artists active between the Civil War and the civil rights era in particular, many were themselves devout Christians, working out of internalized religious convictions and not merely outward tradition or market expectations. This was certainly true for Tanner.

Tanner was as the first of nine children born to Sarah Elizabeth Miller and Benjamin Tucker Tanner in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Religion and racial justice were important aspects of Tanner's early family life. His father, a deeply religious man, served as a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal church and his mother, who had been born a slave, helped to organize one of the first missionary organizations for black women. Tanner was thus well aware of the constraints placed on him as a black man. Yet he refused to be defined by his race. His art represents an effort to transcend those constricting categories and affirm the religious aspirations and experiences shared by people of all races.

Tanner developed an interest in art at an early age, when one day during a park walk with his father, he witnessed an artist painting a landscape outdoors at an easel. After a long conversation that night with his father, he recalls, the young Tanner went the next day and bought some dry colors and a couple of scraggy brushes, and set himself immediately to create art.

At age 22, Tanner enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts as its first African-American attendee. In 1889, having finished his studies, he moved to Atlanta, Georgia and established a photography studio which turned out to be a short-lived experiment. Work was thin on the ground during this time, but, a solo exhibition helped him raise enough money to travel to Europe in 1891. His intention was to settle in Rome, but, after first briefly visiting London, he traveled on to Paris where he was so taken with the city that he decided to stay. Once settled, he enrolled at the Académie Julian to study art and went on to paint professionally not long after.

Within nine years of moving abroad, Henry Ossawa Tanner, America's first major African American artist, had become an international success. By 1900, he ranked among the leading American artists in Paris and was widely considered the premier biblical painter of his day.

Writing for the *Cosmopolitan* in 1900, Vance Thompson observed that "There is no American artist in Paris more talked about than Mr. H. O. Tanner. . . . Mr. Tanner is not only a biblical painter—not only a Philadelphian—but, as well, he has brought to modern art a new spirit."

In speaking of a "new spirit," Thompson was referring to the contribution Tanner made to the evolution of the genre of religious art by departing from traditional representations of narrative biblical scenes and carving out his own symbolic versions that modernized the field, incorporating impressionistic, realist and orientalist influences, along with his own distinct voice to each finished creation.

"He was the most talented religious painter of his generation, at a time religious painting was so popular. Every art museum needed one," said Anna Marley, curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. "To be that leader is something we've lost in the 20th century, because of our tendency to see religious art as traditional, and dismiss it. Tanner made religious art modern. That is one of his great contributions."

With the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and 70s, Tanner's reputation has been burnished as he has been regarded as the father of African-American art and a forerunner to the Harlem Renaissance. He may not have entirely wanted that label. He chose to live abroad rather than in America so that his race would not be used to define his art and once famously stated, "in Paris...no one regards me curiously....I am simply 'M. Tanner, an American artist.' Nobody knows or cares what was the complexion of my forebears. I live and work there on terms of absolute social equality."

His choice of subjects for his artwork—biblical scenes—also likely the result of his wish to be regarded as an artist, not just a *black* artist. Biblical subject matter permitted him to achieve something more universal than the school of Negro art that critics such as African American scholar Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954) wanted from him. Tanner summarized his purposes in 1924: "My effort has not only been to put the Biblical incident in the original setting . . . but at the same time to give the human touch 'which makes the whole world kin' and which ever remains the same."

To "make the world kin" expresses well the earthy-ness and intimacy of his art. Despite the effort to depict stories of faith in their original cultural context, the viewer is encouraged to see often-rarefied biblical events as familiar and recognizable as taking place in our world.

Today, Tanner is recognized as he would have wanted—as an artist of the highest order, *regardless of his race*.

The following are four paintings which highlight the complex exchange between vision and belief in Tanner's art.



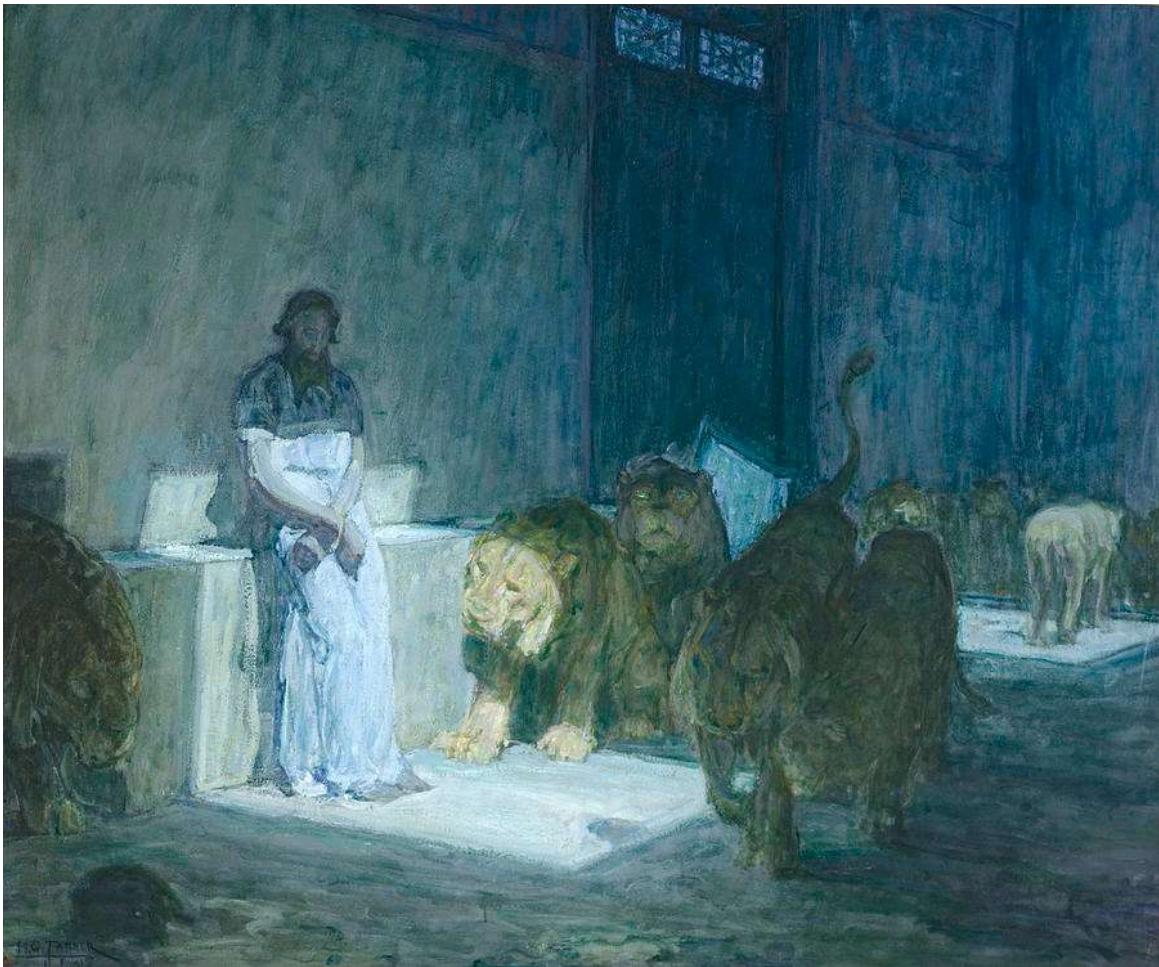
The Resurrection of Lazarus (1896)

In this biblically themed painting from the Gospel of John, Tanner depicts Jesus in a room with the dead Lazarus who lies on the ground, wrapped in white cloth with his head being cradled by a figure behind him. Jesus's arms are outstretched as he commands Lazarus to rise. A crowd in the background has gathered to mourn.

While Europe had a long tradition of artists creating grand religious genre paintings, this work provides an example of how Tanner distinguished himself by modernizing the subject. As curator Anna O. Marley states, "...Tanner's spectators are brought into the light via the miracle occurring before them. Tanner's painting [...] is much more intimate [...] with a] more humble representation of Jesus."

While this work is one of Tanner's earliest paintings featuring a religious theme, it was so well received that it helped solidify the direction of his career. According to art historian Marc Simpson, "by every measure, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* was a milestone in Henry Ossawa Tanner's career... The painting's success established Tanner among the era's foremost makers of religious art." Of important note, American department store owner Rodman Wanamaker was so impressed

with this painting and what he considered Tanner's potential that he sponsored two trips for the artist to the Holy Land; something that would greatly inspire his work.



Daniel in the Lions' Den, 1896

Tanner's first Salon success, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, departed from conventional compositions that highlight Daniel, eyes heavenward, in a threatening circle of lions. Tanner's Daniel hugs the shadows. His head is down, his back to the wall. The prophet is taking no chances even though the pacing lions have that listless look of the caged beasts in the Jardin des Plantes where Tanner sketched them. The loveliest surprise of the work lies in the artist's dramatic massing of dark and light. A single downward shaft breaks the pervading gloom with warm tonal harmonies.



The Annunciation (1898)

This painting was the first of Tanner's works purchased for an American museum, and is a marvelous blend of academic realism and abstract invention. No winged angel appears, no gesture of blessing. The God-bearing word travels, as ever, at the speed of light; Tanner's Gabriel is a radiant blade of light. Gone is the impassive lady of medieval imagining, interrupted at her psalter. Here is a dark-haired peasant girl from the hills of Galilee who never held a book. A teenaged 'Miriam,' hands in her lap, looks into the light, weighing the message, fearful and uncertain of its promise.

Note that single sturdy bare foot that peeks out from a cascade of drapery. It is a small touch but one that marks Tanner's deliberate distance from centuries of conventional depictions of Mary. The Virgin might have bared one breast to suckle her baby, but she was rarely depicted barefoot. One might imagine she never really touched the ground. But traditional images of Mary nursing had a singular purpose: to affirm the humanity of Christ. Tanner, here, emphasizes the humanity of Mary. No need, then, for the exaggerated modesty of a shod foot.



The Banjo Lesson (1893)

In what is Turner's best-known work, *The Banjo Lesson*, an elderly man is teaching a young boy, most likely his grandson, to play the banjo in the setting of a sparsely furnished room. In an intimate depiction, the boy sits on the man's lap, his arms almost too short to properly reach around the instrument to touch the strings as both seriously focus on their task.

The work is important because it is one of only a few genre paintings that Turner would create in an oeuvre largely dominated by religious works. Secondly, it depicts everyday life from an African-American lens, which was not commonly seen at the time in the art canon at large, nor did the artist want to be creatively defined by his race. Third, this painting can be considered a statement about the importance of teaching and passing on information. According to Professor Marcus Bruce, this canvas "...document[s] the artist's exploration and depiction of folk culture and its transmission from one generation to the next." Lastly, the work highlights Turner's skill in the field of Realism and shows his training with figures and scene painting that began with his teacher artist Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia a few years before.

It is ironic that the few paintings featuring African-American subjects — such as *The Banjo Lesson* here — were not well received in the Paris salons.