

The image is a dark, textured painting. The upper two-thirds of the image are dominated by a large, abstract, face-like shape rendered in shades of dark blue, purple, and green. The texture is rough and layered, suggesting a cave wall or a weathered rock surface. In the lower third, a landscape is depicted with horizontal bands of brown, tan, and purple. In the foreground, three figures are visible: one on the left in a blue and white outfit, a central figure in a dark, hooded robe, and another on the right in a dark, pointed hood. A small, bright white object is positioned near the central figure. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

Making the
whole world kin



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. Exhibiting regularly at the Paris Salon, he was attracting even greater critical

son (1863–1925) 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.”¹

The artist’s “new spirit” owed much to the shaping power of the particular branch of American Protestantism in which he was raised. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in protest against slavery, influenced his embrace of biblical imagery. Tanner

Religion, painting, and the transcendence of race: An appreciation of Henry Ossawa Tanner

By Maureen Mullarkey

acclaim than Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), his former mentor at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. His studio at 51 boulevard Saint-Jacques had become a destination for Americans on cultural pilgrimages. It was in France and in biblical motifs that Tanner found a means to transcend considerations of race.

Writing for the *Cosmopolitan* in 1900, Vance Thomp-

son understood his own struggles as an African American painter in biblical terms. That intuition gestated throughout his early career until it was summoned to life at the Académie Julian under the tutelage of Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902), the fashionable orientalist and painter of scriptural motifs. Added to that influence was the subtle capillary action of French piety—with its intense Marian cast—on a religiously sensitive temperament. The result was fertile ground for biblical narratives that are wonderfully distinguished from those by more typical *salonniers*.

Tanner summarized his purposes in 1924: “My effort has not only been to put the

Facing page: Fig. 1. *Sodom and Gomorrah*, by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), c. 1920–1924. Signed “H O Tanner” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 41 ½ by 36 ½ inches. Photograph by courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

This page: Fig. 2. Henry Ossawa Turner in a photograph by Frederick Gutekunst (1831–1917), 1907. Inscribed “To be returned; H. O. Tanner; 70 bis rue Notre Dame des Champs; Paris; 1907” on the back. 5 ⅞ by 4 ⅞ inches (image). Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 3. *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* by Tanner, 1897. Oil on canvas, 29 ¼ by 39 ½ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, partial gift of Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter and purchased with the W. P. Wiltach Fund, the George W. Elkins Fund, the Edward and Althea Budd Fund, and with funds contributed by the Diervich Foundation; photograph by courtesy of Art Resource, New York.



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."² 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.

While race was indelibly present in Tanner's figurative work centered on black models, the sitter's humanity was his enduring subject. Tanner's *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (Fig. 3) testifies to his ability—crucial in any serious artist—to adapt



Fig. 4. *The Thankful Poor* by Tanner, 1894. Inscribed "H. O. Tanner/1894/The Thankful Poor" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 35 by 44 inches. Private collection; Art Resource photograph.

Fig. 5. *The Banjo Lesson* by Tanner, 1893. Signed and dated "H. O. Tanner/93/monogram signature/93" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 49 by 35 1/2 inches. Hampton University, Archival and Museum Collection, Virginia.

the technical and compositional moves of predecessors to his own purposes. The woman's gesture—one hand against her cheek, the other dropped in her lap—echoes Eakins's *Miss Amelia Van Buren* of about 1891 (Phillips Collection, Washington). While the composition is designed after James McNeill Whistler's (1834–1903) celebrated *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* of 1871 (Musée du Louvre, Paris), Tanner's variation, informed by Eakins, more fully summons a human presence.

The angular austerity of Whistler's composition hints at the Protestant streak in his mother's mettle. Still, stress is on the figure as a structural element, one abstract form in play with others. Tanner, by contrast, recasts the composition and lighting to create a tender cameo of a reflective woman

in reverie. Her meditative mood infuses the darksome composition, punctuated by soft light, with a gravity greater than the sum of formal arrangements. Viewers have no doubt that the subject of the painting is the inwardness of the sitter, not the devices of picture-making.

The Thankful Poor (Fig. 4) and *The Banjo Lesson* (Fig. 5) represent the kind of black genre painting initially expected from Tanner. In the former, a man and a boy, presumably a grandson, both black, sit at a table with their heads bowed to say grace over their meal. Race here is incidental to rituals rooted in the larger culture. Tanner's audience would have recognized the subject's affinity with the renowned *L'Angélus* of 1857 to 1859 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) by Jean-François Millet (1814–1895) or *La Bénédicité* of 1740 (Musée du Louvre) by Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1699–1779). Piety and thanksgiving observe no color line.

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A good detective might want to know if Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), an inspired scavenger through the art historical bin, was familiar with the widely popular *The Thankful Poor*. Rockwell's own best loved *Saturday Evening Post* cover was *Saying Grace* (November 24, 1951). Here again are the generations—the boy accompanied by a grandmother this time—joined in the same gesture of gratitude over a simple meal in a railroad station diner. Rockwell, like Tanner, places his familial couple in front of a curtained window. While the emotional tenor is the polar opposite of Tanner's, the pictorial core is intriguingly similar. Rockwell's familiar pair draw amused curiosity from fellow diners—sly surrogates for the culture at large—unaccustomed to displays of piety. Tanner's depiction takes audience intimacy with mealtime for granted. Yet in both, the reverence of the praying couple is the unaffected heart of the motif.

Emphasis on the transmission of culture to the young is a constant in Tanner's figurative work. His most famous painting, *The Banjo Lesson*, follows the lead of Winslow Homer (1836–1910) and Eakins in depicting black subjects as individuals rather than stereotypes. At the same time





Tanner's depiction of an older black man tutoring an adolescent boy, each absorbed in the drill, is of a piece with the paintings he did in this period using Breton subjects: *The Young Sabot Maker* of 1895 (Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri) and *The Bagpipe Lesson* of 1892–1893 (Hampton University Museum, Virginia). The theme also threads through such later paintings as *Christ Learning to Read* of 1911–1914 (Des Moines Art Center, Iowa).

Tanner's first Salon success, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, shown in 1896 (now lost but known through a later version at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art),³ 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 (Fig. 7), the first of Tanner's works purchased for an American museum, is a marvelous blend of academic realism and abstract invention. No winged angel appears, no benedictory gesture. The God-bearing word travels, as ever, at the speed of light; Tanner's Gabriel is a radiant blade of luminescence. Gone is the 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.

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 Marian typology. The Virgin might have bared one breast to suckle her baby, but she was rarely depicted barefoot. You might think 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.

Her exaggerated drapery, however, serves a purpose. A



rad lavish for historical accuracy, its undulating spread provides pictorial counter to the geometry of an otherwise spartan interior. In addition, the technical demands of the pendant droop declare Tanner's brotherhood with William-Adolph Bouguereau, Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alexandre Cabanel, Jules Bastien-Lepage, and other prize-winning stars of the Salon.

Mary (Fig. 8), a rediscovered painting, puts Whistler to use again but in a thoroughly unexpected way. Poised on a low bench, Mary's body forms a right angle that dominates the canvas. Her swaddled infant is lying on the floor and so close to her instep that, at quick glance, the tiny figure suggests the footrest Whistler placed at his mother's feet. That slim circlet of light, a shy halo hovering over the baby's head, is almost invisible. A luminous Mary is the painting's single source of light. Hands in her lap and foregoing any attitude of adoration, she sits in perfect equilibrium contemplating her handiwork, as any first-time mother would. At the same time, something disconsolate marks her composure. Her long thick veil—heavy with dense applications of white lead—carries the weight of a winding cloth.

Angels *Appearing before the Shepherds* (Fig. 6) enlivens a conventional scene by presenting it from the angels' angle of vision. It is a cinematic device that suggests acquaintance with the movies, an industry in full throttle by 1910. (Think of angelic rooftop vigils in Wim Wender's more recent *Wings of Desire*.) Translucent vice-regents from God's throne look down on distant shepherds huddled with their flock. The nighttime terrain is cool-hued and barren; these mortals could use a glad word. Tanner indicates the shepherds' moment of illumination by warming the ground under them. A hint of green sweetens the melancholy blues and violets of the darkling landscape. Light does not descend, as expected, from bright angelic choristers. Their office fulfilled, Tanner's messengers are dim and spectral. Only the men, and a few forward sheep, brighten with the tidings as if from within.

The character of art is not determined by subject matter; it resides in handling. Tanner orchestrated biblical iconography with the same sense of structure and light—a critical empathy—with which he ordered scenes of France and North Africa. *Sodom and Gomorrah* (Fig. 1), once owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a stirring testament to Tanner's brushwork, coloristic agility, and feeling for the scale of things before it is a Holy Land anecdote. Compressing detail to a minimum, he shows Lot's wife as a simple white form, brilliant against a brooding, agitated sky of variegated blues scumbled and glazed to perfection.



It is a thrill to see it together with Tanner's plein-air gem *Birthplace of Joan of Arc* (Fig. 9). Tanner's near contemporaneity with Claude Monet is visible in the delicate tonal range and shifting hues of the earlier painting. Both illustrate the confidence and grace of Tanner's hand and his embrace of Eugène Delacroix's conviction that "the first quality in a picture is to be a delight for the eye."⁴

¹ Vance Thompson, "American Artists in Paris," *Cosmopolitan*, vol. 29 (May 1900), pp. 18–19. ² "Tanner Exhibits Paintings," *New York Times*, January 29, 1924, p. 12. ³ The version in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is a large oil on paper mounted on canvas of 1907–1918. Noting that the "first version of this painting...was more realistic, drawing on Tanner's academic training in Philadelphia and Paris," this one is described as "less a literal narrative than an evocation of Daniel's experience" and reflected the artist's "increasingly Symbolist approach" *Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2003), p. 172. ⁴ Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, June 22, 1863, quoted in Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (3rd ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 2007), p. 243, n 24. For an overview of Tanner's work, see Dewey F. Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1991).

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Fig. 6. *Angels Appearing before the Shepherds* by Tanner, c. 1910. Oil on canvas, 25 5/8 by 32 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington; Art Resource photograph.

Fig. 7. *The Annunciation* by Tanner, 1898. Signed and dated "H. O. Tanner/1898" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 57 by 71 1/4 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, W. P. Wiltach Fund purchase; Art Resource photograph.

Fig. 8. *Mary* by Tanner, 1910. Signed and dated "H. O. Tanner/1910" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 by 23 5/8 inches. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery photograph.

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Fig. 9. *Birthplace of Joan of Arc at Domrémy-la-Pucelle* by Tanner, 1918. Inscribed "H. O. TANNER/DOMREMY-" at lower right. Oil on wood, 9 1/4 by 13 inches. Huntington Museum of Art, West Virginia; Michael Rosenfeld Gallery photograph.