Tanner, Henry Ossawa


After several moves during his childhood, Tanner and his family settled in Philadelphia in 1866. He began his art career in earnest in 1876, painting harbour scenes, landscapes, and animals in the Philadelphia Zoo. In 1880 Tanner began two years of formal study under Thomas Eakins at the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he was the only black student in attendance. In 1888 he moved to Atlanta, Ga., to open a photography studio, but the venture failed. With the help of a benefactor, Joseph C. Hartzell, a bishop from Cincinnati, Ohio, Tanner secured a teaching position at Clark University in Atlanta. In 1890 Hartzell arranged an exhibition of the artist's works in Cincinnati, and when no paintings sold he purchased the entire collection.

Flush with these earnings, Tanner traveled abroad to enroll at the Académie Julian in Paris in 1891. This period saw a dramatic shift in his work and the making of his reputation. His palette became lighter, favouring blues and blue-greens, and he began to manipulate light and shadow for a dramatic and inspirational effect. By 1894 his paintings were being exhibited at the annual Paris Salons, at which, in 1896, he was awarded an honourable mention for his submission, "Daniel in the Lions' Den" (1895). Also biblical in theme, "The Raising of Lazarus" (c. 1897) won a medal at the Paris Salon of 1897, a rare achievement for an American artist. Later that year the French government purchased the painting.

After touring the Holy Land in 1897-98, Tanner painted "Nicodemus Visiting Jesus" (c. 1898), which won the Lippincott prize in Philadelphia in 1900. That same year he received a medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle. He remained an expatriate in France, routinely exhibiting in Paris as well as the United States, where he won several awards. During World War I he served with the American Red Cross in France.

In 1923 the French government made Tanner a chevalier of the Legion of Honour, and in 1927 he became the first black American to be granted full membership in the National Academy of Design. Among his other works were "The Banjo Lesson" (c. 1893), "The Annunciation" (1898), "Abraham's Oak" (1905), and "Two Disciples at the Tomb" (c. 1906).

After his death, Tanner's artistic stature declined until 1969, when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., exhibited several of his works. This was the first major solo exhibition of an African-American artist. In 1991 the Philadelphia Museum of Art mounted a touring retrospective of his works.