



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART AND RACE



HENRY OSSAWA TANNER
Art, Faith, Race, and Legacy

NAURICE FRANK WOODS, JR.

ROUTLEDGE


Henry Ossawa Tanner: Art, Faith, Race, and Legacy

Over the past 40 years, renewed interest in the career of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937) has vaulted him into expanding scholarly discourse on American art. Consequently, he has emerged as the most studied and recognized representative of African American art during the nineteenth century. In fact, Tanner, in the spirit of political correctness and racial inclusiveness, has gained a prominent place in recent textbooks on mainstream American art and his painting *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), has become an iconic symbol of black creativity. In addition, Tanner achieved national recognition when the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1991 and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2012 celebrated him with major retrospectives. The latter exhibition brought in a record number of viewers. While Tanner lived a relatively simple life where his faith and family dictated many of the choices he made daily, his emergence as a prominent black artist in the late nineteenth century often thrust him openly into coping with the social complexities inherent with America's great racial divide. In order to fully appreciate how he negotiated prevailing prejudices to find success, this book places him in the context of a uniquely talented black man experiencing the demands and rewards of nineteenth-century high art and culture. By careful examination on multiple levels previously not detailed, this book adds greatly to existing Tanner scholarship and provides readers with a more complete, richly deserved portrait of this preeminent American master.

Naurice Frank Woods, Jr. is currently an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is the former program head and has published recently in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, *American Art*, and the *Journal of Black Masculinity*.

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This book is dedicated to Cameron and Aiden and my “Tanner”
cousins, Jason, Roxann, Justin, and Jenna.



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Foreword

Bringing Tanner into the Twenty-First Century

In June 1859, Benjamin Tucker Tanner and Sarah Miller Tanner were celebrating the birth of their son Henry. In choosing his middle name, they commemorated the abolitionist action taken by John Brown in 1856 at Osawatomie, Kansas. Henry Ossawa Tanner was named as an act of love and defiance, in the hope that American slavery would end and he would grow up in a freer world. From his birth, Henry was marked with the spiritual foundation of the AME Church and his parents' commitment to "the race." His name itself ties him to the struggle. As a child, Henry was raised to see past the limits that America's view of race set for his community. He saw himself as an artist, and with perseverance and his family's support he transformed his dream into reality.

This was his nineteenth-century foundation and on it, he built the skills to fulfill his artistic inspiration. He was trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and continued his studies in Europe at the Académie Julian. The work that he produced was always framed in spiritual uplift and the struggle of his people. By the twentieth century, Tanner had established himself in the art world as an important figure and he was widely considered the preeminent African American artist. Much of his success was achieved on the world stage in Paris. He was on a path to success that was not fully open to him at home. Still he maintained his American contacts and even mentored a number of African American artists of the next generations including William Edouard Scott, William Harper, and Hale Woodruff.

Tanner had assured his place in history with the creation of *The Banjo Lesson*, but he had moved to make spiritual and religious scenes the focus of his work. This shift disappointed many in the black community who felt there was a need for positive images of blacks. Tanner was depicting the stories that his father had preached. After a period of being seen as a significant but perhaps out of style artist, a reassessment of his work began to take shape in the 1960s. This resurrection of his status was built on catalogued shows at Spellman College and the Smithsonian, and the 1991 show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Now in the twenty-first century, there is again a need for Tanner and a need for a deeper understanding of his life and the significance of his art. We all need to understand the sources of his courage, strength, and perseverance that allowed him to achieve beyond all expectations. The 2012 traveling show organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts introduced Tanner's work to a new generation. With this biography, N. Frank Woods offers us the opportunity for a new, richer

and deeper understanding of Tanner's life and the worlds in which he lived. Woods has spent decades exploring the record and has unearthed a fuller picture of a man who was shaped by the nineteenth century, influenced the twentieth, and has much to offer us in the twenty-first.

Lewis Tanner Moore 2016

Prologue

Henry Ossawa Tanner, “Negro Painter”

In 1897, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937) (Figure P1) reached the highest measure of artistic achievement available to an American artist during the Gilded Age when his painting *The Resurrection of Lazarus* received a medal at the prestigious Salon de la Société des Artistes Français in Paris. For an American artist, his accomplishment was not unprecedented but its importance was underscored by a writer for the *Quartier Latin*, who stated that the work situated Tanner, “among the envied ranks of the arrived.”¹ Tanner further advanced his international reputation when the French government deemed the painting worthy of purchase for its Musée du Luxembourg, the national repository of works by living artists considered important to the country’s cultural heritage. Thus, his work joined the elite ranks of only 29 others created by American artists between 1878 and 1900 to reside there.²



Figure P1 Henry O. Tanner.

As an African American working in the age of Jim Crow, such recognition exacted a high price socially, economically, and emotionally. Despite his lifelong crusade to have his audiences see him as simply an “American” painter based on his national character, matters of race proved inescapable and central to his life and career. Tanner wanted his talent to take precedence, not to deny his racial identity, but rather to serve as testimony to the possibility that art might transcend the injustices and humiliations of racial prejudice. Furthermore, he desired strongly to attain critical acclaim without racial qualifiers that allowed some to judge him as merely an anomaly. And as long as many in the dominant culture continually regarded him principally as a “Negro” or “colored” painter, a stigma of inferiority inevitably attached.

Within the African American community, however, Tanner’s designation as “Negro painter” served as a badge of racial pride and marked him as one of their own. Long before his emergence as a celebrated Salon artist, the black press followed his career closely and upheld him as the standard-bearer who refuted commonly held, misguided notions that people of African descent had no skill or desire to produce significant works of visual art. Tanner was well aware of his importance to “the race” as the exemplar of the highest level of artistic achievement, yet it placed an additional burden upon him to sustain his artistic production to avoid letting “his people” down. As a writer for the *Indianapolis Freeman* succinctly stated in 1909, “Henry O. Tanner is the only Negro artist of distinction. The race could stand a few more.”³ Earlier, the *American Citizen*, a black newspaper in Kansas City, Kansas, proclaimed in the name of “the race”:

America, France, and Egypt [are] the scenes of his labor and studies. And now all the world bows to the great genius of a negro that elevates not only his race but raises America in the eyes of the artistic world in general, raises her to a point that she should blush for shame that her arts, or position in the world of arts is sustained by a race she oppresses on every side. The honors of Tanner are doubly meritorious under such circumstances.⁴

Thus, Tanner found himself in a unique, and at times uncomfortable, position where race was concerned and it weighed heavily on him throughout his career. The trajectory that carried him to the top rank of late nineteenth-century academic art often placed him in situations that were unique among African Americans. In order to succeed in attaining his goals of national and international acclaim, he found it necessary to follow a traditional career path that whites usually claimed as theirs exclusively. In this pursuit, Tanner experienced numerous highs and lows that helped define him as a man and as an artist. Tanner, as a “Negro painter” and as an African American born before the Civil War, faced unparalleled challenges—socially and artistically—beyond the understanding of his most sympathetic white contemporaries. In many respects, Tanner’s path to success was, by necessity, trod in their wake and in their manner, but, because of his race, his journey was often lonely, carefully guarded, and, at times, full of despair.

Tanner’s emergence as a gifted “Negro” artist came at a time when much of America remained racially hostile and offered people of African descent little opportunity to take charge of their own destiny and realize their full potential. Although being born in Pittsburgh and raised in Philadelphia geographically separated him from slavery and the subsequent onslaught of increasingly detrimental Jim Crow restrictions in the

South, he was, nevertheless, not immune to being treated as a second-class citizen and, therefore, still subject to related psychological and physical brutality. Thus, Tanner would at times equate the word “Negro” when attached to his success as less than complimentary and react accordingly out of the frustration of inequality. However, from the outset of his career, he managed to find rare opportunities and instructors that enabled him to move forward and, in the process, he carefully constructed strategies that at least gave him a chance to realize his dreams of success in the fine arts. In the end, Henry Ossawa Tanner, through his art, faith, and resolve, surmounted numerous overwhelming obstacles to emerge as one of America’s greatest painters.

Notes

- 1 “Tanner’s Salon Painting.” *Quartier Latin*, 3 (1897): 449.
- 2 Lois Marie Fink. *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 126.
- 3 “Henry O. Tanner,” *The Freedman* (October 23, 1909), 4.
- 4 “Henry O. Tanner, a Negro,” *American Citizen* (January 12, 1900), 1.

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Introduction

Creativity and Racism in the Nineteenth Century

Henry Ossawa Tanner was eight years old when a southerner from North Carolina, Hinton Rowan Helper, published a scathing racist treatise, *Nojoque: A Question for a Continent* (1867) that denigrated all Americans sharing the slightest trace of “African ancestry.”¹ Helper stated that his primary purpose was to “frankly and categorically... write the negro out of America,” and that his “secondary object is to write him, (and manifold millions of other black and bicolored caitiffs, little better than himself) out of existence.”² In support of his argument, Helper turned to the arts as conclusive proof that blacks uniformly failed to measure up to white standards of plastic expression and aesthetic comprehension and execution. He wrote:

Can the African hew out of stone, cast of metal, or make of any other solid substance whatever life-like representation of men? Beasts? Bird? Where or when has the Ethiopian executed an admirable statue of any hero? Demi-God? Or other renowned personage?

Is the Negro a clever modeler in plaster? A cunning carver in wood? An expert chiseler in marble? Has he ever, of granite, of bronze, or of oak, formed famous images of the lion? The horse? The dog? White men only... have been known, and but white men can be known, as highly-gifted and accomplished.

Has the African ever artistically pictured, upon canvas, anything animate or inanimate? No, no. The Negro can show no masterpiece in landscape, no pattern in portraiture. It is the white man only, who self-supplied with easel and brush, mysteriously seizes the fantastic and flights of the imagination, and then, with steadiness of nerve, deliberately fashions them into substances of wondrous form and beauty. None but white men... have gained, and none but white men can gain, meritorious recognition and eminence.³

Helper appeared to be ignorant of any form of African American artistic achievement prior to 1867. And even if he was aware that such creativity existed—and it did—he would never acknowledge it. For him and scores of other racist white Americans, the very idea of an African American competing with Caucasians in the fine arts was unthinkable. Those who adhered to the ideologies of racial superiority did so with clearly defined boundaries, which no person of African ancestry dared cross without suffering dire consequences. Many whites, therefore, claimed that America, with all its blessings and opportunities, was reserved strictly for whites while blacks merely served them and stayed in their designated place of societal and cultural subordination.

2 Henry Ossawa Tanner

Noted sociologist Maurice Davie, expounding on the credo of how racist whites viewed African Americans in general, stated:

The Negro is inferior and will remain so. He can never be expected to measure up to the white man's standards of character and achievement. He should be kept in his place as an inferior. This is a white man's country, and the white race must dominate. Moreover, Negroes are by nature lazy and shiftless, dependent and care-free, incapable of self-discipline and forethought, inclined to criminal behavior, and sexually immoral. As an individual, he may be capable, likeable, trustworthy, and honest, but this is the exception. Finally, this whole matter is not a debatable issue.⁴

Helper offered no new ideas on race matters in *Nojoque*; he merely reiterated and reinforced what others had said or written before him, thus drawing an eager audience from across an almost uniform spectrum of likeminded believers. The notion of white supremacy, as they understood it, existed in America in some form from the first arrival of natives of West Africa to its shores and expanded into the profitable business of chattel slavery and a society that drew strict color lines. This notion was not only held by southerners as a defense of slavery and their elevated social standing, but also by northerners who used it to circumvent the political and social progress of free African Americans.

Thus, it is understandable that the restrictions African Americans labored under because of their perceived inferiority became a major obstacle in their quest for equality and self-determination. This was particularly true of the small number of blacks in the nineteenth century, including Henry Tanner, who dared enter the field of fine arts and lay claim to what many in the dominant culture considered a racially exclusive bastion of sanctified white cultural and intellectual attainment. Consequently, the progressivism displayed by these pioneering black artists contradicted the prevailing mainstream notions of African American character and behavior and, as a result, many whites looked upon them with disdain and contempt and often saw them as a threat to the sustainability of their privileged position. American historian Leon Litwack observed:

What had been firmly planted in the white mind was an image of the race as childlike, irresponsible, ignorant, and submissive. And once whites had come to accept these traits as peculiar Negro characteristics, any black man or woman who behaved otherwise was viewed as abnormal, even menacing.⁵

On the level of high art, white supremacists believed that they had found a definitive test for determining the limits of black intelligence and it was there, above all other measures of black achievement, that the "battle lines" in defense of their preeminence were staunchly drawn. More importantly, many white supremacists found one key element lacking in the minds of people of African descent that they believed forever forbade them from painting or sculpting masterpieces of fine art—imagination—that marvelous spark of intellectual perceptibility and expression. Thomas Jefferson clearly advanced this idea as he grappled with the question of how the races differed. Writing in his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson stated:

Comparing them [blacks] by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.⁶

Although he was not specifically addressing the possibility of black painters and sculptors springing into existence among free black and slave communities, Jefferson concluded that there was some underlying racial component that prevented this possibility from ever becoming a reality. As the son of a Virginia planter, he grew up around slaves and, for many years, found himself surrounded by more blacks than whites. Jefferson thought he knew slaves intimately, and as he became more educated and enlightened, he sought to find scientific validations for his beliefs in the differences between blacks and whites. His supposition that slaves lacked the slightest spark of imagination confirmed, for him, that there was a definable chasm between a “superior” race and an “inferior” race. After all, imagination, a word echoed in Helper’s writings, leads to great inventions, the desire to explore the unknown, social, and economic progress, and masterpieces of art and music—all, in the view of white supremacists, their exclusive dominions. Thus, according to Jefferson’s observations, blacks could never rise above being useful “things” that were perpetually destined to occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder in America.

Likewise, Charles R. Ramsay, editor of the anti-abolitionist paper, *The Daily Cincinnati Republican and Commercial Register*, explained:

The liberal and honorable professions are to him [the African American] forbidden fruit. He cannot even embark in business of any kind other than meager scale. His fate is to toil and drudge for subsistence... Whether bondsman or freeman he must be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. Nature has decreed it and her laws cannot be changed.⁷

Even those who conceded that blacks had the capacity to grasp rudimentary concepts placed limits on their ability to move forward and attributed their skill merely to an “imitative” nature. Some believed, therefore, that

the Negro has no invention, but he can be trained to do good mechanical work, and after being trained he must ever afterwards work exactly according to his training. When he learns to make an axe handle, his process in making one never changes, and all his axe handles are just alike.⁸

Extending that line of reasoning to fine art, an 1867 issue of the *New York Herald* concluded, “the Negro seems to have an appreciation of art while being manifestly unable to produce it.”⁹

Yet in this climate of racially induced morass concerning creativity, some blacks claimed small victories that led to a measure of social or cultural advancement and provided the inspiration for Tanner to defy the odds and pursue a career in fine art. Despite the ignorance of or blindness to early black artistic achievement by white supremacists, parts of America, if only locally and regionally, became aware of outstanding black success in the fine arts. These artists established benchmarks for Tanner

4 Henry Ossawa Tanner

that led him to conclude that it was possible to engage whites on their own terms in art galleries and museums and in social settings and circles reserved for the Caucasian culturally elite. Prominent among them were Robert Seldon Duncanson (1821–1872), Edward Mitchell Bannister (c. 1828–1901), and Mary Edmonia Lewis (c. 1844–1907).

Robert Seldon Duncanson was America's first great landscape painter of African descent. From the early 1850s until his death, he achieved national and international recognition for his paintings rendered in the Hudson River style primarily through the support of abolitionist groups. Duncanson's career carried him from humble beginnings in Cincinnati and Detroit, with the aid of local antislavery organizations, to critical acclaim in Canada, where art critics hailed him as an American master. Later, he showed his acknowledged masterpiece, *Land of the Lotus Eaters* (1861), a large work based on the poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in London where the picture made him one of the most talked-about artists among local art circles. He found patronage from the Duchess of Sutherland and the Duchess of Essex and praise among the English art critics. This and other related paintings reflected his intimate knowledge of English romantic literature and his love for nature and gained him the designation of "best landscape painter in the West."¹⁰ There is some evidence that Duncanson, a very fair complexioned African American, at times crossed the color line to gain certain advantages to advance his career, but he never chose passing as a permanent option and his memory remained ensconced within the black community.¹¹ He died in 1872 from the effects of mental illness at the height of his career.

Edward Mitchell Bannister, a native of Boston, also benefited from associations with abolitionists as well as middle-class blacks in the city. His enrolment in evening classes taught at the Lowell Institute by noted sculptor-anatomist Dr. William Rimmer gave him the distinction being one of the first African Americans to receive formal art training. After his marriage to Christiana Cartreaux, a prosperous hairdresser, Bannister was able to devote much of his time in the pursuit of art. With his talent and warm personality, he quickly became a respected and recognized member of the Boston art community. Bannister and his wife moved to Providence, Rhode Island in 1871. At that time, the city was a developing center for the arts and Bannister found a receptive climate to expand his artistic vision. He became, along with several white artists, a founder of the Providence Art Club—an organization later evolved into the Rhode Island School of Design. Bannister's greatest achievement and recognition came when he exhibited a painting, *Under the Oaks* (1876) at the prestigious art exhibition held as part of the great Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. Hanging there among some of the greatest works of art in the world, a jury awarded the work a first-place bronze medal and certificate of award, thus ranking Bannister with the best American artists at that time. When Bannister traveled to Philadelphia to collect his prize, however, officials soundly rejected him when they discovered that he was black. Only loud protest from sympathetic friends and supporters allowed him to receive his award. Bannister died suddenly from a heart attack in 1901 while attending a prayer meeting in Providence.

Mary Edmonia Lewis was the first black professional sculptor to compete successfully in Italy and gain an international reputation. She was born in the state of New York to an African American father and a Native American mother. Orphaned at a young age, Lewis was raised by her mother's people and grew up following the nomadic lifestyle of the Chippewa Indians. She eventually matriculated at Oberlin College in 1859 where she studied art as part of the curriculum, but mounting racial

tension prevented her from graduating. After leaving the school, she went to Boston and began a career in sculpture, relying on the city's abolitionist groups for support. She briefly shared the same studio building where Edward M. Bannister worked. Lewis left for Italy in 1865 and soon joined a small group of female neoclassical sculptors in Rome under the guidance of famous American expatriate actor Charlotte Cushman. Fearing that her race and her sex would hinder her progress in a male-dominated profession, she did much of the physically intensive manual labor usually reserved for studio workers so that no one would accuse her of not creating her own sculpture. Lewis rendered portrait busts of Boston abolitionists, addressed themes of emancipation and Native American life, and took on portrait commissions and she was successful. She unveiled her masterpiece, *Death of Cleopatra*, at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition where the 1.5-ton marble sculpture was exhibited to great acclaim. After the Centennial, Lewis continued to receive commissions. Former President Ulysses S. Grant posed for her in her studio in Rome in 1878 and a church in Baltimore ordered *Adoration of the Magi* in 1883, thus providing Lewis with her last major commission. Unfortunately, Lewis fell victim to a decline in the popularity of neoclassical art and by the end of the nineteenth century the style had run its course. However, Lewis proved that people of African descent could master the intricate skills needed to rank among the world's great sculptors. Lewis never returned to America to live and died in obscurity in London, England on September 17, 1907.

Despite the long odds, Duncanson, Bannister, and Lewis demonstrated to a highly skeptical world that people of African descent could aspire to the fine arts and make significant contributions. They also proved that they could overcome, to an extent, the problems inherent in prevailing racist attitudes and actions when presented with favorable circumstances and support. Their achievements were not lost to Tanner, and he would eventually follow their example and far surpass their notable successes.

Yet, when Hinton Rowan Helper wrote his dismissal of blacks from ever gaining notable artistic standing in 1867, Tanner was still five years away from discovering a passion for art that would last for the rest of his life. He was still too young to grasp fully the ramifications of bearing the "badge of racial inferiority" and the consequences that came with defying deeply entrenched societal limitations on black advancement. And he was also still too young to realize that to negate many of the racially constructed obstacles that lay in his path to artistic greatness, a high price involving his physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing would have to be paid. The toll, as will be seen, was exacting.

As Tanner matured and turned his thoughts increasingly to the possibility of having a long and rewarding career as an artist, he must have also tempered those thoughts with questions as to how his race and the subsequent acts of racism directed against him would affect his plans. It is likely that he shared the sentiments of Peter Humphries Clark, an Ohio educator, writer, abolitionist, and civil rights activist, who perfectly captured how blacks felt about the systemic impact of racial prejudice. Speaking at an Emancipation Day celebration in Dayton, Ohio, in 1873, Clark remarked:

I do not forget the prejudice of the American people; I could not if I would. I am sore from sole to crown with its blows. It stood by the bedside of my mother when she bore me. It darkens with its shadow the grave of my father and mother. It has hindered every step I have taken in life. It poisons the food I eat, the water I drink and the air I breathe. It dims the sunshine of my days, and deepens the

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darkness of my nights. It hampers me in every relation of life, in business, in politics, in religion, as a father or as a husband. It haunts me walking or riding, waking or sleeping. It came to the altar with my bride and now that my children are attaining their majority, and are looking eagerly with their youthful eyes for a career, it stands by them and casts its infernal curse upon them. Hercules could have as easily forgotten the poisoned shirt which scorched his flesh, as I can forget the prejudices of the American people.¹²

Historian Margaret Just Butcher perhaps best summarized the plight of the early African American artists in their attempt to circumvent the nearly insurmountable obstacles they encountered as a direct result of overt racism. She stated that they had to prove:

to a skeptical world that the Negro could be an artist. It had the notion that for a Negro to aspire to the fine arts was ridiculous. Before 1885, any Negro man or woman with artistic talent and ambition confronted an almost impassable barrier. Yet, in a long period of trying apprenticeship, several Negro artists surmounted both the natural and the artificial obstacles with sufficient success to disprove, but not dispel, the prevailing prejudice.¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century, there would be no better example of Butcher's assessment than that found in the life and art of Henry Ossawa Tanner.

In the pages that follow, I detail the life and art of Henry O. Tanner in a manner that portrays him as a gifted artist who managed to overcome the impediments of nineteenth-century racism and, in the process, came to terms with his own fundamental need to serve God fully based on sermons he delivered from gallery walls. Most often, published accounts on Tanner that entered mainstream art history, particularly those since the late 1960s, cast him as an exemplary racial figurehead needed to fill gaps in white-dominated historiographies that for decades denied a significant black presence. Tanner, through his startling accomplishments, fills that role conveniently in the name of political correctness, and his famous *Banjo Lesson*, steeped in its incontestable blackness, literally adds "color" to the pages of current art history texts. Yet, Tanner scholars have rarely explored in depth his struggle along racial lines that led to his present place of inclusivity and, consequently, he often appears alongside his notable white contemporaries as an equal member of the "fraternity" of great nineteenth-century American painters. Tanner often demonstrated that he was their equal in terms of talent, and he preferred that critics and patrons judge him and his art accordingly. In fact, he seldom mentioned race and its ramifications on his life and career during interviews with the press. However, always underlying his remarkable march into the realms of high art was his "unforgivable" racial identity and the consequences, many times dire, that it entailed. It is from this perspective that the core of this book develops.

Tanner lived a relatively simple life where his faith and family dictated many of the choices he made daily. Yet his emergence as a prominent black artist in the late nineteenth century often thrust him openly into coping with the social complexities inherent with America's great racial divide. In order to appreciate fully how he negotiated prevailing prejudices, I find it necessary to delve deeper into his personal life and motivations for creating his masterpieces, but I also place him in the context of

a uniquely talented black man experiencing the demands and rewards of nineteenth-century high art and culture. By careful examination on multiple levels, I hope to add greatly to existing Tanner scholarship and provide readers with a more complete, richly deserved, portrait of this preeminent American master.

Notes

- 1 Hinton Rowan Helper was born near Mocksville, North Carolina in 1829. In 1857, he published the book, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*, in which he advocated for the abolition of slavery based on his belief that the institution greatly hindered the South's economic, educational, cultural, and social development. Helper feared that because the large percentage of blacks in the region remained tied to agricultural endeavors, expansive industrialization throughout the South remained retarded indefinitely. He also blamed the relatively small number of slave owners as being a detrimental presence that prevented the white yeoman class from achieving upward mobility. Ironically, although Helper was decidedly anti-black, he found his ideas and his name vilified in the South especially when the book became a tool of Northern abolitionists who used it to bolster their claims for the end of slavery. *Nojoque* was one of three overtly racist books that followed, all clearly condemning non-whites, in particularly African Americans, as being the bane of American society. See J.J. Cardoso, "Hinton Rowan Helper as a Racist in the Abolitionist Camp," *The Journal of Negro History*, 55 (October 1970): 323–330.
- 2 Hinton Rowan Helper, *Nojoque: A Question for a Continent* (New York: George W. Carleton & Co. 1897), v.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 339–341.
- 4 Maurice R. Davie, *Negroes in American Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1949), 364–365. Davie included Tanner as a prime example of African Americans emergence in the "field of formal expression."
- 5 Leon Litwack, *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind* (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 1982), 15.
- 6 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1785, <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s28.html>, accessed May 3, 2017.
- 7 Richard W. Pih, "Negro Self-Improvement Efforts in Ante-Bellum Cincinnati, 1836–1850," *Ohio History* 78 (Summer 1969): 180.
- 8 Otto Klineberg, *Characteristics of the America Negro* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944), 12.
- 9 Quoted in William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland: Revel, 1887), 129.
- 10 *Daily Cincinnati Gazette* (May 30, 1861), 3.
- 11 Naurice F. Woods, Jr. "Painting and Passing: Robert S. Duncanson's Dilemma of Racial Identity," unpublished manuscript, 2012.
- 12 Peter H. Clark, "Emancipation Day Speech," delivered at Emancipation Day Celebration, Dayton, Ohio. Reprinted in *Cincinnati Commercial*, September 23, 1873.
- 13 Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York: The New American Library, 1956), 214.

1 Of the Father and of the Son

The Rise of Benjamin and Henry Tanner

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
Proverbs 22:6

Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go; Keep her, for she is your life.
Proverbs 4:13

In October 1860, Reverend Benjamin Tucker Tanner, the father of Henry Ossawa Tanner, took a temporary assignment as pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. He soon sent for his wife, Sarah Elizabeth Miller Tanner, and infant son, Henry, who were still living in Pittsburgh. Shortly afterward, Sarah decided to go shopping somewhere in the nation's capital and she procured transportation accompanied by her baby. The first leg of her trip was uneventful, but returning home proved problematic and possibly life-threatening. A heavy snowfall later in the day forced mother and child to consider riding a streetcar home. City law prohibited black riders, but Sarah, out of desperation, boldly decided to attempt a ruse to board the car. She pulled a veil over her face to disguise her racial identity and uncovered the face of her light-complexioned, auburn-haired child to fool those who sat inside. Unfortunately, two male passengers discovered their presence and remarked, "Who, what have we here a nigger, stop the car."¹ Once revealed, mother and child found themselves ejected into the frigid night.

Henry Ossawa Tanner, at a little more than one year of age, had become the unwitting pawn in a struggle between the races that left most people of African descent at a distinct disadvantage. Sarah Tanner was certainly disadvantaged to the point where her survival, and that of her little son, depended on a successful passage across racial lines at a time when the notion and nature of race, primarily in the form of slavery, dominated much social, political, and economic thought and action in America. Although they survived their ordeal that day, Sarah knew that they had been lucky and blessed, and that similar incidents were likely to befall them in the future. She surely wondered what life would be like for young Henry in the midst of uncertain and turbulent times. She and her family were, after all, part of a larger population of African Americans, both slave and free, whose fate would not be reconciled until long after the end of the prolonged and bloody Civil War.

Tanner learned of the incident years later and it had a profound effect upon him. He wrote:

I never knew this story till I was a grown man and we were in our Diamond Street house in Philadelphia near East Park. I left the house immediately and it took several hours walking in among the trees and under the night skies to cool the heat and hatred that had surged in my bosom. I have no recollection of ever going back there [Washington] till on a trip from Paris I found my mother living there with my sister and I went there for a few days. One day we took a streetcar and a distinguished looking middle age man of the same race that had formerly ejected that same mother and son arose and gave my mother a seat. My mother said it was not a very rare thing, but I always thanked God I had seen it.²

Tanner's mother may have reminded him of that long ago incident as a sign that progress was being made between the races, perhaps in an effort to calm him over a recent racially motivated occurrence directed against him while transitioning from the more tolerant atmosphere of Paris where he now resided. There he was Henry O. Tanner, American artist—a respected and acknowledged painter of merit even among many of his white compatriots sharing similar experiences abroad. At home, however, he was more than likely to find himself on the receiving end of vile racial insults and to be “reassigned” to a place of subordination among whites. The story told by Sarah Tanner merely reinforced what he already knew—that America, even in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction, had not even come close to resolving the issue of race and equality and that he was still as vulnerable as any black person to mistreatment based solely on his ethnic identity. His response to being “cast out” as a child was, “May God forgive them for even at this distant day it is hard for me to do so.”³ It is likely that he echoed that sentiment for most of his life.

Tanner's life was an ongoing struggle to overcome the limitations of race as imposed on African Americans and, ultimately, to achieve greatness at the highest levels of nineteenth-century academic art. In order to realize this lofty goal Tanner subjected himself to rigors of body, mind, and spirit that transcended the experiences of most African Americans of his day. On numerous occasions, he would find himself “cast out,” as he had been in infancy, by prejudiced associates, acquaintances, strangers, and country, only to be rescued repeatedly by his resolute determination and with the help of those whom he regarded as close friends.

Tanner's passage through the crippling effects of racism to critical international acclaim began with his birth on June 21, 1859 in Pittsburgh. Fortunately for the newborn, his father and mother were able to provide him with a stable and relatively comfortable environment that gained him important educational and cultural advantages that allowed him to escape much of the “plague of perceived inferiority” that stood in his way to becoming a great artist.

He was also fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from his father's experiences of growing up black in America. One admirer described Benjamin Tanner as “a mulatto of medium size, about 5 feet, 8 inches, weighing around 190 pounds, modest and genteel, sociable and pleasant in conversation.”⁴ He was also a proud, self-reliant, and deeply spiritual man. These characteristics helped sustain him through the difficult and often hostile times that he faced trying to survive and advance in a white-dominated society. He was born in late December 1835 to Hugh and Isabella Tanner in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania into a family that had known freedom for several generations. Tanner later recalled that his father often boasted with pride of being a “Pittsburgher of three generations.”⁵ He also stated that his father used the expression

when his “fur had been rubbed the wrong way.”⁶ Freedom from slavery in the South gave Benjamin the opportunity to gain an education and, after becoming only one of the less than 6 percent of the total black population in the United States at the time that was literate, he set his sights on college as a means of personal advancement. Barbering to pay for his expenses, Benjamin attended Allegheny Institute (later known as Avery College) for a year, refusing to accept free tuition from the school’s founder, lay Methodist minister and abolitionist Charles Avery, although he was impoverished, his father was dead, and he had to care for his mother. The reason for this behavior is indicative of his character. As William J. Simmons stated, “His whole nature was independent; for he might have sweetened his life some and smoothed many a road over which he passed, but he preferred to work and win.”⁷ He later studied for three years at Pittsburgh’s Western Theological Seminary where he graduated in 1860. Benjamin’s decision to become a minister had a profound effect on his life and career.

While still a student at Western in 1858, he acquired a license to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Thus began a long and distinguished career in service to that denomination. Also as a student at Western, Benjamin demonstrated publically his passion for combating racial intolerance. One evening in March 1859, he attended a lecture by Fanny Kemble, the celebrated antislavery activist, at the Masonic Hall in Pittsburgh. He took a seat in the section assigned for whites only and a US Deputy Marshal asked him to move to the black area. Tanner refused and the Marshal threw him out.⁸ This defiant act, which precursors the sit-ins sparked by the Civil Rights Movement more than 100 years later, marked Benjamin Tanner as a man who refused to accept his assigned place in life. From an early age, Benjamin Tanner exhibited a profound willingness to fight for equality amid a climate of racial intolerance. This desire for civil justice and self-determination was a precious gift that he would pass on to his children.

A clue to Benjamin’s defiance comes from one of his journal entries. In an eloquent passage, he addressed the plight of all African Americans who labored in the shadow of injustice, bigotry, and inferiority while many in white society placed the blame on them as victims of their own racial ineptitude. Tanner wrote:

If the colored people would only do right is the cry from the parlor to the kitchen, from the Senate Hall to the country squire shanty. “Colored people won’t do right.” Right, what do they mean by right, is it to see while yet their eyes have been put out, to love labor while yet they are taught none but the meanest work—to love their country, while yet it brands them the most infamous on earth. To love their race while yet from infancy they are taught to believe their natural inferiority. If colored people would do right. Oh yes, to do that “right” we would not be men.⁹

The year 1856 proved especially important to Benjamin. Not only was it the year he officially joined the AME Church, but it was also the year he met Sarah Elizabeth Miller. She was born on May 18, 1840, in Winchester, Virginia to a slave mother, Elizabeth, and a free black father, Charles. Since Virginia law required that the offspring of an enslaved mother acquire her status, Sarah grew up bound and severely restricted. She later obtained her freedom after Elizabeth managed to send her children to the North on the Underground Railroad.¹⁰ Once safely across the Mason–Dixon Line, the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society dispersed the group throughout the area



Figure 1.1 The Tanner Family, c. 1890. Left to right: Isabella; Halle; her daughter, Sadie; Henry; Bishop Tanner; Carlton; Mrs. Tanner; Bertha; Sarah; and Mary.

with Sarah settling in with a family in Pittsburgh. She attended Avery Institute and later taught there. Benjamin married her on August 19, 1858, and they would eventually have nine children (two, Benjamin and Horace, died in infancy), the first being Henry Ossawa (Figure 1.1). Sarah shared her husband's love for learning and ran a private neighborhood school out of the family home.¹¹ There is no doubt she and her husband saw to it that Henry and all their other children possessed the greatest weapon an African American of the nineteenth century could use to combat racism—an excellent education.

The naming of their first-born carried significant meaning for the Tanners, especially in the selection of his middle name where Reverend Tanner's strong personal feelings about the times in which he lived became part of Henry's legacy. Reacting to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that mandated to all citizens of any state where escaped slaves fled the obligation of returning them to their masters upon their discovery and to impose criminal sanctions on those who aided runaways, Benjamin Tanner wrote in 1851:

Among the many laws with which a certain portion of the human family is doomed to endure, none is held in such abhorrence as the Fugitive Slave Law which was enacted by the great Democratic Republic of America on the 18th of

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September 1850. The provisions of this famous bill are for the capture of fugitive slaves who have had the good fortune to escape from the wicked hands of tyrants into the northern portion of the Republic; but there they are not safe; they can be taken from their families and carried back to suffer the torments of endless slavery, to be whipped and driven as the dumb brute. And though this is our native country where our ancestors fought in defense of American independence, yet we are not protected by their law.¹²

By giving his son the name Ossawa, Benjamin paid tribute to one of the staunchest opponents of slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act, John Brown. In 1855, Brown responded to the recently passed Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854, which left the issue of slavery in the territory up to a vote by its residents. He traveled to Kansas in a wagon loaded with weapons to fight against any supporters of slavery. After a band of proslavery forces had ravaged the abolitionist town of Lawrence, Brown led a small group of men on a retaliatory raid. Brown’s followers captured five proponents of slavery at Potawatomie Creek and hacked them to pieces. Later, John Brown fought at Osawatomie, Kansas where he and 30 free-state defenders fought 250 proslavery militia in 1856 and inflicted heavy casualties before retreating.

News of these events circulated widely in northern abolitionist circles and it is from these actions that the name “Osawatomie” Brown originated. Although Brown eventually met defeat at Osawatomie, he struck a responsive chord with Reverend Tanner. Surely, Brown’s gallant stand against overwhelming odds had parallels with the African America struggle for freedom and equality. And while it may seem contradictory that he, as a man of God, would not find Brown’s militant actions an affront to one of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shall not kill,” Benjamin’s deep understanding of the Bible led him to accept that, as particularly in the Old Testament, there were times when God required lives to be taken in his name and for the preservation of his chosen people. In this regard, Oswald Villard addressed how blacks and their supporters could find justification in Brown’s deeds and elevate him to near sainthood. He stated:

believing fully that there should be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, he killed his men in the conscientious belief that he was a faithful servant of Kansas and the Lord. He killed not to kill, but to free; not to make wives, widows and children fatherless, but to attack on its own ground the hideous institution of human slavery, against which his whole life was a protest... Naturally, a tender-hearted man, he directed a particularly shocking crime without remorse because the men killed typified to him the slave drivers who counted their victims by the hundreds... and always it must not be forgotten that his motives were wholly unselfish and that his aims were none other than the freeing of a race.¹³

In addition, Reverend Tanner was certainly in agreement with his church, which resolved in 1856 to “do all in its power to aid the bondsman, because slavery was a sin of the first degree, and the greatest known catalogue of crimes—the highest violation of God’s law—a shameful abuse of God’s creatures and shocking to enlightened humanity.”¹⁴ Thus, Reverend Tanner honored the memory of John Brown, who died on the gallows as a martyr for black freedom, the same year Henry was born.

Henry’s birth brought great joy to the Tanners and they were fortunate to see him live through his first year given the high mortality rate of the time, especially among