

Henry Ossawa Tanner

A concise collector's companion to this artist's page on TryArtwork.

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859 – 1937) was an American painter associated with Realism. Their work is recognised for biblical Realism.



Portrait

At a Glance

Nationality	American
Lifespan	1859 – 1937
Movement	Realism
School	Académie Julian
Best known for	Biblical Realism
Core subjects	Religious, Landscape Art
Medium	Oil
Central collection	Musée d'Orsay

Signature Style & How to Recognize It

Biblical and religious subjects rendered with a deeply personal faith and a cool blue-green palette unique to Tanner. Humble, contemplative moments rather than grand miracles. His genre scenes of African American life (*The Banjo Lesson*, 1893) are among the earliest dignified Black genre paintings by a Black American artist. Night scenes with an almost phosphorescent blue glow.

Career Timeline

Pennsylvania Academy Training (1879–1885)

Studied under Thomas Eakins.

Paris Move (1891)

Settled permanently in France, finding fewer racial barriers than in the United States.

Religious Peak (1895–1910s)

The Resurrection of Lazarus, The Annunciation, numerous biblical subjects.

Legion of Honour (1923)

First African American to receive the French Legion of Honour for an artistic career.

Museums & Collections

- Philadelphia Museum of Art — The Annunciation, Nicodemus, extensive Tanner holdings.
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- Art Institute of Chicago.
- Musée d'Orsay, Paris — The Resurrection of Lazarus.
- Cincinnati Art Museum.

Famous Works to Know

- **The Banjo Lesson**
- **The Annunciation**

Artist's Own Words

"It is impossible to paint the thing you do not know. To paint I must know, to know I must study, to study I must read and think."

Why This Artist Is Difficult to Reproduce

Tanner's biblical scenes glow from within because of careful layering of warm lights over cool blue-green grounds. Too opaque a reproduction turns the inner light into surface paint. His nocturnal religious moments — a tentative angel, a quiet Nicodemus — depend on restraint; theatrical lighting destroys the contemplation. The balance of racial dignity in his genre scenes requires specific, individualised figures rather than types.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Henry Ossawa Tanner best known for?

Biblical Realism. Core subjects: Religious, Landscape Art.

Where can I see original works by Henry Ossawa Tanner?

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Art Institute of Chicago, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and others.

Which paintings by Henry Ossawa Tanner are the most famous?

The Banjo Lesson, The Annunciation.

Why are reproductions of Henry Ossawa Tanner difficult?

Tanner's biblical scenes glow from within because of careful layering of warm lights over cool blue-green grounds.

Explore More

This guide is a short companion to Henry Ossawa Tanner's page on TryArtwork, where you can find further notes on their life, style and most celebrated works.

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