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Theresa Leininger-Miller

exhibition review of

Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit (exhibition)

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Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
January 28–April 15, 2012

Cincinnati Art Museum
May 26–September 9, 2012

Houston Museum of Fine Arts
October 14, 2012–January 6, 2013

“Mr. Tanner is not only a biblical painter, but he has brought to modern art a new spirit.”
— Vance Thompson, “American Artists in Paris,” *Cosmopolitan* 29, no. 1 (May 1900): 19.

Last summer the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM) hosted a handsome exhibition of more than one hundred works by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), promoting the expatriate American artist in France as a “modern spirit.” Celebrated as a Biblical and landscape painter who was trained in late nineteenth-century academic aesthetics, Tanner was an exemplary draftsman whose large figurative canvases won acclaim at the Paris Salon, garnered the patronage of Gilded Age millionaires, and earned him the Legion of Honor medal from the French government. While his subject matter was largely traditional, Anna Marley, Curator of American Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA, where Tanner studied and this exhibition originated), argues that some of his depictions and innovative painting practices and techniques demonstrate his embrace of modernism; even some contemporary critics called his religious paintings “modern” and “personal.” Marley’s assertion, while developed in the catalogue by more than a dozen scholars, was not as convincing in this presentation. In fact, one could argue that Tanner, with his travels in the Holy Land, lifelong illustration of New Testament images, reliance on conservative subject matter, influences from Rembrandt, and general aversion to abstraction, was anti-modernist, although he was an important contributor to Post-Impressionism. Or rather, as Hélène Valance suggests in the catalogue, it might be more fruitful to highlight the ways in which Tanner “navigated between modernity and antimodernism,” as he did in his moonlit scenes (27). The exhibition was arranged thematically without a rigid organization. This worked well for the most part, although some visitors regretted not seeing a strict chronological approach. Included were twelve paintings never before on view in a Tanner retrospective.

Tanner’s work filled eight large rectangular galleries on the second floor of the CAM, accentuated by two wall-sized enlargements of photographs at the entrance and near the end. The first was a half-length profile image of Tanner (ca. 1935), seated and staring intently into the distance, palette and brushes in his hands (fig. 1). Bespectacled, sporting a goatee, and wearing a smock, Tanner was the picture of a mature, cosmopolitan artist. The original photograph on which this reproduction is based hung in the first room, above a photograph of Tanner sculpting a small, unidentified seated figure (ca. 1880–90). These were displayed to the left of a portrait of Tanner (ca. 1897), completed by his renowned PAFA teacher, Thomas Eakins; the two shared a mutual respect and Eakins depicted only a handful of his students. One wonders why there weren’t other likenesses of Tanner here such as Herman Dudley Murphy’s painting (1895) and fellow PAFA alum Charles Grafly’s bust (1896). This gallery, along with the

next, comprised the “Tanner and America” introductory section (fig. 2). Painted olive, it featured the artist’s early work in three mediums: illustration, sculpture, and oil painting. On the right wall were images reflecting the serious youth’s aspirations to be an animal painter, most of which were of intimate depictions of lions, including an older one named Pompeii, nicknamed ‘Pomp’ (fig. 3). These were a study for *Androcles* (ca. 1885–86), *Lion Licking Its Paw* (1886), *Pomp at the Zoo* (ca. 1880) and *Pomp at Phila. Zoo* (ca. 1880–86). The latter private loan arrived too late to be included in the catalogue. In the center was a display case featuring an open copy of *Harper’s Young People* (January 10, 1888); Tanner had earned money for illustrating a scene from a short story in which a girl visits her former pet, a deer, at the zoo, “*It Must Be My Very Star, Come Down to Brooklyn, After All.*”



Fig. 1, Entrance to “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit”, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, “Tanner and America” gallery. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, Tanner's animal images. [\[larger image\]](#)

Along the left wall were portraits. Two of the most surprising pieces in the exhibition were rarely seen sculptures, a patinated plaster bust of Tanner's father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner (1894), next to a painted portrait of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop with the endearing inscription, "A hurried study of my dear father" (1897) and a long rectangular bas-relief featuring the heads of Richard and Sarah Allen flanking a scene of a blacksmith's shop. Allen, founder of the Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, nurtured his congregation in that space. He used it as both a house of worship and a means of employment and service. Although the sculptures demonstrate an assured and sensitive hand, lamentably, they are the only known three-dimensional works by Tanner. To the right of the plaster bas-relief were two portraits of Tanner's beloved mother, a former slave, the best known of which is his profile view of Sarah in a rocking chair (1897), a warm and personalized nod to James Abbot McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Gray and Black No. 1* (1871), which Tanner had seen on exhibition in the Pennsylvania Academy in 1881. Across the room next to a doorway was one of the earliest paintings by Tanner in the show, a portrait of his sister, Sarah (1881–82). This might have been better hung with the other family likenesses, in place of the contextual wall label adjacent to the images of Tanner's mother.

In the next room, painted an elegant eggplant, were eight landscapes. Most of these were from Tanner's brief stay in the Highlands of North Carolina in 1889, including two lovely watercolors. There were also compositions from Florida and Georgia; Tanner had attended an AME convention in Jacksonville, ca. 1894, and had opened an unsuccessful photography studio in Atlanta in 1889. *Georgia Landscape* (1889–90) is an overcast scene that reveals Tanner's interest in lighting effects and displays the beginnings of his layered painting style. An earlier piece, *Boy and Sheep Under a Tree* (1881), with a lighter, exaggerated palette and mood, is a proto-Impressionist work. Upon entering the gallery, the largest and most commanding painting was directly in the sight line of the previous room (fig. 4). Although the half-length likeness of Booker T. Washington (1917) was both out of time and out of genre in this setting, it would not have fit well elsewhere in the exhibition. The brief biographical label, alas, had nothing to do with the way the artist depicted his family's lifetime friend. The wall text also did not relate to a more impressionistic small French scene, *Edge of the Forest (Bois d'Amour)* (ca. 1893), another work that was out of place in this American section, but it would have been lost among the large canvases in subsequent galleries. This piece easily could have been pruned from the exhibition. The co-owner's name should have been printed on the wall label the way she prefers, in lower case, as it was in the catalogue.



Fig. 4, Tanner's landscapes in America and his portrait of Booker T. Washington. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the left wall was a timeline from the 1860s to the 1890s highlighting Tanner's life and achievements in the context of European and American events (fig. 5). In the Pennsylvania venue, the text related to happenings in Philadelphia. Here, there were references to Cincinnati's history, such as the completion of the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge in 1867 (the longest suspension bridge in the world then and the prototype of the Brooklyn Bridge); the establishment of the Red Stockings, the first professional baseball team in 1869; the creation of painter Frank Duveneck's *Whistling Boy* in 1872 (a beloved CAM painting); the founding of the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1881; and the CAM's acquisition of Robert Duncanson's *Blue Hole, Little Miami River* (1851) in 1923. Most relevant was Tanner's first solo exhibition, which took place in the Queen City in December 1890 at the Board of Education of the AME Church. When none of the works sold, Bishop Joseph Crane Hartzell, whose wife hailed from Cincinnati and arranged for the show, bought the lot, funding Tanner's travel to Europe. This significant detail was not in the wall text in Philadelphia. The Hartzells had met Tanner in Atlanta.

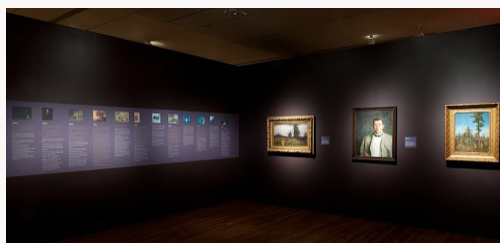


Fig. 5, Timeline of Tanner's life in context. [\[larger image\]](#)

Noticeably missing were Tanner's best-known works, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893, Hampton University Museum) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894, Bill and Camille Cosby), as well as *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, which won honorable mention at the Salon. (The original painting is lost, but an oil on paper version, ca. 1907–18, belongs to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) Despite many entreaties, the owners of all three works would not lend. Rather than call attention to their absence, CAM Curator of American Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper, Julie Aronson, chose not to include reproductions of the paintings; in contrast, PAFA chose to illustrate *The Banjo Lesson* on a wall label and *Daniel in the Lion's Den* in a wall-sized photographic enlargement.

The next room featured works that Tanner created at the Académie Julian and/or displayed at the Salon. To the left of the wall text were two small, stacked paintings of the City of Light, *View of the Seine, Looking Toward Notre Dame* (1896) and *The Seine, Evening* (ca. 1900). At the end of the long gold gallery was one of Tanner's masterpieces, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896), which won the artist a third-class gold medal at the Salon of 1897 (fig. 6). Now owned by the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, this was the first time the career-making canvas had left France, a truly significant event. It received extensive conservation in France and subsequently glowed. While the introductory text asserts that Tanner discovered his calling as a "modern religious artist" with this painting, the caption for the composition makes no claim that this work in particular was modern, and at first, it seems hard to believe, given the historical garb and the complex light effects of Rembrandt in it. As Marc Simpson notes in the catalogue, however, a critic from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* declared that it had "striking originality and modernity—the modernity of thought and study displayed in the characterizations of the personages of the subject and the research into the conditions existing in the time and place where the incident occurred" (73). Tanner evidently believed he achieved what he could with this milestone canvas and never again painted this theme. In his lifetime, *The Resurrection of Lazarus* was Tanner's acknowledged masterwork and most reproduced picture although since then, an earlier secular painting, *The Banjo Lesson* (1894), has supplanted it. Hung to the left of the canvas, one above the other, were a charcoal study for *Resurrection* and an etching, *Raising of Lazarus* (1910). Tanner based the latter work on Rembrandt's print, *The Raising of Lazarus* (1642), which was reproduced on the label; the CAM owns a first state of the etching. Such preparatory works were integrated with final works throughout this installation, in contrast to the PAFA show, in which all etchings were grouped together in the last gallery.



Fig. 6, "Tanner and Modern Painting in Paris: The Academy and the Salon." [\[larger image\]](#)

On the left wall were three large canvases, *Christ at the Home of Martha and Mary* (ca. 1905), *The Pilgrims of Emmaus* (1905), and *The Two Disciples at the Tomb* (ca. 1906). This was a sensible hanging where viewers could compare approaches; the same model appeared in the two latter works. As was the case with *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, the French government purchased *The Pilgrims at Emmaus*. Tanner had submitted only one non-religious painting to the Salon; this was *La Musique* (or *The Cello Lesson*) (1902), which shows his wife playing an instrument. Although the American press gave the work positive reviews, the French did not. Tanner painted *The Pilgrims of Emmaus* over it and submitted only religious subjects to the Salon thereafter.

Despite the somewhat broad header of this section, “Tanner and Modern Painting in Paris: The Academy and the Salon,” most of the works here concerned Christ’s miracles. On the right wall were seven paintings of this theme, the pivotal *Nicodemus* (1899), a study for *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (1899), an undated study for *Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples* (the final painting is now lost), the moonlit landscape, *Christ and His Disciples on Their Way to Bethany* (ca. 1903), *The Miraculous Haul of Fishes* (ca. 1913–14) (which Tanner donated to the National Academy of Design upon his election as full academician in October, 1927), *The Savior* (1900–05), and *The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water* (ca. 1907) (fig. 7). The label for *Christ and His Disciples* was somewhat perplexing since the composition seems firmly set in Biblical times; “the enveloping darkness marks a departure from the daylight of the modern world...” The label for *Nicodemus*, winner of the prestigious Lippincott Prize at PAFA in 1900, acknowledges that Christ has a dark complexion, but “shadows and conflicting light sources...seem deliberately calculated to obscure the precise nature of Christ’s appearance.” One wishes the text could have been extended to include more of the nuances of Alan Braddock’s essay in the catalogue, in which he argues that by shrouding Christ’s countenance, “Tanner repudiated the savior’s identification with a single racial type” because “In light of Christ’s sacred importance to all of humanity, race seemed beside the point” (138). Braddock underscored his point by making comparisons between Tanner’s paintings and his fair complexion: “His physical body and artistic corpus thus became more or less interchangeable: both were perceived as universal, interracial, and worldly, not unlike Christ and the Holy Land” (139).



Fig. 7, “Christ’s Miracles.” [\[larger image\]](#)

In the center of the room was a long glass display case. On one side were two photographs, one of Tanner and his class at the Académie Julian (ca. 1890), and the other of his tent from his travels in Palestine (ca. 1899). On the other side was Tanner’s award medal from the Exposition Universelle of 1900; this was flanked by superfluous photographic enlargements of the front and verso of the bronze piece.

In the fourth gallery, painted eggplant again, was “Tanner in North Africa and the Holy Land.” Marley convincingly asserted that Tanner studied stereographs and postcards for compositional approaches (figs. 8 and 9). The exhibition team acknowledged that Tanner’s North African work was in keeping with the European Orientalist, exoticizing approach, but also argued that it “references the rhetoric of the contemporary New Negro Movement and its use of images of the North African Orient as a way to elevate and define a black identity through African

heritage.” These compositions, largely devoid of people or including only small, indistinct bodies, suggest to me more of a travelogue in the manner of Delacroix than any attempt at race elevation. The labels stop short of stating the limitations of Tanner’s North African views in this vein. As Adrienne Childs notes in the catalogue, “there seems to be no attempt to expressly counter the dominant Orientalist stock-in-trade imagery; there seems to be no attempt to expressly counter the dominant Orientalist narrative...” and “there seemed to be no connection between this [New Negro] movement and Henry Tanner’s foray into Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. Tanner’s Orientalist images of modern Egypt did not adhere to the privileging of ancient Egypt motifs or to Africanesque abstract modes of representation that occupied African American artists early in the twentieth century” (102, 104).



Fig. 8, “Tanner in North Africa and the Holy Land”. Right to left: Study for *The Jews’ Wailing Place*, ca. 1897; *Head of a Jew in Palestine*, 1899, reworked ca. 1918–20; reproduction of a photograph of an older Jewish man published by the American Colony of Jerusalem, ca. 1900–10; *Interior of a Mosque, Cairo*, 1897; *A Mosque in Cairo*, 1897; *A View in Palestine* 1898–99; and *Sunlight, Tangier*, ca. 1910. [\[larger image\]](#)

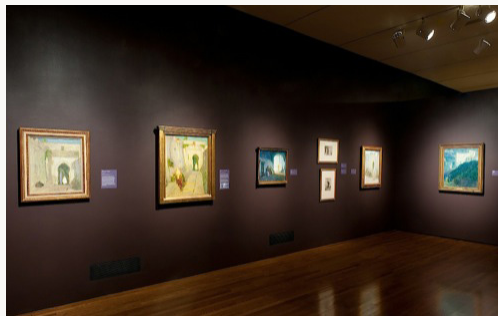


Fig. 9, Tangier and Near East scenes. Right to left: *Gateway Tangier*, ca. 1910; *Entrance to the Casbah*, 1912; stereograph of the Kabash, ca. 1898–1925; *Street Scene, Tangiers*, ca. 1912; *Mosque Tangier* and *Gate in Tangier, Near East Scene*, ca. 1910. Back wall: *Algiers (Old Buildings near Ka-hak)*, ca. 1912. [\[larger image\]](#)

By 1910 Tanner had largely left behind his earthy palette of reds and browns in favor of his signature blues, greens, mauves, and violets, the colors of Islamic tiles that Tanner would have seen on visits to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. These hues glowed against an olive background in the next area, mostly devoted to images of Christ’s mother. At the end of the long gallery was Tanner’s stunning *The Annunciation* (1898) next to a study for the painting (fig. 10). Here, Tanner depicted the archangel Gabriel as a vertical beam of light. The PAFA staff asserted that Tanner was likely aware of, and possibly even witnessed, Nikola Tesla’s dazzling

electrical inventions in London, Paris, and New York, and perhaps based his abstraction on the new technology. This, supposedly, is one of the ways Tanner achieved a “modern spirit” in his biblical paintings, by “infusing contemporary elements—such as the visual culture of electricity—into age-old art-historical subjects, like the Annunciation.” Given the conventional representation of Mary as a lower class teenager in a Middle Eastern interior, this seems rather a stretch. Also, Tanner used a similar approach in *The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water* (ca. 1907), in which he depicted Christ as a vertical specter. In the label for that piece, PAFA curators suggested that Tanner morphed the miraculous into a non-human shape: “flesh and blood are unnecessary in the domain of the spirit.” This is a more convincing assertion than the inspiration of a Tesla electrical tube. While Tanner’s abstraction of a supernatural being was unusual at the time, there were precedents, at least in literature, which predated the invention of electricity by more than half a century. Recall, for instance, Charles Dickens’s ghost of Christmas past in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), a white-robed, androgynous figure that had a blazing light on its head and appeared variously with single limbs, multiple appendages, and “now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away.”^[1] In Tanner’s own time, the American Symbolist Ethel Isadore Brown depicted an angel as a monochromatic glowing beam of light (although admittedly still figurative) in *Vision de Saint Jean à Patmos* (1898); this is reproduced in the catalogue.



Fig. 10, Gallery featuring biblical scenes. Back wall: *The Annunciation*, 1898. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the right wall were three large paintings, *Christ Learning to Read* (ca. 1911), *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scripture* (ca. 1909), and *Return of the Holy Women* (1904) (fig. 11). When one entered the room, *The Three Marys* (1910) was on the left back wall. Its isolation allowed viewers to contemplate Tanner’s focus on the emotional impact of Jesus’s absence from the tomb on the three women’s faces; he omitted the tomb, the discarded shroud, and the risen Christ. Such a scene, in contrast to James Tissot’s popular biblical illustrations, prompted critics of the day to call Tanner a “personal” painter. On the left wall were *The Visitation (Mary Visiting Elizabeth)* (ca. 1909–10), a charcoal study for *Rachel* (ca. 1898), *The Holy Family* (ca. 1909–10), and *Mary (La Sainte-Marie)* (1898). In a square case in the middle of the room were two items: one was a photograph of Tanner’s Swedish-American wife, Jessie, with their son Jesse who modeled for Mary and Jesus, respectively (ca. 1910), and the other was an open copy of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1903) with a reproduction of *Mary* from “The Mothers of the Bible” series that Tanner never completed, in part because of the “inability of the *Journal* and artist to translate

Tanner's painting technique into a legible commercial reproduction." The labels for these items were inexplicably switched.



Fig. 11, Left to right: *Christ Learning to Read*, ca. 1911; *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scripture*, ca. 1909; and *Return of the Holy Women*, 1904. Back wall: *The Three Marys*, 1910. [\[larger image\]](#)

The next eggplant-colored gallery featured “Tanner in the French Countryside” (fig. 12). Tanner worked in three distinct regions outside of Paris, in Brittany, Neufchâteau, and Pas-de-Calais, becoming a leader in the French artistic community in the latter locale. The arrangement here repeated the earlier pattern of a notable large painting to the right of small studies. This time it was *The Young Sabot Maker* (1895) next to an oil study (ca. 1895) and a pastel and ink (1893) of the oil, even though the subject is an interior scene rather than an exterior one. Surprisingly, the label said nothing about the apparent mixed heritage of the apprentice, a concept explored in the major Tanner retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1991. The large canvas, with its narrative peasant scene, reflected the influence of Salon painters rather than the Impressionists.



Fig. 12, “Tanner in the French Countryside” with *The Young Sabot Maker*, 1895, on the back wall. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the left wall were works that also did not really relate to the countryside theme but had more to do with the sea and genre scenes. These included the nocturnal landscape *Le Touquet* (ca. 1910), *Fishermen's Return* (1926), *Étaples Fisher Folk* (1923), *The Fisherman's Devotion, Étaples* (ca. 1910–20), *Return at Night from the Market* (ca. 1912), and *The Bagpipe Player* (1895), as well as a study for it. On the back wall to the right of the doorway was a non-biblical view of a port at Étaples, *Fishermen at Sea* (ca. 1913). The exhibition team contended that Tanner used “energetic and abstracting brushwork, the flattened rendering of the rocking boat, the upward tilt of the

picture plane, and the high horizon line to infuse this traditional subject matter with his modern vision.” Prominent in many of these works is a lantern, an expression of Tanner’s lifelong fascination with depicting the effects of light in the darkness.

On the right were small works (fig. 13). A couple of them concerned outdoor sites in France (but not those of the countryside), such as the flanking paintings, *Neufchâteau* (ca. 1918) and *House of Joan of Arc (Domrémy)* (1918), in which two American soldiers walk next to the birthplace of the medieval French peasant girl. The PAFA staff declared that Tanner “infused this painting with a modern spirituality that merges the sacred and secular aspects of life.” Such a matter-of-fact village scene seems more anecdotal than spiritual to me. The more dominant theme of works in the room was World War I. Here were Tanner’s charcoal drawings of the *A. R. C. Canteen*, *World War I* (1918), and *American Red Cross Canteen* (1918). Also on view were the oil paintings, *War Scene, Étaples, France* (one of the few scenes in which Tanner focused on the impact of the war near his home in northeast France, with a stream of soldiers there) and *The Arch* (1919), which captures the dramatic illumination of a temporary cenotaph built next to the *Arc de Triomphe* in memory of French soldiers who died in the war. In the middle of the wall was *(Untitled) Dusk Scene of a Flooded River and Nearly Town* (ca. 1918), a piece that did not quite fit there, given its subject, abstraction, and predominant blue-white-gray palette.



Fig. 13, “Tanner in the French Countryside” with *House of Joan of Arc (Domrémy)*, 1918, at far right.

[\[larger image\]](#)

A display case in the middle of the room held an enlargement of a photograph of the Old American Art Club in Paris (ca. 1900) and photographs (both ca. 1917) of Tanner’s homes, Les Charmes and Edgewood, near Trépiéd. The label failed to explain that the artist did not own both villas simultaneously. He bought the first in 1908, then sold it after his wife died in 1925, moving into Edgewood in 1926. There were also photographs of Tanner dining outdoors with family (ca. 1907–08), hanging out with French artists in Étaples (ca. 1900), and an exposition in Touquet, as well as an original small catalogue for the Société Artistique de Picardie in Le Touquet (1914). Tanner was elected president of the region’s artistic society in 1913, organizing a Beaux-Arts exhibition that summer and again in 1914. The second one, unfortunately, had to close after five days due to the declaration of war; Tanner fled with his family to England.

In a transitional space leading to the seventh gallery was a mural-sized enlargement of a photograph of Tanner and his family in their Philadelphia home (ca. 1890) (fig. 14). Viewers responded appreciatively to the depiction of these middle-class African-Americans. The seventh gallery, sparser with just six works, differed from the others in that there was no

introductory text to the two apparent themes of the return from the Crucifixion and the flight into Egypt (fig. 15). On the left wall was a charcoal and conté crayon study for the disciple Peter (ca. 1933). When one entered the space, the works on the opposite wall were *Return from the Crucifixion* (1936), a pencil and conté crayon study for *Mary, Return from the Crucifixion* (1933), and *Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1916–22). The exhibition team asserted that Tanner’s unusual mixture of tempera and oil together to develop rough textures and build up the surfaces of these canvases was a “hybrid of modern technique and traditional subject matter.” On the right were *Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1907–12), in which Tanner built up the dome-shaped moon by scoring a circular outline into the surface, and *Palace of Justice, Tangier* (ca. 1912–13), which features the flight into Egypt in the foreground. This room was meant to be more interactive and pedagogical. In the center were a table and six stools. Visitors could peruse the exhibition catalogue there and draw or jot down thoughts on the paper provided on the table; no pencils or pens were permitted in the galleries. On the back wall was a great deal of text in two sections flanking the doorway, inviting viewers to consider various artistic approaches to depicting themes; the CAM staff contributed this (fig. 16). On the left was “Variations on a Theme: Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Views of the Flight Into Egypt.” Reproduced were works by Tanner, Rembrandt, Robert Austin, Ben Miller, and Marc Chagall. On the right was “Preparing for Greatness: Tanner’s Artistic Process.” Reproduced here were four preparatory studies for *The Young Sabot Maker*, two photographs of Jessie and Jesse modeling for *Christ Learning to Read*, two postcards of the Palace of Tangier, and two sketches of study for *Mary* and *Return from the Crucifixion*. For visitors who took the time to read the extensive labels and study the comparisons, this section was effective and enlightening.



Fig. 14, Transitional space with photographic enlargement of Tanner and his family in Philadelphia, ca. 1890.

[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 15, Gallery featuring (left to right): *Return from the Crucifixion*, 1936; *Study for St. Peter*, ca. 1933; *Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1916–22; *Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1907–12; and *Palace of Justice, Tangier*, ca. 1912. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 16, Pedagogical panels. [\[larger image\]](#)

In the final room were large paintings of biblical scenes. The star here, mounted on its own stand-alone plinth at the far end of the eggplant-colored gallery, was *Salome* (ca. 1900), a major deviation from Tanner's typical religious works with its sensuality (fig. 17). The exhibition team suggested on the label that Tanner was inspired by Loïe Fuller, who performed her famous "Salome dance" in a billowing, diaphanous gown at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, where the artist also exhibited *Christ Among the Doctors*. They believed that the electric illumination the dancer used casts a greenish glow on the dancer's visage, a face that does not resemble that of Fuller. [Perhaps Tanner had seen Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's green-faced woman in *At the Moulin Rouge* (ca. 1892–95)]. Wanting to drive home the argument about the influence of electricity on Tanner's work, this painting appeared next to *The Annunciation* at PAFA, even though the female subjects were complete opposites. In contrast to the sensuous femme fatale whose nude body is illuminated through her garment, on a second, perpendicular plinth at much more of a remove in Cincinnati was the chaste mother of Jesus, *Mary* (1910). Each of these panels stood a few feet in front of a doorway, making the arrangement rather awkward. To signal museum-goers about the parameters of the exhibition, text on the backs of both plinths read "This is an exit. Please turn around and enter 'Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit'" through the main exhibition entrance located at the top of the stairs in the Great Hall." (fig. 18). While this was probably useful signage for those who came upon the show unexpectedly, it might have discouraged wanderers from retracing their steps. Further, that "wall" space might have been better filled by interpretive text or additional photographic enlargements.

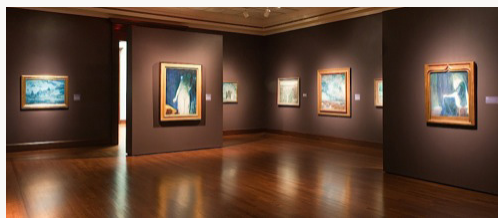


Fig. 17, Gallery featuring *Salome*, ca. 1900, at left and *Mary*, 1910, at right. [\[larger image\]](#)

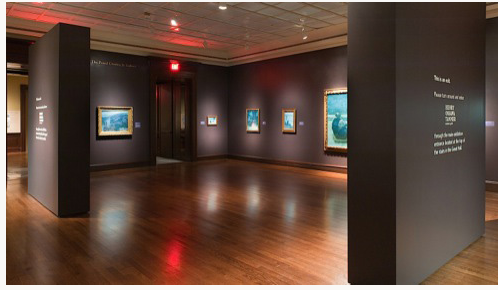


Fig. 18, Text on verso of plinths in final gallery. [\[larger image\]](#)

Most of the paintings in this eighth gallery concerned the life of Christ. Beginning in the back right and circling the room in a counterclockwise manner was a nighttime, Symbolist work, *Angels Appearing Before the Shepherds* (ca. 1910), as well as *Study for Christ and Nicodemus on a Rooftop* (ca. 1923). On the left wall were *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (The Sleeping Disciples)* (ca. 1923), *Moses in the Bullrushes* (1921), *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (1927), *The Good Shepherd* (ca. 1917) (a motif Tanner painted at least fifteen times), *Good Shepherd* (1922), and the *Three Wise Men* (1925), the last two on the back wall flanking an entrance. A painting to the right of that doorway was *Christ and the Disciples Before the Last Supper* (1908–09). On the left wall were *The Good Shepherd (Atlas Mountains, Morocco)* (ca. 1930), *Sodom and Gomorrah* (ca. 1920–24), and *Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1929–30). In the label for *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the team asserted that Tanner’s response to modernism was “to experiment with different materials in order to create new emotional effects in his paintings,” yet this painting and *The Good Shepherd* (ca. 1930) also listed in that text, are made simply of oil on canvas, and the “new emotional effects” are not identified. Even if Tanner’s use of tempera and varnish on cardboard, as in *Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*, was unusual or “modern,” in what way was it particularly noteworthy or innovative? Many other artists also experimented with various “recipes” and had done so since at least the seventeenth century.

Supplementing the Tanner show on the second floor was a small space dedicated to art by sixteen African-Americans, ca. 1930s–2000, at the back of the “The Collections: 6,000 Years of Art,” an exhibition of rotating CAM works on view in an open storage format through December, 2013. These included photographs by James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks, prints by Elizabeth Catlett, Thom Shaw, Elmer Brown, Romare Bearden, Margo Humphrey, Keith Morrison, and Kevin Harris, a drawing by Nathaniel Walker Inez, and a small bust by Elizabeth Catlett. The only apparent connecting threads were race and art created in the twentieth century, but for some viewers eager to witness the museum’s increasing acquisitions in the area, this unpublicized and unnamed display was enough.

The nationally traveling exhibition, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, brought to light previously unknown sculpture, watercolors, and oil paintings from private and institutional collections, and it is the first large compilation of Tanner’s work to be on view since the pioneering retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1991 and the more modest traveling exhibition organized by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1995, with its single-author catalogue. It could have done more in terms of interpretation and contextualization in its labels. Although there was mention of Tanner’s white classmates from PAFA who also

studied in France, there was virtually no comparison with their work or any indication of the other African-American artists who worked in Paris during the same time, such as Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, William Edouard Scott, William Harper, Laura Wheeler Waring, Hale Woodruff, Augusta Savage, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Albert Alexander Smith, Aaron Douglas, William Henry Johnson, and Palmer Hayden, a good number of whom Tanner met and/or mentored, and most of whom also won international acclaim.^[2] It was as if Tanner was completely exceptional and without black networks abroad. Further, while labels drew attention to lanterns and night scenes in the artist's work, they did not acknowledge, as does the catalogue, that Tanner borrowed the lantern motif from Rembrandt and he was influenced by a specialty of Étaplean painters: the night scene.

Nevertheless, this important display gave a new generation the chance to examine numerous works by Tanner in person, and generated deeper contextual scholarship on this major international artist, giving fresh insight into his commercial illustration, travels in the Holy Land and North Africa, nocturnal scenes, modern mysticism, painting techniques, and use of visual culture. The argument about Tanner as a modernist would have been underscored further if wall texts had conveyed more of the assertions that scholars such as Valance did in the catalogue, e.g., that "Blending Whistler's aestheticism with Eakins's realist teachings, Tanner adapted the nocturne to give an aura of mystery to his religious images," or, as Robert Cozzolino noted, "few scholars have made the connections [with European Symbolism] explicit or examined the common ground between the allegedly conservative Tanner and the fin-de-siècle avant-garde" (121). Equally compelling, and missing from the exhibition, was Richard Powell's analysis of the artist's strategic use of the inscrutable, the enigmatic, and the color black, as well as his "color-blind" model of Judeo-Christian exegesis and desire for transcendence (61). Had such nuances about Tanner's explorations of both modernity and antimodernism by these current scholars been highlighted in labels, and had the glare from overhead lights on some paintings been eliminated, the exhibition would have been even more engaging, stimulating, and elegant.

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Notes

[1] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hill, 1843), 19.

[2] Please see Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

Illustrations

All photographs by Jonathan Nolting, Imaging Technician, Cincinnati Art Museum.



Fig. 1, Entrance to “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit”, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.

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Fig. 2, “Tanner and America” gallery. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Tanner’s animal images. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Tanner's landscapes in America and his portrait of Booker T. Washington. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Timeline of Tanner's life in context. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, "Tanner and Modern Painting in Paris: The Academy and the Salon." [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, "Christ's Miracles." [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, “Tanner in North Africa and the Holy Land”. Right to left: Study for *The Jews’ Wailing Place*, ca. 1897; *Head of a Jew in Palestine*, 1899, reworked ca. 1918–20; reproduction of a photograph of an older Jewish man published by the American Colony of Jerusalem, ca. 1900–10; *Interior of a Mosque, Cairo*, 1897; *A Mosque in Cairo*, 1897; *A View in Palestine* 1898–99; and *Sunlight, Tangier*, ca. 1910. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Tangier and Near East scenes. Right to left: *Gateway Tangier*, ca. 1910; *Entrance to the Casbah*, 1912; stereograph of the Kabash, ca. 1898–1925; *Street Scene, Tangiers*, ca. 1912; *Mosque Tangier* and *Gate in Tangier*, *Near East Scene*, ca. 1910. Back wall: *Algiers (Old Buildings near Ka-hak)*, ca. 1912. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Gallery featuring biblical scenes. Back wall: *The Annunciation*, 1898. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Left to right: *Christ Learning to Read*, ca. 1911; *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scripture*, ca. 1909; and *Return of the Holy Women*, 1904. Back wall: *The Three Marys*, 1910. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, “Tanner in the French Countryside” with *The Young Sabot Maker*, 1895, on the back wall.
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Fig. 13, “Tanner in the French Countryside” with *House of Joan of Arc (Domrémy)*, 1918, at far right.
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Fig. 14, Transitional space with photographic enlargement of Tanner and his family in Philadelphia, ca. 1890. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, Gallery featuring (left to right): *Return from the Crucifixion*, 1936; *Study for St. Peter*, ca. 1933; *Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1916–22; *Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1907–12; and *Palace of Justice, Tangier*, ca. 1912. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 16, Pedagogical panels. [\[return to text\]](#)

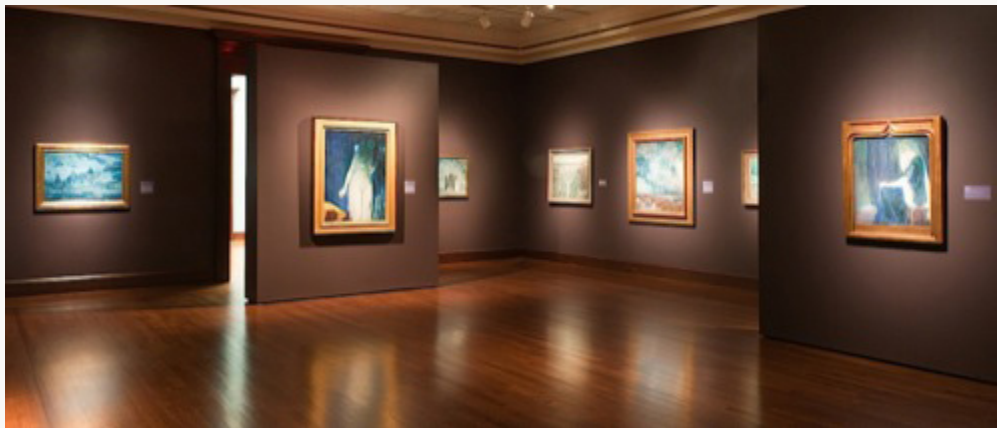


Fig. 17, Gallery featuring *Salome*, ca. 1900, at left and *Mary*, 1910, at right. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 18, Text on verso of plinths in final gallery. [\[return to text\]](#)