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Jennifer Jane Marshall

book review of

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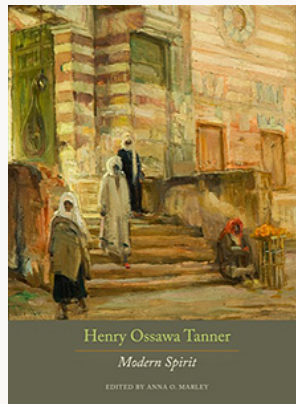
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Anna O. Marley, ed. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*. Berkeley: University of California Press, in association with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 2012. 304 pp.; 107 b/w illus., 106 color illus.; index. \$75.00 (cloth) ISBN-9780520270749 \$39.95 (paperback) ISBN: 9780520270756

In her *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age*, Kristin Schwain emphasizes the importance of precision in using religion as a frame for art historical study. Attention to the particularities within and between religious ideas is not only good scholarship, she argues, but is in fact necessitated by the increasing diversification of modern religion in and after the nineteenth century. Thus, any investigation of spirituality must closely examine “how believers translated official theology into daily life and refashioned it to fit local circumstances”—how, in other words, devotees modernized their faith.^[1]

Here is where we begin to grasp the contribution made by *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, the richly-illustrated catalog published to accompany the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’s (PAFA) recent exhibition of the same name. As the catalog broadly demonstrates, it is precisely this sort of dialectical reconciliation between theology and daily life that is crucial to understanding Tanner and his work. The first major exhibition and catalog to frame Tanner specifically through the twin lenses of modernism and faith, *Modern Spirit*, edited by Anna O. Marley, seeks to demonstrate how the dialectical shuttling between modernity and spirituality informed all aspects of the artist’s work: his choice of subjects, his stylistic strategy, and even his subtly articulated politics.

Over the course of twelve short essays, plus Marley’s introduction and a forward by David C. Driskell, the reader is exposed to the many historical particularities that informed Tanner’s career: his religious upbringing in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, in which his father was a bishop; his travels through North Africa and Palestine, funded by the Wannamaker retail family in Philadelphia; his instruction at the Académie Julian with Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant; his professional competition with James Tissot, painter of wildly popular Christian melodrama; and his volunteer involvement with the Red Cross during World War I. The essays are as varied in scope as they are diverse in topic. Some authors concentrate on single works or

series in Tanner's oeuvre, such as Marc Simpson's essay on *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896), or Michael Leja's analysis of Tanner's ill-fated "Mothers of the Bible" series for the *Ladies Home Journal* (ca. 1902). Others provide background information on Tanner's environment, as in Tyler Stovall's exploration of African-Americans in interwar Paris, and Jean-Claude Lesage's discussion of on Tanner's summer homes on France's northern coast. And still others range widely over broader political and art historical concerns, including Adrienne L. Childs on Tanner's engagement with Orientalism, and Robert Cozzolino's convincing move to situate the artist within Symbolism. A final essay, jointly written by three expert conservators, Brian Baade, Amber Kerr-Allison, and Jennifer Giaccai, takes us deep into the heart of Tanner's constant experiments with his medium, in an essay revealing enough about Tanner's processes to add new depth to all the chapters that precede it. All of this scholarly commentary is usefully divided into four thematic sections: "Tanner in the Context of Black Artists," "Tanner and the Expatriate Experience," "Tanner and Religious Painting," and "Tanner's Style and Techniques." A comprehensive chronology illustrated by a number of charming historical photographs rounds out the volume.

A turn-of-the-twentieth-century painter of genre and religious scenes, whose mother was born into slavery and freed from it via the Underground Railroad, Tanner spent almost the entirety of his adult life in Paris. His study at PAFA between 1879 and 1885, including work under Thomas Eakins, prepared him for instruction with Joseph Benjamin Constant and Jean-Paul Laurens at the Académie Julian, begun in 1891. A major milestone of Tanner's increasing success came in 1897, when the French government purchased his *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896, Musée d'Orsay). From that point on, he was an established fixture in the Parisian art scene and well-known to Americans back home, where his various activities were reported in both national art periodicals and the major black newspapers.

In the century that's passed since his major period of activity, Tanner has generally been situated in the American canon according to the curiosity of his cultural and artistic hybridity. He was an avowed expatriate who split his time between a number of French ateliers and estates, returning to the United States only for occasional work and family obligations. But Philadelphia still stubbornly claims Tanner as its native son. Certainly, David R. Brigham's Foreword is quick to reinforce that patrimony. French by choice, American by birth, Tanner's identity is no clearer when it comes to questions of social-historical periodization. Again, he's an amalgamation: caught somewhere between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, his Biblical and Orientalist canvases smack of academicism lingering beyond-its-time, even while they're also overlaid with electrified color washes, cribbed straight out of Whistler and Gauguin.

Tanner's race towers over all these other hybrid identities. By and large, it's this last concern that has preoccupied Tanner scholars, writers for whom the painter's celebrated genre scenes, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893, Hampton University Museum) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894, collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby, Jr.), have served as primary reference points.^[2] A major challenge for these racially motivated studies has been how limited in number these black genre scenes are, especially in view of the whole corpus of Tanner's long career. These two canvases are very much the exception to the rule of Tanner's endeavor: an overwhelming preponderance of religious paintings, peopled with light-skinned or Middle Eastern types and furnished with Orientalist splendor. Thus, while art historians often portray Tanner as a fighter

for racial causes, the thinness of his resumé on this point has diluted the force of the claim. Complicating the issue further is Tanner's explicit attempts to distance himself from any clearly delineated identity. "Does not the 3/4 of English blood in my veins ... count for anything?" he once asked in a private letter, "Does the 1/4 or 1/8 of 'pure' negro blood in my veins count for all?" (139) In fact, it's notable that so many appeals to Tanner as an instrument of racial advancement have had to proceed by bracketing Tanner's own intentions. Still, in spite of the roadblocks Tanner himself threw up, past scholars have forged ahead, viewing Tanner as a hero of positive racial representation; first, because he did so more or less explicitly in a couple of early canvases, and second, because his many professional successes stood as a beacon to later black painters. These scholars have claimed Tanner for African-American art history, in other words, by shifting the burden of political representation from the paintings themselves to the biography of the artist. *Modern Spirit* works vigorously to overturn this 'representational' approach to Tanner. In their collective emphasis on Tanner's artistic and cultural modernism, the assembled authors are decisively more concerned with his concepts, techniques, and styles, than they are with the representational promise of his life. In fact, to say that *Modern Spirit* moves away from 'representation' is also to suggest just how much distance it has put between itself and the tradition of African-American art history carried out under the aegis of Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois.

In their writings and activities of the 1920s, Locke and Du Bois championed visual art as a means of representing, and so also advancing, the race. Under their leadership, African-American art was instrumentalized as propaganda, a word Du Bois used unflinchingly. Whether through stylistic sophistication, proud expressions of African inheritance, or positive portrayals of black life, African-American painting, sculpture, and graphic arts were to be used as tools to advance the New Negro cause. To a great extent, these period ideas about art's political responsibilities have persisted into latter-day art historical method, as is witnessed in the preponderance of writing on Tanner's "black" paintings, often at the expense of close attention to the majority of his Biblically-minded oeuvre.

At several junctions throughout the volume, scholars in *Modern Spirit* explicitly address the legacy of Locke's New Negro ideology and what it has meant for the study of Tanner. To some extent, they have to. In his highly influential essay, *The New Negro* (1925), Locke took Tanner to task for his failure to represent African-American themes and, so also, to represent himself more forthrightly as an African-American artist. While acknowledging the elder painter as an esteemed pioneer, Locke judged him poorly for failing to provide the younger generation with "a distinctive tradition to focus and direct their talents" (84). In the PAFA volume, scholars come to Tanner's defense, mainly by championing his freedom of expression against the constraints imposed by Locke's racially motivated aesthetic. Directly addressing Locke's slight, Powell argues that Tanner *did* establish an African-American artistic tradition, just one that departed from Locke's prescribed menu of "African forms and jazz themes" (59). For black artists who wanted an alternative to the New Negro orthodoxy, Tanner, in Powell's view, provided one: a model of black artistry as governed by "intentional, learned choices and confirmed, sincerity-filled beliefs" (58). Powell appears to view this alternative as an improvement over Locke; certainly the adjectives he uses to describe it give the reader that sense. Moreover, he suggests that, in "an era preoccupied with primitivism and assumed emotional abandon on the part of black people," Locke's choice of racially representative themes may only have reinforced existing stereotypes and deepened cultural pigeon-holing (58). Instead, Powell traces a lineage of "artistic freedom" from Tanner to black artists in the interwar period who experimented

with expressive landscape: depopulated scenes that have more in common with the French Impressionists and Expressionists of Tanner's time than with the Art Deco Africanisms of Harlem in the '20s and '30s. That many of these artists, including Hale Woodruff, Palmer Hayden, Aaron Douglas, and William H. Johnson, are generally better known for their overt representations of black life and culture only reminds us that Locke, in the long view, has had the upper hand. But something else is at issue here. In his assertion that formal experimentation amounted to "freedom," or that retreating from representation, whether artistic or political, secured "transcendence," Powell makes use of some of the most shopworn chestnuts of formalist modernism. In so doing, he returns us to a triumphant vision of abstraction as the playground of democratic individualism, without recalling any of the critiques of this ideology, the most devastating of which take aim precisely at formalism's historic inhospitable attitude to women artists and artists of color. Defending Tanner against Locke on these grounds thus requires a more thorough round of qualifications than Powell here provides.

Adrienne L. Childs also intervenes against Locke on Tanner's behalf. In this case, what's at issue is the older painter's failure to incorporate sub-Saharan African forms in his paintings, another of Locke's artistic prescriptions. In *The New Negro* and elsewhere, Locke urged artists to study and adopt the motifs of West African visual culture, hoping that the aesthetic could associate the American New Negro with both a tradition of racial ancestry and the European avant-garde. But, if Locke's program was undertaken in good faith—as an opportunity for insinuating African-Americans into the cosmopolitan mainstream—Childs criticizes the move as a major tactical misstep. Specifically, she characterizes it as "an essentialist notion of a black aesthetic," one which assumed some inborn African-derived preference for geometric patterns and abstract forms, and Childs goes on, disallowed "alternative interpretations or experiences of Africa" (102-103). This is a more just corrective to Locke than what Powell mounts, simultaneously revealing Locke's regrettably narrow view of "Africa," and permitting a fresh look at Tanner's travels along the Mediterranean edge of that continent. At the same time, it seems untenable to conclude, as Childs does, that Tanner's failure to engage with cubism, fauvism, or any of the other so-called primitivist modernisms was a tacit rebuke of those experiments. "The absence of [Tanner's] voice in this discourse," Childs writes, referring to the African-obsessed modernisms of Picasso, Matisse, and, yes, Alain Locke, "speaks volumes about the instability of the project" (103). But silence can't be read so straightforwardly as condemnation; or, at least, the condemnation it offers might be more complex than Childs explores. Tanner's reticence to associate himself with "Negro art," whether African or American, may have been a professional necessity given the persistence of racism in the art world. This is a more-than-feasible possibility, but one that neither Childs nor any of her fellow contributors explores in *Modern Spirit*. Instead, Tanner's studied disinterest in racially-charged styles or subjects is counted only as evidence of his freedom—of his resistance to normalized race codes. Just as easily, of course, the same observation could yield the opposite conclusion: a picture of an artist profoundly hemmed in.

A third scholar deals directly with Tanner's ambivalent record vis-à-vis race. Alan C. Braddock's forceful essay is toughest on what we might call the representational tradition in African-American art history. It is also the riskiest in its pursuit of a post-racial method. Braddock returns to Locke's disappointment in Tanner; what might have been a chance to establish an internationally recognized, race-based tradition was squandered on old-style salon paintings. This lament illustrates "Locke's bias," in Braddock's view, but he isn't prepared to chalk it up to

essentialism (140). It only *becomes* essentialist, he argues when later scholars seek to find covert race parables in all his Sunday school scenes, as though the only way to incorporate Tanner into a canon of black art is through the dogma of representational race politics. Instead, when art historians “discover” hidden racial narratives in Tanner’s paintings, Braddock believes they are taking precisely the wrong lesson from Locke. Yes, the philosopher-turned-art-critic wanted to mobilize positive race representations against the oppressions of racism, and yes, these representations necessarily surrendered to the essentialist logic of “race” in the first place (140). But, as Braddock reminds us, Locke was able to proceed with this strategy without harboring any belief in race-as-such, an idea he indeed once called an “ethnic fiction” (140).

I, for one, am grateful for this discussion. It encompasses Locke’s own foundations in pragmatism, and it’s an incisive way of summing up the peace so many of us make with race-based categories of art history and interpretation in our own teaching and writing. Wincing at our methodological ghettos, we offer sober recognitions that race exists (culturally, if not biologically), that this social construction has unquestionably informed the production and reception of art, and express hope that disciplinary segregations will one day themselves be historical artifacts. Braddock wants these boundary lines gone *now*. He wants scholars to acknowledge how the idea of race-as-social-construction imposes as tight a strait-jacket as any biological determinism. He wants scholars to recognize that “race” was an epistemological mistake made by eighteenth-century scientists and twentieth-century social-relativists alike. And, much more pointedly, he wants us all to “stop making the mistake” (136). This last quote isn’t Braddock, but Braddock quoting Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Trouble With Diversity*, a book that stirred up a fair amount of controversy, even outrage, when it appeared in 2006.^[3] In it, Michaels argued that liberal efforts to increase diversity and promote multiculturalism in the latter half of the twentieth century amounted to a colossal political disaster, a fatal distraction from class inequity. Instead, if a scholar now wishes to advance social equality in his or her work, Michaels advises them to train their sights squarely on capitalism, what he views as the main engine of all disenfranchisement and oppression. Here, Braddock asks readers of *Modern Spirit*, many of whom have surely picked up the volume because we’re interested in African-American history, to take Michaels’s challenge seriously. In a move that he justifiably compares to dropping a bomb, Braddock invites us to give up on multiculturalism and pursue a “postracial vision” that he believes Tanner credibly to provide (136). “Long before today’s scientific consensus and scholarly critiques,” he writes, referring to the academic debunking of scientific racism in the 1980s and 90s and, more recently and controversially, to the literature agitating “against” or “after” race, “Tanner offered a powerful but now neglected alternative to racial thinking”, specifically, “Christian Cosmopolitanism,” the title of Braddock’s piece (136).

In the essay that follows these provocations, Braddock charts several theological traditions that have historically positioned Christianity at cross-purposes with racism. For one thing, the creation story told in Genesis plainly establishes one origin for all mankind, and is thus at odds with the theories of polygenesis that underwrote scientific racism. Second, a tradition of Biblical scholarship, including that of French thinker Ernest Renan (1823–92), maintains that it’s impossible to know exactly what Jesus looked like, given the absence of any recorded details on the subject. For Renan, this aporia at the heart of the Gospel—what *did* god-made-man looklike?—was not just incidental, it was the very foundation for a morality that would “efface the distinctions of blood in humanity,” as he put it in 1899 (138). Braddock discerns this same line of thought in Tanner’s own faith. He quotes the painter’s 1903 statement: “The physical characteristics of the child Jesus will always remain a point of discussion. No artist has ever

produced a type, nor ever will, that has in it all that the varying minds of all time will acknowledge as complete” (138). In other words, in his efforts at specifically *Christian* representations, Tanner knew from the outset that the results would always be partial and incomplete, at best a signpost, pointing his audiences to the essentially unseeable and unknowable heart of their faith. Framed in *this* way, Michaels’s Marxist censuring of multiculturalism is made out to be the ironic inheritor to a Christian tradition of universal humanism, a tradition in which “race” is a false secular idol that Tanner patently refused to worship. Braddock points us to Tanner’s portrayal of Christ in *Nicodemus* (1899, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) as proof enough of this; he’s shadowed and enigmatic, but not swarthy, not a type.

Some readers will disagree that the Jesus in *Nicodemus* is as “deliberately calculated to obfuscate” as Braddock insists (138). Others will object to the mostly white faces of Tanner’s Biblical scenes: an historical blunder as much as a political one. But there’s a further problem at the heart of Braddock’s provocation-cum-theological-lesson: a poison pill brought in by Michaels himself.

Michaels’s emphasis on class is consistent with other recent critiques of race in academic scholarship, whether it’s pushing “against” race, as Paul Gilroy has done, or “after” race, as Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres propose.^[4] It’s conspicuous, then, that class does not emerge in Braddock’s investigation. And it’s more than a little ironic that, if it had, what would have resulted would have called the very premises of postracial thought into question. Tanner may well have been “postracial ... *avant la lettre*,” as Braddock argues, but his cosmopolitan magnanimity on the topic of universal human liberty was an attitude he was able to realize primarily because he had the material means to do so (136). That is, Tanner was free to pursue freedom-from-race—a goal of debatable merit—only because of the benefits awarded to him by class. Braddock’s move to position Tanner as an illustrative figure of postracialism simultaneously reveals that ideology to be strongly marked by class in the first place; to participate in, and arguably benefit from, the very economic hierarchies that postracial critics promise to topple.

Religious studies scholar Marcus Bruce, in an essay primarily devoted to the pedagogical quality of Tanner’s works, extends an argument rather similar to Braddock’s. But, while agreeing on the basic premise of the artist’s universal humanism, Bruce does not view this attitude as at odds with the survival of racial identity or politics. Drawing from David Morgan’s work on the conventions that structure religious receipt of images, Bruce argues that all of Tanner’s work may be seen as extending a promise of radical personal transformation, specifically as this might be precipitated humbly through small acts of interpersonal instruction. It’s a brilliant move, one that allows Bruce to take the central theme of *The Banjo Lesson* and reposition it as the key to understanding Tanner’s project as a whole. A culturally beloved masterpiece thus remains in its spot undisturbed, while the terms of its interpretive significance shift somewhat, in order to accommodate the subtler politics and aesthetic complexities that are advocated by the anthology in sum. Bruce looks especially closely at Tanner’s *The Pilgrims of Emmaus* (1905, Musée d’Orsay), a rustic dinner-table scene meant to portray two disciples’ dawning recognition that the man they’re eating with is, in fact, the risen Christ. Like all of Tanner’s efforts at painting-as-pedagogy, this work “invites’ viewers to accept, embrace, and believe in the portrayal before them” (111). Moreover, the many gradual acts of coming-to-believe that

Tanner returns to throughout his career, Bruce maintains, may be understood to be politically radical *and* theologically affirmative simultaneously. The Bible, Bruce wagers, offered Tanner a nearly inexhaustible supply of well-known stories and characters like these, all of which were more universally relatable than, say, black genre scenes, and all of which came readymade with an aura of transformative grace potent enough to signal a habit of visual interpretation that, in turn, could cue revolutionary attitudes toward the world. Bruce grounds his argument in some *gravitas* provided by Tanner himself in a quote from 1924 that nicely sums up the catalog's prevailing view. Quoting Shakespeare, Tanner explained his personal mission statement: "My effort has been to not only put the Biblical incident in the original setting, but at the same time give the human touch 'which makes the whole [world] kin'" (109). This dialectical effort, this intellectual suturing, all of this work to reconcile historical tradition and timely transcendence emerges justly in *Modern Spirit* as Henry Ossawa Tanner's greatest cultural legacy—the hybridity, in other words, that made the most difference.

In aggregate, what emerges throughout *Modern Spirit* is a picture of Tanner deeply engaged with the ascendant principles of fin-de-siècle modernism: subjective self-expression, artistic experimentation, non-naturalistic color palettes, and transcendent aestheticism. To a lesser but equally enlivening extent, Tanner is also shown to have engaged thoughtfully with contemporary technologies and popular culture. Marley's discussion of early twentieth-century popular religion is an engaging and informative starting point for the remainder of the catalog; and Hélène Valance's essay on the influence of electrical light on Tanner allows for some fantastically interesting forays into the experiments of Loïe Fuller and Nikola Tesla. As I hope is evident from this selective comment on the essays, *Modern Spirit* portrays Tanner much as he would have liked himself to have been viewed: an artist motivated by innovations in artistic form and technique, a man-of-his-time inspired by the novelties of modern life, and spiritual seeker committed to practicing his faith in paint.

Jennifer Jane Marshall
Assistant Professor
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities
marsh590[at]umn.edu

Notes

[1] Kristin Schwain, *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 6.

[2] For representative and significant examples, see Jo-Ann Morgan, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and the Iconic Persistence of Uncle Tom," in Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 166–204, and Judith Wilson, "Lifting the Veil: Henry O. Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*," *Contributions in Black Studies* 9/10 (1990–92): 31–54.

[3] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company, 2006).

[4] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); and Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres, *After Race: Racism after Multiculturalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).