

Selfish Portraits by Andrew Bracey

November 2021

The portrait to which I was drawn to was that of Henry Ossawa Tanner. A number of things intrigued me and despite looking at other artists whom I had not heard of or knew little of, I kept returning to the one of Henry Ossawa Tanner.

Who was Henry Ossawa Tanner?

The Selfish Portrait of Henry Ossawa Tanner by Andrew made me want to study this artist who seems to be of Afro-mixed origin, with bright orange hair and the clothing of either a clergyman or a graduate. I was baffled!

My interpretation:

In Andrew's profile portrait of Tanner, resilience from overcoming struggle, determination and courage from hurt, maybe hardship, is very apparent from Andrew's markmaking. The assertive right hand of Henry on his chest, to me, re-affirms a man brought up with good principles and morals together with an attainment of good education. Although portraying humility in the Selfish Portrait, Henry is also proud to be who he is, who and what he stands for as a human being first then an artist.

Henry Ossawa Tanner
American, 1859 – 1937

Born in Pittsburgh, first of five children, his middle name was derived from the name of the town Osawatimie in Kansas (where John Brown, the abolitionist, had initiated his antislavery campaign).

Father: Reverend Benjamin Tucker Tanner. Future bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mother: Sarah Tanner. Had escaped her enslavers via the Underground Railroad.

Tanner enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1879 and studied under the direction of Thomas Eakins. Tanner set up a photography studio in Atlanta, Georgia. The venture failed. This is where Henry met Bishop Joseph Crane Hartzell who arranged for Tanner to teach drawing at Clark University. The following year Hartzell organized an exhibition of Tanner's art work. When none of Tanner's paintings sold, Hartzell purchased them, thus enabling Tanner to have sufficient funds to enable him to further his art in Europe.

In 1891 Tanner commenced his studies under Jean-Paul Laurens and Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant at the Academie Julian in Paris. He joined the American Art Students' Club and his first summer in France was in the colony of artists in Brittany at Pont-Aven.

In 1893, during a trip back to the United States, Tanner delivered a paper at the World's Congress on Africa in Chicago, entitled 'The American Negro in Art'. Tanner's subject matter was influenced by a growing consciousness of his racial identity. His concern was exemplified by *The Banjo Lesson* (1893, Hampton University Museum, Virginia).

In 1894, one of Tanner's paintings was accepted at the Salon. Tanner's abandoned genre on Black subjects and focussed painting biblical scenes. In 1896, *Daniel in the Lions' Den* (1894, location unknown) won honorable mention in the Salon. Gaining recognition, museums began to acquire his paintings.

In 1897, with the financial support of his lifelong friend Rodman Wanamaker, Tanner made the first of many long trips to the Middle East so that he could familiarize himself with the topography and appearance of people. the visual appeal of the biblical subjects he painted were augmented by scrupulous attention to naturalistic details and original settings.

Tanner's *Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896, Musee d'Orsay, Paris) also won a third-class medal at the Salon in 1897. This painting was purchased by the French Government for the Luxembourg Gallery.

Tanner was made an associate member of the National Academy of Design in 1909 alongside Mary Cassatt. He was elected to full membership in 1927. The French government named him Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1923.