



2nd Grade: JANUARY

The Banjo Lesson

by Henry Ossawa Tanner

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Henry Ossawa Tanner

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born on June 21, 1859, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the first of nine children. He and his siblings were brought up in a home where education was especially valued. His father, Benjamin Tucker, was a college-educated African-American Methodist Episcopal preacher. His mother, Sarah Miller Tanner, was a private school teacher. Sarah had lived in the south early in her life and had escaped slavery by traveling north via the Underground Railroad. Tanner's middle name, Ossawa, was in honor of the Kansas town where Abolitionist John Brown held his first anti-slavery campaign.

Henry Tanner's parents knew the value of reading to their young children and used the Bible to share stories. Young Tanner was filled with vivid imagery of powerful Biblical scenes and transferred these images to canvas in his adult life.

As a teenager on a walk, Tanner observed a landscape painter and decided then and there to be an artist—despite his color blindness. He spent free time looking at art in the Philadelphia galleries. Tanner's decision to be an artist was not well received by his preacher father who, in an attempt to re-direct his son's ambition, sent young Tanner to apprentice at a local flour mill. The apprenticeship was hard on Tanner's frail body and he fell seriously ill. Fortunately, two years of recuperation gave Tanner time to paint. In 1880, at the age of twenty-two, Tanner became the first full-time black student to enroll in the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Dean and teacher, Thomas Eakins, greatly encouraged and influenced Tanner and other minority individuals, including women, to pursue their interest in studying art in an academic setting. It was largely through Eakins' efforts that Philadelphia became the center for minority artists at this time.

Tanner spent the summer of 1888 in Highlands, North Carolina, where he executed many drawings of the Blue Ridge Mountain area, including its residents. These sketches of rural African-Americans were foundational for his later work.

In common with many artists, he rarely had a steady paycheck. Henry Tanner was fortunate to secure funding in 1891 from patrons, prompting a move to France where he remained for most of his adult life. He found Paris to be more accepting of his African

heritage than in America. He appreciated having his work critiqued on pure artistic merit without prejudice. Tanner took classes at the Academie Julian in Paris where he painted some of his most important work. *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* were exhibited in Parisien salons and galleries and in time received recognition in America as well. It was his ability to portray African-Americans with pride and dignity that brought Tanner international recognition. Actor Bill Cosby and his wife purchased *The Thankful Poor* in 1981 for \$250,000.

Tanner began to steer away from genre paintings of humble rural African-Americans in the 1880s and focused on the Biblical images he remembered as a child, much to his father's approval. He submitted one such painting, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, to the 1896 Paris Salon Exhibition where he was awarded an honorable mention, an honor not realized by any other American that year. Several trips to the Middle East and the Holy Land provided opportunity to observe the barren landscape, the textiles and dress of the population, and other cultural imagery. Tanner used his trademark loose brushstrokes, muted palate, and dramatic lighting to capture his religious subjects.

Henry Ossawa Tanner married Jessie Olssen, a white opera singer, and was father to son Jesse Ossawa. The couple owned a small house in the country where they welcomed young artists of all races who sought guidance and encouragement in pursuing their passion for art. Tanner was known for his generosity and hospitality to these visitors who stayed in his home.

Tanner died in his sleep at home in Paris on May 25, 1937, at the age of seventy-eight and is buried in nearby Sceaux next to his wife who preceded him in death by twelve years. He is remembered as the most distinguished African-American artist of the 19th Century and the first artist of his race to achieve international acclaim. He inspired many African-Americans to pursue their dreams of being artists.

About the Art

The Banjo Lesson, painted 1893, oil on canvas, 4'1/2" x 3' 11," is in the collection at Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia, a prestigious African-American college in Virginia.

The Banjo Lesson was based on a Paul Lawrence Dunbar poem, *A Banjo Song* published in 1893 in a book of poems titled *Oak and Ivy*. Dunbar attained international recognition and was known for his use of African-American dialect. Dunbar writes of a banjo player who creates music to "furgit the aches an' pains an' troubles all." The banjo music is compared to the "ha'ps o' gold" played in "haben" by angels.

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Ben's Trumpet* by Rachael Isadora
- *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* by Brian Pinkney
- *Extraordinary People of the Harlem Renaissance* by P. Stephen Hardy and Sheila Jackson Hardy
- *Max Found Two Sticks* by Brian Pinkney
- *Satchmo's Blues* by Alan Schroeder
- *Words With Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* by Belinda Rochelle

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Janson, H.W. *History of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1999
- Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History, Volume Two*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1995
- Matthew, Marcia M. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: An American Artist*. University of Chicago Press. 1995

As a realist painter, it was Henry Tanner's mission to portray African Americans as serious and dignified people in contrast to many 19th century paintings in which African-Americans were presented as comical and with sometimes exaggerated proportions. *The Banjo Lesson* offers a glimpse into a humble home where a male adult figure shares his wisdom and knowledge with a young boy. The tender moment is captured with brushstrokes that somewhat blur and soften the image. The figure of the young boy and man are a bit in the dark since the daylight hits the background and surrounds the figures, bringing attention to them. The light and color are indicative of the Impressionist influence Tanner studied in Paris. Also evident is the influence of Tanner's mentor, Thomas Eakins, with the inclusion of the simple details.

Henry Tanner presented *The Banjo Lesson*, along with a paper titled "The American Negro in Art" at the 1893 World's Congress on Africa in Chicago. A similar work by Tanner, *The Thankful Poor*, is worth considering. It offers the same private moment as *The Banjo Lesson* and it was the last genre subject painted by Tanner.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Banjo Lesson* and tell them it was painted by Henry Ossawa Tanner in 1893. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. What do you see?
2. Who are the people?
3. Where are they?
4. What are they doing?
5. Who is the teacher and who is the student? How do you know?
6. Describe their house. What do the simple surroundings tell you about the people?
7. What time of day is it? What clues does the artist give you?
8. What time of the year is it? What clues does the artist give you?
9. What is the most important object in this painting? (banjo) How does the artist use lines, shapes, and colors to tell you this?
10. Describe the colors you see. How would this painting look if the artist used bright colors everywhere?
11. If you painted a picture of a music lesson, what instrument would you paint and who would be the student and the teacher?
12. What did Henry Ossawa Tanner want you to know about the people in his painting?
13. Do they care for each other?

Things to Do

1. If you could interview the man or the young boy in the painting, what would you ask them?
2. What do you think they did after the lesson ended? Draw a picture of this. Be sure to keep them in the same clothes.
3. Give a name to the young boy in the painting. Create a book that includes drawings of what the boy did from the time he got up in the morning to the time he went to bed. Share your picture book with others in the class.
4. Or, tell a story. Sit in a circle and have someone start by stating what the young boy did early in the morning. The next student adds to the story by stating what happened next. Continue until everyone has a chance to share.
5. If your school has a music program, borrow a few instruments and draw them.
6. Invite the music teacher and a student into your classroom for a lesson. While they are working, draw or paint them.
7. Locate a few brass instruments like a trombone or French Horn. Place them against a dark background. Instead of coloring in the instrument (the positive space), color in the space around the instrument (the negative). In other words, color in the air.
8. Tanner was inspired by a poem when he painted *The Banjo Lesson*. Find a poem you like (or a song) and use it to inspire a piece of artwork.
9. Tanner used an older person, perhaps a relative, with a younger person in *The Banjo Lesson*. Think about a time when you did something with a grandparent or special older friend. Talk about the feelings you have for this person and the time spent together. Bring in photographs of these special friends and use them to draw a picture of the time you shared. Sometimes, drawing a picture of time with a special person makes you draw a better picture. Why?
10. Tanner placed his subjects in a room. Draw a picture of people inside a room and be sure to include details of the room.
11. Make a list of other types of lessons people have in addition to music lessons. Choose one of these lessons and make a drawing. Combine everyone's drawings to make one book for all to share.
12. Pretend you are the teacher. What special skills do you have that you could share with others? Create a poster advertising your skills.
13. Or, give a speech and demonstrate your skills in front of the entire class. Have fun! Take pictures!