

## Henry Ossawa Tanner

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on June 21, 1859. His father was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and his mother was a school teacher. He was the oldest of 9 children.

In 1868 the family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where Henry was enrolled in the *Robert Vaux School* for Negro students. *Robert Vaux School* was one of the very few schools for African Americans in the mid 1850s that included a liberal arts curriculum and Henry graduated as class valedictorian.

When Henry was 13, he observed an artist working in Fairmount Park. Henry was fascinated by the compositional elements used in the painting and from that time on, his life's ambition was to become an artist.

Henry's first efforts were marine scenes and animals painted at the Philadelphia Zoo. In 1878 he painted several Adirondack landscapes while convalescing from an illness. Henry enrolled as a student at [Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts](#) in 1880 and he taught at at [Clark College](#) in Atlanta, Georgia from 1889 to 1891.

Henry moved to Paris France in 1891 to escape the racial prejudice that was an impediment to the aspirations and ambitions of all African Americans in that era. Soon after his arrival, Henry began studying under [Jean Paul Laurens](#) at the *Acade'mie Julien*. Except for two brief visits to his family in 1893 and 1896, Henry remained in Paris until his death in 1937. Henry painted one of his most famous paintings, [The Banjo Lesson](#) while visiting his family in 1893. During the 1890s he painted several scenes of African American life including another famous painting, [The Thankful Poor](#).

Henry switched from painting genre scenes during the mid 1890s and began painting religious scenes. It is these religious paintings for which Henry O. Tanner is best remembered. In 1896 his painting, *Daniel in the Lion's Den* won honorable mention at the Paris Salon. *The Resurrection of Lazarus* was purchased and exhibited at the [Louvre](#) in 1897.

Henry married Jessie, a Frenchwoman in 1899.

During World War I, Henry worked for the Red Cross Public Information Department and he was allowed to sketch scenes from the front lines of the war. His paintings of World War I African American soldiers are exceptional and virtually the only paintings in that genre ever produced.

Henry O. Tanner continued to paint until the mid 1930s. He died in Paris, France on May 25, 1937.

After a half-century of obscurity, Henry's work is finally beginning to receive the acclaim it deserves. In 1990, the *Philadelphia Museum of Art* presented an exhibition of Henry's works which drew record crowds.

**Paintings on the Internet:**

[\*The Seine\*](#)

[\*Two Disciples at the Tomb\*](#)

[\*Abraham's Oak\*](#)

[\*America Guided by Wisdom\*](#)

**Sources:**

[\*Encyclopedia Britannica\*](#)

[\*Encyclopedia Africana\*](#)