

# Henry ossawa tanner

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Henry Ossawa Tanner was an American painter who lived between the years 1859 and 1937. His early paintings were associated with African Americans. In one of his most popular paintings, 'The Banjo Lesson', he depicts an older man training a boy on how to play the banjo.

This painting was created in 1893 when he was calling on his family in Philadelphia. He created another great painting in the year that followed. This painting was known as 'The Thankful Poor.' He became a successful painter in the 19th century and gained admiration from both Americans and Europeans. It was in this century that he created another famous painting known as 'Nicodemus Visiting Jesus'. This was an oil painting which had a biblical theme and led Tanner to win the Lippincott prize of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Even with the change of focus in his painting to biblical and religious themes, he was still a celebrated painter who was showered with praise and honor. In this essay, I will compare and contrast the use of color in his paintings, 'The Banjo Lesson', 'The Young Sabot Maker' and 'The Two Disciples at the Tomb'.

The Banjo Lesson is one of the most famous paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner. In the painting, a boy is being shown how to play the banjo by an older man. The surrounding is a log cabin and there seems to be a glow from the right corner of the painting which represents a source of light. The boy uses both of his hands to hold the banjo as he gazes downwards which a reflection of his complete concentration on the instructions is being given by the older man. The man helps in supporting the banjo by gently holding it with his left hand so that the boy is not overwhelmed by its weight.

The staging of the painting depicts the idea that the man wants the boy to learn to play the instrument and reap the rewards of this through hardwork.

The Banjo Lesson, Henry Ossawa Turner. Oil painting. The Hampton University Museum in Virginia.

Tanner uses a narrow palette in this painting. The painting is almost fully monochromatic. Earth tones are prominent in the painting and are seen in the floor planks, the wall and cabinet in the back, the chair and the coat that rests limply on it, the man's clothes and the boy's pants and shirt. The earth tones are also seen in the man's complexion and the brown color of his pupil. The break away from this uniformity is brought about by the background with its blue shadows and yellow cloth. The earth tones suggest humility and plainness. The furniture in the painting appears rough and unfinished. There are only a few bright colors which represent the light from the fire. The only decorated items in the painting are the two pictures on the wall at the back. These are, however, small and not clearly defined. This brings forth the concept of simplicity and poverty. The match between the clothes of the man and boy and the setting suggests the attachment of these two people to the setting.

The cabin appears to be a structure of restriction and the grey and brown hues suggest a lot about those in the painting. They are poverty stricken and lack elegance. The concept of inexactness is also brought forth by the intricacy and finite range of the earth tones and the complexion difference between the man and boy. The boy is similar to the man but does not match him exactly. Similarly, the hues of the clothing and setting match but not

exactly. This shows that the people are attached to the cabin but cannot be reduced to its roughness. The brushwork in the painting compliments the color. He uses broad strokes for the light parts of the painting to represent the background and show quality of items. On the other hand, he uses careful strokes to represent the figures. This echoes the concept of inexactness with the setting.

Similar to *The Banjo Lesson*, *the Young Sabot Maker* depicts a student learning from his master. In the painting, the older man watches the boy as he carves out a sabot using a sawhorse. The two are in a sabot maker's shop with wood shavings

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Scatterings all over the floor. Although in this painting the young sabot maker is white, the final painting portrays the young sabot maker as African-American rather than French given that at the time of creating this painting, Tarnar was living in France and sabots were commonly worn in this country. This painting is very similar to *The Banjo Lesson* as there is a prominence of earth tones in the painting which can be seen in the wood shavings on the floor, the sabot being carved by the boy, the older man's complexion and coat, the crossbar handle of the sawhorse, the walls of the shop, the table at the back, the sabots and logs of wood that have been set aside and the door. The contrast from this uniformity is brought about by the clothes of the boy which are blue in color and his complexion. The earth tones in this painting are a representation of humility and poverty. Sabot makers were people of a humble income. They were mostly deemed the kind and poor class in

society. The painting also has no items of decoration apart from the two candles on the wall which are difficult to make out. The items present in the painting are simple such as the walls with no paintings, the sabots being carved and those already made. The color of the clothing of the man is similar to those of the setting which gives the idea of the ownership of the sabot shop. The boy has different colors on his clothes that contrast with those of the setting and of the man and this is a representation of unfamiliarity. The boy is trying something that he is not used to doing and this is further emphasized by the fact that the man seems to be watching the boy despite working on his own sabots.

The boy is in blue, a color that represents loyalty and faith. This points to the idea that the boy will likely work under the man as he further learns how to make sabots and the color is an expression of the loyalty of the boy to the man. The room is painted with dark hues of the earthy tones and light hues are only present in the right corner of the painting as was the case in *The Banjo Lesson*. Also, the painting utilizes rough and broad brushstrokes on items in the shop but they are more careful on the man and boy. This is a representation of the inexactness between the people in the painting and the setting. The painting also makes use of organic shapes in the sabots, items hanging next to the door and the wood on which the sabot is being carved. These irregular shapes emphasize nature and therefore further emphasize the simplicity of the figures as they obtain their raw materials from nature. The only difference in this painting is the race of the figures who appear to be white. However, as already mentioned, in the final painting the young boy is African-American.

The Two Disciples at the Tomb is thematically different from the other two paintings. It has a biblical theme and which Turner adopted later on in France. The painting depicts Peter and John, as is in the gospel of saint John, at the tomb of Jesus but find no one in it. Peter gazes down grimly while John is rapt and his face is covered in white light which serves to represent the spirit of Christ in the tomb. Despite the difference in theme, there are several concepts such as contrast and color that still remain the same in this painting as with Turner's two other paintings. There is the use of dark colors in this painting such that the left portion of the painting is dark and the right portion is light owing to the source of light emanating from Christ's spirit. The contrast in this case serves to represent a miracle. The contrast in color also sets the mood in the painting. Earth tones are also present as seen in the tomb, complexion of Peter, the background and John's robe. This represents the disciples' humble status. The right side of the painting has darker colors that can be seen in the surrounding and in the clothing of the disciples. This sets a gloomy and dark mood as the disciples did not find Jesus in the tomb. The left side of the painting is light which represents a joyous mood. This joy is derived from the glory of the spirit of Christ. The lines in the painting complement the color as they are vertical hence create a feeling of spirituality as vertical lines' perpendicularity to the earth leads upwards to the sky.

Henry Ossawa Turner was a great American painter with several famous works of art. He commonly represented African Americans in his art as is seen in The Banjo Lesson and final copy of The Young Sabot Maker which is different from the one shown. He also commonly represented poverty and

simplicity in his paintings through the use of earth tones as is seen in all the paintings above. However, the theme of his paintings changed after he feared racism in his country and moved to France where he created paintings of a biblical theme.

Khalid, F. (2016). Henry Ossawa Turner, The Banjo Lesson. Smarthistory. Accessed December 4, 2017. <https://baroquepotion.com/2008/01/evidence-in-art-tanners-the-banjo-lesson/>

Luce Foundation Center. (2016) Study for the Young Sabot Maker. SAAM. Accessed December 4, 2017. <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/study-for-the-young-sabot-maker-23694>