

The racial and artistic tension of henry ossawa tanner essay sample



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In 1913 American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, best known then and today as a “religious” painter, finished the oil on canvas “Fishermen at Sea”. The intense and captivating painting is considered by critic Will South as “one of Tanner’s boldest works and one of his most mysterious” (South 5). The viewer sees the small fishing sloop from above and to the rear; the vessel lies in the hollow between dark swells as an angry white-cap wave seems to swallow the bow. It is an incredible “scene of danger and risk, it is itself a design of dynamic instability” (South 5). As with most paintings a variety of interpretations have been assigned. However, few who knew the man would hesitate to agree it “may be a metaphor for the artist’s life—a self-portrait—that summarizes survival despite prevailing contrary forces” (South 6). Tanner is representative of the great American artists who found it necessary to leave the repression facing them in America. Once in France, Tanner soon gained critical acclaim here and abroad. It can be argued ironically that the racial strife and bigotry he endured was in fact a significant contribution to his success.

Henry Tanner was born in 1859 and began studying art in 1879. In 1891 he relocated to Paris; by 1894 he earned critical acclaim with his oil on canvas “The Banjo Lesson”. Later works, including his 1896 “The Resurrection of Jesus” and the 1899 “Nicodemus Visiting Jesus” firmly established his master status. According to art critic Alan Braddock, “it was only in the European art world and in biblical subject matter that Tanner found what he called ‘a perfect race democracy’” (Braddock 1).

Tanner had been subjected to incredible cruelty in America. When he was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts “one night his easel was

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carried out into the middle of Broad Street and, though not painfully crucified, he was firmly tied to it and left there” (South 2). He was well aware “ that the real danger confronting him was American racism, which continued to categorize him—and now potentially his son—as second-class citizens” (Braddock 16). In Europe, particularly his home in France, Tanner stated “ no one regards me curiously. I am simply ‘ M. Tanner, an American artist’. ... Questions of race or color are not considered—a man’s professional skill and social qualities are fairly and ungrudgingly recognized” (Braddock 9).

Ironically, race was not an issue for Tanner in any sense. When a reviewer had sympathized for what she believed he faced as a “ Negro artist” Tanner had a very wise response: “(n)ow I am a Negro? Does not the $\frac{3}{4}$ of English blood in my veins...count for anything? Does the $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$ of ‘ pure’ Negro blood in my veins count for all?” (Braddock 10). He makes it clear he believes neither “ percentage” accounts for his talent. Obviously it was the racist American perspective of his “ blood” that caused his exile, under which his talent reached its incredible full potential—and only then was his talent recognized and acknowledged in America. Tanner is emblematic of the timeless adage of success in the face of adversity. His life story, so much like “ Fishermen at Sea”, will forever be an example to anyone subjected to class hatred or bigotry. Tanner has proved that sometimes the player must leave an unequal playing field and seek victory on a level field of his own choosing—and thus win the game at home as well as abroad.

References

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