

The Clerk's Black History Series



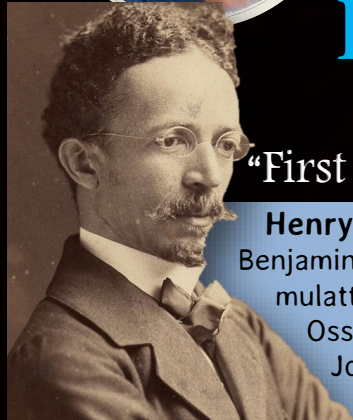
Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Henry Ossawa Tanner

(June 21, 1859 – May 25, 1937)

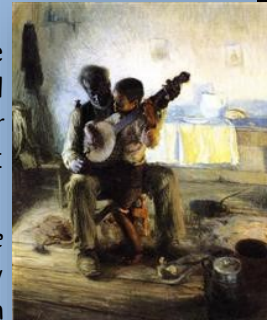
“First African-American Artist in the White House Art Collection”



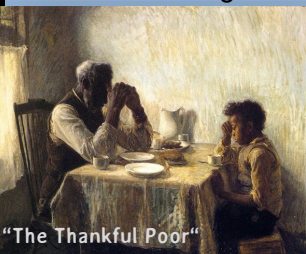
Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pennsylvania on June 21, 1859. His parents were, Reverend Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Sarah Tanner, a mulatto woman who escaped her enslavers via the Underground Railroad. His middle name, Ossawa, was derived from the name of the town Osawatimie, Kansas, where the abolitionist John Brown initiated his antislavery campaign. His father often consulted with Frederick

Douglas. At the age of 21, Henry entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts studying under renowned artist, Thomas Eakins. As the only African-American student, he suffered discrimination at the hands of some of his fellow students, being physically assaulted and having his painting supplies damaged. Despite the efforts to limit his talent, Henry was able to exhibit some of his work at the Academy and at the Philadelphia Society of Artists. Henry left the Pennsylvania Academy prior to graduating to pursue the idea of combining business with art. In the fall of 1888, he moved to Atlanta, Georgia, opened a photography studio, and began teaching art classes at Clark (University) College.

In 1891, Henry traveled to Paris with the American Art Students' Club and enrolled in the Académie Julian. His early art showcased his social awareness and talent for painting dignified and sympathetic portrayals of Black people, such as *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894). In 1893 he returned to Chicago to deliver a paper entitled “The American Negro in Art” at the World's Congress on Africa. The visit, however, dimmed his hope for success in America.



“The Banjo Lesson”



“The Thankful Poor”

After returning to Paris in 1894, one of Henry's paintings, *Daniel in the Lion's Den* (1895), was accepted for exhibition at that year's Salon. Henry soon abandoned his works focusing on African-Americans and began painting the biblical scenes for which he became best known. Two years later he completed a painting which so impressed Rodman Wanamaker, a Philadelphia merchant in Paris, that he decided to finance the first of Henry's several trips to the Holy Land. Before leaving, Henry sent



“The Resurrection of Lazarus”

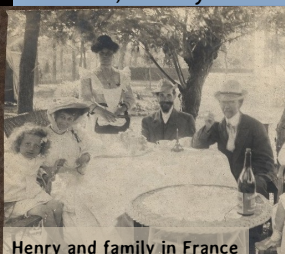
the painting, *Resurrection of Lazarus* (1896), to the Paris Salon. Here it was awarded a third class medal and purchased by the French government for exhibition at the Luxembourg Gallery and eventually entered into the collection of the Louvre. It also won a silver medal at the Universal Exposition and a silver medal at the Pan American exhibition in Buffalo, NY.

In 1899 Booker T. Washington visited Henry in Paris and Henry painted his portrait. That same year Henry married Jessie Olssen, an American woman of Scandinavian descent, whom he had met in Paris. The couple's only child, Jesse Ossawa, was born in New York in 1903. Acceptance of their interracial family influenced Henry's decision to settle permanently in France. Although he was considered an expatriate, Henry maintained close ties to the United States and remained active in the fight for racial equality. He was a regular contributor to the NAACP and his work and success inspired African-American leaders and young black artists, many of whom visited him in Paris.



“Sand Dunes at Sunset”

In 1909, Henry was made an associate member of the National Academy of Design and was elected to full membership in 1927. He achieved one of his greatest distinctions in 1923 when the French government named him chevalier of the Legion of Honor. His painting, *Sand Dunes at Sunset* (1885), is part of the official [White House Collection](#), making him the first African-American Artist to be showcased in the White House (1995). On May 25, 1937, Henry Ossawa Tanner died at his home in Paris, surrounded by his family.



Henry and family in France

“Booker T. Washington”

