

## Worcester Art Museum docent promotes forgotten pioneer

By Mark Sullivan

Telegram & Gazette Staff

Posted Feb 14, 2019 at 9:44 PM

Updated Feb 14, 2019 at 9:47 PM

He might be called the Jackie Robinson of the art world. Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) was the first African-American artist to achieve international acclaim.

WORCESTER — He might be called the Jackie Robinson of the art world.

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) was the first African-American artist to achieve international acclaim.

Tanner was one of the premier painters of religious scenes in Europe from the 1890s to the 1920s, and a contemporary of American expatriate artists James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent.

Today, few have heard of him.

“In common knowledge, he’s almost unknown,” says Brad Barker, a docent at the Worcester Art Museum.

“I would love to fix that.”

Mr. Barker, of Boylston, will deliver a Black History Month presentation on “Henry Ossawa Tanner and the Emergence of African-American Fine Art” at the museum at 1 p.m. Saturday.

His presentation is being made in conjunction with the showing of a painting by Tanner, “The Annunciation,” on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art to the Worcester Art Museum through February.

The 1898 painting, of a teenage Mary being told by the Archangel Gabriel that she is to bear the Son of God, fairly glows as if illuminated, a hallmark of Tanner’s art.

“You come in and it ‘pops,’” said Erin Corrales-Diaz, the museum’s assistant curator of American art.

The work portrays Mary's reaction to the miraculous news she is being given by a heavenly messenger depicted as a beam of light.

"She's a little tentative, there's a little bit of anxiety there, but there's also curiosity," said Ms. Corrales-Diaz. "Tanner captures the mixed emotions Mary would have experienced having the divine come and approach her and tell her she was going to give birth to Christ.

"Tanner re-envisioned a scene referred to quite often in art history, all the way back to the Renaissance, and he transforms it for the modern day," she said.

"She's often called the 'modern Mary.'"

The artist, who had visited Egypt and Palestine, took care to use authentic textiles and clothing, and presumably used a Middle Eastern model, Ms. Corrales-Diaz said. "Mary's an adolescent," she said. "She doesn't have the halo you see in Renaissance art. Tanner is able to showcase the extraordinary in the ordinary."

Ms. Corrales-Diaz said a radical departure in the painting, beyond the "modern Mary," is its depiction of the Archangel Gabriel not as a winged figure but as a flash of light. In the late 19th century, electricity was seen as "miraculous and spectacular," she said, which may be why Tanner portrayed this divine force radiating like a lightning bolt.

Mr. Barker said he is on a mission to bring greater recognition to Tanner as an African-American pioneer in the arts. "I try to tell anyone I can talk to that he deserves (greater recognition) among the American people," he said.

He said Tanner's father, Rev. Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was a second-generation free black and a prominent clergyman of the African Methodist Episcopal church as well as a vocal abolitionist. His son's middle name, Ossawa, was short for Osawotamie, the Kansas town where John Brown based his anti-slavery operations. Tanner's mother, Sarah, had escaped slavery as a child through the Underground Railroad, which delivered her to freedom in Pennsylvania.

Tanner was one of the first African-Americans to enter the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, and studied under Thomas Eakins, who took him under his wing, said Ms. Corrales-Diaz. But the racism he encountered as an aspiring black artist in 19th-century America led him to leave for Europe.

Mr. Barker said: "Tanner faced difficulties from both races as a painter. He experienced racism from the whites who ridiculed him for trying to be a painter and rejection from poor blacks who disdained his association with whites. Tanner eventually fled the U.S. to live in Paris where he, and his paintings, were welcomed without prejudice."

The minister's son found success painting religious scenes. "Tanner tried to paint images of African-American life depicting the tenderness, love and faith of black families, but the realities of racism were that these paintings couldn't sell," Mr. Barker said.

According to Tanner's biography at the website of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in 1900, his 1895 painting, "Daniel in the Lion's Den," was awarded a silver medal at the Universal Exposition in Paris, and the following year, received a silver medal at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.

In 1908 his first one-man exhibition of religious paintings in the United States was held at the American Art Galleries in New York. In 1923 he was made an honorary chevalier of the Order of the Legion of Honor, France's highest honor, and in 1927 he became a full academician of the National Academy of Design — the first African-American to receive that honor.

"In his later years, Tanner was a symbol of hope and inspiration for African-American leaders and young black artists, many of whom visited him in Paris," his biography at the Smithsonian states. Ms. Corrales-Diaz said he helped inspire the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

Still, his paintings often were not displayed in the leading museums, or if they were, they were relegated to side galleries, Mr. Barker said, and Tanner did not receive the visibility his better-known contemporaries like Sargent and Whistler did.

"He never got that," said Mr. Barker. Hence the docent's crusade.

Guiding tours of the museum, Mr. Barker said, he likes to steer his groups to the room where "The Annunciation" hangs.

"I ask people whether or not they've ever heard of Tanner," he said. "I've never had a person raise their hand.

"He really is a lost artist, in a lot of ways, to the American public," he said.