



1898

Oil on canvas

57 x 71 1/4 inches
(144.8 x 181 cm)

Framed: 73 3/4 x 87 1/4 inches
(187.3 x 221.6 cm)

HENRY OSSAWA TANNER

American (active France)

Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach
Fund, 1899, W1899-1-1

LET'S LOOK

Who is this person?

How old do you think she is?

What is she wearing?

How is she sitting?

How is she holding her
hands and her body?

What expression does
she have on her face?

Where is she?

What does her room look like?

Is it simple or fancy?

Do you notice anything else
unusual in this room?

THE ANNUNCIATION

We see a teenage girl, dressed in peasant robes, sitting on a rumpled bed in a room with a bumpy, cobblestone floor. She seems afraid and awed. Who could she be? What is happening? What is that bright column of light on the left? This painting is an unusual version of one of the oldest themes in European art, the Annunciation (which means announcement). In this New Testament Bible story, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will become the mother of Jesus. Traditional paintings of the Annunciation show Mary wearing fancy blue robes and seated in a European palace or cathedral, as she listens calmly to an angel with glorious wings and a halo.

Tanner made his painting so different from other artists' paintings of the same subject because he wanted the scene to be realistic. He painted *The Annunciation* in 1898, just after returning from his first trip to the Holy Land—Egypt and Palestine (now Israel). Sketching ordinary Jewish people in the settings where Jesus lived moved Tanner deeply, and he tried to make his painting as authentic as possible.

Tanner's academic training is evident in his skillful depiction of Mary's tense face and body and in his use of thin, transparent coats of paint called glazes to create the dark shadows and the soft, luminous effect. He also included several religious symbols in some of the details. Can you find them? The three pottery vessels in the corners may represent Mary since she will soon be the vessel of Jesus. The shelf high up on the wall in the upper left corner intersects the column of light to form the shape of a cross, the symbol of Christianity.

For Tanner, just as for African American artists who made pottery and quilts, and for preachers and congregations who sang spirituals, certain Bible stories became metaphors for freedom from slavery

and discrimination. When *The Annunciation* was first shown in America, it was hailed as a “brilliant masterpiece.” In 1899 the painting was purchased for the city of Philadelphia and exhibited at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Art (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art). It was the first work by Tanner to find a permanent home at a museum in the United States.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh in 1859, to Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Sarah Elizabeth Miller, who had escaped slavery as a child. His parents gave him the middle name Ossawa to honor the antislavery campaign launched three years earlier by John Brown in Osawatimie, Kansas.

When Tanner was ten years old, his family moved to Philadelphia, where he soon realized he wanted to be an artist. Against his father’s wishes, he struggled to learn to paint over the next ten years, and was then admitted for free to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Although he suffered insults from some of the white students there, he also found supportive teachers, including the realist painters Thomas Eakins and Thomas Hovenden.

In 1889, after moving to Atlanta, Tanner met a Methodist bishop who made it possible for the artist to travel to Europe. When he discovered that people in Paris were more accepting of racial diversity than in America, and that he could continue his academic training, he decided to stay. He was also thrilled by the Salon exhibitions held annually in Paris and hoped his paintings would be accepted there. Salon is French for “room” and refers to the part of the Louvre—now a museum, originally a royal palace—where the government-sponsored exhibitions took place. After several of his paintings based on Bible stories won Salon prizes, a wealthy American living in Paris was so impressed that he paid for Tanner’s travels in Egypt and Palestine (now Israel). *The Annunciation* was the first painting Tanner made when he returned to Paris in 1898.

That same year he also met his future wife, Jessie M. Olssen, a young American opera singer of Swedish-Scottish descent. She was intrigued by Tanner’s modesty, especially in light of his artistic accomplishments, and they shared a love of music. Both sets of parents approved of the interracial marriage, and they were married in London the following year. Their only son was named Jesse Ossawa Tanner, a reminder of the Tanner family’s struggle against prejudice. Tanner and his wife were discouraged by the ongoing racial tension they found during visits to the United States in the early

1900s, and decided to settle permanently in France. Tanner continued painting Biblical subjects, often with mystical overtones, and found success on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1923 he was awarded the Legion of Honor by the French government. When he died in his sleep in 1937, he was a celebrity in France, but still stereotyped as a “Negro painter” in America.

PHILADELPHIA ROOTS

Although Henry Ossawa Tanner chose to live most of his adult life in Paris, France, his youth was spent in Philadelphia. He lived with his parents and seven brothers and sisters in the oldest part of the city near his father’s church, Mother Bethel. At age thirteen, while taking a walk with his father, he encountered an artist painting in Fairmount Park and was so impressed that he decided on the spot to be a painter. He spent many hours at the Philadelphia Zoo sketching the African lions. He studied anatomy, perspective, and photography at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Tanner loved to visit the art galleries on Chestnut Street and in 1886 he rented a studio at 927 Chestnut Street, where he painted *Lion Licking Its Paw*, also known as *After Dinner*. Although Tanner left America because he found it impossible to “fight prejudice and paint at the same time,” one of his best-known paintings, *The Annunciation*, is now on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

LET’S LOOK AGAIN

Where in the world could this scene be taking place?

If you could step into this painting, how would it feel—warm or cool? Make lists of all the warm and cool colors.

Imagine changing one of them, like the robe in the lower-right corner. How would this make the painting feel different?

Why do you think Tanner represented the angel Gabriel as a column of light?

CONNECT AND COMPARE

- Compare Tanner’s depiction of the Annunciation with the painting below of the same subject by Francisco de Zurbarán, dating from 1630. Find the lines and shapes in each painting that link the figures of Mary and the angel. Print out these reproductions and use a marker to draw them. Explain in writing what you have discovered.



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Fund, 1899, W1899-1-1



The Annunciation
c. 1650

Oil on canvas
85 5/8 x 124 1/2 inches
(217.5 x 316.2 cm)

FRANCISCO DE ZURBARÁN
Spanish

Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach
Fund, 1900, W1900-1-16

- Research the route Tanner traveled from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia to Atlanta and on to Paris, Israel, and Egypt.
- Tanner made paintings of other Bible stories, such as *The Raising of Lazarus* and *Daniel in the Lions' Den*. Explain how each of these stories, and the story of the Annunciation, could represent the hopes and concerns of African Americans who experience discrimination.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Take turns posing for one another. Each "model" picks a card with one of these phrases to act out:

- I won the race! I am the best!
- I am tired, frightened, and cold.
- I can't wait to open my birthday gifts!
- I feel warm, relaxed, and sleepy . . .
- I am awestruck, like a miracle is taking place.
- I am so angry at my brother (or sister) that I could scream!

Make a series of quick sketches using black markers on newsprint paper. Pick one sketch/pose to make again, this time using sculpture wire and a wood block base.

This painting is included in African American Artists: 1859 to the Present, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.