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“Henry Ossawa Tanner and Visual Mysticism,” *Mysticism Group*, AAR

“I paint things that I see and believe... I believe in my religion. I have chosen the character of my art because it conveys my message and tells what I want to tell my own generation and leave to the future.”ⁱ These are the words of Henry Ossawa Tanner. Tanner, an African American artist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, depicted grand biblical narratives on canvas. Tanner, as an artist and as a spiritual person, has been called a “mystic” by friends, family, and scholars alike.ⁱⁱ His luminous canvases, with the interplay of dark and light and with narratives that encapsulate the universal themes in Christianity, portray something more than the characters Tanner chose to paint. These canvases reflect his spirituality and mysticism. A contemporary of the artist classified the artist as a “practical believer,” who painted “dramatic portrayals of moving [s]criptural scenes” that were reminiscent “of those earlier days when immortal masters pictured on the walls or canvas with earnest faith and profound soul experiences of humanity.”ⁱⁱⁱ Tanner was a mystic and his paintings reflect his religious belief and practice.

However, previous scholarship has ignored religious and mystical impulses in the art of Henry Tanner.^{iv} Instead, these works have focused on the racial heritage of the artist and its impact of his work. His black genre paintings, *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, are the works that have primarily been studied though his oeuvre consists of over 130 paintings. When previous scholars examined religion, they only examined it through the lens of race. Each religious painting was an expression of race cloaked in the symbol of religion. On the other hand, some scholars^v have identified the importance of Christianity to Tanner yet their respective works still seem wedded to a racial analysis. Admittedly, Tanner’s religious life was enmeshed in understandings of race and desire for racial equality. However, the goal of this paper is to

examine Tanner as a mystic, but more importantly, propose that the artist was a visual mystic due to the medium of his religious expression. This paper is a case study of visual mysticism, which examines Tanner's life, his paintings, *The Annunciation*, *Daniel and the Lion's Den*, and *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, his commentary about his work, and how others commented on the artist and his art.

Mysticism for Tanner was typified as a close personal unity with God, a keen perception that something was not quite right in the world, his sense of the interconnectedness of the world, and heightened emotion.^{vi} With the use of these parameters, Henry Tanner was a mystic. Moreover, he was a visual mystic because of the importance of his mode of expression, art, for his mystical consciousness. Visual mysticism is a method to express the divine similar to the use of language by mystics like St. John of the Cross. Visual mysticism provides an outlet to understanding the artist's unbounded religious impulses that permeate his paintings. This artist wanted his visual expression of religious beliefs to show the presence of God in human life while this expression was an exercise, for Tanner, in devotion and piety to God. To the artist, painting was a display of his personal, religious, and mystical experiences. Thus, painting was his practice of his religious belief. It was a way to resolve and communicate his connection to God as well as his inner conflict caused by his understanding of the world. Tanner believed that God had communicated with the prophets and ordinary men and women in the biblical narrative, but he also knew the "good God" was ever-present in his life as well.

Before we examine the paintings of Henry Tanner, we first must understand some of his biography. Henry Tanner was born on the eve of the Civil War in 1859. His parents gave him the middle name "Ossawa," which was short Osawatomie, Kansas, the place where John Brown and his men raided and killed several slavery supporters. His father was a free black, and his

mother had been enslaved but was rescued by the Underground Railroad. His father, Benjamin Tucker Tanner, was a minister, an editor, and eventually a bishop for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His mother ran a school from her home that educated recently freed blacks. His father taught the artist and his siblings to strive for an intelligent faith. Tanner was of mixed ancestry, European, African, and Native American, and he faced painful prejudice throughout his life. With art as his choice of vocation, Tanner faced prejudice from a white-dominated art world and an America in which race profoundly mattered. In 1896, Tanner left America to study in France, and he remained in France only returning to his home country briefly. Religion was a vehicle of solace for him in often-unjust world, and he deployed his religion to understand himself and the world around him.

Henry Tanner has been classified as a mystic, and many have noted the religious emotion of his artistic themes. When reflecting on his father, Jesse Ossawa Tanner stated, “My father was a great mystic, in the sense that his intellectual stature was above human contingencies, he felt influences which the common mortal does not perceive, his pictures reflect this perception.”^{vii} His son’s description painted a portrait of a sensitive man with insights on humanity and divinity that appeared in his works. A biographer noted Tanner “lost interest in the formal aspects of religion,” and “even became a Christian Scientist.”^{viii} Christian Science was not a lasting affiliation for Tanner, though his mysticism seemed to be effected by it. “By nature Henry Tanner was a mystic who found emotional fulfillment with God,” and this “mystical element” apparent in his work “gave his art the greatest appeal and...kept him from becoming just another raconteur of sacred anecdotes.”^{ix} He practiced daily meditations that indicated his devout faith. It is unknown how long the artist practiced Christian Science, but it impacted his religious life. Christian Scientists believed that God was All-in-All, and that the

universe was connected through the divine. God was constantly “self-revealed and self-revealing to His creation, and could not by His very nature be self-concealed or arbitrary in His self-disclosures.”^x

Tanner believed that God was everywhere and was a part of everything. The younger Tanner presented his father’s religious belief:

Though my father felt that the presence of God stretches out through the cosmos and his love extends to other worlds than our own, he also felt that man has an active role to play and should not submit passively to his fate. Christ watches over his flock...but evil is a tangible thing and *God needs us* to help fight with him against evil and *we need God* to guide us. (We all have a little of God in us).^{xi}

The interconnectedness of the world would be emphasized again and again in his work and commentary. Tanner hoped his art would be demonstrative of kinship of the world.

As his life progressed, Tanner became “unorthodox” in his beliefs and shed the denominational strictures of the A.M.E. His faith became more spiritual and more concerned with universal themes in Christianity. The artist “believed in God and the revelations of the Bible” yet he also thought that an open mind “made humans more receptive to an encounter with the divine,” and he wanted his paintings to provide a place where this interaction could occur.^{xii} God and humanity needed this communication, and his paintings could be the venue. Tanner hoped this message would remind future viewers of his paintings of the presence of God, and that they, too, could rely on the divine in periods of struggle like the figures of his art.

For Tanner, previous religious paintings of other artists did not convey the true religious sentiment that he believed that these paintings did not allow for a communication of a religious message. To the artist, religious sentiment belonged in religious art. His religious emotions

about the divine were the message of his art. Tanner's intent for his paintings was to make the Bible "real" to his viewers and demonstrate that God interacted with humanity in his time as well as biblical times. He stated:

My effort has been to not only put the Biblical incident in the original setting...but at the same time give the human touch "which makes the whole world kin" and which ever remains the same. While giving the truth of detail not to lose sight of more important matter, by this I mean that of color and design should be as carefully thought out as if the subject had only these qualities. To me it seems no handicap to have a subject of nobility worthy of one's best continued effort. There is but one thing more important than these qualities and that is to try and convey to your public the reverence and elevation these subjects impart to you, which the primary cause of their choice.^{xiii}

His commentary represented the importance of his religious subjects to him, but also his desire to impart this "reverence" to the audiences of his paintings. The human-God relationship should have made "the whole world kin," but Tanner realized that many did not recognize the humanity of all races and peoples. Thus, his art was a way to show that all had the similar struggles and joys. His work emphasized themes of hope, struggle, sacrifice, rebirth, and unwavering faith in God that supplied his biblical figures with the ability to persevere. His paintings, *The Annunciation* (1898), *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (1894), and *Daniel and the Lion's Den* (1895)^{xiv}, portray the interaction.

The Annunciation is one of Tanner's most famous religious paintings, and it was a depiction of the moment that Mary learns from the angel Gabriel that she will give birth to the son of God. A contemporary of Tanner described it best:

the young Jewish peasant sitting on the edge of the couch wearing the common striped

cotton of the Eastern women of the poorer class, a costume which they have kept to the present day, no halo or celestial attributes about her, and only the flood of golden light to herald the approach of the angel. It was decidedly an unconventional treatment of the subject.^{xv}

Unlike previous paintings of the same subject, the artist relied upon the simplicity of scene instead of a grandiose recreation. Tanner's Mary was a young Jewish girl, who appeared thoughtful and reflective of Gabriel's message, and Gabriel did not appear as "bewinged angel" but as a beam of light that permeated the room with its glow. The young woman watched the celestial light as she pondered her great responsibility. Gabriel communicated with Mary, and she listened while attempting to comprehend his message. With Tanner's emphasis on Mary's humanity and ordinariness, the viewer can relate to her person to person instead of seeing her in the elevated position as the mother of Jesus. The emphasis on her humanity was contrasted with the figure of Gabriel as a "flood of golden light." Where Mary was substantial, Gabriel was immaterial. The artist demonstrated this communication between divine and human, seen and unseen. By portraying Mary as ordinary and human, Tanner presented the potential for all humans to have this intimate relationship with the divine.

As with most of his paintings, the artist depicted God and messengers of God in the form of light, which resonated their divine status to contrast to their human counterparts. Light was the artist's outlet to represent Gabriel, and thus, divinity and love. A *New York Times* art critic proposed that Tanner was "pantheistic" in his paintings because he revered everything and light was his way to express love. In Tanner's works, light was "sweet and soft," and no matter where it emanated from, "it is always a source of goodness" and "even touched by it, people are safe."^{xvi} Light was Tanner's expression of God that radiated in his paintings to provide guidance

and safety for humanity and offered comfort in the face of struggle and oppression. In *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, Tanner employed light that basked over Lazarus and Jesus and highlighted the miracle of rebirth that was possible with faith in God. *Lazarus* like *The Annunciation* revolved around the idea of interaction between humanity and divinity except divinity was in the form of man, Jesus, in the painting. Jesus was “God made man” for Tanner. The artist depicted both the moment when Jesus called for Lazarus to awaken from the dead and Lazarus’s stunned awakening. In this composition, Jesus demonstrated the interactive relationship between human and divine. This interaction affected all in Tanner’s composition. The onlookers’ faces were mixtures of horror and awe while Jesus remained calm and composed. Jesus’s composure contradicted the reactions of the crowd. His divinity made the impossible possible and guided and reassured those present. The artist bathed the painting in a warm light that connoted the miracle that just occurred. Light, again, was love for the artist. Light also described his own inspiration. It became his much-needed inspiration that possibly was derived from his relationship with God. His reliance upon light as an analogy for the divine in his paintings had resonance in how he described his life and viewed God’s interaction in his own life. When art became a “drudge,” Tanner saw light that reinvigorated the process that he loved.^{xvii} Light was a metaphor for his painting and in his life.

The use of light as a symbol for God was a common metaphor in the writings of other mystics. Light symbolized good and perfection while dark was metaphor for evil. Many mystics employed light as a metaphor for God including Hildegard of Bingen, St. John of the Cross, Mechtchild of Madgeburg, and St. Therese of the Child Jesus.^{xviii} Tanner’s depiction and discussion of divinity as light followed a long history of mystics signifying God as light. Along

with his use of light, Tanner often returned to biblical figures and themes again and again on canvas to garner a better understanding of the subject.

The artist painted at least three versions of *Daniel and the Lion's Den*, but two have been lost though the original version still exists in a photograph. In the first version, Daniel's composure was calm, and he looked upward to the heavens assured that God would "deliver" him from the lions. One beam of light illuminated Daniel's body yet his face was obscured by shadow. Daniel was a favorite of Tanner's because God interceded to save Daniel from the lions. Daniel's unwavering faith and devotion to God equipped him with the ability to overcome adversity and oppression. The later version of *Daniel* was not as optimistic with Daniel's posture being resigned and his face tilted down. This figure was not as confident as the original and appeared burdened by the weight of his struggle yet God was still present in the den to protect him from the lions.

This version was created in 1916 after the advent of World War I during a period of struggle and depression for the artist, and thus, his painting seems to signify his struggle rather than Daniel's. Many scholars have proposed that Tanner identified with Daniel and his struggles, and one noted that perhaps the artist was "portraying a vision of himself in *Daniel* in the figure of the lonely, persecuted, yet persevering prophet."^{xix} The artist like the biblical prophet possibly was waiting for God's help and guidance. Thus, it is obvious that the artist found solace and hope in this theme, which reflected his personal experience while communicating that message to others. What is most intriguing about the painting was the presence of the divine despite Daniel's resigned faith. The artist still asserted interaction and protection from God even when the figure's faith was not the strongest. The biblical figure and

Tanner both waited from assurance from God. God was ever-present, and painting was a devotion in which Tanner found God's presence.

Audiences of Tanner's painting remarked upon his religious expression. William R. Lester, an art critic, noted Tanner's "glow of reverent devotion" and "intensity of spiritual expression" in his art. He classified the artist as a "practical believer."^{xx} Lester discovered Tanner's faith and spiritual nature in his paintings, and he could see the artist's devotion and the depth of his experiences in the painting. The artist's devotion was not only suggested in his paintings, but also in his approach to his work. Tanner was known as one of the hardest workers in the "quarter."^{xxi} A friend of Tanner's, when asked about the artist's working habits, stated that the artist did most of his work in the morning and that he rose quite early. The interviewer, then, asked about Tanner's afternoons to which the friend replied, "Oh, he works."^{xxii} The artist spent most of his waking hours on his work, and he only painted three or four paintings a year because of his desire for them to be perfect. Jesse Tanner proposed that his father, due to the long labor of his paintings, wanted viewers to study his paintings many times to find new themes and nuances,^{xxiii} which Tanner practiced himself by reevaluating certain themes at different points in his life. Painting was a way for Tanner to reclaim a sense of renewal and hope, and thus, he tackled some themes often to apprehend them and find incidents of hope and faith. Painting consumed Tanner as well as a want for an accurate depiction. A French critic, who interviewed Tanner, commented on the artist's intense approach to painting. He stated:

Mr. Tanner is a dreamer and a worker. He works diligently and with a good will, but he produces only two or three canvases a year—"Because I paint laboriously," he has said with a charming modesty...He reflects long on the subject, until he has permeated the spirit of it; he searches out its intimate poetry at the same time carefully studying its

psychological aspect: and even after the general affect has been established he returns to it again and again, tirelessly seeking to improve it.”^{xxiv}

His painting was a form of visual piety, a way he uncovered and expressed divinity. Michael Brenson, a modern art critic, offered that “there is a sense—both within the paintings and within the painter—of total devotion to a task or an event or a vision, and an unshakable faith that something would happen...in Tanner’s work,” it often did.”^{xxv} In Tanner’s work, the miraculous was the mundane.

For comfort and understanding, the artist turned to his personal relationship with God. Tanner felt the presence of God. In his work, depicted prophets and ordinary men and women who were aware of “it” as well. There was a sense of unity between Tanner and God. The artist was aware of God’s presence in all of his activities and events in his life, and he believed that “it was good God who opened the way and gave me good friends, thus filling me with confidence in the future, which never deserted me in those darkest days.”^{xxvi}

His mysticism emerged from his feeling that something was not right with the world, and his paintings showed how the world could be corrected. His mysticism sprang forth from his desire to connect a disjointed world where racism was prevalent and still a barrier for many including him. By exhibiting the ties to divinity and to each other, the artist hoped to encourage his viewers to cross barriers and focus on their shared humanity.

The artist, thus, was visually a mystic and visually pious. He painted what he learned from his mysticism and his faith in God. Painting was not just a career choice to Henry Tanner but devotion, religious experience and practice in itself. Painting “was the place where he gained a deeper sense of humanity and occasionally glimpsed the divine. It was the vocation to which he always returned.”^{xxvii} Art sustained the artist and became a way to communicate personal

experience of God while providing others a venue to a similar relationship and devotion. Each painting was a “labor of love,” a devotion, to God. His son, Jesse Tanner, described his art the best:

A Tanner can do more than give you enjoyment, it can come to your rescue, it can reaffirm your confidence in man and his destiny, it can help you surmount your difficulties or console you in your distress. A picture by Tanner is really a part of the artist himself, a mystic whose visions are deeply personal yet universal in significance.^{xxviii}

ⁱ H. O. Tanner, “The Artist’s Autobiography,” *The Advance*, 1914, quoted in Marcus Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Spiritual Biography*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 120.

ⁱⁱ Jesse Ossawa Tanner stated, “My father was a great mystic, in the sense that his intellectual stature was above human contingencies, he felt influences which the common mortal does not perceive, his pictures reflect this perception.” See Jesse Ossawa Tanner’s letter to Marcia M. Matthews, February 12, 1966, Marcia M. Mathews papers relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1937-1969 (bulk 1963-1969), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 64. Marcia Matthews commented, “By nature Henry Tanner was a mystic who found emotional fulfillment with God,” and this “mystical element” apparent in his work “gave his art the greatest appeal and...kept him from becoming just another raconteur of sacred anecdotes.” See Marcia Matthews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: An American Artist*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), especially 73. Marcus Bruce, a biographer of artist, reiterated Matthews’s claims of mysticism. See Marcus Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Spiritual Biography*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), especially 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ William R. Lester, “Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake.” *Alexander’s Magazine*. v. 7, n.2. (December 15, 1908), 73.

^{iv} For an understanding of previous work on Tanner, which primarily revolves around Tanner as a race artist, see Marcia Matthews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: An American Artist*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Dewey F. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures: The Art and Life of Henry Ossawa Tanner*, (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1995); Dewey F. Mosby and Darrel Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, with introduction by Rae Alexander-Minter, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1991); Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson. *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993). For additional commentary, see Walter A. Simon, “Henry O. Tanner—A Study of the Development of an

American Negro Artist: 1859-1937,” Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1961 (which is considered the first substantial work on Tanner, but Simon was mostly concerned with the Negro’s place in America and Tanner as somewhat representative); Naurice Frank Woods, “Lending Color to Canvas: Henry O. Tanner’s African-American Themes,” *American Visions*, v.6, n.1 (February 1991), 14-20; Albert Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” *Art Bulletin*, v. 75, n. 3, (Sept 1993), 415-441; Brooks Adams, “Tanner’s Odyssey,” *Art in America*, v. 79, n. 6, (June 1991), 108-112, 93; Sharon Kay Skeel, “Black American in the Paris Salon,” *American Heritage*, v. 42, n. 1, (February/March 1991), 77-83; Jennifer J. Harper, “The Early Religious Painting of Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Study of the Influences of Church, Family, and Era,” *American Art*, v.6, n. 4, (1992), 69-85; Judith Wilson, “Lifting the ‘Veil’: Henry O. Tanner’s *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*,” in *Critical Issues in American Art: A Book of Readings*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 199-219. Tanner is also one of the five artists that were discussed in Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 99-116.

^v For a consideration of the spiritual life of Tanner, see Marcus Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Spiritual Biography*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), and Kristin Schwain, “Figuring Belief,” Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2001, pages?.

^{vi} Unfortunately, this paper does not allow an exposition on mysticism. My categorization of his mysticism comes from my analysis of what it means to be a mystic. I relied upon William James, Leigh Schmidt, Bruno Brochert, Hal Bridges, and Bernard McGinn. See my thesis for further explanation, Kelly J. Baker, “Henry Ossawa Tanner: Race, Religion, and Visual Mysticism,” M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 2003, 32-46. Available at <http://etd.lib.fsu.com/theses/available/etd-11282003-160632>

^{vii} Jesse Ossawa Tanner’s letter to Marcia M. Matthews, February 12, 1966, Marcia M. Matthews papers relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1937-1969 (bulk 1963-1969), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 64.

^{viii} Matthews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 73.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 73.

^x Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1973), 27.

^{xi} Jesse Ossawa Tanner, “Introduction,” in Matthews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, xiii. Emphasis original.

^{xii} Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 15.

^{xiii} Henry O. Tanner, “Effort,” statement published in “Exhibition of Religious Paintings by H.O. Tanner,” checklist of an exhibition at Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1924, n.p. as quoted in Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 106-107.

^{xiv} Due to copy right restrictions, these images are available at <http://etd.lib.fsu.com/theses/available/etd-11282003-160632>

^{xv} Helen Cole, “Henry O. Tanner, Painter,” *Brush and Pencil*. v. 6, n. 3. (June 1900). 101-102.

^{xvi} Michael Brenson, “For Tanner, Light Was Love,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1991, 33.

^{xvii} See Henry O. Tanner, “The Story of An Artist’s Life II.” *World’s Work*. v. 18, n. 3. (July 1909) 11769-11775, especially 11775 for references to light. Tanner wrote, “Then one by one the great hopes you have vanish, the various qualities you knew you were going to get fail to materialize, the lights go out—what misery—then it is determination to succeed has to be

evoked...but again light begins to appear and with it a picture, something quite a little different in details from your original idea, but one which work is a pleasure.”

^{xxviii} For exposition of mystics and light, see Kelly J. Baker, “Henry Ossawa Tanner,” 37-38.

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^{xix} Harper, “The Early Religious Paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner,” 75. See also Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 145.

^{xx} William R. Lester, “Henry O. Tanner: Exile for Art’s Sake,” *Alexander’s Magazine*, v. 7, n. 2, (December 15, 1908), 72.

^{xxi} The nickname for the area in which his studio was located.

^{xxii} Cole, “Henry O. Tanner,” 104. Unknown friend quoted by Cole.

^{xxiii} Jesse Ossawa Tanner’s letter to Marcia M. Matthews, February 12, 1966, Marcia M. Mathews papers relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1937-1969 (bulk 1963-1969), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., reel 64.

^{xxiv} Anonymous, “An Afro-American Painter,” 406. The translation of the unknown French critic’s commentary on Tanner appeared in this article.

^{xxv} Brenson, “For Tanner, Light was Love,” 35.

^{xxvi} Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life I,” 11664.

^{xxvii} Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 169.

^{xxviii} Jesse Ossawa Tanner, “An Introduction,” in Matthews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, xii-xiii.