American Negro Painter Dies in His Paris Home

[[image]]
Herald Tribune photo
Henry Ossawa Tanner at work in his studio in Paris

Henry Tanner, 77, Dies in Paris;
Was American Negro Painter

Religious Canvases of Pittsburg-born Artist Hang
in Many Museums; France Bought His "The
Raising of Lazarus" for the Luxembourg

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Paris, May 25.—Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Negro artist, died here today at his home in the Rue de Fleurus, on the left bank. He was seventy-seven years old.

Canvases in Many Museums

Henry Ossawa Tanner was one of the first Negro artists to attain international eminence as a painter. He contributed many canvases to museums and collections in the United States and Europe and his Biblical canvases have been compared with those of Fra Bartolommeo and other Italian masters.

One of his paintings, "The Raising of Lazarus," was purchased by the French government in 1897 for the Luxembourg. He was the first Negro, and one of the first American artists, to achieve that distinction. At the time of his death another canvas, "The Disciples at Emmaus," also was in the Luxembourg and now probably will be transferred to the galleries of the Louvre in the customary manner. His choice of religious subjects was a reflection of early training. He was born in Pittsburg, the son of Bishop Benjamin Tanner, of the African Methodist Church. When Mr. Tanner was five years old, his family moved to Philadelphia and he received his first training under Thomas Eakin, at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The decision to try an artistic career was made the first time he ever saw an artist at work, on an afternoon when his father had taken him for a walk in Fairmount Park. At home, the child cut up a kitchen awning for a canvas and converted the back of his geography textbook into a palette, while his father contributed fifteen cents for colors.

Mr. Tanner's health was not good, and natural timidity also made him sensitive to barriers to his career because of race, so he agreed when his family at length urged him to take a job in a flour mill. He became seriously ill soon after, however, and his parents agreed that he should return to painting during his recuperation.

He was interested in racial questions, and for a time taught at Clark University, at Atlanta, Ga. He also set up in business as a photographer in Atlanta, but was so unsuccessful that his daily menu for several
months consisted entirely of corn mush and apple sauce.

Painting Attracts Attention

Meanwhile, his painting had attracted the attention of several artists in Philadelphia, and while he was in Atlanta one of his pictures was sold for $250, of which he received $15. The backing, however, made it possible for him to arrange an exhibition in Cincinnati in 1890, and the following year he was able to set out for Rome to study. The journey was by way of Paris, and that city so appealed to him that he decided to remain.

At the Academie Julian poverty and religious training both caused him some embarrassment. The first year in Paris he lived on $365. One of his ambitions was to win a prize in the academie competitions, but they always were held on Sunday. He tried to effect a change in this custom, but failed, and at length made a private arrangement to do his work on Monday and have it accepted for the competition. His first work won a prize.

In Paris he studied under Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant and his work attracted the attention of Rodman Wanamaker, who made it possible for him to take the first of many trips to Palestine, which were of importance in his development as a painter of religious subjects. During the journey he received word that the French government had purchased "The Raising of Lazarus," so that the date was doubly a turning point in his career.

Mr. Tanner was slender, with sharply moulded features and an appearance of frailty, but for many years he made regular journeys to Palestine, Egypt, Algiers and even to Tetuan, in the interior of Morocco, at a time when danger as well as physical hardships had to be faced.

The depth of feeling in his religious paintings caught the attention of critics as much as his skills and he frequently said that it was his ambition to show that an artist's choice of a religious subject was not an excuse for mediocre work, and attitude, he said, which had been prevalent almost since the decline of Italian art after the Renaissance.

Gave U. S. Exhibitions

Although almost all his painting was done in Paris, he gave several exhibitions in this country and a number of his paintings are in American galleries and collections. They include "Sodom and Gomorrah" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "L'Annunciation" in the Wistach collection in Philadelphia, "The Three Marys" and "Two Disciples at the Tomb" in the Chicago Art In-
stitute and others at the Harrison
Gallery in Los Angeles, the Hackley
Gallery in Muskegon, Mich., and the
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Mr. Tanner won the Lippincott
Prize in 1900, silver medals at the
Paris Exhibition of 1900, the Pan-
American Exposition at Buffalo, in
1901, and the St. Louis Exposition
of 1904, the gold medal at San
Francisco Exposition of 1915, and the
Clark Prize at the Grand Central
Galleries in 1930.

The French government made him
a chevalier of the Legion of Honor,
and he was a member of the Paris
Society of American Painters, of the
National Academy and the Societe
Internationale de Peinture et Sculpture. During the World War Mr.
Tanner served for eighteen months
with the American Red Cross. His
wife, the former Miss Jessie M.
Olssen, of San Francisco, died
several years ago.
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