



FEBRUARY 2021

SHEDDING LIGHT ON A LOVED ONE

Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner | Henry Ossawa Tanner



Henry Ossawa Tanner. *Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner*. 1897. Oil on canvas. 16 1/8 x 11 3/4 in. (41 x 29.8 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Partial and promised gift of Eddie C. Brown, C. Sylvia Brown, and their Children, Tonya Y. Brown Ingersol and Jennifer L. Brown, Baltimore, BMA 2002.561

A mature Black man looks downward and to the left in this painting. The viewer's eye is drawn to his face—the lines between his eyebrows, the slight depression under his eyes, his still lips under a parted mustache—due to the light illuminating him from an unknown source. The black cap and garments he wears blend into the dark background, making the contrast with his face all the more noticeable. Also contrasting with his dark clothing is a gold cross he wears on his chest. He appears to be caught in a moment of contemplation.

The man depicted in this painting is Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner (1835–1923), here in the robes he would wear in his role as Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME church was established in 1787 in Philadelphia as a place of worship for Black Methodists who experienced brutal discrimination within the existing Methodist church. Bishop Tanner was a distinguished lifelong minister who made significant contributions in theology and education, including founding two freedmen's schools (for previously enslaved Black Americans)—one in Washington, D.C., and one in Maryland.

The artist was the Bishop's son, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937). Tanner was an internationally celebrated painter who studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Académie Julian in Paris. He would ultimately make France his permanent home.

Tanner described this painting as “a hurried study of my dear father,” a remarkably humble assessment of this beautifully rendered and sensitive portrait. Among the many elements that Tanner includes in this work, it is his use of light that is one of the most noticeable and allows the viewer to see a lingering glimpse of his father in deep thought.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

Ask students to look closely at and describe this painting. What do they notice about the man depicted by the artist? What effect does the artist's choices have on their perception of the man in the painting? As students respond to these questions, offer relevant information from this resource (and any other resources on the artist and his father) that may be helpful for students' understanding of the painting. Have students create their own painting or oil pastel of someone they care about using light as an important effect.



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