



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1860s-1978(bulk 1890-1937), in the Archives of American Art

Erin Corley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection
was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Henry Ossawa Tanner papers
Date:	1860s-1978 (bulk 1890-1937)
Identifier:	AAA.tannhenr
Creator:	Tanner, Henry Ossawa, 1859-1937
Extent:	2.3 Linear feet
Language:	English and French
Summary:	The papers of the expatriate African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner measure 2.3 linear feet and date from the 1860s to 1978, with the bulk of the material dating from 1890 to 1937. Found in the papers are scattered biographical, family, and legal materials; twenty-seven folders of correspondence with family, friends, patrons, and galleries; writings and notes by Tanner and others; a small amount of printed material; numerous photographs of Tanner, his studio in Paris and home in Trepied, Normandy, his family, friends, fellow artists, and his artwork. Additional photographs include a circa 1890 shot of Tanner with fellow students at the Académie Julian and another depicting Tanner with members of the American Art Club in Paris, circa 1900. Also found are a few sketches and drawings.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The Henry Ossawa Tanner papers were donated in several increments by his son, Jesse O. Tanner, between 1967 to 1978. Additional papers were donated by Jesse O. Tanner through Marcia M. Mathews, who was in possession of Tanner's papers to write Tanner's biography. Four medals were transferred to the Archives from the National Museum of African Art.

Related Material

Also found at the Archives of American Art are the Marcia M. Mathews papers relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1937-1969, available on microfilm reels 64 and 3268. Archives of American Art microfilm reel 4399 contains the Alexander family papers relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1912-1985, the originals of which are housed in the University of Pennsylvania Archives. Microfilm reel 4397 is a copy of the the Henry O. Tanner letters to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1885-1909, loaned for microfilming by the Academy.

Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **Henry Ossawa Tanner** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2007, and total 2,471 images.

Processing Information

The papers were microfilmed in several increments shortly after each donation on reels D306-D307, 3268, 107 and 3480. All of the accessions were merged, processed, arranged, and described by Erin Corley in 2007 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

Henry Ossawa Tanner papers, 1860s-1978 (bulk 1890-1937). Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

The collection has been digitized and is available online via AAA's website.

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Biographical Note

African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a college-educated teacher and minister, and Sarah Miller Tanner, who was formerly enslaved. Benjamin Tanner was very active in the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church, eventually becoming a bishop, and the family often moved while Henry was a small child. They settled in Philadelphia, and as a teenager, Tanner spent his free time painting, drawing, and visiting art galleries. In 1880 he enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he studied under several master art instructors, including Thomas Eakins who greatly influenced his early work.

Tanner moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1888 and opened a photography gallery which was not very successful. After teaching briefly at Clark College, a sponsorship from his patrons Bishop and Mrs. Joseph Crane Hartzell allowed him to travel to Europe in 1891 and study at the Académie Julian in Paris. There he was taught by Jean Joseph Benjamin-Constant and Jean-Paul Laurens. After returning to Philadelphia in late 1892, he painted many works depicting African American subjects, including *The Banjo Lesson* (1893). He returned to Paris in 1894. There, his work began to receive favorable reviews, particularly at the Paris Salon for his biblical scenes. Tanner began to specialize in painting bible imagery and scenes, and traveled to Palestine in 1897 and 1898 and later to Morocco to study costumes, customs, and cityscapes.

In 1899 Tanner married Jessie Macauley Olssen, a young woman from San Francisco living in Paris. Also around this time reproductions of his artwork were published in a few popular American magazines, and Tanner began to receive praise for his artwork in the United States. Tanner, however, objected to being labeled as "Negro artist". Despite their misgivings, the couple moved back to the United States for a short time. Their son, Jesse Ossawa Tanner was born in 1903. One year later Tanner and his wife returned to Paris and made it their lifelong permanent home, only occasionally visiting the United States for exhibitions of his work. They also maintained a leisure farm in Trepied, Normandy.

Tanner continued to exhibit his work in Paris, develop his painting technique and imagery, and travel, becoming friends with many artists throughout Europe. In 1913 he became president of the Societe Artistique de Picardie and during World War I he worked for the American Red Cross in France. In 1923 he was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor in France for his work as an artist. Tanner became affiliated with Grand Central Art Galleries and other dealers in the United States and had great success there during the 1920s. When Jessie Tanner died

in 1925 Henry was grief stricken and remained in poor health for the remainder of his life. He continued to paint occasionally until his death in 1937.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of the expatriate African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner measure 2.3 linear feet and date from the 1860s to 1978, with the bulk of the material dating from 1890 to 1937. Found in the papers are scattered biographical, family, and legal materials; twenty-seven folders of correspondence with family, friends, patrons, and galleries; writings and notes by Tanner and others; a small amount of printed material; numerous photographs of Tanner, his family, friends, his artwork, and the galleries at the Chicago Art Institute; and a few sketches and drawings.

Biographical material contains identification documents, awards, family and personal bibles, scattered records of his membership in the Societe Artistique de Picardie and the American Expeditionary Forces, address books, family history, a file concerning a lawsuit against the Bethel A.M.E. Church, and a few records documenting the sale of his artwork. Tanner's personal and professional correspondence is with his wife Jessie, his family, friends, patrons, art galleries, and others. Letters are from various family members, his closest friend Atherton Curtis and his wife Ingeborg, friend J.S. Carpenter who was president of the Des Moines Association of Fine Arts and arranged for sales of Tanner's work in the mid-west, Grand Central Art Galleries in New York, and J.J. Taverly who purchased Tanner's work for the High Museum in Atlanta. Topics of note covered in the correspondence include the sale and exhibition of his artwork and his work for the Red Cross.

Writings and Notes by Tanner include two small notebooks, one of which he kept during his travels in Europe and Palestine in 1897. Also found are his scattered loose writings, jottings, and other notes on various subjects, including autobiographical notes. Writings by others include notes and an essay by his wife Jessie, and a manuscript, "The Life and Works of Henry O. Tanner," by his son Jesse. Printed Materials document Tanner's career and other interests through exhibition announcements, news clippings, printed reproductions of artwork, a published autobiographical essay, and other miscellaneous items. The collection includes numerous photographs of Tanner, family and friends, his studio in Paris, his home in Trepied and in Spain, travels, and artwork. Additional photographs include a circa 1890 shot of Tanner with students at the Académie Julian and another depicting Tanner with members of the American Art Club in Paris, circa 1900. Artwork consists of an ink drawing of a Paris studio and pencil sketches by Tanner.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 6 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1890-1937 (Box 1, 4, OV 5; 0.8 linear feet)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1890-1978 (Box 1, OV 5; 0.6 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings and Notes, 1897-circa 1950s (Box 1-2, OV 5; 9 folders)
- Series 4: Printed Material, 1897-1975 (Box 2, OV 5; 9 folders)
- Series 5: Photographs, 1860s-1943 (Box 3, OV 5; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 6: Artwork, 1891-1893 (Box 3; 2 folders)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African American artists

Art -- Economic aspects
Expatriate painters -- France -- Paris

Types of Materials:

Photographs
Sketches

Names:

Académie Julian
Art Institute of Chicago
Carpenter, J.S.
Curtis, Atherton
Grand Central Art Galleries
Old American Art Club (Paris, France)
Tanner, Jesse O., 1903-
Tanner, Jessie O., 1873-1925
Taverty, J.J.

Occupations:

Painters -- France -- Paris
Painters -- United States

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1890-1937

(Box 1, 4, OV 5; 0.8 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Found here are published biographies, including Tanner's 1937 obituary; identification documents, such as passports and Red Cross identity card; a one-page handwritten record of Tanner family marriages, possibly removed from a family bible; a small personal bible and larger family bible; membership documents for the Societe Artistique de Picardie, and the American Expeditionary Forces. A few documents concern his father Benjamin Tucker Tanner's estate. There is one file regarding a lawsuit with the Bethel A. M. E. Church over the church's failure to pay for a commissioned work of art by Tanner. Also found are three of Tanner's address books, loose addresses, scattered notes, lists, and a few receipts regarding the sale of his paintings. Award certificates and medals include his Legion of Honor medal and National Academy of Design membership certificate.

Arrangement: Items are arranged in chronological order within each folder.

Box 1, Folder 1	Published Biographical Summaries, circa 1905, 1925, 1937
Box 1, Folder 2	Identification Documents, 1915-1918, 1936 (See also OV 5)
Box 1, Folder 3	Tanner Family Marriage Record, circa 1890
Box 1, Folder 4	Societe Artistique de Picardie Documents, 1914
Box 1, Folder 5	American Expeditionary Forces Documents, 1918-1921
Box 1, Folder 6	Benjamin Tucker Tanner Estate Documents, circa 1923-1935
Box 1, Folder 7	Bethel A. M. E. Church Legal Documents, 1929
Box 1, Folder 8	Address Book, circa 1900-1920s Image(s): Address Books
Box 1, Folder 9	Address Book, circa 1900-1920s Image(s): Address Books
Box 1, Folder 10	Loose Addresses, circa 1900-1930
Box 1, Folder 11	Documents regarding sale of paintings, circa 1890-1937
Box 1, Folder 12	Award Certificates, 1901-1927 (See also OV 5)
Box 1, Folder 13	Award Medals, 1900-1927

Box 1, Folder 14	Award Medals, 1900-1927
Box 1, Folder 15	Personal Bible, circa 1920s
Box 4	Family Bible, 1899 (Not scanned)
Box OV 5	Identification Documents, 1915 (See also Box 1, F2)
Box OV 5	Award Certificates, 1901-1927 (See also Box 1, F12)

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Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1890-1978

(Box 1, OV 5; 0.6 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: This series contains Henry Ossawa Tanner's personal and professional correspondence, with the bulk of the letters dating after 1900 until his death in 1937. Found here are letters from members of the Tanner family, including his sisters Mary and Belle, several nieces, and one letter from Benjamin Tucker Tanner to Jessie Olssen Tanner. These letters primarily discuss family news. Also found is correspondence between Tanner and his wife Jessie, including telegrams and letters from Jessie while Tanner was traveling in Jerusalem and while serving in the Red Cross in 1918. A small amount of correspondence with his son Jesse Ossawa Tanner exists here. Also found is correspondence with Tanner's friend J. S. Carpenter, president of the Des Moines Association of Fine Arts, that concerns sales of Tanner's work in the mid-west, and with his closest friend Atherton Curtis and his wife Ingeborg. Additional correspondence is with Grand Central Art Galleries in who represented his art in the New York area, with J. J. Haverty who purchased Tanner's work for the High Museum in Atlanta, and with Tanner's brother-in-law Charles Tough. Tanner also received numerous letters of condolence after the death of his wife in 1925.

General chronological correspondence includes letters from friends, patrons, dealers, galleries, and others. Business letters concern loans of paintings for exhibitions, requests for photograph reproductions, information requests for articles, commissioned artwork, and inquiries about purchasing paintings. Also included are more intimate correspondence with friends, letters of congratulations, and correspondence with his wife's family. A small amount of the general correspondence is in French. Additional material found in this series is a letterbook containing carbon copies of letters Tanner wrote during 1918 while working for the Red Cross, and Jesse Tanner's correspondence with others concerning Henry Tanner's death and his artwork.

Arrangement: Items are arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 1, Folder 16	Tanner Family, 1910-1937
Box 1, Folder 17	Tanner, Jessie Olssen, 1899, 1918, 1925
Box 1, Folder 18	Tanner, Jesse Ossawa, 1909-1934
Box 1, Folder 19	Bateman, Jessie, 1931-1935
Box 1, Folder 20	Carpenter, J. S., 1919-1936
Box 1, Folder 21	Curtis, Atherton & Ingeborg, 1904-1937
Box 1, Folder 22	Grand Central Art Galleries, 1927-1936
Box 1, Folder 23	Haverty, J. J., 1929-1934
Box 1, Folder 24	Tough, Charles C., 1927-1935
Box 1, Folder 25	White, Clarence Cameron, 1932-1935
Box 1, Folder 26	Letters of Condolence, 1925 (See also OV 5)

Box 1, Folder 27	Calling cards, circa 1890-1930
Box 1, Folder 28	Greeting Cards, circa 1890-1937
Box 1, Folder 29	Invitations, circa 1920s
Box 1, Folder 30	Letter Book, 1918
Box 1, Folder 31	General Correspondence, 1892-1937
Box 1, Folder 32	General Correspondence, 1904-1917
Box 1, Folder 33	General Correspondence, 1918-1924
Box 1, Folder 34	General Correspondence, 1924-1925
Box 1, Folder 35	General Correspondence, 1926-1928
Box 1, Folder 36	General Correspondence, 1929-1930
Box 1, Folder 37	General Correspondence, 1931-1933
Box 1, Folder 38	General Correspondence, 1934
Box 1, Folder 39	General Correspondence, 1935
Box 1, Folder 40	General Correspondence, 1936-1937
Box 1, Folder 41	Undated Correspondence, circa 1892-1937
Box 1, Folder 42	Jesse O. Tanner Correspondence with Others, 1937-1978
Box OV 5	Letters of Condolence (List of Letters), 1925 (See also Box 1, F26)

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Series 3: Writings and Notes, 1897-circa 1950s

(Box 1-2, OV 5; 9 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series contains writings by and about Henry Ossawa Tanner. Writings by Tanner include two pocket-sized notebooks, one of which was kept during his travels in Europe and Palestine in 1897. Also found are loose writings and notes, primarily fragments of his autobiographical writings, and also draft essays and notes on various subjects. Writings by others include an essay by Jessie Olssen Tanner about women's lives in France during WWI. Writings by Tanner's son Jesse include a two volume manuscript with attached news clippings and additional notes about the life and work of his father. Also found is an essay about Tanner by the writer and journalist Eunice Tietjens, and a few unidentified writing fragments.

Box 1, Folder 43	Henry Ossawa Tanner, Notebooks, 1897, circa 1913
Box 2, Folder 1	Henry Ossawa Tanner, Writings & Notes, circa 1900-1930s Notes: (see also OV 5)
Box 2, Folder 2	Henry Ossawa Tanner, Writings & Notes, circa 1900-1930s Notes: (see also OV 5)
Box 2, Folder 3	Jessie O. Tanner, "Women Behind the Firing-Line In France," , 1914
Box 2, Folder 4	Jesse O. Tanner, Manuscript, "The Life and Works of Henry O. Tanner," , circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 5	Jesse O. Tanner, Notes for "The Life and Works of Henry O. Tanner," , circa 1950s
Box 2, Folder 6	Jesse O. Tanner, Miscellaneous Writings, circa 1920s
Box 2, Folder 7	Eunice Tietjens, "H. O. Tanner," , 1914
Box 2, Folder 8	Unidentified Miscellaneous Writings, undated
Box OV 5	Henry Ossawa Tanner, Writings & Notes, circa 1900-1930s (See also Box 2, F1-F2)

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Series 4: Printed Material, 1897-1975

(Box 2, OV 5; 9 folders)

Scope and Contents: Printed material includes exhibition announcements for Tanner and other artists, news clippings from magazines and newspapers (mostly American publications) about Tanner and exhibitions of his artwork, and news of art events in France. Also found is a two part article "The Story of an Artist's Life," by Henry Ossawa Tanner in *World's Work* from June and July 1909. Other miscellaneous printed material includes brochures, pamphlets, programs and other miscellaneous printed items mostly relating to religion and the civil rights of African Americans.

Arrangement: Items are arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 2, Folder 9	Exhibition Announcements, 1913-1975
Box 2, Folder 10	News Clippings, 1897-1908
Box 2, Folder 11	News Clippings, 1908
Box 2, Folder 12	News Clippings, 1909-1910
Box 2, Folder 13	News Clippings, 1911-1934, 1970
Box 2, Folder 14	News Clippings, circa 1897-circa 1970
Box 2, Folder 15	Reproductions of Artwork, circa 1900-1920
Box 2, Folder 16	The World's Work Magazine, 1909
Box 2, Folder 17	Miscellaneous Printed Material, circa 1910-1933, 1964 (See also OV 5)
Box OV 5	Miscellaneous Printed Material, circa 1910-1933, 1964 (See also Box 2, F17)

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Series 5: Photographs, 1860s-1943

(Box 3, OV 5; 0.4 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Found here are numerous photographs of Tanner, his family, and friends. Included are several portraits of Tanner - a photograph of him on horseback as a young man, in his military uniform during WWI, and painting in his studio. Also found is a circa 1890 photograph of Tanner with other fellow students at the Académie Julian, and another dated circa 1900 taken with members of the American Art Club in Paris. Other photographs of Tanner depict him with his wife Jessie, son Jesse, and friends at social gatherings, and together in Morocco. Additional family photographs include portraits of Jessie as a young woman, Jesse as a small child and playing with friends, and several portraits of Jessie and Jesse together, including one in which they are posing for Tanner's painting "Christ Learning to Read." Also found are photographs of Tanner's parents, Benjamin Tucker Tanner and Sarah Tanner, a tintype of Sarah Tanner's sister, and other Tanner family members, including portraits of Henry Tanner's sisters Mary, Sadie, Bertha, and Isabella, and a few of his nieces. The collection contains several photographs of Tanner's close friend Atherton Curtis and his family, including his first wife Louise and his second wife Ingeborg. Photographs of Tanner's teacher Benjamin Constant, other friends, and an ambrotype of an unidentified woman are found here. Additional photographs are of Tanner's studio in Paris, his tent and campground in Palestine, his residences, including his home in Trepied, Normandy, and of exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago. Also found are numerous photographs of Tanner's paintings and drawings.

Arrangement: Items are arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 2, Folder 18	Photographs of Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1890-1935
Box 2, Folder 19	Photographs of Henry Ossawa Tanner with Family & Friends, circa 1890-1935 Notes: (Includes a circa 1890 photograph of Tanner with fellow students at the Académie Julian and one depicting Tanner with members of the American Art Club in Paris, circa 1900)
Box 2, Folder 20	Photographs of Jessie & Jesse Tanner, circa 1890-1943
Box 2, Folder 21	Photographs of Benjamin Tucker Tanner & Sarah Tanner, circa 1897-1920
Box 2, Folder 22	Photographs of Tanner Family Members, circa 1890-1900
Box 3, Folder 1	Photographs of Atherton Curtis & Family, circa 1895-1935
Box 3, Folder 2	Photographs of Others, circa 1870s-1910
Box 3, Folder 3	Unidentified Portrait of Woman, 1860s (See Black Cabinet, Drawer 3: Cased Photographs)
Box 3, Folder 4	Photographs of Henry Ossawa Tanner Studio, circa 1937
Box 3, Folder 5	Photographs of Tanner's Tent in Palestine, circa 1899
Box 3, Folder 6	Photographs of Tanner Residences, circa 1917

Box 3, Folder 7	Photographs of Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, 1905, 1913, 1910
Box 3, Folder 8	Photographs of Exhibition, Exposition at de Touquet, 1913
Box 3, Folder 9	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 10	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 11	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 12	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 13	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 14	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (see also OV 5)
Box 3, Folder 15	Photographs of Artwork, Glass Plate Negatives, circa 1920s
Box OV 5	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1920s (See also Box 3, F9-F14)

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Series 6: Artwork, 1891-1893

(Box 3; 2 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series contains two examples of artwork executed by Henry Ossawa Tanner early in his career - an ink wash drawing of a studio in Paris, and a book, *The Wreck of the Schooner "Storm"* by Dwight Williams, with added pencil and ink illustrations by Tanner.

Arrangement: Items are arranged chronologically.

Box 3, Folder 16 [Illustrations for The Wreck of the Schooner 'Storm', 1891](#)

Box 3, Folder 17 [Drawings of Paris Studio, 1893](#)

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