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Henry Ossawa Tanner portrays the holy family's clandestine travel to escape persecution, an event that resonated with the artist's personal story.

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), FLIGHT INTO EGYPT (1923). Oil on canvas. 29" x 26". Marguerite and Frank A. Cosgrove Jr. Fund, 2001. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image Source: Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Night Escape

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The story of the holy family's night flight into Egypt to escape King Herod's assassins (Matthew 2:13-18) invites artists to paint a scene shrouded in darkness and imbued with moral symbolism. Henry Ossawa Tanner achieves this foreboding mood in *Flight into Egypt*. It depicts the artist's favorite biblical story, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where the painting has been located since 2001.¹

Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where his father, Benjamin Tanner, was a prominent minister. His mother, Sarah Miller, had been a slave before she escaped via the Underground Railway. Tanner became an accomplished illustrator and photographer before concentrating on painting. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1880 to 1882 under Thomas Eakins, then moved to Atlanta where he opened a photography gallery and taught drawing at Clark University for a few years. He was the first African American artist to emigrate to France, where he studied at the Académie Julian in 1891 before he settled in the country permanently in 1894. He later traveled to Rome and, when he became fascinated with biblical narratives, to Palestine.²

Tanner's early paintings reflect the academic style and realism of his teacher, Thomas Eakins. The works after the mid-1890s have a more personal style based on a layering effect of thick paint with complex glazes and characteristic blueish tonalities ("Tanner blues").

The artist gravitated toward biblical subjects, even though these were quite rare in American culture in the nineteenth century. In *Flight into Egypt*, Tanner employs his knowledge of Palestinian architecture to recreate the mystery and danger of the holy family's clandestine escape. The event must have resonated with Tanner's personal experience, for in this depiction we can discern his "sensitivity to issues of personal freedom, escape from persecution, and migrations of African-Americans from the South to the North."³

NOTES

1 Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Flight into Egypt*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection Record. www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/16947 (accessed June 25, 2016).

2 "Tanner, Henry Ossawa," *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford Art Online (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00179492 (accessed June 28, 2016).

3 Tanner, *Flight into Egypt*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection Record.