Today, Henry Ossawa Tanner is the first (and, as of 1997, the only) African American artist whose work hangs on the walls of the White House in Washington, D.C. The painting *Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City*, c. 1885 [see figure 1], was acquired for the presidential collection in 1996, ninety years after the Art Institute acquired *The Two Disciples at the Tomb*, c. 1906. [See slide 2] He was also considered the most famous black artist of his time. But to reach that point, he had to flee to Europe to receive acclaim at home.

In 1880, a decade after black males were granted the right to vote in the United States, Tanner was admitted as a student to the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. His teacher was Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), now considered one of America’s greatest nineteenth-century artists. Tanner was pursuing a dream he had harbored since youth, when he had first seen a landscape painter working in a park near his Pittsburgh home. At the Academy, he was an accomplished, although quiet student, and he was also the only black enrolled. One night, fellow students seized Tanner and tied him to his easel in a mock crucifixion. As one of the participants later declared: There had never been “a great Negro or a great Jew artist.... Rembrandt and Turner were accused of being Jews but they never admitted it.”

Tanner withdrew as a student from the Academy in 1881. For the next ten years, he struggled to establish himself as an artist, first in Philadelphia, then in Atlanta, where he opened up an ill-fated photography shop while teach-
ing art. He would occasionally sell works and receive acknowledgment, but not enough to sustain or support him. Finally in 1891, aided by some white patrons, Tanner followed the precedent set by many American artists of studying abroad. But Tanner was not merely drawn to Europe’s venerable artistic tradition. He left, as he declared, because it was impossible “to fight prejudice and paint at the same time.” He made Paris his home for the rest of his life.

There, in the capital of the international art world, Tanner finally found the freedom to paint. With poignant genre scenes like *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893, Tanner became one of the first academically trained African American artists to render the black experience on canvas. (See figure 2) The painting portrays an old man sitting in a sparsely furnished, light-flooded room showing a little boy how to play a banjo. In featuring an instrument that slaves brought to America before 1700, this simply composed scene of passing on a musical tradition from one generation to another quietly asserts the prominent contribution African Americans have made to music in United States history. With his signature use of color and light, Tanner captures the dignity and humility of this deeply felt universal subject. *The Banjo Lesson* would become one of his most famous works, offering the public a glimpse into the daily life of American blacks. As Tanner said: “He who has the most sympathy with his subject will achieve the best result.”

However, around 1895, Tanner realized that Europeans could hardly understand African American themes, and in the United States, there was no market
for sympathetic images of them. After completing only some four genre scenes, he began to focus instead on landscapes and religious imagery. Adopting these subjects proved that black artists could paint in the prevailing European mode. Also, religious painting came naturally to Tanner. As the son of a highly educated minister who eventually became bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Tanner had always considered the church a source of support and inspiration.

Tanner’s first religious painting, a dramatically lit *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* (1895; now lost) won an honorable mention in the highly competitive, government-sponsored annual Paris Salon exhibition of 1896. The next year, his *Raising of Lazarus* (1896, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Compiègne) won a third-class medal and, more significantly, the French government bought the painting. Less than forty years after the abolition of slavery, a black received an honor given by that time to only a handful of Americans. Then in 1899, the site of Tanner’s humiliating “crucifixion” some nineteen years earlier, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts bought his *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (1899, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia), giving its former student his first major recognition at home. In addition, Tanner’s growing reputation led an American benefactor to finance trips for the artist to the biblical Middle East, especially Jerusalem, which inspired him for years to come.

Evidence of the trip’s influence is the Art Institute’s compelling *Two Disciples at the Tomb* which depicts the discovery of Jesus’s empty tomb on Easter Sunday. As the Gospel of John (20:5) in the Bible’s New Testament proclaims: “And [John] stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.” Here, John’s youthful, radiant face reflects the luminous emptiness of the arched sepulchre, while next to him, bowing his head in awe, stands the bearded disciple Peter, who will become Jesus’s successor and the leader of the Christian church. With his great skill at handling light effects, Tanner has chosen very carefully a moment that best represents the drama of this hallowed event. He captures the dim early light of the morning star hovering above the outline of trees in the upper right portion of the picture. The light both heralds the dawn of a new day and plays off against the miraculous glow emanating from the now empty tomb of the resurrected Jesus.

Tanner’s composition places the two disciples right at the edge of the landscape and the wall of the tomb, with Peter closest to the tomb. Next to him stands John, the beardless intellectual among the apostles who wrote two books of the New Testament: the Book of John the Apostle and the visionary Revelation of Saint John the Divine that describes the return of Christ on the Day of Last Judgment. The younger John’s expression is alert as he responds to this miracle at the tomb.
Tanner's use of color and light to define structure and infuse essence seems to have reached its peak in this painting. Nothing detracts from the power of this portentous New Testament scene. Tanner crops the opening to the wondrously shining tomb. He also uses a subdued and restricted palette, dominated by dark hues and layered on with broad, commanding brushstrokes. Like The Banjo Lesson, the composition is simple, consisting of two masterfully painted figures who contrast youth and age. Our main focus is the apostles's expressive hand gestures and facial expressions, which glow with radiant light. "My effort," Tanner explained, "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."

*Two Disciples at the Tomb* became Tanner's most well-known religious painting in America, giving him at long last the kind of recognition that he had received abroad. Called "the most impressive and distinguished work of the season," the painting competed against 350 other works to win the Harris Silver Medal at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1906, which acquired the painting later that year.

Tanner lived through some of America's—and the world's—most profound changes. Born in 1859 on the eve of the Civil War in a house that was an Underground Railroad station, he was six years old when the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865—giving rise, the following year, to the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. By the dawn of the twentieth century, modernism had begun its ascendancy in art, and world order was about to topple with the advent of World War I (1914-1918). African Americans began to claim their heritage, and one of their heroes was Tanner, who became labelled the "dean" of African American artists. Black educator Booker T. Washington* pleaded with him to paint more of his early African American genre scenes. But like figures in his paintings—dignified, deeply feeling, isolated—Tanner followed his own artistic vision. However, his commitment to religious subjects led some to believe he was rejecting his heritage.

Tanner continued to receive awards. In 1908/9, he was made a member of the National Academy of Design in the United States, and, in 1927, received France's highest honor: he was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. But in America, success was always qualified. Reviews unfailingly referred to him as the country's "foremost Negro artist." Although he had never discussed that early incident of racism in Philadelphia—or any instance, for that matter—he was moved to rebuke: "Now am I a Negro? ... Does the 1/2 or 1/8 of 'pure' Negro blood, in my veins, count for all? I believe it, the Negro blood, counts and counts to my advantage—though it has caused me at times a life of great humiliation and sorrow but that it is the source of all my talents (if I have any) I do not believe, any more than I believe it all
comes from my English ancestors.... True—this condition has driven me out of the country, but still the best friends I have are 'white' Americans and while I cannot sing our National Hymn, 'Land of Liberty,' etc. still deep down in my heart I love it and am sometimes sad that I cannot live where my heart is.” Tanner died in Paris in 1937.
1. Describe and discuss the expressions of the two men. Have two students pose as the two figures recreating their body postures, hand gestures and facial expressions. (If costume and makeup are available, recreate their ages and dress). Have the rest of the class assist the students in moving into the stances. How do the two students feel when in the positions? Have the rest of the class discuss their responses watching the two students assume the characters’ poses. Are both figures feeling and responding in the same way? Is this scene a public or private moment? Is it an emotional or spiritual event? Have students perform an appropriate dialogue.

2. Describe the light in the painting. Where is it coming from and what does it illuminate? Have students investigate the effects of different kinds of light on a still life setting. On a table arrange objects such as rocks, cloth, etc., or items from the classroom. Illuminate them with different kinds of light such as a candle, a flashlight, fluorescents, holiday lights, or different color bulbs. Perform this experiment at different times throughout the day to capture changing light effects. Have students write a description of the different moods lighting creates. What mood do they think Tanner was hoping to create in Two Disciples?

3. This painting depicts an event from the ancient biblical Middle East. Have your students be archaeologists and “collect” evidence by making a list of everything in this painting such as clothes, tomb, door, hair styles, and lighting. Make a chart with the headings “modern” and “ancient times” and chart the evidence in the painting under the above five categories. Have students discuss if there is enough evidence in the painting to indicate that this event takes place in ancient times. Have students list other “artifacts” that could have been added to confirm the time and location of the event.

4. This painting is based on writings on Christ’s life in the book of John found in the Bible. As a class, choose a book to read (see bibliography for students). Assign each student a chapter of the book to illustrate. Have students hang the illustrations around the room sequentially and discuss the stories each illustration represents.
BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS


