
Art Masterpiece: Henry Tanner “The Banjo Lesson”

Keywords: Subject, Detail, Mood

Grade: 2nd – 4th (recommended)

Activity: Crayon resist drawing



Meet the Artist:

- Henry Tanner was born in Philadelphia in 1859. One day when Henry and his father were out walking in the park, they came across an artist painting a landscape. Henry decided right then that he wanted to paint. His mother gave him 15 cents for brushes and paint. When he was older, Henry attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia where he studied with an artist named Thomas Eakins. The style he learned from Eakins is known as realistic.
- Tanner's best-known work is "The Banjo Lesson," which reflects black life on the plantations. Tanner experienced much racial prejudice in the United States and decided to move to Europe in 1891.
- In Paris, where he spent the rest of his life, the emphasis of his paintings began to change from life on the plantations to religious themes. These pictures, like his earlier ones, glow with warmth and dramatic contrasts between dark and light colors.

About the Painting

Definitions:

- Detail – detail means showing many visible things. To paint something in detail is to paint even the smallest things you notice.
- Subject – The subject of the painting is the part the artist wants us to look at most.
- Mood – The mood of a painting is the feeling a painting gives us.

Possible Questions: Look and discuss the painting “The Banjo Lesson.” For example:

(Detail) Where does this scene take place? (In a kitchen.) How can you tell? (Table, plates, pitcher, frying pan, coffee pot.) What part of the picture do you think the artist wants you to look at most? (The people.) How can you tell? (The people are painted with great detail, but the rest of the picture shows few details.) Describe the details you see in this painting.

Tanner uses many *details* to show us that the people are the most important part of the painting. Notice the wrinkles in the man’s hands, and the smoothness of the boy’s hands. Can you see the stripes and folds of their clothes? What other details did the artist paint when he painted these people?

(Subject) Do you think these two people are related? (Father and son, grandfather and grandson, good friends.) What are they doing? (The man is showing the boy how to play a banjo.)

People are the *subject* of this painting. The subject of the painting is the part the artist wants us to look at most. Notice how the colors to the side and behind the people are soft, as though they are far away or not important.

(Mood) How do you think these two people feel about each other? (They love each other.) How does the artist tell us they feel this way about one another? (The boy is on the man’s lap; the man has his arms around the boy; the expression on their faces shows their love of music.) What can you guess about the lives of these two people? (They are not rich; they love each other.) What do you think about when you look at this painting? (Discuss special relationships.)

The *mood* of a painting is the feeling a painting gives us. Tanner uses browns and yellows and reds (warm colors) to give the scene a feeling of warmth. He paints gentle light shining on both the faces. The man and boy sit close together, in a comfortable position. They are sitting in a simple room with very little furniture and a bare floor. (What else tells you that they probably do not have much money?) The artist has used all these things to create a mood of simple, peaceful companionship.

Activity: Crayon resist drawing

Materials needed:

- 8”X10” drawing paper (pre-cut this before class)
- 10”X12” construction paper (for mounting)
- Crayons
- Pencils
- Brown tempera paint
- Tap water
- Plastic containers
- Paint brushes or paint sponges

**** Troubleshooting Thoughts****

Set up a paint station in the classroom. A table or even a desk might be used. Cover with newspaper and have about half a dozen paint brushes/sponges ready for the kids to use. Pre-thin out the brown tempera paint with tap water. You want this very, very thin. (The brown will simply be a light “wash” of color to help with mood.) Have several plastic containers of the pre-thinned paint ready for the kids to use.

Process:

1. Have the class close their eyes and think about a very special time and a very special adult. Encourage the children to think of a time when they felt very happy, thankful, or learned something new.
2. Distribute the materials. Have students draw the most important person or thing very large and near the center of the paper so it will be easy to see. Encourage students to include lots of details. The children should also show the environment around the people or events – indoors, outdoors, etc. – but in less detail.
3. Have the children color their drawing.
4. When the students are done with their crayons, have them come to the paint station area to sponge (or paint) over their artwork with a wash of very diluted brown tempera paint. Younger students should be supervised so that they don't soak their artwork in paint; paint should be applied evenly but sparingly.
5. Make sure they write their name and title their artwork. Hang when dry.

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