

# WHO AM I?

## SILHOUETTE SELF-PORTRAITS

ART & LANGUAGE ARTS  
GRADES: 6 – 12

### BASED ON

*Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, (On View 5/26/12 – 9/9/12, Cincinnati Art Museum)

*I became an artist at the age of thirteen. I was walking out with my father one fine, fair afternoon in Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, and there for the first time I saw an artist at work. Since that moment I, too, have been an artist.*  
—Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1913

### OBJECTIVES

- Students will create a representation of identity in terms of their self-image through a silhouette self-portrait that incorporates elements of personal identity
- Students will examine other students' self-portraits to expand understanding of identity

### CONCEPT

Just as Henry Ossawa Tanner discovered his own artistic identity at the age of 13, our students also have moments of realization or discovery about who they are. This activity allows students to consider just who they are and how that can be visually represented.

### BACKGROUND

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born on June 21, 1859, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the first of nine children. He and his siblings were brought up in a home where education was especially valued. His father, Benjamin Tucker, was a college-educated African-American Methodist Episcopal preacher. His mother, Sarah Miller Tanner, was a private school teacher. Sarah had lived in the south early in her life and had escaped slavery by traveling north via the Underground Railroad. Tanner's middle name, Ossawa, was in honor of the Kansas town where Abolitionist John Brown held his first anti-slavery campaign.

Henry Tanner's parents knew the value of reading to their young children and used the Bible to share stories. Young Tanner was filled with vivid imagery of powerful Biblical scenes and transferred these images in his adult life.

As a teenager on a walk, Tanner observed a landscape painter and decided then and there to be an artist – despite his color blindness. He spent free time looking at art in the Philadelphia galleries. Tanner's decision to be an artist was not well-received by his preacher father who, in an attempt to re-direct his son's ambition, sent young Tanner to apprentice at a local flour mill. The apprenticeship was hard on Tanner's frail body and he fell seriously ill. Fortunately, two years of recuperation gave Tanner time to paint. IN 1880, at the age of 22, Tanner became the first full-time black student to enroll in the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Dean and teacher, Thomas Eakins, greatly encouraged and influenced Tanner and other minority individuals, including women, to pursue their interest in studying art in an academic setting.

## CLASS EXPERIENCE

It was largely through Eakins' efforts that Philadelphia became the center for minority artists at this time.

Tanner spent the summer of 1888 in Highlands, North Carolina, where he executed many drawings of the Blue Ridge Mountain area, including its residents. These sketches of rural African-Americans were foundational for his later work.

In common with many artists, he rarely had a steady paycheck. Henry Tanner was fortunate to secure funding in 1891 from patrons, prompting a move to France where he remained for most of his adult life. He found Paris to be more accepting of his African heritage than in America. He appreciated having his work critiqued on pure artistic merit without prejudice. Tanner took classes at the Academie Julian in Paris where he painted some of his most important work. *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* were exhibited in Parisien salons and galleries and in time received recognition in America as well. It was his ability to portray African-Americans with pride and dignity that brought Tanner international recognition. Actor Bill Cosby and his wife purchased *The Thankful Poor* in 1981 for \$250,000.

Tanner began to steer away from genre paintings of humble rural African-Americans in the 1880s and focused on Biblical images he remembered as a child, much to his father's approval. He submitted one such painting, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, to the 1896 Paris Salon Exhibition where he was awarded an honorable mention, an honor not realized by any other American that year. Several trips to the Middle East and the Holy Land provided opportunity to observe the barren landscape, the textiles and dress of the population, and other cultural imagery. Tanner used his trademark loose brushstrokes, muted palate, and dramatic lighting to capture his religious subjects.

Henry Ossawa Tanner married Jessie Olssen, a white opera singer, and was father to son Jesse Ossawa. The couple owned a small house in the country where they welcomed young artists of all races who sought guidance and encouragement in pursuing their passion for art. Tanner was known for his generosity and hospitality to these visitors who stayed in his home.

Tanner died in his sleep at home in Paris on May 25, 1937, at the age of 78 and is buried in nearby Sceaux next to his wife who preceded him in death by 12 years. He is remembered as the most distinguished African-American artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first artist of his race to achieve international acclaim. He inspired many African-Americans to pursue their dreams of being artists.<sup>1</sup>

### BIG IDEAS & ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Identity is something all humans encounter.
- Identity can be influenced by stereotypes and assumptions.
- Artists have used artwork to question stereotypes and assumptions made about identity.
- What is my identity?
- How is my identity influenced by stereotypes?
- How would I alter these assumptions through my own perceptions or the perceptions of others?
- How do artists deal with identity in their own works?

### MATERIALS

- Overhead projector
- Paper for tracing
- Examples of self-portraits
- Choices for media: colored pencils, oil pastels, crayons, tempera paint, paper scraps, images, brushes, watercolors, markers, etc.

---

<sup>1</sup> from Debra J. Herman, M.F.A., Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois

**VOCABULARY**

- **Collage** - a paste-up made by sticking together pieces of paper or photographs to form an artistic image
- **Identity** - the individual characteristics by which a thing or person is recognized or known
- **Mixed Media** - combination involving the use of two or more artistic media, such as ink and pastel or painting and collage, that are combined in a single composition
- **Narrative** - art that tells a story or the story being told within the artwork
- **Negative Space** - space between objects or the parts of an object, for example the area between a cup and its handle. Also the space between an object and the edges of the canvas, i.e. the space around an object. The opposite of negative space is positive space.
- **Portrait** - any likeness of a person, in any medium
- **Positive Space** - area or part of a painting's composition that the subject occupies. For instance, the positive space could be a vase of flowers in a still life painting, a person's face in a portrait, the trees and hills of a landscape painting. The area around the positive space is called the negative space.
- **Representation** - a creation that is a visual or tangible rendering of someone or something
- **Self-Portrait** - a representation of an artist drawn, painted, photographed or sculpted by the artist
- **Silhouette** - dark shape and outline of someone or something visible against a lighter background, esp. in dim light.
- **Symbolism** - use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities

**PROCEDURE**

*Note: To save time, prep in advance by tracing silhouettes during a previous lesson or class period by using an overhead projector or other strong light source. Students can take turn tracing or teacher can trace them all.*

1. Discuss identity with students. Give time for students to brainstorm images, symbols and ideas that personally represent identity or self.
2. Ask "What is a self-portrait?" Show examples of traditional and nontraditional self-portraits. View and discuss.
3. Explain that answering the question "Who am I" results in establishing identity. Allow students times to collect or create images that respond to the question.
4. Distribute student silhouettes (or trace silhouettes, if not prepped prior to class.)
5. Arrange the images and symbols within the silhouette portrait using elements of art and the principles design. Review elements and principles, if necessary.
6. Add elements to the negative space (review negative and positive space) to enhance personal identity or personal story.
7. Choose media to render the final composition.
8. Write a personal reflection on the meaning of the self-portrait. Make an artist's statement reflecting on identity.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students will be assessed based on participation in class discussion, overall effort in their silhouette project, and the craftsmanship and artistic skill presented through their final product.

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS**

### **Arts Connections**

Standard 1. Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines.

### **Visual Arts**

Standard 3. Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts.

Standard 5. Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others.

### **Language Arts**

Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

## **RESOURCES**

[http://www.sullivangoss.com/henry\\_Tanner/](http://www.sullivangoss.com/henry_Tanner/)

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/582691/Henry-Ossawa-Tanner>

[http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int\\_sec=11&int\\_new=56140&int\\_mod=1](http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=56140&int_mod=1)

[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/tanner\\_henry\\_ossawa.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/tanner_henry_ossawa.html)

[http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/EOP/First\\_Lady/html/hot-bio.html](http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/EOP/First_Lady/html/hot-bio.html)

<http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/homepage-feature/item/33232-celebrating-henry-ossawa-tanners-legacy-of-art-inspiration>