OLIVIA: Imagine being born to a former slave who escaped via the Underground Railroad. You want to establish yourself in the art world, but although your mother was a free woman by the time you were born, the legacy of slavery still overshadows you. Now you want to paint African American subjects and give them a better legacy. In this episode we are going to talk about Henry Ossawa Tanner.

ALISHA: Hey everybody, it’s Alisha and Olivia with you again.

OLIVIA: Hey guys!

ALISHA: Today we are going to talk about Henry Tanner. And, oh my goodness, we just love his work.

OLIVIA: Yes.

ALISHA: We recently got to see one of his pieces at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

OLIVIA: It was really awesome.

ALISHA: I know. I want to try to pronounce it but I’m not French. The name of the painting that we saw was *Etaples Fisher Folk* and it’s a...

OLIVIA: Fisher Folk.

ALISHA: Yeah, it’s a village in France so it’s spelled E-T-A-P-L-E-S. I’ve never been there so how am I supposed to know how to pronounce it? Anyway, we love Henry Tanner and we can’t wait to talk to you about him today. He is probably one of the most recognized African American artists of all times and he painted during the Realest period.

If you remember, last week we talked about Realism in a little more detail, but I just wanted to remind you that it was a time in France when many young artists were
looking for a subject matter that didn’t glorify or romanticize the past. They rejected Neoclassicism and Romanticism.

In this time, factories were expanding, using new machines to increase production, and great numbers of people were moving from rural areas of France into the major cities where there were factories. Factory workers were usually unskilled and poorly paid and they lived in crowded and drab conditions. So these artists realized that the classical models and the romantic subject matter were out of place in their world. They felt like peasants and factory workers were better subjects for their brush than Greek gods and goddesses.

Now, a lot of the same things were happening in America at this time. There was a growth westward and there was a growth in industry and trade and population and in wealth. And even though the Civil War had slowed down the rate of progress, after the war ended, progress came back with a vigor. So Henry Tanner is growing up during a time of rebuilding in the United States.

So Olivia, why don't you give us a timeline of what is happening around the world?

OLIVIA: Okay. Well, Big Ben was completed one year after Henry Tanner was born, and that was in England in 1858. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species*. The American Civil War took place from 1861 to 1865, and in 1862 Victor Hugo published *Les Miserables*.

In 1863, Manet exhibits *Luncheon on the Grass*, which was a painting that sparked public outrage. Slavery was abolished in America in 1865 and the war between Cuba and Spain took place between 1868 and 1878.

The same year Henry went to school, in 1879, Thomas Edison was testing his first light bulb. Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker* premiered in Russia in 1892, and in 1893 New Zealand became the first country to enact women’s suffrage.

ALISHA: Awesome. Thank you, Olivia.

OLIVIA: You’re welcome!

ALISHA: Let’s just go ahead and talk about Henry Tanner. He was born Henry Ossawa Tanner in 1859 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father was a well-respected minister, and as Olivia mentioned earlier, his mother Sarah, was a former slave, but she had escaped to Pennsylvania via the Underground Railroad and was now a free woman.

Henry loved art from a young age and decided by the age of 13 that he was going to be an artist. Now, against his father’s wishes, he enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under the instruction of the famous Thomas Eakins, another Realist painter. Tanner was actually the first African American to attend that school, and as he studied under Eakins, the two of them became good friends. He ended up leaving the school early, but during his time there he learned a great deal about art and the anatomy of the human body.
Henry lived in Philadelphia for nearly a decade afterwards, but he had a difficult time gaining recognition due to the issues of racism that still abounded, even after the Civil War. So in 1891 he moved to France, and this was an attempt for him to gain acceptance with his art. And actually, it proved to be a huge success for him because his art quickly gained more and more recognition. In fact, in 1895, Tanner won an honorable mention for one of his paintings on a religious subject.

OLIVIA: Well that's cool.

ALISHA: Yeah. He was actually the only American to be honored.

OLIVIA: Really?

ALISHA: Yeah, so that's pretty sweet. He continued to paint religious subjects with great frequency, and isn’t he the one that has the quote that he would preach with his brush?

OLIVIA: Mm-hm!

ALISHA: I love that quote.

OLIVIA: Me too.

ALISHA: Tanner actually lived in Paris for the rest of his life and in 1899, he married American singer, Jessie Olssen, and the two of them had a son together. He studied at the Louvre under well-known artists such as Joseph Benjamin Constant and Jean-Paul Laurens.

We talked about him painting various religious scenes from the Bible and some of his paintings, such as Daniel and the Lion’s Den and The Resurrection of Lazarus, attracted attention of an art critic named Rodman Wanamaker. And he offered to pay for Henry to travel to the Middle East so that he could have firsthand experience in that environment while he continued to paint biblical scenes. Of course, Henry accepted the offer and was able to further his artistic training by traveling to Palestine, where he explored various mosques and biblical sites.

OLIVIA: That's cool.

ALISHA: Yeah. He worked for the Red Cross Public Information Department during World War I, and at that time he also painted images from the front lines. Sadly, he died in Paris in 1937. So Olivia, why don’t you give us some fun facts about Henry Tanner.

OLIVIA: Alright. Well, he did spend most of his career traveling abroad, including places such as London and Rome and Palestine before he finally settled down in Paris. He did, he really loved Paris, where he was able to draw a great deal of inspiration for his paintings.

ALISHA: Who would not love Paris?
OLIVIA: I know! It's so beautiful there. He loved the culture and so ultimately it did become his home. His parents gave him his middle name, Ossawa, which was after the abolitionist, John Brown. John Brown was a man who fought against slavery in the 19th century in the United States and he was actually nicknamed “Osawatomie” after the Battle of Osawatomie, Kansas in 1856.

ALISHA: That’s cool!

OLIVIA: Yeah! Henry was also a photographer. He liked to take photographs of people and images and different things that kind of just stuck out to him, and then he would end up painting them later. Like we mentioned, he is known for his realistic paintings of everyday life, such as The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor, but he’s also really famous for his Bible pieces, which is The Good Shepherd and The Raising of Lazarus, because of his time in Palestine. He loved painting biblical scenes, obviously, since his father was a preacher and so he grew up in that environment.

ALISHA: Thank you, ma'am.

OLIVIA: You’re welcome.

ALISHA: Alright, so now is the time where you can pause this episode and I want you to go to masterpiece society.com/015. There we’re going to have a link to the painting that we’re going to study, which is The Banjo Lesson, and a free fact sheet about Henry Tanner for you to download. The Banjo Lesson was painted in 1893 while Henry Tanner was visiting the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. Now, slavery had already been abolished a few decades earlier but there were a lot of physical and psychological wounds, as you can imagine.

He really loved painting African American subjects and, as we mentioned earlier, he wanted to give them a different legacy than the slavery legacy that hung over them. So think about this painting. There is an old man sitting on a chair with a little boy on his knee and he’s strumming a tune from a banjo. Music is this man’s legacy to the little boy and it’s the one thing of value he has to pass on. By teaching him to play this instrument, he’s not only instilling a valuable skill, but most likely a source of joy and delight and gratification for years to come. Music is a gift that will bring him comfort and consolation when times are difficult.

OLIVIA: Ah, that’s really sweet.

ALISHA: I know, I love this picture.

OLIVIA: Yeah.

ALISHA: This painting is actually inspired by a story called Uncle Tim’s Compromise on Christmas. This was a short story written by Ruth McEnery Stuart for a periodical in 1893 called Harper’s Young People. He would set up the scene and have somebody pose, take the picture, and then he went back and illustrated for this periodical, and I’ll
have a picture of both the photograph and his illustration in the show notes. But then he took that photograph and he painted this banjo lesson.

I wanted to read you just a little segment from the story. It says, “The only thing in the world that the old man held as a personal possession was his banjo. It was the one thing the little boy counted on as a precious future property. And often, at all hours of the day or evening, Old Tim could be seen sitting before the cabin, his arms around the boy and sometimes, holding the banjo steady, he would invite little Tim to try his tiny hands at picking the strings.” Isn’t that so sweet?

OLIVIA: That is sweet.

ALISHA: And even though he tells this story with simplicity, the viewer can see the warmth and the tenderness of this moment shared between the two. If you want to, you can go ahead and click on it and enlarge it. It doesn’t get quite as large as some of the other paintings that we give you links to, but let’s just talk about some of the techniques that he used in this painting.

OLIVIA: Well, you can definitely tell that he used the chiaroscuro here.

ALISHA: Yeah. In fact, I was going to talk about the light sources because there are two different light sources in this painting. You can see behind him on the wall, there is a natural, bluish-white light. It’s also on the viewer’s left, his right, but you can see it coming in on the floor. Probably it’s a window where the natural light is coming in and illuminating that area.

But then, if you look on the viewer’s right, which would be the man and the boy’s left side, you can see a warm yellow light on the tablecloth, on the man’s leg, on the leg of the chair, on the boy’s arm and hands. That’s a warm yellow light most likely coming from a fireplace that’s not in the picture. We know that this takes place in a kitchen because there’s a table with the tablecloth and a pitcher and plates set out. Then on the floor there’s a frying pan and some kind of vessel and a coffee pot.

What I like about this is that Tanner painted the man and the little boy precisely in the center of where the two light sources meet. We can’t enlarge it very much, as I mentioned earlier, but you do notice the graying of the man’s hair and his hands are a little more wrinkled, whereas the boy’s skin is smooth and supple looking. I love the rich details that Tanner used in this. Look at the wooden floors and how the floorboards are carved, or the wrinkles in the man’s and boy’s clothing.

OLIVIA: Well, this is a prime example for how good he was at painting the human anatomy. You can really tell just with the perspective and with the two of them there together.

ALISHA: Yeah.

OLIVIA: Just looks great.
**ALISHA:** Yeah, I love this painting.

**OLIVIA:** It’s so cute.

**ALISHA:** So that brings us to our Fine Art Fanfiction. What I would like for y’all to do is to write a couple of paragraphs or a short story about what you imagine is taking place in this scene. Both the old man and the boy have really serious looks on their faces, but this is most likely a source of joy for both of them. You know how much you love playing music.

**OLIVIA:** Yeah, that’s right.

**ALISHA:** Although, the learning process wasn’t always enjoyable for you.

**OLIVIA:** Yeah, it can be a little bit frustrating.

**ALISHA:** How do you think this man is feeling as he passes on this gift of his to the next generation? Or what do you think is going on inside the little boy’s mind? He’s concentrating really hard, but is he excited to learn, or is he like, "Okay, Uncle Tim, let’s just get this over with." I think he’s a little bit more excited just due to the look of concentration on his face.

**OLIVIA:** Yeah.

**ALISHA:** So have fun with this art piece from Henry Tanner and next week we’re going to move on to the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. So we will talk to you guys then.

**OLIVIA:** Alright. Bye everyone!

**ALISHA:** Bye bye!