THE ART OF BECOMING: MIMICRY, AMBIVALENCE, AND ORIENTALISM IN THE WORK OF HENRY OSSAWA TANNER AND HILDA RIX

By

LAURA M. WINN

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To my first teachers, my Mom and Dad, for giving me the lifelong gift and love for learning
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By
Laura M. Winn

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Chair: Melissa L. Hyde
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In 1912, the African-American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, and the aspiring female Australian artist Hilda Rix, traveled together to colonial Morocco. The artistic pilgrimage was hardly unique for European-trained artists during the early twentieth century, yet, Tanner’s race and Rix’s gender made them unconventional Orientalists and exceptional travel and work companions on this journey. The dissertation examines the artists’ desire to create a space for themselves and their art within Belle Époque culture by strategically mimicking the dominant traditions of fine art, a desire that ultimately led them to North Africa in the years leading up to the First World War.

Tanner and Rix’s maturation within European academic ateliers and fine art tradition inspired them to set their sights on North Africa, as it represented both a geographic and conceptual space in which they had the freedom and western authority to create an image of exotic otherness that satisfied a sense agency and self-affirmation. The artists uniquely conceived of and portrayed Morocco as a site of escape and artistic fulfillment, creating imagery that ambivalently reinforced, but also rejected, colonial ideology resulting in an unresolved dialectic of Orientalism and Counter-Orientalism.
Rix and Tanner’s complex and conflicted relationship with white-patriarchal art systems are examined through the postcolonial and feminist-psychoanalytic concept of mimicry drawn from the theories of Homi Bhabha and Luce Irigaray. The mimicry of prevailing forms of language, systems of knowledge, and authoritative cultural practices performed by those othered, and positioned outside these systems, acquires potentially parodic and subversive effects. The dissertation highlights the successes, but also the limitations of the artists’ mimicry, a strategy that facilitated their entry into Belle Époque art, but one that also reveals their struggle and ambivalence in attempting to work within a system that was designed to exclude them.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In late January of 1912, the African-American painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner and the aspiring female Australian artist, Hilda Rix1, embarked on an artistic pilgrimage to Morocco leaving the fishing village and artists’ colony of Étaples, in Picardie, which they had come to rely upon and regard as a surrogate home.2 Their small entourage traveled from northern France to Spain and across the Straight of Gibraltar to the Moroccan Port of Tangier in early February.3 While the Rix-Tanner party’s voyage to colonial Morocco was hardly unique for European-trained artists during the early twentieth century, when compared to archetypal Orientalist painters, most famously Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme, Tanner’s race and Rix’s gender made them unconventional Orientalists and exceptional travel and work companions on this journey.

The artists’ sense of identity and professional goals were shaped by very different backgrounds and formative experiences in America and Australia, which contributed to an understanding of their status and otherness within Belle Époque society as structured within a matrix of class, race, gender, and colonial hierarchies. Collectively in America, Australia, and

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1 The artist is known today as Hilda Rix Nicholas, a title she adopted and used throughout her professional career after her marriage to Captain George Matson Nicholas in 1916, who was killed in action in World War One. I will use the artist’s maiden name throughout the dissertation, as the period of her career I am concerned with predates her marriage to Captain Nicholas. While maintaining an artistic identity as Hilda Rix Nicholas, in her personal life and legal matters, the artist went by the name Hilda Rix Wright following her second marriage to grazier Edgar Wright in 1928.

2 In January 2016, the Picardie region of France was combined with the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region to form the new Hauts-de-France. Trépied and Étaples are now part of the Pas-de-Calais Department of the Hauts-de-France Region.

3 The Rix-Tanner party traveled from France to Madrid, Cordoba, and Algeciras. The original plan was to cross to Tangier from Algeciras but the weather was too poor, which forced them to Gibraltar for the rough crossing to the port of Tangier. Jeanette Hoorne, *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix’s Moroccan Idyll: Art and Orientalism* (Melbourne, VIC: The Mieguyan Press, 2012), 62.
Europe, the prestigious cultural institutions that Tanner and Rix sought access to and participation within, historically defined and defended the identity of Artist as exclusively white and male, situating them squarely outside the norms and traditions of the fine art system.

Throughout their long and evolutionary careers, Rix and Tanner confronted and defied the categorical otherness assigned to them by strategically emulating, appropriation, rejecting, and correcting the subject matter, pictorial strategies, and artistic practices of their white male mentors and colleagues. The artists’ desire to be recognized and accepted within the privileged sphere of Belle Époque fine art while simultaneously challenging its exclusive whiteness and maleness, created tensions within their work between the emulation of ideal subjects, models, and forms defined by traditional art—and the mimicry or mocking of these ideals through subtle alterations and corrections to these models. Tanner and Rix’s mimicry of traditional imagery work to expose these ideals as misrepresentations fabricated and replicated for the maintenance of white-patriarchal authority.

A cursory review of diverse and disparate subjects and styles that make up Henry Ossawa Tanner and Hilda Rix’s oeuvres suggests that these artists had little in common. However, their lives and work briefly intersected in the years immediately preceding the First World War. The two artists met when Rix, accompanied by her sister and mother, took up residence in the rural art colony of Étaples the summer of 1910. Tanner, an established artist in France, was viewed as a leader of this colony and the organization the Société Artistique de Picardie.4 Tanner’s mentorship of the younger Rix culminated in his chaperoning of the aspiring antipodean artist to Morocco the winter through early spring of 1912.

4 After Tanner and Rix’s expedition to Morocco, the elder artist would be named the group’s president in 1913. Jean-Claude Lesage. Peintres américains en Pas-de-Calais: la colonie d’Étaples (St. Josse-sur-Mer: A.M.M.E. editions, 2007).
The imagery they produced in North Africa demonstrates that these unconventional Orientalists and travel companions learned from and influenced one another, but more striking is that despite their personal connections in Étapes and Morocco, Rix and Tanner’s Orientalism was remarkably individual. The difference in their approaches to portraying the Moroccan landscape, people, and customs speaks to the multifarious and hybrid nature of Orientalism. Highlighting this hybridity challenges the Saidian framework of a unified hierarchal East/West binary employed to privilege the white male colonizer.

The originality of Rix and Tanner’s imagery and active participation as cultural producers in Morocco, demonstrates that Orientalism is anything but monolithic. Furthermore, to accommodate each artist’s individual set of personal and professional desires, Tanner and Rix appropriated and mimicked the traditions of Orientalism, resulting in an unresolved dialectic of Orientalism and Counter-Orientalism. Working during a period that pre-dated the emergence of postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist cultural critiques, I consider Tanner and Rix’s Orientalism as efforts to make visible the fissures in the binaries that structured white-patriarchal authority, which despite the conservative aspects of their academic training and subject matter, reveals them as radically forward thinking for their time.

To highlight the diverse strategies the artists adopted to gain access to and negotiate their status within the dominant institutions and discourses of Belle Époque fine art, this study will explore Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix’s foundational experiences, respectively in America and Australia, and their maturation within European academic ateliers and fine art traditions. These experiences ultimately inspired the artists to set their sights on North Africa, as it represented both a geographic and conceptual space in which they had the freedom and western authority to create an image of exotic otherness that fulfilled a sense agency and self-affirmation. Hilda Rix
and Henry Tanner’s engagement with Orientalism will be central to the dissertation, but their travel to Morocco is indicative of their larger artistic project to leverage the power of traditional art in order to overcome the societal-cultural limitations ascribed to them as a “Negro” and “woman” artist.

Tanner and Rix lived and worked in a world that preferred they remain silent and invisible, instead these artists dedicated their lives to a profession and sought to contribute to a culture that was structured to maintain the authority and normativity of white men. Far from resigning themselves to careers in commercial art or acquiescing to a devaluation of their talents as amateur artists, Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner refused the marginalized position assigned to them and instead chose the ambitious and difficult mission to enter into the spaces and discourses of the elite and conservative fine art of their generation.5 Echoing Melissa Hyde’s assertion that the act of cultural creation itself is an “act of self-invention and becoming,”6 it can be argued that Tanner and Rix’s art served as a form of resistance to a society and culture that was hostile to their race and gender, but their art is also a visual record that insists upon their presence within Belle Époque fine art, visualizing their complex and conflicted process in “becoming” Artists.

**Previous Scholarship and Approaches to Henry Ossawa Tanner and Hilda Rix**

During the height of their careers, both Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner were the subjects of critical appraisal receiving accolades reserved for those deemed exceptional by the conservative

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5 Sarah Engledow hypothetically proposes that if Hilda Rix, a student in John Hassall’s New School in London, had committed herself to illustration and poster design “her work would have slotted neatly into historical context. In the vital, vivid and virile sphere of pub art, as opposed to the perfumed playground afforded other female artists by journals like the Home, the fact of her womanhood would have been all the more remarkable. Instead, her art remains anomalous.” See Sarah Engledow, *Paris to Monaro: Pleasures from the Studio of Hilda Rix Nicholas* (Canberra, ACT: National Portrait Gallery, 2015), 87.

gatekeepers of culture. After the 1920s, however, their work and accomplishments were overshadowed for the majority of the twentieth century. The studies and exhibitions in which the artists appeared before the last decade of the twentieth century were traditionally surveys and compilations of African American or Australian Women artists. This tendency demonstrates the normative whiteness and maleness that structures the discipline of art history, in that to receive scholarly attention, Tanner and Rix were classified, not by the style or content of their art, but according to their race and gender, as representative accomplishments of a “Negro” and “Woman” artist. The question of how to best recognize and produce meaningful discourse

7 For example, Henry Ossawa Tanner was elected president of the Société Artistique de Picardie in 1913, made a Chevalier of Legion of Honor by French government in 1923, elected a full academican of National Academy of Design (NY) in 1927, and was the recipient of numerous awards for the exhibition of his work in Europe and the United States. Hilda Rix Nicholas was made an Associate of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1926.


concerning women and artists of color is a challenge that art historians continue to struggle with today.\textsuperscript{10}

The methodological questions that feminist and black art history face converge in the debate whether to write an alternate history that highlights the accomplishments of black and women artists, which is separate from traditional history of art, or to attempt to integrate women and artists of color into the dominant white-patriarchal narrative. While efforts to rehabilitate and recognize marginalized artists’ talent and influence through an alterative history of black or women artists are admirable in their consciousness raising efforts, these subaltern histories do little to disrupt the traditional canon of art history or challenge the ideological whiteness or maleness of the discipline itself.

This study will adopt the latter approach in an effort to offer a history of Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix that is inclusive, intersectional, and interconnected by situating them within, and illuminating how they responded to the tradition of fine art and Orientalism as a means to underscore the contributions they made to these discourses. My aim is to highlight, but also problematize, how Tanner and Rix navigated and negotiated white-patriarchal culture to overcome their otherness, acknowledging that the artists’ racial and gender identity was at times an integral motivating factor for their creative efforts, but ultimately was not the reason for their art.

The first monograph detailing the art of Hilda Rix was made available in 2000 by Australian art historian John Pigot. Since the publication of \textit{Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and}

Art, the artist has reemerged as a notable figure in the history of Australian art.\textsuperscript{11} Pigot worked with Rix Wright, the artist’s son, and drew much of his information from the family’s personal archive, which was acquired by The National Library of Australia in 2003.\textsuperscript{12}

Similarly, working from the documents the artist’s son, Jesse Tanner, preserved from his father’s estate in France, as well as information in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art’s archive, and the Tanner family’s personal records in Philadelphia, Marcia Mathews compiled the first substantial study and biography on Henry Tanner in the 1969, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist.*\textsuperscript{13} Because Jesse Tanner provided access to his father’s letters, all of which subsequently entered the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art between 1967-1978, Mathews’s text remains an important resource for Tanner scholars. A later account of the artist’s life from the African American perspective was published in 1991 by Tanner’s grandniece, Rae

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Studies that followed Pigot’s biography include the 2012, *In Search of Beauty: Hilda Rix Nicholas’ Sketchbook Art* compiled by Karen Johnson, a manuscript librarian at the National Library of Australia. Johnson’s text includes images from the artist’s early sketchbooks, which were created as a student in Melbourne, London, and Paris. Additionally, Sarah Engledow’s *Paris to Monaro: Pleasures from the Studio of Hilda Rix Nicholas* offers an overview of the artist’s life and career traced through a variety of items and images that were preserved in the artist’s studio at her family’s estate in Knockalong near Delegate in New South Wales. Engledow’s 2013 text accompanied the exhibition of these same objects and selected works of art for a show that highlighted the artist for the first time in the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. Karen Johnson, *In Search of Beauty: Hilda Rix Nicholas’ Sketchbook Art* (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2012).

\textsuperscript{12} Hilda Rix Nicholas’s son Rix Wright donated the artist’s archive and family papers in 2003. The artist’s granddaughter Bronwyn Wright is the trustee and caretaker of the Rix Nicholas estate including the maintenance and preservation of the artist’s studio in Knockalong, NSW.

\end{flushleft}
Alexander-Minter, the daughter of Henry’s “favorite” niece Sadie, who initiated the biographical project many years earlier.\textsuperscript{14}

The monographic studies authored by Pigot and Mathews provided a narrative arc of the artists’ careers that do a great service in helping to situate them within the context of the early twentieth century and mainstream artistic trends. These texts contributed to a rehabilitation of the artists’ reputations and laid the groundwork for future study of their oeuvres. However, in adopting a monographic formula, Pigot and Mathews’s accounts of the Rix and Tanner’s lives and work were intended to be informative and biographical rather than critical. This dissertation seeks to build upon and advance these earlier monographs and biography as a methodology, by incorporating a critical and analytic examination of the artists’ work and lived experiences through postmodern and intersectional approaches.\textsuperscript{15}

Scholarship on Henry Tanner continues to focus on his relationship with race and religion, circumscribing a discussion of his Orientalism as relative to these positions. An example of this approach is Adrienne Child’s essay, “Tanner and ‘Oriental’ Africa,” which attempts to place the artist’s Orientalism in dialogue with the New Negro Movement’s efforts to

\textsuperscript{14} There are differing perspectives on Tanner’s life and work from his relatives on opposing sides of the Atlantic. In her biography of the artist, Rae Alexander-Minter voiced her dissatisfaction with Marcia Mathews’s account of Henry Tanner’s family history, specifically with regard to his mother Sarah Miller’s slave origins. Alexander-Minter’s frustration is elaborated within a footnote which explains: “Marcia Mathews, whose book \textit{Henry Ossawa Tanner} was published in 1969, talked only briefly with my mother [Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander] and never on this issue. Mathews gained much of her information from Henry Tanner’s son, Jesse, who had lived his entire life in Europe…He had a skewed view of America and particularly of race relations in this country. Certainly the story as told by Mathews is more comforting than the one told by mother, which shows how slavery tore at the fabric of the black family. See Alexander-Minter, “The Tanner Family: A Grandniece’s Chronicle,” 291.

\textsuperscript{15} For instance, although outside the scope of this dissertation, while recognizing that Hilda Rix Nicholas was progressive in her challenge of the gender bias fostered in institutions of high culture—a project that was made especially clear after her return to Australia and the frustration she encountered in attempting to negotiate the conservative antipodean art world—her concept of race and apathy for the plight of indigenous Australians, which manifested itself in their erasure from her nationalistic paintings of idealized pastoral, bush life, is a concern that needs to be problematized and interrogated further.
“position North Africa among the sites deemed cultural homelands for ‘Negro’ Americans.”16 Citing the New Negro Movement’s appropriation of North Africa, which “employed images of the North African Orient in the concerted effort to elevate and define a black identity through African heritage,” Childs proposes that Tanner’s North African images should also be considered as an extension of his black genre paintings.17

I am skeptical of this conclusion, as Childs admits that Tanner’s Orientalism was securely aligned within the traditions of European exoticism and that “there seems to be no connection between this movement and Henry Tanner’s foray into Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco.”18 However, Childs’s suggestion that Tanner’s work in North Africa “operates at the intersection of two discourses attempting to come to terms with difference, sameness, history and the unwieldy importance of Africa,”19 underscores the complex negotiation of gender, racial, religious, and colonial binaries that I aim to highlight throughout the artist’s oeuvre.

Similarly, Alan Braddock’s interpretation of Tanner’s strategy in portraying race in his biblical Orientalism has helped to define my approach to these paintings. Braddock draws from Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to frame how Tanner perceived and challenged the binary racial classifications enforced by white society. Through a portrayal of what Braddock interprets as a racially mixed or hybrid figure of Christ in that artist’s work, the author adopts Bhabha’s

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16 Childs’ essay appears in Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit, the most recent comprehensive and critical examination of Tanner’s career. The catalog was created to accompany the traveling exhibition of Tanner’s work organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art between 2012 and 2013. The exhibition and catalog was organized and edited by Anna O. Marley, which features a diverse set of approaches to Henry Tanner’s oeuvre. A collaboration of American Art scholars and curators contributed to the catalog providing an inquiry that addresses many facets of Tanner’s unique life and art including a much needed technical and scientific examination on his experimental painting technique and approach to media. Adrienne Childs, “Tanner and ‘Oriental’ Africa,” in Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit, edited by Anna O. Marley, 98-108 (LA: University of California Press, 2012), 99.


theory of cultural hybridity to explain how Tanner attempted to visualize the complexities of race during the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{20} In his analysis, Braddock identifies racial hybridity in Tanner’s religious paintings, but does not attend to the issue of the artist’s western status in the Orient, which provides him the privilege to appropriate and shape the Oriental Other to fit his ideological and religious ideals.

The scholarship on Hilda Rix’s work has predominantly focused on the nationalistic pastoral imagery of Australia, which became her signature after the First World War. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the artist’s biographer, John Pigot, sought to emphasize her Orientalist work by curating an exhibition that coupled the imagery she completed in Morocco between 1912 and 1914 with that of the English-Australian painter Ethel Carrick.\textsuperscript{21}

Pigot’s project was intended to distinguish the role women played in the creation of Orientalism, as many women did travel, write, and create art in North Africa and the Middle East. Yet, reflective in how women’s contributions to the fine arts and crafts have been purged from the history of art, the work of women Orientalists has received little interest until the last decade of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{22} To frame Carrick and Rix’s Orientalism, Pigot adopted a


Saidian approach, which defined Orientalism as a system of textual and visual discourse that represents, and often misrepresents, the East as an expression of western hegemony. Accordingly, Pigot identified Rix and Carrick as complicit co-conspirators within the traditionally patriarchal project of colonization arguing: “Rix Nicholas and Carrick did not set out to challenge the well constructed patriarchal framework of orientalist discourse but chose to work within in claiming the Orient with as much vigor as the men.”

In attempting to highlight Rix and Carrick’s subjectivity, Pigot asserted that the women painters perceived the Orient from “a different point of view from that of their male colleagues, although the need to claim and construct the Orient as a European ‘other’ was as fundamental to their project as it was to that of the men.” He identified this different point of view as expressed through the subjects that were appropriate and accessible for the women to portray. While odalisques and harem scenes were off limits for these respectable bourgeois women, Pigot linked Carrick and Rix’s preference in portraying spaces of public life and commerce in North Africa with their western authority and sense of colonial possession over these sites. Rix’s practice of sketching daily life in the Tangier marketplace is interpreted as demonstrating the artist’s “desiring” and “objectifying the Arabs with her gaze,” an assessment which draws upon Linda Nochlin’s examination of the white-male colonial gaze.

Problematically, in his analysis of Carrick and Rix’s Orientalism, Pigot did not address the artists’ own gendered otherness, or differentiate how the women’s gaze and portrayal of the Orient differed from that of their male colleagues, except with respect to their choice in subject matter. The reader is left to conclude

23 Pigot, Capturing the Orient, 5.

24 Ibid.

25 Pigot draws heavily on Linda Nochlin’s critique of Orientalism in “The Imaginary Orient,” but regrettably does not make mention of or cite the feminist art historian anywhere in either of his essays on Rix and Carrick’s North African imagery.
that he viewed Rix and Carrick’s efforts as being reinscribing into the inherently patriarchal and polemical discourse of Saidian Orientalism.

Proposing to build on the 1993 exhibition of Rix’s Orientalism, John Pigot planned to edit and publish the correspondence that Hilda and her older sister Elsie Rix wrote from Morocco during the 1912 and 1914 artistic expeditions. After his death in 2002, Pigot’s colleague and art historian, Jeanette Hoorn, took over and reshaped the project in several ways. Hoorn sought to emphasize the role Elsie Rix played in making her sister’s work possible. According to Hoorn, Elsie contributed nearly 70 percent of the correspondence from the 1914 trip, providing greater detail and context for the women’s time in Tangier. In discussing Hilda Rix’s images, scholars regularly reference Elsie’s letters, yet she remains an unknown supportive character to her sister’s artistic efforts.

While Hoorn relied on Pigot’s previous study, she interprets Hilda Rix’s Moroccan imagery, not as being subsumed by the patriarchal structure of Orientalism, but rather creating a form of Counter-Orientalism that resisted the stereotypical masculine predispositions of this genre. Hoorn identifies Rix’s primary choice in subject matter—the Grand Soko of Tangier—and her desire to sketch quotidian scenes of daily life as she “believed it really was,” with graphic clarity and realism, as an aspect of her Counter-Orientalism. Hoorn proposes that the artist’s

26 This extensive correspondence is now preserved as part of the Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

27 Hoorn notes: “Historians have quoted liberally from her letters in writing about Hilda’s paintings and time in Morocco, but there is no discussion of Elsie as an individual. She is a chronicler of events whose letter are quoted to back up points, but nowhere is she embodied in their narratives about Morocco.” In order to do Elsie justice, Hoorn changed the title of Pigot’s proposed study from Letters from Tangiers, Hilda Rix Nicholas in Morocco to Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix’s Moroccan Idyll: Art and Orientalism. Hoorn laments that in the 1993 exhibition catalog Pigot “neglected” Elsie and created an artistic narrative of Hilda Rix and Ethel Carrick, which suggested they traveled to North Africa together, when in reality their expeditions were made years apart. Ethel Carrick first traveled to North Africa in 1909 when she visited Tunisia with her husband, the Australian painter Emanuel Phillips Fox. Jeanette Hoorn, “Letters from Tangiers: The Creative Partnership Between Elsie and Hilda Rix in Morocco,” in Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s-1960s, edited by Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, 38-51 (Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press), 43 and fn 8.
devotion to realism and her rejection of sensational, mythological, or erotic subjects common in male artists’ portrayal of the Orient, revealed her alternative, feminine perspective of Morocco.

Referencing Reina Lewis’ study, *Gendering Orientalism*, which examines the difficulties and contradictions female artists and authors encountered in creating Orientalism, Hoorn acknowledges the conflict that resonates within Hilda and Elsie Rix’s account of Morocco, stating: “The cultural productions reveal both an engagement with the orientalist discourse of the West and a participation in the gendered counter-discourse against orientalism that had emerged in the work of other women across the British Empire.”28 I am indebted to Hoorn and Lewis’s nuanced approach to women’s Orientalism, their scholarship has been influential in shaping my own thoughts on Tanner and Rix’s Orientalism, but I found that Hoorn’s desire to cast a positive feminist perspective of the Rix sister’s Orientalism overlooks some of the more damning evidence in how they exercised their privilege and revealed their colonial bias.

Hoorn grants both Hilda and Elsie Rix a far greater degree of cultural sympathy for the Moroccan people they interact with and describe than I believe the textual and visual documents they produced reveals. Moreover, I am not convinced of Hoorn’s conclusion that Rix committed herself to creating anti-Orientalist imagery, instead I view the inconsistencies and contradictions that are wrought throughout her work are indicative of an ambivalence in appropriating and mimicking patriarchal models, which created a dialectic tension between her Orientalist and Counter-Orientalist desires.

My study of Rix’s Orientalism will attempt to establish what I consider the messy reality, which occupies a middle ground between Hoorn and Pigot’s conclusions to offer a more nuanced, but no less critical interpretation of both Tanner and Rix’s Orientalism. This approach

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will call on Reina Lewis’s efforts to legitimize the heterogeneity and transgressive aspects of Orientalism created by outsiders, like Rix and Tanner, while also adopting the postcolonial concepts of mimicry and hybridity proposed by Homi Bhabha.  

**Orientalism and its Interlocutors**

Edward Said’s 1978 foundational study, *Orientalism*, is a critical intellectual history that revealed the ways the West invented the idea of the Orient through the discursive production of textual and visual representations intended to demonstrate cultural and political hegemony over the East. An alternative way to frame Said’s ideas is succinctly defined by feminist and postcolonial author, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, as: “the cultural representation of the West to itself by way of a detour through the Other.”

Said’s text marked the beginning of postcolonial theory, in its aim to expose the suppressed and unacknowledged forces that motivated and supported Oriental discourse as a strategy of misrepresentation for colonial, political, and economic gains. He argued that the West’s power to create the East resulted in the binary opposition of Orient and the Occident, claiming: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and…‘the Occident.’”

Five years after the publication of *Orientalism*, art historian Linda Nochlin embraced Said’s methodology to condemn the discipline’s continued and entrenched practice and rejection of postmodern critiques by analyzing nineteenth-century European Orientalist painting through the ahistorical lens of stylistic affinities and formalism. Her groundbreaking essay, “The

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31 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 1.

Imaginary Orient,” considered how the political, raced, and gendered binary structures of colonialism shaped the creation of Orientalist imagery.³³ Nochlin’s critique was instrumental in introducing the psychoanalytic and visual theory of the Gaze, and putting this theory into effect in her analysis of Orientalist paintings.

Said and Nochlin’s texts are valuable in revealing the purposeful misrepresentation and power dynamics at play in the creation of colonial discourse; however, their studies and the many subsequent inquiries they inspired, rely on the opposing binary positions of Subject/Object and Occident/Orient, which has itself been the subject of critique. Nochlin herself gestures to Said’s inconsistent position in identifying the Orient as a fabricated idea and as a geographic site. In her own essay, she accommodates for artists’ interpretation of both when she states: “But of course, there is Orientalism and Orientalism. If for painters like Gérôme the Near East existed as an actual place to be mystified with effects of realness, for other artists it existed as a project of the imagination, a fantasy space or screen onto which strong desires—erotic, sadistic, or both—could be projected with impunity.”³⁴

Since the 1978 publication Orientalism, Said’s analysis of the relationship between the East and West has received both wide reaching interdisciplinary application and critique, revealing that the concept of Orientalism itself has never been unified.³⁵ While I find that Saidian Orientalism remains a useful theory to explore the power dynamics and strategies the Occident deployed to shape perceptions of both a real and imagined hegemony over the East during

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³⁵ Scholars who have taken issue with Said’s commitment to canonical European texts and Humanistic approach include the anthropologist James Clifford and historian of imperialism, John Mackenzie, Ali Behdad, W. J. T. Mitchell, Ania Loomba, Sara Mills, and David Porter among others. Said’s polarization of the Orient and Occident has been criticized as unnecessarily polemic, as it creates a power structure in which the West has unchallenged dominance and control over a silent and subservient East.
colonialism, this paradigm must be revised to acknowledge the dynamic and hybrid relationships and encounters that occurred between a heterogeneous East and West, and Self and Other.

Among my disagreements with Saidian Orientalism is that it does not account for the role of women, people of color, or any individual deemed an outsider to normative culture as official producers of Oriental discourse worthy of study. It denies the possibility that Others, situated outside the traditions and classifications of white patriarchal discourses, including Tanner and Rix, could create authoritative imagery of exotic otherness. Moreover, Said’s adoption of the Foucauldian concept of discourse, as relating to the structure of thinking and producing meaning within larger cultural-political systems, underestimates the ways in which Orientalism may not be politically motivated, but deeply personal. While political and personal motivations of Orientalism are not mutually exclusive, I would argue that although Rix and Tanner benefited from their western status within colonialism, their art was not intended to advocate or support colonial policies, but instead to advance their own tenuous position in Belle Époque culture.

Said and Nochlin did much to reveal Orientalism’s power to reinforce prejudices and stereotypes that legitimized the West’s intervention and occupation of the Middle East and colonization of Africa, however, they did nothing to challenge the identity of the Orientalist as anything but white and male. The scholars only considered women and people of color as exotic subject matter for white male artists and authors. The feminist critiques of Orientalism that followed substantiated the existence of a female presence in imperial discourse.\(^{36}\) Tanner and Rix’s efforts in Morocco and the text and imagery that resulted disrupt the assumption of an exclusive white male gaze and authorship over the Orient.

\(^{36}\) See footnote 22.
The intersectional perspective embraced by Reina Lewis in her 1996 *Gendering Orientalism* explores the work of unconventional Orientalist authors and artists. Lewis’s approach is extremely valuable in identifying and understanding the ambivalent desires that motivated Rix and Tanner’s work in North Africa and how each artist visualized and negotiated the hierarchal binaries of gender, race, and nationality in Morocco. Her study was motivated by a recognition of the limitations a Saidian critique of the colonial, racial, and gendered categories would yield, stating that: “things were more complicated than they appeared. Rather than reduce difficult situations to simple oppositions, it is one of the pressing needs of our time to understand the contradictions inherent in the relationships between these differentiating terms and our experiences of them.”  

In addition to exploring Tanner and Rix’s work through the framework outlined by Lewis, revisions to the binary model of Saidian Orientalism proposed by postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha will be employed to theoretically ground Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner’s practice within the colonial concepts of mimicry and hybridity. Bhabha, among others, took issue with the “unidirectionality of colonial power” that Said’s framework allows, suggesting that cultural and political authority is only located with the West, and that the Orient has no capacity to resist the Occidental representations, or alternatively represent themselves. Additionally, Bhabha recognizes the ways in which the Orient/Occident and Self/Other binaries are not fixed or unified, but instead intersect and overlap in ways that creates anxiety in the colonizer. This

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38 “There is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer, which is a historical and theoretical simplification.” Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 103. Roger Benjamin adopts a similar approach invoking the terms “emulation, hybridity, and ambivlance” in his examination of the early twentieth-century Algerian born painters, Azouaou Mammeri and Mohammed Racim. Similar to Rix and Tanner’s adoption of dominant white-patriarchal artistic practices, Benjamin highlights the ways in which Mammeri and Racim negotiate their artistic identities between French and Maghrebian traditions for potentially subversive effect. Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
anxiety is created by the inconsistencies and slippages of colonial mimicry that expose the colonizer’s authority as continuously under threat by the people he oppresses. The tensions wrought throughout the colonial enterprise that Bhabha explores are analogous to the conflicted process Tanner and Rix undertake in the fashioning of their artistic identities, and their unstable place within the field of white-patriarchal culture.

Drawing from Lewis and Bhabha’s scholarship, I propose a definition of Orientalism that accommodates for Tanner and Rix’s Moroccan imagery and acknowledges what professor of comparative literature Lisa Lowe has identified as the “heterogeneous variety of discursive formations of cultural difference.” For the purposes of this study, Orientalism constitutes both a conceptual process and an ideological product, which entails the portrayal of the East—real, imagined, and virtual—intended for an Occidental audience as a form of self-affirmation. This definition recognizes that relationships of power are cultivated through visual and textual discourse and, as such, there is nothing about Orientalism that is objective or neutral. Moreover, the Orient and the Occident are never fixed identities or categories, but are mutable, polysemic, and dynamic in responding to specific historical, cultural, and geographic needs.

**Defining Mimicry, Methods, and Purpose of Study**

Like all Orientalist imagery of their generation, Rix and Tanner’s encounter with and portrayal of Morocco was enabled by colonialism, which granted them certain Occidental viewing rights and a position of power over the exotic people and landscape they portrayed.

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40 This affirmation can be personal, political, cultural, and intellectual, etc. The definition casts a broad net to include scientifically-empirically grounded studies, as well as imagined fantasies, in addition to forms of mimicry and hybridity that consider eastern individuals as potential creators of Oriental discourse. Indigenous Orientalism is a form of mimicry that is especially powerful, exemplified by the Orientalist paintings of Osman Hamdi Bey, an Ottoman painter working under the tutelage of Jean-Léon Gérôme and the work of Algerian painters, Azouaou Mammerî and Mohammed Racim discussed by Benjamin in *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 221-248.
Building on the existing scholarship of Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix, as well as feminist and psychoanalytic revisions to Saidian Orientalism, this study will investigate the artists’ aspirations to create a space for themselves and their art through an engagement with, and a negotiation of the dominant traditions of fine art. The dissertation will examine the artists’ formative cultural and educational experiences in Australia and America that defined and motivated their desire to participate in, and be legitimized by, the dominant institutions and practices of fine art, a desire, which ultimately led them to North Africa in the years leading up to the First World War.

The advent of “New Art History” in the 1980s challenged scholars to reexamine and critique the systems of power that historically facilitated and supported the creation, dissemination, and reception of art, as well as the epistemology of canonical and narrative art history itself. Poststructuralist perspectives are important and necessary in revealing previously “mystified” aspects of the history of art and visual culture, however in interrogating larger systems and institutions, already marginalized artists, like Tanner and Rix whose work was tied to their identity, continued to be neglected. This study will employ biography as a method to highlight the experiences that shaped and motivated Rix and Tanner’s life and work, offering them a new level of complexity and nuance by integrating them into a critique of Belle Époque artistic practice and Orientalism that takes into account feminist and postcolonial perspectives. The artists’ race and gender certainly contributed to a devaluation of their efforts and legacy, however, it is my aim to highlight how Rix and Tanner were not simply acted upon or unilaterally oppressed by white-patriarchal culture, but through strategic and even subversive choices were active agents and negotiators of their place and identity in Belle Époque art.

Rix and Tanner’s complex and ambivalent relationship with white-patriarchal art systems will be framed through the postcolonial and feminist-psychoanalytic concept of mimicry. The
theories of Homi Bhabha and Luce Irigaray will provide a theoretical framework and field of play for Rix and Tanner’s emulation, appropriation, and mimicry of dominant Belle Époque artistic subjects, practices, and aesthetics. Bhabha and Irigaray have both identified the mimicry or mimétisme of prevailing forms of language, replication of systems of knowledge, and authoritative cultural practices performed by those othered and positioned outside these systems, as an action that is potentially parodic and subversive.41 These scholars’ approach to mimicry is largely a response to the psychoanalytic theory and symbolic binaries formulated by Jacques Lacan. Irigaray and Bhabha’s thoughts on mimicry attend to their respective disciplines of psychoanalysis and postcolonial-literary studies, however, their ideas overlap and intersect in ways that I believe are valuable in offering a new lens through which to interpret and highlight Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix’s artistic engagement with dominant cultural discourses of their age.

Homi Bhabha articulated his theory of colonial mimicry in the 1984 “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” His interpretation stems from a critique of European colonialism, which made attempts to impose western culture and beliefs on colonized peoples as a form of dominance and display of cultural superiority. Important to Bhabha’s concept of mimicry is identifying the ambivalence and contradictions in how the colonizer enforced the indigenous population’s adoption of western culture, and in turn, how colonized peoples made attempts to replicate and mimic the colonizer’s language, art, dress, and other cultural practices and attributes. Bhabha argues that on the colonizer’s part: “Mimicry is the

desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence.”

Traditionally, the concept of mimicry has been used in postcolonial scholarship to describe the opportunistic acts of colonized peoples, who imitate the behavior, language, and cultural practices of their colonizers in an effort to access the symbolic promise of power these actions and knowledge represent. In most contexts, mimicry is interpreted as a negative practice because it requires the colonized individual to suppress their indigenous culture and identity in order to replicate that of their oppressors. Bhabha, however, emphasizes that the inherent ambivalence within the process of colonial mimicry guarantees that the colonized subject will never be able to perfectly imitate, or achieve a mimesis, of the dominant culture. Rather, the colonized individual imperfectly or mockingly reproduces western culture in a way that creates “a text rich in the traditions of trompe l’oeil, irony, mimicry, and repetition.”

In order to be effective, mimicry must continuously produce its slippage, its excess, its difference…It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double…the excess of slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’…The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.

It is within these slippages—the almost the same, but not quite—where mimicry can manifest itself as subversive by highlighting the inconsistency and flaws within the oppressor’s claims to a unified and authoritative system of culture and knowledge. In turn, the colonized

42 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 122.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid, 123.
subject’s ostensive obedience to colonial authority, demonstrated through the superficial replication of the dominant culture, serves as a protective camouflage masking the indigenous population’s resistance to the oppressor’s cultural hegemony by subtly mocking and deriding it. Bhabha argues that: “under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness,’ that which it disavows.”

Although mimicry may work to “deauthorize” the colonizer’s forms of knowledge, in “Of Mimicry of Man,” Bhabha ultimately frames this subversion as unintentional on the part of the colonized Other due to the confusion, contradictions, and ambivalence, all consequences of their desire to mimic or “be like” the colonizer in order to access the symbolic power ascribed to their oppressor. He believes that while that mimicry creates a form of camouflage and destroys the colonizer’s “narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire,” indigenous populations rarely capitalize on these slippages because they do not recognize that they are actually undermining the systems of power that oppress them.

Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix mimicked aspects of traditional fine art so that they might be legitimized by, and gain access to the power and privilege of dominant cultural systems. The artists’ race and gender positioned them as outsiders to white-patriarchal culture, thereby conceptually assuming the role of the colonized Other to white-patriarchal cultural norms within Bhabha’s framework. The artists’ pursuit of academic training in America and Australia, along with their ambition to travel to Europe and enter into the esteemed ateliers of Belle Époque

46 Ibid.
France, effectively acculturated them to a system of artistic practice dominated by white men. This acculturation was enforced by the repetitive and emulative practices that structured fine art academic education in Europe since its establishment in sixteenth-century Italy. At home and in France, Rix and Tanner were encouraged to copy masterworks of the past, as well as imitate the subjects, practices, and aesthetics demonstrated by their white male teachers and mentors shaping the artists into what Bhabha would refer to as “reformed, recognizable Others.”47 Moreover, Tanner and Rix’s entrance into the European hegemonic cultural system, which was predicated on the practices of emulation and mimicry, required that the African American and female Australian artist mirror the whiteness and maleness of these Old World institutions. This process echoes Bhabha’s assertion that: “Mimicry is, thus the sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.”48

To understand Tanner and Rix’s Orientalism as a form of mimicry, it is also necessary to understand their desire to emulate white male artists as a struggle with ambivalence or “double-consciousness.” W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term to describe the psychological and cultural self-splitting that plagued those—in his case African Americans—who sought access to, but stood outside the privilege and prestige of authoritative forms of culture.49 For Bhabha, double-consciousness manifests itself as the ambivalent vacillation between desire and repulsion, acceptance and rejection, which colonized peoples struggled with and which served as the motivating factor for the mimicry of their oppressors’ cultural ideals. My examination of Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner will demonstrate how they were torn between the conflicting projects of

48 Ibid.
undermining the societal structures and cultural institutions that limited their professional success, while at the same time, striving to be accepted by these elite art establishments, not as a black or woman artist, but on the merit of their talents alone.

While Rix and Tanner were squarely situated as outsiders to all forms of Belle Époque white-patriarchal culture and knowledge, it must also be recognized that as highly educated westerners they enjoyed far more agency and influence than the colonized Others Bhabha describes. As the following chapters will outline, in spite of the otherness attributed respectively to their race and gender, Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix were fortunate and even privileged in ways which helped to facilitate their acquisition of a fine arts education and travel abroad. Nevertheless, Rix and Tanner occupied a complex and uncertain in-betweenness within the matrix of Belle Époque social and cultural binaries and struggled with the uncertainty and ambivalence of their insider/outsider statuses.

Despite their complex and tenuous statuses, unlike the colonial subjects who mimicked their oppressors and often, but not always, remained unconscious of this subversive effect, I argue that Tanner and Rix’s deployment of mimicry was one that would ultimately become intentionally to challenge their own marginalized status, but also resistance of the racist and sexist facets of white-patriarchal art. The artists’ ambivalence in imitating and rejecting the models of dominant art facilitated their access to white-patriarchal artistic discourse and enabled them to critique this discourse from within the system itself.

While Bhabha’s work deals specifically with race and colonization, which are applicable to both Tanner and Rix’s Orientalism, as a woman seeking recognition in a man’s profession, Luce Irigaray’s interpretation of mimicry and its potentially subversive power is useful in
examining how Hilda Rix struggled to negotiate a place for herself within the dominant patriarchal norms of Belle Époque fine art.

In her critique of the phallocentricism of traditional psychoanalysis and epistemological structures of philosophy, Irigaray describes the oppressed position women occupy within Freud and Lacan’s frameworks. Within these systems meaning and identity are ascribed singularly through male subjectivity, as they possess the phallus. Irigaray elucidates that within the existing psychoanalytic structure, because women lack the phallus, they can only constitute meaning and a sense of identity through their lack and a desire for wholeness (penis-envy). Within patriarchy, men require the woman, as his Other, to act as a mirror that reflects his Self-Same. Therefore, women perform a “femininity” that is defined by men. Irigaray warns that the repetitive performance of this male-defined femininity, or femininity “as the otherness of sameness,” is “almost fatal” to the recovery of woman’s subjectivity.50

Within this framework, women have historically been assigned the role of mimicry or mimétisme, as patriarchy “requires her to replicate a ‘femininity’ that is not of her making.”51 Hilary Robinson, scholar of feminist theory and art, and author of Reading Art, Reading Irigaray outlines the bleak position women have been assigned within traditional psychoanalytic structure. “At present the major options are either to mimic a ‘femininity’ not of our making, or to mimic men and the phallic Symbolic—which are, of course, (two sides of) the same (coin).”52

50 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, 152.


52 Robinson elaborates on this further when stating: “Irigaray is suggesting that women have two strategies of response to their subordination. One, maintaining ‘sexual indifference,’ evokes an ‘equal rights feminism,’ It is an approach that would be akin to desiring a bigger slice of a poisonous pie [alla Lucy Lippard] or to deny that gender is of any cultural importance. The other option is the strategy Irigaray has learned from the hysteric.” Robinson, Reading Art, Reading Irigaray, 41.
According to the role of mimic assigned to women, Rix is expected to mirror and replicate the image of a “woman” artist defined by men. This required women to moderate their ambition as amateur image makers or commit themselves to lower genres and subjects, such as flower painting and still life, that did not threaten serious “male” themes, establishing women’s art as different and subsequently marginalized in relation to Art defined and created by men. Alternatively, as in Bhabha’s model, by entering into a male dominated profession, similar to the colonized individual, Rix was forced to mirror the Self-Same of male artists, reproducing ideology and subject matter that subjugated women (stereotyped female subjects or nudes), which reinforced male authority. The imitative and emulative pedagogy of patriarchal art enforced by academic education is a kin to the unconscious mimicry of colonized peoples, as “mimic men,” which suppressed them through their replication and reinforcement of the colonizer’s culture and ideology.

In her critique of traditional psychoanalysis, Irigaray refutes the logic that woman is fixed in a position of lack on the basis that she does not have what is like a man (the phallus) and instead identifies mimesis as a strategy that has the potential to disrupt the unity of patriarchal reflection to itself.53 This means that women perform the mimetic role assigned to them, but doing so in a manner that is deliberate and self-conscious. She argues that women can acquire a sense of subjectivity by performing femininity in a way that converts “a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.”54 Irigaray identifies two potential paths through which women can break the closed and repetitive cycle of mirroring the male/phallus Self-Same: mimicry and hysteria.

53 Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, 52.
54 Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, 76.
As part of her interrogation of the patriarchal structuring of philosophy and psychology, Irigaray draws her definition of mimesis from that of classical antiquity to expose the epistemological origins of women’s role as Other to the male subject. Irigaray reexamines Plato’s philosophy on mimesis referencing Book X of the *Republic*. The adoption of a classical text is noteworthy as it provides an ancient historical example for the foundational thinking of mimesis as subversive or potentially dangerous to the ideals of white-patriarchal (Athenian) culture and knowledge. Plato was hostile to the visual arts because he recognized that achieving a perfect copy, or mimesis, of nature was impossible. While both Plato and Irigaray recognized that art or representation is not the “real” thing, Plato perceived mimesis as potentially dangerous because through the process of imitation, the creator can alter the model in ways that changes its original meaning and therefore its truthfulness. He fears the slippage between the real or authentic and its representation, because citizens may mistake or begin to associate the simulacrum for the thing itself. In turn, through mimesis, Irigaray sees an opportunity for women to mimic the role men have assigned to them, but perform it in a way that mocks male-defined femininity, disrupting the ideal/model/form’s perception of unity and infallibility, which ultimately enables the Other/Woman to dismantle patriarchal power. By participating in traditional artistic discourses and choosing to portray rural and exotic subject matter understood to be the purview of male artists, Hilda Rix enters into a process of strategically mimicking patriarchal forms in which she made subtle alterations to well established male models. Rix’s mimicry of these male ideals disrupted claims of truthfulness or naturalness ascribed to male

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56 I thank Brigitte Weltman-Aron for her insight on Irigaray’s use and interpretation of Plato here.
artists’ portrayals of these subjects, especially as related to men’s representation of ideal femininity and misogynist tropes.

The second, more radical, strategy Irigaray proposes as a means for women to acquire a sense of subjectivity is through hysteria. Hysteria is “a direct feminine challenge…demanding to speak as a (masculine) ‘subject.”’\textsuperscript{57} Irigaray argues that for a woman to speak outside, “miming/reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language, it caricatures and deforms that language.”\textsuperscript{58} Through hysterical mimicry, women can break free from their role as a mirror to man’s Self-Same image. Hysteria is described as a woman’s expression of desire and subjectivity, which has no means for expression or language in patriarchy. The hysteric speaks from an outside forbidden position defined by men, which causes chaos and disruption, as these enunciations have no point of reference to the male subject or phallus, allowing a woman to claim a “hysterical” ownership over her own subjectivity.\textsuperscript{59}

It is through hysteria that Irigaray argues women can become speaking subjects. Speaking-(as)-woman or parler-femme is an experimental process through which women discover their voice (and sexuality) through writing, or in Rix’s case through image making. Speaking “hysterically” as a woman opens the door to “disrupt or alter the syntax of discursive logic, based on the requirements of univocity and masculine sameness, in order to express the plurality and mutality of feminine difference.”\textsuperscript{60} I propose that in Morocco, outside the jurisdiction of western-patriarchal constraints on her gender, for the first time Rix engaged with

\textsuperscript{57} Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which is Not One}, 76.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 137.

\textsuperscript{59} The desire to regain and retain subjectivity through controlling how she performs ‘femininity’ is often associated with extremes. For example, eating disorders in women have been associated with the performance of hysteria. Anorexia as an attempt to maintain control over one’s body and take an ideal to the extreme. Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which is Not One}, 136 and Robinson, \textit{Reading Art, Reading Irigaray}, 40.

\textsuperscript{60} Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which is Not One}, 222.
the experimental process of hysteria to assert her presence within Belle Époque art and subjectivity as an independent artist.

The overarching goal of this project is to provide an account of the artists’ upbringing and cultural experiences that motivated them to seek out and portray the Oriental Other for western audiences. The dissertation will examine the diverse work the artists created leading up to and during their expeditions to North Africa before the First World War. I will argue that the tension and inconsistencies exhibited in Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner’s mimicry of Belle Époque fine art may be understood as evidence of their process of “becoming” and their negotiation of an artistic identity within the context of an era that witnessed great social and cultural conflict and transformation. The artists’ engagement with dominant culture was complex, ambivalent, and contradictory, a tendency that is revealing of the diverse strategies and challenges they faced in attempting to carve out a place for themselves and their art within a cultural space and discourse that was traditionally reserved for white men.

**Overview of Chapters**

Chapter 2 provides a context for Henry Tanner’s upbringing in Postbellum Philadelphia, tracing his struggle with racism and double-consciousness in America and France, in addition to his early artistic success and increased visibility through the Paris Salon. This chapter will explore the evolution of Tanner’s subject matter from an interest in rural genre to biblical narratives, and later biblical Orientalism, which I suggest is a self-conscious strategy on the artist’s part to modify his emulation and mimicry of white culture in order to appeal to a broader audience while still challenging the occlusion and misrepresentation of people of color in traditional fine art. As Tanner gained acceptance and recognition in France he was forced to devise new strategies to overcome his continued marginalization and classification as a “Negro” artist in America.
The next chapter will continue to explore Tanner’s use of mimicry, but shift to focus on his portrayal of women. The artist’s relationship with race has been the primary lens through which scholars have used to interpret his diverse and multifarious work, however, in Chapter 3, I argue that Tanner’s art not only responded to issues of race, but also reveals his sensitivity to the subjugation of women in patriarchy by portraying and uplifting women in his biblical imagery.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Tanner’s artistic mission transformed as a response to his marriage, the birth of his son, and new sense of belonging within the artists’ colony in Étaples. While he remained committed to religious subjects, the artist drew from the exceptional achievements and talents of the women in his life, to inspire biblical narratives that highlighted women’s intellectual and industrious contributions to religious-spiritual life.

I propose that in developing a personal and sophisticated visual idiom, which bridged academic-realism and avant-garde Symbolism, Tanner’s biblical figures became increasingly ambiguous and abstracted as a means to disrupt their fixed racial and gender identity; an effort that reveals Tanner’s understanding of how the oppression of both women and people of color is imbricated by the structures of white-patriarchy.

Chapter 4 shifts geographically to examine Hilda Rix’s upbringing and education in Edwardian Australia. The chapter will provide the historical and social context and state of the fine arts in Melbourne, which shaped the young artist’s aspirations and idealization of European art. Due to the male dominated nature of fine art in Australia, and limited opportunities for female artists, Rix rejected the identity of a “woman” artist that would marginalize and suppress her ambitions and talent to instead adopt the position of male artist, mimicking his education, travels, and subject matter.
Rix’s efforts as a student and young artist will be examined using an Irigarayan analysis to identify how the aspiring artist mimicked her teachers and mentors, while also making alterations to their subjects to undermine misogynist stereotypes of women that were reinforced by patriarchal art. Like Tanner, Rix struggled with the ambivalence of aspiring to “be like” the male artists she emulated, while also resisting reabsorption into patriarchy. Rix’s self perception as an artist and her stylistic evolution from Melbourne, to London, Paris, and the colony at Étaples will be considered as a process and experimentation in calibrating her mimicry of patriarchal art. As a student in Paris and the art colony of Étaples in rural France, Rix would make contact with artists, including Henry Tanner, E. Phillips Fox, and Ethel Carrick that would indelibly shape her career. The work of these artists inspired her travel to Morocco, which would earn her international recognition and entrance into Belle Époque fine art.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the artists’ travel and work in the Orient beginning with Tanner’s 1897 voyage to Palestine and Egypt and ending with Tanner and Rix’s collaborative journey to Morocco in 1912. I reason that the contradictions evident in Rix and Tanner’s Moroccan inspired imagery, is the result of how they situated themselves in relation to existing Orient discourse. The artists’ conflict in adopting and rejecting aspects of the traditions of Orientalism created a dialectic tension of Orientalism and Counter-Orientalism. This dialectic and the paradoxes it produced are revealing of the artists’ struggle to create a space for themselves within Belle Époque where there was none before. Ultimately, both artists interpret and employ the traditions of Orientalism in unique ways to fulfill their individual personal and professional desires.

Chapter 5 examines Tanner’s decision to engage with Orientalism and how his approach to this genre evolved between 1897 and 1912 to accommodate his evolving strategies in
representing race and gender. The artist shifted his focus from the portrayal and inclusion of women and racial difference, to create biblical imagery that stressed the oneness of humanity through the abstraction and ambiguity of biblical figures to communicate the unifying power of spirituality. Tanner viewed his travel to Morocco as an escape that offered him the freedom to leave the academic-realism he became known for behind, in addition to cultivating a personal visual idiom that defied western categorizations of himself and his work. In North Africa, Tanner freely experimented with modernist aesthetics and abstraction to achieve a hybridity in his subjects and style. Despite Tanner’s humanistic goals of equality and unity, his Orientalism is complicated by his adoption of a discourse that was used to establish and ascribe otherness and subservience to the East.

Chapter 6 focuses on Hilda Rix’s 1912 journey with Tanner, in addition to the Orientalist imagery she created during her return to Morocco in 1914 accompanied by her older sister Elsie. Seeking acceptance into the privileged discourse of fine art, Rix adopted Orientalism as a vehicle to create imagery using and manipulating a language that was valued by patriarchal art. The artist centers her practice in Morocco on the public spaces and quotidian interactions of the major marketplace, the Grand Soko. In Morocco, Rix continued her mimicry of patriarchal practices and stereotypes in a manner that problematically both reinforced and resisted the colonial ideology of Orientalism. At times the artist self-consciously inverted misogynist Oriental tropes of the harem and odalisque, and in others appears to complicity exploit the Oriental Other for her aesthetic gain. Finding it difficult to procure local models, the artist devised a strategy that involved the collaborative performance of Oriental masquerade with her sister. Capturing these performances in sketches and later finished paintings, Rix pushed her practice beyond the
restrictive confines of mimicry to speak “hysterically” as a woman, asserting her desire and subjectivity as an artist.

The dissertation will conclude with a brief discussion of the obstacles and tragedy the artists faced and worked to overcome during the First World War, in addition to considering why their work was nearly absent from critical discussion or scholarship after the Great Depression. My examination of the lives and work of these very different artists aims to offer a new perspective that illustrates how their struggles with and strategies to overcome racial and gendered oppression overlapped and were imbricated, ultimately leading them to Morocco as a site of escape and artistic fulfillment. It is my hope that this study will supplement the existing scholarship on Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix to highlight their remarkable talent, adaptability, resilience, and life-long commitment to their craft.
CHAPTER 2
FIGHT OR FLIGHT? TANNER’S NEGOTIATION OF THE “NEGRO QUESTION”

In Paris, no one regards me curiously. I am simply M. Tanner, an American artist. Nobody knows or cares what was the complexion of my forebears. I live and work there on terms of absolute social equality. Questions of race or color are not considered—a man’s professional skill and social qualities are fairly and ungrudgingly recognized…In the European art world there is a perfect race democracy.

—Henry Ossawa Tanner

“Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake,” *Alexander’s Magazine* (Dec. 15, 1908)

Throughout his long and successful career Henry Ossawa Tanner endeavored to be judged solely on his artistic merit and talent. While Tanner’s account of the “perfect race democracy” described above is a highly idealized portrayal of the social and cultural conditions of Belle Époque France, when compared to the strict racial segregation and discrimination he experienced within American cultural institutions, it is easy to understand why the artist chose to remain and work in an environment of “absolute social equality.” It is evident from his ability to enter the most prestigious ateliers and earn recognition from artistic organizations and exhibitions in Europe that he enjoyed far more social freedom and the potential for professional growth and achievements as an expatriate.

A deeper examination of his life and work exposes the real struggles Tanner endured in gaining access to and navigating white Euro-American culture. The artist’s description of the raceless, cosmopolitan conditions in Paris—notably intended for an American readership—was just one among many methods he employed in challenging the racial classification that inhibited and continued to haunt his artistic efforts and identity in America. Whether or not Tanner actually believed that he lived and worked in an environment of racial democracy in France is unclear. The artist’s writings rarely, and very carefully, addressed issues of race.¹ What this quote does

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demonstrate is that by 1908, as an established artist working across the Atlantic, Tanner acquired the separation he needed from the binary racial categorizations that marginalized his artistic efforts in America, to feel empowered enough to begin shaping his own narrative as an individual whose art and identity transcended racial otherness.

Following his death in 1937, Tanner fell into relative obscurity on both sides of the Atlantic. While this was partially the result of the artist’s idiosyncratic and increasingly experimental style, making his oeuvre challenging to assign to any of the dominant Belle Époque movements, it is hard to argue that race was not a contributing factor in Tanner’s omission from mainstream art historical discourse for much of the twentieth century. When compared to the celebrated legacies of white expatriate artists, including James Abbott McNeil Whistler and John Singer Sargent, Tanner appears to be a victim of art historical “cultural amnesia.”² Dewey Mosby, who assisted in curating Henry Ossawa Tanner’s 1991 retrospective exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art and served as the editor of the accompanying catalog, attributed this “cultural amnesia” to the uncertainty and racial unrest that paralyzed Postbellum America, and only began to abate with the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of Black Cultural Studies programs.³

Today, Tanner is regarded as a foundational figure for African American arts, sharing this prestigious position with Robert Duncanson, Edward Bannister, Robert Douglas Jr., and Edmonia Lewis, all of whom are now canonical nineteenth-century black American artists.⁴ Concerning Tanner, this appellation is problematized when one recognizes that nearly all his

professional career was spent, and his successes were achieved, not in the country of his birth, but in France. Dewey Mosby described the artist’s liminal transatlantic predicament: “In the United States he tended to be seen as an expatriate absorbed into French culture, and in France he was always ‘citoyen américain.’ As a result, Tanner and other artists working abroad have tended to fall between the cracks.”

It is striking that even after finding success and residing in France for the majority of his adult life, Tanner still sought to be regarded as an American artist. In 1913, William E. Barton provided an introduction to an autobiography composed by the artist. Barton first met Tanner and his wife Jessie on an omnibus in Paris several years before. The author recalled their discussion, stating that Tanner told him: “a little of his struggles and of his determination to win recognition and return to his own land…In Paris his color never counted against him in the least, and he and his wife, who was with him on top of that omnibus that night, moved freely in which society as they chose. It was not quite so in America, but he intended to win fame and return to his own land.”

Although he was awarded many honors by American institutions, including induction as a full academician at the National Academy of Design in 1927, Tanner never triumphantly returned to create art in the United States. Far from this being a failure, his continued expatriatism and estrangement with his country of birth demonstrates the artist’s ability to respond to and evolve accordingly to the challenges he faced in securing and maintaining his tenuous place within the world of white culture. In her account of the Tanner family history, the

5 Dewey Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 15.

artist’s grandniece, Rae Alexander-Minter, provides and explanation for her granduncle’s
decision to remain in Europe:

Henry Ossawa Tanner was a complex man who was unwilling to compromise his
integrity or his humanism. In the same way that his family fought for civil rights
in America, Henry waged a determined struggle against the social and historical
factors that sought to limit his artistic expression. His residency in Europe was not
a retreat from political issues facing his people; he needed this distance to paint
freely the stories he had heard at his father’s knee and in his father’s churches.7

In her defense of the artist, Alexander-Minter incisively underscores the cornerstones that
motivated and supported Tanner’s life-long artistic project: his family and faith.

**Race Relations and Artistic Foundations in Postbellum America**

On June 21, 1859 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the first of Sarah and Benjamin Tanner’s
seven children was born. The Tanners named their first son Henry, giving him the middle name
Ossawawa, a reference to Osawatomie, the abolitionist settlement in Kansas and site of the anti-
slavery advocate John Brown’s 1856 militant uprising. In bestowing their first son the
appellation Ossawawa, Benjamin and Sarah Tanner envisioned a future for Henry that included
social activism to overcome prejudice and oppression of all varieties. Henry Tanner’s
perseverance through often-insurmountable challenges was fueled by his deep religious
devotion. The artist’s investment in spiritual ideals was imparted through his family and the
teachings of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), an organization that W.E.B. Du
Bois credited as “the greatest social institution of American Negroes.”8 Henry’s father, Reverend
Benjamin Tanner, was an influential leader in the Church, serving as the editor of *The Christian
Recorder*, a weekly journal of the AME. He later established the periodical, *African Methodist

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Episcopal Church Review, serving as its editor until 1888 when he received the honor of being elected the eighteenth Bishop of the AME Church.9

In 1868 the Tanner family moved from Baltimore to Philadelphia. As a child, Henry’s home in Philadelphia was a synergetic space of intellect, activism, and spirituality. The young Tanner’s sense of social equality and moral obligation was not only guided by AME Church teachings, but also in Benjamin and Sara Tanner’s insistence on self-reliance and the belief that education and the active acquisition of knowledge were keys to empowerment. His family was close with Booker T. Washington, the activist who established the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The institute served as a vocational school that trained southern blacks with the necessary skills to acquire careers in teaching, nursing, agriculture, and artisanal trades. In accordance with Sarah and Benjamin Tanner’s beliefs, Washington held that education was a tool for self-empowerment.

Washington’s teachings relied heavily on the spiritual support of the AME Church and its leaders, including Reverend Tanner. The director of the Tuskegee Institute often cited the Tanner family’s achievements as evidence of African American triumphs, which were accomplished though the skills and knowledge obtained by pursuing a higher education.10

In Up from Slavery Washington made a point to recognize Henry Tanner:

My acquaintance with Mr. Tanner reinforced in my mind the truth which I am constantly trying to impress upon our students at Tuskegee–and on our people throughout the country, as far as I can reach them with my voice–that any man, regardless of color, will be recognized and rewarded just in proportion as he learns to do something well–learns to do it better than some one else–however humble the thing may be.11

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10 Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 432.

The Tanner family also shared values with the more progressive leaders of the New Negro Movement, including W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter. This urban centered movement philosophically opposed the Atlanta Compromise of 1895 and Booker T. Washington’s advocacy for African Americans’ education to focus on industrial and vocational training as “accommodationism” that resigned southern blacks to lower wage, working class positions, which were unnecessarily narrow and reinforced racial segregation and oppression. Du Bois argued that the only way black Americans could achieve real social equality was by gaining unfettered access, not only to a vocational-industrial education, but more importantly, to traditionally white liberal arts academic programs.

In “The Talented Tenth,” first published in 1899 as part of Washington’s compilation of essays, *The Negro Problem*, Du Bois voiced his opposition to Washington’s limitations on the education of blacks. As the first African American to graduate with a doctorate from Harvard University and study at the University of Berlin, Du Bois understood firsthand the power a liberal arts education—what he defined as a “classical” education—had in allowing blacks to participate in white cultural discourse and gain civil rights for African Americans. Du Bois

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14 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Training of Black Men” in *The Lives of Black Folks*, 55-67. Also see Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 429-432. Note that Tanner’s upbringing and beliefs challenge contemporary African American intellectual and cultural movements, such as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which insisted that the divide between white and black Americans were too much to overcome. UNIA stressed the autonomy of black culture over integration and sought for the return of black Americans to Africa.

asserted that blacks, armed with the knowledge of a classical education, could rise up and become an example for their race, but that it was only realistic for an “aristocracy of talent and character,” or a tenth of the black population, to achieve the success and visibility needed to guide the masses.\textsuperscript{16} Du Bois articulated this theory as follows:

> The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races...Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress...\textsuperscript{17}

Du Bois’s own pursuit of a prestigious liberal arts degree was analogous with Henry Tanner’s desire to be admitted and trained within respected fine art institutions, such as PAFA and the Académie Julian. The Tanner family was the ideal image of the educated African American elite that Du Bois invoked when he spoke of the “talented tenth.”\textsuperscript{18}

It was rare for black Americans to receive a college degree during the nineteenth century, yet both Benjamin and Sarah studied at Avery College in Pennsylvania. Benjamin pursued his education further at the Western Theological Seminary, providing him with the qualifications to be ordained as minister and eventually a Bishop.\textsuperscript{19} Henry adhered to his parents’ guidance, excelling in his studies to serve as valedictorian for Robert Vaux Consolidated School’s class of

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{17} As an African American man, Du Bois is chiefly concerned with the plight and civil rights of black men. Although progressive and groundbreaking for the time, his perspective is no less patriarchal than that of dominant white culture and society. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” 8.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 8-22.

\textsuperscript{19} Rae Alexander-Minter cites census data from the mid nineteenth century as evidence that only “half of the one-tenth of black Americans who were free managed to attain literacy,” truly making Sarah and Benjamin Tanner remarkable in their level of education. Rae Alexander Minter, “An African American Artist Finds His Voice in Paris During the 19th Century,” Présence Africaine, Nouvelle série, no. 171 (1er semestre 2005), 120-121. Judith Wilson, “Lifting ’The Veil,’” 33, and Marley, “Introduction” in Modern Spirit, 18.
1877. His address at graduation stressed the necessity of education as a vehicle to overcome ignorance and vice emphasizing that a compulsory education could transform “many diamonds in the rough…[to] become lustrous stars in the crown of America’s glory.”

Reverend Tanner wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and pursue the ministry. The elder Tanner had serious doubts concerning Henry’s choice to pursue a career in the visual arts, as there were few African American artists during this period, and none working in Philadelphia to mentor Henry. Despite these concerns, Benjamin Tanner was impressed by his son’s steadfast determination to make a life for himself as a professional artist and ultimately supported him in this endeavor.

Despite the notable accomplishments and high esteem the Tanner family enjoyed within the black community, Henry Tanner, of course, was well acquainted with the stigma and prejudice that accompanied his race in Postbellum America. In response to the injustices he witnessed and experienced first hand, he recognized that finding professional success within the American institutions that systematically suppressed the cultural achievements of people of color was nearly unattainable, a fact that ultimately led him to pursue his career abroad.

The justification for excluding non-whites from cultural discourse was that “the consensus among most white Americans during that period was that black Americans were inferior and had no capacity for creating and enjoying art.” As Marcus Bruce has noted: “many whites marveled at the fact that he was a black man who painted rather than a painter who


happened to be black. Their attitude reflected a widespread assumption often expressed in criticism of Tanner’s work: that there was a contradiction between being black and painting.”24 This view afforded white-patriarchal society to reserve judgment, access to, and the creation of fine art for itself, and meant that Tanner’s success as an artist relied on the acceptance and financial support of white teachers, collectors, and patrons. This is made clear by Tanner’s early struggles to find a teacher that would accept a black student, which he recounted in an autobiographical essay published in 1913, in the journal The Advance.

In this narrative, Tanner claims that: “I became an artist at the age of thirteen. I was walking out with my father one fine, fair afternoon in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, and there for the first time I saw an artist at work. Since that moment I, too, have been an artist.”25 After boldly deciding upon his future, Tanner described the immediate difficulties he encountered: “I made the round of the studios. Alas! it was a disheartening process. The artists had other pupils, or they had no time for pupils, and the men whom I first visited had little time to bestow on a boy who knew nothing and had little money. Finally, Mr. I. L. Williams agreed to take me for $2 a lesson.”26

It is noteworthy that an earlier version of his autobiography published in the World’s Work in 1909, elaborated further on the hardship Tanner faced in securing an instructor:

During one of my school vacations, I had worked and saved up fifty dollars. This was to be devoted to study. But with whom should I study? No man or boy to whom this country is a land of “equal chances” can realize what heartaches this question caused me, and with what trepidation and nervousness I made the round of the studios…The question was not, would the desired teacher have a boy who

26 Ibid.
knew nothing and had little money, but would he have me, or would he keep me after he found out who I was?27

The earlier memoir is significant, as the 1913 version omits the overt reference to race and satirical allusion to “equal chances” that addressed the heartaches and nervousness that plagued the aspiring student based on the knowledge that a potential teacher would likely rescind their acceptance to instruct him “after he found out who I was.” I would like to consider the subsequent edited retelling of his artistic origins as a more deliberate and self-conscious effort on Tanner’s part to correct the emphasis American journalists and critics placed on his race, a prejudice that plagued him throughout the duration of his career.

“The Battle of My Life” – Double-Consciousness and Racial Oppression

Tanner eventually did find a teacher and made early attempts in the genres of marine and animal painting before enrolling in Philadelphia’s most prestigious art program. On December 4, 1879 he was accepted, and registered in classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA).28 At PAFA, and later in the Académie Julian, Tanner participated in the repetitive and emulative practices that structured the pedagogy of fine art academies. By choosing to pursue the highest level of artistic training, he hoped to learn the aesthetic codes, artistic practices, and adopt subjects that were established in white culture in an effort to access the power and prestige this knowledge symbolized. By adopting these codes, Tanner sought to be accepted into and make a place for himself within the normative discourse of American fine art. While at PAFA, Tanner took advantage of the opportunity to study with established academicians, working


diligently and becoming one of Thomas Eakins and Thomas Hovenden’s star pupils, relying particularly on Eakins’s guidance and support for the rest of the teacher’s life.\textsuperscript{29}

Although Tanner’s time at PAFA was foundational in cultivating his skills and valuable in the mentorship he received from his instructors, the aspiring artist’s tenure at the academy was often not an easy one. Tanner did not indicate his race in his application. His acceptance was merit-based, determined by a drawing he submitted to the academy. According to the memoir of the illustrator Joseph Pennell, a contemporary student at the school, when it was revealed that Tanner was black, his acceptance into the institution was put to a student vote.\textsuperscript{30} The PAFA administration’s decision to allow Tanner’s inclusion, only after a vote was cast by the all-white student body, illustrates the open and systemic racism characteristic of all such institutions and was indicative of the prejudices Tanner would continue to experience at PAFA. None of the students voted against Tanner’s acceptance allowing him to enroll in his first coursework at the academy in December of 1879. It can be argued that the white students did not object to Henry Tanner’s enrollment, due to the prevailing belief that African Americans had no capacity for the cultural production of fine arts, and therefore the aspiring black artist posed no threat to their own ambitions. When Tanner proved himself to be a competent artist, earning the respect and attention of the academy’s famous (and infamous) instructor, Thomas Eakins, the student body’s attitude changed. Pennell recounted: “We were interested at first, but soon he passed almost unnoticed, though the room was hot. Little by little, however, we were conscious of a change. I

\textsuperscript{29} Tanner enjoyed a close relationship with Hovenden, exhibiting with his former teacher the spring of 1894 in James S. Earle and Sons Gallery in Philadelphia. While many scholars consider Thomas Eakins as having a more pronounced influence on Tanner, Naurice Frank Woods Jr. quotes W.S. Scarborough who identified Thomas Hovenden as the teacher who “infused into him a comprehension of and sympathy with the broader and deeper things of life and art.” Woods suggests that Hovenden’s own outsider status as an Irish immigrant and his efforts in the abolitionist cause and organization of the Underground Railroad, allowed him to sympathize and shape Tanner’s future as an artist. Woods, “Lending Color to Canvas,” 14-20.

can hardly explain, but he seemed to want things; we seemed in the way, and the feelings
grew.\textsuperscript{31}

The tense relationship with the institution and his classmates is highlighted by an event
Tanner alluded to, but refrained from describing in detail in his autobiography:

I was extremely timid, and to be made to feel that I was not wanted, although in a
place where I had every right to be, even months afterward caused me sometimes
weeks of pain. Every time any one of these disagreeable incidents came into my
mind, my heart sank, and I was anew tortured by the thought of what I had
endured, almost as much as by the incident itself. Well, it was to endure these
things that helped me. It was he [Christopher High Shearer] who first gave me the
idea that I might have the qualities that, cultivated, would be of great help in the
battle of my life.\textsuperscript{32}

In composing his memoirs many years after his days as a student at PAFA, Joseph
Pennell’s resentment towards and outright hostility to Henry Tanner—likely due to the black
artist’s international success—is made apparent in the section the illustrator titled: “The Academy
School-The Coming of the Nigger.”\textsuperscript{33} The unnamed “incident” that tortured Tanner is likely an
encounter that was described by Pennell illustrating the unabashedly racist attitudes and
treatment Tanner was forced to contend with at PAFA.

One night we were walking down Broad Street, he with us, when a crowd of
people of his color who were walking up the street, came a greeting, “Hullo,
George Washington, howse yer getting on wid yer White fren’s? Then he began
to assert himself and, to cut a long story short, one night his easel was carried out
into the middle of Broad Street and, though not painfully crucified, he was firmly
tied to it and left there. And this is my only experience of my colored brothers in a

\textsuperscript{31} Joseph Pennell, \textit{The Adventures of an Illustrator, Mostly in Following his Authors in America and Europe}
(Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1925), 54.

\textsuperscript{32} Throughout his career, this “battle” was waged through the emotional and spiritual support of his family, as well
as progressive white patrons, who provided Tanner access to the inner workings of Euro-American cultural
institutions and its benefactors. During his turbulent time at PAFA, Tanner befriended the Philadelphia landscape
painter Christopher High Shearer. Tanner credits Shearer in helping him through these difficult times and
encouraging him to fight against the exclusionary practices and attitudes of white fine art. See Tanner, “The Story of
an Artist’s Life,” 11664-1165.

\textsuperscript{33} Pennell, \textit{The Adventures of an Illustrator}, 53-54.
White school; but it was enough. Curiously, there had never been a great Negro or
Jew artist in the history of the world.\textsuperscript{34}

Pennell’s report reveals that Henry Tanner not only had to struggle with “the battle of his life” in negotiating his identity as a black artist of talent within white culture, but also wrestle with his liminal position in American culture and double-consciousness, which Du Bois argued, all black Americans suffer from. Tanner’s harassment from both the white students and the “people of his color,” illustrates his conflicted and unstable place inbetween the segregated spheres of white and black culture in late nineteenth-century America.

Instead of pursuing a career and finding recognition in a less esteemed, but more hospitable avenue for his talent and artistic expression, despite the systemic racism of dominant white culture, Tanner made efforts to access and work within prestigious institutions, such as PAFA. In doing so, he carefully imitated and emulated the practices of well-known and successful white American artists by obtaining an academic education at PAFA and pursuing more advanced training and cultural opportunities in Europe. In waging the life-long “battle” for his art and talent to be recognized and accepted into dominant white culture, Tanner’s project was weighted with the burden of conflicting desires.

It is clear that Henry Tanner sought to be accepted by the Euro-American fine art establishment, thus legitimizing his identity as an African American and demonstrating the talent and accomplishments possible of this race. Yet, Tanner simultaneously struggled with the desire to resist the racist and oppressive aspects of white culture. The internal contradiction of desire and rejection of white cultural models the artist struggled with can be attributed to what WEB Du Bois defined as the “double consciousness.” In \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, Du Bois described the

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 49-50.
difficult process black Americans endured in negotiating a multi-dimensional Afro-European identity:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.  

Du Bois’ description is related to the ambivalence Homi Bhabha identifies in the process of colonial mimicry in which the indigenous population seeks to imitate the culture of their oppressor in order to access the authority it represents. Accordingly, by entering into, and accessing the dominant system of whiteness at PAFA, Tanner acculturated the aesthetics, practices, and subjects of American fine art through the academy’s pedagogical insistence on imitation and emulation. Tanner’s “battle” was to be recognized by the major institutions of fine art, but not be reabsorbed into white art as a subaltern, “same, but not quite” status, rather, to transcend the limitations and otherness attributed to his race, and be considered an artist in his own right. In negotiating his identity and navigating the hostile landscape of white culture, Tanner’s life-long project was not without ambivalences and contradictions.

It was during his foundational experiences as an outsider within the normative white-masculine identity of American art and culture that Tanner became increasingly cognizant of the need to leave the country he called home in order to acquire the distance and freedom necessary to challenge the system of exclusionary practices and misrepresentation from abroad. This is not to say that Tanner would never have achieved success as an artist in the United States. Rather, by

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imitating the practices of his white peers in traveling and seeking further artistic instruction in Europe, he could potentially tap into the respect and authority these Old World cultural systems represented in America, acquiring the cultural collateral needed to legitimize a place for himself within American fine art. Henry Tanner went to great lengths and overcame many obstacles to actualize his departure from the systemic racism of late nineteenth-century America and achieve success in Europe. The artist’s decision to study in Europe began a sustained project to sublimate the otherness he experienced in the United States by imitating the travels, education, and subject matter of his white mentors and colleagues.

With the assistance of Bishop Hartzell and his wife, friends of the Tanner family, the artist organized a show in Mrs. Hartzell’s hometown of Cincinnati to raise funds for his artistic pilgrimage to Europe. Despite receiving a favorable critical response, nothing from the exhibition was sold. Believing in Tanner’s talent and potential, Bishop Hartzell generously purchased the entire show so that Henry had the sufficient funds necessary for his travel and study in Europe. He referred to the Hartzells as “patron saints,” recalling: “They did their very best for me, but I did not sell a picture. I would have gladly parted with the whole collection for $25, however, I had saved a little money and my friends made up a sum beside, and on January 4, 1891 I set sail for Rome by way of London and Paris.”

**Academic Ambivalence and Black Genre Scenes**

On January 18, 1891, Tanner arrived in Liverpool, England. Although his plan was to visit London and Paris, and eventually settle in Rome, he was seduced by the City of Light later recalling: “I did not get to Rome. I stopped in Paris and began painting there. I had little money, 

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36 Tanner, “An Artist’s Autobiography” 2472. and “The Story of an Artist’s Life,” 11666. In addition to the Hartzell family’s contribution, Tanner received seventy-five dollars toward his European travel from a “Mr. E” for a new commission. It is uncertain who Mr. E was, however it is likely this money came from Tanner’s mentor Thomas Eakins, who was known to financially assist worthy students when in need. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 28.
and I suffered much self-denial, but I never suffered anything on account of my color. No bars were ever put in my way. From the beginning I was counted a hopeful student, and in time I was called a credit to American art.”

In Paris, Tanner enrolled in classes at the Académie Julian, a favorite of American artists during the late nineteenth century and an alternative to the stringent entrance requirements of the official École des Beaux-Arts, which included a French language exam. Julian’s Academy offered “an invaluable start for a career as an artist, guaranteeing a model, tuition, experience and contacts for little outlay.”

In Rodolphe Julian’s atelier, Tanner matured as an artist, building on the skills of draftsmanship and mastery of anatomical studies he acquired under Eakins and Hovenden at PAFA. It was during this time that Tanner worked under the supervision of the academicians Jean-Paul Laurens and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant. Known for his Orientalist imagery, Benjamin-Constant would have a great influence in encouraging Tanner’s future travels and portrayal of Oriental subjects; however, unforeseeable to the academician, his pupil would ultimately seek to challenge the very Orientalist models he created.

Because living in Paris was costly, Tanner, like many other artists, escaped from the city and took up residence in the country during the summer. In 1891 he worked on rural subjects and seascapes in Pont-Aven, Brittany, themes that were popular with both academic and avant-garde painters. The following year Tanner summered in Concarneau, which was populated with members of the Post-Impressionist and emerging Symbolist movements, including Paul Gauguin. While it is documented that Tanner “formed close links” with the Symbolists during

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37 Tanner, “An Artist’s Autobiography,” 2472


this period by working closely with Séguin and Sérusier in Paris and Brittany and that he found elements of the Symbolist-Nabi principles appealing, he never officially aligned himself with the group. Instead, his work from this period illustrates that, like most Americans, he remained loyal to academism and more conventional approaches to the Breton landscape and figures.40

Tanner’s commitment to academic aesthetics may be attributed to his outsider status. Cognizant of his otherness to the tradition of Old World cultural systems, in both race and nationality, the artist realized that identifying himself as a vanguard modernist would jeopardize his ability to find success or acceptance within the fine art establishment he desired to be legitimized by. Not unlike Édouard Manet, who declined the invitation to exhibit independently with the Impressionists, preferring instead to “enter the Salon through the front door,” Tanner aspired for official recognition through the Salon and with its conservative white audience and patrons. Moreover, as the artist became indoctrinated by the ideals and practices of the Académie Julian and the imitative and emulative structure of official art in France, he dedicated himself to the goal of having a canvas exhibited in the annual Salon (the “Old Salon” or Salon de la Société des Artistes Français).41

Living off a strict budget, Tanner accounted that he survived on $365 a year his first two years in Europe. During his third year in Paris, the artist fell dangerously ill with typhoid fever, which he attributed to “too much work and too little food.”42 Finding himself unsuccessful in his

40 Mosby, Across Continents and Cultures, 34-37.
41 While studying in Paris, Tanner, like most students, became further immersed in the cycle of academic mimicry. The novelist and playwright, George Moore, described his time in Julian’s atelier and the indoctrination that occurred in these academic institutions before abandoning the visual arts for a literary career. “That great studio of Julian’s is a sphinx, and all the poor folk that go there for artistic education are devoured…After two years they all paint and draw alike, every one has that vile execution—la pâte, la peinture au premier coup...” Moore quoted in Milner, The Studios of Paris, 11.
42 Tanner, “An Artist’s Autobiography,” 2472
first bid to exhibit at the Salon, during the summer of 1893 he returned to the United States “for a convalescence, and to ‘recoup’ a depleted treasury.” During his recovery in Philadelphia, in August Tanner was invited and traveled to deliver a paper at the Congress on Africa held in conjunction with the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The conference centered on the progress and cultural achievements made by African Americans since the Emancipation Proclamation. Tanner’s speech, “The American Negro in Art,” confronted the lie that black artists did not have the ability, intellect, or cultural appreciation to compete with white artists. He based these statements on his own experiences and participation in the artistic community and ateliers of France, as these institutions were considered by Americans to represent “official” forms of culture and success. Following his involvement in the Congress on Africa Conference Tanner wrote about the new direction his work would take using the third person:

Since his return from Europe he has painted mostly Negro subjects, he feels drawn to such subjects on account of the newness of the field and because of a desire to represent the serious, and pathetic side of life among them, and it is his thought that other things being equal, he who has most sympathy with his subjects will obtain the best results. To his mind many of the artists who have represented Negro life have only seen the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior.

Perhaps inspired by his participation in the Congress on Africa Conference, between 1893 and 1894 Tanner completed the two canvases, which he is most recognized for today. The

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43 Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life,” 11772.

44 Mosby, Across Continents and Cultures, 31 and Frances Pohl, Framing America (NY: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 315.

45 Quote reproduced in Dewey Mosby, Across Continents and Cultures, 31 and Frances Pohl, Framing America, 316.

46 There has been debate concerning the location and dates of creation for The Banjo Lesson. It was previously thought that the subject originated from Tanner’s time in the early 1890s in Atlanta and was composed from sketches of local figures. These sketches have never been located; however, the artist’s grandniece, Rae Alexander-Minter found a photographic study for The Banjo Lesson was taken in 1893 while the artist recovered in the Carolina mountains. The canvas was likely created in America after his speech at the Congress on Africa
Banjo Lesson (Figure 2-1) and The Thankful Poor (Figure 2-2) are the most frequently cited paintings in Tanner’s oeuvre and, notably, are the only known canvases in which the artist chose to overtly portray African American life. Although The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor are the only black genre scenes Tanner created, problematically, these two works are what granted his inclusion into the art historical canon as a token representative of African American art.

These genre paintings are the most frequently reproduced when representing the artist in compilations of black art history and western survey of art texts. In her review of art historical survey texts, Kymberly Pinder stressed that in 1896 Tanner devoted himself, almost exclusively, to religious subject matter the next four decades of his life. Biblical subjects dominate Tanner’s oeuvre and earned him the official recognition he sought, however his religious paintings continue to be presented as secondary to his African American genre scenes, which were created early on, and for only a brief period in the artist’s long career.

It is revealing of the ideological whiteness of art history that, despite not being representative of Tanner’s mature style and subject matter, these genre scenes have come to narrowly signify his contribution to the history of art when black artists were first included in the survey of art texts beginning in the mid-1990s. This not only diminishes Tanner’s stature as a painter of biblical scenes, but it suggests that his racial identity was inextricable from his choice Conference in Chicago that August. The painting may have been conceived of earlier, but created in Philadelphia during the late summer and early fall of 1893. The Banjo Lesson was first exhibited in Philadelphia October of 1893. See Wilson, “Lifting ‘The Veil,’” fn 52. Recent scholarship proposes that Tanner may have created more than one version of the Banjo Lesson. Sarah Burns contends that there were two canvases and that the one currently in the Hampton Institute collection is the same exhibited at the 1894 Salon. See South, “A Missing Question Mark,” fn 33.


in subject matter; that because Tanner was a black artist, it was “natural” and or inevitable that he portrayed black themes. Furthermore, these genre scenes are often situated in dialog with his teacher, Thomas Eakins, and the context of American Realism, which implies that Tanner’s work can only be understood, or is indelibly indebted to the achievements of the white artist.49

While there is no debate concerning the importance of these canvases to American Art and to Tanner personally as a turning point in his career, it is misleading that they serve in representing him as a canonical artist as they express a brief period in his “battle” and life’s work. The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor are unique, but also should not be considered anomalies. They exemplify Tanner’s ongoing search for subject matter as a student and a continued interest in portraying rural genre scenes that were thematically connected through the familial and inter-generational transmission of knowledge and skills.50

For the purposes of this study, The Banjo Lesson and The Thankful Poor signify a conceptual turning point in Tanner’s approach to the imitation and emulation enforced within the academic atelier. The process through which the canvas was composed, as well as the theme of black banjo playing, are evidence of an emulation of his teachers’ technique and subjects, while the choice in how to replicate, or mimic, this theme reveals a tension and resistance to white cultural portrayals of black banjo playing that were pervasive in American fine art and popular culture.

49 A similar treatment occurs when women artists, such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, are included in the survey of art texts. They are situated in relation to and presented in a way that forces the reader to understand them through their more famous male counterparts.

50 Contemporaneous Bretonian genre scenes include The Big Pipe Lesson and The Young Sabot Maker, which also explore the theme of trans-generational teaching.
An example of Tanner’s emulation, was his eager adoption of photography. The artist learned to utilize the technology for compositional studies and as an aide-mémoire from his mentor Thomas Eakins, who in turn learned this practice from his teacher Jean-Léon Gérôme. A photograph recently discovered by Tanner’s grandniece represents an older seated gentleman encircling in his arms a young boy who holds a prop cardboard banjo (Figure 2-3). The photograph illustrates the artist’s desire to mimic and “be like” Eakins in employing photographic studies as a pragmatic step in the compositional process.

During his time in France, Tanner grew more self-aware and purposeful in how and what he imitated. In taking on the subject matter of black life in the rural south, and particularly the theme of banjo playing, the artist took a critical step in his artistic evolution to renegotiate the terms of his mimicry. Describing the process of colonial mimicry Bhabha states: “what emerges from mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable.” Accordingly, Tanner did not simply repeat what he was taught within white cultural institutions, but consciously mimicked making alterations and corrections to subjects he felt were misrepresented in fine art and popular culture. Tanner boldly appropriated from imagery that reinforced white supremacy to mimic and undermine the power of stereotypes, revealing their fallacy. His portrayal of black rural life in The Banjo Lesson and

51 After his studies at PAFA, Tanner briefly attempted to run a photographic studio in Atlanta.

52 The image was most likely taken during Tanner’s respite in North Carolina after his bout with Typhoid and return from France in 1893. Judith Wilson’s correspondence with Rae Alexander-Minter, “Lifting ‘The Veil,” fn 52.

53 Will South provides another hypothesis that identifies the photographic studies as source material for a commissioned assignment Tanner received from Harper’s Young People in 1893 to illustrate the short story “Uncle Tim’s Compromise on Christmas” by Ruth McEnery Stuart. South, “A Missing Question Mark,” 11-13.

54 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 125.
The Thankful Poor seizes upon the ubiquitous white portrayals of African American life in popular culture.

Before The Banjo Lesson, black Americans rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to represent their own culture, especially in fine art. White Americans possessed the power to idealize their own history and culture, but also the authority to misrepresent or erase the populations they deemed as Other to maintain white dominance. The grotesque images of minstrel performance and racist portrayals of black entertainers singing, dancing, and playing music were popular with white audiences throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “The black male, Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus, was depicted as a shuffling, lazy, ill spoken and dishonest person. The African American woman did not fare so well either. She was seen as oversized, illiterate Aunt Jemima or mammy, the obedient servant.” These images were inspired by the blackface performances of white actors pioneered by Thomas Darmouth Rice who is attributed with the creation of the Jim Crow song and dance in 1828. As Ralph Ellison asserted in the Invisible Man: “the Negro was portrayed in American art to evoke only two emotions, humor and pity.”

In The Art of Exclusion, one of the first studies that examined the representation of blacks during the nineteenth century, Albert Boime identified the strategies white artists employed to sensationalize and distort the image and culture of black Americans. Boime characterized the minstrel inspired images of white artists, such as William Sidney Mount, George Caleb

55 This extended beyond just genre and history painting to include a latent ideology of whiteness in the representation of the American landscape. Berger’s Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture, 43-80.


57 Traveling minstrel shows owned by Al G. Field and George Mitchell established and reinforced the satirical image of blacks characterized with a large toothy grin and tattered clothing, conventionally equipped with a fiddle, banjo, or tambourine to perform the “cakewalk.” Boime, Art of Exclusion, 100.

Bingham, George Fuller, Eastman Johnson, and even Tanner’s teacher, Thomas Hovenden, as constructing a “white fantasy projected upon black people.”  

Boime stressed that: “The banjo-picking Jim Crow character with the apelike features and wide grin became the stereotypical ideal of white racism in the nineteenth century.”

Tanner’s sensitive and noble portrayal of an act of familial bonding through cultural instruction serves to correct and speak back to the often-ludicrous minstrel representations of his contemporaries. The Banjo Lesson is a thoughtfully crafted counter-image which mimics well-known models to undermine the truthfulness of images, such as Eastman Johnson’s 1859 Life at the South, (Figure 2-4) commonly known as Old Kentucky Home, among many others, revealing these as idealized images as fabrications of “white fantasy.”

Recent interpretations of Tanner’s teachers, Eakins and Hovenden’s, black subjects disclose that despite the artists’ liberal abolitionist pedigrees, their imagery often reflected and even upheld racial stereotypes. An engraving by Willy Miller, I’m So Happy! (Figure 2-5), created from a lost Thomas Hovenden painting, demonstrates the teacher’s racial myopia by portraying his black banjo player facing outward and on display, performing for the white viewer’s omnipotent gaze. In his analysis of The Banjo Lesson, Tanner scholar Naurice Frank Woods Jr. points to Hovenden’s I’m So Happy! as the “single painting Tanner could have used as a prototype for The Banjo Lesson.”

59 Boime, Art of Exclusion, 100-101.
60 Ibid., and Boime “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 418.
62 Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 120.
63 Ibid.
In addition to Hovenden’s banjo player, Tanner’s canvas may have purposefully appropriated from Thomas Eakins’s 1878 *Negro Boy Dancing* (Figure 2-6) Eakins’s watercolor was celebrated by northern art critics for challenging the “slavophile iconography of banjo, grin, and jig.” 65 The image of three black males of various ages partaking in the personal enjoyment of music and dance has been interpreted as Eakins’s own attempt to correct racist portrayals of this age.

Why Tanner became more socially engaged after 1893 is unknown, but it is possible that after living and working in relative freedom in France, the artist’s “reacquaintance with American prejudices” 66 may have also motivated his uncharacteristically outspoken denouncement against the continued invisibility and segregation of blacks at the World’s Columbian Exposition. By embarking on the creation of *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, Henry Tanner tested the effectiveness of mimicry to produced an image that ambivalently emulated the aesthetic practices while mocking the subject matter of white art to offer a corrective image intended to combat white artists’ racist misrepresentations of black culture.

*The Banjo Lesson* (Figure 2-1) portrays an intimate moment between a humbly dressed paternal figure, who affectionately instructs a young barefoot boy in playing a banjo. The figures, possibly, grandfather and grandson, are completely absorbed in the pedagogical task of transferring and acquiring knowledge. 67 The lesson takes place within a modest interior framed by simple white walls and unfinished wooden floor. The room is sparse, suggesting the rural lower class status of the individuals, as the space is decorated within only two small pictures on

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66 Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 120.

67 Dewey Mosby interpreted the placement of the older man’s hat on the floor as indicating his status as an itinerant teacher, not a member of the household. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 31.
the back wall and a shelf hanging in the room’s corner. The only visible furniture are two chairs, one of which the elder teacher occupies, and a table situated against the back wall partially draped with a white cloth. A variety of utilitarian objects appear throughout the room including a water pitcher and washing dish placed on the table, containers, and cooking implements on the fireplace hearth, situated in the right foreground of the composition.

Spatial depth is suggested through the stacking and placement of objects throughout the composition and the modeling of the figures in raking blue and yellow light. Tanner rendered the figures with volume, but the space they occupy is flattened by the decision to tip the floor and fireplace hearth towards the painting’s surface. This unusual perspective is a characteristic of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist work Tanner would have been exposed to in France, but also reinforces the likelihood that the canvas was composed from a photographic study, as this flattened aesthetic is attributed to nineteenth-century view cameras.68

Tanner’s handling of his medium and treatment of light further serve in emphasizing the familial intimacy and nurturing atmosphere of this scene. Tanner’s wet-on-wet application of paint is illustrative of the au premier coup technique he would have encountered in the Académie Julian in Paris. In Tanner’s hands, this “direct method” created a soft, hazy rendering of figures and objects bathed in symbolic light, a characteristic that would become a hallmark of the artist’s biblical paintings. The representation of light as a visual metaphor for spirituality will remain a consistent and significant theme in Tanner’s work.

In The Banjo Lesson, the artist situated the pyramidal figural arrangement at the center of the canvas. The teacher and student are illuminated from the left by a cool-white light originating from a window situated outside the picture frame. This blue-white natural light is countered by

the warm-golden firelight emanating from an unseen fireplace to right. *The Banjo Lesson* was first exhibited in Philadelphia the fall of 1893 and was well received. The critic from the *Daily Evening Telegraph* commented on the unnecessary challenge Tanner created for himself by introducing two divergent light sources, yet ultimately commended the painter on his success in effectively negotiating the cool and warm lights in the rendering of his figures.\(^6^9\)

The elder figure faces the audience, but is entirely focused on the lesson, unaware of the presumably white viewer’s gaze that lingers outside the canvas. In front of the seated man, the boy stands with his back to the warm glow of the fireplace, and is protectively encircled by his teacher who supports the neck of the banjo, which appears far too large for the young pupil to play. The physical proximity and echoing of the teacher and student’s hands on the neck and base of the instrument reinforces the pedagogical investment and emotional connection between the figures. Albert Boime has identified the importance of the instrument and its presentation not as a prop or stereotyped accessory, “but the means for passing on instruction.”\(^7^0\)

Tanner’s investment in portraying the figures as immersed in their activity, unaware of or in disregard of the white gaze, evokes Thomas Eakins’s *Negro Boy Dancing* (Figure 2-6). In his assessment of Eakins’s painting, Boime states that: “At the moment they do not perform on the white man’s stage, and they form their own triangular enclosure in this rare glimpse of the private side of black life in the nineteenth century.”\(^7^1\) Following Eakins’s model, Tanner expunged the performative aspect of black banjo playing for the enjoyment of a white audience.

\(^6^9\) “He has posed his figures between the chimney and the window, with warm firelight illuminating one side of his group, and cold daylight striking sharply against the other side. To paint his details in these two hostile lights, to make them blend where they come together, and to harmonize the whole…is an exceedingly trying task which he grappled manfully and with marked success, but which is, after all, evidently enough not the happiest way in which the subject might have been treated.” *Daily Evening Telegraph*, October 7, 1893. Quoted in Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 119.

\(^7^0\) Boime, *Art of Exclusion*, 101.

\(^7^1\) Ibid., 102.
by altering the triangular figural grouping into an absorptive interaction between grandfather and grandson. The figures’ tenderness and intellectual immersion deflects the white gaze and expectation of performance. Instead of existing for the enjoyment of a white audience the figures turn inward stressing their own mental activity.

In composing *The Banjo Lesson*, Tanner made great efforts to strategically appropriate both historical and contemporary models enacting the strategy of mimicry-as-mockery. Through the process of artistic mimicry he sought to distinguish the difference and slippages between his portrayal of musical education and traditional white depictions of minstrel entertainment to expose the latter as inauthentic. The focus and absorbed concentration described as a part of this musical lesson underscores the intellectual capacity of African Americans and the value of education, which the Tanner family espoused.

The artist’s choice of a pyramidal figural composition is significant because it not only drew from well-known and established religious imagery of the pietà and lamentation, but also compositions frequently adopted by white artists to position black figures in subservient roles. Albert Boime identified this compositional strategy, which consisted of a white male figure positioned at the peak of a pyramidal arrangement as a “heroic signifier.”72 African Americans are situated beneath the white paternal hero, often kneeling or sitting, to form the lower triangular zones of the figural grouping. Boime referenced Thomas Ball’s 1876 *Emancipation Group* (Figure 2-7), as an example of this strategy. Abraham Lincoln is presented as a Christ-like figure granting freedom to a subservient bare-chested slave kneeling below. Similarly, many depictions of the abolitionist John Brown being led to his execution repeat this pictorial strategy, creating a white heroic apex and black subjugated base, which aesthetically reiterated hierarchal

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social-cultural roles within the pyramidal composition. Collectively, these images visually reinforced the subservience of blacks while also offering the “fantasy of black people’s continued dependence upon white paternalism” created by and for the enjoyment of white audiences.73

Thomas Eakins’s figural composition in *The Negro Boy Dancing* begins the project of undermining the hierarchal placement of black figures, but Tanner’s affectionate arrangement of teacher and pupil in *The Banjo Lesson* pushes this further, by dramatically resisting any attempt to visually subjugate the black body. I propose that Tanner’s figural composition also makes reference to canonical religious works of art, famously Michelangelo, Bellini, and Carracci’s versions of the Pietà (Figure 2-8). During his academic training in Philadelphia and Paris, the artist was likely exposed to or even copied these canonical works of art. These historic portrayals of the Pietà employed a figural arrangement in which the Virgin’s form creates the apex and base of a pyramidal composition, which supports the horizontal body of Christ. The form the Virgin and Christ create is similar to that of Tanner’s teacher and student. The elder figure envelops and supports his pupil, which I see as suggesting a spiritual-religious element to pedagogical practice. The representatives of two generations form a cohesive body that creates a stable pyramidal form. Both the mental and physical absorption of the figures not only deflects the exhibitionary expectations of the white gaze, but also corrects white artists’ tactics to relegate black figures beneath those of white heroes.

Tanner’s *The Banjo Lesson* offered a starkly different image of the black banjo-playing figure that was intended to disrupt and undermine the clichéd dominant white fantasy. In taking on a subject matter that was considered the exclusive property of white artists and offering a

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73 Ibid., 19.
corrective to the racist stereotype it perpetuated, Tanner made a conscious step to move beyond an emulation of his mentors and the models offered by white art. Naurice Frank Woods Jr., who has written extensively on Henry Tanner, describes the monumentality of the artist’s decision, “to take brush in hand and deliver what no previous black artist had dared portray—dignified images of his race in everyday settings. His two most famous paintings…ended a white monopoly that had existed for nearly 200 years in American art.”

*The Thankful Poor* (Figure 2-2) functions as a pendant to *The Banjo Lesson*, in its portrayal of a sensitive moment in rural black life that was fortified and ennobled through piety and religious devotion. Tanner’s careful rendering of the figures in natural light provides a transcendental grandeur to the quotidian scene. The canvas is infused with a sense of quiet absorption and religiosity, which transforms an ordinary into a monumental moment. The horizontal composition represents an older man with his back to a window that serves as the single source of light. He is seated in a chair to the left of a square table and bears a striking resemblance to the grandfatherly figure from *The Banjo Lesson*. The elder gentleman solemnly bows his head, rests his elbows on the table, and raises his clasped hands in prayer over the meager meal he is thankful to share with the younger figure seated across the table.

The theme of education and transmission of knowledge between generations once again features prominently in *The Thankful Poor*. While *The Banjo Lesson* emphasized the acquisition of cultural skills, *The Thankful Poor* stresses the importance of a moral and spiritual education. The grandfather guides a young black figure in saying Grace. Emulating the older figure’s praying gesture and pious seriousness, the young man rests his bowed head on his hand and closes his eyes so as not to be distracted from his mindful prayer. The stark interior and empty

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white plates on the table suggests the meager means of the pair, yet they are gracious for the little
they have to share with one another.

The noble and absorptive image Tanner offers of African American spirituality and piety
is unique for the late nineteenth century; however, as in *The Banjo Lesson*, the artist purposefully
manipulated the aesthetic codes of existing representations of the rural poor he encountered in
France. Tanner’s access to the artistic collections in Paris, which offered countless
representations of Barbizon inspired peasant types, and his first hand experience with the rural poor in Brittany exposed him to both academic and avant-garde interpretations of rural peasant
scenes from which to appropriate and represent within the context of African American life in the rural south. The quiet absorption of the figures’ prayer served in undermining the
superstition and fanaticism often attributed to African American religious practice. The most
obvious of Tanner’s appropriations are found in Chardin’s 1740 *Saying Grace* (Figure 2-9),
which the artist had the opportunity to view in the Musée du Louvre, and the contemporary work
of American painter Elizabeth Nourse, *Le Repas en Famille* (Figure 2-10).

Tanner imbued his portrayal of moral education with a seriousness and authenticity that
eschewed the anecdotal and sentimentality of late nineteenth-century Salon genre scenes
characteristic of Jules Breton and William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s canvases. While drawing from
French representations of the white rural poor, Tanner makes this image his own by illustrating
filial piety as a visual manifestation of his father’s moral teachings and spiritual education in the
AME Church. As Boime observed:

75 Ibid., 14-20.
76 Wilson, “Lifting the Veil” 37-38.
It is notable that Tanner’s first genre works represent a male-centered universe comprising father and son...Away from the family in Paris, missing the council of his father, he may have pursued his early genre themes as a kind of regression to childhood fantasies in which an older, wise protective male nurtures the child. The paintings may very well contain autobiographical recollections of his own training and education, at the same time that they constitute a means to communicate his personal message as an alternative to that of standard genre imagery and popular illustration. 78

Tanner’s black genre scenes mark a turning point in his artistic evolution through a recognition of the subversive power mimicry had to offer in undermining the false models and ideals of white culture. Additionally, *The Banjo Lesson* provided Tanner with another milestone in May of 1894. The canvas, entered as *La Leçon de Musique*, fulfilled the artist’s aspiration as the first of his many paintings that were accepted and exhibited at the Paris Salon. Although the canvas was “skied” and received little attention, the exhibition of Tanner’s work at the official Salon was a significant achievement that made him visible in the eyes of the fine art world for the first time. Dewey Mosby recognized: “the importance of acceptance into the Salon should not be underestimated. The *vernissage* (or varnishing day for artists) was a great social event in Paris for the smart crowd. For European and American artists, it was an immense marketplace with many thousands of visitors.” 79

Tanner returned to Europe in 1894 and officially claimed residency in France. The following year, he again had work accepted into the Salon, exhibiting two Breton inspired genre scenes and a pastel of the New Jersey coast in moonlight. 80 Having more than one work selected for the 1895 exhibition was no doubt encouraging for the artist, yet none of it garnered significant attention. It was only after Tanner shifted his focus from genre to more obvious

78 Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 426.


80 May 1895 Salon: Two oil on canvas, *Brittany Interior, The Young Sabot Maker*, and a pastel of the New Jersey coast in moonlight.
religious subject matter that the Salon jury and French critics began to take serious notice of the American painter. As his biographer Marcia Mathews noted: “Genre painting was not the be the field in which his reputation was won.”

**Expatriatism and Abandonment of the New Negro?**

In 1896, members of the Salon jury rewarded Henry Tanner for one of his earliest religious paintings, granting *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* an honorable mention. The artist remarked: “So it was that this first little ‘mention honorable’ gave me a courage and a power for hard work, and also a hope that I had never before possessed.” While Tanner’s star was rising in France, many black leaders celebrated the artist’s success overseas, but were increasingly dismayed by Tanner’s residency in France and abandonment of African American subject matter. Leaders from the black community, including Alain Locke, hoped that Tanner would return to the States to serve as a pioneer of the New Negro Movement. A Tanner family friend, W.S. Scarborough, summarized the attitude of his contemporaries:

When ‘The Banjo Lesson’ appeared, many of the friends of the race sincerely hoped that a portrayer of Negro life by a Negro artist had arisen indeed. They hoped, too, that the treatment of race subjects by him would serve to counterbalance so much that has made the race only the laughingstock of subjects for those artists who see nothing in it but the most extravagantly absurd and grotesque. But this was not to be.

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82 According to Mathews, during the hanging of the Salon Tanner’s canvas was relegated to an obscure location making it easily overshadowed on the tightly packed walls of the exhibition space. As a coincidence, or perhaps due to Tanner’s artistic lineage, Eakins’s teacher and renowned academician, Jean-Leon Gérôme, took notice of the painting—likely because of the subject matter—and insisted that it be rehung “on the line.” This granted the canvas a coveted space in the exhibition that offered Tanner a new degree of visibility. Mathews notes that Gérôme did not know Tanner personally but was attracted by the subject matter, which was “his kind of archaeological art.” Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist*, 73-74.

83 Tanner “The Story of an Artist’s Life.” 11772.

After 1896 Tanner would never again portray African American culture, instead shifting his focus, almost exclusively, to religious and Oriental subjects for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{85} Some in the black community felt abandoned by the artist’s new direction to paint subjects that were more aligned with the ideals of white audiences and patrons. The importance of Tanner’s black genre scenes to the African American community during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should not be underestimated, as they were viewed as artistic achievements, which powerfully communicated the philosophy and aspirations of the New Negro Movement.\textsuperscript{86}

Although Tanner philosophically agreed with many of W.E.B. Du Bois’s and the New Negro Movement ideals, especially in regard to the necessity for black’s unfettered access to elite educational opportunities, his decision to remain in Europe caused many in this movement to become disheartened by his perceived lack of engagement with their cause. Alain Locke was among the prominent voices who celebrated Tanner’s “Negro” genre scenes, but was dismissive of his later biblical paintings for being too European and racially unspecific:

Tanner, who as one of the outstanding pupils of Thomas Eakins, should have become the path breaker in art documenting Negro life (who, indeed, started his career with intimate folk studies like \textit{The Banjo Lesson}) remained in Europe, except for occasional family and sales visits, to absorb brilliantly but futilely, a lapsing French style.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Tanner does paint portraits of his mother and father in 1897 and Booker T. Washington in 1917, but these are the extent to which he engages with representation of black American life after 1896. The portrait Tanner completed of this mother, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is noteworthy as it represents the artist’s playful imitation of James McNeill Whistler’s \textit{Arrangement in Black and Gray, No. 1 (Whistler’s Mother)}. The French Government purchased Whistler’s canvas and put on display in 1891, making it highly likely Tanner was able to add this work to his repository of material for mimicry after from seeing the canvas in person.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{The Banjo Lesson} was first exhibited in Philadelphia the fall of 1893 and later at the Paris Salon of 1894. It was purchased by Robert Ogden and donated to Hampton Institute, a historically black college. See “Provenance and Exhibition Histories” in Mosby, \textit{Henry Ossawa Tanner}, 299. Judith Wilson designates Tanner’s works as the foundation for future developments in black culture providing “a site of a profound psychic break or break-through—a declaration of African American self-esteem that anticipated the twin emphases on racial pride and vernacular culture which would come to characterize the work of numbers of Black artists only in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, beginning with the so-called Harlem Renaissance. Wilson, “Lifting the Veil,” 1.

\textsuperscript{87} Alain Lock, \textit{The Negro in Art}, 9.
More recently, scholar and curator Adrienne Childs has defended Henry Tanner against Alain Locke’s charges and the accusation of the artist as “selling out” by abandoning his cultural heritage by moving to “European” religious paintings. Childs contends that Locke’s advocacy of New Negro art perpetuated the notion of a biological or innate aesthetic shared by all black artists. This perception encouraged a narrow and monolithic interpretation of African American culture, which Tanner took considerable efforts to challenge through his art.

In reviewing his personal letters and correspondence, Tanner’s grandniece, Rae Alexander-Minter reveals: “I discovered that my granduncle never considered himself an expatriate; in fact he eschewed the word. He believed he did not have the luxury of being an expatriate, a privilege, as James Baldwin would suggest years later, accorded only to white Americans.”88 While expatriatism embellished the status and careers of white American artists, many of whom Tanner admired, his personal writings indicate that he never considered himself anything but American, shunning this classification.

In an effort to maintain his American roots, in 1895 Tanner joined the American Art Club in Paris (AAAP) following the lead of his colleagues, Hermon MacNeil and Hermann Dudley Murphy.89 It was through the American Art Club that Henry was introduced to Rodman Wanamaker, the president of the group and heir to a fortune amassed by his father, John Wanamaker, the owner of a chain of high-end department stores in New York and Philadelphia.90 Rodman Wanamaker took up residence in France to acquire fine art for display in his father’s businesses. As the Hertzells had done early in his career, Wanamaker and his

associate, Robert Ogden, would serve a prominent role in assisting Tanner financially, sponsoring several trips to the Holy Land in an effort to advance his artistic career and cultural resources.

Scholars have provided various explanations for Tanner’s shift in subject matter between 1895 and 1897. Some believe the decision was economically motivated as religious subjects were preferred by his white benefactors, while others cite a spiritual enlightenment and renewed religious devotion as the inspiration for a focus on biblical themes.

Despite living abstemiously, Tanner often faced financial struggles. Much of his correspondence with Harrison Morris, the then director of PAFA, reveals the economic hardships the artist endured even after his success and notoriety at the Paris Salon. Ultimately, it was the support of white American benefactors, including Harrison Morris, Robert Ogden, Atherton and Ingeborg Curtis, and John and Rodman Wanamaker that sustained Tanner for the duration of his artistic career. One can speculate that ideally, he would have preferred to have the financial backing of the African American community, but the level of support Tanner needed to achieve his lofty aspirations would never materialize from black patrons during his own lifetime.

In order to fund his return and continued study in France, in 1894 Tanner made various efforts to sell his genre scenes to investors in America. The artist wrote: “An auction sale of all the pictures I could lay by hands on furnished a few hundred dollars, and with this and ‘promises’ (never fulfilled) I returned again to Paris.” There are theories as to what Tanner implied by “promises never fulfilled.” In the summer of 1894, a plan was devised by Ogden that the board of minsters of Reverend Tanner’s church should purchase the artist’s 1893 genre

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91 Henry Ossawa Tanner File (1885-1904) PAFA Archive.

92 Henry Ossawa Tanner papers, 1860s-1978, bulk 1890-1937. AAA Smithsonian Institute.
scene, *The Bagpipe Lesson*, and present it to the Pennsylvania Academy for display in their permanent collection, “on behalf of the colored people of Philadelphia.”

The plan was abandoned when the board was only able to raise three hundred of the thousand dollars requested for the canvas. Tanner’s disappointment in this unfulfilled promise made him aware that he could not rely solely on the monetary support of the black community. At this same moment in his career, the artist was encouraged by patrons, including Wanamaker and Ogden, to focus on subjects they perceived as salable and more agreeable with white American audiences. Boime highlights the hypocrisy of Tanner’s white patrons who were “uncomfortable with his earlier genre pictures and more at home with imagery of exotic people of color. In this form, they could also praise the contribution of his ‘African’ heritage to the expressiveness of his religious paintings.”

Religious subjects had a venerable and well-established history in the fine arts and were proven to appeal to a potential white moneyed clientele. In an attempt to combine his evangelism

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93 Robert Ogden’s letter to Booker T. Washington on October 17, 1895 reads: “A proposition was made in this city some time ago for the colored people to purchase [Tanner’s] large picture, ‘The Bagpipe Lesson’ and present it to the Academy of Fine Arts in this city. The movement did not make much progress; resulting in the collection of only about $100...The amount needed is something over $1000. If you think this is a worthy matter, please give it your influence for at least the 25¢ subscriptions [for a good reproduction of the picture]. I have bestowed time, thought and money upon the plan and I certainly hope it will succeed.” Quoted in Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 113.

94 The plan did not succeed but Ogden, who was a trustee of Hampton University, bought the picture himself and donated it to the university in 1905 where it remains today. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 33. Tanner will again be disappointed by patronage from the black community when between 1924-1929 he was forced to sue the Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia for the payment of a memorial he created. In a letter dated May 30, 1927, to his lawyer Raymond Pace Alexander-who was married to Tanner’s niece Sadie, the artist lamented: “For me it is too bad that the only time in my life when I have had to appeal to the law to aid me in collecting the amount agreed to for one of my works should be for an order from my own people. What would I have amounted to if I had had to depend upon my own people-who make a great fuss about me-I do not know or I do know-but I do not fail to understand it in the masses, but in our leaders is harder.” Alexander Papers: Papers of or Relating to Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia, PA.

95 Woods also provides a rationale for Tanner’s evolution to religious subjects after 1896: “Tanner’s eagerness to advance African Americans pictorially ended, therefore, by the fact that from a purely financial standpoint, the French did not want such paintings, the Black masses in the United States could not sustain him, and mixing race and art could not advance him.” Woods Jr. “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Negotiation of Race and Art,” 895 and Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 438.
with business, in 1899 John Wanamaker financed the publication of James Tissot’s large series of religious images for *The Life of Our Savior, Jesus Christ* making these illustrations available to American consumers. By joining the “Wanamaker Tissot Club” subscribers could acquire the four volume series, normally a cost of $30 to $50, for just $1 down and $3 dollars a month.

Wanamaker’s son Rodman, with whom Tanner became acquainted through his position as the president of the American Artist’s Association of Paris, and John Wanamaker’s business partner Robert Ogden, saw potential in the artist and invested in him beginning in the mid 1890s. Ogden and Rodman Wanamaker sponsored Tanner’s expeditions to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and encouraged him to continue working on biblical subjects. After the success John Wanamaker achieved selling reproductions of Tissot’s religious imagery, it appears that Ogden and the younger Wanamaker sought to duplicate this effort with Tanner. In a letter from Robert Ogden to Tanner dated July 12, 1900, his benefactor suggested that his continued focus on biblical subjects could garner the same success as Tissot’s series.

I like the idea of the production of a collection that may be suggested by subjects that you may find in Palestine. It strikes me that, if the number of pictures is sufficiently large to command general interest, it would be a very great success. The Tissot pictures when first exhibited in this country, were welcomed by crowds of intelligent people. Of course, they were greatly advertised in advance, but some of the wisdom of this world may be applied to the development of your idea.

While it was economically practical for Tanner to turn to religious imagery, this move cannot be solely attributed to financial concerns. Given his upbringing and family’s prominent

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97 “John Wanamaker, Great Book Offer,” *Southern Workman*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Jan 1900), 57.

98 Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 434.

99 Henry Ossawa Tanner File (1885-1904) PAFA Archive.
position in the AME Church, it seems quite natural that Tanner would eventually depict religious figures and narratives that he was familiar with, which echoed the “moral, spiritual, and sociopolitical lessons connected to black theology of the period.”

According to W.S. Scarborough, family friend and the vice president of Wilberforce University, the first African American university and AME Church’s theological seminary school, Henry Tanner gave up genre painting for religious scenes simply because of the impact the AME Church and his father had in every facet of his life. Scarborough stated that Tanner’s admiration of his father pushed the artist’s “genius into religious channels and thus made his art serve religion, since neither his pen nor his voice was to be employed in such service.” From this standpoint, Henry Tanner continued to pursue the connection between didactic and spiritual imagery initiated in *The Thankful Poor*, thus carrying on the legacy of Bishop Tanner by visualizing the virtues of a spiritual and moral education in his canvases.

Later in his career, during an interview, the American journalist Jessie Fauset, repeated an anecdote attributed to Tanner. In pursuing an artistic career instead of joining the ministry, as his father had hoped, Henry offered Benjamin Tanner a consolation, stating: “you preach from the pulpit and I will preach with my brush.” When pressed by Fauset about this anecdote, the artist replied: “For the first time in my life I resemble a great artist. I won’t destroy a pretty story.”

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103 Fauset, “Henry Ossawa Tanner,” 258.
While the turn to religious subject matter seems quite natural for the son of a prominent Bishop, the timing of this career-defining shift may have been motivated by a spiritual and moral awakening, which occurred sometime after Tanner’s return to Paris. Naurice Frank Woods Jr. attributes this conversion to a “spiritual crisis,” which the artist alluded to in an unpublished letter to his parents dated “Xmas 1896.” Throughout the letter it becomes clear that the artist’s faith was tested and that he felt he had not responded appropriately, writing: “The Lord has been good and how unfaithful I have been, how far I have lived from what it was my privilege to live. How very sorry I am. How by the help of the Lord I am going to try to live much more faithfully to Him.” In this heartfelt confession, it also becomes clear that Tanner vowed to amend his unfaithfulness and atone for his sins by turning to God. “I have made up my mind to serve Him more faithfully.”

Woods suggests that as part of his repentance Tanner chose to concentrate specifically on religious art from this point forward. According to Woods: “his ‘confession’ coincided with his shift to primarily bible-derived imagery and his decision to redirect his life to atone for his perceived spiritual lapses.” Tanner’s pledge, or as Woods calls it, his “covenant,” suggests that the artist’s concentration on biblical subjects after 1896 was the result of a crisis and renewal of spirit and that his penance was to serve God by dedicating himself to creating a visual ministry.

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104 Letter from Henry Tanner to his parents, December 1896 from private collection. Woods notes that the owners of this letter have never before made it available to researchers. Woods Jr. “Embarking on a New Covenant,” 94-103.


106 Ibid.

107 Ibid., 98.

108 Ibid.,102.
Tanner’s emotional confession came in the form of a personal letter to his family. In his public-professional life, the artist was far more restrained, leaving his expressions and feelings often guarded and rehearsed. In his published autobiography, Tanner offered his own explanation for the “abandonment” of American subjects, which was objectively simple: “I refused to come home and paint things I was not drawn to, I did not like the idea of quitting the helpful influences by with I was surrounded.”

Marcia Mathews expands on Tanner’s response framing his decision in an equally sensible manner:

The artists under whom Tanner studied at Julien’s, as well as the successful ones he heard discussed there—Benjamin-Constant, Laurens, Gérôme, Meissonier, Chavannes, Bastien-Lepage—had all won their laurels as painters of history or allegory. If Tanner wished to try his hand at more elevated subjects than Breton fishermen or landscapes, it was logical for him, with his background, to turn to the Bible.

Far from abandoning or being absorbed by dominant art, I believe Tanner made the choice to shift his attention to and specialize as a biblical painter because it offered him a degree of camouflage under which he could continue waging the “battle of his life” and challenge his designation as a “Negro” artist. Tanner’s evolution toward biblical subjects, which were popular with white patrons during the nineteenth century, was not only economically pragmatic and spiritually satisfying, but necessary in enabling him to address a wider and more diverse audience. It can be argued that Tanner shared a racial identity with the rural African Americans he portrayed in *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, but that they were not necessarily “his people.” Although connected by the experience of being black in America, Tanner’s experiences as a highly educated, urban, middle-class individual was very different from the rural blacks he portrays in these canvases.

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The artist’s black genre scenes were successful in their aim to undermine the authority of racist representation, but had the unintended affect of alienating the very audience Tanner sought to engage in dialogue. This became clear the fall of 1895, when the artist exhibited three paintings and earned a medal at the Cotton States Exhibition held in Atlanta. The show included celebrated American artists, such as Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, and Winslow Homer. Yet, the event was bittersweet for Tanner, as his work was segregated from the white artists in the Negro Building. Mosby suggests that: “Tanner must have felt that his exclusion from the Exposition proper was a racial affront from his native country…he certainly recognized that his Bagpipe Lesson, with Brittany denizen, was given a medal, while paintings with a ‘distinctive race influence and character’ were ignored.”

Keeping in mind his recent success at the Salon with Daniel in the Lion’s Den, I would argue that Tanner’s move to religious subjects was likely motivated by more than just economic or spiritual concerns alone. Tanner was no doubt cognizant that if he wanted to advance his professional career and status in the world of white culture, he not only had to remain in France, the capital of fine art, but pursue subject matter that was held in higher esteem than genre or landscape. Instead of being resigned to a segregation of his work, Tanner took on biblical themes that would further facilitate his immersion within the institutions and visual expressions of white privilege.

**Mimicry and Mockery in the Latin Quarter**

Within a Euro-American artistic context during the nineteenth century, Christian imagery was considered the exclusive property of white artists and worshipers. Tanner’s adoption of

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111 The exclusion of his work was especially hurtful because it came at the urging of his patron Robert Ogden. In a letter to Booker T. Washington, Ogden explained: “They would lose their distinctive race influence and character if place in the general art exhibit. My purpose was to get the influence of Mr. Tanner’s genius on the side of the race he represents and at the same time I did not want it degraded by inharmonious associations with inferior work.” Quote reproduced in Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 38.
biblical subjects provided him the cover to create imagery that challenged conventional religious art, effacing the visibility he desired previously, in order to become unseen and unthreatening. His mimicry of traditional and accepted subject matter camouflaged the artist, allowing him to make subtle alternations and revisions to the normative white portrayals of biblical narratives. Homi Bhabha identified mimicry’s protective potential in accordance with Lacan’s belief that: “The effect of mimicry is camouflage...It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background of becoming mottled.”112 Additionally, in framing the artist’s choice of religious subject matter as camouflage, in his study of Tanner’s black genre scenes, Albert Boime convincingly argued: “Tanner did not stop painting genre when he stopped painting African-American subjects, but his work allowed for a different expression of his racialized identity.”113

After the success of Daniel and the Lion’s Den, the artist embarked on a new canvas in which he would exercise mimicry as a form of visual biblical exegesis. The summer and fall of 1896, Tanner chose not to travel to Brittany, but remained in Paris working tirelessly on the painting that would secure his place in the fine art world. The Resurrection of Lazarus (Figure 2-11) granted him critical and professional success while attracting the attention and accolades of audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Before the painting was celebrated at the 1897 Salon, it elicited the praise of his colleagues and teacher Benjamin-Constant.

In September of 1896, the Latin Quarter, the official publication of the AAAP, singled out Tanner’s efforts by publishing a photograph of the ‘Lazarus’ in progress (Figure 2-12). It is clear from the state of the canvas documented in the photograph that the artist continued to labor

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112 Jacques Lacan, from “The line of light,” Of the Gaze reproduced in Bhabha, Location of Culture, 121.

113 Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 433.
throughout the autumn of 1896 making numerous revisions to the composition and size of the finished canvas within the rented studio he shared on the boulevard Saint-Jacques.\textsuperscript{114} Tanner wrote to his parents that Benjamin-Constant was so pleased with his ‘Lazarus’ that the teacher proclaimed, if he did not receive a Salon medal: “it would be an injustice.”\textsuperscript{115} The artist went on to write:

> It only shows how much more he likes my picture this year—he never expresses himself like that and even with the ‘Daniel’ I came very near in getting a medal. He did not say all of this to me privately there were 3 or 4 persons in the room 2 of which were artists…He said with a ring in his voice that indicated he was at least not ashamed to own me. ‘This is one of my pupils.’\textsuperscript{116}

In addition to the desired approval of his mentor at the Académie Julian, Rodman Wanamaker, the president of AAAP, was granted a viewing of the canvas before it was submitted to the Salon. Wanamaker’s admiration of the work prompted him to insist that Tanner visit the Holy Land to experience the birthplace of the religious sentiment the artist captured in his canvas. Wanamaker and Robert Ogden granted Tanner the opportunity to experience the Orientalism he invoked in the ‘Lazarus’ supporting his travel and study in the Holy Land in February through late April of 1897.\textsuperscript{117}

Although the painting was completed before the artist left for Holy Land in early 1897, when the ‘Lazarus’ was exhibited at the Salon, critics identified an Oriental quality in Tanner’s portrayal of John’s gospel. In response to this assessment the artist replied:

\textsuperscript{114} Tanner made note of the struggles he encountered in attempting to paint a larger version of this theme. “I nearly made a shipwreck trying to follow the advice of a friend who counselled [sic] that a canvas that gave as much promise ‘as this small-sized one should be much larger.’ He prevailed—very likely it flattered my vanity—and I bought a canvas size by ten feet. After working upon it quite a long time, I came to the conclusion that I could only make a much ‘watered’ edition of the smaller one and I recommenced work upon my ‘first love.’” Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life, Part II,” 11772-11773.


\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 96-97.

\textsuperscript{117} Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life.” 11773.
There is Orientalism in the ‘Lazarus,’ but it was a fortunate accident. In the Orient the light, both interior and exterior, the mannerisms of the people, the costumes and habits of living all are vastly different from anything that could be imagined in the West. One should go there every two or three years, at least, to keep in touch with the true Oriental spirit.\(^\text{118}\)

The artist’s travel to Egypt and Palestine emulated the artistic journey white male European and American artists made seeking an exotic inspiration that was provided by the colonial viewing rights they claimed over the Orient. Notably, Tanner’s travel and motivation to experience the Holy Land imitated the journey James Tissot made a decade earlier to study and record the people, customs, and landscape for his illustrations of the New Testament.

After six weeks in Palestine, Tanner began his return to Paris through Venice, where he received notification that the *Resurrection of Lazarus* was awarded a medal and would be purchased by the French government. “I shall never forget the feeling I had upon the reception of this letter…Now letters came from Paris, some with offers to buy; but the one that affected me the most was one from a very old friend in Paris who said, ‘Come home, Tanner, to see the crowds before your picture.’ This was a chance not to be lost. I was off next morning to Paris.”\(^\text{119}\)

Well before Tanner began work on his interpretation of Lazarus’s resurrection from the dead, the biblical narrative enjoyed a rich history of representation in the visual arts and was portrayed by many of Europe’s leading artists. This episode from the gospel of John appears in a variety of media beginning with early Christian frescoes preserved in catacombs, to medieval illuminated texts, such as the Rossano Gospels and Hunterian Psalter, as well as a Byzantine style mosaic found in the Basilica di Sant’Apollinare Nuovo. Canonical artists such as Giotto,

\(^\text{118}\) Tanner quoted in William R. Lester, “Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake,” *Alexander’s Magazine*, 7 (December 15, 1908), 72.

\(^\text{119}\) Tanner, “The Story of an Artist’s Life,” 11773.
Duccio, Tintoretto, Caravaggio, William Blake, and Benjamin West, as well as numerous named and unnamed artists, dating from late antiquity to Tanner’s Belle Époque contemporaries, illustrated Lazarus’s rebirth. Tanner would likely have been aware of versions created by his fellow academicians, including celebrated portrayals by Léon Bonnat (1857, Figure 2-13) the Danish painter Carl Heinrich Bloch (1870), James Tissot (ca. 1886, Figure 2-14), and his mentor, Benjamin-Constant’s, illustration of the resurrection of Lazarus for the Amsterdam Illustrated Bible Society (1895-1899, Figure 2-15).

Tanner may have appropriated elements from a number of these historic and contemporary representations; however, critics in both Europe and America saw stylistic affinities with Rembrandt van Rijn’s seventeenth-century interpretation of this biblical subject. L’Artiste gave Tanner the appellation: “Rembrandt’s unforeseen disciple,” while the British publication The Art Journal referred to the canvas as “small in size, but full of a rich Rembrandt quality, well worthy of development.” London’s Magazine of Arts critic cited Tanner’s Lazarus as one of the Salon’s “most notable works…in spite of its obvious imitation of Rembrandt.”

The Baroque Dutch artist made several images of the resurrection of Lazarus, including an etching in 1632 and another, similar to Tanner’s composition from 1642, (Figure 2-16), as well as an oil on canvas ca. 1630 (Figure 2-17). During the late nineteenth century, Rembrandt’s canvas was held in Paris in a private collection. It is unknown if Tanner ever saw this work in person, but he wrote of the many hours he spent in the Louvre and certainly would have had access to the museum’s extensive collection of Rembrandt’s work. In an interview later in his career, Tanner acknowledged his appreciation for the Baroque master stating: “Rembrandt, yes.

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Now there was a true portrayer of man...Rembrandt’s figures were conceptualized both as paintings and as interpretations of a living reality.”\textsuperscript{122} It is noteworthy that both Rembrandt and Tanner’s portrayals of the narrative diverged from the gospel of John by situating the miracle within the darkness of a burial chamber. This setting deviates from the text, which describes the disciple emerging from the tomb into the daylight and to the astonishment of his mourners.\textsuperscript{123}

Although Tanner may have appropriated elements of Rembrandt’s \textit{Resurrection of Lazarus}, the Belle \textsuperscript{122}Époque painter’s portrayal of salvation and rebirth through the power of faith is distinguished from his predecessors in its ethnographic realism and emotional authenticity. In taking on this biblical narrative, Tanner mimicked an established subject of Euro-American Christian culture and played with the artistic codes and compositional strategies of a respected artist, like Rembrandt, to offer a biblical image that represented the diversity of Christ’s followers.

The artist captured the most dramatic moment of the gospel, when Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth out of the grave. Tanner’s miracle takes place in the dimly lit interior of a cavernous burial chamber. Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus, kneel on either side of Christ. Mary, positioned to the left of Jesus, covers her face clutching her bowed head in her hands. Her face is not visible, but her gesture and long expressive hair reveals that she is overcome with emotion. On the other side of Christ, Martha, although more composed than her sister, gazes up


\textsuperscript{123} It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lift up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus said unto them, Loose him, and let him go. Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed in him. Gospel of John 11:1-45
at Jesus in awe. A crowd of onlookers fills the cave and its entrance, many obscured in darkness. An elderly man with a long wiry beard dressed in beggar’s clothing—who appears strikingly similar to the bearded man in Rembrandt’s painting—looks down upon a miraculously reanimated Lazarus, and supports the disciple’s head as he emerges from the unnatural glow of his own grave.

Despite the obvious theatricality of bringing a dead man back to life, Tanner offered an emotionally and psychologically intense scene that eschewed the sensationalism or formulaic staging of previous portrayals to entice all viewers, regardless of national, racial, gender, or even religious background. In the left of the canvas, the crowd of onlookers is compressed within the tomb displaying an array of expressions that demonstrate astonishment, awe, and even fear in the power they have just witnessed. Instead of adhering to the traditional portrayal of Christ, with arms raised powerfully in a commanding gesture, Tanner chose to describe Jesus as absorbed and meditative. This decision represents a continuation of the absorptive project Tanner began in *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, enticing all viewers to participate in and experience the miracle themselves, resisting theatricality for focused emotional intensity.

Compositionally, the grave from which Lazarus emerges is positioned in the foreground, pushed towards the pictorial surface, which separates the viewer from the scene inside the canvas. This strategy effectively forces the viewer to enter the space in a similar manner to the positioning of graves in Caravaggio’s ca. 1600-1604 *Deposition of Christ*, (Figure 2-18) and Courbet’s 1849-1850 *Burial at Ornans* (Figure 2-19).

In his analysis of *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, Marc Simpson identifies the compositional revisions that were made to the final canvas by comparing it to the photograph of the work in progress published in the September 1896 issue of the *Latin Quarter* (Figure 2-12).
Simpson argues that these changes were made to enhance the viewer’s direct engagement with the miracle depicted before them. He observes that “In the foreground, Tanner had originally put a figure on our side of the grave—one hand raised in wonder, back towards us. Eliminating this Rückenfigur complicated the question of the light source...The figure, however, functioned as a surrogate for the viewer; by giving us access without this intermediary, Tanner compels us to experience the miracle directly.”

Likewise, Woods underscores how the artist mimicked Rembrandt’s own departure from biblical accuracy by situating the viewer within the confined space of a crowded tomb to heighten the emotional intensity and directness, effectively replacing the exterior clarity of daylight “with a restrictive space of spiritual intimacy.”

By mimicking the interior setting Rembrandt used in all three of his Lazarus inspired works, Tanner not only facilitated the audience’s participation in the scene, but also utilized the darkness of the burial chamber as a mode of camouflage or protective covering. The palette of Tanner’s *The Resurrection of Lazarus* is dark and warm, composed almost entirely in shades of black, brown, and golden yellows with strategically placed white highlights. The deployment of light is similar to that of the tenebrist followers of Caravaggio, as well as Rembrandt’s sensitive rendering of light for psychological and spiritual effect. The dark ambiguousness of the tomb’s interior provided Tanner the opportunity to render complex light effects that simultaneously concealed and revealed, reinforcing the ambivalent effects of mimicry.

As Tanner’s style evolved during the early twentieth century, his manipulation of light for symbolic effect, in often mysterious and dark environments, remained a signature of the artist’s religious paintings. These scenes are set at night or in shadowy interiors, which employ

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the presence or possession of light as an indicator of spirituality and holiness. In Tanner’s ‘Lazarus’ a supernatural light emanates from the tomb communicating the disciple’s unyielding faith in Christ. In the New Testament, Lazarus is described as one of the most ardent and faithful followers of Jesus. For this he is rewarded by God, bathed in spiritual light and resurrected from the dead.

The dark setting for this miracle serves to emphasize Lazarus’s holiness in the form of light, but it also provides an degree of anonymity and protective covering intended to camouflage Tanner’s corrective of traditional Christian imagery, which traditionally featured an all white cast of characters. The artist populated the dark tomb with a heterogeneous and anti-hierarchal crowd of Others. Tanner’s ensemble of Others is represented by a diversity of age, race, and gender, many of which are obscured and ambiguous within the shadows of the tightly packed interior. Most notable is an Orientalized black man wearing a white turban. Art historian Kristin Schwain has noted the visual importance of this astonished looking figure within the composition. Within the dark canvas, the black figure is the only witness that wears white robes, visually connecting him with the white light of Lazarus’s resurrection and the daylight that creeps in through the entrance of the tomb. Schwain interprets this aesthetic choice as: “linking the black man to notions of resurrection, liberation from death, and enlightenment.”¹²⁶

When the canvas was exhibited at the Salon, audiences did not view the inclusion of non-white Europeans in the composition as subversive; instead, Tanner’s portrayal was lauded as an effort to portray a biblical episode in an authentic and historicized manner. Tanner’s cast of racially diverse, non-western figures was interpreted by critics as participating in an artistic trend made popular by the exotic-ethnographic interest of nineteenth-century descriptions of the

Orient, made famous by Gérôme and his teacher Benjamin-Constant. Tanner would have been exposed to, and possibly became interested in, representing ethnographic types during his studies with Eakins and Benjamin-Constant. Benjamin-Constant in particular was known for his investment in rendering exotic, Oriental figures with archaeological and ethnographic detail. He was recognized by being made the co-president of the Société des Peintres Orientalistes Français at its inception in 1893.

The Orientalizing of Tanner’s black figure also represents another aspect of Rembrandt’s work. Rembrandt often depicted his biblical figures in exotic garb, exemplified in the Oriental clothing and accoutrements, which appear in *Judas Repentant and Returning the Pieces of Silver*, *Joseph Accused by Potiphar’s Wife*, and the ca. 1635 *Belshazzar’s Feast* (Figure 2-20) among many others. Both Rembrandt and Tanner’s decision to Orientalize their religious figures was likely an effort to link the modern inhabitants of the Holy Land with those from the biblical past.

Additionally, Tanner’s Orientalizing of ‘Lazarus’ may have directly invoked and mocked James Tissot’s contemporary series of New Testament watercolors. Tissot’s images for the *Life of Christ* were celebrated as verifying biblical narratives “by providing physical evidence for Christ’s historical reality.”127 Tanner negotiated historic and contemporary Orientalized representations of religious narratives to capitalize on his white western audience’s predilection for “authentic” images of the Holy Land. More importantly, the artist’s Orientalism provided him with an alibi to insert racial diversity his religious paintings. Tanner could have depicted the resurrection of Lazarus in any number of ways by mimicking well-known and established models from the past. Therefore, it is significant that he chose to Orientalize the scene as it

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allowed him to portray non-white individuals by appropriating a visual discourse that was sanctioned and valued by white culture.

Tanner carefully calculated his approach in mimicking and mocking biblical art to appeal to white viewers by using a historically tested subject to camouflage his challenge to the authority and exclusive ownership white worshipers held over Christianity and its interpretation in fine arts. *The Resurrection of Lazarus* was a biblical narrative most Christians during the late nineteenth century would have immediately recognized. Although the artist’s interpretation of this gospel episode imitated historical conventions, Tanner’s ‘Lazarus’ also mocked the Euro-American tradition of biblical art by replacing the all-white followers of Christ with a diverse cast of figures regarded as Others in Belle Époque society. He playfully repeated and revised elements of traditional biblical art to offer a corrective image that represented the heterogeneous reality of those that identified as Christians throughout the world. By representing the diversity of Christian believers, Tanner created an image that promoted social equality and humanity through the power of faith and spirituality. The effect of this representation validated and gave visibility to Other Christians, undermining the authority white culture held over the practice, interpretation, and portrayal of these beliefs, a mission that was intimately connected to the religious and social imperatives of the AME Church. Tanner’s ensemble of Others in Lazarus’s tomb “encapsulated much of the teachings of his father-the belief that all people were created equal in the eyes of God and that the struggles of the Jews could be seen as parallel to the struggles of blacks to free themselves from bondage.”

Critics praised ‘Lazarus’ for its authenticity; however, there were those in the black community who were more perceptive in identifying the artist’s motives. W.S. Scarborough’s

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128 Pohl, *Framing America*, 318.
assessment of the canvas was that “Mr. Tanner studied to put ‘race in it’…[He] went straight to
the real-the lowly people of Palestine-for his types, and he has succeeded admirably in his
masculine subjects in showing us the Jew as he must have lived and looked nearly twenty
centuries ago.”129

Scholars have interpreted Tanner’s biblical paintings and deviation from the textual
source as a form of visual exegesis. This personal interpretation of the gospel of John, informed
by AME Church teachings, allowed Tanner, as the first spectator and creator of the image, to
identify with struggles and oppression of the holy figures he portrayed. Within this context it is
tempting to interpret the hazing incident at PAFA that resulted in the artist tied and “crucified” to
his easel on Broad Street, as an event that moved him to relate with the condemned and
marginalized, but also the spiritually resilient biblical figures he chose to represent.

Naurice Frank Woods Jr. convincingly argues that Henry Tanner possessed a special
affinity for the figure of Lazarus. Although the artist never specifically returned to the subject of
Lazarus’s resurrection, he continued to portray biblical narratives that featured the disciple’s
sisters Mary and Martha. Additionally, he painted several versions of *Christ in the House of
Lazarus*, most significantly a canvas that was exhibited in the 1914 Salon (Figure 2-21), which
included a self-portrait of the artist. A study for this painting, held in the Smithsonian’s
American Art Collection, presents Tanner embodying the figure of Lazarus (Figure 2-22).

Woods points out that “No other known religious painting by Tanner contains a self-portrait, and

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129 Scarborough, “Henry Ossian [sic] Tanner,” 666. For the relationship between the Jewish people and blacks’
oppression see Kristin Schwain’s study of Henry Tanner’s biblical paintings and his investment in the AME Church
teachings in which she expands upon the history and affinities black Americans shared with Jews. “Their association
with the Jewish people began soon after they arrived in the New World and learned the tenets of Christianity from
European American slave owners. The Africans identified themselves as God’s chosen people by relating the
Exodus story to their own experience in slavery…This general use of Jewish history to construct an African
American past was employed, too, by the AME Church.” Schwain, “A School-Master” to Lead Men to Christ,” 54-55.
this version of Lazarus appears to have been a favorite of his, as he exhibited it regularly, including at the Salon of 1914.” By adopting the figure of Lazarus as an avatar, Tanner further used religious camouflage to insert his own presence and subjectivity into the work making visible his practice and beliefs as a black Christian for a white audience.

The Reverend Bishop wrote extensively of the mutual oppression that blacks and biblical figures endured and made attempts to bring to light the contribution non-whites made in the foundation of Judaism and Christianity. Benjamin Tanner denounced the racist hypocrisy of white Christians who used biblical texts to normalize segregation and oppression of other races asserting that “white scholars [are] so remorseless that [they have] not hesitated to lay unholy hands upon the Scripture of God.” Leaders in the AME Church were vocal in criticizing white Americans’ racist distortion of Christianity arguing: “that the New Testament preached a gospel of inclusion and racial harmony, and once white scholars read the Bible through a nonracist lens they would grasp Christ’s true vision.”

Henry Tanner’s religious works of the late nineteenth century were an effort to recognize the existence and role that racial and gendered Others played in Christianity, but were also images that ultimately sought to overcome racial distinctions in favor of equality and spiritual unity. During a trip to Paris, Booker T. Washington described how that artist’s award-winning canvas had the power to erase difference by elevating viewers’ thoughts and discourse beyond

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131 In 1869 Benjamin Tanner wrote: “No people now exist who can trace more clearly their paternity than the Negro. The genealogical table of the Negro, written in his own flesh remains. Ages of scouring have not sufficed to erase it. Written by the finger of God, it is more enduring than the stones of Sinai. It remains, and will remain the badge of our suffering, the triumph of our courage.” From The Negro’s Origins and Is the Negro Cursed, 1869, 22. See Schwain, “A School-Master to Lead Men to Christ,” 58-59.

the categories of race, gender, and class. In witnessing individuals’ reactions to Tanner’s ‘Lazarus’ in the Musée du Luxembourg, Washington stated:

Few people ever stopped, I found, when looking at his pictures, to inquire whether Mr. Tanner was a Negro painter, a French painter, a German painter. They simply knew that he was able to produce something which the world wanted—a great painting—and the matter of his color did not enter their minds.\textsuperscript{133}

While Washington was convinced that Tanner’s work was successful in encouraging a white audience to overcome obsessive racial classification, contemporary reviews and publications announcing Tanner’s success reveal that Americans in particular were not ready to look beyond the racial binary. As Tanner’s reputation and international accolades grew, the American press took notice. While never losing touch with his African American heritage and cultural upbringing, the artist desired to be judged on the artistic merit and talent demonstrated by his work, not by associations or assumptions made according to his complexion. However, American critics and journalists were quick to classify him as a “Negro” painter highlighting his race over his artistic and aesthetic achievements. Among many others, the Harper’s Weekly review of The Resurrection of Lazarus noted: “Not the least interesting fact in connection with the picture is that Mr. Tanner is a colored citizen of the United States.”\textsuperscript{134}

For an article titled “Exile for Art’s Sake,” published in the American journal Alexander’s Magazine, the author, William Lester, summarized Tanner’s arduous journey in achieving artistic and professional success. Lester addressed his American readers in an admonishing tone, underscoring the societal prejudices that forced the artist to flee the land of his birth in order to pursue an artistic career in France. Lester described Tanner as:

\textsuperscript{133} Washington, \textit{Up from Slavery}, 1901, 202.

A distinguished American artist, less known and honored in his own country than in the centers of European art...Everywhere in the art world his name and fame were known—save only in America, the land of his birth...Mr. Tanner had to make a difficult choice between expatriation and surrender of artistic ideas...There is no nationality nor race in art, and Mr. Tanner has found in Paris none of the obstacles that might have barred his way to success in his own land.\textsuperscript{135}

Despite the author’s rebuke of American racial divisions, he could not help but fall into the trap of defining the artist in accordance to his appearance. Reiterating the belief that the artistic identity and blackness were somehow incompatible, in order to validate Tanner’s work, Lester denied the artist’s African origins:

It is a singularly mixed strain of blood that flows in the artist’s veins; for in his personality there is little to no trace nor suggestion of African ancestry. His clear, grey eyes are of the Aryan type; his complexion is a clear white, bronzed by the sun in an active outdoor life. His features are of the classical Roman mold, his carriage, attire and manner that of the modern Parisian. His thick, dark, curly hair, brushed carelessly back from a fair, broad brow, suggests the southern Latin races rather than types of tropical origin.\textsuperscript{136}

Recent publications debating Tanner’s personal understanding and relationship to his race have stirred important, yet emotional, debates regarding the artist’s connection to black artistic and cultural movements of the twentieth century. Much of this debate centers on an excerpt of a letter Tanner wrote to the American art critic Eunice Tietjens in response to the draft of an article featuring the artist, which she planned to publish in the \textit{International Studio}.

The author made a point to praise his artistic accomplishments in spite of the many obstacles he faced as a “Negro artist.”\textsuperscript{137} Tanner thanked Tietjens for her high estimation of his work, but challenged her classification of him as a “Negro artist.” In his reply to Tietjens, he asked her a rhetorical question: “Now am I a Negro?” The statement exemplifies Tanner’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{135} Lester, “Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake,” 69 and 73.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Lester, “Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake,” 70.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Henry Ossawa Tanner papers, 1860s-1978, bulk 1890-1937. AAA Smithsonian Institute.
\end{itemize}
objection to the American classification of race based on the “one drop rule,” which enforced a strict White/Black, or White/Other racial binary, classifying those with any trace of African ancestry as black and therefore Other to normative white culture and society. In his reply Tanner wrote:

Now am I a Negro? Does not the ¾ of English blood in my veins, which when it flowed in “pure” Anglo-Saxon men and which has done in the past effective and distinguished work in the U.S.—does this not count for anything? Does the ¼ or 1/8 of “pure” Negro blood in my veins count for it 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.  

Tanner’s response makes it clear that he does not attribute his talent to either his “Negro” or “Anglo-Saxon” blood and mocks the very notion or possibility of racial “purity.” His quotation of the word “pure” emphasizes his personal understanding of the false binary that was fabricated and enforced by American racial categorizations and the creation of a color-line, a topic Du Bois will later identify as the “problem of the twentieth century.”

Tanner’s grandniece describes his nuanced approach to his mixed Euro-African heritage, defending him against accusations that he sought to abandon his “blackness.” She asserts that: “Henry Tanner recognized himself for what he was, an American who could trace his complex genealogy from multiple ethnicities and who was raised in a family that identified with and made great efforts to advance African American culture and society.”

While Tanner’s mimicry and camouflaged mockery earned him recognition and at least a temporary acceptance into elite Belle Époque fine art in Europe, the American press continued to reinforce his race over his merit as an artist, a preoccupation that would haunt the artist’s

138 Henry Ossawa Tanner’s letter to Eunice Tietjens, dated May 25, 1914 and Eunice Tietjens, unpublished manuscript, 1914, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

posthumous legacy. Henry Tanner’s efforts to overcome the segregation of his work and classification as “Negro” artist in the United States may have inspired him to conceive of an art that pushed beyond the mimicry and mockery of pre-existing white ideals to create an entirely new image of universality and unity through the concept of hybridity.
Figure 2-1. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893, oil on canvas, 124.5 x 90.2 cm., Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA.

Figure 2-2. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Thankful Poor*, 1894, oil on canvas, 90 x 111.75 cm., private collection.
Figure 2-3. Attributed to Henry Ossawa Tanner, Photographic study for *The Banjo Lesson*.

Figure 2-4. Eastman Johnson, *Negro Life in the South (Old Kentucky Home)*, 1859, oil on canvas, 91.45 x 115 cm., New York Historical Society, NY.
Figure 2-5. Willy Miller, *I se So Happy*, wood engraving after lost painting by Thomas Hovenden, n.d.

Figure 2-6. Thomas Eakins, *Negro Boy Dancing*, 1878, watercolor, 45.7 x 55.8 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.
Figure 2-7. Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Group or Freedman’s Memorial*, 1876, bronze, Lincoln Park, Washington DC.

Figure 2-8. Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498-1500, Marble, St Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City, Rome.
Figure 2-9. Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, *Saying Grace (le bénédicité)* ca.1740, oil on canvas, 49 x 38 cm., Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2-10. Elizabeth Nourse, *Le Repas en Famille*, 1891, oil on canvas, location unknown.
Figure 2-11. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1897, oil on canvas, 94 x 121 cm., Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Figure 2-12. Photograph of *The Resurrection of Lazarus* in progress. Published in *The Latin Quarter* (September/August 1896).
Figure 2-13. Léon Joseph Florentin Bonnat, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1857, oil on canvas, 112 x 145 cm., Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, France.

Figure 2-14. James Tissot, “Resurrection of Lazarus” from *The Life of Christ*, 1886-1894, watercolor and graphite on paper, 25.4 x 18.4 cm., Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY.
Figure 2-15. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, “Christ Raiseth Lazarus,” ca 1895-1899, illustration for the *Holy Bible* Amsterdam Illustrated Bible Society, 1900.

Figure 2-16. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1642, etching and dry point, 15.2 x 11.4 cm., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.
Figure 2-17. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Raising of Lazarus*, ca 1630 oil on panel, 99.5 x 81.3 cm., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA.

Figure 2-18. Caravaggio, *Deposition of Christ*, 1603, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm., Pinacoteca, Musei Vaticani, Rome.
Figure 2-19. Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-1850, oil on canvas, 315 x 668 cm., Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Figure 2-20. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Belshazzar’s Feast*, ca 1635, oil on canvas, 167.6 x 209.2 cm., National Gallery of Art, London.
Figure 2-21. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ at the Home of Lazarus* (lost painting with self-portrait), n.d.

Figure 2-22. Henry Ossawa Tanner, Study (Self-Portrait) for *Christ at the Home of Lazarus*, graphite on paper, n.d. Smithsonian American Art Collection, Washington DC.
CHAPTER 3
CREATING A HOME FOR WOMEN, REALISM, AND RELIGION

As indicative of the previous chapter, the majority of scholarship on Henry Ossawa Tanner remains centered on the artist’s relationship with religion and racial identity. Tanner’s upbringing in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and experiences with the racism of Postbellum America no doubt shaped his work and artistic mission. While Tanner was certainly aware that his African ancestry positioned him as an outsider to dominant nineteenth-century culture, he rejected this position, and responded by creating imagery that revealed the fiction of Belle Époque racial classifications and the deception of white artists’ misrepresentation and erasure of black culture. Much of Tanner’s work is different in how it represents race, not as an affirmation of “blackness,” but rather in its refusal of the White/Other racial binary, illustrating his sophisticated understanding of race as a complex social construction, not a biologically fixed category.

In Chapter 2, I propose that Henry Tanner’s struggle with the ambivalence of double-consciousness is reified in the artist’s mimicry of traditional fine art’s “ideology of whiteness.” The artist’s effort was not to faithfully imitate or replicate, but to undermine dominant models by creating representations that corrected the occlusion of those marginalized in Belle Époque society and culture, including himself. Tanner’s strategy in creating art that represented racial diversity will evolve during the turn of the century to accommodate for his concern and interest in addressing the subjugation of women as Others within patriarchy. His new focus reflected a transformation in his artistic mission, which continued his efforts to correct the misrepresentation of those marginalized in Belle Époque society by underscoring the important and necessary role women played in shaping and supporting culture. This concern inspired Tanner to create imagery

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1 Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History’s Black and Indian Subject*, 32-33.
that focused on the lives of biblical women, and to ultimately adopt a modernist aesthetic strategy that embraced formal abstraction as a means to portray religious figures as both un-fixed and purposefully ambiguous in their race and gender.

This chapter will examine the biblical imagery Tannery created after 1897, which I consider indicative of his relationship with and understanding of the “Other sex.” While remaining committed to religious narratives, the artist’s work indicates a great interest in portraying biblical women, with a particular affinity for Marian imagery. Tanner’s depiction of biblical women also offered him the opportunity to create a visual response to the Catholic Revival occurring in Europe and America during the second-half of the nineteenth century.

While recognizing that the oppression women suffered was different from that of racial subjugation, his own experiences with racism likely made him more aware and sympathetic to the marginalization that many endured within white-patriarchal order. Tanner’s artistic and social project transformed to reflect milestones in his own life and his evolving relationship with women. These gendered relationships provided him a greater understanding of how the otherness of race and gender are different but also imbricated.

**Foundations in Gender Consciousness: The Exceptional Tanner Women**

Tanner scholar Dewey Mosby suggested that Tanner’s heightened sensitivity to the status of women was awakened by a trip to England in September of 1901 to meet Reverend Benjamin Tanner. Henry’s father was in London as a delegate to the Third Ecumenical Conference of Methodism. During their time across the channel, the artist visited the home of Catherine Impey. Impey was a well-known “feminist, temperance agitator, anti-segregationist, and humanitarian worker, and the founder of the *Anti-Caste*, a publication designed to argue against discrimination
and segregation.” The Tanners’s meeting with Impey certainly would have included conversation on contemporary issues of race and gender discrimination, potentially illuminating the intersectionality of these oppressions. Given the artist’s upbringing and the extraordinary accomplishments the women in his family achieved, in spite of their marginalization as women and African Americans, I believe Tanner readily recognized the inequalities and otherness women faced well before his encounter with the renowned feminist in 1901.

The foundation for Tanner’s artistic advocacy and approach to gender was laid within the Tanner family’s Philadelphia home. Benjamin Tanner’s intellectual accomplishments surely provided a model for Henry to aspire to; however, higher education and academic pursuits were not limited to the men in the Tanner household. While Henry’s mother, Sarah Miller Tanner, was busy raising her seven children, she managed to organize the Mite Missionary Society for the AME Church, the first of its kind for African American women. Today the Mite Society continues their work internationally by organizing and facilitating church members’ community engagement to address economic, social, and justice issues. Additionally, Sarah and her daughters were active members in the Pierian Club, an organization that advocated for and supported women’s intellectual pursuits, meeting regularly to study and discuss art, literature, and science. In 1895, Sarah published two articles in the AME Church Review. “A Study of Thoreau” an analysis that contextualized the Transcendentalist’s philosophical writings within the socio-political life of early nineteenth-century New England. This publication was followed by her study of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow later that year.  

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2 Mosby, Across Continents and Cultures, 50 and Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 152.


In addition to his mother’s accomplishments, Henry Tanner’s sister Halle graduated from the Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia and became the first woman, white or black, to pass the medical boards and practice in Alabama. Halle relocated to Alabama at the invitation of Booker T. Washington, who offered her a position as resident physician at the Tuskegee Institute. In a letter from Benjamin Tanner to Washington, Halle’s father expressed his concerns for her success in Alabama, demonstrating an awareness of the multilayered oppression his daughter faced. The reverend wrote: “Of course, we are all anxious about the Doctor. Not that we have any misgivings as to her ability to pass any reasonable and just examination. But we know that both her sex and her color will be against her.”

While working as a physician at the Tuskegee Institute, Halle established the Lafayette Dispensary and Nurses’ Training School. In addition to these remarkable accomplishments, Tanner’s niece, Sadie, earned a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Pennsylvania and later became the first black woman to graduate from Penn’s Law School, pass the bar, and practice in the state of Pennsylvania.

The groundbreaking achievements of the women in Henry Tanner’s life defied gender and racial norms of their time, serving as a foundational example for his belief in the intellectual and cultural capabilities of both women and individuals of color. Tanner’s early and continued exposure to the encouragement of female intellectual activity and the milestones achieved by the women close to him, no doubt shaped his progressive stance toward women’s education and professional pursuits.

Through his own quest for an artistic education, Tanner was likely familiar with the difficulties women artists faced within the patriarchal world of fine art. For example, when he arrived in Paris, women were still denied entrance into the École des Beaux Arts, only acquiring

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6 Ibid., 31.
acceptance after 1897. Being among the most progressive art institutions, both PAFA and the Académie Julian allowed women to enroll in classes, although, during Tanner’s tenure these classes continued to be segregated by sex. At PAFA, women were granted access to the statue gallery to copy casts for “professional purposes” on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings beginning in 1844.

In 1860, women could enroll in coursework, but were limited to anatomy and antique drawing classes, which formally provided them with instruction in the copying of classical plaster casts. Later in 1868, female students acquired access to life drawing classes first with the female and then the male model in 1874. As Tanner would have experienced during his enrollment at PAFA, these life-drawing classes were segregated by sex and male models were almost always draped during women’s study.

Despite being denied entrance to the École des Beaux Arts, aspiring women could find instruction in private ateliers, including the Académie Julian, which was one of the only ateliers in Paris that offered women the opportunity to study the nude figure. These studios, however, were particularly costly for female students, often charging double or more the rate of their male colleagues. While Tanner enjoyed the “race democracy” of France’s art system, given the obstacles the women in his own family overcame to achieve academic and professional accomplishments, he must have been conscious of the ways women artists were systematically excluded from professional artistic opportunities, not on account of their race, but because of the gender expectations of women in Belle Époque society.

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Creating a Home in France

When the artist set sail for Europe in 1891, he could not have imagined that he would never return to live permanently in the country of his birth. Early accounts of his time in France offer insight into his struggle with isolation and loneliness. In Tanner’s 1909 autobiography, he confessed:

I felt what it was to be a stranger in a strange land. True, by good friends I was warmed and fed, both of which I needed, and not until having made the rounds of the student hotels and seeing me comfortably settled did they leave me; yet I was depressingly lonesome. How strange it was to have the power of understanding and being understood suddenly withdraw! The strangeness of it, perhaps, is what made me feel so isolated.8

To assuage this loneness, the artist threw himself into his work. His grueling work habits were so well known that his American patron, Robert Ogden, cautioned him: “Your art draws heavily upon your sympathies, and such work is always both mentally and physically exhausting. If you want to get there quick go slow.”9 In December of 1897, Henry Tanner met a future patron who would have an enormous effect on his future. Atherton Curtis, like Rodman Wanamaker, was an American living comfortably in France as an expatriate, from inherited wealth.10 While their meeting in 1897 was not immediately impactful, Atherton and his wife Louise, and later, his second wife Ingeborg, would become the artist’s closest friends, confidants, and generous supporters for the remainder of his life.11 Their encounter began a new chapter in Tanner’s life and career, which provided him with a sense of belonging and completeness that he lacked.

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10 In a letter to Jesse Tanner after his father’s death Atherton recalls meeting the artist on December 6, 1897 and purchasing a small canvas of the pyramids. Atherton was an avid Egyptologist, but eventually extended his interests into contemporary art. Letter from Atherton Curtis to Jesse Tanner dated November 22, 1937, AAA Tanner Papers.

11 Atherton Curtis Married Louise Burleigh in New York City in 1894. Louise died young in 1910 after which Atherton remarried a Dutch woman Ingeborg Flinch. Atherton and Ingeborg both died in 1943 two days apart from one another.
without the immediate support and stability of his home and family. As evidence of Tanner’s close relationship with the Curtises, Louise, Atherton, and Ingeborg all make appearances in his paintings. Marcia Mathews described the impact the Curtises had in Tanner’s life:

His interest in Henry Tanner initially was as an artist who was worth encouraging. This interest developed into a lifelong friendship that sustained Tanner, materially and spiritually, over many rough moments and made it possible for him to enjoy a life devoted to his art. There were other people in Tanner’s life—the Hartzells, Robert Ogden, and Rodman Wannamaker—whose benefactions help him overcome obstacles, but none who could compare with Atherton Curtis for the extent of his help or the affection that went with it.\(^\text{12}\)

Henry Tanner’s friendship with the Curtises had a tremendous impact on his career, but it was a chance encounter the following year, which developed into a relationship that was arguably the most significant of all his partnerships in shaping and sustaining his art and life. During the summer of 1898, the artist and several colleagues traveled to Barbizon to escape the heat and congestion of Paris and paint landscapes in the Fontainebleau Forest. It was in the idyllic Barbizon environs that Tanner first met his future wife.\(^\text{13}\) Jessie Macauley Olssen was a young white woman of Swedish-American decent. She was raised in San Francisco, where her father worked as an electrician for the shipping industry. The summer of 1898, Jessie, who was an accomplished opera singer, and her sister Elna, who played the piano, traveled to Germany to advance their musical studies. When their father’s business required him to return to San Francisco, Jessie and Elna traveled to Paris and then down to Barbizon where they met Henry

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\(^\text{12}\) Atherton Curtis inherited his wealth from his family’s medical patent on Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup. Atherton was not interested in the family business and relocated to Europe. He assisted several artists in Europe, but only became close with Tanner and his family. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist*, 90-91.

\(^\text{13}\) Most scholars agree that Henry and Jessie first met in the Barbizon, however Dewey Mosby suggested that the two met when Henry was painting landscapes in Cernay-la-Ville, northwest of the Fontainbleau Forest. Mosby, *Continents and Cultures*, 46.
Tanner and his colleagues. In a letter to Atherton’s second wife, Ingeborg Curtis, written in 1909, Tanner reminisced about his first meeting with Jessie:

As you will see by the very important printing at head of letter I have left Paris for a few days during the extreme heat. I shall very likely return at the latest Friday, for several reasons. I spent a summer here before 1900 where I met Roy, Avy and lot of the French painters and incidentally Jessie and Elna Olssen were among the party. I doubt not the memories of those days had something to do with my coming back again. Of course I was not so foolish as to expect to live those days over again.

Despite having very different personalities, their first encounter must have been agreeable because they arranged to meet again in Paris. Marcia Mathews described Jessie as “tall, attractive, and talented. Her warmth and spontaneity were in contrast to Tanner’s gentle reserve.” Mathews continued: “The difference in their personalities seems to have acted as a magnet between them,” and before long, the two were inseparable.

Their courtship was interrupted in October when Rodman Wanamaker suggested the artist return to Palestine for further study, once again financing his trip. Tanner’s second journey to the Holy Land was longer than his first, spanning from October 1898 to March of 1899. It seems the artist threw himself into his studies, perhaps as a distraction from Jessie’s absence. However, a telegram Jessie sent to the artist in late February addressed to his boarding house in Jerusalem, makes it clear they had not forgotten about one another. Her three-word message, “Come to me,” eliminated any inhibitions the shy, modest artist may have had in proposing marriage. On December 14, 1899, Henry and Jessie were married at Saint Files-in-the-Field’s in

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15 Marcia Mathews dates Jessie and Henry’s meeting to 1897, however the artist’s letter states that he met Jessie in Barbizon during the summer, which would have been 1898. Letter reproduced in Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist*, 94. Mosby includes Joseph-Maurice Avy and Roy H. Brown among the painters Tanner was with at Cernay-la-Ville the summer of 1898. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 46.


17 Ibid.
Bloomsbury, London. Through the many travels, triumphs, and struggles they shared, the couple’s 26-year relationship was to be a singularly happy one.\(^{18}\)

Jessie’s outgoing and gregarious character seems to have made Henry not only more sociable, but also accessible to journalists and aspiring artists. It was after their marriage that Helen Cole, journalist for *Brush and Pencil*, provided her American audience with one of the first artistic profiles on Tanner.\(^{19}\) Cole described Tanner’s work ethic and shyness, which she noted had improved over the years, no doubt due to Jessie’s influence and sociability. The journalist reported:

He is one of the hardest workers in the quarter, and has been very little known in student circles for the reason that with the roystering café habitués he has little sympathy. Now that he is so much sought, he is coming out of his shell a little more, and this year, for the first time, he will hold receptions twice a month in his studio in the Boulevard Saint Jacques.\(^{20}\)

Jessie’s role in encouraging Henry to be more accessible advanced his professional standing and social ties with fellow artists. Her position as social mediator was just one of the many roles she played in his life. Beginning in 1898, Jessie would serve as the model for many of the artist’s biblically inspired works.\(^{21}\) Art historian Alan Braddock, has suggested that by frequently employing Jessie as a model for his religious imagery, Tanner “established an

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Many of the interviews Tanner granted during his career were with female journalists. It is tempting to speculate that as part of the artist’s advocacy for women’s access to education and professional opportunities, he made an effort to speak with female journalists when possible. I thank Brigitte Weltman-Aron for bringing this to my attention. Helen Cole, “Henry O. Tanner, Painter” *Brush and Pencil*, vol. 6, no. 3 (June 1900), 103-104. E.F. Baldwin’s “A Negro Artist of Unique Power,” published in the *Outlook* also appeared in April of that year.


especially rich structure of autobiographical relations in the picture that once again underscores Tanner’s strong identification with the story of Christ.”  

During the twentieth century, Tanner’s work continued to echo his experiences, travels, and beliefs. Beginning in 1900, Jessie and Henry spent their summers in the small village of Trépied near the coastal artists’ colony of Étaples in northern France. Trépied became a refuge for the Tanners providing them respite from the urban chaos of Paris. In 1904, Henry purchased property in the village and collaborated with other expatriates to establish the Société Artistique de Picardie. Several other American artists took up residency near the Tanners, forming what became known as the American colony of Trépied. Included among these was Myron Barlow, who lived next to the Tanner property and became especially close with Henry and Jessie. The artist previously met Barlow, a native of Detroit Michigan, when he arrived in France and joined the American Art Students’ Club of Paris.

Both of the Tanner homes in Trépied, Les Charmes and later Edgewood, echoed the comforts and intellectual synergy Henry enjoyed in his childhood home on Diamond Street in Philadelphia. The Trépied Tanner residence was a space for friends, relatives, patrons, journalists, and colleagues to converge. With Jessie by his side, the artist was less withdrawn and generously opened his home to host social gatherings. Jean-Claude Lesage, an art historian who has written extensively on the artist colony and those working in Étaples during the Belle

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22 Alan Braddock, “Painting the World’s Christ,” 16.

23 The official site of the artists’ colony was identified as at Le Touquet Paris-Plage, Pas-de-Calais. In their catalog chronologies, PAFA’s Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit and the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Henry Ossawa Tanner, both date the purchase of this property to the spring of 1904. Alternatively, Lesage dates the acquisition of Les Charmes to 1908 after Tanner returned from studying in Algeria. See Jean-Claude Lesage, “Tanner, The Pillar of Trépied,” in Henry Ossawa Tanner, Modern Spirit, edited by Anna O. Marley, 87-97 (LA: University of California Press, 2012), 89 and Lesage, Jean-Claude. Peintres américains en Pas-de-Calais: la colonie d’Étaples.

Époque, identified Tanner as a “pillar” of the community. Locals of the village, including Myron Barlow’s frequent model, Louise Grandidier, joyfully recalled the summers when Henry would bike into Étaples from Trépied on a tricycle towing Jessie in a little wagon.25

No longer “strangers in a strange land,” Jessie and Henry created a home for themselves in Trépied. Between 1910 and 1914 the Tanners made Les Charmes their permanent residence, while Henry maintained a studio apartment in Paris.26 It was in Trépied, surrounded by his family, friends, and colleagues that the artist finally found his home away from home. He had achieved a sense of belonging and was at the height of his professional career.

Henry Tanner’s work during the first decade of the twentieth century reflected this domestic contentment by underscoring the importance of home in his religious narratives. Biblical domestic scenes were a way for the artist to explore and promote both the real and spiritual satisfaction a collaboration of religion, family, and home could provide. This sentiment was echoed by F.J. Campbell, the editor for the Fine Arts Journal, who reported his conversation with the artist, noting “Mr. Tanner told me that one of his aims was to present the simple domestic side of biblical personages. He said that the Bible was full of suggested domesticity. He is not painting actual incidents, as they have a thousand times been represented, but that quiet suggestion of Bible characters as we might imagine them to be.”27

Evidence in how Tanner merged his personal, spiritual, and artistic ideals is found in the canvases Christ at the Home of Martha and Mary (1905), The Visitation (Mary Visiting Elizabeth) (ca. 1909), The Holy Family (ca. 1909-1910) and two versions of Christ at the Home

of Lazarus. The artist’s choice to portray these specific gospel narratives had the effect of highlighting women’s presence in the scripture, which Tanner viewed as translating to women’s equally important role and contributions to a spiritual life. Additionally, in composing these domestically set biblical narratives, Tanner incorporated portraits of his wife, Jessie, his friends and benefactors, Ingeborg and Atherton Curtis, as well as a self-portrait, revealing the canvases’ autobiographical nature.

The undated version of Christ at the Home of Lazarus (Figure 3-1), cast Jessie in the role of Lazarus’s sister Martha. The figure sweeps into the composition from the left, attentively balancing a small platter with food, which she eagerly presents to Christ, who is seated at a table with Mary and Lazarus, portrayed by Ingeborg and Atherton. The location of the original canvas is unknown and survives only through a black and white photograph. From this photograph, it is clear that Tanner replicated the portraits of Ingeborg and Atherton for the Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Atherton Curtis with Still Life (Figure 3-2), or alternatively cut the original canvas to reimagine the painting of his friend and benefactor as a secular portrait.

In both versions of the Christ at the Home of Lazarus, Tanner’s collaboration with his wife and benefactors identified the home as a site of spiritual sanctuary, a space that cultivated a sense of belonging and friendship. As such, these canvases are intimate reflections, which underscored their role in Tanner’s sense of home and spiritual wholeness. While deeply personal to the artist, his biblical imagery was intended to communicate more than just private domestic contentment. Tanner chose his subject matter carefully, depicting Martha and Mary numerous times, to highlight the importance of Christ’s female followers.
In Luke’s gospel narrative, the apostle conveyed Mary’s desire to learn from Christ, describing her as sitting “at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.”28 While the gospel informs the reader of Jesus’s egalitarian position to teach his disciples regardless of gender, class, or race, by portraying Mary seated at the table with Christ and her brother Lazarus, instead of “at the Lord’s feet,” Tanner communicated his own belief that women were as capable and worthy of intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

Martha’s domestic industriousness symbolizes the importance of service and home in fostering and nurturing a spiritual life. However, in the gospel text, Jesus corrected Martha for criticizing Mary’s desire to learn, instead of attending to the traditional female domestic tasks. “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” Historically, Christ’s acceptance of believers, regardless of previous sins, gender, race, class, or nationality was viewed as radically egalitarian in rejecting first-century Mediterranean patriarchal order, as well as the social norms of Judaism. Breaking with traditional rabbinic teaching practices, Christ welcomed Mary, and other women throughout the gospels, to sit with him and learn, an activity reserved only for men in Judaism at this time. The rejection of gendered social norms is evident by Martha’s response, and her uncomfortability, with Mary’s choice not assist to her with the traditional domestic role of service. Ultimately, Christ chastises Martha, stating that Mary has made a wise choice, illustrating the inclusivity of his message and the desire for equality in pursuing knowledge and a spiritual education.

28 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. Luke, 10: 38-42
While the gospel elevated intellectual pursuits over industriousness, rather than disparage Martha, Tanner chose to emphasize her active role as well. In the 1912 version of *Christ at the Home of Lazarus*, Tanner replaced Atherton Curtis with his self-portrait, embodying the figure of Lazarus (Figure 3-3). Sadly, the location of this canvas is also unknown, but Clara MacChesney, an artist and journalist for the *International Studio*, offered a description of the painting when it was first exhibited at the 1912 Paris Salon:

H.O. Tanner continues to be the poet-painter of Palestine…In this admirable picture, yellow and brown tones predominate…His large Salon picture shows Christ at supper in the home of Lazarus. Martha standing and in the act of serving at the left. Christ is seated at the center, a self-portrait of the artist is represented at the right with Mary at his side. In the figure of Martha Tanner tries to raise her from the position of a worried housekeeper to that of a human and very sympathetic woman, lovingly serving her master. He considers this one of his most successful figures.  

MacChesney’s description of Martha is perceptive in identifying Tanner’s desire to portray her, not simply as a foil to her sister Mary, or as the ideal patriarchal model of woman as attentive and subservient. Instead, the artist attempted to “raise” Martha’s position, rendering her as more than a servant, but an active participant in the composition, granting her humanity and substance equal to that of her siblings seated with Christ. She serves them not out of spite, but as MacChesney identified, with “sympathy” and “love.” Martha’s humanity and sincerity is made more evident knowing that the artist took care to model the figure after his wife. Tanner’s investment in these biblical sisters recognized both the industriousness and intellectual equality of women. By underscoring the multidimensional aspects of women’s lives, Tanner described the complexity in talent, intelligence, service, and faith of the women in his life.

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Marian Imagery and Mothers of the Bible

In 1897, after traveling to Egypt and Palestine the spring of that year, Tanner stopped in Italy visiting Venice, Rome, Florence, and Pisa to study the work of the “Old Masters.” While seeking out noteworthy Christian art and architecture in Italy, he could not have escaped the Catholic Church’s intense efforts to promote the dogma of Mariology. Marian devotion became particularly important after the mid-century papal doctrine of *Ineffabilis Deus*, which officially declared the Virgin’s immaculate nature. This declaration and the imagery it inspired became a feature of the Catholic Revival, adopted first by Catholics in Italy and then quickly implemented around the world.  

The purpose of the *Ineffabilis Deus* was to indisputably recognize the Virgin Mary’s immaculate conception. The Catholic Church’s proclamation that Mary was born without the original sin that burdened humans is a belief that continues to be rejected by Protestant denominations. The authoritarian nature of the papal decree increased tensions between Catholics and Protestants, highlighting the two faiths’ differing beliefs on the nature of Mary and her role in Christian worship. In addition to what many Protestant worshipers viewed as provocative actions by Pius IX, his successor, Leo XIII, continued to emphasize Mariology, becoming the first church leader to officially embrace the Virgin’s status as Mediatrix, stressing her divine nature and role as a mediator to Christ.

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30 The Catholic Revival in Italy was inspired in part as a reaction to the secularization advocated by the Risorgimento, the unification of Italian states during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1846 at the beginning of his tenure, Pope Pius IX was viewed as a modern reformer, but two years later he was forced to flee Rome during a political uprising in the city. When returning to the Vatican in 1850, he rescinded his more liberal approach and “began to view Italian nationalism, constitutionalism, and liberalism as threats to the institution of the Church.” The Vatican’s Catholic allies, France and Austria, orchestrated the Pope’s return to power. Shortly after, Pius pressured the last Hapsburg Duke of Tuscany, Leopold II, to overturn his “Statute of Rights,” which provided Tuscans with secular privileges. In 1851, Leopold repealed his liberal statute and signed a concordat with the Vatican that retracted these recently acquired secular freedoms and subjugated all non-Catholics in Tuscany. The agreement and its enforcement were fiercely draconian, including imprisonment if found privately reading the Bible. See Nancy Thompson, “The Immaculate Conception Window in Santa Croce and the Catholic Revival in Nineteenth-Century Florence,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 1-16.
While in Florence, Tanner had the opportunity to see the Fra Angelico’s well-known portrayals of the annunciation in the San Marco Dominican convent complex. In a letter to Ingeborg Curtis, he described how the work inspired his own interpretation of the gospel of Luke. “I made a wise choice when I saw Fra Angelico’s Annunciation in Florence. I refused to buy even a photograph of it preferring to live with the impressions I had.”

Fra Angelico painted several versions of the Annunciation, including two in the convent dormitory at San Marco in Florence (Figure 3-4), which would inspire many subsequent versions of this theme. While the encounter between Mary and the Angel Gabriel appears several times throughout the New Testament, the gospel of Luke provides the fullest account of this event.

In formulating his own version of the annunciation, Tanner continued his practice of mimicry by appropriating elements from Fra Angelico’s canonical Catholic representation and making revisions to the Quattrocento model. His modifications offered a corrective Methodist interpretation of Mary’s nature and her role in Christian worship. In The Annunciation (Figure 3-5), Tanner attempted to remedy the centuries of representations that portrayed biblical women as idealized abstractions, devoid of substance and subjecthood, and ultimately Other to the men who dominated these narratives.

31 After visiting the Holy Land and observing “biblical women” first hand, the artist once again called upon a canonical work of art as a starting point, but relied on his personal impression and experience with the image, instead of attempting a direct mimetic replication of the original. Letter from Henry to Ingeborg Curtis ca. 1909. Henry Ossawa Tanner papers, 1860s-1978, bulk 1890-1937. AAA Smithsonian Institute.

32 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38
Tanner’s Mary and angel are situated within a humble, but warm and welcoming domestic environment once again reinforcing the importance of home. The rich palette of deep reds, browns, and gold is a great departure from Fra Angelico’s higher keyed, but now admittedly faded, fresco in San Marco. Both Fra Angelico’s Mary and Gabriel are idealized with golden-blond hair and exceptionally pale complexions. Mary’s face is unemotional defying expression, but she bows slightly in deference with her arms crossed in front of her stomach in a gesture of prayer and submission. The angel genuflects and repeats the Virgin’s gesture as a form of mutual greeting. Gabriel’s comparatively rich attire of a rose robe embellished with gold embroidery communicates his divine status. His wings are comprised of sharp angular forms, fashioned with layers of fantastic multi-chromatic feathers.

Fra Angelico’s Annunciation is a highly idealized rendering of the miraculous encounter, leaving the fresco formulaic and emotionally sterile. In contrast, Tanner presented these biblical characters in a way that emphasized an emotional and material authenticity. At this point in his career, Tanner’s academic education, as well as the realism of Eakins and Benjamin-Constant, still had a considerable influence over his aesthetic approach. While the academic-realism of The Annunciation may be attributed to an emulation of his teachers, it was also an approach that Tanner deemed appropriate to communicate the reality and material presence of women’s contributions to a spiritual life.

Helen Cole, a contemporary journalist for Brush and Pencil, described the studied realism of Tanner’s The Annunciation.

33 Marcia Mathews suggested that Jessie modeled for the figure of the Virgin in Tanner’s The Annunciation; however, this is unlikely as the two did not meet until after the May 1898 Salon exhibition. In Tanner’s letter to Ingeborg Curtis he mentions that they first met during the summer, which would make it impossible for Jessie to be the model for The Annunciation, which was completed the spring of 1898 and shown at the May Salon before they met in Barbizon. Mathews, Henry Tanner: American Artist, 94-96 and Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 162. Further evidence of this is provided by a charcoal study that was reproduced in Helen Cole’s 1900 article (figure 38). An academic nude, likely created in Julian’s atelier, depicts the head and shoulders of a young woman in profile, who appears strikingly similar to the figure of the Virgin in the 1898 The Annunciation.
The young Jewish peasant sitting on the edge of a couch, wearing the common striped cotton of the Eastern women of the poorer class, a costume which they have kept to the present day, no halo or celestial attributes about her, and only the flood of golden light to herald the approach of the angel. It was decidedly an unconventional treatment of this subject, a favorite one with the old masters.34

Tanner portrayed Mary perched anxiously on the edge of her bed. It appears that Gabriel’s presence, which represents the sole source of light in an otherwise dark domestic interior, has just awoken her. Her sublime fear and awe of the holy presence is expressed through her tightly clasped hands and indirect gaze. Mary shrinks into her voluminous robes, only revealing her toes, which peek out the bottom of her garment. She is overcome by the heavy fabric, which itself becomes lost within a sea of blankets on the bed. Her frail form is silhouetted against the dark maroon textile hanging behind the bed. Tanner portrayed her as a noble, but also sympathetic figure, foreshadowing the struggles and tragedy that lay ahead for her.

Unlike the ivory skinned, golden blonde Virgins created by Botticelli and Da Vinci, which would inspire modern portrayals by Edward Burne-Jones and others in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, Tanner’s Mary is pictured with dark hair and large, perceptive, and knowing eyes. The artist does not idealize the Virgin in a manner that aestheticizes her into a beautiful object or set of surfaces to be worshiped. This manner of idealization was typical in Marian imagery from Fra Angelico to the Pre-Raphaelites, which remained popular with conservative audiences and patrons into the late nineteenth century. Burne-Jones described the Virgin as a beautiful stoic figure lacking substance and personhood (Figures 3-6 and 3-7).

Tanner’s aversion to the aesthetic idealization of holy figures was expressed in an interview with the African American artist Hale Woodruff. When asked about his artistic influence, Tanner explained why he did not find great inspiration in Italian Renaissance art:

“Italian art…idealized man according to prevailing aesthetic concepts and this reduced man to a

kind of pictorial anonymity.” In composing *The Annunciation*, Tanner rejected idealization and “pictorial anonymity” to portray Mary as plain, but beautiful in her purity and authenticity. He did not offer her any holy attributes or embellishments to suggest her divine nature, rather emphasized her corporal and emotional reality, representing the Virgin as a convincing image of a pious Palestinian teenager.

The historic and material validity of Tanner’s scene was reinforced by his recent studies in the Holy Land. The Virgin’s dress, the hanging textile, rug, and terracotta pitcher resting on the shelf are items the artist would have likely seen and documented during his travels in Palestine, which provided the canvas a heightened degree of “authenticity.” Counter to the idealized, emotionless Pre-Raphaelite Virgins, the reserved posture and expression of Tanner’s Mary communicates her acceptance of the heavy burden ahead of her, but also hesitation and a sense of self-doubt, reinforcing the humanity and realism of this encounter. She gazes shyly and indirectly at the holy presence in her bedroom, which is manifested in a column of brilliant white light.

After the canvas’s debut at the Paris Salon in May of 1898, reviews of *The Annunciation* noted the unique portrayal of the figure of Gabriel. In keeping with his previous use of light as a signifier of holiness, Tanner presented a radically modern interpretation of Gabriel, which rejected the traditional anthropomorphized form that was standard since the middle ages. Instead, the artist described the divine potency of the archangel’s holy presence through a column of white-hot light that illuminated the face and anxiously clasped hands of the Virgin. The intense spiritual power of this being is suggested through the materiality of thick pure white and yellow impasto. The direct, wet-on-wet application of paint provides a tactile materialism and academic-realism that is in keeping with the technique and realism of Tanner’s mentors, however, his

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choice to describe Gabriel as a glowing apparition also reveals the artist’s interest in the more mystical and esoteric aspects of Symbolism. This early attempt to bridge academic-realism and Symbolism was reiterated in Helen Cole’s review of *The Annunciation*: “Certainly there are few enough in this generation capable of touching the chords he has touched for few have the spiritual insight to paint these scenes realistic, and yet to express all that ought to be told.”

During his visit to the convent of San Marco and experience with Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*, Tanner likely took notice of the inscription that accompanied the fresco. Renaissance art specialist William Hood has identified the top inscription as a hymn to the Virgin, which was painted at the end of the fifteenth century. The lower inscription painted in black letters was likely added by Fra Angelico himself. In Latin, it reads: VIRGINIS INTACTE CVM VENERIS ANTE FIGVRAM PRETERVNDO CAVE NE SILEATVR AVE. Translated as: “When you come before the image of the Ever-Virgin, take care that you do not neglect to say an Ave.” This was a reminder to the Renaissance inhabitants and modern viewer that when entering the dormitory they should offer the Virgin a “Hail Mary.” Hood notes that as part of Dominican practice, the friars would genuflect when praying the Hail Mary, mobilizing an interaction with the fresco that echoed the gesture made by the Angel Gabriel.

Additionally, during his time in San Marco, Tanner would have also viewed the Fra Angelico’s *Coronation of the Virgin* in cell 9 of the dormitory as part of the fresco cycle (Figure 3-8). Much like the Mariology that was emphasized by papal decree of the nineteenth century, Fra Angelico’s portrayal of the crowning of Mary as the Queen of Heaven was not based on

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37 Hood believes the top inscription was added at the same time as the inscription on the Saint Dominici with the Crucifix diagonally opposite, probably in the late 1490s William Hood, *Fra Angelico: San Marco, Florence* (NY: George Braziller, Inc., 1995), 71.

biblical scripture and was therefore rejected by Protestant faiths. In his analysis of this fresco, Hood describes the composition as “divinely visionary.”

As a Christian invested in the Protestant teachings of the AME Church, Tanner certainly would not have ascribed to, and may have even been offended by, Catholic Marian imagery that celebrated the Virgin as a figure devoid of sin and potentially divine in nature. Fra Angelico’s frescoes were intended to inspire devotion and prayer to the Virgin Mary, a practice condemned by Protestant doctrine as it was maintained that Mary was human and prayer was reserved for the divine. In the Methodist tradition, Mary was considered a pious example for Christians to emulate, but was not immaculately born without original sin, and should not be worshiped or prayed to directly. The AME Church viewed excessive devotion to Mary as a distraction from the religion’s true focus on Christ. Catholic portrayals of the Immaculate Conception and Mary as the Queen of Heaven were considered blasphemous or potentially idolatrous by many Protestant denominations.

Tanner’s response to the unnatural, stoically divine, and formulaic portrayals of the Virgin inspired him to create an image of the annunciation that expressed what he believed to be Mary’s true nature: a noble and exemplary woman, but a real corporeal being with human emotions. In his effort to refocus Christian worship on Christ, I propose that Tanner used the realism of Mary as a foil to the abstraction of the Angel Gabriel’s supernatural power.

Additionally, the symbolic interpretation of Gabriel’s holy presence in the form of radiant spiritual light could be the artist’s attempt to synopsize various aspects of Luke’s gospel.40

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39 “The saints are suspended in heaven itself, on clouds; they do not look directly at the Coronation. Instead, one can imagine that what they ‘see’ is in their mind’s, not their body’s eyes, and that the viewer, like the saints, is somehow privy to an occurrence so transcendent that its representation is lifted above the plane of reality, where heavy, corporal bodies must be shown responding to the pull of gravity and interrupting the fall of light. In this fresco neither Christ nor the Virgin is subject to such limitations of the flesh.” William Hood, *Fra Angelico: San Marco, Florence*, 101.
During Gabriel’s visitation, Mary asks how it is possible for her to conceive a child when she remains a virgin. “Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

Tanner’s depiction of the archangel as holy light may actually intend to symbolize the Holy Spirit, reiterating Luke’s testimony that: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” By choosing a highly ambiguous, abstract form to represent Gabriel, I believe that Tanner sought to conflate the Angel Gabriel with that of the Holy Spirit, whom Methodists view as part of the Holy Trinity, being one with God and Christ. The AME Church’s “Articles of Faith” outlines the belief in the unity of the Holy Trinity. “The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty and glory with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.”

To strategically merge these divine figures, Tanner once again appropriated from the history of Christian art, as the divine power of the Holy Spirit was traditionally communicated in the form of light, fire, or a dove. Tanner rendered the Holy Spirit as a modern abstraction because he understood that humans struggled in comprehending the impossibility of three divine entities being one. Accepting and believing in the Holy Trinity required faith and mental

40 This does not appear to be the only instance that Tanner attempted to combine two gospel stories. In Tanner’s 1905 Christ at the Home of Mary and Martha the strange pentimento in the right of the composition might be the obscured figure of Judas. Dewey Mosby suggests that the artist attempted to combine the narrative provided by Luke in which Jesus reproves Martha for criticizing Mary for not helping her serve, and the gospel of John 12:1-8 in which Mary anoints Jesus’s feet with expensive oils, which offends Judas believing she should have given the money to the poor instead. Both narratives occur in the same household. Tanner describes a “difficult effect” in creating the canvas. “The ‘difficult effect’ might have been Tanner’s attempt to combine these two stories into one picture. Based on John’s account, it would be Mary who is stunned by Judas’ criticism, and the background figure would be Judas, here indeed rendered as a shadowy character.” Dewey Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 190.


abstraction, which Tanner felt was best communicated in pictorial terms through visual abstraction. This is reflected and visualized in Mary’s absorbed response to the sublime spiritual light, an experience Tanner invites the viewer to share and contemplate.

The artist’s mimicry and corrective mockery of Catholic annunciation scenes not only shifted focus back to Christ, as a part of the Holy Spirit, but also stressed Mary’s corporal reality and human emotions as antithetical to the abstract nature of the divine. In interpreting a transformative moment and an awakening of faith, Tanner rejected the Virgin’s immaculate nature, and instead, offered her the personhood, substance, and the subjectivity she was stripped of for centuries through her portrayal in Catholic art.

While Henry Tanner shared an affinity with the figures of Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and the archetype of the good shepherd, returning to their narratives throughout his career, the artist had a special fondness and attachment to the Virgin Mary, demonstrated by her appearance in dozens of his canvases. *The Annunciation* was the first of Tanner’s many depictions of the Virgin, and to this day, remains the most celebrated. After his marriage to Jessie in December of 1899, the artist would redouble the humanity of his Marian imagery by modeling her likeness on that of his bride. *Mary (La Sainte-Marie)* (Figure 3-9), exhibited at the 1900 Salon, is the first of many canvases in which Jessie would stand in for the Virgin Mary.

The artist situated Mary seated on a carpet in the interior of an austere Middle Eastern home. Unique to Tanner’s biblical scenes, which traditionally described figures absorbed in spiritual experiences and contemplation, in *Mary*, Jessie—as the Madonna—engages the viewer, gazing pensively and sorrowfully into the audience’s space. Tanner’s portrayal of the Virgin reaffirms his efforts in *The Annunciation*, not to idealize her as stoic or abstractly beautiful, but
rather, to imbue Mary with real emotion, which spills out of the composition through her connection with the viewer’s gaze.

The sorrowful expression and intense emotion conveyed by the Virgin was unconventional, but not without precedence. Instead of the formulaic Madonna and child composition, Tanner drew from the Mater Dolorosa tradition, which described Mary’s grief in mourning Christ’s passion. Mater Dolorosa, or Mother of Sorrows, imagery frequently depicted Mary after the crucifixion, often at the foot of the cross. Jessie’s expression is despondent and her slumping posture indicative of the Virgin’s maternal sorrow; yet, Tanner’s image diverged from Mater Dolorosa types by portraying Mary as a new mother, well before the passion of Christ.

The most obvious element of Tanner’s Mary, which broke with the long history of Madonna and child iconography, was the conspicuous absence of the baby Jesus. The only indication Tanner offers of the child’s presence is a horizontal halo that floats above the bundle of white blankets on the floor before Mary. Daniel Burke’s analysis of this canvas points to Tanner’s inspiration in Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret’s 1885 *Madonna and the Rose* (Figure 3-10), in which the painter concealed the face of the baby Jesus. 43 Tanner’s contemporary, the journalist Helen Cole, supports this suggestion in her 1900 profile on the artist: “Aside from Dagnan-Bouveret, who Tanner acknowledges has influenced him to some extent, there is more true religious sentiment in Tanner’s pictures than in any contemporary work.” 44 Although Tanner may have appropriated the veiling or concealing of the baby Jesus from Dagan-Bouveret’s *Mater Dolorosa*, he pushed this pictorial strategy further, completely

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shrouding and obfuscating the child, throwing its likeness and presence into question. While it is impossible to substantiate without the artist or family’s corroboration, Mary’s intense sadness modeled by Jessie, and the omission of the baby Jesus, may reveal the couple’s challenge to conceive a child at this time.

Tanner’s apparent preoccupation with motherhood is further demonstrated by the “Mothers of the Bible” series he created for the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Shortly after his marriage, the artist conceived of the idea for a series of illustrations that portrayed biblical women. He proposed the idea to Edward Bok, the editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, who commissioned six illustrations describing episodes in the lives of noteworthy mothers of the Bible.45 Tanner defined this project as marking “the commencement of my painting pictures containing all or nearly all female figures.”46 The artist’s choice to seek out and create images for the most popular woman’s journal at the time speaks to his desire not only to create images of women, but to do so for a female audience. Ultimately, only four images portraying Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, and Mary were published between 1902 and 1903.47 Scaling back the project was likely due to the difficulty in translating Tanner’s original paintings into reproducible halftones.48

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47 Sarah appeared in September, Hagar in October, and Rachel in the November 1902 issues of Ladies Home Journal. The last of the series, Mary, was not published in sequence appearing later in the January 1903 issue.

48 After receiving the paintings for Hagar, Rachel, and Mary, Bok contacted Tanner to inform him that the originals would be more difficult and expensive to reproduce than previously thought and requested that the artist scale down the series to four instead of six images. *LHJ* was illustrated using a photomechanical process, which converted original images, such as Tanner’s paintings, into a screen, which were then translated into tiny dots. Due to Tanner’s unique use of light and heavy application of paint, Leja suggests that the reproductions don’t do justice to the original paintings because elements of Tanner’s style were too difficult to translate using halftone. Leja, “Reproduction Troubles,” 148 and 152-154.
None of the original paintings survive, but sketches and the final printed images in *Ladies’ Home Journal* clearly point to Jessie as the model for all of the biblical mothers.

As art historian Michael Leja has identified, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, Tanner’s selection of biblical mothers was in itself a challenge (Figures 3-11). “Of the four women Tanner chose to include in the published series, only one, Mary, could possibly be described as a model mother by the period’s standards of propriety…Even Mary—mother of Jesus Christ, icon of the ‘Madonna,’ an impressive mother by any standards—was unusual, given that her husband was not the father of her child (nor was any man) and that she had only one child.” 49

More unconventional were the figures of Sarah, Hagar, and Rachel who shared their husbands with other women. 50 In an effort to make these biblical mothers suitable to the standards of Belle Époque propriety, Tanner chose sympathetic and positive aspects related to their difficulties with motherhood and family. By early twentieth-century norms, all of the women he portrayed had a very complex and untraditional relationship with their husbands. If the autobiographical nature of Tanner’s biblical paintings is any indication, his choice of Sarah and Rachel, both of whom were infertile for much of their lives, is noteworthy as it may be reflective of Jessie and Henry’s unfulfilled desire for a child of their own.

**Abstraction as Camouflage for the Re-Presentation of Women in Christian Art**

As Tanner collaborated with his friends and family to correct the portrayal of holy women, such as the Virgin and the sisters, Mary and Martha, to emphasize women’s equality and the role of home in a fulfilling spiritual life, he began to experiment with abstraction and embrace the aesthetic philosophy of the Symbolists. Diverging from the realism he employed to

49 Leja, “Reproduction Troubles,” 149.

50 Sarah gave her husband Abraham to her maid Hagar and Rachel shared her husband Jacob with her sister Leah. Both Hagar and Rachel’s maid Bilhah acted as surrogate mothers for the women.
emphasize holy women’s humanity and substance, the artist began to experiment and develop his own stylistic and spiritual approach to making modern religious art. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the figures Tanner incorporated in his biblical canvases became increasingly simplified and abstracted, allowing him to render their gender and racial identity as unfixed and ambiguous.

In addition to satisfying Tanner’s sense of home in France, far from the electric urban incandescence of Paris, the artist found new inspiration on the Étaplean coast in the blue-green natural glow of the evening and moon lit sky. During the summers the Tanners spent in Trépied, Henry Tanner also became interested in creating nautically themed biblical images. He painted multiple versions of Christ walking on water and the miraculous haul of fishes, which took place on the Sea of Galilee. In his study of the Étaples art colony, Jean-Claude Lesage observed: “Until 1914, Tanner’s paintings had a strong air of scenes viewed at Trépied and Étapes. The figures in The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water (ca. 1907) and like those in The Disciples on the Sea of Galilee, are seen sailing in Étaplean boats on the Channel coast.”51

Tanner’s 1907 canvas The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water (Figure 3-12) is an innovative vertical composition in which the artist placed the horizon line at the top of the canvas, which cropped the mast of the fishing boat. The distinctive composition does not include the night sky; rather Tanner illuminated his canvas by rendering the full moon as an iridescent reflection among the impressionistically applied blue and green pigments that created a heavily factured chalky surface to describe the glowing Sea of Galilee. An amorphous divine presence appears on the horizon, taking on a form similar to that of the column of light in The Annunciation (Figure 3-5). The apostles depicted in the boat direct their attention to this spiritual

being with a sense of fear and awe, compelling Jesus to call out: “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”

In transforming the Étaples coast into the Sea of Galilee, Tanner called on several New Testament accounts, including Matthew, Mark, and John’s narratives of Christ walking on water. Using the gospels as a point of departure, Tanner offered a uniquely modern interpretation of this narrative, which continued the artist’s efforts to correct, not only the misrepresentation, but traditional Christian art’s tendency to erase holy women and focus on the lives of the male apostles. In his nautically themed biblical canvases, Tanner sought to remedy the homosocial conventions of Christian art by making visible a female presence within these traditionally male dominated narratives. None of the New Testament accounts name all of the disciples that were present to witness Christ’s miracle of walking on water, yet, according to the custom of Christian art, including famous portrayals of this subject by Rembrandt, Boucher, and Tanner’s contemporary, Tissot, those present are portrayed as men (Figures 3-13 and 3-14).

As was typical of ancient Mediterranean patriarchal order, men and women’s spaces and activities were segregated, relegating the Other sex to the domestic realm, however, as indicated in the scripture, Jesus had both male and female disciples, breaking with first-century Jewish gender and social norms. According to the New Testament, Jesus openly addressed women in public outside the confines of their homes and had female followers that traveled with him, defying their occlusion and confinement to the private sphere. In his The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water, Tanner worked to re-present women into the traditional homosocial spaces of Christian art.

52 Matthew 14: 24-28.
As Tanner’s style evolved during the first decade of the twentieth century, his figures became increasingly simplified and stylized. This abstraction is evidence of Tanner’s maturation as an artist and the desire to develop his own stylistic idiom. In addition to aesthetic concerns, the simplification and abstraction of the human figure, which he frequently employed in nocturnal landscapes, may be interpreted as Tanner’s effort to portray the followers of Christ as ambiguous in terms of gender and race. In this sense, the formal-aesthetic abstraction of holy figures functioned as a form of camouflage. The artist substituted the dark warm palette and domestic interiors he became recognized for at the Salon, with blue-green ethereal ambiguity, rendering the gender and race of the characters in these biblical landscapes un-fixed to disrupt and confuse Belle Époque binaries.

This strategy is illustrated in The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water, which included seven figures in the fishing boat, four of them veiled, rendering their gender identity unknown and open to interpretation. The simplification of the figures, and their veiled garments, which is more typical of biblical and modern Middle Eastern women, allows for the possibility that both male and female followers of Christ took part in this miracle. While the artist’s 1907 The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water rendered the race and gender of the disciples enigmatic, an etching from 1910, Christ Walking on the Waters (Figure 3-15), more definitively incorporated women’s presence in visualizing this Gospel narrative.

Tanner’s primary medium was painting, but the Picardie colony’s investment in a printing press and his collaboration with artists who worked in this medium, allowed him to experiment with etching. Lesage reports that: “Along with painting, Tanner was able to practice engraving in Trépied, an art well represented in the local artists’ colony. If such a practice prompted Tanner to handle the burin or to blacken the lithographic stone it also revived his
affinities with Rembrandt, a master etcher for all eternity…The passion for engraving was common enough that a ‘Club des Graveurs’ was planned at Étaples; however, the declaration of war did not permit its actual foundation.”

Tanner’s etching, *The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water*, portrayed nine apostles in an Étaplean style fishing boat. The most prominent figure, situated in the bow of the boat, is likely the apostle Peter. Tanner singled Peter out by portraying him in light robe and a dark cape against the heavily incised markings used to render the interior of the fishing vessel. Peter’s back is turned to the viewer, as he grasps the edge of the boat to focus, in astonishment, at the apparition of Christ, rendered as anamorphous light, in keeping with the previous 1907 painted version of this narrative (Figure 3-12).

Tanner again described the apostles using an abstracted short hand that rendered them relatively ambiguous. Separated from the primary figure of Peter, the other eight disciples occupy the hull or sit in the stern of the vessel. Several of these figures are depicted with beards or turbans indicating their gender as the more traditionally represented male followers of Jesus. However, at the apex of the stern, Tanner arranged a group of three figures. Two of them are identifiable as men, but the third lacks facial hair, and is veiled in the convention of Marian imagery, suggesting that the figure is a woman. The veiled head of this female follower of Christ is placed parallel with that of Peter’s at the front of the boat, formally suggesting a connection between the two, or their equal importance.

A later biblically themed marine painting, the *Miraculous Haul of Fishes*, ca. 1913-1914 (Figure 3-16), reinforces my suggestion that Tanner sought to include women’s presence and active contributions in Christian narratives by representing them as disciples. Through his art, Tanner attempted to correct the long history of patriarchal Christian imagery that minimized

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women’s status in the church by visually excluding them as witnesses to these miracles despite their presence in the gospel text and Christ’s acknowledgement of them as worthy and equal believers. This critique and correction of historic imagery may also point to the long standing social segregation and subjugation of women within patriarchy, which Tanner recognized denied them certain civil rights, educational, and professional opportunities, but were challenged by the remarkable women in his life.

In his *Miraculous Haul of Fishes*, Tanner chose to include more figures in the fishing vessel than was indicated by the gospel. According to John 21:1-14, there were seven disciples who were witness to this miracle, which occurred after the resurrection of Christ. John names the apostles Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, and notes the presence of two unnamed and un-gendered individuals. Mosby attributed Tanner’s deviation from seven figures to nine to formal concerns stating: “Perhaps to underscore the geometrical aspects of the composition. The four net pullers on the port side of the vessel echo its shape; Peter and his oar and the other oarsman provide vertical and diagonal elements. The two disciples in the foreground who pull in the net and the figure behind and between them form a triangle.”55

In his analysis of the canvas, Dewey Mosby identified nine apostles, however, I would argue that Tanner actually painted ten figures in this composition. Mosby’s description of this canvas highlights the role of Peter within the gospel narrative: “The principle standing figure, Simon Peter, mans an oar and is without a cloak; his light-encircled head inclines toward a bright mauve heap of cloth in the stern.”56 Instead of representing a mauve heap of cloth in the bow of the boat, I interpret the abstracted form as a tenth female figure holding a child (Figure 3-17). The female disciple is rendered with blond hair, wearing mauve clothing. Her back is positioned

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56 Ibid.
to the viewer as she looks toward the horizon. The figure’s head breaks beyond the edge of the vessel, allowing her blond hair to contrast against the blue-green waves. In front of her, she holds a baby that is swaddled in a lighter hue of pink. It is unclear if Tanner intended to portray a specific female disciple, or if he considered the addition of an abstracted and ambiguous female presence within the narrative sufficient, as the original text left the identity of two of Christ’s followers unknown.57

While the Gospels described Christ’s inclusivity of women, a radically egalitarian approach that defied the patriarchal structure of Judaism and ancient Mediterranean gender relations at large, as Christianity spread from the Levant to Rome and beyond, its democratic nature was restructured to adhere with the rigid patriarchal values of Roman society. According to the New Testament, women were important figures in early Christianity, even being the first to witness and believe in Christ’s resurrection before any of his male followers. Yet, as the religion spread throughout the Roman Empire, it became increasingly dogmatic, administrative, and hierarchal. Venerable women, like the Virgin Mary, were idolized into abstraction, while the contributions of real women were suppressed or written out of history by the patriarchal structure of Catholicism and subsequent Protestant movements.

Tanner’s decision to include women in biblical imagery, that was traditionally homosocial, was just one aspect of his larger mission to communicate the equality and unity offered through Christ’s teachings. Additionally, the identity of the female figure in the Miraculous Haul of Fishes as a mother with child is significant, as it represents the importance Tanner placed on the role of motherhood in nurturing a spiritual life. The artist’s earlier portrayal of Jessie as the unconventional sorrowful, biblical mother in Mary (La Sainte Marie) (Figure 3-
may have related to the couple’s unfulfilled desire for a child, but at last, on September 24, 1903, Jessie’s relationship with Henry transformed when she became a mother. Jesse Ossawa Tanner was born in New York, but spent the rest of his life in France, raised between the family’s properties in Paris and Trépied.

**Tanner’s Modern Muse**

Contemporaries of Jessie and Henry described the complementary nature and equality of their relationship, defining it as one of “equal talents.” Jessie played many different roles in Henry Tanner’s life, which he commemorated in his art. Between 1898 and 1912, while helping the artist advance his career and cultivate a sense of home, Jessie was also playing the part of temptress and inspirational muse in *Salome* (Figure 3-18). During these years, she simultaneously appeared as the Virgin Mary, Rachel, Hagar, Sarah, Mary Magdalene, and Martha. The diverse, real and imagined, roles Jessie played in Henry Tanner’s life and art, suggested that she was all of these things to him and more.

Henry Tanner celebrated Jessie’s new position as a mother by continuing to use her as a model for the maternal figure of the Madonna, but updated the shrouded and questionably present figure of the baby Jesus in *Mary (La Saint Marie)* (Figure 3-9) to incorporate the image of his own son, Jesse, as a young Christ. Tanner created two versions of the Madonna and child reading scriptures: *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures*, ca. 1909 (Figure 3-19) and *Christ Learning to Read* in 1911. Scholars including Dewey Mosby, Alan Braddock, and Anna

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58 Lesage, “Tanner, The Pillar of Trépied,” 88

59 *Salome* is the only known female nude Tanner completed, standing out as a fascinating aberration in his oeuvre for its nudity and eroticism. The canvas may have been inspired by a painted sketch Tanner completed of Jessie, titled *Head of a Girl in Jerusalem*. The artist’s 1899 study, now subtitled *The Artist’s Wife*, provides an intimate view of Jessie and Henry’s early relationship. Tanner’s own reserved nature likely made him hesitant to exhibit the canvas publically. He declined to exhibit *Salome* until a retrospective exhibition of his work in New York City’s Grand Central Art Gallery in 1924. However, choosing to only show the canvas once certainly did not translate into his lack of affection for the work. It is telling that Tanner never parted with his *Salome*. It was one of the few works that remained in his studio until his death in 1937.
Marley have identified these canvases as a continuation of Tanner’s investment in elevating domestic and spiritual didactic moments. *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* represents a transformation in Tanner’s portrayals of education, which began in his early rural genre scenes, most famously *The Banjo Lesson* (Figure 2-1).

The 1909 canvas describes the dissemination of knowledge, exchanging the male pupil and teacher’s relationship, to underscore the vital role mothers played as conduits of knowledge and spiritual educators. In comparing this later canvas with his black genre scenes, Alan Braddock notes: “As a statement about education, though, *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* dramatically reverses the terms of Tanner’s *Banjo Lesson* by substituting a feminized culture of writing for the emphatically masculine scene of oral instruction in that 1893 work.”

Similarly, for these later canvases, Tanner employed photography as a compositional aide, capturing images of his wife and son that echoed the figural grouping of *The Banjo Lesson* (Figure 3-20).

*Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* satisfied the artist’s dual aims to correct both racial and gendered occlusion and misrepresentation. By using his son Jesse as the model for a young Jesus, Tanner offered his audience an authentic image of a multiracial figure that challenged the racial binary. In the “Mothers of Bible” series for *Ladies’ Home Journal*, the artist made studies, which included a charcoal drawing titled *Study for Jesus (Study of an Indian)*, (Figure 3-21). The drawing portrayed an ethnically ambiguous young Jesus for the illustration of Mary. In the caption for the image of Mary in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Tanner provided his own text, which clearly articulated his belief in the un-fixed non-binary race of Christ. “The physical characteristics of the child Jesus will always remain a point of discussion.

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60 Braddock, “Painting the World’s Christ,” 18.

61 Mosby suggests that Jessie actually modeled for the figure in this study. Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 179.
No artist has ever produced a type, nor ever will, that has in it all that the varying minds of all time will acknowledge as complete.”

Tanner’s desire to represent the universality of Christ by invoking the mixed heritage of his young son echoes the artist’s impassioned response to Eunice Tietjens’s categorization of him as a “Negro artist.” In outlining his own complex European and African lineage, which undermined the falsehood of America’s racial binary, in his response to Tietjens, Tanner goes on to write: “I suppose according to the distorted way things are seen in the States my blond curly headed boy would be also a ‘negro.’”

Alan Braddock interprets both the representation of his son as a multiracial Christ and the objection to Tietjens as offering “an extraordinarily prescient critique of racial thinking tout court…The light complexion of his son confirmed for Tanner the absurdity or racial thinking and the arbitrariness of color in every sense. Christ remained a universal figure of humanity, regardless of his appearance in pictures.”

Tanner’s tender image of maternal education also attempted to re-present the intellectual contributions, not just of biblical women from past, but modern Belle Époque women and the role they played in fostering an environment that nurtured both spirituality and a sense of belonging. The artist aspired to celebrate and acknowledge women’s interwoven efforts in service and intellect reflecting the valuable work of both Martha and Mary. The women in Tanner’s life presented first-hand evidence and a model for the spiritual, cultural, and scholarly vitality that shaped the artist’s belief in women’s intellectual and social equality.

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His upbringing and the exceptional intellectual achievements of the women in the Tanner family shaped the artist’s view of education and knowledge as a key to empowerment. Tanner expanded upon W.E.B. Du Bois’s belief that higher educational and cultural opportunities should be available to everyone regardless of race, as well as gender. Although Tanner stated that he never had any official pupils, inquiry in his activities in the art colony of Étaples makes it clear that he put his belief in the value of education into action, becoming a leader and mentor to many young artists who sought him out for advice.\textsuperscript{65} The diverse race, nationality, and gender of the artists who learned from, or whom Tanner influenced, serves as the most powerful evidence in his belief for equal access to educational and cultural opportunities.

The artist’s role as a mentor becomes manifestly apparent through his coordination and chaperoning of the aspiring Australian artist Hilda Rix, making her first trip to Morocco possible in 1912. Tanner’s support of Rix illustrates his sympathy and desire to enable and aid in creating opportunities for women artists, whose efforts were marginalized by the patriarchal structure and values of Belle Époque fine art. In his recognition of women’s struggles, it is tempting to consider that when reflecting on the challenges he faced as a young artist and student, Tanner chose to facilitate an artistic pilgrimage for the Australian artist that would help in advancing the artistic “battle for her life.”

\textsuperscript{65} Between 1890 and 1937 students flocked to Paris and Trépied to study with Tanner. Among these were Annie E.A. Walker, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (whom he forgot to pick up at the train station), William A. Harper, and William Edouard Scott. W.E. Scott suffered financial troubles while in France. Tanner invited him to stay at his home in Étaples and under his tutelage he was successful in showing three paintings at the Salon des Beaux Arts at Toquet in 1911. Theresa Leininger-Miller. \textit{New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1932.} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 2.
Figure 3-1. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ at the Home of Lazarus*, n.d., oil on canvas, location unknown.

Figure 3-2. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Atherton Curtis with Still Life*, n.d., oil on canvas, 67.6 x 73.3 cm., Smithsonian American Art Collection, Washington DC.
Figure 3-3. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, ca. 1440, fresco, 230 x 321 cm., San Marco convent, Florence.

Figure 3-4. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, 1898, oil on canvas, 144.8 x 181 cm., Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA.
Figure 3-5. Sandro Botticelli, *The Castello Annunciation*, 1489-1490, tempera on panel, 150 x 156 cm., Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Figure 3-6. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Annunciation*, 1876-1879, oil on canvas, 104.1 x 250.2 cm., Lady Lever Art Gallery, Merseyside, UK.
Figure 3-7. Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, 1437-1446, fresco, San Marco convent, cell 9 of the dormitory, Florence.

Figure 3-8. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *La Sainte-Marie*, ca 1898-1900 (exhibited at 1900 Salon, Paris), oil on canvas, 87.6 x 109.8 cm., Lasalle University Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA.
Figure 3-9. Pascal-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, *Madonna and the Rose*, 1885, oil on canvas, 85.7 x 68.6 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.

Figure 3-10. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Mary* from “Mothers of the Bible Series, *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1903).
Figure 3-11. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water*, ca. 1907, oil on canvas, 126.4 x 101.3 cm., Des Moines Art Center, IA.

Figure 3-12. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633. Oil on canvas, 160 x 128 cm., location unknown, previously Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.
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Figure 3-14. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ Walking on the Water*, 1910, etching (restrike), 18.3 x 24.3 cm., Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA.
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Figure 3-16. Detail of *Miraculous Haul of Fishes*, ca. 1913-1914.
Figure 3-17. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Salome*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 116.5 x 89.4 cm., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.

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Figure 3-19. Henry Ossawa Tanner, Photographic study for *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures*, ca. 1909, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
CHAPTER 4
HILDA RIX: PROFESSIONAL AMBITION IN A NEW WORLD/NEW WOMAN

Women should be allowed to do everything they prove themselves capable of. The work is the thing that matters not who does it.

–Hilda Rix Nicholas
“Women’s Section,” Daily Telegraph (June 9, 1927)

While many Australian women participated in the arts during the first decades of the twentieth century, Hilda Rix was exceptional in challenging the gender restrictions and patriarchal structure of fine art by shunning her designation as “woman artist” to instead “paint like a man” and pursue opportunities, visibility, and achievements traditionally reserved for male artists.¹ Rix’s privileged upper-middle-class upbringing afforded her the cultural training expected of a young lady in Melbourne society during the Edwardian era. She was not, however, satisfied with the achievements of feminine bourgeois cultivation and, with the support of her family, left Australia in 1907 to pursue advanced artistic training and a professional career in Europe. Rix’s “unfeminine” ambition coupled with her unmarried, childless status made her a problematic figure within the male-dominated institutions and networks of Australian art.

Analogous to Henry Tanner’s struggle to overcome his classification as a “Negro” artist, Hilda Rix equally rejected the limited role patriarchal culture assigned to her as a “woman” artist and insisted that she be judged on the quality of her work alone.

Like Tanner, Hilda Rix understood that to be taken seriously as an artist, she needed to access the advanced training and privileges her male peers enjoyed requiring her to leave home. In imitating the artistic pilgrimage to Europe that aspiring male artists undertook, Rix began the

lifelong project of seeking to contribute to, and be recognized by the official discourses of fine art. As an outsider in relation to the normative masculine identity of Artist and professional considerations of fine art, similar to Henry Tanner, Hilda Rix’s artistic journey was one conflicted by her ambivalent desires to mime and mock dominant artistic traditions. Her desire to “be like” male artists by gaining acceptance within the spaces of Belle Époque art, but also rejecting the marginalized role assigned to her by men, echoes Tanner’s struggle with the double-consciousness of African American existence and the desire to be accepted by white culture on equal terms.

As a student in France, Rix attempted to negotiate a status that was equivalent to her male colleagues, by strategically emulating and appropriating from her artistic mentors, depicting subject matter that was historically controlled and valued by men through their authority as cultural arbiters. Rix’s mimicry will be considered in relation to Luce Irigaray’s interpretation of women’s imitation and performance of the roles assigned to them by patriarchal culture and society. Rix’s life-long aspirations for professional recognition and standing reveal that by rejecting the marginalized amateur role ascribed to her by patriarchal art, she instead self-consciously mimicked the identity of the male artist: their training, practices, and subjects. By performing the male role of Artist, as a woman, Rix challenged the perceived naturalness and uncontested authority of male dominated art, imitating and replicating its traditions in a distorted and subtly modified manner. The slippages created between the Self-Same of male ideals and traditions, and the alterations in Rix’s art—what Bhabha would identify as “the same, but not quite”—expose fissures in the system, which, I argue, open a limited and tenuous space for herself and her art within Belle Époque culture.
The instability of Rix’s position in patriarchal culture is made apparent by the near erasure of her life and work from the history of Australian art after the Great Depression. While in Europe, between the years 1907-1918 and again in 1924-1926, Hilda Rix worked tirelessly to achieve professional success, being represented by independent galleries, and exhibiting canvases at the Royal Academy, the Paris Salon, and with the Société des Peintres Orientalistes Français, as well as enjoying the honor of being named an Associate of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts and having her work purchased by the French government.²

After finding professional success and honors in France and enduring a series of tragedies during the First World War, Rix returned home in 1918, a celebrated artist. As she began exhibiting her paintings and sketches in Australia, because of the conservative nature of Australian art during this period, critics disapproved of the work she created overseas—especially her Orientalist imagery—as being too modern and decadent. Australian art in general remained wedded to European academic trends well into the twentieth century, long after these institutions and styles were relevant in France and England.³ As Australian art historians Janine Burke, Jeanette Hoorn, and John Pigot have noted, it was women, including Hilda Rix, who made the

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² 1911 *Retour de la Chasse* exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français, 1912 *Grand Marché, Tangier* was purchased by the Musée du Luxembourg, and in 1925 *In Australia* is acquired by the French government. 1926 *Le Bigouden* is hung at the Royal Academy in London. See Pigot, “Chronology” in *Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Art*, 73-74.

³ An alternative interpretation, that challenges the provincial perception of Australian Impressionism, is offered by Virginia Spate. Spate argues: “It has been customary to evaluate Australian Impressionism in terms of its relationship to that of Paris. Even if this relationship is traced through English painting, through Whisterism or impressionistic naturalism, the central obsession remains the French Impressionist connection— or its absence. The underlying assumption is always that Australian art come from somewhere else...that there can be no relationship but one of provincialism. Certainly geographical isolation meant that the relationship could not be one of slow assimilation or mutual exchange, but this model of dependency allows no consideration of a shared style that would acquire meaning in terms of its adaptation to local conditions. This model is, however, so strong that some art historians have even denied the existence of Australian Impressionism...Indeed, the standard notion of French Impressionism not only denies essential stylistic and ideological differences within the group, but also excludes other local variants. Virginia Spate, “The Sunny South: Australian Impressionism,” in *World Impressionism: The International Movement 1860-1920*, edited by N. Broude, 114-135 (NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 117.
earliest contributions to Modern art in Australia.\(^4\) Jeanette Hoorn summarizes the regressive conservative tendencies of Australian art between the wars as “clearly a gendered discourse.” Hoorn continues:

Modernist painting was fiercely resisted by the conservative art establishment, who saw it as a decadent art, one which required little skill and suited the lesser talents of women. At the same time, contemporary critics worked to maintain the supremacy of academic painting, especially academic pastoral painting which was considered to be the pre-eminent art form. This was seen to be the preserve of male artists.\(^5\)

Whereas in the Europe, the movements of Fauvism and Cubism were associated with masculine powers of abstraction and creative genius, in Australia these avant-garde trends and modernist aesthetics were connected with the feminine and accordingly aligned with fashion, artifice, and decadence.\(^6\) Attempting to contribute and make her mark in Australian art, Rix continued her artistic mimicry by recalibrating her aesthetic and subjects to align with those of official art’s emerging nationalistic imagery. After the First World War, Australian art celebrated a white Australian identity through the image of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldier and grazier situated in idealized pastoral landscapes. Between 1918 and the 1940s, Hilda Rix created her own romanticized vision of Australia, which highlighted both men and women’s participation in nation building from a female perspective, challenging the dominant masculine paradigm of the heroic male settler that was cultivated within the academy (Figure 4-1).


\(^5\) Hoorn argues that “The painting of women at certain points in the years 1910-15 and later again in the 1920s eclipsed the work of ‘our’ Australian male artists, working outside of what was considered to be acceptable genres for women within the academic tradition, certainly as it was practised in Australia, rather than within it.” Hoorn, *Moroccan Idyll*, 195-196 and Hoorn, “Women Make Modernism: Contesting Masculinist Art Criticism,” 21-22.

A reviewer of the artist’s June 1919 exhibition at the Anthony Horden Fine Art Gallery described Rix’s work as a “mastery of composition and vigorous brushwork that was strangely unfeminine.” By insisting on “paint[ing] like a man” en plein air in rural Australia and taking on subject matter considered the exclusive artistic prerogative of white men, Rix’s identity as an independent, public, and aspiring woman was made uncomfortably visible for the patriarchal sensibilities and cultural gatekeepers of Australian art. Hilda Rix’s biographer, John Pigot, held that her unapologetic desire to add her voice and vision to a male dominated art world ultimately led to her censure from major exhibitions and art criticism within her lifetime. Pigot argued:

Achieving any lasting recognition was difficult for the majority of women painters, because gendered boundaries that were maintained by a well-established and patriarchal cultural framework largely determined the nature and reception of their art. Acknowledgment of these boundaries, and a willingness to work within them, could lead to a successful career…but failure to do so could have serious consequences for a woman like Hilda Rix Nicholas who was unwilling to play by the rules…Her assertive declaration of women’s rights proved ultimately to be self-destructive; the art establishment was not prepared to let a woman contravene the rules of representation that had so effectively preserved its power in Australia.  

It is clear from her own correspondence that the artist attributed her exclusion from exhibitions and museum acquisitions to the threat her gender represented to patriarchal authority, stating in a letter: “my art has enemies.” Rix’s assault on masculine artistic traditions certainly contributed to her occlusion from Australian art history; yet, it was also her insistence in mimicking the official models and ideals of patriarchal art that would ultimately align her with what was perceived as a regressive form of academicism after the Depression. When situated within the arc of twentieth-century Australian artistic practice, which saw the eventual triumph

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7 Quote reproduced by Hoorn in *Moroccan Idyll*, 188.


9 Letter to Howard Ashton, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.
of modernism during the mid-century, by the time of Hilda Rix’s death in 1961, her nationalist painting of an Australian Arcadia appeared out of touch, unconvincing, and unworthy of study when compared to contemporary artistic trends.

In her quest to obtain official recognition as an artist, but also her sincere desire to highlight what she understood as the beauty and unique character of Australia, Hilda Rix aligned herself with established and conservative academic art institutions and traditions in Europe and Australia. As Rix’s was shut out of exhibition opportunities, her vigilance in miming masculine conventions is demonstrated by her initiative to compose an autobiography in the Vasarian tradition, titled “In Search of Beauty.” The text was never published, but is preserved in the artist’s extensive personal archive in the National Library of Australia. Not unlike Henry Tanner’s desire to offer a highly idealized portrayal of the artistic race relations in France for American readers, in which he lived and worked in “terms of absolute social equality,” within a “perfect race democracy,”10 at the end of a long career, seeking to control her own narrative, Hilda Rix mimicked the Vasarian biographic model to shape her artistic legacy as a refracted reflection within the Self-Same mirror of patriarchal art.

Mimicking the trope of artistic prodigy and discovery that sets young talent on a predestined path of greatness, Hilda Rix appropriated the model of canonical figures, such as Giotto and Michelangelo. In recounting her earliest memories, Rix claims to have had a crayon in her hand at the age of three.11 By composing “In Search of Beauty,” Rix sought to offer her potential reader an engaging artistic journey that took her from being punished for neglecting her

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10 Lester, “Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art’s Sake,” 73.

elementary school work in favor of sketching, to traveling to the other side of the world and back to establish and legitimize her place in Australian art.

While this chapter will examine Hilda Rix’s artistic upbringing and maturation in Australia and Europe before World War One, exploring the ways in which she contended with and confronted Belle Époque art’s “woman problem,” I view her desire to compose an autobiography in the twilight of her career, which self-consciously mimics the patriarchal canonical tradition, as an extraordinary example of her enduring commitment to work within the privileged arena of male dominated fine art. As the patriarchal system of Australian art made attempts to suppress her work, Rix stood her ground and demanded to retain the place she struggled to acquire by writing herself into an existing history of art. Her “In Search of Beauty” is the final chapter and a testament to Hilda Rix’s lifelong project and remarkable perseverance in fighting for her talents and contributions, as a woman and an Artist, to remain visible.

The State of the Arts in Edwardian Australia: Women’s Role and Relationship to the Heidelberg School Mythology

Before the foundation of the National Gallery School of Victoria in 1867, fine art instruction in the antipodean British colony was virtually non-existent, requiring ambitious art students to travel to Europe. When Australia was first established as a penal colony in the bay of Sydney in 1788, colonizers had little concern for the luxury of art. The focus of early settlers’ image making centered on documenting the topography in addition to the native inhabitants,

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12 The National Gallery of Victoria Art School was established in 1867, but soon after split into two distinct institutions in 1870, the School of Art and the School of Design. Between 1872 and 1873 both were incorporated into the Victoria College of Arts in Melbourne. Sydney, Melbourne’s major competitor, enrolled their first class of students in the New South Wales Academy of Art in 1875. South Australia was not to be outdone and in 1892 incorporated a School of Design into the Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide. The successive foundation of art academies in major Australian cities signified the desire for a new degree of professionalism and seriousness in artistic practice. However, like their antecedents in Europe, these institutions of artistic education were structured to privilege male students and professional careers.
plants, and animals. These efforts were aligned with Enlightenment disciplining and categorization of knowledge rather than aesthetic expression.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of artists working in Australia were not born on the continent, but immigrated to the colony after acquiring training in European ateliers. White Australian-born individuals interested in making art at home were limited by the lack of educational and exhibition opportunities, forcing them to Europe for these essential cultural experiences. Both of these factors resulted in the character of white-colonial arts in Australia being quintessentially European and academic in nature up until the early to mid twentieth century, effectively making the normative identity of the Artist both white and male.

Just as Louis XIV’s Académie de peinture et de sculpture and George III’s Royal Academy fostered French and British nationalistic styles and subject matter, the foundation of the National Gallery School in Melbourne offered colonial Australians a sense of cultural self, but one that was similar to American art academies in its reliance on European tradition and practices. As Australia’s colonial provinces matured during the late nineteenth century, political and cultural leaders found it increasingly necessary and expedient to define their status as white-Anglo Australians within the complex matrix of settler and colonialized identities that intersected and webbed through the vast territories of the British Empire. To propagate a sense of patriotism and identity, white colonists cultivated an official image and aesthetic philosophy of Australianness, and established a school of art to reinforce the teaching of these ideals.

Bonding over their mutual dissatisfaction with the limited curriculum and opportunities provided by the Gallery School in Melbourne during the late nineteenth century, a circle of artists, including Frederick McCubbin, Charles Conder, Tom Roberts, and Arthur Streeton gathered to discuss and debate artistic philosophies and the merits of stylistic trends emanating
from Europe.\textsuperscript{13} This group, which became known as Heidelberg School painters, crystalized white Australian nationalistic ideals into visual form, adopting the bushland as the symbolic site for the performance of heroic masculine and feminine identities, which epitomized their roles respectively as pastoralists and mothers.\textsuperscript{14}

Australia’s unique and dangerous terrain was used as the backdrop to characterize colonists’ dichotomous reproductive and destructive relationship with the land. The Heidelberg School painters portrayed man’s power to control and cultivate the land or engage “in a battle against nature,” while also alluding to women settlers’ complementary role as “the bearer of new life and civilization’s values to the wilderness.”\textsuperscript{15} Apart from insisting on women’s responsibility to give birth and rear offspring, male painters of the late nineteenth century gave their archetypal Australian women limited and unsatisfying roles in their nationalistic tableaus.

\textsuperscript{13} The Heidelberg painters were not the first to take issue with the Gallery School’s limited and conservative teaching methods. In 1880, two years before Elizabeth Rix enrolled in classes at the institution, thirty-six students petitioned the trustees, desiring the “application of our skill to higher work and original composition.” The Students’ petition was published in \textit{The Argus}, October 7, 1880. Their frustration stemmed from the limited instruction offered by Eugène Von Guérard, the master of the painting school from 1870 until his retirement in 1881. Leigh Astbury reports, “His teaching was limited by his rigidly held view concerning the role of the Gallery School and by his low estimation of the caliber of his students. During his eleven-year tenure at the academy, Von Guérard confined his students’ endeavours to one academic practice, that of repeatedly copying the pictures in the Gallery’s collection.” Von Guérard defended his method of instruction, asserting that “original artists would only be trained in an academy with an adequate number of professors in the different branches of instruction. All that could be hoped for under the circumstances was the moral endeavor of educating a number of students to see and feel correctly what the productions of Art are, without claiming to be self-independent artists.” Von Guérard strongly believed in the academic focus on drawing and disegno before painting. “At the same time he held such a low opinion of his students’ artistic ability that none was ever considered able enough to progress to the stage of original composition.” Leigh Astbury, \textit{City Bushmen: the Heidelberg School and the Rural Mythology} (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford Press, 1985), 18-19.

\textsuperscript{14} The group became known by this appellation after Sidney Dickinson, an American art critic used the term to describe the work of Walter Withers and Arthur Streeton. In a review published in the \textit{Australasian Critic} in July of 1891, Withers wrote, “Both these artists are of that that practice which may be called, for purposes of distinction, the ‘Heidelberg School’, for their work has been done chiefly in this attractive suburb, where, with others of like inclination, they have established a summer congregation for out-of-door painting.” Sidney Dickinson, “Two Exhibitions of Paintings,” \textit{Australasian Critic}, (July 1, 1891), 240.

\textsuperscript{15} Astbury, \textit{City Bushmen}, 4.
An example is Aby Altson’s 1890 celebrated canvas, *Flood Sufferings* (Figure 4-2), which described Australian man’s stoic and heroic response to Mother Nature’s destructive power by rescuing a young mother, an archetypal damsel in distress, from dangerous floodwaters that have encroached on the feminine sanctity of the domestic sphere. Heidelberg narratives idealized male settlers, miners, and graziers as actively laboring to tame and transform the land into inhabitable and productive expanses, while alternatively, women were rendered as beautiful objects in aestheticized landscapes or alternatively overwhelmed by the sublime power and danger of the Australian outback, in need of man’s assistance.

The trio of Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, and Charles Conder made regular outings to the rural Eaglemont estate.\(^1^6\) Tom Roberts 1886, *The Artists’ Camp* (Figure 4-3), typified the Heidelberg School’s *plein air* responses to light, atmosphere, and idealized rural subject matter, which have frequently been interpreted as a form of Australian Impressionism.\(^1^7\) The Heidelberg School painters contributed to what Norma Broude has identified as an international movement of “World Impressionism,” inspired by aesthetic trends that first appeared in France, but quickly adapted to, and evolved to meet diverse needs, intentions, and topographies around the globe. Broude states:

> A fresh vision of the total picture with the specific characteristics of the various national schools taken into account can help us to understand French Impressionism as part of a larger movement – as one specific manifestation of a larger Impressionist impulse…among artists all over the world in the nineteenth century there was an impulse to paint contemporary life and experience directly

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\(^{1^6}\) Recently, scholars have dispelled the myth that these artists were living ruggedly in the bushland. Clark and Whitelaw note that by 1885 Box Hill was only three quarters of a mile from the rail station. “Box Hill was no longer virgin bush by 1885. The arrival of the railway line in 1882 had increased its accessibility and considerable areas were under cultivation, however it still provided patches of natural vegetation comparatively close to the city.” Jane Clark and Bridget Whitelaw, *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond* (Sydney, NSW: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, Lmtd., 1985), 61.

\(^{1^7}\) The painting was a success in Australia and internationally, becoming the first work created by an Australian-born artist to hang in the Royal Academy in London. The canvas would also receive accolades at the Paris Salon of 1892 with an honorable mention.
from nature, to study the effects of nature’s light, and to use a lighter palette and
looser brushwork to proclaim the artist’s individuality and sincerity and the
immediacy of the experiences that the canvas mediated for the viewer.¹⁸

Contemporary critics in Australia linked the Heidelberg School with a negative
interpretation of French Impressionism’s *esquisse*-like finish and illegibility. The prevailing
aesthetic favored by the conservative Melbourne art establishment and the principles taught at
the Gallery School were aligned with John Ruskin’s promotion of clarity, rationality, and
polished realism, illustrated by obsessive detail of Pre-Raphaelite canvases. Yet, it wasn’t long
before the group’s loose and improvised brushwork would be absorbed by the Gallery School,
becoming the preferred mode of painting by the turn of the century. In his 1890 essay “What
should Australian artists paint?” Sidney Dickinson favorably described the Heidelberg School’s
approach to painting as presenting “on canvas the earnestness, rigour, pathos, and heroism of the
life that is about them.”¹⁹

In art historical scholarship, the Heidelberg School painters emerged as the artistic heroes
of William Moore’s *Story of Australian Art*, first published in 1934, and followed by Bernard
Smith’s *Place, Taste and Tradition* of 1945. Both art historians identified 1885 as the “Genesis”
of an identifiable “Australian School.”²⁰ Arthur Streeton was one of the youngest, but ultimately,

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²⁰ These authors point to 1885 as significant because it marked the year the painter Tom Roberts returned to Melbourne from Europe and initiated a movement of self-conscious pictorial Australianess expressed through *plein air* landscape painting. Both Roberts and Frederick McCubbin were disappointed by the Gallery School’s teachings
due to their expectations of superior instruction. “They measured their aspirations against the available teaching
practices and generally found that latter to be wanting. Yet, from their shared dissatisfaction emerged an attempt
to supplement their training and an increased awareness of art practice outside the school.” Leigh Astbury, *City Bushmen*, 18. “Genesis” and “Australian School” are the chapter titles in which Moore and Shaw outline the
contributions of the Heidelberg School. In his own survey of Australian art, Andrew Sayers attempts to debunk the
myth that a unique movement “sprung into existence with the Heidelberg School,” by identifying and discussing the
contributions of artists working in the colony before 1885. Most importantly, he recognizes that “the masculine
most influential members of the Heidelberg painters by way of his position at the Gallery School and post as the art critic for *The Argus*. Streeton’s sentimental accounts of the group’s work in the late nineteenth century were published in *The Argus* throughout the 1930s.\textsuperscript{21} The artist had a principal role in creating and perpetuating the group’s status, later writing of the “youthful enterprise” of painting with Roberts and Conder during the last decades of the nineteenth century “with an intense and lifelong nostalgia.”\textsuperscript{22}

The origin myth of an independent Australian style that was attributed to the Heidelberg School retained its popularity throughout the twentieth century because this circle of artists fortuitously came into the consciousness of the Australian public when the six colonial provinces were unified as single nation. This move hastened political and social elite’s efforts to fabricate an image and national aesthetic that celebrated their new level of independence and self-governance within the British Empire. Australia’s federation in 1901 intensified nationalistic efforts to instill an image of cultural white Australianness, embodied by the pastoralist and bushman who tamed and transformed the newly unified nation’s rugged topography. The artists’ overstated, if not entirely superficial, claims of communion with the landscape were supported by nationalistic interests in the White Australian Policy, which sought to expand control over, cultivate, and populate into new expanses of Australia. The Heidelberg painters’ imagery

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world-view presented by the Heidelberg artists has been modified by an examination of the work of late-nineteenth-century women painters. See Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 79-80.
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{21} Subsequent narratives authored by Moore and Smith drew on Streeton’s accounts thus reinforcing the rural-pastoral locale and masculine mythology that surrounded the Heidelberg School. Streeton’s continued influence on early twentieth-century landscape painting has been described by Australian historian, W.K. Hancock as, “a national habit.” “The landscapes created by Streeton’s visual integrity have provided the recipe for every prosaic artist with his eye on an easy public of unimaginative dealers and collectors. In this respect Hancock’s ‘national habit’ has taken on the qualities of a national vice. Bernard Smith, *Taste, Place and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788*, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979,) 146.

\textsuperscript{22} Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art*, 80-82.
delivered attractive landscapes that artfully occluded Aboriginal presence and linked national progress with the white occupation, settlement, and cultivation of this land.

As the leaders of the six Australian colonies negotiated their own independence from Britain, throughout these debates, suffragettes maintained their presence in the public discourse fighting for and ultimately achieving enfranchisement in the newly formed Australian Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{23} The feminist movement that flourished in Australia during the late nineteenth century until the beginning of the Depression, increased women’s access to the public sphere. The political and social climate leading up to the unification and federation of the six colonies in 1901 was a unique moment during which women made advances gaining access to educational and career opportunities.

In \textit{The Ladies’ Picture Show} author Caroline Ambrus, characterizes the decades surrounding the 1901 Federation as providing “a social climate that favoured the aspirations of women artists.”\textsuperscript{24}

At the turn of the century women from all walks of life were agitating for change. Organisations were created by women to cater for their specific needs…The rise in the consciousness of women, the emergence of women’s organisations and the feminist activism during the 1880s and 1890s coincided with the radical and national sentiments that prevailed in the six colonies as part of the process of federation and the formation of a democracy…Australian conditions differed from those in England in that Australia’s newly-established social order was still malleable and there was less resistance to change than in Britain where centuries of tradition were a formidable obstacle.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Neighboring New Zealand and the Cook Islands were the first to grant women enfranchisement in 1893. The “Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902” provided uniform and universal suffrage to Australian women, but also restricted Aboriginal voting rights, which were not established until 1963 and with Queensland being the last state to conform in 1965.

\textsuperscript{24} Caroline Ambrus, \textit{The Ladies’ Picture Show}, 11.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 15.
As evidence of new opportunities for women in Australia, from its inception in 1870, the National Gallery School in Victoria welcomed women to enroll in coursework. Yet, although women could enroll in coursework, it was only after years of petitioning that female students were offered access to life drawing classes, which were introduced into the curriculum in the early 1880s. Once allowed, these classes were strictly segregated by the gender of students and models. By comparison, in France after decades of petitions, women finally gained access to the hallowed ateliers of the École des Beaux Arts in 1897, well after the institution was displaced by private ateliers and increasingly popular alternative exhibition opportunities.²⁶

Although women were allowed to study at the Gallery School, John Pigot described the obstacles they faced in overcoming the perception that a woman’s talent and professional artistic ambitions were incompatible with, and detrimental to her prescribed role as mother and caregiver.

Women were tolerated at the School, but the gendered structure of Australian society meant that their achievements were not acknowledged in the same way as those of their male fellow students…The idea that a woman could successfully take up a professional career as a fine artist was still an unusual proposition in the early 1880s.²⁷

As is the story of art in Europe and the United States, Australian women were also limited and culturally defined by their biological and domestic responsibilities, expected to fulfill their patriotic duty by contributing children and maintaining a home. Accordingly, it was not the women artists of the Gallery School, but the men of the Heidelberg School, who are credited

²⁶ When compared to their female counterparts in Europe, especially women artists seeking to access the prestigious École des Beaux Arts, it appears, at least on a superficial level, that aspiring women in America and Australia enjoyed more opportunities to acquire academic training in the visual arts. Women fared better in England. At its inception in 1768, the Royal Academy had two members, Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. During the nineteenth century women were forced to petition the Royal Academy School for entrance. The Academy began accepting petitions in the 1840s and enrolled the first female student, Laura Herford, in 1860.

²⁷ Pigot, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art, 4.
with shaping what was long viewed as the first uniquely “Australian Art Movement.” Following postmodern revisions of the history of European art, the acknowledgment, rehabilitation, and renewed interest in Australian women artists also took place as part of Second Wave Feminism’s challenge of canonical knowledge and histories of the colony and commonwealth. When reconsidering the history of Australian art, it becomes evident that men of the Heidelberg School were not the only individuals attempting to document or create an image of Australianness leading up to Federation. Long overshadowed by their famous male peers, there were women artists who negotiated the patriarchal art world of the late nineteenth century and worked alongside the more famous male members of Heidelberg School.

Although she attended the Gallery School with Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, until recently Jane Sutherland was written out of the male dominated mythology of the Heidelberg School. Sutherland occupied a unique position in late nineteenth-century Australian art, being the first woman invited to join the Buonarotti Society in 1884, the preeminent arts society in Melbourne, and was the first female member to be elected to the council of the Victorian Artists Society in 1900. Despite the subsequent suppression of her work from the Heidelberg School narrative established by Streeton, and reinforced by subsequent art historians, Sutherland did work en plein air alongside Roberts, McCubbin, and Streeton to sketch and paint landscapes in Alphington, Templestowe, Diamond Creek, and Box Hill. Similar to the societal restrictions that governed the appropriateness of subjects and modes of practice for women Impressionists in France, as a bourgeois lady, Sutherland had to carefully negotiate how and


29 Clark and Whitelaw, Golden Summers, Heidelberg and Beyond, 28.
what she painted. In Janine Burke’s 1980 study of Australian women artists, the first of its kind, the author describes the limitations Sutherland had to contend with as a woman working in a man’s profession.

In 1885 she accompanied Tom Roberts, Fred McCubbin, E. Phillip Fox, Walter Withers and other artists on sketching trips, but, as a properly brought up Victorian lady, constrained as much by social convention as by cumbersome, restricting clothes, she certainly could not have camped out with them on their weekends spent in the bush.30

Sutherland’s *Two Figures in a Field (The Mushroom Gatherers)* (Figure 4-4) demonstrates the painter’s commitment to the Heidelberg impressionistic aesthetic and rural subject matter, while presenting an alternative to the overt masculine imagery created by her peers. As was typical of Heidelberg landscapes, the two female figures that occupy this scene are positioned at a distance in the middle ground next to a protruding tree stump and are subsumed within the land through the high horizon line. Behind the women hazy pink and lavender rolling hills of dried bush unfold into a gray overcast sky. Sutherland’s palette of light blues, rosy mauve and purple hues distinguished her work from the yellowed, sun scorched brushscapes of McCubbin, Roberts, and Streeton’s canvases.

While the broken brushwork and sensitivity to natural light are aesthetic preoccupations she shared with the male Heidelberg painters, the active role Sutherland’s female figures take within this idealized pastoral landscape is unique when compared to the tradition of feminine portrayals espoused in Aby Altson’s *Flood Sufferings* (Figure 4-2). Departing from the inactive, but beautiful women as objects, lounging decoratively in nature or the archetypal damsel in distress lost, helpless, and in need of masculine intervention, Sutherland’s figures are not sedentary, secondary, or subservient to a heroic male presence in the composition. Instead,

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Sutherland resists a masculine presence to emphasize her female figures’ contact with the land and contribution to the household in the gathering of food.

In accordance with Sutherland’s own bourgeois class, the task of gathering mushrooms is presented as leisure opposed to necessity. The figure on the left bends over to collect mushrooms, which her companion gathers in her white apron. The artist offered an image of women engaging directly and working with the land, but also one that eschews the hard peasant labor and sense of dire need described in French Barbizon School canvases that inspired Roberts and Streeton. Janie Burke described the portrayal of women’s “work” in *Two Figures in a Field* as a reflection of Sutherland’s own bourgeois experiences: “The domestic labour of women has never been glamorized as have been daring or dangerous heroic male occupations. It is also true that upper middle-class women like Jane Sutherland would not have been closely engaged with physically hard housework and they would have been trained to think it an unsuitable subject for art.”

Sutherland offered an alternative anti-heroic feminine vision of the land that drew upon her own experiences as a bourgeois woman who found comfort and communion with nature.

Although Jane Sutherland’s contributions to Australian art were suppressed for much of the twentieth century by the overt masculine proclivities of the Heidelberg School mythology, during her upbringing and cultural education in Melbourne, Hilda Rix would certainly have been aware of Sutherland’s work. As a pioneering female, artist Jane Sutherland likely served as an example for Hilda Rix’s commitment to artistic professionalism, demonstrating that while her artistic ambitions were outside the normative boundaries of cultural production designated for women in Australia, women could successfully contribute and negotiate their place within the world of fine art.

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31 Ibid., 30.
Hilda Rix benefited from the successes of the pioneering women artists of the Gallery School and likely modeled her own artistic aspirations on the achievements of women like Sutherland. Most important to her artistic foundation was the support and encouragement she received at home, as Hilda’s mother, Elizabeth Rix, was among of the first generation of women to attend classes at the Gallery School. Elizabeth Rix’s attendance at the Gallery School in the 1880s was significant, as her male classmates Rupert Bunny, Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton, and Emanuel Phillips Fox would come to establish the standards of practice at the school and emerge as the most successful and respected artists of that generation. Her connection to these noteworthy figures would prove beneficial in advancing her daughter’s artistic study and career abroad.

During the late nineteenth century, Elizabeth Rix exhibited locally and was recognized for her skill as a painter of still life and flowers. Although she was allowed to enroll in the Gallery School with other female students, her gender and responsibilities as a married woman ultimately negated a serious or professional acceptance of her work.32 Despite pursuing advanced training in the Gallery School, she and the majority of her female cohort’s efforts were marginalized as those of the accomplished lady and amateur artist. By accepting and performing the patriarchal defined role of “woman” artist, after Hilda’s birth, it seems that Elizabeth substantially tempered her artistic practice to focus her attention on raising her daughters and instead encouraging and supporting their professional ambitions.

32 Female students enrolled in the Gallery School with Elizabeth Rix included: Iso Rae, May Vale, Jane Southerland, and Clara Southern, the majority of whom were never married and remained childless.
Artistic Foundations and “Unnatural” Antipodean Ambition

Hilda Rix was born on September 1, 1884 in the city of Ballarat in Victoria, 65 miles west from the capital of Melbourne. The second of two girls, she was raised in a respected upper middle-class family. Her mother and father were born in England but arrived in Victoria as children in 1853. Their families immigrated to Australia in search of financial opportunities promised by the mid nineteenth-century gold rush, which resulted in the rapid population growth of free white immigrants in Victoria. Her father, Henry Finch Rix, taught at Wesley College in Melbourne and in 1884 took up a prestigious position as the Inspector of Schools for the Beechworth District of northeastern Victoria.

Hilda Rix’s mother, Elizabeth Sutton, came from an entrepreneurial family who successfully combined their musical talents with business. After Richard Sutton, the patriarch of the family, made enough money in the gold fields, his wife encouraged him to follow his passion for music and make a profit by opening a specialty store in Ballarat that sold musical instruments. The business was a triumph, which allowed Sutton to establish a chain of musical stores making the family wealthy and culturally connected in the colony.

As it was in the Tanner family, the Rixes ensured that their children received a quality education, viewing knowledge and cultural accomplishments as tools for a happy and successful life. During the decade of Hilda Rix’s birth, the feminist movement in Australia was a powerful force that organized and lobbied for women’s entrance and meaningful participation in public

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33 Hilda’s birth name was Emily Hilda Rix. Before her first marriage she signed her paintings using a monogram of E. H. Rix, however she consistently used Hilda as her first name throughout her life.

34 The shared date of arrival is purely a coincidence.

35 Pigot, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art, 4.

36 The Suttons had shops in Ballarat, Melbourne, Geelong, and Bendigo. The original Ballarat storefront boasted a stock of 22 different types of pianos, a variety of instruments, and sheet music. Pigot also notes that this location included a hydraulic lift to transport the pianos, which was a “landmark in the prosperous city.” Ibid.
life. Hilda and her older sister Elsie were the beneficiaries of the changing attitude towards women’s education, which was no doubt reinforced at home by Henry Rix’s own progressive stance and work within the state education system.37

Despite feminist advances during the turn of the century, Australian culture retained its deeply masculine character, due in large part to the unequal population of men to women living in the continent.38 Although there is evidence that unmarried women did enter the workforce, societal pressure made it clear that a woman’s proper place in Australia was serving a supportive role at home, as a wife and mother. Hilda Rix would have grown up in a society that offered women like her more opportunities and new accessibility to academic and cultural institutions than the previous generation, but also one that continued to idealize sons, male professionalism, and masculine virtues. We may suppose then, that because Henry Rix did not have a male child to focus his attention on, Elsie and Hilda were granted affection and offered choices they otherwise might not have enjoyed if they had a brother to contend or compete with.

The extensive travel and long hours required by Henry Rix’s job as the Inspector of Schools meant that he was frequently absent from home. Elizabeth Rix filled this void and augmented the girls’ schooling with a cultural education and social refinement typical of bourgeois ladies. Acquiring a repertoire of talents provided young women with the ability to successfully navigate social situations, skillfully conversing and entertaining, making them appealing and ultimately ideal future wives. It was expected for upper class women to have a certain level of education and amateur interest in music, theatre, and art; however, it was

37 In her father’s obituary, preserved in the artist’s papers in the National Library in Canberra, Henry Finch Rix was remembered as a respected teacher and scholar advocating for teacher training, educational reform, as well as writing several textbooks on mathematics. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia and Pigot, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art, 5.

38 It is well acknowledged that early Australian society and culture was highly masculine, due in large part to the high percentage of men who were transported to the colony as exiled British convicts.
considered potentially hazardous for a young lady to allow these skills to extend beyond that of accomplishment, especially if it took her outside the confines of the domestic sphere. Acquiring talents and social skills was necessary for a young lady to attract a husband, but, as Caroline Ambrus warns, these potentially ‘dubious’ talents should only be pursued professionally as a last resort. Ambrus states: “The essential prerequisite was a command of ladylike behaviour rather than the possession of formal qualifications. A woman who was properly reared, with some training in ‘feminine accomplishments,’ could market these dubious skills if she failed to ensnare a breadwinner.”

Although deeply indebted to English values and social mores, as antipodean settlers became increasingly invested in defining their own identity in the Empire, turn of the century Australian society and culture was not as inhibited by the entrenched traditions that structured British culture and society. With respect to art in Australia, the categories and boundaries between amateur and professional, craft and fine art were not as clearly or rigidly delineated as one would find in the more established practices of Europe.

To immerse her daughters in Melbourne society, in 1895, Elizabeth Rix joined the Austral Salon, a women’s organization that functioned as a meeting place for those pursuing intellectual and artistic endeavors. The Rix household frequently hosted the monthly salons, where Hilda and Elsie had the opportunity to demonstrate their talents by reciting poetry, reading Shakespeare, and performing music and plays. While Elsie was commended for her singing and acting, Hilda demonstrated early skills for design and draughtsmanship by creating the pamphlets and posters that advertised the salon’s events.

39 Ambrus, *The Ladies’ Picture Show*, 16.

40 Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 5-6.
In addition to hosting women’s salon gatherings, the Rix family frequented Melbourne’s operatic and theatrical performances. The young artist’s love of theatrical costume and masquerade is illustrated in a sketchbook from her childhood. This sketchbook, which is inscribed on the inside cover in pencil by the artist, “My very earliest drawing when a child in Melbourne,” provides a record of Rix’s youthful interests, but also early evidence of skillful drawing and design. It is filled with fanciful theatrical costumes inspired by idealized medieval and Shakespearian types and studies of her friends and relatives drawn with graphic clarity (Figures 4-5 and 4-6). The “Melbourne Sketchbook” confirms that Hilda Rix’s artistic skills were evident early in life. A review of Rix’s work displayed at the Austral Salon described her as: “an entirely distinctive talent, that of catching a likeness with a few strokes of a lead pencil.”

In addition to the sketchbook, a collection of family photographs and news clippings preserved in the National Library of Australia, illustrates that Elizabeth and Henry Rix fostered a home that was rich in intellect and culture. Hilda and Elise Rix were provided with the cultural education of accomplished women, but as they matured they were encouraged to pursue their interests beyond that of the dilettante.

From 1902 to 1905, early attempts to cultivate her natural talent were undertaken during Hilda Rix’s enrollment in the National Gallery School of Victoria. It was here that she studied under her mother’s former classmate, Frederick McCubbin, who since 1888 oversaw instruction at the institution. Rix’s study with McCubbin provided her with foundational skills, including the practice of drawing from casts. In her journal, Rix described the enthusiasm of leaving behind

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41 Johnson, In Search of Beauty: Hilda Rix Nicholas’ Sketchbook Art, 11.
these antiquated practices, immensely preferring life-drawing classes during her European

Despite his youthful rebellion and rejection of the Gallery School’s conservative teaching
during the mid 1880s, as Frederick McCubbin became recognized by the art establishment he
was reabsorbed into Melbourne’s cultural institutions, eventually wielding great influence over
the next generation of Australian art through his teaching position at the Gallery School. While
still promoting an academicized impressionistic approach and demonstrating a willingness to
experiment with his own technique during the early twentieth century, McCubbin’s work
remained faithful to naturalism and the traditional academic tenants of clarity of composition and
draughtsmanship.

Under McCubbin’s tutelage, Rix advanced her skills as a draughtswoman by obsessively
sketching the people she encountered with boldness and clarity. John Pigot suggested that the
teacher’s influence on the young artist is evident in how Rix began to emphasize her subjects.
Pigot claimed: “For McCubbin the importance of the subject as a means of conveying meaning
and emotion in a work of art was all-important…Under McCubbin, Rix’s style developed some
of its characteristic forcefulness and vigour as well as a belief in the significance of the subject”\(^43\)

Rix was among the high percentage of women enrolled in the National Gallery School,
between the years of 1890 and 1914. This suggests that an advanced arts education was an
acceptable and even an encouraged path for women, but it should also be noted that by steering
women toward the arts, it prevented them from pursuing the more “serious” male dominated

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\(^42\) Despite McCubbin’s general popularity as a teacher at the Gallery School, Hilda was not altogether satisfied with his methods of instruction, writing later in her career that his teaching were “vague persuasions rather than instructions.” Hilda Rix Nicholas, “In Search of Beauty,” Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.

\(^43\) Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 7.
disciplines of medicine, law, or university positions. It is possible that making a fine arts education readily accessible to women in Australia was a calculated maneuver to dissuade them from assaults on the male stronghold over more esteemed professions.

While the Gallery School allowed women admission since its inception, by comparison the University of Melbourne, established earlier in 1855 and considered the most elite and serious institution of higher education in Victoria, denied women admission into the University until 1880. Janie Burke reports that “at the Gallery School there was a staggering disproportion of female students, sometimes of the order of 5:1.”44 In 1890 the National Gallery School enrolled 58 male compared to a 120 female students. The years during which Hilda Rix attended the school the enrollment is recorded as 45-47 male to 95-87 females.45

The numbers make it clear that women had access to a fine art education, but their tenure at the Gallery School did not translate to successful careers as professional artists. Given the ratio of male to female students at the institution during the turn of the century, and the gross disproportion of successful male to female professional artists working in Australia or Europe who attended the institution, it seems that the Gallery School represented an acceptable creative outlet for women, but ultimately, very few of these students had the opportunity to establish artistic careers. Individuals like Jane Sutherland, who was not constrained by financial concerns, and who chose a career over marriage and motherhood, reappears in the historical narrative as an exception to the patriarchal control over professionalism, only because of the efforts made by revisionist scholarship.


A reevaluation of the traditional narrative of late nineteenth-century Australian art reveals that more women did pursue professional careers, if not in Australia, than as expatriates in Europe. Yet these individuals were still exceptions within what was a white male profession and they did not achieve their success without facing considerable opposition. Accordingly, Hilda Rix and her female classmates were able to cultivate their skills and pursue an arts education; yet, regardless of talent, their efforts were inhibited by societal duty or marginalized as dilettante and amateurish. Despite the dominant population of female students at the Gallery School, women were dissuaded from professional fine art ambitions and pushed to illustration and commercial work as a suitable outlet for their artistic impulses. “Women’s intellectual abilities were often disparaged, and it was felt that commercial art and the crafts were more viable career options.”

In October of 1907, Australian women created their first opportunity to publicly exhibit their art and crafts at the Women’s Work Exhibition. The exhibition was a major achievement, which demonstrated women’s ability to organize and assert their independence, exhibiting their work for public praise and scrutiny, but it also reveals that women artists felt the need to create this event because they were not receiving the visibility they desired in the official Gallery School exhibitions with their male peers. By establishing a separate exhibition specifically for women’s arts and crafts, the event reinforced the perception of women’s arts as different or incompatible with the identity of male artists, creating an alternative space and class for women’s contributions to the arts and culture.

Despite an “emphasis on professionalism” Emma Willoughby notes that the 1907 Women’s Exhibition was criticized as “amateurish.” Willoughby states:

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The implication of much of the press criticism was clear: women’s art was essentially amateur, whether they were making money from it or not...[the exhibition’s] broad inclusivity of types of work, from practical homemaking to childcare to teaching, presents a continuum of work, rather than a clear dichotomy between the professional woman worker and the amateur.47

As a response to the Women’s Exhibition, William Moore, the then influential art and drama critic of the Melbourne Herald, addressed Australian art’s “woman problem” by warning off aspiring female artists from pursuing careers in his 1907 article “Careers for Australasian Girls.”48 He acknowledged that illustration was an acceptable career goal for women who could draw, but the fine arts were still considered to be a dubious profession for women. Moore suggested that there were some opening for women in portraiture, but it was ‘impossible’ for a woman to support herself as a landscape artist.49

The woman who takes up art as career must be prepared to go through years of training and practice after all these years she may find that the results for all this toil, as far as the monetary side is concerned, are despicably small.50

Given the conservative social and cultural context of Edwardian Australia, it became apparent to Henry and Elizabeth Rix that if Hilda were to advance her career as an artist she would need to look beyond the constraints of Melbourne’s patriarchal cultural systems and limited opportunities offered by the Gallery School by studying and working in Europe. During this time, Henry Rix’s demanding work and travels took a toll on his health. In 1906, following a near breakdown, he was granted a leave of absence and planned to use this time traveling


48 After promoting Australian arts in Europe, Moore relocated to Sydney working as a critic and author. In 1934 he published The Story of Australian Art, the first survey of the history of art in Australia.


throughout Europe with his wife and two daughters. In a tragic turn of events, Henry Rix died unexpectedly on February 27, 1907.\(^51\)

Although Elizabeth had inherited money from her parents, Henry’s premature death suddenly left the Rix women without a steady income. To compound on their new financial difficulties, Henry passed away before his retirement, which meant Elizabeth could not collect his pension from the state of Victoria. Being a savvy and well-connected woman, Elizabeth Rix cashed in her family’s first class tickets to Europe and put their Melbourne home up for rent to create the capital she needed for her girls to fulfill their father’s wish and travel to Europe, albeit on a significantly reduced budget.

During her years as a student in Melbourne, Hilda Rix exhibited drawings in the Austral Salons and the Victorian Artists’ Society. Now, tapping into their family’s entrepreneurial spirit, the three Rix women organized an art exhibition at the Studio in the Flinders Building in Melbourne to raise funds for their travel and boarding in Europe.\(^52\) The drawings Hilda Rix exhibited were reviewed by a critic from the Argus, who described her work as having the “promise of great possibilities in the future, which training in the world’s art centre might enable her to fulfill.”\(^53\) It was clear even to this critic that Rix demonstrated potential, but that she would need to look further than the National Gallery School to cultivate and ultimately capitalize on her natural talents.

\(^{51}\) Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Work*, 7.

\(^{52}\) In addition to her coursework at the National Gallery School, Hilda sought out commissions for commercial illustration, embellishing the pages of advertisements and children’s books, including *The School Paper*, a monthly national education magazine. She was successful in saving 100 pounds from her illustration work, which was allocated toward her future studies in Europe. Johnson, *In Search of Beauty*, 11-12 and Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 7-8.

Embarking on a journey that would shape her life and professional career, on March 22, 1907, Hilda Rix, her sister Elsie, and their mother sailed from Melbourne on the SS Runic, beginning their nearly two month journey to the center of the British Empire. After combating some early seasickness, Rix became a “good sailor” and dedicated herself to the task of copiously documenting their seven-week voyage through daily briefings, sketches, and neatly pasted and annotated postcards that highlighted picturesque topography and major attractions in the port cities they visited (Figure 4-7). Rix recorded in her journal:

The life on board is great !!!!! We tramped the long decks with jolly companions, talked, watched sunsets and moonrises and passing ships and whale spouts, albatross following the ships…We had the celebration of Neptune’s Day when crossed the line. I had an industrious fit for one week, in which I drew and painted nearly all the children on board—who were willing victims.

Like many Australians of her generation, both male and female, Rix recognized the need to travel to the metropoles of London and Paris to acquire the experiences and training unavailable in the colonial periphery. For those of the Rix’s class and education this journey was not solely an artistic pilgrimage, but also a social ritual imbricated with colonial identity formation. Angela Woollacott, author of To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity, argues that Australian women’s journey to England was an integral part in the process of identity formation, offering white colonials the opportunity to negotiate their status between the Old and New Worlds. Woollacott states: “Australian women viewed and reconstructed their status in the British Empire through the knowledge they gleaned of the

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54 Instead of traveling through the Suez Canal, to reduce the cost of their journey, the Rix women opted for a less expensive route to England, which took them around the Cape of Good Hope including stops along the west coast of Africa. As part of the journey to London, the Australian imperial subjects, were able to visit several colonies and territories in the Empire before reaching the colonial metropole.

55 Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.
empire’s constituent parts on their passages ‘home,’ as they often called England.”\textsuperscript{56} Australians’ notion of England as “home,” especially after the federation of the Commonwealth, reveals a sense of the cultural and psychological inferiority these British subjects struggled with on account of their distance and therefore difference from the metropole, but also their desire to access the cosmopolitan urbanity and cultivated authority they believed their whiteness and connection to London symbolized. Woollacott describes how the colonial Australians viewed their identity in relation to England.

Australians may have hoped that the whiteness they claimed would counteract their colonial status, but this very claim became part of the cultural fabric of the British Isles themselves. Australian women who went to London followed their own individual paths, but they also participated in and shaped an imperial culture that was hierarchical, racist, and gendered, even as it was changing.\textsuperscript{57}

Evidence of this process appears throughout Rix’s travel journal. She asserted her whiteness by describing encounters with Africans and Arabs in the coastal cities the SS Runic anchored.

Mother, Elsie, and I went on shore at Cape Town—Glorious place—colouring gorgeous—went for tram ride right up mountains around the coast—heavenly—Quaint white houses against intense blue sky all the buildings picturesque. On our way back to township I came through Raffer quarters—cute little black babies with huge roly[sic] eyes. Being Sunday all shops were shut for which we were sorry. Managed to find one jolly rester[?] open where we had tea with him.\textsuperscript{58}

Her impressions capture the young artist’s enthusiasm and openness to new experiences and picturesque sights, but also evidence of the privileged viewing rights she claimed over other colonized peoples on account of her whiteness. Rix, like other white colonials capitalized on her complexion as a signifier of her special status and relation to the power Englishness symbolized.


\textsuperscript{57} Woollacott, \textit{To Try Her Fortune in London}, 17.

\textsuperscript{58} Hilda Rix Nicholas European Journal, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.
Her coded language reveals the racist stereotypes held by white colonials as a means to distinguish their difference and superiority within the complex hierarchal matrix of British Imperial identity.

By leaving Australia and partaking in the social-cultural ritual of traveling “home,” Hilda gave up the stability of bourgeois Melbourne to enter a far more tenuous and transitory state in which she was liberated from the social expectations and domestic responsibilities of raising a family. Woollacott frames women’s travel as a “cultural ritual,” which had the power to sublimate what would be viewed otherwise as unfeminine professional ambitions at home.

Because departing for London was a recognized cultural ritual in Australia, women could undertake this huge step without being condemned for transgressing femininity through being overly ambitious, despite contemporary cultural limitations on women’s claims to the public domain…Going to London was therefore a way for an Australian woman to express and act on her ambition.59

Hilda Rix’s departure for Europe was not only a strategy of mimicry in pursuing the travels and advanced artistic training typical of successful male artists, but it was also her escape from the expectation of bourgeois femininity of early twentieth-century Australia. In a liminal state, untethered to the continent, Rix was not under the same demands to perform her assigned role and espouse the feminine duties of a “good” Australian woman. Instead, her pursuit of professional ambitions echoes not just those of Australian male artists, but the strategic choices made by exceptional female artists, including Iso Rae and Jane Sutherland who never married or had children.60

Hilda’s mother, Elizabeth Rix was an example of the acceptable “woman” artist, an individual who demonstrated a talent in flower painting and still life, but who ultimately


60 Records from the Sydney Society of Women Painters reveal that between 1910 and 1929 the majority of members were unmarried. In 1912 there were 40 unmarried to 7 married members and in 1922 the highest disparity of 51 unmarried to 3 married women painters. See Ambrus, *The Ladies’ Picture Show*, 16-17.
suppressed the potential of her artistic skills to focus her attention on her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Unwilling to give up her passion, Hilda Rix was exceptional, or according to a psychoanalytic interpretation “abnormal,” for not following the prescribed path for “women” artists in Australia. Luce Irigaray would argue that women’s assigned role in patriarchy as mimic required Rix replicate the image of “woman” artist–defined by lack–in relation to the model of Artist as normatively white and male. In Australia, a “woman” artist performed her marginalized role, or “lack,” by submitting to an amateur status or working in the lower genres, which did not challenge men’s provenance over more celebrated themes and subject matter. Hilda Rix did neither of these things. She rejected her feminine role and committed to work according to the professional practices of male artists.

As Linda Nochlin first articulated in 1971, marriage and raising children could inhibit women artists’ productivity, especially limiting the possibility for creative activities outside the confines of the home.61 Given the disproportionate proportion of men to women in Australia, it was presumed, and in fact expected, that women could marry if they desired. The single and childless status of Hilda Rix’s predecessors, Iso Rae and Jane Sutherland, suggests that they chose this “abnormal” path in order to advance their professional careers.62 At the age of 23, by embarking to Europe to follow professional ambitions, it was clear that at this time in her life, Hilda chose her love of art over any desire for marriage and children.

**Artistic Ingénue in Europe**

By framing Hilda Rix’s artistic ambitions and desires within an Irigaryan critique of patriarchal models, it becomes clear that, instead of faithfully replicating the feminine role of

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62 Caroline Ambrus, *The Ladies’ Picture Show*, 16-17.
“woman” artist assigned to her by men, Rix was not resigned to a life or position of lack and instead adopted and performed the role of the male artist, mimicking and mirroring his practices and subjects. By embarking on the quest to acquire advanced arts training in Europe and entering into the male defined and dominated spaces of the Parisian atelier and Salon, Rix was acculturated by patriarchal art, in a manner similar to Henry Tanner’s absorption into the dominant whiteness of artistic tradition. Entering into academic practice shaped both Tanner and Rix into recognizable Others, through the pedagogical structure, which dictated that both outsider artists mirror and replicate official art’s ideology and practices.

Rix’s acculturation began in May of 1907 when, after seven weeks at sea, the Rix Women arrived in Southampton. They proceeded to London by train and stayed in a boarding house, which the artist described as “A dear old house at the top of a hill, which provided a heavenly view of the surrounding country.”63 Hilda and Elsie Rix took in the usual tourist sites including the Tower Bridge, Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul’s Cathedral. Rix was eager to visit the Royal Academy and noted in her journal a great admiration for John Singer Sargent’s portraits and R.A. Frank Craig’s *The Maid*, a painting of Joan of Arc in battle.64 They admired the aesthetic eclecticism of Whistler and Sargent’s confident brushwork, grand manner, and Gilded Age subjects.

Hilda Rix was trained and worked as an artist during the Belle Époque generation of political, social, cultural transformations, which was visualized through the coexistence of an eclectic array of avant-garde and conservative movements and tastes. Rix’s relatively sheltered upbringing in the suburbs of Melbourne and cultural training in the Gallery School shaped her

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64 Ibid., 11.
foundational thinking and relatively conservative views on art. Generally, the Rix women preferred tradition and academic naturalism to modern trends, demonstrating a fondness for the picturesque and romanticized historical and literary subjects. The artist disliked what she perceived as the pretentiousness and artificial “artistic temperament” of Art Nouveau, and Elsie Rix described some of the Impressionist work in the Musée du Luxembourg as a “terror.”

Rix’s aversion to the “artistic temperament” of Art Nouveau may be interpreted as her understanding of the gendered codes of art in which artificiality, fussiness, and attention to surface were defined as feminine. During her studies in Europe Rix mimicked her male teachers, but the style she developed was not simply the result of imitating the practices of men. Rather, her commitment to naturalism and the desire to further cultivate her skills as a draughtswoman were a conscious effort to align herself with what were understood to be the masculine attributes of artistic practice, namely a tradition in Disegno, or drawing and design.

As Tamar Garb highlights in her study of the women artists of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs: “While works by male artists were not generally understood as symptomatic of their author’s masculinity (it went without saying), those by women could not escape the determining origin of their producer’s femininity. The sex of art was crucial.”

To defend herself against the gendered stereotypes, or “nature,” of women’s art, Hilda Rix developed sound drawing and painting skills that emphasized clarity and legibility, opposed to what were perceived as the feminine attributes of feeling, color, and imitation. These gendered associations were wielded as pejoratives by traditional-academic art to diminish avant-garde

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movements, including Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, as “feminine,” an insult Rix herself employed in critiquing Art Nouveau as artificial and pretentious.

Aligning herself with a more conservative academic aesthetic allowed Rix to learn the codes of masculine practice that would provide her official recognition. Similar to Henry Tanner, Rix likely recognized that already having two strikes against her—as a woman and provincial New World outsider—earning validation would be nearly impossible if she chose an avant-garde or transgressive style to work in. In navigating the gendered discourse of art, the artist learned and manipulated the codes of masculine art. Her understanding of these codes is evidenced in a letter she composed later in her career, in which she described herself as “the right man for the job.”67 As such, during her time in Europe, Rix rejected the contemporary avant-garde aesthetics of Cubism and Fauvism and squarely aligned herself with traditional academic and masculine values of careful draughtsmanship, studied realism, and legibility.

In striving to work in this tradition, Hilda Rix set her sights on the challenge of exhibiting at the Paris Salon.68 Rix, like Tanner, recognized that having work hung in the Salon was a vehicle for visibility and notoriety at home. While new exhibition opportunities rendered the Salon sponsored by the Société des Artistes Français irrelevant to the needs of early-twentieth-century avant-garde artists, for foreign, especially New World painters, recognition by this esteemed institution was a milestone that many considered obligatory to advancing a professional career. John Pigot described how Australian male artists negotiated the dominant cultural tastes of Belle Époque Paris and patronage to maintain lucrative careers.

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Acceptance [in the Salon] meant that an artist had been admitted into a select international community of like-minded painters. Medals and honours won by Australian painters at the Salon were reported in the press at home…Australians working in Paris generally avoided avant-garde art and artists. Rupert Bunny, George Lambert and Emanuel Phillips Fox, for example were very successful artists in France because they conscientiously courted the Salon and its audience; their elegant and aristocratic compositions portraying the languorous and exotic life of the upper classes at leisure were well received in Paris precisely because they did not disrupt the status quo.69

Seeking the same level of success achieved by these celebrated male Australian artists working in Europe, Hilda Rix adopted their conservative aesthetic, which was reinforced by the École des Beaux Arts and proliferated in the numerous private ateliers overseen by renowned academicians.

While in London and anxious to begin her training, Rix interviewed and was accepted for a position in John Hassall’s New Art School, recently established in 1900. She documented her first encounter with Hassall in her journal, recounting that after reviewing her portfolio the prominent English illustrator asked Elizabeth Rix: “Why do you bring this girl to me? She can draw better than I can already.”70 In Hassall’s studio, Rix had the opportunity to work from a live model for the first time. She only spent a month in his studio, but wrote of her time there and her teacher in glowing terms. She described Hassall as “Simply great. Taught me miles. He is gloriously enthusiastic, which makes one work twice as hard…He is jolly as any school boy. He came twice a day in the morning for life work and then afternoon for posters and illustration…Oh the models we had were devy [divine].”71 The aspiring artist did not stay long

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69 Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 11.

70 Rix Nicholas, “In Search of Beauty.”

71 Johnson, *In Search of Beauty*, 12.
in Hassall’s school, as she left Australia seeking a career in the fine arts, not to refine her skills as a commercial illustrator.\(^2\)

Six months after arriving in London, in September of 1907, the Rix women decided to continue their journey on to Paris. Before reaching the City of Light, they were treated to a relaxing and luxurious stay in Rouen at a chateau owned by old family friends. Following the lead of many artists in Paris, the Rixes found lodging in Montparnasse settling in a pension on the Rue de Joseph Bara. After enjoying the luxuries of life in a chateau, the artist lamented over the humble living accommodations of their pension writing:

Oh! quel Malheur!!! Why is one born with the sympathies and feelings which fit into a chateau and then have a fortune which fits into a nutshell?...But thank goodness we enjoy really everything, and although ones throat swells and ones eyes feel hot around the edges – one loves to live and see everything and know miles.\(^3\)

The location was chosen for its proximity to the Rue Notre Dame des Champs and the number of schools and studios located there.\(^4\) Among the street’s famous residents were the painters William-Adolphe Bouguereau, James McNeill Whistler, Rosa Bonheur, Carolus-Duran, Jean Léon Gérôme, Jean-Paul Laurens, and many more Rix would have been familiar with. Additionally, the pension’s location was close to the Luxembourg Gardens, a space that provided

\(^2\) Moving on from the New School may have been encouraged in part by Arthur Streeton. Before the Rixes departed for Europe, Streeton advised Hilda’s mother to provide her daughter with opportunities to study with many different teachers, not under the influence of a single master or within the same atelier for too long in order to “retain any originality.” Echoing the advice given to her by Arthur Streeton, when advising the next generation of artists in a lecture given in Australia, Hilda stated: “If you are wise, and if you have originality–do not stay too long at any one of the schools–but take what good you can from any of all them, if possible. Take your own studio and work out your own salvation–making sure first that your drawing will stand the test of any circumstances.” Hilda Rix Nicholas, artist’s talk “An Artist’s Life in France,” Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817 National Library of Australia.

\(^3\) Johnson, In Search of Beauty, 11.

\(^4\) Milner notes that this area was the home of 100s of studios well into the twentieth century. “As recently as the 1970s when the massive Tour Maine-Montparnasse complex was built, it is estimated that five hundred studios were demolished...Yet some studios still remain, their windows overlooking gardens, or piled one upon another in courtyards, providing a glimpse of the area’s past.” Milner, The Studios of Paris, 211-217.
a welcome outdoor refuge for the Rix women to escape from their cramped lodging and the
occasional unpleasant tenants they were forced to share their accommodations with. The
gardens offered Rix an opportunity to practice *plein air* sketching, a skill she would capitalize on
in her later Étaplean and Moroccan imagery.

Energized by the possibilities Paris offered, Hilda set off to explore the city making the
Musée du Louvre her first stop. Despite being initially disheartened by her family’s cramped
lodgings, she was often overwhelmed by the beauty and elegance of Paris. After visiting several
schools in Montparnasse, Rix enrolled at the Académie Delecluse beginning classes in
November of 1907. Auguste Delecluse, an academician trained by Carolus-Duran, established
his school in the late nineteenth century. As was the situation in most Paris académies,
instruction at Delecluse was centered on figure drawing and painting from models. Rix may have
chosen Delecluse’s atelier because of its reputation for supporting female students. It was
particularly popular with American and English women, as he provided two studio spaces for
female enrollees and only one for the male students. In 1900, the British publication, *The
Lady’s Realm Magazine*, compiled a report that outlined the fine art academies most
advantageous for female students in Paris describing some of the perks the Académie Delecluse
offered.

The fees for the women students are higher than those of the men; but then the
‘weaker vessels’ are allowed many more advantages, their studios are fitted up in
a more comfortable manner, and they have a salon to themselves, while the
concierge is engaged to attend to their wants, and will serve afternoon tea or
luncheon to them at a very nominal cost. The students at the atelier ballot for their

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75 Rix writes of this in her journal. “Our pension is—ugh! At present—several there [sic] whom we hate! So work all
day, and am just there for meals—and go straight up to bed after dinner. We are too poor to go away from there for
it’s cheap!” Johnson, *In search of Beauty*, 12.

76 Edith Waldemar Leverton, "Paris Ateliers". *Lady's Realm: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. 8,
(May/October 1900) 580-583.
places, so it is not a case of ‘first come, first served’; everyone thus has an equal
change of a good position.\textsuperscript{77}

Under Delecluse’s instruction, Rix began the next stage of her artistic training by
translating her natural proficiency in pencil and charcoal to her first attempts in oil painting.
None of these oil sketches survive, however, the artist writes of her experience with the new
medium and the process of selecting models at the académie.

Alas, I felt that I was sadly murdering him [the model] for I had never painted in
oils before. In one of the rest times in marched a procession of models for our
approval. Mons. Del.C. posed them and asked ‘Do you want this man?’ (in
French). One was an old fat moonfaced model dressed in a cook’s costume. He
has a stupid smile, his expression being as vacant of sense as the basin of stuff he
was stirring. But I liked his legs who’s knobby calves shine through emerald
green stockings. He wears buckled shoes on his small fat feet. More than half of
the girls put up their hands and so alas he is to pose for us some time soon.\textsuperscript{78}

After initially struggling with the new medium, Rix was determined and diligent in her
efforts to gain a surer hand with the paints stating: “I’m dying to have the oil pigment under
control and to feel perfectly sure of myself, then let it fly.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textbf{Mirroring Woman’s Otherness or Resisting Reflection?}

The Rix women spent the Christmas of 1907 relaxing in Rouen. When they returned to
Paris, the artist began the New Year by enrolling in classes with the American painter Richard
Miller at the Académie Colarossi.\textsuperscript{80} Richard Miller had studied at the Académie Julian between

\textsuperscript{77} Leverton, “Paris Ateliers,” 580-83.
\textsuperscript{78} Hilda Rix Nicholas, European Journal, undated. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of
Australia.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, November 1907.
\textsuperscript{80} Académie Colarossi was located at No. 10 Rue de la Grande Chaumière. American Painter Clive Holland
described the Académie and its international appeal during the early twentieth century: “Space counts for a good
deal at Colarossi’s; and so when the \textit{nouveau} a day or two later climbs the stairs…he finds them narrow, steep and
leading past a veritable nest of ateliers, located one above another…The life class was cosmopolitan enough, and
Englishman or two, a few Americans, a couple of Japanese, a coloured gentleman, Poles, Austrians, French,
Russians; girls and fellows all hard at work with the model posed.” See Clive Holland, “Student Life in the Latin
Quarter, Paris” \textit{The Studio}, vol. 27, no. 115 (1902) and Milner, \textit{The Studios of Paris}, 216-217.
1898 and 1901, working under Jean-Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant. When Rix entered Miller’s studio, he was regarded as a popular teacher having established himself as a Salon painter, earning acclaim that led to his nomination by the French government as a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1909.81

Miller’s effect on Rix’s art was immediate and lasting. As a member of the American Artists’ colony in Giverny, he worked in the Impressionist manner that sought to capture the momentary effects of light through animated brushstrokes of high-keyed pigment. This approach created a heavily worked surface while still retaining a sense of naturalism and pictorial structure. The academicized, distilled version of Impressionism offered Belle Époque Salon painters a more modern and eclectic aesthetic, when compared to the slick varnished surfaces of conservative academicians such as Gérôme. This variety of Impressionism represented an aesthetic compromise, which remained popular with Salon audiences and profitable for artists throughout the Belle Époque.

Typical of the American Impressionist movement, Miller painted *plein air* landscapes, though, the majority of his oeuvre consists of formulaic garden scenes and interior sunlit compositions featuring a single female figure. These young women are portrayed in a manner that reinforced the stereotypes of woman as a beautiful, thoughtless, and superficial object. Miller’s women are adorned in fussy garments posed languidly, lost in daydream, or consumed by ennui. The figures are portrayed as thoughtlessly handling or playing with feminine accessories such as parasols, fans, flowers, or jewelry. Miller frequently employed the use of a mirror in his interior compositions to offer his audience a second reflected view of the

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aestheticized female figure, while also suggesting the superficiality and vanity of woman as fixated on appearance and surfaces.

A canvas representative of Miller’s oeuvre is *The Necklace* from 1909 (Figure 4-8). The composition featured a single female figure seated in a boudoir embellished with luxurious patterned fabrics. The space is enlivened by sunlight, which warms the room through large windows that provide a pastel backdrop for this decidedly feminine space and offers a glimpse of the garden beyond. The female figure’s auburn hair is parted in the middle then wrapped and pinned up at the back of her head. She leans forward towards the viewer and a mirror situated in the bottom left of the canvas. The young woman admires or contemplates her reflection while absent-mindedly handling the necklace fastened around her alabaster neck.

She is dressed in an ivory-white, off the shoulder gown that Miller rendered using light blues, swatches of yellow, and hues of pink with a loaded brush to convey the dappled sunlight that animates the boudoir, which enters through windows behind the figure, offering a view of the garden outside. The gown is cinched at the waist then bursts out into a multi-tiered skirt that envelops the woman’s lower half. The surface of the skirt is further fragmented into reflections of light through Miller’s alternation of wet-into-wet and scumbling techniques that describe the voluminous layers of white ruffles.

It is likely that Miller would have returned to models he found attractive and reliable. This is evidenced by a number of identifiable women who make frequent appearances in his canvases despite the artistic license he exercised to generalize their features and costume through vigorous broken brushwork. The hazy appearance and heavily worked surface was a modern strategy to suggest naturalism and the effects of sunlight. The mixing, matching, and recycling of accessories, costumes, settings, and models ultimately made Miller’s oeuvre rather systematic.
and predictable, yet his attractive women and canvases remained appealing to Salon audiences and bourgeois patrons.

It was under Miller’s instruction that Rix developed confidence in oil and experimented with the direct painting technique known as “wet-into-wet” and “wet-on-dry,” a common technique taught in the Parisian académies. In a letter written to friends, Rix described her newfound success with the medium. “Ok Kid it is exciting work painting. I’ve brought each as I’ve finished it along to the studio on the day Mr. Miller give his correction, and he has given me an excellent and long chriticism [sic] of each, and likes the last best.”

As Rix became more self-assured in her skills, she also began to self-consciously mimic and alter the subjects of her male mentors, creating subtle variations and correctives that resisted these masculine coded subjects, especially those that portrayed the female form in a way that marginalized or subjugated women. Female subjects make up the majority of Rix’s oeuvre. The inconsistency in her portrayal of different types of women reveals Rix’s ambivalence in accepting and rejecting masculine codes of representation that othered and stereotyped women. At times, it appears that Rix replicated male defined archetypes and tropes of femininity too perfectly, thereby maintaining and supporting the patriarchal othering of women. Rix’s desire to enjoy the privilege and recognition of the male artist, but also to “speak” as herself— as a woman and an artist— required careful balance and calculation in how she mimicked and manipulated patriarchal tradition. This process was risky in that Rix had to perform her role as an artist self-consciously to resist being reinscribed within patriarchy’s Self-Same. As Luce Irigaray warned

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82 Letter written February 27, 1908. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia. In a lecture given later in her career to an Australian audience, Rix recalled her time in Miller’s studio stating, “There one may learn agile brushwork— but many of his students became weak Richard Millers catching his tricks of technique without the substance of his greater gifts.” “An Artist’s life in France.”
destroying the discursive mechanism of women’s oppression was “not a simple
undertaking…For how can we introduce ourselves into such a tightly-woven systematicity?”

As a student and young artist learning to negotiate the appropriation and resistance of
patriarchal traditions, Hilda Rix experimented and struggled with the challenge of mimicking the
male artist, without reducing herself or women to the stereotypical views of patriarchy. Creating
a position for herself as a Subject was a complex and conflicted task that required Rix to
fabricate a new visual language by appropriating the male position of Self, while not being
reduced to it. Irigaray describes this challenging process with regard to language:

Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason,
inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a faithfully
elaborated code in hand…One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing
an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself
with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed,
congealed in them.84

An early attempt in imitating the work of her teacher, but one that also works to reject the
stereotypes of woman as vain and superficial, is Rix’s 1913 the Pink Scarf (Figure 4-9). Rix’s
canvas, is clearly indebted to Miller’s earlier The Necklace, not only in technique, but in the
choice of subject and figural composition, qualities that she would continue to appropriate and
make her own throughout her career. I would argue Rix’s mimicry extended to her portrayal of
the same model that Miller employed in The Necklace, as the white gown and pink accessory
included in Rix’s canvas are nearly identical to those in her teacher’s composition.85

It seems likely that Miller’s frequent employment of models and costumes extended to
his role as an instructor at Colarossi’s academy. Rix’s early oil paintings include themes, models,

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83 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, 76.
84 Ibid., 29.
85 This same white, off the shoulder dress appears in at least ten of Miller’s canvases.
and wardrobe that are familiar to Miller’s canvases. Rix may have composed *The Pink Scarf* from sketches and painted studies she completed during her time in Miller’s studio, making it possible that both teacher and student created finished canvases featuring the same model and dress years apart. A comparison of Miller and Rix’s œuvres reveals that *The Pink Scarf* was just one of several paintings in which the artist mimicked her teacher’s figural compositions and costuming. 86 This suggests that Rix returned to the studies and sketches she made under Miller’s guidance to compose these later canvases. In his own study of Rix’s œuvre, Pigot argued that she “acquired a great deal more from the man than she cared to admit.” 87

In the *Pink Scarf*, Rix imitated her teacher’s central pyramidal composition to feature an auburn haired model outfitted in a white, off the shoulder dress accented by a long blush-pink scarf that falls down the back of her dress and over the multiple layers of ivory ruffles. The thick wet-into-wet technique and scumbling that animates the surface of the canvas demonstrates Rix’s growing confidence in painting with oils. Rather than faithfully imitating Miller’s image of an unthinking, vain woman, Rix made slight alterations to her teacher’s formula of woman-as-image. It is through the juxtaposition and imperfect replication of the original that Rix begins to assert her own subjectivity and expression.

Alternatively, Catherine Speck has interpreted Rix’s *The Pink Scarf* as belonging to Miller’s category of “fashionably dressed woman, [as] overt display of the high life of Belle Époque Paris,” or the “subjectless subject.” 88 Speck describes the canvas:

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86 I also believe that Hilda Rix’s 1913 canvas *Sleepy*, which features a similar pyramidal figural composition of a woman with her back to the viewer turning left as posed in the *Pink Scarf*, employs the same model or was made from sketches of the model used in Miller’s *The Necklace* and Rix’s the *Pink Scarf*. Later canvases inspired by Miller include the Spanish themed *The Masquerade*, ca 1913 and *Spanish Shawl*, ca. 1936.


88 Catherine Speck, “The ‘Frontier’ Speaks Back,” *PORTAL*, vol. 10, no. 2 (July 2013), 5.
Rix’s woman is passive, posed, waiting, and contained. The filmy pink organza scarf trailing around the beautifully adorned woman frames her, and accentuates her creamy off-the-shoulder gown. Her expansive uncovered back and shoulders are the focus of the gaze. The decorative flowery wallpaper screen behind her again creates a shallow space forcing the viewer’s eyes onto the subject herself.89

Speck’s analysis of Rix’s canvas underscores the danger she faced in being reduced to the Self-Same of male artist’s negative portrayals of women’s “nature.” On the surface, the young artist does create an image of woman that is passive and posed as Speck suggests; however, I see several ways in which Rix’s image of woman diverges from Miller’s canvas, which I would argue point to her desire to undermine the vanity and vacancy of her teacher’s image of femininity. Rix repeats the stereotypes unfaithfully and unconvincingly as a means to undermine the original’s claims of truthfulness.

Although Rix’s woman is conventionally beautiful, she is not overly idealized. While Miller simplified and aestheticized the details of his model’s features, effectively rendering his models as a singular Woman or Other, Rix described the auburn haired model, in a manner that articulated her features and offered a degree of substance and individuality when compared to Miller’s preference for scumbled generic beauty. Rix framed her female figure from behind turning her face to the left. The pose is similar to that of Miller’s figure in a study for The Necklace (Figure 4-10). Instead of leaning toward the artist and viewer, the model in The Pink Scarf rolls her shoulders inward and casts her gaze downward, indicating that she is aware, but not entirely comfortable or content with her role as the object of the gaze. There is a degree of unhappiness, reluctance, and resistance in her comportment and expression that is not found in Miller’s forward leaning, mirror gazing woman as object.

89 Speck, “The ‘Frontier’ Speaks Back,” 5.
Most significant to Rix’s alterations is the omission of the mirror from her composition—the object that signifies the woman’s vanity and superficiality. Accordingly, this image, both figuratively and literally, refuses to mirror Miller’s misogynist stereotype. Rix paints a reflective woman who refracts her role as image revealing the superficiality and artifice of Miller’s work. In response to Miller’s canvas, Rix creates, as Irigaray would say, a curved or concave mirror,

To put in place a mode of specularization that allows for the relation of woman to ‘herself’ and to her like. Which presupposes a curved mirror, but also one that is folded back on itself, with its impossible reappropriation ‘on the inside’ of the mind, of thought, of subjectivity. Whence the intervention of the speculum and of the concave mirror, which disturb the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters.90

Rix plays with the concept of artifice to highlight the painting as a construction. The elegant interior of Miller’s boudoir is replaced with what appears to be the austere wall of the studio space in the far right of the canvas behind the colorful rose patterned backdrop. Throughout her career, Rix would compose images that negotiated the real and artificial in a way that attempted to give substance to her sitters, which was denied by her male contemporaries.

While Hilda Rix internalized much from her teachers in France, perhaps the greatest influence during her first years in France was that of another Australian artist, the Melbourne painter Emmanuel Phillips Fox. Fox was already a well-known and respected artist in Australia, having found success at home and abroad in England and France. Following the path of aspiring Australian artists, after his training in Melbourne’s Gallery School, in 1887 Fox followed his ambitions to Europe. In Paris he studied with William Bouguereau and Jean-Léon Gérôme at the École des Beaux Arts and alternated his summers working in Étaples and Brittany where he

90 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One 154-155.
engaged with the prevailing trend for *plein-air* practices and impressionistic technique.\textsuperscript{91} In 1892, Fox returned to Melbourne and established a private art school modeled after the Académie Julian, and offered *plein air* painting retreats for his pupils during the summer.\textsuperscript{92} Similar to the enrollment at the Gallery School, a large percentage of Fox’s students in Melbourne were women. His 1895 canvas, *Art students*, offered an untraditional portrayal of his studio (Figure 4-11). It is very likely that the Rix women saw this painting when it was first exhibited in Melbourne in 1895.\textsuperscript{93}

Inhibited by the conservative artistic institutions in Australia, Fox returned to Europe in 1901, and in May of 1905 married Ethel Carrick, an English painter. The couple moved to Paris and made their home near the Luxembourg Gardens. The couple regularly hosted guests, including many artists “in the privacy of their small arboured garden, which provided bright flowers, verdure and filtered sunlight, they entertained and painted many of their works.”\textsuperscript{94} Carrick described the communal synergy of their Montparnasse apartment complex, the Cité Fleurie, as “quite a cosmopolitan little colony of hard working artists who have apartments in the same building, thirty different nationalities being represented.”\textsuperscript{95} During their first few days in Paris, Elsie and Hilda visited the Foxes in their Paris apartment and had the opportunity to see the painters’ works in progress. The sisters sat and discussed art with the esteemed painters in the garden that provided the colorful setting for many of the couple’s canvases (Figure 4-12).


\textsuperscript{93} Hilda would have had another opportunity to view this canvas when it was shown at the 1910 Salon in Paris.

\textsuperscript{94} Zubans, *E. Phillips Fox, 1865-1915*, 7.

\textsuperscript{95} Goddard, “An artistic marriage,” 18.
It is likely that Fox and Carrick contributed to Rix’s interest in *plein airism* evidenced by her new found embrace of an impressionistic aesthetic, sensitivity to light, and employment of vibrant pigments. What would have been most appealing and influential to Rix was the couple’s support and respect of one another’s careers. Australian art curator Tony Ellwood, described the equality of Fox and Carrick’s relationship:

From the time they married in London until Fox’s untimely death in Melbourne, the two lived, worked and travelled side-by-side, equals in life and art…Importantly, Fox was clearly also willing to meet Carrick on her own terms—his support and admiration for her achievements, and an awareness of the struggles for greater independence of the women of her generation, were evidently crucial to their successful union.\(^6\)

As a respected teacher, Rix would have taken any advice and critique Fox offered seriously, and as a successful artist in her own right, Carrick would have served as a model for the young artist, proving that being a woman and an artist were not mutually exclusive. Rix’s mimicry of Fox and Carrick would be significant in shaping her artistic maturation abroad, as it is likely the couple’s mentorship was instrumental in encouraging the young artist to venture outside Paris, first to the coastal fishing village of Étaples beginning in the summer of 1910, and later to Morocco in 1912.

**Becoming an Artist in Étaples**

Before WWI, the seaside village of Étaples was home to a popular artists’ colony, becoming a favorite for American and other English-speaking artists working in France. The Americans were joined by notable Australian artists including, E. Phillips Fox and his wife Ethel Carrick, the celebrated painter Rupert Bunny, Marie Tuck, Arthur Baker Clack, Margaret

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Preston, and Isobel (Iso) Rae, a former classmate of Elizabeth Rix at the Gallery School and a long standing figure in the art colony, first settling there in 1887.\textsuperscript{97}

Étaples, located in the northern coast of France in Pas-de-Calais, at the mouth of the Canche River, was an ideal alternative to Brittany, allowing artists to portray the local population in their picturesque rural costumes, as well as the variety of agrarian and coastal topography available for landscape painters. Although several artists lived in the area year round, the Étaples colony swelled during the summer months when the Parisian ateliers closed. In addition to painters seeking picturesque subjects and inexpensive accommodations, wealthy tourists vacationed at the Le Touquet-Paris-Plage resort each summer. As Pigot noted: “Le Touquet’s size, coupled with the presence of so many wealthy visitors, made it an ideal location for the annual exhibitions of the newly formed Société Artistique de Picardie.”\textsuperscript{98} The proximity to Paris, availability of cheap housing and models, local exhibition opportunities, and affluent patrons made Étaples the ideal site for Rix to set up her first studio and elevate her career.

Upon her arrival the artist expressed disappointment with the village’s muddy appearance, smell, and begging peasant children that followed the Rix women through the fishing village, yet it was not long before Hilda Rix came to think of Étaples as a home away from home and a site of rural refuge. The time she spent on the coast between the years 1910 and 1914, and the artistic exchanges that took place there, would be the most influential of her young career. Unlike the crowded and competitive study in urban ateliers, the artistic community in

\textsuperscript{97} When most of the Étaples community fled during the German occupation of France, Iso Rae and Henry Tanner were among the few that remained and documented the transformation and new life of the village into a base for allied troops (American and AIF). Rae was not officially named as a war artists by AIF despite documenting her first hand experiences in Etaples during the war. Tanner also remained in Etaples serving in the American army. The images he created during this period are some of the only representations of African American service men, acknowledging and making visual their contributions, which were occluded by white American patriotic images. Jean-Claude Lesage, Peintres Australiens à Étaples, (A.M.M.E editions, 2000), 18.

\textsuperscript{98} Pigot, Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Art, 18.
Étaples was welcoming and collaborative. Pigot described the hospitable nature of the colony: “Artists shared their knowledge, and very few worked in isolation. Rix eagerly absorbed advice and constructed her art according to the conservatively modern art of her colleagues.”

After exploring the village, Rix decided to rent a studio space that was situated directly off the town square. The property included a garden in which she posed her sitters, imitating the verdant backdrop of the Foxes’ Parisian garden. The market and women working and conversing in the town square became one of the artist’s favorite subjects. She described the noise and life that drew her out of the studio and into the public square to sketch.

There is such a hum and buzz of traffic going past my window as I write—it is almost incredible that a little village like this could produce such noise, but it is market day, and that means that a long procession of country carts pass, driven by dear little rosy faced, snowy capped women. They are mostly donkey carts, laden with butter, eggs, green vegetables and great bunches of sweet smelling flowers that tell of the overflowing gardens.

During her studies in Paris and Étaples, Rix cultivated her interest in portraying types, painting strong singular female figures in a variety of ethnic and historical costumes. In Étaples, she established an ongoing engagement with the figure of the rural peasant and depiction of agrarian life that would persist throughout her career. Rix’s Étaplean work was defined by two different approaches in depicting the local population. The first encompassed lively *plein air* sketches made in color pencil, graphite, and charcoal that captured vendors, shoppers, and the locals socializing in the marketplace (Figure 4-13). The second mode featured local women as monumentalized figures in oil paintings.

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99 Ibid., 19.

100 Ibid.

101 Rix Nicholas, “An Artist’s Life in France.”
Rix’s skills as a draughtswoman were already well developed before she left Melbourne, but she refined the “masculine” technique of drawing and design, studying with John Hassel in London and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Her *croquis* lessons with Steinlen were especially beneficial in cultivating her ability to capture animated scenes and figures in the Étapes’ market and urban gardens of Paris. Rix described Steinlen in her journal as an “invaluable instructor in the art of quick sketching.”102 Additionally, Hassel and Steinlen’s clarity in communicating through an economy of vigorous mark making provided an important example for Rix, giving her “good reason to develop her skills.”103

When Rix enrolled at the Grande Chaumière Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen was already a significant contributor in the Montmartre avant-garde, known for his illustration and poster art. His work was often political in nature, focusing on the life of the lower and working classes in Paris, “combining a compassionate understanding of the plight of the poor with broader social issues, his pictures confronted some of the problems facing modern France.”104

In taking on rural subjects, Rix attempted to enter into an artistic discourse that enjoyed popularity beginning in the mid nineteenth century. With the establishment of the Barbizon School, rural art colonies in France became a fundamental element in both academic and avant-garde practice. Artists and Salon audiences were attracted to the idealized otherness of non-industrialized peasant life. The untouched purity of the rural landscape and biblical associations with the honest labor of agrarian life established by Millet and the Barbizon painters generations earlier, had since regressed into a superficial portrayal of peasant otherness made famous by

102 Ibid.

103 Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 16.

104 John Pigot noted that Steinlen was unique among Hilda’s influences as he was the only teacher who was not part of the traditional Salon system. Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 16.
Salon painters, including Jules Breton and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (Figures 4-14). These beautiful and problematically available and sexualized peasant girls and young women pandered to the desires of bourgeois viewers, representing a comforting fiction of rural life, which was in conflict with the often desperate realities and hard labor peasants endured. These idealized images of France’s coastal peasant communities had little to do with the reality of lived experiences or the character of individuals in Étaples or Brittany.

The rural settings and working class subjects in Étaples appealed to Rix’s affinity for the narrative, romantic, and picturesque. She may have admired the hard work of the rural merchants she sketched in the Étaples market, but her descriptions of the village make it clear that she did not identify with them as individuals or become interested in advocating for their social equality or liberation from economic oppression in the manner of Steinlen. As a bourgeois woman accustomed to the luxuries of city life in Melbourne and Paris, Rix likely did view the peasants of Étaples as Other.

While Rix’s imagery of Étaplean women resists the more exploitative aspects of male portrayals of rural peasants, her ambivalent positioning to these women often worked to reinscribe their otherness. In attempting to speak using the visual language of male painters’ stereotypes of rural types, while also disrupting this language, Rix crafted imagery of the Étaples peasant woman that maintained their otherness—as a means for her own bourgeois self-affirmation—while also undermining the idealization and latent eroticism of male artists’ peasant women. For her mimicry, Rix turned to the images made by her contemporaries in Étaples, demonstrating her interaction with Myron Barlow, an American painter, who was regarded as one of the leaders of the artistic community.
Rix’s 1911 canvas, Work, is one of the earliest canvases she created in Étaples (Figure 4-15). Drawing from the repertoire of rural types established in the nineteenth century, the artist focused on the daily life and the mundane domestic labor assigned to women, however, the subject, composition, and pastel palette of Work clearly mimic the idyllic peasant scenes of Myron Barlow. Scaling Fish (Figure 4-16) and Gathering Apples (Figure 4-17) are typical of Barlow’s oeuvre in which he artfully arranged female sitters in quiet modest interiors.105

The two peasants in Work create a pyramidal form that occupies the majority of the canvas. On the right, a woman stands while pouring a steaming brass kettle into a large basin below. A second bonneted figure on the left kneels by the basin leaning forward to retrieve dishes for washing. The women attend to their quotidian labor with a silent stoicism. The domestic setting is appropriately austere and convincing of an Étaplean home consisting of a small table topped with a pitcher and basin against a white washed wall and utilitarian hanging mirror.

Similar to the alterations Rix made to Miller’s stereotypical cosmopolitan women, in mimicking Barlow’s young Étaplean women, the artist portrayed these models attractively, yet made them less available than her male colleagues. The simplicity of their clothing and strength conveyed by the women’s muscular forearms, resists an attempt to beautify or eroticize the figures and instead underscores their active role in rural life and their contributions to the family and community. In titling the canvas Work, Rix indicates what these Étaplean women represent to her, undermining the idealized portrayals of female peasants pausing from their productivity to pose suggestively with the instruments of their labor, gossip, or rest in the bountiful fields and

105 Jean-Claude Lesage, Myron Barlow: Un peintre & son modèle (1873-1937) (Ennetières-en-Weppes: Invenit, 2012), 67. As with Miller, Hilda may have also shared models with Barlow in Étaples. While Hilda may have borrowed Barlow’s multi-figured composition and subject for Work, Barlow’s canvases from the 1920s and 30s may have been influenced by Rix or Fox’s strong central figural compositions. See Barlow’s portraits of Louise Descharles from the 1930s Femme à la pelote (woman winding yarn) and La Blanchisseuse (Laundress).
gardens. Rix’s young women are appealing, but eschew the availability and sense of possession suggested by male painters. As the title suggests, the two women in Rix’s composition are less interested in performing as objects of display and more invested in the real action of communal work.

As an alternative to the overtly aestheticized young peasant women preferred by male painters, Rix frequently focused her attention on the older women of the community describing them with vigorous realism. Her sketches and paintings of these matriarchs communicate their experience and strength in the unidealized rendering of their faces and hands hardened by a lifetime of manual labor. The artist made an effort to underscore rural women’s work and contributions to the community, while simultaneously creating an image that would appeal to Salon goers by perpetuating the urban bourgeois romanticism, which Rix likely subscribed to herself, that idealized the communion with nature peasants enjoyed without representing their actual struggles or poverty.

The artist’s alteration between sketches and refined pencil drawings of the Étaples’ market, in addition to oil paintings posed in her studio and garden, demonstrate the refinement of design and composition skills, as well as a sureness and control of the oils allowing her brushwork to become looser and broken while retaining naturalism and legibility. She adopted an impressionistic application of paint and became more sensitive to rendering the effects of sunlight.

Two canvases, Grandmère (Figure 4-18) and A Mother of France (Figure 4-19), painted in 1914, her last year in Étaples, illustrate Rix’s command of her subject matter, which resists the youthful, idealized, and potentially sexualized portrayals of rural women, while still contributing to the dominant discourse, which Others peasant life. Rix’s portraits of Étaplean matriarchs
emphasized the character and presence of her sitters. The women are made statuesque through the painter’s proximity and three-quarter cropping. This compositional strategy was appropriated from Miller, but also may be attributed to the mentorship of E. Phillips Fox, as both of Rix’s figural compositions in *Grandmère* and *A Mother of France* are reminiscent of the Australian painter’s single female compositions. Fox painted several canvases in his Parisian garden, including *Nasturtiums*, which frame their subjects in three-quarter pose, making them both statuesque and intimate through the artist’s proximity the figures (Figure 4-12).

More specifically, *Grandmère* (Figure 4-18) may be a direct imitation of *Eighty-Five Years*, a canvas Fox painted during his time in Brittany in 1891106 (Figure 4-20). Similar to Fox’s the *Art Students*, his sympathetic portrayal of rural wisdom and age was exhibited in Melbourne during the late nineteenth century, providing Rix the opportunity to view the work before seeking out Fox’s mentorship in Paris. *Grandmère* reveals Rix’s skill in mimicking a variety of influences—in this particular canvas, the dominant female figure and leafy abstracted backdrop found in Fox’s *Nasturtiums* (Figure 4-12) with the intense realism and character conveyed in the elderly sitter for *Eighty-Five Years* (Figure 4-20).

In modeling Fox’s imagery, Rix’s portrayal of the industrious peasant woman employed a confident and expressive application of paint to suggest the bright sun and clear sky of a summer afternoon in Étaples. Her broken brushwork enlivens the surface of the canvas in capturing the reflection of sunlight that nourishes the old woman’s garden, but over time has also

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106 “This subject, unusual among Fox’s early work, demonstrates his capacity for the sensitive portrayal of old age…Critics in Melbourne stressed its realism and drew attention to Fox’s ability to vary his mode of expression to fit the subject.” Zubans, *E. Phillips Fox, 1865-1915*, 23.
weathered her body. The image is evidence of Rix’s capacity to negotiate the traditions of peasant painting, replacing youth with experience, and idealism with forceful realism.\textsuperscript{107}

The collaborative and collegial environment that shaped and supported Rix’s work in Étaples between 1910 and 1914, allowed her to imitate and learn from the community of artists who made the coastal village their home each summer. It was also within this community that the artist met the American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, the president of the newly formed Société Artistique de Picardie. In her European journal, Rix first makes reference to Tanner to describe how admirers would gather around the leader of the art colony while he and others worked in the Étaples’s village square.

Mr. Tanner is an American artist but he hasn’t been American long enough to prevent him attending with fervour to the beautiful peer…[illegible] He looks like a picture of Frans Hals, and has a quite beauty [sic] manner – there are the people who [?] surround us. There is quite a large colony of artists at the Hôtel Loos and at various studios and cottages throughout the village of Trépied nearby.\textsuperscript{108}

Although Rix would make only several direct references to the esteemed painter in her writings, Henry Tanner would become extraordinarily influential to her career as he made the young artist’s desire to emulate the travels of her mentors, Carrick and Fox, a reality.

\textsuperscript{107} A postcard image, similar to Grandmère is preserved in the artist’s archive. The practice of employing photographs and postcard imagery as compositional and aide memoires may also be adopted from Henry Tanner’s practice.

\textsuperscript{108} Hilda Rix Nicholas, European journal, 1910. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.
Figure 4-1. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Bringing in the Sheep*, ca. 1936. Oil on canvas, Bega Valley Art and Craft Regional Gallery, Bega, NSW.

Figure 4-2. Aby Altson, *Flood Sufferings*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 110 x 153.5 cm., National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.
Figure 4-3. Tom Roberts, *The Artists’ Camp*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 46 x 60.9 cm., National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.

Figure 4-4. Jane Sutherland, *Two Figures in a Field (The Mushroom Gatherers)*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas, 41.8 x 99.3 cm., National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, VIC.
Figure 4-5. Hilda Rix Nicholas, “Melbourne Sketchbook,” ca. 1903-1909, the Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, Series 18, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

Figure 4-6. Hilda Rix Nicholas, “Melbourne Sketchbook,” ca. 1903-1909, the Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, Series 18, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT.
Figure 4-7. Hilda Rix Nicholas, “European Travel Journal,” ca. 1907, the Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, Series 10, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

Figure 4-8. Richard Miller, *The Necklace*, 1909. Oil on canvas, Private Collection.
Figure 4-9. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *The Pink Scarf*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 80.5 x 65.0 cm., Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

Figure 4-10. Richard Miller, *Study* (possibly for the Necklace) n.d.
Figure 4-11. Emmanuel Phillips Fox, *Art students*, 1895. Oil on canvas 182.9 x 114.3 cm., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.

Figure 4-12. Emmanuel Phillips Fox, *Nasturtiums*, ca. 1912. Oil on canvas, 91.3 x 71.3 cm., Private Collection, Melbourne, VIC.
Figure 4-13. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Fruit Market, Etaples I*, ca. 1901. Graphite, pastel, coloured pencil on paper, 37.5 x 27.8 cm., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.

Figure 4-14. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *The Broken Pitcher*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 85.5 x 133 cm., Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA.
Figure 4-15. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Work*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 162 x 130.5 cm., Orica Art Collection, Melbourne, VIC.

Figure 4-16. Myron Barlow, *Scaling Fish*, n.d., Oil on canvas, Private Collection.
Figure 4-17. Myron Barlow, *Gathering Apples*, n.d. oil on canvas. 100.33 x 101.60 cm.

Figure 4-18. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Grandmère*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 80.9 x 64.1 cm., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.
Figure 4-19. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Mother of France*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 88.5 cm x 76.5 cm., Australian War Memorial Collection, Canberra, ACT.

Figure 4-20. Emmanuel Phillips Fox, *Eighty-Five Years*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 35.4 x 29.3 cm., Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.
CHAPTER 5
ESCAPE AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE ORIENT

My effort has been not only to put the Biblical incident in the original setting, but at the same time, give the human touch ‘which makes the whole world kin’ and which ever remains the same. While giving truth of detail not to lose sight of more important matters–by this I mean that of color and design should be as carefully thought out as if the subjects had only these qualities.

–Henry O. Tanner describing the necessity of traveling to the Orient
“Tanner Exhibits Paintings” New York Times (Jan. 29, 1924)

The above quote appeared in an interview and review of Henry Ossawa Tanner’s retrospective exhibition in New York City in 1924. Decades after the artist’s first encounter with the East, this quote reveals that in reflecting on his long career and engagement with biblical Orientalism, Tanner remained ambivalent in his desire for the Orient to be impossibly original and authentic, but also unifying, timeless, and universal.

Henry Tanner’s desire to travel, study, and create Orientalist imagery is arguably the most revealing aspect of the artist’s ongoing struggle to reconcile the double-consciousness that was a consequence of his determination to work and find recognition in a world designed to reinforce the values and authority of white men. Tanner’s diverse approaches to Orientalism, beginning in 1897 with his first trip to Palestine to his last expedition to Morocco in 1912, are illustrative of the artist’s evolutionary thinking in what the East could offer to his art at various stages of his career.

Over this period of time, Tanner’s Orientalism shifted stylistically from academic-realism, which described a sense of difference from the West through the “authenticity” of his experience and direct study of the people and places of the Holy Land for biblical-religious content, to a progressive modernist aesthetic that embraced abstraction and the expressive power of color, to encourage an experience of oneness or “universality” and mysticism within a
timeless, placeless Orient. The stylistic arc of Tanner’s Orientalism is marked by tension and the conflicting desires to emulate and resist a culture that continued to marginalize women and people of color. This inconsistency resulted in a dynamic and dialectic push and pull, between an acceptance and resistance to the traditions of Orientalism, which reflected Tanner’s own ambivalent positioning within these discourses.

Tanner’s artistic achievements as a “Negro” artist allowed him to participate in, but continued to situate him at the margins of white culture. While resisting the racial binary that othered this work, Tanner eagerly capitalized on his position in the Oriental/Occidental, Colonized/Colonizer system. Within the context of colonialism, his status as a western man in the East sublimated Tanner’s racial otherness and offered him a sense of freedom and authority when working abroad.

My examination of Tanner’s imagery from the Middle East and North Africa aims to highlight the visual and ideological contradictions and paradoxes at work in his Orientalism, which I consider to be the latent traces of his own struggles in negotiating Belle Époque cultural and social binaries, a “battle” he conceived of, and dedicated his art to, early in his career as a student in Philadelphia. I argue that Tanner viewed Orientalism a strategy that would enable him to negotiate a place for himself and his art through the adoption and manipulation of an artistic discourse that was valued by white culture. His strategy centered on the ambivalent desires of unsettling Euro-American racial and gender hierarchies, while also reinforcing the Oriental/Occidental binary that privileged his access to and portrayal of the East, offering him a sense of authority, which transcended the racial otherness assigned to him in the West.
Hybridity in the Holy Land

After the success of Tanner’s “Oriental” *Resurrection of Lazarus* (Figure 2-11), his American patrons, Rodman Wanamaker and Robert Ogden, were eager to provide the artist with the experience and opportunities that would reinforce their investment in his ability to generate salable religious art similar to that of James Tissot’s *The Life of Christ* series. As a result, Tanner participated in two artistic pilgrimages to Palestine and Egypt in search of “authentic” material for his religious paintings, the first in 1897 and again in 1898, both sponsored by his American benefactors. Several of Tanner’s early Salon successes were indebted to these initial experiences with the East, inspiring *The Annunciation* (Figure 3-5) and *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (Figure 5-1).

Given Tanner’s upbringing as the son of a Methodist Bishop, it is no surprise that the artist would have been drawn to Jerusalem. His desire to visit and experience the birthplace of Christianity also participated in the larger context of religious revivals occurring in Europe and America during the late nineteenth century. Art historian Alan Braddock notes that the Belle Époque “Holy Land Mania” inspired Americans in particular to travel to Palestine as a way to facilitate a re-imagination or re-enactment of biblical narratives that merged the past with the present.¹ “Holy Land Mania” created a desire for a pseudo-ethnographic and archeological variety of Orientalism, made popular by figures like Jean-Léon Gérôme and Ludwig Deutsch, in which the artists’ portrayals claimed a sense of “authenticity” through their first-hand experience in the East. The artist-as-anthropologist studied the people, landscape, and archaeology, granting their Orientalism a degree of scientific authority.

In addition to religious sentiment, Tanner’s interest in traveling to the Orient demonstrated the degree to which he was acculturated by the dominant practices of Belle Époque art. As a student of the renowned Orientalist Benjamin-Constant, Tanner recognized the power and privilege this genre signified. Tanner’s emulation of the academic-realism and exotic travels of his white mentor and colleagues, exposes the unresolved desires and his psychological struggle with double-consciousness that compelled him to mimic the dominant practices, themes, and aesthetics of Belle Époque art in order to be embraced by, and circulate within these dominant discourses.

Further complicating Tanner’s ambivalent relationship with Orientalism was the fact that his travel to the Holy Land situated him outside the geographical and conceptual binaries that governed Euro-American identity, allowing him to negotiate his status by leveraging his western and gendered privilege. While Tanner found far more liberty to pursue a professional artistic career in France, within the power dynamics of colonialism, the artist’s status as a western man in Egypt and Palestine offered him a sense of freedom and agency that was unthinkable when compared to his experience as a struggling art student in America. Tanner’s study in North Africa and the Middle East was a milestone as it made him the first professional black artist to make this voyage. His participation in Orientalism indicates that he was complicit in exercising

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2 Kristin Schwain notes that Tanner’s written description of the Holy Land also contributes to Orientalist rhetoric quoting the artist’s reflection on his visit to the tomb of Lazarus published in the *AME Church Review*. “In Jerusalem—on foot, or riding a thin, wirey [sic] Arab horse—through narrow streets, in and out among a jostling, motely, turbaned burnoosed crowd—passed crowded cafes filled with wild men from beyond the Jordan playing checkers, or a kind of backgammon, each group surrounded by stately Arabs lazily smoking their chibouk—through the Bazaars where others more actively engaged are buying, selling, or disputing with money changers—past shops with their picturesque occupants, both Jew and Arab—past a ragged and, perchance, sore-footed sentinel at St. Stephan’s Gate, and you are now outside Jerusalem.” H.O. Tanner “A Visit to the Tomb of Lazarus,” *AME Church Review* 15 (January 1908): 359.

colonial viewing rights over the people, customs, and landscape of the East; however, his art was far from an endorsement of colonialism or its policies.

Tanner’s second trip to Palestine was longer than his first, lasting nearly six months, during which time he was accompanied by Sandor Landeau, a colleague from the Académie Julian. Describing his second experience in the Holy Land, Tanner stated:

We spent six months painting around Jerusalem and the Dead Sea and this gave me an insight into the country and the character of the people that my shorter visit had only whetted my appetite for. It was here that I made a study for the Mount of Temptation from which I afterward painted *Moses and the Burning Bush*, I also commenced a picture, *The Scapegoat* which still languishes in a dark closet of unfinished efforts.

Tanner’s sustained study in Palestine provided him with the opportunity to more fully document and acquire a command over the people and landscape, which he and Salon audiences, critics, and patrons had come to equate with the biblical past. The result of his efforts in Palestine was the canvas *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (Figure 5-1) exhibited in the 1899 Paris Salon and later awarded PAFA’s coveted Lippincott Prize. Mimicking the realism and ethnographic-archaeological details of Benjamin-Constant’s Orientalism, Tanner underscored the painting’s “truthfulness” by signing the bottom left corner of the canvas, followed with “Jerusalem, 99,” confirming its connection to, and creation within the Holy Land.

The biblical episode Tanner portrayed is unique, only appearing in the gospel of John (3:1-21). In his narrative, John described the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a well-respected Pharisee ruler. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to ask him about rebirth and how one could enter the kingdom of God. The dialogue amounts to a lesson, continuing Tanner’s investment in the portrayal of spiritual didactic themes. The gospel text does not describe where

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4 Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 149.
Jesus and Nicodemus’s interaction took place other than indicating that the Pharisee “came by night.” In a reversal of the enclosed, intimate setting Tanner appropriated from Rembrandt for his *Resurrection of Lazarus* (Figure 2-11), the artist chose to situate Christ’s lesson outside under the open sky, including the local topography and architecture of Palestine to “authenticate” the image’s Orientalism.

While this canvas owes much to the artist’s emulation of Benjamin-Constant, Tanner’s ambivalence towards his teacher’s Orientalism becomes evident in his appropriation and mockery of the academician’s exotic tropes. At least three of Benjamin-Constant’s Orientalist canvases: *Evening on the Terrace Morocco* (two versions including a graphite drawing and oil on canvas) (Figure 5-2), *Arabian Nights* (Figure 5-3), *On the Terrace*, set his imaginative tableau and exotic figures on a rooftop, offering his western audience a romanticized view of the Oriental topography and life of leisured luxury. In his *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, Tanner mocked the listlessness of Benjamin-Constant’s exotic figures by replacing the lounging odalisques with a serious encounter between a holy teacher and his attentive student seeking spiritual guidance.6

The nearly square canvas centers on the figure Christ, who sits facing the viewer on the ledge of a rooftop, overlooking the blue night sky and the sleepy city of Jerusalem below. Seated across from Jesus, in profile to the viewer, Nicodemus is presented as a venerable eastern type. Tanner envisioned Nicodemus as a wizened, but eager, and attentive old man, with a long flowing white beard, dressed in garments typical of Middle Eastern men. The nocturnal scene is composed of blues and greens with darker hues of grey and brown reserved for the rendering of the figures. The blue moonlit environment is early evidence of the artist’s shift in palette from

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6 Dewey Mosby cites the Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca’s (ca. 1420-1492) *Saint Jerome and Gerolamo Amadi* as the basis for the figural composition in Tanner’s Nicodemus. Mosby states that the artist saw this work in Venice at the Galleria dell’Accademia in 1897. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 48.
the dark protective shades of warm black and browns, that worked to ambivalently obscure and reveal, to a more mysterious ethereal application of blues and greens, which becomes a signature of his later work.

Scholars have interpreted Tanner’s signature blue-green nocturnal and golden-brown dimly lit interior religious scenes as symbolic of the practices of African American Christians during slavery. Slaves were barred from reading the Bible or holding formal church services forcing worshipers to organize clandestine meetings under the protective cover and darkness of night. Dewey Mosby has attributed Tanner’s interest in moonlit landscapes with the surreptitious strategies the oppressed created to worship Christ.7 This suggestion is convincing when one considers the covert work Tanner’s biblical imagery sought to perform in critiquing and correcting Belle Époque inequalities.

The canvas is dark and serious with the exception of the light that emanates from Christ’s heart and the orange glow that highlights the staircase leading to the rooftop. Tanner’s inclusion of the mysteriously illuminated staircase in the bottom right of the composition provides his audience access to, and absorption into the painting, just how the placement of the grave in The Resurrection of Lazarus (Figure 2-11) invites viewers to participate in the narrative. In keeping with the artist’s employment of light as an indicator of holiness and spirituality, Tanner incorporated yellow-orange and white light sparingly within the otherwise dark canvas to underscore the purity of Jesus’s literal and figurative heart and teachings. Tanner’s interpretation of light may have been inspired directly from the text, which makes reference to the purpose of light in the world:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the

7 Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 168-169.
light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But who
ever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.  

Stylistically, Tanner’s Nikodemus Visiting Jesus corresponds with the mimicked academic-realism he became proficient in during his time at PAFA and the Académie Julian. However, instead of employing realism as a means to describe a heterogeneous cast of Others, as he did in The Resurrection of Lazarus, Tanner introduced a remarkably unique image of Jesus as a dark skinned, ambiguously raced figure. Christ’s darker than conventional complexion is particularly noticeable in the figure’s raised hand. Tanner’s Jesus was exceptional when compared to the innumerable historical portrayals of Christ as a white European man, including James Tissot’s rendering of Jesus as a contemporary Palestinian Jew, which at the time was considered radically modern in its ethnographic accuracy (Figure 2-14).

As in his previous work, Tanner made a point to represent race. His various approaches in The Banjo Lesson, The Thankful Poor, and The Resurrection of Lazarus mimic and playfully repeat the codes of fine art to create images that were the “same but not quite.” The turn of the century also witnessed a turn in Tanner’s religious works. Instead of re-presenting race and gender through the inclusion of women and non-white figures in his biblical paintings, in an attempt to disrupt the hierarchal binary systems of racial classification, the artist presented a racially un-fixed image of Christ and called on his study in Palestine in the rendering of the city’s architecture and landscape to authenticate his image. Tanner utilized his privilege to study and document the East to create an Orientalist image that critiqued and sought to correct the inequities of Belle Époque society through the camouflage of an exotic, historic, and religious

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8 John 3:19-21.
East, a strategy that reiterates Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s assessment of Orientalism as a “representation of the West to itself by way of a detour through the other.”

Offering an innovative image of Jesus that was racially enigmatic was Tanner’s answer to the classificatory systems that divided humanity and, instead, emphasized Christ’s mission to enlighten and unify through his teachings. The artist’s figure of Christ is neither white nor black, rather what Alan Braddock has identified as a “hybrid” of racial identities. By creating a hybrid or “World’s Christ,” Tanner stressed his belief in the utopian universality or cosmopolitanism that could be achieved through a common investment in Christ’s teachings. Braddock argues that Tanner’s “Nicodemus” is not an allegory of African American identity, rather a vision of “a utopian Christian vision of a world community to which he thought the United States ought to aspire…Christ as a figure of universality—offered a critique not simply of racism, but of ‘race’ itself as an epistemological category.”

This position is reflected in the artist’s response to Eunice Tietjens, “Now am I a Negro?” In his letter to Tietjens, it is clear that Tanner did not consider himself to be singularly of African or European lineage. As such, he developed a visual corrective that stressed the impossibility of racial purity and offered an image of hybridity that reflected his own mixed

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9 Yeğenoğlu, Colonial Fantasies, 1.

10 Contemporary critics also extended this identification to Nicodemus as the figure of “an old man in any country—a world-craving knowledge. See E.F. Baldwin, “A Negro Artist of Unique Power,” The Outlook, vol. 64, no. 14 (April 7, 1900): 793.


12 “Does not the ¾ of English blood in my veins, which when it flowed in “pure” Anglo-Saxon men and which has done in the past effective and distinguished work in the U.S.—does this not count for anything? Does the ¼ or 1/8 of “pure” Negro blood in my veins count for it 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.” Henry Ossawa Tanner letter to Eunice Tietjens, dated May 25, 1914, Henry Ossawa Tanner papers, 1860s-1978, bulk 1890-1937. AAA, Smithsonian Institute.
ancestry. Tanner’s ambiguously raced figure of Jesus expressed the reality of interracial relationships, policed at the time through miscegenation laws, which was especially personal, as it pertained to his own racial identity and marriage to a white woman. The dark complexion of Christ in “Nicodemus” communicated Tanner’s belief in Christ’s power to unify diverse peoples, stressing the inter-connectedness and hybridity of humanity. In addition to visualizing his spiritual beliefs, Tanner’s “World’s Christ” illustrates the artist’s relationship to the ideals espoused by W.E.B Du Bois. In the Souls of Black Folks, Du Bois advocated for an “ideal of human brotherhood,” in which black and white Americans collaborated to combine the strengths of each “race” resulting in an ideal hybrid culture:

Ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of Negros, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack.\(^{13}\)

Du Bois’s description of an ideal communal-hybrid culture foreshadows Homi Bhabha’s assertion that as cultures and peoples overlap in the process of hybridity within a Third Space, the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.”\(^{14}\) According to Bhabha’s definition, Tanner’s painting Nicodemus Visiting Jesus is itself the result of hybridity. The canvas is an object of cultural expression produced geographically and conceptually in a Third Space between Orient/Occident or Palestine/Paris. Bhabha argues it is within the Third Space that cultures come into contact and overlap creating new forms of transcultural hybridity.\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 7.

\(^{14}\) Bhabha, Location of Culture, 4.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 53-56.
This interpretation supports Tanner’s own method of visually disrupting the power of racial and
gender classifications. Bhabha argues:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are
constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we
begin to understand why hierarchal claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of
cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that
demonstrate their hybridity.16

“Nicodemus” was a point of departure for Tanner’s thinking about how to best
communicate the unifying power of Christianity and the complexity of Belle Époque racial
relations through art. During the twentieth century, the artist’s approach to hybridity evolved
from the literal-bodily representation of diverse and mixed-raced figures to a more figurative and
symbolic approach that rendered holy individuals ambiguous and open to interpretation through
a manipulation of formal aesthetic elements.

Aesthetic Experimentation and Escapism in the Orient

An examination of the stylistic evolution of Tanner’s work demonstrates that, during the
first decade of the twentieth century, the artist became more open to the aesthetics and
philosophy of avant-garde movements, such as Symbolism and Expressionism.17 It was during
this time the painter made an aesthetic turn, shifting from the warm, dark palette that gained him
notoriety with late nineteenth-century Salon audiences and critics, to an increased abstraction of
his figures and an emphasis on cool tonal harmonies of violet, blue, and greens referred to as the
“Tanner Blues.” As part of this shift, the artist moved from academic-realism, which allowed
him to emphasize the unidealized, but noble, humanity of biblical women evidenced in his

16 Ibid., 54-55.

17 Robert Cozzolino, “‘I Invite the Christ Spirit to Manifest in Me:’ Tanner and Symbolism,” in Henry Ossawa
Marian canvases, to a retreat from naturalism, in which he depicted biblical figures through radically simplified means of expressive form and color.

It is my argument that Tanner made a conscious decision to increasingly abstract his figures as a pictorial strategy to re-present a world that transcended societal and representative categories of race, gender, and class. Tanner’s strategy also allowed him to evade the prevailing stylistic categorizations and affiliations of fine art. While maintaining his connection to academic and narrative figural art, he attempted to bridge his academicism with a more progressive modernist privileging of form and color that resulted in a hybridity of practice and aesthetics.

The artist’s interest in the psychological and spiritual possibilities of color, form, and symbols to communicate beyond the visual should squarely situate him in dialogue with the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement, in addition to early twentieth-century modernists, including Wassily Kandinsky, who shared Tanner’s mission to create spiritual art that could speak universally. No major study of has identified Tanner with this movement, with the exception of a passing reference to the artist in Judy Le Paul’s examination of Gauguin’s influence at Pont Aven. Le Paul reported that “links were formed at Pont-Aven between…British painters, the American Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Gauguin’s group.”

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18 According to Michelle Facos’s definition of Symbolism, Tanner’s modern Orientalism certainly meets this criteria. Facos identifies two factors needed to qualify work as Symbolist: authorial intention and aesthetic qualities. “It contends that a Symbolist work of art is characterized by (1) an artist’s desire to represent ideas and (2) a manipulation of color, form, and composition that signals the artist’s relative indifference to worldly appearances.” Michelle Facos, Symbolist Art in Context, (LA: University of California Press, 2009), 1.

including Dewey Mosby and Robert Cozzolino, have acknowledged the artist’s Symbolist
tendencies, but also the challenges in attempting to assign him to a particular movement or style.

Cozzolino articulates Tanner’s place in-between movements and classifications:

Historians of American art have been too preoccupied with Tanner as evidence of
a realist legacy in the expatriate experience…One reason may be the persistence
of his career into the twentieth century and the reluctance of scholars to integrate
him into his time, choosing instead to try to sweep him back into the nineteenth
century or, conversely, uncritically make him an available precursor to Harlem
Renaissance artists…Tanner, synonymous with religious painting, was always
doomed in early modernist culture to be a relic.20

Tanner’s contemporaries also noted the difficulty in attempting to classify his art. Writing
in 1900, American journalist Vance Thompson recognized Tanner’s avant-garde-academic
hybrid sensibilities in his description of the painter for *Cosmopolitan*. Thompson reported: “he is
a mystic, but a mystic who has read Renan and studied with Benjamin Constant.”21 Tanner’s
links to realism and academic art should not disqualify him from being considered a Symbolist,
as Gustave Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes, both prominent academicians, have long been
recognized for their contributions to this movement.22 Yet, as he rejected his categorization as a
“Negro” artist, I would argue that Tanner’s purpose in developing a distinct and highly personal
aesthetic idiom was due in part to his desire to defy any limiting classifications of his art.

As a student in the 1890s, Tanner made connections with well-known artists of the
Symbolist-Nabi movement. He spent the summer of 1891 in Pont-Aven and 1892 in Concarneau,

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20 Cozzolino, “‘I Invite the Christ Spirit to Manifest in Me:’”124-125. In describing Tanner’s work, critics and journalists attempted to link it with larger stylistic movements of the late nineteenth century. Tanner’s unique and highly personal aesthetic employed a variety of mainstream styles that were popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.


22 Robert Cozzolino, “‘I Invite the Christ Spirit to Manifest in Me,’”117-126.
Brittany where Paul Gauguin was already regarded as a leading figure of Symbolism and Synthesis aesthetic philosophies. In Brittany, Tanner conversed and exchanged ideas with members of this avant-garde movement whom he became acquainted while at the Académie Julian. Moreover, in his memoirs, the painter Gustave Loiseau suggested that Tanner was a “transatlantic continuation of the work of the Nabi group…clearly influenced by the religious and mystical elements of Symbolism.”

The artist’s *Salome* (Figure 3-18), often regarded as an anomaly in his oeuvre, reveals that as early as 1900, Tanner explored a variety of styles and manipulated formal elements for expressive effect. Because the artist employed his wife as the model for *Salome*, the painting remained deeply personal to Tanner. He kept the canvas with him in the studio, but declined to exhibit it publicly until 1924. Another reason Tanner may have had reservations about

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23 Before returning to America for financial respite and recovery from typhoid fever in 1893, it is also likely that Tanner spent the early part of the summer in Brittany and again the summer of 1894. See “Chronology” compiled by Kathleen James, Sylvia Yount, Jane Tippet, and Jeffrey Richmond-Moll in *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, edited by Anna Marley, 284 and Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 201 and 210. During his enrollment in the Académie Julian, Tanner was introduced to Gustave Loiseau, Armand Séguin, and Paul Sérusier, who would go on to establish the Nabi movement. Dewey Mosby pointed to a portrait of Tanner painted by Séguin, which was exhibited in 1895 at Le Barc de Boutteville in Paris, as evidence indicating the artists’ friendship and exchange of ideas. Dewey Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 93.

24 Le Paul and Le Paul, *Gauguin and the Impressionists*, fn 53. It is unlikely that Tanner would have been comfortable with the Nabi gatherings more esoteric and anarchist tendencies practiced at “the temple” 25 boulevard Montparnasse. Facos describes these gatherings: “They addressed one another with cryptic salutations, wore strange robes, and devised secret ceremonies. To varying degrees they infused their paintings with ideas drawn from Buddhism, Catholicism, Judaism, Neoplatonism, and Theosophy, with the intent of manifesting hidden truths–recognition of which would, they hoped, improve the condition of humanity.” Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 173.

25 In recent years the intervention of conservators has become necessary due to webbed cracking in the thickly painted and textured surface of this work. When specialists at the SAAM removed *Salome* from its stretcher, they discovered another painting inside used to support the lining. The *Fishermen at Sea* dated to 1913 was a canvas Tanner chose to sacrifice in order to support his *Salome* despite declining to exhibit the nude publically. I would like to thank Amber Kerr at the SAAM for this insight and for meeting with me to discuss Tanner’s *Salome*. Additionally, on the back of *Salome* the conservationists discovered the abandoned painting *Moses and the Burning Bush*. See Brian Baade, Amber Kerr-Allison and Jennifer Giacciai, “Pursuit of the Ideal Effect: The Materials and Techniques of Henry Ossawa Tanner,” in *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, edited Anna O. Marley, 157-166. (L.A: University of California Press, 2012). While the reuse of canvas was not uncommon among artists, I propose that the *Moses and the Burning Bush* on the verso of *Salome* is connected with the artist’s own account of his second stay in Palestine. Tanner wrote: “Here it was that I made a study of the Mount of Temptation from which I afterward painted ‘Moses and the Burning Bush.’” The October 1898 to March 1899 stay in the Holy Land took him away from Jessie. Later when she modeled for his first and only female nude, he chose to repurpose the “Moses” canvas.
displaying *Salome* was that when compared to his traditional Salon paintings, it was radically modern in its attention to the materiality of paint, expressive color and light, and the abstracted rendering of Salome’s elongated body and John the Baptist’s head. *Salome* represented a departure from the manner of *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (Figure 2-11), *The Annunciation* (Figure 3-5), and the domestic biblical canvases Tanner was recognized for by the Société des Artistes Français and its conservative patrons.

The painter’s earliest experimentation with blue-green composition is illustrated in the eerie electric frigidity of *Salome*. Unlike anything Tanner painted before, the work suggests his openness to avant-gardism in Paris, as *Salome* coincided with the emergence of Picasso’s Blue Period. More specific to his interest in religious art, Tanner began to manipulate color to encourage spiritual and psychological contemplation, a preoccupation he shared with the Russian expatriate Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky claimed that color had a psychic effect on the viewer, maintaining that: “to a more sensitive soul the effect of colors is deeper and intensely moving.”

Kandinsky went on to define the spiritual significance of the color blue in his 1911 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

> The power of profound meaning is found in blue, and first in its physical movements (1) of retreat from the spectator, (2) of turning in upon its own center. The inclination of blue to depth is so strong that its inner appeal is strong when its shade is deeper. Blue is the typical heavenly color. The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest.

Tanner had cause to be wary over his modernist inclinations. After visiting the artist’s studio in the early 1900s, one of his earliest patrons, Robert Ogden, wrote to Booker T.

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27 Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 76.
Washington: “I am anxious to help him. I fear that, in the development of his art, difficulties have arisen that will operate against the sale of his recent work. I have seen a half dozen of his pictures which are very mysterious in spirit, very abstruse in art, full of delicate sensitivity, and altogether too transcendental for popular appreciation.”

It seems that during the first decade of the twentieth century Tanner continued to create academically styled biblical paintings, which staged gospel narratives in a literal, illustrative manner for the Salon, while privately dabbling with abstraction, the expressive power of color and light to increasingly focus on the materiality of his medium through the mixing of oil, tempera, and glazes. However, by the end of the decade, he was no longer willing to inhibit his modernist impulses and artistic goals to appease conservative patrons.

The transformation to a modernist idiom indicates that Tanner was in a place in his career where he felt confident enough to follow his artistic goals and aesthetic desires against the judgment of his early benefactors. This was a time of great happiness, as well as personal and professional security for the artist. In 1908, Tanner purchased property in Trépied, which he would transform into a personal studio space and home with his wife Jessie. Tanner’s son Jesse recalled his childhood in Trépied as “supremely happy.”

In addition to emerging as the leader

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28 Booker T. Washington papers reproduced in Boime, “Henry Ossawa Tanner’s Subversion of Genre,” 441. Marcia Mathews also suggested that the artist’s style began to shift as early as 1902, evidenced by that year’s Salon entry, the Chamber Music or The Cello Lesson. Mathews stated: “A change in Tanner’s art may be noted as early as 1902 in a picture painted before he left Paris to join Atherton Curtis at Mount Kisco. In style and technique it is curiously unlike any that he painted before or after. When it was shown at the Salon of 1902 it no doubt caused spirited conversation among the Salon habitués who had come to think of Tanner in terms of religious art.” Mathews, Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist, 127-128. The Cello Lesson was not received well by the Salon critics, which may have inhibited Tanner from publicly exhibiting his more progressive experimentations with formal elements until later that decade. Until recently, it was believed that this canvas was lost or destroyed. In an ironic twist of fate, through the implementation of the latest imaging and scanning methods, the curators at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Musée d’Orsay discovered that the scene was painted over by the artist with the 1905 The Disciples at Emmaus. Unlike the critically disappointing Cello Lesson, Tanner’s The Disciples at Emmaus was awarded a silver medal and purchased by the state, allowing both the hidden and visible paintings an honored place in the French Government’s collection of art. Anna Marley, “Introduction” in Modern Spirit, 34 and Baade, Kerr-Allison, and Giaccai, “Pursuit of the Ideal Effect,” 158.

29 Mathews, Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist, 124.
of the art colony and finding a communion of like-minded artists in Étaples, Tanner also benefited from the emotional and financial support of Atherton and Ingeborg Curtis. Atherton arranged a system of patronage with Tanner in an effort to “relieve him, insofar as it was within his [Atherton’s] power, of all worries that would impede his creativity.”

To advance his career and artistic goals, as he did a decade earlier, Tanner once again, looked to the “Orient.” Instead of returning to the Holy Land as a strategy to authenticate his biblical scenes through a studied realism of the local population and the inclusion of exotic artifacts, Tanner set his sights on North Africa possibly because French-controlled Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco were artistic destinations that were frequented by both academic and avant-garde artists. Unlike his earlier expeditions to the Holy Land, which were inscribed within the discourses of pilgrimage and archaeology, during the early twentieth century, North Africa was a desirable and accessible destination for western tourists, authors, and artists all seeking to partake in the exotic. At this point in his career, in Tanner’s mind the “Orient” offered him an escape from western conventions and conservative artistic expectations. The promise of freedom and escape Tanner hoped to secure in North Africa, was itself an Orientalist trope; yet the artist invested in Algeria and Morocco as a real and imagined space in which he could shed his academic inhibitions by experimenting with and embracing a modernist aesthetic.

**Imaging/Imagining North Africa**

Henry Tanner’s travel to Morocco in 1912 followed that of his mentor, Jean Joseph Benjamin Constant, who accompanied the French ambassador on a diplomatic mission, allowing

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30 According to Mathews, shortly after the Curtises returned to Paris in 1905, an arrangement was made between Henry and Atherton “whereby Atherton was to pay Henry a certain sum each month, and in return Henry was to paint for him a picture—or more than one, depending on the size and value... The arrangement was not particularly feasible as far as Atherton was concerned since he had only a small collection of paintings.” In addition to this monthly stipend, the Curtises ensured that Jesse Tanner received the best education by generously paying his tuition at the Hillcrest School in England and later at Cambridge University, Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist*, 123.
him to live and work in Tangier between 1872 and 1874. Four decades later, Tanner set out for North Africa seeking to partake in the freedom and privilege his predecessor enjoyed, using this freedom to break with his emulative academic past.

Long before Henry Tanner embarked for North Africa, western artists exercised discursive power over the East by fabricating impressions and interpretations of the people, customs, and landscape they both encountered and imagined. As Hélène Gill, author of The Language of French Orientalist Painting, stated: “Even the most sincerely ‘objective’ Orientalists were, in fact, in the business of producing meaning, and therefore ideology.”

Western artists’ power to create an Orient according to their desires is expressed by Linda Nochlin’s coining of the term the “Imagery Orient.” Nochlin argued that European colonization created real geographic sites of interest that western artists could travel to and document, but that for others the Orient “existed as a project of the imagination, a fantasy space or screen onto which strong desires—erotic, sadistic, or both—could be projected with impunity.”

Tanner’s late nineteenth-century biblical Orientalism adhered to the realism acculturated through his academic education and his travel to Palestine and Egypt as a means to authenticate his imagery, situating his early encounters with the East within the first category of Orientalism identified by Nochlin. Between February and March of 1908, the artist traveled to and studied in Algeria. Despite experiencing North Africa first hand, the goal of Tanner’s Orientalism was not to document or “unveil” the exotic East for western audiences with ethnographic exactitude, as

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33 Mosby suggested that Tanner’s decision to visit Algeria was influenced by an artistic subsidy of the Vilal Abd el Tif, a foundation established by the Algerian governor Célestin Jonnart in 1907, for French artists to work in the country. “Tanner’s choice of Algeria illustrates the degree to which he had become immersed in French artistic traditions. Earlier trips had taken him to Egypt and Palestine, but the western coast of North Africa had been preferred by several generations of French painters.” Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 200.
was the aim of academic Orientalists, including Gérôme, Eugène Fromentin, Ludwig Deutsch, David Roberts, and John Frederick Lewis among others (Figure 5-4). Rather, Tanner’s new vision of the Orient eschewed detail and specificity in favor of ambiguity, abstraction, and expressive color and light (Figure 5-5). Through the sense of freedom he acquired in North Africa, the artist fabricated an image of the Orient that fulfilled his desires and fantasies, aligning his efforts with what Nochlin identified as the “Imaginary Orient.”

According to Said: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and…‘the Occident.’”34 Tanner’s “Imaginary Orient” was not one fabricated on articulating difference, rather, the fantasy of his Orient was unity and universalism. Far from projecting erotic and sadistic desires, as Nochlin suggested, by bridging academic and modernist aesthetic principles, Tanner called upon the power of biblical symbols and archetypes, as well as the belief that formal elements, including color harmonies and abstraction, had the power to communicate universally, inspiring spiritual reflection.

While today the concept of universality is discredited as a homogenizing Eurocentric philosophy, Tanner’s belief was rooted in a humanistic cosmopolitan desire to bridge or eliminate differences and encourage equality. This sentiment resonates in the artist’s quote from a 1924 interview in the New York Times. When asked to describe his biblical Orientalism Tanner replied that he aimed to “give the human touch ‘which makes the whole world kin’ and which ever remains the same.”35 The artist’s faith in the universal was reinforced by his spiritual

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34 Said, Orientalism, 2.

35 Tanner Exhibits Paintings.” 9.
upbringing, but also demonstrates his connection to the modernist aesthetic philosophy of the early twentieth century.

The paradoxes in Henry Tanner’s North African Orientalism become apparent when we recognize that the artist used his authority, as a western man, to transform the East into a homogenized, timeless and placeless, site mimicking a colonial discourse that was rooted in establishing difference to imagine universality. While I believe that the artist’s intentions were genuine in their humanistic intent, the ambivalence created between emulating and resisting and selectively adopting some, while rejecting other Orientalist tropes, ultimately undermined both the authority of Tanner’s vision of the Orient and the dominant traditions he mocked, foreshadowing Audre Lorde’s caution in attempting to utilizing the existing discourse, or “tools,” to dismantle the “master’s” authority. “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”

An aspect of Henry Tanner’s North African imagery that reinforced Orientalist ideology, while also communicating his desire for unity, was the homogenization of “the Orient.” The titles and content of several paintings that were created during, or inspired by, his time in Algeria suggest that these images represent Morocco, although the artist did not travel there until 1912 with Hilda Rix. These paintings make assigning a definitive date to Tanner’s North African Orientalism problematic. An example of a canvas that was initiated before his time in Morocco, but one that represents architecture specific to Tangier, is the Flight into Egypt: Palais de Justice, Tangier (Figure 5-6).

Drawing from his academic training and previous working methods, Dewy Mosby suggested that Tanner created this canvas using photographic postcards of Tangier’s well-known and picturesque sights, purchased while the artist was in Algeria (Figure 5-7). Mosby claimed that “Although there is no doubt that the buildings shown in the present picture [Flight into Egypt] are located in the Moroccan summer capital of Tangier, no firm evidence places Tanner in Morocco at this time, and he most likely did not base his rendition on first hand knowledge of the site.”  

It is likely that Tanner employed photographs from Morocco and synthesized these images with the exotic architecture and landscape he encountered in Algeria.  

As previously discussed, Tanner’s adoption of photography as a compositional aid was an established method utilized by academic-realist painters, foremost of which was the Orientalists Jean-Léon Gérôme. The Flight to Egypt employed commercial postcards as a source of information, which Tanner then took artistic license in referencing Tangier’s iconic sites and architectural motifs to squarely situate this biblical narrative within an Orientalist discourse. Although Tanner utilized the academic strategy of photography as an aide-mémoire, The Flight to Egypt is antithetical in style and intent to Gérôme’s Orientalism. As Nochlin has argued, the obsessive verismilitude and overwhelming exotic information presented in Gérôme’s 

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37 This canvas has been variously dated to 1908, 1910, and 1912. Mosby cited the cataloged list of works displayed in Tanner’s first solo exhibition held December of 1908 in the American Art Galleries in New York City, the May 1910 Salon exhibition in Paris, and an October show at the Art Institute of Chicago of the same year, all of which recorded a “Flight into Egypt” displayed as evidence that this canvas was completed before Tanner’s first visit to Morocco in 1912. This is problematized by the fact that Tanner created multiple images of this narrative. Additionally, Dewey noted that the Flight into Egypt shares stylistic affinities with Entrance to the Customs House at Tangier, which was exhibited in Chicago, February of 1911 under the title Morocco. Dewey Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, 210. The record for Tanner’s December 1908 solo exhibition in New York City lists two different canvases titled “Flight into Egypt.” See “Chronology” compiled by Kathleen James, Sylvia Yount, Jane Tippet, and Jeffrey Richmond-Moll in Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit, edited by Anna Marley, 284 and Mosby, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 201 and 210.

38 Mosby also identifies Entrance to the Customs House, Tangiers (1908) as borrowing its composition from photographic sources available at this time. He argues, “Entrance to the Customs House, Tangier duplicates, with very little artistic license, the composition of the photographic reproduction of the site used in Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada. The two conversing figures in the middle ground of the photograph are mirrored in the foreground of the painting.” Mosby, Across Continents and Cultures, 58.
compositions emphasized the Islamic East’s difference from western culture and the artist’s authority to realistically configure these “authentic” signifiers into a tableau of Oriental culture for curious western audiences.

Tanner’s conflation of Algeria and Morocco to envision an unspecified Oriental landscape is telling, as it illustrates his authority to exercise artistic license in fabricating an “Imaginary Orient” that erased the specificity of diverse peoples, cultural attributes, and customs in North Africa and the Middle East and replaced these with a homogenized image of a timeless and placeless Orient. Nochlin’s critique of nineteenth-century Orientalism revealed that these images were structured around a series of absences. *The Flight from Egypt* is absent of time and place. Although the painting claims to represent a specific site in Tangier, it was conceived of in Algeria and likely finished in France. Tanner represented an episode from biblical antiquity, but incorporated modern Islamic architecture and Maghrebian styled figures to do so. Nochlin stressed that: “These absences are so conspicuous that, once we become aware of them, they begin to function as presences, in fact, as signs of a certain kind of conceptual deprivation…The Oriental world is a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were ‘afflicting’ or ‘improving but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies.”

While Tanner’s vision of the Orient as a homogenized Other to the West certainly seems to reinforce Orientalist discourse, the artist viewed the erasure of difference through the lens of equality opposed to oppression visualizing his desire to “make the whole world kin.” Bhabha’s

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40 “Tanner Exhibits Paintings”, 9.
discussion of cultural difference and authority may elucidate in part why Tanner adopted the

Orient as site of cultural difference to express his artistic freedom.

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but as a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice and the archaic.41

The artist’s embrace of colonial prejudices as a means to fabricate a timeless, placeless site of spiritual contemplation is certainly problematic in the postcolonial present, but it is also illuminating of how Tanner interpreted and attempted to enact the aesthetic and philosophic principles of early twentieth-century modernism and the concept of universalism.

Tanner’s Flight into Egypt: Palais de Justice, Tangier (Figure 5-6) is a modern and innovative, re-telling of the concluding episode of Christ’s nativity, in which the holy family flees to Egypt to escape Herod’s purge of newborn males. By universalizing the Orient, Tanner employed the exotic backdrop of Tangier to stand in for, or signify, Egypt to his western audience. The dark, loosely rendered figures of the holy family, are silhouetted against the white washed architecture of the Palais de Justice. The white reflective surface of the architecture is woven into a harmony of thick wet-into-wet blue, green, and violet pigments that reflects the cool glow of the moonlit sky above. The numerous layers of pigment and glazes create a heavily factured, almost chalk-like, surface that vibrates with an unexplained luminosity.42 Tanner’s

41 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 51-52.

42 I am indebted to Amber Kerr at the SAAM for her willingness to share her time and insight into Tanner’s later painting methods. Earlier works under the academic influence of Constant and Laurens adhere to the direct, wet-into-wet method of applying oils, while his mature works are built up from multiple layers of glazes to build up the surface and in some cases scrap off sections. Kerr advised that these later compositions, created through the indirect method of multiple glazes, include many more layers than one would expect (in some cases up to nineteen different layers have been identified) emphasizing the importance of Tanner’s thinking about process and materials.
interlocking brushwork of cool hues unifies the composition and infuses the canvas with an ethereal light that invites spiritual introspection. The goal was not to capture or recreate the natural reflection of light in the impressionist manner; rather, his portrayal of light and color is unnatural and otherworldly. Tanner’s mature method of painting combined multiple approaches, employing both a direct and indirect technique, which involved numerous layering of glazes and mixing of oil, tempera, and animal glues. The importance of technique and contemplation of materials evident in this later works reveals the artist’s process as an existential spiritual exercise in itself.

Sections of the canvas are worked up and scrapped down in a manner that grants the painting a secondary three-dimensional, even sculptural quality (Figure 5-8). The artist outlined the figures of Mary and Joseph in paint before building them up with a loaded brush of dark-blue pigments. The traced outline encases the holy family in an abstracted halo, while the thick daubs of paint convey their physicality and presence (Figure 5-9). Although they are painted in a manner that communicates significance and materiality, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus are rendered as simplified archetypes.

Tanner abstracted the figures of the holy family down to the bare essentials of Christian iconography: a blue veiled woman, donkey, and a concealed infant, led by a male figure. Tanner’s considerations in emphasizing the materiality of paint, light, and color, render the principle characters of this narrative into vague, amorphous figures when compared to the genre scenes he painted a decade earlier.

Additionally, the artist turns away from traditional brushwork and begins to employ a variety of non-standard tools to apply and manipulate or even sculpt his medium.

The Flight into Egypt illustrates Tanner’s engagement with the Symbolist aesthetic philosophy, which advocated for the freedom to express ideas and emotions through imagery that was not tethered to the natural world. The painter’s heavily worked and textured canvas positions itself as a counterpoint to the hermetically sealed photographic-like varnish of Gérôme’s canvases in order, not to convey information, but rather non-visual spiritual truths (Figure 5-4) Tanner’s choice to reject detail and specificity in search of expression echoed Van Gogh’s own ruminations on Gérôme’s work as cold and sterile: “I feel very little sympathy for this figure by Gérôme…I can find no sign of spirituality in it, and a pair of hands which show they have worked are more beautiful than those of this figure.”44

Clara MacChesney, an artist and journalist for the journal International Studio, visited Tanner’s Trépied studio in 1913 as he was preparing biblical Oriental paintings for an upcoming exhibition. MacChesney reported that he had been experimenting with pigments and glazes for the past two years.45

His present style is much changed. Not only has he a greater breadth of vision, but his effects are cooler, grayer in tone and higher key, not as black and brown in the shadows, or hot in color, as formerly. Thus his new canvases have a more spiritual, dream like quality. They are more poetical and show a greater advance from earlier efforts…On being questioned, Mr. Tanner says that the ultimate effect of the new movement in art will be a good one…He believes in acquiring new ideas from all schools and methods.46

MacChesney makes a point to recognize that Tanner, traditionally regarded as an academician, was well aware of and in dialogue with the “new movements” and modernist trends taking shape in France. Additionally, Marcia Mathews, the artist’s first biographer, suggested

46 Ibid.
that earlier that decade, Tanner had the opportunity to meet Pablo Picasso in Paris and was fond of his early Blue and Rose period canvases, but was “never converted to the movement as a whole and post impressionism he considered ‘anarchic’ in its disregard for law and order.”47

Despite Mathews’s claim that the artist was never “converted” to Post-Impressionism, a closer examination of Tanner’s North African work illustrates his engagement with Symbolism’s aesthetic ideals and a willingness to not disregard, but push the boundaries of representational-narrative art, as a means to inspire spiritual contemplation and reflection of the divine.

It is well established that the Symbolists of the late nineteenth century were interested in creating spiritual art, a preoccupation which, no doubt, appealed to Tanner. In building upon Mosey and Cozzolinio’s assertions that Tanner contributed to the international Symbolist movement, I am also convinced that his interest in Symbolism carried over and positioned him in dialogue with the ideals of early twentieth-century modernism, specifically that of Wassily Kandinsky’s pursuit of universal spiritual art.

Neither Tanner nor Kandinsky mention one another in their writings, making it impossible to substantiate; yet, it is tempting to consider that Tanner may have had the opportunity to discuss spiritual art with Kandinsky during the thirteen months the Russian artist lived in Paris between 1906 and 1907. Mathews reported that Tanner met with Picasso during this time, making it feasible that he also exchanged ideas with Kandinsky, who, in addition to expressing interest in the formal and expressive possibilities of the emerging movements of Fauvism and Cubism, was equally influenced by the legacy of Symbolism.48 In his study of

47 “Of all the movements, cubism, originated by Pablo Picasso…was, in their minds, the most questionable. Tanner had met this young artist and seen some of his work in which blue and pink tones predominated, and he had found in it great sensitivity and feeling.” Mathews, Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist, 127 and 144.

Kandinsky’s time in Paris, Jonathan Fineberg stressed the artist’s debt to the principles of Symbolism. “[Art] should aspire to make its prophetic message immediately and universally accessible to viewers. These are Symbolist attitudes, based on a concept of art as the revelation of another deeper reality, which lay beyond the superficial appearance of things.”⁴⁹ Embracing the spiritual inclinations of Symbolism, both Tanner and Kandinsky committed themselves to the belief that art had the capacity to advance humanity.

Writing to Marcia Mathews from France, as she prepared his father’s biography, the artist’s son, Jesse Tanner, described what he insisted was his father’s mystic-spiritual intuition. “My father was a great mystic, in the sense that his intellectual stature was above human contingencies, he felt influences which the common mortal does not perceive, his pictures reflect this perception”⁵⁰ The artist’s alleged mystic sensibilities would have shaped what he believed his role and responsibility were to create work that inspired spiritual consciousness, a conviction equally espoused by Kandinsky: “The artist’s inner feeling is an evangelical talent and it is a sin to conceal it.”⁵¹

It is also noteworthy that before spending a year in Paris, Kandinsky traveled and worked for three months in North Africa studying the exotic light, color, and landscape of Tunisia.⁵² While Kandinsky and Tanner’s mutual desire to explore form and color in the Orient is likely a coincidence, as many Symbolists sought inspiration from so-called primitive, non-western cultures due to their perceived purity and concern in expressing the inner through abstraction, if Tanner and Kandinsky had an opportunity to connect in Paris, it is very possible that the


Russian’s work in North Africa was instructive and encouraging, as Tanner embarked for Algeria the following year. Tanner’s 1908 study in Algeria was a success in that it facilitated his creation of an “Imaginary Orient” that fulfilled his vision of spiritual unity. Eager to capitalize on the success of his first trip, Tanner would return to North Africa in 1912 leading an artistic expedition that provided Hilda Rix her first encounter with “Oriental” Morocco.

Transcendence in Morocco

Tanner’s voyage to Morocco with Hilda Rix would be his last first-hand experience with the exotic East. During the last week of January 1912, the Tanner-Rix expedition, which included Henry, Hilda, Jessie Tanner, and a Ms. Simpson from Étaples, set off from Paris to Madrid. Through her correspondence to friends and relatives, Rix provided the most information regarding the travel party’s itinerary, sights, daily activities, and artistic working methods. Inclement weather delayed their crossing to Tangier and made for rough travel. On February 5th, after arriving safely to their residence in the Hôtel Villa de France, a popular residence for artists in the city, Hilda Rix wrote a letter to her sister Elsie that described the travel party’s lodgings:

The hotel with its terraces standing on top of the hill its big lovely garden is a joy—and from the window of my room I look down on a courtyard which is an unending source of interest to me—Silent footed be-turbaned servants move about their duties…On the other side of the courtyard stand a row of tall graceful gum trees, their branches bending over the white walls of a Moorish praying ground. The people in the hotel of many nationalities promise to be interesting.53

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53 In the same letter Hilda described the ordeal of their arrival in Tangier: “The coast of Tangier is very exposed, and seems to be the place for half a dozen currents to meet for there was an awful swell. Nearing land, the sea heaved, building its pale green surface like the huge chest of a heavy sleeper—The three others of our party felt fit—and I said ‘Look at those splendid men in little boats coming out for us!’ But I had promptly shut my eyes, the boat was stopping and just slowly rose and fell on the breast of the water—oh I began to feel fearful—Two of them went downstairs to see about everything and Mrs. T [Jessie Tanner] stayed kindly with me—Then the others called and she led me by the hand, while I closed tightly my eyes, to the steps and down them to where we hopped into a little boat at critical moment when it heaved up to the shore amid yells in the weirdest languages. Hands came forth and landed me safely, and I hung my head over the end of the little boat and paid toll!!…Then followed a babble. Mr. T [Tanner] giving directions to the Moorish sailors and they answering in quite good English—I took very little heed, and just cared enough to hope my things were being put in too…We came up from the boat with our luggage loaded on donkey back and we passed slowly up hill through crowded streets full of wonderful people—up and up past queer little cubby hole shops, under quaint arches to the foot of the open hill called the Soko where, joy for us, the big
Unlike his enthusiastic travel companion, Henry Tanner did not offer a detailed record of his time in North Africa in writing, but the painted sketches and finished canvases that are the result of his time in Morocco are evidence of the artist’s continued exploration of the expressive and unifying possibilities of color, shape, and light.

A painting that is distinctive in the artist’s Orientalist imagery, for its large size and inscribed date, is the *Entrance to the Casbah* (Figure 5-10). This canvas can be safely attributed to Tanner’s time in Morocco as he signed and dated the lower right of the composition: “H. O. Tanner, Morocco 1912.” While many of Tanner’s North African Orientalist paintings demonstrate an expressive and spiritual interest in blue harmonies, there are examples, including *Entrance to the Casbah*, which are studies of white, yellow, warmth, and light. Despite often being ascribed to earlier dates of 1908 and 1910, I would argue that many of the sunlit compositions he created were done on-site in Morocco and are, in part, the outcome of the artistic exchange Tanner and Hilda Rix shared with one another and the larger Étaples artistic community, including the Australian painters E. Phillips Fox and Ethel Carrick.54

*Entrance to the Casbah* demonstrates that Tanner experimented in creating spiritual and contemplative imagery through harmonies of blue, but also that he looked to the white hot, colorful sunlight of Morocco as a formal and conceptual pendant to his nocturnal moonlit scenes.

In Tangier, Tanner explored the emotional and expressive power of color and light, alternating

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54 Similar to the *Flight into Egypt: Palace of Justice, Tangier*, many of Tanner’s Orientalist painted sketches and finished canvases are difficult to date and place despite being assigned titles, which suggest they represent Morocco. These undated paintings have frequently been designated as ca. 1908 or ca. 1910 to accommodate for their creation in Algeria, France, or Morocco. However, the paintings that show an interest in capturing sunlight may have been influenced by the work of his Australian colleagues E. Phillips Fox, Ethel Carrick, and Hilda Rix. I believe the following canvases were created on-site or as a result of the 1912 Moroccan expedition despite being assigned earlier dates. *Gateway Tangier, Street Scene, Tangier (Man Leading Calf), Street Scene, Tangier (Crenelated Architecture)* all dated ca. 1910 in SAAM collection, Washington DC, *Sunlight Tangier* dated ca. 1910 in Milwaukee Art Museum, *Near East Scene* dated ca. 1910 in Des Moines Art Center collection.
between blue-green and white-yellow compositions. In his historical study of color and meaning, John Gage identifies the importance of color polarities, especially blue-yellow, which fascinated German and French artists and theorists, “for it could readily be understood in terms of either a physiological or a psychic dynamism.”\(^{55}\) The opposition of blue and yellow, or of moonlight and sunlight, that Tanner employed in Tangier, echoes Kandinsky’s theory on the psychological and emotive effects of color in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

Two great divisions of color occur to the mind at the outset: into warm and cold, and into light and dark. To each color there are thereafter four shades of appeal—warm and light or warm and dark, or cold and light or cold and dark. Generally speaking, warmth or cold in a color means an approach respectively to yellow or to blue…The movement is an horizontal one, the warm colors approaching the spectator, the cold ones retreating from him…Besides this physical relationship, is also a spiritual one (between yellow and white on one side, between blue and black on the other) which marks a strong separation between the two pairs.\(^{56}\)

As in the *Flight to Egypt*, Tanner simplified and abstracted the cast of Oriental characters in the *Entrance to the Casbah*, effectively destabilizing their temporality, as well as gender, racial, and religious identities. The title does not suggest an overly religious scene, however, Tanner incorporated familiar and suggestive religious symbols throughout the composition signifying that it should be interpreted as more than a secular Orientalist genre scene.

The scene is portrayed from above, and at a distance, offering the audience a privileged perspective of Tangier’s Casbah entrance. A Marian-like figure, atop a donkey, veiled in blue, greets the viewer at the bottom of the composition. The figure’s long shadow, rendered with patches of violet and blue-green, draws the eye into the scene and up the stepped-ramp, from which she descended, to a blue and turquoise passageway that creates a dark void within the high-keyed hues of the towering citadel walls. The protective walls that encircle the Casbah are


\(^{56}\) Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 74-76.
animated by thick painterly brushwork that weaves together vibrant complimentary and analogous colors. Access to the inner sanctum of the city is provided through the passage of a large horseshoe arch that pierces the reflective white-yellow walls of Tangier’s citadel.

At the center of this passageway stands the silhouette of an ambiguous figure cloaked in a white *burnous* or *djellaba*, a traditional Maghrebian garment used for protection from the elements. Tanner employed the *burnous* as an Oriental signifier, but also to shroud and abstract the individual, allowing him to obscure their identity and present them in the most simplified terms. The thick layering of various tints of white pigment used to shape the hooded figure renders the individual into an amorphous glowing mandorla, similar to the column of light in *The Annunciation* and the apparition of Christ as he appears, walking toward his disciples on the moonlit sea of Galilee (Figures 3-5 and 3-12). The *burnous* itself was symbolic, as it was typically worn by individuals of high standing in North Africa.

The ambiguous white figure stands silhouetted against the dark passageway, keeping watch and protecting the entrance to the inner sanctum of the city. Calling upon the repertoire of Christian prototypes, the gatekeeper figure could allude to St. Peter or more generally to the importance of protecting sacred spaces, including passage to the kingdom of heaven. Unnamed gatekeeper figures make appearances throughout the Old and New Testaments as archetypes of trustworthiness, watchfulness, preparedness, protection, and often served as the conveyers of information.57

Tanner reinforced the theme of protection, or gatekeeping, in this scene through the inclusion of a group of figures congregated against the citadel wall in the left of the composition. These figures, known as *bowaabs*, or *bawabs*, were tasked with the responsibility of keeping

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57 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Matthew 7:14. Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6.
watch over all varieties of entrances—from domestic doorways to monumental gates—throughout
North Africa. The congregation of bowaabs are pictured wearing djellaba, a genderless robe that
usually included a hood called a qob identified by its iconic shape. The qob concealed and
protected the wearer creating a triangular form with a point at the apex when pulled on over the
head. Tanner may have been inspired to portray the qob for its interesting abstract shape as,
similar to the burnous, the garment rendered these gatekeepers into abstract genderless and
raceless figures.

_The Entrance to the Casbah_ is one of many paintings Tanner created in Morocco that
emphasized a visual contrast of light and darkness through arches and passageways. The artist’s
interest in portraying passageways may allude to larger spiritual journeys while also symbolizing
his personal and artistic pilgrimage, which involved navigating and traversing obstruction and
cultural gatekeepers. The vantage point Tanner chose for _The Entrance to the Casbah_ is
significant in that, while many artists, including Hilda Rix and Henri Matisse, also depicted this
iconic gate, they chose to situate themselves within the citadel.58 Tanner portrayed the Casbah
gateway from outside the city using the horseshoe arch passageway as a physical and conceptual
barrier to communicate his position as an outsider.

Tanner was not the only artist that focused on Oriental gateways as a symbolic expression
of tension and uncertainty. In her study of Delacroix’s sketchbooks, Elisabeth Fraser has
identified that during his 1832 expedition to North Africa, the artist created more images of
thresholds or passageways than any other motif.59 Fraser attributes his interest in this imagery to
the otherwise unrepresented tensions Delacroix experienced in Morocco before the kingdom was

58 Hoorn, _Moroccan Idyll_, 74-80.

more securely wrested by European influences later in the century. Fraser interprets the threshold as a visual metaphor for these latent tensions and feeling of uncertainty. She states: “the experience of being outside, the possibility and desire of entering before him, the privilege of access not quite attainable...Representations often heightened awareness of it and point to its most complicated, vulnerable aspects. These conflicting strategies show the artist coming to terms with a world in which he had little control.”

Unlike Delacroix, whose European power and privilege were inverted by his alien-outsider status in the Kingdom of Morocco in 1832, I would argue that in the Moroccan protectorate of 1912, Tanner found a sense of freedom and rights he may not have enjoyed in Europe or America. His portrayal of symbolic barriers, thresholds, and protected passages likely alludes not to his experiences in North Africa, but rather, calls upon a lifetime of struggles, casting the “battle of his life” as a pilgrimage in overcoming obstacles to gain passage into the metaphorical citadel of white culture, while also recognizing his tenuous position within Belle Époque culture and society. Marcus Bruce suggested that Tanner portrayed specific biblical narratives, which alluded to the trials and triumphs in his own life and artistic career. The theme of pilgrimage was an enduring theme, appearing in many different stylistic variations throughout the artist’s long career. Bruce articulates:

Tanner’s conception of himself as a pilgrim offers important insights into his paintings and what he considered his larger mission and message. He viewed his paintings and invitation to others to reflect and engage in a dialogue on the most familiar moments of life...Tanner’s use of allegory is important for another reason. It is in this allegorical light that we need to interpret Tanner’s reference to a ‘repressing load’ as a metaphor, albeit a veiled one, for the burden of race. It is the closest he ever came to publically discussing the impact of racial prejudice on his life. Though his letters are filled with comments and remarks about the challenges of pursing a career as a painter in a country obsessed with racial classifications, Tanner rarely spoke about the subject in public. When he did he

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60 Fraser, “Images of Uncertainty: Delacroix and the Art of Nineteenth-Century Expansion,” 142-143.
used a veiled and indirect language, not unlike the coded visual language he used in his religious paintings, works that speak to the issues at the heart of racial matters without using the more familiar categories, terminology or signs.61

As camouflage for his meditations on struggle and transcendence, Tanner chose to abstract and manipulate form and color, casting his hybrid pilgrims and protectors within an Orient that was devoid of time or place. Counter to Orientalist imagery that worked to establish difference and western superiority, the simplification and ambiguity of the symbolic holy figures, such as Mary or Peter, and the suggestion of open-ended, unresolved, or unfolding biblical narratives, invites the viewer to spiritually and psychologically identify with the figure and themes of transition, struggle, faith, joy, and mystery.

Jesse Tanner contended that his father’s paintings were more than for “enjoyment.” Jessie claimed: “A Tanner…can come to your rescue, it can reaffirm your confidence in man and his destiny; it can help you surmount your difficulties or console you in your distress. A picture by Tanner is really a part of the artist himself, a mystic whose visions are deeply personal yet universal in significance.”62 Jesse’s observation that his father’s paintings were “a part of the artist himself” is essential as it highlights the accommodations made for personal-artistic subjectivity in the making of modern universal art. Kandinsky addressed the duality of subjective/objective or personal/universal in art through the standpoint of mobility.

Kandinsky advocated that artists embody their work with personal ideas, beliefs, and feelings because, if sincere, the art will evoke a similar reaction in the viewer. Successful art then will mobilize an interaction between the artist’s inner emotions and outer expression manifested


in the aesthetic choices and material form of the art. A beautiful work, according to Kandinsky, is “the consequence of an harmonious cooperation of the inner and the outer.”\textsuperscript{63}

Kandinsky’s theory on the interaction and movement between inner and outer, personal and universal, echoes Bhabha’s assertion that hybridity is achieved through a mobility of the positions of “you” and “I.” “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in a statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space.”\textsuperscript{64} For Tanner, Morocco and more generally the East, served as this Third Space acting as an escape from both American and European conventions and classifications. His process of applying numerous layers of pigment and glazes is an existential spiritual and meditative exercise for the artist, which also invited, or “mobilizes” his viewers to look beyond the overt narrative aspects of his paintings. His attention to materials and formal manipulation of colors and symbols were intended to communicate on multiple levels.

Commenting on the collection of Orientalist work Tanner exhibited at the Knoedler’s Gallery in New York City in 1913, the critic for the \textit{New York American} made note of the artist’s new treatment of materials.

If you examine his canvases closely, you will find that the blue is threaded through with strokes of purple, gray and pinkish mauve, and more sparingly with pale, creamy yellow. On the other hand, where the ‘local’ color is creamy, it is found to be dragged over with threads of pink, pale mauve and green. It is this way that Tanner introduces chromatic relations into the dark and light colors of his canvas and so draws them into a unity of vibrating and resonant harmony.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{63} Kandinsky, \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art}, 68.

\textsuperscript{64} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 53.

The critic’s choice of language is revealing, as Tanner’s manner of layering pigments created “chromatic relations” between the light and dark sections of the composition, which facilitated visual “unity” and “harmony.” Tanner imposed meaning on his materials through mixing, weaving, and interlocking his pigments and glazes into harmonies and complementary studies of light and darkness, which further alluded to interconnectedness and unity of humanity. Tanner’s mature approach to the act of painting and the meaning he attributed to his materials reveals that, not unlike Kandinsky, he viewed abstraction and modern universalism as a vehicle to achieve a hybrid spiritual art.

Tanner’s academic biblical paintings of the late nineteenth century were successful in part because they presented venerable religious figures in an un-idealized manner within the comfort of domestic setting, encouraging viewers to relate to the humanity of these individuals portrayed within an “authentic” biblical-archaeological history. The artist’s modernist biblical Orientalism manipulated color and form for expressive effect, rendering these same religious figures as abstracted archetypes to invite viewers to identify directly-psychologically and spiritually-with these symbols. The figures’ un-fixed ambiguity accommodated viewers regardless of their identity. To achieve these goals, Tanner reinforced the colonial perception of the Orient as a site of stasis to collapse time and space, thus providing a biblical narrative that was both in the past and present, allowing the episode to unfold through the viewer’s own existential-spiritual contemplation with the image.

Although he never returned to the Orient after 1912, for the remainder of his career Tanner revisited the imagery and architectural motifs of Morocco. In the aftermath of the great conflict and loss inflicted during World War One, the artist focused on biblical themes and narratives that were personal and poignant, including the Good Shepherd and the Flight to Egypt,
which in the post-war context likely evoked his own migration, transition, and transformation during and after the war. In his 1923 *Flight into Egypt* (Figure 5-11) Tanner portrayed one of his favorite gospel stories by drawing from his repertoire of Oriental imagery. He once again called on the symbolic figure of the *bowaabs* as archetypal protectors to guide the holy family. The ambiguous *bowaab* figure symbolically holds possession of a lantern indicating his spirituality, while illuminating the path for Mary and her newborn son, easing the heavy burden of their transient and uncertain state. The holy family is depicted in transition, either beginning, ending, or stopping for shelter along their arduous pilgrimage to freedom. The figures are sheltered and concealed from Herod’s accomplices by a Moroccan arched passageway that communicates safe passage, but may also allude to an uneasiness that Fraser interpreted in Delacroix’s imagery of thresholds given the current uncertainty in Tanner’s life after the First World War.66

While it is impossible to know whether Kandinsky and Tanner had the opportunity to discuss and share their philosophy on spiritual art, their mutual interests speak to how European artists responded to the need for art that could communicate universally to humanity in the face of the dynamic changes and tensions leading up to the First World War. Tanner’s investment in the Orient as a means to escape his own classifications and create art that he believed could communicate by transcending cultural boundaries and binaries, illuminates how he situated himself within the existing discourse of Orientalism and interpreted his role as an artist in relation to modern universalism.

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66 In the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. On the back of this canvas is a study for *Christ at the Home of Lazarus,* 1911-1912, present location unknown.
In 1911, the year before Tanner embarked for Morocco, Kandinsky published *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art). Kandinsky’s artistic manifesto and handbook to abstraction crystalized in writing aspects of what Tanner would attempt in his Orientalism. While Kandinsky ultimately found expression for the spiritual through non-representational art, Tanner found his own freedom to experiment with color, light, and religious symbolism within the geographic and conceptual “Third Space” of the Orient, bridging past and present, Paris and Tangier, and academic and avant-garde tenets to create a truly unique spiritually infused hybrid art that transcended classification.

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67 Published in 1911 as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, translated into French in 1912 as *Du Spirituel dans l’art*, and appeared in English, translated by Michael Sadler in 1914 as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. 

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Figure 5-1. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, 1899, oil on canvas, 85.6 x 100.3 cm., Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia, PA.

Figure 5-2. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Evening on the Terrace (Morocco)*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 123 x 198.5 cm., Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
Figure 5-3. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Arabian Nights*, n.d., Oil on canvas, approx 46.9 x 88.9 cm., Private Collection.

Figure 5-4. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer*, ca. 1879. Oil on canvas, 82.2 x 121 cm., Sterling and Francine Clark Museum, Williamstown, MA.
Figure 5-5. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *In Constantine*, ca. 1908. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 45.09 x 33.02 cm., Rosenfeld Fine Arts, NY.

Figure 5-6. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Flight into Egypt: Palais de Justice, Tangier*, ca. 1908. Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 81.0 cm., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.
Figure 5-7. Photographic postcard of the Palais de Justice, Tangier, ca. 1900.

Figure 5-8. Detail of surface, *Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1908.
Figure 5-9. Detail of holy family, *Flight in to Egypt*, 1908.

Figure 5-10. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Entrance to the Casbah*, 1912. Oil on wood pulp paper mounted on canvas, 81.2 x 67.3 cm., Art Museum of Greater Lafayette, IN.
Figure 5-11. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Flight into Egypt* 1923. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 66 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.
CHAPTER 6
MIMICRY AND HYSTERIA IN THE ORIENT

We are really truly here!!! And Oh oh oh it is wonderful!! So much like an extraordinarily beautiful dream that I’m afraid to wake up in the morning and find it all gone–oh it is impossible to give you the faintest impression of it all for it is more splendid than I thought a great great deal. There is such quantity and richness of wonderful picturesqueness every way one turns the head there is a new picture. The people are dears so glorious, splendid features–and so many with great calm dignity–They are not one bit rude and don’t stare at one as people in Paris and Madrid–Thank goodness for that it will make it more comfortable for sketching–I’m pining to start–shall take one days rest tho after such a crossing!

–Hilda Rix
Letter from Tangier dated February 5, 1912

The excitement Hilda Rix felt when finally reaching Tangier in February of 1912 is apparent in a letter she wrote the day of her arrival to her sister and mother in Étaples. The artist seemed overwhelmed with the endless possibilities for “new pictures,” but expressed her determination to start her work and capture this “extraordinarily beautiful dream.” Rix’s enthusiasm speaks to what she believed her efforts in Morocco, and the creation of Orientalist imagery could do for her status as an artist. Mobilizing the Orientalist trope of western escape and freedom, the aspiring Australian artist viewed her travel to Morocco as a conduit through which she could experiment and create art more freely than in Australia or Europe, uninhibited by the societal rules that governed a young bourgeois woman like herself in the West. During her time in Tangier, Hilda Rix’s sister Elsie remarked at the artist’s boldness: “I don’t suppose there are many countries in which she could be so audacious.”

In Morocco, Hilda Rix evaded the otherness attributed to her as a “woman” artist to instead capitalize on the privilege her whiteness and western identity granted her to access and portray the exotic Other. This privilege allowed Rix to creatively maneuver and situate herself.

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1 Elsie Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Tangier, dated February 14, 1914. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
within the traditions and visual discourse of Orientalism and by extension facilitated her entry into the dominant discourses of Belle Époque art. Although Hilda Rix attracted attention when sketching in the Moroccan marketplace, even earning a kind of celebrity status in Tangier, her sister Elsie Rix reported that the locals did not resent her, “they invariably treat her with respect.”

Within the complex hierarchal and intersecting binary systems of colonial identity, while in Morocco Hilda Rix’s complexion signified her relationship to western authority that sublimated the otherness of her gender. When sketching and painting in North Africa, Rix was not marginalized as a “woman” artist; rather, she was simply a “katsouer” or a maker of images.

Seeking to work and be recognized on equal terms with her male colleagues, Rix mimicked elements of her mentors’ travels and exotic imagery in the hopes of appropriating the power and authority Orientalism represented in Belle Époque art. In Morocco, Rix self-consciously produced a visual and textual record that was intended to emphasize her presence, privilege, and difference from the subjects she was so captivated by, demonstrating her proficiency to “speak” using the existing language and visual vocabulary that was controlled and valued by male artists. Rix’s ease in embracing Orientalism as an expression of power, reflects Said’s thoughts: “In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him [or her] the relative upper hand.”

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2 Elsie goes on to write: “Today when she was drawing she was surrounded by a big semicircle of people, but they were always considerate enough to stand behind her, and mostly spoke in whispers for fear of interrupting. She got a glorious sketch full of colour, also full of the sizzle that is in the air of the Soko.” Undated letter from Elsie Rix to Elizabeth Rix from Hôtel Villa de France, Tangier. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

3 Hilda Rix letter to Elizabeth and Elsie from Hôtel Villa de France, Tangier February 1912. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817.

4 Said, Orientalism, 7.
As she did in Paris and Étaples, to participate and be accepted into the male dominated world of fine art, Rix mimicked traditions and stereotypes, which both resisted and reinforced existing ideology. In Morocco, Rix adopted the language of Orientalism as a means of self-affirmation, but also chose her subjects carefully and challenged misogynistic stereotypes of Oriental women, as I believe she recognized the “relationship between misogyny at home and exploitation abroad,” understanding these fantasies as repressive of all women.6

Similar to Bhabha’s interpretation of colonial ambivalence, Reina Lewis has identified the duality of women’s Orientalism in subverting some codes while challenging others. Orientalism’s ability to accommodate for individual and conflicting desires speaks to its heterogeneity as a mode of discourse. In her study of female European painters and literature authored by Turkish women, Lewis suggests that “this supplementary Orientalism challenged as many cherished male fantasies as it upheld. So, dominant Orientalist discourse can be reconfigured as heterogeneous and contested rather than homogeneous and monolithic.”7

By participating in the colonial discourse of Orientalism, Rix took on the challenge of negotiating an image of the exotic Other that undermined patriarchal fantasy, while also elevating her status in relation to the Moroccan people she had the power to portray as a means

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5 Lewis, Gendering Orientalism, 162.

6 In 1912 the artist had the opportunity to visit a harem and recounted her experience in a lecture delivered after her return to Australia. “We women may be surprised to learn that although [sic] we may pity the Eastern women for being veiled, and closed in, and tucked away—some of them pity us, and ‘think men must think little of them to allow them to run around loose.’ There are two sides to every question. You may have visions of a Harem culled from a Western Poem or from a scene in a theater produced by a western manager. I visited a harem, and my [?] meeting is of very nice, rather lovely little ladies, sitting around on cushions against the walls—who rose eagerly to greet and talk with us—to whose busy eyes and fingers caressed curiously our funny Western clothes. I was very fortunate in having friends who knew most of the wealthy Moors of Tetuan—and my women friends spoke Arabic and could interpret for me. Some of my women painter friends, the other day, asked me had I not been afraid to go into a harem—when I asked—‘of what’—she said of being kept there!” Hilda Rix, undated manuscript, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

7 Reina Lewis, “Cross-Cultural Reiterations: Demetra Vaka Brown and the Performance of Racialized Female Beauty,” in Performing the Body/Performing the Text, edited by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, 56-75 (NY: Routledge, 1999), 60.
to assert her identity as an artist. These contradictions are further problematized by her antipodean upbringing and status as subject of the British Empire. As an Australian and a provincial outsider to European fine art, Rix’s choice to travel to and portray the people and customs of North Africa indicated that she possessed the cultural competency necessary to navigate within and contribute to both patriarchal and imperial discourses of fine art. Rix’s ambivalent approach to Orientalism and the contradictions in her work are reflective of Reina Lewis’s assessment that “Women who transgressed the codes of femininity to publish or exhibit art were to some extent aspiring to recognition in the terms of their culture. The contradictions of their position mean that their representations are likely simultaneously to confirm and transgress social and textual codes.”

As in her imagery of cosmopolitan artifice and rural peasant women, a tension exists in Rix’s Orientalism that was created by her repetition, but also resistance to tropes and misogynist fantasies, that results in a dialectic of Orientalism and a Counter-Orientalism. It is within this unresolved space of the dialectic, between the push and pull of Rix’s desires, where she created a space for herself as an artist, working and existing within a tradition of fine art that was designed to exclude her.

**Australian Orientalism and Romantic Antecedents**

In her study of Australian Orientalism, Ursula Prunster connects antipodean artists’ desire to participate in this colonial discourse as representative of their cultural aspirations and a testament of Europeanness. The incorporation of exotic elements in their work communicated that these artists had cultural knowledge and competence in European ideology and fashions. Following in the footsteps of Australian artists who found success in Europe, including her mentors, Arthur Streeton and E. Phillips Fox, Hilda Rix would have presented her Orientalism as

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a demonstration and self-affirmation of her cosmopolitan interests and a badge of European cultural sophistication.

Antipodean artists’ desire to work in Morocco also has to do with their interest in studying and capturing the exotic light of North Africa. Many artists were motivated to travel to Morocco, Tunis, and Algeria as it was believed the light there was exceptional.9 Scholars have argued that Australian artists demonstrated a special propensity in their ability to convey “Oriental” sunlight, due to their experience with the harsh, sun-scorched landscapes of the arid bushland and coastal Australia. When convalescing in Algiers in 1891, the English-Australian painter Charles Conder remarked: “Here one feels quite in Australia again.” Likewise, reflecting on her world travels, Ethel Carrick stated, that “the light in Australia reminds me of North Africa more than any other country I have ever visited.”10

Similarly, in Morocco, Hilda delighted in the discovery of foliage and vegetation she associated with Australia. She made special reference to the gum trees she was accustomed to growing up in Melbourne, which offered her a connection to something familiar and comforting while in a foreign land. “Below me in the hotel garden, all the vegetation is exactly what we are used to in Australia—great masses of purple bougainvillea, trees of different kinds of acacias, roses and wattle blossom.”11

Australians’ understanding of Orientalism and exoticism was viewed through the prism of European imperialism, which circulated through colonial networks and channels of


11 Hilda Rix letter to the Van de Weyden’s from “the Hotel Terrance, Tangier, Morocco,” dated February 17, 1912. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817.
communication. As provincial outsiders, white Australians’ complex identity within the culturally diverse and geographically expansive context of the British Empire was strained by their temporal and geographic distance from the metropole, but also indelibly linked to a sense of Britishness on account of their whiteness. Australians’ participation in Orientalism—itself part of the discourse of imperialism—was inherently conflicted and ambivalent.¹²

In mimicking the traditions of imperial and patriarchal art, Rix adopted the language and perception of the Orient that were steeped in colonial stereotypes. Rix’s letters and postcards from Morocco captured her youthful excitement and passion, but also disclosed her colonial bias. Throughout her communication, she deployed coded language portraying the “Moors” frequently as picturesque, queer, mischievous, and even fatalists.¹³ Working in tandem, Rix’s written descriptions and images ensured that she established her difference from the exotic Others she was there to depict.

In a letter written to her mother and sister from Tangier, the artist concluded with: “And now to rest and dream of a calm crossing tomorrow to the wonderful fairytale land of the Moors—from where you will next hear.”¹⁴ Rix’s letters make clear that before arriving in Tangier she had already well established picturesque and exotic expectations for the Orient. Evidence of the artist’s concept of North Africa as primitive, or in a state of stasis, is expressed in a letter Rix wrote from Tangier to Harry and Florence Van der Weyden in Étapes:

Oh my dears the people are going to enchant me over in Tangier. I know by the Moors I have already seen here. Their wonderful simplicity of drapery in period many thousand years ago is just as if they had walked out of a bible story. They


¹³ Series 17 “Trips to Morocco, 1912-1914,” Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

¹⁴ Hilda Rix letter to Elsie and Elizabeth Rix from Gibraltar dated February 4, 1912. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas MS9817.
are more stunning than any pictures I have ever seen of them—more quaint and wonderful—Oh I’m excited!\textsuperscript{15}

It is unknown if Rix read or was aware of Eugene Delacroix’s journals, first published between 1893 and 1895 in four volumes, as the young artist’s account of the “Moors” in Gibraltar is strikingly similar to that of Delacroix’s. During his stay in Morocco in 1832, the artist described the locals as if they belonged to the classical past:

The picturesque abounds here. At each step there are tableaux already made which would make the fortune and the glory of twenty generations of painters. You believe yourself in Rome or Athens without the Atticism, but with the robes, togas and a thousand other of the most antique details. A rouge who repairs shoes for a few pennies has the dress and the form of a Brutus or a Cato.\textsuperscript{16}

Rix and Delacroix’s similar references to biblical or classical antiquity and clothing as an anachronistic signifier of North Africa’s perceived primitivism underscores how deep colonial stereotypes were integrated into the collective conscious of the West. The Romantic painter’s perception of Morocco was inherited by Rix and many others, who traveled to North Africa and the Middle East in search of a hermetic pre-modern culture to exploit for aesthetic gain. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists were drawn to North Africa pursuing the evocative, exotic, and erotic advertised in Delacroix’s canvases. For instance, upon arriving in Morocco eighty years after his avant-garde predecessor, Matisse wrote: “I found the Moroccan landscape exactly as they are described in Delacroix’s paintings.”\textsuperscript{17} More than a

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\textsuperscript{15} Hilda Rix letter to Van der Weyden’s from Gibraltar dated February 4, 1912. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas MS9817.
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\textsuperscript{16} Although many of Delacroix’s studies of Moroccan types are strikingly similar in composition to those of Rix, it is nearly impossible that she would have had the opportunity to see these, exhibited in 1885 and again 1930 in Paris. Quote reproduced in Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby “Orients and Colonies: Delacroix’s Algerian Harem,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix}, edited by Beth S. Wright, 69-87 (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2001), 77.
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A century of Orientalist discourse provided the necessary material for both Rix and Matisse to imagine and shape their view of Morocco before they left Paris.

**Miming the Mimic in Morocco**

In early February of 1912, after spending time in Madrid, Toledo, and Gibraltar, Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix arrived in the French protectorate of Morocco. As a senior and well-respected member of the Étaples community, Tanner’s generosity in overseeing the planning and chaperoning of the younger artist’s first voyage to the Orient must have been thrilling for Rix.

Hilda’s eagerness is obvious in her correspondence with friends in the days before they embarked. “Mr. Tanner comes Tonight–to Paris–Tomorrow morning. We go over the other side to get our tickets which take 24 hours to mature–then off we go on Saturday evening–I’ll write you where and how long we are to stay on way to Tangiers–guess I’ll be glad to start and see new things. Of course I love Paris but when one has begun a journey it is jolly to continue it.”

Given Tanner’s own struggles to establish himself as a successful artist within the oppressive ideology of whiteness that structured Belle Époque art, it is likely that he recognized and sympathized with Hilda Rix’s own challenges in attempting to make a career for herself as an artist in a culture and society that sought to control and marginalize women. At transitional points in their careers, Tanner and Rix welcomed the artistic pilgrimage to North Africa as an avenue towards greater artistic freedom and agency. In Morocco, both artists capitalized on their privilege within the colonial system to portray an Orient that was reflective of their individual desires and aspirations.

In a letter to her mother Hilda stated: “I like my travelling party very much. The Tanners and Miss Simpson are very nice–we are fitting awfully well.” In detailed account she described

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18 Hilda Rix letter dated January 25, 1912. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817.
19 Hilda Rix undated letter from Tangiers to Elise and Elizabeth Rix, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
her party’s journey to Tétouan by mule, approximately 40 miles east of Tangier. They arrived to the medieval city of Tétouan by moonlight and found the gates to the citadel locked. After much negotiation, their guide convinced the local Pasha to let them in for the night after which they promptly secured lodging at a “very crowded primitive Spanish hotel” and rested for the next day. Rix reported:

Next morning the joys of Tétuan [Tétouan] began to dawn upon us—Oh the arches, doorways, little streets, quaint lovely people—houses and the whole glorious white Tetuan against wonderful blue mountains…Turning a corner in the maze of white houses we came suddenly to a place where freshly dyed silk, hung in great skeins across the street poles. Colour!, Colour! 

Outside this particular outing, it is unclear how much time Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix spent painting or sketching together in Morocco. In her correspondence with friends and family, Hilda frequently described sketching in colored pencil, pastels, and charcoal in the Grand Soko (or Socco), the large public marketplace in the Medina, alone or chaperoned by a Miss Simpson. It seems that Rix preferred sketching to painting during her first stay in Morocco, perhaps because she was more confident in her drawing skills and the prospect of attempting to advance her plein air painting in a foreign environment may have been too daunting. However, the artist did complete a handful of painted sketches during her 1912 and 1914 stays in Morocco which, when compared to Henry Tanner’s Orientalist paintings from Morocco, suggest that the younger artist imitated the methods and subject matter of her traveling partner, as well as the Orientalist imagery of her Australian compatriots, E. Phillip Fox and Ethel Carrick.

20 “The heat had been fierce during the mornings ride and poor Mrs. T was absolutely limp and spread herself out on the curly roots of the tree, and was fanned – Oh deary me, I was hungry, and devoured my lunch ravenously – It was very lovely there among the mountain tops…after a while we began to climb and descend –down steep paths our sure footed mules picking their way between huge boulders with dainty discretion – On and on we went, some of our party looking like wee crawling ants climbing up mountains ahead of us.” Hilda Rix undated letter from Tangiers to Elise and Elizabeth Rix, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

21 Hilda Rix undated letter from Tangiers to Elise and Elizabeth Rix, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

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Tanner’s affiliation with Australian artists began long before he met Hilda Rix in Étaples the summer of 1910. Some of Tanner’s earliest artistic connections in Europe were with Australians. As a student, he shared a Montparnasse studio with Australian artists Hugh Ramsay and Ambrose Patterson, both of whom studied with E. Phillips Fox in Melbourne before venturing to Europe and the Académies Julian and Colarossi. It is possible that after spending several summers in Brittany, Tanner’s relationship with Australian artists in Paris led him to the English-speaking art colony in Étaples beginning the summer of 1900. His connection to and relationships with Australian artists, most significantly Fox and Carrick in Paris and Étaples, no doubt made his introduction to Hilda Rix the summer of 1910 possible.

While Rix considered Carrick and Fox mentors, there is evidence that Tanner also engaged in a mutual and collaborative relationship with the artistic couple. Ursula Prunster has suggested that Tanner’s work in Algeria during the winter of 1908 may have encouraged Fox and Carrick to embark on their own Orientalist expedition for six weeks to Algeria and Morocco beginning February of 1911. The sketches and finished work that Carrick and Fox painted in North Africa, including Fox’s *Street in Morocco* (Figure 6-1), are sun-drenched landscapes that include whitewashed Islamic architecture as a backdrop for quotidian scenes of daily life. The loose and spontaneous application of pure pigments on canvas board and wood panels captured the couple’s responses to the reflective light and bold colors of North Africa by painting *en plein air*. Perhaps as a response to Carrick and Fox’s, in 1912 with Hilda Rix, Tanner was more open to experimenting with white-yellow hues to capture the intense sunlight of Morocco as a complement to his blue-green moonlit studies.

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A painted sketch completed by Rix in 1912 that demonstrates her “Australian” sensitivity to the glaring North African sunlight is *Moroccan loggia* (Figure 6-2). The paintings Rix completed in Morocco are like nothing she created before. As an artist who remained grounded in naturalism and pictorial clarity, Rix’s willingness to experiment with a Post-Impressionist palette of vivid colors and a looser, more improvised application of paint in Morocco may be attributed to an emulation of Tanner, Carrick, and Fox’s North African work. Rix rendered the horseshoe-arched arcade with thick daubs of opaque white and blue pigments. The white-hot sun is suggested through the handling of her medium, in which she lays down patches of undiluted titanium white, creating sections of the canvas that are heavily built up in an impastoed surface. The chunky materiality of these sections conveys the reflective sunlight and heat that radiates off the white arches enticing the viewer’s eye to visually seek shade and shelter in the cool blue shadows of the loggia.

With two more years of painting experience under her belt, during her second visit to Tangier in 1914, Rix created landscapes and engaged with subjects that echoed Tanner’s Oriental imagery. *Through the arch to the sea*, (Figure 6-3) bears striking similarities to Henry Tanner’s *Entrance to the Casbah* (Figure 5-10) in its style and interest in arch and passageways populated with abstracted veiled figures. Imitating her Australian and American mentors, Rix captured the iconic architecture and reflective light of Morocco through a thick, spontaneous application of pigments.

The painted compositions Rix completed in Tangier between 1912 and 1914 are the most modern and experimental of her career. In fact, Jeanette Hoorn argues that Rix’s Moroccan paintings are some of the earliest work completed by an Australian artist, male or female, in the
“modernist idiom.” Hoorn suggests that Rix’s expressive handling of oils and high keyed palette may have been influenced by Henri Matisse who, coincidentally, traveled to Tangier the winter of 1912 and took up residence in the Hôtel Villa de France, which would have placed the young artist in close quarters with the well known Fauvist painter. Hoorn notes: “Rix’s style underwent an interesting development during her first trip to Morocco. Her oils took on a decidedly post-impressionist appearance as she began to use bigger blocks of color and looser brushwork and sometimes bright primary colours.” While it is very possible that Rix made contact with Matisse in Morocco, however, I believe her willingness to experiment with a more progressive modernist aesthetic was directly shaped by the work of her travel companion, Henry Tanner, and to a large degree, her response and imitation of Ethel Carrick’s imagery of North Africa completed the previous year.

As a successful woman painter, Carrick no doubt served as a role model and inspiration for Rix. When compared to her husband, Carrick’s work was regarded as more avant-garde for

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24 Hoorn, Moroccan Idyll, 9.

25 According to Hilda’s account of her travel party’s adventure to Tetuan, they were accompanied by a “Mr. M.” who joined them in dining at “the house of a wealthy Moor.” Alternatively “Mr. M” could be the Fauvist painter Albert Marquet or the Canadian artist James Wilson Morrice, both of whom were in Morocco during Tanner and Rix’s 1912 expedition and stayed at the Hôtel Villa de France. “When our coffee was finished, our smiling host was told that I could sing, and two of my friends who spoke Arabic, translated his desire to hear me, and so I sang! I wonder how it sounded to their Moorish ears, judging by the smiling nods and bows of approval, but a Moor is a very prince of politeness. My party then bade their farewells, save Mr M and I, who were given permission to sketch in the garden court…Presently, very softly and slyly, mysterious gorgeous people began to appear, and encouraged by my smiles, crept nearer. They were not the sacredly sealed inmates of the harem, but slave women, old and young, and little children, all dressed gorgeously, and looking thoroughly happy. And, how could they be otherwise, in this beautiful setting? When our sketches were finished, Mr. M and I departed with many thanks for our charming visit. Hilda Rix, letter to Elise and Elizabeth Rix, no date. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.


27 Hoorne makes an attempt to connect Rix with Matisse in both Paris and Tangier. “During the years 1907-1909 Matisse had an open studio at 19 quai de St. Michelle once a week. There he would show his earlier work to his students, comparing it to the works he was currently working on to reveal the process through which he had derived his fauvist compositions. Most of those who turned up were foreign students from the Académie Colarossi, so it is possible that Hilda found her way into Matisse’s studio, out of curiosity.” Hoorne, Moroccan Idyll, 24.
her interest in Fauvism. Where each artist chose to exhibit their Orientalist work is indicative of how they situated themselves with the aesthetic and stylistic terrain of Belle Époque art. While Fox continued to exhibit regularly at the Salon in Paris and the Royal Academy of Arts in London, institutions known for their conservative academic values, in 1911 Carrick chose to show her Orientalist paintings at the Salon d’Automne, a recently established independent and progressive organization. In a letter to fellow Australian painter Hans Heysen, Fox noted: “my wife is doing some very interesting and personal stuff–she is Sociétaire of the Autumn Salon and is very keen on modern outlook.”

Furthermore, Rix’s colorful, Post-Impressionist work in Morocco also illustrates affinities with Carrick’s choice in subject matter. While Tanner preferred to paint landscapes and architectural motifs populated with ambiguous, yet powerfully symbolic figures, Carrick focused her attention on public market scenes that included colorful vendors and their products, illustrated by her 1911 *Moroccan Street* (Figure 6-4). Perhaps because of his shyness or sensitivity to the religious prohibition of making figural images in Muslim cultures, Tanner’s Orientalist work avoided overtly portraying local figures in public spaces.

Following Carrick’s lead, Rix capitalized on the sense of freedom she gained in Morocco as a “katsouer” and defied Muslim customs to sketch figures in Tangier’s major market, the Grand Soko. Moreover, the women’s choice to describe quotidian scenes of daily life in public spaces was their response in negotiating how to most effectively create imagery that adopted an Orientalist language, but rejected its violent, sensational, and erotic tropes. In his study of Carrick and Rix’s Orientalism, John Pigot argued:

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28 It seems that Fox was not interested in Post-Impressionism. In a 1913 interview, the artist was quoted as saying he disliked the Post-Impressionists because they did not “go to nature to learn.” Quote reproduced in Ursula Prunster, “From Empire’s End,” 49.
As European painters and colonists they [Rix and Carrick] were granted automatic rights of visual and cultural possession, but as women they were not able to claim the Orient in quite the same way as the men...their artistic practice and choice of subject matter was modified by their gender...It was difficult for a European woman to claim the Orient through the naked bodies of exotic women, as men had done. Possession of a public space was less problematic and was not subject to the same gendered classifications as other subjects in the Orient.  

Rix gained a sense of freedom and authority to work as an artist in Morocco and ironically, on account of her gender, she may have been given special dispensation to sketch in public, an activity her male colleagues traditionally avoided because they were often met with hostility and barred from doing so. Rix was likely tolerated because her presence was not viewed as threatening as that of male Orientalists. Writing in 1913, Clara MacChesney informed her readers of the hazards western artists faced in Morocco.

There is a danger for the art seeker, and he finds everything to fight against, and conditions never easy. The anti-Christian feeling is particularly strong in Tangier, and a woman once, seeing some artists sketching, was heard to say, ‘Is there no Mohamedan near to strangle those Christians!’

Rix acknowledged the indulgence she was granted by the local population writing: “Having heard so many reports of shutters going down over stalls and hoods being drawn over heads at the approach of artists, I gratefully stand my ground and continue to work.” Despite working in a foreign environment, the artist’s letters describe her confidence in navigating the market place and her ability to capture interesting subjects.

**Distinguishing Difference in the Grand Soko**

Notably, Carrick, Rix, and Tanner all avoided sensational, violent, and erotic Oriental subjects that were popular with western audiences and instead attended to architectural motifs, public daily life, and the effects of light in North Africa. As Pigot suggested, in order for Rix to

31 Hilda Rix undated letter to Van der Weydens. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
acquire the artistic authority she sought after, she needed to carefully choose her subject matter. Hilda Rix’s decision to focus her efforts documenting the people and products of Tangier’s Grand Soko allowed her to exercise a certain degree of authority through her ability as a white westerner to look and describe Oriental types, but importantly resist Orientalist subjects of fantasy—especially those that exploited women.

Deploying Orientalism as a powerful visual language to describe exotic otherness, Rix captured different types of people as they engaged in public interactions in the marketplace. In her studies of Oriental types, the figures’ garments and accessories signified their exoticness, but were used to conceal rather than reveal their bodies. Rix’s Orientalism portrayed women protected by their clothing in a public space as an inversion of the male fantasy of the nude or semi-clad odalisque within the private privileged space of the harem or Turkish bath. Rix ensured that the figures retain their exotic otherness while rejecting the escapist fantasy that exploited eastern, and as an extension western, women’s bodies.

Hoorn attributes Rix’s avoidance of these popular erotic Oriental themes to her desire to create a “Counter-Orientalism,” and interprets Rix’s efforts to document types of exotic people in the public market with realism and attention to detail as her determination “to present an accurate impression of what she saw.”32 Hoorn views Rix’s description of commercial interactions and conversation in the Grand Soko as an attempt to link the cosmopolitan centers of Morocco, France, and Australia, highlighting the “similarities rather than the differences” to expose the myths and misrepresentations of the East perpetuated by Orientalist stereotypes.33 Hoorn argues that:

Hilda Rix prefigured the writing of Edward Said, recognizing that “the orient” was, in fact, a place “Orientalized” by generations of occidental commentators. Setting the record straight, she focused on the quotidian, presenting a universalizing account of the life and culture she witnessed in Tangier.  

While I agree with Hoorn’s assertion that aspects of Rix’s work are fashioned against the grain, or “counter,” to the traditions of Orientalism created by male artists, it is evident from the artist’s imagery and her written descriptions of Morocco that she did not intend to “set the record straight.” Rather, the artist reinforced many Orientalist stereotypes in order to distinguish and elevate her own status in relation to the Others she had the opportunity and authority to portray in Morocco. Hoorn’s interpretation is problematic in that Hilda Rix’s identity as a white western colonial woman would have made it impossible for her to “set the record straight,” as she could only view Morocco as an outsider through the prism of colonialism. Despite the artist’s first-hand experience, careful study, and the graphic clarity of her images, all of which contributed to a perception of “authenticity,” Rix’s Orientalism by definition was a reflection of western desire projected onto the East, making it impossible for her, or any western artist, to portray a “real” Orient.

By appropriating the subject position of a male artist and mimicking the pictorial language and tropes of Orientalism, Rix repeated many of its ideological codes, which Linda Nochlin identified as a variety of absences including time, place, and a visible western presence, all of which Rix reinforced in her images of Morocco. In her desire to focus on exotic clothing and products, Rix’s market scenes are challenging to place geographically and temporally, portraying the “Orient” as a universal Other. Additionally, although she made note of the

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European presence and influence in her letters, she took care not to contaminate the purity of her images with any evidence of the West.  

The artist’s *Charcoal Sellers* (Figure 6-5) illustrates Rix’s sophisticated sense of design and advanced skills as a draftswoman, but also her ability to communicate an exotic otherness through a compilation of Oriental signifiers including the camel, Riffian headdress, and veiled woman. Employing the male defined language of exoticism, but being vigilant to avoid Orientalist mythology of the erotic, violent, or sensational, Rix fabricated an image that illustrated her ability to capture and manipulate subjects in Tangier. Although she described working quickly and diligently in public spaces, the carefully considered composition of this sketch, like many others, was no doubt worked over when she returned to her hotel. Instead of capturing daily life in Morocco “as it was,” as Hoorn suggests, Rix’s *The Charcoal Sellers* is a highly self-conscious image that works to negotiate the artist’s place within Orientalist discourse. Although the finished drawing is thoughtfully rendered and organized, the artist recounted her frenzied efforts to capture the novel appearance of the principle female figure.

Oh you would have loved being with me today in the big Soco [sic]. There was an extraordinarily huge market in progress. Cram, jam packing full of the most weird and wonderful people. Many of whom have come in from the country…I squeezed my way beneath this seething mass of animals and human beings and dodging bumps and jostling as much as possible proceeded to work while a merry interested crowd grew before me. I put into my foreground one of the many women who, like any of the other beasts of burden, had tramped fifteen miles bearing a heavy load on her back. She wore scant attire made of a series of towels, her face all but the eyes was bond and veiled, her legs were encased in primitive leather gaiters and, which is rare to see, the heels of her shoes were twined up because she had passed through boggy country coming from inland to this sea port city. I got her in my sketch before the teasing crowd had succeeded in

35 “It is indeed interesting to be in Tangier now, for one feels the making of history in the air of Morocco. There is a bustle and a thrill and an undercurrent of big things happening. On the surface everything is peaceful and happy, and the unconscious Moors don’t realise that the European powers are all rope pulling beneath their noses. The bigger Moors recognise that these other nations can do more with their country, and seem reconciled to the invasion.” Hilda also notes witnessing the reception celebrating the official signing of the French protectorate of Morocco between the Sultan and French minister of affairs. Hilda Rix undated letter to Elizabeth Rix. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas MS9817.
making her understand what I was about, hurrah! Then I slipped away, and got
lost in the multitude.\textsuperscript{36}

Rix’s description of the events that contributed to \textit{The Charcoal Sellers} is telling not only
of the problematic way in which she associated the veiled woman she portrayed with her pack
animals, and the identification of her clothing with primitivism, but the manner in which the
artist had to surreptitiously capture the woman’s image without her consent and then escape into
the crowded market. By contrast, Hoorn described Rix as being sensitive and demonstrating
discretion when sketching subjects in the Soko:

The injunction against the making of image which was adhered to by strict
Muslims meant that any painting in public places had to be done discreetly and in
a manner which showed grateful acknowledgment of the indulgence given by
local people to the artist. If anyone showed discomfort Rix immediately ceased
drawing or painting; she packed her materials and awaited a more opportune
moment.\textsuperscript{37}

Contrary to Hoorn’s appraisal of Rix’s cultural sensitivity, the artist’s own writing
describes her unwelcome pursuit of subjects in the market, a feat she considered an
accomplishment and was proud enough to publish. During her second stay in Tangier, the artist
wrote to the \textit{International Studio}, which included her letter in their November 1914 issue. In
“Sketching in Morocco” the artist reported her working conditions and methods for capturing
scenes in the Soko. Pigot made note of the language Rix used, which he believed implied a sense
of possession in how she captured her subjects: “Describing her experiences with a hunter’s
enthusiasm, she used words like ‘game’ and ‘capture.’”\textsuperscript{38} Rix’s letter to \textit{International Studio}

\textsuperscript{36} Hilda Rix undated letter to Van der Weydens. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

\textsuperscript{37} Hoorn, “Women and Men and Public Space,” 10.

\textsuperscript{38} Pigot, “Les Femmes Orientalistes,” 159. “I’ve got my shoes–comfy, and smart looking too, got most things–oh a
jolly pencil bag–really a hunters bag and then place for holding the cartridges is just fine for holding my pencils–it
straps across my shoulders–Ha ha. I’m getting keen for work…Don’t know how on earth I’m going to pack my traps
with the extra odd things to put in–and my! don’t the paints weigh heavily!”\textsuperscript{38}
included her account of stalking and ultimately chasing an unwilling subject and his camels out of the Soko.

Of course many subterfuges have to be employed to keep the victim unsuspecting but unhappily someone in my audience invariably recognizes my prey and calls to Mohammed or Absolem that he is being captured on paper...The other day, coming up from the Soko, I saw two camels scaling superciliously down the hill into the market with huge cases and baskets of dates and oranges...so with my bag of ammunition and my big drawing board, I followed them. They descended the hill to the foot of the Soko where their master made them kneel to be unloaded. I began my work, and immediately a merry crowd formed around me; but the owner of the camel, a man from the interior, unused to my naughty ways, at once became agitated—fearing harm to his camel through my ‘evil eye.’ So he planted himself in front of the beast, and a friend, looking equally fierce, joined him; the two of them holding out their wide jelabas [djellabas] succeeded in blocking out my entire view...Finding them adamant, I went away amid much heated comment and laughter. Instead of going quite away, however, I made a little detour and returned to that corner of the Soko, but on the other side of the camel, and stood on a two-foot-high-wall from where I got a splendid view of my game. I proceeded to draw feverishly.\(^{39}\)

Far from describing cultural sensitivity, Rix’s account demonstrates her willingness to ignore cultural norms and prohibitions for her own advantage. Furthermore, her letter reveals a sense of desire for the Oriental Other that she does not possess or have control over, offering a very different view of the power relations and the assumptions of mastery that male Orientalists exerted over their subjects. Instead of communicating authority over the “Orient” Rix—likely unintentionally—discloses her unstable position within this male dominated discourse. Her method of hunting and poaching subjects in Morocco reveals a power dynamic between herself and her often-unwilling subjects that were highly unpredictable and potentially precarious.

Rix’s letter to International Studio was an effort on her part to articulate and attempt to substantiate her presence as an artist working in a dominant tradition of fine art. Between 1912 and 1914, the artist fashioned a matrix of visual and textual documents that worked to establish her presence in Morocco and by extension reinforce her position as a Belle Époque artist.

During her second stay in Tangier, Rix ensured that her sketches from the Soko were supported with “objective” images that documented her work in the market through photographs. (Figure 6-6). The authoritative, scientific, and documentary associations of photography may be interpreted as an attempt to support Rix’s claims of a “natural” sense of possession over the “Orient.” Pigot has interpreted the significance of these photographs in establishing Rix’s western difference and sense of superiority.

Despite Rix Nicholas’s closeness to the surrounding crowd of Arabs she is distanced from them, her dress and bearing signifying her different status. The artist is able to look at the site and construct its imaginary space for herself, but the Arabs do not have any “looking” rights; they are objectified players enacting a Western fantasy with no control over the European artists and photographer standing in their midst.40

Pigot’s view of Rix’s Orientalism circumscribes her efforts into a Saidian hegemonic interpretation of colonial discourse, which does not account for the slippages, contradictions, and resistance in her descriptions of Morocco. The ambivalence, tension, and tenuous claims to authority in Rix’s Orientalism are indicative of her experimental process in both adopting and rejecting the masculine traditions of Orientalism. In acknowledging and approaching women’s role as cultural producers of imperial discourse, Lewis asks us to “consider women’s relationship to Orientalism and imperialism as a series of identifications that did not have to be either simply supportive or simply oppositional, but that could be partial, fragmented and contradictory.”41 It is through this understanding that Orientalism can be reconceptualized as plural and “polysemic in its potential to produce diverse positions of spectator pleasure and identification.”42

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41 Lewis, Gendering Orientalism, 237.
An image that reveals a tension between the artist’s Orientalist and Counter-Orientalist desires as well as the potential for female identification is Arab Women at Market (Figure 6-7). Rix captured both male and female subjects in the Soko, but was especially interested in describing the exotic costumes of Arab women and their role in commerce and public life. Her sketch articulates the colorful wares and people of the Grand Soko through confident and economic mark making. Rix rendered the tight quarters of the marketplace with a sense of spontaneity, which in tandem with the photographs attempted to secure her place in the Soko while also maintaining her distance and difference as a western bystander to the transaction she documents.

The vantage point suggests a proximity to the three main figures who dominate the center of the composition, however the seated figure with their back to the artist, dressed in a traditional Riffian hat and striped red and white pants, creates a barrier that separated Rix from the interaction she captured between a veiled female customer and vendor. The artist breaks the illusion of a fly on the wall, or detached observer, by choosing to capture the veiled woman making eye contact with the artist/viewer. While establishing a sense of difference between herself and her subjects, by making eye contact with the figure through her veil, Rix also provides a point of entry and potential identification for a female viewer.

The exotic clothing that protects and conceals the figure in the white haik, similar to the veiled subject in The Charcoal Sellers (Figure 6-5), works to deflect the colonial male gaze. Rix’s positioning of the primary figure in The Charcoal Sellers as rigidly in profile with her face and head covered protects her not only from the artist’s desire to capture her likeness, but also from male Orientalist objectification. Contrary to Pigot’s assessment that “The artist is able to look…but the Arabs do not have any ‘looking’ rights; they are objectified players enacting a
Western fantasy with no control, the veil provides Rix’s female figures the power to see, without their bodies being made available for scrutiny and enjoyment. In Colonial Fantasies, Meyda Yeğenoğlu considers the politics and power of the veil a symbol of female Muslim identity, and the obsession and apprehension it causes for the western male:

The veiled woman is not simply an obstacle in the field of visibility and control, but her veiled presence also seems to provide the Western subject with a condition which is the inverse of Bentham’s omnipotent gaze. The loss of control does not imply a mere loss of sight, but a complete reversal of positions: her body completely invisible to the European observer except for here eyes, the veiled woman can see without being seen.44

Hilda Rix’s presence in Morocco in conjunction with the texts and imagery that resulted from her efforts there disrupt the monopoly of the male gaze and authority over the Orient. Rix’s participation in Orientalism and the imposition of her female gaze within the traditional power dynamic threatens the phallocentric paradigm of Male/Female, Occident/Orient. The artist’s choice to portray veiled women in public interactions destabilizes western man’s fantasy of the “Orient” while attempting to assert her agency as an image maker.

Oriental Ambivalence – Exploitation or Subversion?

The success of the 1912 expedition likely convinced the artist to invest in a second trip to Morocco the spring of 1914, this time accompanied by her older sister, Elsie Rix. During this voyage, the artist continued her efforts sketching in the Grand Soko and benefited from the assistance her sister provided in sharpening pencils and running interference if she drew too large a crowd. Yet, on this expedition, the Rix sisters were forced to contend with unfavorable weather, which made plein air sketching or painting nearly impossible. In a letter written to their mother from the Hôtel Villa de France Elsie Rix lamented: “Do you know Mother it is raining

44 Meyda Yeğenoğlu, Colonial Fantasies, 43.
45 Lewis, Gendering Orientalism, 162.
frightfully. Everyone says they never knew such a wet season. Isn’t it maddening?46 In her study of the Rix sisters’ “Moroccan Idyll,” Hoorn reports that the rain lasted nearly six weeks after their arrival in Tangier, making Hilda Rix’s attempts to capitalize on her earlier success of portraying Oriental types in public spaces far more difficult.47

Although Hilda Rix devised methods to stalk her “prey” in the Soko, convincing the local Moroccans to sit for portraits in her hotel chamber was considerably more challenging. Once again, in the event when the artist was able to acquire models, her gender may have worked in her favor as she was not viewed as threatening when compared to male artists. Elsie Rix recounted her sister’s struggle to find reliable sitters.

Everyone says its [sic] absolutely impossible to get models here. You get them to promise and they won’t come or they come only for the first sitting then are bored and won’t turn up again for any money. Or maybe their friends and relatives hear and tell they’ll go to perdition and they become ashamed and won’t turn up.48

Desperate to find appropriately exotic subject matter during their time in Tangier, Elsie provided a detailed account of an opportunity Hilda was granted to sketch an escaped slave that was being held by the French Consul in Tangier awaiting trial. The outcome is An African Slave Woman (Figure 6-8) and A Negro Woman Morocco (Figure 6-9), both of which were reproduced in black and white with Hilda’s letter in the November 1914 issue of International Studio.49 Hoorn describes the artist’s portrayal of the escaped slave as serious and reflective. “A subtle

46 Elsie Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Hôtel Villa de France dated March 13, 1914. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.

47 Hoorn, Moroccan Idyll, 69. In 1913 Matisse suffered a similar predicament in Tangier, which resulted in a series of colorfully abstract still lifes and landscapes of the city framed by his window in the Hôtel Villa de France. In 1913 the artist sent a postcard from Tangier to Gertrude Stein in Paris complaining “it had rained incessantly” for 5 days.

48 Elsie Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Hôtel Villa de France dated March 13, 1914. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817

study of a woman deep in thought and seemingly worried as she contemplates an uncertain future...This study in personality reveals the artist’s burgeoning skill in graphic representation and her interest in revealing the emotional state of her sitter.”

While Hoorn’s reading of these skillful sketches touches upon Rix’s ability to capture the African woman’s present state of distress, the textual evidence provided by Elsie Rix undermines the level of sympathy Hoorn attributes to these images. Elsie documented the African woman’s tribulation for her mother in an undated letter: “I am sitting on one of the benches of the tribunal in the French Embassy:–No I am not being tried for any offense against the law but I am chaperoning Hilda while she draws an escaped slave–a fine negress.” Elsie continued to explain the woman’s situation and why she was being held at the French embassy:

He [a M. Malzac] told us that the woman was an escaped slave–He heard of her and wished to rescue her–So he got one of the Algerians attached to the embassy to go pretending he wished to buy the woman. He said he wished to show her to his family before he bought her–and instead brought her to the embassy…For though slavery is supposed to be finished yet a lot of it goes on above all in the interior and as slavery is not really abolished the French have no right to interfere.

What is most troubling about the Rix sisters’ involvement in the portrayal of the escaped slave is the lack of humanity granted to her, a consequence of the multiple layers of otherness assigned to her within the intersections of colonial, racial, and gendered difference. Expressing a surprising level of apathy, Elsie described the African woman only in terms of her appearance and appropriateness as an exotic subject for her sister’s art. Elsie’s account makes it clear the woman was not altogether comfortable or compliant with having her image made.

Well Hilda and I are now as I told you before the tribunal. They have hung a cream burnous behind her head for a background. She has a good type not really

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50 Hoorn, Moroccan Idyll, 170.
51 Elsie Rix in a letter written “Wednesday” in April 1914 to Elizabeth Rix. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
52 Ibid.
beautiful and nothing in the way of clothes–save that the black handkerchief bound around her head has a red border and is interesting against her bronze face:–her dress is a washed out pink cotton jelaba [jilbāb] with an old darned man’s cream burnous on top. They asked her if she would pose and she said yes–but she just curls up with fear every moment and doesn’t know to stay still.53

While the historical period and context is quite different, I believe James Smalls’s thorough examination of Marie-Guillelmine Benoist’s 1800 Portrait d’une négresse (Figure 6-10) is applicable in situating Hilda Rix’s portrayal of the escaped slave within a historical continuity of colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy in the early twentieth century.54 While I am not suggesting that Rix consciously created her studies of the African woman to serve as an analogy for the subjugation of women–principally white women–under patriarchy as akin to slavery, these images, and their subsequent dissemination in print through the International Studio, communicated certain claims about women and the continued practice of human bondage, which articulated that both slavery and patriarchy were still alive and well. Rix’s own conflicted positioning within Orientalism makes her intentions in both the making and publication of these images ambiguous. The result of this ambiguity and ambivalence is an unresolved tension between the exploitation of the African woman and the advocacy for her plight through an unconventional and potentially subversive portrayal of the black Oriental slave woman.

What links Benoist and Rix’s representations of black women is the artists’ mutual desire and power to co-opt the body of the racial Other in order to elevate the Self. It is also striking

53 The level of apathy and disinterest in the woman’s dire situation is surmised by Elsie’s perspective of events as part of the plot to an exotic romance novel. After recounting the ordeal, she concluded the letter to her mother, “But don’t you find it romantic Mother mine?” Ibid.

that both Benoist’s *Négresse* and Rix’s *An African Slave Woman* interrupt the traditional image of African women as accessory or aesthetic foil to their white exoticized mistress. The Orientalist trope, deployed with frequency by Jean-Léon Gérôme, is illustrated in his 1870 *Moorish Bath* (Figure 6-11), which features a nude ivory-skinned Arab or Turkish woman being tended to by a semi-nude muscular and subservient African woman within an exotic bath embellished with Iznik tiles and the presence of a hookah pipe as signifiers that locate the scene within the “Orient.”

Although the black women portrayed by Benoist and Rix do not perform an overtly subservient role, the titles are an important aspect in demonstrating the artists’ ability to define the African models’ identity, or lack of identity, indicating their subservience to the white women that controlled and gave meaning to their image. Benoist’s title makes reference, not to her sitter’s character, but only to her physical appearance. Rix’s choice in title, *An African Slave Woman*, directly links the woman to her subservient status and bondage, reinforcing her subjugation. Both Benoist and Rix’s models were submissive to the artists’ gaze, in that they had little to no recourse or agency in how their bodies would be represented. Their portrayals had more to do with their makers’ desire for status, than with their own. Smalls convincingly positioned Benoist’s “portrait” within the context of French colonial relations.

It is a typical colonialist picture in that the artist who created it made use of the racialized Other to define and empower the colonizing Self. That is, the portrait constitutes a visual record of white woman’s construction and affirmation of self through the racial and cultural Other…The image underscores the observation that national and cultural identities of artists who speak through and for the Other oftentimes ‘mark themselves and their objects of othering in specific terms of racial, gender, and class differences.’

55 Smalls, “Race, Gender and Visuality in Marie Bensoit’s Portrait d’une nègresse (1800),” 4-5.
Despite being created more than a century apart, these images fashioned by white women of privilege, are yoked together through the arc of patriarchy, colonialism, and slavery that endured into the twentieth century. The artists’ own ambivalence within these systems of power is manifest in the unresolved contradictions of *Portrait d’une nègresse* and *An African Slave Woman*. This claim is echoed by Smalls’s assessment: “I see in the portrait the ‘classic’ ambiguity, struggle, and neurotic exchange of power played out between colonizer and colonized—a state of affairs that has become an all-too-expected feature of racial and cultural relations in the modern Western world.”

The sketches that result from Rix’s brief encounter with the escaped slave are ambiguous in their intent and message. They are highly problematic in that they demonstrate the artist’s willingness to exercise her white western gaze over the black subjugated body of a woman that was in distress. On the surface it appears that Rix was complicit in exploiting the African woman for her aesthetic gain and artistic status, but her images also resist mimicking the well-worn trope of African servant as an accessory or an aesthetic complement to her white mistress. Alternatively, Rix portrayed the woman as a monumental figure and subject with emotional complexity in her own right. It is noteworthy that the artist chose these images, out of the many sketches she completed in Morocco in 1914, to submit with her account of working in the Soko to the *International Studio*, knowing that they would reach a wide audience. I would like to think that Rix viewed her images of subjugation as an agent of consciousness to the West, making visual the continued practice of slavery. Unfortunately, the artist published these images as evidence of her experience in colonial Morocco, without articulating her position, or desires, as being clearly sympathetic to, or exploitative of her subject, leaving the sketches unsatisfying and unresolved documents in her mimicry of male colonial discourse.

56 Ibid., 6.
Hilda Rix’s portrayal of the African woman speaks to the complex terrain of colonial, gender, and racial hierarchies the artist attempted to navigate in Morocco and the necessity of sustaining a “critical consciousness” in her practice of mimicry. The artist’s interaction with and representation of the escaped slave exposes the trap of mimicry, reinforcing Irigaray’s warning that repetition or reversal of phallocentric norms are not enough to undermine them “for it remains locked within the same economy that it aims to shatter.” Mimicry alone does not automatically produce a subversive outcome, to effectively undermine phallocentric norms, Rix had to perform parodic slippages that were self-conscious, which I see as lacking or perhaps not adequately articulated in her depiction of the African woman.

What the sketches and the circumstances of their creation do reveal is Rix’s desire to assert her identity as an artist, even if it involves the exploitation of Others. In considering women’s role in imperial discourse, Yeğenoğlu suggests that instead of interpreting the work of white female Orientalists as “prejudices” or “negative” images, she supports Homi Bhabha’s call to analyze these interactions as part of “the process of subjectification achieved through the production of stereotypes.” From this perspective, Rix’s work in Morocco can be understood as reproducing Orientalist tropes in an attempt to undermine the phallocentric economy of Belle Époque art, but in doing so her complicity in performing Orientalism contributes to the “epistemic violence” of colonial discourse. As Yeğenoğlu would argue, Rix used the Orient to

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57 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 66.
58 Ibid., 65.
59 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 96.
60 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 94.
“reproduce herself and constitute her identity. She thus becomes the One/Self in relation to the Orient and the Oriental woman.”

**Hysterically Defining the Self by Masquerading as the Other**

While the escaped slave held in the French Consulate had little choice in her procurement as a model, Rix was able to convince several local women in Morocco to sit for her. Despite the non-threatening perception of her gender, acquiring models, especially female models was challenging due to both gender and religious prohibitions. Even when Hilda was able to convince female subjects to sit for her, Elsie Rix spoke of them disparagingly.

Today an Arab girl of about 18 years—a naughty one I guess—for no self respecting Arab woman would pose. Today she brought a friend and oh they were queer and Eastern and ‘let-go’. One was playing my Arab lute and both singing the weirdest things in harsh sad voices. She didn’t pose very well but you’ll like the things I got.

Hindered by the weather and unable to find what she deemed as adequate or consistent models, Hilda Rix turned to her sister to pose disguised as a variety of Oriental types. The Rix sisters’ visual masquerade is coupled with their written descriptions of dressing and attempting to pass as Arab women, often fooling the hotel staff and their travel companions. In a letter to Elizabeth, Elsie conveyed that Hilda dressed not just in Arab-Berber woman’s traditional clothing, but as an Arab boy. “Hilda dressed up as a Moorish boy today—she looked so fine—just

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61 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 93.

62 Hilda Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Tangier, dated March 21, 1914. Hilda Rix Nicholas Papers, MS 8917.

63 “Oh I’ve been having whips of fun: I dressed up as an Arab woman and Absolom—the Jarres servant, came up stairs—he saw me but absolutely didn’t take any notice he thought I was the real thing—then I laughed at him and Oh he jumped. So I went down to Mrs Goodwins and knocked at her door, she called, ‘come in,’ and I knocked again—‘come in’ she cried, and then *entrez* and I came in—*qu’est que c’est*—she asked—and then I laughed. And she knew me—she said she hadn’t the slightest idea who I was till I laughed. I wish I had played a comedy—I could have kept it up a long time if I hadn’t laughed—Miss Goodwin came in too and they thought I looked splendid. They wanted me to show the Cannon but I got shy. Later two Spanish maids saw me and I spoke to them in Arabic and they didn’t dream I was anything but a moor. Wasn’t it larks?” Elsie Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Tangier dated March 27-28, 1914. Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
like a moor of about sixteen.”^64 Their collaborative masquerade drew upon a lifelong penchant for artifice and theatriques, evidenced by Rix’s earliest drawings in Melbourne of costume design (Figure 4-6) and the sister’s efforts to organize fêtes and plays throughout their travels, including productions aboard the SS Runic en route to Europe and in the artistic community of Étaples.

As evidenced by the ambiguity and ambivalence in An African Slave Woman (Figure 6-8) and A Negro Woman Morocco (Figure 6-9) Rix’s artistic mimicry could at times reinforce instead of resist the prevailing ideology and stereotypes of patriarchal art when not performed in a conscious and reflective manner. In an effort to define a space for herself as an artist within dominant art, Rix devised a new strategy that involved the collaboration of her sister, to create highly self-reflective and deliberate imagery intended not just to mimic and parody Orientalist fantasy and stereotypes, but as an expression of her subjectivity and desire. In this process, Rix crafted images that spoke “hysterically” outside the phallocentric system undermining the unity of the male artist and Orientalist Self-Same.

A drawing composed during the sisters’ time in Morocco that documents their Oriental masquerade is Camouflage (Figure 6-12). Rix portrayed her sister as a Muslim woman, first outlining her veiled contours in black charcoal, and then by animating the image with sketchy blocks of bold color to translate the red, yellow, and blue patterning of the hijab. Elsie Rix wears a white veil that covers her face in a similar fashion to the haik or white niqab included in Arab Women at Market (Figure 6-7). This image may be indebted to the previous sketch as Elsie shares in an exchange of gaze with the artist that bears resemblance to the connection made with the principal female figure in the Soko drawing.

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64 Elsie Rix letter to Elizabeth Rix from Tangier, written on envelope “received March 28, 1914” Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS9817.
The artist’s own performance in the masquerade is activated through her purposeful looking and pictorial translation, which created a communal economy of gazes between the sisters that resisted and insulated their image from the male gaze. The women’s collaboration displaces the male gaze, situating it outside a self-contained circuit of reciprocal female glances, thereby disrupting the traditional power men exercised in looking and possessing. Rix’s image offers a revision to Nochlin’s assertion that the white man is omnipresent in Orientalism, through the authority of his—the artist’s—gaze, which grants him ownership over the Orient and the female body as the maker and foremost viewer. Accordingly, as the maker of this image and its first viewer, it could be argued that Hilda Rix created a feminine alternative of Orientalism, or at least one that was intended to be accommodating and inviting for a female audience.

*Camouflage* is also related to *Women at Market*, in that it serves as a self-conscious alternative or inversion to the misogynist fantasy of the harem or Turkish bath. In portraying her sister, a white western bourgeois woman as a Maghrebian Muslim woman, Rix adopted a strategy frequently employed by male Orientalists in populating their harem and bath scenes with European models. While male artists did this out of necessity, as no western man would ever be given license to create images in one of these highly protected spaces, I interpret Hilda’s collaboration with Elsie as not simply practical, but subversive in its hysterical mimicry of male Oriental practices. The image that Rix created is antithetical to the highly sexualized European woman as nude odalisque or concubine. As in *Women at Market*, the artist employed the veil as an Oriental signifier to protect rather than reveal the female body. The collaborative masquerade demonstrates Rix’s ability to adopt and deploy male artistic strategies, but also to disrupt the authority of these images.
The connection between clothing or costume as a signifier of identity is meaningful, as Hilda’s portrayal of Elsie as a Muslim woman in *Camouflage* expressed the sister’s privilege to choose and perform a series of identities. Pigot argued that “Disguising themselves as Arabs made their possession of the Orient complete.”65 There is no doubt that the Rix sisters did possess a degree of authority in their economic privilege to purchase Oriental clothing and accessories in Morocco and their subsequent use of these garments to perform exotic alter-identities. The possession not of the Arabs themselves, but their exotic garments, illustrates the sisters’ ability to both put on and take off otherness, while also quite literally possessing, through economic means, the clothing that functioned as signifiers in this process. Moreover, the artist’s appropriation of the veil is significant as a symbol of resistance, protection, and barrier from the colonial male gaze. Yeğenoğlu describes the veil as the colonizer’s *subjet petit a*, the object of desire they could not penetrate and under which they believed the Orient hid its mysterious and potentially subversive nature.66

In *Camouflage*, Elsie is depicted suggestively touching the veil she wears, a garment that is contingent to her performance of exotic otherness. The gesture and Elsie’s touch of the *hijab* draws attention to the veil as a sign, highlighting its power to mask and protect, but also the artifice she performs. Choosing to highlight the white colonial woman’s touch of the Oriental garment that transforms her identity suggests a self-awareness and reflexivity of this masquerade as a strategy of subverting and asserting identity by manipulating the binaries of Self/Other, Occident/Orient. The artist and theorist Mary Kelly argues that the practice of masquerade

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65 “But the innocence of their subterfuge did not conceal the violence of their act of appropriation: implicit in the pictures of Elsie dressed up was the idea that Arabs had been dressed down, their identity absorbed by European desire.” Pigot, “Les Femmes Orientalistes,”164.

66 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 39 and 49.
Impinges on the cultural order as a mode of conscious acting out; a performance of identity which is bounded...by the tyranny and pleasure of the stereotype...The masquerade effectively maneuvers between the compression of the signified and the endless deferral of the signifier, by articulating the body as a language by making it visible, sometimes subversively so.\(^\text{67}\)

The Rix sisters’ masquerade undermined the categories of fixed identity and manipulated what these categories signified, allowing Hilda Rix to create new meaning. The deliberate and collaborative performance undertaken to create *Camouflage* offered the artist the opportunity to push beyond mimicry and parody to parler-femme or speak “hysterically” as a woman. It is through hysteria, Irigaray argues, that women become speaking subjects allowing them to express desire that is outside the male framework, accommodating for the expression of a “plurality and mutality of feminine difference.”\(^\text{68}\)

Irigaray asserts that women’s discourse needs to speak and listen outside the readymade grids of phallocentric language:

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which women would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretention to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals in knowledge.\(^\text{69}\)

Instead of adopting the male artist’s authoritative position in relation to women and the Orient to become “One/Self in relation to the Orient and the Oriental woman,”\(^\text{70}\) through their masquerade the Rix sisters appropriated an otherness that is not their own, displacing and collapsing the normative binaries of Self/Other, Man/Woman, Occident/Orient. It was through her Oriental otherness that Rix found not subjugation but empowerment.

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\(^{68}\) Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 222.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 78.

\(^{70}\) Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 93.
As Mary Sheriff demonstrated in her analysis of Jean-Etienne Liotard’s self portrait in the mode of *turquerie*, and Nebahat Avcioğlu’s study of the portrait of the deposed Polish monarch, Stanislas Leszczyński, as a sultan, the fabrication of an Oriental identity was far more serious than mere playful masquerade.\(^1\) Sheriff and Avcioğlu recognized that in assuming an Oriental identity, an itinerant artist, as well as a king without a kingdom to rule over, could forge a sense of “empowerment through expressing the Other within.”

Sheriff highlights how the interplay of text and image, or title and signs, work in tandem to create meaning. In *Camouflage*, Rix manipulated masculine visual and textual codes to undermine their logic and authority. The title and image of *Camouflage* push and pull at one another, working to locate and displace identity. There is a tension created between the image’s perceived authenticity, as it was sketched on-site in Morocco deploying the visual language of realism and confident mark making, and the title, *Camouflage*, which indicates that this figure is hiding something or that she is not what she appears to be. The title underscores the artifice of this particular image, but also acts as an accusation, which interrogates the extensive history of Oriental nudes it challenges.

The incongruences of text and image signal the contradictions and instability of identity within the image. Rix called upon her sister and the cross-cultural reference of the *hijab* and *haik* to destabilize and transgress racial, religious, and colonial identity, echoing Sheriff’s assessment: “Comprising this matrix are the significations attached to figure and text, to the costume shown and the places named, and to what each reveals and masks. Suspended in this matrix is the

artistic identity…an identity forged through repeated instances of cultural engagement and disengagement and the processes of imitation and differentiation.”

It is within the self-conscious engagement and disengagement, and the imitation of and differentiation from patriarchal models where Rix struggled to create a new place for herself in Belle Époque art through appropriating its visual language, but using it to speak subversively outside the preordained structures of fine art, a process Yeğenoğlu identifies as “subversive on the condition that the naturalized gender codes are critically reflected upon. The re-articulation, re-working and re-signification of the discursive characteristics of phallocentrism can open the possibility of an in-between ambivalent zone where the agency of the female subject can be construed.”

It was in a re-worked or Third Space, in-between Australia, France, and Morocco, where Hilda Rix found herself and became an Artist.

The 1912 and 1914 expeditions to Morocco were significant to Rix’s artistic career. The artist held her first solo show in Paris on November of 1912 at the Galerie J. Chaine and Simonson Gallery. The exhibition included forty-five paintings and drawings in crayon and charcoal made during her time in Morocco. The exhibition earned Rix accolades and her first real international success. This achievement was multiplied in December when the French government purchased the canvas, Grand marché, Tanger, for the Musée du Luxembourg, a work that was also selected for exhibition by the Société des Peintres Orientalistes Français in 1912. The artists of the Étaples colony celebrated Rix’s achievement by organizing a banquet in her honor. On December 5, 1912 the artists of the Société Artistique de Picardie came together

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72 Sheriff, “The Dislocations of Jean-Etienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter,” 103.

73 Yeğenoğlu, Colonial Fantasies, 66.

74 The French state acquired the Great Market of Tangiers (Grand Marché de Tanger).
to celebrate Hilda Rix’s achievement, but also enshrined Henry Tanner as the guest of honor, as
he “instigated the trip to Morocco” during which the painting that earned her international
recognition was created.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75} Lesage, “Tanner, the Pillar of Trépied,” 91.
Figure 6-1. Emanuel Phillips Fox, *Street in Morocco*, ca. 1911. 16 x 22 cm., Private Collection.

Figure 6-2. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Moroccan loggia*, 1912. Oil on canvas on board, 25 x 21 cm., National Gallery of Art, Canberra, ACT.
Figure 6-3. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Through the arch to the sea*, 1912-1914. Oil on board, 33.5 x 25.5 cm., Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

Figure 6-4. Ethel Carrick Fox, *Moroccan Street*, ca. 1911. Oil on panel, 26.5 x 35 cm., Private Collection.
Figure 6-5. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Marchands de charbon de bois* (The Charcoal Sellers), 1912. Colored pencil, pen and ink on paper, 37.5 x 27 cm., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

Figure 6-6. Photograph of Hilda Rix sketching in the Grand Socco, Tangier, 1914. Unknown photographer (possibly a Miss Goodwin).
Figure 6-7. Hilda Rix *Arab Women at Market*, 1912-1914. Colored crayons and charcoal on paper, 37.2 x 27.2 cm., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

Figure 6-8. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *An African Slave Woman*, 1914. Colored pencils on paper, 34 x 37.8 cm., Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.

Figure 6-10. Marie Guilleminie Benoist, *Portrait d'une nègresse*, 1800. Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm., Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 6-11. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 40.6 cm., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

Figure 6-12. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Camouflage*, 1914. Colored pencil or crayon with black charcoal on paper, 38 x 28 cm., National Gallery Australia, Canberra ACT.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The End of the Belle Époque: Tragedy and Transformation

The decades preceding the First World War witnessed dramatic shifts in the intellectual, economic, cultural, and political systems that structured western society, inspiring artists to respond to these transformations and conflicts in diverse and multifarious ways. The tensions fostered by the expansion and dismantling of empires and alliances culminated in the near global conflict of World War One. For Hilda Rix and Henry Tanner, the sense of artistic triumph and fulfillment that came with the success of their Moroccan expeditions would be short lived. The picturesque and peaceful existence the artists shaped for themselves in the Étapiés community was destroyed by the war. Marcia Mathews described in frank terms the devastation the artists and local community would endure:

"Time was running out for the artists of Trépied...their pleasant meetings under the tall pines, in ‘the big studio,’ or at their cheerful homes would come to an end. The First World War, a disaster of phenomenal proportions, was about to shatter not only the tranquility of Trépied, but of the world as they knew it."

When France and England declared war on Germany at the beginning of August 1914, many American artists left the Étapiés colony at the first opportunity. The Tanners were hesitant to abandon Trépied, as they considered it and France their home. Additionally, as the president of the Société Artistique de Picardie, Henry had invested much of his time and energy that summer into the planning of the society’s yearly exhibition, which was scheduled to open in August in Le Touquet. With the outbreak of war, art was no longer a priority. Five days after the opening, local officials closed the exhibition because the building was needed to house refugees.

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1 Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist*, 151.
2 Ibid., 153.
3 Ibid.
By the end of August, when they could hear the “grumbling of cannon firing all day,” the Tanners were forced to evacuate, hastily departing “Les Charmes,” their home in Trépied, for England on August 28, 1914. They made the crossing just before the German army occupied nearby Amiens on August 30. Clara MacChesney described artists’ flight from Étaples: “The artistic homes, the gardens filled with flowers, the orchards loaded with fruit, the studios with the unfinished canvases, were left to the mercy of the marauding peasant or the devastating Germans.”

Two weeks later, Henry Tanner returned to Étaples leaving his family safe in England. He visited the art colony to assess the damage to their community and salvage what he could from the studios abandoned by fellow artists. Tanner was so affected by the conflict that he could not bring himself to paint, creating very few works between 1914 and 1918. His biographer, Marcia Mathews, succinctly rationalized the artist’s inability to focus on his craft during the conflict stating: “for art was of no interest to people that lived in daily apprehension of death.”

In the draft of a letter intended for his longtime friend and supporter, Atherton Curtis, written shortly after his return to Trépied, that artist attempted to convey his current state of despair and the triviality of art in the face of such a great conflict and loss.

The Germans are on the retreat, Amiens evacuated etc.–soon you can work say some of my friends–but how can I? What right have I to do, what right to be

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4 The Tanners chose to stay in Rye opposed to London, as it was less crowded and far less expensive. Jesse Tanner recalls that the famous American author Henry James lived in Rye and had the Tanners over for tea during their brief stay in the village. Mathews, _Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist_, 154.

5 MacChesney, “American Artists in Paris,” 24. As the war continued the Étaples community would be used for refugees and a staging area for British Imperial Army. The American artist Arnold Slade describes the situation in Étaples spring of 1915. “Some sixty American, English and French painters were here at the time the war broke out…The town is full of refugees. Within the last month, most of artists have left; just at present only Mr. Barlow and myself remain. The various studios are now used by the refugees, as are also some of the artist’s home. Naturally very little painting has been done under such conditions.” Arnold Slade, quoted in _Art and Progress_, March 1915, 171.

6 Mathews, _Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist_, 157.
comfortable? In London I saw some of the Canadian contingent and many volunteers, fine, handsome, intelligent men going out to fight, to suffer and to die for principles which I believe in as strongly as they and sit down to paint a little picture, and thus make myself happy—No it cannot be done. Not after what I saw in London…How many loving, carefully raised sons…how many fathers, how many lonely wives, mothers, children, sweethearts, waiting for the return that never comes. This waiting…waiting, waiting, with less light each day until despair puts out all light of life—and this is why I cannot work.\(^7\)

Henry and Jessie Tanner spent the duration of the war in France, relocating when necessary if the front lines encroached uncomfortably close. Because of its strategic location, Étaples was designated as the main infantry base for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).\(^8\)

Uninspired to create art, Tanner searched for ways to contribute to the war effort. In 1917, when the United States entered the conflict, the artist was fifty-eight years of age, barring him from enlisting in the army. Working around this limitation, he developed a plan to cultivate the land around the army base and hospital located in Vittel, France to raise livestock and produce that would supply the American service men and women recovering there, while also providing an activity to promote morale.\(^9\)

The American Red Cross in Paris adopted Tanner’s plan and he was appointed a lieutenant in the Farm Service Bureau. During the First World War, African Americans were segregated into all black regiments, a policy that continued through the Second

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\(^7\) The text comes from a draft of an unfinished letter almost certainly intended for Atherton Curtis. The entirety of the letter is reproduced in Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 156-157.

\(^8\) As many as 100,000 troops were located in Étaples during WWI making it a prime target for German aerial attacks. For their generosity in offering their homes to the war effort the community was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1920. The Étaples camp is historically infamous for the September 1917 mutiny staged by AIF and NZEF officers. Additionally, Étaples is home to the largest Commonwealth Cemetery in France holding 11,500 burials.

\(^9\) Tanner’s plan was such a success that it was also implemented in Chaumont, Neufchâteau, and other allied bases and hospitals through Europe. In 1918 Tanner was promoted to assistant director of the Farm and Garden Services for the American Red Cross. As Dewey Mosby highlighted, in spite of Tanner’s successful management of this program the Red Cross history does not mention his contribution. Letter from the American Red Cross, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1860s-1978, bulk 1890-1937, AAA Smithsonian Institute and Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures*, 66-67.
World War. Henry Tanner’s work with the white officers in the Red Cross, and later as an official war artist, was exceptional as he was permitted to work across racial lines.\(^{10}\)

By September of 1918, Tanner had once again found artistic inspiration. He requested and was granted permission to sketch and paint the activities of the service men and women on the Red Cross base where he was stationed. Unique to Tanner’s work is the depiction of black soldiers included among those convalescing at the hospital and canteen scenes he captured. Henry Tanner and the Australian artist, Iso Rae, were among the few from the Étaples community who remained in the region during the war. Tanner and Rae both produced imagery of the BEF camp and its inhabitants, which remain significant documents and responses to the war.\(^{11}\)

A canvas Tanner painted in the aftermath of World War One reflects the solemn and meditative character that would pervade his biblical scenes for the remainder of his career. Distinct from the allegorical allusions to flight, pilgrimage, suffering, and faith that the artist focused on after the war, *The Arc* (Figure 7-1) deals specifically with the human loss and spiritual recuperation after this unprecedented conflict. The artist signed and dated the lower left corner of the composition, indicating that it was created on July 13, 1919, the day before the French celebration of independence, when a cenotaph was erected in memory of the French soldiers and civilians who lost their lives during the war.

Tanner employed his signature blue-green palette to convey both the melancholy and peacefulness of this nocturnal scene. The imposing, statuesque presence of the Arc de Triomphe is juxtaposed with the ephemerality of the temporary memorial, which lay protected within the

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 68.

monument’s archway. Tanner described the arch in washes of blue and green hues built up into a surface that reflected the moonlight in a manner reminiscent of the animated architectural surfaces of Flight into Egypt: Palais de Justice, Tangier (Figure 5-6). The symbolically empty tomb is dramatically illuminated with white-yellow light that radiates against the coffered surface of the archway above.

Tanner’s canvas documents the reality of this memorial indicated by the inclusion of place and date with his signature in the bottom left of the composition, but also poses more immaterial aesthetic and spiritual connections with his Orientalism. The layering and weaving of pigments, the emphasis on light and spiritual associations with the color blue, and the artist’s symbolic inclusion of arches and passageways as protective, but also sites of uncertainty and transience, are all interconnected with his pre-war Moroccan inspired scenes. Moreover, the artist’s desire to express the transcendent universality of humanity is communicated through the singular mass of people who gather before the monument to pay their respects. The crowd of people that stand in the middle ground of the composition at the base of the arch and cenotaph form a wall of ambiguous individuals, suggesting nothing of their race, class, gender, religious, national, or political affiliations, only their humanity and oneness in collective mourning.

In the foreground, placed on opposite sides of the monumental arch, are a mother and child in ambiguous, possibly “Oriental” inspired robes, and a pair of veterans in uniform (Figures 7-2 and 7-3). Hélène Valance has interpreted the juxtaposition of an archetypal widow and orphan to the left of the memorial with the two soldiers on the right as representative of the “anonymous victims of the war.” Furthermore, Anna Marley suggests that the duality and

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symbolism of this work “can thus be read as both an elegy for what was lost and a hope for what remained.”

Although the First World War deeply affected Tanner’s life and his ability to produce art, fresh from the success of her second artistic expedition to Morocco, Hilda Rix could not have imagined how profoundly the conflict would cost her, not only in professional opportunities and advancement, but also with the lives of those closest to her. In April of 1914, the Rix sisters began their triumphant return to Étaples, eager to show the artist’s most recent Moroccan efforts in the Picardie exhibition that summer. Elsie and Hilda Rix reunited with their mother in England and then returned to the Étaplean artistic community at the beginning of the summer. When France declared war and ordered a partial mobilization, the Rix women decided to pack up what they could, leaving most of their belonging in storage in Étaples to join their friends in England. Finding room on one of the last ships to leave France, they made the difficult crossing on August 2, 1914.

The hasty evacuation and poor traveling conditions proved especially detrimental for Elizabeth and Elsie, who both contracted Enteric fever during their escape. Fearing for her mother’s health, Elsie hid her condition, and as a result she died suddenly on September 2, 1914. In turn, in an effort not to exacerbate her mother’s fragile state, the artist mourned the loss of her sister alone, only delivering the news of Elsie’s death three months later. After her return to Australia, Rix compiled her recollections of these tragic war years in writing and recounted the senselessness of her sister’s death:

She told no-one how she was suffering, not wanting to take anyone’s attention from our mother. But when mother was a little more at ease, my sister then gave in, and I got a nurse for her and the doctor said that awful word ‘Enteric.’ She too was carried away in an ambulance. Then followed two ghastly weeks of terror.

13 Ibid., 40.
flew from one to the other, trying to cheer both, and my own heart, in the terrible consciousness that at any moment one or both of my loved ones might leave this world. At the end of the next week that terrible malady, which, had we known of her brave self-sacrifice, might have been stemmed and caught in time, took her to itself in death.\footnote{Account of the war years written by Hilda Rix Nicholas from Melbourne. November 1918, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.}

The artist spent the next several months caring for her mother in London, but after a prolonged illness, Elizabeth Rix died in March of 1916, leaving Hilda utterly devastated and alone.\footnote{Pigot, \textit{Hilda Rix Nicholas}, 27-28.} During her time caring for her family, Rix abandoned her art. She describes her own state during this time as: “I could scarcely put one foot in front of the other and walked like an old thing.”\footnote{Account of the war years written by Hilda Rix Nicholas from Melbourne. November 1918, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia reproduced in Pigot, \textit{Hilda Rix Nicholas}, 28.}

In September of 1916, an Australian Imperial Force officer, Captain George Matson Nicholas, came to London searching for the internationally renowned Australian artist Hilda Rix. According to the family, Matson was stationed in Étaples and found Rix’s canvas and sketches in her abandoned studio. When on leave he sought her out in London to return these works to her. The two immediately fell in love and were married in early October. Still mourning the loss of her mother and sister, she was concerned about Matson’s return to the front. Her anxiety is evident in a letter she wrote on November 15, 1916, which Matson would never receive.

\begin{quote}
Oh God guard and keep you safe, Matson. Your letter with news that you have gone back to the Battalion has come–and frightens me–oh dear dear lover–it’s terrible–you are in danger–and I am far away–oh this ghastly war. Dear husband, be brave and splendid and always your best–but don’t be wreckless. I need you and love you utterly. Your wife Hilda.
\end{quote}\footnote{Letter written by Hilda to Matson dated November 15, 1916. Account of the war years written by Hilda Rix Nicholas from Melbourne. November 1918, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia.}
The newlyweds’ happiness was not to last as Captain Nicholas was killed in action at Fleurs a little more than a month after their wedding.\(^\text{18}\) After receiving news of Matson’s death, Rix could only briefly take comfort in the company of her late husband’s brothers before they were required to return to the front. Four of the Nicholas brothers served in the AIF during the First World War.\(^\text{19}\) The young widow documented her grief writing: “I would have died, had I been allowed—I was so near. I wanted to go.”\(^\text{20}\) Within less than two years, Hilda Rix lost her family and became a war widow. During this time, she sketched portraits of the Nicholas brothers in uniform and made a pledge to carry on the patriotic work of her husband’s family by retaining the Nicholas name throughout her life. When she had the strength, Rix turned to her art as a vehicle for mourning and catharsis. Scholars who have studied the arc of Hilda Rix’s career recognize this series of tragedies as a tipping point, which transformed her identity and mission as an artist.\(^\text{21}\)

In May of 1918, after several near death encounters during the German zeppelin raids on London, Rix made the decision to return to the safety and familiarity of Australia.\(^\text{22}\) She arrived in Melbourne after 11 years abroad, a war widow seeking self-renewal in the midst of the war’s nationalistic patriotic fervor. To make sense of the tragedy and great sacrifices she endured, Rix


\(^{19}\) Mary Ellen and John Pern Nicholas of Trafalgar Victoria had a large family of seven children; six boys and one girl. The two youngest boys were not old enough to enlist in the AIF during WWI.

\(^{20}\) Documented in the account of the war years written by Hilda Rix Nicholas from Melbourne. November 1918, Papers of Hilda Rix Nicholas, MS 9817, National Library of Australia, reproduced in Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas*, 29.


\(^{22}\) Hilda sailed back to Melbourne arriving May of 1918 with her brother-in-law, Frank Nicholas. He was one of the four Nicholas boys who fought in WWI. Both Frank and Athol were discharged and allowed to return to Australia due to post-traumatic stress. George Matson and Byron Nicholas were both killed in action in France. I thank Alexandra Torrens, the curator of art at the National War Memorial, for this information and for her time speaking with me about the Nicholas family.
worked to redefine her art in the Heidelberg aesthetic tradition, which now was bound to the heroic identity of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldier. She found renewed purpose as an artist and Australian through her ability to document the transformation of returning soldiers into settlers, yet she would never find the same acceptance or recognition within Australia’s overtly patriarchal and conservative artistic institutions that she achieved in Europe.

A work that was created while Rix was still in England, *These Gave the World Away*, is an example of her artistic bereavement (Figure 7-4). The title is an adaptation of Rupert Brooke’s patriotic war poem, “The Dead,” which eulogizes the nobility of self-sacrifice and the romanticism of a youthful death. Rix called upon her skills as a draftswoman to forcefully articulate the bodies of fallen AIF soldiers in the foreground of the composition. Two soldiers, one of whom was modeled on the likeness of her husband, are splayed prostrate on the ridge of a barren landscape, blanketed only by the grim slate-gray night sky above. The artist envisioned an existential battleground, tilting the stark topography towards the pictorial surface in a manner that forces the viewer to confront the bodies of the AIF soldiers and their scattered belongings with intense graphic legibility and cold sterility. In her study of women artists’ depictions of WWI and WWII subjects, Catherine Speck distinguishes Rix’s contributions to Australian war art as quite different from that of her male compatriots and official war artists George Lambert, George Bell, John Longstaff, and Arthur Streeton.

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23 Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead! There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old, But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold. *These laid the world away*; poured out the red, Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be, Of work and joy, and that unho ped serene, That men call age; and those who would have been, Their sons, they gave, their immortality. Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth, Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain, Honour has come back, as a king, to earth, And paid his subjects with a royal wage; And Nobleness walks in our ways again; And we have come into our heritage.

Hers is a very different kind of war art. It is not based on observation, which was the principle underpinning much official and commissioned war art, but on her emotional or affective response to the loss of Matson Nicholas. She was informed of his death via a telegram and then a letter, but like all who lost loved ones in that war, she couldn’t view her husband’s body. He was buried at a distance, in a battlefield at Fleurs in France; so she did what an artist would do, she visualised him as having died. She took the unusual step of portraying him along with another soldier lying deceased and alone on the rough terrain of a battlefield...These gave the world away...show two soldiers lying in a remote and cold moonlit landscape, out of human reach.25

Thus Rix’s canvas was a highly personal meditation on the war and the loss of her husband, an image that rendered the human cost directly and viscerally when compared to the symbolic nature of Tanner’s The Arch. Rix’s artistic goals were dramatically altered by the tragedies she endured during World War One. After her return to Australia in 1918, she committed herself to an academic realism modeled on the Heidelberg School; however, in this canvas, the artist’s rendering of the night sky reveals that Henry Tanner’s lessons remained with her during this dark time.

In the center of the blue-grey night sky, which encompasses the upper half of the composition, adding to the bleak emptiness and desolation of the scene, the pentimenti of an “angel of death” is visible emerging from the horizon. A sketch of this figure, now in the National Gallery of Australia’s collection, provides insight into Rix’s process and thinking through how to best express her grief in this work (Figure 7-5).

The drawing portrays a ghostly female figure cloaked in swirling drapery. The angel of death stretches her arms upward and looks to the heavens with an expression that pleads the divine for mercy. To the right of the figure are two compositional sketches prefiguring her veiled placement within the canvas. Because of the dedication to realism demonstrated throughout Rix’s oeuvre, the decision to paint over and obscure this spiritual figure is significant as it is

unique to this work. The angel of death rendered in the preparatory sketch has been painted over with thick opaque multidirectional brushwork, which distinguishes it from the flatly painted ominous night sky. In choosing to obscure the angelic figure, Hilda, this once, invoked the power of abstraction to communicate beyond the implicit legibility of words and images. The figure is transformed into an amorphous silhouette not unlike Tanner’s method of veiling and abstracting spiritually significant figures for expressive effect. In taking a lesson from Tanner’s artistic strategies, Rix created an image that was profoundly personal, but also spoke universally to the collective sense of sacrifice and bereavement inflicted by the war.

An Ambivalent Legacy

Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix were raised a generation apart in very different social and cultural contexts on opposite ends of the earth, yet, due to their exceptional talent and perseverance, their paths crossed briefly and brilliantly. Their diverse backgrounds shaped their individual approaches and goals in creating art, but as a result of their outsider status and struggles to negotiate their place within dominant culture, their desires and aspirations overlapped and intersected, leading them first to Étaples, then drawing them together in Morocco.

For Tanner and Rix, Morocco was both a dream and a mirage. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the artists’ contributions to the colonial discourse of Orientalism uniquely satisfied their individual goals and desires and succeeded in advancing their careers during the first decades of the twentieth century. Despite these successes, both artists fell into relative obscurity after the 1920s, being excluded from major exhibitions and mainstream art historical or critical discourses. The reasons for their omission from traditional, canonical art history, which
prevailed for much of the twentieth century, are as complex as the artists themselves, yet, also painfully simple in that a “woman” and a “Negro” artist were not deemed worthy study.26

The postcolonial and feminist psychoanalytic approaches adopted in this study offer a new lens through which to view Rix and Tanner’s artistic efforts. These approaches highlight the successes, but also the limitations of the artists’ mimicry and mockery, a strategy that facilitated their entry into Belle Époque art, but one that also reveals the struggle and their ambivalence in attempting to work within the existing framework of a white-patriarchal system. Tanner and Rix’s engagement with Orientalism provided them the freedom and agency to portray the Other as a means to elevate and express their ideal Selves. The conflicted vacillation between Orientalism and Counter-Orientalism exposed the inconsistency and fissures within the Oriental discourse they sought to participate in, but also resist through their own corrective mimicry.

Tanner and Rix’s Oriental imagery was created during the height of colonialism, and within this context, was regarded as a welcome contribution to the discourse of exotic otherness and western hegemony, which granted the artists a degree of cultural license, allowing them to enjoy professional success and recognition through the 1920s. Despite the mirage of authority and the sense of place and possession they cultivated in their Orientalism, as a woman and an artist of color, the reality of Rix and Tanner’s position within the normative systems of white-patriarchal fine art was tenuous. Their ambivalence and unsecured place in mainstream art explains, in part, why it was so easy for their accomplishments and contributions to be overlooked for the majority of the twentieth century.

26 Throughout his monograph of Hilda Rix Nicholas, John Pigot portrays the artist as a New Woman who was marginalized because she “refused to play by the artistic rules of the day.” However, Pigot reluctantly concluded that Rix’s erasure from Australian art could not be attributed to her gender alone. By advocating for academic aesthetics and specializing in idealized rural landscapes and portraiture, after the Depression, “she was out of step with the contemporary world.” Pigot, *Hilda Rix Nicholas, Her Life and Art*, 2 and 72.
Tanner and Rix represented a challenge to the monopoly white men enjoyed over the identity of Artist, as well as the education, production, and reception of high culture. Their complex art defied easy classification, providing the necessary justification to exclude them from mainstream art historical study. While individuality and unique expression were necessary attributes in achieving Modern or avant-garde status—evidenced by their contemporaries, Matisse, Picasso, and Kandinsky—Tanner and Rix’s difference in expression and identity ultimately proved too much of an obstacle for the systemic racism and sexism of conventional art history to overlook after the 1920s. Their subsequent erasure from traditional scholarship should underscore just how much of an achievement the artists’ success in negotiating and carving out a place for themselves and their art within the dynamic historical and social context of white-patriarchal Belle Époque culture truly was.

It is my hope that this study’s exploration of the artists’ education and maturation within the dominant systems of fine art highlights the strategies Rix and Tanner undertook as efforts—not to deny their race or gender—but to overcome its categorical otherness. As Jackie Stacey suggested in her interpretation of Roland Barthes’s thoughts on difference, Tanner and Rix sought “to neither destroy difference nor to valorize it, but to multiply and disperse differences, to move towards a world where differences are not synonymous with exclusion.”

Rix and Tanner embarked on the project ethical philosopher Kwame Appiah defined: “To create a life…is to create a life out of the materials that history has given you.” In spite of their

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28 “An identity is always articulated through concepts (and practices) made available to you by religion, society, school, and state, mediated by family, peers, friends…Whether the story you tell of your life is one of constraint or one of freedom relates, as I say, to the purpose of your story. So you might take it to be a fool’s errand to reconcile the putative tensions between loyalty and impartiality, between the claims of my ties and relationships and the claims of universalism.” Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 231-232.
otherness, Tanner and Rix did the most with the skills and individual advantages they possessed. In Morocco, Rix capitalized on her whiteness and class, performing the role of western colonizer and masquerading as the Oriental Other, confusing and subverting her own otherness as a woman and antipodean British subject. In Morocco, she speaks “hysterically” as herself and as an Artist. Her Orientalism and subsequent Australian nationalistic imagery were problematic to patriarchal art history in that they were both masculine and feminine. Furthermore, she was an artist that freely adopted and experimented with Post-Impressionist trends in Europe and North Africa, but one that was a staunch defender of academic-realism against the encroaching “decadence” of Modernism in Australia.  

Tanner equally accepted, subverted, and transgressed classifications assigned to himself and the people and subjects he chose to paint by exercising his western privilege to fabricate an Orient that was devoid of time and space, but also one that overcame gender and racial hierarchies to insist upon the spiritual unity of humanity.

This study is an effort to contribute to the existing scholarship on Henry Tanner and Hilda Rix, which seeks not to simplify their art or unproblematically advocate for their inclusion into a canonical art history. Rather, my intention is to explicate the complexity and ambivalence of their lives and the remarkable art they created before the First World War, to offer a history of art that is inclusive and nuanced, allowing the artists to be both exceptional and problematic.

Tanner and Rix recognized their otherness as something that was not insurmountable, but approached it through the constructive position advocated by art historian Nebahat Avioğlu to

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29 In an editorial submitted to the Sydney Sun Hilda expressed her distain for Modernism in Australia. “Why should Australia, a healthy young country, be forced to swallow that decadence which out here is called ‘Modern Art?’ Our art should express the clean freshness and vigor of our country, and decadent art, dirty paint, and lack of drawing is not the stuff to exhibit to our grand fighting men, who have earned for us the reputation of force and initiative….As a mother and an artist, I protest and mean to fight for a better state of things. Sincere art is one weapon. Sincerity will ring clear and live through all fashions and diseases in art when it is backed by intensive, lifelong study….This is why I feel that all artists capable of clean, strong art should offer it to the public now, who in turn many thus balance it against that so-called art which displays sloppiness and lack of construction and which has a degrading influence.” Hilda Rix Nicholas, “Decadent Art,” Sydney Sun (February 19, 1945), 4.
“contextualize otherness not as a cultural dead end burdened by an over-determined sense of identity but that taps an opportunity to participate in a material and open ended becoming.”

Figure 7-1. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Arch*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 99.7 x 97 cm., Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY.

Figure 7-2. Henry Ossawa Tanner, Detail of mother and child in *The Arch*, 1919.
Figure 7-3. Henry Ossawa Tanner, Detail of two veterans in uniform, *The Arch*, 1919.

Figure 7-4. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *These gave the world away*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 127 x 97 cm., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT.
Figure 7-5. Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Angle of Death*, 1917. Charcoal and black pencil on paper, 55.5 x 38 cm., National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, ACT.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Laura Winn was born and raised in Wilmington, Massachusetts. She completed her BFA in photography with departmental honors in 2003 and in 2007 a Master of Arts in Teaching in Integrated Learning and Educational Technology from Jacksonville University in Florida. Laura went on to pursue a master’s degree in Art History at the University of Florida earning her MA in Ancient Art and Archaeology the spring of 2011. The fall of 2012 she began the doctoral program in Art History at Florida specializing in eighteenth and nineteenth-century European art and criticism. During her doctoral program, Laura was awarded the James J. Rizzi scholarship and the Jerry Cutler travel award for her research. In 2018 she earned her doctoral degree and a graduate certificate in Women’s Studies from the University of Florida.