



1897

Oil on canvas

29 ¼ x 39 ½ inches (74.3 x 100.3 cm)

HENRY OSSAWA TANNER

American, 1859–1937

LET'S LOOK

Describe this woman's pose and facial expression.

What might she be feeling?

What might her clothing and the **setting** tell us about her?

Where are the brightest parts of the picture? The darkest? Why might that be?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

How would you describe the **mood** of the painting?

If you could read this woman's thoughts, what do you think they would be?

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S MOTHER

A woman sits on a wooden rocking chair and gazes ahead, deep in thought. A golden light brightens her face and left hand as well as the shawl that drapes onto the floor. She wears a long navy dress, and her black leather shoes are just visible beneath it. She appears relaxed, holding a palm leaf fan in one hand and gently resting the other against her cheek. Her pose and facial expression suggest that she is a strong and thoughtful woman.

African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner painted this **portrait** of his mother, Sarah Elizabeth Miller Tanner, in 1897. When Sarah was a child, her mother put her and her siblings on an oxcart bound for Pennsylvania to escape slavery in Virginia via the Underground Railroad. Later, she married Benjamin Tucker Tanner, a highly educated minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and they had nine children. Their son Henry showed an early interest in art and studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In 1891 he moved to Paris to pursue a successful artistic career and escape the racial discrimination he experienced in America.

Tanner created this portrait on a visit home after a long time abroad. He based the **composition** on James Abbott McNeill Whistler's famous 1871 painting known as "Whistler's Mother." However, while Whistler's portrait is cold and austere, Tanner's is warm and affectionate. In the bottom right corner, Tanner wrote, "To my dear mother, H. O. Tanner." This sensitive portrayal and endearing inscription capture the love and admiration the artist felt for his mother, the center of his large and distinguished family.

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