

Works of Art, Thoughts of Thanks

By Jabari Asim

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WASHINGTON -- The Hausa of Nigeria have a saying that goes something like this: Give thanks for a little and you will find a lot.

A valuable nugget of wisdom ideally suited to the holiday season, it resonates in two very different works of art that I'm inclined to think of at this time of year.

One of them is a painting called "The Thankful Poor" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, one of the first great African-American painters.

Tanner did his best work in Paris after arriving there in 1891. The son of escaped slaves, he had studied for six years with Thomas Eakins, the dean of the American Naturalist school, at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Tanner was grateful for Eakins' tutelage as well as for the generous financial support of Bishop and Mrs. Joseph Hartzell of Philadelphia, who paid for his journey overseas. But his benefactors were enlightened exceptions to the American racism of that period. In search of a less encumbered lifestyle, Tanner settled in the City of Light and eventually won widespread acclaim.

In 1894 Tanner painted "The Thankful Poor," an oil-on-canvas portrait of an elderly black man sitting down to supper with a young boy. Their heads are bowed in prayer. The man's rough hands and the boy's bedraggled clothes suggest that they are no strangers to privation and toil. The table is plain and sparse, but Tanner has endowed the humble pair with an aura of hard-earned dignity -- even a rough-edged beauty.

"The Thankful Poor" is slowly becoming a familiar image. After lingering in a school closet for 75 years, it was rediscovered and auctioned at Sotheby's in 1981. Bill and Camille Cosby purchased it for \$250,000, at the time the most ever spent for a painting by an African-American artist.

I had admired Tanner's work long before I encountered "The Thankful Poor." His best-known painting, "The Banjo Lesson" (1893), features what looks to be the same protagonists. In a Spartan cabin, the boy sits on the old man's lap and carefully strums the instrument under his patient gaze. An inexpensive print of "The Banjo Lesson" graced my parents' bedroom wall for much of my childhood.

I don't know if William DeVaughn was familiar with the Hausa proverb or if he'd heard of Henry Ossawa Tanner. But during the summer of 1974, he created a similar kind of gem that remains with me. It seeped into my brain that year, when it was possible for me to study Tanner's print on my parents' wall while listening to DeVaughn on the radio.

Amid the noise and sunshine of daily life in my neighborhood, his hit single, "Be Thankful For What You Got," seemed to float out of every open window. During an era of superbly soulful music, DeVaughn's burnished tenor stood out with its perfect blend of up-to-the-minute street smarts and timeless philosophy. He advised his listeners to conduct themselves with pride, "Though you may not drive a great big Cadillac" with "gangster whitewalls" and "TV antennas in the back." "You may not have a car at all. But remember, brothers and sisters, you can still stand tall."

The song's catchy chorus -- "Diamond in the back, sunroof top, diggin' the scene/ With a gangster lean wooh-oooh-oooh" -- occasionally surfaces in sample-happy hip-hop concoctions that my son favors. But it has achieved genuine immortality in the memories of members of my generation who spent their wonder years in the nation's inner cities.

DeVaughn, like Tanner and those black and unknown bards of Hausa wisdom, describes a particular type of gratefulness. Theirs is not a craven submission to the powers that be, a bootlicking acceptance of the scraps tossed from the ruling class' table. Nor it is a willingness to forgo the pleasures of this existence with an eye to a spiritual reward on some other plane. It's just a self-aware recognition that all pleasures are not rooted in the material and that dignity is a commodity as precious as air.

As we give thanks for the glorious American plenty that is ours, let us also acknowledge -- with hope, not bitterness -- that there are still playing fields to be leveled, glass ceilings to be shattered and freedoms to be won. Surely it's possible to do that, brothers and sisters, and still stand tall.