



*Woman Reading Under a Tree*, Edward Mitchell Bannister.  
Rhode Island, 1880–1885, oil on canvas, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches.  
Museum purchase.

# CREATIVE BREAKTHROUGH

## Battling Racism to be an Artist

by ROSALYN DELORES ELDER

A registered architect, entrepreneur, artist, and writer, Elder is author of *Exploring the Legacy*, a book about African Americans' contributions to Massachusetts and United States history.

**E** DWARD MITCHELL BANNISTER LIVED AS A successful artist in New England during the late nineteenth century. He accepted commissions, painted, socialized with peers and taught art students, and in his leisure time, sailed his boat along Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay. Such normalcy would not stand out if it were not for the fact that Bannister (1828–1901), a Canadian immigrant, was black. Because of that single trait, the art world would have relegated him

to the margins of success. Instead, Bannister reached a singular level of distinction.

Being a black man in America could have consigned his career to mere survival at best and failure at worst. Despite that reality, Bannister achieved commercial success and critical acclaim with a laser-focused determination, driven in part by his intention to disprove beliefs that people of African descent could not develop the aesthetic sensibility to create art.

Edward Mitchell Bannister in a c. 1880 photograph taken in the studio of Gustine L. Hurd in Providence, Rhode Island. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Sandra and Jacob Turner.

Deeply religious, Bannister considered the goal of the artist to be the spiritual expression of nature. He often tried to achieve in his paintings, as he said in an 1886 lecture, an affirmation of the harmony and spirituality in “all created things.” Bannister is best known for landscapes with picturesque motifs such as farming activities and livestock, sunrises and sunsets, cottages and castles, and small bodies of water. He also painted seascapes, religious scenes, still lifes, portraits and figure studies, and genre scenes.

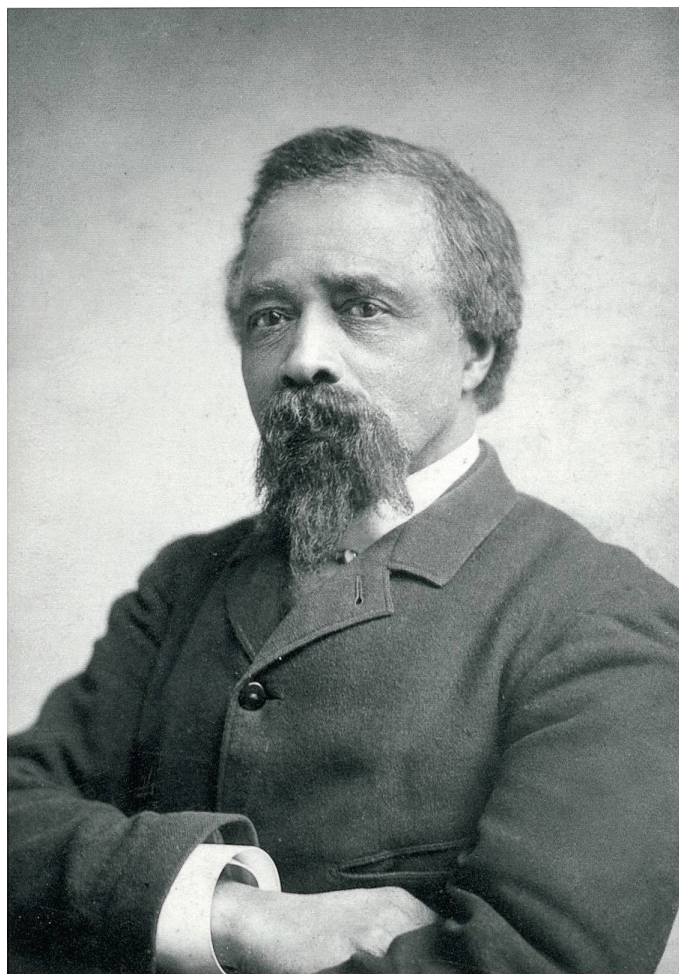
When Bannister began his journey to becoming an artist, slavery no longer existed in the northern states, having been abolished by 1804. But freedom came with social, economic, and cultural constraints; blacks throughout the North created a life that was separate from but largely mirrored white society. They founded churches, established literary and choral groups, and organized mutual aid societies, which fostered cohesiveness within African American communities. Entry into professions such as law and medicine was curbed by discrimination and segregation. Those in the upper levels of the African American social spectrum possessed some degree of economic independence through self-employment as barbers, wigmakers, caterers, leather-dressers, proprietors of used clothing stores, tailors, seamstresses, and retail store owners.

Creating art as an occupation was not a practical consideration for

most African Americans. Regardless of ethnicity, a successful artist needed steady access to clients with the means to commission work—usually portraits, still lifes, and landscapes to adorn their homes. That necessity doomed many artists to fail; they simply did not have the connections to contract with wealthy clients. Others who did make a living with their art were frequently members of the same social class as their clients.

Despite those barriers, Bannister pursued the calling that had taken hold of him during childhood. He was born in St. Andrews in New Brunswick, Canada, the first of two sons of Edward and Hannah Alexander Bannister. Young Edward was no more than six years old when his father died, leaving Hannah to bring up him and his younger brother, William. Hannah’s encouragement of young Edward’s creativity fueled his desire to become a practicing artist.

Hannah died in 1844, before her sons came of age. The youngsters boarded with the family of Harris Hatch, a well-to-do white lawyer. The Hatches also encouraged Edward’s artistic explorations, and it was in their household that he developed an appreciation for classical music and literature. It was also probably there that he acquired the mannerisms of a quiet, determined



gentleman that impressed all who met him later in life.

In about 1848, Bannister relocated to Boston, where his brother had moved earlier, and worked in a variety of jobs. In 1853 he applied for a job as a barber in a downtown hair salon owned by Christiana Babcock Carteaux (1819–1902), a prosperous entrepreneur. Working as a barber put Bannister in the higher echelons of African American society. He could support himself and pursue self-guided art studies, the route he had to map out because racism barred him from the traditional path of apprenticeship and travel to Europe. He attended the Lowell Institute, which in 1850 opened a free drawing school, in keeping with its 1836 founding mission of offering public lectures and courses to Boston citizens regardless of gender or ethnicity. Bannister participated in

exhibitions at the Boston Art Club, too. This afforded him opportunities to associate with others in the art community. Bannister understood well that participating in exhibitions with his peers was critical as he developed his skills.

In 1854, Bannister received his first landscape commission, *The Ship Outward Bound*. He did receive portrait work, but focusing on landscape painting allowed him to stand out among the artists in his community. Black portraitists had to compete with their white counterparts for a limited African American clientele. Two black painters in New England who focused on portraiture were William H. Simpson (1818-1872) and Nelson A. Primus (1842-1916). Both worked in Boston; Primus even studied for a short time under Bannister.

In 1857, Bannister and Carteaux wed. Besides being a successful businesswoman, Carteaux, who was from North Kingstown, Rhode Island, was a philanthropist and an abolition activist with ties to the Remond family of Salem, Massachusetts. The Remonds were known internationally as leaders of the movement to end slavery. Promoting herself as “Madame Carteaux, Hair Doctress,” she was also a wigmaker and owned at least four salons, including one in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and another in Providence, Rhode Island. Madame Carteaux catered to elite clients, black and white. Her salons also served as meeting places for black and white abolitionists.

After marrying, Bannister’s life entered a phase of relative financial stability and he could devote himself to working as an artist. He acknowledged the essential role his wife took in helping him establish his career, writing in his

later years: “I would have made out very poorly had it not been for her. ... My greatest successes have come through her.” One of his portraits is a captivating likeness of Christiana (see page 16), fashionably dressed, which hangs in the RISD Museum in Providence.

The 1860s was a crucial period of creative growth for Bannister. He frequently visited local art galleries, including the Boston Athenaeum, where he came to admire the work of the painters who gathered in the French village of Barbizon, among them Jean-François Millet, Constant Troyon, and American artist William Morris Hunt. The Barbizon school, as it came to be known, emphasized the intimate and poetic quality of nature. Bannister spent a year in New York City studying photography and returned to Boston in 1863. By that time, he had developed a reputation as an up-and-coming artist, meriting an entry in the biographical encyclopedia by author William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*. Brown proclaimed it “commendable” that the artist “has thus far overcome the many obstacles thrown in his way by his color, and made himself an honor to his race.” He also expressed certainty that Bannister, “still young, enterprising, and spirited,” was destined to “create a sensation in our country as an artist.”

Bannister engaged socially as well as professionally with other black artists throughout his career. He and portrait painter William H. Simpson sang in a community choir. When sculptor Edmonia Lewis relocated to Boston in 1864 to pursue her artistic career after her horrific experience with racism at Oberlin College, he mentored the newcomer by showing

her how to be a more successful vendor of her work at abolitionist fundraising events.

Some of Bannister’s interactions with African American peers were not so collegial, however. Nelson A. Primus, mentioned earlier, believed that Bannister could have done more to assist him in moving his career forward. Primus wrote his mother in 1864: “Mr. Bannister, I think, is a little jealous of me. He says that I have got great taste in art but does not try very hard to get me work. ... Mr. Bannister has got on with the white people here, and they think a great deal of him. He is afraid that I would be liked as much as himself.”

A pivotal moment came in 1867 when Bannister read an article in *The New York Herald* that stated, “The Negro seems to have an appreciation of art while being manifestly unable to produce it.” The disparaging remark not only angered Bannister; it also intensified his artistic drive and he became determined to disprove the racist myth.

In 1870, the Bannisters moved to Providence, where they quickly became prominent members of the city’s black elite. Again, Bannister established himself among his fellow artists. He helped found the Providence Art Club in 1880 and in 1885, the Ann Eliza Club. Membership in the city’s community of creatives also provided Bannister with a layer of insulation against the prejudice and discrimination that all blacks experienced in America.

In 1876, Bannister entered *Under the Oaks* in the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. It captured a winning medal. The revelation that a black man had painted this work of art sent shock waves through the exposition crowd. The judges

*Christiana Carteaux Bannister. Probably Boston, c. 1860, oil on panel, 35 x 25 7/8 inches. Gift to RISD Museum by the Edward M. Bannister Foundation.*

wanted to withdraw the award, but pressure from Bannister's white peers allowed it to stand. Two decades later, Bannister recounted the event to journalist T. Thomas Fortune, who wrote a profile of the artist in *The New York Sun*:

"I learned from the newspapers that '54' [*Under the Oaks*] had received a first-prize gold medal, so I hurried to the committee rooms to make sure that the report was true. There was a great crowd there ahead of me. As I jostled among them, many resented my presence, some actually commenting within my hearing, in a most petulant manner, 'What is that colored person in here for?' and similar discourteous remarks. Finally, when I succeeded in reaching the desk where inquiries were made, I endeavoured to gain the attention of the official in charge. He was very insolent. Without raising his eyes, he demanded in the most exasperating tone of voice, 'Well, what do you want here anyway? Speak lively.' 'I want to inquire concerning '54. Is it a prize winner?' I replied. 'What's that to you,' he said. In an instant my blood was up; the deprecatory looks that passed between him and others in the room were unmistakable. I was not an artist to them; I was simply an inquisitive colored man. His manner suggested a nature so small and petty that I could not bring myself to his level. Besides, the thought flashed through my mind, 'Why give this man a chance to express his prejudice?' So, controlling myself, I said deliberately: 'I am interested in the report that "Under the Oaks"



has received a prize; I painted the picture.'

"An explosion could not have made a more marked impression. Without hesitation he apologized, and soon every one in the room was bowing and scraping to me."

A "Mr. Duff of Boston" purchased Bannister's painting for the significant sum of \$1,500. To date, the location of *Under the Oaks* is not known.

Bannister is often associated with the tonalist movement, which emerged from the Barbizon artists' taste for muted coloring, subtle contrasts of light and shadow, looser and less precise draftsmanship, contemplative—almost poetic—

moods, and prioritization of calm, seemingly ordinary scenes over famous or dramatic ones. His painting in Historic New England's collection, *Woman Reading Under a Tree*, is a testament to his virtuosity. He probably painted it outdoors in the countryside near Providence, where he often brought his students to study nature. In this scene, the artist effectively evokes the heat and humidity of a summer's day, deftly guiding the viewer around the composition to ultimately settle on the massive trunk of the oak tree at center. Although it is comparatively small, this jewel-like work of art is one of the highlights of the *Artful Stories* exhibition. 🌀