The transformative vision of James Hampton

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The artist James Hampton, celebrated today for his sculptural masterpiece *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly*, would never have imagined that his devotional creation might one day alter the course of American art. When Hampton’s resplendent, pulpit-style array was discovered, soon after his death in 1964, the nature and meaning of his complex project – fashioned from discarded oddments, wood, cardboard and metallic paper and foil – was little understood. It was interpreted foremost as a work of Christian visionary art, but presumptions regarding the sanity of a man who had spent his free time alone, consumed with bringing his grand vision to fruition, cast Hampton as eccentric, if
not mentally unsound. Over time, as scholars increasingly situate his endeavour against the backdrop of African American history and culture, The Throne became grasped as a historically and culturally rooted work of art rather than an isolated oddity, paving the way for an expanded understanding of American art\(^1\) (Foy and McMurrer, 1975; Cep, 2017).

Hampton was born in 1909 in an impoverished South Carolina community largely made up of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers. His father, a Baptist minister, abandoned the family to pursue his itinerant calling (Quigley, 1971; Hartigan, 1974, 1976, 1977). At nineteen, Hampton followed the ‘Great Migration’, north to Washington, DC. He served in a segregated, noncombatant unit during the Second World War, and returned to Washington in 1945, working thereafter as a janitor in a federal building.

The grand nationalistic memorials and statuary (overwhelmingly dedicated to deceased white men) that lend the US capital an air of a Christian devotional array, revealing it as a multivalent fusion of African folk religion and black formulations of Christianity in America, and the embodiment of protective spiritual practices and pathways to ancestral memory – critical tools in a land that had, for centuries, sought to suppress and terminate cultural roots, pride and identity (Thompson, 1983).

In 1970, on view to a national audience and garnering the attention of DC’s local African American community in a way that artworks at SAAM previously had not, Hampton’s oeuvre revealed the acute need for museums and scholars to delve into a richer, fuller and more honest assessment of American art and its creators, who comprised a diverse and complicated national identity. It was the dawn of an institutional awakening to serious fault lines in an über-narrative that had long ignored challenging. It was variously called a stylistic reshaping of age-old ‘yard shows’, also called dressed yards or spirit yards, describing manners of embellishing homes, graves, and personal places that trace from Africa throughout Caribbean, into the American South, and beyond (Umberger, 2018). As African Americans increasingly had personal spaces they could freely alter, such embellished or fabricated spaces became bolder, more visible. In 1983 the Harvard art historian Robert Farris Thompson published his groundbreaking book Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy, persuasively arguing that projects like Hampton’s com mingled African spiritual traditions and survivalist strategies in America. Thompson assessed The Throne as more than a Christian devotional array, revealing it as a multivalent fusion of African folk religion and black formulations of Christianity in America, and the embodiment of protective spiritual practices and pathways to ancestral memory – critical tools in a land that had, for centuries, sought to suppress and terminate cultural roots, pride and identity (Thompson, 1983).

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\(^1\) In early articles, Hampton’s errors in spelling and punctuation were mirrored by authors in deference to his apparent choices. It was later determined that Hampton’s spelling and punctuation were inconsistent, as were occasional iterations of backward-written letters and other irregularities in his texts. Because Hampton’s intentions are not explicit, SAAM ultimately chose to standardize the title of his artwork thusly: The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly.

References


https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796019000362 Published online by Cambridge University Press


About the Author. Since the late 1990s, curator and art historian Leslie Umberger has focused on artists who navigated autonomous artistic paths, often in the face of oppression or personal challenge. Umberger has served as Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), in Washington, DC, since 2012, where recent projects include the 2018–19 retrospective exhibition: Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor, and the 2017 reinstallation of SAAM’s galleries for folk and self-taught art. Between Worlds was accompanied by a monograph of the same title co-published by SAAM and Princeton University Press (2018). Other notable publications include: Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley (2015); Untitled: The Art of James Castle (2014), and Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists (2007).

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