

His Heavenly Act of Faith

A former janitor's room-size 'Throne' is a dazzling piece of religious art

By SIDNEY LAWRENCE

WASHINGTON -- One of America's sleeper masterpieces, James Hampton's "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly" (c. 1950-64), is on view again at the newly revamped Smithsonian American Art Museum. This luminous and strange construction, known primarily to scholars and others lucky enough to have encountered it in person, is the centerpiece of SAAM's folk-art collection.



SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Hampton's room-size "Throne" is a gloriously personal,

dazzling work of religious art. It presents nearly 180 components of salvaged materials on two tiers filling a 17-by-17-foot niche end to end, creating a kind of altar. Every edge, corner and curve of every object touched by Hampton is sheathed -- no, smothered -- in crumpled silver and gold foil that glistens under the gallery lights against purple walls. Shimmering surfaces reveal pulpits and offertory tables fashioned from cast-off furniture, angels with light bulb heads and wide-open wings, wall-hung frames enclosing hand-written texts, and various crowns, decorative flourishes and ceremonial vessels that once were jelly jars, cardboard cylinders or desk blotters. People crowd around here as nowhere else, and while there are explanatory panels to read, there is also a lot to drink in, visually and emotionally.

Hampton (1909-1964), a black janitor and onetime short-order cook who served in a segregated unit in Guam during World War II, was a classic art-world "outsider." That is, he was someone who didn't see himself as an "artist" in the conventional sense and who -- as far as we know -- had no formal art training. Remembered as courtly but very much a loner, he spent every waking hour away from his job building and embellishing his "Throne" in a rented garage in a down-and-out neighborhood of Northwest Washington, from about 1950 until his death.

Ed Kelley, a white artist and film maker looking for a cheap studio to rent, discovered the "Throne" shortly after Hampton died, and word spread fast. Local avant-garde doyenne Alice Denney brought Robert Rauschenberg to see it, and this New York Pop pioneer savored the work as a possible backdrop for one of his performance pieces. Dealer Leo Castelli also saw greatness in the "Throne," recalls retired DC museum official Harry Lowe. As newspapers heralded the visionary opus, the National Collection of Fine Arts, where Mr. Lowe worked (today's SAAM), made the

prescient move of acquiring it in 1970.



Smithsonian Museum
of American Art

James Hampton created "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly"

Ironically, Hampton, whose father was an itinerant preacher, intended the "Throne" not as a work of art but an expression of faith for an unknown denomination. He used it for occasional impromptu services for small groups, happily gave tours to neighborhood residents, and once offered the "Throne" to a local church as its altarpiece. He was politely turned down. Hampton's "General Assembly" was apparently too idiosyncratic to serve anyone but himself, and so it remained, as it grew over the years, a one-person universe.

It is easy to imagine Hampton performing solitary rituals amid the gilded decoration that form an actual throne at the pinnacle of the composition. "Fear Not," an oft-quoted phrase from the Bible, broadcasts its message above, flanked by bulb-headed angels on poles with wings so broad and stalwart they look more like military insignia than heavenly creatures. More angels, additional twinkly furniture and other embellishments are

arranged symmetrically below and in front of the throne, while below them, on the floor, sits a semicircle of eight crowns.

From a notebook Hampton kept independently and tablets and inscriptions within the "Throne" itself we learn that he called himself "St. James." Hampton dreamed about mystical experiences and paradise in his "Third Heaven," a term he borrowed from Corinthians, and hoped for Christ's Second Coming. Shop tags attached to several objects document rather startling visions -- the appearances in Washington by the prophet Moses in 1931, the Virgin Mary in 1946 and Adam in 1949, with specific dates ascribed to each.

Some might dismiss Hampton as being a bit "off," but eccentricity, even a touch of insanity, is not only appreciated and encouraged but expected in the Outsider and folk art worlds. Mention the "Throne," and aficionados will point you to such similarly obsessive lifelong projects as Simon Rodia's Watts Towers projects in Los Angeles, and Nek Chand's immense Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India, still in process after five decades. Antoni Gaudí's still-unfinished Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, although not technically folk art, also fits the category. Still, we remember Hampton and the others today because of their artistic achievement, not any personality quirks.

Working in isolation makes a certain amount of sense for an African-American who died the year Lyndon's Johnson's Civil Rights Act became law. Hampton lived most of his life as part of an underpaid, undervalued, split-off segment of American society. His "Throne" served as an antidote, a beautiful sanctuary for all God's children where he could take comfort that he truly mattered.

Mr. Lawrence is an artist and writer in Washington.