

## THRONE OF THE THIRD HEAVEN

BY

JAMES HAMPTON

James Hampton's "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly" -- part of the permanent collection at the National Museum of American Art -- is an impressive work with its 177 glittering objects sheathed in aluminum and gold foil. It was exhibited here in 1971 and again in 1974 and then traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama. When it was shown at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1976, Robert Hughes of Time magazine wrote that it "may well be the finest work of visionary religious art produced by an American." It was permanently installed at the NMAA in 1977.

Little is known about Hampton, a quiet man who had few, if any, close friends. Born in rural South Carolina in 1909, he was one of four children of a black gospel singer and itinerant preacher and, around 1928, moved to Washington. He was a short order cook, served in the Army and, returning to Washington, was a janitor for the General Services Administration from 1946 until he died of cancer in 1964. At some point in his youth, he believed God had come to him in a vision and, until his death, he continued to receive visions. His massive Throne is a moving testament to his spiritual dedication and faith.

In 1950, Hampton rented an unheated, poorly lit garage and there he built the Throne -- which he may have begun earlier. At midnight, after finishing his janitorial duties, he went to the garage for five or six hours and believed God visited him there to guide him as he worked. With discarded materials -- old furniture, cardboard, bottles, kraft paper, desk blotters, sheets of transparent plastic, burnt out light bulbs, aluminum and gold foil -- he fashioned his intricate objects. Some suggest traditional church appointments -- a throne chair, pulpits and offertory tables; each unit is one of a pair and each has its assigned place on either side of the center throne chair.

Presumably, the work is unfinished but, from Hampton's explanatory labels, the basic scheme is discernible: to the left, the objects refer to the New Testament, Jesus and Grace and, to the right, the Old Testament, Moses and Law. Crowning the throne chair are the words "Fear Not"

and tacked to Hampton's bulletin board is the inscription, "Where There Is No Vision the People Perish."

Hampton often used layers of insulation board to construct the armature of each piece. The framework of several units consists of hollow cardboard cylinders removed from rolls of carpeting. In other cases, the original furniture is easily identified. The throne chair, for example, is essentially an old armchair with a faded red cloth cushion, while two semicircular pieces are a large round table sawed in half. Small stands are formed by drawers turned upside-down and mounted on inexpensive glass vases. Jelly glasses and light bulbs covered with foil often complete tops and corners of objects, while kraft paper and cardboard are the foundations for stars and wings. The edges of tables are sometimes trimmed with slender tubes of electrical cable camouflaged with gold foil, and rows of small knobs are made of crumpled foil or newspaper covered with foil.

Of the Throne, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, NMAA Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture, writes: "As one concentrates on the radiance, symmetry, decorative patterns and eccentric improvisation of the Throne, Hampton's primary intention -- to create a vehicle for religious renewal and teaching -- may be overlooked. Preserved and admired as a work of art, however, it enjoys exposure more far reaching than Hampton could ever have hoped for. The Throne stands as remarkable testimony to his devotion, patience, faith and imagination."