



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Recontextualizing *The Throne*: James Hampton's Material Iconology

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Despite the iconic stature of the work as an exemplar of American visionary art, James Hampton's monumental *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950–1964) has yet to receive in-depth academic study. Building upon previous scholarship—especially that of curator Lynda Roscoe Hartigan—my project aspires to develop a focused critical interpretation of the object's materiality, symbolism, and evocation of historical context. Arguing against the popular assumption that Hampton's choice of medium—second-hand/found items—was determined solely by economic hardship, I will propose that Hampton purposefully mined the symbolic and material auras of such objects to construct *The Throne* as a means of articulating both a message of spiritual anticipation and social critique. Various originary contexts will be explored, including poverty in Washington, D.C., and popular evangelicals' adoption of the nuclear threat into biblical eschatological prophecy. Though Hampton worked outside the sphere of fine art, his work offers an intriguing foil to contemporary proto-pop and pop art in its use of common, everyday objects and materials—another context to be considered. The final component of my project involves a critical comparison of Hampton's original arrangement of *The Throne* to its subsequent museum display. I propose a new reading by revealing how Hampton's intentions in producing and displaying *The Throne* differed from those governing its posthumous exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.