

SHARDS OF WISDOM

“Heard it Through the Grapevine”



Researching bottles by Eric McGuire

For those who like to research bottles, the U.S. Copyright Office is embarking on a massive digitization project that will eventually include thousands of bottled products. The project is in its infancy, even though more than 11.5 million pages of copyright records have already been scanned. One might ask what this has to do with bottles. The U.S. government has offered a number of methods for the protection of proprietary products. The owners of bottled items often chose to copyright the wording on labels, flyers, and other documents as a method of protecting their business interests. It was not unusual for proprietors to submit bottle labels as examples of the wording they chose to have protected under the copyright system. Those labels were often included in the copyright statements, and are most prevalent from about 1845 to 1870, depending upon the “whims” of the particular registration clerks working within the U.S. District Court system, who were responsible for documenting copyrights.

This digitization project has a long way to go in order to be an effective tool for bottle research, but it is beginning to happen, which is a huge step in allowing the public viewing of records that were previously extremely difficult to access. Save the attached URL in the accompanying information page for current and future research (go.loc.gov/s/Wli5OQwT7u).

In His Garage, an Untrained Artist Created a Work of Sublime Divinity – *Smithsonian Magazine*

How deep faith created one of the loveliest—and most curious—sacred objects in the Smithsonian collections

For some 14 years he labored in solitude. Lovingly. Obsessively. Every night after work, in a rented garage on 7th Street NW in Washington, D.C., James Hampton, a World War II veteran and janitor for the General Services Administration with no artistic training, methodically built what he came to call The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation’s Millennium General Assembly. Hampton prepared the throne to receive Jesus, flanked by a dozen angels, at the time of the Second Coming.

Born in 1909 to a South Carolina preacher, Hampton, who may have lived with schizophrenia, had his first religious vision at the age of 22—a visitation from the patriarch Moses. He later said Adam and the Virgin Mary had come to him as well. Why he began the Throne in 1950, no one can say. Passion. Devotion. Divine inspiration. But it came to comprise a handmade masterpiece of 180 or so separate components, each crafted from found and scavenged parts. Hampton embellished discarded furniture and light bulbs, tin cans and jelly jars with gold and silver foils and wrapping paper—materials reflecting light and inspiring something like awe at the prospect of an apocalyptic end to this world and the peace and glory to come in the next. Leslie Umberger, a curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, de-

scribes the part of the sculpture on display as the “central section of a spiritually driven, pulpit-style array” that Hampton created “as a sacred space for sharing his faith.” The “third heaven” is a reference to God’s home, an exalted heaven-within-a-heaven; the Throne, Hampton is reported to have said, “is my life. I’ll finish it before I die.”

Hampton’s materials were an inventory of junked 1950s office supplies: inks and desk blotters, construction paper and sheets of transparent plastic. The chairs and altars and offering tables are made of what he carted home from used furniture sellers, often cut in two. Each half of the assembly is beautifully symmetrical with the other. It is a miracle of craft and art and carpentry, of architecture and engineering, ingenuity and loneliness and holy madness. With a million featherlight hammer taps, Hampton built batches of trim molding and sawtooth decoration. Wings upon wings upon wings. Above the throne, Hampton placed these words of reassurance from Revelation 1:17: “Fear not.”

The Throne’s story has since hardened into legend. Hampton died of cancer at a Veterans’ Administration hospital in 1964. The work was unfinished. But then his landlord, Myer Wertlieb, came to the garage to collect the overdue rent, not knowing Hampton had died. Instead, he found the Throne. For months, Wertlieb searched without much success to find someone, anyone, who might want it. Then Harry Lowe got involved.

“It was like opening Tut’s tomb,” Lowe, head of exhibitions and design at what was then the National Collection of Fine Arts, told the Washington Post about entering that garage for the first time. Lowe paid the landlord Hampton’s back rent and arranged the purchase of the entire assembly for the museum. A selection from the center section was first exhibited in 1971. The illustrious art critic Robert Hughes wrote in *Time* magazine that the Throne “may well be the finest work of visionary religious art produced by an American.” Just as often, though, critics marginalized it as “outsider” art.

Now, a new generation of curators and conservators are working on the Throne, and their cozy laboratory at the museum, filled with magnifiers, sable brushes and purple nitrile gloves, is open to the public a few afternoons each week. There you can talk to conservation fellows Katya Zinsli and Eliza Macdonald as they catalog, clean, examine, scan, restore, record and photograph every piece of the Throne.

“It is always such a nice surprise to find Hampton’s fingerprints,” Zinsli says. “I have found at least one on almost every object in the collection, in nearly every medium. I’ve found it as smudged ink on paper; paint transfer on plastic; and the oils from his fingers forever etched into the aluminum foil. It is an ever-present reminder of his hand.”

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Hampton with his creation in the Washington, D.C. garage where he worked in the 1950s and early 1960s. Unknown photographer.



The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly, James Hampton's strange and transporting magnum opus.

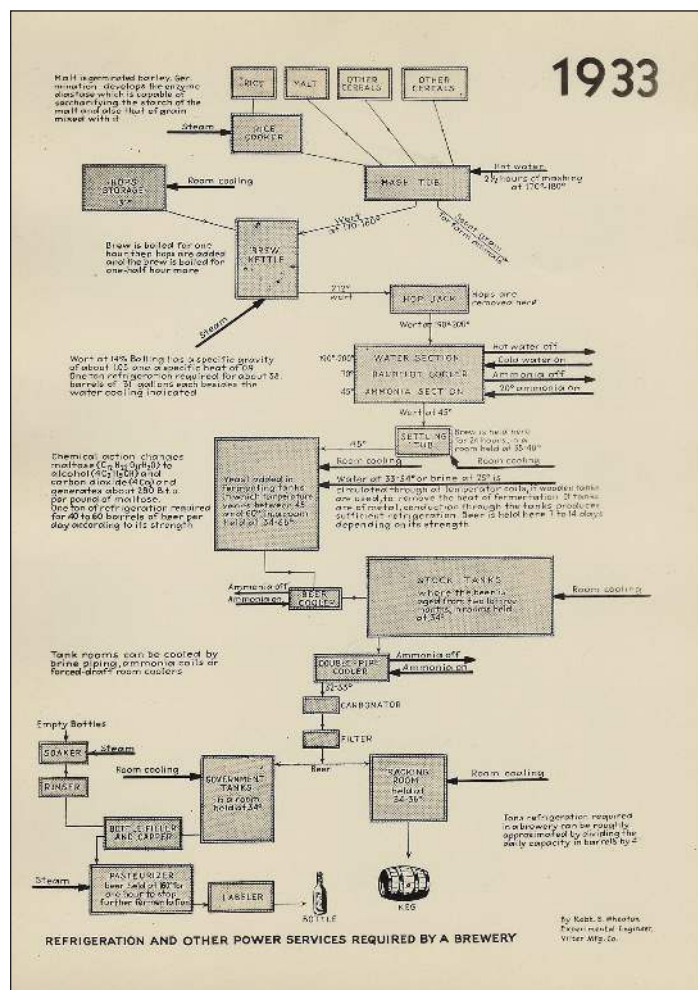
Images courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Throne is not only an act of electrifying veneration; it is also a time machine, an escape pod, an expression of postwar nuclear paranoia. The Throne may be as much a reflection of post-atomic American anxiety as any work of art by Jackson Pollock or John Cage.

On display beside the Throne in the laboratory is the notebook Hampton kept, called The Book of the 7 Dispensation, containing page after page of cryptic symbols, strokes and slashes, numbered by chapter like the Bible but largely indecipherable. At the bottom of most pages, the word Revelation is inked in Hampton's jittery block printing. Flipping through the book is like reading in tongues. Inside, Hampton refers to himself as ST JAMES. In one of the few known photos of Hampton, he stands before the Throne, a slender man of perfect seriousness, purely awkward in a suit and tie, wearing a marvelous cardboard crown covered in metallic foil. You read too much into it: self-denial, self-mortification, beatific martyrdom and the sacrifice of ecstatic madness—the state of every saint. How little we really know of this man, the mystery of whom somehow makes his art, this heaven beyond heaven, all the greater.

Brewing Beer in 1933

FOHBC Historian, Brian Bingham, sent in a 5" x 7" 1933 chart illustration (pictured on the right). "Malt is germinated barley. Germination develops the enzyme diastase (A diastase is any one of a group of enzymes that catalyses the breakdown of starch into maltose) which is capable of saccharifying (make into sugar) the starch of the malt and also that of grain mixed with it."



A larger version can be found at Editors' Choice at FOHBC.org.