

‘Lonely Man’s Strange Vision’: A Jungian Look at James Hampton’s *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*

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Abstract

This essay analyses to what extent James Hampton’s *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* expresses Jungian ideas around art, vision, religion, and ritual. I will be referencing previous academic writing on Hampton’s work, placing it in its proper historical and cultural context as part of the wider canon of Southern folk art and African-American religious practices. I will refer to Jung’s own writing and secondary sources interpreting his ideas around the themes of religion and the transformative nature of artistic creation. A Jungian analysis of this work will demonstrate how psychoanalytic theory can be valuable in interpreting pieces of ‘outsider art’ inspired by religious experiences.

Keywords: James Hampton, religious art, outsider art, Southern folk art, African-American art, Jung

Introduction

From 1950 until his death in 1964, James Hampton worked in a rented storage unit in the predominantly African-American Shaw neighbourhood of Washington, D.C., creating ‘the finest work of visionary religious art produced by an American’ (Hartigan, 2000, p. 34). By salvaging cast-off materials from the community surrounding him to fabricate *The Throne of the Third Heaven*

of the Nations Millennium General Assembly, Hampton created a work that represented that community, and its rich tradition of beliefs and rituals. Beal (2018, p. 156) describes the awestruck landlord of Hampton's storage locker finding the work it contained after his death, in a passage which sounds as if it could have been lifted directly from Scripture:

"To his astonishment, he found himself standing before a dazzling array of silver, gold, and purple winged thrones, glimmering altarpieces, bedazzled crowns, and other lustrous objects, all flooded with the light of a dozen 500-watt bulbs hanging from the rafters overhead. And at the centre of everything stood a seven-foot-high, brilliantly ornate throne, with silver wings spread wide over this garaged sanctuary like some back-alley seraphim. Above the throne were written the famous first words spoken by every Biblical angel: "FEAR NOT."

Hampton's work is often labelled 'outsider art'. However, implying that his work was the creation of a lone 'religious fanatic' rather than placing it in the wider context of African-American worship practices of the time is ultimately problematic; (Wojcik, 2008, pp. 180-182). The decontextualising of this piece was even a problem around the time of its discovery and first exhibiting. The exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980* draw criticism for 'overemphasis on a formalist approach' which removed the work on display from the cultural context of its creation (Crown & Rivers, 2013, p. 31). The assumptions made when categorising works of art as 'outsider art' are often elitist, dehumanising, or patronising, failing to give attention to the context of their creation and their value as works with real artistic merit. In contrast to Foy and McMurrer's (1975, pp. 72-73) description of Hampton as 'an innocent artist...outside of culture in the usual accepted sense of the term' and their assertion that his work falls into the category of 'outsider art', I argue that this piece is a product of the culture Hampton experienced, specifically situated within the context of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural Southern states to urban areas, and the folk art and religious practices of those communities. The psychoanalytic theory of C.G. Jung (1958) can provide some insight into the themes expressed in this piece and help future scholars of Hampton to contextualise his work. This extends not just to its context as a product of Hampton's Washington, D. C. African-American Christian community, but as a piece with universal relevance, which can shed light on the ways humanity expresses religious belief. Casting Hampton in the role of artist-as-chemist, the Jungian theory can also be used to explore how Hampton's work

exemplifies the transformative nature of artistic creation, affecting both the artist and the materials he uses.

Section I: Why a Jungian lens?

Hampton, the son of an 'itinerant preacher' (Crown & Rivers, 2013, p. 28) used his work to give an 'archetypal expression' to the idea of religion present in the collective unconscious, the 'repository of man's psychic image' (Samuels & Plaut, 1986, p. 32). Inspired by the rituals and religious practices that surrounded him, Hampton transformed materials such as light bulbs, cardboard cartons, and wooden furniture into 'an overwhelming vision of mysterious otherness' (Beal, 2018, p. 159).

So why use Jung to analyse the work of 'Washington D. C.'s alleyway visionary' (Hartigan, 2000, p. 27)? Rowland (2008) argues that Jung's psychology is 'particularly attuned to artistic creation', and that his version of the unconscious is, by nature, 'creative' and 'unknowable'. Jungian theory can only ever be a means of 'telling a story about being', which relies on historical and cultural contexts but also exists outside of them. We can never truly know what happens in the 'creative unconscious', the 'unpredictable divine' aspects which are affected by the culture surrounding them, but are never fully controlled by it (Rowland, 2008, p. 2). I aim to use the work of Jung to explore the universality of Hampton's work, removing it from the label of 'outsider art'. A Jungian analysis will help to contextualise this work as being both an expression of the collective worship practices of Hampton's community, and a broader concept of religion present in the collective unconscious.

Jungian theory is ideal for examining works of art and the culture that produced them because of its 'dialogical nature': Jung's idea of the psyche is composed of parts that often exist in opposition to one another. Through Jung we can investigate where *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* falls on the spectrum of 'universals and particulars'. By considering where the piece falls under Jung's idea of art as 'transcendent' or 'immanent', I analyse to what extent Hampton's *Throne* is specific to the time and place in which it was created, and whether it should be considered separately from its cultural and historical context. Rowland (2008) identifies an imbalance of how art is analysed, suggesting that art criticism often places too much emphasis on concepts associated with Jung's 'Logos' such as rationality and transcendence, and

'Eros' concepts such as connection and consciousness. To properly understand art which comes from the 'soul', the 'body and spirit in creative union', we must acknowledge both sides of the Jungian mythos (Rowland, 2008, p. 6).

Section II: Vision, alchemy, and transformation

The theme of vision is prevalent in Hampton's work and its academic analysis. A Washington Post headline at the time of its discovery even referred to the piece as the 'Sole Legacy of Lonely Man's Strange Vision' (Crown & Rivers, 2018, p. 28). The title of Hampton's work *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* references the religious visions he experienced that inspired its creation. Examining the piece through the lens of Biblical scholarship, Beal (2018, p.163) theorises Hampton is referring to the 'third heaven' mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, the site of Paul receiving a revelation, and Hampton sees himself in the role of Paul as described in that passage. Beal (2018, p.162) supports this assertion by referencing a photograph of Hampton standing in front of his work, which bears the label 'The Third Heaven, The Second Corinthianist'. Hampton also referred to himself as 'St. James', a possible reference to St. Jon, the purported author of the Book of Revelation (Crown & Rivers, 2018, p. 298).

Hampton's fervent belief in the second coming of Jesus and his self-appointment as the 'Director for Special Projects for the State of Eternity' (Crown & Rivers, 2018, p. 297) can be viewed as an example of the Jungian concept of 'numinosum'. This force seizes control of individuals and compels them to perform an action, encounters with which Jung saw as a feature of all religious experience. Using the methodology of folklore studies to interrogate the idea of 'outsider art', Wojcik (2008) argues the religious function of such art pieces are often downplayed or completely ignored. Many outsider artists describe the creation of their work as involving 'trance states, revelations, dreams, or the guidance of spiritual beings or forces' (Wojcik, 2008, p. 181). This can be interpreted as archetypes present in the artist's unconscious; given agency and acting through them, the artist then interpreting this experience as divine. Outsider artists inspired by religion and spirituality use their work to give 'archetypal expression' to the idea of religion present in the collective unconscious, the 'reservoir of psychic possibilities' (Samuels & Plaut, 1986, p. 32).

Another way we can relate Hampton's work to Jung's ideas around the creative process is through Jung's notion of alchemy. Marlan (2006) describes how Jung's psychology was heavily informed by alchemical texts, such as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. The transformations of materials in alchemy informed Jung's idea that the psyche can be transformed in a positive way through contact between the ego and the unconscious (Marlan, 2006, pp. 267-269). Writing about painting from this perspective, Parker (2008) theorises it is the materials and process of transformation, whether in art or alchemy, that brings about 'a psychological change in the painter/chemist'. We can relate Parker's comparisons between art and alchemy to Hampton's process of creating *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*, beginning with a 'void' which here would be Hampton's Seventh Street storage unit, and introducing the 'chaotic, unstructured material', which is the collected debris of his neighbourhood. Additionally, Parker (2008) describes the process of creation as being bound by the conditions of the medium as much as by the artists themselves. Hampton's religious visions that inspired him to create this work, and the obsessive fervour with which he worked for many years, exemplifies the 'artist/chemist' affected by the transformation of the materials in this way. The dialogue between material and creator, with the creator being transformed by his/her relationship with the material, leads to 'altered states' of consciousness. The stimulation of the imagination by the properties of the material being transformed exposes the 'extraordinary daemonic forces of unconscious drives' which lead to the work's creation (Parker, 2008, p. 47). Foy and McMurrer (1975, p.69) comment on Hampton's process of transformation by focussing on his use of used light bulbs covered in silver foil. No longer able to independently produce light, they are transformed by Hampton into symbols expressing the light of God. Hampton's transformation of ordinary household materials into an 'overwhelming vision of mysterious otherness' (Beal, 2018, p. 159) further confirms my interpretation of his role as Jungian 'artist/chemist'.

Section III: Culture, worship, and the collective unconscious

One of the most important sources for putting Hampton's throne in context of the community within which it was created is an article by Hartigan (2000), exploring the effect the urbanisation of the American South in the mid-20th century had on the folk art produced by the African-American population who migrated to these new urban areas. Describing the diverse range of

religious practices in the Shaw community which inspired Hampton’s *Throne*, Hartigan (2000, p.37) writes:

‘Some of its residents worshiped at home altars assembled on dressers or tabletops. Others preferred the services of traveling evangelists and nationally prominent black cult leaders. Revivals and public baptisms abounded, as did numerous traditional churches and “shouting” services in storefronts and alley parlors.’

Even the seemingly convoluted name, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*, fits the naming conventions of African-American churches of the time. The *Throne*’s ‘assertive theatricality’ may have been influenced by the ‘pageantry’ of black religious figures such as Charles M. “Sweet Daddy” Grace (Hartigan, 2000, p. 38-39). In fact, Grace’s church, United House of Prayer for All People of the Church on the Rock of the Apostolic Faith, was located on Seventh Street, the same street as the storage unit where Hampton constructed his work. Hence, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* is not only the expression of Hampton’s individual belief, but an expression of the beliefs and customs of an entire community during a moment of great societal change.

According to Main (2006, pp. 297-303), Jung’s position on religion was complex and evolved over the course of his career. He asserts that Jung’s later theories on religion hinge on his notion of the collective unconscious - how the human personality is composed of aspects both unique to that individual (the ‘self’) and universally shared by all humanity (the ‘archetypes’ of the collective unconscious). The archetypes generate images which are then realised by the person, projecting them onto their own personal experiences, including ‘religious symbols’ which Jung states are generated by the ‘religious function’ (Main, 2006, p. 303). *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* can be interpreted as an example of Jung’s idea of ‘the naturalness and importance of direct religious experience’ (Main, 2006, p. 304), as it was Hampton’s religious visions which compelled him to produce such a beautiful and haunting work of folk art. Hampton’s work and its direct connection to his community also concurs with the ‘epistemological implication’ of the idea of the collective unconscious: the ‘knowing subject’ being part of a ‘wider knowledge pool’ (Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 41).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jung's ideas can be applied to *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* to elucidate new information about the creation and meaning of this piece. By applying Jung's ideas of alchemy to the process of artistic creation, we can understand artists as simultaneously transforming and being psychically transformed by the materials they work with. I argue that Hampton fills the role of 'artist/chemist' due to his work of transforming familiar household objects and refuse salvaged from the streets of Shaw into a breath-taking work of American folk art. Jungian theory can be applied when considering Hampton's work not as a solo project, but as an expression of the beliefs and customs of his community. *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* expresses universally held concepts of religion present in the collective unconscious, of both Hampton's community and humanity as a whole, given physical form in this divinely inspired artwork.

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