

A Celebration of Vision:
The Art of Phillip Hampton



The Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis
The Bellwether Gallery of St. Louis Artists
September 24 - December 3, 2005

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By Olivia Lahs-Gonzales, Director, The Sheldon Art Galleries

A passionate experimentalist, Phillip J. Hampton has celebrated visual perception by investigating aesthetic problems and exploring the effects and conditions of a variety of materials for over 60 years. With roots in realism, Hampton moved into abstraction in the 1970s. Informed by his studies of art and cultural history, he has applied a wealth of aesthetic ideas in his works including elements of visual languages employed by the Ancient Greeks, European Old Masters, and African and Asian artists.

Born in 1922 in Kansas City, Missouri, Hampton's interest in artistic endeavors came at an early age. The blinds at his childhood home provided the first substrate for his artistic inspiration and while these efforts were chastised, the supportive relatives with whom he lived nurtured his interest in artistic expression. Raised in the home of Eliza B. Hampton-Sisemore and her daughter Wilma, a school teacher, young Phillip spent the years of the Great Depression moving from school to school as his sponsor moved through a variety of teaching appointments as they became available. After yearly moves between 1928 and 1941, Hampton entered Citrus Junior College in Glendora, California, where he majored in art. In 1943 he was inducted into the U.S. Army and served two years in World War II, culminating in his participation in day 12 of the D-Day invasion of Omaha Beach in France, where his Company received little enemy resistance. A decorated Staff Sergeant, Hampton survived five military campaigns, including the Battle of the Bulge. For each of these engagements he received a campaign star.

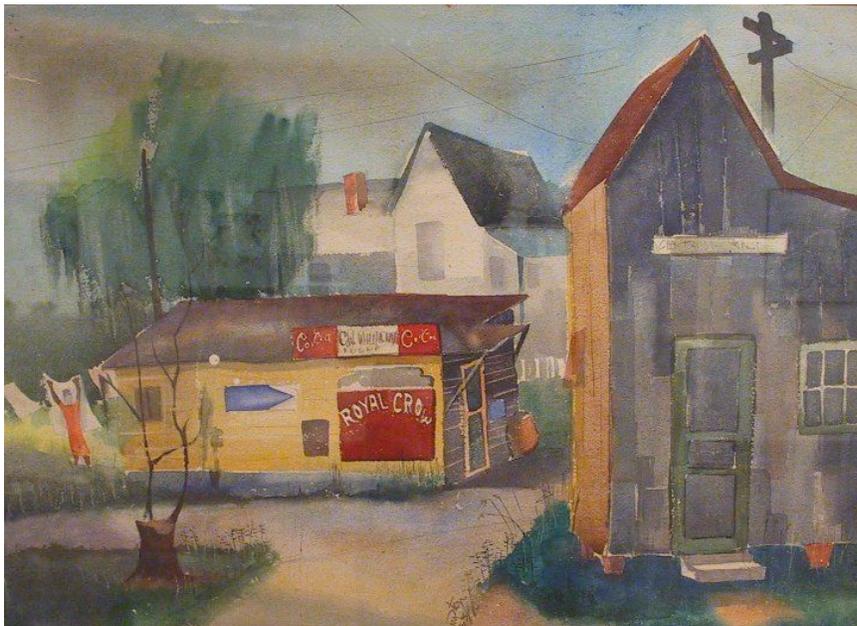
In 1946, Hampton entered Kansas State College, in Manhattan, Kansas on the G.I. Bill, where he attended scientific, engineering and other technical drawing classes. The art program was just being developed, conjoined with the curriculum in architecture, so technical drawing classes were predominant. Not satisfied with the program, he moved to Des Moines, Iowa in 1948 to study at Drake University, which offered a program that focused on aesthetic rather than technical or commercial art applications. Hampton chose Drake because he had heard that his first choice, the Art Institute in Kansas City, was not receptive to African-American students. It was during this time that his entry in the Latham Foundation International Poster Contest won him a prize. In 1948, Hampton returned to Kansas City, where he worked at the Thompson-Hayward Chemical Company and enrolled in the Kansas City Art Institute, who had now begun to accept all who were qualified. In 1950, he enrolled in the academic courses at the University of Kansas City, which had been recommended to him by the Kansas City Art Institute. There he completed a BFA degree in illustration and qualifications in secondary education in 1951 and a Master's Degree in 1952. His Master's thesis painting was an allegorical opus on the subject of happiness. *Environment and Happiness*, an ambitious work in which figures frolic and dance in a Breugelesque landscape, is outwardly joyful but the composition also seems to convey a darker, more ominous undertone.¹ In this piece, Hampton was concerned with illustrating the dichotomies and ironies of contemporary life. He drew on his knowledge of psychology and the social sciences (classes that he had taken at the University) to examine the effects of the environment on personality.

Already active in the arts community, Hampton participated in many exhibitions, including a group exhibition of African-American artists in 1951. During this period, he supported himself

and his young family with work as a janitor and window dresser at a women's fine clothier. That same year, he was invited to join the local and national chapters of the College Art Association. His active participation in the arts community earned him an entry in *Who's Who in American Art* in 1952, following his acceptance in the Mid-American Annual show, presented in the Nelson Gallery of Art, in Kansas City.

In 1952, he joined the teaching staff at Savannah State College (now University) to build a program in art and design. In Savannah, Hampton quickly immersed himself in the arts community, teaching workshops, giving lectures, writing articles and contributing works to group exhibitions. In his teaching, Hampton stressed the value of art on emotional and intellectual growth and promoted these theories through a variety of workshops throughout the 1950s. His first art appreciation workshop, given in the summer of 1953 and titled "Art Will Prepare the Path," was based on a philosophy rooted in Plato's teachings. Another summer workshop called "Intellectual and Emotional Growth through Creative Experiences" was held by the artist in 1955. Throughout the years, these philosophies have continued to impact Hampton's artistic work and teaching. He also championed the work of African-American artists, participating in panels and organizing a number of exhibitions of African American artists, including one at the Telfair Museum of Art (then the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences) in Savannah.²

Hampton's contributions to the art department were many during his tenure. In the early 1960s he created a liaison with Syracuse University and consulted with other universities to create and structure a major program in Art Education at Savannah. He was instrumental in shaping the art department's programs during his tenure from 1952 to 1969 as professor and later as director of the department. When Hampton left Savannah, the art department had grown both in its programs and physical plant.



In the early years of his teaching career in Savannah, Hampton recorded his surroundings, rendering the neighborhoods, beaches and marinas of the coastal town and its surrounding villages in watercolor on paper. These expressive paintings are a fusion of social realism and expressionism. While echoing realist approaches of artists like Henry Ossawa

Untitled, 1953, watercolor on paper, 20 1/2 x 26 3/8 inches, collection of Larry L. Deskins.

Tanner, Thomas Hart Benton, Hale Woodruff and others, they also exhibit an affinity with German Expressionist and Fauve artists like Karl Schmidt-Rottluff or Maurice de Vlaminck in their loose, dynamic, angular style.

Hampton's urban landscapes from this period show his interest in the aesthetic qualities of the everyday: apartment buildings and other structures, well-worn and lived-in, are rendered by the artist with as much affection and reverence for form and color as a bucolic landscape might have been. Integrating subtle references to human presence, he created studies that sometimes depicted the harshness of the urban environment. His figures, often only lyrical ciphers seemingly engulfed by their surroundings, nevertheless exuded a strong sense of perseverance and optimism.

Hampton's facility with and interest in cartooning and illustration also influenced his technical approach in these early works. Exhibiting the artist's humor and joie de vivre are illustrations like *Blooz in the Night*, 1942 and *Doo Diddy*, 1955. *Doo Diddy* was part of a children's story that he created for his son. He hoped to publish the story as a children's book, but the project was never realized. The drawing *Blooz in the Night* was part of a series of youthful drawings that exploited his talent for cartooning. Based on the popular Harold Arlen/Billie Holiday song *Blues in the Night*, the drawing illustrated the song's lyrics and told the story of the trials and tribulations of Hampton's character, "Icky Square," a boy not hip enough to find love.³

Hampton's paintings and drawings first began to find homes in private collections in 1950. He remembers the general social and artistic climate in Savannah as open, and the milieu in which he moved as racially mixed and liberal in spirit. Not immune to experiences of racism however, Hampton had experienced insulting and demeaning episodes throughout his life. In Kansas City, for example, he had been denied a job as an illustrator at a local corporation after he was hired "sight unseen" based upon the talent that he exhibited in his portfolio. In Savannah, he sidestepped "back of the bus" rules by quickly purchasing an automobile after his first experience with the discriminatory and demeaning practice.

Although Hampton's early works were characterized by an interest in perception and the realities and aesthetics of the world around him, a shift began to take place in the 1960s when he began to investigate abstraction. Abstraction in African-American art has a cultural history that is born out of a reaction against social realist trends of the 1930s. As it grew in the late 40s and early 1950s, the move by artists to abstraction also signaled a desire for integration rather than segregation. While African-American artists were historically consigned to exhibit in "all Negro" art exhibits, abstraction was a way for these artists to navigate into the mainstream art world. It also allowed them to pursue an avenue of self discovery that was based on cerebral and subjective rather than objective or documentary modes.⁴ For Hampton, abstraction was a challenge initially posed by an instructor, who vigorously tried to move the young painter from realistic representation. Numerous heated discussions ensued, which led Hampton to explore this new visual language. He found abstraction to be infinitely satisfying because it allowed him to break free of representational constraints. With abstraction, he could address philosophical concerns without being bound to specific narratives or didactic ideas.

Richard J. Powell in *Black Art: A Cultural History* defines this moment in African-American

abstraction, writing, “Although abstraction was perceived to be in an antithetical relationship to such issues as race and ethnicity, several artists in the 1960s and 70s experimented with forms of abstraction that, if not explicit in their aesthetic or ideological ties with social themes, were engaged in an implicit discourse about black consciousness (most often represented through social realism and cultural nationalism) but, rather, one that could conceivably embrace a multiplicity of personae or states of blackness.”⁵ Other artists in the 1960s favoring abstraction, like Norman Lewis, Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas and others, saw representational art as “ideologically conservative” and retreated from its use in their works. Although not the status quo, which still favored political works of social realism created to raise consciousness in black issues, abstraction was a way in which this group of African-American artists could pursue intellectual and cerebral investigations while the freedom of spontaneity could remain. Ralph Ellison, in his essay foreword to Romare Bearden’s *The Painter’s Mind*, argues for a universal, rather than specific or didactic visual language with which to “depict the times” and the African-American experience. Ellison wrote “...the Negro American who aspired to the title Artist was too often restricted by sociological notions of racial separatism, and these appear not only to have restricted his use of artistic freedom, but to have limited his curiosity as to the abundant resources made available to him by those restless and assertive agencies of the artistic imagination which we call technique and conscious culture.”⁶

In the 1960s too, a jaunty new style is seen to emerge in Hampton’s works. In these paintings, he began to break his subjects into dynamic linear and cubist planes of color with the application of string directly to the surface of the canvas. Between 1963 and 1969, Hampton completed several paintings in this style, some figural and the others abstract investigations of color and space. Noteworthy are the abstract *Repined Prisms*, 1967 (figure 2) and *Bang! Abel*, 1965 in which a two male figures are presented in two separate planes of light and dark. The foreground of this work, which is illustrated in Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy’s *Black Artists on Art*,⁷ shows a large seated figure bisected by lines of string. The intersecting planes created by this vertical and horizontal application of string creates a fragmentation of the body and a veil-like effect that simultaneously shades and illuminates the larger figure. In the distance, a smaller, standing figure bathed in light looks on. Within the picture plane, the figures, although seemingly on two separate planes of existence, nevertheless form a powerful psychological bond and imply a narrative that is facilitated by the painting’s title, a reference to the biblical story of Cain and Abel. The painting was made in the year of the Watts riots and a year after three Civil Rights workers were found slain in Mississippi.

Although much of his work today remains free of overt political messages, there were singular moments in his career in which Hampton addressed issues of race and civil rights in American life. During the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and before, Hampton created a number of works that spoke directly of his thoughts and experiences on issues of race and discrimination. Four notable works *We Were Served Slices of Mythical Iconography, Like T. Sawyer and B. Sambo* (1972); a mixed media work titled *Funky Rainbow Series* (1982), which was part of his *Plastigraphs* research project and combined printmaking, collage and an acrylic substrate; *An Autobiography of Another American*, 1972; and a shaped canvas titled *We Watched the Ritual of the No-Magic Mask*, 1973. Each responded to his experiences as a black man in a white society. Made both in protest to the volatile and deadly events that defined the early days of the civil rights movement and to create “a new way of expressing an artistic idea,”⁸

Hampton's series of shaped-canvas paintings of the early 1970s of which *We Watched the Ritual of the No-Magic Mask* is one, reflected upon the artist's experiences with racism. A protest piece, the painting is a complex, quatrefoil-shaped abstraction with four protruding corners veiled in reds, blacks and subtle grays. The work's title alludes to and questions the need that many African Americans felt to create a "white mask" behind which they could hide, thereby negating their blackness.⁹ By employing abstraction, the artist makes reference to important issues like these without didacticism. No longer interested in realistic representation, he instead offered a multiplicity of ideas and meanings, which are suggested in his use of abstracted form, color and in the titles of the works. Poetic and sometimes mysterious, Hampton's titles point but do not lead, instead providing clues to the underlying meaning of the works.



We Watched the Ritual of the No-magic Mask, 1973,
acrylic on linen, 59 ½ x 59 ½.,courtesy of artist.

Throughout his career Hampton also took an active role in the promotion of African-American artists, writing catalogues and articles and organizing a number of survey exhibitions on the theme. A founding member of the National Conference of Artists, a group that supports African-American artists still active today, Hampton served as a quiet but effective presence in the promotion of artists of color. His promotion of the importance of visual arts in everyday life has been a key philosophy in his life and teaching career. In 1972, Hampton participated on the panel *Contemporary Black Art Philosophy and Thought* with co-panelists Mary Washington, collector Caroline Stokes, University of Southern California professor Carlton Westbrook and artist Nelson Stevens from Northern Illinois University. In the same year, he also organized *Existence/Black: An Exhibition of African-American Artists*, featuring a group of nationally recognized artists for Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville. A quiet, reticent man, Hampton today prefers not to make overt political statements about the condition of African Americans in society. Instead, the artist provides subtle commentaries which celebrate the African-American experience both intellectually and emotionally through abstract, visual means.

In 1969, Hampton was instrumental in a major expansion of Savannah State College's art program and its facilities. In the same year, he was courted by Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIUE) and flown with his family to visit the campus. Several additional letters of invitation, and a generous salary offer indicating the seriousness of the proposal were needed to persuade Hampton to move his family to Edwardsville in the fall of 1969.

At SIUE, Hampton taught undergraduate courses in printmaking, design and painting. In these years, he was active in the community both locally and nationally, participating in exhibitions

and panel discussions, writing articles and conducting workshops. In 1970, Hampton was the focus of a one-person exhibit at Mark Twain Bank in St. Louis. The bank's innovative art program, headed by the bank's founder and chairman, Adam Aronson, was groundbreaking, supporting local artists through commissions and exhibitions and exhibiting artists of national and international reputation. Aronson was instrumental in bringing the first exhibits of Pop Art to St. Louis, and showed works by Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein in some of their earliest exhibits outside New York City. Through this exhibition, Hampton's acrylic and collage paintings, *Tenacious Soul* and *Boy in Alice's Now Land* (both 1970), entered the bank's collection.



High Jazz Yeller, 1975, acrylic emulsion (Rhoplex) structure, canvas, 43 ¾ x 45 ½ inches. courtesy of artist.

In 1971 Hampton went on sabbatical and embarked on research into synthetic media which included acrylic emulsions, Plexiglas, acrylic resins, vinyl acetate, styrene, Styrofoam and other non-traditional materials. He wrote to the manufacturers Rhom and Haas, makers of Rhoplex, who sent him 200 gallons of the acrylic emulsion in differing formulae. He would continue to experiment with Rhoplex in a variety of ways over the next 30 years. The project, titled *An Investigation of Non Circumscribed Continuities from a Painterly Position*

Exploring the Use of Synthetic Media, was his first formal research project at SIUE. “Because it appears evident that newer and proliferating media have potential for increasing the creative scope of artists, it becomes important to grasp a deeper understanding of these materials and their limitations...” Hampton argued in his proposal. The investigation would be made in order to “gain knowledge of the qualities and interrelationships of the various media that are relatively new to aesthetic expression. It will also be intended to seek newer applications of these media relevant to aesthetic ideas and possibly contribute to experimental curriculum and structuring in art.”¹⁰ *High Jazz Yeller* and *Deep Forest Pulsations*, both from 1975, are two works from this period.

Throughout his career, Hampton has taken a scientific approach to his artmaking process. Hampton began to write proposals for projects at SIUE in the 1970s that would include in-depth research into materials, ideas and cultural histories relating to artistic concepts that he wished to pursue. Providing a rigorous platform for these investigations, his research proposals were complex theses that brought together research in art, cultural history and social sciences, with analytic passages on practical artistic concerns and philosophical questions. The ideas he would pursue were a springboard for the translation of states of mind and observations into visual terms.

With the “*Non Circumscribed Continuities*” project, it was Hampton’s goal to find ways of expressing the “spirit of the era” through the application of non-traditional materials that would help him to create a new visual language for the times.¹¹ “*Artists are facing today the task of discarding principles that are no longer relative to current creative demands,*” wrote Hampton in his research proposal. “*This condition may exist among artists for the simple reason that society also had to react to newer media and ideas. It follows, therefore, that a society being increasingly oriented to newness will expect art forms that are commensurate with their era.*”¹² In the 1960s and 70s, Pop artists were embracing materials like plastics and other non-traditional effluents of consumer culture and, like these artists, Hampton felt these materials could help him to communicate with this burgeoning mass media and consumer culture. In his research of synthetic media, he strove to create a new language that could find relevance in this time of upheaval. Not to be classified as Pop art or pure Abstract Expressionism, Hampton’s works are a rich synthesis of expressive forms from both artistic philosophies that form a unique visual language.

String also continued to be an important aesthetic device in Hampton’s works. In a series of paintings made during his “*Noncircumscribed Continuities*” research project in the 1970s, it served as a gridded matrix onto which tinted Rhoplex, an aqueous acrylic emulsion, was poured to form a “floating” surface. In abstract works like *Deep Forest Pulsations* and others, Hampton contrasted the rigor of a string-matrix with the dynamic abstract expressionist color treatment of poured acrylic medium. Ten paintings on this theme were shown in an exhibition mounted at Southern Illinois University at the end of the year.

In 1978, Hampton proposed the research project *Plastigraphs: An Examination of Multimedia and Idea Expressed as Plastic-Graphic Art Forms*. In a complex and thoughtful written essay that served as a research proposal, Hampton traced the parallels of symbolism found in a variety of world cultures and proposed a new visual language based upon a synthesis of symbols from these world sources. The project was to create the feeling of a palimpsest of images, drawing on the art and imagery of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Chinese and Russian cultures as well as the art of the Nok and the Yoruba. Reacting also to the mass of imagery spewed forth from the mass media, Hampton created a new visual language of hieroglyphics inspired by forms found in his research and street graffiti. This language he applied in the *Plastigraphs* series, which he hoped would “establish a visual sensation...” and “manifest a form that is as equivocal, sententious, arcane, ritualistic, and obscure as that of some ancient tablets, manuscripts, books or icons.”¹³ Hampton would work on these ideas well into the early 1980s.

One of the most ambitious applications of this idea culminated in the multimedia polyptich work

of 1980, *Funky Rainbow Series*. The ambitious work, a combination of media and techniques that included collage, drawing, decal, painting, and shaped, printed Plexiglas, was a four-panel piece devised to swivel, fold and tuck beautifully into a special box when not fully unfurled and on display. With this project he reiterated the need to speak to the “spirit of the era” and hoped to “transcend several definitive art barriers” through the use of non-traditional materials.”¹⁴ In his works, Hampton would continue to challenge the status quo, proposing projects that would re-define how artistic media could be used.

In the 1980s and 90s, Hampton continued the exploration of the fruitful riches of abstraction that he began to undertake in the 1960s. Working on a series of what he termed “abstracted landscapes,” Hampton continued to break free of the rectangle as his compositions exploded from within carefully drawn borders to leaked and prodded beyond the formal edges of the picture plane. Utilizing a complex palette including watercolor, acrylic, oils, pastel and collage, he continued to investigate the building blocks of perception: mass, space, directional forces and light. Cerebral in his approach to these characteristics of form, Hampton responded to perceptual possibilities by challenging and upending norms and traditions. Hampton also continued to mine techniques and ideas from the history of art, while elucidating African and African-American histories and culture through abstraction and symbol-making. In his *Imhotep* series that combined painting and collage, he drew on Egyptian symbols, but also integrated gridded elements and abstract expressionist mark-making.



Funky Rainbow Series, 1980, mixed media, box size: 24 x 24 x 4 inches, size when unfolded: 23 13/16 x 79” x 4 inches, courtesy of the artist.

In other abstract works, ancient Greek aesthetic ideas and Renaissance space were sources of inspiration. *Moodside Horizons* of 1975 is one such painting where Hampton paid special tribute to a variety of processes techniques and theories used by Old Master painters, – in particular, *sfumato*, a term meaning “dark smoke” coined by Leonardo DaVinci. A technique used by

DaVinci to create atmospheric perspective, depth, volume, and form through the layering of translucent veils of overlaid and intermixed color, Hampton used *sfumato* in several of his “abstract landscapes,” including *Moodside Horizons*, to create the effect of depth and perspective. The painting, created in a combination of watermedia, can be experienced either as a dynamic abstract composition that is a play of color, form and spatial concerns, or as an abstract interpretation of land, sea and sky. Influential to these investigations was the book *A Painter’s Mind* by Romare Bearden and Carl Holty in which space, structure and visual perception in world art are analyzed and related to contemporary applications in imagemaking. Influential too was Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park* series. Hampton translated these visual ideas into his own analytic works, which he continues to pursue today.

In 1992 upon his retirement from SIUE, Phillip Hampton was honored with the title of Professor Emeritus. A well-loved educator, he has served as a great mentor to his students throughout his career.

Hampton continues to take an active role in the investigation and expression of aesthetic problems and artistic ideas -- most recently his ideas have centered around a revival of the figure; in particular, his new work will include self-portraiture. While the paintings created during his long career constitute a self portrait in conceptual terms, Hampton’s new work will take him on a journey to decipher what it means to communicate the self

to others in visual terms. Assertive inquiry remains the heart of Hampton’s experimentation and this new challenge will provide us, the viewer, with a new set of exciting visual experiences and cerebral exercises with which we can challenge our minds.



Moodside Horizons, 1975, watercolor and acrylic, 39 ¼ x 43 ¼ inches.
Collection of Brenda and Jamie Rivers.

This essay is published in conjunction with the exhibition *A Celebration of Vision: The Art of Phillip Hampton* in the Sheldon Art Galleries’ Bellwether Gallery of St. Louis Artists, September 24 – December 3, 2005. Essay Copyright © Olivia Lahs-Gonzales and the Sheldon Art Galleries, 2005.

Endnotes

¹ Not in exhibition.

² The exhibition was the first of its kind in the area.

³ From a conversation with the artist in August, 2005.

⁴ Powell, Richard, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, (London: Thames and Hudson World of Art), 1997 and 2002, p. 102.

⁵ Powell, p. 128

⁶ Ellison, Ralph, "The Art of Romare Bearden" in Romare Bearden, *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981, p. xiii. The essay was originally published in a catalogue to an exhibition of paintings and projections by Romare Bearden at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany in 1968.

⁷ Lewis, Samella S. and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art*, p. 28

⁸ From a conversation with the artist in August, 2005.

⁹ From a conversation with the artist in August, 2005.

¹⁰ Hampton, Phillip J., "An Investigation of Noncircumscribed Continuities from a Painterly Position Exploring the Use of Synthetic Media." Unpublished research proposal for SIUE, 1971, p. 2

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ Hampton, Phillip J., Essay: "Plastigraphs: An Examination of Multimedia and Ideas Expressed as Plasti-Graphic Art Forms, unpublished manuscript, 1978.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

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