

Smithsonian Institution NEWS

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" THE ROAD TO HEAVEN IS PAVED BY GOOD WORKS:
ART OF THE REV. HOWARD FINSTER"

Art of the Rev. Howard Finster, one of the United States' best-known folk artists, will be the focus of a new Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition.

"The Road to Heaven is Paved by Good Works: Art of the Rev. Howard Finster" will open Sept. 1 at the Blaffer Gallery in Houston, Texas, and be on view there through Oct. 14. Featured will be 45 objects--paintings, sculpture and cut-outs--as well as excerpts from the artist's archival records.

"The Road to Heaven" is based on a 1989 exhibition funded by Paine Webber Group Inc. and organized for the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City. It will travel nationally for one year under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES).

John F. Turner, who is the author of a 1989 book titled "Howard Finster: Man of Visions" (Knopf), is the curator of the exhibition. He is also curator of 20th Century American folk art at the San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum.

Finster, a Baptist minister and latecomer to the art world, draws upon his religious beliefs and vivid imagination to create whimsical, fantastic and unconventional art spanning several media. His art is inspired by "visions,"

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which he believes come from God. Finster's "sermons in paint," as he calls his paintings, were always intended to spread the gospel. Nevertheless, they depict secular cultural icons and alien worlds as well as religious figures.

A self-taught artist, Finster has produced approximately 15,000 paintings and many sculptures. In recent years, he has enjoyed both popular and critical success.

He was born in 1916, and now lives in Summerville, Ga. Although for several years he had produced sculptures composed of cast-offs and bric-a-brac--and had showcased them in an area near his home known as Paradise Garden--he did not seriously delve into painting until after age 60.

In 1976, while working in his repair shop touching up a bicycle with white Fixal enamel, he noticed that a spot of paint on his finger resembled a human face. Feeling that incident revealed God's desire for him to "paint sacred art," he took a dollar bill from his wallet and, from it, began to try to reproduce the image of George Washington. After a few tries, he was successful. Six months later, he quit the repair business and became a full-time artist.

His art, which is inextricably intertwined with his religious convictions, is characterized by primitively drawn wide-eyed American presidents and other recognizable figures, including himself. The aim is to use familiar images to attract the attention of people who might not otherwise be exposed to his evangelical teachings. Invariably, messages of Finster's own or verses from the Bible appear in his work, with the sometimes misspelled words as much a part of the piece as the images.

Finster usually bases his images on photographs or other printed material, and most often uses enamel on either wood or metal backing. After sketching a

figure, he cuts it out to produce a "dimension," or stencil, that he may use repeatedly in many combinations and variations--a technique devised to help him keep pace with the demand for his work.

Finster's artwork has been exhibited at the 1984 Venice Biennale, at the White House and in galleries throughout the U.S. and abroad. In 1985, his painting "Talking Heads View the Whole World" graced the rock group's "Little Creatures" album cover. He has also appeared on "The Tonight Show" with host Johnny Carson.

Although Finster--a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm who has been known to work on as many as 50 paintings at once--has had an astoundingly prolific career, he says he is hardly a spent creative force. "I haven't painted enough paintings," he says. "If I have a new vision, it will bring new art. I've got a lot of visions of art that I've never drawn yet."

SITES is a bureau of the Smithsonian that develops, organizes and circulates exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad.

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Itinerary

1990

Sept. 1-Oct. 14--Blaffer Gallery, Houston, Texas
Oct. 27-Dec. 2--To be announced
Dec. 22-Jan. 27--To be announced

1991

Feb. 16-March 24--Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, Calif.
April 13-May 19--Fine Arts Center at Cheekwood, Nashville, Tenn.
June 8-Sept. 8--Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, Ala.
Sept. 28-Nov. 3--To be announced