

REFLECTIONS ON A PORTRAIT OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Robert Bonazzi**

When The Estate of John Howard Griffin commissioned Randall S. Browning to render an oil portrait of Thomas Merton, our assumption was that the artist would work from one of Griffin's black and white photographs of the monk. We suggested that Browning contemplate the Griffin-Merton collaboration, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, select an image from which to work, and then determine his palette from several color prints of Merton.

To our surprise, it was not a Griffin photograph that Browning selected, but the picture of Merton standing next to the Dalai Lama. That particular print had been developed by Griffin, but the photograph had been taken by Tenzin Geyche, secretary to His Holiness, using the camera Griffin had loaned "in perpetuity" to Merton. (Well, we laughed, at least it was a photograph taken with one of Griffin's cameras and John Howard did develop the print!)

The Swiss-made Alpa, which Merton referred to as the "Picasso camera"—because it was the same model used by David Douglas Duncan for his lavish books, *Picasso's Picassos*—deeply impressed the monk as "a beautiful instrument." In a letter to Griffin (March 29, 1968), Merton wrote of the camera: "It is fabulous. What a joy of a thing to work with. I am sending the first rolls and hoping that they are ok, that I haven't done something all wrong: but the camera is the most eager and helpful of beings, all full of happy suggestions....Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. So simply. This is a Zen camera. As for the F.100, I tell you I'm going to blow my mind with it!"

We loaned the artist a magnificent print of the Dalai Lama and Merton (reproduced on page 132 of *A Hidden Wholeness*), and he was convinced that it would be a superb image for his portrait. "I was struck immediately by a sense of triumph in Merton's expression," remarked Browning. "It was as if his search to understand the roots of eastern mysticism had been resolved during those dialogues with the Dalai Lama.

In retrospect, the artist's choice is not so surprising. Browning has long been a serious student of mysticism. His search has taken him to Kyoto—the ultimate temple of Japanese Zen—as well as to Bangkok, Thailand, and the Philippines. His most extensive travels have been in Mexico where he has lived among and befriended various indigenous shamans. From his research of these western mystic cultures came the inspiration for an ongoing series of paintings. These vibrant canvases, reflecting the ritualistic masks and ceremonial costumes



THOMAS MERTON & THE DALAI LAMA

Robert Bonazzi lives in Arlington, Texas. He is the editor of *Latitudes* Press and is currently working on the authorized biography of John Howard Griffin. His revised edition of *Griffin's Follow the Extacy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton* was published in 1993 by Orbis Books. He and his wife, Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, will participate at Bellarmine College in the Celebration of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Thomas Merton Center.

fashioned by those whose traditions have persisted for centuries, are a radical counterpoint to the formal portraiture for which he is best known.

Browning's commissioned portraits form an American gallery of prominent political, civic, and business leaders and their families. His work has evoked an international range as well: Spanish flamenco dancers, Far East artisans, and Native Americans in tribal dress. In all these faces, the viewer experiences the breath of life and the mark of individual awareness.

At the midpoint along this colorful continuum stand several portraits, including this recent one of Thomas Merton and a portrait of Dr. Edward Teller, the eminent physicist, painted a few years ago. These canvases suggest the formal elegance of vintage portraiture, yet reveal a stunning freedom that elevates these creative likenesses into works of art.

Browning's work has been in gallery exhibits in Europe, Mexico, and the United States. Many of his portraits hang in public buildings and distinctive private collections. Taught from childhood by his father, who is a professional illustrator, Browning has been a professional artist since the age of thirteen. He attended the Arts Students League in New York City, where he studied under Robert Emil Shulz, Jack Faragasso, and George Passantino, all fine illustrators. His advance study was done with the celebrated portrait painter, Louis de Donato, at the Salmagundi Club of Manhattan. Browning's most recent exhibition, exclusively featuring canvases in the Mexican series, was held in the gallery of the Trammel Crow Center in downtown Dallas. His latest portrait is a magnificent painting of Bishop Andrew McDonald of the Archdiocese of Little Rock, Arkansas.

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The Merton portrait was completed in July of 1992. The work is oil on canvas, measuring thirty by forty inches. Commissioned by the Estate of John Howard Griffin, the portrait has been donated to The Thomas Merton Studies Center by Elizabeth Griffin-Bonazzi, widow of Griffin and Executor of his Estate.