

# Transcendent Creativity

Review of  
*Mystery Hidden Yet Revealed*  
 by Marie Theresa Coombs  
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Reviewed by **Margaret B. Betz**

This small volume was written with visual artists and art historians particularly in mind, especially those of us interested in the ways spirituality is manifest in paintings and other forms of fine art. Artistic creativity is one fruit on the tree of life. The mystery of its source, and of the methods for its development, is explored in this study of Thomas Merton and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Actually, a larger theme subtitles the volume: "A Study of the Interrelationship of Transcendence, Self-actualization and Creative Expression, with Reference to the Lives and the Works of Thomas Merton and Georgia O'Keeffe." In thus setting out the book's purpose, this canonically recognized hermit living in south Texas presents us with the sort of detailed table of contents (running to eight pages) familiar only to those who have read theology books by mystics and scholars from another age altogether.

It is a charming device, as used here, and entirely consistent with the almost chant-like reiteration of the key phrase, "how transcendence, self-actualization and creative expression are profoundly interrelated," in the work of these two key figures in American art and spirituality in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Coombs consistently and methodically sets out the purpose of each segment of her book with reference to this phrase, devoting the first nine chapters to defining transcendence, self-actualization and creative expression. All the while, we see more and more deeply into the "mystery fraught with paradox," the "immanent transcendence of God" (32-33).

Encounter with this mystery takes place, the author explains, at the level of the "hidden self," and is transforming, purifying, and enlightening, through the entire cycle of human growth and development. Coombs even tackles the difficult topic of *perichoresis*, a "reference to the Christian revelation of God as trinitarian, . . . the three persons indwelling each other, while remaining distinct. The word designates the dynamic presence of each person to the other two. . . . That continuously circling energy of love and life is divine creativity" (78-79). Relating this complex term to creative expression is a sample of the ingenuity of this meditation. The nebulous is made clear by such vivid images given as metaphors. And isn't this what Merton and O'Keeffe have done in their art?

As an experienced spiritual director, Coombs provides an invaluable resource for those creative people who need to understand their longing for inspirational content in their art, their desire to express their own sense of the "continuously circling energy of love and life" that causes them to

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create in the first place.

Especially helpful is Coombs' exposition of the process of creative expression followed by both Merton and O'Keeffe, their daily routines, and their love of earliest morning. Facts such as the following may surprise the reader who thought she had a grasp of what obedience meant for Merton. On hearing that the young monk often wrote during the hour from 4 to 5 a.m., Father Master enjoined him to stop, which he did. His creative writing and drawing continued in the more limited hours available (152). By 1958, according to the author, Merton had a new understanding of contemplation, due to his "keen intuition of God's immanent transcendence animating all daily existence and routine activity" (172).

From personal experience, this reviewer can testify to the high enthusiasm engendered by the early months of daily monastic practices, such as 3 a.m. Matins and the hour of meditation following. It is very easy to see how fruitful that time was for Merton. How he coped may indeed have pressed him all the sooner to his expression in the early 1960s of the calligraphies, which I consider his contemplation "burning in the silence of his imageless faith" (160).

Such rehearsing of the facts of the lives of these two, in light of the interrelation of transcendence, self-actualization and the creative process, throws a sharp, new light on precisely those aspects of their biographies most helpful for creative people, who need experienced companions in the "desert of compassion," the province of one like Marie Theresa Coombs, who lives the eremitical life, as she does.

One very slight flaw may be the author's assertion (173) that modern art was new to Merton. Before entering the monastery he habitually visited museums and wrote extensively about exhibitions, such as Picasso's, at the Museum of Modern Art. Merton knew at least the major European painters of the early twentieth century. He did admit that he could not stay current from Gethsemani, however, and this is no doubt what Coombs means.

When exploring O'Keeffe's spirituality, the author is undaunted by her exclamation, at age 96, "I don't think much of God." Rather than allowing this to deflect inquiries, Coombs goes beneath it to investigate just how much the painter was attracted to the "beauty of a subject radiating a mysterious energy or presence and evoking wonder in the beholder" (233). By highlighting just this quality in O'Keeffe's work, that sense of "an infinite emptiness fraught with presence . . . [and a light that] pervades everything [but whose] source is nowhere visible" (238), Coombs puts a name to the most distinctive trait in her paintings, that quality allowing us to associate O'Keeffe's art with what is most spiritual in human life and aspirations.

In many ways this book works for those wishing to treat this volume as *lectio divina*, picking a section at a time to read and meditate on in depth. The mantra of "how transcendence, self-actualization and creative expression are profoundly interrelated," renews our focus on the central purpose both of this volume, and of our own lives in the spirit as well.