

Signatures of Someone Not Around

Review of
Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton

By Roger Lipsey

Boston: New Seeds, 2006
xvii + 197 pages / \$26.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Donna Kristoff, OSU**

Recent symposia and exhibitions of Thomas Merton's photography and drawings, organized and sponsored by the Thomas Merton Center, form a prelude to this book and set the direction for a new era of research and scholarship: Merton, the visual artist. Roger Lipsey's remarkable new book has opened the drawers housing 900 drawings and calligraphies archived at the Center to reveal a treasury largely unknown and little studied, but readily accessible to those who deem it vital for a complete picture of the whole Merton. The very verbal Merton needs to be balanced by the very non-verbal Merton. *Angelic Mistakes* treats Thomas Merton's visual art seriously for the first time and for this readers owe to Roger Lipsey the debt of gratitude Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center, offers in his Foreword to this handsome book.

In *Angelic Mistakes* we learn from Lipsey's investigations that Thomas Merton's calligraphies were neither "angelic" nor "mistakes." (The title is drawn from Merton's own phrase referring to some drawings he is sending to Jim Forest.) Instead, they are shown to be the conscious and deliberate works of art produced by a creative American spiritual writer, unique for being a Western monk engaged in Zen, who sought to have them shared, exhibited and preserved.

Roger Lipsey, author of *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, is well qualified as art historian and critic, noted in the field of comparative spirituality, myth, religion and the arts, to shoulder the task before him. Faced with the sheer quantity of drawings produced by Merton (are we surprised?) and the problems involved with establishing a chronology from much undated material, Lipsey creates a manageable pathway for his readers, constructing a cohesive, clear and highly focused work. He divides the drawings into three distinct periods and styles: the college and pre-monastic days, largely consisting of cartoons and sketches reminiscent of Reginald Marsh, Picasso, Klee and Matisse; the early monastic years until the late '50s with its vast output of religious themes, Christian images and symbols, the Virgin, saints and monks; and the later monastic and hermitage years comprising a large body of abstract and experimental ink drawings. It is the work of the second period with which Merton readers are probably most familiar from recent books and printed materials. These, however, do not engage Lipsey's interest. Rather, he evaluates Merton's mature work to be the 450 abstract drawings produced from 1960 through 1968, and these form the basis for his research. From these he selects 34 calligraphies to compose an intimate exhibition at the heart of the book.

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Lipsey's main thesis is that Merton's mature calligraphies owe their influence to two cultures that united in him: Zen Buddhism and Abstract Expressionism, both distant from the institutional Church. He maintains that Merton's visual art and writing parallel his personal and spiritual journey. He believes Merton to be a man of his time and that his works of art reflect this position. Therefore, he carefully details Merton's conversion to contemporary art, amazingly pinpointing the actual date and place it began and his subsequent flowering as a calligrapher-printmaker.

Friendship was an essential element in Merton's life, and according to Lipsey, D. T. Suzuki, Victor Hammer, Ad Reinhardt, Ulfert Wilke and Jacques Maritain each played an important and distinct role in his development as a visual artist. A few of these were mere names that appeared in journals and letters until Lipsey establishes their credentials and records their encounters with Merton. His long introductory essay is extremely informative in detailing Merton's links to Zen and to Abstract Expressionism. It also shows us a Merton who can bear much ambiguity in his understanding and appreciation of various artistic approaches, which sometimes led to embarrassing confrontations.

An instructive section of the book is given over to Merton the printmaker. The discovery that not all calligraphies were made with direct brushwork takes Lipsey by surprise and delight. In an obscure letter that Lipsey unearths, Merton references his new "technique," which is basically that of monoprinting: applying ink to one surface (a negative) and pressing a sheet of paper to it to pull the solo print. Sometimes the negative consists of free brush work, or a collage of simple, found objects from nature or the hermitage. How Merton actually began this process is not documented – he could have accidentally come upon it, but that he preferred it is clear and the results are astonishing. Many of the 34 plates selected by Roger Lipsey for the Portfolio section of this book are of this type. Not until recently has the monoprint been accepted as a serious printmaking form, since it is a hybrid of a drawing technique and does not consist of multiples. Lipsey, the consummate researcher, sought the assistance of members of the Art Department at the University of Louisville to reconstruct Merton's technique. Their full detailed report appears in an appendix and is fascinating reading. In a similar vein, one wonders if Lipsey had also considered consulting a master oriental calligrapher to assess Merton's direct brush drawings in the light of that tradition.

Leaving aside questions of technique and influence, Lipsey escorts the reader to the inner Merton when he muses over the roles played by poverty, providence and chance in the production of the calligraphies. As Thomas Merton strives for greater freedom of spirit, detachment, and humility in his hermitage years, these "signatures of someone who is not around," these impersonal and unpredictable imageless images, indirectly produced and beyond the total control of the artist, express the collaboration, even communion, with the "unknown" that Merton sought in his life. It is as if Merton were "listening" to these subtle ink graffiti for a "word." Lipsey does not use the vocabulary of apophatic or negative theology to describe Merton's experience, yet the link is apparent.

Throughout the book, Merton's "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings," the essay he wrote to accompany his first exhibition of calligraphies which was later published in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, acts as a refrain, a recurring motif appearing here and there, chanting Merton's own thought and keeping his presence alive between the lines. The complete text, conveniently reprinted at the beginning of the Portfolio section, welcomes further interpretation in light of the themes of law and freedom and other essays in the book such as "Message to Poets" and "Rain and the Rhinoceros." The strong social commentary of these works would make one think that the calligraphies were considered by Merton to be sympathetic to this message, yet this does not seem to be a thread

that Lipsey pursues.

Roger Lipsey leads up to the Portfolio section with a type of catalog in which he interprets each image. He offers the reader illuminating ways of looking at the drawings: referencing analogies to Zen and oriental calligraphy, citing from Merton's writings, describing technical and visual qualities, and comparing or contrasting them to other images. The heart of *Angelic Mistakes* is an intimate meditation gallery, lean and spare – ample white space and large margins create open space for breathing in the silence and listening to Merton's "beautiful writings" (calligraphies). The images rise up from the page on their own power, but the reader must provide the time and interior emptiness to become aware of what is there and what is not. Each drawing is accompanied by well-selected passages from Merton's writings: journals, letters, poems, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The excerpts amazingly mirror the mood, rhythm, and textural subtleties of the drawings without describing or defining them. The juxtaposition of Merton's written word – sequential and rectilinear, with Merton's drawings – inconsequential and gestural, heightens the reader/viewer's perception and appreciation of both. This section deserves to be lingered over and savored.

This well-written and copiously annotated book is certain to appeal to a broad range of readers, and so one reservation I have is that Roger Lipsey's concentration on the later drawings focuses so thoroughly on their Zen and Abstract Expressionistic influences, a reader may miss the fact that concurrently, Merton was deeply immersed in a Christian mystical path of prayer and a compassionate outreach to the world in his prophetic social involvement. It needs to be emphasized that Merton was becoming a totally integrated person, making of his entire life a work of art. Another concern issues from the discussion of *Art and Worship*, Merton's only book that has not been published. Lipsey agrees with others who see Merton's "medieval concepts" as hampering the discussion of modern sacred art. If, at the same time, Merton also discovers abstract calligraphy as a praxis he enjoys, this does not constitute a rejection of his thoughts and preference for sacred art regardless of faith tradition. I expected a rather more balanced look at this issue from Lipsey, the biographer of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and editor of his essays, much admired by Merton. Serious study remains to be done on *Art and Worship*, respecting the limited focus signaled by its title. Confusion arises from discussions that fail to distinguish between spiritual, religious and sacred (liturgical) art. If Merton's book had come out in 1959, as originally projected, it would have filled a vacuum in the American Church and proved to be prophetic for the liturgical renewal issuing from Vatican II. Merton was well aware of the liturgical theology developing in Europe for over twenty-five years and sought to return to the sources to educate a faithful ignorant of their Christian artistic heritage. It was a project he truly loved and never completely abandoned.

One small note on the subtitle of the book, *The Art of Thomas Merton*: it is unfortunate that the word "art" is used in its narrow sense here, usually referring only to painting or drawing or sculpture. Thomas Merton dedicated himself to the art of writing and other authors have beautifully demonstrated this aspect of his oeuvre. Merton's visual art includes photography as well as drawings. His abstract calligraphies may never have as wide an audience as his photography simply because they are more difficult, just as his later creative poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, still prove challenging and are under-appreciated. We can only hope that capable scholars like Roger Lipsey will not tire in their attempts to interpret them for an ever wider audience and for the sake of a "truer" portrait of Thomas Merton.