

## Record of an Exceptional Friendship

Review of

*The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer:  
Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*

Edited by F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook, Jr.

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Reviewed by **Donna Kristoff, OSU**

I was deeply moved by reading this scholarly publication edited by F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook, Jr. The correspondence of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer form the centerpiece of this work, but each section contributes to its context, scope and significance in the lives of all three parties.

The Introduction fleshes out for most Merton readers the Hammers' sketchy personae. The Austrian-born Victor Hammer was a highly skilled, classically trained painter, portraitist, printer, type designer, engraver and architect and a very successful artist/craftsman and teacher in Europe. But the war intervened and he secretly left Austria. Assisted by friends he came to New York, and finally to Lexington, Kentucky where his wife, Carolyn, a gifted printer with her own press, was curator of rare books at the University Library. When Merton meets him, Victor presents a complex figure – a cultured intellectual, a religious/spiritual seeker, a disciplined artist/craftsman committed to the perfection of his work – in many ways more European than American. Hammer is seventy-three years old, and struggling to accept the fact that his style of painting was out of fashion in a contemporary art world dominated by self-expression and abstract expressionism.

These letters tell the story of a tender and deep friendship among artists. The value Merton placed on this relationship, as well as the caliber of Victor Hammer as an artist, surprised me, a longtime reader of Merton. The letters, chronologically arranged, communicate an evolving kinship beginning with artistic collaborations, expanded through human, spiritual and artistic concerns/challenges, and celebrated frequently with the little picnic or visit – an agape of sorts. The editors cite each Merton journal entry for these meetings, which were often at Gethsemani in some barn, “under the cedars,” by the lake or in a car in bad weather. In reviewing his entries, I discovered that Merton, beyond mentioning the weather and the fine menu, was spare in his accounts. The letters that precede and/or follow each visit give clues to what may have been the immediate reason (excuse?) for coming together, but these encounters were never casual or spontaneous. Many letters, some of them as cryptic as telegrams, sent flying back and forth between Lexington and Gethsemani with great speed and efficiency, specify arrangements by Merton for days and times that were convenient for him to visit. Therefore these gatherings were extremely important to Merton and to the Hammers, who traveled

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four hours round-trip in all kinds of weather and health conditions to spend a few hours together with their monk. In their friendship, the letters represent *communication* about ideas, projects, theories, books, mutual friends, and concerns; the picnics represent *communion*. What more apt symbol for the sacred bond these visits honored, than the three silver plates hand-beaten by Victor and inscribed with a Latin text from the Vulgate chosen by Merton (“*The tongue of the righteous is choice silver*”) which were used for their shared meals (312, n. 53). A few days after Victor died, Merton records: “This evening I reflected how his visits were always something reassuring, stabilizing – because of his intelligence and European culture. . . . I never felt distracted and restless after one of his visits with Carolyn here: we belonged together” (*Learning to Love* 269-70).

These letters are also about books: the many volumes Merton borrowed with Carolyn’s assistance and advice from the University of Kentucky Library which create a veritable record of his reading and writing projects for fifteen years; and the limited editions of Merton’s writings, printed in letterpress on Italian handmade paper, designed and bound so beautifully by Victor and/or Carolyn. Merton’s letters reveal his sheer delight upon receiving his writing produced as a work of art in itself. His deep pleasure in the quality of these small treasures and the satisfaction of co-creating with the Hammers, prompted Merton to offer a continuous stream of new ideas “as a pretext for printing.” Appendix C lists the ten Merton related books printed by the Hammers’ various presses, the Stamperia del Santuccio, the Anvil Press and the King Library Press. Of these, Merton readers will probably be most familiar with the fascinating story of *Hagia Sophia* (1962).

These letters discuss art. Victor Hammer initiates a lengthy correspondence explaining his neo-Kantian classical theory of visual representation, thereby hoping to find in Merton the supporter and dialogue partner for which he so earnestly yearned. Yet Merton is reticent to discuss art at a theoretical level. In truth, he did not agree with all the ideas and held some that Victor could not abide. Yet, on other levels, especially that of spirituality and art, Merton and Hammer concurred. In his little-known, unpublished work “Art and Worship,” Merton discusses sacred art and artist, echoing the thought of Eric Gill, Jacques Maritain, A. K. Coomaraswamy and the Shakers. In their view, aesthetics and beauty are not the goal of art and the artist, a contemplative and skilled workman, seeks the integrity of the work alone. With his motto: “*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*,” Hammer could very well fit Merton’s profile of the sacred artist. Illustrations of his work helped me to see some of what Hammer writes about. His paintings of religious (biblical/mythical) subjects have an underlying abstract, geometric structure echoing his work as a typographer. A graphic quality, similar to his woodcuts, defines hieratic figures and the use of symbol, script and gold leaf together conveys a timeless reality akin to icons. The reader is wise to study the discerning Afterword which probes the art/spirituality dimension of their dialogue.

Merton’s Foreword to the catalog of Hammer’s retrospective exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1965, found in Appendix B, is pure Merton – playing with paradox, bringing opposites together, and then transcending them with a newer reality. It manifests his honest and profound respect for Victor’s work. Pure Merton too (did he not play Dylan’s music for Maritain?) would have been the meeting of Ad Reinhardt and Victor Hammer that Merton tried to arrange. All through their artistic discourse, Merton shows himself as a true patron of the arts, purchasing for the novitiate chapel Hammer’s *Crucifixus* and commissioning furniture for the hermitage from a local carpenter recommended by Hammer.

Near the end of his life, Hammer was trying to complete his *Resurrection* painting. He had achieved a certain peace with his work as an artist. He had had the retrospective exhibition, bringing together most of his work, and he had finished writing his artist's memoirs, *Fragments*, lovingly hand printed by Carolyn. The very private story of his making peace with his God involved Merton as a pastor of souls. In Appendix A is a letter from Victor's concerned daughter pleading Merton to help her father reconcile with God and the Church. On September 20, 1966, Merton writes Victor as friend and priest, a letter full of respect and concern, compassionately asking him to consider the sacraments, or if that were "too official" for him, to find some other way to express his deep underlying belief in the source of Love and Truth. In his next letter Hammer responds: "Your letter moved me to tears, your friendship is so precious to me, it means so much" (238). The story of this exceptional friendship awaits all readers of *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.