

Do I want a small painting?

The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary

Roger Lipsey

Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt met as undergraduates at Columbia University (respectively, Class of 1937 and 1935) and formed a lifelong friendship. Although from wholly different backgrounds, in some ways they were uncannily alike. With their friend, the poet and sage Robert Lax (Class of 1938), and a second friend, the multi-talented editor, writer, and photographer Edward Rice (Class of 1940), they were seekers of truth who never lost touch with one another, however great the geographical distance separating them. Close readers of Thomas Merton have known for years of the Merton-Reinhardt correspondence, published in part and cited where useful to other purposes in the large Merton literature. It has never appeared as a whole, and several brilliant letters have remained unpublished. Further, in the absence of context, certain published passages were enigmatic—one had to guess their meaning, and it was more sensible not to guess at all.

The extant correspondence is just 20 letters, spanning the years 1956 to 1964. This is conceivably the entire correspondence, but that seems unlikely; there are evident gaps and it ends too soon. The first, Reinhardt to Merton, is a catch-up letter—Reinhardt tells Merton what he has been doing in recent years—but it also responds to a request, relayed from Merton through Lax, for a cover design that would suit an instructional pamphlet or series of pamphlets which Merton was preparing for the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Reinhardt's first letter could be the beginning of the correspondence, but it could also be the resumption after a gap of some years. The last letter, Merton to Reinhardt in early 1964, is in full motion; there is no sense of a stop, no sign that the friends would fail to continue their exchanges, which had intensi-

fied in recent years. Since late 1960, Merton had been practicing a visual art—at first brush-drawn ink calligraphy on paper, later a rudimentary but effective form of printmaking—and in the course of 1964 he achieved his impressive maturity as a visual artist. That was hardly an opportune moment to break off communications with Reinhardt, a well-known artist and peer of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and other participants in the so-called New York School. Reinhardt had served as a mentor in art, though distant; he had provided fine paper for Merton's use; and the correspondence has the verve of a going concern.

How often did Merton and Reinhardt actually meet? Like so many of Merton's relationships, this one was conducted largely by correspondence. Reinhardt and Lax called together on Merton at Gethsemani in the spring of 1959. Although Reinhardt and Merton had ambitions to meet more frequently, this was Reinhardt's only visit; Lax visited more often. Apart from that meeting, correspondence was the link. But the common word "correspondence" doesn't reflect the place of letters dispatched and received in Merton's inner life. Though he was voluntarily cloistered in rural Kentucky and scarcely traveled until the last year of his life, some magical ether linked Merton to friends and correspondents worldwide. He seemed to experience his correspondents as nearby, as engaged with him in shared concerns and tasks that undid distance.

Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) was an artist of unique mind and temperament. As noted earlier, Merton and he met at Columbia, where they both provided creative leadership for student publications. At the time, Reinhardt was studying art history with the great Meyer Schapiro, while Merton was studying literature with the great Mark Van Doren—those were especially good years at Columbia. Though Reinhardt's art would evolve through many stages in later decades and become a profound and profoundly sophisticated offering, the young Reinhardt described by the young Merton is surprisingly consistent with Reinhardt in his maturity. "The other evening I was to Ad Reinhardt's," Merton wrote in his journal at the beginning of 1940.

I think Ad Reinhardt is possibly the best artist in America. Anyway the best whose work I've seen.... Reinhardt still sticks with the communists. Certainly understandable: a religious activity. He believes, as an article of faith, that "society ought to be better," that the world ought to be somehow changed

and redeemed.... In such a state artists would be free to paint what they were really impelled to paint by a kind of inner necessity, or by the light of grace....

Reinhardt's abstract art is pure and religious. It flies away from all naturalism, from all representation to pure formal and intellectual values.... Reinhardt's abstract art is completely chaste, and full of love of form and very good indeed.... He'd make a pretty good priest....¹

So much of Reinhardt is already recognizable: religious intensity after his own manner, the detectable presence of some inner necessity that would shape his art in later years, an art that is chaste and avoids mixing, intellectuality ceaselessly cultivated and used to good purpose.

Ad Reinhardt came of age as an artist in the same rough cradle as many of his American peers. The son of immigrant parents from Lithuania who brought with them their Socialist beliefs, he was drawn to Communism in the 1930s—hence Merton's recurrent teasing comments in the correspondence about Moscow—but gradually withdrew from politics while retaining a wounded, easily angered idealism to the end of his life, at least where art was concerned. In the mid 1930s, like many of his peers, he joined the American Abstract Artists group and derived a modest living from 1936 to 1941 in a Depression-era federal program that employed artists. He served in the US Navy in the last two years of World War II as a photographer and after the war, on the GI Bill, studied art history with a distinguished scholar of Asian art, Alfred Salmony. His work with Salmony and extensive travel in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia as the years went by prepared him to teach college-level art history at various institutions, and until quite late in life his teaching career afforded him the living wage that his art—little valued at the time—did not offer through gallery sales. Today he is recognized as a major artist.

Reinhardt shared with Merton a taste for cartooning, and Reinhardt's hilarious, edgy, sometimes bitter cartoons about the art world of his time and its public in the 1940s and '50s remain key documents of their era, both funny and wise.² An early participant in the New York School and a familiar presence at artists' gatherings from the 1930s forward, Reinhardt was nonetheless also an outsider increasingly at odds with his peers, uncomfortable with the impact of material success on his artist friends when at last they were materially successful. He was pure in an impure world,

demanding in a world that he regarded as compromised. Reinhardt's art became simpler and simpler, more and more still, darker and darker, until in 1954 he found his way to what became known as his Black Paintings, astonishing works. In their developed form, they were unchangeably the same in many respects: a five-foot by five-foot canvas, with a cross-shaped pattern, painted in subtly differing shades of matte black. Precursors of what would be called Minimalism in the next decade, these are works that one has to learn to see: they confront the observer ruthlessly with his or her own act of observation, the waywardness or steadiness of attention, the act of seeing as a discipline of mind, an exercise of patience. As one stands, of necessity quietly, before a Black Painting, one's first impression of a black canvas of no interest gradually resolves into a perceptual experience—and potentially a spiritual experience—of surprising richness. The cruciform pattern emerges, the extreme subtlety of differing shades of black emerges (plum black, orange black, blue black—wonderful kinds of black). Some observers bring to this experience their appreciation of the last moments of twilight, when the sky is a tinted black; others may bring their appreciation of phases of Christian and Buddhist literature with which Reinhardt himself was familiar, from St. John of the Cross on the Dark Night of the Soul to the Buddhist concept of Emptiness.

Many, in Reinhardt's lifetime, bought nothing at all and found nothing in his art. Reinhardt became known in art circles as the Black Monk—an irony not lost on his friend, Thomas Merton. Until the last year of his life, in late 1966 to early 1967, when he had a major retrospective at The Jewish Museum in New York and was featured in an article in *Life* magazine,³ Reinhardt had to make do with the esteem of few peers and still fewer art critics. When well-deserved attention at last came his way, it came so late that it, too, was received with irony.

Like some earlier embattled artists of the twentieth century with a gift for the written word, Reinhardt wrote quite extensively and published just some of his writings in art journals, not precisely to explain his art—he did not respect explanations—but to surround it with the nutrient ideas and poetic-religious images from which it drew. Just as his art coalesced into a single form subject to slight but eloquent variations, his writings coalesced into what he willingly called "dogma," a chant-like, compressed style of statement reminiscent of some Buddhist scripture.⁴ In

homage to his late friend, Merton published an excerpt from a writing of this kind in *Monks Pond*, the literary journal which it was Merton's delight—and burden—to publish in four issues in the course of 1968. Reinhardt's unique voice perfectly matched his unique paintings:

The one object of fifty years of abstract art is to present art-as-art and as nothing else, to make it into the one thing it is only, separating and defining it more and more, making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive—non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative, non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective. The only and one way to say what abstract art or art-as-art is, is to say what it is not.⁵

There is much more to say about Reinhardt himself and about the dynamic friendship between Merton and Reinhardt. At this point, however, we can ask their correspondence to lead us and suggest themes for further exploration. It seems best to present the correspondence without interruption. Commentary, on each letter in turn, resumes after this middle section in which the friends speak.

**1: Reinhardt to Merton, Thomas Merton Papers,
Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University**

June, 1956

Dear Rev.? Louis? Merton?: Is that your joke Lax is telling, from Avenue A to Albany, about the herring to the whale, "Am I my blubber's kipper?" Did you ask, in a letter to Lax, was I still straddling a fence? Whether to choose Rome or Moscow? Is that a choice between Togliatti and Sergius? Please answer. The summer's stupor's in and four months now of nothing, just sitting in my studio, working when I work, painting Greek crosses, my black and blue period. I almost came to visit you for a day this June and I will next time I get a ride to Ohio or Kentucky. You know one side of me is on the side of the angels, and part of me is part of things, half of me is tied to an ivory tower, two-thirds to a family (new), two-fifths of me is tied to a job which I thought would be like the monastic life (that it grew from) (but university teaching is the life of the advertising-agency and entertainment-business) (But I do teach Chinese and Indian painting and sculpture, art history, art theory, etc., for Western novices), the rest of the parts of me is

free. But little time for either yogi or commissar activity. Must I choose? What could I do for you? I do things and I thought these things might parallel some things you say. Lax gave me the book of instructions (and my only background is Tillich, Buber, Maritain, Suzuki, Coomaraswamy and Bishop Berkeley) which I read, and I see only abstract forms, concrete, but not as specific and particularized as your images and symbols, the vertical and horizontal, the Greek cross, transcendent color, all right, but I don't know what to do with your Christian words, and I'm not a good illustrator, I understand the invisible, unseen but not the unspoken, so what could I do? Outside of my own process, vision, work? What do you suppose I could do, say for *Pax*? For *Jubilee*?

Love, Ad

2: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art⁶

July 3, 1956

Dear Ad,

Deep calls unto deep and salt mine unto salt mine. From tunnel to tunnel, how are you these days? First the statements and later the questions, as for the choices, the answer is choose everything. As for me, neither Togliatti nor Sergius are characters in the operas of these here deeps in which I find myself my brother's scraper. Who are they? Baseball players? (Important dissident clergy I profoundly suspect)

First then about the pamphlets which I have carved out for my young. The words of the pamphlets are chosen and selected according to the pictures in the mind thereof. With which the cover has nothing necessarily to do. All I can say is I can think of no better cover than crosses within crosses black upon black, brown, blue, grey, what have you (two colors at the most though for the pennies' sake). If the words in the pamphlet are more specific than make me generally comfortable in my own private conclusions the cover need say no more than the general darkness which lies beyond the conclusions and in which the realities are grasped which the words fail to signify as much as they pretend to. The mandala, now, while interesting, would fail to make an appropriate cover. (A sort

of general abstract mandala maybe, why not? We can think about it)

The only thing I would say nothing negatively specific should be in there, such as various masonic insignia, hammer and sickle, etc etc.

The very name of Suzuki produces in me electric currents from head to foot. If you come here you will have to answer such questions as "Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?" You will be given a cell in which to meditate on Joshu's Mu. Etc etc.

My favorite answer to all questions is "The wooden man sits at the loom and the stone man at night throws in the shuttle."

My favorite character—Hui Neng, the 6th patriarch.

My roots: Wu-chu, which is to say not abiding anywhere.

My philosophy: Wu nien, or in plain English, "leave them all be: they are okay the way they are."

(Whose character, whose roots, whose philosophy? The blue man sits on the dome and the other one draws forth stars from his pockets.)

I guess I better tell you more about the pamphlet. It is printed in Janson or will be, if that means anything. The size of the thing is 6 by 9. Any kind of a cover will do, so long as it is decent and does not look anything like the usual cover on those things.

Lax kept assuring me that you and he would come down here in the fall, and that would be a fine idea. If you suddenly get a ride any time, that is fine too, only let me know beforehand. End of July and early August will be no good for me as during that time I shall be in jail for two weeks for subversive activities. I can hardly think of anything better for a person of quality in polite society to do than teach Chinese and Japanese painting. Do you think there is any hope of anyone really learning what is behind all that and what has been so largely forgotten by everyone? I conclude with a lyric which come to me on a sudden whilst I was climbing palm trees:

The lyric is called "Wisdom." The English version is as follows:

I studied it and it taught me nothing
I learned it and soon forgot everything else:

Having forgotten, I was burdened with knowledge
—The insupportable knowledge of nothing.

How sweet my life would be if I were wise!
Wisdom is well known
When it is no longer seen or thought of.
Only then is understanding bearable.

As for the insides of this particular existence here, it is most simple although everyone tries to make it most complicated. In all directions people run as fast as they can from themselves, even when they are religious, because they want to appear to themselves as gods and the effort is exhausting. After having run in all directions at once, a person decides through no fault of his own that he has to stop running and finds himself in the center of everything, having everything knowing everything because they have and know nothing and realize that this is the way it should be. This, as I say, comes about against all our own plans and best intentions, and the less said about it the better.

With hymns and canticles I return into the cellar of darkness. I shall hold off from becoming an Arhat until after you have been here, but after that—Pfft!

For *Pax* and *Jubilee* you should do just what you actually do, no? Why something else?

Love, blessings,
in Christ
Tom

PS If you wouldn't be doing a cover say within a couple weeks, or if it still perplexes you, let me know real quick and I will cook up something with letter-spaced Janson. Have you some small black and blue cross painting (say about a foot and a half high) for the cell in which I perch? But Lax says everything you do is now the size of a building.

I think the Yhung Mandala covers just about everything!

3: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

July 9 1956

Dear Ad

Make out this letter so terse and excited is really a telegram. Hurry hurry to the post offices with the files of emergency decisions. Paste them on to the wires and zip! Here goes telegrams for Ad Reinhardt New Yorks New Yorks. Psst! Reinhardt! Are you listening to the files slipping up and down the cables?

Practical Lax as usual horrible mistake stop all newyork in uproar over Lax's mistake stop stop stop. Lax in jail. Stop. Told you and Rice at same time design pious pamphlets of Chinese Merton in Kentucky cookie factory (joke some other time) stop.

Seems Rice had designed pamphlets stop, one to ten new pamphlets he has designed same time taking over print shop of Margrave or Marbrigge with guerilla hostiles stop. Printing pamphlets badly in dusk beyond Varick Street while cops all lie drugged in dopedens Stop. Alas, what about your designs. Don't stop.

You Reinhardt don't stop also designing Chinese pamphlet I got great idea stop continue stop no, continue. I got wizard idea, I return Chinese cookie factory and write out marvelous new secret fortunes each night with stolen pencils braving guerilla hostiles and all others with Zen fury cloaked in my swift overcoats. Stop. I drum up fifty select pages very small sharp koans break heads of all modern western stupids with tricky oriental koans and you illustrate wow, how you like question mark stop. Wham. Solution to all problems found in lightning flash stop start stop no start right away. Just wait until I get a pencil sharpened. Get Lax out of jail quick feed with vitamins embrace and forgive. Am I my buzzard's flipper?

Meanwhile New York is so full of new pamphlets by me that nobody can hear themselves think. I go hide immediately.

Lv, blessings, woe to Moscow.

Tom

**4: Reinhardt to Merton, Thomas Merton Papers,
Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University**

[July 10,] 1956

Dear Tom: I was going to try a cover but I'm afraid what exactly I get in a painting (plattdeutsch) is exactly what gets lost in a photography, reproduction or in a designing for something else—I'll send you a small painting in the fall, or bring it, after my show (I wonder why I still show, and act as if my painting were a public thing, and sometimes even expect some response, even fame & fortune—but I guess I don't—only money, security, bellyful, car, house—of these things, all I seem to have is security, maybe a pension in twenty-five years)

I guess I could tell you more in some words than I can by some diagram like this?

[here Reinhardt offers a simple rectilinear sketch of a proposed cover design]

(Thomas Merton in letter spaced Janson, of course)

Words like black & blue crosses, vertical & horizontal equal bands, bars & squares, dark colors, deep but not heavy—like Amida-Buddhist ceilings, Russian icons, Irish stones, Jain prayer cards, Persian rugs, Carolingian reliefs, Maya temples, 13th century Italian crosses, Koran covers, Chinese landscapes, Greek church floor plans, Neolithic columns, Japanese girders, Gothic window glass, Peruvian textiles, Amerindian adobe houses, Early Christian manuscripts, etc.—all these words are a little better than my design above, attached enclosed

A painting has the possibility of becoming a serious object of contemplation, but how long can you look at a design? My design, above, would look like nothing to a publisher, not even like a cross (because of the color)

I haven't read much about Zen or Suzuki, more on early Ch'an and Dhyani Buddhism, the Chinese and Indian being less handcrafty to me, than the Japanese.

Lax says maybe you don't know who Togliatti of Rome and Sergius of Moscow are? Commissar of Italy and Metropolitan of Russian-Greek Orthodoxy! You don't read newspapers? Or see television? All kinds of gag cartoons have monks in them now, do you know? You know about movies? Lax says Don Ameche wants to play your movie life.

I like that "wisdom" piece. Did Lax tell you how much I thought about your "tower of babel"? Rice and Breughel did a good job of illustrating it for you.

My daughter (2 1/2 yrs.) calls Lax "cracker" something to do with fourth of July, I think, and not "Georgia" or "wise."

My ex-stepson (18 yrs.) (Pat's son) is a sophomore at Middlebury College in Vermont

The "jhs" at the top of your letter, Lax says, is not the New York lawyer, John Hampton Slate?

I haven't seen many of your books or pamphlets except the first and last, I think—an advertisement of one of them, a design, a chalice, mosaic-like, was pretty nice—

Here's some more designs, free—

[Reinhardt includes additional sketched cover designs]

Do you know who Elvis Presley and Erwin Panofsky are? Do you know what Fulbright and Ford Fellows are? I tried to get a Fulbright to Ceylon and a Ford to Iran and India but was not successful—I'm not liked in a lot of quarters and circles, and quadrants and squares—May I have some sympathy for my wanderlust?—Do you know anything about the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas in Central Asia at Tun Huang? The equivalent in the East of the ceiling Chapel Sistine, which I saw several times, passing through the Vatican Museum. Ever been there? Love, Ad

5: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Jul 19, 1956

Dear Ad:

Telegrams from Rice say Lax lies dismembered in Union Square.

Your suggestion on page one of the last missive from Chinese Cookie function is very fine, but have you all got mad and dropped the pamphlet singly and severally I hope not. Only question about your design is if it is in three colors maybe it would cost more than we could pay if (as happens) the monastery is printing the pamphlet. But I like it so much I would like to save it for say a bigger book to be printed by Farrar Straus—we could try it out on Giroux. What I have coming out next (I mean next after what is already bought) is a thing

called Thirty Seven Meditations of which Lax has the manuscript. Get him to give it to you.

All the words you mention are for me like letters from home viz covers, stones, prayer cards, ceilings, icons, beams, reliefs, crosses, columns, neolithic, Jain, Amida, Peruvian, Amerindian (not so much) etc. Anything you got.

My real idea is that I write a book of proverbs and you maybe fill in with beams, girders, textiles, and korans.

Seriously what you know about Cistercian architecture? Like Fontenay cloister on end sheets of my book *Waters of Siloe* which if you not got I send. Ought to see a big album on a place called Senanque photos by Jahan, published by Editions du Cerf Paris. Monk friends of mine in France put out three marvelous books on Romanesque churches in 1) Burgundy, 2) Auvergne 3) Loire Valley. I'm talling you supoib. Lax got one anyway. He can show it to you.

Got to quit now to go to the Elks' convention in Seattle. I seen a picture of Sergius and I don't trust him. Lv—and don't forget to come in Sept.

Tom

6: Merton to Reinhardt, *The Archives of American Art*

Aug 22, 1956

Dear Ad.

Split second flash speed note. Business efficiency bubbles all around. We are delighted with yours of the inst. Ours of the ult. will follow by return of press.

We have all the characters on your graph present here in this domicile. The whole is resplendent, each part is a gem. Jack frost hath nipped the toes of the dandies. The Late neo classicists are among my favorite crystal. Each snowflake spells mysterious russian pax. Flying machines are fastest ever. Clowns hoopla, even the devils truly dandy.

How would it be to take a few of them and put them all over the cover like a pattern, if I make myself obscure. One I like a lot is a cross as follows: [*here Merton puts a simple drawing*] This could be a big one by itself in the middle of the cover. Or this. Or the star. [*further drawings*] Or some form of Pax

which I would be swiping I presume from Lax? He is rich in Paxes and would not care, the rich millionaire.

Or has Rice designed a cover of his own with celtic wit? I must stop now or the supper will spoil. The Georgia Cracker cleric in person waits to be seen. Where is my pipe and my bowl and my fiddlers three? How I wish I could spell. I close with my devotions. I bow to everyone and I vanish.

In the Spirit.
Tom

I know a man who consulted a shaman about a siberian tiger which he missed. The shaman said one day he would hit. He is waiting.

7: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Oct. 29, 1957

Dear Ad:

Do I want a small painting? You inquire if I want a small painting. What you wish to know: do I desire a small painting.

Do I desire a small painting? Well, it is clear at least to me that I desire a small painting since I am in point of fact crazy mad for a small painting. They have to keep me chained to the wall day and night and a gag in my mouth because I roar continuously that I am dying for lack of a small painting. I have already started on a campaign of actively destroying every large painting that I can lay hands on because I am totally consecrated in life and in death to the cause of small paintings, for this reason that I am consumed with a most ardent thirst for a small painting. So much so that if I do not have a small painting in my hands by Christmas I am like to destroy the entire building and all the monks in it, for when I love something I love it very aggressively and thus hate the opposite. Now the monastery is very large. Thus, if I do not very soon get a small painting, I will destroy the large monastery which, by contrast, reminds me of my lack of a small painting, and this is torment. Therefore it is clear that I want a small painting. I dream at night of getting one tomorrow, and tomorrow turns into today and brings no small painting. This is to me an ever increasing source of consternation which has by

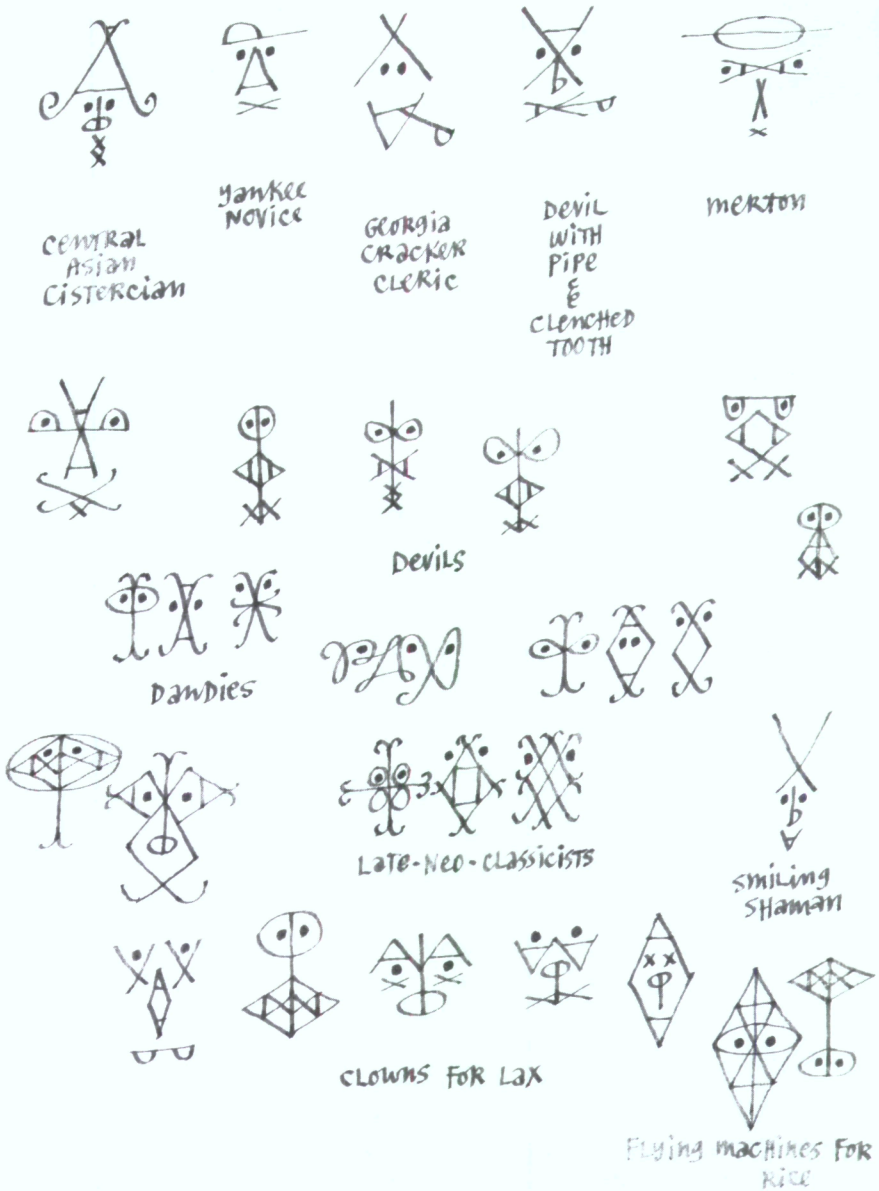


Fig. 1: Ad Reinhardt, Entertaining Sketches for Thomas Merton, 1956 (mentioned in Merton's letter of August 22, 1956)

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now turned into a river of consternation, and I have to be restrained by force from rushing headlong to the paint brush and painting for myself a small painting which would clearly be a disaster. Therefore the only solution to this problem which sears and burns the inner man, is for you to send in all haste, carefully packed, mounted upon lamas, the small painting of which you speak. I will have my scouts wait for the small painting upon the summit of the Alleghany mountains and escort it with fifes from thence to hence.

After the arrival of the small painting there will be here a week of sabbaths or a sabbath of weeks. The small painting will be honored by deacons and acolytes. The small painting will be taken in procession from the larvas to the basilicas. The small painting will be laid in reverence upon the altar of Saint Panteleimon. The small painting will be removed thence with lights and incense to the altar of Sts Boris and Bleb or is it Greb (Gleb)? The small painting will be set up on the iconostasis. It will be viewed by all during the mysteries. It will elevate the hearts and minds of all to participate in the mysteries. It will bring to the artist the Holy Spirit. It will cause all things to be transfigured. It will hasten the day of glory.

As the hart thirsteth for the waterbrooks I thirst for the small painting.

The sickness of Lax, as I know for certain, was caused by malevolent pixies. But good comes out of evil and Lax has gone to Connecticut to stay with holy people, and this I know through the thought waves. Lax's auric colors, as I view them here from a distance, are growing more healthful.

Beware of wines, love healthful meats, tropical fruits are good. Painters should ea[t] much egg, for the sake of pigment. Beers you may tolerate. Do evil to no man. Fly bank robbers. Let your conversation be only with honest men. Do not believe everything you read or hear. Watch out for the Asiatic scurvy. Collect stamps in your spare time, one day you will not regret it. Every man ought to have one or two dogs in the house, as a mortification. Once a sage sat in a barrel and looked for an honest man. What did he find? I often wonder.

After this advice every word of which is solidly impractical, I return to my hymns and spiritual exercises. May you enjoy a holy and solitary Martinmas, in the caves.

Remember the small painting.

Harps sound as we withdraw. Benisons.

Folio

8: Merton to Reinhardt, *The Archives of American Art*

Nov 23, 1957

Dear Ad.

Your letter found me, as I hope this does not find you, in the hospital.

The small painting arrived just before I was removed from my haunts and it enabled me to bear up against despair in the wilderness in which I have since found myself.

They have rushed upon me from all sides, singing their abominable hillbilly anthems, wrenching my teeth from my head and at the same time submitting my person to every indignity in order to remove, as they jestingly asserted, piles. Nay rather they have made off with an entire bowel. From bitter experience I will send this message to any man who has piles. To such a one I will say: "Brother, keep your piles and with them your honor."

It would not have been so bad if I had not foolishly decided this was the best time to get an impacted molar dug out too.

With this darkness and chaos there comes filtering from time to time the distant memory of your small painting so soon lost after having been looked at! When shall I return to this mysterious small painting? When shall I once again console myself with the mystical abyss of the small painting? It has the following noble features, namely its refusal to have anything to do with anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is true, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting. For it I award you the Molotov-Zhukhov-Malenkov prize for the painter of the year who has gone absolutely the farthest from Socialist realism. The small painting is a landmark in the history of Kentucky. The state, having within it such a painting, can now raise its head and brush its hair and talk English. I will write more when I am back in one piece. Love to all—
in Xt

Tom

**9: Reinhardt to Merton, Thomas Merton Papers,
Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University**

[May 6] 1959

Dear Tom: Bread and cheese letter? I forgot to pick up some Trappist bread and cheese in my last minute rush into that Cadillac that took me right to the airport, fellow name of Steptoe or Tiptoe, five fellows, Catholics, I assumed, politicians of Louisville, wanted me to tell them all about you. So I did. You don't mind?

It was good to see you and you look great. I expected you to look old, sick, holier. I had a good time but I ate too much, gained three pounds. It was a real "retreat" for me, things here have been a pain in the spine for some time, during the boom, everybody being prosperous, fat.

I expected more caves, more eleventh and twelfth century stones and places, more seductively "contemplative" niches. Your Romanesque garments and singing were not disappointing in any way. I needed more time to find more things to point my camera at. There's never anything out there always, theoretically, for me, anywhere in the world, but some places take longer to put something there. A place like the Acropolis, Athens, insists on its every stone, corner, inch being photographed, photographed in every way and manner it always has been photographed since the invention of the photograph. I'll send you your picture in color.

Next time I come I'll bring a projector, and project for you the wonders of the world.

I wrote to Ulfert Wilke, art dept., University of Louisville, who spent a couple of months in a Zen Buddhist temple and study center in Kyoto, where I found him last summer and made a tourist out of him for a couple days. He was "ink painting" like any eccentric monk, and not seeing any sights, like in the museums.

I told him to invite you to his next Kentucky cocktail party or university tea, probably around Derby time. I don't know whether he plays the horses. He just won a Guggenheim to study in Braunschweig, Germany (where my wife was born) (He was born in Munich, I think.)

Next time I'll send the writings I write, not necessarily cross-legged. An artist need not sit cross-legged, I feel, which puts

me outside the dhyana, ch'an and Zen main line. I always wanted to ask someone if "Zen" from the Japanese "za-zen" was any relation to the German "zit-zen"? Joke.

Let's argue about art and religion some more. If you're doing a book on it, and you have a world-wide audience, can I help you say what's right, instead of saying things people want to hear and agree with? You just make people happy if you don't say what's right, true. (beautiful?)

Write,
Ad

Everytime you attack "quietists," I think that's me.

Thanks for the weekend

10: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

May 9, 1959

Dear Ad,

This I write flash fast in two minutes got to get out to the woods and think. First if Wilke of Louisville wrote I never got it, but tell him maybe I'll be able to look him up in town if I ever happen to get in there before he goes to study the Guggenheim at Brunswicks. I like to see him.

About the art argument, I am not clear where it was getting and I am not clear in what way I was writing just what will please readers because a lot of what I have written about art will make them mad. The first thing to make clear about the art book is this however: it is expressly designed for people who, as priests or laymen, need to know what the Church thinks about art. Has thought about art, done about it, etc. Hence I am limited to a traditional approach, designedly. It is that kind of a book. But there is every obligation for one who follows tradition to be alive and original, and not simply to follow convention. Now you come along and ask me to fall into the iconoclast tradition. Which is admittedly something like my own (supposedly my own) Cistercian background. St. Bernard threw out all the statues. They were a distraction, he said. I used to believe it. I think it is an affectation, from the religious viewpoint, to hold that statues are a distraction. Nothing is a distraction or everything is a distraction. Who is there to be distracted?

A lot of the background of this book is the Mount Athos tradition that an ikon is so alive that if you cut it it will bleed. Idolatry, hah? And yet being a sophisticated monk I am not really interested in that idea the way they (unsophisticated) are. I am interested in it as a pattern.

That which is religious and sacred in a work of art is something other than just the artistic content, or form, or excellence of the work of art. But it is not something material, it is not information, it is not propaganda, it is not doctrine. It is not "about" anything. It is existential, it is what *is* in the work of art.

Quietist? Neither here nor there. Quietist as an insult is restricted to a peculiarly baroque sphere of spiritual reference. How could you be superficial enough to be a quietist? I think that your use of the label, which is a sophisticated use, is elegant and effective. Like the dead black paint rather than the lively which the other ones choose.

You tell me, then, what it is that makes Giotto different from Carlo Crivelli. The date? The example is badly chosen. The spirituality of Giotto is part and parcel of his time, I suppose. But as I write these things I wonder how one can make sense arguing about them.

If it is about the book, you should have the proofs of the book and pick out the points and say what you say. I wish you would. But wait until there are proofs, which will be a little while yet. Meanwhile, how about letting me have some Asiatic non-Christian religious art, if you can reduce your disbelief in this category into a practical discrimination.

Got to get out of here. Lawnmowers all around like divebombers. More later. Yes, come back with projectors and the wonders of the world.

To all a great salute.

In Christ,
Tom

11: Reinhardt to Merton, The Thomas Merton Center

[June] 1959

Dear Tom:

Thanks for the bread and cheese. I gave some to the starving Lax, who's so ready to come visit again, you watch out, he'll be there full time, visiting, eating all your bread and cheese, or rather, eating you all out of your bread and cheese. Enclosed find seven images I made with my magic box. What's to prevent me from making your image into postcards and cleaning up everywhere there's Catholics? And Thomas-Merton-fan-clubs?

I think I've got it in for celebrities these days. I read a book called "The Power Elite" and it seems that celebrities everywhere nowadays are used as "distractions," celebrities and their doings are the "opium of the people." "Who is there to be distracted?" You ask of statues? People. Distracted from "reality." People don't face reality, I guess. Nobody knows what's real. In art, we know that realism (according to the Hindu?) is one of the fifty-seven varieties of decoration.

Latest idea is, what is religious and sacred in a work of art is its pattern, form, artistic content, which is not anything you can pin down, as excellence or specific quality, or etc. or anything like that. Latest idea among theologians on art? This is an old "puritanical," Moslem, and Zen idea? Jewish too? Not Negro, I bet. Or Porto Rican.

I'll probably give a slide-lecture at the Dayton Art Institute on "Moslem vs. Hindu Art" (I make it sound like a war in the title to attract crowds) this fall, when Lax and I may come by again. I'll have projectors, etc.

I'll dig up what I feel is the great "Asiatic art," though your asking me for "some" of it is like asking, like some non-Christian asking, how about a little "Christian art"? Some great Christian art?

Classic "Buddhas," Indian, Chinese, Cambodian, Japanese, Javanese, Singhalese. And "mandalas," Indian, Central Asian, Japanese (mandaras), Tibetan, etc. I'll send photographs or bring them. You can parallel everything "east" in "west," celestial ceilings, paradise scenes, infernos, temptations, diagrams, icons, etc.

See you soon,
Ad

12: Reinhardt to Merton, The Thomas Merton Center

1960

Dear Tom:

Merton, Thomas, 1937 unknown*
Robinson, Leonard, W., 1935 unknown
Reinhardt, Adolph, F., 1935 732 Broadway, N.Y.

From a new book of the old Sachems. Did you know we belonged to the same lodge, same tribe? I saw you summer of 1958, last spring 1960 I saw Leonard Robinson at our 25 reunion. Shall I report you two as not unknown? To me?

There's too much to say about a reunion, particularly one's history, remembrance. I got angry at an article on the middle thirties by James Wechsler (1935) and several years ago by Herman Wouk (1934). Too much trouble to write my history to kill their history. As the old Sachems have it: "By your words and not by your deeds shall you be known." Old Indian saying, some people "unknown"* no matter how many best sellers.

I don't have to apologize for that remark? Lax says your best seller book on art is out? Some day I'll make a book on art.

I was in Paris, London in June, also finished my "Arab tour" in Andalusia (Seville, Cordoba, Granada) which I started in India, Persia, Egypt in 1958. Now I'm tired of traveling, especially by jets. Next trips, slow boats. No reasons to get anywhere that fast any more.

I'm working, not teaching next year, planning a painting retrospective show, 25 years of abstract art, like 1935-1960 (Columbia), next reunion and survey or show like this 1985. See you before then. What's up? Ad.

13: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Aug. 8, 1960

Dear Fellow Sachem:

Little do you realize that we "unknowns" are in all actual fact the very heart and marrow of our sacred and venerable organization. Yes, we are indeed the powers behind the tom tom. I

authorize you to inform them that I am deceased. I estimate that the twenty-fifth reunion of my class will be in 1962. But tell me, WHO ARE THOSE PEOPLE? Those NAMES. Those guys claim they are sachems. They have substituted themselves for the genuine sachems of twenty-five years ago. This is a national nay world wide scandal that has been hushed up by the daughters of Pocohontas, a Barnard Jewish cell of the Fathers of the American Revolution. Wait til I get that Pocohontas. Meanwhile I would like to state that those guys are entirely unknown. Their homes are false props and vacant lots. Their addresses are the back doors of bars and alleys. Their claims are egregious. Everybody knows that Lax was always the president of sachems. Where is he on the list? And if the truth be told, *I was a member of Nacoms*. Tell them to put that in their pipe and smoke it. Yeah, tell them the next time that list comes out they got to put after my name "deceased member of nacoms."

I went to one dinner of sachems in my life and it was so dark that it was utterly impossible to discern anybody else present. The entire organization is unknown and always has been. I am waiting for the twenty-fifth annual reunion of the 1848 society in order to make this fact public. This society is a horse of a different hue, I can tell you that. Its members were selected purely by divine Providence. When the cameraman came to take the picture of the 1848 society for the Yearbook we went out into the hallway and pulled in everybody who happened to be walking about at that precise moment. Thus we got Lax, Syd Luckman, and many other people too notable to mention. And we despised dinners, dark or light. We just lived for that photograph.

It is absurd and preposterous to state that the Art book by me is out. It is impossible for an Art book by me to come out in anything under ninety years. I am now waiting in complete docility and torpor for a woman to tell me what to put in about modern sacred art. That is, to send me pictures. Why don't you enter into competition with this female and send me some pictures black and white glossy fit to arouse a spark of enthusiasm in the breast of a neglected author. Above all, serious, can you send me some good buddhas and hindu things and some Islam architecture of which you are so replete? I need a

section of pix on non-Christian sacred art, if that makes meanings to you.

Above all when you come down here not on jets but on slowpoke trams? You are invited to come here in Sept or Oct, with or without Lax, bad time to come is middle of Oct, then I am deluged with academicians.

You are invited to come here for the twenty-fifth reunion of the unknowns.

Twenty-fifth reunion of the unknowns can easily be held on Labor Day weekend and thence, no wait, not that Sunday so much, but Labor Day and after. If you was to arrive [by] swans in the evening of Sunday before Labor Day and there would be no labor the following day but only a reunion of unknowns. What you think about that. Tell me what you think about that. Now I fade.

With extreme reserve and cordial invisibility
Tom

14: Reinhardt to Merton, The Thomas Merton Center

1962 [before February 20]

Dear Tom:

Sometimes we see jolly old friends only at sad funerals, dear relatives and classmates only at tragedies, communicate only at crises. When everything is all right, everything is all right. The other day I received in my mail, a mailing piece and a blurb... I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw....

Why shouldn't you be human after all and to err is human, we all know, but why should I be forgiving? And you forgiven? It seems that all my favorite religious writers, one day, like Coomaraswamy and Suzuki, who were all right until... Then Tillich had to be abandoned because of his introduction to the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue of "The New Images of Man," now Maritain and you... Is Buber still all right? He sympathizes with the Arabs... Can you understand why I became a white Muslim two summers ago?

Do you know I was in Jerusalem-Jordan (7th century), Damascus (8th), Cordoba (8th, 9th), Cairo (9-14th), Seville and Granada (13-15th), Konya (12-14), Istanbul (16-19), the last few summers, fellow-Sachem? And before that in Delhi and Agra (14-18) and

Isfahan (16-18)? The dates are the dates of the mosques I saw. Do you know that I give a survey course in Islamic, and Coptic, art at Hunter and Brooklyn Colleges in the City University of New York? It's proper maybe, I should find myself among anti-imagists, anti-idolatrists, pro-iconoclasts, and nonobjectivists?

Imagine you after all these years.... Have you given up hope? Have you no respect for sacredness and art? Reality-schmearality, as long as you're sound of body? Are you throwing in the trowel at long last? Can't you tell your impasto from a holy ground? Any more? Is the scum of its pots greater than the holy? Just pack up your scribbles in your old kitch bag and smile, smile, smile, hey? Is the potchy calling the whole kittle-kaboodle back? With all the scumble-bumpkins and Mac the Palette-Knifers storming the gates of all the four quarters, Lax and I have been meeting to discuss means... We'll send help, hold on, old man.

Your old friend,
Ad

15: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

March 3, 1962

Dear Ad:

Once, twice, often, repeatedly, I have reached out for your letter and for the typewriter. Choked with sobs, or rather more often carried away by the futilities of life, I have desisted. Dear relatives and classmates at tragedies. Ah yes, how true. As life goes on, as we descend more and more into the hebetude of middle age, as the brain coagulates, as the members lose their spring, as the spirit fades, as the mind dims, we come together face to face with one another and with our lamentable errors.

Our lamentable errors. My lamentable errors.

Truly immersed in the five skandhas and plunged in avidya, I have taken the shell for the nut and the nut for the nugget and the nugget for the essence and the essence for the suchness. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

You throw the centuries at me and you are right. Throw them all. Kneeling, I receive the centuries in a shower cascad-

ing all over my head. Weeping and penitent I receive upon the back of the head Jordan (8th cent.) and Damascus (8th cent.). You do not mention Isphahan, or the place where the Blue Dome is and where some Imam whose name I forget is venerated (9th cent?). These are the centuries, indeed they are the centuries. And I, as I look at myself with increasing horror, I remark that I have become a boy of the twenty-first century. Throw then your centuries at me, you are right, the centuries are right, and the twenty-first century has very slim chances of ever existing.

Going further down I see you do mention Isphahan after all but you spell it with an F. Go on throw it, I deserve it with an F also.

I have embraced a bucket of schmaltz. I have accepted the mish mash of kitsch. I have been made public with a mitre of marshmallows upon my dumkopf. This is the price of folly and the wages of middle aged perversity. I thought my friends would never know.

Victor Hammer is coming today. He does not know. If he has come to know about this disgrace, I shall efface myself in a barn someplace and become a sheep. I shall weave rugs out of cornsilk, equivalent in substance to my artistic judgments which I eternally regret.

My artistic judgment has contacted the measles. My love of kunst has become mumped. My appreciation of the sacreds hath a great whoreson pox and is reproved by all with good tastings and holy lauds. What would it be if he knew, the Imam? If he knew? Under his blue dome? He would stir, he would stir.

You are pro-iconoclast and you are right. You are quietists and you are right. You are non-objectivist and you are right. Down with object. Down with damn subject. Down with matter and form. Down with nanarupa. I mean namarupa. Sometimes get my terms wrong. Terms in general have the weasels.

Now the thing is, I am up to my neck. I am in the wash. I am under the mangle. I am publicly identified with all the idols. I am the byword of critics and galleries. I am eaten alive by the art racket. I am threatened with publication of a great book of horrors which I have despised and do recant. Bring the bell book and candle and have me shriven. Lift the ban,

dissolve the excommunication, release the golden doves from the high dome, let the bells ring and let me be reconciled with the Moslem Synagogue. Help, help, rescue your old fellow sachem from way back in 1937 or whenever there was sachems. Tell Lax, help, help, help.

Tom

16: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Sept 28, 1963

Dear Ad.

Ulfert Wilke was here, and before that I was doing calligraphy – but since I have done more. As this is the most rapid form of art production I have now thousands of calligraphies and the only reason I don't have millions is that I have been in the hospital with a cervical disc.

Let's hear from you some time.

All the best.

Tom

17: Reinhardt to Merton, The Thomas Merton Center

October [3], 1963

Dear Tom:

Talk about telepathy, extra-sensory-stuff or what you would call it. I was about to sit right down and write you a letter or post card, a pleasant one maybe, or one chewing you up or down for the Billy-Congdon-business, digging up old sores, dead horses, sleeping dogs, telling you about how I was on that March-on-Washington, only saw two other artists, saw no Catholic poets, especially neither Lax nor [Ned] O'Gorman, their being on Greek or Manhattan islands being no excuse at all, tomorrow I write them chewing them up about it, when all of a sudden out of the clear sky and mailbox, comes your calligraphy, your beautiful calligraphy but too small, don't you know them fellows way down East used brushes bigger than anyone's big head, a big pot of paint size of a big sink, and in bare feet, dance over a piece of paper bigger and longer than

Ulfert Wilke stretched from end to end, rack-like, didn't Wilke tell you and how I found him in a Kyoto temple sitting on the floor with his ink and paper, and I grabbed him and made a Western tourist out of him again, showed him the sites and sights, museums, made him take his camera out and shoot whatever you see in the books and histories of art, whacking him on the head whenever he thought about going back to the meditations, and cross-legged sitting he was doing?

The old-time, big, choreographic calligraphy was too physical, too poetic (they called their marks "Dog Baying at Moon" or "Tiger in the Marches" or "Dragon in the Lilies")—I like your calligraphy because its pure and to me. I'm as pure as ever, people say he thinks he's "holier than thou" about other artists still. I title my written works "Art-as-art Dogma" now (I used to make sentences out of words as a joke and after I kept repeating the same jokes over and over again, they suddenly turned into dogma, a sort of absolute truth, more or less). I had a show in Paris that sounded mystical again, "Les forces immobiles" (not my idea), lectured in Oregon "Against Things" in July (show in Paris in June), and marched one day in August and that's this summer.

Have I sent you the Museum of Modern Art catalogue of "Americans, 1963"? The officialdom finally proclaimed my existence, stuck me into a "Pop-"Art" and "Young Talent" show (about 15 years after my age-group graduated into the museum). Well, "That's life" (everyone says, when I call it corruption, injustice, vanity, misery, success, failure, karma, sell-out, fall-out, money-grubbing, imperialist, colonialist, profiteerist, etc.).

Well, I wrote this at "one throw," just like that, all at once, the way the calligraphy's supposed to go, hit or miss, all the way to the bottom of the sheet, only one or two under the belt, Spanish brandy. Propaganda will follow, next mail. you write.

18: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Oct 31, 1963

Dear Ad:

Well, October has thirty one and here I am again your friendly old calligrapher always small calligraphies down here, I am

the grandfather of the small calligraphy because I don't have a big brush and because I no longer run about the temple bare-foot in the frosts. But I am amiable and the smaller they get the more mysterious they are, though in fact it is the irony of art when a calligrapher gets stuck with a whole pile of papers the same size and texture, why don't friends from New York who received all kinds expensive samples of paper send me samples of exotic and costly materials I invite you to pretend you are about to print a most exotic book and get samples of papers from distant Cathay and all over and then send them to your dusty old correspondent who is very poor and got no papers any more except toilet papers for the calligraphy.

I mean it about the samples. Or scraps that are left over from your large calligraphies (come on, I know you are making large calligraphies in secret and that corners of the huge papyrus are lying around and fed to the mice they should rather be sent down here and to be made into calligraphic minuscules of which I am the grandfather.)

Here are some more calligraphic hats for New Years.

And now a jocular thrust: history has sure made your face red, yes? when all the time who was at the parade but Ned O'Gorman the Catholic Poet and you having surveyed a small sea of only two thousand faces mostly non-Catholic have cynically asserted that there was no Catholic poets present, well history gave you the lie because there it was in *Jubilee* not only Catholic poets but also Catholic babes, extremely well fed and furnished by nature with unusual great wads of insulation fit for the pencil of a Rubens. Oh for the pencils of a Rubens. (You don't get the classical reference of this quip it is an 1840 book by some Lord Curzon or other who was in the Greek monasteries and mocked at the monks and when some staretz would creep out of a grotto with a beard this Limey would mock out loud: "Oh for the pencils of a Rembrandt.") Well now I a boy of the twentieth century exclaim for the pencils of a Rubens at all the well baptized flesh that was in that parade and you had no eyes for any of it, you were in one of your trances, you were getting into one of those dervish moods of yours, you were hobnobbing with the Muslims and not paying any attention to the delights of Christianity, it is pretty easy to see you are no Rubens you big quietist wait till the Jesuits get after you but this is only a jest and not a threat you go

ahead be a quietist I am right with you I am a Jansenist also and a Sufi, I am the biggest Sufi in Kentucky though I admit there is not much competition. Anyhow it is when I dance that I make the calligraph.

Lax was very piqued with all your nasty stabs about the parade and he has written me since then fifteen letters about the parades he has been in that you were not in I have no doubt he has treated you to the same.

What else I do is make the snapshot of old distilleries. And now enough of art. Take seriously the samples.

Tom

19: Reinhardt to Merton, The Thomas Merton Center

[Jan 1,] 1964

Tom: Rev. M Louis Merton, O.C.S.O.—is that still your title, rank, status, position, do you get promoted inside there in the monastery as everyone does outside? If one endures long enough in our art world, one becomes a “dean.” I’ll be the “dean of abstract art” when a few of the older men are no longer alive. Stuart Davis used to be “dean” but now he’s only “dean of regional art” or is second in line after Hopper, “dean of American Scene art.” Josef Albers, I guess, is “dean of squares.” Robert Lax is “dean of the American Catholic poets in the Orthodox islands.” Did you ever see Lax and O’Gorman on the telly (TV) reading their stuff? I’m sure you’re the dean of something besides small calligraphy.

That “T” above, its stem, is a sample of the best paper I could find to send you. I had to fold it “eightfold” wise to fit it in an envelope so please forgive the creases. I put in two other mailings some fine-Italian-hand-paper and some non-yellowing-fine-Japanese-paper. I couldn’t find any fine, clean, efficient, German papier, old Nazi stock, parchment, but enough of Fascist business. I’ll look up some 100% American stock. You want a big brush? Happy New Year,

Ad

T

OM: REV. M. LOUIS MERTON, O.C.S.O. — IS THAT STILL YOUR TITLE, RANK, STATUS, POSITION, DO YOU GET PROMOTED INSIDE THERE IN THE MONASTERY AS EVERYONE DOES OUTSIDE? IF ONE EMPHASES LONG ENOUGH IN OUR ART WORLD, ONE BECOMES A "DEAN". I'LL BE THE "DEAN OF ABSTRACT ART" WHEN A FEW OF THE OLDER MEN ARE NO LONGER ALIVE. STUART DAVIS USED TO BE "DEAN" BUT NOW HE'S ONLY "DEAN OF REGIONAL ART" OR IS SECOND IN LINE AFTER HOPPER, "DEAN OF AMERICAN SCENE ART". JOSEF ALBERS, I GUESS, IS "DEAN OF SQUARES". ROBERT LAX IS "DEAN OF THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC POETS IN THE ORTHODOX ISLANDS". DID YOU EVER SEE LAX AND O'ROURKE ON THE TELLY (TV) READING THEIR STUFF? I'M SURE YOU'RE THE DEAN OF SOMETHING BESIDES SMALL CALIGRAPHY.

↑ THAT "T" ABOVE, ITS STEM, IS A SAMPLE OF THE BEST PAPER I COULD FIND TO SEND YOU. I HAD TO FOLD IT "EIGHT FOLD" WISE TO FIT IT IN AN ENVELOPE SO PLEASE FORGIVE THE CREASES. I PUT IN TWO OTHER MAILINGS SOME FINE-ITALIAN-HAND-PAPER AND SOME NON-YELLOWING-FINE-JAPANESE-PAPER. I COULDN'T FIND ANY FINE, CLEAN, EFFICIENT, GERMAN PAPIER, OLD NAZI STOCK, PAPERMENT, BUT ENOUGH OF FASCIST BUSINESS. I'LL LOOK UP SOME 100% AMERICAN STOCK. YOU WANT A BIG BRUSH? HAPPY NEW YEAR, AD

Fig. 2: Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton, [January 1,] 1964

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20: Merton to Reinhardt, The Archives of American Art

Jan 12, 1964

Dear Dean:

Yes, as one dean to another, I am frequently promoted as dean, usually by myself as I get little cooperation in this matter from others. However, it is true that with your encouragement and assistance I am already the dean of the small abstract calligraphy. As to the title of Louis which I share with too many bartenders and taxi drivers, I am detached from it and as to OCSO after the Louis I am in a state of torpor with regard to this. Not unappreciative, just torpid as to letters after names which are a Jesuitical trope. I am through with all tropes. I am begun to be nothing but a dean. I want all the letters in front of the name only, and after the name just a lot of room to get out of the way when they throw things, not to have to stumble around with any OCSO. Promotion is what I despise, except promotion once in a while as dean.

Now as to your papers you have been most generous with the papers and if I send you some of the small abstract calligraphies it is not in order to plague you and clutter up your flat, but to show you whereof I am the dean, and you should send back whatever would otherwise just clutter up the flat as I intend to get through to the millionaires like all the other deans. But for you I have signed the small abstract calligropos which I take to be the most lively, for the Dragon Year as a new year card and stay away from feminine dragons in this year especially.

The big fine Italian hand paper I have not yet got to with my fine Italian hand.

Now what do you think of the printing method I have devised as dean in my specialty? I think it makes for very nice small obscure calligraphies and comes out more fine than the great brush. I am nuts about my method, like all the other deans. While you have a free moment from being Dean of Regionals and Folk Art and Dean of the Great Quiet, maybe you tell me which is the most lively methods and second how I get to the millionaires with the minimum of delay. No this about the millionaires is joshing, but if you think they would be good for calendars or Antonucci children books or other

such, tell me what you think. In any case this pictures is for pleasures of contemplation and if it has this effect I go back content to my deanery and make a lot more, however not threatening to send you the whole tidal wave which is soon to break.

What is your mind about the great brush? It seems to me that with the great brush goes also a huge pot, as I cannot get the great brush into the small bottle of India ink, it seems to me I should experiment with a slightly larger brush which I have and make prints and see what happens, but all large brushes drink up the whole bottle of ink in one gulp then where are you, I ask myself? What is your counsel in this grave matter? Maybe there is some funny way of making the ink bottle go a long way like putting i[n] half water or something mean like that.

Lax has got out of being dean of Greek Islands for a while. It is he that start all the wars in Cyprus. You wait, it will all come out.

I hide my head from the American hubris that starts and will start wars and violence all over the place, I go back to be dean of the small silent calligraphy and weep for the peace race. Now its flags in Panama, and I got a friend just through telling me of peaceful Indians on islands around there etc. Bah. Fooy on the pale faces.

Coda: Merton to Robert Lax, on the death of Ad Reinhardt?

Sept 5 67

O Lax:

Do you know the great sorrows? Just heard today by clipping from Schwester Therese about Reinhardt. Reinhardt he daid. Reinhardt done in. He die. Last Wednesday he die with the sorrows in the studio. Just said he died in a black picture he daid. The sorrows have said that he has gone into the black picture for he is dead. All I read was the clip. Very small clip. Say Reinhardt was black monk of the pix and he daid. Spell his name wrong and everything. Dead none the less. Tried at first to figure it because the name was wrong maybe it was not Ad Reinhardt who was dead. But all the statements was there to state it. Black monk of pix. Was cartoons in PM now de-

funct. The sorrows is true, the surmises is no evade. It is too true the sorrows. Reinhardt he dead. Don't say in the clips how he died, maybe just sat down and give up in front of the black picture. Impossible to believe.

Maybe if Reinhardt had the sense to die quietly in quietist studio it is becoming soon the long procession of big woes and he seen it come.

Maybe the sorrows is coming to roost and to lay the biggest egg you ever did see and he seen the sorrow coming with the egg to lay and he walked off into his picture.

Impossible to believe but is truth nevertheless too much sorrows.

How to grasp with the grapple sorrows? How to understand the excellence of the great squares of black now done in? Glad he was to become the Jews exhibit this year for final success and laurels before the departure. He have this satisfaction how he was in *Life* think of the satisfaction probably so much it caused death. For to appear in *Life* is too often the cause of death.

Tomorrow the solemn. The requiems alone in the hermit hatch. Before the ikons the offering. The oblations. The clean oblations all round thunder quiet silence black picture oblations. Make Mass beautiful silence like big black picture speaking requiem. Tears in the shadows of hermit hatch requiems blue black tone. Sorrows for Ad in the oblation quiet peace request rest. Tomorrow is solemn in the hermit hatch for the old lutheran reinhardt commie paintblack. Tomorrow is the eternal solemn fending off the purge-fire place non catch old skipper reinhardt safely by into the heavens. Tomorrow is the solemn and the barefoots and the ashes and the masses, oldstyle liturgy masses without the colonels and without the sergeants yelling sit down. Just old black quiet requiems in hermit hatch with decent sorrows good bye college chum.

It is all solemn and sads all over beginning to fade out people in process before comes the march of ogres and djinns. Well out of the way is safe Reinhardt in his simple black painting the final statement includes all.

Next thing you know the procession of weevils and the big germ. Pardon the Big Germ in capitals. It is now waking in the labor-blossoms a big pardon Big Germ. Ad is well out of sight in his blacks. It is likely too true the bad fortunes and

the sorrows. Gypsy Rose Lee look in her crystal ball and see no more jokes and no more funnies it is not any more like thirty-seven college chums. I must therefore cease and sit in the sorrows. I was not write before because I was in the dump with a sickness. Nothing bad. But you can only daid oncet. Like said uncle arthur in the aforesaid. Well is all silence in the den of glooms. Look around at some cheerful flower.

Lv.

Commentary on the Correspondence

1

Merton, Reinhardt, and Lax acquired as young men a taste for punning language which they retained ever after. The immediate inspiration must have been James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In the Merton-Lax correspondence (see endnote 7 for details), Joycean complexity and playfulness dominate to the point that one sometimes puts the published letters aside with an exasperated sigh; they could write in wholly impenetrable code to one another. The Merton-Reinhardt correspondence has sallies and sorties of this kind ("Am I my blubber's kipper?"), but it never goes over the top.

At the time of this opening letter, mid 1956, Merton must have been unsure about Reinhardt's political and religious convictions. Hence the inquiry, relayed by Lax to Reinhardt, about Rome or Moscow, Togliatti or Sergius. This is tightly wound—these witty men delighted in puzzling each other—but the meanings are clear enough. The choice between Rome and Moscow suggests Catholicism on the one hand and Communism on the other, while the choice between Togliatti and Sergius reverses the proposition for the fun of it: Palmiro Togliatti was the crusading leader of the Italian Communist party, while St. Sergius of Radonezh was a fourteenth-century Russian saint, still widely venerated.

The mid-section of this letter, Reinhardt's inspired riff on his many parts, ties, and bondages, is altogether memorable. "Part of me is part of things"—few could say this so cleanly and well. The wacky cumulative arithmetic is just one delicious element among others in this classic Reinhardt self-assessment.

With some reserve, Reinhardt offers to design the cover for a pamphlet or perhaps a series of pamphlets Merton has prepared

for the novices at Gethsemani, whom he was serving at the time as Master of Novices, their principal instructor in monastic knowledge and customs. He questions whether his art is fully suited to the purpose. Beyond that, he questions whether his sensibility is attuned to Merton's world: "I don't know what to do with your Christian words... I understand the invisible, unseen but not the unspoken...." And finally, on a quite separate topic, he asks Merton what sort of contribution he might make to two Catholic journals, *Pax* and *Jubilee*, with which their friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice were associated.

No instructional materials were ultimately published at Gethsemani with a cover by Ad Reinhardt.

2

Merton responded promptly to Reinhardt with much the same playfulness and sudden rushes of seriousness. "...As for the choices, the answer is choose everything." These few words, seemingly tossed off in the course of a playful opening, are rooted in Merton's engagement with Zen Buddhism, still quite new in 1956. They reflect the intensity of his engagement but also something that was his before he encountered Zen. Call it the need to say yes to life, to love fully. In the mid 1960s he wrote, very beautifully, "My whole being must be a yes and an amen...."⁸

In his discussion of the pamphlets being readied for the novices, Merton refers to the distance that had appeared over the years between what he is expected by monastic authority to teach and what he privately feels and thinks. The stark cover design he hopes to receive from Reinhardt will wordlessly convey his deeper view: "...the cover need say no more than the general darkness which lies beyond the conclusions and in which the realities are grasped which the words fail to signify as much as they pretend to." The year is 1956, many years still lie ahead. Merton was not yet pressing hard against the bounds set for him by Cistercian tradition and his Father Abbot, but the signs that he would need to do so, for the sake of his maturing religious vocation and his gifts and concerns as a writer, are already evident.

Merton's allusions to Zen Buddhism are wonderfully revealing. More than a year earlier, he had written to his friend and publisher, Jay Laughlin of New Directions Books, to request whatever books Laughlin could send by D.T. Suzuki, the sage and scholar who had almost single-handedly introduced Zen to the

West.⁹ The impact of the books he received is evident: "The very name of Suzuki produces in me electric currents from head to foot." The lines that follow in the letter show how very much Merton had absorbed from Suzuki's writings. We can be certain of at least one book he was reading, *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind* (1949), in which Dr. Suzuki explored in depth the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui-Neng, who organized much of his teaching around the concept of *wu-nien*, translated by Suzuki as "no-thought" or "no-mind." Where Merton offers in the letter his own vernacular gloss on this ancient concept ("Leave them all be: they are okay the way they are"), we witness a very early stage of his adoption of Zen thinking and impulse to naturalize it, to make it his own.

Even with generous help from within the American Zen community, I've been unable to track down the specific source of Merton's cited line about the wooden man and the stone man. In Zen literature as a whole, the images refer to the Zen adept who is no longer enslaved by life experience happy or sad: he or she (the stone woman shows up in Zen literature) is unshakably serene.¹⁰

Merton's reference to jail for subversive activities signals that he expects to attend a mid-summer conference away from the monastery. It was to be one of his rare sorties beyond the walls, and he speaks of it lightly. Not light at all in the same paragraph is his question about Reinhardt's college courses in the history of Far Eastern painting. "Do you think," asks Merton, "there is any hope of anyone really learning what is behind all that and what has been so largely forgotten by everyone?" This perception of forgotten wisdom—of a Church that has forgotten its own contemplative traditions, and here of a distant world of art that could teach great things, if only we could learn great things—was much with Merton in these years and in years to come. He longed to retrieve lost wisdom at the conceptual level and wise practices at the level of daily life. The poem, "Wisdom," with which he brought these thoughts to a close, must have been very new at the time Merton wrote this note to Reinhardt. It was published in the following year in his book, *The Strange Islands*.¹¹

Merton's closing remarks about "the insides of this particular existence" return to the theme of his restless, increasingly disillusioned experience of monastic life, already evident paragraphs earlier where he refers to the difference between his private views and those he felt obliged to offer in the novice pamphlets. Again

Zen Buddhism throws much of the light and offers much of the language:

In all directions people run as fast as they can from themselves, even when they are religious, because they want to appear to themselves as gods and the effort is exhausting. After having run in all directions at once, a person decides through no fault of his own that he has to stop running and finds himself in the center of everything, having everything knowing everything because they have and know nothing and realize that this is the way it should be. This, as I say, comes about against all our own plans and best intentions, and the less said about it the better.

The overall vision owes much to Zen, although at the end the Christian notion of grace unmerited, freely offered by the Lord and wholly redemptive, makes itself felt. In these years, Merton had begun working toward the integration of Christian faith with the stark psychological realism and practice of awareness here and now, which he had discovered in Zen.

Always ready in these years to spring free of solemnity so as not to be snared by pride and prudery and who knows what else, Merton writes with good humor that he would resist becoming an Arhat until after a visit from Reinhardt. Well versed in Buddhist thought, Reinhardt would have recognized at once Merton's reference to the early Buddhist Arhats, enlightened disciples of the Buddha, represented particularly in Chinese art as majestic, sometimes marvelously eccentric elders.

At the very end of his letter, Merton expresses his appreciation for one of Reinhardt's wittiest cartoon art commentaries, "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala," which Reinhardt must have sent him.¹² The play on words, multiple, takes in the title of a famed book by James Joyce, the mandala studies of C.G. Jung, and the typical look and feel of Tibetan in English transcription.

You will notice in Merton's postscript that he requested a small painting from Reinhardt. From this request, much good would come.

An admission of defeat: who are the "blue man" who "sits on the dome and the other one [who] draws forth stars from his pockets"? Merton's references to the Blue Dome in letter 15 yield to inquiry: he is thinking of a shrine complex in Iran where the Imam Ali ibn Musa-ar-Reza has his resting place, surmounted by an el-

egant turquoise-blue dome. Merton had much appreciated a textile from that shrine, preserved in the Cincinnati Art Museum.¹³ As well, he translated verse inscribed on the textile in his poem, "Tomb Cover of Imam Riza."¹⁴ But I have no idea what Merton means by the blue man and the one with stars, images distantly reminiscent of the Revelations of St. John, but for the moment unmoored.

3

Written only six days after the preceding, this letter is all fun and mostly self-explanatory. Merton seems to have been tripping over himself—his friend Ed Rice, an editor and capable designer, must also have been asked to design the novice pamphlets and had gotten out ahead of Reinhardt. Merton nonetheless encourages Reinhardt to continue his design effort and already has a new, ambitious idea to offer: Merton would write (or adapt) a series of 50 "small sharp koans," the enigmatic teaching tales of Zen tradition, and Reinhardt would illustrate the book. "...wow, how you like question mark stop." This "wizard idea" didn't come to fruition, but as it breezes by we catch a glimpse of Merton's tireless creativity.

4

Reinhardt's response to Merton about the novice pamphlets must have crossed the preceding letter in the mail—the dates are tight and Reinhardt doesn't realize that Merton's plans were changing. Reinhardt offers quite a thorough study of potential cover designs, complete with two sets of sketches. He plunges in his letter from a proper artist-client discussion into the intricately furnished world of his own creative life as he deploys the long list of works of art that his design will somehow evoke. "Amida-Buddhist ceilings, Russian icons, Irish stones, Jain prayer cards, Persian rugs, Carolingian reliefs..." and so on through many more reference points in the history of art. Reinhardt's knowing love of these things is evident, and his impulse to create litanies or chants, as in his published writings, is also audible.

A few references in the balance of the letter may be unclear. Reinhardt had read and liked an early poem by Merton, "Tower of Babel," published by Ed Rice in the Catholic journal, *Jubilee* (3:6, October, 1955),¹⁵ where it was accompanied by a reproduction of the famous painting on the same theme by Pieter Breughel.

Reinhardt's inquiry about the initial "jhs," which Merton almost always inscribed at the top of his correspondence, is a teasing joke about a Columbia classmate, John Hampton Slate, strictly speaking an aviation lawyer who at Merton's request turned his skills to providing an initial structure for the Merton Legacy Trust. The initials are a beautifully solemn Christian remembrance, more familiar in the form IHS, a monogram for the name of Jesus derived from Greek.

Reinhardt's last paragraph is a funny and sad, slightly exasperated tease targeting Merton's presumed ignorance because he lives the cloistered life. A few paragraphs earlier he had launched the theme: "You don't read newspapers? Or see television?" And now he continues: "Do you know who Elvis Presley and Erwin Panofsky are?" This is a droll juxtaposition—the pop culture idol and the distinguished art historian, whose writings Reinhardt would have encountered as a graduate student of art history. A sophisticated *New Yorker*, Reinhardt is not about to wax sentimental over Merton's status as a monk. Yet Reinhardt was a seeker, no less severe and impelled from within than his friend.

5

A lighthearted letter from Merton to Reinhardt, it has few points that call for added context. Merton's mention of a forthcoming book, *Thirty-Seven Meditations*, refers to the book actually published in 1958 as *Thoughts in Solitude*.¹⁶ The paragraph about Cistercian architecture mentions the marvelous series of books on Romanesque art and architecture edited and published by French Benedictine monks under the name Editions Zodiaque.

Apart from these matters of detail, there is one strong pulse in the letter: Merton's response to the litany of arts in Reinhardt's previous letter. "All the words you mention are for me like letters from home, viz. covers, stones, prayer cards, ceilings, beams..." and so on. In mid 1956, when Merton wrote these words, he was not yet seriously practicing a visual art, although he is likely to have been doing brush drawings on simple, repeated themes—above all, the Blessed Virgin and the portrait of a tonsured, bearded monk with wistful eyes. But the immediacy and power of his response to Reinhardt's inventory of kinds and times of art suggest that Merton could himself become a working artist.

6

Between Merton's letters dated July 19 and August 22, 1956 (nos. 5 and 6), Reinhardt sent his friend a wonderfully droll collection of line portraits (fig. 1), ranging in theme from a "Central Asian Cistercian" with a peaked Tibetan hat to various glowering devils and an assortment of "Clowns for Lax." Their friend Robert Lax had followed a circus troupe in 1949, and in 1959 would publish a book of poems, *Circus of the Sun*, inspired by his experiences in and around the circus. Reinhardt and Merton must have known that the book was on its way.

In the Thomas Merton Papers, Columbia University, there is what appears to be a draft of the sketches in fig. 1; the images are much the same, though fewer in number and lacking captions. This is not the last time we will see Reinhardt making a draft of something he wished to convey to Merton. The sketches in fig. 1 float free of any specific letter. There may be a gap at this point in the preserved correspondence, as it seems doubtful that Reinhardt would have sent the sketches with no accompanying note.

Merton immediately applies Reinhardt's intriguing human comedy to his own life and circumstances. "We have all the characters on your graph present here in this domicile," he writes. Looking around him among his monastic brothers, he finds the same cast of characters as in Reinhardt's collection of "snowflakes," as Merton puts it.

The "Georgia Cracker Cleric" is one of Reinhardt's sketches, and we know from a prior letter that this is a joking reference to Lax. Merton writes that Lax is visiting the monastery just then, and he needs to join him for supper. The word play about *pax* refers to the Catholic journal, *Pax*, to which Lax and other friends contributed. Getting Russia into it—the "mysterious russian *pax*"—must be yet another tease targeting Reinhardt's involvement with Communism when both men were young.

7

Every reader will quickly recognize that Merton's letter to Reinhardt of October 29, 1957, is one of the gems of this correspondence. It is perfect Merton.

In an earlier letter (no. 2) Merton had asked Reinhardt whether he could spare a small painting "for the cell in which I perch." Reinhardt rather promptly promised to do so: "I'll send you a

small painting in the fall, or bring it...." But well more than a year has now passed, and Merton again raises the topic, this time with superb humor and mock pathos—beneath which one senses a very real pathos and need. There is again likely to be a gap at this point in the sequence of letters. The extant correspondence doesn't reveal why Merton would return just now to the topic of his wish for a small painting.

Apart from a few details—for example, the custom Merton shared with Lax of signing letters in some original, obscure way, here "Folio" or perhaps "Folie"—the letter needs no commentary. But one larger point might easily escape us. Merton had never seen an original Black Painting. He had almost certainly seen illustrations, and if not illustrations then he must have heard enough to know roughly what a Black Painting was. But unlike many of us now reading this correspondence, who have seen Reinhardt's mature work in museums and galleries, Merton could not at the time have fully known what he was asking for. This explains, in part, the truly touching letter that follows, in which Merton conveys to Reinhardt his initial responses to the small painting that did, indeed, reach him at Gethsemani.

It is difficult today to imagine the experience of seeing a Reinhardt Black Painting for the first time. The next letter restores that experience to us.

8

Merton's acknowledgment of Reinhardt's gift¹⁷ is in a letter dated November 23, 1957. An earlier journal entry, for November 17, 1957, records in perceptual flashes Merton's first responses to the Black Painting:

Reinhardt finally sent his "small" painting. Almost invisible cross on a black background. As though immersed in darkness and trying to emerge from it. Seen in relation to my other object[s], the picture is meaningless—a black square "without purpose." You have to look hard to see the cross. One must turn away from everything else and concentrate on the picture as though peering through a window into the night. The picture demands this—or is meaningless for I presume that someone might be unmoved by any such demand. I should say a very "holy" picture—helps prayer—an "image" without features to accustom the mind at once to the night of prayer—

and to help one set aside trivial and useless images that wander into prayer and spoil it.

He deserves the Molotov-Zhukhov medal as the artist who has gone farthest from "socialist realism."¹⁸

This entry and his letter show vividly that Merton was far better prepared to appreciate a Reinhardt Black Painting than the New York critics and collectors who at the time were still treating Reinhardt with indifference or contempt—Reinhardt's breakthrough to fame and recognition in 1967, the last year of his life, was quite far ahead. Merton's practice of contemplative prayer, under the inspiration of St. John of the Cross and other Catholic teachers of the "night of prayer," and his avid study of Zen Buddhism, still at an early stage in 1957, provided him with all of the concepts and intuitive recognitions he needed to embrace Reinhardt's painting in a way that must have been enormously touching to Reinhardt himself.

Merton's thought that the painting is "a black square without purpose" draws from Zen. A few years later, when Merton was first beginning to spend time at the hermitage that had recently been built with him in mind, he returned to the notion of purposelessness in a way that shows us what he meant—not aimlessness, not triviality, but something more like transcendent freedom. Speaking of his life at the hermitage, he wrote:

Afternoons are for nothing.

For cutting away all that is practical.

Learn to wash your cup and give rise to nothing.

What house? No house could possibly make a difference.

It is a house for nothing. It has no purpose. Do not give it one, and the whole universe will be thankful.¹⁹

One further point in this letter needs clarification. At the heart of Merton's memorable praise of the painting is an antique word. "It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting," he wrote. I cannot imagine that the marvelously Latinate word "latreutic" was common, even at Gethsemani, even in 1957, well before Vatican II and its introduction of the vernacular Mass, which signaled the retreat of Latin. Referring to the worship of God, "latreutic" fits into a triad of terms, *latria*, *hyperdulia*, *dulia*, by which the Church designates worship of God, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints.²⁰

The swinging freedom of Merton's description of Reinhardt's painting alerts us that when he wrote privately about art in these years he used the full resources of his keen eyes and creative imagination. It was otherwise when he wrote of art for the public. He would soon be struggling to complete a book on sacred art, under the title *Art and Worship*, which started as a joyful project and became, by 1960, a thorn in his side. The book was ultimately never published.²¹ He would need to dare to release his perceptions of art, rich and true, from a preachy, constricted view that he had perhaps unknowingly absorbed in the course of his monastic experience. He was repelled by the sentimental, realistic Catholic art of holy cards and standard statuary of the saints. But in 1957 he had not yet found a whole and truly individual view of art. He had only bits and pieces. The utter simplicity and sobriety of Reinhardt's canvas skipped over all that and spoke to him in depth. Strange to say, Merton was one of the first to understand Reinhardt's art.

The letter includes the customary dig at Reinhardt for his youthful Communistic leanings. In this case, Merton conjures up a prize for the painting *least like* the prescribed Socialist Realism of the Soviet Union.

9

This letter, Reinhardt to Merton, was written just after Reinhardt in the company of Robert Lax had visited Merton at Gethsemani. Vividly descriptive, it is one of the many treasures of the correspondence. Among other things, it reflects Reinhardt's love-hate relationship with formal religious discipline. On the one hand, Reinhardt writes with perfect Zen pitch about his photographic venture at the monastery: "I needed more time to find more things to point my camera at. There's never anything out there always, theoretically, for me, anywhere in the world, but some places take longer to put something there...." This is indeed perfect Zen pitch, paradoxical, playful, aware of the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*—the unutterable, infinitely alive emptiness at the core of things. On the other hand, toward the end of the letter Reinhardt produces a coarse joke about Zen, asking whether *zazen*, the practice of sitting meditation, bears any relation to German *Zitzen*, meaning teats. Like us all, Reinhardt was trying to find his way: he was allergic to pretentiousness, including religious pretension; he avoided organizations and adopted the role of gadfly when near

them; and yet he learned in depth from the written texts and art of religious and spiritual traditions, virtually all of which developed within the shelter of ordered communities, as he well knew.

Reinhardt's mention of Ulfert Wilke, professor of studio art at the University of Louisville, is a sign of future meetings and meanings. In the spring of 1959 when this letter was written, Merton had not yet begun to explore with brush and ink and paper the world of calligraphic marks and signs—that would come later, in the fall of 1960, and Wilke would prove to be a friend to that enterprise. Wilke and Merton met only some years later, in fall 1963.

At the end of the letter, Reinhardt expresses the hope that he and Merton can "argue about art and religion some more." They must have done a good deal of that when they had been together. Merton would have asked Reinhardt for insights that could enrich his planned book on sacred art, and Reinhardt's remarks in this letter betray a certain impatience, as if he is unsure whether Merton had been listening well. "...Can I help you say what's right, instead of saying things people want to hear and agree with?" Merton's response to this letter, nearly immediate, betrays some irritation in return.

10

"I am not clear," writes Merton, "in what way I was writing just what will please readers because a lot of what I have written about art will make them mad." And so he joins battle, with just a trace of rancor, against Reinhardt's assertion. Other elements in the letter clearly continue discussions begun when they were together at Gethsemani—for example, the topic of iconoclasm. As Merton notes, threads from the Byzantine quarrel over the validity of sacred images found their way into the Cistercian Order. Its founder, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, was indifferent to art. Merton's critique of Bernard's attitude—"Who is there to be distracted?"—draws on the Zen inquiry into human identity to make its point. Reinhardt himself, advocate of the most extreme and radical abstraction in art, was a born iconoclast. From his perspective all descriptive images were anecdotal and ultimately trivial.

Reinhardt had expressed in the previous letter a concern that Merton viewed him as a "quietist," not a word of praise in the traditional Catholic lexicon. A current Catholic encyclopedia defines it, in part, as "the doctrine which declares that man's highest perfection consists in a sort of psychical self-annihilation and a

consequent absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence even during the present life.... Quietism is thus generally speaking a sort of false or exaggerated mysticism."²² Merton now assures Reinhardt of his admiration for Reinhardt's "elegant and effective" approach to issues of importance to Merton also: the emptying out of all personal nonsense so as to be open to something other and incommensurably greater. For Reinhardt the locus of this drama was the work of art; for Merton it was the living person.

There is a further point about art that the reader may find puzzling. Merton's deepest preference in art was for Byzantine and Russian Orthodox icons, which he glosses here as "the Mount Athos tradition." His hermitage chapel in later years would have images of this kind. Some were precious antiques offered by friends, others were reproductions which he valued just as much owing to their religiously powerful imagery. Readers will find in his essay, "Mount Athos," in *Disputed Questions* (1960), Merton's sweet praise of the Holy Mountain's religious attitudes, way of life, and art. In the journals and other correspondence occur passages recording his love of the icon tradition—as for example these words from a letter written toward the end of his life:

The Christ of the ikons represents a traditional *experience* formulated in a theology of light, the ikon being a kind of sacramental medium for the illumination and awareness of the glory of Christ within us (in faith). The hieratic rules for ikon painting are not just rigid and formal, they are the guarantee of an authentic transmission of the possibility of this experience, provided the ikon painter was also himself a man of prayer (like Roublev).²³

Toward the end of the letter, Merton's contrast of the 14th-century Florentine painter, Giotto, with the 15th-century Venetian painter, Carlo Crivelli, sets up but retreats from a discussion of pictorial style in relation to the religious moment. Crivelli was an elegant painter within a tradition that had already found its stylistic fundamentals, while Giotto was the artist of genius who first discovered and displayed those fundamentals. Merton seems to intuit behind Giotto's greatness another greatness in the religious sensibility of his time.

11

Reinhardt's letter of June, 1959, still moves in the enriched wake of his May visit to Gethsemani. The seven photographs Reinhardt sent of that occasion have not come to light, but they may yet be found.²⁴ Central to this letter is Reinhardt's continued questioning of Merton's views on art. Merton may well be a famous author read by millions but Reinhardt, who served all by doubting and probing, did not neglect to doubt and probe here, too.

Merton had written his Zen-like pronouncement: "Who is there to be distracted?" It doesn't suit Reinhardt, who takes a more earthy approach. He asks Merton whether he is speaking of statues—they can't be distracted. But real people are easily distracted, and in that lies a certain tragedy: "Nobody knows what's real." This is not the end of Reinhardt's uneasiness with Merton's thinking. Responding to Merton's thoughts in the previous letter about "that which is religious and sacred in a work of art," Reinhardt cuts him no slack. He describes Merton's views as perhaps new to theologians on art, by which Reinhardt means nothing very complimentary, but out of touch with the reality of the art object. Reinhardt is emerging as Merton's loyal adversary, where questions of art are concerned.

12

Because Merton and Reinhardt belonged to different classes at Columbia University (respectively, 1937 and 1935), they must have been unaware that each had been a member of the same final-year honor society, the Senior Society of Sachems, founded in 1915. This letter is newsy, although not quite serene in every line. Among other things, Reinhardt conveys his edgy attitude toward fame ("I don't have to apologize for that remark?").

As Merton clarifies in the next letter, Reinhardt had been misinformed about the appearance of an art book by Merton; nothing had as yet been published.

13

Merton to Reinhardt in response is mostly fun. Nacoms was another Columbia institution, a senior honor society, apparently a rival to the Sachems.²⁵ Later Merton refers not kindly to Eloise Spaeth, the young art historian who had been asked by Robert Giroux, Merton's friend and publisher, to help Merton solve the

difficulties that had been preventing progress on his projected book, *Art and Worship*.

Merton's longing to see Reinhardt again at Gethsemani, restated in letter after letter, is the poignant note here. Reinhardt brought to him the warmth of old friendship and a keen, demanding knowledge of art which Merton clearly respected.

14

Letters 14 and 15 enact a drama that proved to be a turning point for Merton. The letters do not simply reflect that drama, as if they were reports after the fact. They are the drama itself, direct vehicles of transformation. However, background information is needed to understand the exchange.

Since the later 1950s, Merton had been struggling to write *Art and Worship* and, as we have seen, recruited Reinhardt to help him illustrate the section on sacred art in Asia. Robert Giroux had introduced Eloise Spaeth into the project in order to bring an art historian's experience and judgment to bear, especially in the field of modern sacred art where Merton had run short of ideas. Merton had nurtured for some time the thought that the language of Abstract Expressionism, the art of his own time and place, could lend itself richly to the themes of Christian art. However, it was not until he encountered the art of a devout Catholic convert, William Congdon, who painted classic images of Catholic spirituality in an Abstract Expressionist style, that Merton felt justified in his original surmise. Eloise Spaeth shared his enthusiasm for Congdon's work. Together they felt that they had discovered a great and specifically Catholic modern master. Merton invited Congdon to visit him at Gethsemani, but even before that meeting occurred he wrote a statement in praise of Congdon's art that appeared as a lengthy endorsement on the back of a substantial art book: *In My Disc of Gold: Itinerary to Christ of William Congdon* (ca. 1962). What Merton wrote could be described, not unfairly, as purple prose:

There is in the recent painting of William Congdon an air of theophany that imposes silence.... Here we see a completely extraordinary breakthrough of genuine spiritual light in the art of an abstract expressionist.... Here we see a rare instance in which the latent spiritual *logos* of abstract art has been completely set free. The inner dynamism which so often remains

pent up and chokes to death in inarticulate, frustrated mannerism, is here let loose with all its power. How has this been possible? Here the dynamism of abstraction has been set free from its compulsive, Dionysian and potentially orgiastic self-frustration and raised to the level of spirituality....

To Merton's good fortune and misfortune, Reinhardt received this effusion as a mailing piece and fired off the letter reproduced here, no. 14 in the series. "Fired off" is the right expression as to general mood and impact, but in point of fact the Archives of American Art has on microfilm the draft of a key portion of the letter—and so we know that Reinhardt took aim before he fired.

On February 20, 1962, Merton recorded in his journal an initial reaction to Reinhardt's letter: "A very funny and also serious letter from Ad Reinhardt, mocking and reproving me for the piece I wrote about Congdon and which is splashed all over the back of his big book. Ad is perfectly right. Congdon not yet here."²⁶ But that was hardly the end of the matter. Two weeks later, he sat down to write Reinhardt from within the shock and turmoil that his friend's letter had caused. That response follows here as the 15th letter.

There is one further movement across this map that readers would wish to know. Since late 1960, Merton had been experimenting with brush-drawn calligraphy on paper, probably in the quiet remoteness of the newly built hermitage at Gethsemani. He was not yet living there full time—that would take some years more—but the hermitage quickly became his second home, the center and solace of his life in the 1960s and, among other things, an improvised art studio. Merton's experiments as a visual artist began with images that had debts of studentship to Ad Reinhardt and to the late period of Paul Klee, the twentieth-century artist he most deeply admired, but he was moving steadily toward his own ground, midway between Abstract Expressionism and the Zen calligraphy he so appreciated in the work of the eighteenth-century priest and artist, Sengai.²⁷ Although in 1962 Merton's own art had not yet matured—he was still finding his way, unsure but advancing—he was nonetheless now writing to the artist Ad Reinhardt as the artist Thomas Merton.

The high point of Merton's side of the correspondence in terms of imaginative ingenuity and biographical importance, this letter needs surprisingly little commentary. Merton's anguish is real. He plays with it, makes it utterly funny, mocks himself in ways hilarious, philosophical, and sad, but throughout he is asking forgiveness. For what, really? For so wanting a baptized, Catholic, at least marginally traditional solution to the difficulties surrounding contemporary sacred art that he had turned his back on the world to which Ad Reinhardt and his peers belonged. He had described Congdon's art as transcending and legitimizing a darker realm of art in which, Merton had written, there was little more than "inarticulate, frustrated mannerism..., compulsive, Dionysian and potentially orgiastic self-frustration...." Reading these words, Reinhardt could only have felt that his friend had slipped into attitudes—judgmental, oddly frantic—from which there was perhaps no return. It was a great kindness on Reinhardt's part, and a sign of his underlying confidence in Merton, that he wrote at all.

Merton had broken faith not only with the formidably rich quest of artists of his own time; he had also broken faith with himself. His own tentative explorations with ink, brush, and paper drew from Abstract Expressionism and shared with the artists of that generation—his own generation, precisely—a deep interest in Far Eastern calligraphy and the expressive power of abstraction. In his impromptu hermitage studio he was not exploring traditional Christian imagery. He was learning to float in the wild seas of unconstrained visual imagination, learning to let the brush lead, learning to discover rather than impose. He was learning as a visual artist lessons long since learned as a poet.

There was a debate in Merton's mind and heart at this time between the old and the new, the contained and the released, the known and the wholly uncertain. Close readers of Merton will know that this debate was occurring not only where art was concerned, but also in his approach to issues of war and peace, racial justice, and the religious life itself. Merton's eventual resolve to explore as a visual artist the forms and methods of his own time parallels his resolve to participate fearlessly in what he perceived as the great issues of his time in the world at large.

After this letter, Merton accepted the art of his time as his own. His friend, Reinhardt, who had not ceased helping him, could now be still more helpful.

16

Some 18 months after the preceding exchange, Merton briefly reports to Reinhardt that he is working with great intensity on brush-drawn calligraphy and has received the visit of Reinhardt's friend, the artist Ulfert Wilke.²⁸ An artist of very real sophistication, born and educated in Europe with a wide circle of artist friends ranging from Ad Reinhardt to Mark Tobey and Robert Motherwell, Wilke had studied brush calligraphy in Kyoto. Sent by Reinhardt, he was the ideal partner and mentor for Merton at this point in Merton's development as a visual artist.

It appears that soon after Wilke's first visit—there were further meetings in the following year—Merton began to explore a very simple but effective approach to printmaking, based on transferring marks from one sheet of paper to another by hand pressure. Merton's art at this point is akin to Wilke's calligraphic art of somewhat earlier date, which Wilke had shown him. The topic of Merton's printmaking is too complex for discussion here, but readers will find a full discussion and examples in *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*.

17

Reinhardt's immediate response to Merton's previous letter is rich in content. Reinhardt tells briefly about his participation in the celebrated March on Washington for civil rights, August 1963, at which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his great speech, "I have a dream," to a peaceful assembly of some 250,000 people. Reinhardt had expected to see Robert Lax and the gifted Catholic poet, Ned O'Gorman, at the March, but in the huge crowd failed to spot them.

Reinhardt responds with marvelous warmth to Merton's gift of representative examples of his brush-drawn calligraphy (the first of three such gifts in the coming months). There is likely to be a gap in the preserved correspondence at this point—if Merton wrote a cover letter with the gift of calligraphy, it has not yet come to light. This letter sets up a witty exchange about the size of Merton's calligraphy, too small in Reinhardt's view. Merton replies archly and with good humor in the next letter.

Reinhardt's bitterness over his treatment by the New York art establishment is poignantly evident toward the end of this letter, where he refers to his inclusion in a prominent exhibition of much younger artists among whom he felt out of place.²⁹ His gloss on the stock phrase "that's life" is classic Reinhardt.

18

Merton responds with little delay to Reinhardt's most recent letter and sends a further batch of calligraphic drawings with a plea for fine paper—"your dusty old correspondent who is very poor...got no papers any more...." By now, in late 1963, Merton was fully engaged in the exploration of visual art and kinds of meaning that have nothing, or nearly nothing, to do with words. The realm of images had opened.

Readers who are aware of Merton's interest in photography, growing ever stronger in the course of the 1960s, will note his glancing reference here: "What else I do is make the snapshot of old distilleries."

19

Two months after receiving Merton's request for fine paper, Reinhardt sends three types of paper, including the "non-yellowing-fine-Japanese-paper" that Merton would come to prefer. Some of his most beautiful calligraphies and prints are on this paper. Apart from this generous offering, Reinhardt sets up the premise for the next extended round of humor, this time focused on the concept of being designated a "dean."

20

As noted at the beginning of this exploration, this last preserved letter of January 12, 1964, is unlikely to be the last exchanged. They are both in motion and have more topics than ever of shared interest. Merton includes a third batch of calligraphy in this mailing, works now part of a generous donation to the Thomas Merton Center by the Reinhardt family.

Merton is engaged by now in printmaking on the basis of brushed calligraphic marks, to which he was learning to add found objects such as grass stems from the fields surrounding the hermitage. Helped by Ulfert Wilke toward the end of the year, he would by then be sufficiently confident to accept the invitation of a local Catholic college to mount an exhibition of his ink drawings and prints.

Merton collaborated with Emil Antonucci, artist and graphic designer, to produce an anti-war book in 1962, *Original Child Bomb*. Antonucci's heavily inked, calligraphic illustrations for the book

must relate in some way to the development of Merton's own calligraphic art, but it has so far proved difficult to document and specify this connection.

Readers interested in Merton's changing relations with his Church, his Order, and the monastery will not miss the poignant humor of his discussion of the initials OCSO, denoting the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, to which he belonged as monk and priest. Through the 1960s he became more and more informal, with the exception of his conduct of the Mass, his enduring love of the traditional Latin of the Church, and careful service to his community as Master of Novices (until 1965). Informal though he now was in some respects, he was also one of the most strictly observant Cistercians of all: observing himself and his friends and the troubled life of society with keen vigilance, ever-increasing compassion, and faith in the workings of the Lord.

Coda

Thomas Merton outlived Ad Reinhardt by some 16 months. His letter to Robert Lax, conveying and mourning Reinhardt's death, is the natural coda to this vital exchange of letters. The letter reads easily without added commentary, although it is partially written in the Joycean, fluidly transforming language that Merton and Lax had enjoyed with one another for years.

A few points of information may interest the reader. Schwester Therese refers to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Savior, a Merton friend and correspondent who was one of the earliest and most thorough collectors of Merton memorabilia—correspondence, manuscript, and much else. Her collection, now in the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, is an important resource for Merton scholars.

The "Jews exhibit" is not an attractive expression but without anti-Semitic intent (it is simply another example of contracted Joyce-speak). Merton is referring to the 1967 exhibition of Reinhardt's art at The Jewish Museum in New York City, the art-world event that at last paid him well-deserved homage as an artist. Merton also mentions the article on Reinhardt in *Life* magazine, cited in earlier pages (and offering some of the most compelling photographs of Reinhardt ever made). He speculates that all of the attention was too much for his friend to bear, too unfamil-

iar. The thought that Reinhardt "walked off into his picture" echoes an old Chinese tale recounted in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, whom Merton read with particular care over the years.

What is "the Big Germ"? Earlier in the year, U.S. Army efforts to develop biological weapons had been in the news. That must have stuck in Merton's mind as a further dreadful feature of the violence and threats in society at large, of which he was acutely aware through these years.

In the first issue of his literary journal, *Monks Pond*, Merton wrote a brief biographical entry for his late friend. Using the slightly formal language suited to the task, he acknowledged his friend in terms of his own values as a religious seeker. Reinhardt was "a rigorous contemplative." He was "prophetic." He was the black monk. Merton saluted not just a friend but a companion on the way.

Ad Reinhardt was an abstract painter who died in August 1967 at the height of his powers, soon after an exhibition of all his most important work at the Jewish Museum in New York. Though he had made common cause with abstract expressionists like Pollock and De Kooning in the fifties, he differed entirely from them. A classicist and a rigorous contemplative, he was only just beginning to be recognized as prophetic by a new generation. He was called the "black monk" of abstract art, a purist who made Mondrian look problematic, who referred to himself as a "quietist" and said: "I'm just making the last paintings which anyone can make."³⁰

Notes

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1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One, 1939-1942* (ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 128-29.

2. See Thomas B. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, Düsseldorf: Kunsthalles; Rome: Marlborough, 1975.

3. David Bourdon, "Master of the Minimal," *Life*, February 3, 1967, pp. 45-52; *Ad Reinhardt Paintings*, New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966 (exhibition dates Nov. 23, 1966 - January 15, 1967).

4. See Barbara Rose, ed., *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Viking, 1975). The classic study of Ad Reinhardt's art is Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Abrams, 1981).

5. Robert E. Daggy, ed., *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1968), pp. 6-8.

6. The Archives of American Art has microfilm of all letters attributed to that collection. The originals remain with the Reinhardt family.

7. Arthur W. Biddle, ed., *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 368-69.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (Christine M. Bochen, ed., New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 225.

9. See David D. Cooper, ed., *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, New York and London: Norton, 1997, p. 108.

10. See, for example, Victor Sogen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases from Koan Practice*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, indexed references.

11. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 279

12. See note 2.
13. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Four, 1960-1963* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 60-61.
14. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 985.
15. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 21-22.
16. Thanking Dr. Paul Pearson for this information.
17. For an illustration of the Black Painting given by Reinhardt to Merton, see Joseph Masheck, "Five Unpublished Letters...", p. 23.
18. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three, 1952-1960*, (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 139-40.
19. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 100.
20. Thanking Joseph Masheck for clarifying this triad of terms.
21. On the troubled manuscript *Art and Worship*, see David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens (GA) and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), chapter 4, and scattered references in Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*.
22. See www.newadvent.org/cathen/12608c.htm.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 642.
24. In a letter to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, 11 December 1959, Merton refers to photographs of himself, Lax, and Reinhardt, which he is sending as a Christmas present to some friends; this argues for the eventual recovery of the photographs. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 235. Thanks to Dr. Paul Pearson for this reference.
25. Thanking Joseph Masheck, a Columbia graduate, for information about honor societies.
26. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 204.
27. See Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, s.v. "Kyoto" and "D. T. Suzuki." A primary source for Sengai, assembled as a book in part from materials Merton had seen and valued, is D.T. Suzuki, *Sengai: The Zen Master* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).
28. For a fuller account, including correspondence between Merton and Wilke, see Roger Lipsey, "Thomas Merton and Ulfert Wilke: The Friendship of Artists," *The Merton Seasonal* 30.2 (Summer 2005), pp. 3-12.
29. Dorothy Miller, ed., *Americans 1963* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963).
30. Merton, *Monks Pond*, p. 62.