

# A Monk with the Spiritual Equipment of an Artist: The Art of Thomas Merton

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## Introduction

Thomas Merton's artistic worldview was no doubt inherited from his parents, Owen and Ruth Merton. They had met in Paris where they were both pursuing artistic careers, Ruth was interested in interior decoration and design and Owen was a New Zealand painter who had already had a number of exhibitions. Ruth wrote that "there is no more fascinating subject in the world than the influence of surroundings on the human character" and Thomas Merton had described his father in the opening pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* saying

His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking of Owen, Merton points to some trends in his father's art work which would later surface in Merton's photographs and drawings. Owen's work can be seen to be influenced by the work of Cezanne (with whom he in fact he shared an exhibition in London) and by a "synthetic cubism" adopting a "simplified and geometricised form."<sup>2</sup> This would also be true of Thomas Merton's own drawings which seem to be influenced by cubism as is seen in his use of strong, emphatic lines and a tendency to simplification, ignoring detail.

The obituary of Owen in the London *Times* described him as "a water-colour painter of distinction, who, had he lived longer, would have earned a wide reputation." It continued:

His pictures displayed a sense of design and a delicacy of colour which reflected his love of the Chinese masters, together with a strength and individuality which bore witness to the originality and power of the artists mind ... His love of landscape and his passion for painting enabled him to inspire all those who came in contact with him, and many other painters owe much to his helpful enthusiasm.<sup>3</sup>

It was inevitable that Thomas Merton should try his own hand at art. The earliest surviving images we have of Merton's were drawings he made to illustrate stories that he was writing in his early teens. Merton refers to these stories, and their illustrations, in his autobiography. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton, already an avid reader, recalls how he and his friends at the Lycee Ingres, in Montauban in 1926, when he was only eleven, "were all furiously writing novels" and that he was "engaged in a great adventure story." Although that particular story "was never finished" he recalls that he "finished at least one other, and probably two, besides one which I wrote at St. Antonin before coming to the Lycee." These novels "scribbled in exercise books, profusely illustrated in pen and ink"<sup>4</sup> may sound like the poetic license of the budding author writing in later years but, recently discovered manuscripts dating back to December 1929 confirm his description. *The Haunted Castle*<sup>5</sup> and *The Great Voyage*, obviously imitating the recently published Winnie the Pooh stories, are "profusely illustrated in pen and ink" and another, *Ravenswell*,<sup>6</sup> is an adventure story filling an exercise book of one hundred and fifty-eight pages, and was written in just twelve days.<sup>7</sup> Throughout Merton's life he would be influenced by the current trends in art, literature and other disciplines, and in these early novels we can see the beginning of this trend.

The next known images date from Merton's time at Columbia University—cartoons published in the *Jester*, the humorous magazine on campus of which Merton was the Art Editor in his senior year, other artwork saved by his Columbia friend and Godfather, Ed Rice,<sup>8</sup> along with materials in the Columbia University archives. On Merton's "Declaration of Intention" for permanent residence in the United States, completed in 1938, his stated occupation was "cartoonist and writer."<sup>9</sup> Some of Merton's cartoons, as with those of other contributors for the *Jester*,<sup>10</sup> bear some resemblance to the work of Thurber or other cartoonists publishing in *The New Yorker* at this time.

Other Images from this period include a variety of female nudes—joyful, laughing images, full of life and energy, at times provocative. Again, there are other images, which I would suggest, were imitations of movements in modern art that attracted him—the surrealists, Picasso, Calder or Joan Miro—a trend that would later continue in some of his artwork from Gethsemani.<sup>11</sup> Other images from this time included figures made up of words appropriate to the subject, for example, reflecting the exuberance of life in the thirties and then, later in the thirties, the growing shadows of war.

After his conversion to Catholicism in November 1938 the subjects of his drawings changed and, as seen in many of the images to be found in the archives at St. Bonaventure University where Merton taught prior to his entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941, line drawings of religious images came to dominate his artistic output, images though not as simple or stark as those he would draw in his early years in the monastery. However some images were still drawn by stringing words together now however reflecting Merton's conversion with religious images drawn using the words of prayers. This combination of the power of both images and the written word was one that would appeal to Merton for the rest of his life.

### Early Gethsemani Drawings

Once at Gethsemani Merton continued to draw. As he could not stop writing prose or poetry, so he could also not stop drawing. His images from this period were traditional images of saints, prophets, angels, the cross and Christ crucified, most noticeably a large collection of groups of the crucifixion, St. John of the Cross, and female saints, in particular the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Therese and Mary Magdalene. Besides these images there are a smaller number of still life and landscape studies. The majority of images from this period were unsigned, undated and untitled. But it is possible to see connections with, and the influence, of other religious art Merton may have been exposed to.

In the fall of 1954 Merton gave a series of conferences to the scholastics at Gethsemani. Although these conferences were not recorded his notes, entitled "Notes on Sacred Art," have been preserved. From these lectures Merton prepared a manuscript for publication entitled "Art and Worship."

As Merton was collecting images for "Art and Worship" he obviously thought he was in touch once more, with the larger art

world—possibly returning once more to the world of his childhood and youth, though this time from a deeper religious perspective. However both the images he was selecting for “Art and Worship” and his text were criticized by potential publishers and friends, suggesting he was out of touch with the current art world, or at least the world of publishing art books. One “reader” wrote “I have read Merton’s manuscript three times now and it is my best advice that you have nothing to do with it ... it is simply incredibly naïve” and “beyond any real salvation.” Eloise Spaeth, in her report to the prospective publisher, was equally harsh calling it “Bad Merton” with “no vitality, even the usual stunning phraseology is lacking” adding, “this is written by a man who has not looked at a real work of art for a long time.” Based on reports such as these the book was put to one side and never finished or published in its entirety.

Merton, however, published a number of articles and essays about art, partially based on his manuscript. The earliest of these was a short section from his book *No Man Is An Island*, published in *Commonweal* in March 1955 with the title: “Reality, Art and Prayer.”<sup>12</sup> The following year a much longer article appeared in the journal *Jubilee* entitled “Notes on Sacred and Profane Art.”<sup>13</sup> As the title suggests this article was closer to notes than to an essay and, as Merton had planned with “Art and Worship” it was illustrated by examples of the work of artists such as Cezanne, Van Eyck, Fra Angelico and Rouault, and by an example of a carving from the Cathedral of Chartres. Three further articles on art: “The Monk and Sacred Art,”<sup>14</sup> “Art and Worship”<sup>15</sup> and “Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life”<sup>16</sup> were all published in the journal *Sponsa Regis* between 1957 and 1960, with a further article, “Absurdity in Sacred Decoration,”<sup>17</sup> attacking “the appetite for useless decoration and for illustration” in church decoration, published in the journal *Worship* in 1960.<sup>18</sup>

But Merton did not completely drop the idea of a book on Sacred Art and in September 1963 writes to Sister Therese Lentfoehr:

I am trying finally to brush up the little book on Sacred Art I was trying to do four or five years ago. First we intended to publish it here. Then I saw it was going to be too complicated, and tried it on Farrar Straus and though they wanted it, we bogged down over a detail. I hope I can get it out of the way – though that is hardly the way to approach a book, least of all a book on art.<sup>19</sup>

In 1964 in "Seven Qualities of the Sacred,"<sup>20</sup> an article published in the journal *Good Work*, Merton presented a more coherent and developed presentation of his thinking first expressed in the 1956 *Jubilee* article about what is meant by sacredness in art. Each of the seven qualities Merton suggests—hieratic, traditional, living, sincere, reverent, spiritual and pure—was once again illustrated by examples of art work that Merton felt exhibited these qualities, once more reminiscent of the layout he had envisaged for "Art and Worship."

**Experimental images:  
Zen calligraphies, graffiti, ink-blots**

Over the course of Merton's writings about art some of his thinking stayed remarkably consistent, whereas his actual practice of art changed and developed in a way that was at times radical.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote that he had learned from his father "that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties."<sup>21</sup> In his reading of *Art and Scholasticism* by Jacques Maritain, as he was working on his master's thesis on William Blake at Columbia University, Merton found a theory of art that confirmed the view he had inherited from his father. A belief that "art is the ability to see not merely what is apparent to the senses but the inner radiance of Being,"<sup>22</sup> a consciousness of paradise, of the creative *logos*, the creative word. This understanding of art is evident in many of the authors to whom Merton was attracted—William Blake, Boris Pasternak, Louis Zukofsky and Edwin Muir. It is expressed in Rainer Maria Rilke's concept of "inseeing" and in the "inscape" of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In one of Merton's lectures to the monastic community at Gethsemani in the mid-sixties on Rainer Maria Rilke Merton described Rilke's "inseeing" as a deep encounter between the poet and his subject, getting right into the center of the subject, right into the heart. In one conference Merton describes the way Rilke gets into the very center of the thing he is describing. Taking a dog as an example this inseeing involves getting into

the dog's very center, the point from where it begins to be a dog, the place in which, in it, where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrass-

ments and inspirations and to know that it was good, that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been made better.<sup>23</sup>

It was this same spirit that attracted Merton to the Shakers. Their architecture and their furniture were made, so they believed, as God would have made it, it could not have been made better. Merton discovered a similar spirit in the Hindu tradition of art, where “all artistic work is a form of *Yoga*” writing

all art is *Yoga*, and even the act of making a table or a bed, or building a house, proceeds from the craftsman’s *Yoga* and from his spiritual discipline of meditation.<sup>24</sup>

He goes on, in words reminiscent of his comments on Rainer Maria Rilke, and influenced by his reading of A. K. Coomaraswamy, to add

in the East it is believed that the mind that has entered into meditative recollection and attained ‘one pointedness’ has liberated itself from domination by the accidental, the trivial and the jejune, in order to enter into the heart of being, and thus to be able to identify itself, by contemplative penetration, with any being and to know it by empathy from within.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to his theory of art, Merton’s practice of art changed dramatically at times. These changes, I would suggest, were consistent with other changes taking place in his life and thought, especially in the late fifties and early sixties. As Thomas Merton moved from the world-denying monk of the forties and early fifties to the world-embracing monk of the sixties he found that the language he had used previously in both his public and his personal writings was no longer adequate or appropriate. This is particularly noticeable in the metaphors he used to describe himself, especially his move from the role of an “innocent bystander” to that of a “guilty bystander.” The change was clearly evident in both his prose and his poetry. The quiet voice of monasticism that many catholic readers had associated with Merton’s earlier work had seemingly disappeared into the Gethsemani woods and the new Merton was disturbing and could grate on his readers sensibilities—the same could also be true of his art from this period.

Thomas Merton rarely wrote about his own attempts at art. The majority of information that we have has to be gleaned from the many pages of his personal journals and from his voluminous

correspondence. From an entry contained in his personal journal for October 28, 1960 Merton records a marked change in his style of drawing. He writes: "Tried some abstract-looking art this week."<sup>26</sup> Just a few entries later he refers to "spending some work time on abstract drawings for a possible experimental book." Some of these drawings, which Merton would begin calling "calligraphies" were semi-representational, but the majority were completely abstract.

The one time Merton wrote at any length or in any detail was in the fall of 1964 as he was preparing for an exhibition of his drawings to be held at Catherine Spalding College in Louisville. The exhibition of twenty-six calligraphies opened in November 1964 and subsequently visited a number of other cities including New Orleans, Atlanta, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Santa Barbara and Washington, D.C. The pictures were available for purchase with the money raised to be used for a scholarship for an African-American student to study at Spalding. Sales did not go well and Merton writes to John Howard Griffin saying

none were sold in Milwaukee where the price was a hundred and fifty dollars. Now we are down to a hundred. If you wait until we crawl out of Santa Barbara, Cal. in September they will be ten cents apiece with a sheaf of green coupons into the bargain.<sup>27</sup>

Subsequently the Abbey of Gethsemani funded the scholarship.

The essay Merton wrote was later published as "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings" in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable*. It is an important essay as it contains Merton's only extended reflection on his own drawings, in particular on the drawings he was creating in the sixties. As such, I think it is really essential reading in attaining an understanding of what Merton was attempting to do with his drawings at this period. Merton begins by saying that the viewer is not to regard the drawings as "works of art," nor to seek in them "traces of irony" or "a conscious polemic against art." The viewer is encouraged not to judge them, or to consider themselves judged by them. Before moving on to say what the drawings are, Merton makes a comment on the titles writing:

it would be better if these abstractions did not have titles. However, titles were provided out of the air. The viewer will hardly be aided by them, but he may imagine himself aided if he wishes.<sup>28</sup>

Merton then writes about his understanding of the drawings, and I will just quote here a few of the most incisive passages:

These abstractions—one might almost call them *graffiti* rather than calligraphies—are simple signs and ciphers of energy, acts of movement intended to be propitious. Their “meaning” is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept.

Again:

In a world cluttered and programmed with an infinity of practical signs and consequential digits referring to business, law, government and war, one who makes such nondescript marks as these is conscious of a special vocation to be inconsequent, to be outside the sequence and to remain firmly alien to the program...they stand outside all processes of production, marketing, consumption and destruction.

Merton then adds mischievously that it “does not however mean that they cannot be bought.” Words reminiscent, as is much of Merton’s thinking in this essay, of some of the writings of Ad Reinhardt, the abstract artist, who once described his black paintings in similar terms:

A free, unmanipulated, unmanipulatable, useless, unmarketable, irreducible, unphotographable, unreproducible, inexplicable icon.<sup>29</sup>

### **Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt**

Merton and Reinhardt first met at Columbia University in the thirties. Although Reinhardt graduated shortly after Merton’s arrival at the University he continued to provide illustrations for the *Jester*. Merton makes a number of references to Reinhardt in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in *Run to the Mountain*, his personal journal from this period. After an evening with Reinhardt in January 1940 Merton calls him “possibly the best artist in America” writing

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.<sup>30</sup>

After Merton’s entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani he sporadically stayed in touch with Reinhardt. Copies of a number of



early letters from Merton to Reinhardt from 1956 to 1964 are preserved in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, along with some calligraphies Merton had sent him. Five letters to Merton from Reinhardt, all from the sixties, are preserved in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

In the mid fifties Merton asked Reinhardt to design the cover of a pamphlet to be printed by the Abbey of Gethsemani, requesting also "some small black and blue cross painting (say about a foot and a half high) for the cell in which I perch."<sup>31</sup> When the painting arrived Merton recorded in his journal:

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 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.<sup>32</sup>

Merton wrote to Reinhardt thanking him for the painting saying:

It has the following noble feature, namely its refusal to have anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary & this is time, 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 laitreutic small painting.<sup>33</sup>

In May 1959 Reinhardt along with Bob Lax, another Columbia friend, visited Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Other than recording the visit in his journal Merton makes no other comment about this visit. During the visit however they must have discussed Merton's plans for a book on art as a few days later Merton refers to this in a letter to Reinhardt:

Now you come along and ask me to fall into the iconoclastic tradition. Which is admittedly something like my own (sup-

posedly 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. Who is there to be distracted?... 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.<sup>34</sup>

Both Merton and Reinhardt were influenced by the apophatic mystical tradition – writers such as John of the Cross, pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa come to mind. Merton's references to apophatic mysticism are found in a number of his works throughout his monastic life, most notably his attempt at a theological study of St. John of the Cross, eventually published as *The Ascent to Truth* and in the more recently published book, *The Inner Experience*. Reinhardt also makes references to the apophatic mystics in his writings, for example in 1965 quoting Nicholas of Cusa:

How needful it is to enter into the darkness and to admit the coincidence of opposites  
to seek the truth where impossibility meets us.<sup>35</sup>

Writing to an artist friend in Lexington, Victor Hammer, Merton describes Reinhardt's work in the following terms

His approach is very austere and ascetic. It is a kind of exaggerated reticence, a kind of fear of self expression. All his paintings are very formal and black. I certainly do not think he is a quack like so many others; on the contrary, he is in strong reaction against them.<sup>36</sup>

The influence of apophatic mysticism on Reinhardt has been referred to by critics of his work in recent years. Yve-Alain Bois suggested that what Reinhardt hoped to realize in his black paintings recalled the aspirations of negation theology, apophatic mysticism, a "method of thought employed to comprehend the Divine by indicating everything it was not."<sup>37</sup>

In fall 1963 Merton sent one of his calligraphies to Ad Reinhardt who reacted enthusiastically writing

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 Willkie stretched from end to end ... I like your calligraphy because its pure.

Merton replied humorously

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 barefoot in 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

going on to suggest

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.<sup>38</sup>

And concluding the letter "Take seriously the samples."

In January 1964 Merton records in his journal a package that had arrived from Ad Reinhardt. Following up on Merton's request he had sent Merton "all kinds of fine paper, especially some thin, almost transparent beautiful Japanese paper on which I have found a way of crudely printing abstract 'calligraphies' which in some cases turn out exciting – at least to me."<sup>39</sup> Taking note of Reinhardt's comments about his calligraphies Merton also sent a new calligraphy to Reinhardt titled: "slightly larger calligraphy."

In contrast to friends such as Ad Reinhardt Merton reflected on how his artist friend, Victor Hammer, would react to these drawings. Merton writes in his journal on November 4, 1964:

One thing that saddens and embarrasses me—that he [Victor Hammer] will be shocked at my exhibition of drawings or calligraphies or what you will. There is no way to explain this to him, and in a way I am on his side, on principle. And yet they have a meaning, and there is a reason for them: an unreasoned reason perhaps.

He then continues with a note of humour:

I feel like writing to him and saying: if you heard I had taken a mistress you would be sad but you would understand. These drawings are perhaps worse than that. But regard them as a human folly. Allow me at least, like everyone else, at least one abominable vice, etc.<sup>40</sup>

And in a letter to Hammer Merton warns him that

If you should hear news of my exhibiting strange blobs of ink in Louisville, ignore the information: it is not worthy of your notice. As always my feelings about it are very mixed ... I think I have made it plain to all concerned that I do not regard it as "art" and that they are not supposed to either.<sup>41</sup>

But, having told Hammer to ignore the exhibit and that he did not regard the strange blots of ink as art, it is clear from other correspondence of Merton's and from entries in his personal journals, that it was important to him and expressed for him his art in this period when his representational work was no longer sufficient, when it no longer addressed the anguish of the age. Both Merton and Reinhardt reacted to the climate of Cold War America through their work. Although rarely in touch with each other their stand on contemporary issues was remarkably similar. Reinhardt was actively involved in political and social issues throughout his life, he participated in the anti-war movement, he protested against the war in Vietnam and also donated his work to benefits for civil rights activities—all areas in which Merton was involved through the sixties—even, as already mentioned, selling his calligraphies to fund a scholarship for African-American students.<sup>42</sup>

Merton had a similar experience with his poetry. He began to feel that language had become so abused, so overused, especially in the world of media and advertising, that it had become virtually meaningless. To compensate for this Merton began to use anti-poetry as a form of expression at this time.<sup>43</sup> Is it possible that Merton's calligraphies and drawings of this period are anti-art, like his anti-poetry, trying to express a form of art that made sense in the face of advertising and the media, and in the face of humanity's experience of the darker, shadow side so evident in the images of this period of the cold war, the bomb, racial violence, and the Vietnam War?

Merton first touched on this theme explicitly as he was working on "Art and Worship" and, in a chapter published in *Sponsa Regis* in January 1960, and also included in his book *Disputed Questions*, published later that year he wrote:

In an age of concentration camps and atomic bombs, religious and artistic sincerity will certainly exclude all "prettiness" or shallow sentimentality. Beauty, for us, cannot be a mere appeal to conventional pleasures of the imagination and senses. Nor can it be found in cold, academic perfectionism. The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age. Sacred art cannot be cruel, but it must know how to be compassionate with the victims of cruelty: and one does not offer lollipops to a starving man in a totalitarian death-camp.

Nor does one offer him the message of a pitifully inadequate optimism. Our Christian hope is the purest of all lights that shine in darkness, but it shines in darkness, and one must enter into darkness to see it shining.<sup>44</sup>

As Merton saw, John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul, the experience of the apophatic mystics, was no longer confined to a spiritual minority. The horrors of the twentieth century, the degradation of human life, was making manifest the darkness within each and every one of us and Merton through his anti-poetry, his writings on war and violence, and through his art work of this period was trying to stand and face the darkness and encouraging others to do the same. As he wrote in his introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable*:

Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable... The goodness of the world, stricken or not, is incontestable and definitive. If it is stricken, it is also healed in Christ. But nevertheless one of the awful facts of our age is the evidence that it is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable.

Against this background Merton can speak words of hope.

Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the image of man for it is the image of God.<sup>45</sup>

### Photography

Thomas Merton showed little interest in photography until the final years of his life. On a visit to Germany as a teenager he had bought his first camera, a Zeiss, which he subsequently pawned as his debts grew at Cambridge University<sup>46</sup> in the early thirties. In 1939 he visited an exhibit of Charles Sheeler's at the Museum of Modern Art, which he found "dull."<sup>47</sup> Then, from the late fifties onwards Merton had contact with some eminent North American photographers beginning with Shirley Burden. Burden had provided photographs for a postulant's guide, *Monastic Peace*, for the cover of Merton's *Selected Poems* and had undertaken a photographic study of the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani, *God Is My Life*, for which Merton wrote the introduction. When Merton was considering a photographic study of the Shakers, it was to Burden he turned.

In 1963 John Howard Griffin, with whom Merton had already had contact in relation to Civil Rights, wrote requesting permission to "begin a photographic archive of Merton's life and activities." When Griffin visited Merton to photograph him he recalls "Tom watched with interest, wanting an explanation of the cameras—a Leica and an Alpa." According to Griffin Merton remarked on his friendship with Shirley Burden and also with Edward Rice, a friend from his days at Columbia, before stating "I don't know anything about photography, but it fascinates me."<sup>48</sup>

It is a little unclear when Merton began taking photographs himself at the Abbey of Gethsemani. On October 10<sup>th</sup> 1961 he records having taken "half a roll of Kodacolor at the hermitage" wondering "what earthly reason is there for taking color photographs?... or any photographs at all."<sup>49</sup> Yet, just a few months later in January 1962 Merton records taking photographs at Shakertown, finding there "some marvelous subjects."<sup>50</sup>

Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees... How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine.

A completely miraculous achievement of forms.<sup>51</sup>

Merton was obviously pleased with his results that day as in a later journal entry he says he is planning to have enlargements made of some of his photographs of Shakertown, describing it as "very satisfying."<sup>52</sup>

Certainly by 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1964 Merton had regular access to a camera and records in his personal journal

Brother Ephrem has fitted me out with a camera (Kodak Instamatic) to help take pictures for a book Dom James wants done. So far I have been photographing a fascinating old cedar root I have on the porch. I am not sure what this baby can do. The lens does not look like much – but it changes the film by itself and sets the aperture, etc. Very nice.<sup>53</sup>

Just two days later Merton continues

After dinner I was distracted by the dream camera, and instead of seriously reading the Zen anthology I got from the Louisville Library, kept seeing curious things to shoot, especially a mad window in the old tool room of the woodshed. The whole place is full of fantastic and strange subjects – a mine of Zen photography. After that the dream camera suddenly misbehaved.<sup>54</sup>

and Merton records that the back of the camera would not lock shot. Two days later he writes again

Camera back. Love affair with camera. Darling camera, so glad to have you back! Monarch! XXX. It will I think be a bright day again today.<sup>55</sup>

In his journals Merton records occasional access to a variety of cameras belonging to his visitors—Naomi Burton Stone's Nikon,<sup>56</sup> John Howard Griffin's Alpa,<sup>57</sup> even on one occasion a "Japanese movie camera" which he described as "a beautiful thing."<sup>58</sup> In August 1967 Merton refers in passing to taking some pictures of roots, this time with a Rolleiflex. However in January 1968 Merton fell and thought he might have broken the Rolleiflex so that the back was letting in light. He immediately wrote to John Howard Griffin to take up an offer he had made to loan Merton a camera. In his letter Merton describes the kind of camera he would need:

Obviously I am not covering the Kentucky Derby etc. But I do like a chance at fast funny out of the way stuff too. The possibility of it in case. But as I see it I am going to be on roots, sides of barns, tall weeds, mudpuddles, and junkpiles until Kingdom come. A built-in exposure meter might be a help.<sup>59</sup>

In response Griffin loaned Merton a Canon F-X which he described as “fabulous” and “a joy to work with.” Merton continues

The camera is the most eager and helpful of beings, all full of happy suggestions: “Try this! Do it that way!” Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. So simply. This is a Zen camera.

Generally Merton’s preferred photographic medium was black and white, though a number of photographs in the collections at the Thomas Merton Center are in color. Merton never did his own developing or printing, this was generally done for him either by Griffin, his son Gregory, or by other friends. Griffin recalls that he and his son were frequently bewildered by the pictures Merton selected from contact sheets to be enlarged. “He ignored many superlative photographs while marking others” wrote Griffin,

we thought he had not yet learned to judge photographs well enough to select consistently the best frames. We wrote and offered advice about the quality of some of the ignored frames. He went right on marking what he wanted rather than what we thought he should want. Then, more and more often, he would send a contact sheet with a certain frame marked and his excited notation: ‘At last—this is what I have been aiming for.’<sup>60</sup>

Sadly, none of those original contact sheets have survived. They would have provided a fascinating insight into Merton’s photography.

In January 1967 Thomas Merton began to develop a friendship with another local photographer, Ralph Eugene Meatyard who, through his photographs, has left us an intriguing photographic record of Merton. In his personal journal Merton recorded the visit of Jonathan Williams, Guy Davenport and Meatyard<sup>61</sup> and in particular his excitement at Meatyard’s work:

The one who made the greatest impression on me as artist was Gene Meatyard, the photographer – does marvelous arresting visionary things, most haunting and suggestive, mythical, photography I ever saw. I felt that here was someone really going somewhere.<sup>62</sup>

Later writing about Merton and Meatyard, Davenport described Meatyard as “one of the most distinguished of American photog-



rappers," part of the Lexington Camera Club with members such as Van Deren Coke, Guy Mendes, James Baker Hall and Robert C. May. Meatyard, was a professional optician, who bought his first camera to photograph his young son in 1950. In 1956 his photographs were exhibited with those of Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, Henry Callaghan and other modern masters. That same year he attended a photography workshop where, working with Henry Holmes Smith and Minor White, he became interested in Zen. Davenport describes Meatyard's work as "primarily an intricate symmetry of light and shadow. He liked deep shadows of considerable weight, and he liked light that was decisive and clean."<sup>63</sup> Words equally applicable to many of Merton's photographs.

From their meeting in January 1967 until Merton's death the following year Merton met Gene Meatyard numerous times and exchanged a brief but steady correspondence of over sixteen letters. During this time Meatyard took over one hundred photographs of Merton, some of the most enigmatic taken. These photographs capture both the paradox of Merton and Meatyard's surrealist vision—Meatyard realized with Merton that he was

photographing a Kierkegaard who was a fan of *Mad*; a Zen adept and hermit who drooled over hospital nurses with a cute behind ... a man of accomplished self-discipline who sometimes acted like a ten-year-old with an unlimited charge account at a candy store.<sup>64</sup>

For Merton his photography, as his writing, became a way for him to explore and express his relationship with the world. In a journal entry from December 1963 Merton reflects on a saying of Merleau-Ponty: "I am myself as I exist in the world."<sup>65</sup> This leads him to question the position he had been taking, of being himself by withdrawing from the world, and stating that he agrees profoundly with Merleau-Ponty providing that the world he is referring to is not one of "delusions and clichés." He writes that "to withdraw from where I am in order to be totally outside all that situates me—this is real delusion." Merton's description of his camera as a "Zen camera" fits very well with the Zen koan-like nature of this insight.

In Darjeeling, just a couple of weeks before his death, Merton struggled with the Mountain Kanchenjunga. In Kanchenjunga, Merton saw an answer to his questions, the mountain holds paradoxes together. It has a side that is seen and a side that is not seen,

it is a “palace of opposites in unity,” “impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom.” Developing his reflection on the mountain Merton added:

The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN.<sup>66</sup>

This is similar to Merton’s vision of photography and, as he tries to capture images of the mountain with his camera, Merton writes:

The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it—especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.<sup>67</sup>

This is reminiscent of Meatyard’s understanding of Zen and his way of dealing with illusion by his frequent use of masks in his photographs, most noticeably in his collection *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*. In *A Hidden Wholeness* Griffin describes Merton’s vision of photography:

His vision was more often attracted to the movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stone, crocuses blossoming through weeds—or again, the woods in all their hours, from the first fog or morning, though noonday stillness, to evening quiet.

In his photography, he focused on the images of his contemplation, as they were and not as he wanted them to be. He took his camera on his walks and, with his special way of seeing, photographed what moved or excited him—whatsoever responded to that inner orientation.

His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path. In these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions.

In a certain sense, then, these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact.<sup>68</sup>

From these comments by Griffin, and through looking at Merton's photographs it is clear that Thomas Merton used his camera as a contemplative instrument and he photographed the things he contemplated.

### Conclusion

Thomas Merton's art parallels his spiritual journey. Moving from childhood drawings, through his Columbia cartoons, to devout, strong and simple images, to his experiments with Zen calligraphies and graffiti along with his use of a Zen camera expressing his mature relationship with God, the world and his own self. Merton's mature drawings and his photography serve as question marks, asking us to pause and to reflect on what we are seeing. The words of his poem "In Silence," with which I will conclude, serve to illustrate this well:

Be still  
Listen to the stones of the wall.  
Be silent, they try  
To speak your

Name.  
Listen to the living walls.  
Who are you?  
Who  
Are you? Whose  
Silence are you?

Who (be quiet)  
Are you (as these stones  
Are Quiet). Do not  
Think of what you are  
Still less of  
What you may one day be.  
Rather  
Be what you are (but who?) be  
The unthinkable one  
You do not know.

O be still, while  
You are still alive,  
And all things live around you  
Speaking (I do not hear)  
To your own being,  
Speaking by the Unknown  
That is in you and in themselves.

"I will try, like them  
To be my own silence:  
And this is difficult. The whole  
World is secretly on fire. The stones  
Burn, even the stones  
They burn me. How can a man be still or  
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare  
To sit with them when  
All their silence  
Is on fire?"<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 3.

2. Katarzyna Bruzda, "Thomas Merton—An Artist." *Studia Mertoniana 2: Collected Papers of the First Merton Conference in Poland, Lublin, Oct. 24-27, 2002* edited by Krzysztof Bielawski. (Kraków: Homini, 2003): 179.

3. *The Times*, (Wednesday, January 21, 1931), p. 10.

4. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 52.

5. Thomas Merton, "The Haunted Castle," *The Merton Seasonal 19* (Winter 1994), pp. 7-10, is the earliest of these manuscripts and dates back to Christmas 1929.

6. "Ravenswell." Unpublished Manuscript. April 1929. [photocopy]. All unpublished materials referred to in this paper, unless indicated otherwise, are available at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

7. These manuscripts were discovered in December 1993 by the present writer and Robert E. Daggy in the possession of Frank Merton Trier, a first cousin, with whom Merton spent some school holidays until the summer of 1930. The style of the author's handwriting, the content of the stories, and Mr. Trier's testimony, verified their authenticity. The manuscripts remain in Mr. Trier's possession with photocopies held on file at the Merton Center.

8. These drawings were acquired by Georgetown University in Washington.
9. Thomas Merton Center Collections, Bellarmine University.
10. Merton served for a while as art editor of *The Jester*.
11. See for example his Geometric Cross from around the early fifties which could be compared to French Concrete Art.
12. *Commonweal* 61.25 (March 25, 1955), pp. 658-659.
13. *Jubilee* 4.7 (November 1956), pp. 25-32.
14. *Sponsa Regis* 28.9 (May 1957), pp. 231-234.
15. *Sponsa Regis* 31.4 (December 1959), pp. 114-117.
16. *Sponsa Regis* 31.5 (January 1960), pp. 133-140. Republished in *Disputed Questions*.
17. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), pp. 264-273.
18. *The Road to Worship*, 34.5 (April 1960), pp. 248-255. Republished in *Disputed Questions*.
19. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 246.
20. *Good Work* 27.1 (Winter 1964), pp. 15-20.
21. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 203.
22. Christine M. Bochen, Patrick F. O'Connell and William H. Shannon, eds., *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 9.
23. Thomas Merton. *Natural Contemplation* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1987). Transcribed by the current author.
24. "Sacred and Profane." *Stained Glass* 69.4 (Winter 1975), p. 82.
25. "Sacred and Profane," p. 83.
26. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 60.
27. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 133.
28. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 180.
29. [http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date\\_work\\_md\\_133A1.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date_work_md_133A1.html) [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2004.]
30. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 128-29.
31. Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, July 3, 1956. Unpublished letter. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.
32. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 139-40.
33. Joseph Masheck, "Five Unpublished Letters From Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return." *Artforum* 17 (December 1978), p. 24.

34. "Five Unpublished Letters..." p. 24.

35. "Five Unpublished Letters..." p. 24.

36. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 5. In another letter to Victor Hammer Merton suggests that both Hammer and Reinhardt would be "in fundamental agreement" and regrets the fact that they have not had the opportunity to meet. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 6.

37. Quoted at [http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date\\_work\\_md\\_133A1.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date_work_md_133A1.html) [Accessed 23rd January, 2004.]

38. Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, October 31, 1963. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 281.

39. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 58.

40. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 162.

41. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 10.

42. As Merton was attempting to find other galleries to host the exhibit of his calligraphies he wrote to Shirley Burden in California requesting his help. In Burden's reply to Merton he also noted that royalties from his book *I Wonder Why* had been earmarked for scholarships for African-American students. Burden to Merton, March 29, 1965.

43. Elsewhere I have argued that Merton's development of anti-poetry developed at the same time as that of Parra in Chile, that his anti-poetry was not copied from Parra, and that in a relatively short period of time it matured in ways that Parra's never did. See "Poetry of the Sneeze: Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra." *The Merton Journal* 8.2 (Advent 2002), pp. 3-20.

44. Merton, *Disputed Questions*, p. 164.

45. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 5-6.

46. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 83.

47. *Run to the Mountain*, p. 68.

48. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 37.

49. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 169.

50. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 194.

51. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p. 194.

52. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 23.

53. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 147.

54. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 147.

55. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 149.

56. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 221.

57. Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 37.
58. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 286.
59. Merton, *A Road to Joy*, p. 140.
60. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 90.
61. Writing to Bob Lax he referred to them as "three Kings from Lexington."
62. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York: Timken, 1991), pp. 34-35.
63. *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard*, p. 34.
64. *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard*, p.35.
65. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 48.
66. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 286.
67. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 284.
68. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1978), pp. 280-281.
69. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 280-281.