

# SACRED ARTS STUDY:

## Thomas Merton's Guides for

### Art and Worship

by **Gloria Kitto Lewis**

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In the fifties, Thomas Merton, poet, monk, and student and teacher of the arts and humanities finds himself saddened and often outraged by the state of religious art in the Catholic community. Clergy and parishioners alike seem to lack much knowledge about fine sacred art. Of particular concern is the lack of appreciation for traditional sacred art, those works from the tenth to the fifteenth century which are part of the church's precious heritage. He sees the faithful in a state of some ignorance, endorsing an appalling mixture of styles ranging from the popular to the sentimental to the abstract in an effort to bring "new life" to sacred art.<sup>1</sup>

Merton is offended, for example, by images inspired by advertising and pop art. With disgust he describes a current picture of the Blessed Virgin as a monstrous caricature "made up with lipstick and mascara, Hollywood style, and at the same time, elongated and launched into space, as if she is jet-propelled."<sup>2</sup> He has an instinctive revulsion to what might be called non-art, to cheap, gaudy musical machines sold often as gifts in church goods stores. He recalls in some desperation "a musical Madonna" which "glows softly with comforting concealing light: and upon opening the rosary window plays Gounod's Ave Maria."<sup>3</sup> Also, he is distracted in

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1. Thomas Merton, "The Importance of Art" in *Art and Worship*, p. 1. Hereafter referred to in the text as IA.

2. Thomas Merton, "Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life" in *Disputed Questions* (New York: HBJ/ Harvest Paperback, 1985), p. 159. Hereafter referred to in the text as SASL.

3. Thomas Merton, "The Popes and Sacred Art" in *Art and Worship*, p. 16. Hereafter referred to in the text as PSA.

homes and particularly churches by soothing decorative art which merely appeals to the emotions. These illustrations can distract parishioners and priests alike. As he notes: "The priest stands at the altar, after the consecration. The sacred Body and Blood of the Lord are there before him. And on the pall — a highly colored, sugary painting of the divine Infant. I say "sugary" because the purpose seems to be to make Him look like candy, something "you could eat."<sup>4</sup>

The ill conceived use of modern styles in church decor and architecture is also troubling. Unfortunately, some parishes were inviting "modern secular artists of genius" to redecorate their church interiors in abstract decor "discussed in slick magazines" in an effort to make their churches seem respectable and up-to-date.<sup>5</sup> Church exteriors were also being modernized. Merton finds the flood of pseudo-modern churches that are "hardly to be identified as different from the least distinguished forms of modern building: the drive in theater, the filling station, the motel, and even the nightclub," to be outrageous if not ludicrous (*IA*, p. 8). The effects of this often trivial, absurd, vulgar art on the spiritual lives of those bombarded by such art are profound for Merton. He argues that art "exercises a powerful formative influence on the Christian soul" (*SASL*, p. 157). While good art can nurture spiritual growth, "bad art exercises equally powerful influence for deformation" (*SASL*, p. 155).

However, he discovers that these damaging effects of inferior sacred art on the senses, mind, and spirit, are clearly not so apparent to others in the Church. In a confused state church members seem blindly to endorse the modernization in sacred art. Some were enthusiastically embracing, in indiscriminate fashion, modern abstract styles. Thus, they rather mindlessly were giving allegiance to any new style simply because it is endorsed by "experts" and pronounced acceptable and fashionable by wealthy patrons of the arts (*SASL*, p. 152). A second group, in contrast, were passively clinging to the sentimental and the popular inspired by advertising. Merton concludes that they are a generation "who have eyes and see not, ears and hear not," who have allowed themselves to be passively deluged with "all kinds of pious and artistic tripe" (*SASL*, pp. 152-153).

Believing that this lack of ability to discern the good from the bad was having disastrous effects on the corporate church spirit, Merton urges

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4. Thomas Merton, "Absurdity in Sacred Decoration" in *Disputed Questions* (1985), p. 267. Hereafter referred to in the text as *ASD*.

5. Thomas Merton, "Preface" in *Art and Worship*, pp. 13-14. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AWP*.

those "with obligation of forming Christian and religious souls, whether in schools, colleges, novitiates, or seminaries," to give art education a more important place in the curriculum (SASL, p. 155). With a more appropriate kind of education, people could learn to recognize good art for themselves and could participate in preserving true sacred art.

Feeling some personal responsibility to help with arts education, Merton turned in the fifties to preparing commentaries on sacred art for broadly educated audiences. A central work of that period is the book, *Art and Worship*, conceived initially for seminarians and later on for a larger generally educated lay audience. The book was to be richly illustrated, with commentary accompanying the numerous pictures. The first draft of the book was finished in 1954, and Merton continued to work on the manuscript over the next ten years. He finished the sixth revision in 1964, and intended to continue to perfect the manuscript after returning from his ill-fated trip to Asia in 1968. Though the book was never completed, Merton managed between 1954 and 1964, to publish sections in an anthology of essays, *Disputed Questions*, and in Catholic journals such as *Jubilee* and *Sponsa Regis*. In addition in 1955, he published in *The Commonwealth* an article, "Reality, Art, and Prayer," which was based on germinal materials from the first draft of *Art and Worship*.<sup>6</sup>

In the unpublished drafts of *Art and Worship*, in the published articles in journals and anthologies, in preparatory notes for classes and conferences for scholastics at Gethsemani, and in the published and unpublished tapes of those classes and conferences, Merton presents some pedagogically sound ideas about independent arts study. He provides guidance for the layperson for a conservative and introductory study of sacred art. A central goal of the study is to help the person become familiar with the most traditional and pure sacred art of the Catholic church, that of the Byzantine and the Renaissance. In *Art and Worship* and in "Sacred Art and Spiritual Life," for example, he is intent upon urging the faithful to begin with the art of the Great Age of Faith. That is why a great share of the pictures in *Art and Worship* are "drawn from the present sources of Christian traditions in art" (AWP, p. 16). Having participated in that art, he feels readers will be prepared to recognize good art of later periods, particularly that of the twentieth century.

Merton's approach to arts study is well suited for the participant

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6. David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 105. Hereafter referred to in the text as TMAD.

who is new to the arts. He is convinced that those motivated to study works of art can do so with relative ease and stresses to his students and readers of his materials on art education that they “do not have to be experts on art, or know all the names of the ‘famous masterpieces.’ [They] have no obligation to lecture others on aesthetic theory, or convince the Philistine that he does not know art when he sees it” (*SASL*, p. 164). Further, he stresses that it is not necessary to study works only in the original. As he notes:

There are fortunately plenty of excellent reproductions of all the best art. The fact that we never enter a museum is of no importance. We do not need to go to Assisi and see Giotto on the walls which he actually painted. We may perhaps get a much more adequate idea of him from an inexpensive magazine. But what we have to do is open our eyes and look at the right things. (*SASL*, p. 160)

Armed with a book like *Art and Worship*, he believes that participants can begin to understand, evaluate, and enjoy art to the benefit of mind and spirit. In a draft of the Preface to *Art and Worship*, he simply asks readers to study the pictures on their own “in a prayerful, intent, relaxed, and unprejudiced atmosphere,” after reading the preceding preparatory sections (*AWP*, p. ii). If they do so, they can first begin deeply to appreciate the traditional and pure sacred Byzantine and Renaissance art. Then they can start to analyze, evaluate, and appreciate the modern sacred art in an effort to “distinguish what is genuine and what is faked” (*AWP*, p. 11). That is, they can learn how to separate genuine sacred art from decorative art and non-art.

In *Art and Worship* and articles that issue from that book, Merton does not intend to present a comprehensive history of sacred art or a cohesive document about his aesthetic philosophy. He makes no claim to be an art historian or a philosopher. Neither does he wish to put forth a formal pedagogical strategy. Such a set of formulaic pronouncements would have been an anathema to him. As a “tentative and intuitive thinker,” he simply wishes to offer some suggestions about why to study sacred art, what artworks to study, and how to understand and appreciate works of art.<sup>7</sup> In *Art and Worship*, for example, he gives his characterizations of fine art in general and sacred art in particular, a brief sketch of the history of sacred art, his vision of the artist, and his perceptions about the aesthetic experience. Building on these descriptions of art and experience, he presents his practical and pedagogically sound strategy for participating

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7. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 108. Hereafter referred to in the text as *ATM*.

in a work of art which can enable the participant to recognize good sacred art and to come to terms with the underlying content about Being.

Because these commentaries address in a searching way the nature of art, the artist and the creative process, the aesthetic experience, some principles of criticism, and the role of art in Church and society, it can be argued that they represent Merton's evolving aesthetic philosophy which has been applied to education in the arts. This philosophy links, at every turn, the aesthetic, the religious, and the liturgical. It is most cohesive and consistent when it remains basically true to traditional Catholic theology and is most informed when Merton centers his attentions on Byzantine and early Renaissance art. His discussion of art after the Renaissance is problematic and sketchy. Discussions of modern art are particularly weak because, by his own admission, he is not very knowledgeable about modern art (*TMAD*, p. 116). His most comfortable discussions are about conservative modern works by such artists as Eric Gill and Peter Watts because their pieces of sculpture are clearly influenced by the art of the Great Age of Faith.

### ART, THE ARTIST, AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

As background for sketching out a strategy for his special kind of study of sacred art, Merton describes the nature of art, artists, and the aesthetic experience. Merton likes Roualt's definition of art because it links the aesthetic and the spiritual: art "is the accordance of the sensible world with a certain interior light." That interior light is "the 'vision' of the artist which is almost religious, for it sees the inner meaning of things."<sup>8</sup> This vision, to Merton's mind, sees beyond real objects, "beyond their surface appearance and recognizes in them a reflection of reality which is perceived spiritually in the artist's soul." It is characterized as "an interior perception, an intuitive conception as opposed to a concept." All true art always reveals something of God in the world and comments on essential spiritual values. Thus, he claims that all true art conveys something of the world of the spirit, though sacred art does even more in that "it seeks not only the 'inner meaning' of things but seeks to represent in some way the reality of God Himself" (*IA*, p. 5).

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8. Thomas Merton, "Notes on Sacred and Profane Art," *Jubilee* 4 (1956), p. 32. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSPA*.

Further to clarify his general description of sacred art, Merton presents a set of basic qualities which a religious piece of art ought to have. As would be expected, these qualities bring together the aesthetic, spiritual, and liturgical. Sacred art must conform to the norms of fine art and sacredness. To qualify under each norm, the work of art ought to have seven specific qualities. Of course, not wishing to be prescriptive and arbitrary, Merton is quick to point out that these qualities speak to the ideal and are therefore relative (*TMAD*, p. 112). To be a work of art, the work must be original, creative, spontaneous, and pure, as well as competent, intellectual, and inspiring. This is a sound list of the traits the fine artist and the true work of art ought to have. In discussion of the work of art, there is clear attention to subject, form, and content. The traits of originality, creativity, spontaneity, and purity relate to the quality of spirit of the creator and the method of creating reflected in the piece. The work must be original, done by a kind of seer who is free from the dictates of political parties or academic communities and who is able to communicate freely the inner meaning of the world and events. This communication must be shaped into a statement whose style is authentic to the artist and fitting for the content. The work ought not to mimic the latest experimental fad. Competency refers to the technical skill reflected in the execution of the work. And it can be posited that it also speaks to the required tightness and accuracy of the form, the interrelationships of details such as line, color, texture, and light and shadow. The quality of intellectuality addresses the content. There must be intellectual as well as spiritual power in what is said. Content ought to be substantive, not merely emotional or narrative. This quality, however, does not connote a kind of exclusivity. The comments ought to be clear to more than just the academic or the culturally enlightened. Very importantly, the work should be inspiring. It ought to awaken in the viewer a creative response over and over again, drawing the participant into the world of the artist wherein he or she can share in the spiritual experiences of the artist.

To complement the qualities of art, Merton lists seven traits of sacred art. The two lists are not mutually exclusive, as would be expected, and explanations in one listing do help inform those in the other. Fortunately, in "Seven Qualities of the Sacred," he includes interesting, rather idiosyncratic examples of pieces of fine art and craftwork that have each trait.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Thomas Merton, "Seven Qualities of the Sacred," *Good Work* 27 (Winter 1964). Hereafter referred to in the text as SQSA.

A couple are well known in the literature, a couple are relatively obscure, a couple are ancient and a notable number are contemporary. Such examples not only give information about the qualities under consideration, but also give indications of Merton's knowledge of art, his personal preferences, and his eclectic taste. As might be expected, the greater share of these examples have striking resemblances to semi-abstract Byzantine art. To be sacred, the work must be hieratic, traditional, living, sincere, reverent, spiritual, catholic, and pure. Sacredness is defined as "something that signs and consecrates the work of art in its inmost being" (SQS, p. 15). The hieratic quality requires that the work ought either to be created for the divine service or be suitable for such use. A work that possesses this quality because it has the power to communicate something of the divine is the great mosaic of the Pantocrator in the apse of the twelfth century cathedral of Monreale. The term "traditional" means that the artwork must be linked to the visions of those who "first spoke to us in God's name" (SQS, p. 15). A contemporary icon of the Blessed Virgin and the Christ Child painted behind the altar of St. Mary's Greek Orthodox Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by Demetrios Dukas illustrates this quality. Traditional, as opposed to conventional, carries the connotation of timelessness, for the traditional is alive and dynamic, always "new and original," ever underscoring the eternal newness of the Word. The living quality is related to the creative quality of true art in that it speaks about the origins of the work which ought to be in a true and intense religious feeling or experience of the artist. Even such a technically crude piece as a cottonwood figure of the Blessed Mother carved by George Lopez of Cordova, New Mexico, can be viewed as a living work.

The quality of sincerity reflects upon the genuineness of the emotion inherent. With some reservations, Merton turns to the work of Spanish Baroque painter El Greco for illustration, suggesting that perhaps his subtle and complex religious paintings carry authentic, not melodramatic, emotions. To explain the quality of the reverent, Merton places it in opposition to the informal and familiar. He warns against the sacred artist conveying a kind of tenderness "which all too quickly becomes condescension and patronage" (SQS, p. 17). The general negative example cited is a work that makes Jesus Christ look feminine in order to express that God is love. Merton explains the quality of the spiritual as something inherent in the form, noting that "the Spirit of God speaks between the lines and colors," telling the students "things that the art critic cannot see but which — if he is a worthy critic — he too will sense" (SQS, p. 17). Citing the works of Fra

Angelico and the Byzantine painters, he notes that the faithful can perceive the spiritual realities within the form in the act of prayerful participation. Fortunately Merton saw fit to include the quality of being catholic. This most important quality found, for example, in Fra Angelico's *Lamentation* means that the work must speak to people of God in all times and cultures. The quality of purity appears again as a final characteristic. Referring to the figure of the apocalyptic Christ, a detail in the facade of the Romanesque Church in Moissac in Barcelona, Merton underscores that sacred art ought to have as its single objective "the raising of the mind of the worshipper to God and to the liturgy of heaven" (*SQS*, p. 20).

Together, the lists essentially argue that the art of the Byzantine comes closest to being ideal art, as it is not only hieratic and spiritually inspiring, but most importantly, is pure (*TMAD*, p. 115). The icons center on the spiritual. They are created by deeply religious persons who work not for fame or fortune, but for the greater glory of God. The artists' goal is to share their religious perceptions in masterfully conceived traditional works.

In *Art and Worship*, Merton discusses some works of fine sacred art that have the required qualities. After giving a thumbnail sketch of the history of sacred art in the Western World in which he indicates some universally acceptable schools and traditions with which the reader ought to become familiar, he lists some painters' and sculptors' works that ought to be studied in "Examples of Hieratic Art." This section is sketched out only in the broadest outline. For each illustration, Merton offers but a brief observation in a sentence or two. Most paintings or pieces of sculpture are drawn from the traditions of the Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance. Those in the Byzantine tradition, "the tap root of the great tree of Christian art, both in the Eastern and Western Church," he identifies as the most important (*SASL*, p. 160). As David Cooper notes:

Merton naturally established medieval Church art as his controlling paradigm. Byzantine art became the aesthetic benchmark to which all historical developments in art had to refer, for Byzantine art had perfected "a hieratic and noble style which affirmed triumphantly the Church's belief in the sovereignty of Christ." Byzantine art was "dominated," Merton believed, by a single aesthetic mandate: "by art, as by contemplation, man recovered something of the purity of vision and the selfless simplicity before God, which had belonged to Adam in paradise."

(*TMAD*, p. 109).

He also believes that works of the Italian proto-Renaissance painters, Fra Angelico, Giotto, and Cimabue, are worthy of study because they "have a purity and innocence of vision that is sublimely spiritual and contempla-



tive" (SQSL, p. 161). The great artists of the Renaissance — Raphael, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and surprisingly, Paolo Uccello (whom he regards as the most interesting) — are included in his recommended list. Works of Baroque art are notably excluded because they signal decline in sacred art. As Merton notes: "It was during the Baroque era that the saints in art began to strike operatic attitudes and found themselves surrounded by rosy clouds of infant cherubim" (SASL, p. 162). The one Baroque artist included is El Greco because Merton found him to be "a great, though perhaps sometimes an over-rated religious artist" (SASL, p. 162). He chose to cite him in the book on art and worship because he thought works such as *Agony in the Garden* clearly speak of spiritual truths. In a section, "The Genesis of Kitsch," sixteenth century works of artists such as Murillo are included but only as relatively negative examples. Henri Rousseau is the only nineteenth century painter listed while Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera and painter George Rouault are the only twentieth century artists included. Merton suggests study of Rouault's frequently anthologized work, *Ecce Homo*, a work of expressionist art, because he maintains that here Rouault gives deep and poignant, yet authentic, witness to the spiritual temper of the twentieth century.

Turning to a description of the artist, Merton again underscores both aesthetic and religious qualities. He claims that in addition to having good technical skills, the artist must be a spiritual person, though not in the narrow religious or denominational sense. The artist must have some knowledge of and sympathy for religious values and, also, ought to have some spiritual depth. For Merton, "the artist does not need to be a saint. By artistic intuition of his genius, he may be able to grasp by some kind of sixth sense, what the saints mean by inspiration. But he at least must have enough sensibility to religious values to do this" (NSPA, p. 32). The artist is like the mystic because with his intuition he perceives the wholeness of life, discovering with his creative imagination "correspondences, symbols and meanings" which in turn become "nuclei" around which the artist's perceptions can orbit (ATM, p. 8).

In intuiting life's inner connectedness, the artist serves as a kind of unifier of different kinds of experience. His business is "to reach the intimate," those ontological sources that can not be conceptualized but once intuited, can be made accessible through symbols" (ATM, p. 14). The artist is able to intuit essences because of a childlike innocence, a kind of pureness of vision. Because of this innocence, he or she is able to perceive the pure world, a paradise that has always been and will always be present

beneath the chaotic mass of details that make up modern life (*ATM*, p. 13).

Seizing upon a vision of reality, the artist does not copy nature but creates something new which conveys "the REAL within the real."<sup>10</sup> What is conveyed is not simply the object, but most importantly, the experience of the artist's perceiving of the object or event. The artist speaks of his rich experience through symbols. Merton explains symbols by likening them to the icons of the Russian Orthodox Church. An icon is more than a representation of an object. It is a suggestive image that conveys the spiritual presence of the figure represented. Hence, a symbol by its nature and structure speaks of a depth of a person's unconscious life, realities that can only be comprehended using the intuition and imagination. "The symbol does not merely teach and inform, nor does it explain." Rather, "the vital role of the symbol is to express and encourage man's acceptance of his own center, his own ontological roots in the mystery of being that transcends the individual ego."<sup>11</sup> In sum, Merton notes:

The symbol points to an object that can never become an object. The symbol is an object pointing to a subject. The symbol is not an object for its own sake: it is a reminder that [the participant] is summoned to a deeper spiritual awareness, far beyond that level of subject and object.

(*SCC*, p. 72).

In perceiving symbols, the participant has an aesthetic experience which Merton claims is a kind of spiritual experience.

The genuine aesthetic experience is something that transcends not only the sensible order (in which it has its beginning) but also of reason itself. It is a suprarational intuition of the latent perfection of things. In the natural order . . . it is an analogue to the mysterious experience which it resembles and imitates from afar. Its mode of apprehension is that of "connaturality" — it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its subject, by a kind of affective identification with itself.<sup>12</sup>

This experience involves the aesthetic intuition. In describing this special gift, Merton notes that "aesthetic intuition is not merely the act of a faculty, it is also a heightening and intensification of our personal identity and being by the perception of our connatural affinity" with all of life. Through this special intuition, a participant " 'sees' by identifying spiritually with what he or she studies in a contemplative mode" (*AS*, p. 400, 409).

10. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 99. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TMMP*.

11. Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *Love and Living*; eds. Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 65. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SCC*.

12. Thomas Merton, "Art and Spirituality" in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (rev. ed.); ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974), p. 407. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AS*.

## STRATEGY FOR PARTICIPATING IN A WORK OF SACRED ART

To help students to have a genuine aesthetic experience, Merton gives guidance about how to participate in a work of art. He urges students to study, indeed to contemplate, a work of art on their own in solitude. It is important to begin by confronting the work of art directly whether in a reproduction or in the original. As he notes in one of his taped classes for scholastics, students ought to begin with study of the work of art. They ought to resist initially asking historical and posing critical questions, and then turning to textbooks for answers.<sup>13</sup> He is more concerned that students initially gain knowledge of the work of art rather than facts about the work. He wishes for students "to think *from* rather than *at*" the work of art.<sup>14</sup> In that way students can discover how the work "works," so to speak, in him or her, as the subjective and objective sides of experience merge into unity. Only through personal contact can the students "connect," as he calls it, with the artist. And that connecting is the aesthetic experience. In connecting with the artist, the see-er, the participant becomes an artist and recreates the experience inside himself or herself. In the moment of recreation through a momentary union with the creator, the participant experiences a kind of explosion of the artist within. That explosion, as Merton refers to it, is an epiphany, an aesthetic revelation of not only life but Being (ATM, p. 11).

In his taped classes and commentaries on art education, he gives some idea about how he guides students in their study of individual works of art. He is concerned that students use their senses, their imagination, and their spiritual intelligence in moving into work and coming to a deep intellectual and spiritual understanding of the experience shared with the artist. He asks students to identify first the subject of the work and then to experience the form — the lines, colors, textures, shapes, and light and shadow — because, as he underscores, "the meaning of a picture is not to be sought merely in a 'message' or in the 'subject,' but in the interrelations of forms. colors, lines, etc., in an integrated, living, creative unity" (AW, p. 22). Only by moving inside the colors, lines, and shapes which create the world of the work, can the students share the artist's experience and understand and intuit the "living" content.

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13. Thomas Merton, *Art & Imagination* (Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes), tape # AA2076.

14. F. David Martin & Lee A. Jacobs, *The Humanities through the Arts*; 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company), 1983), p. 36. Hereafter referred to in the text as HTA.

Merton's strategy is sound and certainly in concert with contemporary arts study. For example, Merton's method bears a striking resemblance to that of a contemporary philosopher and teacher of the humanities, F. David Martin, who presents his aesthetic theory in *Art and the Religious Experience*.<sup>15</sup> Martin's method is based on revelatory aesthetics, a theory which claims that the arts reveal values, "objects and events important to man" and that particularly the sacred arts, reveal spiritual values (*HTA*, p. ix). They are a path to the spiritual or "depth" dimension (*ARE*, p. 72). Like Merton, Martin believes in what he calls a perceptual approach as opposed to a conceptual approach. He encourages students to perceive the work freshly on their own first and then turn to the ideas of historian and critics. In participating in the work, he asks students to identify first the subject, then to move into the form and to "become" the work, as he puts it, and finally to discover the comment on the subject, that is, the content. In a true work of art in which the form informs, he states that students can have a life-enhancing experience, one in which new inexhaustible and timeless insights about life and spirit are revealed.

#### APPLICATIONS OF MERTON'S METHOD OF STUDYING WORKS OF ART

Merton's method of studying a work of art is helpful for students first, in analyzing and understanding a work of art and second, in criticizing the work. For example, in applying the strategy, students can come to recognize and appreciate genuine works of sacred art and very importantly, can learn to separate genuine sacred art from profane, popular and devotional art. In so doing, they can begin to understand better why Merton claims that Byzantine art is purer sacred art than Renaissance painting and sculpture and why so much of the pseudo modern and sentimental artwork in the churches is inferior to the traditional sacred art.

The usefulness of Merton's participatory method for separating pure sacred art from the less pure can be demonstrated by discussing a twelfth century icon, an altar painting by Raphael, and a piece of popular art. For purposes of comparison, it will be helpful to deal with well known works that talk about the same subject, the Madonna. Because of Merton's

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15. F. David Martin, *Art & the Religious Experience: The Language of the Sacred* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1972). Hereafter referred to in the text as *ARE*.

knowledge of and love for Byzantine art and the art of the High Renaissance painter, there is every possibility that Merton knew these works, though he did not include either in his extremely rough draft of "Examples of Hieratic Art."

Because Merton feels that Byzantine art is the purest sacred art, it is fitting to begin with study of an icon, The Vladimir Madonna, a twelfth century panel painting which now hangs in the State Historical Museum in Moscow. The icon was created by a Byzantine painter. It was sent to Kiev in 1333, then to Vladimir where it was given the toponym *Vladimirskaja*, then to the Kremlin in 1355, and finally to Moscow in 1395. The Madonna is depicted in typical semi-abstract Byzantine style. The rendering is objective, unemotional. The figure is two-dimensional with the anatomical features and the drapery of the clothing simplified to flat or linear abstract patterns. She and the Child sit stiffly, silhouettes against the brilliant gold and crimson background. The Madonna's face is presented in the typical configuration: almond shaped eyes, a narrow-ridged long nose, and a tiny mouth. Her expression is one of sadness rather than devotion and love for her infant, conveying her anticipation of the Passion of her Son.

Participation in this work can surely reveal that it is an explicitly sacred work. It clearly fits Merton's description of the art of the Byzantine.

This is for the most part art in which the gestures are hieratic, liturgical. The garb and the expressions are those of worship. The aim of the artist is never to reproduce a scene of merely human interest. He is depicting the liturgy of heaven, which the Church's liturgy on earth strives to imitate and in which it participates. The purpose of the pictures is never merely to please the eye or enchant the senses. They appeal to the depths of the soul, to the inmost religious sense of man. Their effect is solemn, awe-inspiring, mysterious. It is of the very nature of such art to be unrealistic, unfamiliar. The makers of Byzantine mosaics seldom felt themselves called upon to show the saints exactly as they were in earthly life. They strove for something which they considered far more "real" — the portrayal of the life of the spirit in which the saints bow down in worship before the throne of God.<sup>16</sup>

The sacred subject of this icon is the Madonna. Through the almost abstract form, the viewer "connects" with the deeply religious artist and shares his experience with the Blessed Mother. To him, the Madonna is not of this world, but of the world above. She is "the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of God," a supreme being in the other world toward whom the worldly beholder reacts with awe and adoration, respect and fear."<sup>17</sup> She

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16. Thomas Merton, "Examples of Hieratic Art" in *Art and Worship*, p. 40. Hereafter referred to in the text as *EHA*.

17. Ernest T. DeWald, *Italian Painting 1200-1600* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), p. 12. Hereafter referred to in the text as *IP*.

interpreted as a symbol rather than a living creature and, therefore, is depicted according to the law and tradition of the Catholic Church. Her features are unrealistic, and abbreviated. Immobile, enclosed, she is placed against a rich golden background that emphasizes her unreality. The purpose of the work is essentially didactic: "Love not the world, neither things that are of the world . . . For all that is in the world . . . passes away."<sup>18</sup> This work is designed to teach, bringing forth emotions of adoration and obedience in the participant who enters into this world of the divine. Through participating in this hieratic, liturgical work of sacred art, the viewer can move through the integrated form, the lines, shapes, and colors, to discover the "life" within the work, the experience of the Madonna as divine, a saint worthy of worship.

In contrast to the Byzantine icon, Merton finds paintings in the Renaissance begin to lose some of their sacred character.<sup>19</sup> As he writes in the introduction to the illustrated section of *Art and Worship*:

The Renaissance was an age of great art: an age in which the most famous artists devoted all their talent to the expression of traditional and familiar Christian themes. Yet it is significant that in this magnificent flowering of talent, Christian art tended to a great extent to lose the highly sacred character it possessed in earlier centuries. That is why, in this book, we find many mosaics, painting, and sculptures from the 10th to the 14th centuries, and relatively few examples from the better known, "classical" artists of the 15th to the 17th centuries. (EHA, p. 39)

Paintings in the fifteenth century begin to center on men and women rather than on God. Artists now become public figures, often revered as geniuses. They create works of fine art for aristocratic patrons and begin to be concerned with cultivating the aesthetic pleasure of their patrons as well as developing their spiritual understandings (CNA, p. 29). Despite the fact that the art is less sacred, Merton urges his readers to become familiar with the great artists of the Renaissance, such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

Using the perceptual approach in studying the *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael, a work of the High Renaissance, it is possible to discover that this painting, though a great work of art, is not as purely religious as an icon of the twelfth century. That is, it speaks more in terms of the real world. The work was painted for the High Altar of the Black Monks of San Sixto in about 1513. However, it was never an altar panel. Rather it was painted on canvas

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18. John 1: 15-17.

19. Thomas Merton, *Changing Notions of Art* in *Art and Worship*, p. 30. Hereafter referred to in the text as CNA.

and was never even transferred to wood. Today it hangs in the Dresden Gallery in Germany.

Again, the subject is that of the Madonna, but the comment on the subject developed through the form is more worldly. The setting is admittedly quasi-heavenly, as the Blessed Mother is set carefully in billowy blue clouds in the center of the painting. However, the Madonna is rendered in a three-dimensional form, depicted as a classically beautiful woman holding an equally beautiful baby. Clearly Raphael drew her from a live model. She is clothed in elegant blue and red flowing brocade robes. Her gaze is directed outward rather than inward. She looks directly at the viewer as she stands carefully posed, holding her child in a loving and comfortable fashion. Her expression is peaceful and serene, giving no indication that she is somehow absorbed in the tragedy in her Child's future. Though the Madonna is presented in a dignified manner, some of the aura of reverence is lacking. The scene reminds the viewer a little of a kind of theatrical tableau (*IT*, p. 411). The Madonna, with a sweet expression bordering on the sentimental, floats on the stage with its curtains drawn. The figures of St. Sixtus and St. Barbara are carefully placed in dramatic poses on either side of the central figure. The saints, one kneeling to the left and one to the right, one facing in and one out, seem more like performers than reverent worshippers. All are rather sumptuously clothed in draped garments in elegant blues, golds, and crimsons. At the bottom of the simple and monumental canvas are two charming but impish putti who resemble puckish youngsters (*ARE*, p. 177).

The *Sistine Madonna* presents a religious subject in a context that is more earthbound and therefore less sacred than that of the icon. It has less of the "objectivity and serene symblic calm" that Merton cherished in the Byzantine artists and Italian Primitives (*ASD*, p. 270). Participating in the painting gives insights into the differences between the pure Byzantine icon and this less religious painting. Now the artist shares his experience with the Blessed Mother and reveals her more as Mama than Madonna. She resembles an actual young mother living in the Renaissance. And now the angels are more like smiling infants. No doubt Merton would object to this representation of angels just as he did in the similar rendition of putti in the sixteenth century painting, *Immaculate Conception*, by the Spanish artist Murillo. He noted that the "angels are no longer the awe inspiring beings of the Byzantine mosaics."<sup>20</sup> They "have now become smiling infants" and

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20. Thomas Merton, "The Genesis of Kitsch" in *Art and Worship*. Hereafter referred to in the text as *GK*.

virtuosity has now "taken pleasure in the supremely realistic representation of soft babies." He sees in the depiction a certain conventionalism. In sum, the expressions of Madonna, saints, and putti are more human as opposed to being mysterious and withdrawn, and poses are more animated, natural, and dramatic as opposed to being passive, stiff, objective, and traditional. Because the figures have a less "austerely simple, hieratic character" than that of the icon, the viewer experiences less intense feelings of awe and fear.

Merton's approach to participating in works of art is also helpful in learning to divide genuine sacred works and works of "almost-art."<sup>21</sup> Along with non-art, that body of trivial mass-produced, machine-made objects that often "light up, glow in the dark or perhaps move," representational almost-art provides the major catalyst for Merton's efforts to improve aesthetic education (AW, p. 30). The kind of almost-art that concerns Merton most is illustrations, beloved by many because they are easy to comprehend immediately. However, accessibility and quality are being erroneously equated. The more traditional pieces reminiscent of the Victorian period, often called devotional art, are barely tolerable to Merton because they are often sentimental, sweet, lugubrious pictures filled with visual clichés that are simply nice to have in a living room. However, the modern illustrations influenced by advertising and filled with "melodramatic, immature, sensual, and sometimes, cheap imagery," he finds outrageous, indeed, dangerous to spiritual health. (SASL, p. 155). As he observes:

The prevalence of bad so-called sacred art everywhere constitutes a grave spiritual problem, comparable, for example, to the analogous problem of polluted air in some of our big industrial centers. One breathes bad air, aware only of a slight general discomfort, headache, stinging in the eyes; but in the long run the effect is grave. One looks at bad art, in church, in pious magazines, in some missals and liturgical books, on so called "holy" pictures; one is aware of a vague spiritual uneasiness and distaste.

(SASL, p. 155)

It can be discovered through participating in works of almost-art that illustrations are not fine art because they may entertain and please, they do not inform. After all, as Merton points out, art is never merely a literal copy of an object (AW, p. 69). Like bits of decoration such as wall paper or linoleum, these pictures have subject matter and form, but no content. They present familiar material, but fail to provide insights on the topic

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21. F. David Martin & Lee A. Jacobus, *The Humanities through the Arts*; 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1991). Martin uses his neologism, *almost-art*, to refer to works on the periphery of fine art such as illustration, decoration, craft design and Meta-art.



(HTA, p. 46). The student needs only to be a spectator as there is no need to participate in a superficial picture that copies an object or event and that offers no opportunity to connect with an artist with spiritual depth intent upon sharing a profound insight. Obviously, participation in those absurd popular illustrations that Merton saw of the Blessed Virgin painted up like a movie starlet would hardly be productive if one was seeking spiritual illumination.

Merton's ideas about the nature of sacred art, artist, and aesthetic education must be viewed as exploratory and evolving. After all, though some sections were published, *Art and Worship* remains essentially in a draft form which Merton and his editors knew still required a great deal of work (TMAD, pp. 116-120). Yet, as can be seen, there is some notable coherence and wisdom in his ideas about art, artist, and the participatory experience, and most importantly, some valuable and timely guides that can help students to discover most surely in traditional sacred art, a true and beautiful path to Being.