"The Monk and Sacred Art" (1956); and "Art and Worship" (1959)

Thomas Merton
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Editorial Note: These articles first appeared in Sponsa Regis (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN). They have not been reprinted since their original appearance. The essays succinctly reflect the early convergence of Merton's ideas about art, monasticism, liturgy and worship.

The two articles are also especially appropriate for inclusion in this volume of *The Merton Annual* since we have the good fortune to include several other articles about Benedictine and Cistercian art, liturgy and life.

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"The Monk and Sacred Art"
By Thomas Merton

IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY it was possible for St. Bernard to ask how much a monk could do without art, how much he could sacrifice it. That question is no longer as intelligent for us as it was for him. One cannot sacrifice what one does not possess. Before we can go to God "without art," we must learn to go to Him with it. That was something the men of the twelfth century acquired with the very air they breathed. Bernard of Clairvaux was raised in the country of Vezelay, Cluny, Paray-le-Monial, Tournus, Saulieu. The rich imagery of his prose is precisely the imagery of romanesque sculpture. He could afford to "renounce art," when his imagination, his character, his whole being were steeped through and through in the romanesque.

We, on the other hand, not so. Reared in a degenerate and tasteless eclecticism, passively carried this way and that by the winds of artistic doctrine, we need to hear a voice that will steady

us in our confusion, enable us to recognize, in the art of the past and that of the present, what belongs to us and what is alien to us as Christians. And it is normal and right that this voice should come to us from the monasteries, from monks trained in the great tradition which is more than a culture—deep and pure religious cult.

Art and worship are inseparable in the Christian view of life, and where a true and healthy asceticism has stripped art of its non-essentials, the result has been a revival of art and worship. In either case, where art is rich, lavish, magnificent, or where it is severe, austere and strong, it needs to be *seen* before it can fulfill its function as an aid to worship.

Today we speak of the monk as a "contemplative"—a vague, abstract term which is not always free of pagan connotations. The Fathers said the same thing much more concretely by calling the monk a *prophet*. Both the prophet and the contemplative are men who see what others do not see. They see the inner meaning of things. They see God in the darkness of faith. Yet the difference between the word "contemplative" and the word "prophet" would seem to be this: that the contemplative sees essences, while the prophet sees persons and things. And the contemplative, while indeed capable of "sharing with others his contemplation", does not do so in the same way as the prophet, who sees the things of God and announces them as the instrument and the mouthpiece of God.

The monk, then, is a prophet who sees and speaks the things of God. He is a *videns*, a seer, whose very vocation is vigilance on the frontiers that divide the flesh and the spirit, so that he may "see" what things are coming over the horizon and "announce" to others what they are.

Christian art is prophetic in this sense, because it is spiritual, and mystical. It is part of the *conversatio* by which the Christian lives in heaven while still living on earth. It fully and uncompromisingly accepts the limitations of matter, but spiritualizes and elevates its material element, making all the creatures of God transparent symbols of God's great work in the world of men, symbols of the Mystery that reestablishes all things in Christ.

The difference between a Prophet like Isaias and the nameless prophet who carved the magnificent capitals of the "martyred Church," Saulieu, is that Isaias foresaw the Mystery of Christ as a future thing, the sculptor of Saulieu saw it as a present reality which

was still, nevertheless, hidden by the veils of faith. Isaias said: "These are the things that will happen." The artists of the twelfth century said: "This is what is now happening, what is now being fulfilled in us." And the voices of the monastic "prophets" of our time join in the solemn chorus: "Yes, we too see that this is what is happening." But all together turn their eyes to the future, expecting the great consummation that is finally to come.

If the monk is a *seer*, it is also because he is a *maker*. Far from being an antiquarian, or an academician, the monastic "seer" studies not "rules" and "canons of beauty," but *how to make things*—how to form an earthenware vessel on the potter's wheel, how to carve a saint's image in applewood. In so doing he does not elevate himself into a kind of academic superego, dictating norms and imposing them upon the rest of the human race with severe sanctions ("you must believe this is beautiful, or you will pay the penalty of not being thought a man of culture"). He simply looks, and responds to what he sees. All his life is a looking, a making, a praising. It is in this way that he imitates God, by imitating the Son who is always busy doing what He sees the Father doing. The monk learns to see the things of God, and God's creation, by himself participating in God's creative work. This he does in his manual labor in the fields, in his artistic creative work in the studio, in his meditative reading of the Scriptures, in his guidance of other souls. In all these activities he is praising God the Creator, learning the greatness of God and the beauty of creation by making for himself and his brothers a whole new world of his own which mirrors the hidden purposes of the Almighty. The monk who has made something with his own hands and his own mind is entitled to speak, modestly, of the sacredness of a creation which God has made. He too has looked upon the world through the eyes of Him who made the world, and has seen that all things are "very good."

As a *seer* and a *maker* the monk is attuned to what is. He knows by instinct the difference between the solid and the artificial, the sincere and the false in art. He knows what is "right" and, therefore, also what is "sacred," because he himself is right. He has reestablished in himself by self-denial and prayer and love the rectitude with which man was made in God's image (*Deus fecit hominem rectum*). And from the depths of his own simplicity the monk can then praise God in Himself and in all His creatures. Filled with the life that God gives to His sons, the monk is attuned

to sacredness wherever it is found, and it is found everywhere, because the imprint of God's creative hand is upon everything that is. Everything that is, is holy.[1]

But there is more. The monk sees also that all things have their special holiness in Christ. All things are good because they are blessed by the word of God and by prayer. The world is sanctified by the Mystical Body of the Risen Christ. The monk sees that all things are holy because he sees them only in Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of every creature. In him were all things created, in heaven and on earth ...[.] And he is before all, and by him all things consist" (Col. 1:15-17). Christ, the Logos, is the "art" of the Father, the Creator of the world. But in Him and by Him the fallen creation is redeemed, saved, sanctified, transfigured and offered once again to the Father. Sacred art is then a prophetic participation in the consciousness of the Mystery of Christ, which is the great work of the Father. This prophetic participation cannot be content merely to look: it must imitate, it must praise. That is why sacred art is inseparable from Liturgy, from adoration, from prayer. It enters into the great complex of means by which the Christian communes with God and with his fellow Christian. Sacred art is, therefore, another means of verifying our communion in Christ. As all true Christian art enters into the setting of the infinite act of worship which the Mystical Christ offers to God, all true art is Eucharistic. The *tympan* of Vezelay is a picture of what St. Thomas would call the *Res sacramenti* of the Eucharist, the final and perfect union of the faithful in the risen Christ.

The vocation of the monk is, therefore, in the highest sense prophetic. The message of the monk is the message of seers, *videntes*, who remind the sacred City of Jerusalem of her true identity as the Body of Christ. The monk is not merely trying to tell us about art, but about ourselves, not merely how to identify a work of art, but how to identify ourselves, how to find ourselves in Christ. This means finding ourselves in the art of the past, creating for ourselves our own art in the present, handing on to other generations the awareness of the Mystery which is coming closer and closer to its final manifestation. In a word, it is the message of Isaias: "Arise and be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (Is. 60:1). All sacred art that is worthy of its name is but a faint reflection of the glory of Christ's transfiguration. No one who sees that light can help but say, "It is good for me to be here."

"Art and Worship"
By Thomas Merton

MAN THE IMAGE of God has a vocation not only to rule and exploit the world, but to transform it and to draw forth from it the hidden glory which has been placed in creation by its Creator. Hence man cannot be complete if he is only a scientist and a technician: he must also be an artist and a contemplative. Unless these elements in his life reach a proper balance, his society and culture will be out of harmony with the spiritual needs of his inner life. Hence art has a vitally important place to play not only in keeping man civilized but also in helping him to "save his soul," that is to say, to live as a Child of God who has knowledge, understanding and love of the things of his Father.

Unless man fulfills his vocation as artist, technology will tend to blind him to the things of God. By artistic and creative insight, man rises above the material elements and outer appearances of things and sees into their inner nature. By the disciplined exercise of his art he is enabled to draw forth the glory of God that is hidden in created beauty and make it manifest in the world.

The traditional definition of glory is *clara cognitio cum laude*—clear perception with praise. This definition contains what is most essential about the aesthetic experience—a combination of discovery with admiration. Art is not merely an interior appreciation of ideal beauty. It implies also a workman-like and disciplined use of tools and materials to produce a work of art which is a visible embodiment of the ideal form which the artist has seen in his contemplation of nature.

One of the marks of a secularized society is the stunting and degradation of art, both as contemplation and as discipline. This is inseparable from the decline of spirituality and prayer, but also results from the culture of our age which is top heavy with technology and fails to satisfy some of the deepest and most elementary needs of man's nature.

Our phenomenal advance in scientific investigation and technique has been accompanied by a kind of regression in spirit and also in instinct. We can find out all sorts of things about the most distant stars but we have lost the capacity to "see" a chrysanthemum in the garden or the beech trees on the hill side. The reality that is all around us has become alien and unreal to us, and while our senses are subjected to a constant bombardment of useless

and obnoxious stimuli, we are out of contact with the very things that would keep us healthy and sane. Nothing is familiar any longer except what is alien to our true nature.

Twentieth century art is endowed with great vitality and immense aspirations for discovery, but it is flourishing in the darkness of the prison house. Why is this? Because in a technological society art loses its roots in spirituality and religion, and tries to take root in the dead world of subjective abstraction. Not that there is anything wrong with abstract art: it can be very much alive and have a great deal to say. But no art, whether abstract or not, can get anywhere if it does not exercise a transforming and spiritual action in the world of visible things, revealing in its midst the reflected glory of hidden and spiritual forms.

This is another way of saying that art cannot be content with simply copying the outward aspect of visible things. To copy nature is to falsify it. The artist is not simply reproducing the thing he paints, but creating something new, an *eikon*, an image which embodies the inner truth of things as they exist in the mystery of God. Such an *eikon* or image may be a very striking and suggestive representation of a scene or of a person—witness the intense spiritual clarity of Japanese painting. The "realism" of such a picture is nevertheless all the more real in proportion as it *suggests* rather than *copies* the object. What is real in such a case is not the picture but the experience of the one looking at it.

An *eikon* then, does not reproduce the reality of an object, but contains that reality, in a spiritual or "sacramental" form within itself, so as to communicate it wholly and directly to the spirit of the one who sees it. In this sense, the word *eikon* might be translated as "symbol," but not as a "symbol" that has to be figured out through ratiocination. It is a symbol which directly and intuitively communicates, by a sign, the reality of the thing symbolized. The realm of art is then the realm of intuition, and not of reasoning.

Modern art, flying further and further from the pedestrian logic of straight representation, has tried to live up to its vocation to grasp the inner spiritual reality of things. But in order to do this the artist must be a spiritual man. Now in some modern artists who have not painted "religious" subjects at all, there can be found a deep and original spiritual quality: for example in Cezanne's *eikons* of landscape, or in Paul Klee's mysterious cult-like symbols, or in the painstaking dreamlike evocations of the jungle by Le Douanier Rousseau.

In spite of this, modern art remains to a great extent frustrated in its search for valid symbols, because it is out of touch with God who gives meaning as well as existence to the world of images and to the world of things. As S. Boulgakov has said: "The inspiration of art attains its completeness of insight only when it is enlightened by religion; only in religion does art become truly symbolic; only in religion does it fully understand its symbolic nature as a witness of the invisible through the medium of the visible."

This statement would not be fully acceptable if it meant that art was only fully itself when associated with a religious *cult*. Art can have an essentially religious quality even when not having anything directly to do with worship. "Even when art is not strictly an art of the cult it remains religious as long as it is *true* art because it reveals beauty, that is the hand of God in the world.... It always retains a connection with the world of essential spiritual values, i.e., with religious values."

While all true art is spiritual in the above sense, sacred art does even more. It seeks not only the "inner meaning" of things, it seeks to represent in some way the reality of God Himself. Now the divine nature as such cannot be represented by any material form, but the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, is Himself an *eikon* or manifestation of the divinity. For Christ, the author of Hebrews says, is "the brightness of (God's) glory and the figure of His substance" (Hebrews 1:3).

Sacred art therefore seeks to represent the hidden things of God as they are manifested in those beings, Christ, His Blessed Mother and His saints, who are themselves *eikons* of God.

Notes

1. This echo of William Blake is fundamental to the aesthetic of Thomas Merton.