

The Photography of Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton became interested in photography in the last years of his life and, in that time produced a large number of photographs. On December 10, 1978, the first major exhibition of his photographs opened at the Louisville School of Art and at the Shelbyville Road Mall in Louisville. The exhibition, organized and installed by Phil Wakeman and Diane Heilenman of the Louisville School of Art, was jointly sponsored by the Louisville School of Art and the Thomas Merton Studies Center through the financial support of the Kentucky Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The exhibition was opened with a reception and round table discussion. Participants were Dr. Daggy, Curator of the Thomas Merton Studies Center; Dr. Leon Driskell, Professor of English at the University of Louisville; Scott Hammen, Curator of the D.W. Griffith Film Center at the Speed Museum; Mrs. Tommie O'Callahan, Trustee of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust; Dr. Deba Patnaik, Visiting Professor at the University of Rochester; and Bruce Yenawine, Director of the Louisville School of Art. The Catalogue for the Exhibition is available from the Thomas Merton Studies Center. The following is an excerpt from the Catalogue.

On the Photography of Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton began to photograph seriously only during the last years of his monastic life at Gethsemani. Most of his camera-work can be attributed to the three years that he lived in a small hermitage on the property of the Abbey of Gethsemani (1965-1968), and the two trips to New Mexico and California and finally Alaska and Asia preceding his tragic death on December 10, 1968, in Bangkok. Thomas Merton was encouraged in his photographic work by the loan of a camera (a Canon FX) from John Howard Griffin, who likewise provided Merton with film and dark room services.

Following the example of a number of contemporary photographers, Thomas Merton used the camera as a contemplative instrument. Griffin accurately wrote of Merton's photographic work in a volume entitled: **A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton**: "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 of morning, through noon-day stillness, to evening quiet."

While walking in the woods, Merton photographed the images of his contemplation as he saw them, as they really were, in no way manipulated to create an artificial effect. He photographed whatever crossed his path: a dead tree root, the texture of weather-beaten clapboard on an abandoned barn, a rusted distillery, or the play of light and shadow on dry leaves in the woods. His contemplative and incarnational vision of reality was quite simply "things as they are." As such, they spoke eloquently to him of their Creator.

The camera was for Merton a potential catalyst for contemplation. Minor White, in **Octave of Prayer: An Exhibition on a Theme**, comes to a personal realization that at times photography and prayer converge. I think Thomas Merton would agree to that. Photography for many today has become a substitute for religion. But for Merton, I would suggest, it was more of a preparation for prayer, and in some sense prayer itself.

As an art form photography, like poetry and music, creates mental and vital values which can be turned to a higher end. "Like all things that are capable of linking our consciousness to God, they can become spiritual and a powerful aid to prayer", writes White. For him, meditative camerawork can lead one to a deep prayer life. To see God in the design of things leads to the quiet prayer of wonder.

The very real connection between prayer and camerawork is not always realized by the photographer. Yet, photography allows a consciousness of things, a heightened awareness very similar to meditative prayer. In contemplative prayer the experience is that of being united with God, as the mystics verify. For them, it is not so much a way of finding God, as resting in Him Whom they have found.

Thomas Merton expressed his photographic vision beautifully in a passage from his prose-poem, **Hagia Sophia**: "There is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek nameless, a hidden wholeness. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy rising up in wordless gentleness and flowing out from the unseen roots of all created being."

For Merton there was a "hidden wholeness" in all God's creation, a wholeness discovered anew each day in the common things of life. In these photographs Thomas Merton succeeds in communicating something of that contemplative vision.