

The Equipment of an Artist

By Allan M. McMillan

Thomas Merton's legacy of contemplation and prophecy is important to the society in which we live. Even more important to me is the artistic power of his life that began to show itself even in his early days in Prades – "O color!"¹ – and at various other times erupted with such subtle appreciation that his connection to the world of artists (especially the world of his father) is sometimes missed. When talking to the sisters at the Redwoods monastery he confessed that everything connects. When talking to the students in the monastery he frequently interjected "See. . ." in order to show that there was something more to be seen than the obvious or the sensation of the moment. Merton's writings are all over the map to those who don't see the connections. Prayer, peace, journals, critique, social commentary, anthropology and geography, to say even more about his poetry. But once the connections are seen, the pages of his writings call forth more images than are hanging in the George Pompidou Museum of Paris. But we have to look for the connections. Let me illustrate with the passage seldom considered in his novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*. As he escapes from the Hotel Rocamadour he ruminates about "Jzhere idz nyubbodyi omn dlhe shtiars."² This wonderful flight of fancy goes on for several pages and makes no sense at all unless one is familiar with the Marcel Duchamps painting "*Nude descending a staircase No. 2*" – a painting that was the main attention-grabber at the Armory Show in New York 1914. I believe that Merton's voice will speak clearly to the times in which we live if we can recognize his connections to a world of Modernism, Cubism, Abstractionism, Mannerism and a lot of other -isms of art that have come down to us as classic to our times. I further believe that an exploration of this world of art will connect us to the subtle realm of theosophy that plagued the thinking of many in the art world and has become a catch-all for pseudo-mysticism in the world of celebrity in the new millennium. Merton's voice still speaks with urgency.

1. Ruth Merton, *Tom's Book: To Granny with Tom's Best Love – 1916*, ed. Sheila Milton (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2006) n. p.
2. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 197.

Allan M. McMillan, priest of the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, recently retired from parish ministry after 42 years. He was trained as a sociologist at St. John Fisher College (Rochester, NY) and Boston College where he specialized in sociology of religion. In 1969, he entered the seminary a second time in preparation for ministry after reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His ministry gave him opportunities to teach in a Faculty of Education, Diaconate and Ministry Formation and various chaplaincies such as hospital, jails and policing. Through all of this he has maintained a deep interest in Thomas Merton and his connection to the world of modern art. In retirement, he hopes to spend more time in research and writing.



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