

AN OWEN MERTON LETTER

In his later years, Thomas Merton received, from some friends, letters written by his father. These letters prompted him to speculate on the whereabouts of his father's surviving paintings and to edit and publish a letter to Owen's friend Esmond Atkinson under the title "Sincerely in Art and Life." Merton himself undoubtedly never suspected that dozens of his father's letters had survived and that eventually they would be preserved in public and private collections. Yet many did survive — letters to Owen's parents and sisters in New Zealand, to Merton's mother Ruth Jenkins Merton, to Owen's lover Evelyn Scott and some of her friends, to Owen's "art teacher" Percyval Tudor-Hart. The following letter was written to Tudor-Hart while the Mertons were living on Long Island some nine months before the death of Thomas Merton's mother. This letter is from the Richard Bassett Archives.

57 Hillside Avenue
Flushing L.I.

Jan 22nd 1921.

My dear Mr Tudor Hart.

I have been silent a good many years, because I have been a pretty busy man, but I had a photograph taken the other day, of one of my water colours, and I thought I should like to send you a copy.

I cannot judge how far the photo conveys an idea of the thing. I fear it is very different from the original. I am sure you wd find the original the best thing you ever saw of mine except for one form which requires strengthening.

I am not painting very much at present. Really life is so damned complicated, it is next door to impossible to live & paint at the same time over here, but I shall be able to do a good deal this summer, and am keeping my hand in, now, with some oil colours.

Thompson was in New York a year ago and he seemed to me to have developed far and away ahead of anyone I know here, (where there are some very talented men) but I did not see his pictures. He baulks at exhibiting here in New York which is a mistake.

For myself, do you know that I really find I have a small reputation here, but that is all. It simply will not sell water colours to have the finest reputation in the world. I cannot keep away from painting, and yet I must confess that I have had no end of satisfaction in being able to use a sense of where to limit & where to open space, (to my monetary profit) in designing gardens etc! It is satisfactory to have found something the wretched people will pay for. I had the most devilish job in the world for 3 years over here, it was to be the organist in a Church of England American church. They were as you may imagine, a most charitable & Christian lot. I found at the end I made more by digging ditches, or such work, than by playing the organ.

Please do not be depressed or amazed that I seem to have messed up my life in a certain way. I defy you to find another of your pupils, as I knew them, to have been through what I have, & been able to do some good painting, & keep up in spite of all. Recently I have been desperately determined to end this perpetual bondage of working long hours for a living wage, that I have made up my mind to make a great effort to make enough money this year to get back to France. If things go as I hope, I should make quite a lot of money this year anyway, and the only reason I am content to paint less now, is that I can see it is necessary to keep close watch on all kinds of other things if I want to make money by planting trees & gardens in spring.

I have a couple of fine kids anyway, & my wife is a brick — who takes a good deal more than her fair share of worry & work.

Well. Goodbye. I often think I want you to know that without your teaching, which gave me a philosophy I could use as well as making me understand something about art, I would have been hopeless long ago. Thompson & I are certainly in your debt for everything we have, and we never forget it.

Your most affectionate pupil

Merton