

Into the light

Thomas Merton photos
now on display at Ali Center

BY JO ANNE TRIPLETT

He's not a bad photographer for a monk.

Actually, Thomas Merton is a renaissance man, as good at the visual arts as he was with analyzing his faith. Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk who lived at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Ky., beginning in 1941. His 70-plus books, including the ones on his personal spiritual and intellectual journey, like "Seven Storey Mountain," reflect the zigzag paths he took to get to Gethsemani, as well as his interest in Zen Buddhism.

The exhibition at the Ali Center features 35 black-and-white photographs from the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. The Merton Center houses more than 1,100 photographs and 900 drawings as well as other memorabilia, making it the largest collection of Merton items in the world. An excellent touch is the pairing of Merton's photographs with quotes from his writings.

Merton was fascinated by the details of ordinary objects as well as focusing on a moment of the scene. He wrote about how Zen Buddhism "seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness ..." He even said his photographs were produced with the aid of his "Zen camera," resulting in the "mundane and the spiritual as one."

On the other hand, his nature images also function aesthetically and can be taken at face value for their study of light and shadow. "Wooded Glade" consists of dark trees and bushes revealing an open field of light. It's pictorial in the 19th century sense of photography. By adding Merton's spiritual aspect to the photograph, you come to understand how he relates it to the New Testament, "that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it."



PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS MERTON. USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MERTON LEGACY TRUST AND THE THOMAS MERTON CENTER AT BELLARMINI UNIVERSITY
"Rocks and Root" by Thomas Merton is part of the "A Hidden Wholeness" exhibit at the Ali Center.

The simplicity of an "Open Barn Door" further illustrates his light studies. The exterior light of the fields brightens the dark interior of the barn by way of the open door. Merton also did series, such as "Rocks and Root." He sometimes even combined two subjects, such as expanding "Basket" to "Basket and Tree Root."

But you are reminded that the photographer is a monk when viewing "Monastery Window." His trademark strong shadows are present as they surround the white Gothic arch window. Falling leaves are reflected on the building.

Unfortunately, Merton died in the middle of his life. He was electrocuted after stepping onto an exposed electric fan wire while wet on a trip to Bangkok, Thailand. He is buried at Gethsemani.

Louisville showed its appreciation of Merton by establishing the Merton Square at Fourth Street and Muhammad Ali on March 18, 2008. Merton wrote about his Louisville

epiphany in "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander": "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammad Ali), in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers ... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." Relating Merton's words to his photographs help deepen the understanding of his spiritual philosophy. ■

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'A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton'

Through June 15
Muhammad Ali Center
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