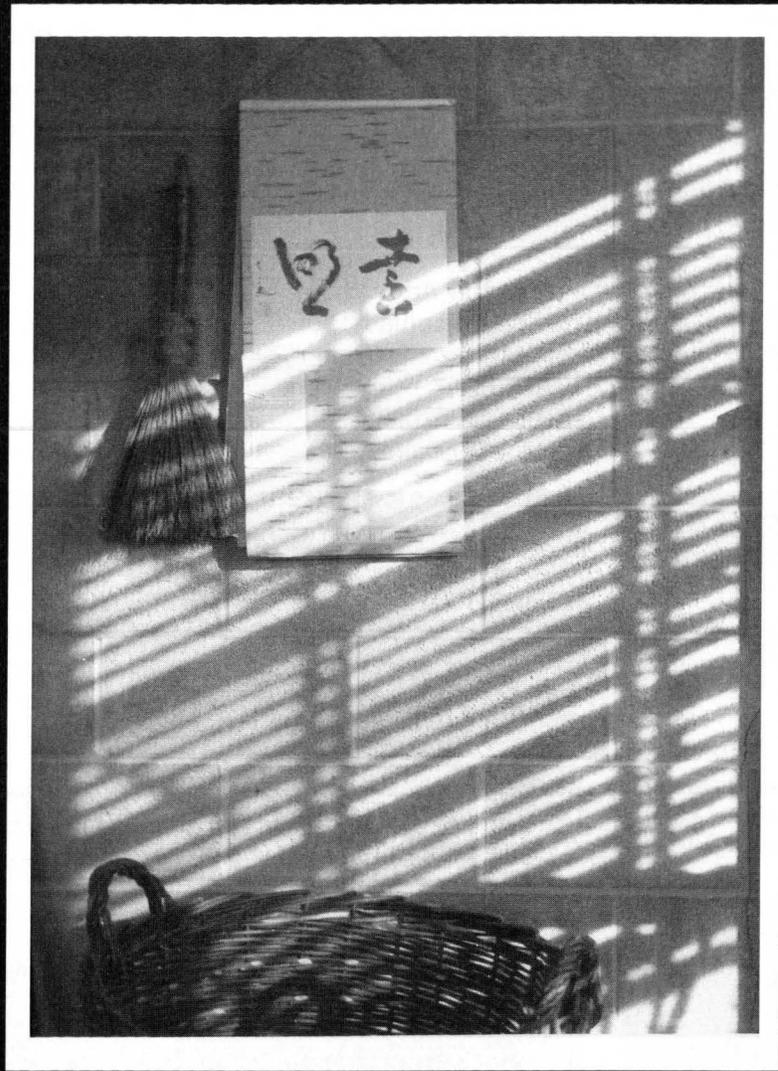


Wholeness A Hidden

Exhibit and Conference at Bellarmine focus on Merton's Visual Art
Photograph by Thomas Merton Used with Permission of the Merton Legacy Trust



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Thirty-five black and white images photographed by poet/monk/writer, Thomas Merton, were exhibited for the first time at the McGrath Art Gallery at Bellarmine University between November 19, 2004 and January 5, 2005. These photographs – mostly tightly framed close-ups – are spare and simple shots taken at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky, Merton's home from 1941 until his death in December 1968.

The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton

"Tracks in Snow," "Broken Rock and Grass," "Watering Can at Hermitage," and "Barn Door and Weeds" are samplings of titles in this exhibit which indicate Merton's keen awareness of and response to ordinary objects, familiar landscapes and the place he called home. Merton described his photography as "Zen photography" and his camera as a "Zen camera," said Paul Pearson, the Director and Archivist of the Thomas Merton Center and the organizer of this exhibit and conference. The photos clearly have a Zen orientation.

The world famous D.T. Suzuki, who is said to have set the stage for Zen training in America had a profound influence on Thomas Merton. Merton's letters to Suzuki began in the late 1950s and continued until Suzuki's death in 1966, writes Bonnie Thurston in the Exhibit Catalogue.

Merton wrote two books on Zen: *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), which include his 1961 dialogues with Suzuki. Scattered throughout these books one can find numerous passages which indicate why Merton would make a connection between Zen and his photography. "Zen is saying, as Wittgenstein said, 'Don't think: Look,'" Merton said in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New Directions, 1968). Later, he wrote: "We repeat: Zen explains nothing. It just sees. Sees what? Not an Absolute Object but Absolute Seeing." And quoting Suzuki: "Zen teaches nothing; it merely enables us to wake up and become aware. It does not teach, it points."

Pearson, who is also the author of numerous works on Merton, had placed a quotation from Merton's writings beside each photograph in the exhibit. He told me privately that "it was risky business" to do this because it may seem to some viewers that the quotation was meant to explain the photograph, which is not the case. The quotations merely provide some context. The photograph, "Monastery Window" [shown in this article] was exhibited with a quotation from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*: "The eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me." Merton was quoting Suzuki who was quoting the fourteenth century Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart. I found the quotes invaluable.

The presenters at the conference on Merton's visual art included nationally known art historians and critics, museum directors, writers, and Merton scholars. Despite the diversity of backgrounds and approaches of these speakers, one common note was struck again and again: the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, was not only a prolific writer and accomplished poet, but he was also a talented visual artist who left behind an esteemed collection of photographs, drawings

and calligraphies.

Antony Bannon, who is the director of George Eastman House, the International Museum of Photography and Film, spoke of "shadow" as a significant theme in Merton's photographs. The play of light against dark, the thing and its trace reoccur in Merton's work. "The implied transformation of the thrown image," Bannon has written,

is one carried by photography itself. For photography, with its near magical qualities, is designed to carry the trace of light reflected from the represented thing and impress it upon the light sensitive emulsion of film negative, which, in turn, renders light as darkness, just like a shadow. The photograph as transformation, then, as a kind of shadow itself, fits Merton's work like a glove.

(*Exhibit Catalogue, 2004*)

Bannon also pointed to "the variety of textures" in Merton's photographs.

Most of the speakers made reference to the role played by John Howard Griffin in the discovery of Merton's talent as a photographer. The late Griffin was the author of the best-selling *Black Like Me*, a novelist and a photographer who had built photo archives of people in typical activities. He and Merton had met working together on civil rights. In 1963 he contacted Merton to begin a photographic archive of the monk for history's sake. In their meetings, Griffin soon discovered Merton's interest in photography. A beautiful book, *A Hidden Wholeness/The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Houghton Mifflin, 1970) was eventually published. Here, Griffin brought together selected photos taken by Merton with his own photos and the story of their friendship and collaboration. In the text of the book, Griffin said that Merton's "concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood ... He photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation."

Merton had friendships with a number of other photographers: Shirley Burden, Edward Rice and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. The shared poetics in the photographs of Meatyard and Merton were the subject of a presentation by Therese Mulligan, who emphasized their shared view in prizing the experiential moment.

Although this exhibit featured the photographs that Merton took at Gethsemani, he also took photographs on his travels, many of which have been published. In a recent book, *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers* (Orbis Books, 2003), editor Paul Pearson has

included 25 black and white photographs taken by Merton at Shaker Village in Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. Pearson quotes Merton as saying he found at Shakertown "some marvelous subjects – marvelous, silent vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold pure light and some grand trees."

Perhaps the most well known of Merton's travel photos are those he took of the great carved Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and published posthumously in *The Asian Journal* (New Directions, 1975). Merton took the photos just days before he died of accidental electrocution on December 10, 1968. On the experience of seeing these statues he wrote in his journal on December 4:

I was suddenly, almost forcibly jerked clean out of the habitual, half tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.

The final speaker at the conference was Roger Lipsey, author of *An Art of Our Own*:

The Spiritual in 20th Century Art and Have You Been to Delphi? Tales of the Ancient Oracle for Modern Minds. He also has a book forthcoming from Shambhala Publications in spring 2006 on Merton's calligraphies – *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*. According to the Conference brochure, he was one of the first scholars to study and to realize the importance of Merton's calligraphies. One of many topics he addressed was the relationship between Japanese Zen calligraphies and those of Merton. In countries like China and Japan, calligraphy has been regarded as one of the highest art forms for centuries. Because adeptness with the brush reflects inner character, many of the greatest calligraphers were respected Zen teachers. "One of the most common themes in Zen calligraphy is Enso, the Zen circle" Lipsey explained. Merton had received photographs of Zen calligraphy and began exploring Enso, Lipsey continued. He showed slides of Zen circles by famous Zen Masters and then some of Merton's circles. Merton's Enso calligraphies were not up to the standards of the great masters, Lipsey said. "Merton eventually converted the circular Enso into a fish shape, a Christian symbol. Here Merton had achieved something," Lipsey concluded in this section of his talk.

Many of the photographs, calligraphies and drawings of Thomas Merton are on permanent display at The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine as well as a collection of watercolors by Merton's New Zealand born father, Owen Merton.