

MICHIGAN CITY — Baskets, wheelbarrows, blossoming branches, barn doors and windows, roots, watering cans, wooded glades, shadows, silhouettes, and bark — Thomas Merton captured all these images on film. Many of those images from the celebrated spiritual author are now on display in Northwest Indiana.

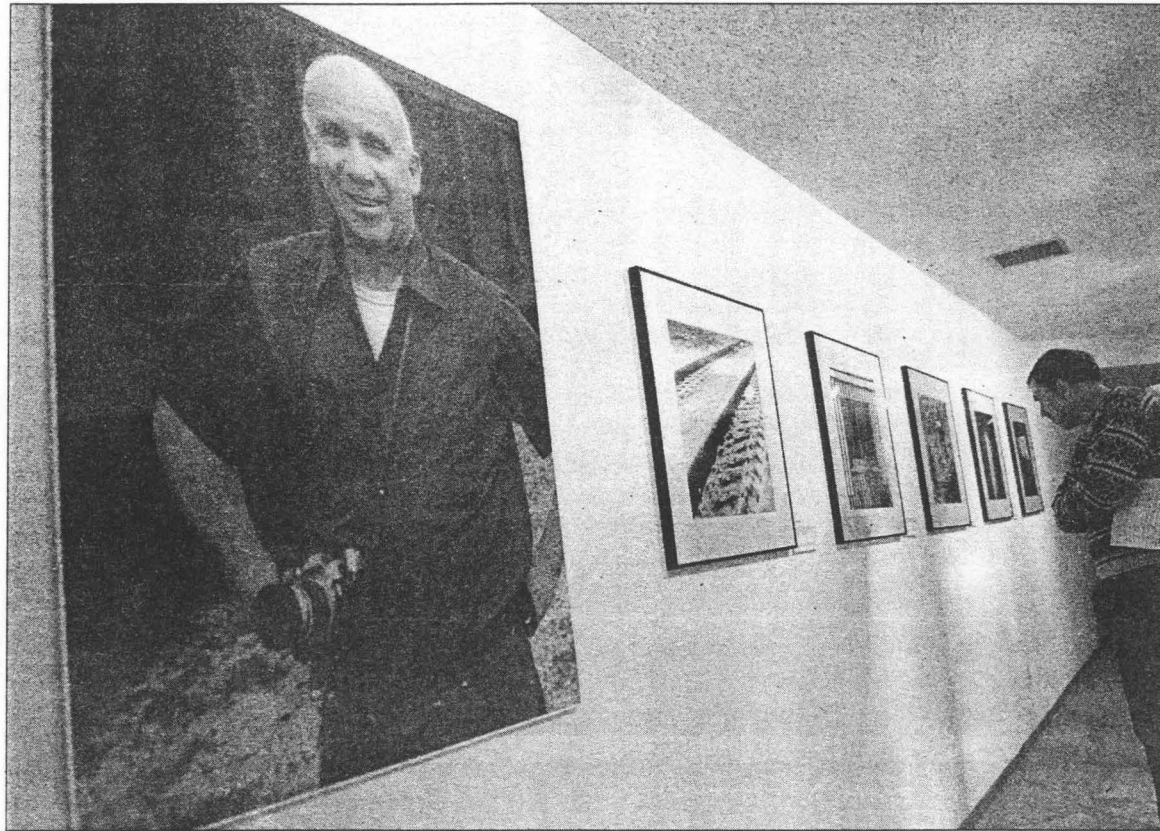
Merton, who spent 27 years as a Trappist monk of the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Ky., became known worldwide for his writings and his reflections on contemplation and social justice. Despite following a monastic life, he amassed writings numbering more than 60 volumes.

Thirty-five samples of his black and white photography are currently on display at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts.

Whether it was his photography, poetry, journals, or other writings, Merton “spent most of his life commenting” about “life itself in all its power,” said Benedictine Sister Suzanne Zuercher, a psychologist and author who has written on Merton.

For Merton, she added, “Life is not a finished product...life is always going on.”

On Dec. 10 — the anniversaries of Merton’s entrance into monastic life (1941) and also of his accidental death (1968) — the art gallery hosted “Celebrate Merton” celebrations. The Saturday afternoon program included the opening



Dennis Richardson from LaPorte looks over the photographs of spiritual writer Thomas Merton during the opening exhibit of his works at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City on Dec. 10. (Karen Callaway photo)

of the exhibit, a film biography on Merton, and commentary from people touched by Merton and/or the monastic life.

“To appreciate Thomas Merton, you have to understand the classic model of the monk,” said Benedictine Father Keith McClellan, administrator at Notre Dame Parish. He explained that the classic monk’s life was one of penance — a vocation of public prayer, for and with the Church, aimed at crushing the ego. There was no “self” in the classic model of the monk, Father McClellan said. Merton,

he added, confronted some of these monastic issues.

Merton, Father McClellan said, challenged the concept of monastic vs. Trappist, a life of piety, silence, and no academics. He also challenged self-actualization vs. self-denial, as well as living in a community vs. being a hermit. According to Father McClellan, Merton also raised the issue of engagement with the world or flight from the world.

“He answered these questions,” Father McClellan said. “There is no peace in the world unless we deal with that

inner life.”

The priest also noted Merton’s belief in dialogue on ecumenism and interracial matters — “the importance of full human development...to be fully human. God calls you every moment of your life, not just once.”

Merton spoke out against racial injustice and the nuclear arms race, while he promoted contemplation and non-violent civil rights. He is also well read by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Deacon Mark Plaiss attributed Merton’s widespread popularity to his ability to “talk

about [God and church] without coming across as a holier-than-thou guy. He’s a regular guy.” Plaiss, the head librarian at the Northern Indiana Educational Foundation, noted that Merton and *Chronicles of Narnia* author C.S. Lewis “speak the same language.”

Known as a poet and writer, Merton was also a skilled calligrapher, pen and ink painter, and photographer. His influences included Islam and Zen Buddhism.

The photography on display at the Lubeznik Center is either of nature or still life. Beside each photo is a brief comment by Merton.

Sister Suzanne Zuercher, who first read Merton during her novitiate, noted that as Merton was struggling with the mystery of life, “in his stories we find our stories. He comments on life in a way that touches us all.”

She added that Merton’s art was the “path by which he saw his limitations. He photographed whatever crossed his path. His contemplative view of reality was things as they are. [His photographs] spoke eloquently to him of his creation. They follow God’s plan.”

If You Go

“A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton,” is on display through Feb. 26 at the Lubeznik Center for the Arts, 101 Avenue of the Arts (W. Second Street), Michigan City. For hours, call 874-4900 or visit www.lubeznikcenter.org.