

KATARZYNA BRUZDA

## THOMAS MERTON – AN ARTIST\*

*“It is not easy to be a monk with a spiritual heritage of an artist”*

“Merton an artist”. Such a formulation seems to define most precisely who he was. Not “Merton – a painter”, “Merton – a poet”, or “Merton – a writer”. Obviously, one can discuss only those particular aspects of his art works, and his identity. But first of all Merton did have the soul of an artist. It is hard to say if Merton as a graphic, drawer or photographer might have become someone famous, someone whose artistic works we could esteem as we do appreciate his writings. It seems that without his special personality, his way of spiritual quest, his at-



tempts to live as a monk, still being in progress, continuously open, we could not have the access and the key to a perception of his artistic works. One can even say that his writings clear us the passage to his person, and the meeting with him, with Thomas Merton himself, allows us to see all aspects of his work.

Thomas Merton, a son of a couple of artists, imbibed with the atmosphere of artistic perception of the world, and above all the artistic climate of

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\* Transl. by A. Wojtasik.

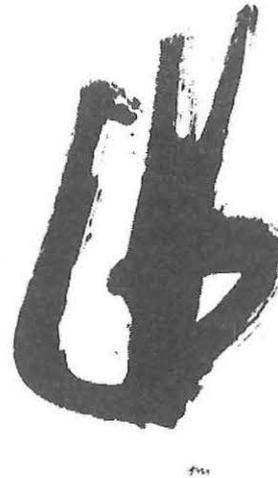
freedom and unconventional existence, for all his life was sensitive to art, understood as an expression of freedom, as a way of describing spiritual states, and as a contact with the Reality, as it appears.

A conflict mentioned in his remark on the spiritual heritage of an artist shows Merton as a person aware of tensions. Merton's paradoxes, living within the conflicts, and, at the same time, reaching some unexpected solutions in the midst of contradictions seem to be the essence of his life's quest. Thomas himself dealt with the problem of an apparent conflict between his artistic identity and his monastic vocation. He wrote about the increase of this tension within him. Already being in Gethsemani, he knew, that in his blood he had the sense of art and understanding of artists, which could not be taken away or internally denied. In the beginning however, the way of a monk seemed to be opposed to such a sensitivity and contradictory to his own need of expression as a writer or an artist. Initially he tried to isolate himself from his needs of answering to important matters using the language art, but, as Andre Malraux said rightly about Picasso, "We call 'artists' the people for whom the art is a need, no matter if they create it or perceive it. If we love a certain being, it doesn't mean that we think he or she is the world's seventh wonder, but it means, that he or she is necessary to us".<sup>1</sup> People internally connected with art, and Merton was such a person, cannot deceive themselves, cannot betray their own humanity described by art, cannot kill the artist within themselves, even being a monk. It was the artist's soul

that opened Merton to the depths of his monastic vocation. It is possible to suggest that the very essence of Thomas Merton's monastic vocation and his faithfulness to what was the most important in his way of existential searching was the result of his great artistic sensitivity, which, if fair, is usually associated with deeper and deeper opening to freedom and truth. And Merton was a seeker of truth and freedom. Thanks to this, in his art he could stay authentic and at the same time his artistic identity would not allow him to stay in



<sup>1</sup> A. Malraux, *Głowa z obsydianu*, Warszawa 1978, s. 125 [*La tête d'obsidienne*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974].



the closed world of spiritual ideals and schemes of institutions but pushed him to penetrate new areas and depths.

Thus let's try to analyse his artistic development, which ran in parallel to his existential and spiritual discoveries, and to find both the sources of his inspirations and the areas he reached thanks to it.

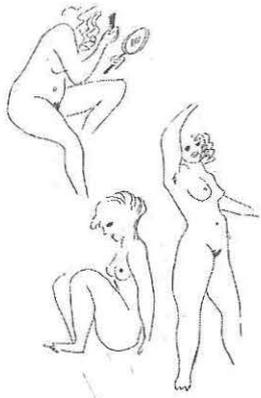
I would like to mention that it is going to be only a very brief journey through the art of Merton. The subject calls for deep studies, and the amount of works made by Merton (for example, a collection of 800 drawings in the Belarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, and the collection of numerous photographs) sug-

gests that such studies are surely more complicated than it may initially seem. The character of my lecture and the time limits do not allow for more detailed analysis. In some cases I failed in precisely locating the time and place of particular works; also not all of the works (especially the earliest ones) presented in my expose are matched to the times of described events from Merton's life, I tried however to maintain the general chronology. Also I do not analyse Merton's theoretical attitude to art. He stated his opinion on those questions many times, for example, expressing his negative attitude to poor sacral art.<sup>2</sup> I consider only those threads that directly influenced his own artistic expression.

Generally speaking, Merton's artistic activity can be divided into three periods or formally into four groups of works differentiated according to various means of artistic expression. **(1a)** Early works: ink drawings, caricatures and funny sketches made before 1940, and **(1b)** formally similar but thematically changed ink drawings and paintings, made after entering Gethsemani (approx. 1950), then **(2)** an extraordinary cycle of female portraits dated before 1960, and **(3)** after 1960, photographs, dominating as a means of artistic expression, as well as **(4)** numerous calligraphies made with ink and brush.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Th. Merton, *Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life*, and Th. Merton, *Absurdity in Sacred Decoration*, in: *Disputed Questions*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960.

## Riot and optimism. Caricature and early sketches



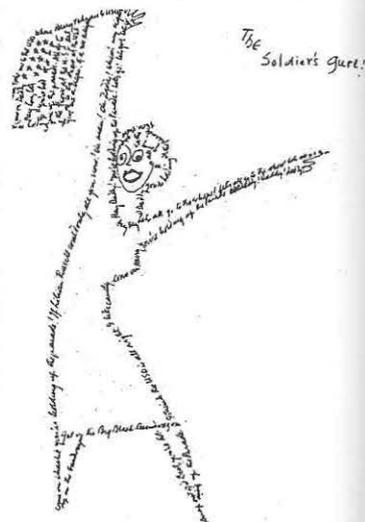
After his childhood, filled with many sad and important events, Merton begins his education in Oakham Public School in Rutlandshire, England. In this way he enters in his stormy youth, full of contrast events. In 1931 he becomes the editor-in-chief of *The Okhamian* and is responsible for the graphic department. In that period his attitude towards reality is complicated. Being already orphaned after his mother's death in his early childhood, he experiences again the passing of a close person: his father dies. It is a shock for Merton who more and more closes internally, at the same time engaging in social life and conflicts. In that period

he develops his gift of writing. Drawings are somehow a support for his literary expression. He draws small illustrations to a magazine.

Merton enters into a stormy pubescence. He often falls in love, suffers and is a subject of erotic fascinations. In his pictures one can see joyful nudes of laughing women, naked young girls, provocative and full of energy. The pictures perfectly catch the movement and vitality of young bodies, however it is hard to call them serious works in any sense. They are just sketches.

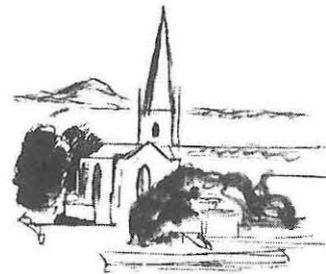
As a student at Columbia University, six years after his graphic trials in *The Okhamian*, he gets a post as editor-in-chief of the *Columbia University Yearbook* and becomes art editor of *The Jester* magazine. Again he is responsible for graphics and uses a language of line.

Merton's drawings from that early period can be formally classified as illustrative sketches. They reveal also his sense of humour. One can observe the critical sense of young Thomas, and at the same time his joy and power of life in the midst of dark and cynical moods. These works prove his skill of using lines and his natural sense of observation, especially visible in the presentations of humans (it must be remembered that, however



being bred by his parents-artists, Merton received no formal artistic education). His works are neither symbolic nor allegoric, but based on the synthesis of form within the realistic frames. His interest in contemporary art is clear. In the first period of his stay Gethsemani, in his journals he comments on the works of famous artists. He mentions Picasso. In Merton's pictures from that period one can easily see his knowledge of contemporary artists. Thomas's father, Owen Merton, in some works inspired by Cezanne's paintings, but also by a synthetic Cubism, simplified and geometricised a form. Thomas's drawings prove his inspiration taken from the Cubists' strong and emphatic line, as well as their tendency to formal simplifications and ignoring the details. In later period it will be visible even more. However, at the same time he is dominated by this illustrative attitude.

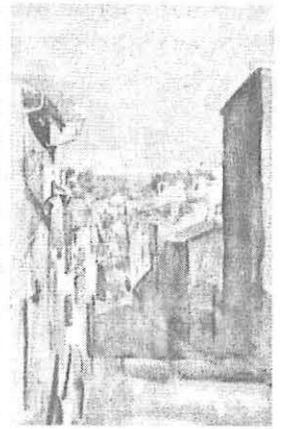
After entering Gethsemani Merton still expresses his sympathy towards drawing, by "illustrating" his interests with the topics important to him. Some figures of the saints and scenes from the Bible appear and, worth mentioning, more and more synthetic portraits. We can see the face of Christ too. Merton's



later works, both paintings and graphics, still having a sort of "topic" as a subject, are much more developed. Merton uses a wide brush and ink. Patches are brave and emphatic. The observation is more accurate and simple. Expression of vitality is visible in a patch. Some of his works are inspired by Expressionism. In the background of his work there is an echo of Munch's famous "Scream". Dramatic impression and

strength of affections are present in his works, but one can still find also a sense of humour and a healthy distance in them. There is also a visible simplification of form and a gradual giving up illustrative elements.

To put things in order I would like to mention that there are also some other Merton's drawings different from the dominating subject of portrait of the human figure, focused on still life study, as well as small landscape studies, formally belonging to "pen notes", and made with wide movements



of charcoal or brush. Those topics were drawn by Merton in various periods, but generally they belong to the first one.

### *Reality and dream. Female portraits*

One cycle of works made before 1960 deserves a separate discussion. It needs to be commented within the context of, extremely important for Merton, the time of a new discovering of his identity.

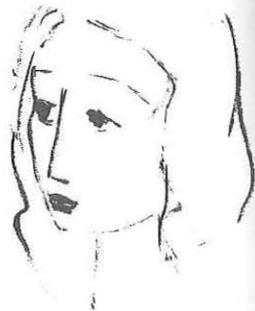
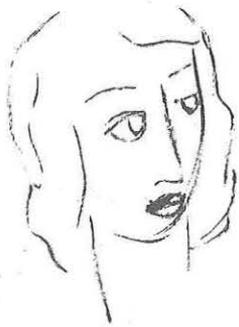
The key to the gallery of female portraits we find in Merton's notes, letters and poetry. The portraits are parallel with Merton's dreams, that he remembered in detail, described and tried to note their impression in a form of drawings. Deepening, experienced at that time by Thomas is associated with a more full, intuitive understanding of the impor-

tance of female element both in his life and his identity as a man, as well as in the cosmic aspect, within everything around us, and finally within God Him/Her-self.

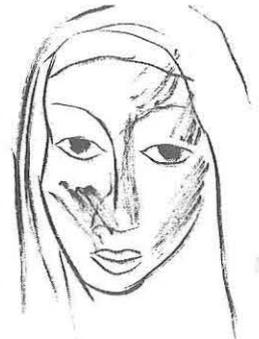
The idea of meeting the female aspect, shown with a deep affection in the portraits, had its literary sources in Boris Pasternak's texts, known by Merton and in letters they exchanged, in writings of Evdokimov, an Orthodox theologian, as well as in texts and meeting with Stern, a psychiatrist of Jewish origins and a Catholic convert.<sup>3</sup> The female thread is associated for Merton with the contemplation of Hagia Sofia, the Divine Wisdom. At the same time he experiences a mystical vision in Louisville, described as a deep awareness of unity of all people, of an absence of strangeness, and being ravished by the beauty of every person. Merton takes that experience as a gift of Wisdom, as a grace of meeting Hagia Sophia. "I shall never forget our meeting yesterday, he writes. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and Truth. Only with you are all things found, dear child, sent by God."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Montaldo, *A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women From the Drawing and Journals of Thomas Merton*, in: *TMA* 14 (2001) 155-172, pp. 156-157.

<sup>4</sup> Journal of Th. Merton, March 19th, 1958, qtd from J. Forest, *Living With Wisdom. A Life of Thomas Merton*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 132.



Women have entered his dreams. He confesses his dream to Pasternak: he dreamt of a Jewish girl, pure and beautiful, who hugged him in a passionate but virgin way. Merton associated this figure with St. Anne, but he was also convinced that it was a meeting with Hagia Sophia. In a sense he interpreted all his dreams archetypically. The following dreams are a dream about a female teacher of Latin, elegant and lost in men's world, who Merton tries to help, he dreams also about a Chinese princess, "Last night my dream about a Chinese princess obsessed me for the whole day again "The Proverb", a close and real person who comes in my dream in various and mysterious ways"<sup>5</sup>. In a later period he dreams about a Black nanny, cuddling him to her heart. "I had a moving dream about a Black mother. . . . She stood at the front of me – her face was ugly and severe, but a great warmth came from her to me and we hugged each other with great love (and I hugged her with gratefulness). What was recognisable, it was not her face, but the warmth of the hug of her heart. We danced together a little bit. Me and my Black mother."<sup>6</sup> It is a sort of memory from childhood. He dreams that he is awakened from his dream by a delicate hand of a nurse. At the same time he writes a poem titled "Hagia Sophia", saturated with allusions combining all those figures in one.



So, she is Eve – who he escaped from and who he desired, but who was not to disturb him, and who returns to him as the most intimate, internal truth, and at the same time, the Holy Virgin, giving him a refuge, as well as the Divine Wisdom, by whom he feels to be awakened to a new life. A girl, a woman who appeared in his dreams and is recognised in particular pictures is called "A Proverb". "A Proverb", or "A Parable" is associated with the Book of Proverbs, wonderfully describing Wisdom – God's masterpiece, playing with Him and being His delight

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *A Gallery of Women's Faces*, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.

(see Proverbs 8, 22-30). Jonathan Monthaldo in his analysis on female portraits by Merton, suggests however an interesting and original thesis, that for him “a proverb” can be, apart from all archetypal associations with met and dreamt women, also Merton himself. Discovering in himself the female element he identifies himself with Hagia Sophia, with the Embodied World of God, and accepts it in himself at the deepest level of his existence. It is an interesting thought, also in the context of later Merton’s love episode in 1966 when he fell in love with a young nurse known as M. It seems as if in this person, met in reality, with whom he experienced an extraordinary time of love, fascination and unity, Merton found an embodiment of his theological intuitions, and the deepest unity with his own being. It is thanks to that mutual love that he discovered a deeper sense of his vocation to the fullness of unity, he experienced that what counts is such a devotion when “our verz being surrenders itself to the nakedness of love and to a union where there us no veil of illusion between us”.<sup>7</sup> Drawing the portraits Merton expresses himself, his prayer, his need of unity. And the high temperature of his heart, which is directed to God.

In a later period he writes about “A Proverb” and about “M”: “I dreamt in several different ways of trying to contact M. I cannot remember what the dreams were, only that the last one, before I woke up, was that I was sending a child to the hospital to tell her that I love her. . . . I almost never dream about M. as she is but of someone who, I instinctively know, represents her.

. . . Still, just when I wake up, the archetypal M. and the reality merge together.”<sup>8</sup> Thus there was an internal connection in Merton’s consciousness between M. and Wisdom, and Mary, Eve and Proverb, as well as with himself in his deepest interior.

There are also two very interesting drawings that show a figure of Christ taking off a veil or a scarf from the head of a young woman. The other picture shows the face of Christ stamped on the veil, “Veron Eikon” known from Christian iconography. Insightful analysis of the way the pictures were produced



<sup>7</sup> *Living With Wisdom*, p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> *A Gallery of Women’s Faces*, p. 171.



leads us to conclude that the female figure is an Old Testament type – the Divine Wisdom dancing in the presence of the Highest; the veil is taken off and “uncovered” by the Incarnated Word, Christ, the Incarnated Wisdom. In 1959 Merton saw the picture made by Victor Hammer showing the Virgin Mary putting a crown on the Christ’s head. “The feminine principle in the universe is the inexhaustible source of creative realization of God’s glory”,<sup>9</sup> he writes to the author impressed by his painting. Yet Merton in his work presented another interpretation of this motif. It was an

intuitive grasp of God, as uniting male and female elements. Merton identified a female figure in Hammer’s painting as the Wisdom.<sup>10</sup> Also in his own work Merton shows Christ who represents Wisdom, Christ and the young Woman personify the Hagia Sophia, and the paradox of joy full of embarrassment or pain is visible.<sup>11</sup> It is a sort of allusion to sad Madonnas presented in Orthodox icons. Christ takes off the veil as a Bridegroom showing the light of beauty of his Bride. But She herself is an image of the Word, a New Face of God. It is interesting in this context to discover some visual resemblance between this Woman – the Wisdom, young, joyful and affected, with the nurse named Margie, who Merton fell in love with. Michael Mott suggests that both the dreams and the drawings, as well as the visualisation of a Jewish girl are reflections or reminiscence of his beloved M.<sup>12</sup>



The works from this cycle are also formally interesting. Merton’s artistic sensitivity does not weaken, on the contrary, despite the fact that it is not the main domain of his activity, he works with increasing verve and concentration. His paintings are simple and deep. At the same time one can feel his

<sup>9</sup> Letter of Th. Merton to Victor Hammer, May 14th, 1959, qtd from: *Living With Wisdom*, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. B. Betz, *Merton’s Images of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God*, in: *TMA*, 13(2000), pp. 190-207, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p.204.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, San Diego: Harvest Books, 1993, p. 578.

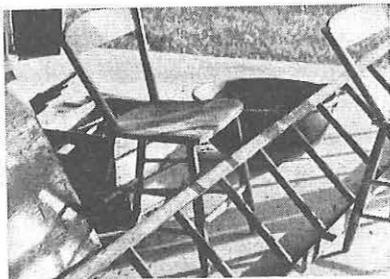
fascination and admiration of women's beauty. He shows their beauty in many different forms, their faces represent various physiognomies, but they all have a sort of common feature. The visual form of the works was influenced by both theological studies of Wisdom, and Merton's sensitivity to the beauty of the human beings surrounding him in reality and in dreams. Through the images from the dreamy meetings he seems to try to get to the core of the reality. To find the meaning and harmony. Dream and reality do not merge, but they enable him to get deeper into his own being and the essence of the world, universe, reality. Merton's art is indissolubly interlocked with meditation and contemplation. It is out of the verbal (and possibly trustful) way of telling the mystical experience of meeting the Hagia Sophia.

Those works, just like the works from the previous period, show Merton's temperament, strong personality, perceptiveness and idealistic tendencies. In the same period he made also portraits and paintings of figures belonging to some other thematic groups.

### *Unspeakable and real. Photography*

Jim Forest in his biography of Merton notices that Merton's "affair" with photography began in autumn 1964.<sup>13</sup> More or less at the same time Merton, continuing his painting experiences begins his experiments with marking paper with black ink abstract, "signs". Experience of photography and calligraphy is the expression of completing a spiritual search and inner journey.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Merton's attitude towards photography is surprising. It was a kind of "transposition" or extraction of the inner, intuitive cognition of the essence of things into the visual world, because this essential world is hidden inside of it. Initially, in the earlier period Merton did not trust photography, because he thought that its advertising function made it submitted to social mechanisms,



<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Living With Wisdom*, p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Th. Merton, *Circular Letter to Friends, September 1968*, in: Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, London: Sheldon Press, 1973.

which misrepresent a human being. He thought that advertisements seduce us, to feel the craving to have an item from the picture. However, when as a



child he saw the photographs of various parts of France – in the albums bought with the money given by his grandfather – he felt an unsatisfied desire of wandering and he wanted to possess everything he saw. Maybe he was seduced by the illusion of photography, but thanks to it he discovered also the call for wandering, taking a journey, and visiting the places that charmed him with their climate. By the encounter and more serious study of Eastern philosophical thought, especially the intuitions

of Zen philosophy, he discovered some extraordinary means of expression, "noting the traces of things", with the help of a camera, as well as the paper covered with light-sensitive emulsion, and the light itself. He noticed that the light as such somehow "works", writing its reflections of objects.

The way photos are made appealed to Merton, and the process of developing them, "calling up" the already noted pictures on paper. It was similar for him to the most important processes in everything that exists, in the Reality. Photography could elicit what analogically happens in the structure of being, everywhere around, within him, and within every human being. He noticed that the same happens when the light of God enters into our life, leaving a mark in it. We can "develop" it, or keep it hidden. The world is like a negative waiting to be transformed by the light of Christ.<sup>15</sup> This way of "illuminating" an object, casting an eye on it and freezing the image caused photography to become a witness of Merton experiences. It began speaking the language, which was different to the language of advertisement he had met and criticised. It allowed for a contemplative perception of an object without the need of possessing it. As if the very sight was an act of entering an object. The way of meeting it, and the union with it, without violating its integrity and virginity. It was the same period when Merton wrote his moving essay titled "Rain and Rhinoceros" about the

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Meatyard, *Merton's "Zen Camera" and Contemplative Photography*, in: *The Kentucky Review* VII, 2, p. 137.

unselfishness of being experienced and described thanks to his ability of admiring the rain, just raining, wanting nothing.<sup>16</sup> This kind of unselfishness is deeply felt in Merton's photography.

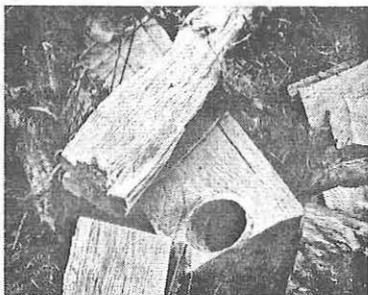
Acquaintance and friendship with artists-photographers helped Merton to learn the secrets of photography.<sup>17</sup> Ralph Eugene Meatyard was one



of them. Christopher Meatyard in his excellent article analyses the development of both artists.<sup>18</sup> They had many common passions – photography, similar attitude towards the outside world, and their fascination with Zen – that gave them a common language on a very deep level. Meatyard's opinion on photography, his experimental achievements put some professional discipline in Merton's photographic attempts. Meatyard's pictures are

like paintings, full of eccentric mysteriousness, sense of humour, and at the same time visionary. But the very essence of his pictures was a response to the aggression of photographic advertisement. Building a picture Meatyard used the "Zen technique" – anti-logical illusion – to expose the mechanism of obsessive attraction, and through the reaction of rejection, to cause a viewer to detach from the object. On the other hand, Merton's pictures are full of simplicity, and reverence towards a common, very important, and, at the same time, totally unimportant object, focused on respect to every detail.

In photography Merton proved to be the most fulfilled artist, showing his excellent intuition in composition, sensitivity for space, climate of the places and objects. We want to meet the things Merton shows us. And, as



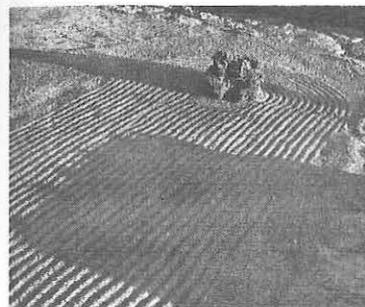
<sup>16</sup> Cf. Th. Merton, *Rain and the Rhinoceros*, in: *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York: New Directions, 1966, pp. 9-23.

<sup>17</sup> Merton's "Zen Camera", p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, pp. 122-131.

Merton himself felt in the past, we feel the urge to be in these places. Through the pictures we absorb a kind of inner strength from these objects. We want to meet them almost as persons, and such a meeting takes place thanks to the picture frozen in the photo. At the same time we are sent to the object, not the same, but the one which is close to us, to learn how to see it in a free way, without possessiveness, aware, not desiring it, and calling for nothing.

Merton is able to gain the affect of abstraction, which has a deeper meaning. One of Merton's biographers, John Howard Griffin, noticed that



Merton was not interested in normal photography, but used it as a focus of contemplation.<sup>19</sup> Merton called the camera he used the "Zen-camera". This was what he noted photographically was a way of meditation on objects, and the act of contemplation was a picturesque metaphor, a kind of allusion. Merton wanted an aware revision, an insight into the

visual world. Studying Zen helped in such "insight". He knew that Zen is neither theology, nor an aesthetic rule, but that it is included in religion or artistic expression.<sup>20</sup> Both Meatyard and Merton, while following slightly different paths, gained similar results. They both wanted to say, that there is no need to possess everything we see, and that there is no need to explain everything completely. One can experience the encounter with Reality, one can participate in it in an aware and contemplative way and one can gain deeper and deeper freedom. Merton noticed that the Eastern style of Zen art uses abstractions and minimalism to detach the observer from the observed object, (this detachment can be called "poverty"), and as a result, or at the same time, to liberate the consciousness. Despite many obvious differences the Zen experience proved to be very close to Christian experience. Thus the photography was also a witness to these similarities.

Photography allowed him to contemplate the visual objects and, at the same time helped to liberate him from them. Photography as such is a means

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

of “factualisation” – but Zen makes us realise that “when a fact is isolated from the stream of reality, it becomes a false representation, an illusion, a contradiction”.<sup>21</sup> Abstraction and minimalism, but also paradox, incoherence, contradictions, and eccentric behaviour aim to destroy the foundations of ready explanation and to remove what is essential in the conjectured “experience”. Such are the origins and the aim of Merton’s photography – to deal with the facts and to get, through the contemplation of an object, to their hidden meanings.

Merton shows also his sense of humour, when in a paradoxical Zen manner he presents “the only known picture of God”, with nothing (or Nothing?) suspended on the empty hook in the centre of the composition.

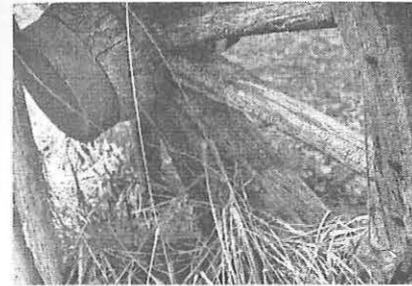
It is worth mentioning here another of Merton’s ambiguous fascination with one of the Himalayas’ peaks, the Mount Kanchen Junga, the affection born during his Asian journey.<sup>22</sup> Initially he was irritated with its proud height and the necessity of seeing it every place. But later on he met the mystery of the mountain and wanted to take pictures of it. He realised that on all available postcards the mountain is presented only from one side. He discovered the other, hidden, dark side of the mountain, invisible for people. In *The Asian Journal* Merton carried away by passionate affection wrote: “O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin–yang palace of opposites in unity!(...) A great *consent* to be and not-be, a compact to



<sup>21</sup> Merton’s “Zen Camera”, pp. 122-131.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Living With Wisdom*, pp. 206-207, and Merton’s “Zen Camera”, p.134.

delude no one who does not first want to be deluded. The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and it is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN”.<sup>23</sup> Merton again dreams about what is most important for him, this time about Kanchen Junga. Then he takes pictures of his new love and notes: “I took three more photos of the mountain. An act of reconciliation? No, a camera cannot reconcile one with anything. Nor can it see a real mountain. The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct, not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it – especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene”.<sup>24</sup> Merton



expresses his credo as a photographer: a picture helps to realise the illusions we are usually submitted to, but we are usually not aware of. But only the awareness of illusion, and letting it speak allows for meeting the Truth. In his opinion photography

is more similar to a thought than to a painting. His pictures show how he perceived, how he “thought” the world, and show his kindness and love towards the world.

As in the case of his calligraphs, Merton’s pictures can be described with a focus on their aesthetic values and his technical skills. We can mention here briefly: he photographed objects, landscapes and people. A separated group contain his photographic notes from his journey to California and New Mexico, when he took pictures of many poetic landscapes as well as nature’s details. He photographed also places and people during his journey to the East. Pictures of the Buddha figures in Pollonaruwa are especially interesting, as they re-create the absolute beauty and harmony of the monuments and the climate of the cool silence and concentration.

<sup>23</sup> *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>24</sup> *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 153.



The majority Merton's pictures are black and white. They have many aesthetic values associated with composition, black and white contrast, graphic gradation of greyness, and the work of light. But the essence of these written actions was seeing and detachment from seeing to get to non-seeing, to void where all facts, objects and axioms are lost, to communicate with the Truth and Wisdom as it is, without any certainties. Thus, for Merton, with the Person of God.

*Solitude and compassion. Calligraphy.*

Calligraphy is a further accomplishment of photographic experience. An adventure with photography begins about 1960. Initially Merton studies Oriental thought, among others a Buddhist Zen scholar from Japan, Doctor Suzuki, he initiates the correspondence, and even is able to meet Suzuki in New York, he next studies authors and thinkers and he dreams of a journey to the East. In 1968 he goes to Asia for the Benedictine and Trappist monks conference near Bangkok, and allowed to visit some other places on the way. As it is known, it was his last journey. It ended with Merton's tragic death in Bangkok. The origins of Merton's interest in the East come deep from the past, through numerous episodes directing his quest. One of the important moments for understanding the philosophy and religion of the East, before he began his journey, was, apart from studying his thoughts, his own experience of contact with the idea of Japanese Zen art. Merton did not deal with it as an imitator; it would be missing its essence anyway. He put his marks individually, not trying to "repeat" the alphabet. The discovery of Zen art was for Merton a very important step in approaching the Truth. The essence of Zen was to destroy the apparently true reality in our minds to let us see directly.<sup>25</sup> Making

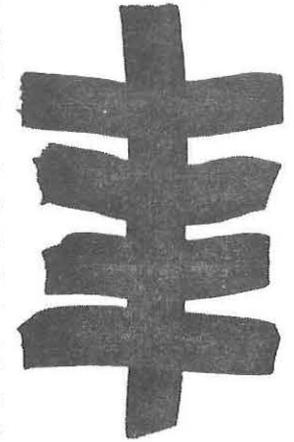
<sup>25</sup> Cf. Merton's "Zen Camera", p. 142.



use of his previous painting experiences and experiments with wide spots Merton bravely enters the world of calligraphy, treating it as an abstract, objectless utterance. He puts black ink marks on paper. The very mark is at the same time its own signature. The Chinese and then Japanese calligraphs were like that. At the same time they were haiku poems and pictures. A short paradoxical thought liberating from the sense, written in a form, which itself is liberated from the meaning.<sup>26</sup> Formal mini-

malism and non-attachment to the form were to preserve the freedom from it.<sup>27</sup> The function of beauty, Merton writes in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, is to be "an epiphany of the Absolute and formless Void which is God. It is an embodiment of the Absolute mediated through the personality of the artist, or perhaps better his "spirit" and contemplative experience. The contribution of Zen to art, he continues, is then a profound spiritual dimension and transforms art into an essentially contemplative experience.<sup>28</sup> Merton notices that there is a coherence between art and life, that in the experience of traditional Japanese art they constitute the inseparable unity.

Calligraphy – in contrast with photography, born in Europe, but treated by Merton as his own "Zen tool" – originated directly from the culture of the East, from the period when the Buddhism in China produced a new current of so-called "contemplative Buddhism", that later developed in Japan as "Zen Buddhism" (approx. 13 century).<sup>29</sup> Merton for the first time found himself in a completely new area, as far as art is concerned. In Merton's hitherto works one can clearly see his more or less conscious inspirations with European art, contemporary painting,

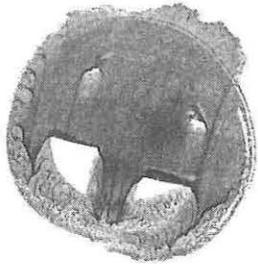


<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. W. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1958.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Merton's "Zen Camera", p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> Th. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York: New Directions, 1968, p. 90.

<sup>29</sup> M. Prodan, *Sztuka chińska*, Warszawa: PIW, 1975, pp. 133-134 [*An Introduction to Chinese Art*, London: Sprong Books, 1966].



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pictures of Cezanne, drawings of Picasso, and the artistic climate of his family. Calligraphy, while being for Merton a sort of “borrowed” artistic means, soon became his own, very individual way of artistic expression, but it was not what he thought while painting calligraphies. The artistic field was prepared by Merton’s impetus, perceptiveness, sensitivity, and his sense of composition, but what is most worth to be esteemed is that they became his extremely personal and individual way of coming into authentic contact with the Reality. They were his own meditation taking him off the subject, meditation negating the *a priori* meanings. The artistic progress made by Merton here is enormous and seems to go in parallel with a sort of passing of another internal mountain from where he could suddenly see the astonishing landscape, full of light and space. We should remember that his last painting works are the female portraits described before, still close to the subject, even if only a dreamy one, or associations with nature. And suddenly, after his experiences with recognition of the Hagia Sophia in many female figures, Merton enters the way of positive negation, as if not experiencing Wisdom through intuitive contact with it, but perhaps being pulled by the “vibrating space” or the “great void” known in Zen, and as a result deepening his recognition of the Beloved Divine Wisdom. I cannot say what Merton’s spiritual experience was like, but his pictures rapidly turning from illustrative into abstract, with the usage of almost the same formal means prove an inner metamorphosis of Merton. As in Chinese or Japanese art colour was rejected “to let the intuition rule freely, because *colour is an illusion, and illusion is colour*”,<sup>30</sup> Merton gives up nice female faces, rejects images and his attachment to forms (even the most lovely, but only allegorical ones), that he used to dress God with. He moves to the pure form, included within itself, suggesting



<sup>30</sup> *Sztuka chińska*, p. 134.

nothing and having no additional meaning. In my opinion Merton’s calligraphies are the mute witnesses of his contemplative enlightenment. The calligraphies emanate from Merton’s solitude and silence. There is a tension, speed and rapidity in them. A line is ruled almost by an accident, but the spots are placed harmonically and sometimes they suggest symbolic associations, such as the sign of the cross, and they are still formally ascetic. In this way the cross becomes a universal note.

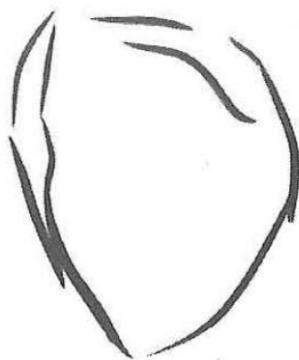
It seems that it is also a means of some kind of contact, harmony and communication which is commonly understood, or rather commonly not understood. The signs – without meaning constitute the code of communication, a kind of empathy with all people, cultures and religions. Finally Merton found his solitude and silence in the very centre of his experience of meeting with people, that he was missing so much, just before he met his death. During his journey to the East he realised the meaning of compassion. He also met

people, with whom he established such a deep communication, that he was joyfully embarrassed and astonished. One such meeting was the encounter with Chatral Rimpoche, described as the experience of being on the verge of “the great realisation”.<sup>31</sup> Compassion, the sharing common feelings could become deeper for Merton thanks to his previous meeting and experience of the art of Zen Buddhism assimilated as his own “Christian” experience of liberation from form for the meeting with the Incarnated Truth and Wisdom. The calligraphies that he painted he called “the seeds that sprouted as the call for the consciousness”.<sup>32</sup>



<sup>31</sup> *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 141.

<sup>32</sup> Merton’s “Zen Camera”, p. 142.



Summing up, one can notice that Merton's artistic way is the witness of his quest and spiritual journey in time and space. It is the record of his following the path of gradually deeper and clearer consciousness, and at the same time the witness of his vivid temperament and unusual dynamism from his youth till the end of his life. For all the time he is deeply involved not only in verbal but also visual expression. In the beginning his drawings show his internal struggle,

mockery and criticism. Then various visual means become helpful in recording the process of recognition of himself and finding his identity. In the final period Merton treats art, especially photography, as a means of a dialogue with society, which has difficulties to get into contact with its inner self, and, on the other hand, as a means of clearing the consciousness and the way of contemplation, which is visible both in photography and in calligraphs. In Merton's opinion an artist should focus on his own task, and not on the role society tries to impose on him. Merton himself for all his life unmasked the stereotypes of thinking about himself within the categories of the roles he played. He was himself as much as it was possible. Thus he did not play the role of the artist. He was an artist – as his talent and his fair quest prove.

