

The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer
Edited by F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook Jr.
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In this volume of letters between Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer the reader will find many different strands woven into the twelve years or so which are covered. On one level we can trace the development of a friendship, from quite formal beginnings – Merton requesting advice and help with raising the standard of sacred art in the monastery. On another there are discussions about aesthetics and the nature of art. Then there are practical details concerning the printing of the various books and leaflets on which they collaborated. All the way through the letters there are requests from Merton for books from the University Library where Carolyn worked which give us a fascinating insight into the breadth, depth and sheer quantity of Merton's reading. The meat of the correspondence is to be found in the letters between Merton and Victor.

Unlike most of Merton's friends the Hammers lived not far from the monastery in Lexington and so were able to visit him; and as their friendship deepened the visits became more frequent often including a picnic. Occasionally Merton was able to go to their house where in a highly civilized atmosphere he would have seen paintings as well as printed books and texts by Victor.

Besides the letters themselves the book has an excellent forward by Paul Pearson which gives a useful overview of the letters and points to one or two key relationships. This is followed by a more general introduction which also provides some biographical information. At the end of the book there is an afterword in which the editors give a resumé of the main themes in the correspondence quoting some important passages from the letters and linking them all together in a very readable account.

The value of these letters lies principally in the light that they shed on Merton's thinking about art, besides giving us a vivid picture of a friendship. When they first met in 1955 Merton was forty and Victor seventy three. Victor Hammer was an artist and craftsman of some distinction. He was a man of great culture and intelligence. Besides his native Vienna he had lived both in France and in Florence, where he first established the printing press *Stamperia Del Santuccio* which, through the printing of beautiful limited edition books, formed a major part of his life's work. He believed in the unity of all the arts and held implacably to a

classical view of art in which order is paramount. He was extremely antagonistic towards, and dismissive of, all forms of contemporary art. Working in almost every branch of the arts from painting, type design, printing and book binding, sculpture and architecture as well as teaching, he nevertheless described himself in the catalogue to an exhibition of his paintings as 'unknown, an individualist, an anachronism if you will; I belong to no school, have not founded one, do not "belong" to my time, my century, work only *ad maiorem dei gloriam*.'

It is clear that from the moment they first met that Thomas Merton and the Hammers got on extremely well. There was much warmth in their friendship and they had a shared interest in sacred art, partly inspired by the friendship they had in common with the great French philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose book on medieval art, *Art and Scholasticism*, was for both of them a key work. This in turn led to many collaborations between them. In addition to these projects there was an ongoing debate taking place between them. Victor was keen from the outset to state his philosophy and the theory of art that had guided his practice. He tried to persuade Merton of the superior nature of 'Classic Art' which he defined as 'three-dimensional seeing' as opposed to the flat shapes and linear approach of Primitive Art. 'Classic art is civilized art... Spiritually active, the artist conceives his work as pure form which is strong enough to hold any content, such as beauty, emotion and even aesthetic pleasure. Woe to the artist who does not conceive in pure form or neglects it altogether.' Merton replied:

I was interested in your remarks... They tend to entrench me in my own prejudice *against* classicism. Not as art, but as sacred art. It is quite true that primitive art and two dimensional art are intellectually poor and limited. Precisely. Less human also - just that! It is the poverty of primitive art that makes it more able to serve as 'matter' so to speak for a sacramental and religious form. I do not argue that three dimensional art cannot be holy - (Fra Angelico!) - only that it grows up in a context where in fact holiness is not encouraged: the academic context. Whatever may be the artist's approach, he opens up the doors of the spirit: but sometimes it is a spirit that is enclosed in its own reference rather than open to the transcendent.

And in a wonderful phrase he writes to Victor: 'Maybe I am just a Lascaux man at heart.'

During this period Merton was increasingly interested in Zen

Buddhism through his friendship with D.T. Suzuki, and this had led to his experimenting with forms of Zen Calligraphy and eventually to his own kind of abstract mark making. In this he was much encouraged by his lifelong friend from college days, the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt. Merton wrote that Reinhardt's approach 'is very austere and aesthetic. It is a kind of exaggerated reticence, a kind of fear of self expression.' It is fascinating to see Merton holding the balance between these two extreme positions. On the one hand the theories and principles of Classic art and on the other the language of abstraction. He even hoped to get the two men to meet!

Through the letters we can see how Merton disagreed with Victor Hammer on some points; and yet he commissioned him to make altar cards for the monastery, got the monastery to buy a large painting of his of the Crucifixion, and he was so moved by one of Victor Hammer's paintings, the triptych called 'Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ', that he contributed to the shaping of the final work and wrote one of his most memorable poems on that theme. Yet while all this was going on he was able to write in some notes that he prepared for talks to the novices: 'Modern non-representational art ... has established itself as one of the most important expressions of man's intellectual and spiritual life in the world today - it flourishes everywhere.' Only a few years earlier Victor Hammer had written to Merton: 'To me abstract art is pure perversion. Reinhardt may be sincere, but as an abstractionist he is a sinner against the Holy Ghost. It is a travesty on creation Carolyn said.'

Thomas Merton's views on the subject of art are of the greatest interest and the fact that the book on which he was working for years *Art and Worship* in which these thoughts were to be gathered together was abandoned and never published makes this volume of letters all the more valuable.

As with any collection of letters there are a few gaps and imbalances. In this respect I would say that there is perhaps not quite enough information nor indeed illustrations to give us a full and rounded picture of Victor Hammer. At the very least there should be an illustration of one of the superb printed texts, using the Uncial Typeface which he had personally designed and cut, and which reveal Merton's texts in a completely different (almost medieval) light. There is, however, very much to enjoy in these letters, casting light as they do on a particular area of Merton's creativity and on his ability to hold together in a dialogue such opposing viewpoints as Victor Hammer's and Ad Reinhardt's without losing any of his warmth towards them.

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