

A Sense of Place in Emptiness: Ad Reinhardt's 'small black cross painting'

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Introduction

In November 1957 the artist Ad Reinhardt sent Merton a small painting. A few days later, in his letter of thanks to the artist, Merton wrote:

When shall I return to this mysterious small painting? When shall I once again console myself with the mystical abyss of the small painting? It has the following noble features, namely its refusal to have anything to do with anything around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most collected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is true, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.¹

The 'small black cross painting' hung in Thomas Merton's hermitage. Much has already been written about Thomas Merton and art as well as his friendship with Reinhardt. But as far as I know, not much has been written in direct response to the last sentence of the above quote. In this essay I will take the question raised in this sentence as the leading focus. What does Thomas Merton possibly mean by calling Ad Reinhardt's small black cross painting 'a most religious ... small painting', when it is clear that the painting is not a traditional Christian painting depicting the cross? The answer may be found by pulling a few threads of Merton's life and spiritual thoughts together.

A Friendship – Merton and Reinhardt

Deep calls unto deep and salt mine unto salt mine. From tunnel to tunnel. How are you these days?²

Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt, along with Robert Lax, had been friends since their undergraduate years at Columbia. In her book, *Ad*

Reinhardt, Lucy Lippard writes about the special nature of the lifelong friendship between Merton, 'the poet, Zen scholar, and Trappist monk', and Reinhardt, one of whose nicknames in the art world was 'the black monk of New York'.³

Roger Lipsey has done further research on this friendship. In his article about the surviving correspondence between Merton and Reinhardt, he has collected 20 letters and put them in context.⁴ I shall refer to this article as an introduction to Merton and Reinhardt's friendship.

The relationship between Merton and Reinhardt was more than a friendship. Reinhardt was also a mentor to Merton as he developed as an artist, discussing art and spirituality with him, and sending him special and valuable paper for his calligraphies. We can read a deeper account of the discussions they had in the letters Merton wrote to Victor and Carolyn Hammer, who were also of significance for Merton's developing thoughts about art.⁵

Ad Reinhardt also brought Thomas Merton in contact with Ulfert Wilke, an artist who visited Merton in the monastery to guide him in his art making. According to Lipsey, 'Wilke was Merton's second godfather in art; Reinhardt the first. ... Both Wilke and Reinhardt offered much to the birth of Thomas Merton as a visual artist.'⁶ Wilke was a calligrapher, and specialized in Zen calligraphy after having studied this particular art in Kyoto, Japan. There are six surviving letters between Wilke and Merton, all written in 1964.⁷ The links between Merton, Reinhardt and Wilke are obvious — they all share an interest in art and Zen Buddhism. In the context of this article I want to go on a short excursion about art in New York in the times of Reinhardt's and Merton's studies at Columbia.

Abstract Expressionism and Spirituality

Both Ad Reinhardt and Ulfert Wilke were part of the art historical movement called abstract expressionism. The context of this essay doesn't allow me to go deeply into the subject, so I can only sketch the highlights that are important to be able to come to an understanding of Merton's reaction to Reinhardt's 'small black painting'. The movement started in the 1930s but became of greater importance after the Second World War when the art practice in the West, both in Europe and the US, underwent a landmark change. Part and parcel of abstract expressionism are the role of the subconscious in creation, spontaneity, art that is (mostly) non-figurative, and a new relationship towards space. The art works can be described as having one of the following formal

characteristics: abstract, action painting or colour field.⁸ There was a move towards abstraction, and the emphasis on the intense expression of emotions. Of great importance for the context of this article is that in most of the artists lives and works, the spiritual, not so much that of the religious institutions, neither Christian nor Jewish, played an important role. Wassily Kandinsky had already built the bridge between spirituality and abstract art. Increasingly, spirituality was seen in relation to the unconscious and the mind. We have to bear in mind that in those years the works of Freud and Jung had clearly influenced the intellectual and artistic milieus. Another key role was played by the founder of the Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky.⁹ Thirdly, Christian Science played a role for some other artists, like Barbara Hepworth.¹⁰ Altogether, spirituality was occupied with references to the esoteric and occult, and not mainstream religion.

Having said that, the spirituality of the Christian and Jewish mystical traditions, as well as Zen Buddhism, started playing an increasingly important role. It should therefore be no surprise that spirituality also played a role in the works of Ad Reinhardt and his peers. Much of the movement's abstract art can be interpreted as either mystical or contemplative, such as Mark Rothko's abstract colour field paintings. Rothko himself stated clearly that he was not a religious painter as such. But his Jewish upbringing and his familiarity with the writings of Meister Eckhardt can serve as a key to this interpretation. His paintings belong to the 'realm of the soul, pregnant with contemplative experiences'.¹¹ Eckhardt's linguistic-mystical concepts brought together in words like waiting, *gelassenheit*, and knowing the not-knowing, are ways through which we can 'read' Rothko's art. The meaning of the artworks is being revealed in the dialectics of a receptive attitude of the onlooker, and the hidden mystery in the painting that wants to reveal itself to us.¹²

Ad Reinhardt on Art and Religion

Formally categorised, Ad Reinhardt is a post-painterly American abstract artist, who belongs to the New York School.¹³ He is mainly known for his radical *Art as Art* manifesto and his *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, in which he invites artists to reject the traditional elements of painting, such as design, form, colour, space, time, scale, movement and subject, and instead focus on pure painting.

Raised a Lutheran, Reinhardt became fascinated with non-Western religion and art, more specifically, the non-figurative art of Buddhism and Islam. These expressions of religion are both decorative, as well as being

instrumental objects for meditation. As such they can be seen as abstract, non-figurative icons, through which one can reach other states of awareness in meditation. For Ad Reinhardt this was the kind of art he was looking for in his attempt to create 'pure art'. This art is an art that is completely separate from the mundane, and even more from popular culture — Art-is-art, and not something else.

In the last 15 years of his life he tried to get even deeper into this by constricting himself to only painting square black paintings. These canvasses were, like the non-western art he studied, without a theme, repetitive, and therefore transcending time and fashion. Reinhart finally reached a purity in his painting by way of deduction. He deleted as much as possible that took away from the essence of painting, like turpentine and binder. Also his painting practice was one of essence, following a monastic lifestyle: ascetic, ritualistic and with a sole concentration on the O/one.

How can we interpret Ad Reinhardt's art in the light of this current essay?¹⁴ As the onlooker, at first, I only see the monochromatic black. But when I stay, and wait – the black starts breathing and comes to life. I then become aware of the iconography. Nine symmetrical squares compose the painting. When I wait and stay, the painting comes to life at the fringe of my perception. The light moves in the dark. Reinhardt himself called his paintings neutral, but that's not what they are at all. There is an inner light, light and non-light in unity.

Barbara Rose, in her collection of Ad Reinhardt's writings, has a chapter devoted to Art and Religion.¹⁵ In it she includes writings in his usual style of lists, a practice also used by Merton. Most noticeable are words that begin with 'non-', and 'trans-'. The chapter makes clear that negative connotations, and transcendence are qualities in art which are important for Reinhardt. But the American historian of modern art, Sam Hunter, pointed towards the absolute immanent quality of Reinhardt's art. He wrote of his paintings that 'his non-compromising quest for an art of absolute purity tended to elevate the nonobjective, totally self-referential painting to the status of a holy object.'¹⁶

For me, it is about surrendering to Reinhardt's black square paintings. By doing so I submerge to the apophatic, finding meaning through the apophatic. I let myself be found by the black and experience oneness. Black eliminates the dual categories of immanent and transcendent. In the act of surrendering to the canvas, the relationship between the canvas and the onlooker disappears. All is being absorbed in the 'black cross'.

Thomas Merton and Art

Most research on Merton as an artist concentrates on his so called dual vocation as a writer and monk.¹⁷ Less attention has been paid to his visual art.¹⁸ But not only was he a prolific essayist and poet, he has also left a legacy of many drawings, calligraphies and photographs.¹⁹ In recent years his photographs have been showcased in a fine volume by Paul Person, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*.²⁰ We are largely indebted to Roger Lipsey for informing us in depth about Merton as a visual artist. Lipsey traces his practice back to a beginning at the end of 1960, and coming to maturity in 1964.²¹ A collection of Merton's artworks was exhibited at Catherine Spalding College in 1964. The exhibiton went on tour and off for several years, until it was finally displayed in Washington in December 1967.

Merton's attitude towards art in his early years in the monastery had been ambivalent, to say the least. He was rather appalled by popular, almost kitsch, religious art. But at the same time, art instigated major religious experiences in his early life such as his conversion experience in Rome after being struck by the religious mosaics and frescoes in 1933, and his religious experiences in Cuba in 1939.

Slowly but gradually we see a change in his appreciation of art. Ross Labrie notices at least two major shifts. Firstly:

Although he argued ... that the experiences of the artist and the mystic were distinct ... he later acknowledged the cross fertilization between art and mysticism. [nevertheless] As early as *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he had indicated that he had from his earliest years regarded mystical and artistic experience as analogues, since both involved an intuitive perception of reality through an 'affective identification' with the object contemplated.

This was Merton's view by the early 1950s, but by the 1960s Merton's view had considerably altered. According to Labrie:

Later in life, writing *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* in the late 1960s, Merton acknowledges the contribution of Zen Buddhism, rather than Thomist philosophy, to art through its awakening in both the artist and the spectator of a primal spiritual consciousness.²²

These quotes are not easy to understand, but important building bricks for our leading question. More importantly, for several years Merton worked on, but never published, his book *Art and Worship*. According to

Lipsey, Merton didn't have 'concepts or language that shines light on the art of his time'.²³ He was constrained to views on sacred art derived from Thomas Aquinas, and those of his friend, the neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain.

Later in his life, Merton had reconciled the paradoxes within himself, but was still 'uneasy about the art of his time'.²⁴ Merton had found a new understanding of art, based on his practice as a working artist, acceptance of the art of his time, and Zen Buddhist thought on art, all concepts embodied by both Ad Reinhardt and Ulfert Wilke.²⁵

Regardless of all the paradoxes, Ross Labrie sees constants in Merton's reflections on art: the inclusive and unifying effect of art, and the emphasis on the connection of art to *seeing*.²⁶ He goes on to mention Merton's valuation of art as having a 'transobjective subjectivity', and that 'in this manner Merton hoped to close the gap between the subjective and other reality without, however, limiting art to realistic art'.²⁷

Between Lower Manhattan, Gethsemani and Kyoto

It is fair to say that Thomas Merton spent his entire life searching for a deeper meaning in human experiences, especially for a meaning that is not in plain sight. As a monk-artist he had found a meaning in life, and 'was driven by a vision beyond his immediate grasp but nonetheless captive of his heart'.²⁸ Therefore it should not come as a surprise that Merton loved the painting he received as a gift from Ad Reinhardt. I can imagine him looking at the dark square in order to discover a Presence.

In a conference to his novices in 1964 Merton said:

Modern [non-representational] art ... has gone its own way and has established itself as one of the most important expressions of man's intellectual and spiritual life in the world today ... It has become a universal language of experience, a common idiom of the Spirit, in which artists all over the world share in the development of new attitudes and new views of the world.²⁹

And so from Columbia University, via the monastery, Merton had ended in the East. It needs no further explanation that Zen had become a very important part in Merton's spirituality, and becoming even more fundamental for his art practice.³⁰ The mystical process of kenotic self-emptying becomes tangible in Merton's art later in life. I only choose three entries to make my point that the transcendence of logic, imagination, and self-emptying go together.

Firstly, the understanding of the going together of identity and creating art came to the full in his calligraphies: 'The only dream a man seriously has when he takes a brush in his hand and dips into ink is to reveal a new sign that can continue to stand by itself and to exist in its own right, transcending all logical interpretation'.³¹

A second pointer towards Merton's transformation comes from one of the appendixes to the *Asian Journal*, which includes Merton's essay, 'The Significance of the *Bhagavad-Gita*'. In the essay he contrasts the difference between the Western mind with its 'single-minded dedication to only half a life: that which is exterior, objective, and quantitative', and the Eastern mind, which surrenders 'a false and illusory liberty on the superficial level' to unite with 'the inner ground of reality and freedom in [oneself] which is the will of God, of Krishna, of Providence, of Tao.' To which he adds: 'These concepts do not all exactly coincide, but they have much in common. It is by remaining open to an infinite number of unexpected possibilities which transcend his own imagination and capacity to plan that man really fulfills his own need for freedom'.³²

Thirdly, Thomas Merton had a profound religious experience while visiting the huge Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) shortly before his death. This intense experience was at the same time religious and aesthetic: 'I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination.' A few days after this experience, four days before his death, he wrote: 'Suddenly there is a point, where religion becomes laughable. Then you decide that you are nevertheless religious'.³³

Zen meets Christianity.

In conclusion, I think that Merton's answer to the question as to why he experienced Reinhardt's 'small black painting' as being a religious painting is because it functions as an icon; it therefore transcends dualities, and it mirrors Merton's understanding of the True Self, that core of 'me' that is not subject to change, where my consciousness and God's consciousness are identical.

Reinhardt's painting allowed Merton to 'look through matter into eternity'.³⁴ And the search for hidden wholeness was answered in a small abstract black painting which absorbs everything that is not-true and not-real. The icon his friend gave him mirrored Merton's sense of place in emptiness: a self in mystical union, and a world in which the light had not been comprehended. Through the painting, the 'Artist-Black Monk' had met the soul of his 'Monk-Artist' friend. Both searched for purity and

meaning, and found an apophatic answer: the experience of the source which transcends all words.

Notes

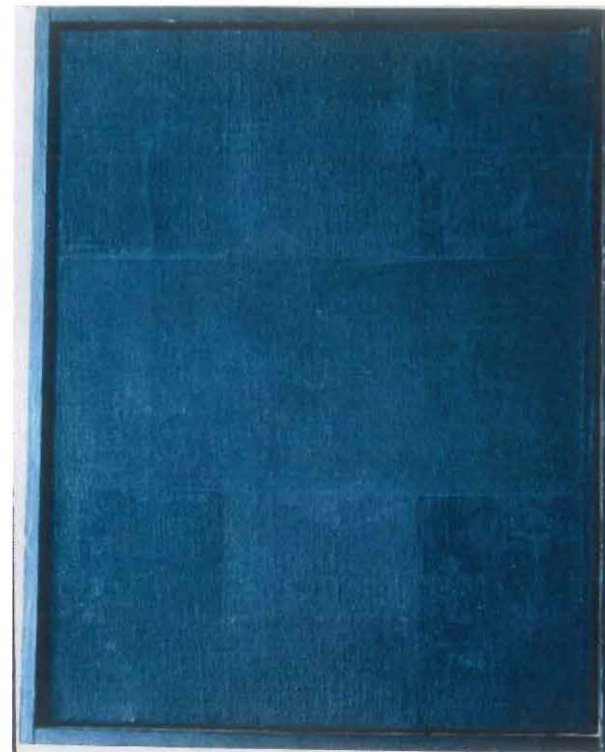
1. Roger Lipsey, 'Do I want a small painting? The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary', *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005), p. 275. According to Lipsey, the painting still has its home in the monastery. Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton* (Boston & London: New Seeds Books, 2006), p. ix.
2. Thomas Merton writing a letter to Ad Reinhardt on July 3, 1956. Published in: Lipsey, 'Do I want a small painting?', p.265.
3. Lucy R Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (HN Abrams, 1981), p. 10.
4. Lipsey detected some gaps between the letters. According to Dr Paul Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University in Louisville, nothing new has come to light since this 2005 article. Dr Paul Pearson in a personal email dated 16-2-2023.
5. F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook, *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer: Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* (University Press of Kentucky, 2014).
6. Roger Lipsey, 'Thomas Merton and Ulfert Wilke: The Friendship of Artists', *The Merton Seasonal* 30, no. 2 (2005), pp. 6-7.
7. Lipsey, 'Thomas Merton and Ulfert Wilke: The Friendship of Artists'.
8. The term colour field painting is applied to the work of abstract painters working in the 1950s and 1960s characterised by large areas of a more or less flat single colour.
9. For a thorough analysis see: Carel Blotkamp, Maurice Tuchman, and Judi Freeman, *The Spiritual in art : abstract painting 1890-1985 / Los Angeles County Museum of Art ; organized by Maurice Tuchman with the assistance of Judi Freeman, in collaboration with Carel Blotkamp ... [et al.]*, ed. Gemeentemuseum Haags, Art Los Angeles County Museum of, and Art Museum of Contemporary, Dr John Cooper Theosophy Collection, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).
10. For example stated in: Eleanor Clayton, *Barbara Hepworth. Art & Life* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2021), Barbara Hepworth, *A pictorial autobiography* (Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker press, 1977).
11. Susan J Barnes and John de Menil, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* (Menil Foundation, 1989), p. 44.
12. Sylvia Grevel, 'Spiritualiteit en de abstracte kunst van Mark Rothko: een tragische en tijdloze betekenis', *Volzin* 1 (2015). Sylvia Grevel, 'Mark Rothko's klassiek abstracte kunst doorboord. Een contemplatieve benadering van abstracte kunst', *Speling* 2 (2015).
13. Post-painterly is a blanket term covering a range of new developments in abstract painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, characterised by a more rigorous approach to abstraction.

14. I have written on Ad Reinhardt before: Sylvia Grevel, 'Kunst-is-Kunst, God-is-God', *Volzin* 6 (2022).
15. Barbara Rose, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Viking Press New York, 1975), pp. 185-196.
16. Hunter, Sam, 'Ad Reinhardt: Sacred and Profane', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 50.2 (1991), p. 31.
17. Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the inclusive imagination* (University of Missouri Press, 2001); Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton. Monk and Artist*, vol. 102, Cistercian Studies Series, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984 (Rev. ed.)).
18. Paul Pearson gives an overview of Merton's art and his development in the foreword to Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton*. p. xv-xvii. According to Pearson, 'Thomas Merton's poetry has been described as the barometer of his soul. In a similar way, his visual art parallels his spiritual journey.' p. xvii. Roger Lipsey discerns three chronological periods. Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton*, p. 3-7.
19. Proofs of his creativity in visual arts can be found in a number of places. Here I'd like to refer to the most accessible source: Jonathan Montaldo and Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with silence : prayers and drawings / Thomas Merton, edited by Jonathan Montaldo* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); John Moses, *The art of Thomas Merton: a divine passion in word and vision* (Cincinnati, US: Franciscan Media, 2018).
20. Paul M. (ed.) Pearson, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2020). Paul Pearson has written a substantial article about Merton and photography prior to the publication of this book in: Paul M. Pearson, 'A Monk with the Spiritual Equipment of an Artist: The Art of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005), pp. 237-259.
21. Lipsey, 'Do I want a small painting? The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary', p. 261
22. Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the inclusive imagination*, p. 162.
23. Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton*, p. 16.
24. Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton*, p. 13.
25. Lipsey, 'Thomas Merton and Ulfert Wilke: The Friendship of Artists', pp. 7-8.
26. Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the inclusive imagination*, p. 163.
27. Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the inclusive imagination*, p. 167.
28. David Joseph Belcastro, 'Thomas Merton: American Monk, Artist and Social Critic', *Theological Librarianship* 7, no. 2 (2014), p. 37.
29. Quoted in: Lipsey, 'Thomas Merton and Ulfert Wilke: The Friendship of Artists', p. 8.
30. Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes. The art of Thomas Merton*. p. 11
31. Thomas Merton, 'Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings', *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 179.

32. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton, Br Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1968). p. 353.
33. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, pp. 235, 238.-238
34. Thomas Merton, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation', *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 443.

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Ad Reinhardt's 'small black cross painting'



The painting measures 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ " by 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". To form the cross, the artist has painted two black rectangular bands superimposed on a pure black background.

On the back of the painting the artist has written, clockwise from the top, 'For T M', 'Small Painting', 'Ad Reinhardt', and '1957'. In the centre he has written 'Top' with an arrow pointing upwards.

The painting is no longer in the hermitage, but is kept securely in the monastery.

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For further details see article on page 51.

