

# Merton's Visual Arts as Spiritual Expression

## Merton's Background with Art

### Owen Merton and Ruth Calvert Jenkins

Thomas Merton was the first son (born January 31, 1915) of Owen Heathcote Grierson Merton (1887–1931) and Ruth Calvert Jenkins Merton (1887–1921). Of Welsh background, Owen was born in New Zealand. Also of Welsh ancestry, Ruth was born in the U.S. Aspiring artists, Owen and Ruth lived in Paris when they met.



*Painting of Ruth Jenkins Merton by Owen Merton*

Ruth died from Stomach Cancer on October 21, 1921, in Bellevue Hospital. Thomas was six years old and his brother not yet three.

After his mother dies, he moves around. Small trips with his father to Cape Cod, Bermuda but was often absent as he went on trips to pursue his painting career. Tom moves to France 1925 then England 1928.

Owen Merton died of a brain tumor in London, England, during 1931 when Thomas was sixteen.

Owen Merton was known primarily for his watercolors, landscapes, and seascapes. His work shows the influence of the post-Impressionist representational style.

Owen painted in England and France until 1916, when the First World War caused him and his family to relocate with his in-laws in the vicinity of Flushing, Long Island, where he worked briefly as a landscape gardener.

After the 1921 death of his wife, Owen Merton lived in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, then in Bermuda. Throughout his career, Merton exhibited his paintings, with varying degrees of success. After returning to Europe during 1923, was elected to the Royal Society of British Artists. He continued to travel between his birthplace of New Zealand, Europe, and the USA. He died of a brain tumor in London, England, during 1931. Paintings by Owen Merton are on permanent display in galleries around the world, most particularly in the Museum of New Zealand.



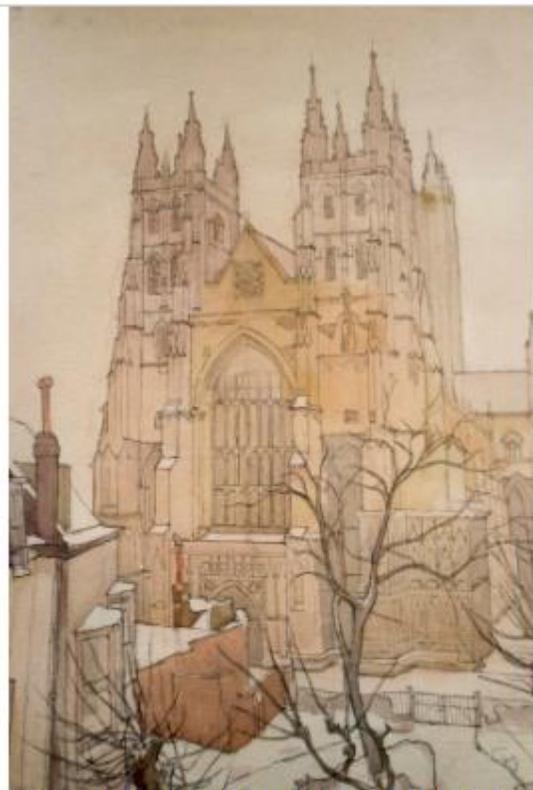
Owen Merton  
"Village Street, Banyuls." Watercolor. 1924.



Owen Merton. "Mont Saint Michel"  
Oil Painting



Owen Merton. "Ealing, London."  
Watercolour. April 8, 1925.



Owen Merton. "Canterbury Cathedral."  
Watercolor. Easter 1929.

**Insights from Seven Storey Mountain: (1948)**

My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or to it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it – not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it. My father painted like Cezanne and understood the southern French landscape like Cezanne did. His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself. My father was a very good artist... I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the mess the world is in, and some of her versatility. From both I got capacities for work and vision and enjoyment and expression... – Seven Storey Mountain pp 3 - 4

Father and Mother had many friends at Prades, and when they had moved there, and had their furniture in their flat, and the canvases piled up in the corner, and the whole place smelling of fresh oil-paints and watercolors and cheap pipe tobacco and cooking, more friends would come down from Paris. And Mother would paint in the hills, under a large canvas parasol, and Father would paint in the sun, and the friends would drink red wine and gaze out over the valley at Canigou, and at the monastery on the slopes of the mountains. – Seven Storey Mountain pg 6.

### **After moving to Long Island from France:**

Father did as much painting as he could. He filled several sketch books and finished some watercolors along the waterfront in New York, and eventually had an exhibition in a place in Flushing...Father could not support us by painting. During the war years we lived on his work as a landscape gardener: which was mostly plain manual labor, for he not only laid out the gardens of some rich people in the neighborhood but did most of the work planting and caring for them: and that was how we lived... he liked this kind of work almost as much as painting. – Seven Storey Mountain pg 8-9.

By 1920 I could read and write and draw. I drew a picture of the house, and everybody sitting under the pine tree, on a blanket, on the grass and sent it to Pop in the mail... But most of the time I drew pictures of boats. Ocean linkers with many funnels and hundreds of portholes, and waves all around as jagged as a saw, and the air full of v's for the seagulls. – Seven Storey Mountain pg 10.

Mother wanted me to be independent, and not to run with the heard. I was to be original, individual; I was to have a definite character and ideals of my own. I was not to be an article thrown together on the common bourgeois pattern, on everybody else's assembly line. – Seven Storey Mountain pg. 12

Mother's Death had made one thing evident: Father now did not have to do anything but paint. He was not tied down to any one place. – Seven Storey Mountain pg 18.

### **Owen had a profound impact on Thomas:**

The only really valuable religious and moral training I ever got as a child came to me from my father, not systematically, but here and there and more or less spontaneously, in the course of ordinary conversations.... If something spiritual was on his mind, it came out more or less naturally. And this is the kind of religious teaching... that has the most effect... And it is precisely this speech 'out of the abundance of the heart' that makes an impression and produces an effect in other people. – Seven Storey Mountain pg. 59

### **The summer of 1933 he went to Rome and began to wander through early Christian Churches and Basilicas, was fascinated by Byzantine mosaics and then had an experience of Owen's presence and of genuine prayer:**

After about a week... I found myself looking into churches rather than ruined temples. Perhaps it was the frescoes on the wall of an old chapel...**After all the vapid, boring, semi-pornographic statuary of the Empire, what a thing it was to**

come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power – an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say. And it was without pretentiousness, without fakery, and had nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity – and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their position and everything about them proclaimed it aloud. I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics. I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found... And thus, without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim. ... though not quite for the right reasons. And yet it was not for the wrong reasons either. **For these mosaics and frescoes and all the ancient altars and thrones and sanctuaries were designed and built for the instruction of people who were not capable of immediately understanding anything higher... These mosaics told me more than I had ever known of the doctrine of a God of infinite power, wisdom and love.** Who had yet become Man, and reveled in His Manhood the infinity of power, wisdom and love that was His Godhead. **Of course, I could not grasp and believe these things explicitly...**

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me... And I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray – praying not with my lips and with my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery. There were a lot of tears connected with this... -- Seven Storey Mountain pg. 119-123

**The subject (the Master's Thesis) I had finally chosen was "Nature and Art in William Blake." I did not realize how providential a subject it actually was!** What it amounted to, was a study of Blake's reaction against every kind of literalism and naturalism and narrow, classical realism in art, because of his own ideal which was essentially mystical and supernatural. In other words, the topic, if I treated it at all sensibly, could not help but cure me of all the naturalism and materialism in my own philosophy, besides resolving all the inconsistencies and self-contradictions that has persisted in my mind for years, without my being able to explain them. **Afterall, from my very childhood, I had understood that the artistic experience, at its highest, was actually a natural analogue of mystical experience. It produced a kind of intuitive perception of reality through a sort of affective identification with the object contemplated – the kind of perception that the Thomists call "connatural." This means simply a knowledge that comes about as it were by the identification of natures...I had learned from my own father that it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as merely to reproduce some kind of sensible pleasure or, at best, to stir up the emotions to a transitory thrill. I had always understood that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties of man. – pp 221 – 222.**

## **Merton's other writing on Art and Creativity**

Merton addresses all Art as Creativity. His reflection on Poets seem to directly apply to Artists of all sorts.

### **Conscience, Freedom and Prayer – No Man is an Island, pp 33 – 36 (1955)**

**One of the most important—and most neglected—elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God.** We do not see these things because we have withdrawn from them. In a way we have to. In modern life our senses are so constantly bombarded with stimulation from every side that unless we developed a kind of protective insensibility we would go crazy trying to respond to all the advertisements at the same time! **The first step**

in the interior life, nowadays, is not, as some might imagine, learning not to see and taste and hear and feel things. On the contrary, what we must do is begin by unlearning our wrong ways of seeing, tasting, feeling, and so forth, and acquire a few of the right ones. For asceticism is not merely a matter of renouncing television, cigarettes, and gin. Before we can begin to be ascetics, we first have to learn to see life as if it were something more than a hypnotizing telecast. And we must be able to taste something besides tobacco and alcohol: we must perhaps even be able to taste these luxuries themselves as if they too were good. How can our conscience tell us whether or not we are renouncing things unless it first of all tells us that we know how to use them properly? For renunciation is not an end in itself: it helps us to use things better. It helps us to give them away. If reality revolts us, if we merely turn away from it in disgust, to whom shall we sacrifice it? How shall we consecrate it? How shall we make of it a gift to God and to men?

**In an aesthetic experience, in the creation or the contemplation of a work of art, the psychological conscience is able to attain some of its highest and most perfect fulfillments. Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.** The soul that picks and pries at itself in the isolation of its own dull self-analysis arrives at a self-consciousness that is a torment and a disfigurement of our whole personality. But the spirit that finds itself above itself in the intensity and cleanness of its reaction to a work of art is "self-conscious" in a way that is productive as well as sublime. Such a one finds in himself totally new capacities for thought and vision and moral action. Without a moment of self-analysis he has discovered himself in discovering his capacity to respond to a value that lifts him above his normal level. His very response makes him better and different. He is conscious of a new life and new powers, and it is not strange that he should proceed to develop them.

It is important, in the life of prayer, to be able to respond to such flashes of aesthetic intuition. Art and prayer have never been conceived by the Church as enemies, and where the Church has been austere it has only been because she meant to insist on the essential difference between art and entertainment. The austerity, gravity, sobriety, and strength of Gregorian chant, of twelfth-century Cistercian architecture, of Carolingian minuscule script, have much to say about the life of prayer, and they have had much to do, in the past, with forming the prayer and the religious consciousness of saints. They have always done so in proportion as they have freed souls from concentration upon themselves, as well as from mere speculation about technical values in the arts and in asceticism. One can be at the same time a technical expert in chant and a man of prayer, but the moments of prayer and of technical criticism do not usually coincide. If the Church has emphasized the function of art in her public prayer, it has been because she knew that a true and valid aesthetic formation was necessary for the wholeness of Christian living and worship. **The liturgy and the chant and Church art are all supposed to form and spiritualize man's consciousness, to give him a tone and a maturity without which his prayer cannot normally be either very deep or very wide or very pure.** There is only one reason why this is completely true: **art is not an end in itself. It introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and in some sense explains.** Music and art and poetry attune the soul to God because they induce a kind of contract with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. The genius of the artist finds its way by the affinity of creative sympathy, or conaturality, into the living law that rules the universe. This law is nothing but the secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their center. **Since all true art lays bare the action of this same law in the depths of our own nature, it makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him.** An art that doesn't produce something of this is not worthy of its name.

## **Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal – Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, pp 338 – 354 (1958)**

In an age of science and technology, in which man finds himself bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of the machines he has created, we live precipitated outside ourselves at every moment, interiorly empty, spiritually lost, seeking at all costs to forget our one our own emptiness and ready to alienate ourselves completely in the name of any "cause" that comes along. At such a time as this, it seems absurd to talk about contemplation: and indeed a great deal of talk had been bandied about timidly enough on this subject is ludicrous and inadequate. Contemplation itself takes on

the appearance of a safe and rather bourgeois “cause” – the refuge of a few well-meaning Christians who are willing to acquaint themselves with St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross, and to disport themselves thereafter in such Edens of passivity and fervor as cannot be disapproved by the so-called “Masters of the Spiritual Life.” For others, after still, contemplation means nothing more than a life of leisure and of study: in many cases more a fond hope than an accomplished fact. The relative timidity of these adventures... should not make us too prone to laugh at every symptom of man’s acute need for an interior life. For one of the most important and most hopeful signs of the times is in the turbulent, archaic, but fully determined efforts of a small minority of men to recover some kind of contact with their own inner depths, to recapture the freshness and truth of their own subjectivity, and to go on from there not only to God but to the spirit of other men. In the face of our own almost hopeless alienation, we are trying to get back to ourselves before it is too late. One of the most outstanding examples of this struggle is seen in the almost symbolic career of Boris Pasternak, whose more recent poetry and prose can most certainly qualify in a broad and basic sense as *contemplative*. **The contemplative is not just a man who sits under a tree with his legs crossed, or one who edified himself with the answer to ultimate and spiritual problems. He is one who seeks to know the meaning of life not only with his head but with his whole being, by living it in depth and in purity, and thus uniting himself to the very Source of Life – a Source which is infinitely actual and therefore too real to be contained satisfactorily inside any word or concept or name assigned by man: for the words of man tend to limit the realities which they express in order to express them. And anything that can be limited cannot be the infinite actuality known to the contemplative without words and without the mediation of precise analytical thought.**

We can say, then, that contemplation is the intuitive perception of life in its Source: that Source Who revealed Himself as the unnamable “I Am” and then again made Himself known to us as Man in Christ. Contemplation is experience of God in Man, God in the world, God in Christ: it is an obscure intuition of God Himself, and this intuition is a gift of God Who reveals Himself in His very hiddenness as One unknown. Contemplation is related to art, to worship, to charity: all these reach out by intuition and self-dedication into the realms that transcend the material conduct of everyday life. Or rather, in the midst of ordinary life itself they seek and find a new and transcendent meaning. And by this meaning they transfigure the whole of life. Art, worship, and love penetrate the spring of living waters that flows from the depths where man’s spirit is united to God, and draw from those depths where man’s spirit is united to God, and draw from those depths power to create a new world and a new life. Contemplation goes deeper than all three and unites them, and plunges man’s whole soul into the supernal waters in the baptism of wordless understanding and ecstatic prayer.

There can be various levels of contemplation. There is contemplation in a broad and improper sense – the religious intuition of the artist, the lover or the worshiper. In these intuitions, art, love, or worship remain in the foreground: they modify the experience of ultimate reality, and present that reality to us as the “object” of aesthetic vision, or adoration, or love. In an even less proper sense, “contemplation” loses sight of ultimates and becomes preoccupied with a beautiful thing, or a meaningful liturgy or a loved person. But in its proper meaning, contemplation transcends all “objects,” all “things,” and goes beyond all “ideas” of beauty or goodness or truth, passes beyond all speculation, all creative fervor, all charitable action, and “rests” in the inexpressible. It lets go of everything and finds All in Nothing – the *todo y nada* of St. John of the Cross...

Now when we speak of a possible conflict between poetry and contemplation, it is clearly only contemplation in the last, most perfect sense that is intended. For when we speak of contemplation in the more broad and improper sense, we find it uniting itself with art, with worship, and with love. It is not only compatible with poetic creation, but is stimulated by it, and in its turn inspires poetry. And in the realm of worship, contemplation in this broad sense is stimulated by meditation, by prayer, by liturgy, and arises out of these religious activities... **This is *active* contemplation, in which grace indeed is the principle of all the supernatural value and ordination of our acts, but in which much of the initiative belongs to our own powers, prompted and sustained by grace. This form of the contemplative life prepares us for contemplation properly so called: the life of *infused* or *passive* or *mystical* contemplation. Contemplation is the fullness of the Christian vocation... Christian contemplation is not something esoteric and dangerous. It is simply the experience of God that is given to a soul purified by humility and faith. It is the “knowledge” of God in the darkness of infused love... By infused love, we are given an immediate grasp of God’s own**

substance, and rest in the obscure and profound sense of His presence and transcendent actions within our inmost selves, yielding ourselves altogether to the work of His transforming Spirit...

Now whether we speak of contemplation as active or passive, one thing is evident: it brings us into the closest contact with the one subject that is truly worthy of a Christian poet: the great Mystery of God, revealing His mercy to us in Christ... the true poet is always akin to the mystic because of the "prophetic" intuition by which he sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object he contemplates, which makes that concrete reality not only a thing worthy of admiration itself, but also and above all makes *it a sign of God*. To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments – signs of God, signs of His love working in the world. However, the mere fact of having this contemplative vision of God in the world around us does not make a man a great poet. One must be not a "seer" but also and especially a "creator" – a "maker." Poetry is an art, a natural skill, a virtue of the practical intellect, and no matter how great a subject we may have in the experience of contemplation, we will not be able to put it into words if we do not that the proper command of our medium. This is true. But let us assume that a man already has this natural gift. If the inspiration is helpless without a correspondingly effective technique, technique is barren without inspiration...

Contemplation has much to offer poetry. And poetry, in its turn, has something to offer contemplation. How is this so? In understanding the relation of poetry to contemplation the first thing that needs to be stressed is the essential dignity of aesthetic experience. It is, in itself, a very high gift, though only in the natural order. It is a gift which very many people never received, and which others, having received, have allowed to spoil or become atrophied within them through neglect and misuse. To many people, the enjoyment of art is nothing more than a sensible and emotional thrill. They look at a picture, and if it stimulates one of another of their sense-appetites they are pleased. On a hot day they like to look at a picture of mountains or the sea because it makes them feel cool. They like paintings of dogs that you could almost pat. But naturally they soon tire of art, under those circumstances. They turn aside to pat a real dog, or they go down the street to an air-conditioned movie, to give their senses another series of jolts. This is not what one can legitimately call the "enjoyment of Art." A genuine aesthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order (in which, however, it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. It is a suprarational intuition of the latent perfection of things. Its immediacy outruns the speed of reasoning and leaves all analysis far behind. In the natural order, as Jacques Maritain has often insisted, it is an analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar. Its mode of apprehension is that of "connaturality" – it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification with it. It rests in the perfection of things by a kind of union which sometimes resembles the quiescence of the soul in its immediate affective contact with God in the obscurity of mystical prayer. A true artist can contemplate a picture for hours, and it is real contemplation, too... The resemblance between the experiences of the artist and of the mystic has been extensively discussed in the long and important article on "Art and Spirituality" by Fr. M. Leonard, S.J....

Yet even in the natural order, without attaining to God in us, and without perceiving this "inner spiritual light," the aesthetic experience introduces us into the interior sanctuary of the soul and to its inexpressible simplicity. For the aesthetic intuition is also beyond objectivity – it "sees" by identifying itself spiritually with what it contemplates. Obviously, then, when the natural contemplation of the artist... has already given a man a taste of the peaceful intoxication which is experienced in the suprarational intuitions of this interior self, the way is already well prepared for infused contemplation. If God should grant that grace, the person so favored will be much better prepared to recognize it, and to co-operate with God's action within him. This, as a matter of fact, is a tremendous advantage. The artist, the poet,... is then, in some sense, already naturally prepared and disposed to remove some of the principal obstacles to the light of infused contemplation. He will be less tempted than the ordinary man to reach out to vulgar satisfactions and imaginable thrills. He will be more "spiritual," if not more "religious." He will be more ready to keep himself detached from the level of crude feelings and emotionalism which so easily corrupt the integrity both of the artist and the man of prayer. The mere fact of the artist's or poet's good taste, which should belong to him by virtue of his art, will help him to avoid some of the evils that tend to corrupt religious experience before it has a chance to take root and grow in his soul.

**Mystical contemplation is absolutely beyond the reach of man's natural activity. There is nothing that he can do to obtain it by himself. It is a pure gift of God... no amount of generosity on our part, no amount of effort, no amount of sacrifice will make us mystics. That is a work that must be done by God acting as the "principal agent" ... If He is the principal agent, there is another agent: ourselves. But our part is simply to consent, to listen, and to follow without knowing where we are going. All the rest we can do amounts to the more or less negative task of avoiding obstacles and keeping our own prejudiced judgements and self-will out of His way... The soul must be stripped of all its selfish desires for natural satisfactions, no matter how high, how noble, or how excellent in themselves. As long as it rests in things for their own sake, seen and possessed as "objects to gratify our own self-love, it cannot possess God and be possessed by Him, for the love of the soul for objectivized beings is darkness in the sight of God... Now it is precisely here that the aesthetic instinct changes its colors and, from being a precious gift, becomes a real danger. If the intuition of the poet naturally leads him into the inner sanctuary of his soul, it is for a special purpose in the natural order: when the poet enters into himself it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to *display it to those outside*. And here the radical difference between the artist and the mystic begins to be seen. The artist enters into himself in order to work. For him, the "superior" soul is a forge where inspiration kindles a fire of white heat, a crucible for the transformation of natural images into new, created forms. But the mystic enters into himself, not in order to work but to pass through the center of his own soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him. Consequently, if the mystic happens to be, at the same time, an artist, when prayer calls him within himself to the secrecy of God's presence, his art will be tempted to start working and producing and studying the "creative" possibilities of this experience. And therefore immediately the whole thing runs the risk of being frustrated and destroyed. The artist will run the risk of losing a gift of tremendous supernatural worth, in order to perform a work of far less value... In a word, natural gifts and talents may be of great value in the beginning, but contemplation can never depend on them. They may, indeed, prove to be obstacles, unless by some special grace we are completely detached from them...**

**What, then, is the conclusion? That poetry can, indeed, help to bring us rapidly through that early part of the journey to contemplation that is called active: but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness is tasted in anticipation, poetic intuition may ruin our rest in God "beyond all images."... It is quite true that aesthetic experience is only a temporal thing, and like other temporal things it passes away. It is true that mystical prayer enriches man a hundredfold in time and in eternity. It purified the soul and loads it with supernatural merits, enlarging man's powers and capacities to absorb the infinite rivers of diving light which will one day be his beatitude. The sacrifice of art would seem a small enough price to lay down for this "pearl of great price." But let us consider for a moment whether the Christian contemplative poet is necessarily confronted with an absolute clean-cut "either/or" choice between "art" and "mystical prayer." It can of course happen that a contemplative and artist finds himself in a situation in which he is morally certain that God demands of him the sacrifice of his art, in order that he may enter more deeply into the contemplative life. In such a case, the sacrifice must be made, not because this is a general law binding all artist-contemplatives, but because it is the will of God in this particular, concrete case. But it may equally well happen that an artist who imagines himself to be called to the higher reaches of mystical prayer is not called to them at all. It becomes evident, to him, that the simplest and most obvious thing for him is to be an artist, and that he should sacrifice his aspirations for a deep mystical life and be content with the lesser gifts with which he has been endowed by God... To take yet another case: it might conceivably be the will of God... that a man should remain at the same time a *mystic and a poet* and ascend to the greatest heights of poetic creation and of mystical prayer without any evident contradiction between them... the problem is solved not by the application of some abstract, a priori principle, but purely by a practically practical appeal to the will of God to give as He pleases, when He pleases, to whom He pleases. It is futile for us to lay down laws which say when or how God's gifts must be given, to whom they can be given, to whom they must be refused. It remains true that at a certain point in the interior life, the instinct to create and communicate enters into conflict with the call to mystical union with God. **But God Himself can resolve the conflict. And He does. Nor does He need any advice from us in order to do so... To be wise with the wisdom of Christ, we must let Christ be born and live within us in His own way. He does not come to all in the same way...****

The Christian poet and artist is one who grows not only by his contemplation but also by his open declaration of the mercy of God. If it is clear that he is called to give this witness to God, then he can say with St. Paul: "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel." At the same time, he should always remember that the hidden and more spiritual gifts are infinitely greater than his art, and if he is called to make an exclusive choice of one or the other, he must know how to sacrifice his art.

### **Message to Poets – Raids on the Unspeakable, pp 155 – 161 (1964)**

We who are poets know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists. The reason for a living act is realized only in the act itself. This meeting is a spontaneous explosion of hopes. That is why it is a venture in prophetic poverty, supported and financed by no foundation, organized and publicized by no official group, but a living expression in the belief that there are not in our world new people,...who are not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural systems... but who dare to hope in their own vision or reality and of the future... Whatever his failures, the poet is not a cunning man. His art depends on an ingrained innocence which he would lose in business, in politics, or in too organized a form of academic life. The hope that rests on calculation has lost its innocence... All innocence is a matter of belief. I do not speak of organized agreement, but of interior personal convictions "in the spirit." These convictions are as strong and undeniable as life itself. They are rooted in fidelity to life rather than to artificial systems... It is a gift to which we must remain open. No man can plan to make the sun rise or the rain fall.

Collective life is often organized on the basis of cunning, doubt and guilt. True solidarity is destroyed by the political art of pitting one man against another and the commercial art of estimating all men at a price. On these illusory measurements men built a world of arbitrary values without life and meaning, full of sterile agitation. **To set one man against another, one life against another, one work against another, and to express the measurement in terms of cost or of economic privilege and moral honor is to infect everybody with the deepest metaphysical doubt. Divided and set up against one another for the purpose of evaluation, men immediately acquire the mentality of objects for sale in a slave market. They despair of themselves because they know they have been unfaithful to life and to being, and they no longer find anyone to forgive the infidelity. Yet their despair condemns them to further infidelity: alienated from their own spiritual roots, they contrive to break, to humiliate and to destroy the spirit of others. In such a situation there is no joy, only rage...**

If we are to remain united against these falsehoods... We must refuse academic classification. We must reject seductions of publicity. We must not allow ourselves to be pitted against another in mystical comparisons... **Let us remain outside of "their" categories. It is in this sense that we are all monks: for we remain innocent and invisible to publicists and bureaucrats...**

**For the poet there is precisely no magic. There is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom. All magic is a ruthless venture in manipulation, a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy... Poetry is the flowering of ordinary possibilities. It is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice. This is its innocence and dignity... Let us obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers – fruits of hope that have never been seen before. With these fruits we shall calm the resentments and the rage of man... Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything... When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it. No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle. No one can enter the river wearing garments of public and collective ideas. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent. Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.**

### **Answers on Art and Freedom – Raids on the Unspeakable, pp 165 – 175, The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, pp 375 – 380 (1965)**

... **the artist is by his very nature free and autonomous. He can be nobody's slave.** There is no problem. Everyone sees the answer. It is even to the interest of those who control him to allow the artist this autonomy... What is the use of art? The artist must serenely defend his right to be completely useless... **The problem arises when art ceases to be honest work and becomes instead a way of self-advertisement and success – when the writer or painter uses his art merely to sell himself... The artist cannot afford to accept, to “reflect” or to celebrate what everybody likes. The artist who subscribes to the commercial slogan that the customer is always right will soon be deserted by everybody... the artist has a moral obligation to maintain his own freedom and his own truth. His art and his life are separable only in theory. The artist cannot be free in his art if he does not have a conscience that warns him when he is acting like a slave in his everyday life. The artist should preach nothing – not even his own autonomy. His art should speak its own truth, and in so doing it will be in harmony with every other kind of truth – moral, metaphysical and mystical...** In every case the artist should be in complete solidarity with those who are fighting for rights and freedom against inertia, hypocrisy, and coercion... Society benefits when the artist liberates himself from its coercive or seductive pressures. **Only when he is obligated to his fellow man in the concrete, rather than to society in the abstract can the artist have anything to say that will be of value to others. His art then becomes accidentally a work of love and justice. The artist would do well, however, not to concern himself too much with “society” in the abstract or with ideal “commitments.”** This has not always been true. It applies more to our time when “society” is in some confusion. It is conceivable that the artist might once again be completely integrated in society as he was in the Middle Ages... today the artist has, whether he likes it or not, inherited the combined functions of hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze. How could such a man be free? How can he really “find himself” if he plays a role that society has predetermined for him? The freedom of the artist is to be sought precisely in the choice of his work and not in the choice of the role as “artist” which society asks him to play, for reasons that will always remain very mysterious. To conclude: the artist must not delude himself that he has an infinite capacity to choose for himself and a moral responsibility to exercise this unlimited choice, especially when it becomes absurd. If he does this, then let him take my word for it, he will find himself with the same problem and in the same quandary as those monks who have vegetated for three centuries in a moral morass of abstract voluntarism... As long as I am obsessed with the need to get myself or my work recognized as “incontestable” and “authentic,” I am still under servitude to the myths and anxieties of society and unable to attain the complete freedom of the artist who chooses his work of art in his own terms and in his, not in those of the market, or of politics, or of philosophy, or of the myth of pure experience, absolute spontaneity, and all the rest... **True artistic freedom can never be a matter of sheer willfulness, or arbitrary posturing. It is the outcome of authentic possibilities, understood and accepted in their own terms, not the refusal of the concrete in favor of the purely “interior.” In the last analysis, the only valid witness to the artist's creative freedom is his work itself. The artist builds his own freedom and forms his own artistic conscience, by the work of his hands. Only when the work is finished can he tell whether or not it was done “freely.”**

## **Zen in Japanese Art – Zen and the Birds of Appetite, pp 89 – 92 (1967)**

Japanese Art has traditionally been a most intimate expression of Japanese, Shinto, Confucian and Buddhist spirituality. In particular, the most contemplative painting, ink drawings, calligraphies and the famous “art of tea” have all been deeply impregnated with the spirit of Zen and flourished above all in the Zen monasteries... **In other words, the most contemplative art forms of Japan... are above all intimately associated with the contemplative intuition of a fundamental truth in an experience that is basically religious and even in a certain sense “mystical.”** ... Zen art regards being as the self-unfolding of the unformed Nothing. In particular, it is the function of the beautiful to be, so to speak, 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 his contemplative experience.

The contribution of Zen to art is then a profound spiritual dimension and transforms art into an essentially contemplative experience in which it awakens “the primal consciousness hidden within us, and which makes possible any spiritual activity.”

In this traditional Japanese concept of art, we find no divorce between art and life or art and spirituality. On the contrary, under the unifying power of the Zen discipline and intuition, art, life and spiritual experience are all brought together and inseparably fused...

### **Other writings for further exploration:**

#### **The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton:**

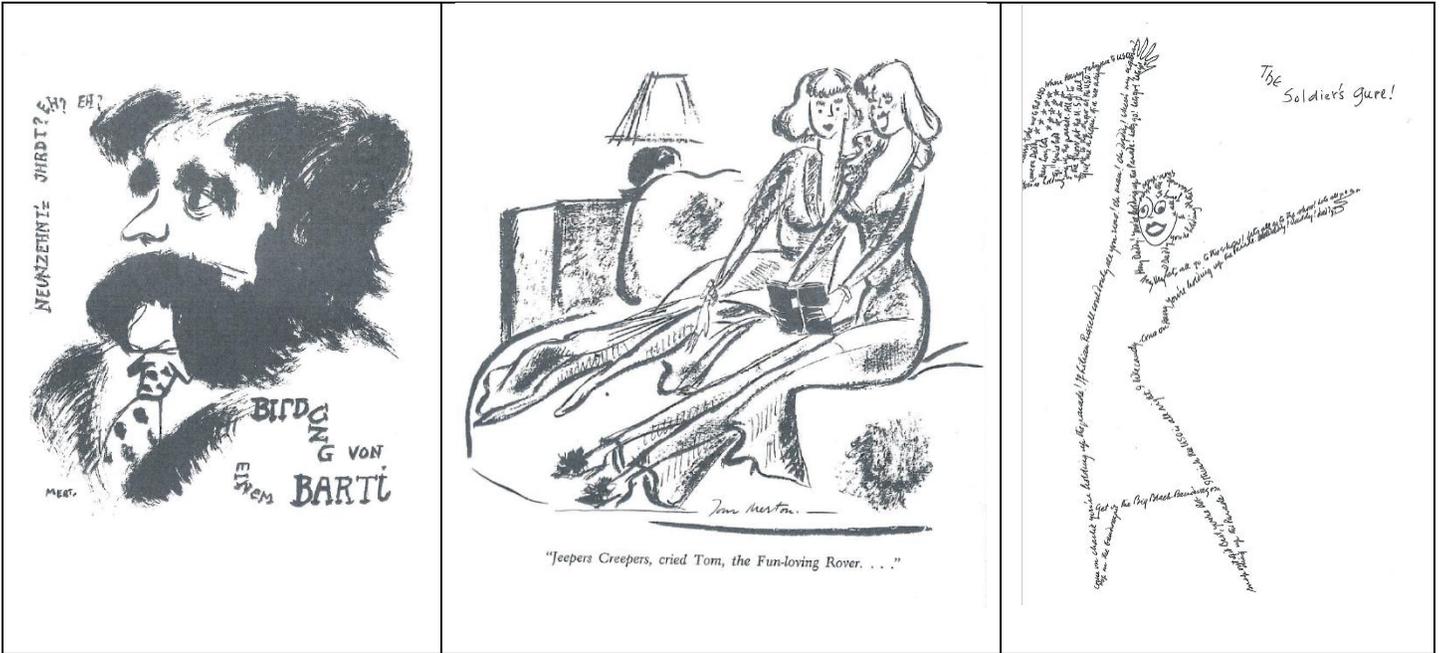
- **Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation (1939) – Thomas Merton's Master's Thesis**
- **Theology of Creativity – pg 355 (1960)**

#### **Disputed Questions: (1960)**

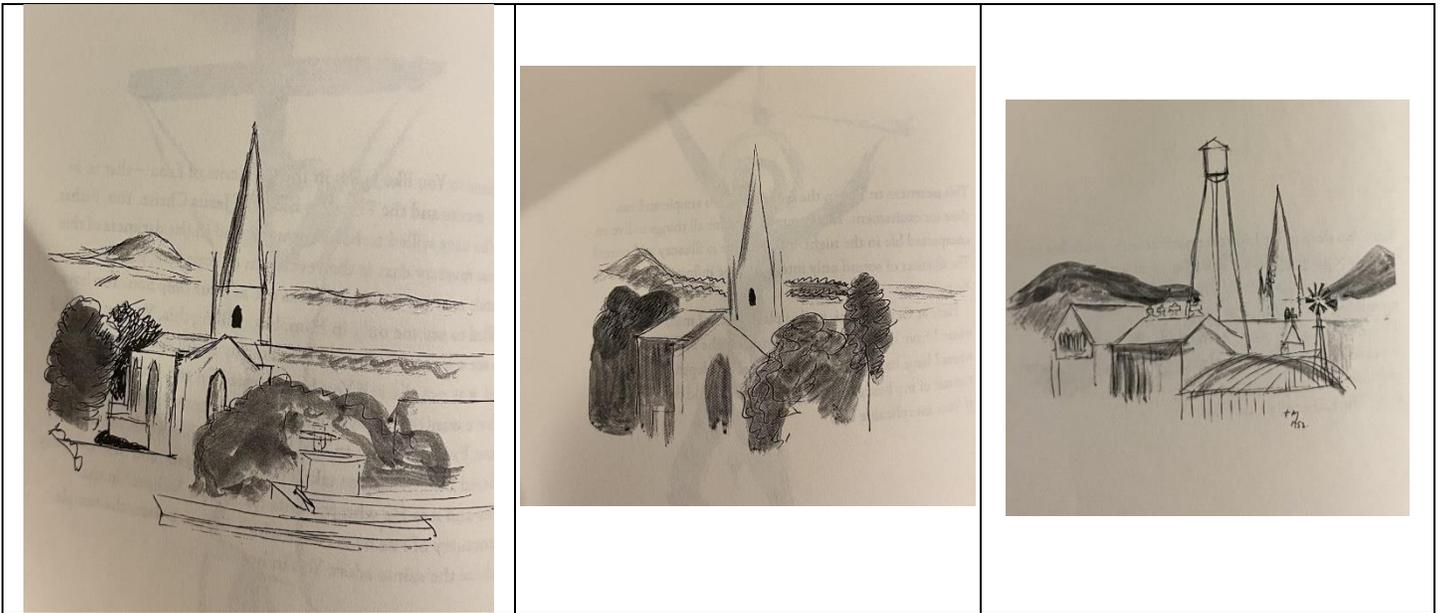
- **Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life – pg 151**
- **Absurdity of Sacred Decoration – pg 264**

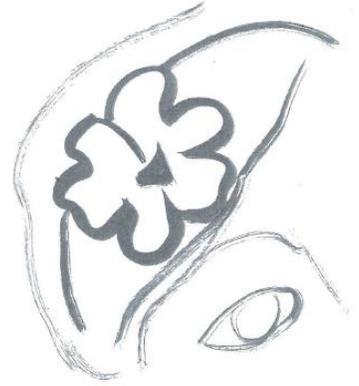
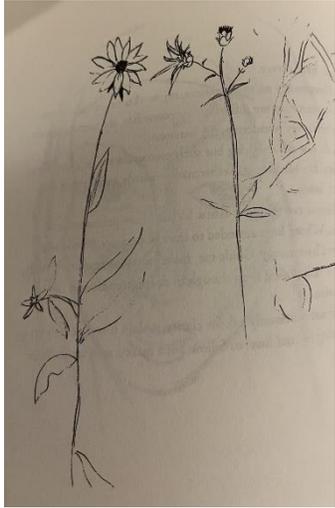
# Examples of Merton's Drawings and Printing

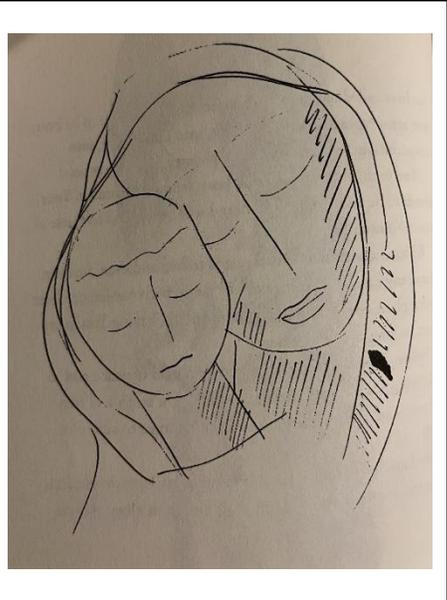
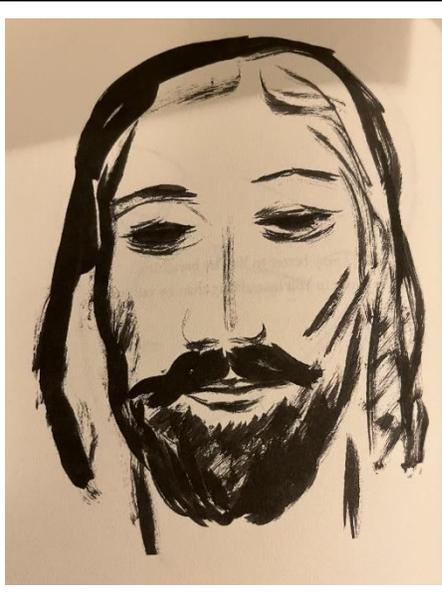
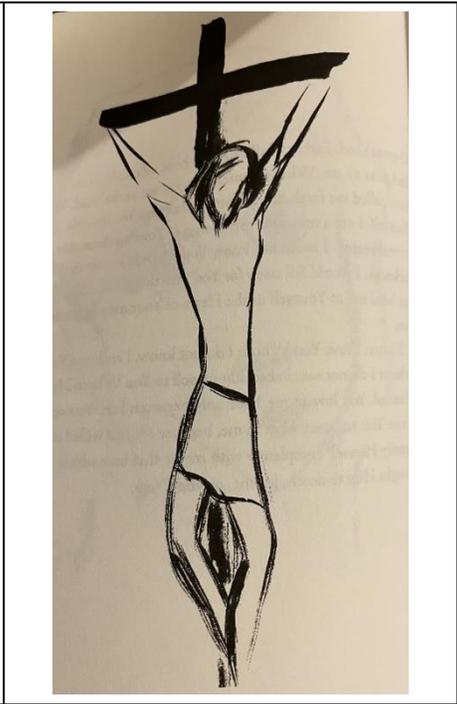
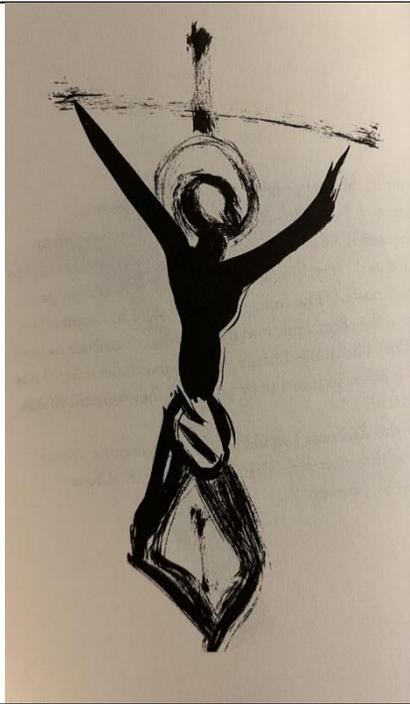
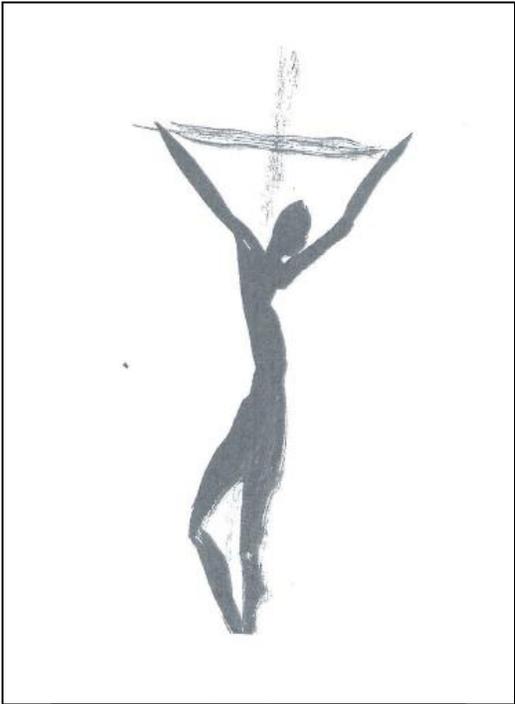
Pre-monastery days – ink drawings, caricatures and funny sketches.

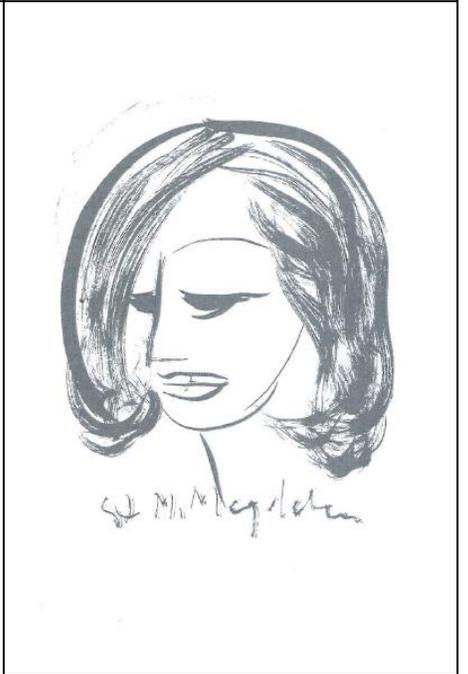
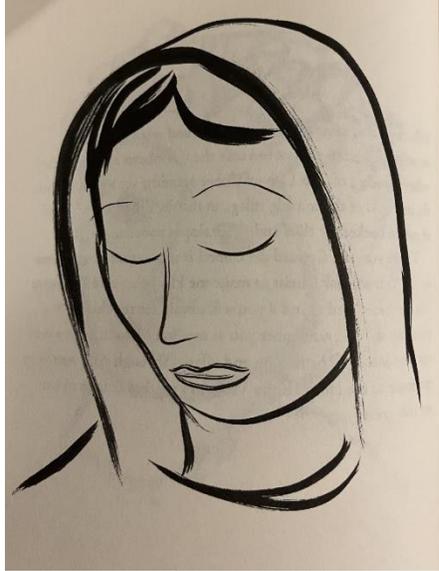
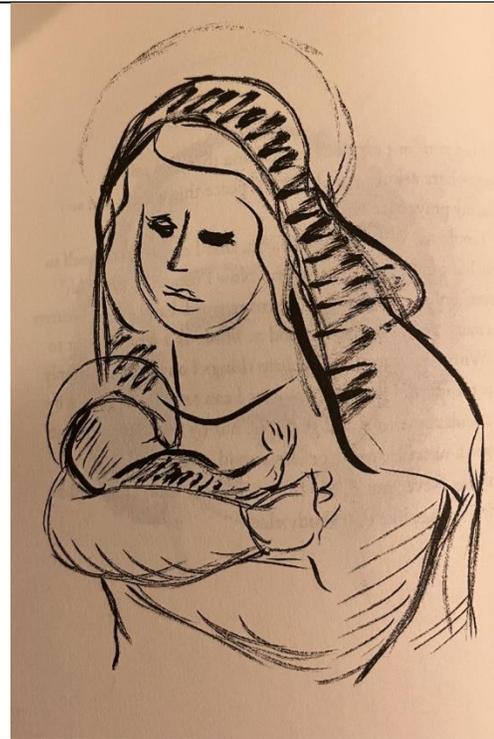


Pre 60's monastic period – ink drawings and paintings





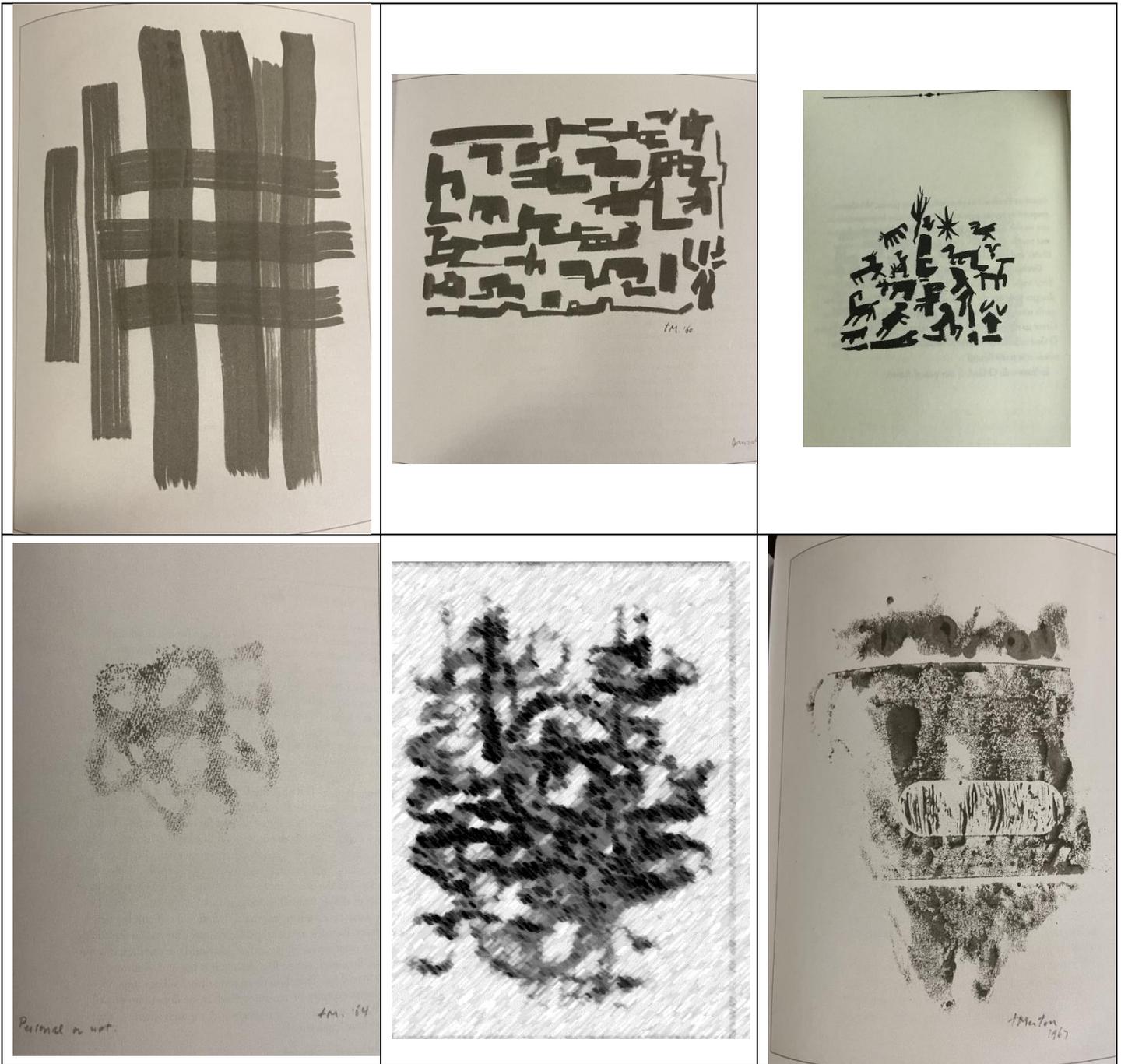




Final period: 1960 on – calligraphies made with ink and brush, prints

*“Here is a collection of shapes, powers, flying beasts, cave animals, bloodstains, angelic mistakes, etc., that can perhaps have some visual effect on the local bisons. I suggest selling them for around ten bucks apiece to the art lovers who can get the fixed up in any way they please... I have signed them but that isn’t fair because the buyer should not be dictated to in any way as to which way he want the shape to be up.”* -- Letter to Jim Forest November 21, 1966.





**Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings – Raids on the Unspeakable, pp 179 – 182 (1964)**

Since judgements are usually based on comparisons and since opportunities for comparison in the visual arts today are so many and often so irrelevant as to be overwhelming, the viewer is invited not to regard the abstract drawings presented here as "works of art"... These signs lay claim to little more than a sort of crude innocence. They desire nothing but their constitutional freedom from polemic, from apologetic, and from program... it must be admitted that the ambiguities of abstraction tend to set some people on edge, as though accusing them of not understanding something, that is doubtless not intended to be understood. But by now everyone knows that it is unwise to ask what abstractions are "of." These are not "drawings of." It would be better if these abstractions did not have titles. However, titles were provided out of the air. The viewer will hardly be aided by them, but he may imagine himself aided if he wishes... In any case, the viewer who wants titles can make up his own. **Once this is admitted, there should not be too much trouble for the observer who desires to be at peace with these crude signs, provided that he is himself a**

basically peaceable man and content to accept life as it is, tolerating its unexpected manifestations, and not interpreting everything unfamiliar as a personal threat. These abstractions – one might almost call them graffiti rather than calligraphies – are simple signs and ciphers of energy, acts or movements intended to be propitious. Their “meaning” is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept. They are not conventional signs as are words, numbers, hieroglyphs, or symbols. They could not be assigned a reference by advance agreement because it has been their nature to appear on paper without previous agreement. On the contrary, **the only “agreements” which they represent were momentary and unique, free, undetermined and inconclusive. They came to life when they did, in the form of reconciliations, as expressions of unique and unconscious harmonies appropriate to their own moment though not confined to it. But they do not register a past and personal experience, nor attempt to indicate playfully the passage of a special kind of artist, life footsteps in the snow... However, the seeing of them may open up a way to obscure reconciliations and agreements that are not arbitrary – or even to new, intimate histories.**

In a world cluttered and programmed with an infinity of practical signs and consequential digits referring to business, law, government and war, one who makes such nondescript marks as these is conscious of a special vocation to be inconsequential, to be outside the sequence and to remain firmly alien to the program. In effect these writings are decidedly hopeful in their own way in so far as they stand outside all processes of production, marketing, consumption and destruction, which does not however mean that they cannot be bought. Nevertheless, it is clear that these are not legal marks. Nor are they illegal marks, since as far as law is concerned, they are perfectly inconsequential. It is that and this alone which gives them a Christian character (Galatians 5), since they obviously do not fit into any familiar setting of religious symbolism, liturgical or otherwise. But one must perhaps ask himself whether it has not now become timely for a Christian who makes a sign or a mark of some sort to feel free about it, and not consider himself rigidly predetermined to a system of glyphs that have a long cultural standing and are fully consequential, event to the point of seeming entirely relevant in the world of business, law, government and war. Ciphers, signs without prearrangement, figures of reconciliation, notes of harmony, inventions perhaps, but not in the sense of “findings” arrived at by the contrived agreement of idea and execution... **Neither rustic nor urbane, primitive nor modern, though they might suggest cave art, maybe Zen calligraphy. No need to categorize these marks. It is better if they remain unidentified vestiges, signatures of someone who is not around. If these drawings are able to persist in a certain autonomy and fidelity, they may continue to awaken possibilities, consonances; they may dimly help to alter one’s perceptions. Or they may quietly and independently continue to invent themselves. Such is the “success” they aspire to. Doubtless there is more ambition than modesty in such an aim. For the only dream a man seriously has when he takes a brush in his hand and dips it onto 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.**

## **Questions / Reflections – categories or prompts**

- Spirituality of an Artist / Creative person
- The Artistic / Creative process as Spiritual Experience and Expression
- A work of Art / Creativity as innate expressions of the Spiritual
- Spirituality of experiencing Art / Creative works