

A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He is best known today for his spiritual writings on contemplation and his own personal spiritual journey that led him to study Eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism. Merton was also a visual artist of considerable talent exploring drawing and calligraphy and, as reflected in this exhibition, photography. It is unclear exactly when Merton took up the camera. On October 10, 1961, Merton recorded in his journal his impressions of using a camera:

A completely miraculous achievement of forms. Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees ... How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine.

This very beginning of using the camera to isolate images, small things normally gone unnoticed, carried out through the brief history of Merton's photography and parallels Zen teaching in allowing the mind to embrace the unnoticed beauty in the world of mundane objects and the passing of light, shadow and textures through the course of a day.

In Deba P. Patnaik's essay, *Through a Glass Purely*, he states:

An avid writer, Merton was, in general, confined to specific themes, topics and issues. In photography, he felt free, open and quiet – nothing to debate or discourse, nothing to argue or explain; only animated by imagination, silence, and connectedness with what he visually experienced. It served him as a mode of attuning “to the other music that is beyond the words.”

Merton's photographs express the Zen perception of our immediate world as ever changing, impermanent, but with a unity of all things.

We are what we are. We are light and dark, substance and shadow, speak the images. We are matter and memory. We are pictures; we are mirrors. We are full; we are empty.

Remember the Three Doors:

the door without wish
the door without sign
the door of emptiness.

SEE

And say: *Amen. Say: Shantih.**

* Shantih is a Hindu blessing wishing one “peace beyond all understanding.”

A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton exhibition includes 35 of Merton's most powerful photographs from the Collections of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.

His photographs were a way to summon viewers to be present to what Merton called the “living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.”

With these photographs we invite viewers to “one aesthetic illumination” in which to see the “mundane” and the “spiritual” as one. Merton wrote, Zen “seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness ...” It is this experience to which Merton invites us as we view these photographs: “Come and see.”