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Victor Hammer and Thomas Merton: A Friendship Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

David D. Cooper

Victor Hammer's dedication to the vocation of art and craftsmanship was inspired at an early age. He was born in the oldest district of Vienna, and his earliest visual recollections bore the lasting imprint of the seventeenth and eighteenth century religious art that surrounded him in his environs in the Schoenlaterngasse. As a young boy, before he had the words or concepts to understand what he saw, he gazed with profound fascination at the carved altar pieces and rood cross in the Jesuit church next door. He frequently visited the empty church alone during mid-week to admire its interior, especially the ceiling fresco where angels and saints appeared among the clouds, seemingly suspended in air. Such sights as these both shaped Hammer's world view and molded him, as an artist, into the character and style of the late Renaissance, a period when a resurgence in the power of Christian faith joined with an artistic celebration of the splendors of antiquity to produce the neoclassical religious art and architecture that absorbed Hammer in his native city. Thus his aims as an artist, pursued unflinchingly for the next eighty years, were unknowingly decided for him, Hammer later claimed, by artists and craftsmen who thrived two centuries before him. "The distant past . . . [of] my world at this early age," Hammer recalled, "still lived [for me] and gave daily nourishment to my vision, my mind. The square, . . . the interior of the church, and all else around me, had a hold on my imagination, a hold that lasted all my life and will last until my ultimate breath."  

Like Victor Hammer, Thomas Merton felt the hands of past artisans shaping his future from an early age, too. And, like the artist who would later become one of his closest and most respected friends, Merton encountered the locus of that influence in religious art and architecture. In his dramatic, high-pitched autobiography, Merton recalled visiting the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Rome. He was both lonely and grief-stricken as a result of his father's recent death. Merton's self-esteem had reached