

**Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation**

**“Seeing *and* Believing: Robert Aldern’s reredos ‘God’s Love Through Christ’”**

**Dr. Lindsay Twa, Department of Art**

2 April 2008

Scripture reading: John 20: 24-31

[\[Link to Reredos image\]](#)

As an art historian, my discipline dictates that I cannot speak without visual aids. So it is a great comfort to me to know that while I have the privilege of delivering today’s message, your eyes and focus should not be on me, but rather, on Robert Aldern’s magnificent reredos, *God’s Love Through Christ*.

For an art historian, seeing is not believing. But seeing is a major avenue to interpretation and then to understanding. So as an art historian, today’s scripture reading strikes a little too close to home. But I will soldier on and ask you to join me in a brief exploration of what we can see, and perhaps, what meanings we might be able to touch.

If you were to take an introductory art history class from me, I would begin by advising you to organize your notes around a few focus questions, a few of which would be: 1. What is this work’s historical context? 2. What is the technique and material in which the work was made? 3. What are the work’s formal qualities? 4. And lastly, what is the work’s subject matter? I will not dwell long on this last focus question, for we would be here much longer than chapel time allows. So, for more on subject matter, I would encourage those of you have not read it to pick up the exquisite poster-pamphlet at

the door of the chapel that includes the biblical passages that inspire the subject of each panel, along with statements by Robert Aldern and additional text by Dr. Sandra Looney.

Let's begin. Biography and historical context are two avenues in which one might begin to *touch* this work. We here are certainly the beneficiaries of many facets of Robert Aldern's life: that he is a South Dakota native, spending formative years on farmland before his schooling in Sioux Falls and studies at Augustana. We are exceedingly fortunate that following military service and completing a BFA in Hartford Connecticut, he chose to return to South Dakota to launch his career as an architectural and liturgical artist-consultant. And it is also important that the beginning of his art career, in the 1950s occurred at the same time that liturgical art was being reinvigorated in the United States. That worship could be assisted and augmented through quality, original, sacred art created by contemporary artists: a reconnected form of visual theology. Or, as Aldern often describes, "visual prayers that aid worshippers in conjunction with spoken and sung prayers."

Aldern's studio was and continues to be ever open to the inquiring student, curious friend or congregational member. And many have been invited to watch and even participate in his unique wood-staining technique which has become so synonymous with his name. For those of you taking notes, we've moved to our next focus point, what is the technique and material in which this work was made? Aldern has developed a very self-effacing and laborious process that results in the subtle variations of tonality and texture found in his luminous panels. Rather than preparing his panel with a layer of gesso that would seal and uniformly smooth the surface, Aldern accepts the wood for what it is. No thick, gestural brushstrokes, which would proclaim the hand and ego of the

individual artist, block the supporting wood. Rather, his process of allowing oil paint to be absorbed in stages of glazing, sanding and re-glazing (again and again), allows the material to carry his design while still keeping the natural textures and idiosyncrasies of individual red oak floor boards. A material that was made to be walked on, the literal downtrodden, the mundane and the touched becomes ennobled in a new life of visuality: a visual prayer to aid in our spiritual journeys.

Let's move to a final focus question: What are the work's formal visual qualities, and what do all of these elements then contribute to enforcing the meanings of the work's subject matter? There are subtle and not-so subtle ways that an artist can move us into and through a composition. All of the individual panels are also linked not just by Christ's repetition, but also through color and line. Take for instance the various horizontal bands that run through the backgrounds of each panel. There is a perceived horizon line that undulates, like the landscape of the plains, connecting the haloed head of Christ in each panel and subtly activating the composition.

More undulating horizontals follow below. The upper register transitions to the lower, through the linking warm earth tones, but also through the insistent vertical lines of the red-oak boards. One line that catches my eye is the orange line that flows down the center of Christ's mantel in the center panel, continuing as a slightly darker beam on the cross in the panel below. Sidestepping, this warm line is joined by a blue complement, to form the shading of Christ's cross, one of the few design elements in the reredos to create a sense of three-dimensional space, enforcing the bodily suffering that we encounter in the bottom register's central panel.

Just as Aldern's composition moves us inevitably to the center crucifixion and the lone articulated face of Christ, he also gives us leading lines to send us forth and back again. For example, the crucified Christ's stretched hands curled in pain complete a circuit with the upper central panel's hands that stretch out in an umbrella of protection, a call and response endlessly circling. Your eye might pause in this circuit to examine how the above Christ's emphatically enlarged and foreshortened hands seem to project and recede, protectively hovering over all of the smaller figures' heads, regardless if placed into the middle-background, like the smaller, isolated figure who seems to fall just as solidly under Christ's right hand as the other two figures that seem to be wedded to his side, almost tugging at his drapery and overlapped by His form.

How can all of these three figures, both at a distance and flanking, still equally be under Christ's protective hands? Well, certainly our Christian belief of all encompassing love can offer an answer to this question, but I would also emphasize that this is where Aldern's visual theology of slightly abstracted forms also "reads"—more so than a much more naturalistic rendering of a figural group could have, which would have been constrained to reproduce how figures *should* interact with one another, *should* recede in space. This is an expansive visual interpretation of this panel's scriptural subject:

"Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

But certainly such a straight forward description cannot encompass all of the meaning radiating from these panels, and there is infinitely more that we could talk about if we had more time today. This is the talent of Robert Aldern and his gift to this community. Excellence in art means an image that does not give up all of its meanings in

one viewing, or even in a lifetime of viewings. While you have been listening to me, your eyes and perhaps mind have wandered across and through this reredos, (as you should have been doing if you had followed my opening instructions) and you have probably found that your eye finds rest on additional points, or goes to other panels first. On another day, you may find that your eye strays to other portions of the piece, dependent not only on your placement in the chapel, but also on where life finds you at that given moment. And at that time, this visual prayer will aid you by offering different meanings to touch your life, to touch your journey.

**HOLY COMMUNION**  
**Wednesday, April 2, 2008**

**Prelude**      *Partita on "With High Delight Let Us Unite"*      Michael  
Wolniakowski

**Easter Greeting**

P: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

**C: Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia**

**Welcome/announcements**

**Invocation**

**Call to Worship**

P: Lord Jesus, by the power of your presence, open our eyes

**C: We praise and thank you for the creativity and colors that help us see.**

P: Lord Jesus, by the power of your resurrection, open us to faith.

**C: We praise and thank you for compassion and imagination that calls us believe what we cannot see.**

P: Lord Jesus, by the power of your peace, open us to one another.

**C: We praise and thank you for the witness of artists and the art of all who witness.**

**Prayer**

**Hymn**      *"Voices Raised to You"*      ELW #845, vv. 1-2

**Scripture**

John 20: 24-31

**Message**

Lindsey Twa, Dept. of Art

**Hymn**      *"Voices Raised to You"*      ELW #845, v. 3

**Holy Communion**

**Benediction**

**Dismissal**

**Postlude**      *"Alleluia! Jesus is Risen"*      Keith Kolander

## CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

**UNITY PRAYER** - There will be an offering of prayer for the community every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 7:00am in the Back Alley and Sundays at 9:00pm at the Valhalla Theme House (1000 W. 28th St.). **All members of the Augustana community are invited to attend.**

**SERVICE OPPORTUNITY** - We have another service opportunity coming up! **Wednesday, April 16th, we will be going to the Sioux Falls Community Food Bank from 6:30- 8:30 p.m.** We will be meeting at the chapel at 6:10 p.m. to carpool. At the Food Bank we will be boxing food. Each month, thousands of individuals and families from across South Dakota receive food assistance through the South Dakota Food Bank pantries or one of the 500+ organizations that they provide food to. Last year, their food banks distributed over 8 million pounds of food in the fight against hunger.

If you are interested in helping at the Sioux Falls Food Bank on April 16th email **Kelsey Erickson by April 10th** ([keerickson06@ole.augie.edu](mailto:keerickson06@ole.augie.edu)).

### CHAPEL CALENDAR

Fri. (4 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - BryAnn Becker, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (6 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Sweet Fellowship Outreach Team
Mon. (7 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Karen Younger, Nursing
Tues. (8 <sup>th</sup> )	Hunger Workshop, 7 pm - 3-1 room
Wed. (9 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Tammy Walhof, Bread for the World; Chamber Choir
Fri. (11 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Josh Schoenfelder, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (13 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Apr. 13 <sup>th</sup> and 14 <sup>th</sup>	- JUBILEE EMPHASIS
Mon. (14 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Pr. Paul