

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

“Robert Aldern”

Heritage and Hope at Augustana

Dr. Lindsay Twa, Department of Art

21 Feb 2011

I want to begin by thanking Pastor Rohde for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I had hoped that this series would have allowed to me have spent greater time in conversation with Bob Aldern—for a conversation with him is always a joy. Bob’s hospitalization and fragile state, however, is also a reminder of how precious having these conversations are both personally and also for institutional memory. Bob, however, while welcoming our prayers, would probably not want us to dwell too long on his condition. Every time that I meet him and I ask him how he is doing, his prompt response is always, “Not so bad for an old duffer.” On tougher days, though, he might acknowledge, “Lindsay, growing old is not for the weak.”

I have been indeed fortunate, though, to have spent many prior hours in conversation with Bob. In part because I had the privilege of organizing a retrospective of his liturgical art which was on view in the spring of 2008. But also in part because although Bob claims to have “retired” many years ago, he has remained a fixture on campus, with a studio still in the Center for Visual Arts.

Robert Aldern is a part of the heritage of Augustana College through several roles. First and foremost, he was a student. He studied at Augustana from 1947 to 1951, where he was influenced by the two founding lions of the department, Palmer Eide and Ogden Dalrymple. Bob observed each artist balancing their teaching loads with their personal studio practices and the execution of public commissions in a range of media. Their art, while showing an awareness of modernist trends occurring in New York City, was ardently never just art for its own sake. Art was to be situated and incorporated within the artist’s own community. This is a legacy that guides the Art Department to this day—and is one of its greatest strengths. The art produced by our faculty is on view in homes, galleries, churches and institutions around the region and beyond. This is critical. Our students learn to balance their work and coursework with their creative lives by seeing their professors do the same. The artist Michael Goro, who is currently on view at the Eide/Dalrymple Gallery, spent several days on campus last week giving lectures and workshops with out students. During one of his talks he noted that for him, as also an artist educator, success in the art world could be measured by the person who is still producing art five years post college graduation. Our world is designed with lots of ways to tame and stifle creative practice. Yet our students can see both their current professors, and “retired” professors like Bob and Carl Grupp still making art, succeeding in making it a priority and a habit of daily life.

Michael Goro’s visit also connects to the department’s heritage and Bob. Connecting our students with nationally and internationally acclaimed artists is also a vital component in inspiring and training future artists, especially in a region lacking in substantial art museums.

During his sophomore year, Palmer Eide had brought to campus the famed artist Jean Charlot. This connection brought about one of Bob's greatest adventures. That summer he and fellow student Darrel Erickson bought a Harley, and road the motorcycle to California. Darrel was fortunately not only a talented art student, but also a talented mechanic. They studied with Charlot for six weeks at the San Diego Balboa Arts Gallery. The Harley then carried them all the way back at the end of the summer. You never know what spark, what introduction, can provide that inspiration and adventure that will sustain a young artist into his or her career.

Because of his service in the military, Bob did not officially complete his degree at that time, and a detail that the humble artist always found problematic when publications and speakers would erroneously note that he was an alumnus. Augustana College rectified this discrepancy, however, at the commencement ceremonies in 2007. Bob and Joey were invited to attend and sit in the front row of the ceremonies under the guise of the celebration and dedication of the new Liturgical Art Center and art building. It was with great joy and surprise then when Bob was announced as a degree awardee—having been just a few credits short, Bob had earned numerous hours of “life credit” for his artwork and dedication. Seeing his face in that moment of surprise and celebration will always embody for me the “Joy of Augustana.”

Bob Aldern is of course also a part of the heritage of Augustana College as a faculty member. As a part of the Sesquicentennial Celebration I organized an alumni invitational exhibit that was on display at the Eide/Dalrymple Gallery and Galleries for the Center for Western Studies this past homecoming. We had over one hundred artists participate. I invited each artist to submit memories of their Augustana days and professors, which were displayed on labels next to the artwork. Many stories of Art Department characters, including Bob, figured prominently in their memories. Bob began his teaching career at Augustana College in 1964, when he was a visiting professor at the same time that he was the Director of the Civic Fine Arts Center in Sioux Falls. His career as a lifelong educator began at this point. He went on to teach at South Dakota State University as an Artist-in-Residence in the late 1960s, and then he would teach full time from 1968-1980 at the University of South Dakota. He was at long last wooed back to the Augustana Art Department in 1980, serving as its Chair from 1980 to 1987, and teaching until 1991.

That Bob maintained such an active studio on campus was another theme that emerged time and again in the memories of countless alums. Visiting his studio, watching a dedicated artist in action day in and day out solidified in the minds of many young students their goal of becoming an artist. To encourage students to stop in, Bob always had a coffee pot and jar of cookies at the ready. Indeed, it had long been dictated that cookies should always be offered at gallery receptions, because any leftovers would be sent to Bob's cookie jar to have available to students. This continued long after he had stopped teaching formal classes.

Bob's influence and general congeniality permeates the art department and is a part of the fabric of how we interact with each other and our students. Case in point, one of the many humorous signs that hung inside Bob's studio included one that read, “Anyone with the name Bob couldn't be all that bad.” Several years back, Gerry Punt had a student in his beginning ceramics class. That student didn't speak a single word all semester, and could barely work in the presence of others. He would wait until after class and when the studio was empty to work on his assignments. But Gerry sensed that he wasn't “all that bad.” Recalling Bob's sign, Gerry began approaching the student, and to draw him out he would say, “Hey, Bob, how's it going?” or, “How are you today, Bob?” and, “What are you working on Bob?” The student would smile, not correct Gerry's “mistake”, and quietly began engaging. The next semester, “Bob”

reappeared in the ceramics class...and continued to appear semester after semester. Today, Shannon Frewaldt holds an MFA in ceramics and teaches his own college students. But to his friends and mentors in the department, he is still called "Bob."

Lastly, Bob Aldern is a part of the heritage of Augustana through his artwork which continues to inspire. His work can be seen in many places around the college, from our Permanent Art Collection, on the walls of the Center for Liturgical Art, to his luminous landscapes in President Oliver's office, and of course, most spectacularly, in the reredos before you.

As a student, Bob had been influenced in particular by Palmer Eide's work with architect Harold Spitznagel and their church commissions. Bob also had the good fortune of beginning his art career in the 1950s at the same time that liturgical art was being reinvigorated in the United States. The growing liturgical arts movement sought to reconnect modern art and architecture to liturgical function, viewing it as a form of visual theology: the liturgy was art and art could be an intrinsic component of the liturgy. It must be a humbling, perhaps terrifying, experience to put into image the face of God. That is the responsibility of the liturgical artist. The details of the job, however, encompass infinitely more and less. The artist must respond to and fulfill the needs of disparate congregations, creating an image that is not only an artist's individual vision, but also a collective statement for a particular congregation and a particular worship space. What a challenge! What a risk! The alternative of bypassing this challenge, however, is infinitely more dreary. What if every image of Christ was the same reproduced chromolithograph of a blond man with blue eyes? Numerous congregations, generations of worshippers and countless visitors who have experienced Aldern's work *in situ* have benefited from this confluence that has resulted in nearly a half century's worth of work. And we are incredibly fortunate to experience this expansive vision at every worship service.

In 2004, Bob completed a triptych for St. Mark's narthex. This was, I believe the "third" *last* commission Bob was to undertake. Since this "last commission," Bob has also finished a narthex panel for Augustana Lutheran Church, a triptych for Messiah New Hope Lutheran Church, the panel "Caring Hands" for Avera McKennan Hospice, and another spectacular stained wood triptych for Our Savior's Lutheran Church across the street, which was dedicated in 2008.

We could say that retirement is the only thing that he has failed at in his life. And this, too, seems to be a part of the Augustana heritage. Our community is sustained by many former faculty and staff who continue to help out in countless large and small ways into their twilight years because they continue to be passionate about making this place as great as it is.

In Bob's studio hangs a sign which reads: "Old artists never die, they just draw flies." We pray for Bob's returned strength so that we can continue to find him in his studio, with cookie jar and coffee pot at the ready for anyone to drop in.

So in reflecting upon our theme of Hope and Heritage, Bob Aldern has and continues to be a guiding light for the art department and Augustana College. He is emblematic of a future that always draws strength from the past, and of a past that is always generative of future endeavors. I would like to leave you with Bob's own words, an artist statement that is also poetry, which he wrote in 1991:

"I want my paintings to seed my remaining seasons.

Through the textural changes of plowing, harrowing, planting, cultivating;
Growing to blossom

And yielding to harvest
To be disked and plowed again
For freezing snow and wind.

Now, resting is the time
For a gathering, scar soaked earth
Later carrying seeds to birth.”

HERITAGE AND HOPE AT AUGUSTANA
Monday, February 21, 2011

Prelude *“How Firm a Foundation”* Janet Linker

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Psalms 19, read responsively by half verse from ELW

Prayer

Hymn *“Let The Whole Creation Cry”* ELW #876

Scripture Romans 9: 20-21

Message Lindsay Twa, Art

Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude *“How Firm a Foundation”* Janet Linker

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

SPRING SEMESTER SERVICE LEARNING - Student participants and leaders are sought for these service learning trips next spring. Costs are reduced for leaders willing to help with recruitment and planning.

See Pr. Paul or Carol if you are interested.

March 18-21 - Joy Ranch, Watertown. Cost is \$25 for gas

March 24-27 - Pine Ridge Reservation. Cost \$130

May 22-26 - New York City. Cost is \$800 including flight, housing, most food and Broadway play ticket. **Full payments for Joy Ranch and Pine Ridge, and \$300 deposit for NY due by Feb. 28th.**

SERVING THE 'BANQUET' - Campus Ministry will be serving the Banquet on **Thurs., March 10th.** **Prep** shift starts at 2:00 pm, serving shift starts at 5:15. Sign-up sheet is on the Narthex table.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Wednesday (23 rd)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Tom Meyer
Friday (25 th)	Worship, 10 am - Laurel Duncan, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (27 th)	Distinguished Scholar Worship, 9 am - Morning Worship, 11 am - Prism Outreach Team