

Portfolio: W. A. Keyser

The challenge of churches

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bill Keyser, 42, is professor of woodworking and furniture design at the School for American Craftsmen, Rochester (N.Y.) Institute of Technology. Over the past 16 years, Keyser has become known for his experiments with construction techniques for achieving curved forms, notably steam-bending (*Fine Woodworking*, Fall '77, pp. 40-45), coopering, the lapstrake approach of the boat builder, and the plywood-skin-over-curved-ribs of the airplane wing. Besides furniture for homes and offices, Keyser has also designed and built furnishings for a number of contemporary churches of various denominations.

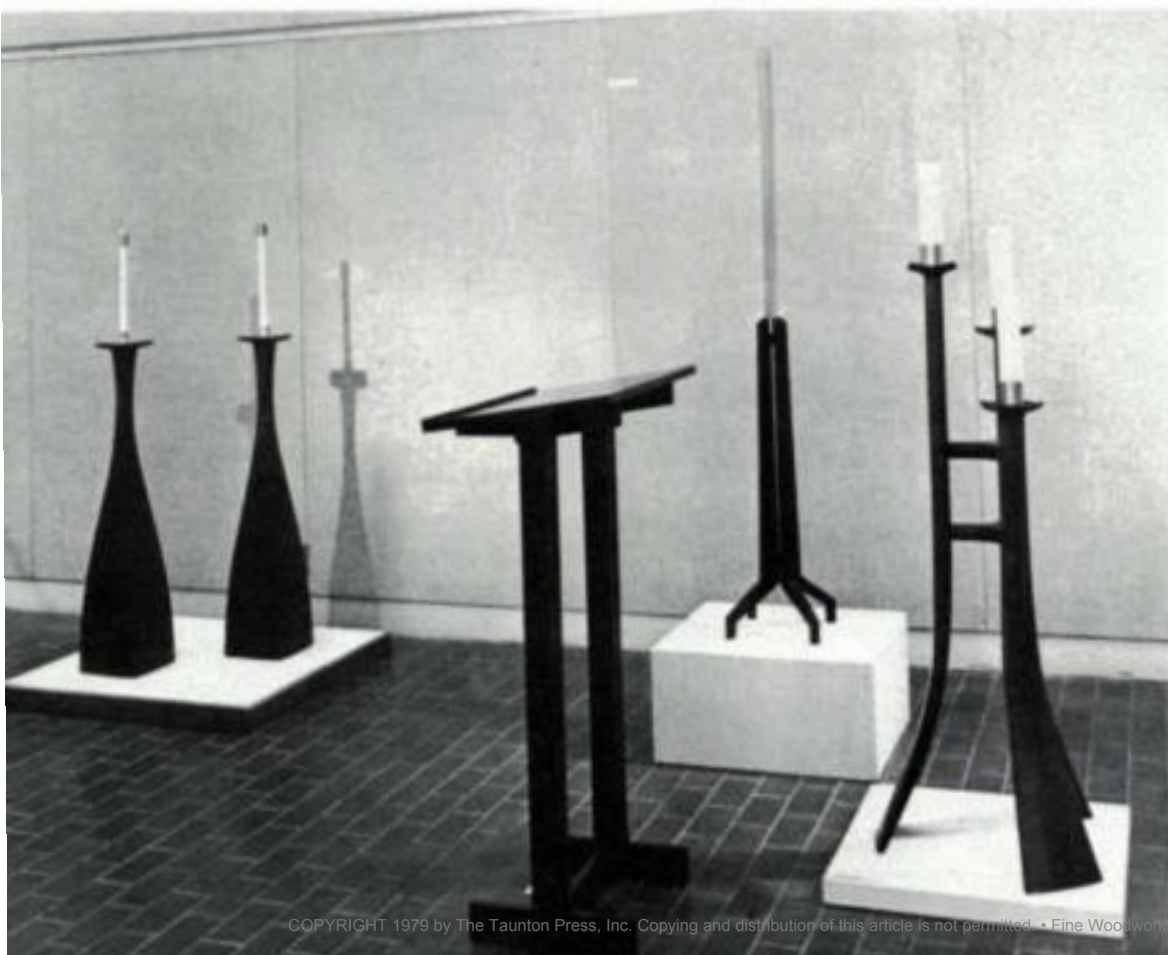
He explained that one of his first commissions was for a set of candlesticks for a seminary chapel. "The priest responsible for the commission has since recommended me to several of his fellow clergy. I've also been fortunate through the years to work with several architects who have regularly built or renovated churches. Somehow one job leads to another."

Last fall, RIT's Bevier Gallery organized a one-man retrospective exhibition of Keyser's work. The 85 pieces on display included portions of altar groupings lent by ten churches—a rare opportunity to see so much liturgical furniture in one place. We decided to emphasize the church work when selecting these photographs, and asked Keyser to concentrate on it in his remarks for the photo captions.

Photos, except where noted: R.B. Kushner, Richard Kautz, Jack Darginsky



Above, credence table. A speculative, experimental piece, executed in 1966. The intent was to achieve a light-weight, hollow, yet monolithic form using fabrication techniques rather than stacking solid wood. The curved areas are three layers of 1/8-in. poplar plywood and 1/28-in. thick face veneer of tulipwood, formed over a male mold in a vacuum press. These bent planes were glued in the openings cut into a hollow particle-board box. Then the flat outside surfaces of the particle board were veneered with 1/28-in. walnut veneer. The lectern at left was made in 1967 for St. John's Lutheran Church, Victor, N.Y., of quartered white oak, using the same technique.



Candlesticks and a rosewood registry stand from several churches.



St. John the Evangelist, Rochester, N.Y., is an older Roman Catholic church that was undergoing renovation. The architect had designed the sanctuary, above, to feature a 22-ft. high white carpeted reredos (the large screen behind the altar) divided by a vertical slice of stained glass. In plan view the reredos curves forward from the stained glass window, runs parallel to the rear wall, and then bends forward again as if to envelop and present the raised sanctuary. The vertical stained glass window, the center line of the church and the main aisle define an axis, which I used along with the vertically extruded shape of the reredos as primary points of departure in designing the furniture. I looked upon the furnishings, all red oak and made in 1976-1977, as forms existing in the space created by the reredos and the raised sanctuary platform.

The altar, bottom left, is the pivotal piece, and its shape somewhat mirrors the curves of the reredos and encapsulates the space between it and the reredos. Within this space, in the alcove of the stained glass, the chair, top left, was fashioned. A risen Christ figure, left, was suspended away from the front of a cross whose arms echo the upward sweep of the arms of the figure. The cross, chair and altar each have a ver-

tical slot of negative space to reinforce the central axis.

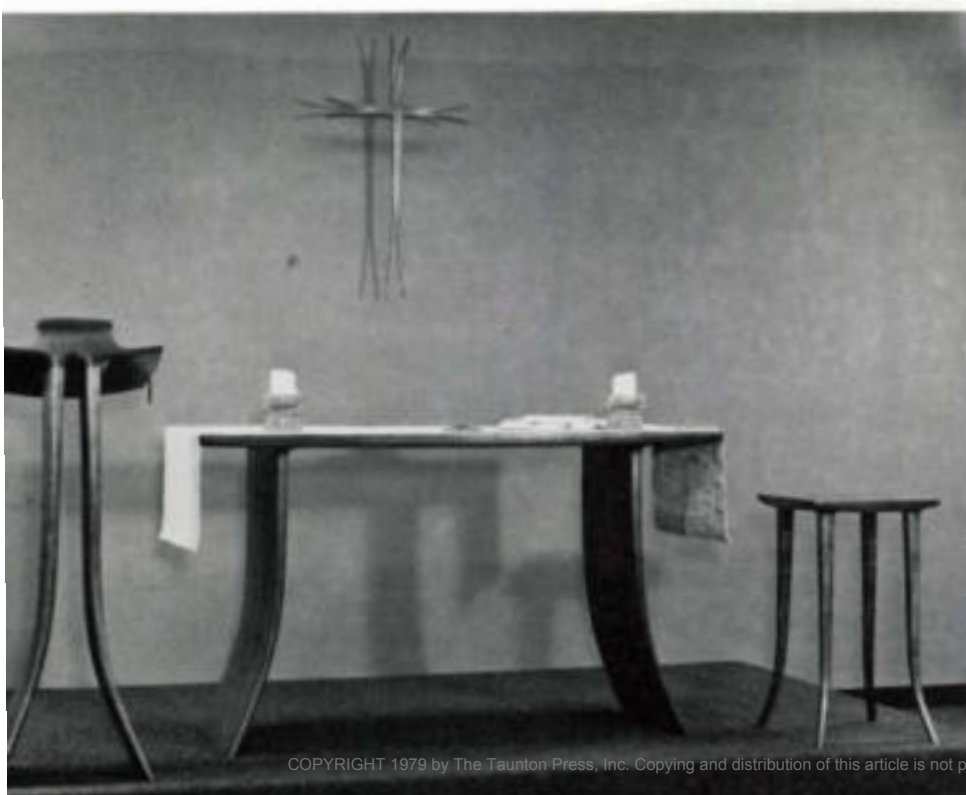
The lectern base (the Word) has a plan view that points outward toward the congregation (photo left, second from top). The three planes of the candlestick (the Light), shown above at right, spiral the eye upward and also symbolize the Trinity.

A 1-in.-to-1-ft. model of the sanctuary and reredos was built, and all designs were presented to the church committee in the form of models. In addition, many of the pieces were rendered in full-sized cardboard mock-ups to resolve scale uncertainties.

The curved planes of all the pieces were coopered, that is, constructed of narrow vertical strips of wood, angled and edge-glued together to approximate the curve. Cove-cutting on the table saw, special rigging for the router and hand-planing with curved-sole planes helped complete the forms.



Clockwise from above: Altar, baptismal, lectern and chair, 1974, red oak, from the Church of the Good Shepherd (Roman Catholic), Henrietta, N.Y. The lines of the chancel furnishings were derived from the form of the tabernacle, which swoops out from the rear sanctuary wall (not shown), and from the stylized tester ceiling over the sanctuary. The bases of the altar, baptismal and lectern are steam-bent pieces, edge-glued into bent planes, mitered at the corners and tenoned into the tops.



Lectern, altar, cross, credence table (left) and candlestick (right) for the Newman (Interdenominational) Community, State University of N.Y. at Geneseo. The first four pieces were designed and executed in 1969, the candlestick in 1978. This is typical of ecclesiastical work, where pieces must be coordinated and made as funds become available. Lacking any strong architectural statement to serve as a point of departure, the forms were generated from a desire to effect an uplifting feeling. The understructure of the altar, table and lectern are steam-bent, then tenoned into the tops.



Donald E. Smith



The design parameters involved with ecclesiastical objects are very specific and challenging, and I find they frequently lead to formal solutions that I never would have created otherwise. The differing beliefs of the various faiths, the resulting liturgies and the ever-present opportunity for abstract symbolism continue to be an inspiration. I try to work within the architectural concept of the specific church, creating forms that present a unified statement with the structure. It's a little like

stage-set design. The problem is a grouping of objects in space, which among themselves must have a hierarchy of importance or focus, and which must be meaningful but yet subservient to the liturgical drama choreographed around them. Working within these parameters dictates fresh solutions.

Ecclesiastical commissions almost always involve committees. I enjoy working with these groups, getting their views, designing the objects, and then doing whatever is necessary to communicate my ideas back to the group. But it takes care—the situation can easily get out of control. I'm often reminded of the old joke about the camel being a horse designed by a committee.

—W. A. K.

Coffee table, below, 1978, of cherry, elm, maple and walnut. Although I usually work using drawings, models and/or mock-ups to predict the outcome of a piece before starting, occasionally I'll respond to cast-off or leftover raw material in a much more spontaneous way. This piece originated with a slab of an elm log and some serpentine stripes laminated of cherry, maple and walnut, left over from another piece. The slab was refined by allowing its natural shape to dictate the final form. The base was constructed hollow by using molded plywood veneered with maple for the top and bottom, placing ribs internally and veneering the serpentine stripes on the sides. In cross section, the base has a distinct slant, which empties the space between the base and top out to one side, and ultimately makes it a much more dynamic component. The base and slab were carried almost to final shape without my knowing how they would be connected. As a transition piece, I tried organically shaped carvings, various pedestal forms and cone-shaped elements to fill the converging void. While cutting cardboard discs to determine final sizes for these cones, I suddenly thought "why not just bridge the gap with various-sized discs?" These discs had all the dynamics of the cones and also permitted a freer flow of negative space through the opening. The various-sized discs were composed within the most constricted portion of the Venturi-like space, which allowed one end of the slab top to cantilever out dramatically over the base. Bolts hidden within the discs connect top to base.



Altar with cross, candlesticks and pulpit, red oak, 1977, for the Risen Christ Lutheran Church, Perinton, N.Y. The plan view of the altar top derives its shape from the semicircular plan of the sanctuary, which features a curved rear wall punctuated by a semicircular window. My fascination with Alexander Calder's stabiles prompted the concept of supporting a horizontal surface with vertical and/or angled planes, rather than legs or pedestals. The sweep of the altar understructure, as well as that of the pulpit, inset, culminates at the cross, upswept to suggest the departure of the risen Christ. A hollow-core construction (similar to residential door construction) used pine ribs between skins of 1/4-in. commercial red oak plywood, with 1/2-in. thick solid red oak edging glued around the perimeter of all the

planes. This technique allowed me to build warp-free and lightweight planes, and it also accommodated internally the large bolts connecting the planes. □

