

FEATURE

Woodcarver's visions grace diocesan churches

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor



U.S. church architect Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) called I. Kirchmayer "the finest carver of wood in America."

Contemporary art critics hailed him as "the dean of American wood carvers," and said his work "found easy comparison with some of the great carvings in Europe."

The Diocese of Rochester is fortunate to have two churches lavishly adorned by Kirchmayer in his top form: Blessed Sacrament, 534 Oxford St., Rochester, and St. Stephen's, 48 Pulteney St., Geneva.

John (Iohannes) Kirchmayer (c. 1860-Nov. 30, 1939) was a native of Oberammergau in Bavaria, according to the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Since Oberammergau is famous not only for its decennial Passion Play but for its woodcarving tradition, Kirchmayer can be said to have been born with hammer and chisel in hand. From childhood on, he showed a talent for drawing, and as a youngster, he picked up in local studios the skills of wood sculpturing and ceramics. Awarded an art scholarship in Munich, he also studied and worked in France and England, broadening his talents to include sculpture in stone and bronze. Eventually, however, he decided to seek his fortune in the United States.

When he reached New York around 1890, he had the early good fortune to make the best possible architectural contacts. Church building in the English Gothic style was then in full revival here, under the ideological leadership of Cram, a high-church Episcopalian.

Architect Stanford White (1853-1906) was the person who "discovered" the young German sculptor. Sensing Kirchmayer's mastery and creative piety, he at once introduced him to colleagues like Henry Vaughan and the Cram architectural partners as an answer to their constant prayer for architectural craftsmen. Kirchmayer settled in Massachusetts, and accepted employment with William F. Ross and Company of East Cambridge, an affiliation that continued until his "retirement" around 1920.

While the Bavarian sculptor executed some American commissions in stone and bronze, most of his work was woodcarving for Episcopal and Catholic churches designed by the Cram firm or others partial to the Neo-Gothic style, with its use of ribbed vaulting, flying buttresses (a support that connects to the outside wall of a building by an arch), pointed arches and steep roofs.

Kirchmayer proved an ideal collaborator for church architects. He had a deep, even mystical Catholic faith, a lively imagination, a perfectionist craftsmanship, and a marvelous sense of the proper relationship between ornament and architecture.

He also profited from this collaboration. The American architects helped him, he frankly admitted, to develop a unique personal style, which he liked to call "American Gothic." No mere copyist of medieval sculpture, Kirchmayer introduced into his sculptures distinctive elements of design, of verticality and depth, that had no parallel in European carving, but possessed a timeless international quality. In carving human figures, he made a point of never repeating himself, and he endowed all his statues with a reverent dignity.

Blessed Sacrament Church in Rochester and St. Stephen's Church in Geneva were both designed by the firm of Gordon and Madden of Rochester, and both buildings were dedicated in 1912. The pastors, Father Thomas F. Connors of



S. John Wilkin

The 12 Apostles are enshrined in I. Kirchmayer's intricate carving featured as part of the high altar in Blessed Sacrament Church, 534 Oxford St., Rochester.

Blessed Sacrament (1870-1966) and Father Stephen V. McPadden of St. Stephen's (1872-1924), both sought to create permanent churches outstanding in structure and decor. Father McPadden was a great devotee of Cram's Neo-Gothic ideology, as was his artistic adviser, Paulist Father Peter J. Moran (1874-1941). Gordon and Madden therefore drew up for both parishes plans in modified English Gothic, and chose Ross and Company's Kirchmayer to decorate the sanctuaries.

For the sanctuary of Blessed Sacrament, of which Rochester architect Walter H. Cassebeer (1884-1963) was co-designer, Kirchmayer provided an intricately carved high-altar reredos (partition behind the altar) enshrining highly individualized images of the 12 Apostles. He also executed the freestanding forward statues of the Sacred Heart and St. Anthony; the pulpit, with statues of Ss. Patrick and Boniface; and, bridging the arch above, the great polychromed rood beam bearing Christ crucified and Mary and John.

The altarpiece of St. Joseph's altar (to the left of the main sanctuary) has statues of King David, Archangel Gabriel, St. Joseph, Archangel Michael and the Patriarch Jacob. The altarpiece of the Madonna and Child altar (to the right of the main sanctuary) has statues of King David, Archangel Gabriel, the Madonna, Archangel Raphael, and St. Joachim. (Oddly, the left hand of Mary was never finished!)

For St. Stephen's, a smaller building, the sculptor prepared a similar, if less ambitious ornamentation: reredoses for the high altar, the St. Joseph altar, and the Marian altar; and a pulpit, an altar rail, and a fine rood beam like, but not identical to, that in Blessed Sacrament. The main altar screen has four major figures, the Evangelists. St. Joseph's statue is flanked by Archangels Raphael and Uriel; the Madonna's, by Archangels Michael and Gabriel.

In addition to these handsome creations of 1912, the Geneva church also



Jacob the Patriarch is one of five statues that adorn the altarpiece of St. Joseph's altar at Blessed Sacrament.

has a delicate little Kirchmayer shrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, dedicated in 1921. It was designed by the noted Pittsburgh architect John Theodore Comes (1873-1922) and is said to have been his last work. The statue was also the last one executed by Kirchmayer before his official retirement.

But a mere catalog of art works is of little service: A close inspection of the two diocesan collections of this master craftsman gives a better sense of his work. Note the luxuriant but orderly decorative details whittled out of oak, the inventive "linen fold" panels, the bold garlands, the everywhere of angels.

But concentrate particularly on the human figures, their magnificent drapery,

their majestic faces. (His Old Testament characters were perhaps his best.) Then it become easier to understand why his biographer called him "one of the indubitably great artists of his era," and why Cram said, "It may be we shall never look upon his like again."

Iohannes Kirchmayer's era has indeed passed. The epoch of the Gothic Revival was doomed to be brief, for the past can never be truly revived. But Kirchmayer's creations deserve not to be forgotten, for his visions, like sacred icons, are of eternity, not time.

Kirchmayer himself once wrote, "Every figure ought to be a poem in itself." Thanks to his skill and insight, he often achieved that deathless ideal.

EDITORS' NOTE: For more information, call St. Stephen's Church, 315/789-1124, or Blessed Sacrament Church, 716/271-7240. Blessed Sacrament's summer hours are 7:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 7:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Sunday. St. Stephen's is open daily from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Entrance after 1:30 p.m. is through the eucharistic adoration chapel in the church's northwest corner.



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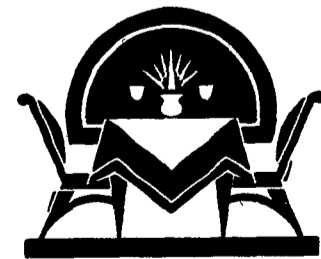
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