
Hildreth Meiere: Master of Art Deco - Ephemera

Hildreth Meiere: Master of Art Deco

Spring 2019

Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce Brochure

Fairfield University Art Museum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/hildrethmeiere-ephemera>

Recommended Citation

Fairfield University Art Museum, "Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce Brochure" (2019). *Hildreth Meiere: Master of Art Deco - Ephemera*. 8.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/hildrethmeiere-ephemera/8>

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

HILDRETH MEIÈRE

The Art of Commerce



April 18 - September 21, 2019



BELLARMINE HALL GALLERIES

We are so pleased to present *Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce* in the museum's Bellarmine Hall Galleries. This exhibition, which highlights Meière's corporate commissions from across her career, has been in the works for a number of years, and it was certainly worth the wait. Showcased in the galleries is the dazzling array of materials in which her finished works were fabricated, ranging from the colossal metal relief sculptures on the exterior of Radio City Music Hall, to the mix of commissions for exterior murals and decorations – eleven in total – for the New York World's Fair, to the massive mosaics for two insurance industry giants that close the exhibition and her career.

Carey Mack Weber, Executive Director, organized this exhibition in collaboration with the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University and the International Hildreth Meière Association. We are extremely grateful to the Ruth McC Dayton Foundation and the Eichholz Foundation, whose generous support made this exhibition possible.

We would like to thank Louise Meière Dunn and Hildreth Meière Dunn, Hildreth's daughter and granddaughter, who shared their endless knowledge and brought their boundless enthusiasm to the project, with special thanks to Hildreth for sharing all of her photographs of Meière's completed projects which are included in this brochure and exhibition. With much gratitude, we also acknowledge the work of the team at the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure including Executive Director Ludwig Brunner, Assistant Director Evelyn J. Penman, and last, but not least, former director Joseph LoSchiavo (and current President and CEO of SDG Music Foundation) who wrote much of the label copy, contributed an essay to this brochure, and who will deliver the opening night lecture.

Thanks as always go to our exceptional museum team: Michelle DiMarzo, Emily McKeon, and Megan Paqua, and to the additional support provided across the University by Edmund Ross, Susan Cipollaro, Tess Brown Long, George Lisi, and Josue Garcia.

Carey Mack Weber
Frank and Clara Meditz Executive Director

Cover image: *Study of Dance*, 1932. Radio City Music Hall, New York. NY. Gouache on cartoon paper. Private Collection, courtesy of the the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University

Back cover images:

Study of Song #1, 1932, Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY. Gouache on cartoon paper. Private Collection

Study of Song #2, 1932, Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY. Gouache on cartoon paper. Private Collection

Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce

Hildreth Meière (American, 1892-1961) was a prolific muralist whose commissioned works adorn the walls and ceilings of public buildings from New York to California. Born in New York, Meière first studied art in Florence, Italy, where she discovered the frescoes and mosaics that were to inform her craft. Continuing her studies in New York, California, and Chicago, she traveled to Europe during the summers, where she was introduced to *les arts decoratifs*, later to be known as Art Deco, of which she became an early American exponent.

Meière's career was launched in 1923 when architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue hired her to decorate the dome of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. Before the commission was complete, she was already working on two additional projects for him, most notably the Nebraska State Capitol, which ultimately encompassed eight distinctive works that collectively became her *pièce de résistance*. Meière was a pioneer in the use of Art Deco in architectural decorations for corporate America, and worked continuously until her death in 1961, completing over 100 corporate and liturgical commissions.



Hildreth Meière, 1957. Hildreth Meière Family Collection

Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce highlights those corporate commissions executed in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut and includes paintings, wall sculptures, preparatory drawings, cartoons, and gouache sketches, as well as photographs of finished commissions. A versatile artist whose commissions were executed in glass and marble mosaic, tile, terra cotta, tapestry, leather, wood, and metal, Meière understood that her success was in large part due to the positive relationships she forged with corporate clients, architects, and the talented craftsmen who executed her works.

Hildreth Meière: Myth, Faith, and the Creative Process

*"I looked and looked at Greek vases and copied and traced until I thought I had the spirit. Then I looked at Egyptian and contemporary art, as their coloring seemed appropriate. Then, disregarding most of my researches, but being influenced by them, I started designing."*ⁱ



Fig. 1

That is how Hildreth Meière described her artistic process, while working on one of her earliest commissions, the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., 1922–1924. Meière's designs for the Academy included anthropomorphic representations of the four elements: *Earth, Air, Fire, and Water*, in the pendentives of the Great Hall. Each allegory is a female figure in classical

drapery holding objects associated with the element she represents. Water, for example is seen emerging from the sea, supporting two boats upon the waves, as dolphins swim below. Surrounding the central roundel, in smaller medallions, are three emblems of water's functions: rain, which enriches the earth, a well that sustains life, and a mill wheel symbolizing Water's ability to power industry.

Here, at the very outset of her professional career, we already can see how Meière's process of "looking and looking" enabled her to create vivid iconographies, invariably appropriate and specific to each commission, whether it be secular or ecclesiastical. Beginning with their work together on the Nebraska State Capitol, 1922–1932, Meière developed a close relationship with philosopher and iconographer Hartley Burr Alexander (1873–1939), whom she regarded as a mentor. Alexander would advise her with the development of overall iconographic programs and also provide constructive criticism on specific images. Meière valued Alexander's mentorship very highly and consulted him on commissions in which he was not officially involved. He was one of the many influences, along with her own experiences, knowledge, and research that she channeled into designs that are uniquely her own.

Meière was a voracious consumer of visual information, beginning in childhood under her mother's tutelage.

*"Even before we went to school she used to show us reproductions of the best pictures in the world, pointing out to us why they were great, explaining their meaning to us, and telling us the story of the artists' lives."*ⁱⁱ

A lifelong world traveler from an early age (her mother took her to Europe for the first time in 1911) Meière went seemingly everywhere to see the art of the world in person, even traveling alone to Russia and Turkey in the 1930s.

Meière undertook formal art studies in New York at the Art Students' League, The Beaux Arts Programs, and the New York School of Applied Design for Women. In San Francisco, she studied at the California School of Art and, in Chicago, at the Art Institute. In 1918, she studied mechanical drawing and applied mathematics at Columbia University so that she could serve in the U.S. Navy as a map-maker during WWI. As a New Yorker, she had regular access to the collections of the Metropolitan Museum.

Beginning in the 1870s, the Metropolitan amassed an enormous collection of plaster casts, predominantly of Greco-Roman sculptures and architectural elements. The collection was maintained through the first third of the 20th century, but as the Met's collections of original artworks grew, the importance of the casts and the available space to display them diminished. They were removed to storage in stages between 1938 and 1949. That Meière took full advantage of the collection, sketching and polishing her figure drawing skills, is evident in the modeling of the classically-inspired figures in so many of her murals.

Ultimately, the strongest influence on Meière's fluency with allegory and symbolism may well be her earliest formal education and her Roman Catholic upbringing, which are intertwined. She attended the Academy (later the College) of the Sacred Heart, located in Manhattanville, which was once a village and is now a part of Harlem. The Sacred Heart experience was a formative part of Meière's life. The study of Latin was at the core of the Catholic academies, both male and female, until the 1970s. Mass and other liturgies were still being conducted in Latin throughout Meière's lifetime. In school curricula, Latin was taught in the context of Roman literature and culture. A typical program would be the first year grammar, the second year Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and the third year the orations of Cicero; advanced students might also get to study Virgil's *Aeneid*.

The Latin classics, with their mythological gods and heroes, dovetailed well with the Church's rich tradition of hagiography, which held great



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

prominence prior to the revision of the canon of saints after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Most of the better-known saints, especially martyrs, are associated with a physical attribute that represents a significant aspect in their biography. Saint Catherine, for example, is associated with the breaking wheel that figured in her martyrdom, while Saint Barbara is often seen with chains and a tower. Some saints are so rooted in legend, rather than history, that their very names are emblematic; in legend, after Saint Veronica (from vero = true and icon = image) used her veil to wipe the face of Jesus on the way to Calvary, His image was transferred to the cloth. *Veronica's Veil* or *The Holy Face* became a popular subject for artists for centuries.

The scholar Joseph Campbell, who wrote extensively on comparative mythology and comparative religion, spoke of his own experience as a Catholic in a way that resonates for our understanding of Meière.

"The Catholic religion is a poetic religion. Every month has its poetic and spiritual value. Boy, that got into me. I'm sure that my interest in mythology comes out of that." ⁱⁱⁱ

It's likely that, consciously or not, this confluence of religion and myth is part of the force that enabled Hildreth Meière to "look and look and copy and trace until she thought she had the spirit," to paraphrase her own words. The impact can be seen in nearly all her major mural projects, in the traditional iconography of the Byzantine-inspired mosaics of St. Bartholomew's Church in New York and the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis, and in the brilliance with which she decorated the massive arch of New York's Temple Emanu-El with Jewish symbols, carefully respecting the prohibition of graven images and meticulously avoiding anything even remotely cruciform in the decorative borders.

Meière channeled the same instincts into many of her secular commissions, employing the inherent spirituality of myth toward a corporate purpose. In her lobby mural for the Prudential Insurance

Company (1960), she begins by relating the company's logo, the Rock of Gibraltar, to the rock's legendary origins in the myth of Hercules. She then evokes other traditions; integrating the work with the architecture, she structures it much like an altar triptych, with the main subject in the central panel and ancillary images in the outer wings. She places Hercules himself in a composition not uncommon in sacred art, in which a saint is depicted, often alone, with his attribute, in an overpowering natural landscape. In the painting by Domenico Veneziano (Fig. 2), St. John the Baptist is seen about to don one of his attributes, the rough clothing that he wears after casting off his worldly garments. We also see him surrounded by highly stylized land formations, common in Italian Renaissance paintings and frequently quoted by Meière, with varying modifications, in both sacred and secular works. They certainly inform the Straits of Gibraltar through which Hercules sails (Fig. 3) and, upon close inspection, we can see a small hint of them in the Travelers Insurance Company mosaic (1956).

At Radio City Music Hall (1932), we see Meière bring another Italianate form, the Renaissance *tondo*, or roundel, to the service of her own vision. This circular form was popular in Renaissance Florence, and Meière undoubtedly saw many examples of its use for both sacred and secular subjects during her time studying in the city in 1911—paintings by Raphael, Botticelli, and Michelangelo, relief sculptures by Michelangelo and the Della Robbia family, and architectural elements on façades of buildings like Orsanmichele. Meière used the *tondo* form in depicting the Elements in the National Academy of Science (Fig.1) but, at Radio City, she expanded it to what might possibly be unprecedented scale.

Finally, in her lost masterpiece *Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth* for the now demolished RKO Theatre (1932) Meière invented a classical iconography to represent a very modern phenomenon, resulting in an image that would be a timeless icon of telecommunication, were it still extant.

Meière's final commission for the Prudential Insurance Company, and her death shortly thereafter, coincided with the ascendancy of abstraction as the dominant trend in art. Although there have been many exciting developments since then, as we continue to assess Meière's work through publications and exhibitions, it's sometimes difficult not to feel a sense of loss. In commenting on the current state of the arts in general, Dana Gioia, poet and former head of the NEA, made this lament:

"The loss of a transcendent religious vision, a refined and vigorous sense of the sacred, and the ancient and powerful tradition of symbolism and allusion have impoverished the language of the arts." ^{iv}

Joseph A. LoSchiavo

- i Hildreth Meière, "Distinguished Artist Comes Home for Visit: Miss Hildreth Meière Tells of the Interesting Work in which She is Engaged," *Women's City Club Magazine* (San Francisco) 1:2 (March 1927): 10
- ii Genevieve Parkhurst, "An Artist Who Happens to be a Woman: The Remarkable Career of Hildreth Meière," *Pictorial Review* 27:12 (September 1926): 106
- iii Joseph Campbell, *The hero's journey: Joseph Campbell on his life and work*, ed. Phil Cousineau (San Francisco/London: Harper & Row, 1990), 6
- iv Erika Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia," *Image: Art, Faith, and Mystery* 73 (2012) <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-dana-gioia/>

Fig. 1. Hildreth Meière, American (1892-1961) *Water*, Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences, 1924. Painted and gilded raised gesso

Fig. 2. Domenico Veneziano, Florentine (ca. 1410-1461) *Saint John in the Desert*, ca. 1445/1450. Tempera on panel. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 3. Hildreth Meière, American (1892-1961) *Study for Prudential Insurance Company Lobby Mural*, 1960. Pastel on brown paper. Private Collection



23



24

Exhibition Checklist

1. James Drummond Herbert (American, 1896-1970) *Bust Portrait of Hildreth Meière*, ca. 1920
Bronze bust on marble base
10 ½ x 10 x 6 ¾ inches
Private Collection
2. *Three Sample color charts*
Glass on boards
Steven Miotto
3. *Two Boxes with loose tesserae*
Metal boxes with glass
Steven Miotto
4. *Double-edged hammer*
Mosaic tool
Metal, wood
Steven Miotto
5. *Mounted chisel*
Mosaic Tool
Metal
Steven Miotto
6. *Beige enamel/glass disc*
Glass
Private Collection
7. *Aqua disc with gold leaf*
Aquamarine glass disc fused with gold leaf
Private Collection
8. *Full Scale Orange Study for Banking Room Mosaic*, 1931
One Wall Street, New York, NY
Gouache and gold paint on Photostat paper
119 ½ x 26 ¼ inches
The Collection of the HLW International LLP
9. *Full Scale Ox-blood Study for Banking Room Mosaic*, 1931
One Wall Street, New York, NY
Gouache and gold paint on cartoon paper
97 ½ x 25 inches
- The Collection of the HLW International LLP
10. *3-Inch Scale Orange Study for Banking Room Mosaic*, 1931
One Wall Street, New York, NY
Gouache and gold paint on cartoon paper
77 ½ x 23 ½ inches
The Collection of the HLW International LLP
11. *Study of Dance*, 1932
Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY
Gouache on cartoon paper
25 5/8 x 25 5/8 inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University
12. *Study of Drama*, 1932
Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY
Graphite on paper
32 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University
13. *Study of Song #1*, 1932
Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY
Gouache on cartoon paper
24 5/8 x 24 5/8 inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University
14. *Study of Song #2*, 1932
Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY
Gouache on cartoon paper
24 5/8 x 24 5/8 inches
Private Collection
15. *Study of Song #3*, 1932
Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY
Gouache on cartoon paper
19 ½ x 19 ½ inches
Private Collection

16. *Study, Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth, 1932*
 RKO, New York, NY
 Gouache on paper
 23 x 32 inches
 Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University

17. *Study, Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth, 1932*
 RKO, New York, NY
 Graphite on cartoon paper
 19 ½ x 28 ¼ inches
 David Bowers

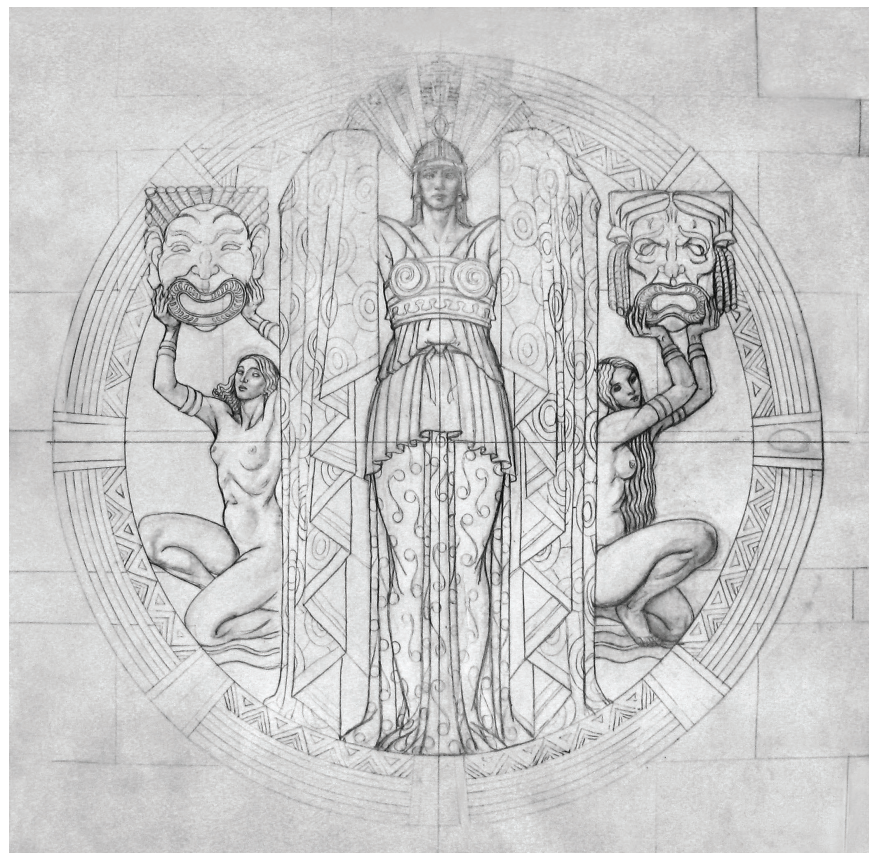
18. *Three Studies for Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth, 1932*
 RKO, New York, NY

Top: Gouache on tracing paper, 3 ¾ x 6 ¾ inches
 Center: Graphite on tracing paper, 6 x 8 ⅜ inches
 Bottom: Gouache on tracing paper, 4 ⅝ x 7 inches
 Private Collection

19. *Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, and the Dragon of Ignorance, 1939*
 New York World's Fair, Flushing, NY
 Foil cutouts on paperboard
 14 ½ x 22 inches
 Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University



16



12

20. *Scale model of Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, and the Dragon of Ignorance, 1939*
 New York World's Fair, Flushing, NY
 Relief cut from paperboard with gouache
 8 ¾ x 15 ¾ inches
 Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University

21. *The Dragon of Ignorance, Scale Model of Head, 1939*
 New York World's Fair, Flushing, NY
 Aluminum with brass
 40 x 49 ½ inches
 Rambusch Decorating Company, established 1898

22. *Scale model of a head for the Communication by Sound and the Spoken Word, 1939*
 Glass mosaic
 New York World's Fair, AT & T Building, Flushing, NY
 12 x 1 ¼ x 15 inches
 Private Collection

23. *World's Fair Temple of Religion: Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, 1939*
 New York World's Fair, Flushing, NY
 Gouache on tracing paper
 18 x 30 inches
 Private Collection

24. *World's Fair Temple of Religion: St. Basil's in Moscow, 1939*
 New York World's Fair, Flushing, NY
 Gouache on tracing paper
 20 ⅜ x 28 ½ inches
 Private Collection

25. *Study to-scale of Travelers Lobby mosaic, 1956*
 Travelers Insurance Company, Hartford, CT
 Gouache on tracing paper
 17 ¼ x 30 ½ inches
 Private Collection, courtesy of the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University

10

26. *Full-size cartoons of Travelers Lobby mosaic, 1956*
Travelers Insurance Company,
Hartford, CT
Paint on cartoon paper
6 panels are 14' x 5 ½' x 53 ½' and
7th panel is 14' 8" x 4'
Private Collection, courtesy of the
Regina A. Quick Center for the
Arts at St. Bonaventure University

27. *Prudential Plaza Lobby mosaic, 1960*
Mosaic pieces
Prudential Plaza, Newark, NJ
Assorted sizes
Private Collection

28. *Scale model of the Prudential Lobby mosaics in place, 1960*
Prudential Plaza, Newark, NJ
Gouache on paper glued to board
24 ¼ x 79 ½ inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the
Regina A. Quick Center for the
Arts at St. Bonaventure University



21

29. *Study for center panel, Prudential Lobby mosaic, 1960*
Prudential Plaza, Newark, NJ
Pastel on brown paper
14 ¾ x 16 ½ inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the
Regina A. Quick Center for the
Arts at St. Bonaventure University

30. *Prudential Lobby mosaic full size cartoon for center section, 1960*
Prudential Plaza, Newark, NJ
Gouache on cartoon paper
48 x 61 inches
Private Collection, courtesy of the
Regina A. Quick Center for the
Arts at St. Bonaventure University

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Hildreth Meière (American, 1892-1961).



30 (detail)

12

11

EXHIBITION PROGRAMS

Wednesday, April 17, 5 p.m.

Opening Night Lecture: *Classical Influences in the Corporate Murals of Hildreth Meière*

Joseph A. LoSchiavo, President and CEO, SDG Music Foundation
Bellarmine Hall, Diffley Board Room

Wednesday, April 17, 6-7:30 p.m.

Opening Reception: *Hildreth Meière: The Art of Commerce*

Bellarmine Hall, Great Hall

Wednesday, May 1, 7-9 p.m.

Event: *A Drawing Party*

Drawing materials and light refreshments are provided.
Bellarmine Hall Galleries and smART classroom, Bellarmine Hall
Co-sponsored by the *Creative Life Residential College*

Thursday, June 6, 11 a.m.

Art in Focus: *Hildreth Meière, Cartoons for Mosaics in the Lobby of Travelers Insurance Company (Hartford, CT), 1956*

Michelle DiMarzo, Curator of Education and Academic Engagement
Bellarmine Hall, Bellarmine Hall Galleries

Saturday, June 15, 4:30-7 p.m.

Lecture: *Hildreth Meière: Ahead of Her Time, Navigates a Career in a Man's World*

Anna Kupik (Meière's great granddaughter)
This lecture will be followed by a wine and cheese reception, and the Bellarmine Hall Galleries will remain open until 7 p.m.

Saturday, September 7, 1-3 p.m.

Walking Tour: *Hildreth Meière's New York* with Kurt Schlichting, Professor Emeritus, Sociology and Anthropology

Wednesday, September 11, 5 p.m.

Lecture: *The City Comes of Age: NYC in the Gilded Age*

Kurt Schlichting, Professor Emeritus, Sociology and Anthropology
Location to be determined

Wednesday, September 18, 5-6:30 p.m.

Panel: *"Women in Management: Then and Now"*

Catherine C. Giapponi (Associate Professor of Management, Dolan School of Business); Elizabeth Hohl (Assistant Professor of the Practice, History)
Dolan School of Business

All events are free and open to the public. Advance registration is recommended. For more information on the exhibition and related programming, and to register for events, visit the museum's website: fairfield.edu/museum





FAIRFIELD
UNIVERSITY
ART MUSEUM

fairfield.edu/museum