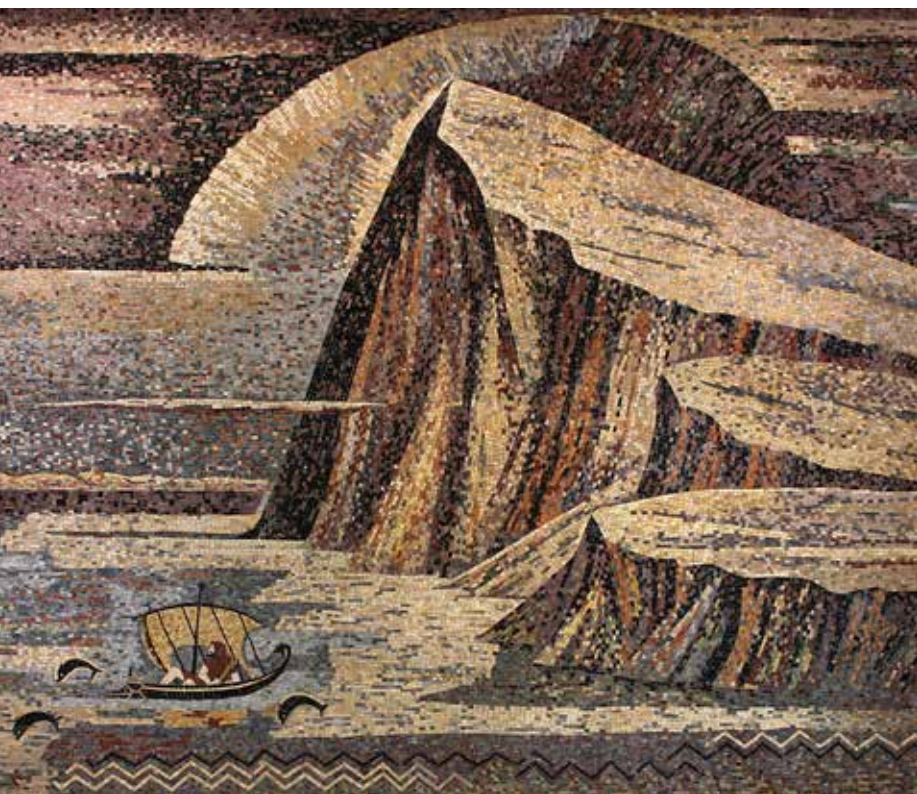


A Labor



Hildreth Meière, center panel of the *Pillars of Hercules*, 1960, marble mosaic, Newark Museum, gift of the Prudential Insurance Company of America.

By Catherine Coleman Brawer

Little did Tony Schiavo know in 1960 when he directed the execution of Hildreth Meière’s three-panel marble mosaic depicting the Pillars of Hercules for the lobby of the Prudential Plaza in Newark, New Jersey, that half a century later he would be supervising the restoration of this late Art Deco gem. Nationally acclaimed as one of the great Art Deco muralists of the twentieth century, Hildreth Meière specialized in creating narrative imagery that represented the purpose of the buildings she decorated. She is best known for her iconic roundels of *Dance*, *Drama*, and *Song* on the façade of Radio City Music Hall.

During her forty-year career from 1921-61, Meière received many commissions from architect Ralph Walker, including murals for office buildings and world’s fair pavilions. So when the firm Vorhees, Walker, Smith, Smith & Haines designed the modernist Prudential Plaza, Meière was the obvious choice to decorate the lobby with mosaic panels that would convey Prudential’s identity. Meière chose as her subject Hercules sailing through the Strait of Gibraltar, a reference to the insurance company’s logo, the Rock of Gibraltar.

Meière herself was familiar with the Strait of Gibraltar and had recorded her experience sailing through it in 1933:

The weather continued to be absolutely perfect, and the day after Lisbon we passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, coming to the Rock itself just at noon. For this reason lunch was at eleven, and later I was allowed up on the very top deck above the chart room while the boat swung close in to the extraordinary pile. I have landed there three times before, but was impressed more than ever with its sheer bulk, and the curious water sheds of masonry on its Eastern face. It is somehow thrilling to pass through that channel—to be able to see Africa on your right and Spain, Europe, on your left.

To convey the “sheer bulk” and the “curious water sheds of masonry on its Eastern face” that had so impressed her, Meière chose the narrative moment when Hercules, having successfully placed the Pillars of Hercules on either side of the Strait, sailed through the channel in his boat. In Greek mythology, the hero Hercules was known to be larger than life. By depicting him as a miniaturized figure dwarfed by the steep, angular cliffs, Meière conveyed to the viewer the magnitude of the Strait.

As in her earlier Art Deco imagery at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. and the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, Meière combined Art Deco forms with references to classical art. Her rendering of Hercules sailing in a small Greek boat surrounded by dolphins is a direct nod to the image of Dionysius sailing in a similarly dolphin-shaped barque surrounded by dolphins on a sixth-century BCE krater. Meière, however, treated the dolphins as dark curvilinear forms that complement the curves of Hercules’s



Meière’s assistant enlarged her design to a full-scale gouache painting called a cartoon. In 1960, Tony Schiavo and his team of mosaicists worked from the cartoon to interpret Meière’s painted design into the medium of marble mosaic. Private collection.

for Hercules

More than fifty years later, Schiavo uses a double-edged hammer against a portable steel chisel to cut small pieces of marble into the shapes needed to replace any tesserae missing from the center mosaic panel. The mural's center panel alone is composed of approximately 38,000 tesserae cut from fourteen different kinds of marble.



Schiavo restores a damaged area of the panel by setting tesserae into a mortar of sand, lime, and cement. He and Miotto match colors from their supply of vintage marble tesserae.

boat, and she represented the waves in the foreground as zigzag lines, a typical Art Deco motif. In fact, Art Deco was so much a part of Meière's vocabulary, that years after the style itself was no longer in vogue, she continued to enliven her murals with such Art Deco elements.

The three mosaic panels for Prudential were Meière's last corporate commission. They decorated the wall area above the passageways to the elevator banks of the Prudential lobby. The center section measured twelve-by-fifteen feet; each side panel, twelve-by-eighteen feet. When the lobby was remodeled in 1998-99, the three panels were removed and placed in storage. Upon their retrieval in 2012, Schiavo was called upon to guide their restoration. As a young head designer at the Foscatto factory in Long Island City in 1960, Schiavo had been responsible for interpreting Meière's original design from full-scale watercolors, called cartoons, into a mosaic that would read clearly from a distance. Using her painted cartoons as a reference, he had selected the subtly colored marble chips called tesserae and distributed them to the mosaicists who fabricated her design. Meière appreciated Schiavo's artistry, understanding that the beauty of the mosaic depended upon the skill of the craftsmen with whom she collaborated. In fact, the collaborative process went beyond Meière and Schiavo. She also worked closely with the architects of Prudential Plaza who commissioned the mosaics, with the client for whom she made a scale model of the lobby showing her proposed designs, and with her assistant who helped enlarge Meière's sketches to the full-scale watercolor cartoons from which Schiavo worked.

Having closely collaborated with Meière in creating the mosaic panels, Schiavo recently had the unusual opportunity of collaborating with the mosaicist Steven Miotto on the panels' restoration. Schiavo is a generation older than Miotto, but their relationship goes back many decades. Together they have made certain that any damage to Meière's panels has been repaired employing the same technique Schiavo used fifty years ago to create the original mosaic mural.

When marble chips of various colors were needed for the restoration, Schiavo and Miotto were able to provide vintage marble tesserae from their own supplies.

Prudential has donated the restored center panel to the Newark Museum, where it is installed in the main atrium, and the two side panels to Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., where they will be installed in the central courtyard. Visitors to both venues will once again be able to appreciate the beauty of Meière's Art Deco panels. But they will be disappointed if they hope to spot the restored areas. Schiavo and Miotto's skill in restoring the mosaic panels to their original appearance makes their work difficult to detect. ■

Schiavo and Miotto have completed their restoration of the center panel so that Hercules can continue to sail past the Strait of Gibraltar. Photos by Hildreth Meière Dunn.

