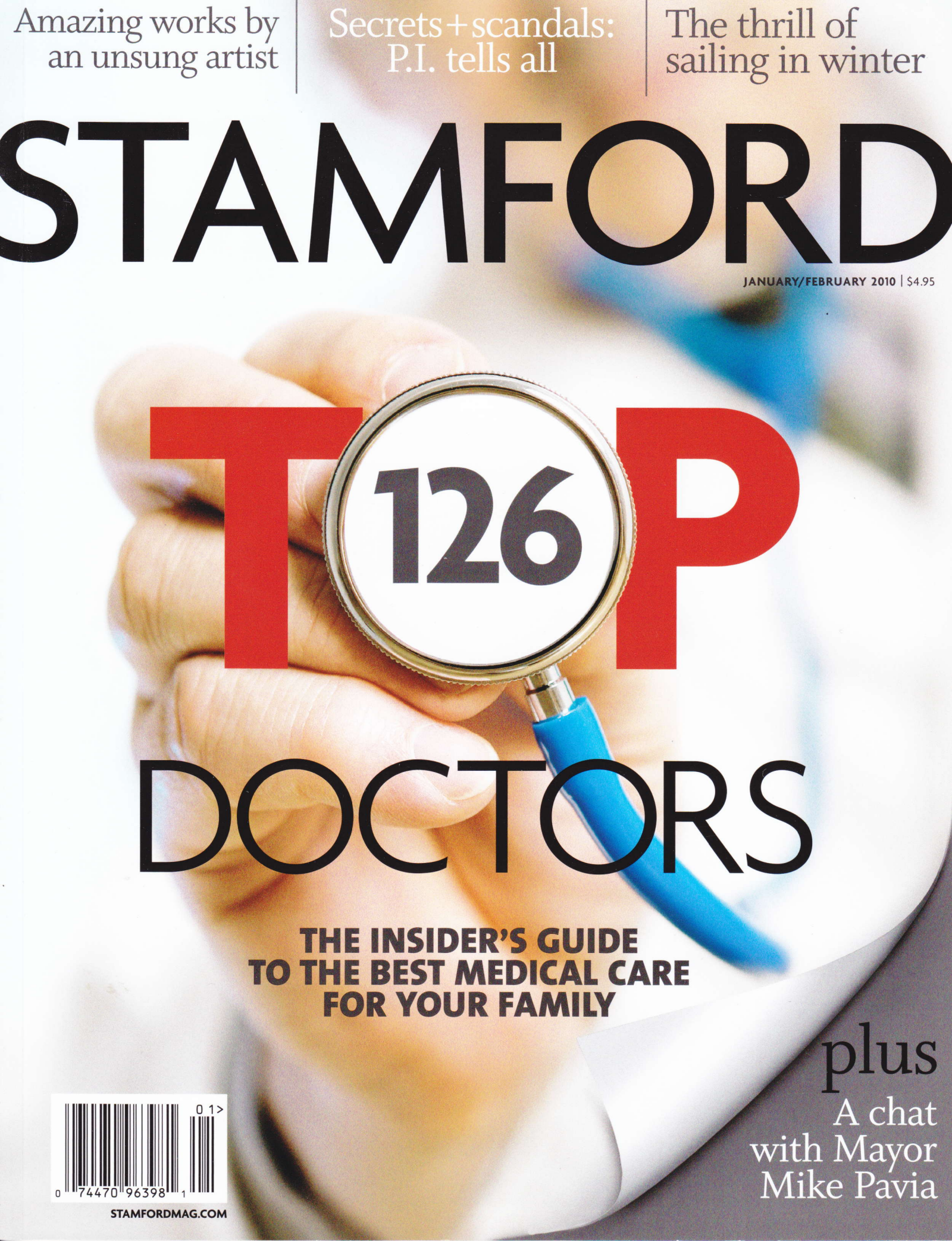
Amazing works by an unsung artist

Secrets + scandals: P.I. tells all

The thrill of sailing in winter

STAMFORD

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010 | $4.95



TOP 126 DOCTORS

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE BEST MEDICAL CARE FOR YOUR FAMILY

plus

A chat with Mayor Mike Pavia

0 74470 96398 1 01>

STAMFORDMAG.COM

BEHIND

Left: Louise and Hilly Dunn at home with a Hildreth Meière illustration behind them from the family collection *Center:* The rotunda dome of the Nebraska State Capitol *Right:* The apse of St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan.

GREGORY CHERIN

THESE WALLS

The Enduring Art and Legacy of Hildreth Meière

HILDRETH MEIÈRE DUNN COPYRIGHT 2009

HILDRETH MEIÈRE DUNN COPYRIGHT 2009

by JANE KENDALL

Hildreth Meière sketches *The Man between the Past and the Future* for one of four pavilions she designed for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Hildreth Meière is by no means a household name. It is a sad truth that those who designed and decorated the public spaces that define our great cities are for the most part unknown.

We admire the Empire State Building as the symbol of Manhattan—but who can name the architect? Who walks through Grand Central Station and remembers Paul César Hellau, who painted the night sky in reverse on its soaring ceiling? Or gazes up at the colorful roundels along the façade of Radio City Music Hall—as evocative of the Art Deco era as a Cole Porter lyric—and knows they were created by Hildreth Meière?

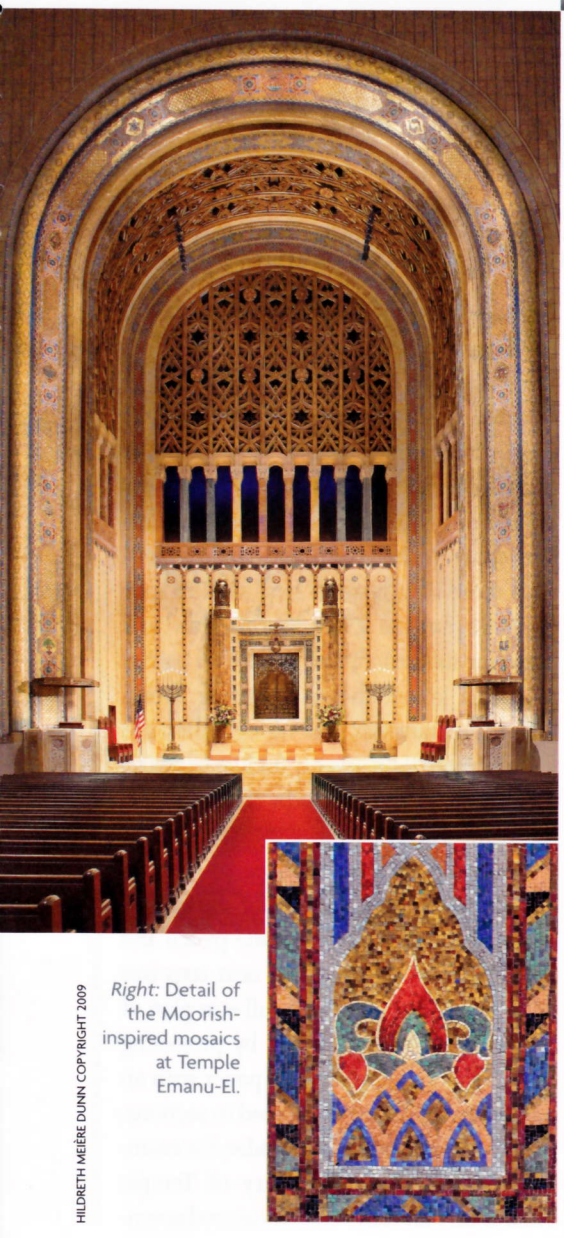
The artistry of Hildreth Meière (pronounced mee-AIR), a gifted and prolific designer of mosaics, murals and stained-glass windows, can be seen in many of our most notable buildings and churches nationwide. At a time when few women, especially those with patrician backgrounds, thought beyond marriage and motherhood, she lived a life as big and bold as the walls that were her canvas. And she competed in an almost exclusively male environment—the architects and builders on whom her more than 100 commissions depended were invariably men. "She was definitely ahead of her time, both from a creative standard and in her philosophy of life," says her daughter, gallery owner, watercolorist and longtime Stamford resident Louise Meière Dunn.

In 1944 Hildreth Meière bought the Stamford property that would be her weekend and summer retreat until her death in 1961. Here, on eleven wooded acres, she relaxed and entertained—Louise recalls Architectural League parties around the pool and picnics in the woods—and she worked, first in the large, sunny living room of the house, and from 1956 to 1960, in the fieldstone farm building she converted into a studio. In this bucolic setting, she made the sketches and models for several of her most important commissions, including the stained-glass windows for St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan and the ornate Romanesque basilica of the Cathedral of St. Louis. "I remember helping to paint gold squares to resemble mosaic ... for one of the arches," says Louise.

Hildreth Meière is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, due in large part to the tireless efforts of her daughter, who founded the 300-member Hildreth Meière International Society, and her granddaughter, Hilly (Hildreth) Meière Dunn, who has traveled the country photographing her grandmother's work in situ. And finally, nearly fifty years after her death, there is a major retrospective of her work, at the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University in St. Bonaventure, New York (near Buffalo). Titled *Walls Speak: The Narrative Art of Hildreth Meière*, the exhibit runs through June and, hopefully, will travel. Joseph A. LoSchiavo, who is executive director of the center, writes in the profusely illustrated catalog: "Speaking most loudly from all of Meière's work is a

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Above, left: The Pursuit of Wealth, a silver-leafed ceiling Meière designed for the lobby of One Wall Street. It was covered in 1961 and may no longer exist. *Above:* The Banking Room at One Wall Street, designated a city landmark and an Art Deco masterpiece, as seen from the street. *Left:* The soaring sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan.



Right: Detail of the Moorish-inspired mosaics at Temple Emanu-El.

HILDRETH MEIÈRE DUNN COPYRIGHT 2009

profound sense of spirit, be it the spirit of the dance at Radio City, the spirit of exploration in her work at Nebraska or Kansas City, or the spirit of faith in her numerous religious commissions."

In 1956 Hildreth Meière became the first woman to receive the Fine Arts Medal of the American Institute of Architects; the citation called her a "Master of Murals" and suggested that "the world of art might write your name high on the list of the greats among our painters. ..." The honor was gratifying; any label of "woman artist" less so. "I have always refused to join any women's professional group, and I think women artists are foolish to segregate themselves or admit the segregation," wrote Hildreth, a prodigious correspondent whose letters Louise has since cataloged. "I've worked as an equal with men, and my rating as an equal is all that I value."

Her course was set early on. Upon Hildreth's graduation from the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Manhattanville, her family offered her the choice between attending Smith College to study writing, and going abroad to study art. Young Hildreth, whose 1915 self-portrait shows the luminous eyes of a dreamer and a firm jaw, chose art. "My mother's artist friends had urged that I start off in Paris, and I often wonder what would have happened if I had been dropped, at eighteen, into the center of the Modern Movement of the School of Paris," she later wrote. "But we did not go first to France—we went to Italy, and the glories of the Renaissance and all that preceded it opened before my hungry eyes, and I fell in love, once and for all, with mural painting and great beautiful walls."

She was never to waver. The walls that are her legacy include, in Manhattan, Radio City Music Hall; the eight-story main sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El, the largest synagogue in the world; the altar in the Lady Chapel of St. Patrick's Cathedral; and the sumptuous red-and-gold Banking Room at One Wall Street, which was designated a city landmark and an "Art Deco masterpiece" in 2001. Her first major architectural commission was the Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., for which she abstracted scientific symbols into a gilded Byzantine dome and devised a process to make painted gesso resemble mosaic. She designed the interiors for the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln when she was only thirty-two years old. With elegant black-and-cream inlaid marble floors, a vast central rotunda in

Above: Hildreth Meière, in one of her trademark tailored suits, points out corrections to her mosaics for the Prudential Plaza lobby in Newark, New Jersey, c. 1956. The Prudential commission would be her last in the New York metropolitan area. *Left:* Cartoon detail of Hercules in the Prudential Plaza mosaic

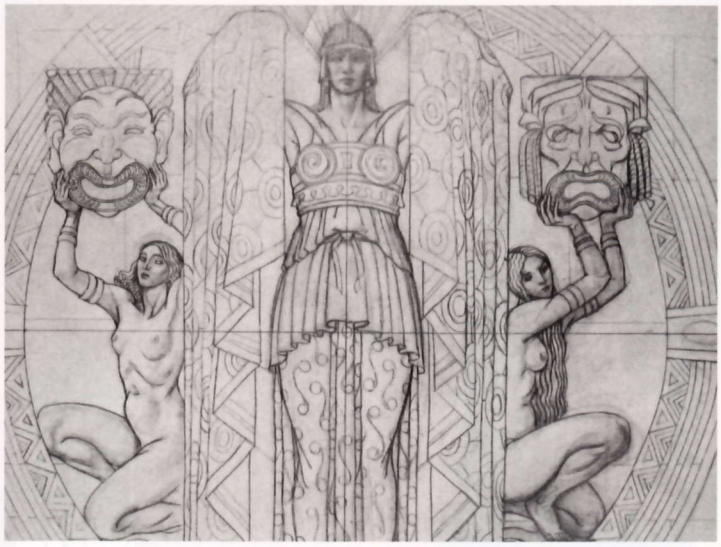
hand-set glazed ceramic tile—an effect she called "glittering and magnificent"—and the vaulted grandeur of the Senate Chamber, Hildreth knew, intuitively, that it would be her masterpiece. "Mother started at the top," says Louise, "and she stayed there for forty years."

Hildreth Meière was born in 1892 in New York City. Her mother, Marie, known as Minnie, was a talented artist who had studied in Paris, where her portrait was painted by Mary Cassatt. ("Unfortunately, we don't own it," Hilly says ruefully.) After her year in Italy, Hildreth studied drawing and painting at the Art Students League in New York and, later, in San Francisco, where she launched her professional career by selling sketches of Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and noted theatrical actors of the day. A chance to design costumes for the Metropolitan Opera's 1916 production of *Francesca Da Rimini* brought her back to Manhattan. For the next few years, she studied, won second prize in a *Chicago Tribune* art contest (she took Minnie to Europe with the $1,000 award), and painted murals in private homes for, among others, actor Alfred Lunt.

Everything changed in 1923 when she was introduced to architect Bertram Goodhue of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, a prestigious firm that specialized in the neo-Gothic and boasted an impressive roster of academic and ecclesiastical clients. "I ... showed him some of my projects," Hildreth wrote. "He said that without doubt they were the worst elevations he had ever seen." He did, however, detect promise in some lively sketches of vaudeville performers, enough so to have her paint the murals on the high altar of St. Mark's Church in Mount Kisco, New York. "From then on," she wrote, "I did most of the mural painting for his office."

The following year brought four major commissions: painting reredos—ornamental screens or panels behind altars—for churches in Lexington, Kentucky, and Providence, Rhode Island; the National Academy of Sciences hall; and the Nebraska State Capitol, for which Hildreth was awarded a gold medal in mural painting by the Architectural League of New York. She would, with little respite, work steadily for the rest of her life, alternating commissions that spoke to her deep and abiding faith with more light-hearted fare, such as four pavilions for the 1939 World's Fair and décor for six ocean liners. A staunch patriot who had joined the navy during World War I as a draftsman and cartographer, she painted more than seventy folding triptychs for army, navy and Air Corps chaplains during World War II.

Designing for enormous spaces requires a special technique, one not for the faint of heart. After Hildreth first made pencil and then full-color sketches, the next step was what is called a cartoon: a full-size plan of the mural or mosaic, made by projecting the design onto large rolls of paper with an enlarging lantern and produced in sections. No mean feat when you consider, for example, the eight-story sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El. Hildreth's easel measured seven-



Left: The mixed metal-and-enamel roundel entitled *Drama Above:* Hildreth Meière's meticulous sketch for the same

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Above: The chromium steel, bronze, brass, copper and enamel *Drama* roundel prior to installation, c. 1932 *Right:* Panpipes and flowing draperies adorn the classically inspired *Song* roundel.

COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS AND SKETCH BY HILDRETH MEIÈRE DUNN COPYRIGHT 2009

Left: Cymbals and symbolism illustrate the *Dance* roundel *Above:* Set against the limestone façade of Radio City Music Hall, the enameled roundels still shine as brightly as they did almost eight decades ago.

The glittering Banking Room at One Wall Street, also known as the Red Room. The walls are faced with 8,911 square feet of red, orange and gold glass tiles, fabricated and installed, as were many of Meière's mosaics, by the Ravenna Company of Berlin, Germany.

teen by twenty-one feet. In a letter to her mother, she cheerfully remarked, "It may be art—but it's a lot more like general carpentry and paperhanging and its *[sic]* a bully experience."

She worked hard in the winter months, commuting every morning from her Park Avenue apartment to her studio. From her seafaring ancestors (a Mayflower passenger and the first superintendent of the United States Naval Academy) she inherited a love of travel verging on wanderlust, and every summer went abroad to "renew the spirit."

Her closest friend was Louise Benedict Harmon, daughter of Greenwich financier and yachtsman Commodore Elias C. Benedict and the wife of pioneer aviator Clifford Harmon. Louise, for whom Hildreth would name her daughter and only child, had taken the young and passionate artist under her proverbial wing, introducing her to, among others, her brother-in law Thomas Hastings, of the architecture firm Carrère and Hastings. "Tom was very supportive of her career," says Louise. "And architects were important—that's who handed out commissions."

On one of Louise and Hildreth's trips to France, Hildreth met and married Richard von Goebel, a handsome Austrian aristocrat with a charming manner and a roving eye. As Louise tells it, "Granny Louise" eventually took Hildreth aside and said, "You know, dear, I think he's just after your money." Hildreth had the marriage annulled within a year, and afterward referred to herself socially as Mrs. Meière to save her daughter any embarrassment.

"To me, she was just my mother, who happened to be a well-known artist in her field," Louise once wrote. "During my high school years, schoolmates remember eating meals with her in utter silence, and yet in later years they adored her. On the telephone her deep voice was often taken to be the voice of a man. This forbidding presence was a cover for a very shy person who had a whimsical sense of humor."

That humor would evidence itself in the little jokes Hildreth hid in her art—her daughter's profile in a mosaic for the National Cathedral, a spike-heeled pump on a classical figure—and in her house in Stamford, where Louise has lived since 1974 (she currently shares the house with Hilly). Over the years it has been through any number of renovations and additions, and as a result wings out in several directions. After taking the tour, which includes Hilly's office (where she maintains the web-

site *www.hildrethmeiere.com*) and Louise's office and workroom, it's easy to understand why the two e-mail or phone each other from opposite ends of the house.

In 1980 Louise founded a framing business in her mother's old studio, which she named the Stone Studio. She is a member of the Professional Picture Framers Association and a certified framer who specializes in archival framing of works on paper. In 1987 she co-authored *Frames and Framing*, which sold more than 39,000 copies. From 1981 through 1988, Louise held exhibits in the Stone Studio featuring local painters, sculptors, photographers and ceramic artists. In 1989 she opened Our World Gallery and until 2008 mounted several exhibits every year, including one of her mother's work in 2007.

"Whenever people walk by Radio City Music Hall, or one of her buildings, she should be remembered."

— LOUISE DUNN ON HER MOTHER, HILDRETH MEIERE

The forty-foot living room of the main house is reminiscent of an Adirondack lodge, with wide windows overlooking the woods and a peaked ceiling. Originally, the far wall featured large wooden doors, but Hildreth had them removed and a fireplace built. She designed the pineapple wall sconces and the witty andirons of devils with pitchforks which, when a fire is blazing, appear to be stoking the flames of hell.

Enormous and enticing, the fireplace wall cried out for a mural. "Mother took her enlarging lantern, in her studio," Louise remembers, "and threw up the Mercator projection of the world." After transferring her charcoal drawing to the wall, Hildreth painted the *Our World* mural in shades of cream and blue and ochre. "She didn't put any outlines of countries because the borders are always changing," says Louise. "Just rivers and mountains." White dots represent Hildreth's travels, blue dots represent Louise, and ochre dots are for Louise's late husband, Paxton Dunn, a foreign service officer with the State Department.

When Louise graduated from college in 1952, she and Hildreth spent a year and a half traveling around the world, visiting Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand and India and then driving more than 9,000 miles from Capetown to Nairobi. (The malaria Hildreth contracted in Africa would have a long-term effect on her health.) "Travel with my mother involved carrying a movie camera, a tripod and hundreds of feet of film, and stopping the car to get the best shot," says Louise. After returning home, Hildreth would spend hours editing the film and then give "movie evenings" at the Architectural League of New York and the Cosmopolitan Club, and by invitation for numerous art and architecture groups. Hildreth also kept a diary on her trips, which she would type up and mail to her lawyer to copy and distribute to friends and family.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH

Three generations c. 1960: left to right, Hilly Dunn, Hildreth Meière, Louise Meière Dunn, and Ted Dunn.

Hildreth Meière was, in fact, an inveterate and meticulous documentarian of her own life, keeping ribbon-tied bundles of letters and portfolios of sketches, her 1916 costume designs for the Metropolitan Opera, steamer trunks from the days of Champagne at the captain's table, Louise Benedict Harmon's daybooks, and even a circus costume she designed and wore to a fancy dress party in the 1930s. (She loved dressing up and one evening slyly took to the bar of the Architectural League in a blonde wig and false eyelashes.) As a result, the Stamford house is not only the repository of a valuable and fascinating life, but a biographer's dream.

"She was an incredible woman," says Hilly. "If you think about it, she really ran a business. Not only was she the artist, she had to work with the architects, she had to work with the people who they were commissioned by, she had to work with the artisans. She decided when she was young what she wanted to do with her life—beautiful walls—and she did it."

"Mother didn't brag about herself, but she was certainly proud of her accomplishments," says Louise. "I just think she should be remembered. Whenever people walk by Radio City Music Hall, or one of her buildings, she should be remembered." S

Louise and Hilly Dunn take a stroll with Tiger near The Stone Studio on their Stamford property.

GREGORY CHERIN