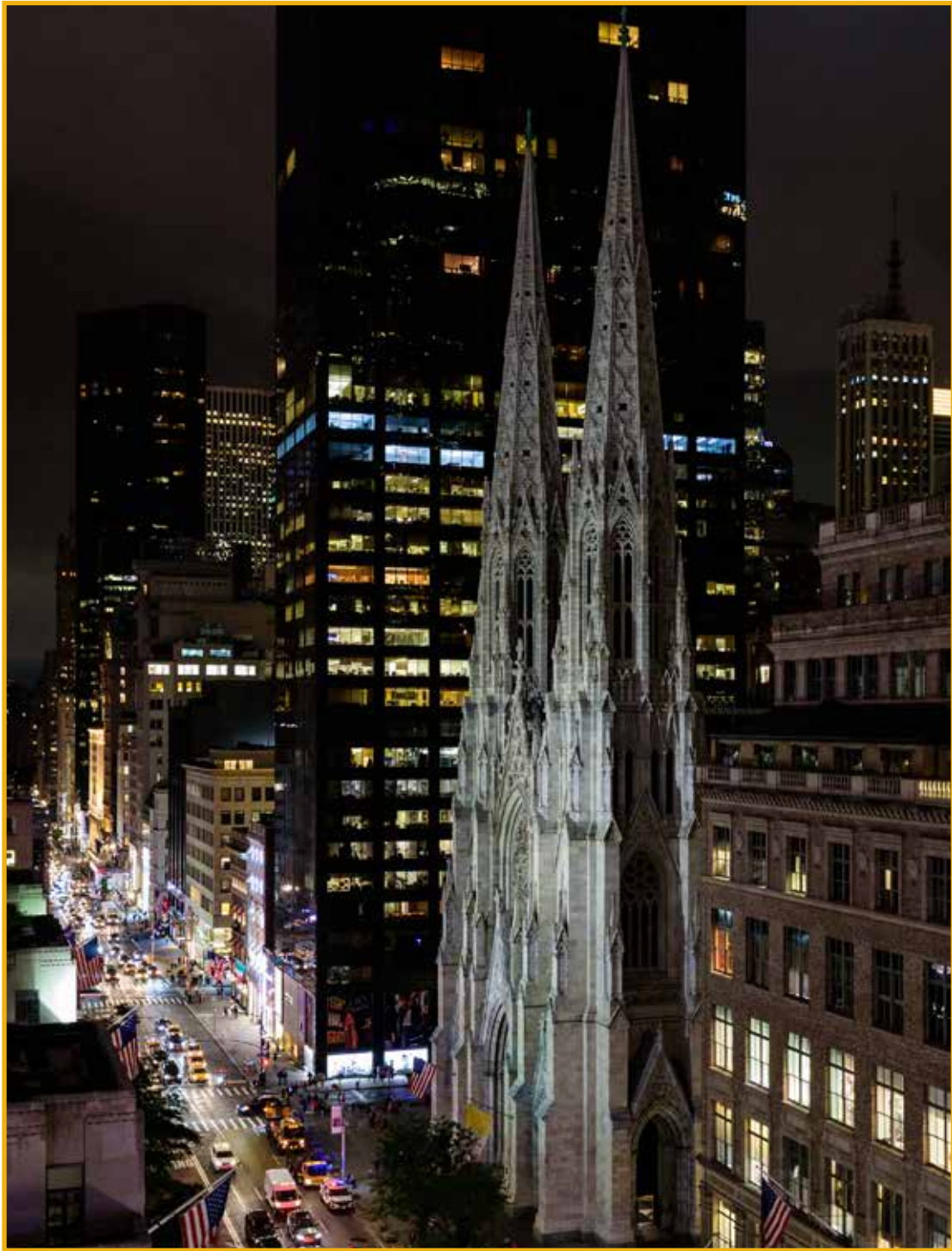


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ST. PATRICK'S
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HILDRETH MEIERE'S GIFT TO OUR LADY

By Miss Catherine Coleman Brawer

On December 25, 1906 the Lady Chapel was officially opened for its first Mass. This year marks the 112th anniversary of the completion of the Lady Chapel.

The following is a brief reflection on Hildreth Meière's life and work as a distinguished Art Deco muralist by writer Catherine Coleman Brawer.

American muralist Hildreth Meière (1892-1961) loved to travel. Her daughter, Louise Meière Dunn, recalls how her mother liked to connect her travels to the commissions that paid for them. She remembers her mother saying that a trip they took to Colorado and New Mexico, during the summer of 1942, was made possible by her commission to design an altar frontal for the Lady Chapel at Saint Patrick's. A gift of George J. Gillespie, the new altar was to replace an old one that the Cathedral had given to the Daughters of Mary at Cragmoor, New York. Meière's design of the Annunciation for the new altar frontal was executed in inlaid marble by Alexander Pelli and Company.

When she received the commission from architect Robert J. Reiley in 1941, Meière was well known for her major liturgical work across the country. In Manhattan, her projects included Byzantine style

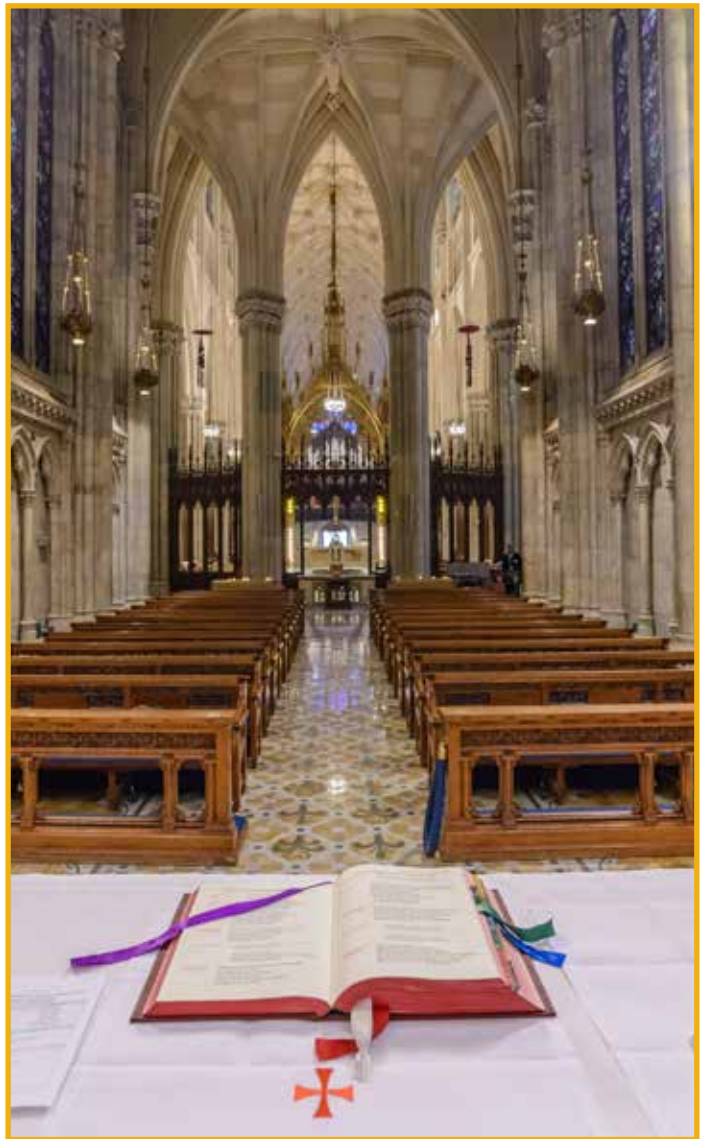
glass mosaic decoration for the eight-story-arch and ark behind it in the main sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El (1929), and the apse and narthex at Saint Bartholomew's Church (1929-30). She had also designed a remembrance shrine in oil and gilt on wood panel for Saint Thomas Church (1935). In nearby Union City, New Jersey she had designed decoration for the ceiling of the Chapel of the Passion at Saint Michael's Monastery Church and painted three altarpieces in oil on canvas. When the church was rebuilt following a massive fire, she then painted thirteen additional murals in oil on canvas for the chancel and pendentives of the main sanctuary (1934-36). The architect with whom she worked at Saint Michael's was Charles D. Maginnis, the same architect responsible for the renovation of the main sanctuary at Saint Patrick's.

Coincidentally, only a few months after she had finished the Saint Patrick's commission, Meière was asked to paint the main and two side altarpieces in oil and gilt on wood panel for the University Church at Fordham University (1942). Her altarpiece depicting Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom,

still hangs over the old high altar from Saint Patrick's Cathedral that Cardinal Spellman gave to Fordham during the renovation of Saint Patrick's in 1941.

As a muralist who worked in a variety of styles and mediums, Meière created decoration to enhance and express the purpose of an architectural space. She believed that her designs should form an organic whole with the architecture. As she later said, "A good mural should be something that cannot be taken away without hurting the design of the building. If the building can look as well without it, it shouldn't be there in the first place." Meière ties her scene of the Annunciation on the altar frontal in the Lady Chapel to the chapel's Gothic details. She echoed the trefoil shape of the marble lancets on the walls surrounding the altarpiece by placing the Annunciation against a trefoil shaped medallion.

Characteristically, Meière dramatized the narrative moment when the angel speaks to Mary by extending the angel's wing beyond the trefoil medallion, thereby suggesting that the angel has just alighted with a message so urgent that he couldn't wait even a moment before breaking the news to Mary. The graceful scene is inlaid in muted shades of blue, grey, brown, red, white, and gold set against the



cream-colored Tavernelle marble of the altar. The trefoil shaped medallion in the center of the frontal is surrounded by a symmetrical, all-over pattern of roses, vines, and leaves in similar colors, in a style reminiscent of decoration found on the pages of medieval books of hours. As architect Robert J. Reiley wrote at the time, the Annunciation "is flanked on either side by a conventionalized rose vine recalling the Mystical Rose and referring to the twenty fourth chapter, 17th and 18th verses of Ecclesiasticus in which we read, 'I was exalted like a cedar in Lebanon and as a rose plant in Jericho'".

The altar in the Lady Chapel was the first that Cardinal Spellman, then Archbishop of New York, consecrated. Meière had completed the altar frontal by the end of 1941, as she wrote to her family on December 18, "[I] went out beyond Calvary Cemetery, Long Island City, to see my marble altar for Saint Patrick's. It's really a beautiful job. I made them do a little toning on it. It should have been in place for the 8 of December, but now, although is it all ready, the installation has to wait. . . ." The consecration took place on April 13, 1942.

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View from Cornerstone Event in
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The name, *Cathedra*, selected for this
publication, refers to the Latinized Greek
for "archbishop's chair." Cathedral is a
short form of the Latin, *ecclesia Cathedralis*
"church of a bishop's seat."

