

# Esprit de Coeur



ASSOCIATED ALUMNAE AND ALUMNI  
OF THE SACRED HEART

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## Discovering the Art of Hildreth Meière

(1892-1961)

AASH PRESIDENT AND MANHATTANVILLE ALUMNA'S PROFOUND ART INFLUENCE



# The Art of Hildreth Meière

While Hildreth Meière (1892-1961) may not be an instantly familiar name, many have admired, appreciated or been awed by her creations. As a decorative artist – one of the most distinguished of the first half of the 20th century – her specialty was mosaic, but she also worked in wall sculptures, murals and stained glass. Considered the most renowned Art Deco muralist in the 1930s, Hildreth’s prolific work spans from coast to coast with a large concentration in New York.

After graduating in 1911 from Convent of the Sacred Heart, Manhattanville, Hildreth studied art in Italy. “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 wrote. She continued her education at the Art Students’ League-New York, the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her career began with sketches and costume design. Then, in the midst of World War I, she trained as a mapmaker in the U.S. Navy, serving as an architectural draftsman. Once the war ended, she had commissions to design murals in private residences, when she was introduced to renowned architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, who began using her designs.

Hildreth was commissioned to design the vestibule, foyer, rotunda, Senate chamber, House chamber and lounge at the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln (1924–32), which established her as a preeminent artist in her field and earned her a gold medal in mural painting in 1928 from the Architectural League of New York. Other major commissions included the National

Academy of Sciences (’24), University of Chicago Chapel (’27), and the Municipal Center (’41) and the Resurrection Chapel of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. (’51).

Skilled in many materials, Hildreth worked in ceramic tile, metal, glass, marble and more. Suspended above 50th Street in Manhattan, three 18-foot enameled metal plaques depicting Dance, Drama and Song adorn the front of Radio City Music Hall (’32). Her design graces the altar in the Lady Chapel (behind the main altar) in St. Patrick’s Cathedral (’42) and her glass mosaics and stained glass windows decorate St. Bartholomew Episcopal Church in New York (’28). Hildreth’s art was not restricted to Christian churches or cathedrals. She was commissioned to design the mosaics surrounding the main altar (*bimah*) as well as the doors to the Ark in Temple Emanu-El in New York (’29), the largest synagogue in the world. One Wall Street (’31) features the red and gold banking room, no longer open to the public, but breathtaking with its walls and ceiling completely covered in glass mosaic, bathing the room in a warm glow.



Top: Hildreth Meière in St. Louis, 1957. Below: Detail of drinking deer mosaic, north wall, Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis. Bottom: Altar in the Lady Chapel at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. Photos courtesy of Hildreth Meière Dunn©2009.



Hildreth’s murals also appeared in Chicago’s 1933 Century of Progress Fair and included “The Progress of Women,” and the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair. During World War II, she supervised the creation of over 500 portable altarpieces (typically 4’ x 6’) for military chaplains of all denominations – 70 of which were her designs. One of these images was used for the AASH Christmas card in 2009.

Like so many AASH founders and presidents who have been remarkably accomplished women – not the women of leisure free to take on the huge volunteer task of leading AASH – Hildreth served as President from 1957-59.



She received the Distinguished Service Award from Manhattanville in 1959.

Perhaps, for Sacred Heart alums, her most beloved work is the mosaic of St. Philippine Duchesne in the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis, which contains the largest single collection of mosaics in the world – the majority created by Hildreth. From 1945–61, she was commissioned to create the Dome of the 12 Apostles, Western Soffit, North Wall and Pendentives as well as the dome upon entrance and surrounding mosaics.

Hildreth served as president of the National Society of Mural Painters and the Liturgical Arts Society (the latter founded in her studio), was first vice president of the Architectural League of New York, was a director of the Municipal Arts Society, an Associate of the National Academy of Design, and was appointed the first woman on the New York City Art Commission. In 1956, she was the first woman to receive the Fine Arts Medal given by the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

Six generations of Hildreth's family have been educated at Sacred Heart

*Hildreth Meière's mixed metal and enamel roundels of Dance, Drama and Song mounted on the façade of Radio City Music Hall are iconic examples of Art Deco design. Right: detail of Drama.*



schools. Hildreth's grandmother Anna Lloyd Mudge attended City House in St. Louis for two years and, according to archival records, may have met Philippine Duchesne. Hildreth's mother, Minnie Hildreth, made her First Communion as a student at Kenwood and graduated from Manhattanville. Hildreth's daughter Louise Meière Dunn, granddaughter Hildreth (Hilly) Meière Dunn, and great granddaughter Kimberly Kupik are graduates of Greenwich ('48, '77 and '05). Louise and Hilly live in Stamford, Conn. and run the International Hildreth Meière

Association, which seeks to perpetuate the legacy of her work. In 2003 when the AASH met in St. Louis, Louise had the distinct honor of addressing a group of alumnae, standing under her mother's mosaics in the Cathedral.

**The first major exhibition of Hildreth's work -- Walls Speak: The Narrative Art of Hildreth Meière -- is at St. Bonaventure University in New York until June 13, 2010 and chronicles her fascinating career. For more information, visit: [www.sbu.edu/QuickCenter.aspx?id=23870](http://www.sbu.edu/QuickCenter.aspx?id=23870) or [www.hildrethmeiere.com](http://www.hildrethmeiere.com).**



*Hildreth Meière served as AASH president from 1957-59 (shown, at the podium at the Biennial National Conference in New York, 1959). During her term, she was commissioned to design mosaics for the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis, including that of Philippine Duchesne (pictured in a to-scale size cartoon of the mosaic).*

*While serving as chairman of the International Relations committee, in 1949, Hildreth introduced the alumni passport, still given to all graduates to identify them as a Children of the Sacred Heart.*

*After her death in 1961, she was called the "very spirit of the AASH. She lived it every minute, she loved it." She was praised as a woman of "deep loyalty, simplicity and sincerity . . . Using the talents loaned to her by her Lord for his glory, she seemed oblivious to praise."*





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BELOW: THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN, THIRD SECTION, CHICAGO EXPOSITION, 1933. THE ONLY REMAINING SECTION OF THE 60-FOOT MURAL DEPICTING THE YEARS 1913-33, HILDRETH MEIÈRE SHARED THE CREDIT FOR THIS SECTION WITH HER ASSISTANT LYNN FAUSETT. INSCRIBED ON THE WALL BEHIND CLIO, THE MUSE OF HISTORY: WOMEN MARCH THROUGH EDUCATION, SUFFRAGE, ECONOMIC FREEDOM TOWARDS GREATER SOCIAL JUSTICE.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HILDRETH MEIÈRE DUNN©2009.



FRONT COVER: IN 1944, HILDRETH MEIÈRE PAINTED A MURAL OF DEFIANT MARIANNE, PERSONIFYING FRANCE, AT THE PROMENADE CAFÉ, ROCKEFELLER CENTER, TO RAISE FUNDS FOR THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR II. PHOTO COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION.