

# EXPLORING DECO IN . . . HILDRETH MEIÈRE'S MANHATTAN

BY ALYSE MAHOOD



The prominent American artist Hildreth Meière undertook more than 100 major commissions from leading architects for projects across the United States. Her impressive career extended from the mid-1920s until her death in 1961. You can still see Meière's designs today at sites throughout the country, but New York City boasts some of her most significant works.

Meière worked during a time when the established art world recognized few women artists. Her innovative style speaks for itself, as evidenced by the numerous awards she received throughout her career. In 1956, she became the first woman to receive the Fine Arts Medal from the American Institute of Architects, who labeled her a "master of murals." Today Meière is known as one of the most distinguished Art Deco muralists.

She often broke the rules, willing to experiment and take risks with new materials and techniques. She worked in a wide variety of media, including glazed ceramic tile, glass, and marble mosaic; wood inlay; metal relief; oil on wood panel; terracotta; raised and gilded gesso; and stained glass. Her versatility with respect to both style and material set her apart from the rest.

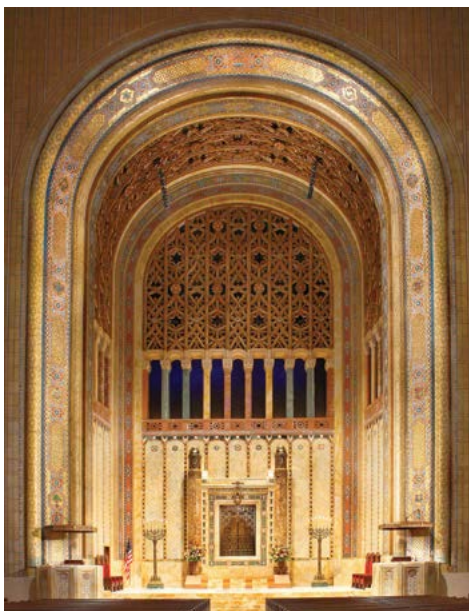
Meière's designs are integral to the architectural spaces for which they were created. She believed that a "good mural should be something that cannot be taken away without hurting the design of the building. If a building can look as well without it, it shouldn't be there in the first place."<sup>1</sup>

Alyse Mahood is the Director of Communications for the International Hildreth Meière Association.

Endnote:

1. Mary Kimbrough, "She Finds an Education in Her Art," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 14, 1955.

Photos: Color: Hildreth Meière Dunn ©2020; Black-and-white: Hildreth Meière Family Collection



1. Temple Emanu-El, 1 East 65th Street, Main Sanctuary: Glass mosaics, 1929.

Meière's mosaics cover the eight-story round-arched bimah (raised area) at the east end of the sanctuary as well as the Ark, the repository of Torah scrolls, on its far wall. Her Byzantine-style design, executed in radiantly colored glass and glimmering gold-leafed tesserae, weaves Art Deco interpretations of Jewish symbols into an elaborate geometric pattern.



2. Saint Thomas Church, 1 West 53rd Street, Book of Remembrance cabinet, 1935. Paint, gesso, and gold enamel on wood.

Meière painted angels on the cabinet housing the Book of Remembrance, which lists people and events associated with the parish's development.



3. St. Patrick's Cathedral, 14 East 51st Street, Lady Chapel altar: *Annunciation*, 1942. Inlaid marble.

Set within a curving rose-vine pattern, the trefoil surrounding the figures echoes the openings of the large lancet windows high above the altar.

4. Radio City Music Hall, 1260 Sixth Ave, 50th Street façade: *Dance, Drama, and Song*, 1932. Bronze, chrome-nickel, steel, aluminum, copper, enamel.

These three roundels, only two of which are pictured here, illustrate the classic stage arts hosted by the Music Hall.



5. Rockefeller Center concourse (opposite 1211 Avenue of the Americas): *Radio & Television Encompassing the Earth*, 1932. Original, mixed metal and enamel.

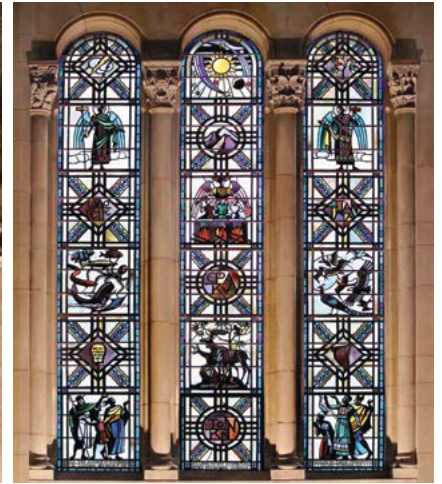
This monumental sculpture measured 18 by 35 feet. Though the original for the West 49th Street façade of Center Theater was lost when the building was demolished, Rockefeller Center commissioned sculptor Gary Sussman to create a smaller replica of the work using Meière's watercolor sketch.

6. St. Bartholomew's Church, 325 Park Avenue



6A. Narthex, domes: *Six Days of Creation*, 1930. Glass mosaics.

This design offers an Art Deco interpretation of the church's Byzantine style. The cycle begins with Day One in the northernmost dome and alternates chronologically between the north and south ends of the narthex.



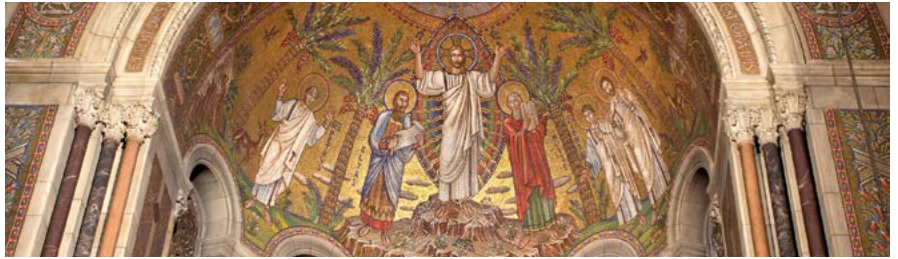
6D. Clerestory: windows, 1948–56. Stained-glass.

Meière returned to St. Bart's for these last commissions. The four windows were intended to advance the vision of St. Bart's as "a unique example of twentieth-century Byzantine art in America."



6B. Apse: *Christian Virtues*, 1929. Glass mosaics.

Meière designed eight panels set into the Siense-marble string course below the chancel windows separating the upper and lower parts of the apse. The panels depict birds and animals symbolic of Christian virtues and behavior.



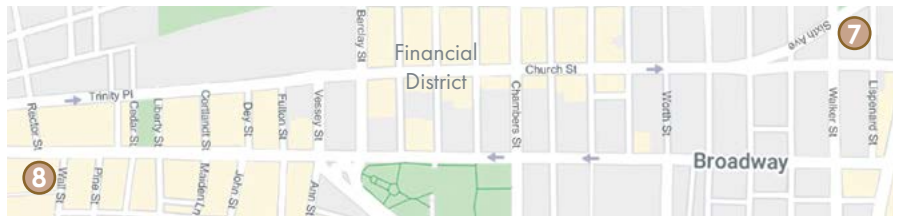
6C. Apse half-dome: *Transfiguration*, 1929. Glass mosaics.

In another Art Deco interpretation of the church's Byzantine style, Meière portrayed (Mark 9:2, 4). The composition itself refers to early Byzantine mosaics and icons.



8. Former Irving Trust Building, One Wall Street: The Red Banking Room, 1931. Glass mosaics.

Architects Voorhees, Gmelin, & Walker commissioned Meière to consult on the color and scale of the Red Banking Hall. The breathtaking space, with its walls and ceiling covered in shimmering glass mosaic, displays Meière's talent for creating drama solely through the use of color, starting above the marble dado with an oxblood red that slowly flows into a scintillating orange at the ceiling.



7. Former AT&T Long Distance Building, 32 Sixth Avenue



7A. Main lobby, ceiling: *The Continents Linked by the Telephone & Wireless*, 1932. Tile.

This ceiling mural reflects the building's purpose as a hub of global communication. Two messengers at the center of the ceiling hold telephone and telegraph wires that extend to personifications of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia.



7B. Main lobby, wall: *Telephone Wires & Radio Unite to Make Neighbors of Nations*, 1932. Tile.

Meière's map of the world shows the continents separated by oceans but connected by wires.