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In this issue

Hildreth Meière in Chicago ■ Photography of the Inter-War Years ■ Art Deco at Auction ■ Carmen Miranda

By Kathleen Murphy Skolnik

HILDRETH MEIÈRE: Designing for Chicago

Hildreth Meière (1892-1961). From the collection of Louise Meière Dunn.

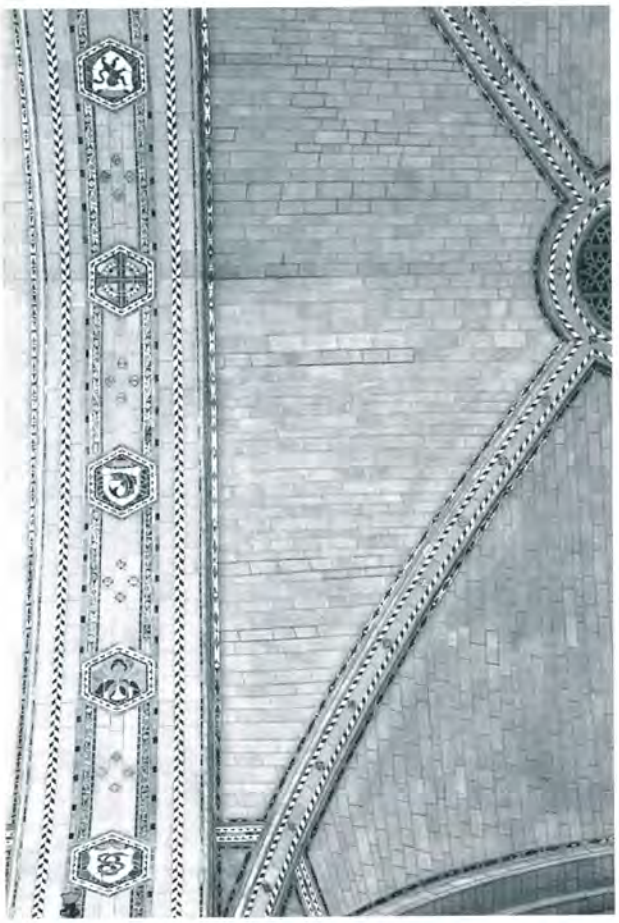
CADS members who attended the 8th International Congress of Art Deco in New York City in 2005 may recall hearing Louise Meière Dunn speak about the life and work of her mother, decorative artist Hildreth Meière. Meière's work can be found throughout the United States, and this article focuses on her Chicago commissions.

Hildreth Meière (1892-1961) was among the best-known and the most prolific decorative artists of the first half of the twentieth century. During her long career, which spanned four decades, she designed murals, mosaics, decorative tiles, sculptures, stained glass windows, and tapestries for churches, commercial and civic buildings, schools, theaters, military ships, and exhibitions at two World's Fairs. Yet despite her immense body of work and the easy accessibility to the public buildings where most of her designs are located, Meière's name is not instantly recognizable today, even in artistic circles. Those who are familiar with Meière are most likely to know her as the designer of the enameled metal plaques representing Dance (see back cover), Drama, and Song that embellish the south façade of Radio City Music Hall on 50th Street in New York or the exquisite interiors of the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln. But these projects represent only a small fraction of her artistic output, which included more than 100 commissions throughout the United States, including several in Chicago.

Sketch prepared by Hildreth Meière for The Chicago Tribune mural competition, 1921-22. The sketch represents a conference held in 1856 between Joseph Medill, editor of The Tribune, and Abraham Lincoln. Private collection.

Marie Hildreth Meière was born in New York City in 1892 into a family that nurtured her artistic talent and ambitions. After graduating from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Manhattanville in 1911, she traveled with her mother and sister Lloyd to Florence where she spent a year studying art. In Italy Meière encountered ancient Roman art and Renaissance frescoes, and she would later fuse elements of these early periods with motifs associated with the style now known as Art Deco. The year abroad also prompted Meière to change her chosen career path. She had previously decided to concentrate on portraits, but after her time in Italy she vowed to become a mural painter. Following her European trip, Meière studied at the Art Students League of New York and, after the family moved to California in 1913, at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. While living in San Francisco, she also exhibited and sold sketches of theatrical performers.

In 1916 Meière returned alone to New York to design costumes for a Metropolitan Opera production of *The Canterbury Pilgrims*. During World War I, she trained as a mapmaker and served in the U.S. Navy as an architectural draftsman. After her honorable discharge in 1919, she studied at the New York School of Applied Design for Women and the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, where her instruc-



Tile medallions and patterned ribs designed by Hildreth Meière for the vaulted ceiling of Rockefeller Chapel, University of Chicago. Photo by Hildreth Meière Dunn.

tors included Ernest Peixotto, the director of the Institute's mural department.

Although much of Meière's later work would incorporate the stylized forms and geometric patterns now identified with Art Deco, her first links with Chicago came before the spirit of the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes had captivated this country and the world. In 1921, four years before the Paris exposition, she received an invitation to participate in a mural painting competition sponsored by the publishers of the *Chicago Tribune*. The planned site of the murals was the city room in the *Tribune's* new printing plant, designed by Jarvis Hunt and located east of Michigan Avenue adjacent to the land where the Tribune Tower would later rise. First prize in the competition was $5000 and a contract to execute the winning design. The murals were to depict two early events of special significance to the freedom of the American press—the 1735 trial of John Peter Zenger, publisher of the *New York Weekly Journal*, who had been charged with libel for printing remarks critical of the corrupt British governor and an 1856 conference between Abraham Lincoln and *Tribune* editor Joseph Medill. Because only students registered for the 1921-22 academic year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago were eligible to participate, Meière enrolled in the school and received a tuition scholarship valued at that time at $180. Home in Chicago from October 1921 to May 1922 was the Hotel Virginia at 600 North Rush Street, a district filled at that time with old buildings housing struggling artists.

Although *Tribune* writer Eleanor Jewett praised the historical accuracy of Meière's realistic sketches for the murals, Meière did not win the competition, but she did place second. In retrospect, this outcome was actually fortuitous, first, because the winning mural designs were never actually executed, and second, because Meière was now available to accept an important commission that would have a significant impact on her future as a decorative artist.

Meière had met architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue through her teacher Peixotto prior to the *Tribune* competition, and she mentions him in letters written to her mother from Chicago. Her sketches of vaudeville dancers impressed Goodhue, and upon her return to New York, he commissioned Meière to design the wall behind the high altar, or reredos, for St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Mt. Kisco, New York. Meière would go on to collaborate with Goodhue, and with his office after his death in 1924, on many other projects, including the decorative ceiling tiles of the Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C and the interiors of the Nebraska State Capitol.

Meière's second involvement with Chicago was also a collaboration with Goodhue, the decorative tiles for the vaulted ceiling of University Chapel, later Rockefeller Chapel, on the campus of the University of Chicago. Goodhue was selected to design the chapel in 1918, but its completion was delayed until 1928. Meière decorated the ceiling's diagonal ribs with geometric patterns and designed colorful Byzantine-inspired medallions based on St. Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures," also known as "Canticle of the Sun," for the ceiling above the apse and the wide arches that transverse the nave.

The National Council of Women selected New York-based interior designer Virginia Hamill to design and install the exhibit and Hildreth Meière to paint the mural that was to be its focal point.

By the time of Meière's next project in Chicago she was one of the foremost decorative artists in the United States and was closely identified with the Art Deco movement. Her completed commissions included the plaques at Radio City Music Hall, a metal sculpture for the RKO Building at Rockefeller Center, mosaics for St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church and Temple Emanu-El in New York, and many others. The event that re-connected her with Chicago was the 1933 Century of Progress Fair.

One of Meière's projects for the fair was a mural commissioned by the National Council of Women. In contrast to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the 1933 event did not include a separate Woman's Building. The reason was explained in a 1932 press release, which stated: "Woman's position in the economic and social world has become too

Meière's mural, The Onward March of American Women, traced the progress made by women in this country between 1833 and 1933.

Studies for The Onward March of American Women. Gouache on Crescent board.

LEFT: Panels representing the decades 1833-1902.

BELOW: Panels representing the decades 1903-1933.

Photos by Hildreth Meière Dunn.

important to be isolated in a Women's Building." However, the fair did include an exhibit dedicated to the achievements of women, which was coordinated by the New York-based National Council of Women.

The Exhibition Committee assigned the exhibit to the Hall of Social Science. The Hall, originally intended as the Radio Building, occupied the north end of the Electrical Group, a three-building complex designed by architect Raymond Hood and located on Northerly Island, the man-made island facing the lagoon. The National Council of Women selected New York-based interior designer Virginia Hamill to design and install the exhibit and Hildreth Meière to paint the mural that was to be its focal point.

Meière's mural, *The Onward March of American Women*, traced the progress made by women in this country between 1833 and 1933. A souvenir leaflet described women's advances during this time as "one of the most colorful phases of A Century of Progress" and stated that women's increased involvement in commercial and civic life over the past century was "almost as dramatic as the evolution of the machine itself." According to the brochure, without an exhibition of organized womanhood, the "story of the machine age would be inadequately told."

Meière divided the mural, which measured sixty feet long and eight feet high, into ten sections, each representing a decade, and chronicled important struggles and achievements of women during each of these decades. As time progressed, the women in the mural moved from the "narrow confines of home and tradition in 1833 to the broad opportunities and freedom of 1933." They attended college, crusaded for temperance, comforted the slaves, aided the wounded in the Civil War, campaigned for suffrage, organized women's clubs, entered the business and professional world, and sought peace. To symbolize the "narrow confines" of the women of 1833, Meière placed her figures against a background of closely spaced iron bars. As women's roles expanded, the bars widened and eventually disappeared. The mural ended with Clio, the Muse of History, recording a century's achievements for women on a stone tablet, which read:

Exhibit of the National Council of Women in the Hall of Social Science at the 1933 Century of Progress Fair. The focal point of the exhibit was The Onward March of American Women, the mural designed by Hildreth Meière. Photo by Kaufmann-Fabry, private collection.

WOMEN MARCH THROUGH

EDUCATION, SUFFRAGE

ECONOMIC FREEDOM

TOWARDS GREATER

SOCIAL JUSTICE

As women's involvement in society changed, so did the style of the mural. Meière rendered the nineteenth century women in a precise linear manner, but as women advanced into the twentieth century, the figures became more fluid and streamlined. In contrast to the restrained poses and movements of the women in the earlier panels, the suffragists of the final portion of the mural stride boldly forward as they campaign for the vote.

In 1943, the National Council of Women donated the mural to Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and two twenty-foot sections were installed in the archives room of the college library. Because of space limitations, the final twenty-foot panel was excised at the suggestion of Meière, who reportedly had never liked that portion of the mural, and placed in storage at Smith. The first two panels originally installed in the library were subsequently damaged in a flood, and the last segment representing the decades from 1903-1933 is all that remains today. That portion of the mural is now in the collection of the Smith College Museum of Art and will be included in an upcoming exhibition of Meière's work (see sidebar).

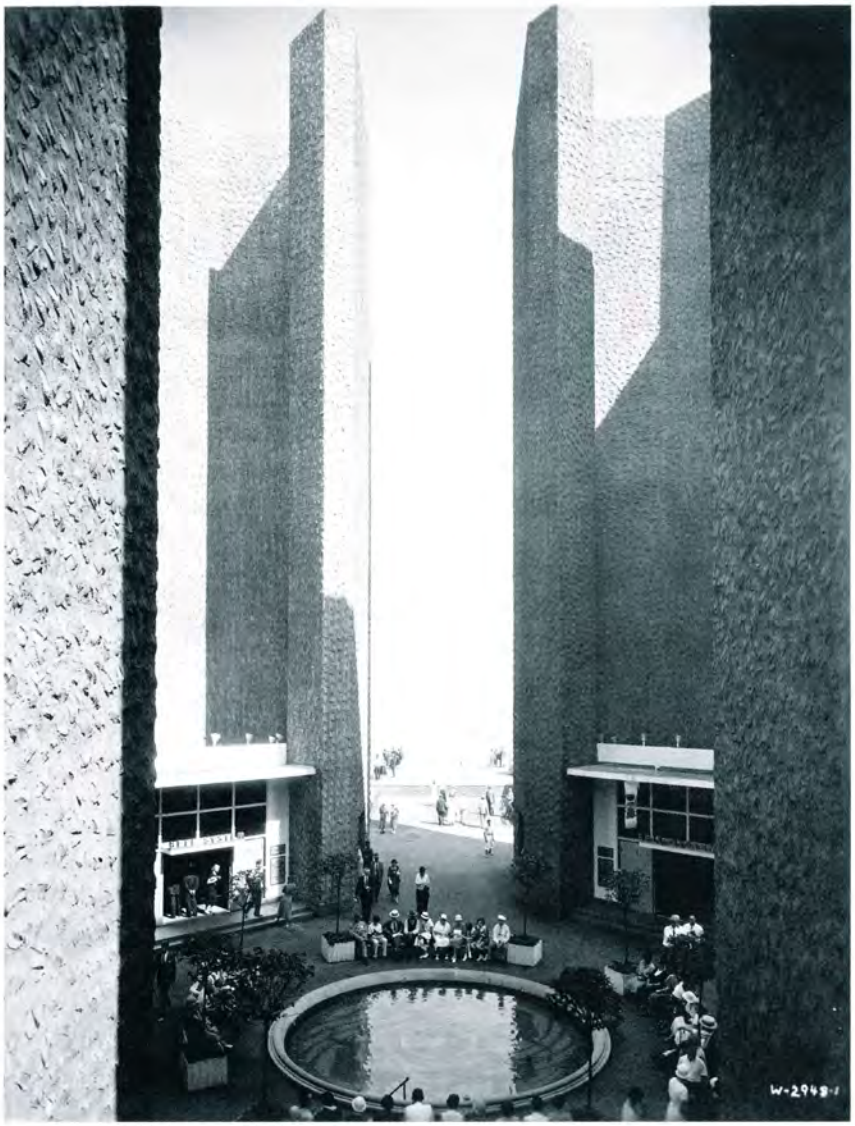
The mural for the exhibit of the National Council of Women was not Meière's only contribution to the Century of Progress Fair. She also designed the terra cotta tile floor of a pool commissioned by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company for the Communications Court, which was located on the east side of the Communications Hall looking toward Lake Michigan. The Communications Hall occupied the central portion of the Electrical Group and housed the exhibits of AT&T as well as the Western Union Telegraph Company and the International Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Designer Raymond Hood used the gardens of the Villa d'Este outside Rome as a model for the Court, which was intended to provide a quiet respite from the bustle of the fairgrounds. Two Roman roads meet at the center of those gardens. A fountain marks their intersection, and a giant cypress tree stands at each corner. For Hood, the gardens symbolized ancient Rome as the crossroads of the world and the center of communication, and this is the theme that he adopted for the Communications Court. Hood's Court became a contemporary interpretation of the Villa d'Este gardens. He replaced the cypress trees with four textured concrete pylons, 110 feet high and painted green. These "great green towers," as they were known, enclosed a shallow concrete reflecting pool designed by Hildreth Meière.

Meière's design for the pool symbolized the speed and worldwide range of electrical communication, and her imagery blended classical influences with the flowing lines and colorful palette of the Art Deco style. Four stylized male and female figures formed from blue and green tiles encircled a blue and white tile bas relief map of the world. As these spirits of communication raced around the world, they wove a net of radio waves and wires, uniting all parts of the earth through communication. Ringing the pool was a border listing the names of the three telecommunication companies represented in the Communications Hall. Four low curvilinear concrete benches surrounding the pool offered fairgoers a pleasant and restful spot to relax and enjoy the lake breezes. As Dr. Sergius P. Grace, the Bell Telephone Laboratories Vice President responsible for the exhibit, wrote in the *World's Fair Weekly*, "Many a foot-weary Ulysses on his Odyssey through the miles of World's Fair Buildings has sunk with a sigh of contentment into a seat beside the quiet pool and imagined that at last he had come to the cool cave home of Æolus, the mythological Greek God of the Winds."

For many the Century of Progress Fair offered a diversion from the hardships of the Great Depression, but that diversion was only temporary. As the depression deepened, the U.S. government initiated programs directed at providing relief for unemployed Americans, including artists. The Fed-

eral Art Project of the Works Progress Administration employed artists to design murals and sculptures for state and municipal institutions, whereas the Section on Painting and Sculpture, later the Section of Fine Arts, of the U.S. Treasury Department awarded commissions through competitions for the decoration of federal buildings. In 1935 Hildreth Meière was among the artists invited to submit a mural design for a work related to "some phase of the administration of justice in relation to contemporary American life" for the Department of Justice Building in Washington, D.C. Meière bitterly disliked the competitive system and did not hesitate to voice her opinion. As she stated in a 1935 letter to the Section's Procurement Division, "I recognize that the competition method is excellent for the discovery of new talent, but for artists whose work is already known, I feel that they [sic] are impositions." Because of her convictions, Meière had refused to enter competitions for over 13 years and agreed to participate in the Department of Justice Building competition "only because of the conditions of the times," namely, the depressed economy.



Communications Court with the terra cotta tile pool designed by Hildreth Meière. Century of Progress (COP_01_0027_1_699). Special Collections, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Meière chose a familiar subject for her mural, the emancipation of women. As she explained, her attraction to this subject was "not because I am a strong suffragist, but because I studied the question in my mural for the National Council of Women, at the 1933 Chicago Fair, and am somewhat aware of its pictorial possibilities." Meière did not win the competition, nor did any of the other invited participants. The Justice Department rejected all of the submitted entries.

However, in August of 1936, based on the design she submitted in the Justice Department competition, the Section on Painting and Sculpture invited Meière to submit a design for a metal sculpture, approximately six feet wide and four feet high, for the lobby of the Logan Square Post Office at 2335 North California Avenue in

Hildreth Meière's design for the terra cotta tile pool of the Communications Court featured stylized male and female figures representing the spirits of communication encircling a map of the world. Private collection.

Intarsia panel possibly designed by Hildreth Meière for the office of the President of Illinois Bell, c. 1940. Private collection.

Model believed to be a study for The Spirit of Communication, the bronze sculpture designed by Hildreth Meière for the Illinois Bell Public Business Office in Chicago, 1940. Rambusch & Company Archives. Founded in 1898.

Chicago. The outcome was one of the most clever, humorous, and whimsical of Meière's works, *The Post*. Her bronze silhouette depicts the Roman messenger god Mercury, flanked by two figures representing the winds, guiding a letter on its safe and speedy journey to the intended recipient (see front cover). Today the sculpture remains in its original location on the south wall of the post office lobby over the door to the vestibule.

Communications was a recurrent theme in Hildreth Meière's work. In addition to *The Post* and the pool for the Communications Court at the Century of Progress Fair she designed the metal sculpture *Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth* for the RKO Building (that building has been demolished but a smaller interpretation of the sculpture based on a watercolor sketch by Meière has been installed in the west concourse at Rockefeller Center), a mosaic ceiling depicting *The Continents Linked by Telephone and Wireless* and a tile wall map entitled *Telephone Wires and Radio Unite to Make Neighbors of Nations* for the lobby of the Walker-Lispenard Telephone Company at 32 Avenue of the Americas in New York, murals for the Bell System New York Telephone Building at the 1939 New York World's Fair, and commissions for the Illinois Bell Telephone Company office at 212 West Washington Street in Chicago. Information about these Chicago commissions is scant. The building that housed the telephone company office still stands and is now a condominium, but the fate of Meière's projects is unknown.

The best documented of the Illinois Bell commissions was a bronze sculpture, *The Spirit of Communication,* installed in 1940 on the west wall of the telephone company's remodeled Public Business Office. The June 1940 issue of *Bell Telephone News*, an in-house publication, described the sculpture as a 12-foot low relief figure modeled after a statue by Evelyn Beatrice Longman that once topped the tower of the AT&T Headquarters Building at 195 Broadway in New York. The article included a photograph showing a winged male figure similar to Longman's standing on a globe with his raised left arm clutching a sheaf of lightning bolts and cables coiled around his right arm and body. Danish-born metalworker Louis Kristian Hansen of the Rambusch Decorating Company executed the figure in repoussé. A model of a head currently in the Rambusch archives is believed to be a study for this commission.

Much less is known about a second commission, an inlaid wood or intarsia panel intended for the office of the President of Illinois Bell. In a July 1938 letter requesting cost and time estimates from Schmeig & Kotzian, the New York furniture maker that had received the commission for the paneling and furniture for the office, Meière states that the panel is to measure approximately seven by ten feet and is to be "recessed over a piece of furniture." Meière's daughter Louise Meière Dunn believes that a photograph in her collection showing an abstract geometric design installed above a sofa may be the Illinois Bell President's office and the intarsia panel referred to by Meière.

Hildreth Meière's last known project for Chicago was also her smallest, a diminutive painting for her friend Mrs. James Ward Thorne for one of the Thorne miniature rooms. The Century of Progress Fair featured an exhibit of the first thirty rooms assembled by Thorne. In the late 1930s she added a set of period rooms illustrating the history of European design. These rooms included the interior of a late thirteenth century English Gothic church that Thorne called Our Lady Queen of Angels, now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. The reredos with its image of virgin and child is the work of Meière.

The best documented of the Illinois Bell commissions was a bronze sculpture, The Spirit of Communication, installed in 1940 on the west wall of the telephone company's remodeled Public Business Office.

Awareness of Meière is increasing today, due largely to the efforts of her daughter Louise Meière Dunn and her granddaughter Hildreth "Hilly" Meière Dunn. Biographical information about Meière and a partial list of her many commissions are available on the website of the International Hildreth Meière Association (www.hildrethmeiere.com), the organization established by Meière's family to promote and perpetuate her legacy. In September 2009, the first major exhibition dedicated to Meière will open at the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University near Olean, New York (see sidebar). As information about Meière and her work becomes more widely disseminated, previously unknown commissions and works presumed lost will hopefully surface. ■

Many thanks to Catherine Brawer and Robert Sideman for sharing their research findings, Catha Grace Rambusch for supplying information from the Rambusch archives, Hildreth "Hilly" Meière Dunn for allowing the use of her recent photographs of her grandmother's work, and especially to Louise Meière Dunn for providing many of the images appearing in this article and much valuable information about her mother and her work.

Major Hildreth Meière Exhibition to Open at the Quick Center for the Arts, St. Bonaventure University, on September 3

Walls Speak: The Narrative Art of Hildreth Meière is the first major exhibition of the artist's work. It will open at the Regina A. Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University in Western New York State on September 3, 2009 and run until June 15, 2010. Meière, an acclaimed Art Deco muralist and mosaicist, worked in a variety of mediums and received over 100 commissions, both secular and liturgical, from leading architects during the first half of the twentieth century.

TOP: Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth, *Hildreth Meière, study for mixed-metal and enamel sculpture, 1932, gouache on paper. Private collection.*

Hippocrates and the Dragon of Ignorance, *Hildreth Meière, scale model of metal-relief sculpture, 1939, foil cut-outs on paperboard. Private collection.*

Walls Speak presents Meière's sketches, studies in gouache, full-scale cartoons, and models, as well as large mosaic samples of her work at such major institutions as the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, and St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church and Radio City Music Hall in New York. In all, the exhibition includes examples never before assembled from twenty-five of her most important commissions. Shown together, they demonstrate that, with rare exceptions such as the abstract red Banking Room at One Wall Street, New York, where she served as color consultant, all of Meière's work is narrative in style.

Meière's career began with several significant commissions from architect Bertram G. Goodhue, including the decoration of the Great Dome of the National Academy of Sciences and the vestibule of the Nebraska State Capitol. Working with the acoustic tile manufacturer R. Guastavino, Meière went on to design the foyer, rotunda, and Senate chamber of the Nebraska Capitol building in glazed ceramic tile. For the House chamber and House lounge she worked in gold-leaf on walnut, leather, and wool tapestry. In 1928, Meière received the Architectural League of New York's Gold Medal in Mural Decoration for her work at the Capitol.

Known for her versatility and willingness to experiment, Meière designed the apse and narthex of St. Bartholomew's Church and the arch of the main sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El in New York as well as nine commissions at the St. Louis Basilica Cathedral in Byzantine-style glass mosaic. She also designed four stained-glass clerestory windows for St. Bartholomew's. For commercial commissions, Meière designed in marble mosaic. Meière also painted interior wall murals, as she did for the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933. Other commissions included large, exterior, mixed-metal and enamel sculptures for Radio City Music Hall and the RKO Theater. For the 1939 New York World's Fair, she created eleven decorative schemes for four different buildings. Among them was an enormous, exterior, mixed-metal sculpture, *Hippocrates and the Dragon of Ignorance*. Two scale models of this work are included in the exhibition.

Walls Speak is accompanied by a 116-page full color catalogue by curator Catherine Coleman Brawer that includes photographs of Meière's work in context. The catalogue can be ordered through the Quick Center for the Arts, St. Bonaventure University, Drawer BH, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778, 716-375-2494, Quicksbu@sbu.edu. The price is $35 plus $4.50 shipping and handling.