



ART DECO ERA "SHERO" AND HER CHICAGO CONNECTIONS

BY KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK

Kathleen Murphy Skolnik teaches art and architectural history at Roosevelt University in Chicago and special seminars in Art Deco design at the Newberry Library. She is the co-author with Catherine Coleman Braver of The Art Deco Murals of Hildreth Meière, published in 2014. This past January, she spoke about Meière at the Art Deco Weekend in Miami Beach.

For the past forty years, the Miami Design Preservation League's Art Deco Weekend has been celebrating the colorful and exuberant architecture of South Miami Beach. This event was the catalyst that saved the historic collection of Art Deco hotels, residences, and commercial buildings that give South Beach its special flair. The three-day festival, typically held on the third weekend in January, is packed with tours, lectures, films, and social events that both educate and entertain.

I was honored to be invited to be part of the Art Deco Weekend's lecture series this year, which took place at the Wolfsonian-FIU. The theme, "Sheroes: Women Who Made a Difference," commemorated the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. My topic was the 20th-century muralist Hildreth Meière, who rose to prominence in a field dominated at the time by men.

Meière was one of the most talented, prolific, and versatile artists of her day.

She was born in New York City in 1892 and received her first formal artistic training in 1911 when she spent a year in Florence studying with an English artist. It was the Renaissance frescoes that she saw in Florence that convinced her to become a muralist.

During her forty-year career, which extended from the early 1920s to her death in 1961, Meière completed approximately 100 commissions. Her work is especially concentrated in New York where she lived and worked and where you will find what are perhaps her best-known works, the mixed metal and enamel roundels, or circular sculptures, on the 50th Street façade of Radio City Music Hall representing Song, Drama, and Dance. But Meière designed murals for locations throughout the United States, including Chicago.

In 1921, Meière received an invitation to participate in a mural competition sponsored by the Chicago Tribune. The murals were for the city room in the Tribune's new printing plant located



east of Michigan Avenue adjacent to the site where the Tribune Tower would later rise. The subjects of the murals were two events of special significance to the freedom of the press in America. To be eligible to participate, Meière had to enroll for the 1921-22 academic year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. While attending the school, she lived at the Hotel Virginia on Rush Street. Although Meière's mural entries were praised by the Tribune art critic, she failed to win the competition but did place second. Her disappointment was assuaged by the fact that the murals were never executed.

In 1928, Meière completed her first project in Chicago, glazed ceramic tile medallions based on St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Creatures for University Chapel, later Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, on the campus of the University of Chicago. The architect of the chapel was Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, who had launched Meière's career by selecting her to design murals for the Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, and the interiors of the Nebraska State Capital in Lincoln. Goodhue had died in 1924 but his successor firm commissioned Meière to design the colorful decorations for the chapel's vaulted ceiling.

Meière received two commissions for the 1933/34 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago. She painted a mural entitled Progress of Women through Organization, 1833 to 1933 for the exhibition of the National Council of Women at the fair. The mural measured 60 feet long and eight feet high and was divided into ten sections, each representing a decade. Within each section, Meière depicted significant achievements of women during those years. The mural ended with Clio,



the muse of history, recording these advances on a stone tablet. Although two of the three panels that made up the mural were lost, the third, representing the years 1903-1933, survives and is in the collection of the Smith College Museum of Art.

Meiere's other commission for the Century of Progress was a terra-cotta tile pool for the Communications Court. Her Spirits

of Communication, classically inspired yet stylized male and female figures racing around a central globe, clasp the wires that united the world through the electronic technology of the time.

In 1937, the Treasury Department's Section on Painting and Sculpture, one of the New Deal agencies that provided work for artists during this time of economic hardship, chose Meiere to design a bronze

silhouette sculpture, *The Post*, for the Logan Square Post Office. Her clever, humorous, and whimsical design shows the Roman messenger god Mercury, flanked by the winds, guiding a letter along its journey.

Chicago is also home to Meiere's smallest commission, also completed in 1937, the altarpiece and rear wall of a model of a 13th-century English Gothic church created by her friend Mrs. James Ward Thorne. The model was shown at world's fairs held in New York and San Francisco in 1939 and today is part of the Thorne Miniature Rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago.

To learn more about Hildreth Meiere, visit the website of the International Hildreth Meiere Association, hildrethmeiere.org, where you will find a complete list, along with images, of her commissions.

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