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The Ceramic Murals of Gregory and Meière for Washington DC's Municipal Center

Although American ceramics are rarely, if ever, concerned with social issues, Waylande Gregory's "Democracy in Action" was a controversial work that merited public outcry over a government sponsored art work that has only grown in relevance over the almost eighty years since it was created.¹ Gregory may have been the first American artist to depict police brutality against African American men, rendered especially meaningful for a building that houses the city's police department, even today. If Gregory had lived to today, he no doubt would have been elated by the public's tumultuous response to the tragic story of George Floyd, a tale that has reverberated so much around the world that it need not be repeated here.

Yet, this is a story of two ceramic murals, both sponsored by the Federal Government for the new Municipal Building in Washington DC which was constructed in 1939-1941, as part of the same commission, for the east and west interior courtyards, each measuring 81 feet long and together comprising the largest ceramic mural in the world at that time. The largest ceramic tile in Gregory's original maquette for the mural (fig.1) depicts the struggle between two policemen and two African American men. It was made to confront viewers with realities they might have been uncomfortable seeing. But, whereas Gregory's mural was made to excite and to agitate viewers, Meière's mural, with its soft tonalities and well-mannered public servants, comforts the viewer, knowing that their government is working to protect their interests.² Both murals are in the then current Art Deco style. In 2019, the Municipal Center and its artwork, was added to the National Register of Historic Places.³

The Works Progress Administration, or the WPA, was a work relief project created to help artists during the Great Depression by employing those already on relief. Part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, it was founded by the Federal Government in October 1935. Some artists, like Gregory, were part of a smaller elect group of the WPA known as the FAP, for Federal Art Project. In a complex layering of federal agencies, the Treasury Department also directed additional art programs as well. One of the programs it sponsored was referred to as "The Section of Fine Arts." It was the longest lived of all these agencies; providing an estimated fourteen hundred commissions, including the iconic post office murals.⁴ Although the majority of the post office murals were painted, many people today do not realize that some are actually relief sculptures. But, during the Great Depression, the cost of

stone or bronze murals was prohibitive, so ceramic murals were an acceptable and welcome alternative. But the Treasury's Public Works Administration, through grants and loans, provided funding for the new municipal center and its architectural artwork, including the two murals which are the subject of this essay. Located at 300 Indiana Avenue NW, the building also housed the Metropolitan Police Department and, in fact, still does.

The theme of police brutality, the most memorable element in Gregory's mural, was not totally new to American Art. Gregory must have been well aware of Philip Evergood's well known oil painting, "American Tragedy" (1937, 70 x 100 inches, Private Collection, New York). This depicts a protest scene in a Chicago steel plant that was initiated by the unions; and, shows a violent confrontation of male and female workers, including some African Americans and some Latinos, bearing sticks against the much better armed police. But Gregory has singled out African American males as a specific target for the police.

The Municipal Building murals were the final federal projects for both Meière and Gregory, as the federal government began to focus more on issues

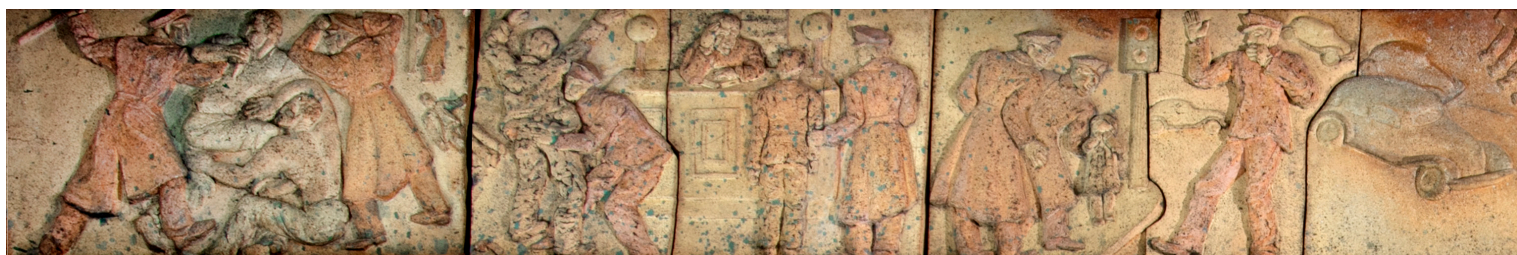




FIG. 1. Waylande Gregory, "Maquette Tile from Twelve Tile Maquette for "Democracy in Action," 1940, terra cotta, 15 x 24 inches, collection of Martin Stogniew. (Photo: Randl Bye).



FIG. 3. Waylande Gregory, "Maquette Tiles from Twelve Tile Maquette for "Democracy in Action," 1940, terra cotta, 15 x 45 inches, collection of Martin Stogniew. (Photo: Randl Bye).

abroad as international tensions would soon lead to World War II, replacing interest in domestic projects. Yet, the Municipal Building was a major endeavor, as funding for the center, from purchasing the land to commissioning artwork, were all provided by the PWA (Public Works Administration). The center's architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, was directly involved in selecting the two artists to create murals for the two open air courtyards. Wyeth was a well-known Washington DC architect, best known for his designs for the West Wing of the White House, thereby creating the first Oval Office. Four artists, including Gregory, Meière, Henry Varnum Poor⁵, and Thomas Johnson⁶ submitted entries. Although Johnson is not well known today, except as an illustrator who lived in New York City. Henry Varnum Poor was a

FIG. 2. (Below) Waylande Gregory, "Twelve Tile Maquette for "Democracy in Action" (complete), 1940, terra cotta, 15 x 108 inches, collection of Martin Stogniew. (Photo: Randl Bye).

leading studio potter at the time, noted for his work in tile, who could have easily completed a successful ceramics mural for this commission. The illustrious jury for the two murals commission, included Wyeth; Duncan Phillips, the well-known Washington DC collector and the founder of the Phillips Collection Museum in the same city; Lee Lawrie, the nation's preeminent architectural sculptor, who also provided a sculptural work for the same building; and George Harding, who was a well-known painter and muralist.

To encourage the judges' decisions, in 1940, Gregory and Meière created maquettes for their murals. Gregory's maquette for "Democracy in Action" was composed of twelve terra cotta tile pieces, which already suggest his specific relief style with figures that are more static and monumental than usual. The largest tile section (fig. 1), depicts two policemen taking control of a violent situation involving two offenders. One offender has a drawn knife and a policeman subdues him with a club. This subject is also the focus of the finished mural. In both cases, the wrong doers are African American and the police depicted are Caucasian. This tile is part of the twelve piece maquette (fig. 2) which also includes an arrest and a trial. Social unrest is also indicated by a group of peaceful protestors carrying placards who are being supervised by the police. Other themes include firemen who are totally selfless, as they save a child from a burning building. (fig. 3).

At the time of this commission, Gregory was at the top of his career.

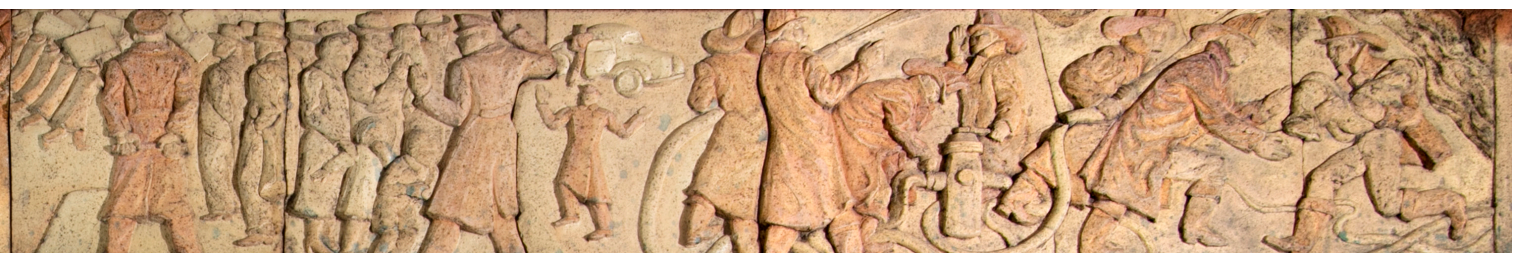




FIG. 4. Waylande Gregory, "R.F.D." or "The Kansas Mural," 1938, terra cotta, Columbus Post office, Kansas, later moved to Columbus Community Building. (Photo: Larry Hiatt).

He was the leading American ceramic artist in a decade that was dominated by ceramic sculpture, not by the ceramic vessel. He had garnered significant recognition, earning prestigious awards, and was exhibiting at both fine arts as well as at ceramic venues. He was the supervisor for sculpture in New Jersey's branch of the WPA/FAP and created an unusual outdoor fountain that featured prominent ceramic elements titled "Light Dispelling Darkness" in Roosevelt Park, New Jersey. Then, he had three important commissions at the New York World's Fair in 1939, one of which was an even more elaborate program for an outdoor fountain, titled "Fountain of the Atom." It featured twelve monumental ceramic sculptures, four of which weighed about a ton each. But his earlier significant work which anticipates "Democracy in Action" was his only post office mural for "the Section of Fine Arts," titled "R.F.D." (fig. 4) for the post office in Columbus, Kansas. Kansas was Gregory's native state and this terra cotta mural features a post man on horseback, as well as three other horses in a corral. "The Mariana Kistler Beach Museum, Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, has recently acquired a duplicate version of this terra cotta mural from the previous year- the earlier version may have helped the artist to win this post office commission.

Of course, Gregory's title for his Municipal Center mural, was tongue-in-cheek, as he probably felt that there was little democracy in America, at least as far as African American men were concerned. His finished mural (fig. 5) depicts the actions



FIG. 5. Waylande Gregory, "Democracy in Action," 1941, glazed terra cotta, 8 feet high x 81 feet long, Municipal Center Building, Washington DC. (Photo: William Gresham)

of the Metropolitan Police Department and the District of Columbia Fire Department. This mural was modeled and fired at Gregory's home in Bound Brook, New Jersey, which had enormous kilns to accommodate his massive ceramics projects. The mural is located on the west wall in an interior courtyard of the building. The mural is composed of 518 glazed fourteen inch, colored terra cotta tiles. The finished mural also depicts the arrest of a man who has his arms handcuffed behind him (similar to the maquette). But, Gregory shows that the police can do compassionate things as well, like assisting children and puppies at a traffic crossing. The firemen, who are now in the center of the work, form a dramatic scene, where a curling fire hose defines their space as jets of water extinguish the flames. They are performing the heroic deed of saving the life of a child.

Hildreth Meière's complimentary mural, "Health and Welfare," was created for the east courtyard of the Municipal Center.⁷ This gifted artist, unlike Gregory, did not have a background in ceramics. She created many architectural commissions as a designer, rather than as a craftsperson. Her projects included mural painting, metal work, stained glass, carved stone, and ceramics. Today, her best known extant works are the three enormous (eighteen feet in diameter) mixed metal and enamel roundels for the exterior of Radio City Music Hall in New York City. These famous roundels, which are recognized as masterworks in the Art Deco style, are figurative works depicting "Dance," "Drama" and "Song." Made for the Music Hall's opening in 1932, Meière selected Oscar Bach as her fabricator. Bach was considered the leading metal smith in America. In these works, Bach developed metals that would not tarnish with time and the elements.

Like Gregory, Meière designed works for several buildings for the

1939 New York World's Fair. But also, like Gregory, she designed a sculptural post office mural for "the Section of Fine Arts," which proceeds her "Health and Welfare" mural. Her engaging and light-hearted mural, "The Post," of 1937, was created for Chicago's Logan Square Post Office. It was comprised of bronze strips that calls to mind a witty line drawing that could be found in a copy of *The New Yorker* from that time. The rather sensual figure of Mercury is flanked by the heads and hands of two female wind goddesses. Meière was probably never again as playful as in this work. As stated above, large bronze relief sculptures were very expensive to cast in the Depression,⁸ so Meière innovated, using a metal strip silhouette inlaid on wooden panels as a clever and more cost efficient method of creating a metal sculpture, that looked sophisticated, rather than inexpensive. Although their approaches were very different in their post office murals, both Meière and Gregory's themes dealt with the role of the post office- a federal agency to deliver the mail. The Rambusch Studio in Jersey City, New Jersey, was Meière's fabricator in this project.

Also, like Gregory, Meière produced a maquette for her Municipal Building mural. Probably early in her designing stages in 1940, Meière was already thinking of the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and its resident ceramic artist, referred to as simply "Klimo" as her fabricator for "Health and Welfare." Assuming that "Klimo" was the craftsman's last name, his identity remains a mystery, as no other works have been attributed to him under his own name. He might have been a Hungarian immigrant trained, perhaps, in Europe before coming to work in the United States. But the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company was well known and significant at different times in the careers of



FIG. 6. Waylande Gregory at his studio at the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, Perth Amboy, New Jersey, ca. 1933-35. Photo courtesy of Waylande Gregory Archive, Cowan Pottery Museum, Rocky River Public Library, Ohio.

both Gregory and Meière. It was the most important producer of architectural tiles in the country. It started in Perth Amboy in 1846 as the A. Hall and Sons Terra Cotta Company, which produced refined table wares; then shifting to architectural tiles, it became the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company, and finally, the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company. It had supplied tiles for both the Flatiron Building (D. H. Burnham & Co., 1901) as well as the Woolworth Building (Cass Gilbert, 1908). Although colorful Art Deco architectural tiles had been popular in New York City skyscrapers in the late twenties, by the thirties American architects, seeking cleaner lines with fewer decorative elements, began to prefer the look of granite and steel, eliminating the need for terra cotta tiles. In the financial void created by a change in style for this company, Gregory was able to use their facilities in Perth Amboy, ca. 1935-37, to execute his major WPA/FAP project, "Light Dispelling Darkness." He was provided with ten workers by the WPA/FAP who, at least judging from their names, might have been European, and especially Italian, immigrants.⁹ In addition to this federal project, he also used their facilities to fire his own work, ca. 1933-35, and as a studio (fig.6) to display his terra cotta sculptures which had become increasingly monumental. However, in 1938, Gregory designed a new ultramodern home of his own design, in nearby Bound Brook, New Jersey. It included extraordinarily large kilns for the fire of his ceramic sculptures and he no longer required the kilns of the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company.

Later, in 1940 and 1941, Hildreth Meière used the same facilities of the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company for the creation of her mural, "Health and Welfare," which was fired there. It may be possible that Gregory had recommended the company to her, and perhaps Klimo could, previously, have been one of his students or assistants, as Gregory's wife was known to assist Hungarian immigrants.¹⁰ In fact, Klimo could have been an associate of Gregory's in Gregory's years at the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company (ca. 1933-37), where Klimo could have gained experience in American industrial ceramics production. A period photograph shot at the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, with their unglazed mural behind them, shows Meière and the young Klimo, who appears to be in his late twenties or early thirties (fig.7). Meière, herself, stated, "it is very important for us to pay more attention to crafts-



FIG. 7. Klimo and Hildreth Meiere at the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, in front of their unglazed mural "Health and Welfare," 1940, Perth Amboy, New Jersey. (Photo: Courtesy of the Hildreth Meiere Family Collection).

manship in this country... all craftsmen connected with the decoration of buildings are getting scarce. Most of them are Europeans trained abroad."¹¹

Klimo produced a maquette for "Health and Welfare" for the competition, based on Meiere's drawings. Why Klimo selected painted plaster for the maquette, rather than fired terra cotta, like the mural, remains unknown.¹² It may have been that plaster might have been easier to work with as it need not to have been fired like terra cotta. Like Gregory's maquette, this one shows the style that Meiere would use in the mural. The faces lack detailed features and are in con-

cave spaces, whereas their bodies are in convex areas. (fig. 8, 1940). Other elements in the design are also either concave or convex. The maquette depicts some of the work provided by the federal government, such as food inspection, and health services. The scene is almost identical in the finished version of the mural (fig. 9). Meiere and Klimo decided to treat the subject in ten scenes (fig. 10), increasing the focus of the maquette to including a doctor and a nurse treating a family with six members; and, two chemists in a laboratory. This was an important theme as the Health Department at that time was also located in the Municipal Center. There are scenes with more patients, ranging from children and youths to aged figures with crutches and a wheelchair in a geriatrics ward, as well as another patient in a bed presumably facing death, all depicting the cycle of life. Perhaps the most touching scene is where a young couple adopts a baby (fig. 11). But perhaps the most interesting scene depicts bricklayers and a federal inspector, as two huge hive-shaped ceramic kilns in the background pour smoke into the sky (fig. 12). This is obviously meant as a nod to the Atlantic Terra Company and perhaps to the American ceramics industry in general, as well as to Klimo, Meiere's ceramics collaborator.

Both murals were installed about eighteen feet from ground level. Although Meiere's mural proved to be popular, Gregory's with its theme of police brutality, drew much criticism, especially since the building housed Washington's Metropolitan Police Department. In a letter to Commissioner Melvin C. Hazen, the Episcopal Reverend James E. Freeman, described the mural as "fitting as an interpretation of the Gestapo... it is such a wretched interpretation and so brutish



FIG. 8. Hildreth Meiere, designer, and Klimo, craftsman, "Maquette for Health and Welfare Mural," 1940, painted plaster, 13 x 30 inches. (Photo: Courtesy of the Hildreth Meiere Family Collection).



FIG. 9. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Klimo, craftsman, "Food Inspection," segment of "Health and Welfare Mural," 1941, glazed terra cotta, 8 feet high, Municipal Center Building, Washington D.C. (Photo: Hildreth Meière Dunn).



FIG. 10. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Klimo, craftsman, "Health and Welfare Mural," 1941, glazed terra cotta, 8 feet high x 81 feet long, Municipal Center Building, Washington D.C. (Photo: Hildreth Meière Dunn).

in character I am wondering if something cannot be done about it."¹³ One of the Washington policemen, who remained unnamed, blamed Gregory for being too familiar with the rougher tactics of the New York City police.¹⁴ Although the police do not come out well in Gregory's interpretation, the mural does tell of the real hardships that black people were experiencing in this country at that time, and it looks forward to the Civil Rights Movement, twenty years later. In retrospect, Meière was on much safer ground with her mural depicting the health and welfare functions of the government, but Gregory should be praised for being willing to take a risk.

Paul Manship was the greatest American sculptor in the world at that time, most remembered for his huge bronze figure of Prometheus for Rockefeller Center (1934). On June 30, 1941, Manship carefully inspected Gregory's mural and reported:

This mural is superb, simple in its design, vigorous in action, and beautiful in its color scheme... one of the very best ceramics done in recent years... adverse criticism was due to a lack of understanding of the real duty of policemen, namely to keep order.¹⁵

By 1943, due to the war effort, the federal art programs were largely and officially concluded. In fact, the two murals were the last federal projects for both artists. Now lack-



FIG. 11. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Klimo, craftsman, "Adoption," segment of "Health and Welfare Mural," 1941, glazed terra cotta, 8 feet high, Municipal Center Building, Washington D.C. (Photo: Hildreth Meière Dunn).

ing the income from federal art projects, the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company soon went out of business. Meière went on to other projects, but her most significant work, in the Art Deco style, started with her three roundels for Radio City in 1932, and concluded with "Health and Welfare," in 1941. Her later works, although well designed as usual, seemed less Art Deco in spirit. "Democracy in Action" was Gregory's last monumental work. He had employed an African American father and son team to help move and tend to such huge ceramic projects at his Bound Brook home and studio with its huge kilns. In fact, Tyson, the father, and his son, Ralph (their last names remain unknown), had lived on the third floor of Gregory's home at the time of the creation of "Democracy in Action." But since Gregory no longer required them for subsequent work, he was forced to release them. But it may seem safe to wonder that in the three or more years that the duo lived with him, that they may have expressed discomfort with the police which may have had an effect on the artist's negative interpretation of them in his mural. After all, they assisted Gregory in the mural's creation.



FIG. 12. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Klimo, craftsman, "Brick Laying and Ceramics Industry," segment of "Health and Welfare Mural," 1941, glazed terra cotta, 8 feet high, Municipal Center Building, Washington D.C. (Photo: Hildreth Meière Dunn).

Gregory continued to produce a line of high quality porcelains that he marketed at top American retail stores;¹⁶ he experimented in glass;¹⁷ and, by the sixties, had mostly given up ceramics to create large hand hammered metal sculptures. But, as “Democracy in Action” clearly demonstrates, few ceramic artists had such a perceptive vision for the future. It seems clear that Gregory was not afraid of the social issues of his time; *or even ours...*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TOM FOLK is an art historian best known for his work on the Pennsylvania Impressionists.

Here, at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, he stands by the museum's recently acquired 1938 portrait of Henry Fonda by Waylande Gregory. Although the Gregory exhibition had opened at the new ceramics museum at Alfred University in February, it later closed due to the Corona virus, but will reopen in September and will run through December, 2020. The Beach Museum in Manhattan, Kansas, will present a virtual exhibition on Gregory, from September 29, 2020- May 18, 2021.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For Gregory, see Thomas C. Folk, *Waylande Gregory: Art Deco Ceramics and the Atomic Impulse* (Richmond, Virginia: University of Richmond Museums, 2013). See also Tom Folk, “Uncommon Cowan Pottery Designs by Waylande Gregory,” *Journal of the American Art Pottery Association*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring, 2014), pp. 14-20; and Tom Folk, “Waylande Gregory’s Plates and Platters,” *Journal of the American Art Pottery Association*, vol. 36, no.1 (Winter, 2020), pp. 22-28.
- 2 For Meière, see Catherine Coleman Brawer and Kathleen Murphy Skolnik, *The Art Deco Murals of Hildreth Meière* (New York: Andrea Monfried Editions, 2014); as well as Catherine Coleman Brawer, *Walls Speak: The Narrative Art of Hildreth Meière* (St. Bonaventure, New York: St. Bonaventure University, 2009).
- 3 In addition to the two murals are two granite relief sculptures, one titled “Urban Life” was by John Gregory, no relation to Waylande Gregory. The other was titled “Thoroughfare” was by Lee Lawrie, who was one of the four judges who determined the winners for the two terra cotta murals.
- 4 For the story of the post office murals, see Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984). Meière’s “the Post” is discussed on page 145; is illustrated, page 152; and listed, page 207. Gregory’s “R.E.D.” is listed on page 211. Park was one of the author’s mentors in graduate school, and he is most indebted to her memory.
- 5 Poor’s most significant work in ceramics are his two miniature stage sets. See Tom Folk, “Henry Varnum Poor’s Ceramic Stage Sets For Radio City Music Hall,” *American Ceramic Circle Journal*, vol. XIX (2017), pp. 173-187.
- 6 Brawer and Skolnik discuss both the four judges and the four competitors in the PWA’s competition for the two murals. See *Meière*, pp. 172-173.
- 7 The author is much indebted to Hildreth Meière Dunn, the granddaughter of the artist, Hildreth Meière, who provided photos of the artist’s work used in this article. Ms. Dunn has photographed more than 40 sites and more than 150 artworks created by her grandmother. Her photographs have appeared in such newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. She has also participated in related television news and documentary programs of Meière’s work.
- 8 Park and Markowitz discuss the Section’s concerns for the cost of sculptural materials, in *Vistas*, p. 130.
- 9 These workers/assistants included Alfred Rossi, Amadeo Lovi, Henry Lovi, Adolph Maffei, Dominick di Lorenzo, Ned Monti, William Deuel, Andrew Petrovitis, Joseph Kalik, and John Corollo.
- 10 Gregory’s wife, Yolande, was herself, an Hungarian immigrant. She helped establish Hungarian refugees, especially after the Hungarian revolt of 1956, when she sporadically took in eleven refugees from Budapest, including Juliana Horn, a chef of some repute. See Clementine Paddleford, “Hungarian Refugees Bring New Dishes,” *Herald Tribune*, undated clipping, ca. 1956, collection of the author.
- 11 Ernest Watson, “Hildreth Meière, Mural Painter: An Interview with Illustrations of Her Work,” *American Artist*, vol. 5, no. 7 (September 1941), p. 6.
- 12 The maquette was included in an exhibition of the National Society of Mural Painters at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the autumn of 1940. Meiere and Klimo also created three related undecorated plaster macquettes for the “Health and Welfare” mural. See Brawer and Skolnik, *Meière*, p. 176.
- 13 “Third Degree Mural Evokes Protest of Bishop Freeman,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 1941, p. 1.
- 14 See Martin Weil, “Waylande Gregory, 66, Dies,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 1971, p. C3.
- 15 *Fourteenth Report of the National Commission of Fine Arts*, Gregory Archives, Cowan Pottery Museum, Rocky River Public Library, Ohio.
- 16 See Folk, “Gregory’s Plates,” as well as Tom Folk, “The Art Deco Porcelains of Waylande Gregory,” *Antiques & Fine Art*, vol. 12, issue 5 (Summer 2013), pp. 164-171.
- 17 Tom Folk, “Waylande Gregory: Fusing Earth and Sand,” e-article, American Craft Council, February 11, 2013.