

# Recalling Art Deco Stylist Who Defined City

By JENNIFER MALONEY

The spectacular architectural decorations of Hildreth Meière live on in landmarks across the country—from the medallions on the façade of Radio City Music Hall to the floors and ceilings of the Nebraska State Capitol.

But even in New York, where she based her career and her Art Deco style became one of the city's signature visual motifs, Ms. Meière's name has faded into obscurity since her death in 1961.

Now, Ms. Meière's work is being celebrated with an exhibit opening Friday at the Museum of Biblical Art, called "Walls Speak: The Narrative Art of Hildreth Meière."

The show, which opened in St. Bonaventure, N.Y., in 2009 and went to the National Building Museum in Washington D.C., last year, displays the pioneering work of a woman who, beginning in the 1920s, completed more than 100 architectural commissions.

Her work appeared in churches, office buildings and



Above, Hildreth Meière, c. 1923; right, one of the medallions she created for Radio City Music Hall.

cocktail lounges across the U.S. and even on ocean liners.

But it was in New York where Ms. Meière's work was most iconic and prolific.

Her designs in sparkling glass mosaic are perhaps her most acclaimed, and in New York these include the 70-foot arch at the



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

front of the sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El, at East 65th Street and Fifth Avenue. The tiny glass pieces—many coated in gold leaf—shimmer as if lit by dancing candlelight.

A similar effect is achieved when spotlights shine on the half-dome of the apse of St. Bar-

tholomew's Church at Park Avenue and 51st Street in Midtown, where a depiction of Jesus raises his arms over glittering saints and animals.

Ms. Meière's windows line St. Bartholomew's nave and in the narthex, five more gilded domes—now capping the

church's gift shop—depict the creation story.

"She was a great storyteller," said the exhibit's curator, Catherine Coleman Brawer. "She interpreted everything she did as a narrative vignette. There's always something happening."

The exhibit shows her work through sketches, full-size watercolor renderings, photographs and mosaic samples shipped from her fabricator in Germany. It has been expanded for the New York show to include new items, such as a never-before-shown film of Ms. Meière making portable triptychs for military field chapels during World War II.

A section will focus on her painted murals at St. Michael's Passionist Monastery Church in Union City, N.J., where a fire ripped through the church shortly after Ms. Meière's chapel dome was installed in 1934. Her work survived, and she was commissioned to create more pieces for the church's restoration.

Some of those pieces have since been lost, and some of

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Above, Catherine Brawer, curator of the exhibit on Ms. Meière's work; right, an Art Deco mosaic designed by Ms. Meière at Temple Emanu-El.

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what remains needs restoring, said Ms. Brawer, who is on the church's restoration group.

At the time of the commission, Ms. Meière wrote, the Passionist monks were unhappy with the facial expression of her depiction of Mary.

So she climbed the 75-foot scaffolding and fixed it.

"She wanted to be known as an artist," said her daughter, Louise Meière Dunn, 81 years old, of Stamford, Conn. "She didn't want to be known as a woman artist."

Ms. Meière (pronounced mee-air) was born in Flushing, Queens, in 1892. Her mother,

who had set aside her own artistic ambition to raise a family, encouraged her and took her to Italy to study.

"Perhaps it was the romance of that word 'abroad' that finally tipped the scales, but by sixteen I had decided to be an artist and from then on, backed by the creative enthusiasm of my mother, I had only to follow my nose," Hildreth Meière wrote in 1946.

In Italy, she fell in love with murals. Her award-winning designs led to an introduction to the architect Bertram Goodhue, who commissioned her to decorate the Nebraska State Capitol and the dome of the Great Hall of the National Academy of Sci-



Remain visible for The Wall Street Journal (2)

ences in Washington.

She plunged into a profession dominated by men, sketching designs in a Midtown studio and negotiating commissions in the cigar-smoke-filled rooms of the Architectural League of New York, which awarded her a gold medal in 1928, six years before the league admitted women

members. In 1946, she was appointed the first woman member of the New York Municipal Art Commission, and in 1956, she was the first woman to receive the Fine Arts Medal from the American Institute of Architects.

"Her work was really her life—and me," Louise Meière Dunn said.