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**Hildreth Meière's *Health and Welfare***

A Thesis Presented

by

Sarah Suzanne Wilson

to

The Graduate School

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in

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Sarah Suzanne Wilson

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this thesis.

Michele Bogart –Advisor  
Professor, Department of Art

Barbara E. Frank - Reader  
Associate Professor, Department of Art

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin  
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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When Hildreth Meière was commissioned to create a frieze for the District of Columbia's Municipal Building in 1941, the work was intended to celebrate the redemptive power of Roosevelt's New Deal welfare programs. Meière's frieze, *Health and Welfare*, is caught in a unique tango between the particularly municipality in question (Washington, D.C.) and the federal government, the at-large administrator and legislator of Washington, D.C. The inability of Washington residents to have a forcible voice in the decisions governing their city has been an ongoing struggle between the residents and their "representatives," causing District residents to be ignored while the rest of the nation received multiple benefits and services from New Deal funds. This situation is a source of contention in the frieze whose panels celebrate civic activities and public benefits such as receiving welfare and health services. Are the scenes in the panels meant to console the District's residents, reminding them that although they are not provided with the benefits and services befitting a democratic people, they are given a work of art that represents the absent services?

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## INTRODUCTION

Hildreth Meière (1892 – 1961) was an artist and arts advocate of national distinction whose catalogue of works includes ceiling and floor mosaics for state governments, altar mosaics, apse murals, restaurant murals, banking room interiors, costume designs, World’s Fair commissions, and architectural plaques. Her dedication to art was a public pursuit; she sought commissions and projects that embraced public-art interaction, preferring the reality and site-specificity of public art to the impersonal gallery or museum. Her many municipal, state and federal-sponsored commissions reflect this inclination. This thesis will explore one of her more than one hundred commissions, *Health and Welfare* (Figure 1), an Art Deco terra cotta frieze commissioned for the Washington, D.C. Municipal Building in 1939. The Municipal Building (designed by Nathan C. Wyeth) and Complex, as well as Meière’s frieze, were the results of New Deal projects, funded in part by grants from the Works Progress Administration.<sup>1</sup> The eight panel scenes depict the range of public benefits and services available to the residents of the nation’s capital at that time – health services, welfare, produce and livestock inspection, and assisted living – a fitting theme for the building which housed the primary municipal government offices: the Metropolitan Police Department, the Department of Finance and

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<sup>1</sup> The title “Works Progress Administration” was changed to “Works Process Administration” in July 1939 due to increasing Congressional and public criticism of President Franklin Roosevelt’s policies; many felt Roosevelt’s strategies were too radical and socialist. Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 129.

Revenue, the Department of Human Resources (health services), the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Department of Vital Statistics. The frieze, though virtually unknown in the present day, is a result of the energies and activities of multiple groups representing multiple interests – from the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration funds which made the commission possible, to the Commission of Fine Arts, the advisory board responsible for maintaining the District’s aesthetic standards in architecture, sculpture, and other works of art.

Few of Meière’s works have received the scholarly treatment, and *Health and Welfare* is no exception. As a muralist, many of her works are viewed as ornamental designs decorating architectural structures such as churches, government buildings, and theatres; they are parts of a whole structure. Scholarship too often ignores these “minor parts” in favor of the whole, leaving those artists specializing in decorative painting and sculpture uncelebrated and forgotten. The work of feminist art scholars has attempted to recover some of the attention past women artists deserve, but they have focused on reclaiming the histories of women artists who fall into the category of the “fine arts.” Artists engaged in the “decorative arts,” such as mural painting, are often ignored. These so-called “minor” arts have been viewed as purely ornamental, with no substance or artistic impact. Their subject matter is viewed as trivial, and their style outdated and undeveloped. Because a great deal of Meière’s works were commissioned for churches and synagogues, she is also recognized as a liturgical artist. Such a label may have been perfectly acceptable for Renaissance artists painting the great cathedrals of Europe, where Meière studied, but in modern secular America, it is a label to avoid. Another reason for the scholarly community’s

unfamiliarity with Meière is her prominent role as an advocate of public art and a participant in the policy-making public groups and commissions. Too often those who work “behind the scenes,” as Meière often did, are ignored.

This thesis will offer an introduction to Meière’s oeuvre by focusing on one case study, providing a multilayered examination of the work through formal and thematic analyses of each panel. I will discuss the artist’s background briefly, as well as highlight the Art Deco movement in the United States and the Works Progress Administration as it relates to public work commissioned in the United States during the 1930s. As the site of Meière’s frieze, I will also discuss the Municipal Building and the frieze’s actual commission. The Municipal Building plays a key role in understanding the frieze’s formal aesthetic qualities as well as the themes and deeper issues of the panels. The conclusion will address the larger political issues surrounding the frieze and discuss how the frieze functions in the present day as a work of public art.

There are three points I will argue in this investigation. First, *Health and Welfare* is an important work of American public art in that it represents a specific aesthetic style and subject matter that are unique to the work’s time period. The second point is that *Health and Welfare* is a significant work of public art to the residents of the District of Columbia in that it engages with them directly in a manner that has rarely – unfortunately – been repeated. The final point I will argue is that *Health and Welfare* was intended to soften tensions between District residents and the federal government in a manner which – despite great artistic skill and craftsmanship – ultimately provided nothing more than a temporary band aid. Hildreth Meière is an



important American artist due to 1) her capability to adopt a wide range of aesthetic styles and subject matters, as indicated by her varied oeuvre; 2) the considerable exposure of the American public, from Michigan to New York, to her works of public art, as indicated by her many public commissions; 3) her influence not only as an artist but as an advocate of the arts, as evidenced by her life-long memberships in art societies and her active role in many public art commissions.

### **Hildreth Meière**

Although Meière described her artistic talent as “a very second hand one,” the education and training she received was first-rate. By the age of sixteen she decided to pursue a career as an artist, a career her mother helped foster by taking her young daughter to Europe where she studied the Renaissance paintings in Florence, Italy, from 1910 to 1911.<sup>2</sup> While in Italy, Meière studied with an English artist whose instructions followed a traditional academic method, insisting that Meière learn to draw from models before drawing from life, as well as required visits to Italy’s famous cathedrals and buildings. This training sparked a lifelong passion for mural work and a talent for ecclesiastic scenes. Following her time in Europe, Meière continued to study drawing and painting in the United States from roughly 1911 to 1914, first at the Art Students’ League in New York City, and then at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute).

Meière’s first commercial projects were sketches of Anna Pavlova’s ballet company, while the company performed in San Francisco during the year 1915, which allowed her an opportunity to design costumes for theatrical productions in New York City. In 1916 at the age of twenty-four, Meière moved back to New York

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<sup>2</sup> Hildreth Meière, *Dossier*, c. 1946, 1.

in order to begin a serious studio practice and continue her studies at the Art Students' League. When the United States entered World War I, Meière joined the war effort by enlisting in the Navy. She served the Navy several years as a Yeomen (F) Second Class, working as an architectural draftsman.<sup>3</sup> Upon her return from Europe, she studied and taught at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design in New York City, eventually assuming the chair of the Mural Painting Department. Through this work she met the architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, with whom she would sustain a highly successful and productive working relationship for several years. Indeed Meière painted the murals for many of Goodhue's structures, including Saint Mark's Episcopal Church in Mt. Kisco, New York (1923); Saint Martin's of Tours Episcopal Church in Providence, Rhode Island (1924); the dome and pendentives of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. (1924); and the Vestibule Dome of the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln, Nebraska (1924-1929). Following Goodhue's death in 1924, Meière continued to collaborate with his office on such projects as Christ Church in Cranbrook, Michigan (1928-1929); Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York City (1928-1929); and the ceilings, floor mosaics, and Senate and House Chamber tapestries for the Nebraska State Capital (1924-1929).

It was for her work in the Nebraska State Capital that Meière received the first of many accolades. In 1929, she was honored with the Gold Medal in Mural Painting from the Architectural League of New York; she was the first female artist to receive

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<sup>3</sup> As a Yeomen (F), Meière was a member of the first group of women to be enlisted in the United States Armed Forces. The U.S. Naval Reserve Force actively recruited women, beginning in March 1917 and ending with the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918. During World War I, nearly 11,000 women served in the United States Navy. Source: Eunice Cecelia Dessez, *The First Enlisted Women, 1917-1918* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1955), 13.

such distinction.<sup>4</sup> Meière continued to receive commissions and awards, such as the Fine Arts Medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1956. With the exception of one year during the Depression, she managed to work steadily as a professional artist until she died. This success in itself is impressive – tens of thousands of artists were unable to find any kind of work, let alone studio work – but Meière’s position as a *female* artist makes her achievements all the more remarkable.<sup>5</sup> In addition to her regular commission work, Meière volunteered her time to professional committees and organizations, devoting hours giving back to the art community which had embraced her and fostered her artistic development. She was the first woman appointed to the Art Commission for the City of New York, serving from 1946 to 1952; she served as President of the National Society of Mural Painters and the Liturgical Arts Society from 1936 to 1937; she served six terms as the Vice President of the Architectural League of New York; she was a life member of the Art Students’ League; and she also served as a member of the Architectural Guild of America, the National Academy of Design, and the Colonial Dames of America.<sup>6</sup>

Meière’s style may be best described as a modernization of the forms she encountered during her travels and studies abroad. A survey of her many works reveals a thorough knowledge of the styles and themes of western art history, from Greek vases to Byzantine mosaics, from Roman gods and goddesses to Renaissance murals. One commissioned project that exemplifies the range of Meière’s knowledge is her designs for the Nebraska State Capitol. Her treatment for the floor mosaics in the Foyer was inspired by simple Greek vase designs. She used two colors of marble

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Hildreth Meière, *Hildreth Meière: Her Life and Times (not hard)*, c. 1955.

in each panel – a light color and a dark color – in order to heighten the contrasts of the figures represented. The frames used around each scene are ornately patterned, but continue the simplified color scheme, using only grays and greens. A figure which references both Roman gods Saturn and Helios marks the entrance to the Foyer. The god, symbolizing “The Genius of Creative Energy,” rides atop a chariot as the sun blazes overhead, in the same way the Sun God Helios is often depicted as he drives his blazing horses across the sky. At the same time, Meière’s god carries bolts of thunder and is framed by zigzagging thunder bolts, similar to depictions of the god Saturn.<sup>7</sup> Meière’s formal interpretation of the scene is a very sinuous and sensuous one; the waves upon which the unseen chariot ride curl up like tendril shoots, and the great force created by the god’s movement causes his hair and garments to gracefully unfurl behind him, reminiscent of Art Nouveau poster art designs. His muscles flex and tighten, from the pointed toes in his left foot to his right-hand fingers clasping a thunderbolt. This is not the stiff pose of a Greek god, however, nor is it a bulging mass of muscle; rather this is a graceful modern athlete, ready to command the cosmos.

In Meière’s ecclesiastic designs, one can see the influence of Byzantine mosaics. In the detail of a glass mosaic for Saint Bartholomew’s Church in New York City, Meière placed a pelican feeding its young in front of an orthodox cross. The flatness of the scene and patterning in the pelican’s wings are reminiscent of the linear forms in Byzantine mosaics. The portraits of Saints Johns and Peter are clearly influenced by the *Emperor Justinian* mosaics from San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy,

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<sup>7</sup> Joan Woodside and Betsy Gabb, “The Decorative Art of Hildreth Meière,” in *A Harmony of the Arts: The Nebraska State Capitol*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 73.

where Meière visited. *Saint John*, created for Saint Aloysius Church in Detroit, Michigan, is designed with the heavy, highly stylized manner found at San Vitale: the face is elongated and flattened, the eyes are almond-shaped, and the drapery is minimal. *Saint Peter* is a more developed and sophisticated rendering of the figure: the garments are draped in a way to provide a sense of corporeality, and the face is more realistic and detailed; however the mosaic captures the glittering shimmer of the San Vitale designs.

Over the span of her lifetime, Meière mastered a variety of styles, from the fluid lyricism of works such as the Saint Aloysius portraits to the more streamlined and geometric forms in the Nebraska State Capitol. Despite these variances, her overarching aesthetic remained grounded in a realist-Modernist style, the “Streamlined Moderne” as described by Marlene Park, which “denotes the elimination of non-functional details and the redesigning of forms according to aerodynamic principles.”<sup>8</sup> Meière’s “Streamlined Moderne,” as apparent in the *Health and Welfare* panels, depicts deep pockets of space between densely-configured horizontal scenes. Her ability to adapt her style to the needs of each commission indicates a complex understanding and grasp of not only the subject matter, but also the public interaction with each work of art, as well as the architectural and structural requirements and impediments of each unique commission.

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<sup>8</sup> Marlene Park, *New Deal for Art: The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State* (Hamilton, NY: Gallery Association of New York State, Inc., 1977), 25.

## **The Municipal Building**

The National Commission of Fine Arts and the United States Congress approved the Art Deco design by Nathan C. Wyeth (1870-1963) for a Municipal Building (Figure 2), located at 300 Indiana Avenue, Northwest. Completed in 1941, the building was part of a larger Municipal Center in Washington, D.C.'s Judiciary Square, one of many construction projects begun during a federal building boom in the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> This was the building that would house multiple public services under one roof.

When the area now known as Washington, D.C. became the federal district, its residents left the protection of services and programs provided by the state governments, whose parcels of land were given up for the District, and were put in the care of Congress. As such, District residents lack voting privileges in the Senate and the House of Representatives, though they are “represented” by a delegate who speaks on their behalf, and the District’s budget is managed and determined by members of Congress. This arrangement has never been smooth and free from problems. During the Depression years, Congress routinely approached the District’s budget with a “penny-pinching” mentality, which roused indignation and resentment among an already-frustrated population.<sup>10</sup> A 1935 editorial in the *Star* newspaper stated “Organized civic Washington is just about as cheerful over its budgets going to the Federal Budget Bureau as it is to hear that the body of a dear friend is at the

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<sup>9</sup> At the time, Wyeth was serving as the municipal architect, a position he held from 1930 to 1946. Prior to this post, he served as the Architect of the Capitol in 1904 and 1905. His numerous buildings can be found throughout Washington, D.C., including the Police Court (which was part of the Municipal Center), the District of Columbia Armory, large homes, and embassies.

<sup>10</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950* Volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 442.

District morgue.”<sup>11</sup> The apparent distrust of Congress was exacerbated even further when the District was required to make room for the new Judiciary Square construction.

In order to accommodate the ever-expanding federal government, Congress proposed the creation of a Federal Triangle in downtown Washington, D.C., where an ambitious construction project encompassed a total of seventy acres, housing the Departments of Justice, Commerce, and Labor, the Internal Revenue Service, the General Accounting Office, the General Supply Building, the Independent Offices Building, and the National Archives.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the new construction plans, Congress had to evict the current tenants, including the District of Columbia’s Municipal Building, which was located in a building it had occupied since 1908. Rather than provide an already-existing building for the District offices, the federal government required the District to purchase land for its building program, as well as submit all proposals for the new complex. Throughout the 1930s, the District of Columbia debated and haggled over the mounting costs of the land for the site, the number of buildings to be erected at the site, the grandeur of the complex, and the funding for the construction.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the Municipal Building, other buildings to be included in the Center were those housing the Juvenile Court, the Police Court, and the District of Columbia Court House. By the mid-1930s, the District’s coffers were empty, forcing the District to apply for Works Progress Administration funds.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sue A. Kohler, *The Commission of Fine Arts: A Brief History, 1910 – 1984* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission of Fine Arts, 1985), 54.

<sup>13</sup> James D. Secrest, “District’s Municipal Center Now Raised From Realm of Myth,” *The Washington Post*, 4 September 1938, B7.

A primary goal of Franklin Roosevelt's New Dealer Administration was to find jobs for out-of-work citizens, including artists. The federal government undertook several art programs during the thirties and forties including the Public Works of Art Project (1933-34), the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (1934-43), and the Federal Art Project (1935-43).<sup>14</sup> Of these programs, the Federal Art Project impacted American visual culture the most as it tackled two issues simultaneously: creating jobs for unemployed artists, musicians, and writers; and enriching and celebrating American culture by honoring and preserving local, regional, and national cultural traditions.<sup>15</sup>

As part of its funding from the Works Progress Administration, the District was awarded a \$5.7 million grant to jumpstart construction on the project in May of 1938, though the funds were awarded as a loan with the expectation that the amount would be repaid to the Federal Government in full.<sup>16</sup>

The Municipal Building, though paid for by federal funds, belonged to the residents of the District of Columbia. It was to be a place where they could come and complete many required municipal transactions as well as receive public services: welfare support, health services, driver's licenses, traffic violation fines, and tax payments. When the Commission of Fine Arts approved Wyeth's plans, they did so with the stipulation that two terra cotta friezes would be installed in the outdoor courtyard located in the middle of the building. After inviting several artists to participate in a competition to design the friezes, the Commission of Fine Arts awarded the commission of the east panel to Hildreth Meière and the west panel to

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>16</sup> "Arts Board Stalls D.C. Center Plan," *The Washington Post*, 31 August 1938, 1.



Waylande Gregory.<sup>17</sup> On the whole, the project went smoothly for both Meière and Gregory. The only exception to their progress was an incident during the spring of 1940, when the Municipal Engineer Commissioner requested that the two artists halt all work due to a lack of funds. When the Commission of Fine Arts members investigated the situation further, they discovered that the funds may have been used toward other building items, such as engineering, landscaping, and sewage treatment. Such neglect of the guaranteed aesthetic development in the Municipal Building project was unacceptable to the Commission of Fine Arts. In retaliation, Gilmore D. Clarke, the Commission of Fine Arts chairman, sent a telegram to Colonel David McCoach, Jr., the Engineer Commission of the District of Columbia, stating:

At meeting today of Commission of Fine Arts we are surprised to learn of suspension and possible elimination of mural ceramics for D.C. East Administration Building. These are considered of prime importance to complement monumental and architectural qualities of buildings. After competition and awards made for this work we believe the District of Columbia Government morally obligated to carry it out (*sic*).<sup>18</sup>

Colonel McCoach responded quickly, assuring Clarke and the Commission that the stop order was merely a precaution and that it was his intention that the friezes remain an integral part of the building. By July that year, the artists were allowed to continue their work, and the commissions progressed as originally planned.<sup>19</sup> The friezes were completed and installed in 1941; both artists received \$25,000 each for their work.

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<sup>17</sup> Commission of Fine Arts, *Commission of Fine Arts Meeting Minutes*, 24 February 1940, 3.

*Note:* The Commission of Fine Arts was a presidentially-appointed group of fine arts experts responsible for overseeing the commissions of works of art throughout the District of Columbia, from an aesthetic standpoint. Though lacking in political power, the group has the authority to select artists or designs for commissions of works of architecture, sculpture, painting, or landscape design.

<sup>18</sup> Commission of Fine Arts, *Commission of Fine Arts Meeting Minutes*, 29 March 1940, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Commission of Fine Arts, *Commission of Fine Arts Meeting Minutes*, 8 July 1940, 1.

Wyeth's building has been described as a significant work of Art Deco architecture in the District of Columbia. The term "Art Deco" is used to refer to a movement of primarily architectural, jewelry, interior, poster, and textile designs during the 1920s and 1930s. During the twenties, frequent motifs in Art Deco designs included zigzagging lines and bright colors, reflecting both the jumpy, syncopated rhythms of jazz music as well as the renewed interest in the ancient cultures of Egypt and the Aztecs.<sup>20</sup> The disasters of the thirties made the themes and colors of the twenties seem frivolous and dangerous, thus the movement developed a streamlined, horizontal aesthetic.

While cities like New York embraced Art Deco immediately, it took Washington, D.C. longer to accept the style. This is partly due to the more conservative and academic-leaning architectural tradition throughout the District. The movement's stylistic trends began to appear sporadically throughout the twenties, but it was not until the building boom brought on by New Deal programs that Art Deco was recognized as a genuine architectural style.<sup>21</sup>

As a work of the Art Deco movement, the Municipal Building is a clearly modern treatment of classical architecture, in keeping with the aesthetic promoted throughout the nearby Federal Triangle: flattened pilasters are topped with Corinthian capitals and placed between piercing vertical fenestrations (windows arranged vertically providing the principal architectural feature of the building) (Figure 3). A repeating half-sun motif forms the decorative panel which runs along the highest register of the building (Figure 4). Above each entrance are cast-aluminum spandrels

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<sup>20</sup> Wirz, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Wirz, 40.

depicting sunrays and thunderbolts, as well as other natural scenes. These sunrays and thunderbolts energize the entrances, welcoming all who pass through them. The visitor entrance lobby features a map of the District laid out in a sparkling terrazzo and mosaic floor, an image that should be a point of pride to the citizens who entered the building. The energy created by Wyeth's imaginative building is carried into Meière's frieze, whose panels offer a sleek, modern interpretation of the Art Deco style.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Health and Welfare Panels*

The *Health and Welfare* frieze is located along the east wall of a courtyard in the Municipal Building. This courtyard was used by municipal employees for lunch and smoking breaks, and it is filled with a modest landscape arrangement of clipped hedges, trees, and benches. Offices and meeting rooms line the courtyard with windows looking out onto the courtyard. The frieze consists of eight painted terra cotta panels, designed by Hildreth Meière, modeled by an artist named Klimo, and executed by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company (Figure 5). The frieze measures 78 feet long by 8 feet high and sits 18 feet above the ground.<sup>22</sup>

From left to right, the panel titles are: *Health Services in the Schools, Inspection, Research, The Hospital, Convalescent and Old People's Homes, Relief, Penal Institutions, and Children's Court.*

#### *Health Services in the Schools*

*Health Services in the Schools* (Figure 6), depicts the kinds of health services available to children through the public school system. While two adults watch (perhaps parents or teachers), a young boy receives an inoculation from a male doctor while his teacher quiets him and holds his hand; to the right of the young boy is an older boy who massages his sore left arm after receiving his shot, meanwhile a female nurse inspects a young girl who obligingly lifts her head, opening her mouth to say “Ah.”

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<sup>22</sup> Commission of Fine Arts, *Commission of Fine Arts Meeting Minutes*, 24 February 1940, 2.

This scene is crowded (there are eight figures total), and even though the spacing between some of the figures is awkward, there is a great deal of movement, and the contrasting heights of the figures break up the visual plane. The left half of the panel contains the most figures, but the lower heights of seated teacher and small boy keep the scene from being too crowded. The movement between the doctor leaning over the boy, and the boy twisting to observe the doctor lessens the impact of the uniform poses of the left half. The tight triangular grouping of the nurse, older boy and girl remains awkward, though, as the boy stands too close to the nurse. This placement creates an empty space between him and the doctor, halting the fluid movement of the sense from left to right.

Despite the lack of facial expressions, Meière leaves no room for imagination as to the feelings of the characters. The doctor is very serious as he prepares the young boy's arm for the shot; the teacher is kind and comforting as she tries to calm the young boy; the young boy, held by his teacher, twists up to the doctor eyeing the needle in fear just as the doctor prepares to administer the shot; and the older boy has endured the pain of the shot and stands, tending to the tender arm.

As will be seen throughout the frieze, patterning in the figures' apparel is used not only to provide a variety of detail but also to assist the composition. In the *Health Services in the Schools* panel, Meière makes use of various patterning in order to frame the scene and to break up the vertical planes of the scene. Both outer characters – the observant woman on the left edge and the young girl on the right edge – stand out for the patterns of their dresses. The observant woman wears a dress distinguished by deep vertical lines, creating a strong left vertical frame, while the

young girl wears a dress marked by both vertical and horizontal lines. In the middle of the scene, the young boy wears shorts and a shirt marked by a speckled pattern, which creates neither a vertical nor horizontal line, but allows the eyes to rest on him before moving out to the edges of the panel.

When Congress passed the Social Security Act in August, 1935, the legislation aimed at providing all levels of relief to all people throughout the country, including welfare for the unemployed, the promotion of public health, relief for the aging, and assistance to children. A significant aspect of the bill was that it recognized children's welfare as equally important as adult's welfare, a historical step that would forever shape American policies on child welfare and development.<sup>23</sup> Provisions within the child welfare program included food to families, education for both children and parents, medical care, and clothing. Such assistance, it was believed, would relieve some of the pressure with which poor families struggled. As a result of the economic disasters of the Depression, thousands of children left school in order to join their parents in the daily search for food and work. This troubled members of Congress and the president's administration, as it became clear that a generation of children would be robbed of a childhood. A report on the welfare status of the nation during the winter of 1934-35 recognized that financial relief and material provisions to families, working and unemployed, would have lasting effects, arguing that "assurance which can hold the family together...is a measure for children

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<sup>23</sup> Katharine F. Lenroot, "Maternal and Child Welfare Provisions of the Social Security Act," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 3, no. 2 (April, 1936), 253.

in that it assures them a childhood rather than the premature strains of the would-be child breadwinner.”<sup>24</sup>

The children pictured in Meière’s panel are benefiting from some of the various relief provisions: they receive an education provided to them by caring and concerned teachers, and they receive medical care which will prevent future illness and ensure lifelong good health. It is a reassuring image that the future workers, soldiers, mothers, and fathers of America are being prepared for what adulthood may bring, and yet there is an innocence in the scene indicating the children are still children and not being forced into premature adulthood.

### *Inspection*

The second panel, *Inspection*, depicts not so much the public benefits provided to residents, but the duties undertaken by the municipal government to ensure a high quality of life and high standards for citizens (Figure 7). In order to sell produce, meat and dairy products in the District of Washington, venders must meet certain standards of quality. In this scene, an inspector from the city is surrounded by a butcher, a farmer, and a milkman to the left, and a fisherman to the lower right. The inspector is in the process of examining the farmer’s produce basket – filled with potatoes, onions, or apples – while the butcher and milkman wait patiently, and the fisherman prepares his catches for inspection. The butcher stands with his knife in hand and a lamb perched on his right shoulder. The milkman holds a sample of his milk, and the fisherman selects smiling fish from several baskets.

Each character is represented as an ideal: the butcher is strong and proud. He wears a clean, starched smock; his blade is razor sharp, and his lamb is healthy and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 254.

covered in soft, fluffy fur. The farmer, too, is muscular and proudly displays his basket filled with produce. He wears overalls, but they are clean and neat-fitting. The produce in his basket is big and round, not small and diseased. The milkman wears a neat cap and overcoat, while the inspector wears his neatly-pressed uniform. The fisherman wears a shirt patterned in the traditional nautical stripes and well-fitted slacks. His fish are long and fat, with smiles on their faces. This is not the scene of a country whose economy is in peril from depleted natural resources or poor financial investment; rather, it indicates a healthy, robust economy bursting with fattened livestock, abundant crops, and plentiful harvests. More importantly, it celebrates the diversity of the local agricultural community and the high standards required to meet in order to feed the residents of the nation's capital.

This is one panel in which the action is quite static; with the exception of the fisherman squatting along the lower right corner, the rest of the figures stand in a tightly grouped cluster. The four standing men are relatively the same height, are all broad-shouldered, and thus are all similar widths. In order to break up the cluster, Meière pivots the heads of the figures in groups of two: the butcher and milkman look towards the inspector, while the inspector and the farmer are focused down on the farmer's produce, causing the eyes to shift from the butcher and milkman to the inspector, then to the farmer's basket and finally to the fisherman. Perhaps because of the lack of action in this panel, we are instead treated to a glimpse of the artist's sense of humor. Two elements in this scene jump out unexpectedly: the fluffy lamb hanging limply over the butcher's right shoulder in a ridiculous manner and the wide,



comic smiles on the fish. These colorful touches add a gaiety to an otherwise somber work of art.

The availability and quality of food to Americans were other issues addressed by the federal relief programs enacted in the early 1930s. Congress appropriated funds to buy surplus crops from farmers, relieving farmers of surplus food, thus removing the burden of the volatile commodities market from the agricultural community as well as ensuring lower prices for consumers. Other programs introduced in the New Deal overhaul of the federal relief system were the food stamp program and the surplus milk plan. Food stamps made it possible for people on welfare to purchase fresh vegetables and fruits, and the surplus milk plan allowed relief families to purchase milk at a reduced cost: five cents a quart.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to dealing with hungry residents, Washington, D.C. had quality issues to tackle. In August of 1937, the District of Columbia announced it had taken steps to expand and improve its food and restaurant inspection services. Before the 1939 announcement, the last time the District government had audited its inspection services was in 1926, when only 10,000 inspections had taken place. By 1937, the District increased its staff considerably, as well as the number of inspections to 26,000.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, under pressure from consumers and farmers, the District's Health Department began an investigation into dairy operations around the District. The investigation included dairy production from uncertified dairies, as well as accusations of price-gauging from nearby producers, which forced District residents

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<sup>25</sup> Emily C. Davis, "America Builds Food Defense," *The Science News-Letter* 38, no. 11 (September 14, 1940), 171.

<sup>26</sup> "Food Inspections in D.C. Increase," *The Washington Post*, 24 August 1937, 13.

to pay high prices.<sup>27</sup> The subject of food inspection for a panel in the frieze reinforces the actions taken by the District to ensure that residents not only have access to high quality produce and foodstuffs, but are not overcharged for these necessary items.

### *Research*

The next panel, *Research*, celebrates the innovative work and new discoveries undertaken by scholars and researchers in the nation's capital (Figure 8). At the furthest left, a woman is seated at a table, peering into a microscope, while a standing man inspects the contents of a test tube, and another man listens to the heartbeat of an athlete or perhaps a soldier. At the furthest right a man stands and observes the scene, his left arm hanging in a cast. It is one of the smallest panels – there are only five figures – but Meière filled the scene with a variety of details, textures and movements. The gazes and poses of each character are different and break up the flatness of the scene. The woman is seated, and we see her right profile. She is bent over her microscope, and because of this, her gaze focuses downward while her right hand adjusts the sharpness of the microscope lens. The man standing behind her is posed frontally, but he must tilt the test tube in order to see its contents clearly, thus requiring his head to lift up and to the side, focusing his gaze at an angle towards the previous panels. The athlete/soldier also stands in a frontal pose, but his stance is much more severe than the scientist to his left, because he stares back at the viewer. The man inspecting the athlete/soldier faces the seated woman, so we see his left profile. Like the seated woman, he too lowers his face and gaze to inspect the athlete/soldier. As in other panels, the detailed props give away the majority of

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<sup>27</sup> “Milk Inquiry to Study Food Inspection,” *The Washington Post*, 2 May 1939, 3.

information about the scene and its characters. In *Research*, the focal point of the scene is the table laden with scientific equipment: a microscope, test tubes, and a round glass bleaker connected to the test tubes. Ensuring standard laboratory safety procedures, the standing man wears a pair of goggles, which pop out from his head. The athlete/soldier wears wide-legged slacks covered in a checkered pattern, and the man inspecting the athlete/soldier uses his stethoscope to listen to the beating heart.

One of the earliest budget cuts undertaken by the first Congress under Roosevelt's New Deal was for research and scientific scholarship. Despite the work and advocacy of an executive appointed Scientific Advisory Board, New Dealers viewed scientific research as an extravagant expense, and funding for scientific research remained low throughout the thirties. Meanwhile, the research activities of the Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes of Health moved out of the District of Columbia and into new facilities in the Maryland suburbs such as Greenbelt.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the social sciences and humanities experienced an increase in research and scholarship. With the opening of the Library of Congress Adams Annex and the Folger Library as well as the high unemployment rate, people – District residents and visitors – flocked to the open collections and reading rooms. According to James Truslow Adams, in the Library of Congress general reading room, “one sees the seats filled with silent readers, old and young, rich and poor, black and white, the executive and the laborer, the general and the private, the noted scholar and the schoolboy, all reading at their own library provided by their own democracy.”<sup>29</sup> The busy researchers depicted in the Municipal Building's frieze

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<sup>28</sup> Green, 411.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 412.

show that the sciences and pursuit of scholarly research are not dead in the District of Columbia. Despite the lack of funding and research opportunities inside the Beltway, the Smithsonian Institution remained committed to scientific research and produced annual reports as well as nationwide broadcasts of the show “The World is Yours,” detailing the histories of scientific innovations.<sup>30</sup> This scene could celebrate the continuing work pioneered by the Smithsonian Institution.

The furthest right figure is a somewhat floating character in the scheme of the panel. He stands behind the man inspecting the athlete/soldier, but doesn’t seem to take part in the action of the researchers. Instead, he serves a more transitional role as we progress from one panel to the next.

### *The Hospital*

The fourth panel, *The Hospital*, depicts a quiet scene in which a girl interred in a hospital is visited by three adults and a nurse (Figure 9). The girl lies on her bed with her clean and neatly-pressed covers tucked around her and her plaited hair falling across her shoulders. A well-dressed couple stands over her – perhaps her parents – while a nurse inspects the patient. Seated at the foot of the bed is another woman – another relative – and a suitcase. The scene is quiet and peaceful, not grave and solemn, thanks to the openness of the composition and the welcoming bouquet of full tulips and roses sitting atop the girl’s bedside table which brightens the room.

This particular panel has an interesting play of horizontal and vertical lines that help focus the viewer’s gaze on the tender moment between the parents and the girl. The heavy horizontal line of the hospital bed and the girl on it stretch out from the right to the left, echoing the repeating horizontal lines running through the bottom

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of the entire frieze. This strong emphasis on the horizontal is complimented by subtle verticals throughout the scene. The three figures standing behind the hospital bed create a formidable vertical line, that is complimented by the vertical blinds or windows located behind the standing group, running across the length of the scene. Other details that engage the horizontal-vertical interplay are the lines of the suitcase and the tall legs of the bedside table. To add to this play between the horizontal and vertical, Meière has included a woman sitting at the foot of the bed; her chair back curves slightly, breaking through the horizontal and vertical planes. Her posture in the chair is not straightforward; instead she lounges in a twisted pose with her right arm draped over the back of the chair, allowing us to see the profile of her face and legs but the front of her torso.

This idealized scene, like the others before and after, was not indicative of the reality facing the District's ailing and afflicted. Another area of civic programs in the District of Columbia lacking funds and proper staffing was the medical field. Medical staff was overworked and underpaid, and there were never enough doctors or nurses to treat the growing number of patients in Washington's hospitals. Statistics and data were reported in newspaper articles, but went unnoticed or were questioned by skeptics. While the national average workday for a nurse was eight hours, District of Columbia nurses routinely worked twelve-hour shifts.<sup>31</sup> And the problems did not stop with the staff. Washington's municipal hospital, built in 1929, was meant to accommodate three hundred patients, but as the population of the District grew by leaps and bounds, the municipal hospital was not expanded to meet the growing demands. By 1934, the hospital accommodated an average 691 patients a day, and in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 449.

1935, the average patient load was 744 per day. Such conditions gave way to horror stories of inadequate care, mistreatment of patients' cases, and less than acceptable standards of cleanliness and hygiene among the staff, rooms, and equipment.<sup>32</sup> Much like the other panels, *The Hospital*, presents an idealized version of a hospital scene. The patient rests in her own comfortable and clean room, attended to by a nurse in a starched uniform and cap. The suitcase indicates either the patient or her visitors will remain in the hospital at least overnight; she will receive full medical attention and will stay under a doctor's care until she has made a full recovery. The apparel of the standing couple denotes they are at least upper-middle class, and it may be deduced that the hospital is in good condition and provides quality care if the couple has decided to send their daughter to it for her medical treatment.

#### *Convalescent and Old People's Homes*

The fifth panel, *Convalescent and Old People's Homes* (Figure 10), is very similar in theme to the previous panel, *The Hospital*. It is a smaller scene: there are only four figures, and it is presented as more of a photographic scene rather than a scene with action or movement. Three patients are grouped together with an attending nurse. To the left is a gentleman wearing a belted robe and leaning on a pair of crutches. Moving to the right is the nurse, wearing her uniform and carrying a tray of medicine. Next to the nurse stands an elderly gentleman who wears a sort of dressing jacket and leans on a cane. Below the elderly gentleman is an elderly woman who rests in a wheelchair.

Unlike the previous panel, there is less emphasis on the horizontal-vertical relationship and more emphasis on the tightly-grouped composition which features a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 450.

variety of shapes and angles. The robe of the furthest left gentleman is made of various vertical lines: wide ones along the bottom half of his robe and thinner lines for the collar and cuff trim. These lines are mimicked in the folds of the elderly woman's robe, but her profile position allows us to see the lining of her robe, which features a horizontal patterning. Out of the three standing figures, the nurse is the only one who stands completely upright, forming a vertical line as the center of the composition. Since both gentlemen to her left and right lean on crutches or a cane, their bodies are slightly stooped, creating curves that slope inward, framing the little group. The semi-circular composition is strengthened by the large circular wheels of the wheelchair, created by concentric circles, as well as by the slightly lowered gazes of the figures.

The theme of elderly care was relatively new at the time the frieze was created, both as a subject in art and the American conscious. By the earlier 1920s, interest to provide support and care to the elderly gained momentum on the state level. As early as 1923, several state legislatures passed old age pension bills, and as more states considered the issue, the movement reached the federal level. Between the years 1927 and 1934, several old age security bills were introduced in Congress. With the passing of the Social Security Act of 1935, a "contributory old age annuity scheme" officially recognized the importance of caring for the nation's aging population.<sup>33</sup> Within the Social Security Act, the old age security program featured two components: Title I, which addressed the provision of medical assistance to those who are ill and those whose age has debilitated them to a point where they can no

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<sup>33</sup> Grace Abbott, "The Social Security Act and Relief," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 4, no. 1 (December, 1936), 46.

longer care for themselves; and Title VIII, which addressed the establishment of pensions provided to the elderly through public taxes.<sup>34</sup>

The necessity for dignified, quality care of the aging is reinforced in Meière's panel. The quiet scene presents a reassuring and welcoming place where the elderly can be looked after by attentive nurses. Such a place provides the kind of care and support families want for their aging parents and grandparents, and it relieves the families of the daily struggles such an undertaking causes. Meière's panel shows that the elderly can be cared for in a way that honors their dignity and shoulders what had historically been the burden of each family.

### *Relief*

The next panel depicts a scene in a welfare office: two social workers assist two families representing two different social classes (Figure 11). There is a female social worker, standing and monitoring the scene, while a male social worker sits at a desk. He currently assists the family of a farmer. The farmer stands, hand in hand, wearing bib overalls. His wife wears a simple dress, and their young daughter carries a doll in her right hand as she approaches the social worker's desk. Waiting behind the farmer's family is a middle class couple and their infant. The father stands over his wife, wearing a sharp double-breasted suit, while his wife, seated, wears an elegant dress while embracing her baby.

Meière manages to fit seven figures in the panel, and avoids crowding by making the central figure stand out. The criss-cross patterning of the farmer's wife (the central figure) contrasts to the seeming solid textiles of the other figures, that

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<sup>34</sup> Edwin E. Witte, "Old Age Security in the Social Security Act," *The Journal of Political Economy* 45, no. 1 (February, 1937), 1.



allows the eyes to rest immediately on her and then move from the social workers, sweeping across to the families. Although the figures are faceless, the details in each figure's apparel and body language give away much information. The two social workers are serious about their work, but not unkind. The farmer and his family stand humble, while the businessman and his wife dote on their baby. Despite the heavy horizontal emphasis, Meière provides a sense of depth. Each figure blends into the next, but with Meière's intense use of bas- and haute-relief, we can locate each figure within the composition.

Meière's welfare scene, though hopeful and positive, did not faithfully represent the experiences of District residents. During the thirties, welfare programs and social workers in the District of Columbia underwent harsh criticism and funding cuts. Many accused social workers of being lazy, and even though the social workers complained of low pay and heavy caseloads (an average of 140 families per social worker in 1937), there existed rumors throughout the city that the social workers exaggerated the situation.<sup>35</sup> Meière depicts a less-threatening view of a welfare office; the scene is quiet and orderly. The families wait patiently, and the ratio of social workers-to-families seems balanced. The scene also shows that welfare assistance is not solely a benefit for the poor and unemployed. Both families represented appear healthy, not starving. Instead of representing the familiar welfare scene of workers handing out food stamps and bedding to suffering children and parents, we see a farmer applying for agricultural subsidies and a businessman applying for a loan to start his own business. In this light, the welfare assistance program seems much less bleak and more diversified too than the rumors accounted.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 455.

### *Penal Institutions*

The seventh panel, *Penal Institutions* (Figure 12), depicts three male convicts as they harvest, weed, and fertilize a crop of vegetables, potatoes, or a similar type of produce. As they engage in this agricultural work, they are monitored by an officer, who stands near their baskets bursting with produce. The officer, wearing a uniform double-breasted suit and hat stands at attention and never takes his eyes off the convicts. The three convicts are all dressed similarly, wearing overalls, rolled-up shirts, and boots.

The composition follows a sort of zigzagging pattern, complimenting the diagonal frame along the right hand side of the panel, while the standing officer forms a vertical frame to the left hand side. The first convict (moving left to right) bends over the bed he is weeding, and his body rises into an arch. This arch shape is emphasized by the vertical patterning of his overalls, allowing the eye to travel up his figure, and – aided by his lowered gaze – down to the kneeling convict. The kneeling convict digs up the vegetables, his right arm reaching toward the earth and his left ready to grasp the produce. Standing behind the kneeling convict is the third, ready to fertilize the soil. The third convict's torso twists towards the other two, ready to dump the contents of the heavy box. His body arches into the group, contrasting the arch of the first convict.

The subject of prisons and other kinds of correctional facilities was not uncommon in New Deal art projects, though the subject appeared in works commissioned most often for prisons only. Prison complexes provided plenty of empty wall space for New Deal art commissions, and the nature of these correctional

facilities paired well with the renewal ideologies of the New Deal policies. As such, the theme of punishment and crime was unsuitable for prison mural subject matter. Instead, prison commissions focused on what WPA Administrator Audrey McMahon described as the communication of “constructive and corrective value.”<sup>36</sup> Because prison subject matter was rarely used in commissions outside correctional facilities, Meière’s choice of using it in a panel for the frieze is unusual. She may have been inspired by the murals commissioned for New York’s Rikers Island between 1935 and 1937, which were created by three of her colleagues: Ben Shahn, Harold Lehman, and Anton Refregier. In each of the proposed designs and completed murals, these artists focused on the positive aspects of the American penal system, emphasizing the redemptive activities promoted by the correctional facility. Labor was an essential component to the rehabilitation system, as it provided good, honest work to the convicts, teaching them the value of hard work and its importance in society. Meière’s panel expresses these ideas, as it presents a scene where three men are in the process of turning their lives around, literally working their way up from being outcasts to members of society.

### *Children’s Court*

The last panel, *Children’s Court*, represents an adoption process as two would-be parents apply and fill out the paperwork necessary to adopt a child (Figure 13). Their potential son stands shyly next to the desk of the social worker who reviews the couple’s file, ready for approval. This is an intimate scene, revealing the hope and compassion of the couple as they lean tenderly toward the boy, who nervously tucks his left arm behind his back to hold his right arm. The father gazes

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<sup>36</sup> Park, 55.

toward the boy, lowering his chin so that his head makes a diagonal line to the boy's head. The mother gazes past the boy toward the files being reviewed by the social worker, but the angle of her head also points toward the boy, making him the focal point of the scene. The social worker looks down at the couple's file, forcing her head down in the direction toward the desk and boy. The curved design along the left edge of the panel matches the curve of the mother's body, framing the scene, while the slight bend of the social worker forms a contrasting frame along the right edge.

Children's welfare had been a delicate issue in Washington, D.C. since the beginning of the twentieth century, and over the course of the century, various charitable organizations and associations worked to improve living conditions and adoption processes for orphans, as well as to eradicate juvenile delinquency. Placement was a serious problem, and throughout the first half of the century, more than half the total of orphaned children in the District were unable to find homes and were forced to live in the orphanage institutions.<sup>37</sup> Delinquency was also a major issue, and the city's juvenile court system was constantly busy, reviewing and monitoring the cases of often orphaned juveniles who were habitual offenders of the law. Eventually, city residents desired preventative measures as well as rehabilitative ones, and developed a program focused on preventing juvenile delinquency before it began. Unfortunately, Congress voted against funding such a program, enabling the system to worsen over time.<sup>38</sup> As in the other panels, Meière presents an idealized scene in which the orphaned child is shy but not a delinquent. He is polite and dressed neatly. Other details refute the well-known problems of Washington's

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 445.

orphan and adoption system. Over the years, Washington couples became reluctant to adopt given the risks for temporary boarders and children passed from home to home. Older children were especially prone to reside with families for short amounts of time, while infants were easier to adopt.<sup>39</sup> The boy in this scene is an older child – possibly between the ages of seven and eleven – and would have been more susceptible to a temporary boarding. But still the parents are determined to adopt him and care for him as their own son. The panel shows an intimate and tender adoption process.

### **Formal Elements of the Frieze**

As a work in the Art Deco style, Meière's *Health and Welfare* exemplifies the streamlined geometric style of the 1930s. Each scene is pared down to reveal only the basic details of each figure and theme: faces are reduced to oval shapes, hairstyles are generalized to cover heads as if they were caps or hats, entire figures are rarely represented as most characters melt into the next, details in the apparel are minimized to repeating patterns of geometric forms, and even the human forms are shaped by geometric, straight lines.

While there is a strong relationship between horizontal and vertical elements, the horizontal elements are emphasized. This is not just because the frieze is wider than it is tall. In almost every panel, Meière included repeating horizontal lines. The horizontal lines are the most pronounced along the bottom of the entire frieze, resembling vents or heating/cooling grates, and create a fluid continuity from panel to panel, making it one complete work. Vertical elements occur frequently in the upper registers of the frieze and often indicate architectural elements, such as concrete or

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 164.

glass blocks in the *Health Services in the Schools* panel and as blinds or windows in *The Hospital* panel. This horizontal-vertical relationship mimics Wyeth's Art Deco architecture, which uses heavy horizontal bands separated by vertical lines created by repeating series of tall windows. The heavy horizontal emphasis of Meière's frieze acknowledges the low roof of the courtyard as it runs the entire length of the western wall. Within the complete frieze, each scene is framed by compositional devices such as using the postures of the figures positioned along the outer edges of each panel.

### **Thematic Elements of the Frieze**

The subject matter of Meière's frieze makes it both typical and unique of WPA projects. As a federal program under Roosevelt's New Deal Administration, the WPA projects focused on promoting the New Deal objectives, the primary objective being relief through purposeful work.<sup>40</sup> In a statement concerning work relief, President Roosevelt claimed, "We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destruction but also their self-respect, their self-reliance, and courage and determination."<sup>41</sup> Because of this focus, works of art funded by the WPA often represented the redemptive powers of labor, specifically the physical labor of agriculture and industry. Scenes of men and women, side-by-side, planting and harvesting healthy crops could be found throughout the country, as well as images of muscular men mining, logging, and building the roads and bridges that were essential to New Deal relief projects.<sup>42</sup> Though they were not direct references

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Park, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Melosh, 57.

to the relief measures passed by Congress, these themes provided subtle reminders of the money surged into the national economy by New Deal projects. In this way, Meière's frieze is similar in that it represents the services available to the public as a result of supposed federal funds.

*Health and Welfare* is a unique work of WPA art in that it engages directly with District residents. The District of Columbia never experienced significant industrial or manufacture economies, and it never existed as the center of an export/import trade such as cities like New York, Chicago, or Boston. Instead, the District's economy has always been the public sector (government), and, by the mid-twentieth century, tourism.<sup>43</sup> Images of agricultural labor, mining, and dam-building were not direct references to the daily life experienced by District residents. Rather than celebrate the benefits of the Farm Bill as experienced by farmers in the form of subsidized crops, the frieze represents the benefits of the Farm Bill passed on to the consumers: improved quality of produce, increased supplies, and lower prices.

As suggested throughout the thematic discussions of each panel, social welfare available to residents of the District of Columbia was greatly lacking in funds, public opinion, facilities, and general support during the 1930s. Such neglect amid the nucleus of the New Deal administration surprised many; with the energy surrounding Roosevelt's presidency, hundreds of eager New Dealers flocked to the capital in hopes of joining the crusade. During the decade, Washington experienced a building boom that included such important and celebrated buildings as the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the completion of the Federal Triangle, National Archives,

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<sup>43</sup> Dennis E. Gale, *Washington, D.C.: Inner-City Revitalization and Minority Suburbanization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 10.

Library of Congress Adams Annex, Folger Shakespeare Library, the Department of Agriculture, Longworth House of Representatives Office Building, Supreme Court Building, a new headquarters for the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, the National Gallery of Art, and city-wide greensward development.<sup>44</sup> Projects like these enhanced the beauty and reception of the nation's capital, but these additions rarely benefited the city's residents; instead these sites were designed with tourists – American and foreign – in mind and soon became part of the myth of Washington as a national symbol. Visitors during this time reported back home of the cultural vitality and cosmopolitan sensibility of Washington – direct results of the impact the New Dealers had on their new city.<sup>45</sup> Just blocks beyond the white marble veneer of the Capitol lay terrible living conditions and the medical, educational, and financial neglect of thousands.

During the 1930s, the average population throughout every American city (with the one exception of Los Angeles) decreased by roughly 20% while the population of Washington, D.C. increased by about 36%. The majority of new residents were those who arrived in the nation's capital hoping to work for the new government, and developers responded with hundreds of new homes and apartment buildings. Unfortunately, the poor residents could not afford to participate in the boom and many were driven from their smaller homes as land values and rent fees skyrocketed. By 1937, thousands of families were living within blocks to the east of the Capitol in slums and shantytowns amid squalid conditions; most had no heating, no plumbing, and no electricity, and those were the fortunate families. Even more

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 397.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 441.



families were confined to dwell in alleys, behind the once-stately homes lining the streets surrounding Capitol Hill.<sup>46</sup> When assistance was offered, it came too late and in insufficient amounts; a public housing project began in 1940 to build public housing units constructed more than three thousand units, but these three thousand units housed only one-tenth of the population living in the alleys and shanties.<sup>47</sup>

Although stories of neglect and Third World living conditions existed throughout the city, the government was slow to respond, a surprising fact given the New Deal promise to improve the lives of Americans via social welfare and relief programs. The District of Columbia lagged behind other American cities in emphasizing its social responsibility to its residents; it struggled to keep up with the ever-increasing demands by the federal government to do more and provide more with less funding. Though Congress held the District's purse strings, Congressional delegates were disengaged from the lives of District residents. As Constance McLaughlin Green states in her book, *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950*, "Texans, Nebraskans, Indianians (*sic*), and South Carolinians, however humane individually, could not be expected to feel and rarely showed profound concern for a community that was not their own; for them Washington's welfare was an abstraction when not an irritating chore foisted upon them at the cost of more rewarding assignments."<sup>48</sup> The situation was not helped by the fact that the nation's perception of Washington, D.C. did not extend beyond its role as the seat of the federal government, creating a paradox in which the voters and legislators in charge of the District's residents often did not recognize the residents' needs.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 397.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 398.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 455.

Meière's panels, with their sleek aesthetic and redemptive subject matter, recognize the needs of the District's residents. Her frieze very stylishly presents to the District the kinds of services to which its residents ought to have been entitled. Unfortunately, there is a rupture between Meière's idealized scenes and the reality of life in the nation's capital. More than anything, this rupture informs and complicates our understanding of the frieze, as well as the hypocritical nature of American welfare and politics.

## CONCLUSION

### **The Frieze Then**

Determining how *Health and Welfare* functions as a work of art is not a simple task. The frieze must be considered as both a work of art and a work of public art. As a work of art, *Health and Welfare* enhances the Municipal Building by adding beauty to it, but it can also stand on its own as a work separate from the building. When it was installed (in 1941), it was a work of contemporary art in that it depicted what would have been scenes familiar to those who viewed it and executed in what would have been a contemporary style, Art Deco. The apparel, hairstyles, furnishings, and situations were all concurrent and exhibited in the Art Deco style, which the viewers would have seen in the designs in local restaurants, shops, clubs, and advertisements.

To determine the frieze's success as a work of public art, it is necessary to consider the work's audience at the time of the installation. The frieze's most frequent viewers can be organized in two categories: 1) those who visited the Municipal Building to transact business of some sort with the municipal government; and 2) those employed by the District of Columbia and worked in the Municipal Building. Both communities are represented throughout the panel scenes: families and residents receive welfare assistance, adopt children, and receive medical treatment; municipal employees provide assistance, treat patients, and inspect

produce. On a superficial level, *Health and Welfare* provides a work of art to which its audience could relate to by representing the familiar and mundane. On a deeper and more important level, *Health and Welfare* celebrates and honors its audience by actually representing its audience. In this vein, *Health and Welfare* does work as public art; it recognized its District constituents and attempted to relate to them.

Given the era's emphasis on civic duty, social responsibility, and the activities in which participation guaranteed citizenship, *Health and Welfare* operates as both a work of validation and subversion to the New Deal promotion of democracy. In the panel scenes, Washington, D.C. residents receive the services and participate in the programs befitting a democratic society, with one exception. That one exception happened to be the most prized patriotic duty and right yet one unavailable to the residents of Washington, D.C.: voting. The right to receive welfare assistance when necessary, to receive medical treatment when sick, and to be assured quality nourishment when hungry are all depicted in *Health and Welfare*; the right to choose who governs the people is not. Was this an oversight by Meière? Was it an omission required by the Commission of Fine Arts? Or was it a deliberate gesture on the part of the artist? Although attempts to locate the details of the Commission's competition guidelines have been unsuccessful, it seems unlikely the Commission of Fine Arts would have requested such a notion. Meière's herself offered no opinion, and she rarely made political statements – verbally or in her work. However, given her education and experience, it is unlikely that the omission escaped her attention.

When the frieze is examined within the context of its location, its funding, its iconography, and the tensions between the federal government and the residents of

the District of Columbia, it creates more questions than it provides answers. The frieze is located in a building which the District of Columbia was forced to construct when the federal government kicked the District offices out of its original home in order to make room for more federal offices as the federal government expanded. The District was required to pay the federal government millions of dollars to purchase the land for the new Municipal Center, as well as fund the construction project. Although the frieze was funded by money from the WPA – a federal aid program – the money was a loan and was expected to be repaid by the District of Columbia. If the frieze’s iconography was predetermined by a federal agency (WPA, Commission of Fine Arts or otherwise), the frieze could be interpreted as a federal attempt to pacify the residents of the District of Columbia. The frieze could be a stand-in in place of the services the residents should have received. Rather than provide welfare for the District residents, the government provided a work of art that would create an image of an orderly, democratic society.

### **The Frieze in the Present Day**

In the year 2008 the frieze is problematic. Its scenes are now familiar, but the style and details give it a vintage quality, and as such no longer functions effectively as a piece of art but as an architectural embellishment, as material culture, and as an historical document of its own time and place. Meière would probably not have regarded such circumstances as a terrible problem – it was in the nature of architectural sculpture to embellish and enhance. Decoration to Meière was a necessary and integral part to the entire structure. She wrote that “man’s impulse toward the decoration of all that touches his life, all that he wears, uses and lives in, is

so universal that it seems that it can be accepted as a fundamental part of human nature.”<sup>49</sup> In defense of architects who built with the inclusion of decorative elements in mind, Meière stated that an architect does so “because he is an artist who designs for aesthetic enjoyment as well as a builder who must build adequately for physical needs...”<sup>50</sup>

True to Meière’s words, her *Health and Welfare* frieze, with its sparkling brightly-painted scenes, would have provided aesthetic enjoyment as well as a meaning to the daily visitors who viewed it. That being said, Meière would likely have been greatly disappointed to see the current conditions of her work. The frieze still occupies the east wall of the courtyard in the Municipal Building, but the offices housed within the Municipal Building have changed. The majority of the space within the building is taken up by the Department of Motor Vehicles, and its subsequent traffic violations department. The services depicted in the panel scenes are no longer offered in the building anymore, rendering the frieze’s themes obsolete. More significant is the neglect of the frieze itself. The courtyard is no longer open – to visitors or municipal employees. The doors leading out to the courtyard are chained and monitored by guards who, when asked, can not remember a time when the public was allowed to enjoy the courtyard. One may catch a glimpse of the frieze through the windows, but this is only possible during the winter months, as several trees have been planted directly in front of the frieze, obscuring it during the summer and autumn. The most unfortunate aspect of the work in its contemporary state is its condition. When the courtyard was open, it was used as a place for smoking breaks.

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<sup>49</sup> Hildreth Meière, “The Question of Decoration,” *The Architectural Forum* 57, no. 1 (July, 1932), 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

The daily exposure to smoke as well as to other pollutants common to a rapidly developing urban area have led to the dulling of the once-brilliant colors and the collection of grime in the cracks and crevices of the relief construction. Although the building itself has been placed on a list of those historic sites in danger of neglect and damage, the frieze is not listed as a separate component in need of conservation. If *Health and Welfare* is cut off from public view, it will fade from public memory. Because of these issues, the frieze has begun to fail as both a work of art and a work of public art. Even more troubling is the prospect that the District of Columbia will allow the panels to fall completely into disrepair, negating all the hope and encouragement of the work's initial intention, and reducing *Health and Welfare* to another neglected resident of Washington, D.C.

But there exists a glimmer of hope. During the course of researching and writing this document, the frieze was suggested as a potential addition to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It will take a considerable amount of time before we will know the outcome of this discussion, but its consideration will hopefully generate national interest in both the frieze and Meière's other works. Though this thesis has only scratched the surface of the frieze's issues as well as Meière's artistic talent, it is my hope that it will be the first of many more to address these topics, which are essential to understanding American public art of the twentieth century.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Hildreth Meière, *Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 2: Nathan C. Wyeth, Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1939. Source: Author's photograph.



Figure 3: Nathan C. Wyeth, Municipal Building, detail. Washington, D.C. 1939. Source: Author's Photograph.





Figure 4: Nathan C. Wyeth, Municipal Building, detail. Washington, D.C. 1939. Source: Photograph of Author.



Figure 5: Klimo and Hildreth Meière. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 6: Hildreth Meière, *Health Services in the Schools* from *Health and Welfare*. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1939. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 7: Hildreth Meière, *Inspection from Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 8: Hildreth Meière, *Research from Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 9: Hildreth Meière, *The Hospital from Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 10: Hildreth Meière, *Convalescent and Old People's Home* from *Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 11: Hildreth Meière, *Relief* from *Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 12: Hildreth Meière, *Penal Institutions* from *Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.



Figure 13: Hildreth Meière, *Children's Court* from *Health and Welfare*. Terra cotta. Municipal Building. Washington, D.C. 1941. Source: Artist's estate.

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