

The Ravenna Company and American Mural Art

When Georgia O’Keeffe sought to name the artistic project that she and her generation were caught up in, the catchphrase she coined was “the Great American Thing,” the effort somehow to make the creative energy of the visual arts embody and express the dynamism of the nation itself, a veritable new country of unfenced space and diverse peoples, now for the first time flexing its formidable industrial muscles and insisting that it be recognized as a figure of consequence on the world stage. While O’Keeffe, like her mentor/husband Alfred Stieglitz, acknowledged the angst and alienation which were the inevitable burdens of modernity, she was also aware of a certain celebratory tendency in the American arts, which might lift anonymous crowds to the dizzying heights of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings or thrill them with the electric poetry of Broadway and Times Square. Nowhere was this positive aesthetic energy more fully evident than in American public art of the first half of the twentieth-century, when the nation’s visual culture borrowed shamelessly from industrialized popular iconography yet individuated and stylized its creations sufficiently to avoid most of the censure Walter Benjamin would visit upon “the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction.” And right at the close of this period, the abstract expressionists added their energy to this mix of creative talent. This is the half century during which American mural art achieved its maturity. It was also the period when the Ravenna Mosaic Company, headed first by Paul and then by Arno Heuduck, earned the distinction of working with some of America’s finest muralists.

Generally speaking, American art of the nineteenth century won its laurels for achievements in easel painting and lithography, often in the genres of portraiture and landscape. Artists carried their sketchbooks from the fog-drenched valleys of upstate New York to the banks of the Mississippi or Missouri, and eventually to the sublime peaks of the Rocky Mountains, so memorably evoked by the vibrant canvases of Thomas Moran. The painterly muse was less often drawn to architectural space, most obviously because — except in the case of a few east-coast cities — there was relatively little architectural space which cried out for decorative attention. Only in the latter decades of the century did a few painters, among them Austin Abbey, Constantino Brumide, Edwin Blanshfield, John La Farge, and John Singer Sargent, begin to distinguish themselves specifically as muralists.

Abbey gained fame in New York through his friendship with Stanford White and Augustus Saint Gaudens. Brumide is remembered for his work at the Capitol in D.C. — the celebration of the citizen-soldier in “Cincinnatus Called from the Plough” and the sacralization of our founding father in “The Apotheosis of George Washington.” Blanchfield not only decorated wall space in the Library of Congress but spread mural art to the provinces with work at state capitols in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota. La Farge and Sargent both executed important mural commissions in Boston, one

at Trinity Church, the other at the Boston Public Library, together reasserting the dual priorities of churchly and civic composition which would carry over into the next century. But the true showcase of American public art at the end of the nineteenth century was the grandiose Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Commemorating the 400th anniversary of America's so-called "discovery" by Columbus, the Exposition called forth the most extravagant dramatizations of national identity.

For better and worse, the Columbian Exposition brought public art to the center of national consciousness. Saint-Gaudens' "Diana," a naked goddess 18 feet tall who flaunted her charms from the top of the Agricultural Building, probably set the most tongues wagging. But Daniel French's "Republic," another gigantic maiden, though more modestly clad in a Roman toga, loomed almost four times taller than Diana, rising spear-in-hand to dominate the Court of Honor from the middle of a man-made lake. If these forms failed to whet the visitors' artistic appetites, they might turn instead to the Venus de Milo carved in chocolate, a knight on horseback cobbled together from prunes, or a huge map of the USA made out of pickles. More forward-looking, of course, was the stylized illumination of buildings, waterways, and fountains supplied by Chicago Edison and Commonwealth Electric. And the buildings themselves were meant to be art objects — especially the Transportation Building of Louis Sullivan or the Art Institute of Chicago, designed by John Wellborn Root. At every turn, the Exposition was alive to the possibility of making public space into a theatricalized civic tableau.

Meanwhile, far from the shores of Lake Michigan, the ancient art of glass mosaic fabrication was enjoying an unexpected revival. Although mosaic art had never ceased to be practiced in Europe and the Near East, it had declined so sharply by the mid-nineteenth century that most work was devoted to restoration. This state of affairs began to change in the 1850s, after Antonio Salviati opened a new production site in Murano, Italy, from which tesserae were exported worldwide. The Salviati workshop also pioneered a new production technique, the so-called "reverse" or "mirror" method of assembly, which turned a labor-intensive craft into a process approximating mass production. Simply put, the mirror method allows mosaic shards to be glued **face down** at the fabrication site to large, numbered sheets of paper (hence the "mirror" effect during assembly). These prefabricated units are then shipped to the job site in relatively large segments which can be attached intact to walls, domes, and arches. This remarkably enhances efficiency in the installation process.



Mosaic Assembly: "Mirror" Method

The new method reduced the cost of installation and led to the commissioning of

mosaic ornament at sites such as the Albert Memorial in London and Sacre Coeur Cathedral in Paris. But with relatively few exceptions, the undertow of European tradition pulled relentlessly backward, honoring obligations to maintain and refurbish prestigious historic sites rather than soliciting mosaic art as ornament for new buildings. In this respect, the German experience was somewhat exceptional, since a new generation of intellectual activists encouraged mosaic ornament as a highly appropriate complement to the “*Monumentalkunst*” they championed for the reborn German Empire. One such enthusiast for “monumentality” was cultural ideologue Richard Muther, who in his turn-of-the-century **Studien** insisted that pictorial art should never give priority to the “image in itself”; rather “painting should voluntarily accept fetters, in order to be part of a unified, symphonic art of space.” And what better sites might there be to practice this post-impressionist “symphonic art of space” than Germany’s great public buildings, some new and some newly refurbished, but all calculated to advertise the young nation’s growing prestige in Europe? Among the historic structures that were renovated, none was more important than the Aachen Cathedral, virtually the shrine of Karl der Grosse, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, who was revered during Germany’s “*Gruenderzeit*” as the perfect exemplar of imperial power. Mosaic work was resumed at the Aachen Cathedral in 1882 when Italian craftsmen restored the mosaic of Christ and the twenty-four sages in the cupola of this building. It was in this climate of opinion that the Puhl-Wagner firm, parent of the Ravenna Mosaic Company, was born. When the new century brought further mosaic commissions at Aachen, this time original work decorating the ambulatories of the church, Puhl-Wagner participated in the decorative project. The ambulatories were treated in the fashionable “*Jugendstil*,” a stylistic companion to modernism and forerunner to the American expression of modernism now generally known as art deco.



Aachen Cathedral, Puhl-Wagner

For the craftsmen of the Ravenna Company, however, the transition to modernism was gradual, hardly at all evident in the earliest commission of the American firm, which entailed work with German-born painter/mosaicist John von Wicht in the massive Saint Louis Cathedral, St. Louis, MO. Indeed, this first work seemed to flow almost inevitably out of Puhl-Wagner’s commitment to courtly and ecclesiastical projects in Europe. Later, the Heuducks would make contact with various modes of the modernist movement through their association with Hildreth Meiere, Winold Reiss, and Richard Haines as well as many lesser known muralists.

Mosaic art is virtually unique in that it accords an almost equal place to conceptual

design and to practical craft. Craftsmen, like the Heuducks, generally play no role in originating the images they install on the walls, domes, and archways of public buildings. This is the work of professional artists, muralists like Meiere, or Reiss, or Haines, who differ from easel painters only in that they paint on broader canvases and execute site-specific designs. But mosaic is crucially different from fresco or oil painting because, in the case of mosaic, the task of translating the artist's cartoon into the opaque glass image ready for installation is a much more active process, requiring conceptual as well as manual skills. While oil painting allows for graduated shading, mosaics are particulate — shards of discrete materials which counterpoint rather than blend with one another. Moreover, there is no equivalent in mosaics to the layering of one color upon another which is the essence of work in oil. Hence the master mosaic craftsman is an artist in his own right, essentially reinterpreting in another medium the images provided him by the muralist with whom he works. The Heuducks, both father and son, had the good fortune to work with several very accomplished American muralists and enter into successful creative partnerships with each of them.

The Ravenna craftsmen began their work in the Saint Louis Cathedral by executing the designs of John von Wicht, a Berlin-educated artist, who had expatriated to the USA in the same year as Paul Heuduck. Settling in New York City, von Wicht worked for two years as a lithographer before taking up mosaic art and associating with the Ravenna Company in the Saint Louis Cathedral project. He would later win modest fame in American abstract art of the 1930s and 1940s. Von Wicht designed gold-leaf, mosaic murals in the Saint Louis Cathedral for the arch leading into the sanctuary and for the entire narthex of this huge Romanesque building.



Sanctuary, St. Louis Cathedral Basilica, John von Wicht

Though stylistically memorable, von Wicht's designs for the arch which frames the sanctuary are entirely traditional, both in their figuration and the themes they elaborate. The design situates Christ at the pinnacle of the arch, making him the focal point of world history, the figure towards whom Old Testament prophets and patriarchs ascend, around whom New Testament figures cluster, and from whom the saints and lawgivers of the Christian era continue in solemn procession. Faithful to Byzantine precedent, which emphasized the divinity of Christ, not his humanity, this Christ is a judge and lawgiver, the "Pantocrator," the Christ of the Second Advent, who according to the promise of the

Nicene Creed would “come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Though clad more like a monk than a king, he is clearly an authority figure, who holds the world in the palm of his left hand, while raising the other in a gesture which suggests both blessing and warning. His stern, watchful eyes intently survey the whole of creation, including the congregants who have come to worship in this church. Frozen outside of space and time in an envelope of pure gold, this Christ has little in common with the “Suffering Servant” of Western art, whose broken and disfigured body has experienced the indignity of crucifixion. The saints and sages bonded to the arch which Christ dominates convey the same unworldly calm, while inhabiting the same transcendent golden world. Aside from new world saints, like Rose of Lima, who would never appear in a European cathedral, this array of sages and holymen is completely certified by precedent, as is their facial expression, their posture, their drapery, and the icons which identify them. In this mosaic display, there is no intention to be “original”; the design pays homage to a millennium of anonymous artists and craftsmen who decorated Christian churches of Europe and the Near East.

The mosaics of the narthex offer more imaginative flexibility, while they glorify the cathedral’s patron, King Louis IX of France. Von Wicht’s early training at Berlin’s Royal School for Fine and Applied Arts served him well in fashioning ornament for the narthex, which effectively combines the enticing curves of art nouveau with the abstract shapes



Narthex, St. Louis Cathedral Basilica, John von Wicht

and vivid color fields of modernists like Cezanne, Mondrian, and Kandinsky, all of whom shaped von Wicht’s development. The artist’s biographer quotes from a memoir in which von Wicht recalls how he studied flowers and organic growth, listening carefully to a teacher who spoke “of circular movements, of space between forms, and of equilibrium.” This sensitivity is apparent in the narthex, where a spiraling vine spreads from the ceiling down each of four walls, both connecting and segmenting off various dramatic tableaux that memorialize the achievements of King Louis. Meanwhile, in vivid counterpoint, great masses of rough-textured, scintillating gold-leaf tesserae lend an element of abstraction to

a design which might otherwise be thought not greatly different from a Morris tapestry. Several small panels are completely non-figural, shaping various shades of gold-leaf into oval patterns which interact with one another in the manner of “orphist” and “synchronist” abstractions of the nineteen-teens.

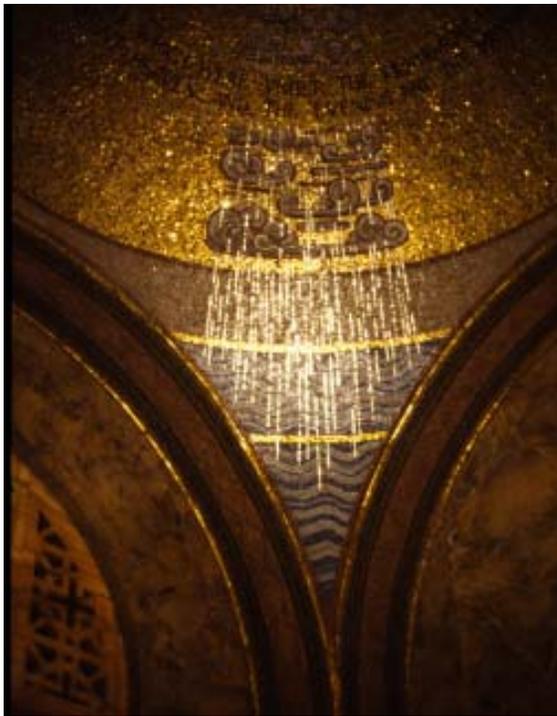
The theme of von Wicht’s work in the narthex is staunchly conservative, in keeping with the dogmatic rigor of 1920s’ Catholicism. Grace descends from on high, carried to Saint Louis’ kingdom by the spiritual life force which the vine represents (“I am the vine, you are the branches,” says the relevant Scriptural text). The individual tableaux suggest that we must look to King Louis, God’s viceroy in the world, for models of behavior, whether we are fostering education (represented in the founding of the Sorbonne), caring for the needy (depicted in the alms-giving images), or girding for war against the infidel. In all cases, wisdom comes from the past, made available by an incorruptible tradition. But in spite of the authoritarian cast of the narthex allegory, the spirit of this building is not quite that of the Aachen Cathedral, which assimilated so readily to the German imperium. By comparison, the Saint Louis Cathedral is an almost subversive structure, arrogantly asserting the claims of an immigrant church against the monied, propertied, and better educated elite of the city in the early decades of the 20th century. Of course, the intention of the imagery is to affiliate Catholicism with its own aristocratic past, represented locally by the French/Creole class which dominated the city in the days before Missouri’s statehood. By the turn of the 20th century, however, Catholicism had been completely marginalized by the Protestant, Yankee culture of New England, which came to power in the railway age, after a catastrophic Civil War had severed ties between St. Louis and Catholic New Orleans. Paradoxically, in von Wicht’s royalist imagery from the narthex, the melting pot culture of St. Louis, typified by Irish day laborers and Italian brick-makers, had found an iconography which legitimated its demand for recognition and status. In the work with John von Wicht, the Ravenna Company began a decorative project in the Saint Cathedral which would continue for the next half century. By the time it was pronounced complete in the 1980s, this building housed the largest display of mosaics in the world.

The Ravenna Company turned more decisively towards modernism in the late 1920s when the firm moved to New York and began working with Hildreth Meiere. Paul Heuduck collaborated with Meiere in three major commissions, both secular and ecclesiastical, beginning with the installations at Temple Emanu-El and Saint Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in uptown Manhattan. They also worked together at the Irving Trust Bank, now called the Bank of New York, which was one of Meiere’s most brilliant imaginative efforts. All three sites represent variations upon the mode of ornament known as art deco.

This term derives from the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925, though at this time the phrase “*style moderne*” was still preferred. The exposition was a state-of-the-art industrial design showcase, which one scholar has called “as much a theme park as a trade fair.” Its impact upon New York City was quickly felt because, just one year after the new design pavilions dazzled Paris, the Metropolitan Museum imported and staged a stripped-down version of

the French exhibit. Art deco named and consolidated a considerable body of design preferences which had been practiced in a more isolated way for the past quarter-century. One strain derives from the Cubist art of Picasso, Braque, and Ferdinand Leger: from this source comes the profusion of geometric figures, not just squares and rectangles, but trapezoids, octagons, ultra-severe triangles, and eventually curvilinear shapes as well. Another strain assimilates the energies of folk art, particularly the bright, high-contrast colors of peasant costumes and village carnivals. Such material had already been drawn into the art world by Ballets Russes, which performed in Paris before World War I. It also made its way into the crafts movement in Vienna, epitomized by the Wiener Werkstatte of Joseph Hoffman and Kolomon Moser. In the USA, this impulse would merge an interest in Native American art, now being brought to international prominence in the work of Mexican Renaissance muralists, like Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco, and David Siqueiros. Finally, there was an element of exoticism, chiefly associated with Egypt, and tied to the opening of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. This treasure trove led to the fetishizing of the sphinx, the ibis, and other exotic animals, as well as to an enthusiasm for gold ornament, epitomized in gold-leaf ceilings, gilded chair slats, and "Cleopatra earrings."

These influences from abroad inspired an America suddenly awake to futurity and national purpose. In spite of the crude xenophobia of the period and the surging stock-market bubble which burst at the end of the 1920s, this decade was a rich one for the American arts, the moment when visual culture began carving, painting, engineering, and fashioning through photography and cinema its unique perceptions of itself. As if con-



St. Bartholomew's, New York
Hildreth Meiere

sciously inaugurating a new epoch in the American arts, Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand launched the decade with their short film **Manhattan** (1921), which lyrically celebrated the rising New York City skyline while liberally quoting the anthems of her favorite son, Walt Whitman. Five years later, Georgia O'Keeffe offered painterly homage to skyscraper art in "The Sheldon with Sunspots." This skyline itself was marked by new masterpieces almost on an annual basis, as architectural wonders such as Van Alen's Chrysler Building and the gravity-defying Empire State Building, sprung up like mushrooms after a rain. Meanwhile, William Carlos Williams urged his countrymen to explore their own "peculiar and discoverable ground," which he started to map in his 1925 work, **In the American Grain**.

These forces worked in

various ways to shape the style of Hildreth Meiere, probably the most accomplished muralist to work in concert with the Ravenna Company. She designed for three of the firm's best known New York sites — Saint Bartholomew's Church, Temple Emanu-El, and the Irving Trust Bank, which is now the Bank of New York. All three installations show to advantage the crafts skills of Paul Heuduck. A native New Yorker, Meiere dated her



Narthex, St. Bartholomew's, Hildreth Meiere

interest in murals, says her daughter, from the time she “began studying drawing and painting at a private studio in Florence.” But her primary training was at New York's Art Students League and the Chicago Art Institute. More important still was her association with the architect Bertram Goodhue, an artist with Ecole de Beaux Arts' training who framed a style usually referred to as “classical modern.” Meiere and Goodhue first worked together in the Nebraska State Capitol

building at Lincoln, Nebraska. That was what recommended her to the firm of Goodhue Associates when they contracted to build Saint Bartholomew's in New York City.

This church at 57th and Sixth Avenue was the third structure to house the Episcopal community founded in 1835. It replaced a church of Gothic design, deliberately turning away from spires and pointed arches towards an architecture of domes which Rev. Leighton Parks, the guiding spirit of the new Saint Bartholomew's, thought best expressed “not the transcendence but the imminence of God, God dwelling among his people.” The decision to use glass mosaic followed logically upon the choice of a Romanesque structure, since Byzantine gold-leaf ornament was perfectly suited to the elegant interior domes, especially those of the narthex.

Though art deco was essentially a secular mode of ornament, more often associated with banks, theatres, and skyscrapers than with churches, its impact in the late 1920s and early 1930s was so powerful that sacred art accommodated to its inflections. Often, as in the case of Saint Bartholomew's, the modernist tendency is particularly evident in the narthex, the entrance hall whose physical space mediates between the street and the more sacred precincts reserved for worship. This space of entry, as we might think of it, is literally profane, i.e., *pro fanum*, which translates into English as “in front of the temple.” In other words, it is the most secular space of a building devoted to sacred purposes.

This is surely the case in the narthex of Saint Bartholomew's, where bright colors, strong contrasts, and the familiar zigzags of art deco prevail. The organizing motif of the

narthex mosaic display is “Creation,” a theme borrowed loosely from San Marco, which visually invokes the Book of Genesis. But parallels to the design scheme of Venice’s most famous cathedral quickly break down, since Meiere’s imagery, while respectful of Biblical reference points, owes its look to decorative modernism. The sinful, shame-ridden Adam



Narthex, St. Bartholomew’s, Hildreth Meiere

of Genesis has vanished, replaced by a figure who would fit readily into the world of Paul Manship’s Prometheus. Fauns cavort, birds perch, and sea creatures swim gracefully through architectural spaces occupied in traditional ecclesiastical ornament by angels, saints, and madonnas. By the same token, the cosmology panels, featuring golden icons of sun, moon, and stars, geometricized and emptied of most explicitly Biblical references, recall

Emerson, Channing, and Whitman at least as much as they remember orthodox Anglican theology. And the sun’s rays slash at fierce angles through a dark blue sky, asserting that fondness zigzag patterns which was a benchmark of New York modernism. Of course, the gold leaf background, which envelops and unifies the architectural space of the narthex, pays homage to “the golden smithies of the emperor,” who were the pride of ancient Byzantium. But even here Meiere remains married to spirit of modernism, since the shades of gold are brighter, more vivid, closer in some ways to the look of a theatre than the look of a church.

When Meiere and the Ravenna Company moved a few blocks further uptown, to Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue at 65th Street, the design issues were similar to those raised with the commission at Saint Bartholomew’s. How does one balance innovation and tradition? What decorative strategy respects the past without entombing the contemporary imagination?

Built in 1929 by the firm of Kohn, Butler, and Stein, Temple Emanu-El is a blend of Gothic and Romanesque elements, without the domes which are the most conspicuous architectural feature of Byzantium. Nevertheless, Meiere was commissioned to design glass mosaic ornament for the interior arches, perhaps to complement the stained glass windows fashioned by Louis Comfort Tiffany. The mosaics of the temple are basically geometric, intended to represent a meeting of East and West. In keeping with the Judaic distaste for “graven images,” the ornament of the sanctuary arch is largely non-figural, though it mingles abstract shapes with a number of traditional symbols from the Torah and

the Talmud. Even these are subordinate to the modernist feel of the entire ensemble. Gold leaf tesserae dominate, scintillating with such intensity as to make the whole sanctuary vivid with light. Vertical gold stripes of color lead the eye up the arch, accentuating its great height while also framing individual decorative panels. These seem endlessly various. Jade green circles envelop silver starbursts. The circles themselves are surrounded by ovoid crimson shapes, hanging in space, suggesting rotation. Bright blue squares interact

vibrantly with serpentine curves abstracted from the floral patterns of art nouveau. . Iconographic elements like the Manora and the Star of David, itself abstracted into a network of goldleaf zigzags, supply thematic punctuation to the pure energy of bright glass, geometrically configured. But the effect is



Temple Emanu-El, New York, Hildreth Meiere

reverential, perhaps even heroic. It is as if these ancient symbols of faith, struggling to assert themselves against the squares, circles, and diamond-like shapes of their immediate environment, somehow gathered relevance from this challenge and proved themselves integral to the speed and color of the jazz age. The mosaic art of Temple Emanu-El is a brilliant effort by young Meiere, advertising her mastery of art deco's complex decorative vocabulary.

But the crowning achievement of the partnership between Meiere and the Ravenna Company is the "Red Room," showcase office space of the Bank of New York at #1 Wall Street. Executed at the beginning of the 1930s, in defiance of the stock market crash and the oncoming Great Depression, the purely abstract mosaic ornament is a hymn to corporate power and the energy it has released on behalf of the American nation. Though faintly anachronistic in light of the doldrums into which the national economy had fallen by 1931, the design perfectly epitomizes the corporate mind of the 1920s — aggressive, confident, ubiquitous, excited, and imbued with Henry Ford's conviction that "history is bunk." The complete absence of figure or icon suggests that banking and brokerage are a self-sufficient, self-perpetuating energy, requiring no heroes, no champions, not even historical models or analogues to justify their undertakings or supply them with purpose. This energy

is represented by what might best be described as a whole room charged with forked lightning, which descends in wildly irregular streaks from a huge rectangular sky. The electrical metaphor, as defining symbol of corporate power, was aptly chosen.

From the vantage point of our own fully electrified world, we have trouble imagining the awe with which Americans of the 1910s and 1920s greeted the corporate mastery of electrical technology. In the several decades after 1900, the laboratories at General Electric and Westinghouse turned out an ever more sophisticated array of incandescent displays featuring more powerful lights, a wider range of colors, better reflectors, even mobile searchlights, soon called into service of the emerging airline industry. During World War I, corporate electrical advertising assimilated patriotic themes, as the Wrigley chewing gum sign on Broadway, ornamented by armed “spearmen,” proclaimed the citizen’s sacred duty to “Buy a Liberty Bond.” Meanwhile, Times Square became the “Great White Way” and the electrical focal point of America’s New Year festivities. Perhaps more to the point, corporate America sought consciously to identify itself with the electrical revolution. At another site on Broadway, Elwood Rice erected on top of the Hotel Normandie an illuminated Roman Chariot Race 90 feet wide and 70 feet high. Here one could see, in the vivid colors of art deco, muscular drivers whose cracks of the whip drove unruly horses and lurching chariots across the night sky. This sign was officially named “Leaders of the World” and provided space for as many as ten corporations to spell out their names in electric letters four feet high. This is the frame of reference in which to understand the symbolism of the Meiere/Ravenna “Red Room” at #1 Wall Street.

The basic design scheme of these premises is a color palette from gold through orange to dark red as the eye descends from the ceiling to the floor. Most striking are the walls where the darker background is slashed by jagged zigzags of gold leaf, suggesting bursts of electrical fire flashing in all directions. Formal symmetry is overwhelmed by patterns too complex for the mind to assimilate. What remains is an impression of uncontrollable power. The other appointments of the room reinforce the mosaic decor: the metal grid of the windows echoes the crisp lines and sharp angles of the



Bank of New York, Hildreth Meiere

gold leaf ornament; the door frame and the doors themselves add more gold to the color scheme; the light fixtures and the metal pillars supporting them are also painted gold; the intense light they throw directly on the walls alters, accents, and intensifies the mosaic ornament. Moreover, the Bank of New York is a triumph of craftsmanship, because exceptionally large, contrasty, and highly irregular mosaic tesserae contribute appreciably to the vibrancy of the effect. Years later, summing up the work of the firm in an interview from the 1980s, Arno Heuduck remembered this texture: “the unique thing was that we used large pieces of mosaics, pieces perhaps two or three inches in diameter, and in different shapes and sizes. They weren’t square pieces, but triangles and rectangles, and all in between were these golden rays that would fluctuate between the reds and the oranges.” The Irving Trust site is an instance of symbol, design, and craft all coming together in a particularly satisfying way.

Though the Ravenna craftsmen continued to collaborate with Hildreth Meiere, indeed partnering with her to execute some fine work in the Saint Louis Cathedral a quarter-century after the Bank of New York commission, they also entered into creative alliance with several other New York muralists of the 1930s, most notably Winold Reiss. Somewhat anomalously, since neither the muralist nor the craftsmen had any longterm connection to the city which offered the commission, the collaboration with Reiss produced the mosaic murals at Union Terminal, an ambitious art deco railway station in Cincinnati, Ohio.



Union Terminal, Cincinnati, Winold Reiss

Reiss exploited a different constellation of art deco elements than Meiere, orienting himself not so much to “classical modern” as to a folk tradition inspired by posters, costumes, and an interest in ethnicity. Like the Heuducks and John von Wicht, Reiss was German-born, the son of a highly successful portrait and landscape painter, Fritz Reiss. From his father he learned discipline and draftsmanship, before moving on to the Schule fuer Kunstgewerbe in Munich. There he was directed towards craft and industrial design, urged to respect utilitarian forms. But he completed his education at Munich’s prestigious Royal Academy of Fine Arts, studying with Franz von

Stuck, a dedicated practitioner of *Jugendstil*, and one who recommended adapting traditional motifs to a modernist line. On the strength of his enthusiastic reading of Karl May and James Fenimore Cooper, Reiss was persuaded to expatriate to the USA, where he imagined himself painting definitive portraits of a vanishing Native American culture. In New York, however, Reiss found few Native American subjects and emerged as an artist of consequence only after the powerful experience of a visit to revolutionary Mexico in 1921. This moment coincided exactly with the Mexican muralist Renaissance, championed by Jose Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros. The emphases of these painters confirmed Reiss's already well developed interest in ethnicity, regionalism, and working class culture. Though never political, in the leftist, ideological sense of the Mexican muralists, Reiss relished the dignity of everyday life and made it the center of his mural art.

At this stage, however, Reiss was still ten years away from his collaboration with the Ravenna Company at Union Terminal. Before this partnership could be formed, he endured a long apprenticeship as unofficial resident artist of the Great Northern Railway, for whom he painted calendars, featuring the peoples (especially what was left of tribal society) and landscapes of the upper-northwest states, through which this railroad ran its trains. Ironically, it was this connection which gained him the commission to design the mosaic murals at Union Terminal. The project to build the terminal was a brainchild of the seven railroad companies which supplied rail service to Cincinnati. Since Great Northern was one of the most powerful of the group (and perhaps the only one which had an immediately available artist to bring forward), Winold Reiss was selected to conceptualize the mosaic program which would ornament the great, hemispheric rotunda of Union Terminal as well as the mural panels situated above individual runways to the rail platforms.



Union Terminal, Cincinnati, Winold Reiss

The approach Reiss took to the murals at Union Terminal reflects the organizational strategies of the Mexican muralists as well as what will eventually be called the “WPA style,” or the “post-office style,” a style already defining itself in New York City before the Roosevelt administration began to invest in public art. Unlike the classical modern of Meiere, this expression of art deco shuns abstraction in favor of history, regionalism, and the celebration of work. It is also people-centered, valuing portraits of typical individuals, sometimes as isolated inserts inattentive to perspective, sometimes as elements in a dynamic, perhaps

allegorical tableau. Rivera's "Allegory of California" (San Francisco Stock Exchange Luncheon Club, 1930) is paradigmatic of the nascent genre: it celebrates natural resources of the land; it alludes to the history of their expropriation; and it acknowledges the industrial worker as the source of our prospective emancipation from need and toil. Whether or not the 1930s muralist Philip Evergood was right to maintain that "the growing interest in the mural is primarily the result of Mexican pollen which has wafted northward on the breeze," the practice of the Mexican triumvirate in the 1920s and early 1930s, especially the practice of Rivera, surely had consequences for the development of Winold Reiss.

At Union Terminal, all the panels were rendered in what the Heuducks called "silhouette mosaic," a medium which combines opaque mosaic glass, generally used as accents and for vivid outlines, with colored concrete surfaces. In an interview from the 1980s, Arno Heuduck gave this account of the technique:

We install just the mosaic medium first and then we have to cut out all around it to receive what we call the stucco mosaic and after this is all installed we apply a fresh layer of cement.

Now that layer of cement can be any color you want because we mix it with oxide coloring. It makes a very interesting combination because a lot of times in the architectural design of today it will blend better with the building than if it were solid mosaic.



Union Terminal, Cincinnati, Winold Reiss

Although the technique is cost-cutting (and issues of cost were surely crucial in the early 1930s), silhouette mosaics were used at Union Terminal to achieve special stylistic effects. In the rotunda, the masses of colored concrete nestled among the mosaic outlines allowed Reiss to blend his mosaic design effectively with the massive painted dome which rises from the hemispheric walls.

Concern with history, region, technology, and the crucial role of the industrial worker give Reiss his access points to the two great pageant scenes of the rotunda, each enacted upon a tall and expansive hemispheric wall (20 by 105 feet). The south wall evokes national history, from the westward migration to the culture of the contemporary

American metropolis. The north wall restricts itself to the history of Cincinnati, first a humble river town on the banks of the Ohio, now a thriving industrial city, home to the various firms which will be featured in individual mosaic panels as we venture deeper into the terminal.

In both style and theme, the rotunda murals represent the highpoint of Reiss' expressive art. His mastery of portraiture declares itself in the profusion of finely sculpted faces and casually posed bodies which give life to this elaborate allegory of American development: the Indian chief, who greets the prospective settlers; the black harbor-worker, hoisting his sack of cotton; the railway hand, whose icon is a can of lubricant; even the young child of the pioneering family, actually a portrait of Winold's ten year old son, Tjark. Reiss makes no effort to render these figures in perspective. They are outsized, larger than life, standing ten to twelve feet tall, more than half the vertical space available; they step out of the settings we might have expected to enclose them in order to personalize and vivify the history their presence makes flesh. This array of figures also provides occasion for Reiss to gratify his love of costume and acknowledge his debt to the folk art of various cultures. The two murals from the rotunda lay out 150 years of American costume in encyclopedic detail: the head-dress of the Indians, the carefully appointed blue coat of the colonial officer, the vivid gold of the shirt worn by the black worker, the carefully differentiated caps of trainman, the river boat captain, and the industrial workers. This folk interest also carried Reiss towards the powerful simplifications of poster art. Speaking of his father's creative preferences, Tjark Reiss emphasizes the satisfaction Reiss Sr. found in strong lines and vibrant accents:

I think when you look at his work you can feel the feeling he had for poster and large design. He didn't do little things. Everything was bold and big and very colorful First he did sketches in crayon, that he enlarged. In the oil paintings, he simplified the colors; he didn't variegate them as in an oil painting but he painted block colors.

This bias towards deep-saturated color and intense contrast is ideally suited for translation into the mosaic medium.

While the details of figure and costume point to Reiss' studio experience and his career in calendar art, his grasp of mural technique is evident from his handling of more abstract spaces behind, below, and around the human protagonists. The pictorial space of the north wall (the history of Cincinnati panel) is unified by the serpentine Ohio River, which spans the entire horizontal dimension. A graceful loop in the river's course at approximately the midpoint of the mural effectively divides the rural space of the founding moment (itself organized around Fort Washington and the colonial officers gathered there) from the metropolitan space of time present, rendered as one of those "alabaster cities" which gleam through the second verse of "America the Beautiful." The river motif also motivates the references to transportation, here chiefly the vessels that transported cargoes along the Ohio, though the constellation of modernist details includes the radically new

pontoon aircraft of the 1930s. Subtly the theme of progress is everywhere apparent, from the cut logs of Fort Washinton to the steel I-beams of the contemporary city and from the oar-propelled craft of the 18th-century to the multi-decked super-steamboats at the close of the 19th-century.

The south wall of the rotunda also celebrates progress, elaborating this theme in its national context. Technical innovation is the key. The dog-travois of Native American culture gives way to the covered wagon of the pioneers. In its turn, the wagon is replaced by a succession of locomotives, each more powerful and more sophisticated than its predecessors. Finally, we are in a world of airships, our attention called to a great dirigible which floats above the elegantly fantasized skyscrapers of the future. While the corporate sponsorship of the Union Terminal project is evident from the fetishizing of commerce in these murals, Reiss's imagination also reflects the growing prestige of industrial labor, soon to become the hallmark of WPA art in the 1930s. At the east end of the north wall, where the allegory of progress completes itself in a dreamscape image of New York City, the most conspicuous element is the giant red girder which holds two workers, one wielding a huge hammer, the other standing tall as a mountain with a hammer in his hand. They are three times the size of the skyscrapers, and one stands at eye-level with the dirigible overhead, while the steamship in the harbor glides under their feet, insignificant as a bathtub toy. Clearly, it is the husky, omni-competent worker who builds our dream of the future.

The primacy of the worker is also apparent in the murals Reiss designed for the railway concourse, each panel featuring one of the fourteen leading industries of Cincinnati, including Procter and Gamble, Lunken Aircraft, Baldwin Piano, Crosley Broadcasting and Cincinnati Millicron. As in the 1920s industrial photographs of Paul Strand and later in those of precisionist Charles Sheeler, the hands and eyes of the workers are dramatically associated with the performance of the machines they control. A mechanic studies the tail assembly of a single-engine plane; an engineer examines a blueprint; a manual worker from the same panel manipulates a set of load-bearing chains. In the Baldwin Piano mosaic, one craftsman's hands conform the materials, while his colleague makes exact measurements with a marking pencil. This harmony



Schoenberg Hall, UCLA campus
Richard Haines

between the worker and the machine is reinforced in the formal design, and even the color schemes of the Cincinnati mosaics. The worker looks at the machine, the worker touches the machine, the worker composes and adjusts his body to the operation of the machine.

All this is conspicuously evident in the mural which celebrates the manufacture of steel. The shop foreman and the skilled craftsmen who preside over the process are virtually assimilated into the process. The foreman surveys the molten metal with an eye-piece (presumably a spectroscope) which becomes an iconic extension of his own eyes; the worker flexes the

muscles of his bare-chested upper body in applying leverage to a metal rod which manipulates the seething cauldron; a third worker is almost enveloped by the smoke and fumes that rise up from the metal. All parties to this labor are rendered in exaggerated, expressionistic colors which are the colors of the scene itself, reflected from protective goggles or even from the bodies of the men.



Knudson Hall, UCLA campus, Richard Haines

The deepening depression of the 1930s curtailed the number of mosaic commissions and eventually caused the Ravenna Company to give up New York City and return to the middle west. This situated the firm ideally to handle mosaic work in the Saint Louis Cathedral, which was resumed after WWII. But during the postwar years the Ravenna craftsmen also made contact with an Iowa-born artist, Richard Haines (1906-84), with whom they would eventually work in Los Angeles, downtown at the site of the Federal Building and also on the suburban UCLA campus, where the Heuducks handled external mosaic ornament for the music and physics buildings. In their collaboration with Haines, the Heuducks accommodated to a further variant of American modernism, steeped in the federalized populism of the 1930s but also aware of the abstract expressionist movement, which dominated the American arts scene of the 1940s and 1950s. While Haines' Los Angeles commissions of the 1950s reflect a southwestern, or explicitly Californian orientation, their shape and substance are anchored in the post office murals for which he had gained attention more than a decade earlier.

Fourteen years younger than Meiere and twenty years younger than Reiss, Haines arrived on the arts scene well after the founding moment of modernism. He received his

early training at the Minneapolis School of Art, then won the Vanderlip Travelling Scholarship which took him to the Ecole des Beaux Arts at Fontainebleau, France. But his real artistic formation was achieved in the New Deal art projects he undertook as a member of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, between 1935 and 1941. During this period he designed and painted a series of government murals, mostly in small town midwestern post offices, including Berwyn, IL, Cresco, IA, Clinton, MO, and Wichita, KS. After resettling in California during the early 1940s, Haines returned to the middle-west in 1952 when he was selected to paint murals for the prestigious Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis. These works largely observe the thematic and stylistic emphases of WPA art, probably best known from the murals of Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry.



Federal Building, L.A., Richard Haines

Explicitly the product of the Great Depression, the WPA murals were conceived as morale boosters, intended to restore confidence in the national economy, celebrate gainful employment, and evoke a sense of community or shared purpose. To this end, murals of the New Deal period often feature natural resources, the bounty of the American continent which seems to assure eventual recovery from present economic stagnation. Coal, oil, iron, livestock, timber, fruit, and “amber waves of grain” are unfailingly represented, often in a context of local history. So too is the worker — who brings in the harvest, herds the cattle into the railroad cars, cuts the recalcitrant timber with his chain-saw, associates himself with wheels, driveshafts, pulleys, even construction cranes. The working-class world is also multicultural, inviting the pictorial presence of blacks, Latinos, and in the southwest, Native Americans. In more pronouncedly rural contexts, we are likely to see county fairs, bandstands, gazebos, green spaces where typical country folk might gather for recreation, or sometimes to conduct informal political debate. Haines remained in the debt of such material. But by the 1950s, when he began to design for the UCLA campus, he had also been touched seriously by the abstract expressionist movement, presided over by figures like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Hence the faceting and geometrizing of space already evident in the “History of Music” panels at Schoenberg Hall (1955) but even more evident in the extended homage to modern science in the murals of Knudson Hall, the university physics building.

By the time of the Los Angeles projects, Arno Heuduck had largely replaced his now quite elderly father as principal craftsman for the Ravenna Company. He was mindful that Haines brought a different signature to the work of the firm. But the relationship between artist and craftsman was very positive, as is clear from Arno Heuduck's comments in a later interview:

You would have to call him [Haines] a contemporary artist. I liked the style. It blended well to mosaics. It was very tastefully done. It was not a representational thing, but his design flowed through all the figures.

These figures were, Heuduck continues, "more geometric — an area here, an area there, just a balance of different areas and different colors." Moreover, according to Nona Haines', the muralist's widow, the Ravenna craftsmen were given great latitude in deciding how Haines' designs would be articulated as mosaics:

It's very interesting, his [Haines'] relationship to the Ravenna Company, because when he did the cartoons, the full-scale cartoons, . . . he did these flat colors, and they would interpret them, put the colors in there, to give them a vibration, to give them life.

Since the Schoenberg Hall mosaics were silhouette mosaics, like those at Union Terminal, this means that the Ravenna Company probably controlled crucial decisions about the color fields which enclose and isolate expressive elements in the composition.

The "History of Music" panels are in debt to the Mexican muralists, especially in their enthusiastic multi-culturalism and their homage to ethnic music. Gregorian chant is represented, as is European orchestral music, but the tribal drum and the hunting horn also receive the muralist's attention. The mandolin player wears Native American costume, and the eastern instruments are handled by musicians whose features are Chinese. Remembering how viciously these minorities had been caricatured in the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1914 (racially insensitive images against which Rivera and Siqueiros had reacted a quarter-century earlier), Haines is careful to confer dignity upon the look and bearing of his subjects. The same holds true for the African-American images of the jazz ensemble panel: the dark-skinned faces are an unmistakable ethnic reference point, but the racialized "Negroid" features of contemporary commercial art (Sambo, Aunt Jemima) are judiciously avoided. Furthermore, Haines' foregrounding of the saxophone and jazz trumpet in two separate panels respectfully acknowledges the African-American contribution to the nation's musical heritage.

On the other hand, the mosaics of Knudsen Hall, the physics building, carry us in quite a different direction. They are exercises in pure abstraction, absent both human figures and any hint of narrative content, an artistic fantasia upon equations, formulas, and geometric shapes. The binary code of zeroes and ones; the signs for roots and powers, the X/Y axis of algebraic space, even Einstein's $e = mc^2$, rumored to be the key to the

universe: all are drawn into a series of brilliantly imagined visual fields. Further imagery seems drawn from the world of biology, taking its place in the early 1960s as the cutting edge of modern science. Suddenly as if looking through a powerful microscope, we see cells, chromosome strands, the micro-organisms in a droplet of water, or the architecture of a snowflake. This iconography is accented by powerful color fields of highly diverse shapes.

Ravenna partnered with Haines for the last time in two downtown Los Angeles murals of 1964, the exterior entrance porch and the interior lobby of the Los Angeles Federal Building. Together, these murals, “Celebration of our Homeland” and “Government of the People” provide a coda which merges the cubist impulses of Braque and Picasso with the populism of the Mexican muralists and the WPA.

The porch mural, “Celebration of our Homeland” loads a considerable freight of Americana upon a relatively compact (2 panels, 24 x 29 feet) pair of rectangles. What gives the mural its distinctly contemporary feel is the complete absence of perspective and scale. It is organized by carefully poised color fields which provide a vivid background to the simplified and geometrized images chosen to represent the world, the nation, and most specifically, the state of California. Haines’ mural replicates and transforms a body of “California” imagery which was introduced at the two international expositions of the 1910s, when the state first began to sell itself to the nation. Thereafter, this sacred trove of images (sun, ocean, fruit, smiles) had been reconfigured throughout the next three decades, turning up everywhere from the murals of Rivera to the colored logos on packing crates which carried refrigerated products to eastern markets. But here the muralist works in a graceful shorthand which avoids clichés by reduction, compression, and a trace of irony. California’s “360 days of sun,” which created both Hollywood and the American swim suit industry, is rendered as a vivid solar disk, whose orange intensity seems fearsome, until we notice that a face with a broad grin is embedded in its fiery core. The decade-long struggle (replete with political scandals) to divert water to Los Angeles is captured as a single elegant droplet, isolated in space, abstracted beyond the fray of controversy. Naturally, there are the inevitable oil derricks, construction hoists, and traffic signals, but removed from narrative and evoked as a dance of forms. More subtly, the leaves of trees and plants, as well as animal shapes, make their mark upon the design. The human figures are also excused from their conventional narrative tasks, though the positive ethnic references, as in the Schoenberg murals, strive to redress the blatant racism of former times.

After the work in Los Angeles, the Ravenna Company continued to fabricate and install mosaics for another two decades, in spite of the toll taken upon public ornament by the triumph of the international style, whose mantra was “less is more.” The increasing cost of this labor-intensive art form also militated against its widespread use in either secular or sacred contexts. The most substantial achievement of the 1970s and 1980s was the completion of mosaic installations in the Saint Louis Cathedral, a task completed in partnership with the New England muralist Mary Reardon. This final work was accomplished just months before Arno Heuduck’s death in 1988, the event which permanently

closed the doors of the Ravenna Mosaic Company.

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