

4090

Marcella

Maura Reilly: Marcella, the first place setting on the second wing of *The Dinner Party*, was a Roman noblewoman born in the fourth century who was declared a saint by the Vatican for her role in founding the Christian monastic system. When she was widowed, Marcella chose to devote her life to Christianity and renounced worldly pleasures; she subsequently turned her home into a refuge for other noblewomen wishing to do the same. This place setting is decorated with the symbols of Marcella's sainthood and those of the Christian church. On the runner is the outline of the architectural plan for an early Christian basilica, upon which the plate rests. This symbolizes Marcella as central to the development and organization of early Christianity. The plate for Marcella is painted in luminous and modulated tones to emphasize Marcella's spirituality and modesty. The front edge of the runner is made of woven camel hairs, also used to make shirts worn by early Christians like Marcella and members of the ascetic women's convent she founded. These shirts, whose rough fibers irritated the skin, were worn under clothes in an act of penance. The capital letter *M* depicts a woman praying in orans pose, with arms spread out and reaching upward in a gesture first associated with goddess figures, and later used to depict Christian women and then Christ himself. It is used in Marcella's place setting to show how early pre-Christian symbols were often co-opted by the church for their own iconography. The names inscribed on the Heritage Floor below Marcella's place setting are the names of other important and powerful Roman women such as Julia Domna, Agrippina I, Anastasia, and Fabiola.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org