

Study of Roman catacombs draws insight

By Jay Pridmore

To an archeologist, nothing has quite so much romance as catacombs. They are invariably dark, dank and fit for a long stay only under certain conditions. But archeologists find them irresistible.

In an effort to inspire such interest in the public at large, the Spertus Museum of Judaica this week opened "Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome." Mostly through photos, it shows that Jews, Christians and pagans in early Rome lived in spiritual worlds that did not diverge greatly.

This exhibition won't be mistaken for King Tut or other attractions that bring out the blockbusting hordes. But so much the better. One of its more interesting features is a convincing reproduction of a Roman catacomb—a crowd would only diminish its effect. Made with Styrofoam, plaster and paint, the walls are distressed and the paintings primitive. The grave niches are empty, as if sacked by grave robbers.

This stark backdrop provides a taste of the archeologist's imagination. What is fascinating about the photos in subsequent galleries, along with the limited artifacts on display, is the story it tells. Ancient Rome, from the 1st Century B.C. to the 5th Century A.D., was not simply a place where people were thrown to lions for their beliefs. Instead, it was a place, for much of this period, of much religious tolerance and interaction.

The exhibition, organized and brought to Chicago by the International Catacombs Society (based in Boston), shows how Jewish, Christian and pagan imagery shared many similarities. Among others, the fish was a symbol common to all three faiths. Sea creatures were associated with Neptune in ancient mythology. Dolphins symbolized salvation to Christians. To Jews, the whale referred to the parable of Jonah. In other paintings, Old and New Testament stories are combined.

"This exhibition is about the whole notion of death and what it means about the hopes and aspirations of mankind," says Morris Fred, director of the

MUSEUMS

Spertus. Even if petty jealousies separated people of different religions in life, the hereafter enabled them to share graves, as archeologists have found they did in many Roman catacombs.

This idea comes across repeatedly in color photos that were assembled by Estelle Brettman, a scholar who was one of the first to work extensively with stone inscriptions now in storage at the Vatican Museum. Such authentic pieces are not on display here, but many plaques—most of the Jewish ones in Greek—have been reproduced and translated: "Here lies Pancharios, Father of the Synagogue of Elaea, aged 110 years, lover of people, lover of the Commandments. He lived a good life. In peace his sleep."

Besides photos, a number of objects have been added to this exhibition by the Spertus to represent the goods that might have been placed in graves. An Egyptian amulet shows that Egyptian ideas were still popular in Rome during this period. Also on display is a collection of heavily patinated reproductions of Pompeian copper goods, made in the 1890s shortly after the originals came out of that excavation. (These come from the Field Museum.)

There's nothing particularly rare about these objects. But the exhibition is satisfying not just for subterranean drama but also because it teaches something surprising. "They show that [different religions] in Rome weren't stuck on anything. They could adapt," says Olga Weiss, the Spertus curator who mounted the exhibition.

"Vaults of Memory" also helps define the idea of what a modern "Jewish museum" can be. While director Fred admits that many such museums can be "boring," his staff is searching for new ways to engage the public.

Catacombs are only part of the effort. Fred is also rethinking the museum's distinguished collection of Judaica, artifacts from Jewish history around the world. In the past, in the wake of the Holocaust, it was enough to "collect and preserve things that

were almost destroyed," he says.

Now that that objective has been largely accomplished, Fred's next objective is to provide a livelier, interpretive setting for scrolls, manuscripts and works such as an exquisite Torah Ark from Jerusalem's Bezalel Workshop in the early 20th Century. "What do you do to fight the contradiction of Judaica [representing a living culture] behind glass?" he asks.

His answer is an installation of the permanent collection within two years. It will focus on "values and ethics," showing how the rites of Purim, Hanukkah and other holy occasions provide lessons for conduct and relationships.

Fred believes that the museum can use its collection to transmit important educational messages. "Of course we need some sense of values and direction in society," he says. He believes museums can make a contribution in providing them.

The Spertus Museum of Judaica, 618 S. Michigan Ave., is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays. Admission is \$3.50 for adults and \$2 for seniors, students and children; Friday is free. "Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome" is open through Dec. 31. For information, call 922-9012.