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Art: Ancient Ecumenism

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BOSTON, Sept. 11 — Ecumenism, a theme of major interest in recent weeks, is evident in an upcoming art exhibition derived from a 1,500-year-old source, the catacombs of Rome.

"Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome," opens Tuesday at the Boston Public Library. Mounted by the International Catacomb Society, which is based in this city, the show includes replicas of carvings and other objects as well as photographs of inscriptions and paintings, and represents a substantial sampling from the underground galleries that once housed 350 miles of burial chambers.

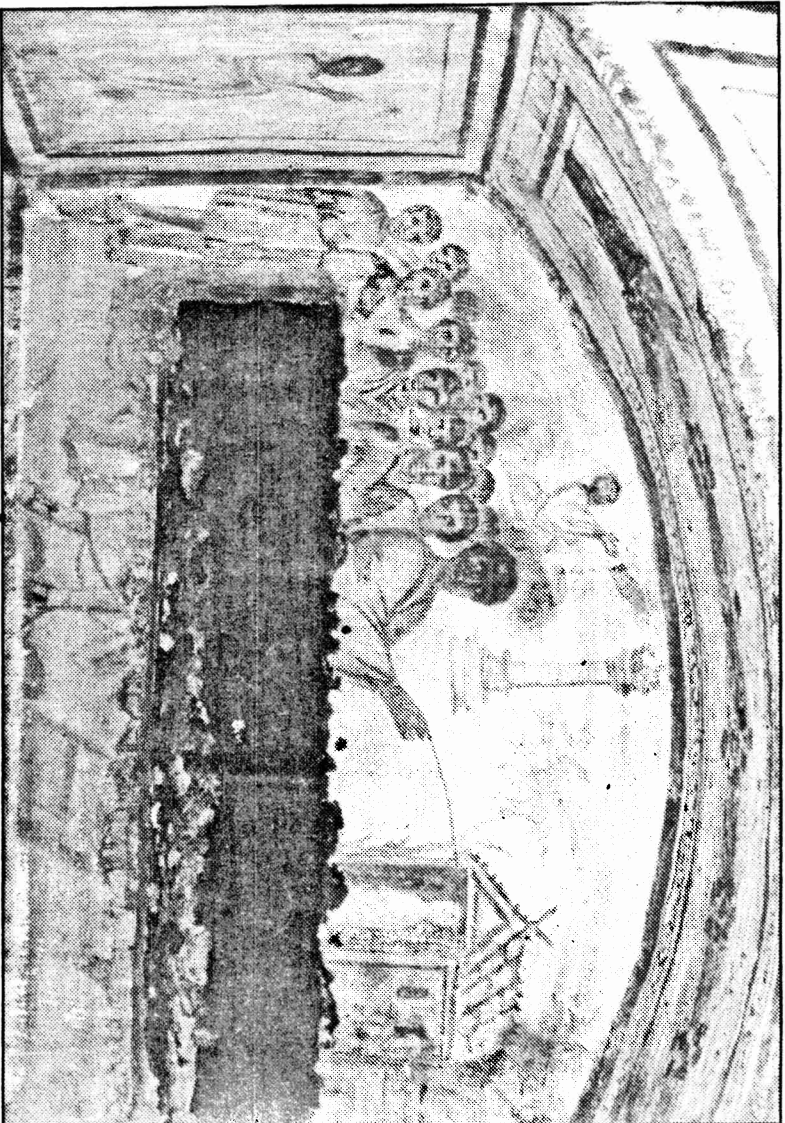
The images on display in the library's Great Hall and Boston Room are not striking for what they contain but for what they mix. While the catacombs are divided into Christian, Jewish and pagan sections, the division among the three on each painting or inscription is not so clear.

A Visual Parallel

From the catacomb of the Via Latina, for example, we see a painting of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as the disciples look on. In the background, in a parallel gesture, Moses receives the law from God, represented as a pillar of fire.

In another display, a fragment of a sarcophagus lid bears the inscription "Here lies Faustina." It is adorned with Jewish symbols, including a menorah and a shofar, or ram's horn, and theatrical masks.

Paintings include the menorah and such images as grapevines, dolphins and tridents, borrowed from Greco-Roman iconography. Christian paintings make the same borrowings.



Photograph of a painting from the catacomb of the Via Latina depicting Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; foreground, with the disciples, at left, looking on. In the background, Moses receives the law from

God, represented by a pillar of fire. The photograph is included in exhibition of replicas of art from the catacombs of Rome that is scheduled to open Tuesday at the Boston Public Library.

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