

# Jewish Art Historian Traces Shared Christian Symbols

By Helen Sevagian

**FROM HER FOREBEARS,** Estelle Shohet Brettman inherited an artistic spirit. Her grandfather, a rabbi known as the "Wise Man of Arbel" in Lithuania, exerted a wise, compassionate influence in his country.

Her father, Dr. G. H. Shohet, was a physician who worked with many types of people and wrote a book entitled *Kinships* about the fundamental bonds uniting all men. His daughter Estelle's search for interpretations and uses of symbols shared by Christians and Jews — such symbols as the dolphin, pegasus, dove, sheep, winged victory, pomegranate, and peacock — seems to have been predestined.

The current exhibition at the Boston Public Library is the culmination of her years of research at a number of archaeological sites and museums throughout the Mediterranean including trips to Sicily, Italy, Turkey, Morocco, Israel, Spain and Greece. Her archaeological scholarship and commitment gained her the cooperation of eminent Vatican churchmen in obtaining access to Roman catacombs seldom viewed.

The exhibit, "Judaism and Christianity in the Catacombs of Rome," opened on December 15th and continues through January 31st in the Boston Room of the Central Library in Copley Square. Some eighty color photographs will highlight funerary artifacts bearing Jewish, Christian, and pagan symbols. Most of these photographs were taken in the catacombs, by special permission, by Mrs. Brettman, often lying flat on her back at least thirty feet underground, with no electricity or light other than a gas lantern. Supplementary pictorial material has been provided from the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology and the Museum of Fine Arts Slide Library.

**THE PHOTOGRAPHS** capture the artistry, beauty, and poignancy of the funerary symbols, showing, for example, the dolphin in its universal role as saviour of man, helping the disabled and escorting the dead across the ocean into the after life. Similarly, the peacock's tail, "circular like the vault of heaven when spread and jewelled as with stars," made that bird a natural symbol of the sky to which the dead ascend and, hence, of immortality. Floor plans acquaint the viewer with the shape of the catacombs.

Drawings of interiors of two burial chambers of more affluent Roman families reveal how the catacombs reflected the social status of those buried there. On loan from



**A SCHOLARLY GREETING . . .** Pope John Paul II gave a warm welcome to art historian Mrs. Estelle Brettman when he received her at a private audience in the Vatican. She was accompanied by Mrs. Eleanor Bourgeois, a cousin of Cardinal Caprio, and Mrs. Frank Gaetz of Saugus.

the Museum of Fine Arts are plaster casts of Roman pottery embossed with many of the symbols found in the funerary art and impressions of coins, gems, and seals which illustrate some of the ancient origin of these symbols. The mythological, religious, and ritual meanings of the symbols give the exhibit an appeal for a wide variety of viewers.

The support and encouragement of the Vatican and well-known Italian archaeologists have enabled Mrs. Brettman to produce this photographic record of the catacombs. Impressed with her archaeological knowledge, Giuseppe Cardinal Caprio, President of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See, asked Mrs. Brettman in company with a Vatican representative, to guide his family through the necropolis, an ancient city of the dead, under St. Peter's. Mrs. Brettman was also "adopted" into the Cardinal's family at a special dinner and participated in a private papal audience granted by Pope John Paul II to thirty members of the Cardinal's family.

Cardinal Caprio and Father Umberto M. Fasola, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology, arranged extended visits for Mrs. Brettman to twelve catacombs over a four-year period, beginning in 1976 with the catacombs under the Villa Torlonia, a Jewish cemetery dating back to the first century, and to the Christian cemetery Domitilla. In November 1978 and again in April 1979 Mrs. Brettman spent weeks in various catacombs, among them, Vigna Randanini, Saint Sebastian, Saint Callisto, Pretestato and Via Dino Compagni.



On Sunday, January 6th, Mrs. Brettman describe her experience in the catacombs and showed the funerary art in multi-screen images cast by rare color slides. The lecture was given in the Rabb Lecture Hall of Boston's Central Library in Copley Square. The Lecture and exhibit are part of a salute to the centennial observance of the Archaeological Institute of America which is holding its annual conference in Boston.

Mrs. Brettman has served as Program Director of the Boston Society of the Archaeological Institute of America and is associated with the Museum of Fine Arts. Working with her on organizing the Library exhibit have been Mrs. Florence Wolsky, Museum of Fine Arts and Professor Cornelius C. Vermeule III, Museum of Fine Arts and Boston College.

(Ms. Sevagian is Chief of Public Relations for the Boston Public Library).

