Jewish Art Historian Traces Shared Christian Symbols

By Hellen Sevagian

FROM HER FOREBEARS, Estelle Shohet Brettman inherited in her blood the spirit of her grandfather, a rabbi known as the "Wise Man of Arbel" in Lithuania. Her father, Dr. G. H. Shohet, was a physician who worked with many types of people and wrote a book entitled, "Kinship Between Jews and Christians," which he wrote to explain the fundamental bonds uniting all men. His daughter Estelle's search for interpretations and use of symbols shared by Christians and Jews - such as symbols as the dolphin, 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," opens on December 1st and continues through January 31st at 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 photographer John 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 afterlife. Similarly, the peacock's tail, "cloak of the elect," 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 the Museum of Fine Arts are plaster casts of Roman pottery embossed with many of the symbols found in the catacombs 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.

A SCHOLARLY GREETING... Pope John Paul II, in the Vatican, was accompanied by Mrs. Eleanor Ford, a warm welcome to art historian Mrs. Estelle Shohet. Brettman, a cousin of Cardinal Cotypio, and Mrs. Brettman when he received her at a private audience.

Cardinal Caprio and Father Umberto M. Pasola, 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 8th Mrs. Brettman described her experiences in the catacombs and showed the funerary art in a slide show. 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 exhibit have been Mrs. Florence Wolisky, 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.)