

LIVES IN THE ARTS

Learning about faith and life in the catacombs of Rome

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

Estelle Shohet Brettman, executive director of the Boston-based International Catacomb Society, has spent the past decade bringing the underground art of Rome to light.

"Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome," which opens a month-long stay at the Boston Public Library Sept. 15 (preceded by a fund-raising banquet on the 14th, at which the guest of honor will be Dr. Walter Persegati, secretary general of the Vatican Museums) is an extraordinary documentation of the subterranean treasures of the ancient world. Photographing for weeks at a time in the tortuous passageways of Christian and Jewish catacombs, Brettman endured taxing conditions. The humidity and condensation in the catacombs often seemed a perpetual drizzle, and again and again she had to wipe her camera lenses. She worked by flashlight in slippery galleries. She squeezed into niches and, to get a particularly striking fresco or ceiling inscription, lay on her back 30 feet underground. It was a long way from the Society's headquarters on Beacon Hill.

"I've always been interested in archeology," she said last week. "In the early '70s I did volunteer work at The Boston Museum of Fine Arts; I was fascinated with the collections from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Near East, and in 1976 I served as program director for the Boston Society of the Archeological Institute of America." That year, exploring a Christian-Byzantine cemetery in Sicily, she stumbled and dislodged a large rock. "On the underside I saw a crude graffiti



A catacomb's depiction of Lazarus being raised from the dead.

to of a menorah. This marked the first time I had perceived a Jewish symbol in such an unlikely place, and the possibilities it suggested, either of neighboring Jewish and Christian burials or the continued use of Jewish symbols by Christians, were intriguing."

Later, in Rome, Brettman, with the permission of Vatican officials, visited the Jewish catacombs of Torlonia, northeast of the ancient walls of Rome. The catacombs were discovered accidentally in 1919 by laborers repairing the foundations of stables beneath the Villa Torlonia. Mussolini lived in the villa from 1925 to 1944, and among his pronouncements there he dubbed the Jews "strangers in Italy." At that moment, he was above some of the oldest Romans of them all, five acres of Jewish burials.

What Brettman found in the Jewish catacombs, as well as in Christian and pagan cemeteries, resembled her encounters with

the Beth Shearim catacombs in Israel and the floor mosaics of ancient synagogues in the Yezreel Valley. Symbols such as the dolphin in the former and the signs of the zodiac and the seasons were especially provocative in view of the Second Commandment's admonition against graven images. During subsequent research trips Brettman found on vaulted ceilings and frescoed walls the visual record of the religions of the Roman Empire. The parallelism, the links, the interacting influences among these religions were dramatically revealed by the dim flicker of her lamp. The dove of Aphrodite reappeared as the messenger of hope to Noah, the grapevine of Dionysos evoked the vineyard representing the "house of Israel" and the Christian church. Like the visionary psychologist C.G. Jung, she concluded that a common source of Judeo-Christian consciousness existed; and indeed, her own descent into the catacombs had about it a mythic quality.

"The catacombs of Rome are unique archives, and they are exceedingly fragile. Ancient Rome was surrounded by a belt of more than 60 catacombs, the equivalent of 350 miles of burial galleries. They were situated beyond the city walls along main thoroughfares, since law proscribed interment within the city. At this time, only seven Christian catacombs are open. Yet if the sites were to

become more accessible, their disintegration would take place. Seven Jewish catacombs have been discovered; of the seven, only three remain."

In 1980, Brettman helped found The International Catacomb Society here, dedicated to the preservation and documentation of history shared by the Jewish and early Christian religions during the heyday of ancient Rome. A first modest core exhibit of "Vaults of Memory" was sponsored by the Boston Public Library that year; since then, knowledge of the project and its objectives has expanded. "The inscriptions alone offer intimate views of family life, the professions, the role of women," Brettman said. "Here lies Eudoxius, a



Estelle Shohet Brettman photographed in the tortuous passageways of Christian and Jewish catacombs.

painter of living things'; 'Here lies Fortunatus and Eutroptius, children who loved each other'; 'Here lies Crispina, diligent lover of the Commandments' ... 'Here lies' - behind those words are people, their culture, their roles, their human relationships, their faiths."