

Subterranean Treasures

Not all the art in Rome is above ground. Carved into the bedrock below the city are the burial vaults of hundreds of pagans, Christians, and Jews, many still richly ornamented with frescoes and memorial carvings despite centuries of natural and human depredation. But those who visit the catacombs open to the public see only a fraction of that legacy: many sites are closed; others have been destroyed. And so Estelle Shohet Brettman '45 has spent much of the past decade bringing this art to light—photographing for weeks at a time, sometimes flat on her back thirty feet underground, and organizing materials and raising money to mount exhibits. The result is "Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome," a photographic record of frescoes, sarcophagi, epitaphs, and artifacts from the catacombs and other burial sites of the early Christian era, on display at the Boston Public Library from September 15 through October 11.

Brettman, now executive director of the International Catacomb Society (ICS), which she helped found, became actively involved in the study of ancient art and archaeology while volunteering at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts twenty years ago. A visit to Rome's little-known Jewish catacombs in 1976 crystallized her various interests; soon she gained the cooperation and support of Vatican and Italian officials for her effort to record the artistic and religious heritage the ancient vaults preserved. (The exhibit on view in Boston was dis-

played at Rome's Castel Sant' Angelo in 1985.)

The exhibit is full of echoes, from the shared methods of burial to the memorial inscriptions, from the tombs of different faiths. But the various objects are unified primarily by the recurring images shared by all three religious communities. The dove of Aphrodite reappears as the messenger of hope to Noah and also as a symbol of the Holy Ghost. Dolphins, which sometimes car-

ried the dead to the Elysian fields, became a metaphor for Jesus carrying souls to heaven. The grapevine of Dionysos, a god associated with resurrection, evoked the vineyard representing both the "house of Israel" and the Christian church. In making this art more accessible, the ICS hopes viewers see not only the beauty but also the ecumenical implications. As Brettman puts it, "We want to break down barriers among people."



PHOTOS BY ESTELLE BRETTMAN

Wall paintings from a closed pagan-Christian catacomb on the Via Latina show an earth goddess clutching a serpent (a symbol of fecundity), Heracles battling the Hydra, and Samson rending a lion. Graeco-Roman myths mingle with Old Testament themes in the funeral iconography, both influencing early Christian expressions of hope for the deceased.



Doves and roses symbolize hope in the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

