

The study and dissemination of an iconography: banquet scenes from the catacombs of Rome to the facsimile catacombs of the nineteenth century

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Historical Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the increase in excavations and discoveries in Roman catacombs has drawn attention across Europe to early Christian art in a very broad and multidisciplinary sense. The cause behind this incredible archaeological development tended to be political: Pope Pius IX from 1850 onwards (after the uprisings of the Roman Republic, his exile in Gaeta in the Bourbon Kingdom, and the independence drive sweeping through Italy) found himself reigning in a climate of crisis for the sovereignty of the pontiff. Making massive and diverse use of papal propaganda, he insisted, until the end of his pontificate, on the self-exaltation of Christendom and the predominance of Rome as the centre of international culture precisely because it was the centuries-old centre of the Catholic and Apostolic Church. Christian antiquity, through the extensive excavations of the Roman catacombs and studies of early Christian Rome, assumed a significant and relevant role in the cultural policy of Pius IX, who was the true promoter and financier of important initiatives for the development of the discipline.

The main consequence of this flourishing of excavations was therefore the expansion of knowledge about the catacombs and paintings in Christian cemeteries, which were certainly among the underground works of art that most attracted the attention of scholars and the general public. Studies and scientific reproductions of these underground paintings multiplied in many languages.² The dissemination of early Christian art themes, however, mainly took place through internationally successful novels, paintings and architecture.

We will pass over edifying novels here and concentrate on visual sources and studies.³ As far as painting is concerned, from 1860 onwards, 'retired' painters from the various international academies, who came to Rome from Spain and

¹ Chiara Cecalupo acknowledges support from the CONEX-Plus programme funded by Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 801538.

² Carla Mazzarelli, "'Copie 'autentiche' delle catacombe nel secondo Ottocento: Marchi, Perret, De Rossi e il dibattito intorno alla riproduzione esatta', *Ricerche di storia dell'arte*, 110/111, 2013, 89-102.

³ We will only recall the main one: *Fabiola or, the Church of the Catacombs* by English Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman (published in 1854).

France in particular, were busy recreating more or less realistic catacomb settings, in which they mainly set burial scenes and stories of martyrdom.⁴

Then, of course, came architecture: as we shall see, many new buildings, both public and private, were inspired by the Christian catacombs, especially in their decoration, in order to offer visitors an experience as close as possible to that of the catacombs,⁵ while at the same time encouraging the study and knowledge of early Christian painting themes.

The attention that was channelled towards the new discoveries was therefore incredible, not only religious, but also political and artistic. Rome, with its catacombs, was obviously the centre of this new wave of interest and the excavations did not cease to amaze the public and the scholars as well. In fact, during the second half of the nineteenth century, some of the most important Christian hypogeal cemetery areas with their incredible artistic heritage came to light. We will focus at this juncture on two discoveries in particular, both with interesting paintings of banquet scenes with multiple semantic levels.

Archaeological discoveries

The presence of this theme of banquet in the paintings of the Roman catacombs has been known since the 16th century. In 1634, a reflection on the *agape* inspired by the apostles' banquet in the New Testament was published in *Roma Sotterranea*, the first monographic work of Christian historiography on the Roman catacombs.⁶ The text limits itself to presenting the ancient sources that testify to the practice of the funeral banquet among the early Christians and would be the reference study for all subsequent works until the mid-nineteenth century.

The panorama changed with the excavations and discoveries the main parts of the catacombs of San Callisto from the winter of 1852. Father Giuseppe Marchi, Pope Pius IX's trusted archaeologist, and his pupil Giovanni Battista de Rossi, proceeded to excavate the oldest part of the cemetery, studying the areas extensively. In the course of the work, they brought to light a series of cubicles richly painted with scenes recalling the main Christian liturgical moments. These rooms had an incredible impact on Christian and European public opinion, and because of their spiritual artistic treasure they were called by Marchi 'Cubicles of the Sacraments'.⁷ The banquet scenes found in various paintings in this cemetery area

⁴ Maria Saveria Ruga, 'I pittori e le catacombe di Napoli: dalle vedute al quadro di storia', in *Ricerche di storia dell'arte*, 110-111, 2013, 103-119; Carlos G. Navarro, 'La arqueología sagrada y los pintores españoles pensionados en Roma durante el pontificado de Pio IX', *Ricerche di storia dell'arte*, 110-111, 2013, 75-88.

⁵ See Chiara Cecalupo, 'Giovanni Battista e Michele Stefano de Rossi all'Esposizione Universale di Parigi (1867)', *Rivista Di Archeologia Cristiana*, 97, 2021, 319-347.

⁶ Antonio Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea*. Roma: Guglielmo Facciotti, 632-635.

⁷ Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia dell'arte italiana nei primi otto secoli della Chiesa*, II, Prato: Giacchetti, 1873, 11.

were published extensively by de Rossi, who inaugurated and influenced the studies (fig. 1).⁸



Figure 1 Banquet scene from the catacombs of San Callisto reproduced by de Rossi (from de Rossi, 'Roma Sotterranea')



Figure 2 Banquet scene from the catacombs of Priscilla photographed by Wilpert (from Wilpert, 'Fractio panis')

A strong impact on the peerage came in 1893 with the discovery of a very similar scene in the catacombs of Priscilla by Joseph Wilpert.⁹ In the Cappella Greca (the 'Greek Chapel'), the most distinguished chamber of the catacombs of Priscilla, he washed the paintings and managed to discover four new paintings, all of which had a major effect on art historical research. One of them is certainly the most important, since it shows a representation of part of what appeared to be an Eucharistic Sacrifice: In the arch above the apse at the end of the chamber, the

⁸ Giovanni Battista de Rossi, *La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana*. Roma: Cromolitografia Pontificia, 1864, vol. I, 328-342.

⁹ Joseph Wilpert, *Fractio panis : die älteste Darstellung des eucharistischen Opfers in der 'Cappella greca,' entdeckt und erläutert*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1895.

cleaning revealed seven figures around a sigmoid table, and a large plate with two fish (fig. 2). Traces of seven baskets of bread later appeared, leading Wilpert¹⁰ to believe that these were Gospel-derived banquet scenes, just like those already known from the Chapels of the Sacraments in San Callisto. This correspondence was soon contradicted by the appearance of a two-handled chalice and a plate with five loaves of bread on either side of the plate with the fish, while the man on the far left is about to break a round bread-like object with his outstretched hands. Wilpert therefore claimed that this was a scene of *fractio panis*, i.e. the act of the Eucharist that recalls Jesus' breaking of bread at the Last Supper.

It is therefore a liturgical painting that is unique in the catacombs, and we can imagine how this scene, strongly imbued with Christian liturgical symbolism, could have had a great impact on the history of Christian art studies. It should be noted, however, that the Priscilla scene does not merely depict a banquet, but goes further in the representation of the division of bread: this gesture, although belonging to the same artistic panorama and the same historiographic strand, is not always recovered from the cases of re-use of early Christian symbolic iconography of late-nineteenth century that we will encounter in this discussion.

The study and the use of the iconography

Looking at the chronologies of these discoveries,¹¹ as well as their comparisons in catacombs and other types of artworks (like sarcophagi), we learn of the precocity of the banquet theme in early Christian art,¹² as well as of its diffusion. Such popularity is certainly due to its adaptability (the scheme of the scene is fixed, but the variations in the position, type and number of characters and visible objects are numerous), but also to its semantics, derived from funerary art but strongly applicable to Christian ritual.

This plurality of interpretations is reflected in historiography. Indeed, since the discoveries of San Callisto and Priscilla, scholars of ancient Christian art have often dealt with the analysis and interpretation of the scene. In fact, during the twentieth century the symbolic interpretations of the banquet included a wide range of themes:¹³ first of all the banquet in a heavenly setting with more 'pagan' connotations; then clearly the references to New Testament events, to Eucharistic

¹⁰ Wilpert studied extensively the theme of Eucharistic meals in early-Christian art: Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*. Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1903, 282-308.

¹¹ Several banquet scenes appear in the Roman catacombs and can be dated between the 3rd and 4th century AD. Four are in the catacombs of St Calixtus, one in the catacombs of Priscilla, two in the Maius Cemetery, one in the catacombs of St Marcellinus et Petrus and one in the catacombs of Domitilla. There are also several scenes of banquet in private Roman hypogea. In general, see: Barbara Mazzei, 'Banchetto', in *Temi di Iconografia Paleocristiana*, Fabrizio Bisconti, Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2000, 134-136.

¹² Mazzei, 'Banchetto', 134.

¹³ Mazzei, 'Banchetto', 134-135.

symbolism and to the liturgy of the *fractio panis* (division of bread).¹⁴ Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when Christian archaeology had been reinvigorated as a discipline of Catholic propaganda, the scenes in the cubicles of the Sacraments fit well into a purely dogmatic reading, where all the scenes painted in the catacombs were linked to the sacramentals of Christian doctrine and all the convivial moments to the sphere of the Eucharist. This 'christianisation' of all the scenes, made de Rossi recognise the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist in the paintings of the cubicles in Callisto.¹⁵

It is only in recent years that iconographers have moved towards less spiritual and more pragmatic positions,¹⁶ preferring instead the connection between this scene and a long-standing funeral ritual in the ancient Roman scene, namely that of the *agapi* or *refrigeria*, i.e. the funeral banquets in honour of the dead. This is a markedly pagan tradition, but one that survived into the first centuries of Christianity, as evidenced by the not infrequent structures for banquets archaeologically found in the Mediterranean catacombs.¹⁷

This interpretation is very much anchored in the reality of the men who chose to paint such banquet scenes in the catacombs. However, this should not underestimate the symbolic impact of the concept of the funeral and celestial banquet which, although originating from the earlier culture, acquired for the early Christians a higher dimension that undoubtedly recalls Eucharistic-type rites and scriptural traditions. This duality of meaning is undoubtedly responsible for its widespread popularity even during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when attention to early Christian themes was, as we have seen, extremely heated both from a scientific and a purely religious point of view.

¹⁴ It was Grabar who underlined how image-signs of early Christian catacombs were related to sacraments of the church (baptism and communion): André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series 35, 10), 1968, pp. 10–11. See also Elżbieta Jastrzębowska, 'Les scènes de banquet dans les peintures et sculptures chrétiennes des IIIe et IVe siècles', *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 14, 1979, 3-90

¹⁵ De Rossi's sacramental interpretation was followed by many other European authors, who always read the decorative programmes of the cubicles with a strong sense of symbolism: Viktor Schultze, *Archäologische Studien über altchristliche Monumente*, Wien: Braumüller 1880, 22-98; Théophile Roller, *Les catacombes de Rome. Histoire de l'art et des croyances religieuses pendant les premiers siècles du christianisme 1*, Paris : Morel, 1881, 125-131; André Perraté, *L'archéologie chrétienne*, Paris : Librairies-impr. réunies 1892, 128-140 ; Franz Xaver Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, Freiburg im Breisgau : Herder, 1896, 161-165. At the very end of the 19th century, the sacrament cubicles became the central theme of the thoroughly apologetic and sacramental investigation of Joseph Wilpert in Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Sakramentskuppeln in der Katakomben des hl. Callistus*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1897.

¹⁶ Paul-Albert Février, 'A propos du repas funéraire : Culte et sociabilité', *Cahiers archéologiques. Fin de l'antiquité et Moyen Âge*, 26, 1977, 29-46 ; Matteo Braconi, 'Le Cappelle dei Sacramenti e Joseph Wilpert. I programmi decorativi dei cubicoli dell'Area I al vaglio della critica del passato', *RACr*, 85, 2009, 77-106

¹⁷ Like the Cappella Greca in the catacombs of Priscilla and the 'ipogeo dei Flavia Aurelii' in the catacombs of Domitilla in Rome. In Sicily and Malta, banquets' tables are common in every Christian catacomb.

On this horizon, the interest in such a scene is translated in different ways, ranging from the more or less exact reproduction in different contexts, to the re-use and re-elaboration of the scene in ecclesiastical settings.

Let us therefore begin by presenting the cases in which banquet scenes from the Cubicles of the Sacraments in the cemetery of San Callisto and from the Cappella Greca in the catacombs of Priscilla were reproduced as such, in order to understand the purpose of these 'copies' and their impact on art history studies.

The oldest case dates back to 1854 and is due to the initiative of Pope Pius IX. Christian antiquity assumed an important role in the cultural policy of this pontiff, who, while leading the Papal State to its political end, personally promoted and financed considerable initiatives for the development of the discipline. Pius IX made use of the work and the advice of the Jesuit scholar Giuseppe Marchi,¹⁸ and later of that of de Rossi himself, a pupil of Marchi's and the founder of Christian archaeology as a scientific discipline.¹⁹ Together with the promotion of countless catacomb excavations, like those in San Callisto, Pius IX favoured the official establishment of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology (in 1852)²⁰ for the study, investigation and protection of Christian monuments, and above all the foundation of the Christian Museum and its Lapidarium in the Lateran Palace on 9 November 1854.²¹ The Lateran Christian Museum²² was designed as an appendix to the visit to the catacombs, to serve as a subsidy for the understanding of Christian antiquities, which in museum could be better observed and understood by visitors, as well as better preserved than in the cemetery galleries or in the basements of the churches from which they came. This didactic aim of the Lateran Christian Museum was also connected with the arrangement of two rooms at the end of the main gallery, dedicated to the exhibition of large watercolour copies of the main paintings of the Christian catacombs. These copies were made by the painter Ercole Ruspi and his sons, who specialised in copies of ancient paintings,²³ and were chosen to best

¹⁸ See Romano Fausti, 'Documenti inediti sull'azione innovatrice del P. G. Marchi S. I.', in *RendPontAcc*, XIX, 1942-1943, 105-181; Romano Fausti, 'Il p. Giuseppe Marchi S.I. e il rinnovamento dell'archeologia cristiana', *Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae*, VII, 1943, 445-514; Umberto Utro, 'Giuseppe Marchi e i "primordi del Museo Cristiano Lateranense"', in *Giuseppe Marchi (1795-1860): archeologo pioniere per il riscatto delle catacombe dalla Carnia a Roma*, Stefano Piussi, Trieste: Editreg, 2012, 91-112.

¹⁹ About de Rossi's biography see Stefan Heid, 'Giovanni Battista de Rossi', in *Personenlexikon Zur Christlichen Archaologie: Forscher Und Personlichkeiten Vom 16. Bis Zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Stefan Heid and Martin Dennert, Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012, 400-405 and all his complete bibliography.

²⁰ Umberto Utro, 'Dalle catacombe al museo: storia e prospettive del Museo Pio Cristiano', *BMMGP*, 25, 2006, 399.

²¹ Utro, 'Dalle catacombe al museo', 398.

²² Utro, 'Giuseppe Marchi'. The museum was moved to the Vatican with the creation of the Museo Pio-Cristiano in the 1960s, see 'Trasferimento delle raccolte Lateranensi al Vaticano', in *BMMP*, I, 1, 1959-1974, 15-32.

²³ For further information on Ruspi's work and copies of ancient paintings: Matteo Piccioni, 'Alessandro Morani e il passato. Copia, revival e arte decorativa della Roma di fine Ottocento', *MDCCC 1800*, 5, 2016, 113-130; Maurizio Sannibale, 'Immagini svelate. Le copie al vero di Carlo Ruspi nel Museo Gregoriano Etrusco', *MEFRA*, 131-2, 2019, 265-281.

illustrate the art of the catacombs. The evocative and uplifting power of their iconographic themes could well complement the display of the great sarcophagi and epigraphic texts.

Reading contemporary chronicles,²⁴ we also find the Eucharistic banquet scene among these copies. In particular, in 1898, Orazio Marucchi's guide recalls that the paintings were chosen to represent early Christian symbolism and that, in the first room dedicated to the paintings, one could find a panel containing the various symbolic paintings of baptism and the Eucharist, represented precisely by the banquet of the seven disciples with the fish and the baskets of multiplied loaves.²⁵

These watercolour copies responded to the nineteenth-century trend characterised throughout Europe by the phenomenon of casts and copies, authentic and/or realistic, not only in museums but also in schools, academies and private homes. Copies were used to reproduce and make known archaeological works for conservation, exhibition and educational purposes. In addition, in Rome, they took on the task of protecting masterpieces that were symbols of Christianity, monopolised by the Papal State which, by exclusively controlling their execution, also managed and controlled their distribution.²⁶

The recording and reproduction of the banquet scenes for the Lateran Museum, the main museum of early Christian art in Rome, had a predictable impact on the production of copies and reproductions for printing and museum purposes. A very faithful series of plates reproducing all the paintings in the Cubicles of the Sacraments are in fact found in the second volume of Giovanni Battista de Rossi's *Roma Sotterranea Cristiana* in 1867.

In volume II, in plates XII and XIII, we find the architectural view of the cubicles of the Sacraments in which the paintings are found, which are instead reproduced in plates XIV, XV, XVI, XVIII. The tables are completed by the historical-artistic analysis of volume I, relating to the five cubicles of San Callisto, symbolically alluding to Baptism and the Eucharist.²⁷ De Rossi describes the scenes and reads their positions as a symbolic concatenation. For him, the scene with fish and bread, in all its variations, is always linked to the multiplication of the loaves, while the diners are always seven, a number full of evangelical symbolism. In the text, De Rossi also questions the absence of the figure of Christ in these scenes, which he sees present, however, in the fish itself, in the representation of the Eucharist. The author thus provides us not only with extensive depictions of the original motif, but also with an overview of the dominant ideas about it in the historiography of the period.

In Rome, the need to obtain reproductions of pictorial scenes from the catacombs (especially these highly symbolic and Christianly characterising scenes) also prompted Monsignor Anton de Waal to commission some watercolours for his museum. Anton de Waal was not only a scholar of the early Church, but also the founder and director of the Teutonic College in the Vatican, where, from 1880

²⁴ *La civiltà Cattolica*, 1854, VIII, 5, 567-576.

²⁵ Orazio Marucchi, 'Guida del Museo Cristiano Lateranense compilata da Orazio Marucchi', Roma: Tipografia Vaticana, 1898, 165, 168-171.

²⁶ Mazzarelli, 'Copie "autentiche" delle catacombe', 91-94.

²⁷ de Rossi, 'La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana', 329-330, 341-342.

onwards, he set up a museum of Christian antiquities.²⁸ The layout of this museum remains iconic to this day, despite its troubled history: in its central phase (1885-1896), it is a significant example of a setting layout, in which early Christian artefacts were displayed in rooms decorated like catacombs.²⁹ The intention of such an exhibition was mainly didactic and, just as in the case of the Lateran Museum, de Waal relied on young German scholars (Joann Peter Kirsch and Joseph Wilpert himself) to obtain watercolour reproductions of the main scenes of the Sacrament Cubicles for use in the museum and during his lectures.³⁰



Figure 3 Johann Dickmann, copy of the Banquet scene from the catacombs of San Callisto
(from Heid, 'Wohnen wie in Katakomben')

In March 1885 Joseph Wilpert worked with the painter Johann Dickmann in the catacombs of Callisto to copy the most important images in their original size for the museum in watercolour.³¹ The majority of these original drawings have been lost but are known through reproductions published by Wilpert over time, and because of the presence of the banquet scene also within the catacomb-style rooms of the museum. Among these drawings were obviously the banquet scenes from the Cubicles of the Sacraments, copied like all the other scenes in isolation, as vignettes, without recording the architectural structure in which they were inserted (fig. 3). Certainly the representations were faithful to the original, but the interpretations given for their display were unmistakably doctrinal: de Waal recognised in them early and undoubted representations of the Eucharist, so much so that in 1891 he had them hung outside the College Chapel to remind priests going to Mass of the beginnings of the Eucharist in the catacombs of Rome. In addition to Dickmann's drawings, there were other watercolours of banquet scenes from San Callisto at the Teutonic College, which are still preserved and exhibited outside its Museum. These

²⁸ Stefan Heid, *Wohnen wie in Katakomben. Kleine Museumsgeschichte des Campo Santo Teutonico*. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2016, 93-99.

²⁹ Heid, 'Wohnen wie in Katakomben', 99-109.

³⁰ Heid, 'Wohnen wie in Katakomben', 145.

³¹ A complete overview of this matter can be found in Heid, 'Wohnen wie in Katakomben', 143-148.

are large (ca. 50x140 cm) anonymous watercolours, composed of a juxtaposition of pictorial scenes and catacomb epigraphs, and made before 1890.³² They were exhibited with other watercolours of catacomb paintings in a special room on the upper floor of the house in 1891, in the style of the paintings room in the Lateran Museum, to explain Christian doctrine and morals. The connection with the Lateran Museum is indeed very close: according to Stefan Heid, these collages of images were made especially in large format for the Campo Santo and were hung to bring its archaeological collection closer to visitors and better explain to them what was preserved in the catacombs of Rome. Everything was, in fact, supported by a clear theological-catechetical concept that aims to teach through images, in full Christian style.

A similar intention, with the aim of disseminating the pictorial themes of the catacombs for edifying but also for more 'advertising' purposes, can be found in a minor way in postcards. These small souvenirs -created by the Roman decorative painter Romeo Cavi- very often show the two pictorial banquet scenes from the catacombs and were distributed both at the cemetery of Callisto (during the period when the catacomb was run by the French Trappists between 1884 and 1928) and at the cemetery of Priscilla (fig. 4).



Figure 4 Banquet scene from the Catacombs of Calixtus in a late nineteenth century postcard (postcard, author's collection)

Faithful reproductions

Starting with the (more or less faithful) reproductions of the scene in its version of San Callisto and Priscilla for study purposes, the connection with the case of the facsimile catacomb in Valkenburg, The Netherlands, is automatic.

³² Heid, 'Wohnen wie in Katakomben', 148.

Between 1910 and 1912, a complex was built in Valkenburg on the initiative and at the expense of the textile magnate Jan Diepen (1872-1930), which consisted of a faithful copy of more than sixty sites of the catacombs of Rome in a specially arranged underground labyrinth inside several existing galleries of an old quarry.³³ The reproduction was designed and supervised by the famous local architect Pierre Cuypers and was carried out by constantly informing the Vatican bodies responsible for the care of the Roman catacombs. We know that, on 9 December 1909, Diepen asked and obtained from the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology permission 'to make some reliefs of cemetery crypts in order to reproduce them in quarries (located in the Netherlands at Valkenburg), which we would like to set up as catacombs, to make them a place for the dissemination of Christian archaeology'.³⁴ The project was linked to educational issues of Christian art and archaeology, but the devotional purposes were also strong, as can be seen in the contemporary press and in the historical representations and masses that took place in the facsimile catacombs of Valkenburg³⁵. The presence in all these excavated chambers of the corresponding, extremely faithful copies of the main pictorial decorations of the Roman catacombs, certainly contributed to this edifying reconstruction. Exact copies of the banquet scenes are clearly present, as both the Cappella G of the Catacombs of Priscilla and the Sacrament Cubicles of Sacraments from San Callisto are duplicated. Indeed, it can be said that the core of the Callisto reproductions was undoubtedly the centre of the Dutch 'catacomb', where all events took place precisely because of the presence of all the most important scenes of the Christian sacraments.

The presence of reproductions of the banquet scene chosen for its Eucharistic symbolic value brings us closer to those cases where such iconography is reused in a strictly ecclesiastical context, both in Rome and in Europe (fig. 5).

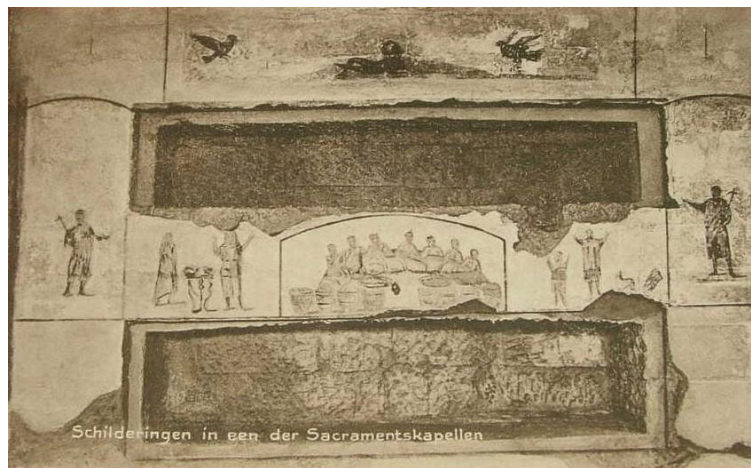


Figure 5 Reproduction of the Cubicles of the Sacraments in the facsimile catacomb of Valkenburg in The Netherlands (postcard, author's collection).

³³ Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Archivio, seduta del 9 dicembre 1909.

³⁴ Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, Archivio, seduta del 10 febbraio 1910.

³⁵ Jasper Van Parys, 'Salvatore Olandese. Pierre Cuypers' Archeologische Commissie en de kunsttheoretische betekenis van de catacombenkopieën in Valkenburg', *Bulletin KNOB*, 2020, 119, 2, 36-51.

The main Roman example is the crypt of the church of the Santi XII Apostoli in Rome, purpose-built as a catacomb in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Between 1870 and 1884, the crypt of the church was excavated and renovated to improve the arrangement of the relics of the Apostles Philip and James resting there. The idea was to create, in the centre of Rome, and around the relics of the two Apostles, the sensation of being in a real catacomb by faithfully reproducing the most famous paintings of real underground Christian cemeteries. The result was so impressive that a few years after its completion, the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology had to ask the parish priest of the church to explain to visitors by means of signs that those were copies in painting, to avoid leaving them confused about the originality of the paintings, or even creating a kind of false worship.

Among the scenes to be reproduced, the banquet from the Cubicles of the Sacraments was obviously chosen.³⁷ The scene was executed by the painter Giuseppe Mari, very faithfully to the version in cubicle A3, adding the surrounding decoration and, at the top, a verse from the Gospel of John with clear references to the banquet with loaves and fishes (fig. 6).



Figure 6 Reproduction of the banquet scene from the Catacombs of Callisto in the Church of Santi XII Apostoli in Rome (postcard, author's collection)

It is not surprising that a revisitation of the banquet motif appears, a few decades after its discovery, in the early Christian reconstruction of one of the oldest and most central churches in Rome. It is more unusual (but much more indicative) to encounter this iconographic theme in the same years in the chapel of a Benedictine abbey in Scotland, on the borders of Catholic Europe.

³⁶ Ippolito Mazzucco, 'L'iconografia di imitazione nella cripta romana dei Santi XII Apostoli', *Strenna dei Romanisti*, 1989, 341-359.

³⁷ Anke Reiß, *Rezeption frühchristlicher Kunst im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Christlichen Archäologie und zum Historismus*. Dettelbach: J.H.Röll Verlag, 2008, 137-141.

From the year 1887, the Benedictine Abbey of Fort Augustus, south of Loch Ness, had added to the rich collection of relics of various saints of the Catholic Church that it had built up over time, with some new relics donated by Pope Leo XIII.³⁸ The abbey had long had more or less direct contact with Rome and its cultural environment: during the Benedictine jubilee celebrations of 1880, the prior of Fort Augustus Jerome Vaughan and Abbot Maurus Wolter of Beuron, who had met in Rome, fought for the separation from the British Benedictine Congregation and its direct subordination to the Holy See, decreed by Pope Leo XIII on 7 January 1883. The same connection with the monastery of Beuron is significant for our theme. The monastery of Beuron was founded in 1863 and many of the so-called painter-monks, who worked on a renewal of Christian art, also using appropriately revised early Christian symbolism, came from there.

The decision to reuse and redecorate a small underground room, previously used as a service room and then abandoned,³⁹ should be included in this panorama. The place was decorated with murals in the style of the Roman catacombs, modelled by members of the Fort Augustus community, Father Luke Cary-Elwies and Father Lawrence Mann. We know of Father Luke that he came from a family of artists well known in England in the Leicestershire area. We also know that he belonged to the Chelsea Arts Club and, like many of the painters associated with this association, had studied in Paris in the 1860s.⁴⁰ We can therefore imagine that he had direct contact with the Universal Exhibitions in Paris and in particular with the model brought by de Rossi and visited by many English people at that time.⁴¹

This reliquary chapel, which still exists but was redecorated in 1998, is a high room measuring about 5 x 4 metres. The side walls were fitted out with reproductions of arcosolia and loculi, all intended to contain the relics. The architectural structure of these walls alone was immediately reminiscent of the funerary context of the cubicles in the early Christian Roman catacombs, to which the decorations also refer: the room was in fact filled with scenes of various kinds inspired by the paintings in the catacombs: among them, obviously, the banquet scene from Callisto (fig. 7). The vaulted ceiling bore the classic system of red and green lines emphasising the hypogeal architecture, while a christogram is placed in the keystone.

Going beyond the nineteenth century and returning to Rome, we encounter a final example for this discussion, namely the large mosaic with a banquet scene from the catacombs on the back wall of the chapel of the convent of the Benedictine Sisters, just above the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome.⁴²

³⁸ John Martin Robinson, *Grass Seed in June. The Making of an Architectural Historian*. Norwich: ed. Michael Russell, 2006, 66-67.

³⁹ The studies on this place are very scarce: *Fort Augustus Abbey. Past and present*. Fort Augustus: Abbey Press, 1963 [5th edition. With illustrations] and John Gifford, *Highland and Islands*. Yale: Yale University Press 2003, 168-173.

⁴⁰ Robinson, 'Grass Seed in June', 66.

⁴¹ Cecalupo, 'Giovanni Battista e Michele Stefano', 342-344.

⁴² The only published study on the mosaic is Axel Alt, 'Il mosaico parietale della cappella delle suore Benedettine di Priscilla sulla Via Salaria (Roma)', *AISCOM XXIV*. Rome: Quasar, 2019, 313-318.

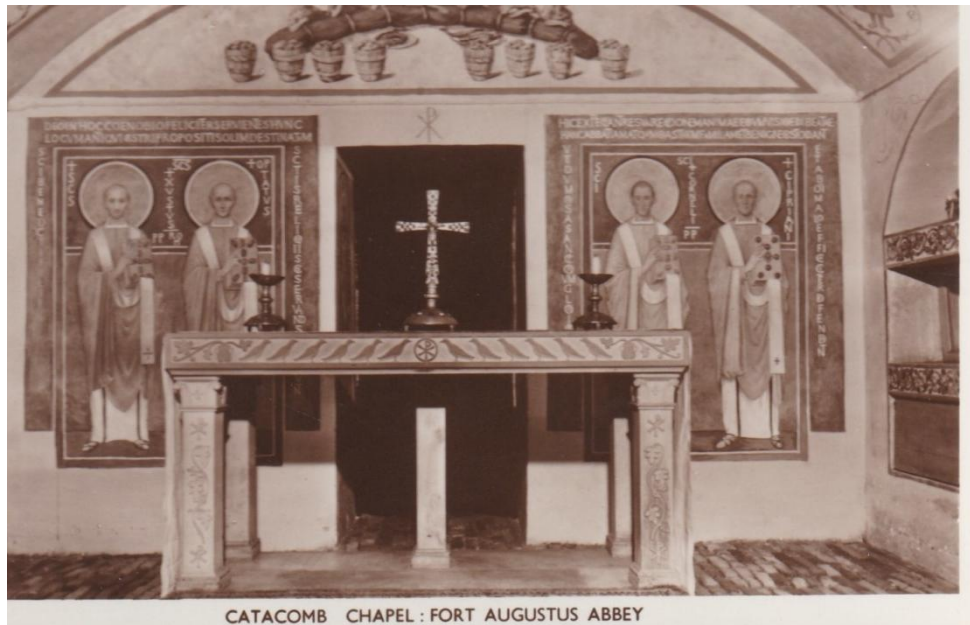


Figure 7 Reliquary chapel in Fort Augustus Abbey in Scotland (postcard, author's collection).



Figure 8 Mosaic reproduction of the banquet scene from the Catacombs of Priscilla in the private chapel of the Benedictine nuns of Priscilla (postcard, author's collection).

In this small private place of worship of the congregation, there is a precious reinterpretation as a wall mosaic of the banquet scene inspired by the one in the Cappella Greca in the catacombs below. The scene occupies the entire back wall of the rectangular chapel, and is proposed in monumental dimensions. Its structure is, however, very well thought out in a Eucharistic key: the central plate with the fish is placed right at the door of the tabernacle, with a very clear Eucharistic meaning that

permeates the whole representation (fig. 8). On the other hand, the lower part contains the dedicatory epigraph that recounts the genesis of this mosaic work. The mosaic was inaugurated on Christmas 1954 and was executed as a gift of thanks by Lorenzo Camerino, a Venetian mosaicist and Jewish convert, who had found refuge in the catacombs of Priscilla with his entire family during the final years of the Second World War (1943-1944). The choice of theme is therefore twofold: not only is it significantly devotional, in memory of a religious conversion, but it is also linked to the meaning of thanksgiving inherent in the banquet scenes in the catacombs and in the entire Christian Eucharistic liturgy in general.

We are in one of the later stages of the process of assimilation and re-use of catacomb art scenes in ecclesiastical or civil settings. From the 1950s onwards, interest in these themes and their use waned, and they are relegated more exclusively to rare decorative moments in contemporary churches.⁴³

Conclusion

The overview presented so far is, therefore, a fairly broad case study of the impact of early Christian art studies on late nineteenth-century historiography. It is certainly not the only one, but critical studies in this direction are still lacking, and the one presented so far is certainly a striking example of how research and studies on Roman catacombs have influenced international artistic culture in very diverse fields. It is undoubtedly an alternative form of reception and diffusion of the artistic motif, stimulated by the flourishing of studies on Christian art in the mid-nineteenth century and by their essentially devotional character. This diffusion not only transcended the borders of the Papal States and the Italian language, but also reached different social classes that were not usually involved in historiographic discourse, opening the doors of the art of the Roman catacombs to a wide and diverse public.

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⁴³ For a very interesting account on early-Christian architecture revival see Reiß, 'Rezeption frühchristlicher Kunst', 39-90, 136-176.