

STILL IN ROME: REDISCOVERY OF 'OLDEST PAINTED LIKENESS OF CHRIST'?

Vividly remembered by this Editor from a schooldays' Oxford encyclopaedia is the painted image reproduced overleaf. It appeared under an intriguing caption worded something like 'Is this the earliest likeness of Christ?' and was said to be from Rome's Catacombs, and of second, or perhaps even first century date. Only in later life did I learn its origin as a sketch from the Catacombs made some time around the mid-nineteenth century by the Victorian artist Thomas Heaphy, also that it is to be found among an album of Heaphy copies of early likenesses of Christ preserved to this day in the Print Room of the British Museum.

In fact, intrigued though I was by any and all early Christ portraits, the Heaphy profile view always had suspicious 'odd-man-out' air about it. Much thumbing of books of the art of the catacombs failed to turn up any photograph corresponding to Heaphy's sketch. And when Heaphy, in the case of likenesses of Christ for which there were photographs, turned out to be an very unreliable, and at times highly inventive copyist (see my review of Rex Morgan's *The Holy Shroud and the Earliest Paintings of Christ* in Newsletter 14; also chapter 7 of my *Holy Faces, Secret Places*), it was easy to dismiss the Catacomb portrait as probably just another piece of Heaphy's artistic fantasising..

But even the most hardened counterfeiter (and I wouldn't rate Heaphy in quite that category), can pass the occasional genuine article. And thanks to some diligent and fascinating research by BSTS member Sylvia Bogdanescu, carried out as long ago as 1969, but only recently brought to our attention, the original painting copied by, Heaphy has at long last been positively tracked down.

Touring Rome's catacombs armed with copies of Heaphy's sketch and 19th century engravings of where she thought the painting to be located, Sylvia and her Romanian-born husband Ras happened to meet a helpful and knowledgeable monk, Brother Serafino, who immediately recognised the painting as one from an area of the Domitilla catacomb normally closed to the general public. After the catacombs' closing time Serafino specially led the Bogdanescus for more than half an hour through labyrinthine and totally unlit passageways until at last they reached number 20, Cubicula dell'Orfeo (the cubiculum of Orpheus), not shown on any known map of the Domitilla catacomb. From Sylvia's researches she expected the painting to be on the ceiling, where Serafino indeed confirmed it to be. But even though Serafino helpfully shone his torch upwards, in Sylvia's words 'all I could see was a rough flaking ceiling blackened by the oily smoke of hundreds of ancient torches.'

Undaunted, and armed only with a Kodak Instamatic and six flashcubes, Sylvia optimistically pointed her camera at the ceiling, and fired six times, each time slightly varying the angle. And when the prints were developed, there, blotchily but unmistakably within a tell-tale roundel, was the painting copied by Heaphy. In fact the discovery raises as many questions as it answers, the face itself being so effaced by time and discoloration that much uncertainty still remains concerning how much the finer details of Heaphy's mid-19th century 'copy' were visible in his time, or were simply another product of his imagination. (Because of these same problems the painting is not reproducible in this Newsletter.) Similar caution is needed with regard to determining the century in which the original was painted, though it is undoubtedly very early.

Nonetheless Heaphy's romantic and colourful story that he had spent a night painting by candlelight in the Catacombs ('A Night in the Catacombs', *St. James's Magazine*, 1881), a story for which there is no equivalent with regard to his purported access to the Veronica, is at least vindicated. So full marks to Sylvia and Ras Bogdanescu's sleuthing; also, one up to you, Rex Morgan'

In 1887 Sylvia Bogdanescu wrote a short, privately-printed book of her Catacomb researches, *The Catacomb Church*, which she has kindly made available to this Editor, also to Rex Morgan. This fascinating, highly original book includes many colour photographs and richly deserves proper publication.