



July 2005

Tree of Paradise: Jewish Mosaics from the Roman Empire on View at Brooklyn Museum October 28, 2005–June 4, 2006

Twenty-one extraordinary Roman-period mosaics from the first archaeological ruins of an ancient synagogue to be discovered in modern times will be on view October 28, 2005 through June 4, 2006, at the Brooklyn Museum. This exhibition will examine the role of these mosaics, acquired by the Museum in 1905, in the development of synagogue decoration in the late Roman Empire. Approximately thirty-eight related artifacts, such as contemporaneous textiles, marble statues, gold jewelry, and bronze ritual objects, will be included.

Tree of Paradise: Jewish Mosaics from the Roman Empire will investigate the origins of synagogues, the development of Jewish art in the Roman period, female patronage in the ancient synagogue, the differences between early Christian and Jewish symbolism in art, and the relationship between ancient and modern synagogues.

Twelve of the mosaic panels that will be on display were part of the sanctuary floor of the synagogue in Hammam Lif, Tunisia (the ancient Punic city of Naro, later the Roman Aquae Persianae), the primary subjects of which are Creation and Paradise. The Latin inscription on the floor panels indicates that Julia of Naro gave the floor to the community. Two menorahs flank the inscription. Included are depictions of a tree in Paradise, sea animals and birds in a scene portraying Creation, and symbolic birds and baskets that relate to the themes of Creation and the coming of the Messiah. Decorative motifs include birds and fruits. The remaining nine panels come from other rooms in the building and other nearby buildings. They depict animals, a male figure, and a female figure.

The discovery of these mosaics, last on view in Brooklyn in 1998, ushered in the birth of synagogue archaeology on February 17, 1883, when the French army captain Ernest de Prudhomme ordered soldiers under his command in Hammam Lif, Tunisia, to prepare his backyard for a garden. Instead of planting vegetables, Prudhomme and his men unearthed the first archaeological ruins of a Roman-period synagogue. Eventually, synagogue archaeology would revolutionize modern understanding of ancient Jewish life and religion.

Brooklyn Museum

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Modern scholars have recognized that the gloomy picture of Jewish life in the later Roman Empire portrayed in texts must be viewed alongside a decidedly different picture formed from archaeological evidence. Archaeological remains of ancient synagogues from Turkey to Spain and from Hungary to Tunisia show that many Jewish communities prospered in spite of official intolerance. Other discoveries of ancient synagogues in modern Israel, Jordan, Syria, Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Italy reveal the vitality of Jewish life around the Mediterranean Sea during the Roman Empire and an unexpected tolerance from their non-Jewish neighbors.

Tree of Paradise: Jewish Mosaics from the Roman Empire has been organized by Edward Bleiberg, Ph.D., Associate Curator in the Brooklyn Museum's Department of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern Art. It is accompanied by a full-color catalogue by Dr. Bleiberg, published by the Brooklyn Museum. As an appendix, the volume includes a previously unpublished 1905 study of the mosaics by the early Brooklyn Museum researcher Henri de Morgan.

A variety of educational programs will be presented in conjunction with the exhibition, including gallery talks. The exhibition will also be featured on the Museum's Web site at www.brooklynmuseum.org.

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BROOKLYN MUSEUM GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$8; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$4. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.