

New Walls For Ancient Murals

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found them, gathering dust in a storage room of the Yale Art Gallery.

"I called the curator and she told me to come and we would hunt through the canvases together," Mrs. Sivan said. She discovered that the panels, had never been displayed all together. Nobody had ever had the space for the murals, which were the same size as the originals that had covered a high-ceilinged hall measuring 40 by 20 feet. Occasionally a single panel had been put on exhibit, but that was all.

"I felt I had to do something," Mrs. Sivan said. "These paintings were crucial to the understanding of all early Judeo-Christian religious art. They bore a remarkable resemblance to medieval church paintings, yet pre-dated them by as much as 300 years."

She immediately set to work telephoning around trying to find a hall suitable for such a reconstruction. The Jewish Community Center on Chapel Street was looking for a suitable exhibit as part of its celebration of Israel's 30th anniversary, and Mrs. Sivan persuaded the center to display the panels exactly as they had appeared in that Dura synagogue.

The exhibition, which opened April 14 and runs until May 15, includes lectures by members of the Yale faculty on the history of the period.

How did the painted copies get to

Yale? Fearing quick decay and loss, the archeologists commissioned an artist in their team to paint full-sized copies of each scene depicted upon those walls as they unearthed them.

The artist, Herbert Gute, went further. He used only those pigments, materials, tools and techniques thought to be known to artists living in Dura in 200 A.D.

It took him two years, working in the heat of the desert, to reproduce all 17 panels — the only loss being those on the eastern wall, which had crumbled beyond redemption. Each panel measures about 5 feet in height and 5 to 12 feet in length. The originals are now in Damascus but are believed to be in a poor state of preservation and closed to general public viewing.

The scenes, said Mrs. Sivan, follow no chronological sequence. They are considered remarkable "because they not only bring to light a side of ancient Jewish life we knew nothing about, but because of their relationship to later Byzantine art."

They show characteristics, she said, such as frontality, lack of perspective, body contours and Biblical settings, that typify many later Christian medieval paintings.

She believes they may be the missing link between Eastern culture and Christian religious wall art. The collection, she said, is "a unique confluence of artistic traditions that are still imper-



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Hagith Sivan in front of a wall painting copied during the excavation at Dura

fectly understood" and that deserve far greater study and accessibility.

Already the new interest has resulted in inquiries from religious foundations in New York. And the Yale Art Gallery and the School of Divinity have promised to look into the possibility of a permanent exhibition.

Visitors coming to see the panels, Mrs. Sivan said, "are particularly fascinated with the idea that this could conceivably have been the walls of a synagogue; they also ask about the graffiti we find on one of the panels and I tell them it is just a message saying somebody came in and enjoyed the paintings."

She believes the wall art could have been the result of a desire by the Jews of Dura to be more like their pagan neighbors and emulate a local fashion that encouraged figure-painting on the wall. She also points out that wall paintings were considered a sign of wealth.

One story concerning the panels concerns a man called Samuel, apparently the leader and financial benefactor of this synagogue. He was naturally given the most important seat in the house —

the one adjacent to the niche for the Torah, which was also alongside the western wall of the synagogue (the wall facing Jerusalem). Directly behind his seat is a painting of the prophet Samuel — "so we might suppose that this painting was done to gratify this important community leader," Mrs. Sivan said.

Ceiling inscriptions further indicate the importance of this man Samuel as well as mentioning the synagogue's treasurer.

Mrs. Sivan emphasizes that the Jews of Dura never went so far as to depict God, which would have been the ultimate sacrilege. "He is only represented by a hand," she said. "the hand of divine intervention."

As daylight fades in that hall in New Haven and one is seemingly transported in time back into the ancient desert, one can almost see the small Jewish boys of Dura, sitting with their fathers in that synagogue, being bored and restless, as children could be as they listened to the repetitious chanting of the prayers, and gazing at the murals for pure enjoyment.