



PRESS RELEASE

Vatican Museum and Jewish Museum of Rome pleased to announce that May 15 will be inaugurated the exhibition *LA MENORÀ: CULTO, STORIA E MITO*, open to the public from 16 May to 23 July 2017 simultaneously in the two prestigious places Braccio di Carlo Magno and Jewish Museum of Rome.

This exhibition, the first ever project to result from team work between the Vatican City State and the Jewish Community of Rome, sets the seal on an initiative with a high institutional profile under the banner of unity, mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue.

The exhibition (comprising some 130 exhibits) uses the figurative arts to tell the unbelievable and troubled story of the Menorah going back over several thousand years. Moses ordered this candelabrum with seven branches to be forged in pure gold in compliance with the Lord's wishes for display in the first Temple of Jerusalem along with other sacred accoutrements to commemorate the covenant with the Children of Israel, as we are told in the *Book of Exodus*. This legendary candelabrum's wanderings across the face of the known world down the centuries, echoing the age-old fate of the Jewish people themselves, build a picture of one of the most evocative stories in the history of mankind in the past 3,000 years – a story that sinks its roots in the mists of time and legend.

The exhibition reconstructs the gripping story of the Menorah in a rich and multi-faceted journey spangled with major works of art ranging from archaeological finds to the 21st century, from sculpture to paintings, from architectural decoration to the decorative arts, and from medieval and Renaissance manuscripts to illustrated books.

Inevitably, Rome is the predestined venue for the exhibition, and indeed it was in the capital of the Roman Empire that the Menorah began its endless wandering, reaching the city in 70 CE after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Titus and his troops, as evoked both in the carved decoration on the Arch of Titus erected on the northern slopes of the Palatine and in the account of historian Flavius Josephus in his *De Bello Judaico*. Brought to Rome in triumph by the imperial troops, the Menorah and the other sacred accoutrements looted from the second Temple (built after the first had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon in 586 BCE, when the first Menorah mentioned in the Bible story is also likely to have been destroyed), ended up on display as trophies in the Temple of Peace built in the Imperial Forum to celebrate the victorious conclusion of the Jewish wars. But above all, it was in Rome at the height of the imperial era that the Menorah became the symbol which most powerfully encapsulated the culture and religion of Judaism; and this, at roughly the same time as the symbols of Christianity were acquiring their final shape and form. Since then, having become the emblem of Judaism *par excellence*, a tangible evocation of divine light, of the cosmic order of creation and of the ancient covenant, a symbol of the Burning Bush and the Tree of Life, a testimonial to the biblical Shabbat, the Menorah began to be depicted in a myriad different places and on every possible occasion, in the East and in the West, in Jewish catacombs in Rome, on sarcophagi and tomb inscriptions, in graffiti, on coins and glass decorated with gold, on necklaces, pendants and other jewellery. This dazzling proliferation is exhaustively documented in the exhibition with unique exhibits displayed in sections ordered in chronological sequence stretching from the 1st century CE to the 20th century, when the Menorah made its appearance on the crest of the new State of Israel.

Rome is also the city in which all trace of the historical Menorah was lost in the 5th century, when it was looted by Genseric's Vandals in the sack of 455 CE, possibly removed first to Carthage and thence (although this is less certain) to Constantinople. Thereafter, its fate increasingly shrouded in mystery, the Menorah vanished for ever, despite the myriad sagas that have sought in vain to perpetuate its material life down the centuries. From that date on, all accounts of the celebrated seven-branch candelabrum migrate into the realm of legend, in a plethora of romantic and swashbuckling tales set in the Middle Ages and down into the 19th century, all of which will be evoked in the exhibition.

The exhibition will also address another crucial aspect of the Menorah's history. In the Middle Ages, and specifically from the Carolingian period (no mere coincidence), Christian art began to emulate the Menorah's shape when creating the seven-branch candelabra that were placed in numerous churches for liturgical purposes. This weighty chapter in its history will be developed in the exhibition through the presence of several important pieces from the 14th and 15th centuries, such as the monumental candelabra from the Sanctuary of the Mentorella, from Prato and Pistoia, from Busdorfkirche of Paderbon and even a pair of huge eighteenth century candelabra from Palma de Mallorca (Capitular Museum, Catedral de Mallorca).

The exhibition will consist in three large sections broken down in turn into subsections. The first large section sets out to reconstruct the history of the Menorah from its extremely ancient presence in the Temple of Jerusalem until it was lost in Rome, in other words from antiquity to the early centuries of our own era. The second section, takes us on a fascinating journey rich in works of art, tracking the legend of the Menorah through time and space from late antiquity to the threshold of the 20th century, focusing in particular on both Christianity's appropriation of its shape to create ceremonial candelabra and on its perpetuation as a strong element for cohesion for Jewish culture and Jewish identity. A series of paintings will explore the popularity of the Menorah in art down the centuries and into the modern era. The Menorah was evoked in painting from the Renaissance right down to the 19th century because it was so closely bound up with the image of the Temple of Jerusalem. Finally, the third section will take a sweeping look at the 20th and 21st centuries with various depictions of the Menorah in work by artists of the highest level, in an era when the deconstructing of artistic vocabulary and visual semantics led to a range of unusual expressive styles being adopted to depict this extraordinary symbol. In fact, in several cases it even became the focal point of masterpieces of 20th century literature, such as Stefan Zweig's *The Buried Candelabrum*.

Exhibits have been lent for this exhibition by some of the most prestigious international and Italian museums, including – in addition to the Vatican Museums, the Jewish Museum of Rome and many other important Roman museums – the Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery in London, the Israel Museum and the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Albertina in Vienna, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the Jewish Museum in New York, the Franz Hals Museum in Haarlem, the Sephardic Museum of Toledo, the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, the Jewish Museums of Padua, Florence, Naples and Casale Monferrato, the Museo Archeologico in Naples, the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence. The exhibits on display include such astonishing and dazzling rarities as a large 1st century stone engraved with a bas-relief from the site of the ancient synagogue of Magdala in Galilee, discovered only a few years ago, some extremely rare Roman glass decorated in gold, sarcophagi and tombstones from the Jewish catacombs in Rome, the Carolingian *Bible of St. Paul*, the imposing 14th and 15th century Christian seven-branch candelabra, Roman Baroque silverware and paintings by such masters as Giulio Romano, Andrea Sacchi, Nicolas Poussin and Marc Chagall.

And finally, an important role will be played by educational panels in a concrete effort to encourage children to set off down the path of knowledge, dialogue and mutual understanding.

The exhibition, for the production of which a working group has been set up comprising scholars of international fame, is curated, coordinated and directed by Arnold Nesselrath, Deputy for the Curatorial Departments and the Conservation Laboratories of the Vatican Museums, by Alessandra Di Castro, the Director of The Jewish Museum of Rome, and by Francesco Leone, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History at Chieti-Pescara's "G. D'Annunzio" University.

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