

# Notes on the display of the *Hall of the Expansion of Christianity* in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense: between copies, reconstructions and didactics

## Notas sobre a exposição da *Sala da Expansão do Cristianismo* no Museu Bíblic Tarraconense: entre cópias, reconstruções e didáticas

**CHIARACECALUPO** 

Conex Plus-Marie Curie Fellow,  
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid,  
Calle Madrid 126, Getafe, Madrid,  
Espanha

[chiaracecalupo@gmail.com](mailto:chiaracecalupo@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This article presents historical and critical reflections on the display of the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense. In the first part it recalls the history of the museum and its cultural background; then it describes the hall and its composition. It ends with comparisons with other cases of similar museum displays between the 1850s and the 1950s, and a reflection on copies and authenticity in museum. The aim is to focus on this example of museum recreation of early-Christian burial and cult settlements, to contribute to the study of casts and reproductions and their role in European historical museum displays for Christian archaeology.

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta reflexões históricas e críticas sobre a exposição da Sala da Expansão do Cristianismo do Museu Bíblic Tarraconense. Na primeira parte apresenta a história do museu e o seu contexto cultural e, em seguida, descreve-se a sala e a sua composição. Termina com algumas comparações com outros casos de exposições museológicas semelhantes entre as décadas de 1850 e 1950, e uma reflexão sobre cópias e autenticidade nos museus. O objetivo é centrar-se neste exemplo de recriação museológica de assentamentos cristãos primitivos e cultos funerários, contribuindo para o estudo de moldes e reproduções e do seu papel para a arqueologia cristã em exposições em museus históricos europeus.

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### KEYWORDS

Museum exhibitions  
Replicas  
Authenticity  
Religious museums  
Early Christian art

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### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Museologia  
Reproduções  
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Arte cristã primitiva

## Introduction

Many European museums still preserve or re-create display modes and museographic concepts developed in past centuries, but which are still valid or interesting today due to their historical importance, didactic usefulness, and their particular aesthetics. It is, for example, the case of the extensive use of copies and reproductions in museum displays. The tradition of copies and reproductions in museums is long and important, and much analysed in the international context [1]: although the museum is the place of material transmission, hence the place of originals, copying is appreciated for aesthetics, and educational purposes, from the middle of the nineteenth century with the emergence of historical museums everywhere [2]. Copies are therefore admitted into museums over the centuries as a means of better understanding, especially in the archaeological field where artefacts need more protection or need to be deeply explained for their better understanding in the museum [3]. Moreover, casts and copies begin to appear in museums, as we shall see in the specific case of this essay, when the originals are inaccessible or are located in places to which not everyone could travel [4]. In this sense, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the permanent presence of copies and casts in museum displays became the main instrument to promote education, artistic training and museum narration [5]. Indeed, starting with the *Convention for the universal promotion of reproductions of works of art for the benefit of the museums of every country* signed at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867 and the creation of important museums that make copies the core of their collections (e.g. the Victoria & Albert Museum or even the Metropolitan Museum in New York), throughout the twentieth century casts became desirable for the creation of “universal” museums of arts and archaeology throughout the western world.

Museum displays thus always reflect the choices of their society. In contemporary times, with the recent central role of the museum in the development of communities and in the formation of a common identity, copies and reproductions of high technical quality play a heartfelt and beneficial role in engaging visitors in museum discourse. They also appeal to an emotional sphere of private experience, of preserving and understanding objects: copies are more approachable and visible, they allow a more direct contact with the past. Today, integrating copies and reproductions into the exhibition still may also mean giving didactic tools to a wider public, as well as allowing direct experience of access to works and contexts at risk or otherwise impossible to reach, creating relationships between objects, filling gaps and creating more complex archaeological discourses.

In the latest years, the interest on the “historical culture” and social aspects of the collections has been at the very basis of a wider inclusion of visitors’ experience in the presentation of history and have been leading to new ways of staging exhibitions [6]. Focus of art has been shifting from the single piece to the historical background [7] and it reflects on restaging exhibitions. There is increased attention to the individual and on the creation of different exhibition mode based on the fact that objects are historically significant only if seen together. Contemporary museums believe in the importance of visual information and are everyday more interested in displaying objects collectively to present larger history and create connections beyond the single textual aids and written information. These collective displays can be created even without authentic objects, aiming at providing “experience” as an opportunity to learn [6]. Sometimes, collections and objects are almost irrelevant to the social and didactic purpose and to the institutional mission: when museums are linked to education, they can decide that objects are not necessary for their didactic purposes [8]. Reimagining the museum experience of the visitors beyond the traditional focus on physical objects today can lead to a greatly impactful visit, a deeper connection with object history. The reframing of museum experience is therefore a very contemporary issue that challenges the central role of museum artefacts [9].

At the same time, these are issues that involve every time more the concept of interpretation in museum. After the emerging of new need of heritage access and understanding, heritage

interpretation led on heritage sites, visitor centres and museums are becoming a key tool for access and understanding, information sources, context and setting, authenticity, tangible and intangible values [10]. Over the years, the interest on heritage interpretation in museums has been growing [11] and interpretation has been developing as a working method both for presentation and public use of heritage, using many presentation resources based on cultural evidence and promotion of original contexts. Heritage interpretation has been proved to answer to public needs of education and leisure, understanding and experience of the site. Interpretation tools bring visitor closer to the site, with numerous presentation forms and techniques both in interpretation centres (to support visitor in exploration and interaction with heritage) and museums (where do not aim only to collect, conserve and study objects, but to offer a better communication of meanings and interrelationships of cultural heritage [12]). In contemporary debate, interpretation serves as a management tool for communicating with the public [13], especially when it focusses on the context of the collections, promoting its use for cultural, educational, social and tourism purposes [14].

The development hinted at here can be clearly seen in the case we are going to examine, namely the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense, and in the critical reflections related to it. This museum was created at the beginning of the twentieth century with a clear didactic intent and, therefore, based mostly on copies.

In this sense, this study focusses on issues of museum display and aims to disseminate a case of a type of museum display and curatorship activity, that is effective from a communicative point of view and also belongs to a long museum tradition.

## Museu Bíblic Tarraconense

### The history

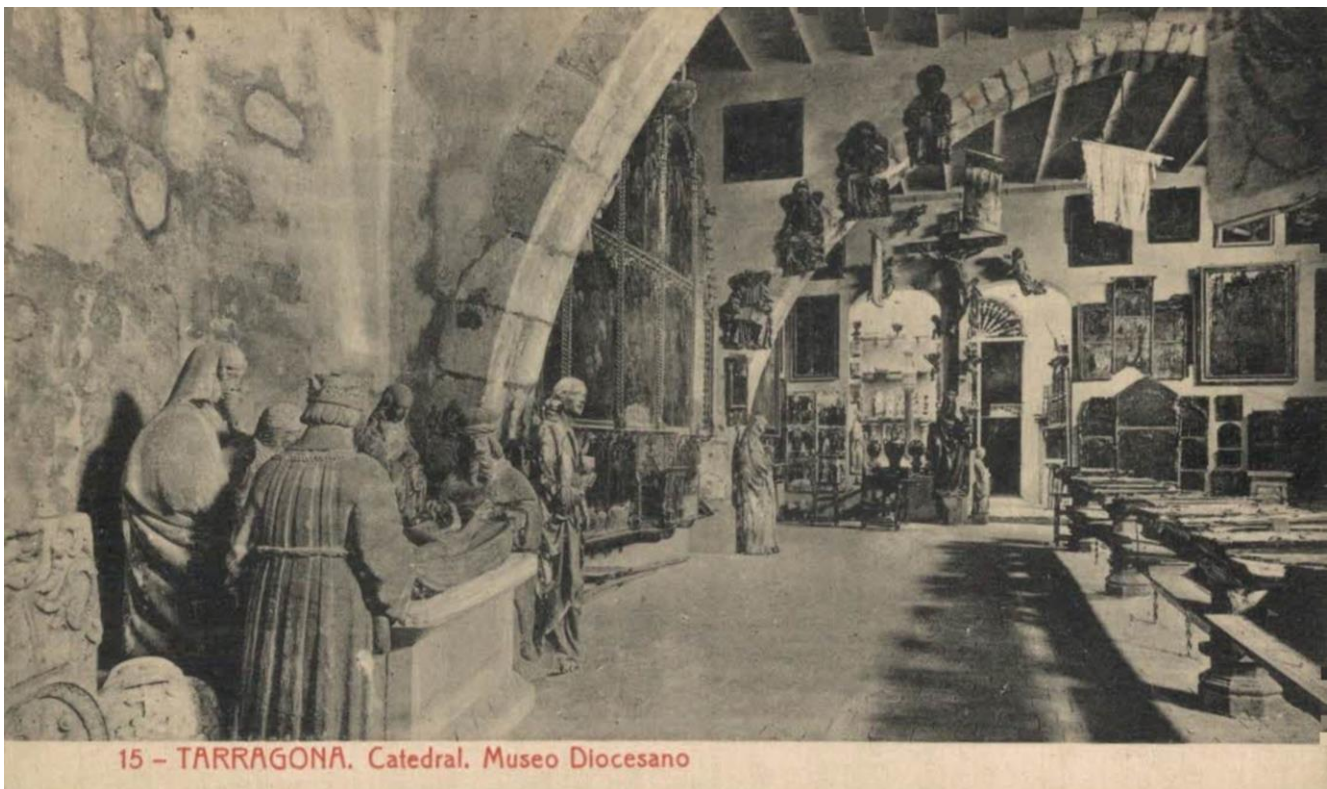
The city of Tarragona has an archaeological museum tradition of considerable importance, starting with the collection of the antiquities of the sixteenth-century scholar Anton Augustí. The rising of the city's museums dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the museums of the Comissió Provincial de Monuments de Tarragona and the Reial Societat Arqueològica Tarraconense were founded [15]. The collections of these institutions were brought together in 1860 in the Provincial Archaeological Museum, which, from its first location in Plaça de la Font in what is now Ayuntamiento, collects finds from all the archaeological discoveries in the province. The museum still exists today as the National Archaeological Museum of Tarragona (MNAT), whose historical headquarter in Plaça del Rei is currently undergoing major restoration and refurbishment work that will hopefully end in 2025 [16]. The main pieces of the permanent collection are now on display in a temporary installation in a structure in the city's port area, the Tinglado 4: this is a museographic experiment that follows in the successful trend of the exhibitions of antiquities hosted in industrial and contemporary venues and represents an excellent example of exhibition and didactic synthesis of a rich collection with a strong historical background. Other important institutions to define Tarragona's museum richness are the house-museums (i.e. Casa Museu Castellarnau or Casa Canals), the Diocesan Museum and the Museum of the Roman-Christian Necropolis. The Museum of the Roman-Christian Necropolis is perhaps one of the jewels of museology on the Iberian Peninsula: although today it is in a state of disrepair, in 2022 it was selected as a recipient of funds from the Plan de Modernización y Competitividad Turística, paid for with the Next Generation EU Plan for its restoration, refurbishment and reopening to the public [17]. It is a museum inaugurated by Joan Serra Vilaró in 1930 on the very site of the Roman-Christian necropolis to keep the artefacts found there, thus preventing their dispersion outside Tarragona [18]. It is a very interesting museum, both for its history and subject (after all, it is one of the very few cases in the Iberian Peninsula of a museum that housed an exclusively early Christian collection at the beginning of the twentieth century), and for its museological layout.



In the basement, excavated burials and other architectural finds and large amphorae could be seen at close quarters. On the first floor, the outer corridor housed sarcophagi displayed in a gallery, while the central hall, the heart of the museum, was decorated with numerous funerary inscriptions on the walls and large wooden showcases in the centre with the smaller finds [19] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Postcard of the inner room of museum of the Necropolis in Tarragona (1930s, private collection).



**Figure 2.** Postcard of the Diocesan Museum in Tarragona (1930s, private collection).

The last crucial place to briefly define the panorama of museums in Tarragona is the Diocesan Museum, founded in 1914 from the union of various collections of different provenances, and which became the convergence point of antiquities and sacred art materials from private collections and from churches and buildings in the diocese [20]. There are numerous pictures testifying the heavy juxtaposition of objects, displayed on all walls according to the accumulation canons typical of the period (Figure 2).

The museum is part of a flourishing Catalan tradition of museums of archaeology and sacred art, which has its roots in the well-known case of the Diocesan Museum of Vic and in the work of one of its main characters, Josep Gudiol i Cunill, who, inspired by contemporary Roman museology, published the first manual of sacred archaeology in Spain in 1902 [21]. The Tarragona Museum has always had the primary objective of preserving the historical and artistic treasures of the seat of the diocese, but it has had a turbulent life over time, with moves and rearrangements within the perimeter of the cathedral and in the buildings adjacent to it. Today, various rooms that open onto the cathedral cloister are being completely refurbished, according to the most modern canons of display and conservation (temperature and humidity control, proper supports, correct lights) [22].

The Museu Bíblic Tarraconense, the focus of this article, is perfectly inserted in this tradition.

### The museum

The history of the Biblical Museum began when Josep Vallès, a canon and professor at the Pontifical Seminary of Tarragona, made a trip to the Near East, collecting archaeological pieces, maps and reproductions of cult objects related to the Bible. On his return, he deposited these objects at the city's seminary to create a bible museum that would serve the education of seminary students and attract scholars and a more general public. This museum was well regarded by the ecclesiastical hierarchies of Tarragona, who wanted to reproduce, in the city, examples such as the Biblical Museum of Monserrat or the Diocesan Museum of Vic. The museum was opened in 1930 in the rooms of the Sacred Heart Cloister of the seminary of Tarragona. It had several nuclei of collections, from a varied archaeological section to a natural history one, and it housed some valuable pieces such as original medieval manuscripts from the cathedral treasury, but above all, many objects related to the Judaic religion and many didactic complements on religion, in particular maps, reproductions and manikins related to events in biblical history. For its founder, who was also inspired by the contemporary experiences of museums and pontifical institutes in Rome, this museum was to be a pedagogical museum at the service of culture and the history of religion, whose pioneering aim was to make people learn "by seeing, touching and creating" [23] (Figure 3).

The museum lived through ups and downs: with the civil war in 1937, it was moved to other locations in the archbishopric, only to return to its rooms in 1950. In 1968 it was dismantled, and the objects were only preserved thanks to the attention of the then diocesan archivist. In 1974, a reopening of the museum was approved with the intention of promoting the local dissemination of biblical studies, on the upper floor of the bishop's palace in 1995. In the last stage of its history, in the 2000s, the museum was once again thought of as a place to be renovated for initiation into religious history and the history of Christianity.

The new museum was inaugurated in the building of the Casa dels Concilis on the 10th of April 2006 in the presence of the then Archbishop Jaume Pujol. From the very first moment, it aimed at being a multidisciplinary pedagogical tool for a historical understanding of the Scriptures and their influence on universal culture, and was intended for the formation of the diocese and for bringing all areas of society closer to biblical culture [24]. The museum fulfils its educational task with a well-developed didactic system and by housing a wide variety of objects ranging from original archaeological and geological finds, to reproductions of sites and monuments and, above all, copies and casts of original objects, that allow visitors to see at the same time objects held in other museums or currently lost. A significant example is the cast of



part of the forehead of the sarcophagus of Peter and Paul from the Necropolis of Tarragona, made and donated to the museum by Serra Vilaró himself. It is now placed at the entrance to the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity, highlighting how the casts and copies play a crucial role in the museum, both in its display and conservation choices, as can be seen in this particular room.



**Figure 3.** Photo of teaching activities inside the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense (1930s photography: Museu Bíblic Tarraconense).



**Figure 4.** Overview of the display of the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense.

The room is presented as a longitudinal space whose back wall has been chosen to reconstruct a kind of presbytery area, generically suggesting an early Christian basilica, which is explicitly linked to the history of the first Christian communities of Tarragona. By placing oneself in the centre of the room, in fact, the visitor can observe the reconstruction of four pillars that recall the presence of a nave and contribute to the reconstruction of an apsidal hall (Figure 4).

The reconstruction of the apsidal basin is completed by a painted decoration with stars, a gem-studded cross and palms on a blue background. The appearance explicitly recalls the typical mosaic decoration of the apses of large Roman churches, referring to an aesthetic immediately recognisable to the visitor as Christian and ancient. A similar Roman inspiration can also be found in the reconstruction of the altar in the centre of the apsidal area, with the aim of enhancing the fragment of an inscription with the name of Saints Fructuosus and Augurus found in the city's Necropolis [25, pp. 131-150], reconstructing a possible location in an altar mensa. The type of altar chosen for this reconstruction is perhaps the best known and best-preserved example of an early Christian altar from the 4th century with a system for direct access to the relics of a saint, the one placed on the tomb of Alexander and Eventius in the Catacombs of St Alexander on the Via Nomentana in Rome. The inscription added above this altar reproduction is the exact copy of the very fragment of the inscription with the names of the martyrs of Tarragona, the original of which is kept in the museum of the Necropolis, which also appears reconstructed in the edge of the canteen. Another copy made of an early Christian artefact found in the necropolis and preserved there is that of the floor mosaic that closed the tomb of Optimus [26, pp. 321-345]. The copy is placed in the floor in the centre of the room, in front of the altar, recalling the presence in early Christian basilicas of floor tombs of various kinds. A small mosaic with a Eucharistic theme of fish and loaves, a copy of a detail from the floor of the Church of Multiplication in Tabgha (Cafarnao), has been placed in the floor near the altar. On either side of the apsidal area there are two small rooms. The room on the right was used as a reconstruction of a small polygonal immersion baptistery, mosaic-covered on the inside, copying North African examples. On the wall, a scene of Adam and Eve is reproduced that clearly recalls a catacomb (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Reconstruction of: a) the baptismal font and b) a catacomb painting of Adam and Eve (right) in the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense.



The room on the left is the most interesting, because the entire long wall is occupied by the reproduction of an arcosolium of a Christian catacomb in Rome, including the reconstruction of the tomb with the body of the deceased, closed by a glass panel to allow the visitor to look inside. The wall decoration reproduces, with some modifications, the upper part of the painted wall of the so-called cubiculum of the five saints found in the mid-nineteenth century in the catacombs of San Callisto in Rome. Here, around the arch of the burial, the five praying saints that appear in the original painting have been reproduced and, on either side of the arcosolium, the two peacocks with painted inscriptions. On the back wall of the arcosolium, a painting of the Good Shepherd from the same catacomb has instead been reproduced (Figure 6).

Following the archive research carried out at the museum, and especially after having directly contacted the authors of the reproductions (Figure 7), it is possible to offer some technical indications on the composition of these reproductions.

The copies were requested by the then Archbishop, Jaume Pujol Balcells, to two English artists contacted by an English collaborator of the museum. The copy of the Optimus mosaic was produced mainly in the United Kingdom by Lawrence Payne, a mosaic artist trained in Ravenna. The panels were then installed into the floor of the room (Figure 8). A similar procedure was followed for the mosaic of the fishes and loaves and the inside of the baptismal font, which was an eclectic composition of general early Christian motifs, fishes and birds [27]. The paintings were also commissioned by the Archbishop in 2005 to the painter Ria Teunisse, expert in copies of ancient paintings. The Archbishop provided examples in photos and pictures with the permission of the Vatican Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra. The techniques used were fresco and secco: fresco for the paintings above the tomb with the copy of the Arcosolio of the five Saints, while an old secco technique was used for the other ones, using a natural gesso and paint with egg tempera [28].



**Figure 6.** Reconstruction of the catacomb arcosolium in the Hall of the Expansion of Christianity in the Museu Bíblic Tarraconense.





**Figure 7.** The authors of the copies posing with the Archbishop of Tarragona on the opening day (10.04.2006) (photography: Museu Bíblic Tarraconense).



**Figure 8.** Installation of the mosaic panel at Museu Bíblic Tarraconense (photography: Museu Bíblic Tarraconense).

The hall was inaugurated together with the museum on the 10th of April 2006, and the press of the time reminds us how, from that day onwards, it served as a helpful tool of approaching ancient practices such as immersion baptism and burial in catacombs. In this sense, the room also became a new setting for events of theatrical reconstructions of early Christian rites and celebrations as part of “open days” or re-enactments of antiquity such as Tarracoviva [29].

### Critical reading

After this formal description, some reflections are necessary as that are the focus of this article. From the point of view of museum display, this apparently naive and simplified layout draws attention to important precedents. In fact, in the history of archaeological museology the effect of an exposition clearly depends also on the history of the displayed objects [30]. Between the nineteenth and twentieth century, there were several cases of displays reproducing the interiors of catacombs [31], which were linked to the development of period rooms and the widespread use of exact copies and facsimile reproductions for the study and conservation of archaeological and artistic heritage. The high regard in which copies and reproductions were held for both display and conservation purposes is clearly expressed by one of the pioneers of cultural heritage conservation and preservation in Europe, right between the nineteenth and twentieth century, the art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905):

*In view of the increasing development of art-technical means of reproduction, one can be confident that in the foreseeable future (especially after the discovery of absolutely convincing colour photography and its combination with facsimile copies) it will be possible to find as perfect replacements as possible for the documentary originals. [32, p. 38, translation from German by the author]*

The increasing use of reproductions was linked as much to their value in replacing the originals and telling the story of the objects [4] as to the interest of critics. It has been recalled [33] how in the German context of the 1920s the problem of copies and reproductions for conservation and museology was strongly raised, at a time when the spread of photography and mechanical reproduction for restoration and reproduction pervaded the debate on the perception of the original. The art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) discussed, in terms that are still valid for our case, how facsimile reproduction could convey the effect and meaning of the original with little loss, effectively allowing people to come into direct contact with objects, and these objects of the past to have an impact on life in the present [34]. In the same years, Alexander Dorner (1893-1957) had already established exhibition criteria for reproductions to bring the spirit of artistic creation to the wider public: original cultural materials are better enhanced in an environment recreated to approximate their original atmosphere [35], and if the virtue of the museum is to educate, then it is the facsimile that allows it to reach many more people.

In the same early decades of the twentieth century, there were of course discussions about reproductions (and not only in museums) with the introduction of photography, and its role in the diffusion of art imaginary and social use [36]. This allowed for a very wide and inexpensive dissemination of visual knowledge both in the international network of scholars and museums as well as in all social classes.

Museums of Christian archaeology and catacomb studies between nineteenth and twentieth century were not excluded from this debate and from the use of reproductions, copies and facsimile. The first institution to make systematic and official copies of the paintings of the catacombs was the papacy: in the Christian Museum in the Lateran Palace, opened in 1854, Pope Pius IX had an entire room set up with copies of the paintings of the Roman catacombs in order to give visitors (in a pre-photographic period) a clear view of the underground paintings, which were very difficult to visit *in situ* [37]. These included a large-

scale copy of the painting of the cubicle of the five saints from the Catacombs of Callisto, which we can identify as the main antecedent to the one in the Museu Bíblic.

In the following years many museums, both public and private, were decorated “like a catacomb” with educational, edifying and didactic purposes and with a strong focus on the promotion of cultural heritage and archaeology. With regard to the dissemination of religious and Christian knowledge, for example, in 1884 two rooms of the Museum of the Campo Santo Teutonico in the Vatican were set up. There, materials from excavations in the catacombs were exhibited in an arrangement that reproduced the pictorial decorations of the catacombs themselves [38]. Then, in 1898, a small museum was opened next to the ancient early Christian basilicas in Salona, Croatia: the museum's library and guest room were decorated in ancient style, reproducing catacomb themes [39]. In 1912, a Dutch entrepreneur opened an entire facsimile catacomb in the countryside of Valkenburg with papal authorisation. It is a still-existing, accurate reproduction of the most important sites of the Roman catacombs, built following a “bringing back to life” concept and with the aim of “reviving interest in the lives, sufferings and deaths of the oldest Christians”, to provoke a “warm Christian ecstasy” in Holland [40]. The museographic choices for reconstructing early Christian environments in museum displays are therefore very interesting and also varied, as the Byzantine rooms of the Bode Museum in Berlin show us. Here, in a famous case of re-contextualization, of the nineteenth century, the sixth-century apsidal mosaic of the Ravenna church of San Michele in Afrisco was transferred and re-installed, arranged in a room together with other late antique architectural pieces arranged as in a basilica [41].

The reproduction of catacombs for museum purposes declined in various ways, some much less faithful to the reconstructions of the setting and with no clear educational intention in a religious sense. This is the case of the reconstructions in wax museums such as the Grevin Museum in Paris where, in 1904, Léopold Bernhard Bernstamm created and exhibited mannequins of Christians performing their rites and funeral ceremonies in hypogeal settings totally inspired by Roman catacombs (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Postcard of the catacomb reproduction at the Grevin Museum in Paris (1930s, private collection).





**Figure 10.** Postcard of the catacomb reproduction at the Musée Historique Canadien in Montreal (1940s, private collection).

In 1935, the sculptor Albert Chartier reproduced similar settings for the Musée Historique Canadien in Montreal (Figure 10), contributing to the intercontinental diffusion of these reconstructions for the purpose of amusement through the recreation of sacred scenes. This purpose was then further enriched by the desire to educate in the Christian faith in various other American cases, ranging from the facsimile catacombs reproduced under the Franciscan monastery of the Holy Land in Washington D.C., to the sacred theme amusement park with reproductions of places of the Jewish and Christian tradition (including the catacombs) in Holyland, in Connecticut since 1995. In these latter examples, far from the scientific and museographic rigour of the older cases, the need for religious education went hand in hand with that of offering a vast public the experience of getting to know very sacred but also very distant places, where they could hardly go in person in the course of their lives.

The Museu Bíblic Tarraconense fits in perfectly in this tradition, and we can indeed say that the 'Hall of the Expansion of Christianity' represents the latest example in chronological order of a museum display trend of more than a hundred years old. In this case, the museum uses a museological expedient to respond to the main objective of the institution itself, i.e. the dissemination of archaeological knowledge about the early Christians, not only in a local sense. The pieces are thus a small part around which a large display project with a broader objective revolves. The main reconstruction of the room intends to provide a plausible original positioning of some very important finds for the ancient history of the city, but these are also declined in a Roman key to link the experience of the martyrs and Christians of Tarragona to

that of the Christians of the eternal city. The very decision to link the finds from Tarragona's early Christian history to international examples (again, to Rome for the reconstruction of the catacomb's arcosolium, and to Africa for that of the baptistery) identifies a clear desire to stitch together the narrative of the local past, using a display that can ennoble it, and above all help the visitor to link Tarragona's past events to much clearer and generically more recognisable examples for all. The use of casts and copies that do not require attention in the museum, nor those conservation practices required of archaeological works, has allowed the curators to freely dispose of the space both in its display and in its didactic and promotional use.

### **Copies, reproduction and authenticity**

Recalling the history of the Museu Bíblic and that of the facsimile catacombs is not idle, but rather represents well how the issue at the heart of the museum and its mission is precisely that of creating educational and evocative places, especially in interpretative centres and museums, whose first focus is to tell stories and generate questions in the visitor [42].

In history and archaeology museums, balancing curatorial and educational aspects is of paramount importance, as collections alone are not always sufficient for fruitful use for scientific purposes [43]: objects can only be truly understood when they are embedded in complex didactic frameworks that make the exhibition a composition of multiple documents [30].

Objects are primary documents that impact on the visitor, and the museum is the place of originality and respect for it, as indicated by the ICOM guidelines. Material authenticity continues to be considered a vehicle of truth, always with a great physical and emotional impact on the visitor, and can be compromised by any human action on the object. But when it is the museum itself that replaces the original and creates displays of reproductions, it certainly does so with other intentions of heritage conservation and promotion. This is indeed the case at the Museu Bíblic, which was created precisely with the intention of using a mixture of originals, copies and reproductions to create a coherent storytelling on the Bible and the history of Christianity. Visitors (always guided through the museum by museum staff) are immediately made aware of the copies and reproductions, which are used by the guides for contextualisation. In fact, visitors are led on a journey through the geography and history of the Holy Land from the Judaic era to the Christian era, and then on to Christianity in Europe and Spain. This journey takes place among original artefacts, copies of cult objects of Judaic-Christian archaeology, models (such as the one of the Temple of Jerusalem in Phase II), reconstructions (such as the one of the trial of Pontius Pilate), videos and photographs of the sites. Such a wealth of material of different types greatly aids the overall understanding of the themes presented in the museum.

In this case, if it is not the object itself that is authentic, the experience created by the museum reconstruction becomes so. We can see, in fact, how the concept of the "aura" of the authentic object on display, of the physical and emotional attraction of the visitor to an object due to its antiquity and being a relic of the past, is overcome in order to focus on its position in a broader panorama. In the case recounted here, we go beyond the entirely subjective concept of credibility and value linked to authenticity. The Museu Bíblic aims to answer to the issues of the object in the museum seen as incomplete and uprooted, and of the cultural experience in the museum as something that does not reveal the authentic context of origin of these objects. It is often the reproduction and facsimile. It is often the reproduction and facsimile arrangement that can serve the visitors to open an eye to the past and reveal how archaeological finds had a presence in the ancient world and society, how they could be used, produced and perceived as a social representation [44].

It is chosen to give up a purely authentic set up in order to create a new display of copies, reproductions, casts and models, which can illustrate the past and be useful to museum

discourse. The atmosphere created by these replicas, without any intention to deceive, is certainly not “authentic” as commonly intended, but has the merit of being able to link the object to its origin [34].

If, therefore, the museum does not exhibit originals, but exhibits an idea, a path, an educational choice, it is the reconstructions that are to be thought of as “creative originals”. The exhibition choices presented here are themselves authentic objects, an artistic reconstruction for archaeological interpretation and education, a new form of scientific creation [43]. This therefore makes them worthy of study: in the “Hall of the Expansion of Christianity”, the archaeological objects (whether originals or copies) make sense because they are placed in a space that recalls the original context (which cannot be visited because it has been lost under the modern city), in a credible architectural arrangement (even if hypothetical, which is unknown due to the lack of archaeological excavations), and in a broader international context (which the individual visitor cannot know or recall all together when visiting the museum). Such an arrangement, in its albeit obvious “inauthenticity”, has a distinct educational and social function. It is a clear exhibition choice that underlines very well the idea of the founders and curators: the Museu Biblic serves education, and it is to this therefore that all its exhibition tactics must aim. The aim of this article was in fact to analyse the display of a room in the Museu Biblic of Tarragona from the perspective of its educational interest for Christian antiquities. It seemed important to place it, in a broader museum tradition, and therefore to contribute to analysing it as the latest development in a century-long trend of the use of reproductions and copies at the service of the dissemination of Christian archaeology. The aim was thus to enter in the debate on the role of the copy in the museum and of the museum in society through the presentation of a single case that is little known but was created precisely for to the cultural development of the community.

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