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Rome. Emperor Constantine's Dream

3 October 2015 - 7 February 2016, De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam

The national church of the Netherlands, De Nieuwe Kerk (The New Church) in Amsterdam features an exhibition which brings us back into the 3rd and 4th century Rome and reconstructs the religious atmosphere of the Eternal City before Christianity gained the status of a state religion. Here we forget about the power and influence of the Christian religious institutions that determined life in Europe for almost two thousand years and relive the times when Christianity was but a sect of Judaism, one of the many religious cults that were practised in the Roman Empire. We are shown numerous examples for religious syncretism¹ as well as for mingling between religious cults and understand that Rome did indeed play an important part in the development of the rising Christian art by acting as a multicultural melting pot where a range of religious cults came together, each contributing with their own imagery at the birthing of the new, autonomous Christian art.

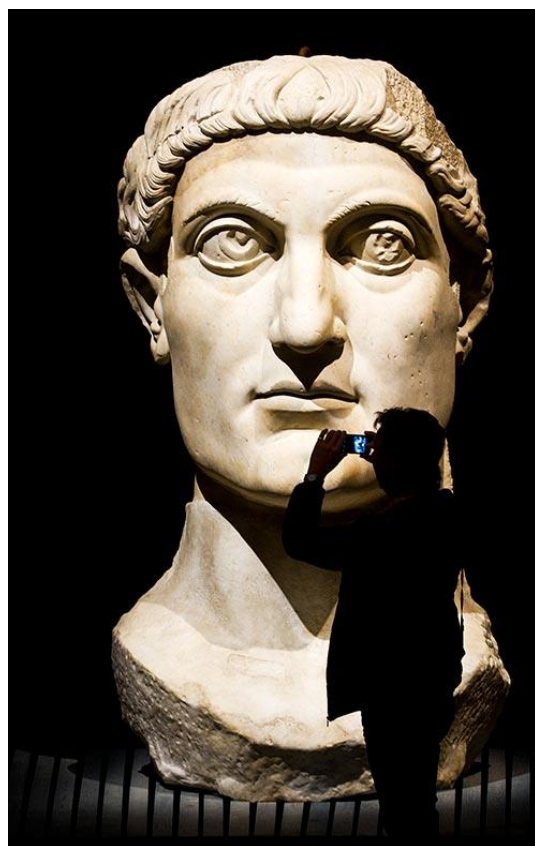
Besides two huge exhibits (a perfect marmer copy of the head of a colossal statue of Constantin and an original marmer hand) the present show features some eighty, mostly small-size objects. It is due to the marvellous design and the various multimedia facilities that these small-size but exquisite objects come perfectly to light. The design was created by Paul Gallis, internationally acclaimed Dutch set designer.

¹ Religious syncretism is a common phenomenon, and we find it to a fair extent in all of the world religions, so also in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It occurs whenever previously independent belief systems come into sustained contact with each other. However, ideological/pictorial similarities do not merely result from physical contact, but also from the work of common basic psychic functions, commonly known as archetypes. The inborn archetypes provide structure to the human psyche just as the skeleton provides structure to the body. We shall not be surprised to find a multitude of parallels to the image of Maria breastfeeding the infant Jesus, or parallels to the immaculate conception (e.g. in Judaism, Sufism, Hinduism), as these are aspects of the archetypes of the divine mother and that of the divine child.



Exhibition view

Photo: Janiek Dam



Copy of the head of a colossal statue of Constantine. The copy belongs to the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier while the original was made in Rome, 312–15 (now in Musei Capitolini). Marble, h 297 cm. Photo: Th. Zühmer.



Votive offering with eyes and cross, Italy?, 6th – 7th century.

Gold, 3,6 x 6,1 cm

This piece was kindly lent for the exhibition by the St Peter's Basilica of Rome.

Next to the spectacular marmer head, we stay still at the quiet beauty of The Good Shepherd, a classical marble sculpture from the fourth-century or a tiny but wonderful golden votive offering which came to light near the supposed tomb of St Peter. Particularly interesting are the grave plaques and a sarcophagus lid where the inscriptions are written partly in Greeks, partly in Hebrews and the pictorial symbols contain elements of Judaism, Christianity, and the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus or Dionysus.



Relief with Isis Lactans
 unknown origin, end of 2th century (?)
 limestone, 31,5 x 21,5 x 2,8 cm
 Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum



Relief with Jupiter Dolichenus and Sol
 Rome, late 2nd – 3rd century
 Marble, 41 x 84 x 7 cm
 Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Terme di Diocleziano

After the marvellous exhibition introducing the arts of Islam in 2010 with the Khalili collection (*Passion for Perfection*) and Judaism in 2011 (*Judaism: A World of Stories*) the present exhibition is another pearl in the series showing the arts of influential world religions.

However, the magnificent design could not hide the huge transformation that has taken place in our relation with Christianity. In this exhibition Christianity is shown as if from outside, from an objective-intellectual viewpoint; its "success story" being attributed mainly to the political farsightedness of emperors Constantine and Theodosius. Obviously, the Christian myth has lost its connection with most people in Western Europe, and nowhere else more, than in the Netherlands, where its function is practically reduced to charity. It is not by accident that the social anarchic movement called 'The Flying Spaghetti Monster' could officially be registered here as church.

"Remember that time slurs over everything, let all deeds fade, blurs all writings and kills all memories. Exempt are only those which dig into the hearts of men by love."²



² Aristotle, Free Translation from the French version of the letter named "The Letter of Aristotle to Alexander on the Policy toward the Cities". Basis for translation: Lettre d'Aristote à Alexandre sur la politique envers les cités, Arabic text edition, translated/edited by Józef Bielawski and Marian Plezia (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1970), p72)
