Fayum Mummy Portraits

Background Notes

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Mummy portrait of a young woman, encaustic and tempera on wood, from Fayum region, on wood, 3rd century AD (Louvre Museum)

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The remarkable funerary paintings known as 'Fayum Portraits' were produced in Egypt during a brief period between the late 1st century BC and early 4th century AD, when the region was part of the Roman Empire. Found chiefly in centres that had already seen extensive Greek settlement under the Ptolemies, the largest numbers have been recovered from cemeteries in the Fayum Oasis, hence their popular name.

In the time of the Ptolemies (332-30 BC), it is estimated that as much as 30 percent of the population of Fayum was Greek, with the rest being native Egyptians. Later, under Roman and Byzantine rule (30 BC-AD 461), the military veterans who settled there came from many cultural and ethnic backgrounds including Europe, North Africa, and the Near East. Over time the colonists intermarried with the local populace, adopting Egyptian religious beliefs and practices, including their funerary rituals.

Mummification had been practised in Egypt since prehistoric times. It is believed that the natural dehydration that occurred when bodies were buried in the desert gave rise to the belief in some kind of afterlife, one in which the deceased would need their physical bodies in order to survive. With the passage of time, this idea expanded into a complex belief system that led to the development of artificial mummification and an elaborate system of ritual funerary rites and beliefs in which the dead were housed in tombs equipped with everything needed for the next world. Only the elite (about 1% of the population) could afford this kind of provision – ordinary people had simple burials in the ground with some basic grave goods.

Made to be attached to the mummified bodies of the deceased, the Fayum paintings represent a development of the traditional mummy masks used in Egypt from around 2000 BC. However, unlike the ancient three-dimensional masks – which were placed over the mummy wrappings – these life-sized paintings, representing the head, or head and upper chest, in full-frontal view were painted on flat wooden panels that were inserted into the wrappings over the face. But the most striking difference is that, whereas the pharaonic-era masks present a conventional idealised image of the deceased, the Fayum paintings clearly represent individuals of different ages and ethnicities.

Although mummification was not generally practised in the Greco-Roman world – cremation or burial in tombs or catacombs was the norm – funerary beliefs and rituals were just as important and complex, and in many cases resembled those observed in Egypt. For example, both cultures regarded the recently deceased as unclean until the funeral rites were complete, and embalmers and undertakers were obliged to live and work outside centres of habitation, where cemeteries were also located.

Mummy case of Henutmehyit, painted and gilded cartonnage, from Thebes (Egypt), c. 1300 BC (British Museum)

Greek funerary portrait of Theodoros from a grave stela, encaustic on marble, 1st century AD (Archaeological Museum of Thebes)

In his Natural History (Book 35, 4-11) Pliny the Elder describes how, at elite Roman funerals, family members or hired actors would carry portraits or masks of the deceased and other ancestors during funeral processions. In both Rome and Egypt, portrait busts of ancestors, and perhaps paintings too, were kept in the home, and families made regular visits to family tombs to make offerings to the dead, who were represented by paintings, statues or relief carvings.

Although panel painting was a highly regarded art form in ancient Greece and Rome, virtually no examples survive from outside Egypt, due to the perishable nature of the wooden panels. Their survival is due entirely to the same hot, dry conditions that caused natural mummification in prehistoric Egypt. For, while the mummies of family members were kept at first in chapels where relatives could visit them, their eventual fate was burial in the desert, and it is this that preserved them.

The Italian explorer Pietro Della Valle was the first European to discover and describe mummy portraits, following a visit to the royal cemeteries at Memphis and Saqqara in northern Egypt in 1615. However, they were not widely known in Europe until the 19th century, when an increased interest in archaeology fired by the discoveries of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition of 1798-1801 saw a huge expansion of excavation in Egypt and the portraits began to appear on the art market.

The first archaeologist to make a systematic study of the Fayum mummies was the British scholar William Flinders Petrie who carried out excavations in the area in 1887-88 and again between 1910-11. In 1887, his team uncovered a Roman cemetery at Hawara that yielded 81 mummies with portraits. As in previous eras, only elite members of the community were represented, reflecting the cost of such elaborate funeral provision.

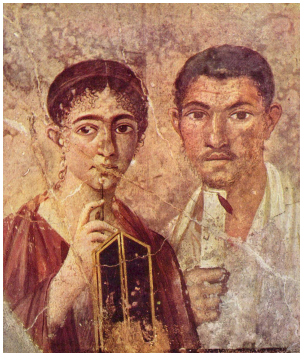
When Petrie exhibited the portraits in London, they sparked a huge wave of interest in the art world, and from that time onwards his attempts at scientific excavation were constantly hampered by the predations of European art dealers. As a result, most of the Fayum portraits seen in museums and galleries around the world are entirely lacking in provenance or archaeological context.

Nonetheless, they are of great interest to art historians as surviving examples of the panel painting tradition of the classical world, which went on to influence Byzantine, Eastern Mediterranean, and Western traditions in the post-classical world. For many, they represent the origins of portraiture as well as early examples of the encaustic and tempera painting techniques.

The thin, rectangular panels on which they are painted are made from imported wood such as sycamore and cedar, long favoured in Egypt for making coffins and wooden masks. The surface was usually prepared with a coat of plaster; this was a tried and trusted technique, used in Egypt for millennia.

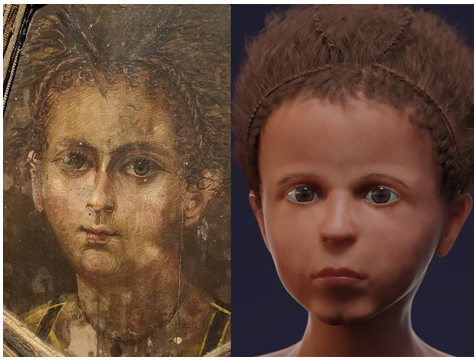
Tempera painting, using pigments mixed with gum, was in widespread use around the Mediterranean in ancient times, and was often used in wall paintings. This, too, was a familiar technique for Egyptian artists, who had been using it for over 2000 years. The advantage of tempera painting was that it allowed for subtler gradations and shades of colour, creating a more naturalistic image. The effect of the encaustic technique, in which pigments were mixed with molten wax, was less detailed but much more striking, characterised by vivid colours and broad, energetic brush strokes that create an impressionistic effect and seem to give life to the subject.

In general, each portrait represents an individual facing the viewer, from an angle that is slightly turned from full face. The subjects – both male and female and ranging in age from childhood to old age – are presented as busts against a monochrome background. But the most striking difference between these paintings and pharaonic-era Egyptian mummy masks is the degree of realism used to depict the age, gender and ethnicity of the deceased.



Portrait of Terentius Neo, fresco from a house in Pompeii AD 20–30 (National Archaeological Museum, Naples)

However, there is still much debate among archaeologists and art historians as to whether these images can be viewed as true portraits of the individuals they represent. This is complicated by the fact that most of the panels were detached from the mummies they belonged to – only the paintings were of interest to the art market, and could be transported far more easily on their own. But, thanks to modern non-invasive techniques, investigations of the mummies that have survived intact show that the age of the deceased typically corresponds to that shown in the painting. Furthermore, forensic-style reconstructions combining data taken from the skull of a subject with their portrait, have produced some remarkable results.



Facial reconstruction of a young boy based on his physical remains (Fayum region, 1st century AD)

Another issue that remains unclear is whether the portraits were painted during the subject's lifetime or after death. Given the correlation between the age of the deceased and their portraits, it is unlikely that the subjects were alive at the time, as so many were young and therefore died unexpectedly. So it would seem that they were painted after death, but not, perhaps in the way we would understand the idea of a portrait. Current consensus favours the theory that painters had a stock of generic ready-painted panels of subjects of various ages that could then be customized for individuals by adding distinguishing features. Some paintings were also inscribed with a name and, more rarely, an occupation, while clothing and hairstyles enable reasonably accurate dating.

In the 1st century AD, Christianity began to take root in Egypt, and in 380 AD it became the official religion under the Byzantine emperor Theodosius. By this time, practices such as mummification, the provision of grave goods and making offerings to the dead had fallen into disuse. But for the painters, there were new opportunities creating icons for churches and monasteries, and the skills once used to paint portraits became the foundation of the Western Christian painting tradition.

Icon of a saint in St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, encaustic on wood, 6th century AD

Perhaps, though, the greatest legacy of the Fayum mummy portraits is the opportunity to look upon the faces of real people, who lived, loved, worked and died two thousand years ago, and to experience our common humanity.

FURTHER READING

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