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## A Painted Funerary Portrait from Roman Egypt

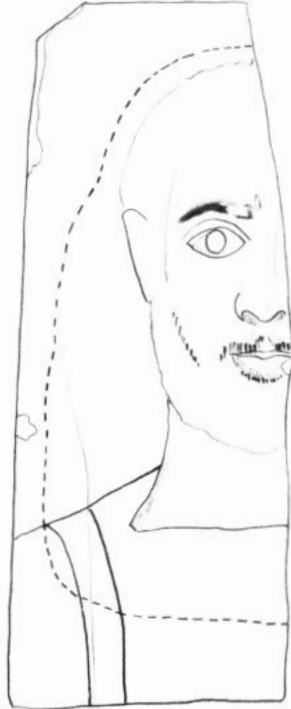
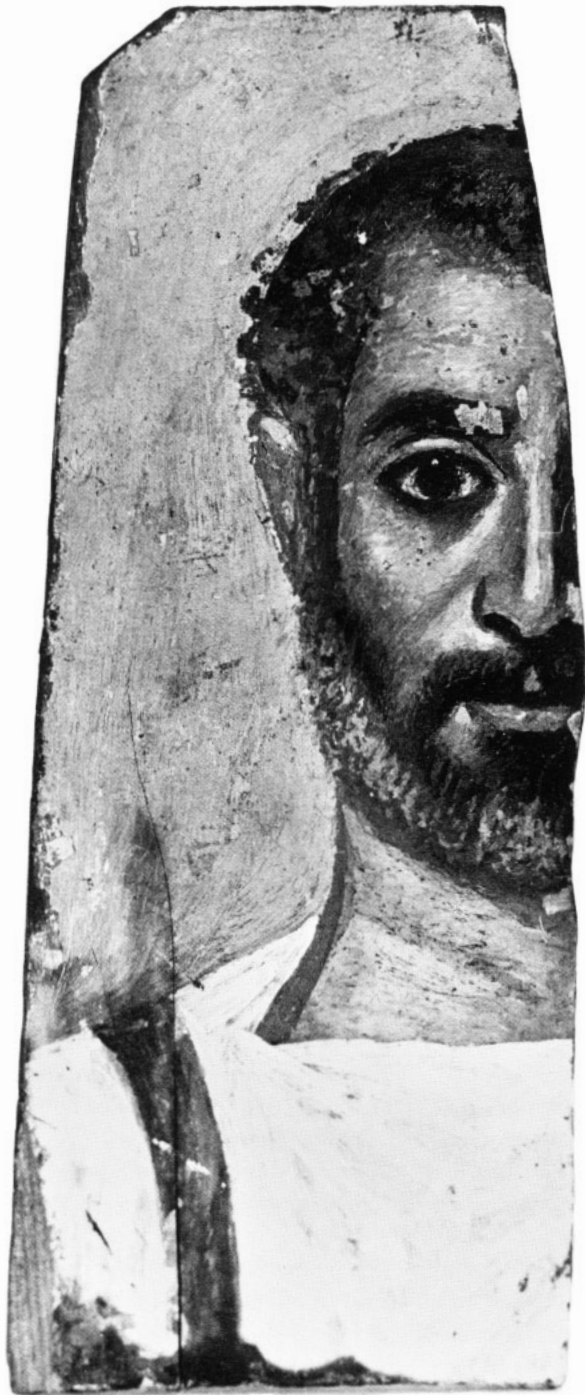
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A recent gift to the Department of Egyptian Art is a striking portrayal of a middle-aged man, which, though fragmentary, is a worthy complement to the museum's collection of eight "Fayum portraits" (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

The left portion of the panel now preserved represents slightly more than half the original portrait. When wrapped into the cartonnage at the time of burial a funerary portrait became subjected to tremendous lateral pressure; it was forced to conform to the contour of the mummy's head over which it was placed. This accounts for the warping seen today in many such portraits, usually in the very thin panels of the first and early second centuries A.D. Thicker panels of later date, such as the Boston example, frequently responded to this pressure by splitting rather than warping, somewhere near the panel's center, along grain lines of the wood. When this portrait was first recovered, the panel halves may have become separated and the right half lost. It seems more likely, however, that the missing portion was too broken to seem worth preserving or that it was destroyed in the process of removing the portrait from the mummy; slash marks at the lower left and a missing chunk of wood attest to a crude and hasty removal. The surviving half is nonetheless in excellent unrestored condition; a longitudinal crack that extends about half the panel's height in no way detracts from the overall fine state of preservation. The top left corner of the fragment was lopped off in antiquity, as normally was done at both upper corners at the time of burial, that is, when the panel was converted from a decorative function—perhaps framed and hung on the wall—to funerary usage.<sup>2</sup>

The painted surface is similarly well preserved. Some minor flaking has occurred around the fragment's edge, in the subject's hair, and most noticeably at the inner end of the brow, but the surface is otherwise intact and unrestored. The slight discoloration at the subject's shoulder has resulted from the staining action of bituminous embalming materials that came into contact with the painted surface.

The artist was a talented colorist. The man's flesh, for example, is rendered in a sophisticated medley of reds ranging from pink to maroon and of browns. A strong light source is suggested above and to the right (and slightly in front) of the subject. This sort of illumination, the direction of which seems to have been conventional, gave Fayum portraitists a vehicle for chiaroscuro effects. Highlighting is here achieved, on the ridge of the nose for example, in light flesh tones with splashes of white; shaded areas (the nostrils, the left side of the nose, the upper lip, the crease between eyelid and brow) are rendered imaginatively and effectively in dark maroon



2. Portrait with outline showing area exposed during funerary use.

1. Painted funerary portrait. Roman Egypt, ca. A.D. 150–200, encaustic on wood, h. (max.) 14¾ in. (37.4 cm.), w. (max.) 5¾ in. (14.7 cm.), thickness ¾ in. (0.8 cm.) *Gift of Mrs. Samuel E. Thorne in memory of Margaret Lewis MacVeagh. 1974.522.* (Photo David Mydans.)

red. The pupil of the eye is a rich olive brown; the hair and well-trimmed beard are black with overlaid shades of gray. The man wears a standard white tunic, with strokes of beige added to indicate shadows cast by the garment folds; a scarlet stripe (*clavus*) extends back over the shoulder. The overall visual impression is that the artist's palette distinctly tended toward rich reds; these provide a striking contrast with the subdued gray of the background and the muted flesh tones of the man's face.

Like most examples of the genre, the painting yields distressingly little personal information about the subject. We assume that the people seen in "Fayum portraits" generally belonged to the upper class, first, because many of the women are shown elaborately bejeweled and, second, because the extraordinarily high quality of many of the portraits, which often, as here, included gilded decoration, bespeaks aristocratic patronage of the custom. We also assume that by about the second century A.D. the subjects represented a complex racial mixture of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. The fellow shown in the Boston example has the distinct look of prosperity; whatever the specific basis for his social and economic prominence—which must, after all, remain conjectural—it was probably in civilian life. Individuals whose prominence was due primarily to military achievement are probably those depicted in a number of portraits where the subject wears full military dress.<sup>3</sup> This man is shown in the prime of middle age, fiftyish, as commonly was done.

Boston's recent acquisition is especially interesting for the light it sheds on some technical aspects of Fayum portraiture. It is, first, a classic illustration of tools used in the encaustic technique. While the artists of tempera portraits painted in the third century and beyond used the brush exclusively, the encaustic painters of earlier portraits, including this example, applied the paint with two general types of tools. A brush was normally used for large areas of uniform color. Here, the background and garment reveal such an application especially well: the marks of individual brush strands are even visible. When more detail was desired, the paint was applied more thickly with a metal spatula (*cestrum*, *cauterium*). In this portrait the face generally and especially the hair and beard clearly show traces of the ancient paint knife. The artist was an accomplished master of encaustic workmanship, and the relief effect of the modeled paint is almost sculptural.

The minor flaking provides a look into and, indeed, through the painted surface of the new portrait. Clearly visible is the white undercoat that was regularly applied by the best artists, both to seal the surface of the panel prior to application of the actual paint and produce a desired luminous effect as well as to heighten the tonal depth of the finished product. Many portraitists sketched a preliminary outline of the subject on this undercoat, which today is visible where the paint has fallen off.<sup>4</sup> Here, curiously, there is no evidence for such a sketch, not even at the brow where an outline might be expected. It seems that the painter may have worked entirely without a cartoon or, at the least, that he worked only from the barest outline of the subject's head, now concealed beneath the intact surface.

The portrait also bears clear and characteristic marks of its adaptation to a funerary purpose. Originally cut as an approximate rectangle, the panel later was modified at

the corners, as mentioned, for convenience in wrapping it into the mummy. Once inserted, the portrait was considerably covered by the mummy wrappings, which left only the central area, the face and part of the garment, exposed to view. The exposed area is here outlined as the part of the background and garment that has darkened and that is also delineated by traces of gilding (fig. 2). The gilding, too, indicates conversion to funerary usage; it has been demonstrated that such enriching decoration was often applied only at the time the portrait was prepared for burial.<sup>5</sup> Such added gilding, however, was usually applied as a wreath, as a gold ground symbolic of the bliss of the hereafter, or on portraits of women as additional jewelry. Since the gold traces on the Boston example follow the outline of the exposed portrait area, it may be that this gilding was applied to the cartonnage and that some spilled over onto the portrait itself. It may, on the other hand, represent an economy version of the gold ground seen on some other portraits. It is evident, in any case, that the gilding was added only after the portrait had been wrapped into the mummy.

The frontal portrayal of the subject is a little surprising in light of the artist's evident talent and the probable date of the portrait. Complete frontality most regularly appears on less attractive portraits and especially on those of late date; it was to become the rule, for example, in the fourth century A.D., near the aesthetic and chronological terminus of portrait production. On this basis, the Boston portrait must postdate the very earliest panels, which normally show subjects in three-quarter view.<sup>6</sup> The overall style combines with that of the beard and hair—luxuriant but well groomed, reflecting Antonine court fashion—to suggest a date in the second half of the second century A.D.

NOTES:

1. I am grateful to William Kelly Simpson, curator of the Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art, for allowing me to study and to publish this piece and for providing data and photographs.

The term "Fayum portraits" is used to designate a type of funerary portrait found mainly in the Fayum (an oasis region southwest of Cairo). For brief introductions in English to these portraits, see A. F. Shore, *Portrait Painting from Roman Egypt*, rev. ed. (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1972); David L. Thompson, *The Artists of the Mummy Portraits* (Malibu, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1976).

2. The question of whether such portraits were painted during the subject's lifetime and, if so, how they were used during life, is extremely complex and cannot be answered in a general statement. Some, especially early examples, seem to have had a definite function during the subject's lifetime — there is considerable evidence for framing — while later pieces may have been painted exclusively as funerary portraits. See Klaus Parlasca, *Mumienporträts und verwandte Denkmäler* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1966), pp. 59–90.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85; the examples date mostly from the second century.

4. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the magnificent portrait of a woman in the Stanford University Art Museum, acc. no. 22225; Parlasca, *Mumienporträts*, pl. 15, fig. 2.

5. X-ray analysis has shown, for example, that the stunning gold pectoral of a female portrait in the Louvre, Département des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, acc. no. P217 (Parlasca, *Mumienporträts*, pl. 30, fig. 2) was a later addition; see E. Coche de la Ferté, "La Peinture de portraits romano-égyptiens au Musée du Louvre," *Bulletin (trimestriel) de la Société Française d'Égyptologie* 13 (1953), pp. 73–78. Parlasca, however, points out (*Mumienporträts*, pp. 59–60) that a limited amount of gilding — earrings, for example — was often an original feature on painted portraits. Contemporary sculpted mummy portraits were often gilded entirely.

6. Curiously, shroud portraits seem to have tended toward frontal views from the beginning; e.g., early portraits in Berlin, Staatliche Museen (DDR), Ägyptische Abteilung, acc. no. 11752; K. Parlasca, *Repertorio d'arte dell' Egitto greco-romano*, series B, vol. 1 [Palermo: Banco di Sicilia, 1969], p. 28, no. 11, pl. 3, fig. 3; and New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 09.181.8; *ibid.*, pp. 31–32, no. 20, pl. 6, fig. 1.