



Portrait of a boy, removed from his embalmed body

On display

Title/Description: Portrait of a boy, removed from his embalmed body

Born: 0090 c. AD - 0120 c. AD

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Pigment, Wax, Wood

Measurements: h. 403 x w. 176 x d. 10 mm

Accession Number: 326

Historic Period: Roman Period (c. AD 100)

Production Place: Africa, Egypt, Hawara

Cultural Group: Egyptian, Roman

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The arresting gaze of the boy in this portrait seems to meet our own, even though he has been dead for almost 2,000 years. Pictured on the border between boyhood and adolescence (a faint moustache shadows his upper lip), he wears a white tunic with a reddish-purple stripe woven into it and a white mantle worn over his left shoulder. His short, dark hair is brushed towards his forehead, where thick eyebrows frame large, brown eyes. In each eye, the painter has placed a white spot as if they were reflecting light. Similar highlights and skilled use of shading give this painting its lifelike appearance, an imitation of nature that was widely admired in ancient Greek and Roman culture.

Paintings like this were familiar around the Mediterranean world in Roman times, but the best examples come from Egypt, where more than a thousand have survived because they were part of the wrappings of embalmed bodies buried in the dry climate. Embalming yielded what are usually called 'mummies', from the Persian and Arabic word *mumia* meaning bitumen, one component of the anointing liquids applied to the bodies and their wrappings. These portraits are therefore known as 'mummy portraits', but the word 'mummy' may encourage us to forget that these were the remains of human beings.

Although the exact identity of the boy in this portrait is unknown, he probably came from a well-to-do family of mixed Greek and Egyptian heritage. Painted portraits were often used to commemorate young people; some were painted from life, while others seem to have been stock items from which

the family chose the best option for a burial. The best quality portraits, like this one, were executed in the encaustic technique, a method that mixed powdered pigments with melted wax. The painter had to work quickly before the wax hardened. Another sign of the special value attached to these portraits is the use of limewood (*tilia*), which was imported to Egypt from the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Painted portraits placed on embalmed bodies were held in place by the elaborate linen wrappings that were a crucial part of the burial. On this example, the thin limewood was cut to shape so that it would fit the head end of the boy's wrapped body, the board's rough edges concealed by the arrangement of the textiles. Whoever painted the portrait seems to have known how it would be used, since the artist applied dark grey paint in broad strokes on the lower part of the board. A protective pattern of criss-crossed bandages covered this area when the portrait was in place on the body. No trace of the body or the wrappings survives. The British archaeologist W.M. Flinders Petrie, who first excavated many of these portraits (including this example) at Hawara in the Faiyum, was more interested in the portraits than the textiles or human remains, apart from a hundred or skulls that he sent to London for further study. The rest of the bodies and textiles were either burned or reburied without a trace. Petrie described his own work at Hawara as 'plundering'. A proponent of scientific racism, he believed that both the portraits and the skulls would reveal the ethnicities of Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, and Jews, as if these were verifiable physical categories instead of social identities informed by European ideas about 'race' - and by widespread racial prejudice.

Not everyone in ancient Egypt received embalming rites, and not everyone embalmed when in Roman Egypt had a portrait in this style. Most portraits, including this one, come from the Faiyum region, where many people of Greek heritage had settled since around 323 BC, when Alexander the Great brought Egypt under his control. By 30 BC, when the death of Cleopatra saw Egypt change hands to Roman rule, Greek and Egyptian culture both flourished in areas like the Faiyum, where Greek settlers had married into Egyptian families. In this multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society, landowners, military officers, and priests read the poet Homer in classical Greek, supported temples to both Greek and Egyptian gods, and buried their dead according to the ancient Egyptian rites. Under the Roman empire, the upper levels of provincial Egyptian society lost some of their privileges thanks to new tax laws and citizenship rules, but using art forms like portraiture offered a way to maintain their high social status in local life - and in death.

Christina Riggs, August 2021

Further Reading

Barbara E. Borg, 'Painted Funerary Portraits', in Willeke Wendrich, ed., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, 2010), open access link: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7426178c>.

Debbie Challis, *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), especially Chapter 5 ('Greek Art, Greek Faces?').

Ian Collins, ed., *Masterpieces of the Sainsbury Centre* (Norwich: SCVA, 2015), p. 37.

Steven Hooper, ed., Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol III, Pre-Columbian, Asian, Egyptian and European Antiquities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 350 (cat. 282).

Susan Walker and Morris Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces* (London: British Museum, 1997), pp. 55-6 (cat. 31), with further references.

Provenance

Excavated by W.M. Flinders Petrie and an Egyptian team, winter 1888-89.

Formerly in the collection of Martyn Kennard, sold at Sotheby's in 1912, lot 540.

Then in the collection of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Farnham, Surrey, whose objects were sold in the 1960s. The Farnham museum was founded in 1880 by Lieutenant General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, who in 1884 gave his main collection to Oxford University.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1966.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
