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Portraits  
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## **Sarcophagus Paintings of Fayum**

The Sarcophagus paintings of Fayum are known as some of the oldest paintings from the Mediterranean area. They represent the people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the diverse mix of people and culture in Egypt. These portraits were thought to represent the deceased of the upper class society. The strong impact they have even today, is due to the intense color and naturalistic feel that these paintings illustrate.

### **Recovery**

Fayum portraits are important pieces of cultural documentation as well as art. They embody many of the great Greek painting traditions. Fayum and its surrounding area is the only area that paintings from this time have survived.

The extremely hot dry climate has helped to preserve these paintings, leaving the rich colors and textures intact. There are around 700 Fayum portraits that have been recovered, 130 of them exist in North America. Amazingly, less than 25 of these portraits had been discovered before 1887 (Thompson, page 3). Fayum is an area in Egypt, south of Cairo, along the Nile River. The Fayum portraits however have been found throughout Egypt, so the term Fayum relates more to the style of the paintings and less about the specific geographic location of Fayum. A large portion of these portraits were found in Hawara and Antinoopolis, as well as a smaller portion being found in er-Rubayat and Deir el-Bahri. Antinoopolis for example, is approximately 150 km south of the Fayum region.

### **The Technique of a Fayum Painter**

A typical starting point for a Fayum portrait, would be selecting a square or rectangular piece of wood. The type of wood was as important as the paints. Painters preferred the harder woods such as, cyprus, cedar, lime, fig, or linden (Thompson, pg. 7). These types of wood prevented the primers and pigments from being absorbed into the wood. With a support material that has a larger absorption property, more paint would have to be used and the color would not be as vibrant. The surface of the portrait was first primed with gesso. The gesso was a combination of gypsum, a common abundant mineral found in the area and glue. The application of the primer had two uses. The first was to prevent the pigments from absorbing into the wood. The second, was more of an aesthetic purpose, it helped give the pigments there luminosity and glow (Walker, pg. 23). The paint was then applied once the primer had dried.

The paint was made up of pigments and a "binder". Different types of binders were mixed with the pigments. The earliest technique for Fayum portraits was called "encaustic", this was a combination of the pigments and wax. Beeswax was the most common type of wax used, and was kept slightly heated. The wood panel, on occasion was also kept warm, to help the application of the paint. The tools used for the application of the medium consisted of a brush and a palette knife, also known as a "cestrum". The best types of brushes were made from human hair but most contained camel, cat, or squirrel hair. The brush was used for painting the larger areas of color on the face and the background. The cestrum was used to create the fine details in the face and nice thin lines in the hair. Since the encaustic method used wax, the panel could be reheated and the paint would become workable again. This technique, created portraits that appear to have an oil-paint quality, even though

oil paints weren't developed until sometime later. Many of the encaustic portraits would be worked on for multiple days (Walker, pg. 40).

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., a paint medium called "tempera" was introduced. Tempera was cheaper to create than encaustics and it could be applied much quicker. This type of paint used the same pigments but instead of using wax, an egg base was added to the pigments. With tempera, only the brush was used for application of the paint. This process was extremely quick drying and unworkable after initial application. Because it was unworkable after application, multiple layers may have had to been applied, creating a more unrealistic, cartoon-like portrait. Inevitably the move to tempera showed a decline in quality in Fayum portraits.

## **Social Context and Religious Association**

The area of Fayum was unique to the rest of Egypt during the time of the Fayum portraits, because of its diverse population. After Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, it became a melting pot of Greeks, Egyptians, Libyans, Syrians, and later Romans. Fayum portraits are extremely important historical documents because they show an obvious change in the burial habits of the Egyptians. Before the Fayum portraits, Egyptians followed ancient traditions, which consisted of mummifying deceased members of the upper class. They were placed into a decorative coffin and their heads were covered with a carved wooden mask (Peck, pg. 23). As time progressed, the Egyptians began integrating many of the Greek and Roman ideas that had been popular in the surrounding areas, such as the Mediterranean. Soon after the arrival of the Romans almost all of the Egyptian elements in society were lost except for one, religion.

Egyptian and Greco-Roman beliefs now started being combined. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, traditional coffin burials had been completely phased out of the burial practices of Greeks and mummification was practiced by most of the population. During this time the Egyptian burial masks had slowly taken on a Greco-Roman look and eventually took on the style of the Roman portrait paintings of the time. One theory is that the Fayum portraits took after the Roman belief in ancestor worship. Either way the Roman beliefs combined with the Egyptian burial traditions is what most likely created the practice of the Fayum portrait paintings.

## **Portrait Preservation**

The brightness and almost fresh look of these ancient paintings is primarily due to the dry, sandy climate of the basin. Practically no other art from any of the surrounding areas including panel painting from ancient Greece survived (Peck, pg. 36). One problem that has encountered many of the surviving portraits is the application of heavy varnishes or extra wax, by excavators or collectors. These types of substances can sometimes turn from transparent to a cloudy grey, de-saturating the original colors.

## **Dating the portraits**

It has been difficult for scientists and historians to figure out the age of the Fayum portraits. The artist very rarely signed his or her work and a date was very rare. On some of the portraits the artist would say a little something about the person, such as their name and occupation (Peck, pg. 38). Historians have been able to estimate the time periods in which the portraits have been painted however. For example, if a portrait was found in Antinoopolis, they would know that it would have been painted sometime after A.D.130, which is the year it was founded. From there they can determine the time period in which the fashion was prevalent. Lastly they can use what is already known about the Fayum portrait history, for example a portrait that is painted in wax and has a realistic look to it, would presumably have been painted earlier. If a portrait had a cartoon-like appearance and was painted with tempera, it would have most likely been painted closer to the end of

the Fayum portraits era, approximately 300 A.D. Recently, the use of carbon dating has also helped with narrowing down the time period in which they may have been painted. With a brief knowledge of the Fayum portrait history, one is able to narrow down the date of almost any given painting, within half or quarter of a century.

## **The End of the Fayum Portrait Tradition**

If Fayum portrait tradition was practiced by such a large portion of ancient society then why did they stop being produced around the last half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century? This is a question that has no solid answer, but there are many different theories. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Rome went through a severe economic downfall, this limited the amount of spending money many people had and public appearance became more important than documented appearances. People still spent money but it was on lavish festivals and parties and less on art commissions. Around the same time there was also religious movements and as Christianity spread throughout Egypt, religious and burial practices changed. Another change that occurred around the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was the Roman citizenship that was given to all free individuals living in Egypt. This caused a change in the social status of many people living in the Fayum and surrounding areas. Many people, now Roman citizens, moved out of the area or adopted more of the Roman culture, and less focus was given to ancient practices (Doxiadis, pg. 82-87).

As a whole, the Fayum portraits are extremely important documents for understanding the people and cultures of ancient places, such as Egypt and its surrounding areas. However they also become something much more than a picture in a history book, they give us an idea of where true masterworks of art come from. These portraits set the foundation for many artists that followed. As time progresses, hopefully more will be learned about the secrets that these Fayum portraits hold.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Doxiadis, Euphrosyne, The Mysterious Fayum Portraits: From Ancient Egypt, 1995, H.N. Abrams.

This book is a comprehensive look at a large portion of the Fayum portraits. It has many high quality pictures of various types of portraits, including multiple “full mummy” pictures.

Eaton-Krauss, Marianne, The Sarcophagus in the Tomb of Tutankhamun, 1993, Oxford.

This book talks about the tomb of Tutankhamun. It has excellent descriptions of Sarcophagus style coffins and paints a clear portrait of life during the period.

Peck, William H, Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt, 1967, Detroit.

This book is an excellent source for learning about the time period that the Fayum portraits were painted in. It also has some color pictures.

Walker, Susan, Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt, 2000, Routledge.

This book has hundreds of quality, full page images that are almost all in color. It also contains essays written by various authors and historians, that detail certain aspects of the Fayum and its portraits.

Thompson, David L, Mummy Portraits in the Paul Getty Museum, 1982, The Museum.

This book talks a lot about the basic techniques that were used for Fayum mummy portraits and some basic history overview of the time. The last half of the book has black and white examples of the portraits.