

Chantry Library Bibliographies:

No. 8: Greco-Roman Funerary Portraits by Jevon Thistlewood



Greco-Roman Funerary Portraits in the Ashmolean Museum Collections © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

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Introduction

Greco-Roman funerary portraits (also known as Fayum portraits or mummy portraits) date from the 1st to the 3rd Century BCE at a time when Egypt was under Roman rule. There are believed to be about one thousand of these portraits in existence. They reflect a fusion of cultural influences with Greek painting techniques combined with Roman identity and Egyptian mummification. They are painted faces (which apart from the larger scale of their eyes) are near life-sized and provide a recognisable, if not always scrutable, representation of a real human face. Funerary portraits were inserted or incorporated into the fabric wrappings around mummified human remains, although the vast majority now exist without this connection. The earliest unearthing of mummy portraits is widely credited to the Italian traveller Andrea Pietro della Valle during a visit to Saqqara in December 1615. It is unclear whether further discoveries continued to be made, but certainly by the nineteenth century, portraits were being bought by travellers and diplomats and placed into private collections. However, it was those unearthed, publicised and dispersed by Otto Theodor Graf and Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie in the nineteenth century, which caught the public attention.

Books

Aubert, M-F and R. Cortopassi, *Portraits Funéraires de L’Egypte Romaine: Cartonnages, Linceuls et Bois* (Paris: Musée Du Louvre, 2004).

A catalogue produced by the Louvre of its extensive collection of funerary portraits on cartonnage, shrouds and wooden supports. Written in French, it has extensive technical information and images.

Bierbrier, M. ed., *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1997).

This volume brings together 21 research papers, the majority of which were presented at a 1995 colloquium organised by the British Museum, on burial customs in Roman Egypt with particular emphasis on the use of the life-like mummy portraits.

Corcoran, LH and M. Svoboda, *Herakleides: A Portrait Mummy from Roman Egypt* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum 2011).

A study of the intact mummified remains and integral funerary portrait of Herakleides and includes its history, results of scientific investigation, and comparison to other red-shroud examples.

Doxiadis, E., *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits: Faces from Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

This large-format publication provides a comprehensive introduction to funerary portraits. There are earlier sources of information, but this volume set new standards, particularly in the high-quality and detailed colour reproductions which were much improved on those published before.

Picton, J. Quirke, S., and P. Roberts eds., *Living Images: Egyptian Funerary Portraits in the Petrie Museum* (New York, Routledge, 2007).

A catalogue of the funerary portraits in the Petrie Museum with essays on archaeological context, conservation, and the contributions of Barbara Adams to the collection. Additionally, it includes an illustrated chart of portraits unearthed in the 1888 and 1911 excavations at Hawara, with both Flinders Petrie’s original indexed identification and the current day location and accession number.

Svoboda, M. and C. Cartwright eds., *Mummy portraits of Roman Egypt: Emerging Research from the APPEAR Project*. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2020).

This publication contains 18 essays from the first APPEAR conference (Ancient Panel Paintings: Examination, Analysis, and Research). Essays from the second APPEAR conference are to follow soon.

Walker, S. and M. Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1997).

Published to coincide with a major exhibition of portraits at the British Museum in 1997.

Walker, S. ed., *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000).

Published to coincide with a major exhibition of portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000. Both editions of this volume include informative essays, comprehensive catalogue entries and high-quality images.

Articles

Berger J., ‘The Fayum portraits’, *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 51-60.

Interesting and thoughtful insights on funerary portraits in a very accessible account from the author of *Ways of Seeing*.

Borg, B.E., 'Painted funerary portraits', in Wendrich, W. ed, *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 1/1 (2010) 1-12.

Borg, B.E., trans. G. Most, 'The face of the elite', *Arion - Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 8/1 (2000) 63-96.

The discovery of funerary portraits (mainly in the nineteenth century) together with the motives, achievements and failings of the various interested parties who intersect with them are comprehensively discussed in these essays by B.E. Borg. They also examine the context in which funerary portraits were produced and existed, and explore their original functions.

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz0021bx22>

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269390945> The Face of the Elite

Challis, D. 'Greek art, Greek faces?', *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 107-128.

Informative account of the discovery of funerary portraits, the associated players and interested parties, their functions to changing audiences, and the changing narratives and meanings that have been variously given to them.

Newman, N. et al, 'The study and conservation of four ancient Egyptian funerary portraits: Provenance, conservation history and structural treatment', in Saunders D. ed., *The British Museum Technical Research Bulletin* 7 (2013) 1-13.

An article from the impressive *British Museum Technical Research Bulletin* which focusses on four funerary portraits from its collection. In particular, it discusses typical treatment interventions made since discovery, that have had significant impacts on the appearance and condition of the portraits.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303549745> The study and conservation of four ancient Egyptian funerary portraits provenance conservation history and structural treatment

Stock, S.R., Stock, M.K., and J.D. Almer, 'Combined computed tomography and position-resolved X-ray diffraction of an intact Roman-era Egyptian portrait mummy', *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*. 17: 20200686.

This article discusses the non-invasive examination and imaging of an intact mummified human remains complete with its funerary portrait.

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsif.2020.0686>

Online Resources

The APPEAR (Ancient Panel Paintings: Examination, Analysis, and Research) Project

This research hub was launched in 2013 by the JP Getty Museum as a 'collaborative initiative focused on the study of ancient panel paintings'. There are currently 50 international partners, including the Ashmolean Museum, and the project website contains many useful links to past and current research, 2018 conference papers, and amongst other resources, includes an extensive bibliography and glossary. In October 2022, the second APPEAR conference took place at the University of Amsterdam, publication of conference papers is to follow.

<https://www.getty.edu/projects/appear-project/>