Fayum Mummy Portraits: Object Biography and Museum Display

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Created from the first to third centuries CE, Roman Egyptian mummy portraits can be found in over a hundred museum institutions around the world. These objects were largely created within the Fayum oasis region of Egypt, south of the ancient capital city of Memphis. With only about a thousand left in existence in varying degrees of preservation, these portraits come from a time where the lines between Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cultures became blurred. The mummy portraits in these collections have two very different lives: the ancient funerary object and the museum display object. I use an object biographical lens to analyze these two different lives and how the modern life of these portraits blocks the ability for much, if anything, to be learned about the ancient life because of how heavily the nature of the museum display is based on modern western ideals. This project does not intend to be a comprehensive analysis of the display of all mummy portraits; therefore, the focus will be on the collections of both the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu due to their accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

First discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, with major discoveries made by British archaeologist Flinders Petrie, the mummy portraits of Roman Egypt were like nothing anyone had seen before. With major finds coming from the Fayum oasis region south of the ancient capital of Memphis, these new "Fayum portraits" were commonly removed from their attached mummies and transported out of Egypt. These portraits are widely painted on wooden panels and painted using an encaustic technique where a pigment and wax mixture was used to paint on to the support. These portraits are a visual representation of the multi-faceted culture of Roman Egypt with the combination of Roman naturalism and Egyptian burial practices. However, because the majority of these portraits have been removed from their mummies, their connection to their original functions has been severed, leaving them as examples of ancient portraiture and nothing more. Currently, there are around a thousand mummy portraits still in existence around the world in various collections, and only a very small number of those are still attached to their respective mummies.

The mummy portraits are used to further the discussion of two very important and on-going issues within museum institutions: the display of human remains / funerary objects and how ancient ethnicity is conveyed by the museum. While these issues can be applied to various kinds of ancient artifacts, the mummy portraits are important in that they are simultaneously viewed as ancient objects while also having notions of modernity attached to them. Using an object biographical analysis, I argue that methods of display used by museums separate these objects from their original contexts and previous lives thereby bestowing on them new lives and different functions that are highly influenced by modern western standards and ideals which hinder the conveyance of the objects' original lives.

This project by no means aims to provide a comprehensive study of every mummy portrait on display in the world. The scope of this project will be focused on the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. The Met and the Getty were chosen due to the convenience of accessibility during the time of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It should be noted that these two institutions do not have the largest collection of mummy portraits in the world with other notable collections being the British Museum and the Petrie Museum both located in London. This project could not have been completed if not for the work previously done by scholars, especially those a part of the APPEAR (Ancient Panel Paintings: Examination, Analysis and Research) Project headed by the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Why Object Biography?

To put it in to the simplest of terms, object biography uses the perceived "lifespan" of an object and tracks the different relationships the object forms with people who use said object throughout its lifespan. Originally put into use by Igor Kopytoff in his essay titled "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", Kopytoff emphasizes the importance of the almost symbiotic relationship between objects as commodities and their place in societies.[1] When an object no longer is involved in the same relationships that it was when it was created or born, it dies.[2] However, objects can be born again when a new relationship of use forms.[3] A prime

[1] Igor Koptoff. "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." In *The Social Life of Things*, (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[2] Jody Joy. "Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives." *World Archaeology* 41, no. 4 (2009): 540.
[3] Joy, "Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives." 543.

example of this phenomenon are the mummy portraits. Their first lives began during their creation, and their second lives are now as museum objects on display.

By observing an object over its proverbial lifespan, or in this case, lifespans, the analysis of its different uses and environments can reveal valuable information not only about the object but how we as humans treat the objects around us. Object biography is a prominent method used in ancient Mediterranean art scholarship with studies being performed on a wide range of objects.[4] In the case of these mummy portraits, their centuries long history means that there is even more information to be gained especially when considering that these objects were created and deposited around the first to third centuries CE and discovered around the turn of the twentieth century. Such a large time gap between the two lives of the portraits leads to these lives being very different from one another.

We know that these objects functioned in a funerary context that has roots in the traditional Egyptian funerary practice of readying the dead for burial. The entire process from creation to deposition is the first life of the portraits. The first life is one of direct contact and function, meaning that the portraits closely interacted with their surroundings and the people of Roman Egypt. While they could have still been considered works of art at their time of direct use, they were also heavily involved in the economic, cultural, and familial spheres of Roman Egypt.

However, since the discovery of these objects, they have been removed from their original contexts and put on display in museums around the world. The portraits are now valued for their visual quality rather than their funerary usage. This new form of use, as objects of

[4] John North Hopkins, Sarah Kielt Costello, and Paul Ramey Davis. *Object Biographies: Collaborative Approaches to Ancient Mediterranean Art*. (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2021).

display, is not just another chapter in their biographies but another life because the nature of their modern use is so different from the ancient. Now, one chapter of an object's biography should not be deemed more important than another chapter; it should simply be acknowledged as a change. Because these portraits are now being displayed in museums and not buried with their respective mummies, their interpretation is affected by influences outside the realm of Roman Egypt effectively giving them new lives.

Rome Takes Over

The combination of the three cultural backgrounds (Greek, Roman, and Egyptian) forms the sphere of cultural hybridity that existed and led to the creation of the mummy portraits and their connected mummies. This section looks at the process of colonization that led to the creation of an environment that existed in order for these objects to be made.

The Romans were not the first foreign rulers of Egypt. In fact, Egypt had not been an independently ruled land for about five hundred years when the at the time of Roman conquest in 31 BCE. The Persian Empire had control over Egypt for roughly two hundred years until the Macedonians, under the command of Alexander the Great, eventually conquered Egypt in the 330s BCE.[5] After the death of Alexander in 323 BCE, the Macedonian Empire was divided into four regions. Dominion over Egypt went to his general Ptolemy, whose successors would rule Egypt as kings. The Ptolemaic period of Egypt lasted three hundred years until the Romans took control.

[5] J. G. Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 40, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Foreign reign over any land results in the rulers of that land leaving their impact on those they controlled. The Ptolemaic period saw some of the beginnings of the cultural hybridity that is so essential to the premises of this project. Because of its new foreign rulers, the Egyptian way of life was about to change drastically. Greeks, Macedonians, and other ethnic groups began to immigrate into Egypt and settle in the Nile valley. Within the Fayum region itself, substantial amounts of immigrants of Macedonian descent, a majority of whom were involved in the military, moved into the region in the third century BCE.[6] While a population's composition and size are bound to change as time progresses, influences of a foreign power in Egypt were not new by the first century CE when the production of the mummy portraits commenced, and the mixing of cultures did not happen overnight.

Hellenistic rule of Egypt lasted under the Ptolemaic dynasty until the historic Battle of Actium in 31 BCE between Augustus and the alliance of Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemies. After Augustus' victory, Egypt became an official province of the Roman Empire. As a part of establishing their influence, the Roman government set up the framework of a tax collection system in Egypt based on ethnic categorization which was overseen by those who were already living there. The Romans kept the established positions of authority from the Ptolemaic period but simply replaced the uppermost members of government with their own.[7]

Egypt had a few different levels of citizenship which became more and more blurred.[8] At the top were the Roman citizens - those considered to be a part of the empire. The next tier down were the citizens of the cities under Roman control with the most notable being Alexandrian

[6] Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure*, 40.
[7] R. C. C. Law, "North Africa in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, 323 BC to AD 305." In *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. J. D. Fage, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 194.
[8] Law, "North Africa in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, 323 BC to AD 305." 192.

citizens. These people were seen not as Romans but as those who, while not fully citizens, held some standing withing society. Then there were the Egyptians. Egyptians were not considered citizens.[9] Becoming a Roman citizen as an Egyptian was not an easy task with the fastest route of enlisting in the legion being "…effectively barred to all Egyptians."[10] This question of citizenship under the law was a significant factor in deciding what a person's identity was in relation to the state. However, it should only be seen as in relation to the state. The question of ethnicity in Roman Egypt and how people identified themselves as in any other society is never one of strict categorizations. While under Roman law a person was only one of three categories, it is more likely that someone may have identified with various aspects of Greek, Roman, and / or Egyptian cultures all at once.

Ethnicity on the other hand, is a much more complicated subject. The question of assigning a person an ethnic label, while already a dicey matter today, is even more difficult when looking at ancient figures and peoples.[11] The terminology that scholars use today (Greek, Roman, and Egyptian) become so muddled when applied to antiquity and this must be noted for this project. Modern concepts surrounding these terms are just that, modern. Assigning the subject of an ancient portrait with a certain racial or ethnic label is a slippery slope that can lead to problems surrounding such as racial determinism, a topic widely used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by early anthropologists as a way to justify modern racial divides and labels.[12]

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[9] Christina Riggs, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 249.
[10] Robert Ritner, "Egypt under Roman Rule: The Legacy of Ancient Egypt." in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. Carl F. Petry, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 6.
[11] Scholar Elizabeth Fentress notes that changes in social or ethnic expression in North Africa happened on an individual level as the economic market changed under the Romans.
[12] One object (11.139) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has already shown to be a part of that history. Twentieth century German eugenicists like George Ebers used the portraits as evidence to further an antisemitic agenda. A

What we think of as race and ethnicity today is very different from how the Romans would have addressed this concept. As already stated, the term "Roman" was more of a signifier of someone being a citizen of the empire (or more broadly, living within the Roman Empire) rather than that person having been born in either the Italian peninsula or even the city of Rome itself. When looking at the ethnic labels of "Egyptian" and "Greek" it is difficult to equate how the modern view of these terms would have aligned with life in the first few centuries. By the time the Roman Empire had annexed Egypt, "…'Greek-ness' and 'Egyptian-ness' were no longer two discrete states. Instead, being Greek and being Egyptian were just two possible constructions of identity that might complement, blend, or clash with one another."[13] The blending of cultural practices is less visibly obvious when the mummy portraits are removed from their respective mummies. When they are attached to the mummy, the combination of a burial practice that is so closely related to Egyptian culture and religious history with a panel portrait that is created in a Greco-Roman style call into question just how these objects should be identified. When they stand alone from the mummy, the only markers of cultural affiliation are what can be seen in the portrait such as hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry. By no means is there any effort to classify the subjects of the mummy portraits under any one label. In fact, it is imperative that the hybridity of these objects be given the spotlight because it shows how much of the culture mixing is lost when on display.

piece of writing titled "Das Antike Weltjudentum" (The Ancient World Jwery) (1943) was originally a part of the reference list provided by the Met which has been removed as of 2021.

[13] Anna Lucille Boozer. "Cultural Identity: Housing and Burial Practices." in *A Companion to Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*, ed. Katelijn Vandorpe (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019) 2.

The Portrait Phase

In the most general of terms, mummy portraits follow a common trend in both their composition and their aesthetic choices. All are painted on wooden supports with an overarching number having multiple panels aligned vertically. They are made using an encaustic method which mixed tempera paint and wax that was then applied to the panel, depicting the subject from the collarbone up in three-quarters position where the subject is looking out towards the viewer. There is no singular style that connects all the portraits; instead, it ranges from portrait to portrait and from generation to generation.[14]

It has not been until recent analysis scientific conducted on the portraits that detail pertaining to the exact materials used for the portraits were discovered.[15] In the following sections, the materials, the artists, as well as the choices the artists made in the making of these portraits, will be assessed. To begin, four portraits have been selected for an in-depth analysis to engage the objects in the discussion. Two are from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and two are from the J. Paul Getty Museum.

[14] Other forms of funerary portraiture from this period exists like shrouds and masks.
[15] Much of this work comes from the APPEAR Project headed by the Getty Institute.

Visual Analysis

Figure 1. 11.139 MMA

Figure 2. 11.139 MMA Detail of Portrait

Metropolitan Museum of Art - *Mummy with an Inserted Panel Portrait of a Youth* (11.139)

Within the collection of the Met, this is the only panel portrait that is still connected to a mummy. This example comes from Hawara and dates to the end of the first century, specifically around 80 -100 CE. The mummy is a little over five feet in length and completely intact with no visible disruption to the most likely linen wrappings - aside from some minor tears. This mummy has no inscriptions leaving the identity of this person a mystery.

The wrappings themselves cross the body creating a rhombus pattern. Around the head of the mummy, the wrappings follow the outline of the portrait with the visible layers (about ten) covering the edges of the panel indicating that the panel was added during the wrapping of the mummy. The head wrappings and the body wrappings blend extremely well because of the patterning used.

The panel is about fifteen inches long. This is the portrait of a young man who seems to be in the process of puberty based on the presence of a small mustache. He is presented in a three-fourths style where his neck is twisted toward the viewer. We can see just a small bit of clothing on the left side of his neck. Because not much is visible, aside from the small bit of what seems to be a white cloth of some kind, not much information can be grasped from the clothing. He looks directly at the viewer with an expressionless face. He wears a golden laurel crown which looks to have been added to the portrait after the subject had been completed. Some traces of paint or some other material is on both the edges of the panel and the bits of wrappings. If this is paint, then it could be possible that pigment was applied after the panel was integrated to the mummy.

The panel has some damage to it, mainly in the lower right portion; however, the damage does not interfere with the image of the subject. It is very clear to see where a brushstroke begins and ends in this panel. The only smooth painted surface is the background of the portrait where the negative space is a solid color and even then, the classic lines of a brush can still be seen. The color usage in the subject's face lights up the face, a good range exists between highlights and shadows. There is no clear usage of outlines in the face and different areas are demarcated by a difference in paint value. White paint is used most in areas like the cheekbones, the ridge above

the left eyebrow and the bridge of the nose. The eyes themselves do not have any strong use of highlighting, keeping them dark, flat, and expressionless in relation to the rest of the face.

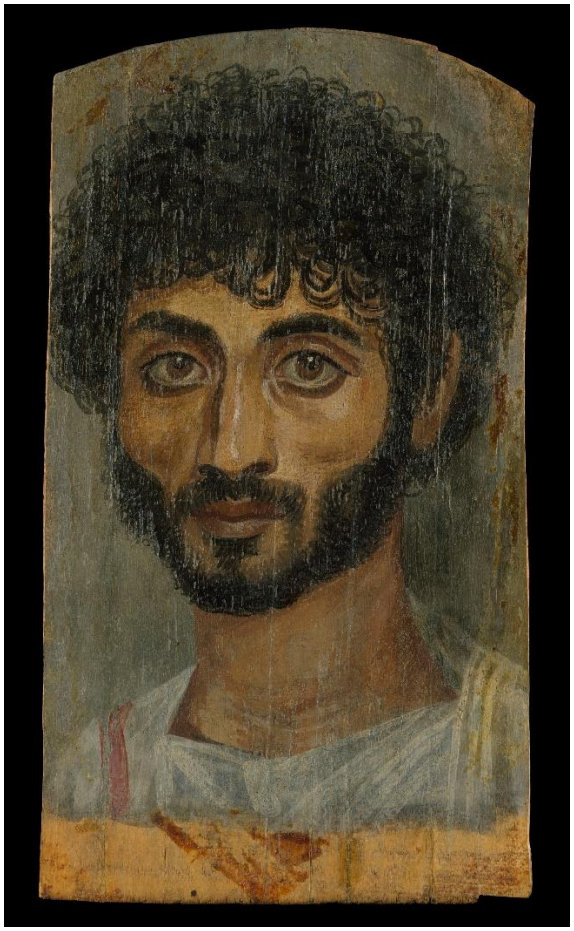

Figure 3. 09.181.1 MMA

Metropolitan Museum of Art – *Portrait of a thin-faced, bearded man* (09.181.1)

This portrait dates to around 160-180 CE. The panel has roughly the same dimensions as 11.139's panel as well as being made of limewood. Unlike the full-bodied mummy this portrait has little provenience; the exact location of origin is not known. Once again, the position of the subject is a three-quarters profile and makes eye contact with the viewer.

The subject of this panel seems to be a middle-aged man. He has a full beard and lots of dark curly hair on his head. The face of the subject is angular with highlights and shadows that

help to emphasize the peaks and valleys of subject's face. The overall face of the subject is a little dark in the way that more shadows are accented by the usage of whiter highlights. Little medium value color which can really only be found in the forehead and the right cheekbone is used in the portrait. The subject is wearing a white robe with blue undertones where lighter paint has been used to create folds on the fabric. The highlights that make these folds are long singular brushstrokes that do not provide great detail but enough that the eye picks it up. On the left shoulder, there is a reddish stripe that goes down the body.[16]

The background of the panel is a rather dark blue hue. That same color can be seen in portions of the subject's clothing where the background shows through. The blue can also be seen in the area of the neck. The combination of the two means that the background was most likely painted first and then the rest of the layers were added.

What is notable about this panel is that there is some indication that the panel was at some point cut down. On the left side of the panel, the subject's hair abruptly ends in a way that is not at all like the right side where there exists some negative space between the hair and the actual edge of the panel. However, the right side of the panel also shows signs of the wood being cut down. Towards the top right corner, the edge is curved. The bottom right corner, where there is no paint, is also uneven and angular enough to not be a deliberate cut. It is in this unpainted section of the portrait that it is the most visibly apparent that the wooden support of the portrait is actually several planks put together. The bottom of the panel equates to the bottom of the painting, and this is different from the left edge. It may be possible that the panel was cut down when it was either added or removed from the mummy. Unlike 11.139, and the other three

[16] Because there are no remaining wrappings around this portrait, it is unclear if the subject's clothing would have continued to the mummy wrappings as seen in the Isadora portrait.

examples, this portrait is removed from its mummy and any wrappings, allowing the viewer to see parts of the panel such as the unpainted wood, that would have otherwise been covered by the linen wrappings. In the object label, there is no mention of the portrait's lack of wrappings or a connection to burial practices; instead, a greater value is put on the painting technique and artistic qualities of the object.

Figure 4. 91.AP.6 Getty Museum

Figure 5. 91.AP. 6 Getty Museum Detail of Portrait

J. Paul Getty Museum – *Mummy of Herakleides* (91.AP.6)

Like 11.139 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this is the only full mummy in the Getty collection. The mummy is just under six feet long and is what is called a red-shroud mummy due to its red dyed outer layer. An under layer of wrappings can be seen by the feet of the mummy where the red outer layer has flaked off. It is also at the feet of the mummy where the name Herakleides has been written in Greek letting us know the name of the deceased. The mummy does not have any visible wrappings on the body and is instead covered in a single red shroud. On the shroud are multiple registers of traditional Egyptian religious iconography, including symbols like wadjet eyes, falcons and Egyptian gods like Osiris. The addition of Egyptian

iconography to the body of the mummy is unique, one because other portraits do not show such clear connection to traditionally Egyptian ones, and two because it is one a very few surviving full mummies like 11.139. When the Herakleides mummy was analyzed by the Getty for the APPEAR Project, it was found through a CT scan that there is another smaller mummy in the wrappings. This is smaller mummy is an ibis, a bird commonly associated with the Egyptian ibis-headed god Thoth. This has led scholars to believe that Herakleides may have been a priest in a temple dedicated to Thoth.

There are gold squares, some more faded than others, on the wrapping surrounding the bottom of the portrait. The background of the panel is painted gold unlike any other mummy portrait. When looking closely where the panel meets the wrappings, there are traces of gold on the wrappings. It could therefore be possible that the background was either painted after the panel was incorporated into the mummy or the background was painted already but touchups were necessary. He also wears the gold leaf crown that is present in other portraits. The techniques that the artist used to paint the face is more of a cross hatching method. It looks as if a smooth lower layer of paint was applied first that consisted of lighter values. The next layer is the cross hatching which are all darker shades and are used to provide shadows that make the face more dynamic and less flat. Herakleides also does not seem to be wearing any clothing in his portrait. Where there would normally be some type of clothing showing at the bottom of the portrait, Herakleides' chest seems to be exposed.

The panel itself is not flush to the wrappings. At the very top of the portrait, the wood is warped and separated from the linen. The most damage to the panel is down the center starting

from the top down and ending around the hair line. The paint in this area has been chipped away leaving the bear wood exposed.

Figure 6. Getty Museum 81.AP.42

Figure 7. 81.AP.42 Left side Photo by Author

J. Paul Getty Museum – *Mummy Portrait of a Woman* / *Mummy Portrait of Isadora* (81.AP.42)

This portrait is one of the most popular portraits at the Getty Villa. In the museum map, it is one of the highlighted objects for visitors. The portrait and surrounding wrappings measure about twenty inches high and about fourteen inches long. According to the object label, the name Isadora is written in Greek on the left side of the wrappings giving the subject a name. However, I was unable to locate the inscription myself, leading me to believe that it may not be visible. The object label and the online catalogue of this portrait also differ in the title of this object. While

the online catalogue names the object as “Mummy Portrait of a Woman”, the object label declares it to be the “Mummy Portrait of Isadora”. Isadora wears a golden leafed crown on her head like both the Herakleides mummy and 11.139 at the Met. She is also wearing a pair of gold and pearl earrings, a necklace of gold, and a three-layer necklace made of gold, pearls, and green and purple gems; possibly amethysts and emeralds. Her hairstyle is short and extremely curly with braids encircling the top of her head above the gold leaf crown. Roman women’s hairstyles have been used to date portraits like this to a specific time periods and serve as indications of societal standing of women.[17]

Isadora has green undertones in her skin with pink and white highlights. The brushstrokes that are commonly seen in these encaustic panel paintings are also seen in this portrait. However, they are much smaller which gives the portrait a look of smoothness when the viewer is farther away from the portrait. It is amazing how intact this mummy portrait is and may be one of only a few still in such condition. Another aspect that sets Isadora apart from the rest of the selected mummy portraits for this project is that she does not make eye contact with her viewer. While her left eye does look at the viewer, her right is looking to the right making her gaze seem to shift to the right over the viewer’s shoulder. The only other portrait that also does not engage with the viewer is another portrait of a woman at the Getty Villa (81.AP.29).

What makes this portrait stand out from the others, aside from it being one of the most technically cohesive portraits at the Villa is that it still has the surrounding wrappings and not just the wooden panel. The Isadora mummy portrait therefore serves as a sort of middle ground between the removed wooden panel portraits and the full body mummies. At the bottom of the

[17] Elizabeth Bartman, “Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 1.

object, we can see the layers of wrappings that would have been otherwise not been visible before the portrait and surrounding wrapping were removed from the mummy. When looking at the object from the side, it is clearer that there are about three different layers of wrappings. The bottom layer is the brown linen, the next is the small bit of lighter cloth can be seen at the bottom. The top layer of wrappings is the red shroud. The wrappings that still surround the panel are similar to the red shroud wrappings that are found on the Herakleides mummy. Gold diamonds line edges where the wrappings meet the panel. The wrappings are also painted as a continuation of the panel's subject matter with the purple clothes extending from the panel onto the wrappings. While there is no way of fully knowing what the rest of the mummy looked like, the presence of clothing on the wrappings may indicate that there may have been a full body depiction of Isadora.

As previously stated, these objects are amazing visual examples of the cultural hybridity of Roman Egypt and the combination of Egyptian and Greco-Roman practices. The following two sections will describe the two main cultural practices at play within these objects: Egyptian mummification and Roman portraiture.

History of Mummification in Egypt

In Egypt, the practice of artificial mummification of the dead arguably has its origins in the Predynastic Period (ca. 3500 – 3200 BCE). The earliest examples of mummified human remains were created naturally by the arid environment of the Egyptian desert. Because the desert is extremely hot and dry, moisture is absorbed quickly and bodies in shallow graves desiccate and naturally mummify. These shallow graves would have been easily unearthed by jackals and other scavengers and made visible to cemetery visitors. It is generally believed that the discovery of these natural mummified bodies shaped later Egyptian eschatological notions of

life after death—namely that the physical body must be preserved in order for the soul to continue its existence in the afterlife.[18]

It is, however, possible that artificial mummification was not influenced by the observance of these natural processes.[19] There are sceptics that question which came first. In other words, did Egyptian eschatological beliefs spur the need for the preservation of the body, or did the observance of natural preservation influence eschatological beliefs?[20] Although there are currently no definitive answers to these questions, it is clear that mummification played an important role in the Egyptian religious belief system.

As previously mentioned, mummification is intimately related to the Egyptian belief in death and rebirth. This belief has its roots in the myth of the death of the god-king Osiris, who was killed by his brother Seth and then reborn as a mummy and the Lord of the Underworld. Osiris is commonly depicted with green skin (a symbol of fertility and rebirth), wrapped in white linen mummy bandages, and holding the crook and flail (two symbols of Egyptian kingship). The belief in the cycle of death and rebirth is also used to explain natural occurrences, such as the sun's progress across the sky. It was believed that at the beginning of each day the sun god would be reborn and then die at sunset. He would then travel through the Underworld, facing monsters and other challenges, and experience rebirth the next day.[21]

The Egyptians believed that the body needed to be preserved so that the soul could live on in the afterlife. They thought that the soul had three components: the *ka*, the *ba*, and the *akh*.

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[18] Françoise Dunand and Roger Lichtenberg, *Mummies and Death in Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.) 9.
[19]Amandine Marshall, "On the Origins of Egyptian Mummification," *Kmt* 25, no.2 (2014): 53.
[20] R.B. Partridge, "Why Did Ancient Egyptians mummify their Dead?" *Ancient Egypt* 10/3, (2009 – 2010): 31.
[21] Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religions, Pyramids and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs* (London: Hermes House, 2010) 326-29.

The *ka*, in a funerary context, was "the 'life force' of the individual."[22] It was believed that the *ka* needed to be fed or nourished after a person's death in order to keep the *ka* alive. It would travel from the physical world to the afterlife every day to get the nourishment it needed. To be able to make this journey, a false door was included in the tomb. The false door acted as a point of connection between the mortal world and the afterlife, but it was not an actual functional door. It was a representation of a door that was either painted or sculpted in relief on a stone wall.[23] However, for the *ka* to successfully return to its tomb, the physical remains needed to stay intact so that it could recognize its destination. The *ba*, on the other hand, was thought of as the personality of a person. This component also left the body upon death but did not return to the deceased as often as the *ka* did.[24] The *ba*, nevertheless, did need to periodically reunite with the body. It is for these reasons that the body was mummified after death and placed in a tomb where the mummy would not be disturbed. The final component of the soul, the *akh*, is the combination of both the *ka* and the *ba*.[25] Unlike the two previous aspects of the soul, the *akh* was only present after the death of a person. Described as the fully transfigured postmortem spirit of the individual, this aspect of the soul would permanently reside in the afterlife and was only be created on the condition that the deceased had lived their life in harmony with *maat* (cosmic order). The *ahk* was widely considered to have a connection to the concept of light and the stars as an opposition to the darkness that is brought on by death.[26] Yet, in order to exist, the *akh* still needed the physical body to remain intact. Thus, the *ba*, *ka*, and *ahk* all required a connection to

[22] John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press for the Trustees of the British Museum, 2001)19.
[23] Salima Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt* (Harlow: Longman, 2003), 163.
[24] Ragai J., De Young G. "Mummies in Egypt," in *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Selin H. (Springer, Dordrecht, 2016).
[25] Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt,* 30.
[26] Salima Ikram and Aidan Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt: Equipping the Dead for Eternity* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998) 18.

the mortal world through the continued preservation of the physical remains. In the event that the physical remains were destroyed, the likeness (a portrait representation) and the name of the deceased could be used as a proxy. If the likeness and the name of the deceased were destroyed, however, the *akh* would cease to exist in the afterlife.[27]

The technical process of artificial mummification can be traced back to the beginning of the Old Kingdom and the First Dynasty (3100 – 2890 BCE). It should be noted that the process of mummification varied over both time and according to social class due principally to cost.[28] In the second book of his *Histories*, Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 430 BCE) describes three different mummification methods that were differentiated according to cost. In general, all internal organs except the heart would be removed from the body and then dried in natron for an extended period, usually 70 days. Natron is a combination of different salts, but it is primarily comprised of sodium bicarbonate, sodium carbonate, sodium sulphate, and sodium chloride. The desiccation of the body with the use of natron would ensure the preservation of the corpse and stop decomposition from taking place.[29] Variance based on cost came in to play regarding the exact procedure of removing the internal organs before the body was packed in natron. The most expensive grade of mummification covered the surgical removal and individual mummification of the internal organs, while the other two grades relied on cedar oil to dissolve the organs. The liquid resulting from this dissolution would then be absorbed by the natron.[30]

After the body was successfully desiccated, it would then be wrapped in linen bandages. These strips of linen helped to keep the mummy intact but also had religious ties to the

[27] Oakes and Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religions, Pyramids and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs*, 393.
[28] Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 5.
[29] Ikram and Dodson. *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt: Equipping the Dead for Eternity*, 104.
[30] Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 56.

goddesses Tayet or Neith due to their connections to the act of weaving.[31] While the body was being wrapped, amulets were placed inside the layers and spells were chanted to provide the body with protection. Throughout Egyptian history, there are several cases of variance in the exact manner of wrapping from period to period and even from mummy to mummy.[32] When the wrapping of the body was complete, the mummy would be returned to the family of deceased for proper burial.

Before a mummy was placed in its coffin, a mask in the form of a human face was often placed over the wrappings. The mask was meant to serve as a representation of the deceased, and as such, it served the vital role of preserving the deceased's likeness. The most famous of these masks is perhaps Tutankhamun's, which is made of gold and precious stones like lapis lazuli, carnelian, and turquoise. Masks of gold, however, were not the norm. Early funerary masks dating to the Old Kingdom were made of painted terracotta.[33] These masks, while used to convey the likeness of the deceased, show some evidence of standardization, especially in masks created for the non-elite.[34] After the Old Kingdom, popular mediums were painted cartonnage and shrouds, which then transitioned into the portrait panels in the Roman period. Even with the shift in the Roman period to the mummy portraits, these naturalistic portraits were still serving the same purpose as the mummy masks.

[31] Taylor, *Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 58.
[32] Ikram and Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt: Equipping the Dead for Eternity*, 153.
[33] Dunand and Lichtenberg, *Mummies and Death in Egypt*, 15.
[34] Ikram, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, 105.

Roman Portraiture

Our idea of the perfect white marble statues of Rome and Greece is only a modern one. Statues were originally painted with vibrant colors that could be seen from a distance. Another prominent area that we see the capability of the Roman's usage of painting is their wall and architectural painting styles. Frescoes have been found in various locations around the empire and have commonly survived in larger numbers than panel paintings.[35] The production of portraits within the Roman world and within Roman culture was deeply tied to their ideas of personhood and were not at all limited to the tomb. Emperors used portraits in various mediums from full bodied marble statues on the larger side to smaller objects like coinage to spread their image over the course of their reigns. The private citizens of Rome and the larger empire used portraiture in ways that were not centered on propaganda but were widely used in funerary settings as a method of commemorating the dead in the house and tomb spaces. Like the imperial portraits, these more private and intimate portraits were commemorative in nature but also used as a way for younger generations to learn from their elders.[36] These portraits would have been accompanied by inscriptions that were written to accompany these memorials to the dead; however, these have been widely lost, just like the mummies that would have accompanied the Fayum portraits. There was also a big difference in the Roman world between the private and the public portrait and even the terms public and private. In Rome, a private citizen was anyone who was not related to the imperial family.[37] We can see the effects of imperial portraiture standards on private portraits. Similar conventions of self-presentation, the result of either the subject themselves or the portrait artist, can be seen in both imperial and private portraits. The

[35] Panel paintings were commonly painted on wooden supports that would have decayed over the centuries.
[36] Barbara E. Borg, A *Companion to Roman Art.* ed. Chicester (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015), 390.
[37] Jane Fejfer, *Roman Portraits in Context*. (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH Co.KG, 2008), 16.

dissemination of imagery from the imperial to the private was a way for the social hierarchy of Rome and the larger empire to not only be created but upheld in the visual format.[38] The more imagery that could be tied to an imperial portrait, the more it can be assumed that the subject of the private portrait aimed to adhere to the canon of the imperial. The portrait can be viewed not as the documentation of the physical appearance of the subject but as a performance of status with the greater context of the Roman world.

Artist Workshops – Painted from life?

Knowledge of those responsible for the production of the mummy portraits is scarce - mostly due to a lack of provenance and archaeological context.[39] It is thought that the portraits were created not by a single artist under commission but by a workshop of artists. Limited access to materials like wood are seen as evidence that led some to think a workshop would have had a better chance of getting its hands on the materials.[40] In addition to questions regarding the acquirement of materials, questions of the veracity of the portraits need to be addressed.

Asking whether these portraits were painted from life or if there are any signs that the artist took liberties of their own will help to provide insight into the portraits' first lives. If the portraits were painted during life, this may explain why the panels show evidence of being cut down. It has been speculated that these portraits may have been displayed in the home before

[38]Amy Russell, and Monica Hellström. *The Social Dynamics of Roman Imperial Imagery*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 11.
[39] Salvant, J., Williams, J., Ganio, M., Casadio, F., Daher, C., Sutherland, K., Monico, L., Vanmeert, F., De Meyer, S., Janssens, K., Cartwright, C., and Walton, M. "A Roman Egyptian Painting Workshop: Technical Investigation of the Portraits from Tebtunis, Egypt." *Archaeometry*, no.60 (2018): 2.
[40] Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann "Crossing Border: Egyptian Mummy Portraits and Christian Icons," in *Artists and Colour in Ancient Egypt: Proceedings of the Colloquium Held in Montepulciano, August 22nd - 24th, 2008*, ed. Angenot, Valerie, and Francesco Tiradritti. (Montepulciano: Missioni Archaeologica Italiana a Luxor, 2016) 8.

they were attached to the mummies.[41] The majority of evidence found for the display of portraits in the home comes from arguments surrounding the inclusion of the portraits in a narrative that connects them to the beginning of early Christian icons. This argument claims the mummies functioned as cult objects of veneration before the final burial.

> Several indications suggest that the portrait mummies were kept in the house of the deceased for a certain period of time in a sort of closet coffin. In this way, the mummy could not only take part in the family's everyday life, but was probably also the centre of certain memorial services and cultic practices. That could go on for a certain period of time until the definitive burial of the mummy. When and under which conditions this event took place remains yet unknown. All we know is that the mummy was provided with a label citing name and destination and was shipped to the necropolis, that were often very distant.[42]

The styles of realism that are used by the artists and seen in the four examples in this paper can be tied to funerary customs. A realistic method of depicting a subject ties into the "deceased-as-in-life" belief that can be seen in Egyptian and Roman religions.[43] While the four examples in this study have a level of realism that would lead the viewer to believe that the subject actually looked that way in their lifetime, it is unclear how much, if any, artistic liberty was taken. It is unclear if the subject sat for their portraits or not. Until any archaeological evidence is uncovered that alludes to exact nature of the relationship between the workshop and the commissioner, it remains uncertain whether these portraits show their subjects reliably.

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[41] Lorelei H. Corcoran "A Cult Function for So-Called Faiyum Portraits," in *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond*, ed. Johnson, Janet H., *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization*, no. 51. (Chicago, Ill: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1992).
[42]Grimm-Stadelmann "Crossing Border: Egyptian Mummy Portraits and Christian Icons," 7.
[43]Riggs, Christina. *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt: Art, Identity, and Funerary Religion*. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; 2006) 142.

Making of the Portraits

Very little solid historical evidence is available for the identification of individual portrait artists aside from bits of papyrus that have been discovered with the names of some painters on them. The lack of archaeological context due to the excavation methods of the early twentieth century does not help give much if any insight into the findspots or original contexts of the portraits. It is unclear whether the few artists that are mentioned were immigrants to Egypt during their lifetimes or if their families had been living in Egypt for some time beforehand.[44] One working theory that might allow for the study of these painters' workshops is the analysis of multiple portraits that come from the same find sites. Commonalities in painting style, drawing technique, or similarities in materials may help. What can be done to gain some understanding of the artisans who made their living making the mummy portraits are the materials used.

The wood used as the support of the portraits have some variation. In Tebtunis, the wood of the portraits was determined to be made of sycamore fig wood, native to Africa. Interestingly, there were also some portraits made out of linden wood which is not native to Egypt but instead comes from Europe. The APPEAR Project, headed by the Getty Institute, has taken samples from the wood of over a hundred mummy portraits and other portrait panels as of 2018. Their results astonishingly show that the majority of the wood samples analyzed were not native to Egypt with the largest percentage being the same European linden wood that was found in Tebtunis. Less than twenty percent of the wood samples were even native to Egypt.[45] The imported linden wood had the ability to be cut thinner than the native woods while still having

[44]Salvant, J., et al. (2018) "A Roman Egyptian Painting Workshop: Technical Investigation of the Portraits from Tebtunis", 2.
[45] Cartwright, Caroline, and Marie Svoboda. *Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt Emerging Research from the APPEAR Project*. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2020).

the flexibility to bend and fit the shape of the mummy. Other woods needed thicker panels. Additional factors, such as the wood's anatomical structure and its overall color, play into why a particular wood was seen as the most desirable.

Moving on to how the actual portrait was made, encaustic is a painting technique that employs the usage of pigment and wax to create an image. This medium can be applied in either a 'hot' or 'cold' style. In the hot method, the wax is melted and the pigments are then added. The mixture was applied to the panel while still hot and would then cool. The cold method involved an emulsification of the wax and the pigment that was added to the panel after cooling.[46] Colors could be blended and mixed after application leaving markings on the images in the wax. Common pigments found in the portraits are yellow ochre, red earth and others. These portraits empoly the Greek tradition of a four color system to paint the flesh areas. Additional colors such as Egyptian blue have been noted through the use of spectrometry. When the portrait was eventually finished and attached to the mummy, often additional painted decorations were added to the body and the surrounding areas of the panel.[47]

Iconography

Looking beyond the formal elements of these portraits (pigments, woods, and waxes) we begin to dive into the realm of assigning a larger meaning to these objects. The study of this deeper meaning is tied to the details of the portraits, iconography, and was made popular by the famous art historian Erwin Panofsky in his book *Meaning in the Visual Arts*.[48] Panofsky is

[46] Stacey, R.J., Dyer, J., Mussell, C., et al. "Ancient encaustic: An experimental exploration of technology, ageing behaviour and approaches to analytical investigation" *Microchemical Journal* 138, (2018), 1.
[47] An amazing example of this is the Mummy of Herakleides.
[48] Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History.* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1955) 26-41.

mentioned in this section because his arguments on the importance of iconography and iconology are foundational to this project as a whole. To introduce his theory, Panofsky uses the example of a man lifting his hat as a form of greeting. He argues that while a formal analysis of this action will only lead to the "factual meaning" i.e., a hat has moved locations using his arm to lift said hat. To understand that this lifting of the hat is meant to convey a form of greeting entails that there is a level of social and greater contextual understanding surrounding the action of lifting the hat. This is by no means a comprehensive retelling of Panofsky's argument, but his thought process is vital to understanding the iconography of the mummy portraits. By simply observing a mummy portrait, the viewer can gain the knowledge of the formal elements of the portrait itself, and that these formal elements create the image of a person adorned with clothing that looks contemporary to the time these objects were made.[49]

These portraits are very consistent with the stylistic trends of the time they were created.[50] Each of these minute details may not seem as having much meaning aside from personal decoration. This is where iconography and an analysis of the visual comes into play. Because hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry are indicators of Roman / Hellenic backgrounds and culture, those wearing these symbols were trying to communicate that they are connected to that heritage. For example, the subject of the Isadora portrait wears jewelry that can be connected to the fashion tradition of the social elite of the time. In a number of the portraits the subjects are commonly dressed in traditionally Greek tunics sometimes even with gilded wreaths on their

[49] Panofsky also brings into the conversation the intrinsic meaning. He says that one must be aware of the contextual significance of the object to have a complete understanding of it. In the case of the mummy portraits, modern viewers do not have that larger contextual understanding of the portrait because of the way they are displayed within museums and therefore cannot grasp the iconographical significance of the portrait. Further discussion of museum display will be addressed in later sections.
[50] Barbara E. Borg, and Glenn W. Most. "The Face of the Elite." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 8, no. 1 (2000): 63-96.

heads. Scholars who have studied the mummy portraits generally connect the fashion choices seen in the portraits with the trends of the time. For example, showing signs of having a Greek education by wearing a tunic meant that the subject was a member of the higher social classes of the time.[51] All the examples with the exception of the Herakleides mummy wear these tunics.

The Question of Context

Little is known about the provenance or the provenience of a majority of the mummy portraits. A good number of the mummy portraits that exist today were found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At this time, archaeological practice was very different than today. The same number of precautions were not present in the nineteenth century. Documentation can be scarce which affects the amount of information that is able to be gained if a portrait does not undergo scientific analysis. It is through the analysis of elements like pigments, wood, and painting style that some portraits, for whom the find site has not been recorded or is no longer known, that an approximation can be made about where a portrait may have originated. To put things into perspective, only about a hundred of the total 278 items in the APPEAR Project database come from documented excavations.[52]

Of the portraits that do have a known provenance, a good number come from the Petrie collection. Flinders Petrie, a British archaeologist, conducted excavations in Egypt over multiple seasons starting in 1883 and later moved to Hawara in 1888 where he would discover a large

[51] Riggs, *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt: Art, Identity, and Funerary Religion*, 140.
[52] Barr, Judith. "From All Sides: The APPEAR Project and Mummy Portrait Provenance." In *Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt: Emerging Research from the APPEAR Project*, ed. Marie Svoboda and Caroline R. Cartwright. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2020.)

amount of the portraits.[53] Petrie was not the only person to uncover mummy portraits in the late nineteenth century, but he is one of the most notable.

There is no blame being put on the archaeologists who discovered these objects; archaeological practices were not what they are today. However, because of these archaeologists' actions, the loss of context makes is easier for modern ideas and standards to be placed on the portraits. This is where the divide between the ancient and the modern lives of the mummy portraits can be seen the most and where the museum needs to step in to try and close that divide.

[53] Freccero, Agneta, *Fayum portraits: Documentation and Scientific Analyses of Mummy Portraits Belonging to Nationalmuseum in Stockholm*. (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2000), 2.

The Museum Phase

The final section of this project will shift from the ancient to the modern and analyze the collection of mummy portraits in both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Getty Villa. The second life of these portraits is heavily influenced by modern practices of display as well as our own modern conceptions of art.

Figure 8. MMA Portrait Display, Gallery 138 Photo by Author

Figure 9. MMA Gallery 137 Photo by Author

Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is located on the first floor of the museum directly off the main building entrance with the Greek and Roman wing on the opposite end of the building. The wing itself is organized as a large loop that proceeds in chronological with the Predynastic on the right and the later Roman on the left. There is no clear form of direction given to visitors to follow, giving them the freedom to roam as they see fit. Visitors can enter either side of the wing from this room (Gallery 138) making the mummy portraits either the first or last thing one sees of Egyptian wing.

In total there are nine mummy portraits currently on display with two being in a separate room connected to the entry gallery.[54] The main wall, on which the portraits are displayed, is

[54] An additional portrait is normally on display; however, at the time of visitation for the purposes of this project, it was no longer on view for conservation reasons.

meant to be a presentation of funerary art during the Roman period with only six of the nine on the same wall. Three portraits are given their own display case. (Fig. 8) (09.181.2, 09.181.2, 09.181.4) All three of these portraits came from the private collection of Maurice Nahman from Cairo, and all were purchased by the Met in 1909. Within this particular display case, along with the object labels that commonly accompany anything on display, there is a short excerpt on the "Technology of Panel Painting" which only focuses on the how the portraits were made. It is not until a visitor reads the text display titled "Funerary Arts of the Roman Period" that they learn that these portraits were originally attached to a mummy. Other forms of funerary art (all on display) are given a brief description in this excerpt including masks, shrouds, stele, and tombs.

Other displays of portraits consist of two portraits in standalone displays that flank a shroud while the remaining portrait is shown in a case with mummy masks. Still in the same room, is the last remaining portrait across from the two freestanding ones. Each of these portraits are positioned at eye level with the viewer making it seem as if the subjects themselves are making eye contact with anyone who looks.

Only one of the nine portraits is still connected to its mummy. (11.139) The mummy is not in the main entry space but is instead in the next room (Gallery 137). This smaller gallery serves almost as a transitory area from the entrance into and out of the rest of the Egyptian wing. The mummy itself is displayed in a glass case with enough space on all sides for viewers to walk around. The entire case is placed on the floor with a small light brown base so that viewers can look down on to the top of the mummy and the portrait. The object label is positioned on the top of the glass case by the foot of the mummy on the same side of the passage between gallery rooms. The label itself focuses on the individual young man depicted on the portrait while also

touching on the display of the mummy in the house before the final burial during the Roman period.

There is no explicit mention of the fact that human remains are being shown with the display of this mummy. Herein lies the issue. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is an art museum and therefore views its collection as works of art putting an emphasis on the visual rather than taking an anthropological or archaeological stance where the focus would be shifted to the body inside of the wrappings. In this context, the mummy is an art object where the exterior has been given more value than the interior. While the artistic nature of Egyptian mummies should, and in fact does hold value, there is still the need to acknowledge the presence of human remains and all the implications that come with that. While historically the display of human remains in museum settings has been very commonplace and continues to be, the ethical debate surrounding this practice has become prevalent. It should be noted that this is not the only mummy within the Met's collection; yet it is the only mummy with an attached portrait.

J. Paul Getty Villa

Figure 10. Getty Gallery 210. Photo by Author

The Getty Museum in Los Angeles has two main complexes; the Getty Center, and the Getty Villa where the collection of classic art and the mummy portraits are housed. The Villa's layout and architecture is meant to mimic an actual Roman villa from the area of Pompeii; the galleries surround a courtyard in the center. Within the galleries themselves all but one mummy portrait can be found within the same gallery (210). Gallery 210 is located within the Roman Art section of the museum, and only focuses on the burial styles of Roman Egypt with an emphasis on the mummy portraits.[55] In this gallery, nine mummy portraits are on display including the famed Herakleides mummy. In addition to the portraits, there is one shroud portrait, one mummy

[55] A larger debate could be raised on where in the museum the mummy portraits are placed. The Met has them in the Egyptian section while the Getty has their collection in the Roman section. Once again showing that the terminology that modern scholarship assigns these objects is inherently modern.

mask, and two panel paintings depicting the gods Serapis and Isis. Also on display is a painted wooden sarcophagus. The Herakleides mummy is displayed in the middle of the room where visitors are able to move around the mummy. The wall opposite the east entrance has seven portraits on the wall divided into two cases with five on the right and two on the left. Normally, another portrait is in the left case, but it was not on view at the time. The last portrait (the Isadora Portrait) is in its own case on the eastern wall. The entire gallery was centered on the theme of burial in Roman Egypt with the Herakleides mummy as the focal point. In one corner of the gallery there is an education video on the process of mumification using the mummy as an example. The gallery is meant to be an educational space along with a visual one. With the mummy being in the same room as the portraits it is clearer to the visitor that the portraits mounted on the wall behind the mummy were meant to be attached to a mummy of their own.[56] A connection to the ancient life is present to the best of the museum's ability; however, the connection is dependent on the presence of the mummy. This cannot be said for the final portrait that has yet to be discussed.

The last portrait in this discussion is one of the first portraits that a visitor might see when they walk through the Villa. It is located on the first floor when the rest are on the second and is in a section of gallery spaces dedicated to the history of the Villa and J. Paul Getty as a collector. The main goal of the gallery is to display various types of marble that had been used in ancient construction and the Villa itself. On one of the walls of this gallery (105), there is a written statement titled "J. Paul Getty, the Collector" which speaks to his collecting of antiquities and the eventual construction of the Villa. To accompany this text, a case with seven different objects is on view with the theme of the display being "A Diverse Collection". The object label for this

[56] This is not the case at the Met where the mummy and a majority of the portraits are in two different galleries.

portrait clearly states how Getty saw the mummy portrait as “a bridge between two parts of his collection.” The two parts being the ancient and the Old Master painting collection that is now housed at the Getty Center. In this text we can see how the portraits are being brought into a very modern conversation between a museum and its collection.

The Role of the Museum

An inherent quality of most museums whether they are art, history, or science museums is that there is some element of the visual that is displayed to the museum visitor. The museum has to come up with a way to engage an audience that may not be knowledgeable on the subject matter on display. In doing so, it is likely that the amount of information that a museum conveys to its viewers is less than they would want when having to consider factors such as visitor attention span, literacy, and the overall goals of the display. It is here where the role of the modern museum comes into play. Are museums still tools of education or are they shifting into the realm of entertainment? Both side of this argument will now be addressed.

If we say education is the answer, then it is the duty of the museum to try and actively engage with its audience and make sure that visitors are coming away from their trips to the museum having learned something. Now, the museum can only do so much to achieve this goal. It can write as many object labels and wall text panels as it wants, but it is the responsibility of the museum goers and their choice whether or not to engage with the material provided by the museum.

If a museum is to be a place of education through the visual, then the display is the method for the dissemination of knowledge. Larger institutions usually take on the more wide-

ranging approach where their collection is from all over the world. International or encyclopedic museums that aim to display a narrative of global art history end up doing so by sectioning off different geographic regions with the European sections being the focal point of the buildings. We can see this play out at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where the European wings are the largest and positioned in the center. The "ancient" wings, Greco-Roman and Egyptian, are in the front of the building creating almost a timeline of art with the two wings feeding into the European wings to show the evolution of art making. It is not the fault of the Met for establishing their gallery spaces this way. The encyclopedic museum structure, while rooted in imperialism and colonization, is still a common structure in leading museums today. There is still an ongoing debate about the decolonialization of museum institutions of all kinds, not only the encyclopedic.[57] The Getty Museum is not an encyclopedic museum perse. But there is still an inherent value put on classical European art.

If the museum has become a source of entertainment, then there is less of a responsibility on the part of the museum to try and engage with its audience as actively.[58] The responsibility of the museum then turns into providing visual stimulus for the viewer, and the museum collection becomes nothing more than the visual. They are only valued for the fact that they can be looked at as a way to gain some kind of satisfaction from the viewer. The objects' history or educational value, while still present, is not what is being favored. There is also something to be said about the fact that the mummy portraits, along with the rest of the museum collection that is on view has been made timeless by their display. While museums do update their galleries on occasion,

[57] A major component of the argument surrounding the encyclopedic museum is James Cuno whose work on the questions on the ownership of antiquities is foundational to these types of conversations. Cuno himself is not a supporter of decolonizing the museum.

[58] With the addition of museum gift shops and the commoditization of collections and decreases in the amount of written information in the gallery space, it seems that places like the Met have been heading down the path of entertainment.

the objects are unmoving and unchanging in their cases. The viewers, on the other hand, make their way through gallery after gallery taking what they want from the experience and putting their own ideas onto the objects they see.

The Western Ideology of the "Portrait"

If asked the question, "Can you show me an example of a portrait?" what would be the common answer? One could argue that the response to such a question would be someone showing you DaVinci's Mona Lisa or one of Rembrandt's famous self-portraits. When hearing the word "portrait" itself, the viewer might expect a painting that depicts a person where the physical qualities of their face and/or body are shown to the viewer and that the display of those physical traits may reveal something about the life or personality of the subject on display.[59]

In the modern western world, our idea of a what a "portrait" is meant to look like is highly influenced by centuries of artists in both the European and later American traditions producing artworks following the same basic mode of representations. This tradition has constructed what we literally have been shown to be a portrait time and time again, "Because post-Renaissance Western art has embraced classical art's appreciation of portraiture and of realism (two separate concepts, after all), it is understandably difficult to keep in mind that the production methods for, and ultimate goals of, ancient portraiture need not have been identical to our own."[60] Because the mummy portraits employ an amount of realism in the depiction of their subjects, this separation between the modern goal of portraiture and the ancient goal is hard for

[59] In this sense we can see Panofsky's intrinsic meaning play out; however, to have a full understanding of the intrinsic meaning according to Panofsky, one has to understand the cultural subtext of the iconography which, in the case of the mummy portraits is lost.
[60] Christina Riggs, "Facing the Dead: Recent Research on the Funerary Art of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt," *American Journal of Archaeology* 106, no. 1 (2002): 85-101. doi:10.2307/507190.

the viewer to discern when the display of these objects are so modernized. If the viewer does not have any previous knowledge on these objects, then the display would make it even more difficult to understand their original functions because they have to deal with their preconceived ideas of what a portrait is and how it is meant to function.

We currently live in a world where digital photography has become the standard method of recording the world around us. Photographs have conditioned modern users to believe that the photograph is a documentation of whatever is being photographed.[61] We have been conditioned to read a picture as a recording of the real world around us and therefore a portrait, painted or photographed but more so the photograph, is a recording of a real person.[62] The subjects of the mummy portraits were real people but because they have been documented by their portraits does not mean that the portrait is an exact recreation of the subject. There is no way of knowing what the subject actually looked like or if the portrait displays them as they would have wanted to be remembered as.

Another way that the modern understanding of the "portrait" is that the "portrait" forms a relationship between the subject and viewer by looking directly at them.[63] The mummy portraits adhere to this trend; however, by the end of their use in ancient times these objects were attached to their respective mummy and were no longer meant to interact with a viewer. The display of these objects in the modern museum is adhering to our modern standards separate from their ancient contexts. It is in this manner of display that we see their new lives are formed. The loss of a contextual understanding by the viewing audience as a result of a highly modernized method

[61] This argument is famously posited by Gombrich in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1971). His main ideas surround the differentiation between representation in paintings and photography.
[62] Of course, with technology developing at an exponential rate and the existence of software like Photoshop, a photograph's connection to validity is becoming strained.
[63] One example that comes to mind is Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665).

of display instituted by the museum creates enough of a divide between the ancient and the modern that the mummy portraits no longer have much of a connection to their previous lives. The simple viewing of these objects as "portraits" separates them from their connection to the mummy.

One of the simplest and yet possibly one of the most effective way to display the portraits horizontally and not vertically. Removing the portraits from the wall visually cuts the tie to portrait paintings, which in turn, makes the viewer interact with these objects in a new way. They are not being viewed for their painted surfaces but as an artifact and not an art object. Some museum institutions have already come to these conclusions on their own. For example, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum has taken their mummy portraits off the wall and instead has them in a display case where the viewer looks down on the objects that are laid out at a slight angle. (Figure 11) The Harvard Art Museum will be opening an exhibition in the fall of 2022 where they too try to visually draw connections to the ancient lives of these objects in a way that is impossible for the viewer to miss.[64]

Removing the objects from the wall is the quickest way for the viewer's preconceived notions of portraiture to be broken. If the object is displayed horizontally, one could argue that the thought process of the viewer shifts to seeing the object as having a function other than visual representation. A connection to the original function is strengthened.[65] As stated, the shift in the positioning is just a first step in the betterment of these objects' display. Object labels and wall texts should also be rewritten to emphasize historical function. Because there has been a decline

[64] I was informed of these plans by talking to curator Jennifer Thum and conservator Kate Smith at the Harvard Art Museum.

[65] With these portraits being funerary objects, it is important to make sure that this connection to the original function is as intact as possible. This is even more important when a fully intact mummy is a part of the collection, because it is then the issue of having human remain on display and the ethical questions that arise with this.

in the amount that the visitor is willing to read, wall text and object labels need to prioritize what information is being presented. While there is an importance for a discussion on painting methods, more space needs to be given over to the original function of the portraits. However, one would argue that these are afterthoughts, because a museum visitor is less inclined to read material provided. The physical positioning would just be the most obvious change.

Figure 11. RISD Museum Showing Portraits Removed from the Wall

Conclusion

There are about seventeen centuries between the creation of the mummy portraits and their discovery in the late nineteenth century and about a century longer until the Getty Museum would start the APPEAR Project. Before the efforts of the Getty Museum and the APPEAR Project, little analysis had been conducted on the mummy portraits. Information on these portraits have allowed for the analysis of burial customs in the Fayum region of the first to third centuries. As previously stated, these objects were made only for those who could afford the

price. The combination of Greco-Roman realism and the Egyptian burial practices is not only an example of the hybrid culture but also nods to the evolving ideas surrounding representing oneself for the afterlife.

Even with the scientific advances made by the APPEAR Project on top of the historical knowledge that scholars have compiled over the years, these portraits have been presented in such a way that all this knowledge is not conveyed to the viewer. Instead, the disconnect of the panel portraits from their respective mummies makes it easier for modern western ideals to be attached to these objects which in turn then changes how these objects function within the museum. The adherence of their displays to traditions of western portraits, hanging the portraits vertically against a wall, gives the viewer the automatic impression that they are a part of that historical tradition when they were not originally used in the same manner. The portraits become objects of visual and aesthetic satisfaction for the viewer instead of being a source of knowledge on Roman Egyptian burial practices.

If the museum wants to display these objects properly, they need to be removed from the walls and placed horizontally. In this way, they are not deemed as only art objects in the eyes of the viewer. It is the responsibility of the museum, art museum or historical museum, to display their collections to the public in a manner that conveys a level of knowledge and relevant information on the collection. In the case of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Villa that information is lost in object labels and wall text that may or may not be read by visitors. Changing the position of the mummy portraits ensures that a message is being sent to the viewer that these objects once served an important purpose when they were created. Because these objects are so closely tied to burial practices and sometimes literally connected to human

remains, it is imperative that the visitors to museums with mummy portraits in their collections are aware of what they are viewing.

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