

Fayum Mummy Portraits

Hellenistic-Egyptian Greek-Style Panel Paintings from Faiyum Basin, Egypt.

Fayum Mummy Portraits (c.50 BCE - 250 CE)

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Fayum Mummy Portrait of a Young Woman (1st Century BCE) Louvre. The Fayum panel paintings are one of the most celebrated examples of

[Hellenistic art](#) found in Egypt.

What are Fayum Mummy Portraits?

In [Egyptian art](#), the term "Fayum (or Faiyum) Mummy Portraits" refers to a number of [panel paintings](#) excavated from sites across Egypt, dating back to [Hellenistic Greek painting](#) of the first century BCE. The finds have been concentrated around the Faiyum Basin, to the west of the Nile south of Cairo, notably in the vicinity of Hawara, Achmim and Antinoopolis. The paintings are highly realistic head-and-shoulder portraits, painted by anonymous artists in the style of [Greek art](#) from the Hellenistic period, and also the later period of [Hellenistic-Roman art](#). The portrait paintings were attached to mummies of the Coptic period, being bound into the burial cloth that was used to wrap the bodies, so that they covered the face of the deceased person. To date, about 900 portraits have been found, and the extremely dry conditions have kept them in good condition: even their [colour](#) has lost little of its original brilliance. The pictures represent the only significant body of original Greek or [Roman art](#) to have survived from Classical Antiquity, and rank alongside other rare painted works, such as Greek vases, the Etruscan tomb paintings, the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum, and the [murals](#) unearthed at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Mummy portraits can be seen in some of the world's [best art museums](#), notably the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the Getty Museum (Los Angeles), the [British Museum](#) (London), the Louvre (Paris), the Antikensammlung and Egyptian Museum (Berlin), and the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (Dresden).

Note: the term "Hellenistic" means "Greek-style", while the "Hellenistic Age" commonly refers to the period 323-27. This opens with the death of Alexander the Great - an event which marks the maximum extent of Greek power and influence - and closes with the complete Roman conquest of the Mediterranean basin. For architectural events, see: [Late Egyptian Architecture](#) (1069 BCE - 200 CE).

Background and Characteristics

Since panel-painting (usually [portrait art](#)) was the most revered form of [art](#) in the Classical world, the Fayum Mummy portraits would have been seen as highly valuable works. Indeed, research indicates that only about 1-2 percent of people could afford to have their portrait painted, and that sitters typically belonged to the affluent upper social strata of government officials, religious dignitaries, military officers and other well-connected families. It is worth remembering that while the rulers of Hellenistic Egypt (c.323-27), may have proclaimed themselves to be Pharaohs, they lived in an entirely Greek-style world, which incorporated only a few local elements. Certainly, from the turn of the Millennium, all purely Egyptian features had disappeared from everyday life, and cities such as Oxyrhynchus or Karanis were essentially Greco-Roman places.

Archeologists have uncovered two types of portrait, differentiated by technique: (1) [encaustic painting](#), in which hot wax is used as a binding medium to bind colour pigments; (2) [tempera painting](#), which use an emulsion of water and egg yolks. The tempera works are generally of a lesser quality.

Nearly all the panels depict the head, or head and shoulders of a single person viewed from the front. Subjects include men, women and children of all ages. Although generally of a high standard, and a highly naturalistic, lifelike appearance, the quality varies according to the artist's understanding of human anatomy and expertise in the use of light and shade ([chiaroscuro](#)).

On first inspection the Fayum mummy [portrait paintings](#) look like true-life depictions of actual individuals, but closer analysis reveals that the 'individual' features are sometimes no more than repetitive, formulaic renderings. In other words, quite a few of the portraits appear to have been created from a small number of facial templates, disguised by the use of different fashions, hairstyles and beards.

The style of this portrait art is quite formal, but given the strict hieratic rules governing all Egyptian art, including [Egyptian sculpture](#), it is clear that the portraits belong to the Greek tradition, rather than the Egyptian. Note also, that when these pictures were first being painted, about 1 in 3 of the Faiyum population was Greek. However - while the artistic style of the Fayum portraits is unmistakably Greek, and some of the early subjects were probably Greek "citizens" - by the time the genre fell into decline about 250 CE, the early Ptolemaic Greek settlers had married local Egyptian women, adopted Egyptian religious practices, and were seen as *Egyptians* by the Roman authorities, despite their own self-perception of being Greek.

Materials and Painting Techniques

Most of the Fayum Mummy portraits were executed on thin rectangular wooden panels or boards, cut from cedar, cypress, oak, lime, sycamore and citrus. The painted boards were then attached to the layers of funereal cloth with which the body was bandaged. Very occasionally, portraits were painted directly onto canvas or the mummy cloth itself, a technique known as cartonnage painting.

As mentioned above, two different painting techniques were used - encaustic and tempera - and analysis has shown that artists often made a preparatory [drawing](#) before applying any paint. In general, the encaustic pictures are more striking than the tempera due to their rich, bright colours, as well as the loose brushwork which give them an Impressionist-style appearance. In contrast, the tempera portraits have a milder, more restrained look. Sometimes, gold leaf or gilding was used to represent jewellery and personal adornments.

For more about art during the three centuries of "Hellenism", see: [Hellenistic Greek Sculpture](#) (323-27) and [Hellenistic Statues, Reliefs](#).

Chronology and History

The Fayum Mummy portraits were painted between roughly 50 BCE and 250 CE. However, no archeological finds are recorded until 1615, when the Italian explorer Pietro della Valle became the first European to see a Fayum Mummy portrait during a visit to Saqqara-Memphis. The portraits he found are now in the State Art Collection of Dresden. Interest in Egyptian antiquities continued to grow during the 18th century, but it wasn't until the early 19th century that more discoveries occurred at Saqqara and Thebes. Other finds followed by such explorers as Leon de Laborde (1827), Ippolito Rosellini (1829), Henry Salt, Daniel Marie Fouquet (1887), Flinders Petrie (1887), Theodor Graf (1890), and Albert Gayet (1906). Supportive analysis by Egyptologists and classical scholars like Georg Ebers and Rudolf Virchow, simply added authenticity and *gravitas* to the finds, as a result of which the Fayum portraits became a magnet for [art collectors](#) around the world.

For more about the art of Ancient Greece, see: [Classical Greek Painting](#) (c.480-323 BCE).

Influence and Legacy

The Fayum Mummy portraits are among a tiny number of other panel paintings to have survived from Classical Antiquity. The genre was continued by practitioners of [Byzantine art](#), notably in the form of encaustic [icon painting](#) which was developed in Middle Eastern monasteries, like the 6th-century monastery of St Catherine in Sinai, founded in the 6th century by the Emperor Justinian. When encaustic painting fell into disuse during the 8th/9th century, tempera took over as the accepted medium for Orthodox Christian icons in Constantinople and later in Kiev, Novgorod and Moscow, where it became an important form of [Russian medieval painting](#). Among the greatest panel painters of the Russian tradition, were: [Theophanes the Greek](#) (c.1340-1410), the founder of the Novgorod school of icon painting and his pupil [Andrei Rublev](#) (c.1360-1430), noted for his [Holy Trinity Icon](#) (1411-25). In the west, the tradition was perfected by the school of [Flemish Painting](#) (c.1400-1500), and by exponents of the [Dutch Baroque](#), in the 17th century.

Further Resources

For more information about ancient art from Egypt and Greece, please use the following resources:

- [Greek Pottery](#) (c.7,000 BCE onwards)
- [Egyptian Architecture](#) (c.3000 BCE onwards)
- [Egyptian Pyramids](#) (c.2600-1600 BCE)
- [Greek Sculpture](#) (650-27 BCE)
- [Parthenon Architecture, Sculpture](#) (c.447-422)

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