

16 What's in a Face?

Mummy Portrait Panels and Identity in Museum Display

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The small gallery called *Arts of Greco-Roman Egypt* at the Getty Villa in Malibu is dedicated to Classical period Egypt. The display is positioned in a reimagining of the Villa Dei Papiri at Herculaneum and feels embedded within Roman Egyptomania itself. The gallery emphasizes the intermingling of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art, in addition to religion and culture. The mummy portrait panels displayed there are used to illustrate Greek painting and the encaustic technique, while the mummy of a man named Herakleides is used to illustrate how these mummy portraits were originally used as funerary masks. *Arts of Greco-Roman Egypt* places Roman mummy portraits firmly within a Greco-Roman artistic context while illustrating the Egyptian funerary practice of mummification. Yet historically, the position of Egyptian antiquities in museums has “occupied uncertain terrain” (Whitehead 2009, 92). The ordering and placing of objects in museums reflects how they are seen by the institution and then perceived by the public: Christopher Whitehead has illustrated how the museum can be viewed as a map around academic disciplines and connecting subject areas, but a map that is not neutral. The travel through space and time that a museum can offer represents a form of “spatialised knowledge” in which cultures are surveyed, laid claim to, and “authority over cultural terrain is sought” (Whitehead 2009, 137).

Arts of Greco-Roman Egypt at the Getty Villa represents several ways of viewing the mummy portrait panels famously found at Hawara in Egypt by Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The display emphasizes the aesthetic importance of the panels while also illustrating their practical role. At the same time, the position of these portraits from Egypt within a replica Roman villa places them almost physically within the Mediterranean world of Classical Greece and Rome rather than in the long artistic funerary traditions of ancient Egypt. This chapter therefore draws attention to some of the discourses that have surrounded and, in some cases, attempted to construct the political and cultural identity of these panels. Its examples come from a range of museum maps and exhibitions to give a sense of how one set of objects can be perceived differently in a different location and exhibitionary context.

DISCOVERY AND EARLY DISPLAY

In the late nineteenth century, excavations in the Fayum area of Egypt led to the discovery of numerous mummy portrait panels. Most notable among the excavators was William Matthew Flinders Petrie, whose excavations at Hawara in 1888 and from 1910 until 1911 were the “best-documented discovery of mummy portraits anywhere in Egypt” at that time (Roberts 2007, 13). The discovery of these portrait panels meant that people could see the application of a Greco-Roman art form in Egyptian burial customs. Petrie exhibited the portraits and other finds from his Hawara excavation at the Egyptian Hall in London (Drower 1995, 141), indicating that he anticipated a huge public response. He framed and mounted each picture ready for the opening on 18 June 1888, and, in order to ensure the exhibition’s impact, he sent personal invitations to influential cultural figures (Drower 1995, 142). Petrie was rewarded with the interest of painters such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema, William Holman Hunt, and Edward Poynter, as well as the Director of the National Gallery, Sir Frederic Burton.

Echoing artistic interest, there was a rapturous reception of Petrie’s exhibition in the press. *The Times* reported that:

in the drawing room of the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, there will be on view one of the most curious collections of Egyptian antiquities that has ever been brought together. Many of the objects, it is true, are of the kind in which every museum abounds, but the portraits, over thirty in number, are almost absolutely new to Egyptologists (*The Times*, 2 July 1888).

The paper further commented that these Hellenic and Roman portraits from Egypt “have the appearance of being no older than Tuscan portraits of the time of Giotto.” This reference to early Renaissance painting, and the painting of Giotto and Florentine art in particular, was a recurring one in the reception of the portrait panels in 1888. *The Times* stressed the Hellenic and Roman origins of the paintings as well as the naturalism of the portraits. In this, the art journal *Academy* concurred, commenting that the “lifelike character of the portraits and their variety of type and expression . . . attest to the fact these are portraits in the truest sense of the word” (*Academy*, 7 July 1888). In 1889, John Forbes-Robertson discussed the portraits in the *Magazine of Art* in which he stressed their artistic value as giving us an “echo of the masterpieces of Greek genius.” Commenting that the portraits were “Egyptian in form, though Greek in face,” Forbes-Robertson argued that the portraits should find a “resting place in the British Museum and the National Gallery” as they illustrated the tradition of Greco-Roman craftsmanship before the “blow” to art of Byzantium (Forbes-Robertson 1889, 178–79). In this way, the mummy portrait panels were defined as artworks representing a “lost” link between Classical Greek and early Renaissance art.

Jesse Haworth, one of Petrie's sponsors for the Hawara excavations, presented seven mummy portraits to the National Gallery, and, perhaps more surprisingly, the National Gallery purchased another four for £95. In a letter to the Director of the National Gallery, Sir Frederic Burton, Petrie apologizes "not to have persuaded my friends to give more to the National Gallery in preference to other places; but I have made a special point of securing the old man's head for you."¹ Burton considered "the old man's head" (probably British Museum object number EA74708) as similar to the work of the Italian portrait painter Giovanni Battista Moroni (1520/4–1579), and Petrie's patron Amelia Edwards recorded that Burton thought that portrait to be "worth all the rest put together" (Edwards 1891, 106). *The Times* reported that the acquisition of these mummy portrait panels added to a sense of "unbroken sequence in the history of the arts" and that a "national museum . . . should aim at being in the fullest sense of the word representative" (*The Times*, 28 August 1888). Frederic Burton's acquisition of these mummy portraits was criticized by some of the Gallery's Trustees, but Burton argued that they belonged in the gallery alongside early Italian art:

I consider these things as appropriate and desirable for a Gallery that pretends to be historical as any early Italian fresco or other work. They belong to European Art and show the method which had already become traditional in it from the time of the Hellenic painters (quoted in Conlin 2006, 324).

In 1912, after Petrie had excavated more portrait panels in Hawara, another four entered the collections of the National Gallery, which were followed by a further bequest of a portrait panel from Algernon Bent in 1916 and one from Major R. G. Gayer-Anderson in 1943. Additionally, two more entered the Gallery in the Mond bequest in 1924, which representatives of the Gallery had chosen from the collection of the chemist and philanthropist Ludwig Mond. Some of these mummy portraits were exhibited in the central hall next to the work *Virgin and Child Enthroned* by Margarito d'Arezzo (painted sometime in the 1260s) and late fourteenth-century fresco fragments by Spinello Aretino. The identity of the portraits as Greek was crucial to their importance in the "great chain" of Western European art. Thus, the mummy portrait panels were displayed as the link between Classical and Renaissance art in the Western tradition.

DEFINING THE FACE

The title of the 2008 catalog of mummy portrait panels in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London is *Living Images* (Picton et al. 2007), which plays on the idea that the mummy panels are so

lifelike that they appear to represent real people. In the 1990s, John Prag and Richard Neave of the University of Manchester used skulls found with two of the panels to reconstruct the faces of the owners: faces that appear to represent the likeness, with varying quality, of the person they were buried with (Prag 2002; although see Filer 1997 for criticism). Indeed, Petrie created life stories or personal characteristics for the portraits after excavating them. For example, he described “R” (now unidentified) by commenting that “he looks as if he would have made a very conscientious hardworking curate, with a tendency to pulpit hysterics” (Petrie 2007, 90). Meanwhile, Dominic Montserrat has explored the nineteenth-century fascination with the portraits both in terms of the “funerary images as evocations of living bodies” and “the ability of the portraits to reanimate and evoke the people of the past in a quasi-psychic way” (Montserrat 1998, 174). He also noted that racial attribution of the people represented in the portraits began early. Part of the reason Petrie collected some of the skulls discovered at Hawara and labeled them by the letters given to the portraits was to ascertain whether they matched the face depicted on the panel and to locate the racial identity of that face.

In 1893, the German Egyptologist Georg Ebers produced “the first popular book on the mummy portraits,” claiming that they were from the Ptolemaic period in Egypt and therefore unequivocally Greek. Ebers used the collection of the Viennese art dealer Theodor Graf as the basis for his book in which he assigned “carefully graded racial types to individuals in the Fayum portraits on pseudo-physiognomic principles” (Montserrat 1998, 176). Ebers thought some portraits belonged to Semitic or Ethiopian “types” but claimed that most of the portraits were of Hellenic people:

But the sun of the South quickly tans the fair European skin, and Hellenic Greeks whose families remained in Egypt for several generations would not be likely to preserve their original fair hue. Certainly most of the pictures show us truly Greek features, and this is the case in many of rather dark complexion (Ebers 1893, 38).

Ebers was not alone in reading the portraits as examples of racial types. In *Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers*, Amelia Edwards assigned racial identities to the mummy portrait panels. In the volume, Edwards asserts that where there are no names on the coffin cases, many are “surely identified by their racial characteristics” (Edwards 1891, 100). For example, she describes one mummy portrait as follows:

This lady is clearly a Greek. The nose and forehead are in one unbroken line, the eyes are well spaced and well opened, and the mouth is prettily drawn (Edwards 1891, 103).

Another panel is described as Egyptian:

Her features are moulded in the unmistakable Egyptian type. The eyes are long and heavy lidded, the nostrils wide, the lips full and prominent. The complexion is swarthy with a dull reddish blush under the skin and the whole expression of the face is that of Oriental languor (Edwards 1891, 104).

Edwards also attributed some portraits as being “distinctly Jewish in type,” such as “Diogenes the Flute Player” (Edwards 1891, 101; fig. 16.1).

This kind of racial attribution led to more extreme anti-Semitic use by Hans F.K. Günther in the 1920s and 1930s. Günther used portraits from



Figure 16.1 “Diogenes the Flute Player,” as featured in Amelia Edwards’s (1891) *Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers*.

Greek and Roman art in *The Racial Elements of European History* (1927) and seven Fayum portraits in his *Rassenkunde des Jüdische Volkes* (1930), supposedly illustrating his argument that there were too many Jews in Europe (Günther 1930, 72 and 76; cf. Fenton 1997). This racial attribution of the mummy portrait panels is an important part of their reception but should make contemporary viewers of these faces wary of attributing personalities and identities to them (Challis 2013). Indeed, the attribution of personal characteristics and racial identities to physical features must be placed within the context of the widespread use of physiognomy in the late nineteenth century. The emphasis in the reception of these panels until the 1930s was very much on them as portraiture within the European art tradition. This emphasis was consistent with the interest in portraits of “great” individuals, which led in part to the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1856 and the opening of its bespoke building on St. Martin’s Place in 1896 as well as the thriving business of portrait making during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Cannadine 2007, 34–35). Little, if any, emphasis was placed on the use of the mummy portrait panels as funerary equipment within ancient Egyptian burial rites.

THE MODERN DISPLAY OF ANCIENT FACES

By 1936, the mummy portraits were no longer considered important for the story of European art put forward in the National Gallery; they were removed from display and loaned to the British Museum. Greater emphasis was placed upon the portraits’ geographical and historical context in Late Antique Egypt, and some were subsequently displayed in the British Museum’s display of Coptic material in its “Coptic corridor.” This shift in thinking was formalized sixty years later when, in 1994, the National Gallery defined itself as housing the “nation’s European paintings from 1300 to 1900” and used the Museums and Galleries Act of 1992 to officially transfer the seventeen mummy portraits in its possession to the British Museum (National Gallery 1994). In 1997, the *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Ancient Egypt* exhibition at the British Museum placed the portraits, once again, in the public gaze.

Ancient Faces displayed the portrait panels alongside funerary equipment from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, such as gilded mummy masks and grave goods. The mummy portrait panels were dated and defined as belonging to Roman-ruled Egypt but placed within the context of the Egyptian practice of mummification and the legacy of Hellenism. Despite this emphasis on historical and archaeological context, the leaflet guide to the exhibition highlighted some of the “most interesting portraits,” and visitors were urged “to muse on the lives and personalities of their subjects, who seem to have turned to us as if we had just called them by name” (Ancient Faces 1997). Much as one hundred years earlier, the faces were described emotively, the leaflet described one as “wistful” and another as “perhaps not handsome

but certainly holds your attention.” The exhibition illustrated how conservation of the portrait panels had led to new discoveries about artistic technique and materials and finished with the display of shrouds dating from a later period and a consideration of the potential connection of the panels to Byzantine painting. A version of this exhibition later went on display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which exhibited portrait panels from collections in North America, such as those of the Getty Villa in Malibu.

A common theme in reviews of *Ancient Faces* was identification with the mummy portrait panels. For example, Adrian Searle's review in *The Guardian* stated:

we recognise the tanned, overweight yuppies of the time and their wives, a man with a tic, his mouth dragged down on one side, proud soldiers and free slaves. How modern they look, just like you and me, except for their I Claudius hairdos and jewellery, their nicely trimmed beards, their Roman poses (*The Guardian*, 7 June 1997).

Despite the exhibition's focus on historical context, *Ancient Faces* was also reviewed in ways reminiscent of late nineteenth-century art-historical understanding. Brian Sewell's review embodies this approach, and, in typical *agent provocateur* mode, his comments generated controversy. Sewell's Hellenocentric tone, such as “this portraiture does not illustrate a native Egyptian skill or sensibility, but is Greek in origin” and his emphasis on the portrait panels' importance in European art history sounds much like John Forbes-Robertson in 1889. Sewell attacked the transfer of the mummy portraits from the National Gallery to the British Museum because they were a:

footnote in Egyptology, make far better sense in the National Gallery, and it is intriguing to find that not only do two of them belong in Trafalgar Square [the National Gallery's location] but that a further seventeen once did. A room displaying nineteen such portraits, most of the highest quality, could and should have been one of the glories of the National Gallery, and a permanent reminder of how much ancient art has been destroyed, breaking the link between antiquity and the Renaissance (*Evening Standard*, 5 June 1997).

The National Gallery and the British Museum responded by stating that the British Museum was the best place to display the portraits in terms of historical and geographical context, in addition to the Museum's environmental conditions and conservation department being optimal in terms of the portraits' care. Sewell is known for his maverick views, but this mild controversy reflects an interesting response in viewing the mummy portraits. Positioning the mummy portraits as *either* art works *or* archaeological objects limits the recognition of multiple visualities at play.

Today, some of the mummy portrait panels are displayed in the *Egyptian Death and Afterlife: Mummies* gallery in the British Museum. There they

help to illustrate examples of funerary practice in Roman Egypt within a broadly chronological sequence of other mummies. Thus, the portraits are effectively marked as part of Egyptian archaeology and history. This emphasis is reflected in most regional displays in Britain where relevant material is held, such as at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. The display at Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow combines collections from the British Museum and Glasgow Museums, and the mummy portrait panels, including some of those excavated by Petrie, are similarly exhibited within the context of funerary practice in ancient Egypt. Egyptian material is usually seen in a museum but “mounted on individual pedestals [. . .] the same objects become fine art” rather than archaeological evidence (Newhouse 2005, 109). In these cases, the mummy portrait panels are effectively marked as Egyptian archaeology, and the focus is purely historical.

Yet, the portrait panels have a considerable influence on how Classical painting is understood, and the idea that “artistic interest waned” after the nineteenth century has been questioned (Bierbrier 1997, 24). In a review of *Ancient Faces*, Jed Perl pointed out the influence of the portrait panels on modernist artists, such as Matisse and André Derain, commenting that this influence may have been overlooked because these “products of Roman Egypt could be fitted into neither a primitivist nor a classicist reading of the origins of modern art” (Perl 1997, 40). In the early 1950s, the French cultural critic André Malraux drew attention to the connections between these portrait panels and Derain, as well as pointing to their foreshadowing of Byzantine art in style and technique (Malraux 1954, 196). Of course, the danger with any display of the mummy portrait panels is on limiting the responses to and context around them. The question of their artistic influence—ancient and modern—is, then, a particularly interesting one in terms of their reception in Greece.

HELLENIC IDENTITY

A year after the *Ancient Faces* exhibition took place at the British Museum, the Vikelaia Municipal Library in Heraklion, Crete, led the organization of the exhibition *From the Portraits of Fayum to the Beginnings of the Art of Byzantine Icons*, which “allowed the visitor to observe the relationship between Byzantine art and the painterly tradition of antiquity” (Benaki Museum Web site a). Euphrosyne C. Doxiadis was academic advisor to this exhibition and author of *Mysterious Fayum Portraits* in which she explored the stylistic and technical similarities between the mummy portraits and early Byzantine art (Doxiadis 1995). The exhibition was displayed at St. Mark’s Basilica at Heraklion in Crete, the Museum of Byzantine Culture at Thessaloniki, and the Benaki Museum of Greek Civilization in Athens during 1998. A number of Fayum portraits that had been in *Ancient Faces* were displayed in this Greek exhibition, including mummy portrait panels

and icons from the British Museum, six from the Petrie Museum, and two from the collections of the Benaki Museum. Accompanying the exhibition at the Benaki Museum was another display entitled *Portraits of Fayum and the Generation of the '30s in its Search for Greekness*, which considered how Greek painters reinterpreted the mummy portraits.

The involvement of the Benaki Museum in an exhibition celebrating the continuity of Greek art exemplifies the idea that “life speaks through art” (Plantzos 2008, 13). Each room in the Benaki Museum takes the visitor on another step in the historical and cultural development of Hellenism. Two mummy portrait panels from the Egyptian site of Antinoopolis are displayed as part of the Byzantine Collection linking “the ancient Greek world to that of modern Greece” (Benaki Museum Web site b). In this way, they are perceived as proving a “bridge between the Greco-Roman and Byzantine pictorial traditions,” and early Byzantine icons are described as displaying “a close affinity with traditional Roman portrait painting, mainly as expressed in the Egyptian funerary portraits.” The mummy portrait panels become a stage in the continuous development of Greek art “from Late Antiquity to medieval Byzantium” (Drandaki 2005, 95), with little acknowledgement of their Egyptian or Roman context.

Doxiadis's *Mysterious Fayum Portraits* emphasized the Greek style of the mummy portrait panels and expanded knowledge on the style, its four color palette, and the links between the encaustic techniques (and others) used on the panels to later Byzantine work as well as the connections of the panels with the work of the modern artist Yannis Tsarouchis; some of these technical continuities had also been suggested by Malraux in the early 1950s (Malraux 1954, 196). In an article for *Minerva*, Doxiadis argued that the discovery of further portrait panels at Alexandria strengthened the link of such portraits to the Hellenic Alexandrian school as they are “purely Greek works” stylistically, though at the same time having a duality of identity since the panels depict both Greeks and Egyptians (Doxiadis 1996, 18 and 21). This interpretation bolsters her statement in *Mysterious Fayum Portraits* about the dominance of Greek culture and lifestyle in the portraits, whatever the ethnic identity of the actual person depicted (Doxiadis 1995, 35). Additionally, Doxiadis makes a number of assertions about the identity of the people in the Fayum portraits. For example:

it as though we had caught the eye of this very memorable, very Greek looking individual, with his strong direct glance, in an Athens street today. The extraordinary freshness with which the image is rendered . . . transports us instantly across two thousand years (Doxiadis 1995, 185).

Again, like Sewell's review of *Ancient Faces*, the 1880s reception of the portraits seems to repeat itself. In his review of Doxiadis's book, John Ray argued that the distinction between Greek and Egyptian had largely broken

down by the time of the Fayum portraits and was “in practice one of education and money” and that “they are just Egyptians” (Ray 1996, 36). Ray’s concerns are valid. Doxiadis’s claims to trace ethnic identity in a face echo those of Amelia Edwards one hundred years previously. However, the search for these supposed identities and the emphasis on Greek continuity of tradition needs to be placed within the use of antiquity and ancient material culture within the changing constructions of modern Hellenic identity over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The nationalist *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), the dominant ideological concept of a “Greater Greece” that would stretch over areas occupied by Hellenic people, was dropped after the disastrous invasion of Asia Minor by Greek troops during 1921 and 1922. In the 1930s, a new Hellenic identity was articulated among Greek intellectuals, which revolved around the idea of *hellenikotea* (Greekness) or Hellenicity. This idea “referred to the intrinsic qualities of the Greek psyche, which had survived, often undetected, through antiquity and Byzantium, to the present day” (Plantzos 2008, 18). The poets Giorgos Seferis and Odysseus Elytis are perhaps the most well-known exponents of Hellenicity, but painters such as Yannis Tsarouchis, Yiannis Moralis, and Nikos Nikolaou also “promoted ideas on the singular essence of Hellenic art—Prehistoric to Byzantine” (Plantzos 2008, 19). At about the same time, Byzantine art was more fully incorporated into the Greek national narrative, and interest in Byzantine studies grew in the 1930s as the Byzantine Museum moved into its new permanent home at the Villa Illissia in Athens in 1930 (Mourelatos 2008, 198).

Hellenicity began as an idea among these left-leaning members of the Greek political and artistic elite but was given a right-wing bent by the Metaxas dictatorship in 1936. Now the glories of ancient, Byzantine, and modern Greece were considered to be connected; linked was the idea of the purity of the Greek race across the ages. The photographer Elli Souyioultzoglou-Seraïdari (better known as “Nelly” or “Nelly’s”), produced modernist images influenced by the healthy body culture she had encountered in 1920s Germany. The most iconic of her photographs positioned impressive looking bodies among impressive looking ruins, which were also supposed to reflect the continuity of the Greek race. For example, Nelly produced images for a section entitled “Race” in the 1937 tourist brochure *Hellas* that supposedly ratified this concept of the purity of race (Damaskos 2008, 328). These views still have a certain currency; the images were reused in an online article called *Racial Type of the Ancient Hellenes* by the “racial anthropologist” Dienekes Pontikos (Pontikos 2009). Interestingly, Pontikos’s blog on race and genetics draws on the work of long-derided race theorists, such as Hans F.K. Günther, to support Pontikos’s nationalist and right-wing political agenda. I do not suggest that Doxiadis’s book is similar to or supports this kind of political race theory, but there are dangers inherent in making assumptions based on preconceived notions of what constitutes a “racial

type” or the kind of “familiar face” we might see in a street in Athens or a coffee shop in Cairo. When looking at these faces from Roman-ruled and Greek-occupied Egypt, it is important to interrogate our own assumptions.

ON DISPLAY TODAY

The only large Egyptian Antiquities collection in Greece is at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. The collection was formed from the donations of two Greek expatriates in Egypt, Ioannis Dimitriou and Alexandros Rostovitch, who donated the objects to the Museum in 1880 and 1904 respectively. The collection's objects are separate to the rest of the Museum's collection, which displays antiquities from across historical periods and locations in Greece. The collection is also placed in a late nineteenth-century context, with the feel—though it is laid out in chronological periods—of a private collection (Egyptian Collection 2008, 5). Three Fayum portraits are displayed in a case entitled *Roman Period in Egypt* and set apart from the other display cases, a move that positions the portraits as art objects with the caption that “art [in the Roman period] was limited to crafts, with the exception of the Fayum portraits” (Museum Label, National Archaeological Museum, Athens). Unlike the Benaki Museum, the position of the objects in the gallery stresses both their Roman and Egyptian origins. However, there is little intersection with the Classical period objects displayed in the rest of the Museum and the Egyptian gallery in general.

Meanwhile, the portrait panels also possess a Roman identity, though it has rarely been touched on in their reception in museums until recently. The *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* exhibition at the British Museum in 2008 used the mummy portrait panels to illustrate people in Hadrian's Egypt in the second century AD. Portraits that were identified as belonging to c. AD 117–150 through coiffure, clothes, and archaeological evidence were represented as contemporaneous with Hadrian. The portrait panels originally from Antinoopolis, a town founded in Egypt by Hadrian in memory of his lover Antinous, were described as providing a “titillating glimpse of the first generations of settlers in Antinoopolis and their contemporaries in other parts of the country.” The description continued by stating that the portraits’ “striking immediacy” brings us “face to face with the people who lived when Hadrian and his party visited Egypt and can stand in for the thousands of people all over the empire he must have met” (Opper 2008, 194). In this exhibition, the vivid lifelike qualities of these portrait panels represented people of the Roman Empire in Egypt with emphasis on identification with these faces from the past.

The *Byzantium, 330–1453* exhibition at London's Royal Academy, which opened as *Hadrian* and closed in October 2008, displayed an early example of a mummy portrait panel (c. AD 55–70) in “naturalistic style.”

A portrait panel excavated by Petrie in 1911 was used to illustrate the connections between “these portraits and early icons” while establishing that:

the development of the icon emerges from the practices of Greco-Roman art rather than simply the funerary portraits of Egypt (the production of Fayum portraits stopped in the mid-third century) (Cormack 2008, 389).

Robin Cormack, one of the curators, stresses here that the stylistic continuities between funerary practice and early Byzantine art are not unique to the mummy portrait panels. This point lessens the emphasis on Hellenic style and technique, though this exhibition was organized in collaboration with the Benaki Museum, which, as we have seen, presents the portraits within themes of Hellenic cultural continuity.

These two exhibitions in London during 2008 used the portraits in very different ways; one represented people of a certain place and historical period and the other illustrated the connections between periods of art through stylistic practice. Meanwhile, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which reopened in 2009, displays its mummy portrait panels in two galleries with different themes. Next to the *Exploring the Past* section on the lower ground floor, which orientates the visitor around key themes of the Museum, is the *Human Image* gallery. One of the most striking galleries in the Ashmolean, it illustrates the ways in which different cultures and ages presented the human form. Amid idealized sculpture, death-masks, and portrait busts is a double-sided mummy portrait panel in tempera on wood (Ashmolean object number AN1966.111.2). The label considers whether this “portrait” documents the multiple identities of people in Roman Egypt, as the panel shows on one side an Egyptian villager and on the other a woman in Greek Alexandrian fashion (Museum Label, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford). Up a floor in the gallery *Rome 400 BC–AD 300*, there are another two mummy portrait panels displayed under the heading *Moving around the Roman Empire*. Here the panels are used to illustrate the development of the Roman Empire and its mix of Greek, Roman, and local cultures. The panels are displayed alongside other objects illustrating this mix of cultural traditions, such as a terracotta figure of a priest at Smyrna, Anatolia, from c. AD 300–350. In this one Museum, then, mummy portrait panels illustrate the artistic representation of the human figure and identity as well as cultural fusion in the Roman Empire.

As yet, there has been little emphasis in exhibition or display on the insights the panels give to the techniques of ancient art. An ongoing conservation research project into the mount systems on the mummy portrait panels at the British Museum was prompted by the return from loan of one panel that showed signs of active deterioration due to the rigid system that had been used. As a result, heavy restoration of these portraits in the recent past has been revealed (Newman and Harrison 2009). The portrait panels can be used to illustrate this modern practice as well as providing evidence for ancient polychromy on Greek and Roman sculpture. Research at the British Museum and in the *Tracking Colour* project at the Ny Carlsberg

Glyptotek has used the pigments on the portrait panels and compared them with traces of color on sculpture (Østergaard 2009). Meanwhile, the portrait panels have also been scrutinized for signs of disease—in particular, neurological ailments, as they “apparently represent people as they appear in life” (Appenzeller et al. 2001, 524). The portrait panels that match the skulls of the people that Petrie collected are viewed as particularly useful for this analysis (Appenzeller et al. 2004, 346). Diseases such as progressive facial hemiatrophy or tropia have been identified on faces depicted on the portrait panels at the British Museum. In this way, the portraits have been pathologized, adding another dimension to their potential interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The mummy portrait panels from Roman-ruled Egypt represent an intersection between Egyptian traditions and Classical cultural forms. They are both art works and archaeological objects as they are evidence of artistic technique and style as well as evidence for funerary equipment and practice during a particular historical period. The mummy portrait panels were precursors to Byzantine style, acted as inspiration for Modernist artists, have become conduits to medical diagnosis of disease, and play a part in the construction of Hellenic identity. The portrait panels have multiple narratives that can be told through museum display, and no doubt they still have more tales to tell. Above all, the portrait panels depict faces. Whether they are the “true” likenesses of the people in whose wrappings they were uncovered is on one level irrelevant. Looking into a face can arouse powerful feelings and identification with those lifelike features. Reading these faces is never an objective act.

NOTE

1. Petrie to Burton, 4 August 1888, National Gallery Archives.

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