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Barbara E. Borg

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PAINTED FUNERARY PORTRAITS
الصور الجنائزية الملونة

Barbara E. Borg

Mumienporträts
Portraits Funéraires Peints

The term "painted funerary portraits" used here encompasses a group of portraits painted on either wooden panels or on linen shrouds that were used to decorate portrait mummies from Roman Egypt (conventionally called "mummy portraits"). They have been found in cemeteries in almost all parts of Egypt, from the coastal city of Marina el-Alamein to Aswan in Upper Egypt, and originate from the early first century AD to the mid third century with the possible exception of a small number of later shrouds. Their patrons were a wealthy local elite influenced by Hellenistic and Roman culture but deeply rooted in Egyptian religious belief. To date, over 1000 portraits, but only a few complete mummies, are known and are dispersed among museums and collections on every continent.

يستخدم مصطلح <<الصور الجنائزية الملونة>> هنا ليضم صور <<البورتريه>> المرسومة على ألواح خشبية أو على الكفن الكتاني والمعتاد استخدامهما بالعصر الروماني لتزيين المومياوات فيما يعرف بإسم <<بورتريه المومياء>>. عثر على هذه الصور الملونة بأغلب أنحاء مصر بدءاً من منطقة مارينا العلمين الساحلية إنتهاءاً بأسوان بصعيد مصر، ويتراوح تأريخهم من بواكير القرن الأول الميلادي وحتى وسط القرن الثالث الميلادي بالإضافة إلى وجود بعض الأكفان التي تعود إلى عصور متأخرة. وكان أصحاب هذه الصور الجنائزية من علية القوم المتأثرين بالحضارتين اليونانية والرومانية بالرغم من إيمانهم العميق بعقيدة الديانة المصرية. يوجد حتى اليوم أكثر من ألف <<بورتريه>> وبعض المومياوات الكاملة ذات الصور الجنائزية الملونة معروفين لدى المتاحف والمجموعات الخاصة بالعام كله.

The first report of a discovery of painted funerary portraits is a letter from 1615 written by the Italian nobleman Pietro della Valle. On his visit to Saqqara, he bought the portrait mummies of a man and a woman, which had only just been discovered in a tomb nearby (Borg 1998: 4 - 6, 2000: 63 - 64; Doxiadis 1995: 123 - 145). The majority of portraits, however, was found in the nineteenth century (Borg 1996: 183 - 190, 1998: 4 - 31; Doxiadis 1995: 122 - 158; Parlasca 1966: 18 - 58; Roberts 1999). After some occasional discoveries in the early decades, the Viennese art dealer Theodor Graf and the British Egyptologist W.M. Flinders Petrie accumulated large collections of portraits in the last quarter of the century. The two could hardly have been more different. Graf was mainly interested in the portraits as pieces of art that would yield a good price. Because he bought the portraits from Egyptian peasants, we do not know much more than the place where they were allegedly found, er-Rubayat in the oasis Fayum some 50 km south of Cairo. Petrie, on the other hand, was an

Figure 1. Portrait mummy of Artemidoros the younger found together with the portrait mummies of an elder Artemidoros (his father?) and a lady named Thermoutharin (his mother?) in the necropolis of Hawara. London, British Museum EA 21810.

Figure 2. Portrait mummy of a girl termed "Golden Girl" because of her gilt stucco case. From Petrie's excavations at Hawara. Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 33216.

established Egyptologist, who had an interest in Egyptian culture and history and worked at various Egyptian sites. He excavated the vast necropolis of Hawara in the Fayum—which lent the genre its alternative name of "Fayum portraits"—according to the then latest scientific standards, took plenty of notes, and published his finds quickly both in public journals and in scholarly books (figs. 1 and 2). Until today, his reports provide the fullest account of burials of portrait mummies (Petrie 1889, 1911). However, as we know from sporadic additional information from other sites, the shallow sand pits in which he found the majority of the mummies were not the norm everywhere. At some places, e.g., at

Figure 3. Mummy shroud of a lady with an *ankh*-cross, the Egyptian symbol of life. She is wearing a tunic with very broad "embroidered" *clavi*. The shroud from Antinoopolis belongs to a small group of late portrait mummies from the second half of the third to the fourth century. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Egyptiennes AF 6440.

Saqqara (according to della Valle's account), at er-Rubayat, or at Aswan, portrait mummies were buried in re-used rock-cut tombs from the Pharaonic Period. At Antinoopolis, the city founded by emperor Hadrian and named after his beloved Antinoos, and at Panopolis/Achmim, another site yielding a considerable number of portrait mummies (fig. 3), both tomb types were used. Unfortunately, none of the lucky finders, including some archaeologists, provided any reports that give more details about the kinds of tombs, grave goods, burial practices, and rituals surrounding the portrait mummies. Moreover, the publication and exhibition of Graf's and Petrie's discoveries resulted in an enormous public interest in these images, many of which appeared so modern in subject and style. They inspired modern artists and boosted the art market with the result that not only forgers but also illegal diggers were encouraged to provide supply. This is one of the reasons the provenance of about half of the mummy portraits as well as any other information concerning their context is unknown. This problem still exists, although a Polish team lead by Daszewsky made an exciting discovery (fig. 4) in 1991/92. In a necropolis near the coastal city of Marina el-Alamein, they found a large tomb consisting of a splendid heroon with a dining hall above ground, with a colonnaded portico facing the sea and an interred courtyard with an altar onto which a burial chamber with burial niches opened. From a stepped ramp connecting the two parts, two smaller undecorated chambers branched off to both sides and included a total of 15 mummies of men, women, and children, which had been placed next to each other on the naked floor; five of them were decorated with painted panel portraits (Daszewski 1997). The variety of tomb types is remarkable—from simple sand pits to re-used older graves to magnificent new tombs built for an aspiring family—but one common feature seems to be the very simple form of deposition of the portrait mummies in entirely inconspicuous cavities or chambers and with only occasional, insignificant grave goods. This suggests that the costly and lavishly decorated mummies were mainly appreciated during the funerary ceremonies and festivals for the dead before burial.

Chronology

In the absence of archaeological contexts, the dating of the mummy portraits has been based on two criteria: their style and their antiquarian detail, especially their fashion hairstyles. The beginning of mummy portraiture in the early first century CE has never been seriously questioned since the studies of Petrie. The end of their production, however, is still being debated. Most studies

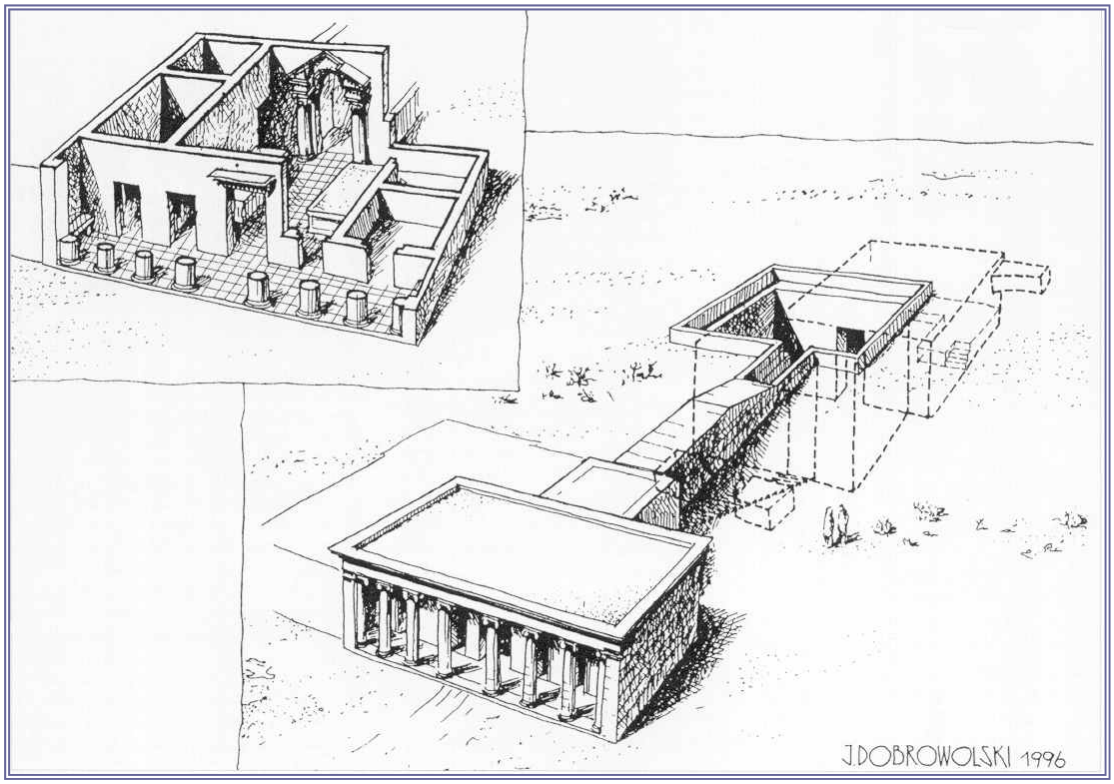

Figure 4. Reconstruction of the most spectacular tomb of the necropolis of Marina el-Alamein with subterranean burial chambers and above ground heroon with dining couches and a view of the sea. The portrait mummies were found in the two small chambers branching off from the ramp. Drawing by J. Dobrowsolski.

use a combination of the two criteria, but in the older studies and some of the more recent ones there is a clear preference for style over external evidence. Based on the assumption of a linear development of style from more naturalistic images to abstract, stylized ones of inferior quality, the bulk of the tempera portraits and some of the encaustic ones were dated to the fourth century when, allegedly, the genre came to an end with Theodosius's edict of 392 banning pagan cults (Aubert et al. 2008; Parlasca 1966: 195 - 202, 1969 - 2003; Parlasca and Seemann 1999). Criticism of these results is based on the following observations: 1) Research in other artistic genres has shown that there was no linear development of style and that both naturalistic and abstract styles were used simultaneously throughout the Roman era. Thus, any dating based on style should be backed up by other evidence. 2) A systematic comparison of the hairstyles on mummy portraits reveals that the vast majority of them correspond to the fast-changing fashion of hairstyles used by the elite of the rest of the Roman Empire (figs. 5 and 6). They, in turn, often followed the fashion of the Roman emperors and their wives, whose images and coiffures can be dated through their depictions on coins. 3) Those hairstyles fashionable in the later third and fourth centuries are almost completely absent from the mummy portraits. These observations led to the suggestion, which is now widely accepted, that the production of mummy portraits increased slowly over the course of the first century, had its peak during the second century, declined dramatically from the early third century onwards, and came to an end around the middle of the third century, with the possible exception of a small number of highly characteristic shrouds from a very limited number of sites of the fourth century (fig. 3; see also Borg 1995, 1996: 19 - 84, 177 -

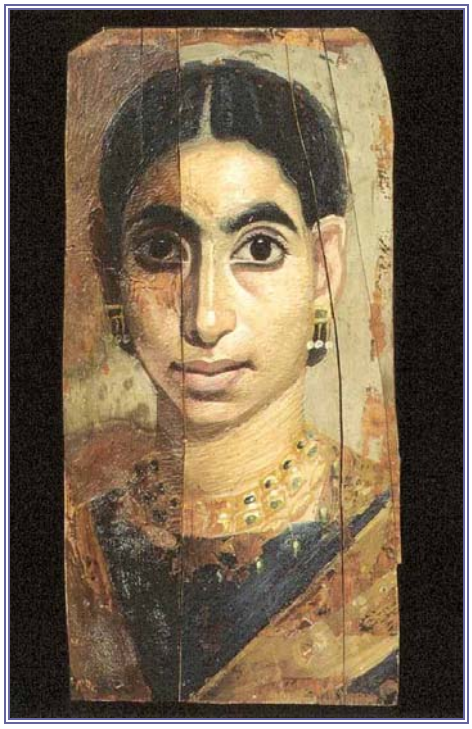

Figure 5. Portrait of a lady wearing rich jewelry and a dark garment with gold borders. Her hairstyle copies that of empress Julia Mamaea (fig. 6). Stanford 22225.

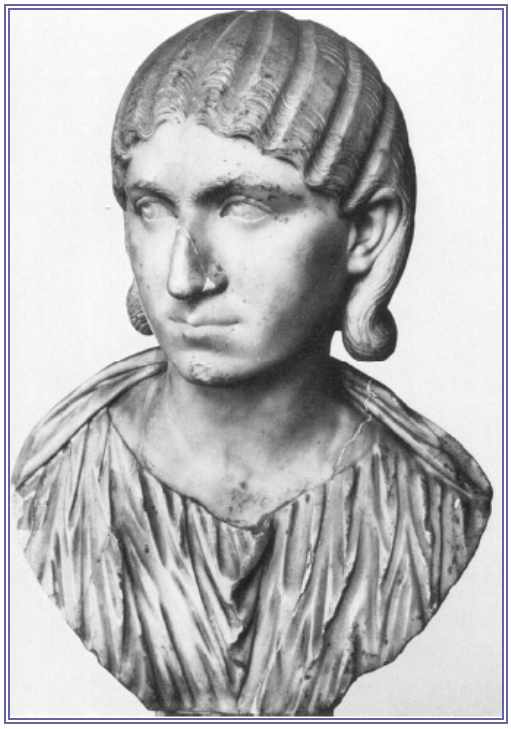

Figure 6. Marble bust of the empress Julia Mamaea (after 180 – 235 CE) wearing the same fashion hairstyle as the lady on the mummy portrait in figure 2. Rome, Museo Capitolino. Stanza degli Imperatori 34. Inv.-no. 457.

178; Walker 1999; Walker and Bierbrier 1997). This is well in accordance with the development of portraiture elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Patrons

When the first painted funerary portraits became to be known more widely, they were appreciated primarily as pieces of art like more recent paintings were. But given the liveliness and immediacy of the images, it is hardly surprising that there was also an interest in the individuals represented. Again, the isolation of the images from their context rendered any answer difficult. Some tried to interpret the patrons' features in terms of their assumed character, an approach that has proven highly problematic (Borg 1998: 35 - 37, 2000: 66 - 67). It not only ignores the fact that the images were made to impress their viewers and thus present us with a representation that is at least partly a deliberate construction, but it also underestimates the gap between the ancient and our own culture. Another hot topic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the ethnic identity of the individuals, which was equally approached with much confidence through their physical features. During the "Third Reich", the doubtful results of such attempts were integrated into Nazi propaganda. The alleged identification of a large number of Jews in the mummy portraits served to demonstrate the danger of Jewish infiltration of society already in antiquity (Borg 1998: 37; Parlasca 1966: 14 - 15). As a reaction, after the Second World War scholars mostly steered clear of any attempts at identifying the portraits' patrons. It was only in the late sixties and especially from the later nineties of the last century onwards that the question was approached again from a different angle. Anthropologists had long demonstrated that there is no firm methodological basis for identifying peoples

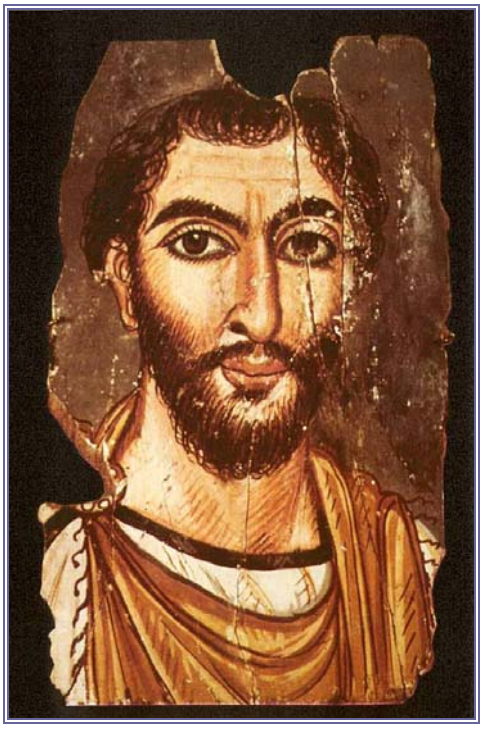

Figure 7. Mummy portrait of a soldier (?) painted in tempera technique. Würzburg, Martin-von-Wagner Museum H 2196.

on the basis of their facial features alone. Moreover, papyrologists and historians have found that there was so much intermarriage between native Egyptians and immigrants from the entire eastern Mediterranean already during the Hellenistic era that distinct ethnic groups no longer existed in the Imperial Period except for the poor peasant population (Bagnall 1997). Accordingly, focus now shifted to the far more interesting question of social class and the different cultural traditions from which this mixed population took their inspiration and constructed their identities (Borg 1996: 150 - 176, 1998: 34 - 59, 2000: 68 - 85, 2004). The deceased were identified as belonging to the rich elite of the local population. Not just the paintings but especially the mummies were extremely expensive, and even more so when they were gilded (fig. 2). Several men present themselves in military guise and thus are likely to be veterans of the Roman army (fig. 7). They received Roman citizenship and other privileges after retirement and belonged to the

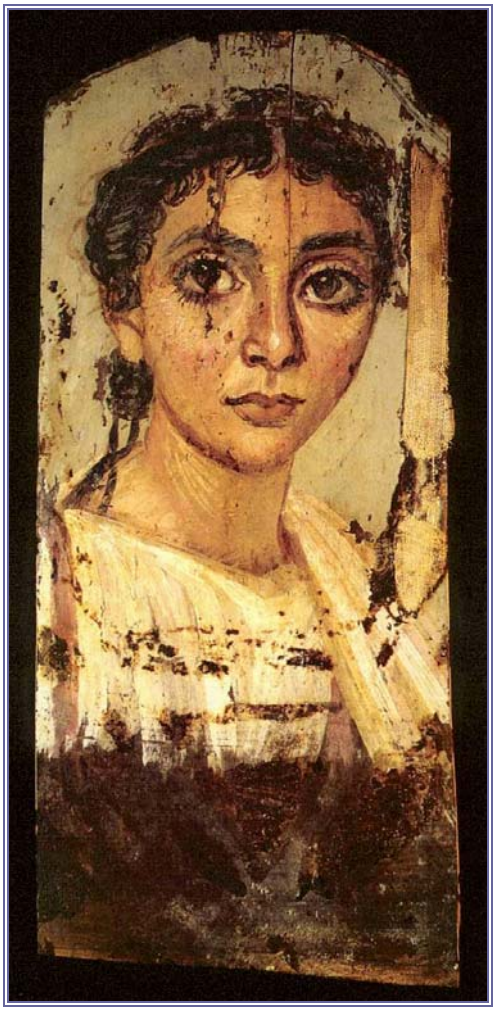

Figure 8. Mummy portrait of a boy with a hairstyle typical of the sons of the local Greco-Egyptian elite. Copenhagen, National Museum 3892.

financial and social elite of their villages. One individual is identified by an inscription as a *naukleros*, a freight contractor for commercial transport by water, an occupation known through papyri to have been particularly profitable. A number of boys stand out through their unusual coiffure with long hair parted on the forehead and bound into a bun in the neck (fig. 8). The ancient author Lucian identified this hairstyle as typical for children of the noblest local elite of Egypt, who trained their sons in the gymnasium and cultivated their Greek heritage (Luc. *nav.* 2 - 3). Hairstyles, dress, and jewelry correspond closely to the fashions followed by the elite of the rest of the Roman Empire. These

observations are in accordance with the sites from which the portrait mummies derive, almost all of which were cities and villages that had accommodated a large number of Greek immigrants from the Hellenistic Period on, after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander. The same locations were also the preferred settlement sites of veterans in the Roman Period. When it comes to religious beliefs, however, the hellenized villages of Egypt had entirely adapted to the Egyptian cult, which also determined their burial rites. Thus, mummification was not just an arbitrary whim. The decoration on many of these mummies consists of scenes and symbols that are entirely intelligible and express the most fundamental ideas of Egyptian belief about resurrection and a cheerful afterlife in the presence of the gods (figs. 1 and 2; see also Borg 1996: 111 - 149, 1998: 62 - 74; Corcoran 1995a, 1995b; Parlasca 1966: 152 - 192; Riggs 2005: 57 - 60, 98 - 103, 165 - 173). This twofold anchoring in the Hellenic as well as Egyptian tradition is corroborated by the names that are sometimes inscribed on either the portrait or the mummy itself (figs. 1 and 9). We find Greek names as well as Egyptian and a few Latin ones. They indicate a particular affinity with one or the other cultural framework, though papyrological evidence makes it clear that individuals could also have two names from a different background, which they would use according to the traditions a particular social environment drew upon (Bagnall 1997; Borg 1996: 150 - 156, 1998: 41). The patrons of the mummy portraits can thus be identified as members of the affluent local elite of towns and villages that were strongly influenced by Hellenistic and, to a lesser extent, Roman culture, who were keen to be members of the wider elite of the Empire and, at the same time, appreciated the wisdom and promises of Egyptian religion.

Purpose of the Paintings

The fact that many of the painted funerary portraits are highly naturalistic and individualistic and that older individuals are very rare has suggested to some that the likenesses were painted during the lifetime of the individuals depicted, that they had decorated the walls of their houses and were put onto the mummy only after the sitter's death (Corcoran 1995a; Parlasca 1966: 59 - 90). This assumption has been seriously challenged. As recent studies of both papyrological evidence and anthropological studies of Roman cemeteries have confirmed, the average life expectancy was rather low. CAT scans of preserved portrait mummies did not reveal any obvious discrepancy in age of the painting and body either (Walker and Bierbrier 1997). Given the very rarity of portrait mummies—Petrie counted one to two for every 100 burials—it is also possible that this honor was only awarded to those whose death was considered particularly tragic, such as a premature demise. Moreover, the background of the paintings often does not cover the entire panel, and only the oval central part was fully covered by paint, in anticipation of what would be visible on the

Figure 9. Mummy portrait of the young Eirene. The Demotic inscription reads: "Eirene, daughter of Silvanus, her mother is Senpnoutis. May her soul live forever before Osiris-Sokar, the great god, the Lord of Abydos." Stuttgart, Wuerttembergisches Landesmuseum 7.2.

Figure 10. Portrait of a woman in tempera technique. Found at er-Rubayat by Grenfell and Hunt in 1901 under uncertain circumstances. Edinburgh, National Museums of Scotland, Royal Museum of Scotland 1902.70.

mummy, i.e., framed by the mummy wrappings. Some highly realistic portraits painted on the outermost layer of the linen shroud in which the mummy was wrapped (fig. 3) could only have been painted at the last stage, thus confirming that naturalistic images could also be created after death—either from memory or based on another portrait of a different function. It is therefore very likely that the portraits were created with their funerary purpose in mind (Borg 1996: 191 - 195, 1998: 67 - 68). While mummification and Egyptian scenes and symbols on the mummy secured the survival of the deceased in the world beyond, the realistic portrait alluding to the deceased's status and life on earth secured his or her survival in the memory of society (Borg 1996: 111 - 149, 1997, 1998: 72 - 85; for a wider range of portrait representation and its meaning, see Riggs 2005: 95 - 174).

Technique and Style of the Paintings, Mummy Wrappings

The portraits were painted in three different techniques on either wooden panels or the outermost layer of the linen shrouds in which the mummies were wrapped (Borg 1996: 5 - 18; Doxiadis 1995: 93 - 101, 1997; Freccero 2000). The majority of the portraits were painted in tempera technique with a water-based medium (figs. 10 and 7). These paintings can be identified by their even surface and the matt, slightly chalky appearance of the color. Many of them are fast-painted, rather stylized, stereotypical renderings with hardly any interest in a faithful portrayal of their patrons' features. The second largest group is painted in wax color, possibly sometimes with some oil added. This technique is often called "encaustic" (from Greek *enkaio* = to burn in). The pigments were mixed in with the molten wax, which was either painted onto the support with a brush or spread out with a spatula-like instrument. Details such as eyelashes were sometimes incised with a tip. These paintings have uneven surfaces and rich and luminous colors, and many of them are very naturalistic likenesses. Few examples were painted in a hybrid technique with an emulsion paint, which could be brushed on in extremely thin and delicate lines like tempera but had a shine and richness of color almost like encaustic paintings. The boards were often made from imported wood such as limewood, oak, cedar, or cypress, but also local sycamore, fig, or citrus wood have been identified. The boards could be up to 1.5 cm thick—especially in the case of lesser paintings—but often were as thin as just 1.5 to 2 mm. Wood and canvas were occasionally primed but mostly painted upon directly. There are instances where the painting has been traced in black in a first stage. Most of the pigments are colors derived from natural

minerals, but dyes including madder, cochineal, and indigo were also quite common. There are several instances for the use of artificially produced Egyptian blue, and red lead was most likely produced synthetically as well. In many instances, gold leaf or gold paint—a color and material that symbolized eternity—was added for wreaths (fig. 1), jewelry, or as (part of) the background. The wooden panels were fixed over the head of the deceased so that the outermost wrappings held them in place. These wrappings often consisted of layers of narrow linen bands that were wrapped around the body in such a way as to create three-dimensional rhombic patterns or lozenges, the centers of which could be decorated with gilded studs. The feet of these mummies were sometimes encased in cartonnage with the feet indicated on the top and captive enemies painted on the soles of the shoes below. In other cases, the entire mummy was wrapped in one large shroud that was either left plain or else decorated with the body of the deceased or religious scenes and symbols (fig. 3). In a third group, the entire body except the head area with the painting was covered in stucco or plaster painted in red (fig. 1) or, more rarely, gilded (fig. 2) and decorated with religious symbols rendered in relief (Corcoran 1995b).

Art Historical Significance of the Paintings

The most striking feature of the painted funerary portraits is their naturalism and immediacy, which delude us to believe we could have met the person somewhere on the street just a day or two ago. While there were occasional attempts at naturalism in Egyptian art, it was only in Hellenistic Greece that the kind of realism we are faced with in the mummy portraits was introduced. Due to less favorable conditions for preservation in that region, very few paintings—painted on stone rather than wood or linen—have come down to us. However, the existence of panel paintings is attested in the written sources, and the naturalistic style is documented in marble portraiture. With the Romans, self-representation through naturalistic portraiture became more widespread and an important marker of status. While material evidence for panel paintings is still lacking from the rest of the Mediterranean, there are occasional examples of painted portraits on walls and glass disks, which are rather similar in style to the mummy portraits. This is in accordance with the introduction date of mummy portraits into Egypt. The style of painting must have been introduced by the Greeks already in the Hellenistic Period, at least in Alexandria, while the adoption of realistic portraits into funerary imagery was encouraged by the new requirements of Roman society (Doxiadis 1995: 84 - 89). It is sometimes claimed that Christian icons depended on the mummy portraits. This statement is both right and wrong. It is wrong insofar as the mummy portraits had long been buried when the first icons were produced and could not have served as direct inspiration. It is correct, however, in the sense that icons continued the old tradition of portrait painting of which the mummy portraits have been one group among others (Doxiadis 1995: 90 - 92). For the history of art and painting, the mummy portraits are not so much important as examples of a particular style or developmental stage. Their significance lies in the fact that they are basically the only panel and canvas paintings that have been preserved from the ancient world. As such, their value can hardly be overestimated.

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There are a large number of overviews and fundamental publications about painted funerary portraits. Bierbrier (1997) includes an important collection of articles. For valuable information on the religious aspects and Egyptian decoration of the mummies, see Borg (1996, 1998) and

especially Corcoran (1995a, 1995b); Doxiadis (1995) is a very good source for information about the sites and has a large number of excellent color photographs. Parlasca (1966, 1969 - 2003) are invaluable as a catalog with images of all known mummy portraits. Riggs (2002) gives a summarizing overview of more recent research on the subject. For various forms of portraits used in funerary contexts and on burial customs in Roman Egypt, see Riggs (2005: 95 - 174 and passim). Important (exhibition) catalogs include Aubert et al. (2008), Parlasca and Seemann (1999), Seipel (1998), Walker and Bierbrier (1997), Walker (2000), and Picton et al. (2007).

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Figure 1. Portrait mummy of Artemidoros the younger found together with the portrait mummies of an elder Artemidoros (his father?) and a lady named Thermoutharin (his mother?) in the necropolis of Hawara. London, British Museum EA 21810. Courtesy of the British Museum London.

Figure 2. Portrait mummy of a girl termed "Golden Girl" because of her gilt stucco case. From Petrie's excavations at Hawara. Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 33216. Courtesy of the Egyptian Museum Cairo.

Figure 3. Mummy shroud of a lady with an *ankh*-cross, the Egyptian symbol of life. She is wearing a tunic with very broad "embroidered" *clavi*. The shroud from Antinoopolis belongs to a small group of late portrait mummies from the second half of the third to the fourth century. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Départment des Antiquités Egyptiennes AF 6440. Courtesy of the Musée du Louvre.

Figure 4. Reconstruction of the most spectacular tomb of the necropolis of Marina el-Alamein with subterranean burial chambers and above ground heroon with dining couches and a view of the sea. The portrait mummies were found in the two small chambers branching off from the ramp. Drawing by J. Dobrowsolski. Courtesy of W.A. Daszewski.

Figure 5. Portrait of a lady wearing rich jewelry and a dark garment with gold borders. Her hairstyle copies that of empress Julia Mamaea (fig. 6). Stanford 22225. Courtesy of the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University.

Figure 6. Marble bust of the empress Julia Mamaea (after 180 – 235 CE) wearing the same fashion hairstyle as the lady on the mummy portrait in figure 2. Rome, Museo Capitolino. Stanza degli Imperatori 34. Inv.-no. 457. Photograph by G. Fittschen-Badura. FittCap 73-44-06.

Figure 7. Mummy portrait of a soldier (?) painted in tempera technique. Würzburg, Martin-von-Wagner Museum H 2196. Courtesy of the Martin-von-Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg.

Figure 8. Mummy portrait of a boy with a hairstyle typical of the sons of the local Greco-Egyptian elite. Copenhagen, National Museum 3892. Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark.

Figure 9. Mummy portrait of the young Eirene. The Demotic inscription reads: "Eirene, daughter of Silvanus, her mother is Senpnoutis. May her soul live forever before Osiris-Sokar, the great god, the Lord of Abydos." Stuttgart, Wuerttembergisches Landesmuseum 7.2. Photograph by P. Frankenstein, H. Zwietasch. Courtesy of the Landesmuseum Wuerttemberg, Stuttgart 2009.

Figure 10. Portrait of a woman in tempera technique. Found at er-Rubayat by Grenfell and Hunt in 1901 under uncertain circumstances. Edinburgh, National Museums of Scotland, Royal Museum of Scotland 1902.70. Courtesy of the Royal Museum of Scotland.