Book Review: Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt: emerging research from the APPEAR project

Reviewed by Alexandra Taylor

Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt: Emerging Research from the APPEAR Project
Edited by Marie Svoboda and Caroline R. Cartwright
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Popular culture is steeped in images of smoky-eyed pharaohs from mummies haunting late October nights to pyramidal tombs brimming with gold. Treasure hunters' tales thrill us. Theatrical readaptations of Antony and Cleopatra's infamous love affair entrance us, whittled into Shakespearean tragedy. Over time we have seen the gradual rise and fall of mystification tactics, which over-exaggerate Egyptian "otherness" in an effort to make the modern world seem more "civilised".

The mummy masks housed in case six in the Egyptian Gallery at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge always feature in my rounds. I often wonder what it is about these paintings that so attracts me. Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, writes in the foreword of Mummy Portraits that the answer may lie in the depicted elite men, women and children who appear so hauntingly familiar. Thiboutot (pp. 46-53) is of the opinion that the ethereal quality of the paint draws the viewer in, and "…choosing painting materials according to how closely they evoked their real-life counterparts may have been a strategy to heighten the portraits' mimetic impact."

Perhaps my interest in Fayum portraits begins with the figurative element, of knowing that behind those startlingly realistic portrayals were people like us, who existed on this Earth thousands of years ago. Now, it's the story behind a legacy in paint and all that remains of an ancient Egyptian belief and hope in the eternal preservation of identity that fascinates me… and the international collaboration, Ancient Panel Paintings: Examination, Analysis, and Research (APPEAR).

THE APPEAR PROJECT: DERIVATION AND BECOMING

The project began in 2013 when an international collaboration known as APPEAR launched a study that aimed to gather scientific and historical findings of Romano-Egyptian paintings, with the intention of creating a shared database of technical, analytical, methodological and provenance findings. The papers and poster presentations in this publication are the result of a two-day conference at the Getty Villa in Malibu, on 17-18 May 2018. The speakers—representing five countries and nineteen museums—offer a rich amalgamation of knowledge and insight across all avenues of learning. I believe this is what makes the publication stand out; it is perceptive because it is multidisciplinary.

Marie Svoboda, associate conservator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum, edited this publication alongside Caroline Cartwright, senior scientist in the Department of Scientific Research at the British Museum. Both women have impressive credentials; Svoboda having also co-authored Herakleides: A Portrait Mummy of Roman Egypt (Getty Publications, 2011) and Cartwright having authored over 245 scientific publications.

The publication is available in free digital formats and in paperback! Please visit https://www.getty.edu/publications/mummyportraits/ for more information. The online editions of Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt feature large, high-quality zoom-friendly illustrations and graphs, embedded glossary entries and linked bibliographic references, having been produced with the Getty's digital multiformat publishing platform Quire, which is currently in development for open-source release. This modern tool publishes books from a single set of plain text files and is the cornerstone of the Getty's sector-leading digital publishing program.

REVIEW

For the purposes of this review, I have chosen to provide brief evaluations of six articles. This should hopefully give you, the reader, a sense of what can be expected from the rest of the publication. Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt is an approachable text that explores Romano-

Egyptian subject matter. Drawing from an international pool of resources has helped to construct a collaborative cross-cultural dialogue, in which findings obtained from researchers and academics in a range of fields are considered. I believe this publication articulates a great starting point for further study of Romano-Egyptian mummy portraits and successfully encourages the exchange of datasets to achieve optimum, reliable and consistent results. Perhaps further discourse with experts working and residing in source locations might offer new insights and perspectives into materiality and context, particularly provenance.

Roberts, C., 'Green Pigments: Exploring Changes in the Egyptian Colour Palette through the Technical Study of Roman-Period Mummy Shrouds', pp. 34-45. Using case-studies from the Getty Museum and Metropolitan Museum, Roberts talks the reader through the complex decision-making process behind studying green pigments samples from six mummy shrouds. She explains why certain findings were ruled out in light of technical research and cross-departmental comparison. In this study, multispectral imaging and analysis soundly informed each other, presenting research that will help to inform scholars of the diversification of green pigment use during Egypt's Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Understanding the shift in use of vergaut and green earth pigments can better inform scholars of alternative trade networks within the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Suffice it to say this article presents fascinating new data on the Egyptian colour palette.

Cartwright C. R., 'Understanding Wood Choices for Ancient Panel Painting and Mummy Portraits in the APPEAR Project through Scanning Electron Microscopy', pp. 16-23. A short historical backdrop of the Battle of Actium in 31 BC and the amalgamation of Egypt into a steadily growing empire of Rome kick-starts Cartwright's article. She discusses the materiality, source location and trade routes for the various wood types found in 180 mummy portraits across 35 institutions. (At the time of writing (2018) this research incorporated both pre-APPEAR and APPEAR phases of scientific analysis.) Cartwright consolidates several wood identifiers in transverse, radial longitudinal and tangential longitudinal sections taken from these 180 mummy portraits and presents her findings comprehensively. She guides the reader through the complexities of wood analysis, enhancing our understanding of the various ancient Egyptian trade routes. Further research could offer insight into the desire for, and the economics surrounding the sourcing of, wood specimens and confirming details about the whereabouts and techniques of those involved in the manufacturing processes.

Dyer, J., Newman, N., 'Multispectral Imaging Techniques Applied to the Study of Romano-Egyptian Funerary Portraits at the British Museum', pp. 54-67. This paper discusses multispectral imaging techniques, a set of procedures used to observe an object by employing wavelength ranges that include and extend beyond the capabilities of the human eye. The findings in this paper were recorded in 2015 by the British Museum and apply to 26 mummy portraits. An excellent double-page spread provides an overview of the schematics for reflected imaging, and luminescence imaging is included, as well as a workflow diagram that assesses the photophysical properties in key pigments using VIL, UVL, IRRFC and UVRFC. These results are then tabulated and expressed as bar charts followed by short descriptions of specific pigment trends. Dyer and Newman highlight that the reproducibility and comparability of MSI imagery, as well as a need to standardise the interpretation of datasets—both within and between institutions—needs improvement. Only once these points have been addressed can useful and objective comparisons be made. I was impressed by the article's exemplification of the far-

reaching possibilities of current MSI methods while also stressing the need for continued collaborative scholarship in this area.

Sutherland, K., Sabino, R. C., Pozzi, F., ‘Challenges in the Characterisation and Categorisation of Binding Media in Mummy Portraits’, pp. 8-15. These authors present a historical overview of the literature relevant to Romano-Egyptian mummy portraits with attention directed specifically to the definitions of wax binders. There is currently no universal method for studying wax binders, and the authors suggest a variety of analytical strategies which can curb the limitations in scientific analysis around these organic materials. The Art Institute of Chicago’s portraits exemplify this. I particularly enjoyed the section in which the authors highlight issues with nomenclature. Accumulating this research with the intention of generating a database of vocabulary specific to mummy portrait binding materials could be a way forward. Differentiating between the various specifics will help to clarify and provide more effective scholarship in this area.

Newman R., Gates G. A., ‘The Matter of Madder in the Ancient World’, pp. 24-33. This article discusses the various invasive and non-invasive techniques that can help to identify specific hydroxyanthraquinone (HA) compounds responsible for generating the madder colour. Newman and Gates experiment with the Rubiacaea family of plants by using historically accurate methods for extracting colourants from the cores of roots and rhizomes. Illustrations displaying the chemical structures of some common aglycones and glycosides in madders, and details of extracted ion chromatograms from mummy portraits using a mass spectrometer are also included. The authors provide equal support for non-invasive techniques, such as fluorescence spectroscopy and reflectance spectroscopy, detailing the excitation maximums of various pigment samples. This research was dense and varied. The addition of subheadings would help to clarify the different areas of investigation covered.

Thiboutot, G., ‘Egyptian Blue in Romano-Egyptian Mummy Portraits’, pp. 46-53. The aim of this paper is to situate the use of the world’s oldest synthetic pigment, Egyptian Blue, in its broader artistic, social and economic contexts. Thiboutot pools together statistics and photographs sourced from several APPEAR project participants, including the Cantor Arts Centre, the British Museum and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology to indicate the correlation between the use of Egyptian blue and wax binders. She lists the location points of Egyptian blue pigment across 47 panel paintings and follows these findings up with an interpretation that references a range of sources, from Pliny the Elder to the Odyssey. I particularly enjoyed this section, which paints Egyptian blue in a variety of Pharaonic and Homeric contexts, shaping a visual, cerebral reconnection with a pigment long-lost since its last production date in the 8th to 9th centuries.

AUTHOR BYLINE

Alexandra Taylor is an assistant paintings conservator at Saltmarsh Paintings Conservation in Cambridge, United Kingdom, and she is the new book reviews coordinator for News in Conservation. Alexandra is a 2019 GAF Fellow at the International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) in Melbourne, Australia. Her fellowship investigated current practice in preventing art crimes in conservation.

(Read the review in the February-March 2021 "News in Conservation" Issue 82, p. 46-48)