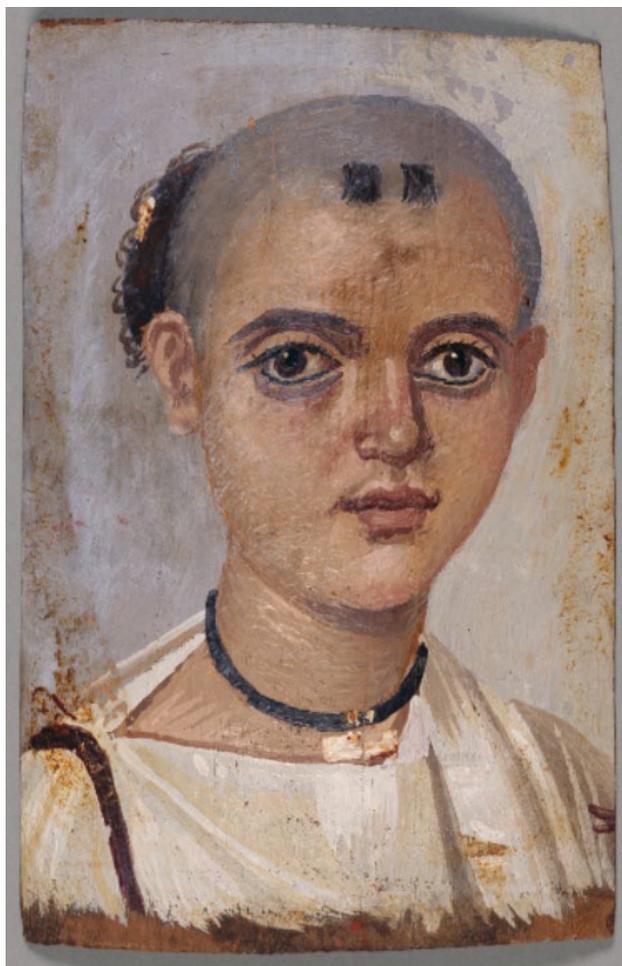


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ARHI-222-A



Mummy Portrait of a Youth
Romano-Egyptian, Egypt, 150-200 C.E.
Encaustic on Linden Wood, 8 × 5 1/8 in.
J. Paul Getty Museum

Practiced But Not Perfect:

Roman-Egyptian Spiritual Beliefs and Practices Revealed by Mummy Portraits

Images that typically come to mind when thinking of mummies are the elaborate sarcophagi of Egyptian pharaohs. Others in Egyptian society, however, were also mummified and had their own means of visual culture to accompany the process. The *Mummy Portrait of a Youth*, housed in the J. Paul Getty Museum, represents one element of this visual culture, portraits of the deceased. The choices made in rendering this mummy portrait of a young boy are connected with the high instance of infant mortality in Roman-Egypt, during Augustus' take over in 30 B.C. until around 640 C.E. I argue that Roman-Egyptians attempted to combat the loss of life with spiritual practices, and when those techniques failed, they created representations of the deceased, such as this, that were crucial for assuring their afterlife.

This portrait was created using encaustic, where pigments are mixed into hot wax, applied to a panel of wood.¹ The artistic influence of Romans in Egypt can already be seen as brushes and spatulas were used to apply the wax and created textures, making a more natural representation of someone, and pulling from the realistic element of Greco-Roman portraiture.² So, this rendering ends up representing a young boy in a rather naturalistic way except for his overly large, drooping eyes. He is clothed in a white tunic with a purple stirp along his right shoulder.³ It can be deduced that at least part of the use of white was representing purity and innocence because this boy died so young as revealed by this being a mummy portrait. Furthermore, purple in ancient Rome typically conveyed royalty, high status, or wealth. There is also a piece of material present on his left shoulder which seems reflective of the draping style of the Romans.⁴ Other general visual elements give a glimpse into the possible cause of the child's

¹ Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Concise Global History*, 4th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017), 107.

² Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 108.

³ Salima Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless: A Possible Explanation for the Tufted Hairstyle Depicted in the 'Fayum' Portrait of a Young Boy," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* vol. 89, (2003): 249.

⁴ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 249.

death and support that he was most likely sick. For example, his skin appears flushed and pail,⁵ and his eyes seem shadowy and tired.⁶

Looking at the more specific elements in the *Mummy Portrait of a Youth*, numerous preventative and protective spiritual practices the Roman-Egyptians used to combat sickness, especially with children, are revealed. The necklace the boy wears has a compartment for amulets which would be used as a source of magic to protect against sickness.⁷ It could also hold written spells and prayers which had disease preventing purposes. Additionally, his eyes are lined with kohl, a black substance made from minerals which the Egyptians used to encourage good health.⁸ This boy also has a notable hairstyle with two tufts in the front. This style was reserved for boys who were only sons and was used to ensure good health.⁹ It may also have been part of an ancient Egyptian tradition where sick boys were taken to shrines and their hair was shaved, except for the two tufts, which would be removed if they got well.¹⁰ These represent more general spiritual and magical beliefs of the society and the measures they took to protect their children.

In addition, the Roman-Egyptians had practices more specific to the cult of Isis, a popular group of religious devotees to the goddess Isis in Egypt and subsequently Roman-Egypt. For instance, the hair that was shaved could be offered up to holy men and saints for additional safety from sickness or to vow a boy to the cult of Isis. Another reference to the Isis cult is the single lock of hair on the back of his head, as it was a common style for children involved with this

⁵ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 249.

⁶ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 250.

⁷ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 249.

⁸ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 251.

⁹ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 250.

¹⁰ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 249.

group.¹¹ It signified the young age of a person,¹² but more importantly was called the Horus lock after the goddess' son who became a symbol of ka, or divine spirit, and therefore protection in life and death.¹³ Isis was considered the mother goddess in Egypt¹⁴, known by her healing power, and bringing her husband Osiris back from the dead.¹⁵ These elements reveal a likely motive behind the use of Isis cult practices in relation to children, society believed they could be healed if they did become ill. Another facet of Horus, the Eye of Horus, supported rebirth, a tremendously important event of the afterlife in this culture.¹⁶ Therefore, if the preventative measures had failed, and a child would unfortunately die, at the very least a safe afterlife would be secured for them through devotion to this cult. The belief and faith the Roman-Egyptians put into the Isis cult to try fighting the high mortality rate of children makes complete sense when seeing the figures of healing and rebirth that are present.

The concept of the community being aware and focused on these tragic deaths, ties into the actual purpose of this specific mummy portrait of a young boy as well. Even with all the protective measures depicted in this wax painting, the boy still ended up passing away and so a mummy portrait of him was created. This rendering would have served various purposes, some relating to general funerary ideas and some spiritually focused. The most basic use was to identify someone who had passed.¹⁷ Then, involving the relationship of family members to the

¹¹ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 249.

¹² Dominic Montserrat, "The Representation of Young Males in 'Fayum Portraits,'" *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* vol. 79, (1993): 217.

¹³ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 31.

¹⁴ Department of Egyptian Art, "Roman Egypt," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified October 2000, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egy/hd_egy.htm.

¹⁵ Susan Sorek, "Egyptian Influences in Rome," in *The Emperor's Needles*, (Exeter, United Kingdom: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2010), 37.

¹⁶ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 32.

¹⁷ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 247.

deceased, mummy portraits were utilized for remembrance and appreciation. This ancestor worship was another Roman influence on Egypt and mummies could even be visited.¹⁸

However, the main function of this particular mummy portrait, and most if not all mummy portraits, was providing a secure afterlife.¹⁹ In ancient Egypt, people believed in a soul or spirit that could live on after death, called ka. In order for someone's spirit to live on, their ka would need a safe home. The primary place this would be was the body of the person, hence the utilization of mummification in this culture to preserve the corpse.²⁰ Nevertheless, there was still a possibility that something could happen to the body, so an alternate home was important. In reference to Roman-Egyptian portraits, Fred S. Kleiner writes that they, "guaranteed the permanence of the person's identity by providing substitute dwelling places for the ka in case the mummy disintegrated."²¹ In the end, mummy portraits allowed people to be reassured of an element related to the Eye of Horus mentioned earlier, a rebirth into the afterlife, for their relatives or themselves.²²

Although the intention of assuring an afterlife by using these portraits could apply to everyone, it was typically adult men who were represented.²³ Therefore, the fact that the *Mummy Portrait of a Youth* depicts a younger person is significant. Firstly, it reflects one of the overarching aspects of this culture and portrait, the high infant and childhood mortality rate in Roman-Egypt. A study of ancient bones compared to modern ones gives insight into why this high instance of mortality occurred.²⁴ The most widespread cause of death for children appears

¹⁸ Montserrat, "The Representation," 216.

¹⁹ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 247.

²⁰ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 32.

²¹ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 32.

²² Montserrat, "The Representation," 216.

²³ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 247.

²⁴ Nathan Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman: Infant Mortality and Reproductive Development," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* vol. 44, no. 1 (2013): 4.

to be disease.²⁵ Infants and children tend to have immature immune systems and Roman-Egypt was a rather disease-ridden environment with malaria, bronchitis, and gastroenteritis all being common.²⁶ A less common cause of death for young people was not being cared for due to child abandonment, a somewhat accepted practice in ancient Egypt.²⁷ Additionally, malnutrition was a concern for this society because of their diet composing of mainly grains with not enough iron and animal protein. This led to anemia, another common condition that could lead to death.²⁸ Factors occurring before a child was born could also cause malnutrition, such as an unhealthy mother causing the stunted growth of her baby.²⁹ Altogether, Egyptian census records show that there was a low life expectancy for the overall population which was another factor stacked against the mortality rate of children.³⁰

The representation of a young boy in this painting also gives a look into details surrounding the child himself, such as the status of his family. It is highly likely that his family was wealthy or of some status because portraits were only made for the rich and prominent, partly because they were the only ones who could afford them, but also as a status marker.³¹ This can be related to the idealized masks of gold and semiprecious stones that only Pharaohs or rulers would have for their tomb.³² However, mummy portraits were more naturalistic and were for a larger group of people, though still not the whole population. It can also be discerned that this child was very well loved and once again prominent because it is rare to see a mummy portrait of a child. Typically, portraits were done while the person was still alive and then kept in

²⁵ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 250.

²⁶ Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman," 21-22.

²⁷ Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman," 4.

²⁸ Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman," 21.

²⁹ Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman," 14.

³⁰ Pilkington, "Growing Up Roman," 6.

³¹ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 248.

³² Kleiner, *Gardner's Art*, 38.

their house until its use after their death.³³ There isn't much of a chance for a rendering of a child to be done if they die so young. So once again, his family would have had money, power, or both and cared for him and his afterlife very much to make this happen.

Even though everyone in the Roman-Egyptian society may have been able to make use of spiritual objects and rituals to make an attempt at fighting the high infant mortality rates, only those of the higher class were able to have mummy portraits of their children rendered to secure their immortality. This can be seen through the *Mummy Portrait of a Youth* where there are not only multiple representations of and references to protective practices, several dealing with the Isis cult, but also the overall aim of the portrait being to give an alternate place for the ka of this boy to reside. All in all, the Roman control of Egypt created a unique culture that combined elements of both societies. In relation to this mummy portrait, it would be interesting to do further research into how Romans adapted elements of Egyptian religion. Another idea to investigate would be how the traditional Egyptian idealization in funerary art came to be influenced by the naturalistic style of Greco-Romans. Even if the special hairstyle is what draws viewers to this painting, deeper engrained spiritual beliefs and practices of an ancient culture are revealed.

³³ Ikram, "Barbering the Beardless," 247-248.

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