

The Mummy Portrait of Sarapon from Fayum

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Abstract

Surviving images of everyday people from antiquity have always fascinated art historians. Especially treasured is an array of painted Roman mummy portraits excavated by Flinders Petrie in Fayum, Egypt. The site is one of the richest sources of ancient portraiture and contained painted panels dating from about the late 1st century BCE onwards. Besides contributing rare information about ancient painting techniques, Roman mummy portraits from Egypt also visually document a historical moment of ethnic hybridization and cultural interaction. This paper explores the context of a young man named Sarapon's mummy portrait (ca. 2nd century CE) currently housed in the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Besides the cataloging done by the Michael C. Carlos Museum, there is almost no information published about Sarapon or his portrait. Though there is no way of ascertaining the intimate details of Sarapon's life, the iconography in his portrait asks answerable questions about his age, social class, and ethnicity. Using historical research and comparisons with other mummy portraits, this paper aims to contribute a preliminary identity to the captivating face of the young Sarapon. Sarapon belonged to an upper-middle class family and his age is more likely placed into the category of a child than a man. Also, the growth of intercultural relations at this time and place in history suggests that Sarapon was a member of a complex and multivalent society of Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. This research uses these characteristics to grant Sarapon some dignity and remembrance after having most of his personal history lost. Analyzing Sarapon's portrait, his name, and his existence also works to study the scope of cultural interaction and hybridization in the ancient Roman Empire.

Keywords: Egyptology, Mummy Portrait, Fayum, hybridization, Roman Egypt

1. Introduction

Surviving images of everyday people from antiquity have always fascinated scholars. Especially treasured is the array of painted Roman mummy portraits that were excavated in the Fayum district of ancient Egypt. The site is one of the richest sources of ancient portraiture and contained painted panels dating from the late 1st century BCE through the 3rd century CE. These portraits evoke the idea of the deceased looking out from their preserved and wrapped body, suggesting the continuation of the soul after death. The portraits also serve as windows into the lives of the subjects, making the viewing experience informative and intimate for those who examine them. Besides lending rare and precious information about Classical painting methods, Roman mummy portraits also visually document the interactions between different cultures and a hybridization of ethnicities.

With research into ancient portrait production and cultural intermingling, this paper explores the significance of a young man's mummy portrait that I have studied in person, which is accompanied by little historical information. This paper connects a broader narrative of ethnic hybridization within the Roman Empire to a quest for the identity of a young man named Sarapon whose mummy portrait was found in Fayum. This paper is primarily based on a formal and iconographic analysis. With this process, historical research and comparisons with other portraits are used to contribute a preliminary background to the mysterious face of Sarapon.

The famous Egyptologist, Flinders Petrie, conducted research throughout the Fayum but this piece lacks the superb amount of documentation that his work in the locale of Hawara is renowned for. The gaping disparities in information has left very little context regarding each of the numerous mummies found there. If there is information about a mummified body that was found with the portrait of Sarapon, it did not accompany the mummy portrait to its current location. There is no known scholarship or documentation published about Sarapon or his portrait besides the cataloging done by Emory University.¹ But even though there is no way of knowing the precise details of Sarapon's life, his portrait asks answerable questions about his age, social class, and ethnicity. These attributes grant the young Sarapon some dignity and remembrance after having much of his personal history lost.

2. History of Mummy Portraits

Mummy portraits “were a product of a fusion of two traditions, that of pharaonic Egypt and that of the Classical world.”² Mummy portraits are painted in a similar style to the paintings seen in Pompeii, but are rooted in Egyptian culture and ritual. The practice of including idealized portraits with the mummified dead had been occurring for over two thousand years and was connected to the Egyptian reverence for the well-being of the dead upon arrival into the Afterlife.³ The mummy portraits painted during Roman rule in Egypt offer insightful information about this time of ethnic and cultural blending. Egyptian mummy portraits are said not to “transcend their localism” and thus offer significant “ethnic markers,” which makes these portraits perfect for the study of diversity and assimilation within the Roman Empire.⁴ Once those of Greco-Roman origin moved into Egypt, they soon adopted the Egyptian customs of preserving the dead through mummification. While mummification was traditional and central to Egyptian ritual, it was also practiced by wealthy people that would have self-identified as Roman or Greek.⁵ It is believed that the portraits from Fayum depict the descendants of a group of Alexander the Great's mercenaries that were sent to the region. Shortly after, they married Egyptian women and embedded their roots in their new home. These soldiers and their multicultural children took on both Greek and Egyptian names as well as the local dialect of the region. Romans would have regarded the inhabitants of Fayum as Egyptian people, but those from Fayum actually would have politically categorized themselves as Greek.⁶

The painting techniques used for the mummy portraits hail from Alexander the Great's cultural influence in Egypt. When Alexander conquered The Egyptian Empire he brought with him masterful Greek painting techniques. The emphasis on naturalism seen in Ptolemaic-era Egyptian art had not been seen in Egypt since the sculptures of the Tell el-Amarna period from over a millennium earlier.⁷ This distinct Greco-Roman style of painting is defined by its “subtle balancing of shapes and colors” as well as the representation of the subject as they really were, which is especially clear in the portraits found in Fayum.⁸ It has been argued that “the Fayum portraits are not art: they are truth.”⁹ The limited chromatic palette consisting of only four subtle colors also characterizes this Classical painting style.¹⁰ Painted portraits were common artistic commissions and were usually produced in encaustic or tempera on wood. This type of painting was popular throughout the Greco-Roman world and inevitably progressed to Egypt. Here, many panel paintings survived through time thanks to the dry climate.

3. Sarapon's Mummy Portrait

The Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta, GA houses one of the valuable mummy portraits from Fayum, which was purchased in 2004 from a private collector in New York City.¹¹ Simply titled *Mummy Portrait*, the wooden panel dates to ca. 2nd century CE and measures 13 ¼ x 16 ½ inches [Figure 1]. Most mummy portraits were painted with a hot wax and pigment mixture called encaustic; but this portrait's medium is tempera, a blend of pigment and egg yolk.¹² The panel of wood has a vertical grain. The painted gray background is the most damaged at the rounded top of the panel. There also appears to be blanching of the wood substrate, which is typical of these wooden artifacts but may be an indicator of past damage from mold.¹³ The wood is moderately damaged and has been reinforced by conservation specialists. Some paint has faded and chipped off through time but overall the image is very readable and in good condition.

The portrait depicts a young man with smooth, dark skin and curly hair. The hair is very dark brown and attention was put into articulating the curls springing from his head. The hair is very individualized compared to other portraits but is cut short enough to remain a proper male style. The style is quite youthful and contrasts to common militaristic, cropped haircut given to men. The skin glows with its rich shades of brown and bronzed highlights on the eyes, cheekbones, and chin cleft. Sarapon gazes at the viewer with engaging, brown eyes. The eyes, which are distinct to

almost all Greco-Roman portraits, are large and almond-shaped with glimmers of light. The eyelashes are thick and alluring but delicately painted. He has thick, crescent-shaped eyebrows that arch above each eye. There are subtly rendered bags underneath the eyes that make them appear more sunken and heavy. This aspect of his face makes Sarapon look less like a small child. The lips are dark and full; the corners of his mouth slightly upturn into a soft smile. The cheeks are plump and youthful. Overall he appears very healthy, happy, and glowing. He has no facial hair, which explicitly indicates that he is not a fully-grown man. I would claim the age of the subject to be in early adolescence. The garment he wears appears to be a basic, white tunic. There are no decorations or accessories on his portrait, which makes assigning an exact date and social context to this portrait more uncertain.

The most noteworthy and exceptional identifier of this young man is the small tag painted to the left of the figure. Such inscriptions are rarely seen in Fayum portraits.¹⁴ The shape of the tag emulates the Egyptian wooden tags that were attached to mummies to identify the deceased and their families.¹⁵ Written in ancient Greek, the tag identifies the subject of the painting as Sarapon and that he is the son of Haresas. The tag is painted red with a black border and white writing.

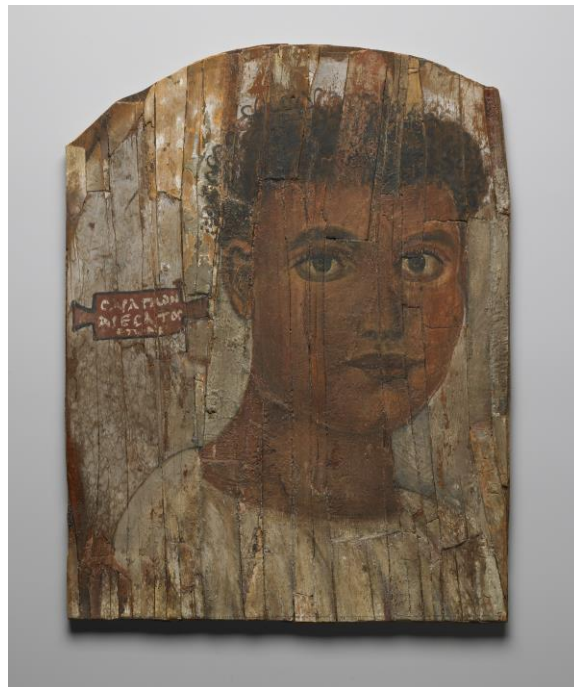


Figure 1. *Mummy Portrait of Sarapon*. Fayum, Egypt. Egyptian. Roman Period, ca. 2nd Century CE. Gift of Mohamed Farid Khamis and Oriental Weavers. 2004.48.1. © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photo by Bruce M. White, 2008.

For reference to the “Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University go to: <http://www.carlos.emory.edu>
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4. Inquiry with Comparisons

Though there is no way of knowing specific details of Sarapon’s life, the painting itself lends much information regarding the subject’s age, social class, and cultural heritage. Sarapon’s age is uncertain, but his youthful presence begs investigation into this young person’s life and death. Much evidence has stated that mummy portraits were created during the subject’s life and were not intended to show the age of the person at their death.¹⁶ While this may be true, Sarapon would not have been permanently represented as a boy if he were a grown man. But, why would a young person be anticipating their death and commissioning a funerary portrait? Roman Egypt had a very short life expectancy mostly due to war, disease, and food insecurity. This fact is reflected in the mass amount of portraits of youth discovered. C.A.T. scans have shown that many of the skeletons accompanying youthful portraits do in fact

belong to young bodies.¹⁷ Lacking documentation of his mummy, I can only hypothesize that Sarapon was in his mid to late adolescence when he died and his portrait immortalized him in this age of boyish vitality.

To help make sense of the representation of age in Roman mummy portraits, I compared the portrait of Sarapon with portraits that were better documented and catalogued from the archaeological site of Hawara in Fayum. Two portraits of young males currently housed at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo are noteworthy as being the most similar to Sarapon's portrait in age and representation. First, Portrait W (CG33245) represents what is assumed to be a twelve-year-old boy.¹⁸ The next mummy portrait is Portrait MM (CG33266), whose accompanying body was scientifically analyzed and the age of the youth at death was determined to have been between 19 and 35.¹⁹ The age suggested by the rendering of his portrait indicates he was less likely in his thirties but rather closer to twenty years old when he died. Like Sarapon's portrait, Portrait MM has deeper skin tone and dark curls. Sarapon's age seems to fall somewhere in between the age of Portrait W and of Portrait MM. Portrait W has a face of innocence and boyishness that Sarapon's does not quite match (the bags under his eyes, for example). Sarapon looks young but experienced and his facial features are slightly more masculine. He does, however, not appear quite as advanced in maturity as Portrait MM. Portrait MM's hair is cut shorter than Sarapon's and his lips are not as plump. His face is thinner, for he has lost his baby fat and developed a manly jawline. Portrait MM does not appear to have much facial hair. Since the subject of that portrait was around his early to mid-twenties and was not bearded, Sarapon's lack of facial hair and youthful features easily place him anywhere between thirteen and eighteen years old.

5. Social Status & Cultural Blending

All mummy portraits found must have once belonged to families with substantial income. The mummification process alone was extremely costly and then the privilege of hiring an artist to paint a portrait increased funeral expenses considerably.²⁰ Therefore, the mere existence of Sarapon's portrait indicates that he belonged to a family with means. But, Sarapon is not shown wearing an embellished garment or accessories to indicate any religious or military importance. Also, there is no expensive gold leaf work that was often applied to portraits of the rich. The portrait is very simple and areas are quite generalized. Sarapon's portrait measures 13 ¼ x 16 ½ inches, which is significantly smaller than the majority of mummy portraits that often measure over 30 inches tall. The larger the panel and more masterful the painting, the more costly the portrait would have been.²¹ It should be noted, though, that Sarapon's young age and the simplicity of his portrait might indicate that he died suddenly and thus required a hastier funeral. Nonetheless, the small size of the portrait indicates that it would not have been very expensive and the average style of painting was not particularly costly either. Sarapon certainly came from a comfortable family with money and the way he was identified in writing in his portrait definitely suggests some social rank or legacy. But, his portrait also implies that he was not as wealthy as many patrons that boasted much more grandeur and ornamentation in their funerary images.

Regarding Sarapon's ethnicity within the Fayum, Sarapon's name tells a story of the Greco-Roman and Egyptian cultural interaction that he lived through. Many names of the mummies who were identified in Fayum are Greek translations of Egyptian religious figures.²² Sarapon's name is presumably derived from the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, a composite god formed of multiple deities introduced to instill unity between the two cultures. The cult of Serapis, the intermarrying between Greeks and Egyptians, and the resulting naming trends all exemplify the blending of these cultures. Sarapon embodied the extensive cultural interaction in Roman Egypt, having lived and died in the multicultural district of Fayum and bearing a hybridized name.

Pluralized ethnic representation was not limited just to art. Ethnicity was quite fluid within the societies of the Roman Empire. The Romans were not the first to occupy Egypt, so the increasing Greek culture added an extra layer of multiculturalism. Greeks (then Romans) held important administrative offices throughout Egypt, so embracing the Greek language and identity, even after Roman conquest, "were keys to economic success and social favor." Thus, Greek continued to serve as the lingua franca. The community and the art they left behind reflect multiple customs and cultures. The intermarrying of Greeks with Egyptians also led to Egyptians taking on Greek names and languages.²³ It is said that most people would use two names: a Greek/Roman name for public appearances and business, and their original Egyptian names reserved for private life.²⁴ It was undeniably important for those in the Empire to maintain a Roman identity as well as their native heritage. Being a Roman citizen generally did not imply one was from Rome, or even Italy. Being a Roman citizen of the Empire was a "cultural, legal, and political status."²⁵ It was important to citizens even in distant parts of the Empire to stay up to date with Roman fashions, exemplified by provincial Roman paintings like the mummy portraits from Fayum. But, each distant territory would combine their indigenous culture with Roman ideals. The entire practice of mummification with Roman mummy portraits embodies

Greek style, Roman politics and order, and Egyptian funerary ritual. The culture of Roman Egypt was very multivalent and maintained a variety of traditional values, which allowed for expansive growth and exploration.

In conclusion, research so far has shown that Sarapon most likely belonged to an upper-middle class family and his age appears to be more easily placed into the category of a child than a man. Also, a history of intercultural relations suggests that Sarapon was a culturally dynamic person who belonged to a complex society of commingling Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans that did not rigidly categorize people by ethnicity. Investigating Sarapon's portrait, his name, and his existence provides a glimpse into a historical moment of immense cultural interaction and hybridization in the midst of the booming Roman Empire.

6. Acknowledgments

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7. References

1. The author wishes to express special thanks to Dr. Lorelei Corcoran. Dr. Corcoran attended my lecture at NCUR 2017 and offered her expertise in hunting down precious information on this portrait. This paper is yet to include the advances in research.
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3. Ibid.
4. Erich S. Gruen, *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2011, 222.
5. Marjorie Susan Venit, *The Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria: The Theater of the Dead*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 11.
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7. Janet Picton, Stephen Quirke, and Paul Robert, *Living Images: Egyptian Funerary Portraits in the Petrie Museum*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007, 144.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 145.
11. Special thanks to Dr. Jasper Gaunt, the curator of Greek and Roman Art at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, for taking the time to personally show me the portrait and aid me in my research.
12. www.digitalgallery.emory.edu/luna/servlet/detail/CARLOS_VC~1~1~11681~102803:Mummy-Portrait
13. Picton, Quirke, and Robert, *Living Images*, 117-119.
14. Ibid., 26.
15. www.digitalgallery.emory.edu/luna/servlet/detail/CARLOS_VC~1~1~11681~102803:Mummy-Portrait
16. Ibid.
17. Walker, *Ancient Faces*, 24.
18. Picton, Quirke, and Robert, *Living Images*, 47. Portrait W (?). Figure 1.26. Currently housed at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, CG33245.
19. Ibid. Portrait MM. Figure 1.27. Currently housed at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, CG33266.
20. Walker, *Ancient Faces*, 26.
21. Picton, Quirke, and Robert, *Living Images*, 172.
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23. Venit, *Monumental Tombs*, 11.
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25. Ibid., 222.

8. Appendix A

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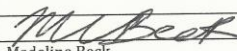
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