

UDC 747

DOI: 10.34670/AR.2021.27.71.002

The Fayum portraits in the history of portraiture

Oleg I. Kir'yanov

Docent, Head of the Department of artistic interior design,
Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry,
125080, 9 Volokolamskoe hwy, Moscow, Russian Federation;
e-mail: kiryanov_62@mail.ru

Abstract

The article aims to identify the role of the Fayum portraits in the formation of a certain painting tradition. It makes an attempt to examine portraits from various collections, taking into account the results of the research conducted by both foreign and Russian art experts. Having studied the Fayum portraits dating back to three centuries from the 1st to the 4th century, the author of the article points out that they became the main representatives of ancient easel painting for the researchers of the modern era, since earlier examples of the Greco-Roman tradition did not actually survive after the fall of the Roman Empire and Byzantium. The Fayum portraits, which performed the cult role of funeral masks, were preserved in the dry Egyptian climate and became not only the embodiment of the skills of ancient painters, but also an example of cult art: portraits, according to the beliefs of the Egyptians, embodied one of the parts of the soul—the ka (the ancient Egyptian concept of vital essence). The author comes to the conclusion that portrait painting developed from material, realistic encaustic to more transparent and conventional tempera, and the tradition of panel painting laid a foundation for Coptic, and then Byzantine iconography.

For citation

Kir'yanov O.I. (2021) The Fayum portraits in the history of portraiture. *Yazyk. Slovesnost'. Yazyk. Slovesnost'. Kul'tura* [Language. Philology. Culture], 11 (1-2), pp. 10-20. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2021.27.71.002

Keywords

Fayum portraits, ancient painting, encaustic, tempera, wax tempera, history of Egyptian art, Byzantine iconography.

Introduction

The history of world painting is rooted in the distant past—in particular, in antiquity. However, very few Greek portraits have been preserved (unlike more persistent statues); they can only be judged by some echoes and later copies. The so-called Fayum portraits are the only reliable source of information about the Greco-Roman traditions of portraiture. These are a group of images that were made in Hellenistic Egypt from the 2nd to the 3rd century as funerary masks. The Egyptian tradition of sacralized individual portraits combined with the Greco-Roman painting traditions; the unique climate of Egypt and encaustic allowed portraits to survive for thousands of years and experienced a lot of ups and downs of the art of portraiture.

Research results

At the end of the 19th century, hundreds of portraits painted on wooden panels put in the shrouds of mummies, or on the shrouds themselves, were discovered in the ancient cemeteries of Fayum province in Egypt. Similar portraits were found in smaller quantities elsewhere in Egypt, especially in Antinopolis, founded by the Roman emperor Hadrian. Most of them are believed to be life portraits that were used instead of the traditional Egyptian funerary masks [Grant, 1978, 2].

The Fayum portraits made a strong impression, literally opening up the world of ancient painting, which was previously judged by the researchers only by the few extant Greek monumental paintings or Roman vase painting. Part of the reason for calling the portraits "Fayum" is the fact that the first portraits were found in the necropolises of er-Rubayat and Hawara in the Fayum Oasis. The Viennese antiquarian Theodor Graf bought the first portraits and exhibited them in many European capitals in 1888-1889 and in New York in 1893, which caused a great sensation. The Russian orientalist and Egyptologist V.S. Golenishchev-Kutuzov, appreciating the significance of the Fayum portraits, bought the collection and sold them to the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow (now the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts), which formed a basis for one of the best collections of the Fayum portraits in Europe [Pavlov, 1965, 5-6]. There are several large collections of the Fayum portraits in the world. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto boast the most representative collections in North America [Thompson, 1975].

To date, about 900 portraits have been found, each of them depicting a specific person [Perevozchikov, Shpak, Shimanovskaya, 2012, 128].

It is obvious that the Fayum portraits combined the ritual traditions of ancient Egypt with its mummification and mythological representations with the visual culture of Greece and Rome. Apparently, the portraits were previously used to decorate Roman atriums, and they were "adapted" to memorial needs in Egypt [Strelkov, 1936, 46]. Some of the portraits have only partially survived, sometimes they are compiled [Thompson, 1981].

The oldest prototypes of the Fayum portraits were Egyptian funerary masks, which were made of cartonnage and brightly painted; they were conventionally portraits with a faint smile since the Sais era (Figure 1).

These masks were made until the Hellenistic period. Sculpted and painted masks, more associated with Roman portrait art, succeeded them from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. Such masks were believed to preserve one of the parts of the Egyptian's soul, the ka (the double), and the portrait likeness was an important requirement.



Figure 1 - An Egyptian funerary mask. Ptolemaic Egypt, 320-30 BC [maska_mumii, www]

The Fayum portraits replaced such masks, bringing some new realism for Egyptian art and the principle of painting from life: "The masters... of the Fayum portrait sought to create a recognisable likeness without relinquishing the ritual function of portraits and without turning it into an individual psychological portrait characteristic of the art of the modern era" [Pavlov, 1965, 8]. A.S. Strelkov points out the ethnocultural nature of the society of that time: "The Egyptian element, being introduced slowly but surely, changed during this process and at the same time obliterated Hellenistic, alien forms brought by the colonizers to everyday life, cult and art. <...> The arrival of the Romans formed another layer—albeit a very thin one—on the Greek and Egyptian part of the population of Egypt—the new owners of the country, the Romans" [Strelkov, 1936, 14]. E.V. Levchuk pays attention to the following fact: "Although the ancient worldview hindered fully understanding the Egyptian religion, the people borrowed the ritual of the funeral cult of the Egyptians first externally, and then more and more internalizing the idea of immortality" [Levchuk, 2015, 211].

Written sources make reasonable assumptions about the nature of the burials, according to which the mummies were kept in the house for several generations until the memories of these people were blotted out: "The painters' task was not merely to create a recognisable likeness of a person, but also to create a likeness that would define the position of the deceased within the familial ancestor-cult and ensure his vitality for rebirth and life in the next world. It seems likely that in the Roman period mummies could be kept on display for some time after death, and were visited on certain days as part of the cult of the dead. The departed continued to play a part in society: the Egyptians did not shut out their dead from the society of the living by rituals of exclusion, and so funerary portraits would need to express, among other things, the social role played by the deceased person in his lifetime. Hence it would have been necessary for the portraits to display an array of visual symbols immediately comprehensible to somebody looking at the painting on the mummy (perhaps several generations after death, when the deceased person had been forgotten as an individual) as it was stored upright in a funerary chapel. The decoration and symbolism employed in the chapel and on the mummy itself, of which the portrait likeness was only one element, worked together to provide the most appropriate and

effective setting for the rebirth of their owner into the next world" [Montserrat, 1993, 216].

All the portraits depict children or relatively young people; there are no elderly people at all: these are no portraits of dying people, but faces embodying the spiritual essence of people.

The Fayum portraits show the ethnic type of the face with great accuracy. They reflect a variety of ethnic groups that inhabited Lower Egypt under the Ptolemies and the Roman Empire. An epitaph for the Jew Jonathan, written in Greek, was found in Fayum in the 21st century [Blumell, 2015]. A series of realistic portraits painted at the same time and in close localities demonstrates the diversity of society in Hellenistic Egypt (Egyptians, Greeks, Nubians, Jews, Syrians, and Romans), which is established primarily by the names of the depicted [Perevozchikov, Shpak, Shimanovskaya, 2012, 128]. It is most likely that only the wealthiest residents of these regions could afford such images: only 1-2% of the mummies found had portraits [Ibidem, 132].

Anthropologists analyzed an array of portraits and, using computer technology, created the average Fayum portraits of men and women: a full-face image with expressive eyes is the dominant and main unifying feature of the iconography of the portraits (Figure 2).

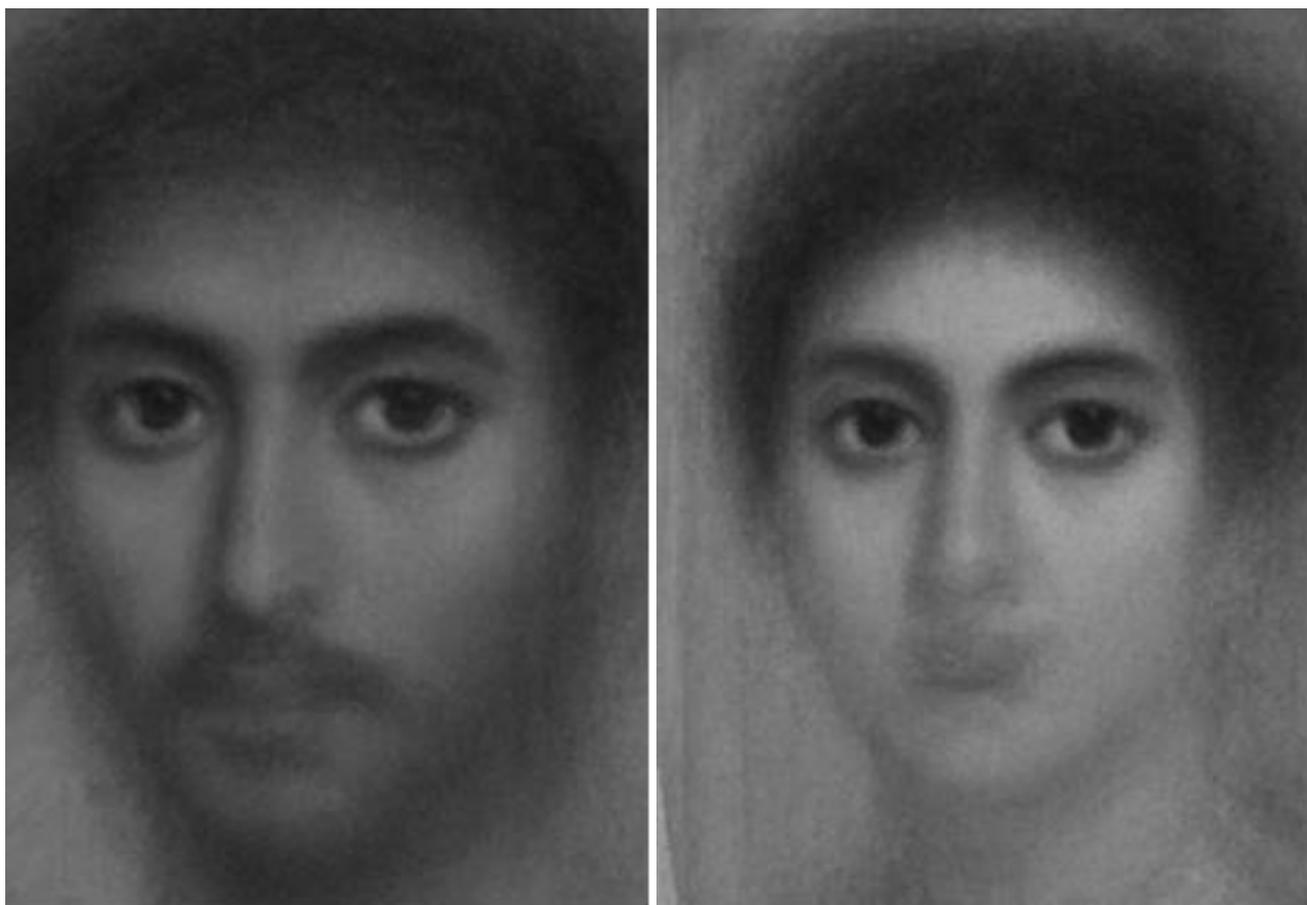


Figure 2 - Male and female average portraits [Perevozchikov, Shpak, Shimanovskaya, 2012]

Roman colonizers appeared in Hellenistic Fayum in the 1st century BC. However, Hellenistic culture continued to exist: "The impact of Roman art in the Fayum portraits is felt more in the elements of iconography than in the style and the artistic image" [Pavlov, 1965, 9].

The importance of Egyptian culture is also great, as the Fayum portraits borrowed not only a

funerary function, but also a special decorative effect—gilding (Figure 3), a subtle combination of colors with their echoes and leitmotives.

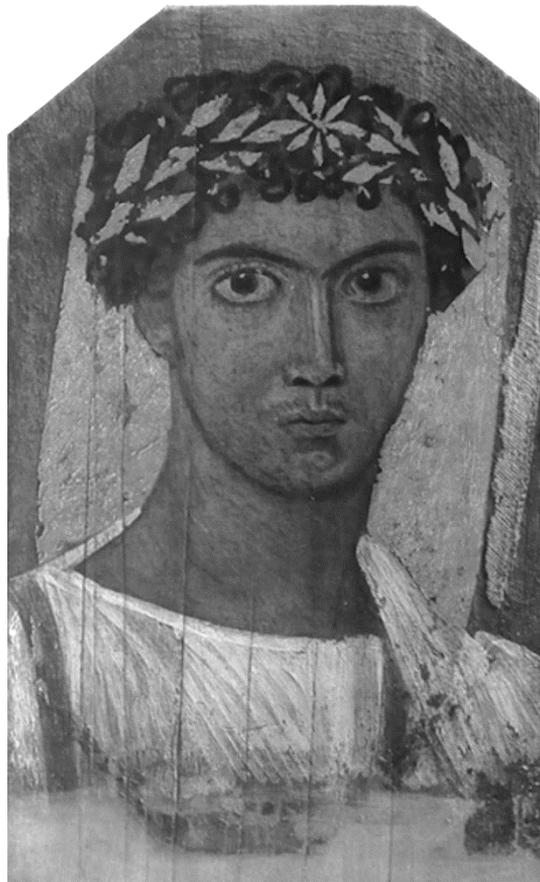


Figure 3 - The portrait of a young man. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. No. 6154/11 a 5776 [Strelkov, 1936, 149]

The portraits are divided into three groups on the basis of the material. The most numerous portraits are ones painted on panels that were inserted into the mummy (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - A female mummy with a portrait. Antinopolis, Egypt, the 2nd century AD. The Louvre, Paris [Fayumskie portrety, www]

Two other types of images are less common: portraits on primed canvas and burial shrouds, entirely painted with distempers (Figure 5).



Figure 5 - The burial shroud of a young man. The first half of the 2nd century. Canvas. Distemper. 185×125 cm. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts [Pavlov, 1965, 9]

The main portrait painting techniques include encaustic and tempera (sometimes a combination of them). Encaustic painting (hot wax painting) is characterized by convex strokes, their shiny texture; the paints were applied both with metal sticks and brushes. Encaustic is considered the main technique of Greco-Roman easel painting.

Ancient descriptions of the origin and development of encaustic painting are not numerous. The main source of information about the tools and materials used, the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, is superficial and ambiguous. The study of the portraits by X-radiography clearly indicates the use of brushes. It is obvious here that long, even brush strokes filled with liquid wax-based paint were used to paint the background, clothing and hair. The face and neck were painted with thicker paste-like paint that created an uneven surface relief in these areas of the portrait. This effect, according to some researchers, confirms the use of a lancet-shaped metal spatula called the *cestrum*, indicated by Pliny as a tool of artists in encaustic [Ramer, 1979, www]. Using encaustic, ancient artists achieved unprecedented verisimilitude [Levchuk, 2012, 118], and the same effect, almost impressionistic, was achieved by the authors of the Fayum portraits.

The second technique typical of the Fayum portraits is wax tempera, i. e., a mixture of wax, protein and a small amount of olive oil. Such a mixture was applied with a brush, and the painting process was

very similar to encaustic painting. The special type of wax tempera consisted of wax, potash and glue melted together.

Tempera, i. e. paints mixed with some binder (glue, protein, egg yolk), was applied only with a brush; this technique was used, in particular, for all portraits on canvas. The predominance of tempera differs at a later time, and it was tempera that was used for painting simplified portraits, which are significantly inferior to the earlier ones in personalization, liveliness and realism (Figure 6).

The authors of the Fayum portraits used a relatively narrow repertoire of iconography and forms, in which there were relatively few variations of characters: a child with a youthful hairstyle, a young woman with jewelry, a soldier with a shield, etc. Artists received extremely limited space to transmit important information about the people: they depicted only the head and shoulders on a piece of wood about 15×30 cm in size.

Compositionally, the portraits are usually chest-length, and only occasionally waist-length. The background is always discreet, from gray to brown. In almost all portraits, the light falls on the face from the viewer's left side, and the right side of the face is shaded; thus, the left side of the nose is in shadow and painted as a thick line that gradually merges with the left eyebrow or into the nose (Figure 7).



Figure 6 - The portrait of a young woman. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. No. 4228/11 a 5785 [Strelkov, 1936, 154]

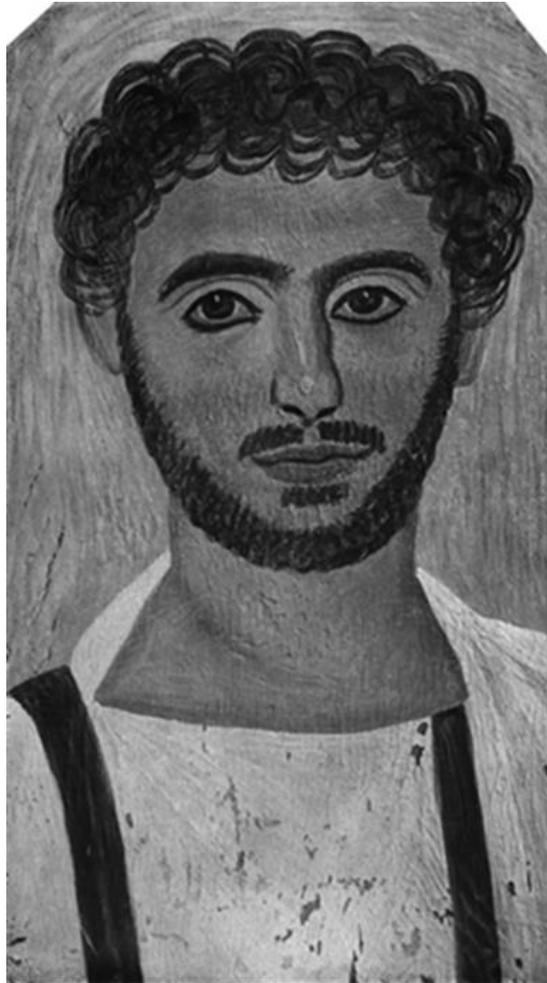


Figure 7 - The portrait of a middle-aged man. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. No. 4296/11 a 5789 [Strelkov, 1936, 157]

Both men and women in portraits usually wear light tunics with below-the-elbow length sleeves, and cloaks or himatias are thrown over their tunics. The cut-outs of chitons and the outside of the shoulders have pointed puffs; the same were used in the so-called Coptic time. Ornamental stripes of the clavus often go through both shoulders. Sometimes the head neckline is trimmed with a fringe. The cloak can be fastened with a round fibula. The portraits, especially the early ones, often feature earrings and necklaces. The hairstyles in the portraits correspond to the Roman ones of the same era.

It is interesting to note that not all portraits were intended for mummies; some of them could be hung in the atrium—both before death and later, taken from mummies as signs of the memory of the deceased [Pavlov, 1965, 12; Strelkov, 1936, 18-19].

The iconography of Coptic Egypt and Byzantium became a natural continuation of the tradition of the Fayum portraits. There is continuity in materials and techniques: like many Fayum portraits, early icons "were painted on rot-resistant wood (pine, cedar, cypress) in the encaustic technique" [Smetanina, 2018, www].

The simplification and "flattening" of the late funerary portraits, in which realism was increasingly lost and the cult purpose emerged, are a kind of step towards the aesthetics of icon painting. The face loses its linear perspective and is built according to the laws of reverse perspective. In addition, the image in both cases is frontal, but the right side of the face may remain in shadow (Figure 8).

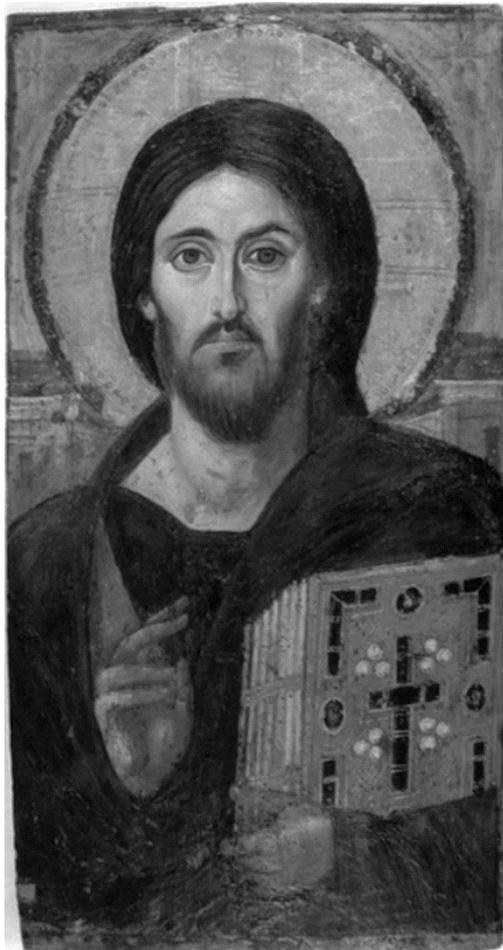


Figure 8 - The Christ Pantocrator, the 6th century, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai [Ibidem]

The main basis for comparing the Fayum portraits and icons is the elaboration and meaning in the composition of the eyes: the eyes as a receptacle of the soul become a kind of portal between the corporeal and the heavenly worlds: "The gaze of the highlighted eyes is an expressive feature that was present in the funerary masks of the ancient Egyptians, and is now highlighted even more in early portraits" [Ibidem].

At the same time, highlighting the eyes has different functions in these two pictorial traditions: the double of a person, the ka, appeared in the eyes in Egyptian portraits, while the eyes in icons reflect the highest essence, a visual symbol of the unimaginable.

Conclusion

The Fayum portraits dating back to three centuries became the main representatives of ancient easel painting for the European researchers of the modern era, since earlier examples of the Greco-Roman tradition did not actually survive after the fall of the Roman Empire and Byzantium. The Fayum portraits, which performed the cult role of funeral masks, were preserved in the dry Egyptian climate and became not only the embodiment of the skills of ancient painters, but also an example of cult art: portraits, according to the beliefs of the Egyptians, embodied one of the parts of the soul—Ka. Portrait painting developed from material, realistic encaustic to more transparent and conventional tempera, and the tradition of panel painting laid a foundation for Coptic, and then Byzantine iconography.

References

1. Blumell L.H. (2015) A Jewish epitaph from the Fayum. *Journal for the study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman period*, 46 (2), pp. 182-197.
2. Fayumskie portrety [The Fayum portraits]. Available at: <http://www.izbrannoe.com/upload/sotbit.htmleditoraddition/5f3/5f34af3936a69ac5fe03ecc414f25da7.jpg> [Accessed 27/01/20].
3. Grant S.M. (1978) Two “Fayum” portraits. *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago*, 72 (6), pp. 2-4.
4. Levchuk E.V. (2015) Fayumskie portrety – ritual'naya portretnaya zhivopis' Drevnego Egipta epokhi ellinizma I-IV vv. n. e. [The Fayum portraits—the ritual portrait painting of ancient Egypt during the Hellenistic period from the 1st to the 4th century AD]. *Global'nyi nauchnyi potentsial [Global scientific potential]*, 10, pp. 210-214.
5. Levchuk E.V. (2012) Priemy ispolneniya fayumskikh portretov v tekhnike enkaustiki I-IV vv. n. e. [The encaustic technique in painting the Fayum portraits from the 1st to the 4th century AD]. *Teatr. Zhivopis'. Kino. Muzyka [Theater. Painting. Cinema. Music]*, 3, pp. 113-136.
6. maska_mumii. Available at: https://civilka.ru/egypt/tekst_evangelie.html/attachment/maska_mumii [Accessed 27/01/20].
7. Montserrat D. (1993) The representation of young males in “Fayum portraits”. *Journal of Egyptian archaeology*, 79, pp. 215-225.
8. Pavlov V.V. (1965) Fayumskii portret [The Fayum portraits]. Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik Publ.
9. Perevozchikov I.V., Shpak L.Yu., Shimanovskaya A.S. (2012) K antropologii Fayumskogo oazisa I-IV vekov nashei ery [On the anthropology of the Fayum Oasis from the 1st to the 4th century AD]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 23: Antropologiya [Bulletin of Moscow University. Series 23: Anthropology]*, 4, pp. 127-133.
10. Ramer B. (1979) The technology, examination and conservation of the Fayum portraits in the Petrie Museum. *Studies in conservation*, 24 (1). Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1505918> [Accessed 27/01/20].
11. Smetanina N.I. (2018) Fayumskii portret i rannyya ikonopis' [The Fayum portraits and early icon painting]. *Nauchnaya palitra [Scientific palette]*, 2. Available at: https://elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_35588961_86327187.pdf [Accessed 27/01/20].
12. Strelkov A.S. (1936) Fayumskii portret [The Fayum portraits]. Moscow; Leningrad: Academia Publ.
13. Thompson D.L. (1981) A lost patchwork “Fayum portrait”. *American journal of archaeology*, 85 (4), pp. 491-492.
14. Thompson D.L. (1975) Four “Fayum portraits” in the Getty Museum. *The J. Paul Getty Museum journal*, 2, pp. 85-92.

Фаюмские портреты в истории становления портретной живописи

Кириянов Олег Игоревич

Доцент,

завкафедрой «Художественное проектирование интерьеров»,

Московская государственная художественно-промышленная академия им. С.Г. Строганова,

125080, Российская Федерация, Москва, ш. Волоколамское, 9;

e-mail: kiryanov_62@mail.ru

Аннотация

В статье предпринимается попытка выявления роли фаюмских портретов в становлении определенной живописной традиции. Автор рассматривает портреты из различных коллекций, обращаясь к исследованиям как зарубежных, так и отечественных искусствоведов. Фаюмские портреты, насчитывавшие три века истории – с I по IV в., для исследователей Нового времени стали главными представителями античной станковой живописи, поскольку более ранние примеры греко-римской традиции фактически не сохранились после падения Римской империи и Византии. Фаюмские портреты, исполнявшие культовую роль погребальной маски, сохранились в сухом египетском климате и стали не только воплощением умения античных живописцев, но и образцом культового искусства: в портретах, согласно верованиям египтян, воплощалась одна из душ человека –

Ка. Написание портретов развивалось от вещественной, реалистичной энкаустики к более прозрачной и условной темпера, и постепенно традиция письма на досках легла в основу коптской, а затем и византийской иконы.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Кирьянов О.И. The Fayum portraits in the history of portraiture // Язык. Словесность. Культура. 2021. Том 11. № 1-2. С. 10-20. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2021.27.71.002

Ключевые слова

Фаюмские портреты, античная живопись, энкаустика, темпера, восковая темпера, история египетского искусства, византийская иконопись.

Библиография

1. Левчук Е.В. Приемы исполнения фаюмских портретов в технике энкаустики I-IV вв. н. э. // Театр. Живопись. Кино. Музыка. 2012. № 3. С. 113-136.
2. Левчук Е.В. Фаюмские портреты – ритуальная портретная живопись Древнего Египта эпохи эллинизма I-IV вв. н. э. // Глобальный научный потенциал. 2015. № 10. С. 210-214.
3. Павлов В.В. Фаюмский портрет. М.: Советский художник, 1965. 80 с.
4. Перевозчиков И.В., Шпак Л.Ю., Шимановская А.С. К антропологии Фаюмского оазиса I-IV веков нашей эры // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 23: Антропология. 2012. № 4. С. 127-133.
5. Сметанина Н.И. Фаюмский портрет и ранняя иконопись // Научная палитра. 2018. № 2. URL: https://elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_35588961_86327187.pdf
6. Стрелков А.С. Фаюмский портрет. М.: Л.: Academia, 1936. 180 с.
7. Фаюмские портреты. URL: <http://www.izbrannoe.com/upload/sotbit.html#editoraddition/5f3/5f34af3936a69ac5fe03ecc414f25da7.jpg>
8. Blumell L.H. A Jewish epitaph from the Fayum // Journal for the study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman period. 2015. Vol. 46. No. 2. P. 182-197.
9. Grant S.M. Two "Fayum" portraits // Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago. 1978. Vol. 72. No. 6. P. 2-4.
10. maska_mumii. URL: https://civilka.ru/egypet/tekst_evangelie.html/attachment/maska_mumii
11. Montserrat D. The representation of young males in "Fayum portraits" // Journal of Egyptian archaeology. 1993. Vol. 79. P. 215-225.
12. Ramer B. The technology, examination and conservation of the Fayum portraits in the Petrie Museum // Studies in conservation. 1979. Vol. 24. No. 1. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1505918>
13. Thompson D.L. A lost patchwork "Fayum portrait" // American journal of archaeology. 1981. Vol. 85. No. 4. P. 491-492.
14. Thompson D.L. Four "Fayum portraits" in the Getty Museum // The J. Paul Getty Museum journal. 1975. Vol. 2. P. 85-92.