

Fayum Portrait Of A Woman
Egypt

1st - 2nd Century A.D.

Tempera on wood board

H: 35cm

A Greco-Roman Egyptian funerary portrait of a woman, painted in tempera on wood. A few patches of linen are preserved along the front of the panel. The woman is depicted in a semi-frontal position with her gaze directed forward; her wavy hair, with hints of grey, reaches to just below her ears. Her large eyes are thickly outlined and heavy lidded and her long narrow nose leads to full red lips. Her brow is slightly furrowed. She wears hooped earrings with three white pearls and her thick gold necklace features intertwined strands, secured in the middle by a medallion. Her chiton is lilac, with black clavi and folds outlined in pale grey. A pink or lavender tunic often appears as a major component of the costume of female funerary portraits and should generally be interpreted as a reference to the expensive purple hues of elite tunics. Fayum portraits were, for all their startling realism, commissioned for a specific representational function and should be seen as displaying how the person wished to be seen; their clothing, attributes, and expressions all lend themselves to this interpretation. They portraits are named for the Fayum region of Egypt, which lies around 60 km south of Cairo and west of the Nile, where a large majority of panels were found. Their chronology is now believed to range from Julio-Claudian days, the 30s A.D., to A.D. 392, when Theodosius I banned the embalming of bodies. They were a part of the mortuary practice of higher-class citizens of the time. The majority are painted in tempera onto board, as this one is, or directly onto the outermost layer of the linen shrouds. Many of the finest are painted in pigment mixed with wax, often called ‘encaustic’, and a much smaller third group were painted in a hybrid technique with an emulsion paint. The best are assumed to have been painted from life, and there is an immediacy and individualism to them which is entirely different to earlier Egyptian mummy portraits. Society in Roman Egypt at that time was an amalgam of Ancient Egyptian

and Greek civilisation and contemporary Roman culture. This mix is reflected in these extraordinary mummy portraits. The attention given to the mummification process and the glorification of the dead hearkens back to Egyptian traditions, as contemporary Romans preferred to burn their dead, but the style of painting is a direct product of the Greek, and in particular Alexandrian, school of naturalism and the fashion and adornment of the sitters is Roman. Indeed, it is often possible to date Fayum portraits using the hairstyle of the sitter in comparison to those seen on contemporary Roman coins, as styles and trends came and went so quickly and were often widely and enthusiastically followed throughout the empire. It is interesting to note that painted portraiture may not have been, at that time, popular in Imperial Rome, having fallen out of favour to carved portraiture. Pliny the Elder writes (Naturalis Historia, book 35, 1st century AD) that "the painting of portraits, by which the closest possible likenesses of deceased persons were handed down from age to age, has died out completely." It shows that these portraits are indeed peculiar to the region, and the melding of cultures there. In total just under a thousand of Fayum portraits have come to light, most, as this one was, discovered in the late 19th century. They are of great significance. Due to more unfavourable conditions for preservation very few examples of early Greek naturalism in painting survive, although we know of their existence through written sources. Naturalistic portraiture was at that time become more widespread in the Roman empire and was held as an important marker for status. The introduction of Greek naturalism in art and the Roman regard for status, combined with the Egyptian religions and funerary rites, all combined to create what are essentially the only surviving panel and canvas paintings preserved from antiquity, whose importance cannot be overestimated. This example comes with an impeccable provenance, having formed part of the renowned collection of Austrian art dealer and collector Theodor Graf, who was responsible for the discovery and dissemination of many of today's known Fayum portraits into the Western market in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was most likely found at er-Rubayat, where almost all of Graf's mummies originated. A similar portrait of a woman with the same earrings and medallion necklace is in the British Museum. It is also ex-Graf collection, also from er-Rubayat, and has been dated to the late second century on the basis of the hairstyle and jewellery. Come, master of the rosy art, Thou painter after my own heart, Come, paint my absent love for me, As I shall describe her thee. Anacreon's Portrait of his Mistress (Leigh Hunt's translation).

Literature:

Kunstauktion 417, Dorotheum, Vienna, 24th November 1932, Lot 38.

Kunstauktion 419, Dorotheum, Vienna, 30th May 1933, Lot 43.

Klaus Parlasca, Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano, Ritratti di mummie, 1980, fig. 521, pl. 127.

Antiquities, Christie's, New York, 9th December 2005, Lot 85.

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