

ART

A Gaze from the Beyond

The Extraordinary Faiyûm Portraits

After nearly a century of neglect, the Faiyûm portraits have at long last found the audience and attention they deserve. Not only can we currently find numerous books devoted to these works of art, but several museums have also made the decision to highlight them. After the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, it was the turn of the Paris Louvre to bring out of its back rooms the most beautiful pieces of its collection. In creating its temporary exhibit, the Louvre united its collection with works held by the British Museum of London, as well as numerous museums from Dijon, Colmar and elsewhere.

We can only welcome these initiatives, for they have at last permitted the public to appreciate these paintings for their true worth. Indeed, long victims of the ultra-classification of historic epochs into "periods" (for they are neither Greek, nor Roman, nor Egyptian), these portraits had been lost in the far corners of museums. But at last, the Faiyûm portraits have been granted their "museum rights."

An additional selection of portraits from Faiyûm is presented on the inside front cover of this issue.

At the end of the 1880's, grave robbers brought to light some remarkable portraits in the Faiyûm, a region of Egypt situated to the west of the Nile. In 1887, the Viennese antique dealer Theodor Ritter von Graf purchased a large number of these portraits and showed them to the world at expositions that he organized in Berlin, Munich, Paris, Brussels, London, and New York. Polemics began almost immediately: disputes spread over the dating of these paintings, others even cried fraud. Finally, it was the British



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Portrait of a woman from a collective vault, middle of the reign of the Antonins, c. 161-180 A.D., Thebes site.

archeologist Flinders Petrie, author of important works on the Hawara necropolis, who determined that they dated back to the period of the Roman occupation of Egypt, i.e., the first centuries of our era.

To date, about one thousand of these Faiyûm portraits have been discovered. Faiyûm is the region where most have been found, although some have been located in Saqqâra, Memphis, Antinoopolis, Akhmîm and Thebes [SEE Figure 1]. The dry climate in the areas where they have been found—neighboring the luxuriant depression of Faiyûm—explains how they have been so well preserved. The warm sands of Egypt have also protected thousands of very precious papyri. These documents, in Greek and Demotic as well as Latin

and Hebrew, demonstrate that the population of that period had a high level of literacy. What's more, they reveal an extraordinary convergence with the tradition of Plato, Homer, and the Greek dramatic authors. This is thanks to the important Greek population established in Egypt beginning the time of Alexander the Great [SEE Box, page 86], as well as the influence of Jewish thought of the Old Testament and the writings contemporary with Philo of Alexandria, early Christianity and, finally, classical Egyptian culture. It is only by keeping in mind this cultural well-spring that one can penetrate the secrets of the Faiyûm portraits.

The Near Afar

The first thing that strikes us when we look at these portraits, is their familiarity: the realism of the features combined with the depth of expression erases the many years that separate us. As opposed to the automata dictated by court painting or the mannerist aesthetic, the Faiyûm portraits stress the unique character of each human being. The Faiyûm portrait artist makes no effort to idealize forms, or to even out physical flaws, as is clearly the case with certain Greek or Roman statues. It would indeed be in vain to search for beauty in this manner, in a perfect body with no soul or life. What the artist wishes to make apparent is the internal beauty of the individual, that which can never be affected by corporal imperfections. Nonetheless, it should not be the artist's concern to create a perfect, hyper-realistic, replica. If this were the case, the artist would be satisfied with making a molded mask. The mask, despite its great faithfulness to the features of the face, remains fixed, "dead," and paradoxically, bears little resemblance to the real face.

On the contrary, it is this concern for the particularity of individuals which makes these portraits universal. In this sense, they belong entirely to the school of "Classical painting" as it will again be found, among others, in Brueghel or

Rembrandt. The term “Classical” as used here does not refer to either a formal aesthetic code, or to a particular historic period. Classical art is in fact the science which, utilizing a sensual experience (principally sight and hearing), allows the awakening of ideas, sentiments, and principles which are at the same time universal and incorporeal. Whereas folklore would have us believe that this science was the privileged possession of one community or ethnic group, Classical art expresses that which is common to all men but specific to humanity: in other words, his creativity.

Therefore, we must consider the panoply of technical advances evident in these paintings not as an end in itself—a feat of prowess—but as a reflection of the will of the painter to most faithfully reflect the beauty of the living and the divine character of man. In this regard, Classical painting is not merely describing the visible object, but the idea it represents. So true is this idea, that these artists were often designated by the term *zoographoi*, that is, literally, “painters of life.”

However, what reinforces even more this feeling of familiarity, is the gaze that comes to rest on us. We are not merely observing, in a distant manner, a scene belonging to another epoch, but

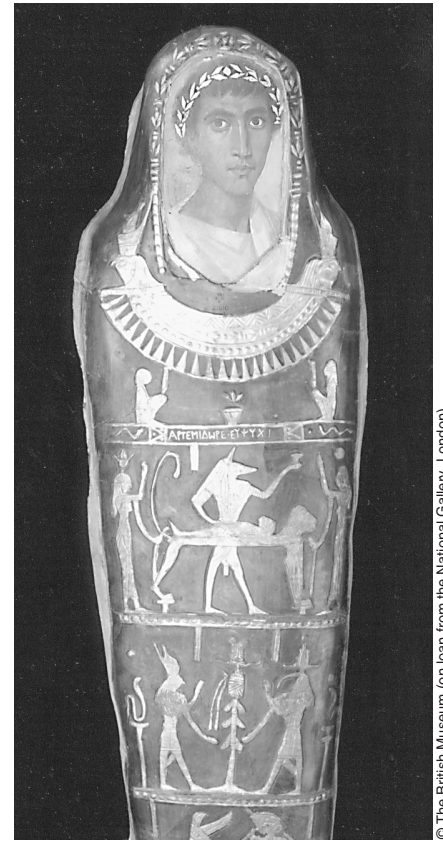
we are exchanging glances with another human being. In keeping with his role, the artist has *immortalized* the being he has painted.

And this immortalization is what painting it is really all about. We are not dealing here with portraits drawn merely for the world of man, as in some of the frescoes of Pompeii, but with souls whose gaze is coming from the world of the dead—from Hades—to the world of the living. Indeed, the Faiyûm portraits were intended to be affixed to the sarcophagus of the deceased. They were painted either directly on the shrouds surrounding the sarcophagus, or on thin wooden tablets that were later inserted with bands of linen.

Of course, this tradition was not a new one. We have interesting testimony on the subject in the commentary of Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), even if, ignoring what was common knowledge in Egypt at his time, he was convinced that this art had disappeared: “In any case, the painting of portraits, which allowed perfect representations to be transmitted across the ages, has completely fallen into disuse. . . . Yes, it is quite true: laxity has caused a loss of the arts and, since one cannot make portraits of souls, the physical portrait has also been neglected. It was altogether different among our ancestors: in the

atriums, a kind of effigy destined to be contemplated was exposed: not statues made by foreign artists, neither of bronze nor of marble, but molded wax masks which were arranged each in a niche: these portraits were to make an escort for the family convoys, and, when someone died, there was always present the entire multitude of his vanished parents; and the branches of the genealogical tree ran in all directions, with their lineal branchings leading to where these portraits were painted.” [Natural History, Book XXXV, On Painting, Verse 6]

Petrie discovered these frames and even certain framed paintings intended for display on a wall. It



The inscription reads, “Artemidoros, have courage!” This illustration shows how the portraits were inserted in the sarcophagus, as well as the coexistence of Egyptian symbolism and the realism of the portraits.

© The British Museum (on loan from the National Gallery, London)

should also be noted that most of the portraits had been cut out, in order to be correctly affixed to the sarcophagus. This would indicate that most of the portraits were of live models, except when it involved the premature death of a child. The Faiyûm portraits in general represented men or women twenty-five to thirty years old, in full bloom. In addition, research has revealed that certain sarcophagi that were decorated with portraits of adults contained the mummies of old people, confirming that some of the portraits had been made well before the death of the person.

According to Petrie, the sarcophagi were not buried right away, but kept in an upright position, leaning against a wall in a room of the family home, in keeping with the Egyptian tradition reported by Diodorus Siculus in the

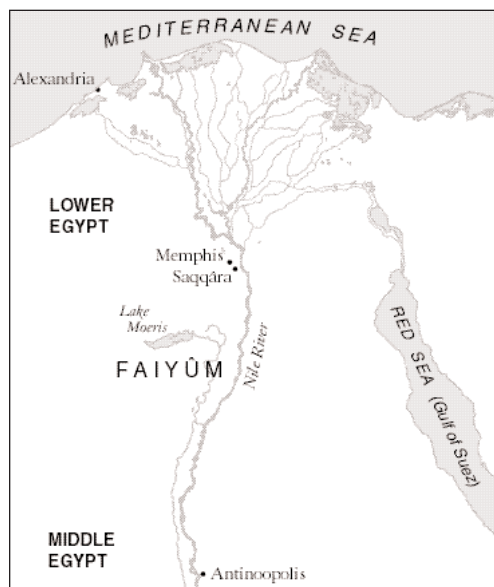


FIGURE 1. Egypt’s Faiyûm region.

First century B.C.: “[M]any Egyptians keep the bodies of their ancestors in magnificent rooms, and so have before their eyes those who died many generations before their birth, and thus . . . derive a particular satisfaction, as though the deceased had lived with them.”

The sarcophagi, themselves covered with Egyptian symbolic representations which contrasted with the realism of these portraits, sometimes included inscriptions, often in Greek, or labels on which the name or other characteristics of the deceased would be imprinted, for example: “Hermione the teacher” or “Sabinus, painter, 26 years of age. Have courage!” Petrie also discovered beneath the head of the mummy of a young woman the second book of the *Iliad*, in the form of a papyrus roll, demonstrating a great attachment to this great C culture.

What is astonishing, is that this practice does not seem connected to just one particular segment of the population. Indeed, their ethnic, social, and even religious origins are quite diverse: priests from the religion of Serapis, Jews, and Christians (the Christians of Egypt embalmed their dead until the Seventh century A.D., despite the protests of some); high functionaries of Rome as well as freed slaves, athletes and military heroes; Ethiopians and Somalians, etc. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that there was some sort of “conversion” of these people to the Egyptian religion. Instead, this represented more of an ecumenicism around certain ideas that transcend the Egyptian funeral rites.

Relationship with Death

It seems clear that these paintings bring together all these men and women from such diverse origins around one fundamental idea: that the soul is immortal. The encounter with the painter, who is himself mortal, is concentrated around a reflection on the eternal, and the model reflects on the ephemeral character of his or her existence.

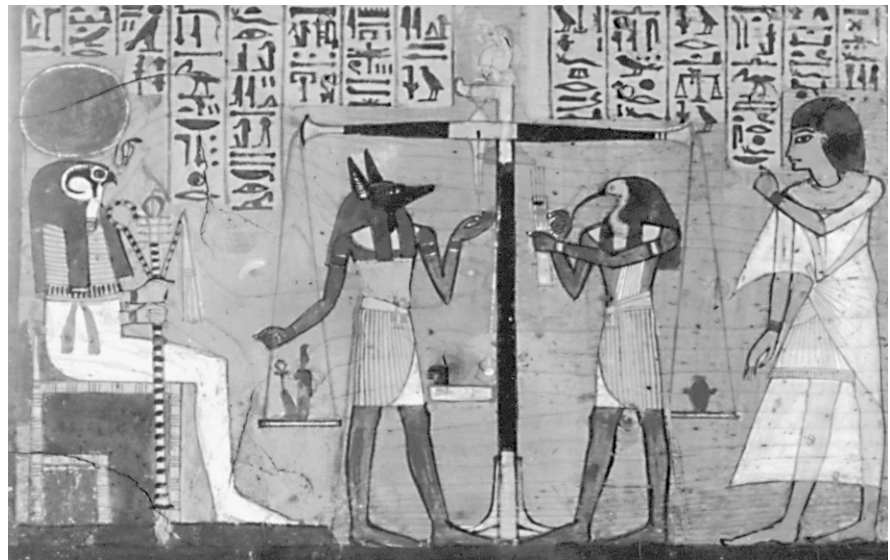
All of these portraits are characterized by wide-open eyes expressing a

tranquil astonishment, a controlled anguish in front of death. The acceptance of the inescapable character of death is transcended into a love of life, by the tranquil affirmation that each human being carries a singular part of eternity.

The fact is, that we are on earth for just a few decades, and this time must not be wasted if we wish to leave something behind us after our death. As Diodorus Siculus described it: “The people of the country understand as quite negligible the time spent living, and they make the most about the time which,

brought out aspects of Egyptian beliefs which were most compatible with their own religion. Finally, it must be noted, as Jean Vercoutter, writing in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* correctly pointed out, the Egyptian religion, which is polytheistic in form, nonetheless tends towards a fundamental monotheism (Pharaoh Amenophis IV-Akhenaten even tried to formalize it). So much so that the first Christians in Egypt had no problem translating the term “God” by the Egyptian term “*neter*,” designating non-representable divinity.

For the Egyptians, faced with



The weighing of the heart. If the deceased has behaved with virtue, then his heart will be in equilibrium with the goddess Maât, symbol of the universal order as it was established at the moment of the world's creation.

through virtue, shall remain in memory after death; they call the habitations of the living, ‘inns,’ since we merely spend but a brief moment there, and call tombs, the habitations of the living, since the dead lead in Hades an unlimited existence.” [Emphasis added]

But, what was the content of these Egyptian funeral rites? First of all, we must understand that Egyptian beliefs have gone through tremendous evolution, and that behind the names “Osiris” and “Isis” there are religions *whose natures are totally different*, according to the specific times and traditions. In addition, it is quite likely that the influence of the first Christians and Jews,

death, it is important to act in conformity with Maât, goddess of truth and justice, but especially of the universal order as it was established at the moment of the creation of the world. Hence, the concern of every man must be to “*place Maât in his heart.*” The deceased is brought by Anubis, a benevolent divinity with a canine head, carrying a key, before the divine Tribunal. That is where his heart, the seat of conscience, shall be weighed. On one of the arms of the divine balance, we find an image of the goddess Maât, and on the other, the heart. If the two are in equilibrium, the deceased is declared “just,” and himself achieves

the state of “Osiris”; Horus will accompany him to Osiris’s side. Remember that the Egyptians practiced mummification to preserve the unity of the individual, body and soul together. It was this lost unity which brought about the downfall of the King Osiris (when he was assassinated and cut into several pieces), and it was that new-found unity (when Isis reconstituted his body) which permitted his resurrection.*

As a Christian theologian of the Thirteenth century put it: “unity is the form of being, we respond in truth that all that is, is because it is one. . . . In fact, unity is the preservation and form of being, whereas division is the

* We refer here to the original religious conception, of which it is obvious the Faiyûm portraits are a reflection. This conception can in no way be confused with its later superstitious degeneration: the cult of animals, and the cult of the obscure forces of Isis, turned into a castrating and bloody goddess.

cause of annihilation.”

It is true, nevertheless, that we have no writings from this period concerning these portraits and their exact significance, but the preceding indications enlighten us on the general spirit of their meaning.

Much later, this spirit would be brought to a higher level, once rid of its pagan forms. The gaze in painting later becomes, explicitly, the mirror of the human soul. In the Fifteenth century, Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa would go even further in his work “The Vision of God,” in which he uses a self-portrait by Rogier van der Weyden as the basis for his reflection—a portrait whose gaze rests on the observer no matter where the latter places himself. Nicolaus of Cusa will compare this gaze to the vision of God, and note the similarity between the Greek terms “God” (“*theos*”) and “to see” (“*theorein*”). At first, Cusanus poses a paradox: “Yet, your gaze brings me to consider why the

image of your face is painted in a sensitive manner: it is because we cannot paint a face without color, and that color does not exist without quantity. But it is not with eyes of flesh that I see this painting, but with eyes of thought and intelligence that I see the invisible truth of your face, which signifies itself here in a reduced shadow.” Then, he insists on the fact that it is not only the gaze of the picture that is important, but also that of the observer. “[Y]our face will bear what the gaze that looks upon you shall bring to it,” stressing that, “where there is an eye, there is love.” And so, the gaze that falls upon the other becomes an act of love:

“I see now in a mirror, in a painting, in an enigma, *the eternal life which is none other than the Beatific Vision*, and it is in this vision that you never cease to see me with the greatest love to the depths of my soul. And for you, to see is nothing more than to give life, to forever inspire in me the gentlest love, . . . to

Alexander the Great in Egypt



Scala/ART Resource, NY

Alexander at the Battle of Issos at Arbela (331 B.C.). This mosaic, which was found in Pompeii, is in fact a copy of a work painted by a member of the School of Sycion, where the painter Apelles was trained. It is from this pictorial tradition that the Faiyûm portraits flowed, and not from the Roman tradition.

Conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., the rich agricultural lands of the Nile and the Faiyûm were given to the former Greek-Macedonian soldiers as a reward for their services. Egypt had already built an impressive irrigation system, permitting the capture of millions of gallons of water for use in the growth of its agriculture. Hereditary land-owners, the Greek-Macedonians immigrants, but also Jews, Asians, Syrians, Libyans, Ethiopians, and others produced wheat, wine, olives, linen, and papyrus.

As Plutarch notes, Alexander “did not do as Aristotle, his preceptor, advised him, to act towards the Greeks as father, and towards the barbarians as lord.” Aristotle’s precept was to treat “the former as friends and family, and to use the latter as one would use animals or plants,” considering them barbarians and slaves “by nature.” The tragedian Euripides, like many other chauvinist Greeks, eloquently affirmed that, “the barbarian is born for slavery

give me the fountain of life, and by this gift augment and perpetuate my being, *to communicate to me your immortality.*” [Emphasis added]

Now, look again at the Faiyûm portraits. Are we not in the presence of an *eternal life which is none other than the Beatific Vision?*

The Tradition of Apelles

The Faiyûm paintings not only memorialize the memory of individuals whom we have never known, they also immortalize the anonymous painter who, thanks to his art, continues to move us to this day.

Contrary to what has often been said, these were not “Roman paintings.” Euphrosyne Doxiadis, basing himself on the impassioned research of the modern Greek painter Yannis Tsarouchis, affirms that they “were a contribution of the Greeks to the Egyptians’ struggle against death.” This pictorial tradition can be dated back to the era of the exclu-

sive portrait-maker of Alexander, the realist painter Apelles (c.360-300 B.C.).

There are two indications that reveal the probable influence of this tradition on the Faiyûm portraits.

Pliny the Elder gives us the first indication when he describes the paintings of Apelles: “The point on which this art manifested its superiority was grace, even though there had been at the time some very great painters; but, even while admiring their works and covering them with praise, he [Apelles] said that they were lacking some of that famous charm that was his own, which the Greeks called *charis*; that they had attained all manner of perfection, except that, on this one point, he had no equal. He also claimed another title to glory: even while he admired a work by Protogenes, the result of tremendous effort and finished to meticulous excess, he said that on all other points they were equals or even that Protogene was superior, but that he alone had the advantage

and the Greek for liberty.” Alexander, however, did not conform to the prejudices of his time. He believed that chance of birth and blood had nothing to do with it, and that one became slave or free as a function of *culture*.

There was, in Egypt, intermarriage among immigrants, and a mixing between immigrants and the native population, leading to the founding of great cities: Alexandria, Naucratis, Ptolemaïs and Antinopolis. Constructed on a geometric model, these cities sheltered temples, gymnasiums, thermal baths, porticoes, and theaters, where sometimes the great Greek dramatists/playwrights were performed for days in a row. Homer and Plato were also read. It was in Alexandria that the Old Testament was translated into Greek and where the astronomer and poet Eratosthenes directed the greatest library of antiquity, where Philo of Alexandria rubbed elbows with St. Peter, and the

Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus was born.

As far as religion was concerned, neither Alexander the Great nor his general and successor Ptolemy I Soter (r. 304-284 B.C.) were much concerned with the forms of the rituals *per se*, but rather more with infusing new conceptions more in conformity with the universalist image which they held of man. This was not some syncretic religion, or a mixture of Greek, Egyptian, and other religions. Rather, Alexander simply wanted to avoid entering into a sterile debate concerning rites.

Inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey*, Alexander considered Zeus to be “the father of men and the gods” and not to be the exclusive and amoral protector of the Greek cities alone. Through his conception, he has become—or rather once again became—the common father of all men, thus encouraging a human fraternity that could live *in concord*, and participate actively in the administration of the empire.

of knowing when to remove his hand from a painting—a precept worthy of being noted, and according to which too much attention to detail can often be harmful.” [*Natural History*, Book XXXV, Verse 80]

Isn’t this precisely one of the stylistic characteristics of the Faiyûm portraits?

No picture or treatise by Apelles, or by his master Pamphilus (whose master was Eupompus, native of Sycion, or modern Sikión), has survived. According to the testimony of Pliny, Eupompus would have been the originator of a revolution in painting, adding the school of Sycion to the Attic and Ionian genres—which, together, made up the Hellenic genre. We can obtain some notion of this art thanks to certain mosaics, such as the one at Pompeii representing Alexander at the Battle of Issos at Arbela (Second century B.C.). This mosaic is supposed to be a copy of a work by a painter from the school of Sycion. This tradition resurfaces once again in Alexandria in some of the monumental mosaics, or in portraits of women also painted in the Second century B.C., both of which reflect an attachment to *realism* in the representation. Add to this the important fact that the Greeks introduced into Egypt the three-quarter profile and frontal pose in a country where, it would seem, all the figures had until then been painted in profile.

The second indication lies in *tetrachromism*, i.e., the use of four colors. Incredible as it might seem, until the invention in the 1950’s of acrylic paints (polymer resins obtained from petroleum products), the basic ingredients of painting had practically not changed from the era of the Sycionian school that trained Apelles, to the era of Rembrandt and Goya, with the portrait artists of Faiyûm in-between! The ingredients which make up the media are, in varying proportions, albumen from egg yellow and white (prehistoric painters used blood), glue (produced, for example, from pelts), aqueous resins, essences, oils, and beeswax.

The famous four-colored palette of Apelles, the “*tetrachromie*,” can be found

in its entirety in the Faiyûm portraits: “melinum,” a white made up of a chalky clay from the Isle of Melos (eventually replaced by lead white); “attic sil” or “ochra”: yellow derived from the silt gathered from silver mines; “sinopsis du Pont”: red ochre soil from Sinope; “astramentum”: black made up in various ways, probably including black from the vine, containing blue highlights. Other pigments appear only in order to replace some of the former, according to the circumstances of availability, or to reflect the detail of a jewel (natural green soil or malachite), or an article of clothing (natural rose garancin, cyclamen rose, or the very expensive crimson extracted from sea shells).

As far as the Faiyûm portraits were concerned, either a wax-based paint (“encaustic”) was applied onto wood, or else the artists painted in distemper on linen canvas (so early!). The wood was mainly thin planks from the sycamore fig, which was easy to find during this period in Egypt, or from the cypress tree (the oak typical of the northern painters being extremely rare in the Mediterranean). Whitened beeswax was heated and mixed with other substances, such as the resins of the Chios mastic type, and different pigments. It could also be prepared in order to be applied cold (punic wax), after being emulsified or saponified, which made for clever possibilities of mixing with eggs or oil. Three main instruments were used to work the matter: the paint-brush, the cautery (a hot metal), and the “*cestre*” (a little stiletto).

When working on a linen canvas, it was customary to paint in distemper, after having laid a layer of glue mixed with a fine layer of plaster (equivalent to the gesso). On wood, where first a layer of glue was applied in distemper, the complexion was sometimes applied directly to the honeyed brown of the bare wood or on a khaki-tinted surface, the “*proplasma*,” the equivalent of the *impressione* (ground-color) or *imprimatura* of the great European Classical masters.

As the modern Greek painter Tsarouchis correctly observed, “the

good colorist sees a harmony of colors where others see objects.” So, against this background of khaki and working from the dark towards the light, depth was created by opposing cold and warm tints—rather than light and dark—in order to bring distances closer or farther away.

Starting on a somber background is a method found again later in the “Titus,” a work by the school of Rembrandt on display in the Louvre, and in “The Young Girl in a Turban” by Vermeer at the Mauritshuis in The Hague. Thus is painting liberated from captive lines, to become a sculpture of light.

Renaissance of Transcendence

The Florentine painter and historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) reported with shock in his *Lives of the Great Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, that painting, starting in the middle of the Thirteenth century, had not only been neglected, but had “practically disappeared” in the West.

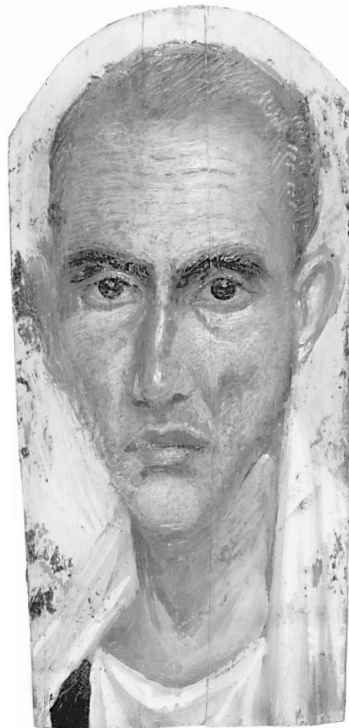
To bring it back to life, a team of

Greek painters was urgently invited by the authorities of Florence, who were convinced that the former possessed the lost secrets of this art. A young man from a noble family, Cenni di Pepe (1240-1302?), better known by the name of Cimabue, quit his studies in order to learn from this team. Once initiated into the secrets of their craft, he became the Master of Giotto, a founding figure of the Renaissance who, with the impetus of some enlightened Franciscans, would bring about a renaissance (rebirth) of Classical painting. “Re-birth” is indeed the appropriate word, since this art was practically non-existent during the 2,200 years that separate the Fifteenth century from the Faiyûm portraits.

The thread of this pictorial/artistic tradition had indeed been broken. More prosaically, this extremely rich region of the Nile, was looted successively by the Roman and Byzantine empires. First, Rome grabbed some thirty percent of Egypt’s grain production, and its entire infrastructure connected with water was sacrificed on the altar of immediate profit. Then, in A.D. 395, Egypt became an integral part of the Byzantine Empire, and continued to be run into the ground. It was then that painting entered a two-dimensional world for centuries to come. The advent of the Byzantine Empire, with its icons, institutionalized a flat stylization, and a symbolism which led to the superstition of “magical re-doubling”: the painting, which has become an object, is supposed to “magically” possess the divine qualities of that which it represents. It is supposed to capture forever a segment of eternity, but represents only a moment of emptiness. From this standpoint, the Faiyûm portraits, despite some technical similarities, are the opposite of the tradition of icons. We could say, that by losing the fourth dimension of transcendence, the third dimension—that of the space created by the unity between perspective and color—is lost along with it.

But whither this thread, last renewed during the Renaissance, today?

—Karel Vereycken and Philippe Messer,
translated by Dana Scanlon



Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart

Older man, middle of the First century, unknown origin. Distemper on linen.