

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



*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