

Golden Mummies of Egypt

Audio guide

7. Gilded mummy mask

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

This cartonnage mummy mask is made of plaster and linen in layers. It measures 48.7 centimetres and is decorated in red and green paint. The face is also gilded with foil so that it has golden skin with striking black and white eyes with a blue outline. The detailed painted headdress extends down onto the chest and includes stylised decoration of seated Egyptian gods.

00:00:29 Greg Jenner

This is a beautiful thing, isn't it? This is a wonderfully crafted, gorgeously colourful, very expressive face looking at us with a little smile, there's a there's a kind of, there's a kind smile on, I'm gonna say *her* face, I don't know if that's true. I don't know if this is a woman? A girl? I don't know what the clue would be. I feel like, because often it when you look at mummies, they look kind of the same for men and women. Is that right?

00:01:00 Campbell

Yeah. Deliberately so. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:01:02 Greg

OK, I feel like it's the eyes. The eyes are amazing. The eyelashes, the eyebrows, that's the thing that's maybe is making me think that. But no, what's the clue?

00:01:14 Campbell

OK, Greg, this is a particular hobby horse of mine. This is something that I bang on about all the time. *She* is rare, because can you see in her ears, she's got earrings – little ibex-headed earrings – you almost never get earrings showing on mummy masks.

00:01:34 Greg

Right.

00:01:35 Campbell

And at this period, and I emphasise at this period, so the Ptolemaic and Roman period, the Graeco-Roman period, the last couple of centuries BC, first couple of centuries AD, only women are shown wearing earrings.

00:01:50 Greg

Right.

00:01:51 Campbell

In the time, back in the time of Tutankhamun, Ramesses II, men are wearing earrings as well, but it's not fashionable in the Graeco-Roman period. So, as you say, you know, when you walk into a museum and they've got an Egyptian, you know, coffin lid or a mummy mask on display, they almost always have this long head covering. And to us living today, we culturally associate longer hair with women. So, I think people often assume that the coffins and the mummy masks belong to women. But no, it's a kind of a sign of being godlike, and otherwise we might not be able to tell. But also, there's another possible little clue in that on her forehead you can see there are, like, a little row of curls which come out just, yeah, just above the eyes. That's also an indication that this is a lady.

00:02:47 Greg

OK. So, golden skin. First off the bat, is obviously very... it's quite the look. You don't see that on the Instagram and TikTok do you? But, I know that you have a pet theory on this, well, it's not even a pet theory that, you know, this is very important, but you believe that mummies are about transforming someone into a god. And I thought, you know, I grew up when I was a kid, and when I went to university, and I read books about mummies, it was always about preserving the body, making sure the body lasted for 2,000 years, whatever. But you think mummification is about transforming the body from person, human being, into god. So, is that what's going on here?

00:03:28 Campbell

Absolutely, Greg. This is a subtle, but really important point, that we tend to think that the ancient Egyptians wanted to preserve their dead, their deceased relatives, as they were in life. And that, you know, Nana Flo would be preserved as she was, and she would live like that for eternity. Actually, the evidence from ancient Egyptian texts and images seems to be that the best way, the best chance you had of surviving for eternity, forever, which is a very long time, was to become a god. And the ancient Egyptians are very clear on this point, gods have bones made of silver or iron, they have hair made of lapis lazuli.

00:04:22 Greg

Blue. Yeah.

00:04:24 Campbell

Yeah, blue, semi-precious stone. And they have skin, flesh, made of gold. Gold doesn't tarnish, you know, it doesn't go rusty, it doesn't go off-coloured, it lasts forever, so the Egyptians thought. So, if you're going to be an immortal god like a superhero, you need to have golden skin, if you can afford it. So here, I know you said, you know, she looks like she's got kind eyes and a nice smile. These features were made in a mould and do not look anything like the person whose mummified body, they were placed on top of.

00:05:03 Greg

Oh no! It's an Instagram filter! She's got a beauty filter on to make her look like someone else?

00:05:11 Campbell

It's a hell of a filter.

00:05:12 Greg

Yeah, it's a god filter! Oh, that's interesting, so, this is just a standard mummy face. This is not what this lady looked like in real life.

00:05:23 Campbell

And you've got to really take a moment, Greg, to think, you know, we all have a sense of self-regard, and we want us to be us for eternity. And I know you get up in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror and think, wow, don't I look fantastic, don't I want to look like this forever. I do. But this is not what the evidence suggests. It suggests that actually, in order to live forever, you have to be less, you, less an individual, and more generically perfect, more symmetrical, more golden skinned, more godlike. Because the idea of the afterlife is once you get there, you know, you're judged in some way. And once you get into the afterlife, you get to hang out with gods and be a god. So, in texts, on coffins on masks like this, dead people are referred to either as Osiris, who is the male god of rebirth and regeneration, or the goddess Hathor, who is often shown as...

00:06:27 Greg

The party cow!

00:06:28 Campbell

As a cow. You may have heard of her. I knew you were gonna say that. Yes. Hathor is the goddess of partying and a good time, and, you know, living forever. She's often called the golden one, so she's associated with gold especially. And she's called the Mistress of the West, the Lady of the West. So,

the sun sets in the West, and so that's where dead people are thought to go. So, women become Hathor, men become Osiris, and by that association with those gods, it's like Spartacus. I'm Spartacus. No, I'm Spartacus. No, I'm Hathor. No, I'm Hathor. It's OK, you can have many, many, many countless numbers of Hathors, because it's the afterlife and anything goes.

00:07:14 Greg

The Spartacus reference is from the 1960s, so good luck there, kids, following that one. But, yeah, I see what you mean. It's beautiful, but what's interesting, I suppose, is you said it's made of plaster and linen, so it's not even wood. It's not even, I mean it's solid, but it's not like, you know, if I was to sort of hit it with my knuckles, which I know you want me to do, I won't. But if I did, it wouldn't go dunk! It would be more papery, maybe?

00:07:43 Campbell

Yeah. And I think, I'm glad you mentioned that. A lot of people who have asked, you know, look at that in the case, and think it's made of stone.

00:07:51 Greg

Yeah. Right, yeah.

00:07:53 Campbell

Or, it's made of gold – solid gold. It's not like Tutankhamun's mummy mask, which *was* made of solid gold, but he was a pharaoh. This is made of this material we call cartonnage, which is like papier-mâché.

00:08:05 Greg

Wow!

00:08:06 Campbell

And it's built up in layers, yeah. And it was really commonly used in the funerary industry. And the last layer would be paint or gold leaf.

00:08:15 Greg

So, it's a papier-mâché death mask. So, we could make one at home.

00:08:19 Campbell

You could! And sometimes in Manchester Museum, we run at events where you can do just that, using a mould taken from a 3D scan of this actual mask.

00:08:29 Greg

That's crazy. That's so cool. Alright, so, I said she's got kind eyes and a nice smile. What you're saying actually, is she doesn't. She's got a god's eyes and a god's smile.

00:08:29 Campbell

Precisely.

00:08:40 Greg

Do we think this was a woman of, I mean, do we know how old the person was who died? Because, you know, this is not her, really, is it? This is a god. This is a goddess.

00:08:52 Campbell

Well, Greg, we have to thank the archaeologist who found this, or removed this piece, because they didn't attempt to keep this divine face with the remains, the body of the person.

00:09:07 Greg

Ah, that's a shame, OK.

00:09:09 Campbell

The body of the person that it was covering. So, we don't know who that individual was. But yes, they were mass produced, if you were rich enough. Because, you know, gold leaf is pretty expensive.

00:09:21 Greg

This is this is not. You don't get this if you're an ordinary farmer.

00:09:25 Campbell

No, you absolutely don't. And even amongst those who could afford mummification, which would be, you know, only a small proportion of society, the archaeologist who led the excavations at the site this was found, Flinders Petrie, he describes maybe two or three percent of the total of the

mummified bodies he excavated, were decorated in any way. He just threw away the undecorated ones and kept the decorated bits that he found.

00:09:53 Greg

Oh no. So, when we think of mummified masks, and we think of Tutankhamun and the incredible famous golden and blue death mask that weighs like 10 kilogrammes and it's like super heavy and it's, you know, made of the most lavish materials possible. That's the absolute, absolute, like, top shelf stuff. And then you've got really lovely stuff made of wood and stone. And then then you've got this stuff, which is papier-mâché cartonnage. But for 97% of people, it's just, bosh, done, dead, Sorry!

00:10:29 Campbell

Yeah, you're wrapped up and that is it. So, I think those other people may have believed that they, too, were becoming gods, joining the gods, had the idea of a blissful afterlife. But for those that could afford it, who could afford that gilded mask, you wanted to make absolutely sure you were going to have that transformation into a godlike state.

00:10:52 Greg

Well, I think she's achieved it, she looks like a god, she's got a lovely smile. Good for her. Well done.