**Golden Mummies of Egypt**

**Audio guide**

**8. Mummified body of a man with a panel painting**

00:02:08 Dr Campbell Price

This is the mummified body of a young man. His careful and elaborate wrappings form a design of diamond shapes. There is a horizontal orange band decorated with gold studs around his chest. A thin wooden panel painted with a young man's face with dark hair and no beard or moustache is inserted into the upper portion of the linen wrappings. The hair on the portrait is intertwined with a gilded wreath and a line of gold has been added between the lips.

00:00:31 Greg Jenner

I love these portraits. They are one of my favourite things from the ancient world. We call them Faiyum portraits, because of where they're found, right? That's the name. Yeah, OK, which is an Arabic name, so it's not necessarily what the place would have been called at the time?

00:00:49 Campbell

Nope. The Faiyum is a lake, really, that that comes off the river Nile, and very good farmland near there, and southwest of modern Cairo, still very good agricultural land. And it was a good settling place in the Graeco-Roman period for Greeks and Romans who had served in the army, and who were kind of pensioned off.

00:01:14 Greg

You've done your 25 years, yeah?

00:01:16 Campbell

In their retirement to go and farm. So, that may explain why this Graeco-Roman focus happens in the Faiyum area. So, we call them Faiyum portraits, but they're attested, they're known, from all over Egypt, so from the north and Alexandria, all the way down south to Aswan and the very southern part of Egypt.

00:01:38 Greg

Now they looked to me very Roman in style. If you get, if you're lucky enough to go on holiday to Italy and you go to Pompeii or Herculaneum, you see portraits of people a bit like this. It's really realistic. This is a man's face where you can see the muscles in his neck. His lips are plump. His eyes are brown and deep, and thoughtful. His eyebrows are on fleek, and his hair is beautifully tussled. His ears are sort of the right size. Like, this looks like, it looks modern. It looks like a, you know, eighteenth, nineteenth century portrait. So, this is ancient, but it feels very different to Egyptian art, as I normally think of it. And it, so I guess what's really interesting is this is a coffin. This is funerary, right? This is a dead person who's being remembered. And so, how do they go about making it? Like, how do, you know, do you paint it by hand away from the body and then put it on at the end?

00:02:42 Campbell

Well, that is a big question that has got Egyptologists and Classicists, you know, people who deal with Greece and Rome and Egypt in the ancient world very excited, and none of us can agree. So, I've got some opinions about this.

00:02:55 Greg

Oh hello. Fight, fight, fight. Yes, yeah.

00:03:03 Campbell

Right. So, Greg, some people will tell you, you would sit for your portrait in the prime of life. So, you'd have a portrait painted, and it would then hang on your wall at home, and then when you popped your clogs, it would be cut down and wrapped into the mummified body. I don't think that's the case. Technically, they're very accomplished. They're on very thin panels of wood. The wood, incidentally, it's been analysed, and where it's been possible to analyse the wood, it's lime wood, which is not native to Egypt. There is even a theory that the portraits are painted in Italy, and they are shipped to Egypt. They do not represent, necessarily, the person whose mummified body they cover.

00:03:56 Greg

Yeah, because if someone dies in Egypt, you don't get a mail order painting done from Italy, it's gonna look like someone else.

00:04:04 Campbell

Your body goes off pretty quickly as well. So, there's no time to, you know, create a portrait based on a freshly dead person. So, there are lots of questions. As you say, they look so different to ancient Egyptian art. They look very Greek or very Roman in style and they have this kind of immediacy. They look like, you can see it's like, someone is turned to look at us.

00:04:33 Greg

It's very much, you know, you're making eye contact with the dead person.

00:04:37 Campbell

Yeah, there's that flash of light, the little dabs of white in the eyes show light, you know, reflectiveness of eyes. And that livingness, I think has confused modern people. We assume these are, as you said, like modern portraits from the nineteenth century that hang in art galleries. They're not. They are meant to represent the dead people as gods. And, you know, the Roman Emperor is worshipped as a god, while he's alive, when he's dead. He was certainly worshipped in Egypt. This is basically a Roman Period equivalent of the golden mummy masks, which the ancient Egyptians believed the gods had flesh of gold, so, you have a mummy mask covered in gold leaf. Here, the best way of dating them is stylistically, and it seems like, you know, depending on what the Roman Emperor's official hairstyle was like, whether it was Augustus or Hadrian or Tiberius, you had your hair the same way. So, you know, Kate Middleton gets a dress, everyone gets the same dress. Someone, a Hollywood actor, has their hair a certain way, people copy their hair. This is what you've got. The message is the same though, and in this case, Greg, it's made especially clear because you've got those golden laurels in the hair, which of course is a sign of victory in the Classical world. And this little line of gold between the teeth, between the lips, just an indication that this man, were he to speak, would have golden speech, and he would speak like a god. And these are little prompts to tell us this is, yeah, different from reality. And the CT scan, actually we did in the hospital, Manchester Children's Hospital on this body showed that the man is significantly overweight in life. So, I'm not saying that all the ancient Egyptians wanted to be thin, that's not the case, it just shows that the portrait doesn't necessarily match the body underneath.

00:06:52 Greg

Right. OK. So, the person, you know, the image we're seeing here is of someone young, they look like they're in their 20s, they look very, you know, yeah, it doesn't look like someone towards the end of their life, perhaps. But what's interesting, I suppose, is in the other mummy that we looked at, the golden lady staring back at us, she looked like a god because she had golden skin. Whereas here, we're looking at a human with normal Mediterranean-style skin, you know slightly, tanned. What makes him a god is the crown on his head and this tiny bit of gold on his lips. So, it's almost like the accessories now matter more than what the face looks like.

00:07:37 Campbell

Yes. And I think that's true of most earlier Egyptian practise, you know. The accessories are the things that help you achieve that status of godliness. Certainly, the golden skin, as you say, is a really explicit thing because the Egyptians, the ancient Egyptians, believed that gods who golden skin. So, if you've got golden skin, you're good to go as a god. But here, yeah, there could be this reference to the Emperor. How much people, you know, actually knew what the Roman Emperor, who was also the ruler of Egypt, of course, at this time, looked like is a different question. But you've got to think of the purpose of these mummified people. In the Roman period at the site of Hawara in the Faiyum, where this this gentleman was found, we have evidence that the mummified bodies were kept above ground for potentially years after the death of the person. And they were stood up, they were propped up in little kind of chapels, little rooms where people could go and visit. So, if you imagine you go to the family chapel and there are, I don't know, 20 relatives stretching back some time, in there little, you know, niches, ready to say hello. There is an element of trying to grab someone's attention. If you've got to make offerings and say prayers for 20 ancestors, how are you gonna stop at one over the other? You want to have a really eye-catching portrait, that might improve on reality quite a bit, just as a way of grabbing someone's attention to give you know offerings to *me*. You know, like, pay attention to me. It could be something as practical as that. But we look at the portraits and we think, oh the people are so young and handsome and how tragic they are. I think that might be a kind of modern notion that we're putting on the ancient evidence.

00:09:39 Greg

It's funny, you say modern, because when I look at this, it looks to me like a sci-fi movie where someone in space has had to go into suspended animation, which means they've been put in a special pod, and they're gonna fly through space for 500 years and the machines gonna keep them alive and slow down their heart. And then five hundred years’ time, they'll wake up, because you can see their face poking out of the little glass. And then the rest of the body’s... And that's what's happening here. You've got a face poking out of them, you know, staring out.

00:10:08 Campbell

Greg, that's brilliant. No one has ever made that analogy in the run of time I've had these on display.

00:10:18 Greg

But do you know what I mean? Like, it looks like they've been put into a little pod and they're waiting, they're waiting to wake up again.

00:10:25 Campbell

And, do you know what, they have, in a way. And I think that's why these mummified people, especially, but mummies in general are so popular, because which of us will be remembered fifty years, a hundred years after we die? After our children die, our grandchildren? We won't, unless, like you, Greg, you’re a famous author, your name will live on. But for most of us, there's a real existential, you know, thought about your life after death. These people have got what they wanted, in a way. Playing by the rules they set for themselves, I suspect actually that the analogy of being put into suspended animation is what happened. They are, in a way, in this suspended animation and they will be as young as the portrait is, magically, forever. As long as the portrait survives.

00:11:27 Greg

I was going to say as long as you don't put it out in the sunshine and suddenly the portrait fades away and bye, bye, god. Wow. Amazing. What a beautiful thing.