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CHAPTER ONE

Invitation

In the chapter devoted to Michelangelo in *Studies in Iconology*, Erwin Panofsky places the tomb of Julius II within the genealogy of funerary art, which, he says, “has manifested the metaphysical beliefs of man more directly and unequivocally than any other form of artistic expression.” That genealogy begins with the Egyptians, whose “prospective and magical” funerary art stands in contrast to the “retrospective and representational” art of the Greeks.² The act of sending the dead into their own kingdom, by which the deceased becomes a kind of traveler, is thus clearly distinct from the farewell to the living that encapsulates the Greek worldview. While these are admittedly broad strokes, against the backdrop of an origin story, they delineate two very different approaches to death: One insists (or wagers) on continuity, as if the human line carried on beyond death; the other emphasizes the irreversible rift death brings.

Yet from the depths of antiquity, strange artifacts emerge — the Fayum portraits — that we all recognize as Greek and Egyptian. Alongside the swathes of bandages that wrapped the mummies, these portraits take their place within the long tradition of Egyptian funerary practices. What each one shows, however, is not a mere symbolic envelope destined to receive a new breath of life in the other world; it is the individuated image of someone who was once alive. Because they lie at the crossroads of two civilizations



Figure 1.2. Eudaimonis, 130–150 CE, originally from Antinoöpolis [?] (Middle Egypt), encaustic on lime wood, linen bandages. © 2007 Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY (photo: Christian Décamps).

and, in one seemingly spontaneous gesture, blend distinct traditions of funerary symbolism and pictorial mimesis, the Fayum portraits represent an enigma — indeed, for us who are seeing them nearly two millennia after they were painted, a kind of hermeneutic knot. The need to untangle this knot is even greater given that the full corpus of these portraits, some thousand artifacts scattered throughout museums worldwide, constitutes an exceptional ensemble in at least three respects.

Exceptional, first of all, because these paintings are the oldest known portraits of individuals. Here “portrait” should be understood in its modern sense: an exact representation — or an attempt at one — of a real person living or dead, a human being of neither royal nor divine rank.

Exceptional, furthermore, because along with the wall paintings of Pompeii, they constitute the only collection of ancient Greek or Roman paintings that we still possess. Indeed, for us, such “ancient painting” will remain forever conjectural, since it has largely disap-



Figure 1.3. Man, early second century CE. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

peared. It is only through ancient literary testimony and all-too-rare traces that we can strive to glimpse it, even if happy surprises — such as the discovery of the royal tombs of Vergina and Macedonia — cannot be ruled out in the future.

Exceptional, I would finally add, in their own right, independent of art or world history: not as artworks or mere traces, but as a deeply moving, discontinuous frieze of faces, a whole horizon of eyes. To borrow Panofsky's dichotomy, neither the faces' "future" (insofar as they are Egyptian) nor their "past" (insofar as they are Greek) predominates; rather, they seem to look at us from an eternal present. It is because they look this way, having seemingly escaped their death and their life, that we desire to know where they come from, and why, in their time, they were given this form that moves and unsettles us (figs. 1.1–1.3).

"At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The



Figure 1.4. Man, late second century CE.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

INVITATION

historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table,” writes Walter Benjamin.³ Here, with the Fayum portraits, the dead almost seem to have invited themselves, not urgently or stridently, but simply through the insistence of their gaze. These portraits confront us with faces that look at us from a neutral place beyond life or death, and they do so from a distant past that reaches our present as if by miracle. Eternally suspended, quixotically sent on their way, they stand before us in a nearness seldom felt. To see a face up close and scrutinize it for several minutes — probing its depths, delighting in its appearance, in the way its appearance is tied to the most radical and mysterious difference — is, although connected to daily life, nevertheless peculiar to the context of intimacy or love. Yet despite everything, and outside of that context, these faces are here and refuse to shy away. Just like any portraits, some will say. Yes, perhaps — *but these are the first*. Beyond their almost haunting formal unity, what comes across is singularity as such, the infinite plural of finite existences.

The representation of a single face is, in effect, the reproduction of singularity itself: the singularity of each face, the singularity of the fact that these faces should exist or have existed at all, and that each one should have been the first and last, the only one of its kind, to travel through life and be sent into death looking just so. Fayum art makes it seem as though the power to apply the finishing touch, previously the sole province of gods and kings, was henceforth granted to all men, though discreetly and beyond any possible appropriation — a skin, a pigment, a complexion. With these faces, something of the great dream of the Nile is preserved. It begins to float, almost outside any religious framework, in a ritual permanence where the sacred, the link between life and death, becomes a kind of emulsion: that muted, uniform light in which eyes open wide (fig. 1.4).



Figure 2.1. Portrait, thought to be of the baker Terentius Neo and his wife, first century CE, originally from Pompeii, fresco, h. 58 cm. Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli, Naples.

CHAPTER TWO

**“You Have Painted the Dead Picture
of What Is Dead”**

For us, the existence of portraits is self-evident. We must almost strain to imagine a time when they didn't exist, or when they did exist but were contested. Pliny the Elder's famous passage crediting a young Corinthian woman with inventing portraiture has less to do with historical truth than with creating a founding myth—an extraordinarily compelling myth, as it happens, and one to which I will return.¹ What interests me in the meantime, however, is the ancients' apparent need to pinpoint the origins of a practice that had become common among them. Ancient Greek portraiture, if ever such a thing existed, has been lost. Though we can infer nothing certain about the number of portraits or how they were used, we can affirm that the notion of representing a human being in their ephemeral truth and preserving their appearance for posterity had become, if not widespread, then at least familiar in the Hellenistic period. Indeed, debates about idealized portraiture (Zeuxis's famous composite method) would be essentially meaningless unless another mode—strictly mimetic, even realist—was already imaginable. By the time of the Fayum, that is, in the first few centuries of the Common Era, the practice of portraiture was attested;² the slightly older testimony of Pliny the Elder (who, oddly enough, laments the art's decline) confirms it had existed for some time.³ Beyond literary testimony, at least two well-known examples survive from Pompeii:

a portrait of a baker and his wife (fig. 2.1, stylistically so close to the Fayum portraits) and a doubtless more idealized portrait of a young woman holding several tablets and a reed pen, once thought to be the likeness of the poet Sappho.

Among the ancient accounts, one is especially valuable, not least because it dates from the second century and is thus strictly contemporaneous with the Fayum portraits. Of Christian origin, it is taken from the apocryphal Acts of John, which André Grabar cites and comments on in his indispensable book on the evolution of Christian iconography.⁴ The story tells how Lycomedes, one of John's disciples, was noticed hiding away in his room from time to time. The reason for these disappearances turned out to be a portrait of John, which Lycomedes had secretly commissioned from a painter friend and worshiped at an altar with candles and garlands. Upon seeing the image, John accused Lycomedes of idolatry. Comparing the portrait with his reflection in the mirror and recognizing that the likeness was of himself and not an idol (for he had never before seen his own objectified image), John remained unmoved, despite Lycomedes's insistence that the object of his reverence was only the "good guide" that John had been for him. John's words to Lycomedes are extraordinary: "But what you have done now is childish and imperfect: *you have painted the dead picture of what is dead.*"⁵ One cannot help recalling Plotinus's refusal to have his portrait painted, recorded by Porphyry: "Isn't it enough that I have to bear this image with which Nature has covered us? Must I also consent to leaving behind me an image of that image — this one even longer-lasting — as if it were an image of something worth seeing?"⁶

With Plotinus, as with John, we return to another era and leave the mental space in which a portrait of a living person, even a portrait intended for death, could be both conceivable and desirable. Yet their attitude, whether already Christian or stemming from the early seeds of Christianity at the heart of Neoplatonic tradition, is illuminating. The rejection of portraiture functions as a negative pole that discloses its opposite. It reminds us that portraiture did

not suddenly emerge once and for all and that it can be an active genre of painting only within a framework of thought that enables and acknowledges it. The Fayum portraits can thus be understood as a particularly significant moment on the long road that leads from masks to faces, and from there to the iconic repetition of features and types. A late but powerful pulse emanating from the mimetic tradition—first of Greek, then of Roman art—the portraits are simultaneously linked to the most ancient funerary symbolism, dominated by the question of masks and doubles, and to a new symbolism no longer of the mask but of the unindividuated face as it would appear in Coptic and Byzantine art.

"You have painted the dead picture of what is dead." Had Lycomedes been a Greek from Egypt, he might have replied to John that he knew perfectly well what he had done. As for us, all these centuries later, we could tell John that he was right, while also regretting (if the anecdote is true) that his portrait should have been lost. It is precisely because the portrait is of a dead man, a being-toward-death, that it presents itself to us not as a simple outer layer of what once was but as a manifestation of essence. "There is no portrait except of essence," writes Louis Marin about the portraiture of Philippe de Champaigne (for Christianity, of course, would eventually claim portraiture for its own), and he reminds us that Aristotle's definition of essence, *to ti ên einai*, means "what it was to be."⁷ By virtue of their destination—the mummy and the tomb—the Fayum portraits, even the most "naïve" among them, are steeped in the knowledge of death accompanying life. They tell us "what it was to be," to be alive in that time and place. Without anecdotes, details, or dramatization, they fold back the surface over essence. Forming a vast chain, they invite themselves to the banquet one by one; in them the living are dead, and the dead become the living.

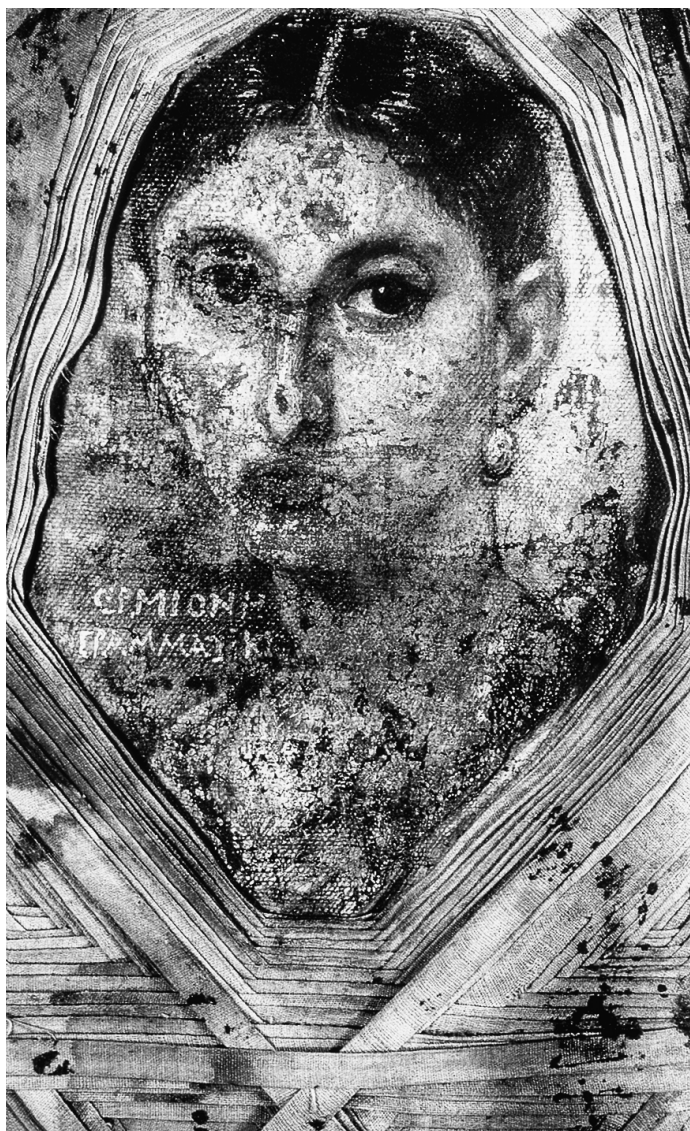


Figure 3.1. Hermione Grammatike, first century CE, originally from Hawara (Fayum), paint on linen, plaster, linen bandages, 30.5×21 cm. With permission from The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, University of Cambridge.

CHAPTER THREE

A Silent Population

The Fayum portraits are portraits in the strictest sense: They present a frontal bust, bringing to life these “images of images.” Except for shrouds or stucco paintings that often accompany a portrait with more or less “translated,” partly decorative mythological figures, very few iconographic elements are added to the face in its plain, head-on representation. Clothes, hairstyles, jewelry, and the occasional votive inscription let us infer that a given man was a soldier, or that a woman was likely painted during the Nerva-Antonine or Severan dynasty. Whether by the label accompanying the mummy according to Egyptian custom (when the portrait remains with the mummy) or by an inscription, we can sometimes know the model’s name — Artemidorus, Eirene, Demetrios, Isarous, Aline, Markos, Isidora — and, more rarely, their name and profession, as with Hermione Grammatike, “teacher,” who lived under the emperor Tiberius (fig. 3.1). Just as often, however, the sitters remain anonymous. Some have acquired nicknames, such as “Zenobia” in the National Archaeological Museum of Florence (so called because her buyer thought she resembled his wife, the daughter of the composer Luigi Cherubini) or the young woman known as “the European,” one of the Louvre’s treasures (figs. 3.2–3.3). This is all there is, though, and it isn’t much: no network of symbols, and practically no objects beyond the occasional garland of flowers or a



Figure 3.2. Young woman known as Zenobia, early third century CE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, Florence.



Figure 3.3. "The European," first half of second century CE, originally from Antinoöpolis [?] (Middle Egypt), encaustic on cedar wood, gold leaf, 42.5 × 24 cm. © Musée du Louvre, Paris/Art Resource, NY (photo: Erich Lessing).

small handheld bouquet. In a rare exception, some shrouds from Antinoöpolis depict a hand raised in blessing or holding an ankh — signs, perhaps, of Christian influence, especially given that these shrouds date to the early third century (fig. 3.4). In any case, such details never alter the nature of these portraits, whose focus remains the facial features and the gaze, and whose appearance is regular, even — this is no criticism — monotonous.

Whether encountered together in a museum's gallery, on the pages of a book, or in the mind's eye, the Fayum portraits appear as a population — in other words, a composite gathering of distinct individuals who nevertheless share something of a family resemblance.¹ The close framing and the absence of dramatic decor help make this population familiar to us. In their variety, ranging from Roman types to Levantine and even Nubian characteristics, the portraits represent a sample of a Mediterranean population eerily similar to today's. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that this population is a representation. Beyond the singularity of each face, differences or nuances reflect the painters as well as the models and prevailing styles as well as the motifs.

The faint air of melancholy indolence, even sadness, that emanates from the portraits as a whole does not preclude occasional variations, from a hint of a smile to something more anxious or frightened. Yet, to my mind, these variations are insignificant next to the portraits' prevailing tonality. These faces — perhaps reflecting a general characteristic of portraits across the ages — are all extraordinarily serious. Wherever they retreat to, wherever they look from, something fixes them there, boring into them. We do not know under what conditions these portraits were painted — whether from memory or during posed sittings. Such sittings may well have occurred, but they likely did not last very long. In any case, the resulting image is neither a snapshot nor a type. It is as if the portrait only had time to deposit itself, to become a portrait and nothing more. Though likely captured on the spot,

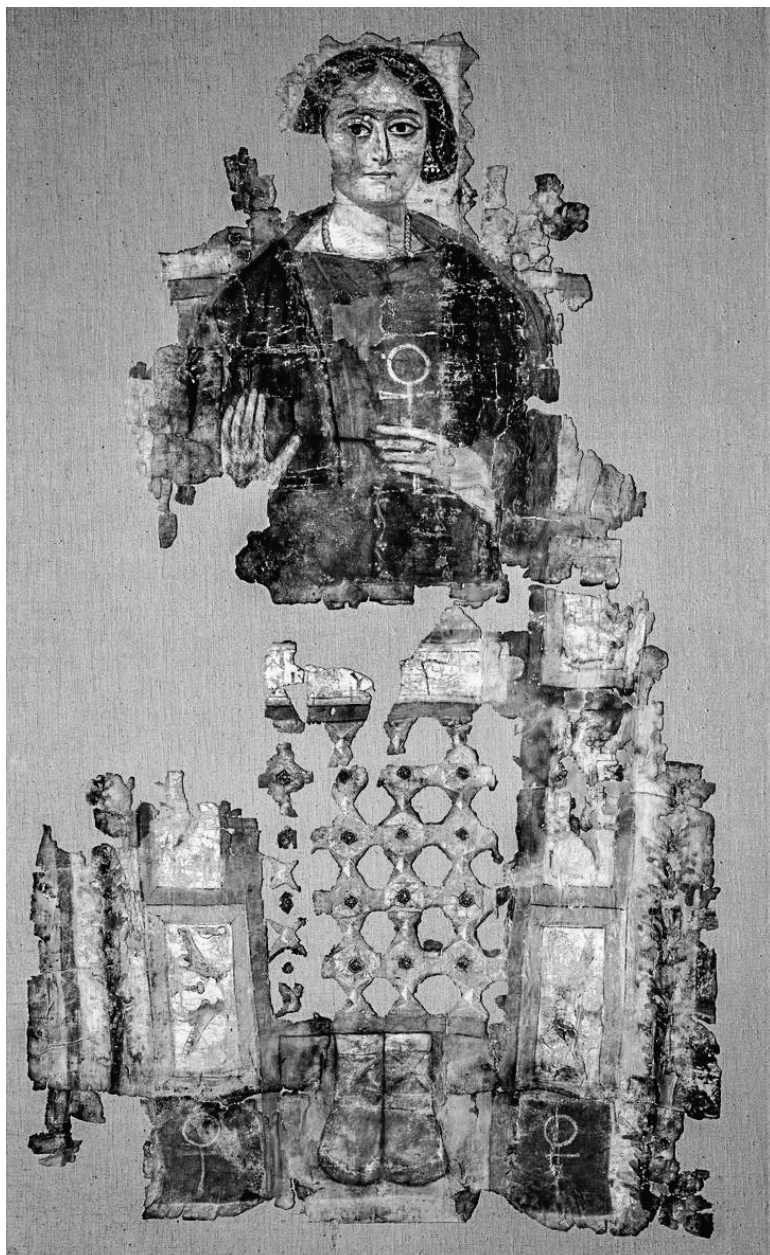


Figure 3.4. Shroud of Crispina, 225–250 CE, originally from Antinoöpolis (Middle Egypt), distemper on linen, gold leaf, 198×96 cm. © Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

these faces betray no impatience. They stand at the fringe of time, in a retreat that is no longer their life and not yet their death. They expect nothing; they are simply there — without gravity or lightness, neither passing nor fading — infinitely resistant. Refusing all affectation or pretense, they are immune to complicity, even charm. What they offer us they keep to themselves at the same time. They possess a remarkable prudence and modesty. They do not try to speak or express themselves; they exist in and with silence, in the “forever” of a silence that escapes their lives and beats against our own. These people were surely talkative, joyful, gossipy, seductive, malicious, troubled, playful, secretive, long-winded; but now — and this “now” has lasted almost two thousand years — they remain silently there, awaiting nothing and no one. Rooted before death, its presence signaled by the painter at work, they unflinchingly welcome the light of life, that light which, in painting, is found in shadows and hues, in crimson, in the sparkle of the eyes. To say that they see us or look at us, as I have already done and will likely keep doing, is just an obligatory figure of speech. Quite simply, to us who look at them, they indicate that they, too, could once see, that they were once alive with eyes open. And in their gaze, confident or worried, often sad or severe, lies the acute awareness that one day they would no longer see or breathe, that one day soon they would cross over into something that no human has ever known. The mystery before them is already upon them, in them. They reside within it. This is what their eyes tell us, wide-open eyes that do not see us and are blind to our time.

What I am trying to characterize here is a representative sample of these faces, their overall tone and mode of existence. Only then can we turn to painting, with its technique, refinements, startling mastery, and anomalies. When I speak of an overall tone, I do not mean a norm; when I speak of anomalies, I do not refer to departures from that tone, which remains constant throughout — a bath in which all these faces are dipped. Beyond that unity, however, one

soon notices divergences in style, desire, and quality. They can be attributed to multiple factors: distinct workshop styles, local or family traditions, popular or “Eastern” influences, a correlation between the quality of the execution and the cost of the commission, or a broad stylistic evolution away from mimetic rigor toward greater stylization. Since we know next to nothing about the painters who created these portraits, we must rely on chronology. Yet even if chronology can roughly delineate the arc of time over which the Fayum portraits extend, thanks in particular to feminine hairstyles that correspond to clearly dated Roman trends, it remains largely conjectural.² Although different styles quite possibly coexisted—meaning that highly detailed portraits were likely contemporaneous with other more loosely painted ones; or even if we reject such criteria as dangerously qualitative and consider instead that the strictly mimetic style long vied with a more schematic one—I see no reason to discard the hypothesis of a slow, steady evolution toward pre-Byzantine schematization.

This evolution, corresponding to late antiquity’s broader movement toward a gradual loss of figurative desire and a weakened mimetic pulse, can be retraced, bearing in mind that it is purely indicative. Portraits such as that of Eirene or of a priest of Serapis (recognizable by his diadem’s seven-pointed star, a sign of the Greco-Egyptian god), dating respectively to the early decades of the first century and to the mid-second, appear to us to belong fully to “Greek” or “Roman” antiquity (figs. 3.5–3.6). A portrait such as that of the young woman in yellow (variously dated back to the Nerva-Antonine dynasty by Euphrosyne Doxiadis and to the reign of Constantius or Julian—a full two centuries later!—by Klaus Parlasca and Jacques-Édouard Berger), though no less “antique,” has nonetheless lost some of the model’s force (fig. 3.7). With its distinctive allure, it seems well on the way to what would later be called Byzantine “flat figures.” Finally, a portrait such as the one in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens has almost ceased to be “antique” in our eyes. The mimetic desire or the ideal of resemblance that appeared

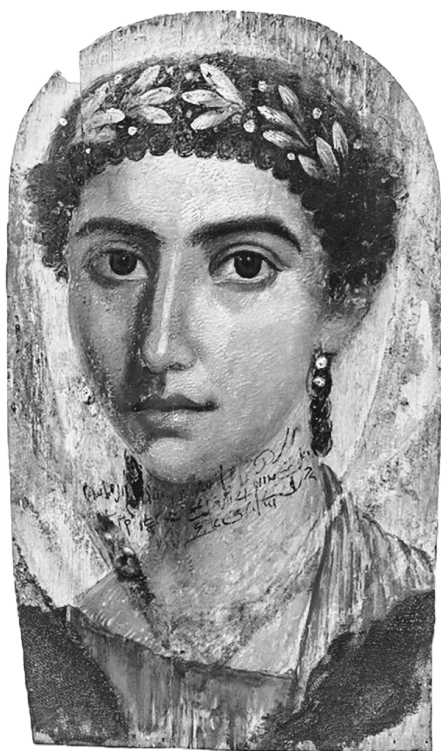


Figure 3.5. Eirene, 40–50 CE, wax paint on wood, 37.2 × 22.2 cm. Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart. License CC BY 4.0, (photo: H. Zwietasch).

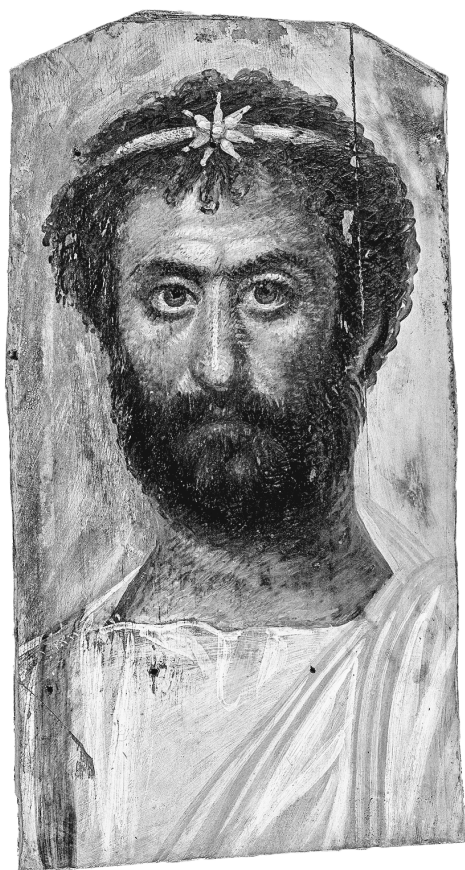


Figure 3.6. Priest of Sarapis, 140–160 CE, originally from Hawara (Fayum), encaustic on lime wood, 42.5 × 22.2 cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

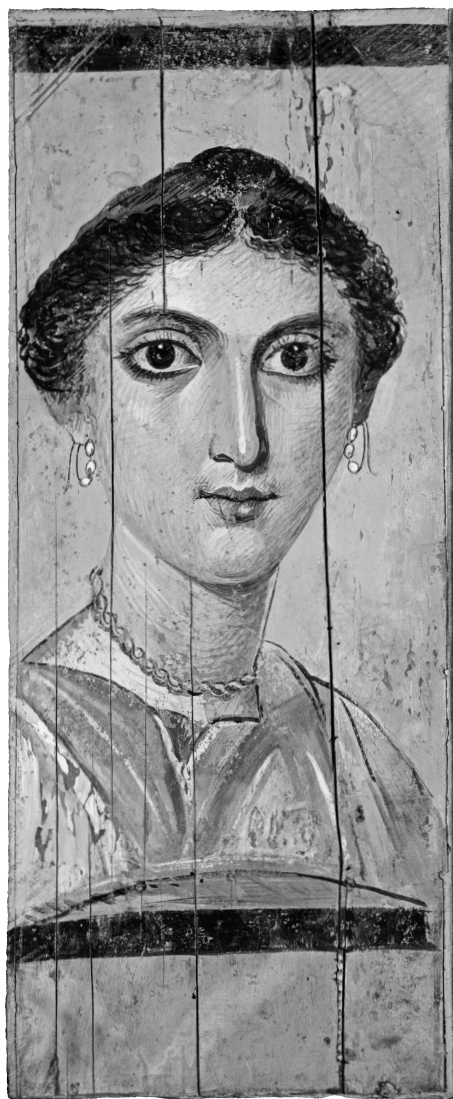


Figure 3.7. Young woman in yellow, fourth century CE, originally from the Memphite Necropolis (Lower Egypt), distemper on lime wood, 46 × 19 cm. © 2007 Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY (photo: Georges Poncet).

to animate Eirene's face has practically disappeared, yielding an emphatic linearity that abolishes almost all sense of volume.

This argument about the portraits' evolution primarily concerns the end of the period, though it could just as well address the beginning; it would involve the question of masks, to which we will return. Indeed, one can point to late masks contemporaneous with the portraits, notably Albert Gayet's abundant haul taken from Antinoöpolis.³ These striking masks individuate features as fully as the portraits, despite frequently having a more naive or jovial quality, both in their workmanship and the way they appear to be awakened from sleep (figs. 3.8–3.9). In his book on the Antinoöpolis portraits, Émile Guimet recounts how museum staff, struck by one woman's vivacious features, took to calling her "the young lady of Montmartre." The nickname spontaneously confirms the reality and intensity of the individuation by which these masks avoid strict schematism, crossing a symbolic threshold identical to that of the painted portraits. Extended with a kind of breastplate, the masks were attached to the mummy by cords. It is quite possible that, though derived from an Alexandrian tradition with deeper Egyptian antecedents, they were also influenced by portraits. Nothing prevents us from supposing that they were conceived in the same workshops by the same artists, responding, as it were, to a different kind of demand from the clientele. However, the affirmative force of the mimetic image remains stronger in the painted portraits, which achieve it in a two-dimensional space that appears to us more "modern." To speak of a shift (or a slippage) from mask to portrait, then later of a gradual diminishing of figurative desire in both the painted portraits and masks, or portrait masks, as they should be called, is to evoke a trend, an accentuation, a rise; it is not to deny the possibility of coexistence.

In art history, breaks from the past are defined statistically whenever a given trend is reversed. By contrast, the overall evolution is an irregular slide, comparable to continental drift—a shifting of cultural plates. As Henri-Irénée Marrou writes, "The historical artifact has a polyphonic structure, and in the minds of any



Figure 3.8. Plaster mask of a woman, late second or early third century CE, originally from Antinoöpolis [?] (Middle Egypt), painted plaster, eyes inlaid with enamel, 59×29.5 cm. Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble.

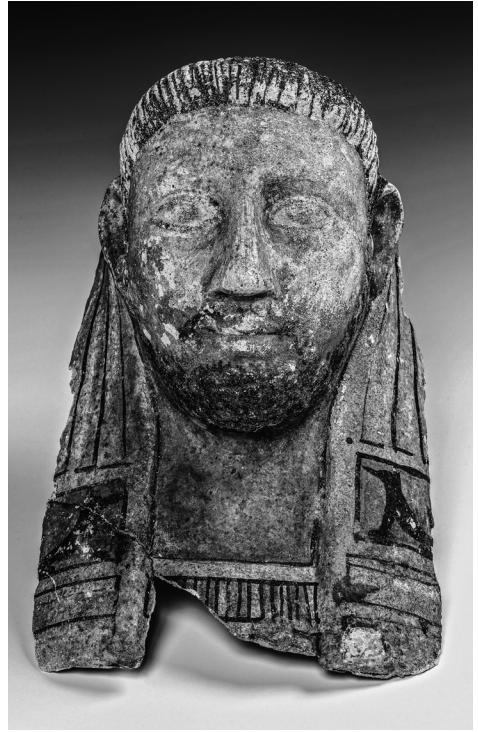


Figure 3.9. Funerary plaster mask, second century CE, molded stucco or plaster, paint, 30.6×19.5 cm. © Musée Bonnat-Helleu, Bayonne (photo: A. Vaquero).

one era . . . are layered a dominant theme, the still-perceptible echo of the receding theme, and a sketch of the theme that will come to assert itself in time.”⁴

Within such a polyphony, one plainly hears the choral effect of the Fayum portraits, whose unity I have tried to emphasize (figs. 3.10–3.13). Yet this unity, in which the portraits represent a unanimous deposit and a single bequest, does not imply uniformity. Between an essentially Western tradition—the tradition of the West itself—and an East that was diffuse but alive, between ancient ritual origins and the emergence of Christianity, and against the backdrop of a complex, uninhibited religious syncretism, the Fayum portraits fully embody a transitional period. The transition was prolonged, involving the survival or extension of features from earlier usages (faces replaced masks while preserving some of their aspects) and the emergence of other features that would only later be liberated and fully active in Coptic and Byzantine art. At the heart of this transition, the “dominant theme,” to use Marrou’s expression, is the face as it appears, deepens, breathes, and looks out from the frame of imitative painting. That it should assume many forms and tend either toward its provenance (the mask) or its descendence (the face of the icon) is not only possible but inevitable. In any case, the face constitutes the *event* of the Fayum portraits.

I do not say this with any notion of (or yearning for) “progress,” and it would be absurd—shaped as we are by mimesis and its ebb, by its twin poles of resistance and retreat—to speak of decadence whenever the figure wanes or remains static. We simply have to ask why, in Roman Egypt, to accompany their dead selves into an ambiguous afterlife, people felt the need to have their own portraits painted in a way that makes them so vividly alive and so “modern”: a silent, enigmatic population that, because it asks nothing and makes no reply, seems at once fraternal and far away, and, in its theological discreetness, so delicately human.



Figure 3.10. Young man, first century CE, originally from Hawara (Fayum), encaustic on wood, 43.5×23 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrus-sammlung, Berlin.

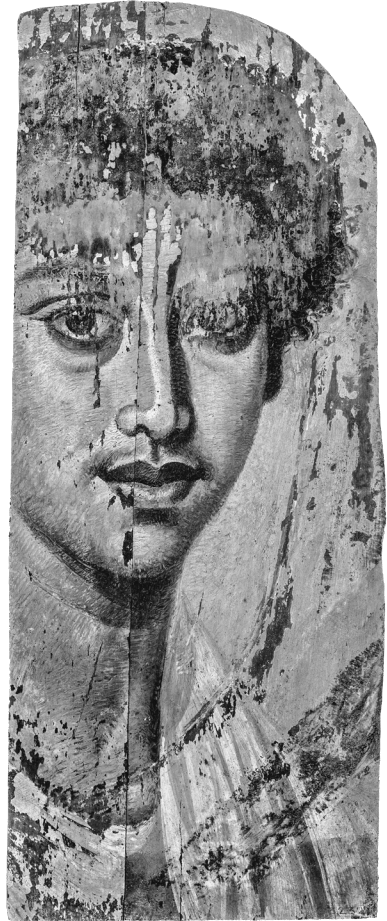


Figure 3.11. Young man, second century CE, encaustic on wood. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
© DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY
(photo: S. Vannini).

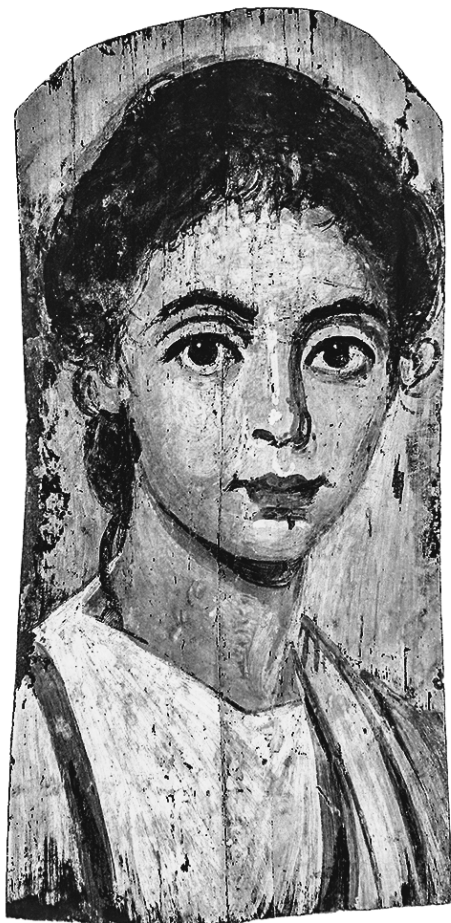


Figure 3.12. Young man, first half of second century CE, originally from the Fayum, wax distemper on wood, 33.5×17.5 cm. bpk Bildagentur/Antikensammlung/ Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin/Art Resource, NY (photo: Johannes Laurentius).

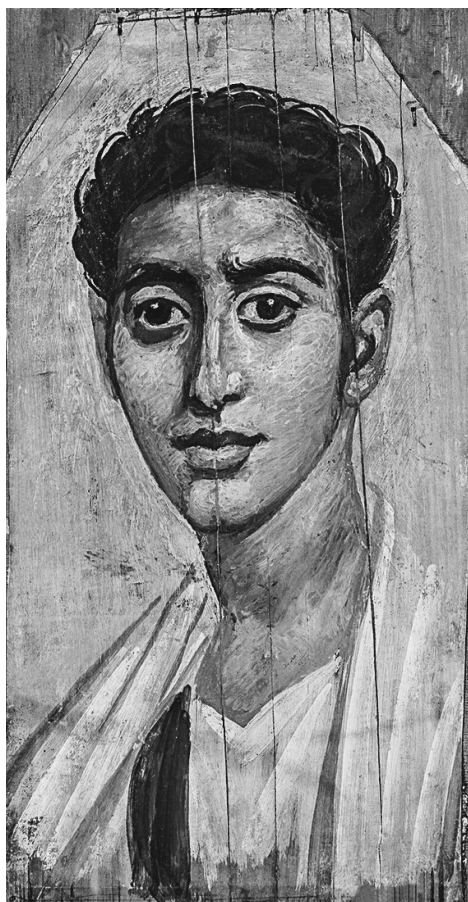


Figure 3.13. Young man, late first century CE, originally from the Fayum, encaustic on wood, 39.4×20.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



Figure 4.1. Funerary shroud, Egyptian, Roman Imperial Period, mid–late first century CE, painted linen, 115×88.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Martha A. Willcomb Fund 50.650. © 2026 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Workshop

We know almost nothing of the painters themselves or of the places where they practiced their art, as I have noted. Still, from the portraits' materiality and the literary traces concerning ancient painting in general, we can at least determine the media, tools, and materials they used.

Most of the Fayum portraits were painted on thin wooden panels — often extremely thin — with the grain running vertically. The woods included sycamore and acacia, along with imported varieties such as cypress and lime. These small panels were often coated with a layer of finely ground stucco, which provided a surface for the artist's sketches. Some of these sketches now peek through the worn pictorial surface, while others appear on the back of the panels.¹ For the shrouds, painters explicitly employed linen, either in its pure form or lightly coated with stucco. The wooden panels were inserted at head height in a tight swathe of bandages — an intricate woven lattice that produced striking decorative effects — while the shrouds covered the entire body, maintaining the face in its natural position (figs. 4.1–4.3). The sarcophagus of Artemidorus, richly ornate and exceptionally luxurious, shows the culmination of these practices: a life-sized portrait set in place, looming forth as if a window had been pierced in the symbolic edifice (fig. 4.4).



Figure 4.2a–b. Man, 25–75 CE, originally from Hawara (Fayum), encaustic on linen, l. 170 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (photos: Ole Haupt).



Figure 4.3. Shroud of Markos, 225–250 CE, originally from Antinoöpolis (Middle Egypt), paint, gold leaf, linen, stucco. © 2003 Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais/ Art Resource, NY (photo: Georges Poncet).

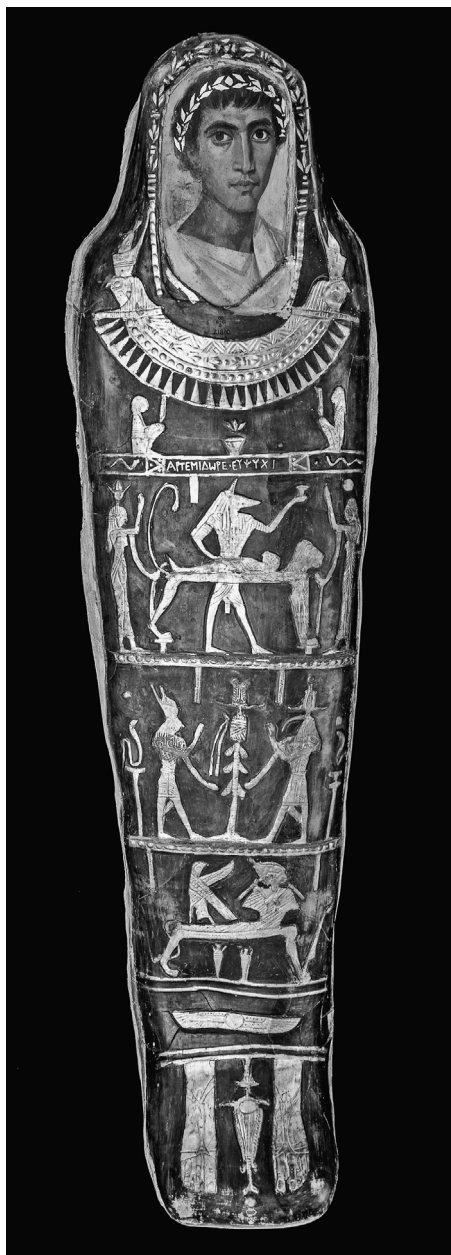


Figure 4.4. Sarcophagus of Artemidorus, second century CE, originally from Hawara (Fayum), encaustic on lime wood, linen [?], plaster, gold leaf, l. 171 cm.
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The painters employed two different techniques: encaustic painting and tempera. Precisely how the encaustic technique was applied has long been debated, but by the Fayum era this practice was firmly established. Although wax seems absent from Egyptian tradition, the Greeks are known to have used it in painting. Pliny remarks, “It is not agreed who was the inventor of painting in wax and of designs in encaustic,” though he suggests the practice dates back centuries.² The technique certainly existed in Plato’s time: in the *Timaeus*, Critias recalls that a story heard long ago — the story of Atlantis, as it happens — has “stayed in [his] mind indelibly like an encaustic picture.”³ Plutarch, in a passage cited by Adolphe Reinach in *La peinture ancienne*, also reflects on the indelibility and solidity of wax painting: “It is as though our sight painted upon wet plaster all the fancies that come to it, so quickly do they fade and vanish from the mind; yet the images of those whom one loves remain burned there like the figures painted by encaustic technique; they leave shapes in memory that move and live and speak and remain forever.”⁴ *Cera punica*, with its beeswax base, could be applied hot or cold, and was mixed with pigments using a hard tool (the *cauterium*) or a plant-fiber brush. As in any era, there were many tricks and workshop secrets, countless variations in the use of these materials and tools. Painters likewise employed different binding agents, depending on whether the wax was applied hot or cold. Tempera, meanwhile, closely resembled the modern technique of the same name: Colors were diluted in water, to which a wide variety of adhesives such as resin, gum arabic, or egg white were then added.⁵

The pigments themselves were formed into small loaves or ingots. In *Natural History*, Pliny offers an impressive catalog of all the conceivable origins of the pigments available in his day. However, it is unlikely that the Fayum painters made use of such a wide and expensive range of colors. According to Euphrosyne Doxiadis, who is particularly attentive to this question, the typical palette was quite limited, built on four basic colors — white, black, yellow ochre, and red earth — with occasional additions, mainly for