

## Short Commentary

## Fayoum Portraits

Fathi Habashi\*

Laval University, Quebec City, Canada

\*Corresponding author: Fathi Habashi, Laval University, Quebec City, Canada

Received: December 07, 2022; Accepted: December 14, 2022; Published: December 21, 2022

The Fayoum portraits owe their name to the place of their discovery in the necropolises of the Fayoum Oasis in the northwest of Egypt, 45 meters below sea level. The name Fayoum is Coptic, ΦΙΟΜ, and meaning “sea” probably because of the large lake there known today as Birket Quaroun. When the Arabs came to Egypt, it became Al Fayoum. The portraits date back to the first century AD, but the bulk belongs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and only a few to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Egypt became a Roman colony in 30 BC after the death of Cleopatra. Mostly Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Hebrews, and Syrians settled the region. Since, the time of Alexander the Great, the newcomers had been gradually merging with the local milieu. It soon rivalled Alexandria for the vineyards and gardens that abandoned on its soil, the most fertile in Egypt. It became a trade center for cereals and vegetables, and was renowned for its figs and roses. Fayoum also became an artistic center for Egypt, during the Greco-Roman period (Figure 1).

While preserving many of the original features of their own culture and way of life, the settlers who became rich owners of large estates borrowed much from the Egyptians. In particular all of them had at an early stage adopted the peculiar, characteristically Egyptian beliefs with regard to death and their meticulously elaborated rituals. The Egyptians attached tremendous importance to the belief in life after death, and developed the art of embalming to a high degree of perfection. The aims of embalming were to preserve the body and to make a lasting portrait of the deceased. The embalmed corps was carefully wrapped and enclosed in several richly decorated coffins

that were mummiform in shape. Badly preserved portraits were not included in this review.

Under the Romans (1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), the procedure became less elaborate. The mummy was carefully wrapped in a special way and the mummiform coffin was made simply of carton. Later, this technique was simplified further and a portrait of the deceased was attached to the mummy's head. Initially people used for this funeral rite portraits that had been painted from life, had been framed and hung in the houses. While the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans excelled in architecture, sculpture, and painting, the art of portraits was not common. A typical ancient Egyptian or a Greek painting of a human face was generally shown in the profile. The obvious analogy of the Fayoum portraits are the Roman wall paintings of the first centuries AD found in the ruins of Pompeii. The Greeks had also fresco in their temples, but none of them survived; they were described in ancient writings. What survived was the painted pottery, which were made to hold water, wine, or oil. The importance of the Fayoum paintings is that the portrait became an art that had religious significance and not for decorative purposes as the frescoes. When Christianity came to Egypt the pagan tradition was gradually abandoned and the art of the portrait took a different form namely that of the icons, i.e., a religious portrait; icon is a Greek word meaning portrait.

The Fayoum portraits are a fascinating collection of people who lived during the first two centuries AD. They have an important historical as well as artistic values. They are dispersed now in at least



Figure 1: Fayoum portraits.

one hundred museums worldwide either on display or in storage. Only few of the portraits in the books available are in colour and are usually arranged according to the countries holding them or some other archaeological criteria. The ankh or key of life is an ancient Egyptian symbol used in Egyptian art and writing to represent the word for “life”. It was used by at least three ancient mummies of ladies and one in men. Two special techniques were used in the Fayoum portraits. In both cases, the pigment was not mixed with water as in the frescoes but either in egg white or in wax and set by passing a hot iron over the painting. The last process became known as the “encaustic wax process”. After all, is it not true that there is life after death? Thanks to archaeologists who are digging the remains of the ancients and bringing them back to life. Here are their portraits filling museums and books. According to R. Shurinova of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, the Fayoum portraits are “a major contribution made by Egypt to the treasures of world culture”.

**Citation:**

Habashi F (2022) Fayoum Portraits. *Nanotechnol Adv Mater Sci* Volume 5(3): 1-2.

*Nanotechnol Adv Mater Sci*, Volume 5(3): 2-2, 2022