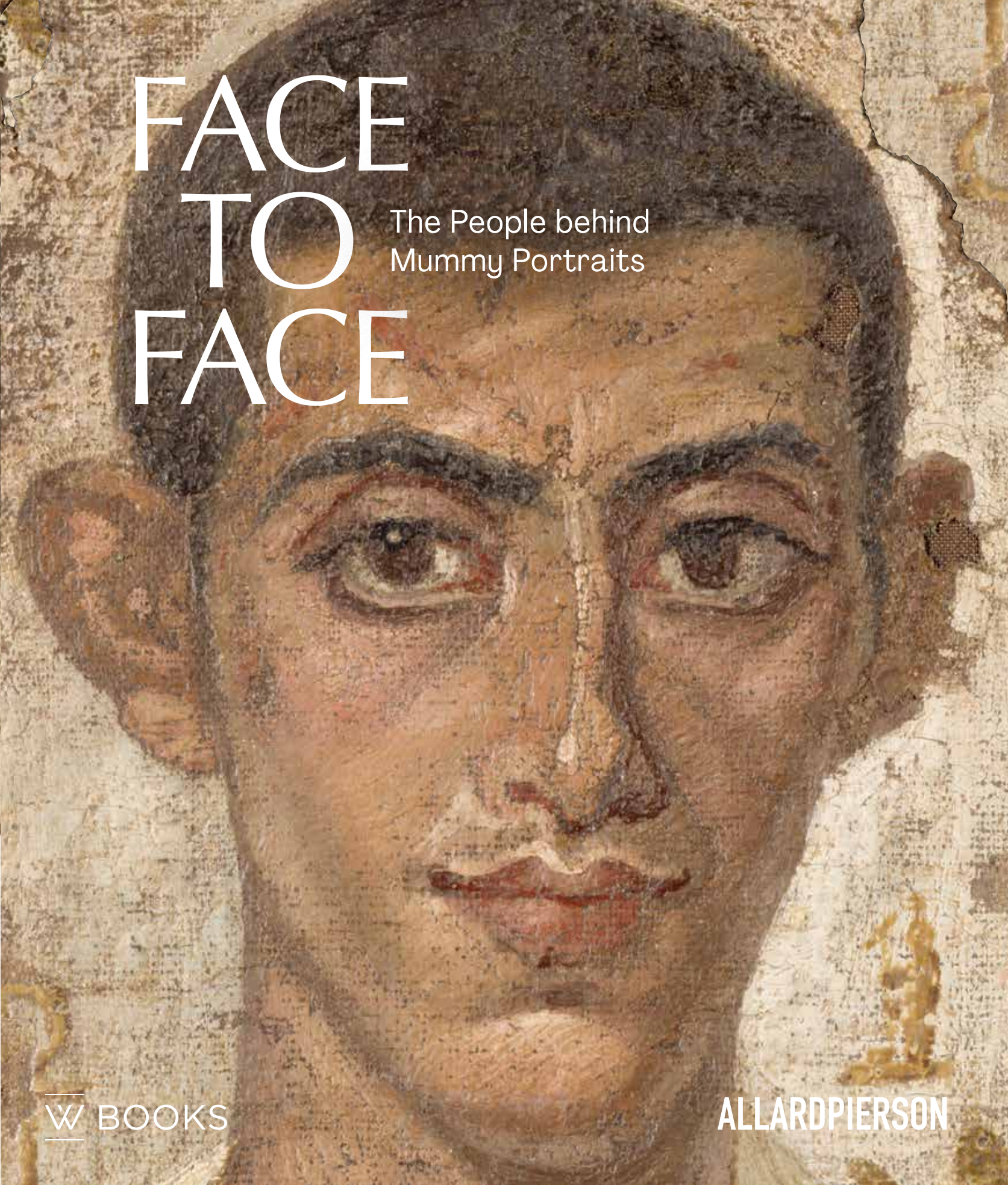

FACE TO FACE

The People behind Mummy Portraits

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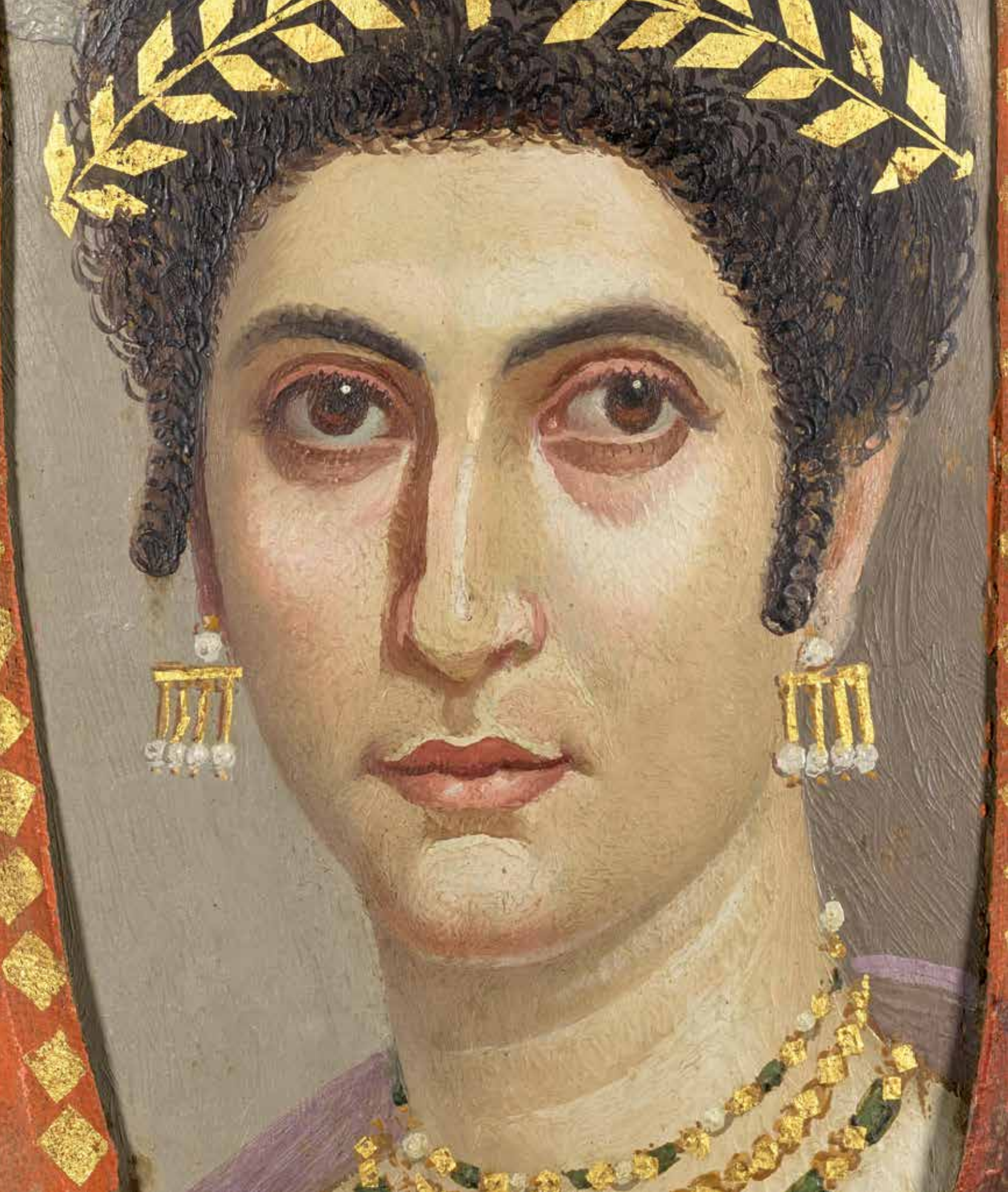

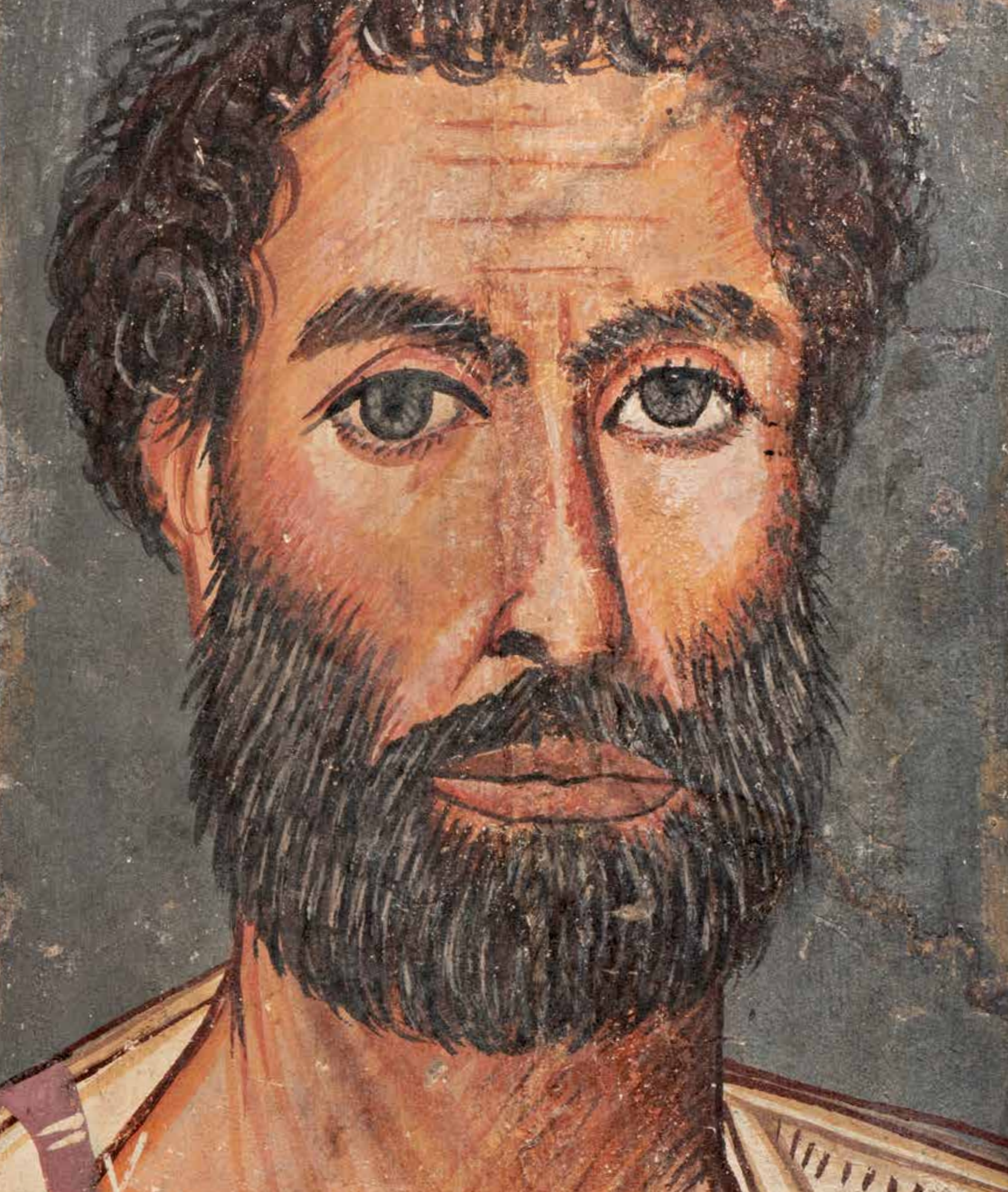

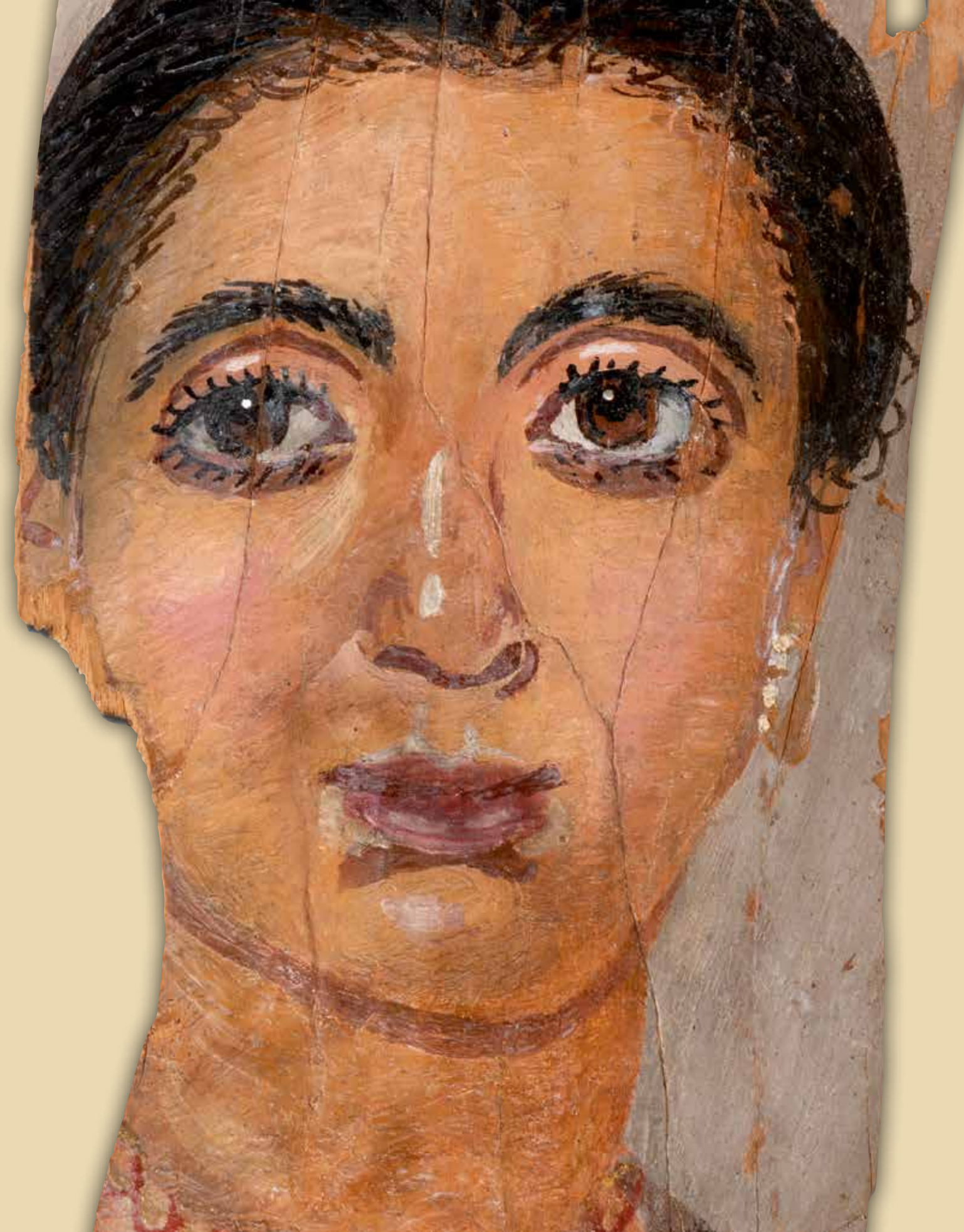

This publication by the Allard Pierson – the collections of the University of Amsterdam accompanies the exhibition *Face to Face: The People behind Mummy Portraits* (6 October 2023–24 February 2024). The exhibition presents the state of research on mummy portraits and interim results of the new technical-analysis project *Face to Face*, which was initiated by the Allard Pierson and lasts through June 2024. This project is a collaboration of the Allard Pierson, the Musée royal de Mariemont in Morlanwelz, the Museum August Kestner in Hannover, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen in Mannheim, the Sammlung des Ägyptologischen Instituts der Universität Heidelberg, the Netherlands Institute for Conservation+Art+Science+ (NICAS), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, and the University of Amsterdam. The *Face to Face* project relies on the about 50 international museums/research partners that constitute the APPEAR network led by the J. Paul Getty Museum.

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FACE TO FACE

The People behind Mummy Portraits

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Contents

THE PEOPLE BEHIND MUMMY PORTRAITS

PAINTERS, SUCCESSORS, COLLECTORS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, AND RESEARCHERS

Ben van den Bercken and Olaf E. Kaper

Mummy panel portraits are regarded as the oldest realistic painted portraits that we know from Egypt. They are in general dated from the first up to the fourth century AD and have been found in various locations in Egypt. Most of them have been found in the Fayum (a region to the southwest of Cairo) and they are for that reason also called Fayum portraits. They impress with their apparent realism and the penetrating gaze with which the person portrayed looks out at the viewer. We can sometimes discern facial expressions—something that offers an unusual glimpse into the emotions and characters of almost two thousand years ago.

Death and afterlife in Roman Egypt

Mummy panel portraits stand in a long line of portrayals of the deceased that we know from ancient Egypt, of coffins, masks and shrouds which encased or covered the dead. Mummification turned this person into an equal of Osiris, god of the dead, and was an attempt thereby to gain near divine status. At the same time, the portrait created a link between the world of the dead and that of the living. In this way, the deceased could receive offerings and accept food, and the next of kin could communicate with them through the portrait, at least up to the point of burial.

During the pharaonic period (2900–332 BC) these images were never really individualised. The more personal characteristics were a Roman accretion to an ancient Egyptian tradition that we see making an appearance from the first century AD. Graeco-Roman influences had previously become noticeable in Egypt, at the level of administration, the economy, trade and religious customs surrounding the dead. For example, in Alexandria, the capital of Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period, mummification, cremation and the interment of bodies occurred alongside each other. This melting pot of customs is an indication of the merging of different traditions outside the catacombs.

The painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1838–1912) became famous for his scenes from Classical Antiquity. This painting, *Love's Jewelled Fetter* from *c.*1894, shows two Roman ladies in a fantasy villa. A panel portrait of a man hangs behind them. Oil on panel, h. 63.5 cm, w. 44.5 cm.

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798–1801) and the subsequent deciphering of hieroglyphs in 1822 led not only to further expeditions in search of ancient Egyptian artefacts, along with increased Western visits to monuments and find locations in the country; the wider public in Europe and the United States also became more interested in ancient Egypt. Maurice-Henri Orange, *Bonaparte devant les pyramides contemplant la momie d'un roi (Bonaparte at the Pyramids Contemplating the Mummy of a King)*, 1895. Musée d'art et histoire de Granville.

Egyptian society during the Roman period (30 BC–AD 306) was highly stratified. Just as in other parts of the empire, Roman citizens occupied the top position on the social ladder, followed by the Greeks. Below there was a large group of Egyptians and others. Displaying cultural characteristics, whether or not they were part of one's own heritage, was an important way of laying claim to status and identity. Having your portrait painted on a panel that was destined to be attached to your body had the same function. The person portrayed revealed their background and status, through a certain hairstyle, jewellery, a sword belt, facial hair, clothing—and in one case an inscription—but more especially how they wished their next of kin to recall them. It is after all highly improbable that the Roman appearance of many men and women on the portraits signifies that those portrayed were in fact Roman citizens. Only after AD 212 did all the citizens of Egypt officially become Roman citizens. But long before then, Egyptians and Greeks dressed in the Roman style and imitated hairstyles that were common in Rome at the time.

Average life expectancy in ancient Egypt was considerably lower than it is today. Certain people of course became relatively old, as we occasionally read on the mummy labels, little wooden boards containing information about the deceased that could be attached to the mummified body. At the same time, child mortality was high, and adults attaining the age of 40 could be seen as 'elderly'. Death was an evident presence in everyday life, more than it is today, now that people get much older on average and death is enveloped in taboo. The ancient Egyptians sought immortality elsewhere than we do in our more secular society, and perhaps for this reason people dealt with

death differently. The panel portraits illustrate this. After being attached to the mummified bodies, the portraits probably continued to play a role in the world of the living before the deceased was finally interred. We assume that the next of kin could for some time continue to view their deceased family member in a chapel or another spot to honour and remember them.

Interplay and diversity

The panel portraits are living depictions of faces from Egypt and provide us with a picture of the upper middle classes during the Roman period in particular. They depict not only adult women and men, but also the elderly and children. In a single case, a profession may be deduced from attributes or a text, but specific cultural elements can be seen, such as a protective amulet in the shape of the goddess Isis around the neck, a child's lock of hair at the nape, or a victory wreath on the head. All of this tells us more about the deceased.

There is also diversity in the painters and/or the 'schools' that underlie the portraits. Much as with paintings from the seventeenth

Votive statuette of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead, who remained important in the Roman period as well. Bronze, 664–525 BC, h. 26.3 cm. Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam.

The Roman emperors were also kings of Egypt. On this relief stela, the Emperor Domitian, dressed as Pharaoh, makes an offering of a statuette of the goddess Maat to the sun god Re-Horakhty. Limestone, 81–96 AD, h. 41.5 cm. Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam.

'A GREAT SURPRISE'

MUMMY PANEL PORTRAITS AND THE MODERN VIEWER

Susan Walker

'You will no doubt have read in the newspapers of the portraits of the dead. They are painted in colour with wax; extremely well-preserved, and in the manner of Paolo Veronese. They were a great surprise, and the collection as a whole most interesting…'

(Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 14280, f. 540r–v, translation from Italian by the author)

So wrote the English collector of Christian and Jewish antiquities Charles Wilshere to the Vatican's archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi on 15 July 1888. Wilshere's response to the first major exhibition of mummy panel portraits, appropriately held in the Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly, was typical of those recorded at the time. Beyond the Italian master Veronese, the anonymous artists of Roman Egypt evoked for nineteenth-century viewers the Spanish seventeenth-century portraitist Diego Velázquez and their contemporaries the French William-Adolphe Bouguereau and the English Frederic Leighton. Another nineteenth-century British artist, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, included an image of a mummy portrait in his Orientalist painting *Love's Jewelled Fetter* (see p. 12). Oscar Wilde is said to have based *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) on a mummy portrait, but there is no surviving record of his attendance at the exhibition.

In the late 1880s, mummy portraits—hitherto only very rarely encountered in historic collections—became a public sensation equivalent to the discovery of Pompeii. The Egyptian Hall displayed for a month some thirty of the sixty mummy portraits, some still set in their mummies, recovered by the renowned Egyptologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) in his first season of excavations at Hawara in the Fayum. Timed to suit the London season, the show was given massive publicity in the quality press, for Petrie needed to sell his finds to raise money for future excavation work. Two thousand visitors came to admire the portraits. In 1887, the Vienna-based dealer and collector Theodor Graf (1840–1903) bought hundreds of mummy panel portraits looted from the Roman cemeteries of er-Rubayyât in the north-east Fayum (ancient Philadelphia). Catalogued by the Egyptologist Georg Ebers, ninety of these were exhibited in Vienna, various other European cities, and New York. Many were purchased by collectors, including Sigmund Freud (see p. 104).

Petrie, almost the only one working in the field using archaeological methods at this time, published information on the archaeological context of his finds of Roman mummy portraits. But their dispersal to European and American museums and private collections made the fresh and brilliantly coloured images vulnerable to intellectual as well as financial speculation. Mummy portraits were co-opted to support a vast range of interests: not only Orientalist art and literature, but also the more controversial new fields of ethnology, eugenics, psychology and sexology.

Advertisement for the first major exhibition of mummy portraits in London. *The Illustrated London News*, 30 June 1888.

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Portrait of a man (see p. 152) with the results of an MA-XRF scan for the element iron: light colours indicate a higher iron value, dark ones a low one or none. Museum August Kestner, Hannover, and the *Face to Face* research project.

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This portrait of a young woman, painted on her linen shroud, was found in a catacomb burial at er-Rubayyât in 2020. Kom Oushim Archaeological Magazine, Fayum.

Petrie and other scholars discovered many more portraits in subsequent campaigns in the Fayum, and more were found at sites in the Nile Valley. Graf's residue collection was sold in 1930, but mummy portraits did not then attract a similar level of public or scientific interest—perhaps because of growing concerns over speculative interpretations. From the 1960s, a comprehensive corpus was published in Italian by the German archaeologist Klaus Parlasca (1925–2020), but the public imagination was only rekindled in 1995, when the Greek painter Euphrosyne Doxiadis (b. 1946) published a well-illustrated, popular study of mummy panel portraits, postulating a direct connection with the technique used to paint Byzantine icons. In the 1990s, further studies by Barbara Borg and by curators of a series of successful exhibitions held in Europe and America helped to restore some context to the portraits and clarify the somewhat controversial dating sequence proposed by Parlasca. Christina Riggs' survey of *The Beautiful Burial in Ancient Egypt* (2005) restored an Egyptological perspective to burials in Roman Egypt.

Recent scientific advances in imaging and testing have brought new opportunities to the study of mummy portraits (see the contribution by Svoboda and Ganio). The long-established technical distinction between paintings made with encaustic wax and those painted in tempera now looks increasingly uncertain, for it appears that artists used both media for particular stages in completing a single painting, the most striking differences emerging from how the layered paint was handled.

All these developments have improved our understanding of mummy panel portraiture, but the most promising new initiative comes from current survey and excavation of the cemeteries at er-Rubayyât. The project reveals the likely context of mummy portraits dispersed more than a century ago in the sales of Graf's collection. Most significantly, the new finds remind us that we are dealing with representations of real individuals here, who lived and died—often far too young—in the more privileged communities of Roman Egypt.

PAINTED SHROUDS

THE LINEN COUNTERPART OF PANEL PORTRAITS

Caroline Thomas

The man depicted on this shroud (see also p. 178) is holding a decorated wine cup, a pink floral garland, and a myrtle branch. Found in Antinoopolis, the portrait shows the characteristic 'stepped' shape often associated with this site. The sitter is commonly referred to as Ammonios, although the origin of the name has been lost since the excavation; it was perhaps written on the parts of the shroud that are now missing. Encaustic paint on linen, c. AD 225–250; h. 52.5 cm, w. 29 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, excavated in Antinoöpolis by archaeologist Albert Gayet in 1904–1905, division of finds.

Funerary portraiture in Roman Egypt adopted a variety of forms, from stucco masks to wood or cartonnage plastrons, panels, and painted shrouds. We still do not know exactly which criteria led the elites of the period, whether of Egyptian, Graeco-Roman or mixed cultural background, to choose particular items for their funerary equipment. Whatever the substrate, though, some representations depict the deceased as an Osiris or a Hathor in the most obvious Pharaonic tradition, a clear plea for rebirth in the afterworld. In other cases, the portrait stems from the tradition of Egyptian mummy masks while imbued with the codes of Graeco-Roman portraiture. While the 'Fayum portraits' are painted on wood panels, we also know a significant number of linen shrouds depicting the deceased. Whereas panel portraits were possibly displayed in houses for some time before their reuse as funerary portraits on the mummified remains, the shrouds were likely painted around the time of death. In any case, both convey the same intensity of gaze so fascinating to the modern viewer.

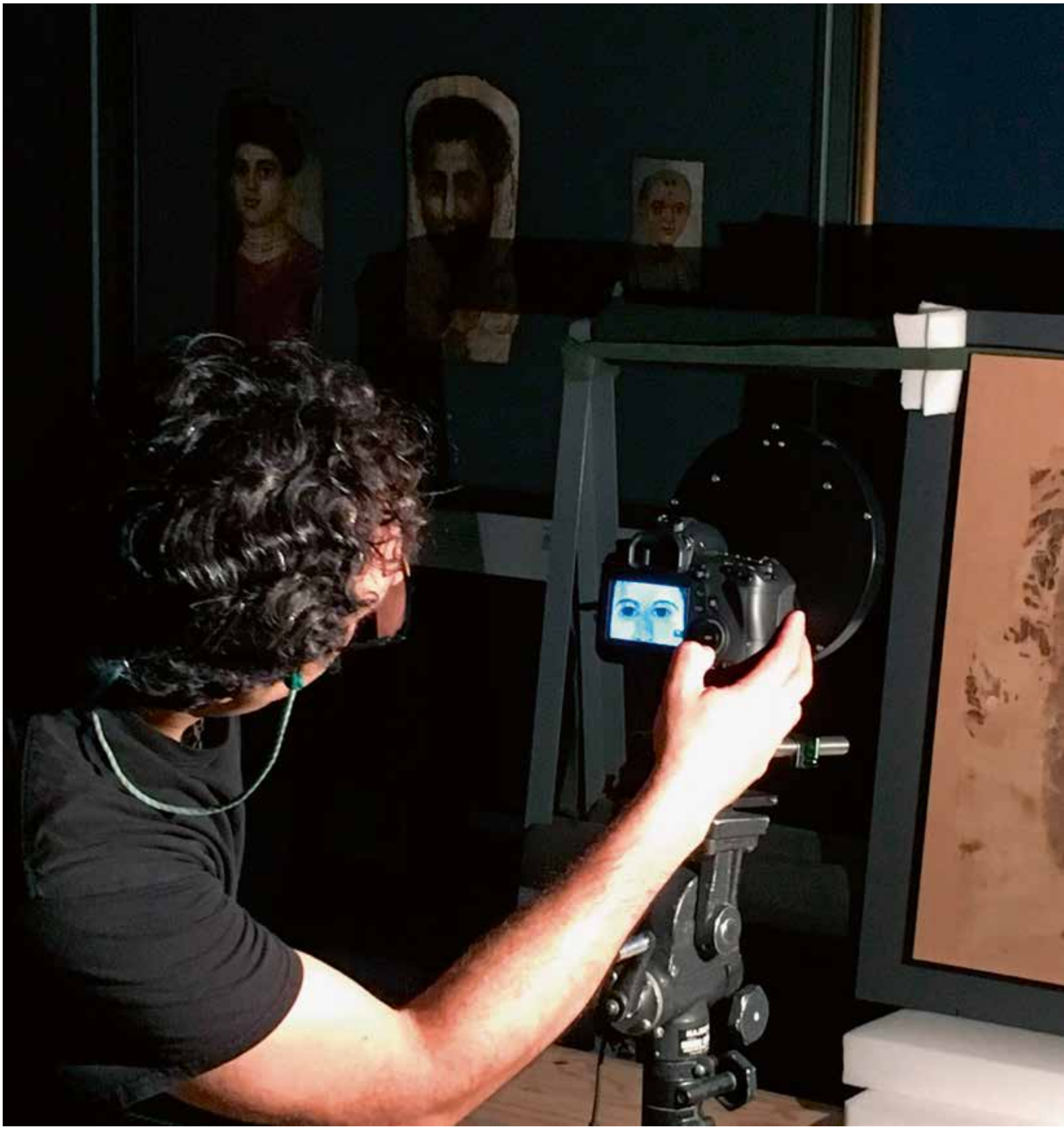
The portrait was a means of modelling the deceased on Osiris or Hathor while honouring their identity and status. The person is depicted as alive, wearing clothes and ornaments worthy of the social rank they wish to emphasise. Women, men, and children wear tunics and mantles, often decorated with the vertical stripes (*clavi*) signifying high status, with fashionable jewellery including emeralds and pearls. Even in such honorific portraits the traditional funerary dimension remains palpable. The person may be holding a wine cup or grapes, associated with Osiris/Dionysus and the funeral banquet, a pink floral garland evoking victory in the divine court of justice, *ankh* signs expressing life and rebirth, or a crown of myrtle recalling Greek funeral rites. Painted shrouds were often meant as a cover for the upper part of the body, to be attached with mummy wrappings like the panel portraits, but some body-length specimens have survived as well. In some cases, the iconography evokes the deceased in a coffin-shrine. The body-length shrouds from Antinoöpolis constitute an expressive group in this regard: they depict the dead in the costume of the living, richly dressed and adorned, standing in a shrine decorated with friezes containing uraeus cobras (a divine and royal symbol) and religious scenes in compartments. The deceased are thus represented in their social glory, while directly associated with the eternal cycles that ensure their rebirth in the afterlife. Although materially these portraits on linen differ from the ones on wood, they have much in common as well, but it is still hard to say whether they were made in the same or even related workshops. We know from the study of some body-length shrouds that they were painted on

The teenage boy on this mummy shroud is wearing a wreath of green leaves with berries painted in yellow. On his shoulder stands a small falcon representing the god Horus or Harpocrates, who accompanies the deceased to the underworld in bird form. Tempera on linen, AD 150–250; l. 62 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu.

The body of this man called Ammon, son of Antinoös, has been placed on boards and wrapped in a body-length painted shroud characteristic of Antinoöpolis in the 3rd century AD. It shows the deceased in the costume of the living, standing in a shrine with shutters and uraeus friezes, with divine scenes to the sides. Tempera and encaustic paint on linen, gilded stucco, c. AD 225–250; h. 162 cm, l. 44 cm, th. 27 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, excavated in Antinoöpolis by archaeologist Albert Gayet in 1907, former collection of the Musée Guimet.

a large piece of linen stretched vertically, which was then wrapped around the body and secured at the feet and head with other bits of cloth. Sometimes the body was laid on wooden boards that fixed the whole and gave it a specific shape, such as the 'shoulder shape' characteristic of Antinoöpolis' painted-shroud mummies. Like the panels, linen portraits could be painted in tempera or encaustic but it is worth noting that often most of the shroud was painted in tempera, with only the face and torso in encaustic—perhaps to confer a special aura to the nobler part of the representation. The chromatic palette seems to be identical with the extended one found in the panel portraits: it includes both locally sourced and imported materials, and traditional pigments as well as others that had more recently become available, such as indigo, in order to have more hues and nuances at one's disposal. Our appreciation of similarities and variations might improve as more linen portraits are analysed in the future.

Indeed, painted shrouds have not yet been studied as systematically and exhaustively as panel portraits, for a variety of reasons including their being fewer in number, their fragility, and their poor state of preservation. The many studies carried out in recent years, however, have provided us with an increasingly detailed knowledge of their iconography, style and techniques, enabling us to compare these data with those gleaned from panel portraits. Like the latter, in modern days they were often detached from the mummified remains and viewed as paintings rather than archaeological objects. Besides severing the link between the portrait and the mummy, these unfortunate actions have often deprived us of names and contexts. Nonetheless, these linen portraits remain as mesmerising as their counterparts on wood in the face-to-face encounter they offer.



DISCOVERY AND RESEARCH

Visible-induced visible luminescence (VIVL) imaging of a mummy portrait shroud in the Getty collection (see p. 93). J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu.

PORTRAIT OF A MAN POSSIBLY CALLED AMMONIOS

Encaustic paint on linen
H. 52.5 cm, l. 29 cm
C. AD 225–250

Antinoöpolis, excavated by Albert Gayet in 1904–1905; in the division of finds it went to the Louvre in 1905

Musée du Louvre, Paris, E 12581

The origin of this man's likely name, Ammonios, has been lost since Albert Gayet's excavations; maybe the name was written on the parts of the shroud that are now missing. Ammonios was a common name among the Hellenised elite of Roman Egypt. The man was depicted on his shroud holding an elaborately decorated wine cup and the pink floral garland often found on mummy panel portraits with the characteristic 'stepped' shape associated with Antinoöpolis. He wears two gold rings on his left hand and is framed by symbols: a cross on the left—not to be confused with the Christian one, as it refers to the Egyptian *ankh* sign—and a seated deity on the right that could be Maat. His face shows striking characteristics: an elongated face with close-cropped hair, protruding ears, thick lips, and a pronounced chin. CTH

PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

Tempera on sycomore-fig wood
H. 36 cm, l. 17 cm, th. 0.5 cm
C. AD 350

Er-Rubayyât/ancient Philadelphia, formerly collections of Theodor Graf and Arthur Sambon, donated to the Louvre by Alfred Sambon in 1951

Musée du Louvre, Paris, MND 2029

This woman is depicted in a frontal and unrealistic style that recalls earlier portraits from er-Rubayyât: she has droopy brown eyes, thick black eyebrows that join over a short nose, a long neck, and sagging shoulders. She wears a gold hairpin, a pair of earrings with two pearls, a gold chain necklace, and another one made of stones and gold beads. Her tunic and cloak are roughly rendered with lines and circles that evoke the folds of the fabric on the chest. Because of its crudity and a hairstyle associated with Fausta (*c.*289–326), Emperor Constantine's wife, it has been dated around AD 350. This would make it one of the last mummy portraits. It belongs to a group of portraits that was reportedly found at er-Rubayyât (ancient Philadelphia) by agents of Theodor Graf, a Viennese art dealer who commissioned excavations in the Fayum and gathered an impressive collection of portraits at the end of the nineteenth century. CTH

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