ANCIENT GREEK ENCAUSTIC PORTRAITS: A CRITICISM BASED UPON THE CELEBRATED COLLECTION OF HERR THEODOR GRAF OF VIENNA. BY RANDOLPH I. GEARE

O the ancient Egyptians is ascribed the origin of the gruesome, although realistic custom of placing an effigy of the dead outside the case which contained the mummy. This effigy usually consisted only of the head of the deceased, which was molded from a composition of sand, gypsum and carbonate of lime.

The Egyptian religion did not contemplate the decay of the body after death. The perishable remains were preserved by embalming, while the immortal spirit (Ba), as was believed, departed in the Sun-Barque, and was carried to the gates of the other world, in the far west, beyond Abydos. Should the spirit then be so fortunate as to become absorbed into the divinity (Osiris), it still would not lose all its identity. It might yet return visibly in its terrestrial form, and it was especially to this end that the body was preserved as a mummy, and a statue of it placed in the tomb. Thus the features by which the person so represented had been distinguished from other mortals in life, would always be recognizable.

Certainly, as far back as the ninth century before Christ, the custom became general of incasing the mummy in a kind of cartonnage, or mummy-shaped shell, which latter was placed in a wooden coffin and sometimes in a stone sarcophagus, and it was on these cartonnages that the molded mask of the face of the dead, usually gilded, or otherwise colored, was applied. This custom, which appears to have attained its height during the years 664-525 B.C., continued through the Persian period (525-333 B.C.), and, after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, up to the rule of the Ptolemies, by which time Hellenic culture had become firmly rooted on the banks of the Nile, and interwoven itself with Egyptian usages. Then, the Hellenic Egyptians also adopted the practise of preparing their dead for the tomb in the form of mummies, but, as the art of painting had sufficiently advanced to permit the production of fairly accurate likenesses, portraits of the dead took the place of the plastic effigies already mentioned. This innovation is believed to have become generally established among the Hellenic Egyptians during the third, or the
second century before Christ. Certainly, as far back as the latter date, many Greeks were embalmed and entombed according to Egyptian rites, and not alone in Alexandria, but in Upper and Middle Egypt as well, at Thebes, and other places.

And it is from the burial-place of Kerke in Middle Egypt, in the province of Fayûm (an extensive oasis fertilized by a branch of the Nile, and lying beyond the Libyan mountain-range on the west of the valley of the Nile)—a region which, in antiquity, was largely occupied by Greeks—that convincing evidence of the practise of placing portraits of the dead with the mummies has been derived, through the discovery of a collection of pictures found at Rubayyat, about twelve miles northeast of Fayûm.

The graves in which these portraits once existed had been ransacked by thieves who, in their quest for gold, destroyed the mummies and coffins, and threw away what was of no value to them. Included with this supposed refuse was a large number of portraits, several of which are here reproduced from illustrations prepared under the direction of Herr Theodor Graf, a merchant of Vienna, and the owner of the collection.

The chief town of Fayûm, Medinet-el-Fayûm, is only a short distance from the ruins of Krokodilopolis, which under the Ptolemies was called Arsinoë. Here a flourishing Greek colony sprang up, and even later, under the Roman emperors, still maintained its prestige as the most important place in that district.

To this discovery, therefore, we of the present day are largely indebted for our knowledge of the practise already mentioned, the period, and conditions of culture to which this art owed its existence, and the manner in which the paintings were executed.

The most interesting feature of these portraits lies in the fact that apparently some of them are original life-paintings of Ptolemaic kings and queens. This matter will receive attention later at greater length.

The portraits themselves are of varying degrees of excellence, and while some of them may be classed as consummate works of art, others are of very crude character. The difference is probably due to the fact that when the persons represented were wealthy, they could afford to employ high-priced artists, while others, less favored in this world's goods, were compelled to be satisfied with a cheaper grade of work. Again, there is good ground for belief that the best pictures belonged
to an earlier period than the others; the latter showing variations in costume and peculiarities of technical execution not present in the former; while the wax colors (which will be explained later) are observed to be gradually superseded by distemper-colors.

It seems altogether probable that the portraits in question were painted during the lifetime of the subjects, and were intended to decorate homes, just as we do at the present time. Great pains were taken to give as much individuality and realistic treatment as possible to the likenesses. This principle was faithfully carried out, even when it involved the presentation of unpleasing features: such as in the sixth illustration,—believed to be Ptolemaeus Euergetes, and evidently that of a man suffering from a contraction of the muscles of the neck; or, in the last figure but one, which is believed to represent Cleopatra Tryphaena, and, at all events, depicts a woman apparently grown prematurely old with sickness, if one may judge from the careworn expression on her face.

Dr. Georg Ebers, who has made a careful study of the subject, accounts for the portraits and their connection with mummies in one of the three following ways:

(1) The painter may have used the corpse as a model, endeavoring to give it a lifelike appearance. (2) The Greeks in Egypt may have been accustomed to have their portraits taken in the prime of life, the pictures which adorned the family living-room being attached to the mummies after the death of the persons represented. (3) The portrait may have been painted and hung during the life of the subject, and, after his death, a copy may have been made to be placed with the mummy.

That the models from which these portraits were painted were not the faces of the dead seems, in Dr. Ebers’s opinion, to be proven by the convincingly lifelike aspect of the heads, and there is no reason to doubt that the houses of the Egyptian Greeks were decorated with portraits of the living members of the family; for even in the time of the Pharaohs the great officials had portrait-statues executed during their lives, and these were subsequently placed in their tombs.

Again, it is known that on the back of some of the portraits a layer of plaster was found, or some holes had been made; which would tend to show that the pictures had formerly hung on walls, or in the case of the holes, that pegs had been used by which to aid in suspending them.

Summing up this phase of the subject, Dr. Ebers expresses his
PTOLEMAEUS PHILADELPHUS (284-246 B. C.)
See "History of Egypt," by Samuel Sharpe, Volume 1, page 1
PTOLEMAEUS SOTER (323-285 B.C.)
See "Classical Dictionary" by William Smith,
page 624.
CLEOPATRA (51-30 B.C.)
BERENICE, WIFE OF PTOLEMAEUS EUERGETES
See "History of Egypt," by Samuel Sharpe, Volume I, page 360
PTOLEMAEUS PHILOMETER (164-145 B.C.)
PTOLEMAEUS EUERGETES (246-221 B.C.)

CLEOPATRA TRYPHAENA (57 B.C.)
See "L'Egype," by George Ebers, page 313
PERSEUS, KING OF MACEDONIA (179-168 B. C.)
See "Portrait Heads upon Antique Coins," by Dr. Blumer (in German).
opinion in the following words: "I am more inclined to believe that
the Hellenic Egyptians were wont to be painted in the prime of life,
to place the picture in the living room, and then, after the death of the
person represented, that an artist was commissioned to copy it for the
mummy. Thus, when a woman died at an advanced age, the portrait
placed with the body showed her in her bloom; just as we often see the
memoirs of a lady of importance who may have lived to a great age,
illustrated by a picture of her in her youth. . . . At the same time this
does not exclude the possibility that, under certain circumstances, a
portrait may have been removed for the purpose from the wall of a
room."

However, until further research has been made, it will be impos-
sible to arrive at a definite conclusion on this point, and the matter will
remain in doubt; although the weight of evidence so far seems to be
in favor of the theory that the pictures were made during life, and
removed to the tomb after the death of the person represented.

The accounts given by ancient writers regarding the methods used
in encaustic painting of Greco-Egyptian origin, are both scanty and
indefinite, and the following statements on this subject are derived
chiefly from the results of investigation by Dr. Otto Donner von Rich-
ter, and from the descriptions given by Pliny.

The latter states that he was unable to ascertain who first devised
the art of painting in wax-colors, and of burning-in the painting.
But he clearly states that in encaustic technics two operations follow
one upon the other: namely, the painting with wax of various colors,
and then the burning-in of the painting, which latter gave rise to the
use of the word "encaustic."

It further seems clear that, from time immemorial, there were two
kinds of encaustic painting, or rather two processes employed with
wax by means of the *cestrum*, which was a lancet-shaped spatula, re-
sembling an antique plaster-knife, having a finely dentated edge, and
a rather long handle, the point being somewhat curved. The mate-
rial forming the base of these paintings was usually a wooden panel,
although ivory was occasionally used for miniature work. This lat-
ter was, of course, more expensive. The portraits with which this
article deals, however, were all painted on wooden panels.

The actual painting with wax was usually done without the em-
ployment of heat, and without using the brush, although occasionally
the wax-colors were melted over a fire, and then laid on with a brush.
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This latter process, however, was found to be very inconvenient, owing to the rapid congealing of the hot mass, both in the brush, and on the surface to be painted. Furthermore, it allowed no great precision of execution, and could be used only for painting in plain shades, and for hasty decorative work. The wax used in this encaustic work, known as “Punic wax,” was prepared by boiling natural yellow bees-wax three times in sea-water with an addition of a little “nitrum,” *i.e.*, mineral soda, and then skimming it. By this means, the wax was not only bleached, but it also acquired a slight degree of saponification, which made it more suitable for combination with other ingredients, while it also rendered the wax soft and pliable when once it had cooled.

In vermillion fresco-painting, a little olive oil was added to the wax, in order to prevent the latter from congealing too rapidly; but this was not suitable for *cestrum* painting alone, because, if too strong, the paint would be prevented from drying; whereas if the reverse were the case, the wax would not be rendered sufficiently ductile. It was therefore necessary to compound a mixture capable of transforming the wax into a soft paste, and yet capable of hardening in due time. The “balm of Chios” (the liquid resin of *Pistacia terebinthinus*) was, according to Dr. von Richter, “the most obvious ingredient for the purpose.” The spreading of the wax-paste with the *cestrum* was a very important part of the operation, and the fact that that instrument was finely-toothed, facilitated the equalizing and smoothing of the paste. The lancet-like point was useful in spreading out and blending together the separate tones of color; the curve in the back of the implement performed the service of flattening out any undue prominences; while the point served to lay on the strong lights, such as the luminous spot in the eye, the eyelashes and hair.

It is interesting to learn that Dr. von Richter has himself produced effects similar to those observable on the original portraits; but, as he admits, the picture attains its perfection only by means of the subsequent encaustic process, in which the ancients used to hold a heated rod of iron, or a vessel filled with hot coals, near the picture. The rough edges of the furrows were thereby melted away, while an even, varnish-like gloss was diffused over the whole painting.

A few of the portraits in this collection were executed, not with wax-colors burnt in, but in distemper, *i.e.*, with water-colors to which a particular binding substance had been added, such as the yolk of
eggs, or the yolk and white of eggs mixed, or fig-milk, or some other resinous material. Yet other portraits, and, among them, some of the best, were produced by a process combining the wax-encaustic and the distemper methods, and which Dr. von Richter named "wax distemper-encaustic." In this process, he explains, "no balsam is added to the wax, which is rubbed down in a heated state, with the yolk and a little white of eggs, also, a drop of olive-oil, and kneaded: the latter process being necessary to free it from particles of water in the egg. In this way, with the addition of the pigments, it is triturated to a paste, and, like the latter, may be worked with the cestrum and burnt in. This method offers the advantage of allowing a few finishing strokes and shades to be added with the brush and the common egg-distemper. The surface of the picture does not so acquire the gloss of the wax-balsam paste; it remains more dull and fresco-like, as may be observed even now in the originals; although the latter have lost something of their first gloss from being so long buried in the sand."

The illustrations accompanying this article are, as already indicated, representations of some of the portraits in Herr Graf's collection, and the photogravures from which they are reproduced have been furnished by him for use in this article.

Particular stress is laid by Herr Graf on the likeness which exists between several of these portraits and the heads of the Ptolemies on coins and cameos: a resemblance which has been confirmed by some of the most prominent artists and men of science in Europe.

Some of these coins and cameos are reproduced here in connection with the portraits which they resemble.

Making reference to these similarities, Herr Graf in a recent letter to the writer says:

"So many striking resemblances in a single collection of portraits discovered in one place of burial (Kerke in Middle Egypt), cannot possibly be the result of chance, and the fact that most of them bear insignia of royalty, such as hyacinth-purple, gold crowns, bandoliers\textsuperscript{1}—distinctive marks of the priests of Isis, etc.—proves the correctness of my assumption." A list of celebrated artists then follows, and these, he adds, have compared the pictures and coins, and are convinced that in the former we have the portraits of the Ptolemaic kings and queens, painted from life. He then quotes from a letter received

\textsuperscript{1} Bands, usually of leather, worn over the right shoulder and passing under the left arm.
from Prof. C. von Zumbusch, who writes as follows: "On comparing picture 28 (the last illustration in this article) with the bust and medal of King Perseus, I find such a strong resemblance between them, that I am convinced that they represent one and the same person."

It seems reasonable that members of royal families should have engaged the services of only the most renowned artists to paint their portraits, and these were doubtless Greek painters who practised their art in Alexandria.

The portrait of King Perseus, which, in some respects, is the most striking one in the collection, was produced in ancient Greece, as it represents him when much younger than he appears in the marble bust from the Borghese Collection (the last illustration in this article), now in the Louvre.

The following descriptions of the portraits here shown are abbreviated from the catalogue of the collection:

The first portrait (Ptolemaeus Philadelphus?) is that of a man of high birth. The hair is encircled with a golden wreath of laurels, while across the breast is a narrow, scarf-like, red ribbon, studded with gold and silver buttons. The head seems to be painted in encaustic with the cestrum and the garments in the same manner, but with the brush.

The second picture (Ptolemaeus Soter?) shows a man’s head, florid, and full of life. From the left shoulder, beneath dark-blue upper drapery, a red sash studded with gold buttons extends to the right hip. The head is painted in wax-distemper with the cestrum and the drapery in distemper, with the brush.

The features of the third portrait (Cleopatra?) show a pronounced Semitic type. Large ball-shaped earrings and neck-ornaments are represented, the dress being of a dark purple. Over the shoulders are worn black stripes edged with gold. Both the head and garment are here painted in the encaustic style with the cestrum.

In the fourth illustration is shown the portrait of a handsome woman of high birth (Berenice, wife of Ptolemaeus Euergetes?), whose delicate complexion, lustrous eyes, oval face, etc., combine to form a picture of great beauty. She wears a diadem of gold, and heavy golden ornaments adorned with various colored stones. The whole picture is painted in distemper with the brush on a chalk ground.

The fifth portrait (Ptolemaeus Philometer?) is that of a man
wearing the golden wreath, scarf-like ribbon, and a blue upper garment; the costume denoting a high dignitary. The head and garments are executed in encaustic, the former with the cestrum, the latter with the brush.

The next one shown, and believed to represent Ptolemaeus Euergetes, is the least pleasing of all; but it attests the fidelity with which the artists discharged their duty. The peculiar posture of the head was doubtless lifelike, and due to a morbid contraction of the cervical muscle. This fidelity to nature is, perhaps, the most interesting lesson taught by this particular picture.

The last portrait but one is evidently that of a sick woman. Her appearance is that of a person suffering from a severe organic disease, probably dropsy. The process used in the picture is encaustic; the head being executed with the cestrum and the costume with the brush. This is another good example of the evident intent on the part of the original artist to render the features faithfully. It is believed to represent Cleopatra Tryphaena.

The concluding portrait, believed to represent Perseus, King of Macedonia, is evidently a highly realistic likeness. The penetrating glance and the closed mouth tell of self-satisfied consciousness of strength. This portrait is produced by a combination of processes. The head is painted in wax-distemper with the cestrum, while the garments, and also the hair, show the stroke of the brush.