Proportion and personality in the Fayum Portraits

A.J.N.W. Prag

This note stems from a paper given in 1998 to the symposium 'From the Fayum Portraits to Early Byzantine Icon Painting' organised by the Vikelaia Municipal Library in Heraklion. The organisers of that excellent occasion never intended to publish the papers, seeing the symposium primarily as an accompaniment to a major exhibition on the same theme. However, my preoccupation with the significance of proportion in portraiture as it applies to these very distinctive faces has not gone away, a preoccupation that has grown out of a long-standing collaboration with my colleague Richard Neave on the reconstruction of ancient faces. The work that we have done together on Romano-Egyptian mummy-portraits came too late to be included in our book *Making Faces,* and the launch of *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* seemed an excellent opportunity to remedy that omission, the more so since it was originally set off by the 'Ancient Faces' exhibition of mummy-portraits from Roman Egypt set up by the Museum in 1997.

These 'portraits' have exercised a fascination from their earliest discovery: when Barbara Borg called her recent study 'Der zierlichste Anblick der Welt', she was already quoting Pietro della Valle's description of them in 1615,[1] while a recent article on the funerary art of later Egypt comments that 'the incorporation of "portraits" … presents modern, Western viewers with a series of human likenesses which tempt us to imagine that we can literally and figuratively come face to face with the past'.[2] Whatever the circumstances in which they were painted–whether in the sitter's lifetime or after his or her death–it is clear that there was a flourishing industry of portrait-painters and their workshops, and that as with all such industries there were not only good and less good craftsmen but also something approaching a production line, in which each painter quite naturally built up his own formulae and his own tricks. Repetitive and formulaic use of proportion has been used[3] as one of the criteria by which different workshops can be distinguished. It is easy to make minor alterations within a formulaic representation, most obviously to the hair and beard, to give the impression of individuality and even naturalism,[4] but that is not a new trick which the Fayum painters invented: for example, we see it already in the terracotta votive heads made by the Etruscans in the 3rd century BC, which themselves form part of a long tradition going back at least to the 7th century.[5]

Whenever one looks through this gallery of faces differences and similarities abound, of technique, of style, of contemporary fashion or regional practice, of the painters' technical abilities and sometimes of their artistic brilliance, and of the physiognomies of the sitters. Seen separately or in small numbers the better paintings do indeed appear as very personal and individual renderings, but as soon as one takes a broader overview one realises how easy it is to be misled by apparent similarities of dress, fashion and technique into seeing similarities of face that are not there. As an example, Barbara Borg's very

1 Cited in Borg, *'Der zierlichste Anblick der Welt…': Ägyptische Porträtmumien,* 6.
2 Riggs, *AJA* 106 (2002), 85.
3 By Barbara Borg in *Mumienporträts*, 93–4, and others.
4 Borg, *Mumienporträts,* 98.
5 e.g. Brendel, *Etruscan Art,* 106–9, 129–31, 393–4.

Fig. 1 Portrait of a woman, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 170–190 (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Antikensammlung, Inv. X30).

Fig. 2 Portrait of a woman, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 190–210 (London, British Museum EA 65343). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

perceptive analysis of the portraits of two seemingly very characterful young men has demonstrated how the 'individual' traits are in the end simply the quirks of a workshop or a painter.[6] Others have commented on the similarities between the portraits of two ladies, both said to be from er-Rubayat: the one shown on the left (**Fig. 1**) is dated *c.* AD 170–190,[7] she on the right (**Fig. 2**) to around AD 190–210.[8]

Their dresses and their jewellery are indeed almost identical, and one hopes they never met on a social occasion. So is the way they have done their hair, except that the lady on the right has frizzy hair whereas her friend on the left has more gently flowing curls. Their faces have the same oval outline, and the same long, straight nose with a rather pointed tip, but there the similarity stops. The face on the right has a much higher forehead, smaller eyes which are set closer together in relation to the overall dimensions of the face, and which slope down towards the nose whereas those on the other face slope up. She has a wider and straighter mouth, while her jaw-line is straighter and ends in a squarer chin. Despite these differences, neither has any features that are strikingly individual, that were painted in a

6 Berlin 19722, New York 11.139; Borg, *'Der zierlichste Anblick der Welt…': Ägyptische Porträtmumien*, 38–40.

7 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum X 301: Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* no. 91.

8 British Museum EA 65343: Walker, *Ancient Faces,* 82 no. 42; Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* 99 no. 92. Walker and Bierbrier's catalogue gives a full bibliography for each of the portraits discussed here, updated where appropriate in the version revised for the New York showing of the exhibition. Walker, *Ancient Faces* includes references to the excellent illustrations in Doxiadis' discussion of the place of these pictures in the tradition that she believes ran through to Byzantine icon painting (*Apo ta Portraita tou Fayoum stis Aparches tis Texnis ton Vyzantinon Eikonon*).

Fig. 3 Portrait of a bearded man, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 150–170 (Malibu, Getty Museum 74.AP.11). © The Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

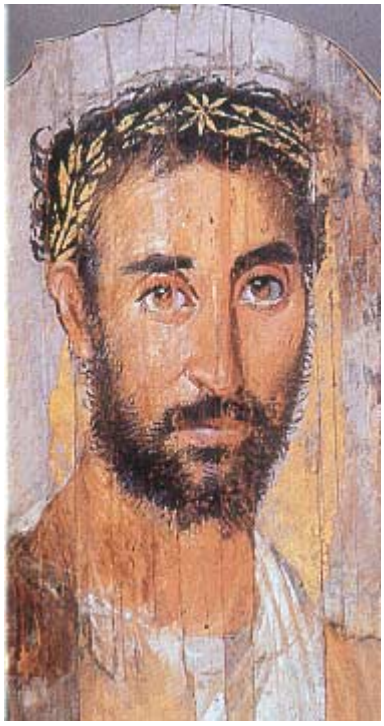

Fig. 4 Portrait of a bearded man, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 150–180 (London, National Gallery 3932). © London, National Gallery.

particular manner because that was how they *were*: within the particular styles of the two painters these are absolutely standard production-line pieces, and it is unlikely that they tell us anything about the real appearance of the two ladies.

Beards should not mislead us any more than hairstyles. The two men illustrated side by side here as they were in the catalogue of the 'Ancient Faces' exhibition are both Antonine of the third quarter of the second century: both have a long face with a high forehead, and share the same long nose as a constant, and they both have a short but full beard, but again there the resemblance ends (**Fig. 3** and **Fig. 4**).[9] The rather unfriendly face on the left with its wide-set narrow eyes and arched eyebrows has well-marked cheekbones and a sloping jaw-line that leads to a rounded chin above a surly, thick-lipped mouth. The more vacuous person on the right has a narrower face that forms an inverted trapezium rather than an oval; his eyes are larger and closer set–though given the somewhat mediocre quality of the drawing I doubt whether too much significance should be given to the fact that his left eye is set higher than his right. Looking at it with an artist's eye, Richard Neave commented on the rather poor drawing of both these pieces, which leaves one wondering how well the artists had actually observed

[9] Malibu: Getty Museum 74.AP.11: Walker, *Ancient Faces,* 77 no.37; Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* 94 no. 84. London, National Gallery 3932, Walker, *Ancient Faces,* 78 no.38; Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* 95 no. 85.

Fig. 5 Portrait of a woman, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 160–170 (London, British Museum EA 65346). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 6 Portrait of a man, said to be from er-Rubayat, *c.* AD 160–170 (Eton College, Myers collection ECM 1473). Reproduced by permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College.

or understood the proportions of the faces of the individuals whom they were intending to portray. The surly man with his rather oddly distributed facial hair may indeed have had thick lips and a small mouth, and one wonders why his picture should have conveyed what seems to be such an unattractive character if it was not really so. On the other hand there is little about the face alongside in **Fig. 4** that conveys individuality or character. The artist cannot have painted it without a model somewhere along the line, for one cannot create such a countenance out of thin air. This face, however, has no feature that makes it unique and idiosyncratic. It lacks the personality that an individual skull with its own individual proportions would have given it.

Though still very close in date to the last two, the next pair of faces belongs to another world (**Fig. 5** and **Fig. 6**).[10] The difference may be subtle, but it is significant. First, they are well drawn and (which is equally important) well observed. Several scholars have noted the similarity of their appearance. These are long oval faces again, with a long narrow nose; his has a more marked bridge, but they both have the pointed tip. Unless it is a painter's trick, the arch of the eyebrows and of the orbits in the skull is common to both, even if his eyes are wider apart and his cheek-bones more noticeable, whereas hers are concealed by the smoothness of her features. While her jaw-line runs smoothly down to a neatly

[10] British Museum EA 65346: Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* no. 86. Eton College, Myers Collection ECM 1473: Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* no. 87.

rounded chin that juts just enough to convey her strength of character, his runs straighter from those more prominent cheek-bones and ends in a larger, squarer chin. There are other differences about the mouth: for instance the distance between the nose and the vermilion of the upper lip is greater on her face, adding to her slightly solemn expression. The important point is that because the relationship of features such as the eyes, nose and lips to each other has been properly observed and properly depicted, these faces *work*. In each case the painter has apparently taken note of the way the essential skull underneath has dictated the proportions of the visible face. This is what was lacking in the bearded faces of the two Antonine men, where the one had a mouth that seemed as if it might drop off the face (**Fig. 3**), and the other a physiognomy that was unnaturally long between the eyes and the mouth (**Fig. 4**).

Returning to our couple, the careful use of light gives depth and life to her features, notably on the cheeks and around the mouth, while the sun shines more strongly on him, as befits a military man with a slightly sunburned nose. There is a touch of humour in both faces: despite those apparently solemn and over-large eyes, she might yet break into a smile, while others have commented on the slightly farouche air about her 'brother' the army officer. The light reflects subtly off her neatly dressed hair to show off its glossiness, whereas anyone who doubts the descent of these Fayum portraits from Classical and Hellenistic art need only compare the simple, almost impressionist rendering of his hair with the Pluto from the Vergina tombs.[11]

The question remains of how one interprets these similarities. Undoubtedly the two people come from the same social background and, to judge by their dress and by the quality of the artists they could afford to paint their portraits, the same social elite. I very much doubt that the two panels were painted by the same hand: there is a precision about the draughtsmanship of the female portrait that contrasts with the much freer handling of the male: it is particularly noticeable in the treatment of the hair, but also in details such as the jewellery and the way the light has been allowed to play on the flesh of the two faces. Given that difference, it becomes at least possible that these two people are blood relations–cousins, or perhaps truly brother and sister.

The acid test of the fidelity of such portraits would of course be a reconstruction based upon the skull. Sadly, none of the skulls belonging to the six faces from er-Rubayat which we have been considering has survived. However, two Fayum portraits of the second half of the 1st century excavated by Petrie at Hawara and now in the British Museum collections have been reconstructed in Manchester. As paintings they are perhaps not of such high quality as the er-Rubayat examples, and both have some very standard features such as the over-large eyes that would lead one to believe that these are off-the-peg physiognomies which have been rendered individual by the addition of attributes such the swarthy jowls (**Fig. 7** left and **Fig. 8** left).[12] Nevertheless they convey sufficient individuality to have acquired character and personality in the eyes of the archaeologists and the medical artists who worked with them.

The process of reconstructing these faces and the associated problems are discussed elsewhere and need not detain us here.[13] Here it is only important to note that the reconstruction of the face is based

[11] Andronicos, *Vergina: The Royal Tombs and the Ancient City,* pls 50, 52.

[12] British Museum EA 74718: Walker, *Ancient Faces,* 45 no. 8, Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* 48 no. 23. British Museum EA 74713: Walker, *Ancient Faces,* 41 no. 4, Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces,* 44 no. 18.

[13] Douglas, *New Scientist* (8 December 2001); Neave and Prag in Bowman and Brady (eds), *Artefacts and Images of the Ancient World* (forthcoming); Wilkinson *et al., Journal of Archaeological Science* (forthcoming); also Filer in Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks.* For a general account of facial reconstruction, e.g. Prag and Neave, *Making Faces Using Forensic and Archaeological Evidence,* chapter 2.

Fig. 7 Portrait of a man, from Hawara, AD 80–100 (British Museum EA 74718), and a reconstruction of his face. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 8 Portrait of a woman, from Hawara, AD 55–70 (British Museum EA 74713), and a reconstruction of her face. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

in the first instance purely on the evidence of the skull, and it is the proportions of the skull that dictate the shape of the face that overlies it. Superficial detail such as hair can be added afterwards from secondary sources like the panel 'portrait', but only once the basic reconstruction has confirmed that portrait is indeed of the person on whose mummy it has been placed. This is not always the case – in some instances even the sex of the individual is wrong, so there can be no question of the 'portrait' having been painted some years in advance and the individual's appearance having changed over the years. However, in the case of the two Hawara mummies the match is sure. If one sets EA 74718's portrait beside his reconstruction there are some significant differences: although the mouths tally, the

reconstruction shows an unusually large distance between the upper lip and the nose, which is lacking on the portrait (**Fig. 7**). The eyes are set close together on both and the painter has picked up the fact that the two eyes are not level–his right eye is shown slightly higher than his left, a feature which appears on the reconstruction too–but the overall proportions of the face are different: on the portrait they take up more of the face, on the reconstruction they are longer and narrower, something that is emphasised by the straighter jaw-line and the squarer chin. So here it would seem that the painter had taken a standard type, yet has made it recognisable by rendering the features heavy and fleshy and by thickening the lips. If this man really did have the 'five o'clock shadow' with which he is portrayed (and for which of course his physical remains do not provide any evidence), then–just as with President Nixon–this would have been a feature that marked him out from most other men for those who knew him, and correspondingly an easy device for the painter to use to identify him. Nonetheless although we can see that these are the same man something does not ring quite true, and that something must be the difference in facial proportion.

The portrait of the woman (EA 74713) appears to be even more of a standard type, with its large eyes, neat straight nose and small mouth, all prettily feminine features though set on a solid neck in a powerful physique, yet it proves to match the reconstruction surprisingly closely (**Fig. 8**). The proportions of the lower face correspond, but because the painting has a rather long narrow nose the shape of the cheeks has been elongated, which in turn has made the line of the jaw smoother. But the mouth *is* small, and the chin relatively large and pointed. The proportions of the forehead are right too, though the eyes are too close together as well as being too large, so the cheekbones are more marked on the reconstruction. However, this time the proportions are correct overall, with the result that not only do we recognise the two as being the same, but we do so without the nagging feeling that something is not quite right.

We have come a long way from the plastered skulls from neolithic Jericho which perhaps represent the first western attempts at portraying an individual's face, but we have not yet come all the way to a true and exclusive personal similitude.[14] In his *Art and Illusion* Sir Ernst Gombrich cites a passage from Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, writing in the 16th century, that seems to fit our Fayum painters most aptly: 'Wee finde many painters who, being ignorant of the art of proportions, onely by a little practize in disposing their lights in some tolerable sorte, have notwithstanding bin reputed good workemen'.[15] In the Fayum of the early centuries AD the painters at whose work we have been looking and to which I have tried to apply the control of modern facial reconstruction may well have won the reputation of being good workmen, and in two cases at least can be shown to have created portraits that would surely have been acceptable to the families of the dead people. However, the man who painted the woman's picture went one step further than his colleague, and by taking careful note of the proportions of his sitter's face created an image that would have left her friends and relatives feeling more sure that this was the face of the person they knew.

As I noted earlier, the portrait painters of Roman Egypt were as varied in their abilities as any group of craftsmen before or since and it would be wrong to expect the same standards or indeed the same aspirations to verisimilitude from them all. One may even debate how necessary exact physical likeness

[14] Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land*, 34–6, pls 20–21; Kenyon, *Excavations at Jericho* III, 77–8, 437, pls 50–9; Prag and Neave, *Making Faces Using Forensic and Archaeological Evidence*, 12–13, fig. 1.

[15] *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scultura e architettura*, here translated by Richard Haydock as *A Tract Containing the Arts of Curious Paintings, Carvings and Building* (Oxford 1958) 136, quoted by Gombrich, *Art and Illusion,* 281.

was either to them or to their customers, but that is not a question I wish to raise here.[16] What I have tried to do is to not merely to use the opportunity provided by facial reconstruction as a simplistic, bland control, but to look more closely at the faces produced by the ancient painter and the modern medical artist from the same evidence, and to ask 'What makes each face special and individual?' 'Have the two artists used their evidence in the same way or is something missing in one or other case?' The study has been based on a tiny sample, and can do no more than point the way: to carry proper conviction and to throw full light on the realism of the Fayum 'portraits' we need many more such comparative studies between 'mummy-portrait' and facial reconstruction. Fortunately such work is already in hand.[17]

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[16] Riggs, *AJA* 106 (2002), 93.

[17] e.g. Wilkinson *et al*, *Journal of Archaeological Science* (forthcoming).

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