



Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt (I-IV centuries A.D.) with a catalogue of Portrait Mummies in Egyptian Museums (Oriental Institute Communications,)

Lorelei H. Corcoran

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In Egypt of the 1st century AD an alternative was introduced to the traditional use of painted masks of papier-mache on wrapped and decorated mummies. A new technique, borrowed from the Hellenic tradition of painting in encaustic (coloured wax) or water colour on wooden panels or linen sheets, involved the production of realistic images of the faces of men, women and children. These idealized paintings were placed over the face of the wrapped mummy. The combination of an impressionistically rendered face and a wrapped mummiform body has been interpreted as a synthesis of two contrasting contemporary cultures - Hellenic and native Egyptian. However Corcoran's analysis of the iconography of these mummies reveals that their decoration reflects the continuity of a cultural alignment that was fundamentally Egyptian. Her study documents a vital and articulate pagan tradition that survived in Egypt until the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century AD. Written from the perspective of an academic Egyptologist, this analysis of an important corpus of objects includes an illustrated catalogue of 23 mummy coverings with 'portrait faces' from the collections of museums in Egypt. Both as an original work on quite inaccessible material and as an important scholarly study of a class of artefact usually treated more 'glossily' this will be an important book for egyptologists, classicists, art historians and historians of religion.

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