

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Mummy Masks
Egyptian Gallery 20
Case 6



E.63.I903

Ancient Egyptians believed that in order for identity to continue after death it was essential to preserve one's name. To deface a name from a monument was an aggressive act, for the identity of the owner was destroyed along with the name. As hieroglyphs were small pictures, images and writing were so interlinked that a portrait served a function similar to that of the written name. Mummy portraits were, therefore, an important aid to the central belief and hope of ancient Egyptian religion, namely the eternal preservation of identity.

Mummy Masks

Mummy masks show the head and a small part of the chest of the dead and were placed over the wrapped head of the mummy. The mask had several functions: firstly it was used to protect the face of the deceased, but it could also act as a substitute for the mummified head should it be damaged or lost. The Ancient Egyptians also believed that the spirit or *ba* survived death, and

could leave the tomb itself. The mummy mask provided a means for the returning *ba* to recognise its host body.

Mummy Portraits

In the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection the mummy masks in case 6 date from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. The Mummy Mask of Tjay dates from around 2000 BC and this earlier style of portrait is closer to the traditional Egyptian in style as can be seen in the wig, eye make-up and the shapes of the eyes and ears. The mask was placed directly over the face of the deceased and then bound into the layers of wrapping. The mask is made of layers of linen, which when wet would have been gummed together and shaped over a mould. A thin layer of plaster was then placed over the surface, left to harden, and then the mask was decorated with gilding and painting.



Mask of Tjay E.I98.I903

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From 300 BC onwards there was a steady immigration of Greek-speaking people into Egypt and by the Roman conquest of 30 BC Egypt was bi-cultural. In the 1st - 3rd centuries AD many of the citizens of Egypt preferred mummification to cremation. Later mummy portraits are more naturalistically painted and were fixed in the mummy wrappings. They were painted by an encaustic method, with the pigment suspended in melted wax and applied with a brush. These panels often show the individuals wearing period jewellery, clothing and hairstyles, as can be seen in the examples in case 6.

It is certain that the mummy portraits were painted by a different artist to the one responsible for the bandage decoration. Often the panels were trimmed by the embalmers to fit within the bandages, which raises speculation that they may have been painted while the deceased was still alive.