

What's in store? 4. A gilded mummy mask (EC 480) by Dulcie Engel¹



(photo by Sam Wale, December 2017)

The mask

EC480 is located in Box 69, shelf 9, room 8.

This is a badly damaged cartonnage mummy mask. According to the old label, it dates from the Ptolemaic period (305-30BC), and probably originated in Thebes. However, the style of the mask suggests it may be

¹ My thanks to Sam Wale for showing me this mask in the storeroom, and for taking the photo.

Roman, from the first century AD: in particular, the hairstyle would date it to c. 40AD onwards. The woman has wavy hair and long ringlets. The label states that it came from the mummy case of a priestess or a lady, and was intended as a portrait of the deceased.

It was purchased by Wellcome at Christie's auction house in April 1933.

The damage, mainly to the right side of the face, reveals the linen and plaster which were the key ingredients of cartonnage. Fragments which have fallen off are in a small plastic box next to the mask. Most of the remaining plaster is gilded, as was normal for a mummy mask. Part of the moulded hair, the ears and nose and the painted eyes are clearly visible, but the mouth is missing. Around the neck there is a suggestion of a moulded necklace, and large round earrings in the ears. The frayed linen edges of the mask would suggest that it was cut away from the mummy, presumably for selling purposes. It was probably an integral part of the mummy case, rather than a fully separate mask. The greenish marks on the left side of the nose may indicate glue which has degraded.²

The labels: The top label is from the case in which the mummy was originally mounted for display: Wellcome Institute notes suggest it came to the Egypt Centre in a glazed case. Below is the original label, possibly written by Wellcome, and bearing the Wellcome accession number. The mask was removed from its mounting frame in March 2000, due to badly damaged and crumbling cartonnage.



Cartonnage³

² Suggested to me by our curator, Carolyn Graves-Brown, who also kindly read through this article for me. NB Much of the information about EC 480 comes from the object file, including the references to the Brooklyn Museum mask and the book by Walker, researched by Carolyn.

³ The technical information about the materials used in cartonnage comes from Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology, ed. P.T. Nicholson & I. Shaw (CUP, 2000/2009), in particular the following chapters: 'Textiles' by G. Vogelsang-Eastwood (p.268-298); 'Stone' by B. Aston, J. Harrell & I. Shaw (p. 5-77); 'Papyrus'

Cartonnage is a mixture of linen or papyrus and plaster, used to make coffins. It can also refer to a coffin case made from these materials. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'An ancient Egyptian mummy case made of tightly fitting layers of linen or papyrus glued together. Origin: Mid 19th century: French'.

Linen was an important material in the mummification ceremony in general, as it was used to wrap the body, and bolts of linen were placed inside tombs. It was also the main textile for clothing, and linen bandages were often cut from old clothing.

Old papyrus documents were also used for cartonnage, sometimes in conjunction with linen. This was particularly prevalent in the Greco-Roman period. These scraps of 2000 year old papyrus found in cartonnage have always been of great interest to Egyptologists as it contains information about the everyday life of ordinary people (old shopping lists, tax returns etc). Until now, these records could only be accessed by destroying the cartonnage mask or coffin case. However, researchers at University College London have recently developed a scanning technique in which light of different frequencies makes the inks glow, and thus brings out the writing obscured by the plaster and glue.⁴

The plaster used was whiting plaster: a mixture of powdered limestone and glue, although sometimes gesso was used (gypsum plaster). The linen and/ or papyrus and the plaster were built up in layers which were glued together and moulded into shape (for a section of a mummy case or a mask), and the outermost layer of plaster was painted or gilded. The glue used originated in plant gums. Furthermore, from the Late Period to the Roman Period, cartonnages were often 'anointed' with a sticky black liquid containing beeswax.

The function of mummy masks

Masks in all periods (dating back to the Stone Age), and from all cultures have served to hide or to reveal personalities/identities:

'The morphological elements of the mask are with few exceptions derived from natural forms. Masks with human features are classified as anthropomorphic and those with animal characteristics as theriomorphic. In some instances the mask form is a replication of natural features or is quite realistic, and in other instances it is an abstraction. Masks usually represent supernatural beings, ancestors, and fanciful or imagined figures, and they can also be portraits...The mask, therefore, most often functions as a means of contact with various spirit powers, thereby protecting against the unknown forces of the universe by prevailing upon their potential beneficence in all matters relative to life'⁵

Throughout the Pharaonic Period, masks were placed on mummies. Early masks were made of wood, and later, cartonnage. Royal death masks were made of gold, or gilded bronze. Cartonnage death masks were also painted or gilded.⁶ Gold represents the flesh of the gods: it was important for the deceased to share attributes with the gods in order to progress to the afterlife. The masks represented an idealised portrait of the deceased, and were necessary as the heads were bandaged: it was considered important for the 'ba' to recognise the body so it could return to it. The masks restored and transformed the features of the deceased. During the 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony, the priest would touch the eyes, nose, mouth and ears on the mask with an adze to restore senses to the deceased, ready for the journey to the afterlife.⁷ To this end, we also find eyes painted on the outside of coffins. The need for a head may explain the mysterious and rare reserve heads which have been found in some Old Kingdom tombs.⁸

by B. Leach & J. Tait (p. 227-253); 'Oil, Fat and Wax' by M. Serpico & R. White (p.p. 390-429); and 'Adhesives and Binders' by R. Newark & M. Serpico (p.475-494).

⁴ 'Scan technique reveals secret writing in mummy cases' by P. Ghosh, 31/12/17

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-42357259>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/art/mask-face-covering>

⁶ See: <http://www.historyofmasks.net/mask-history/history-of-egyptian-masks/>

⁷ The ceremony would be supervised by a priest wearing another mask: that of Anubis the jackal god of mummification.

⁸ Such as W164 in the House of Death. See Lacovara, P. 1997 'The Riddle Of The Reserve Heads' In KMT 8 number 4 (winter 1997-98) p28-36.

Mummy masks and mummy portraits in the Greco-Roman period

It is well known that during the Ptolemaic period, Egyptian religious and cultural practices became widespread not just amongst the Greeks of Egypt, but throughout the Greek world. Our own collection contains many artefacts from this fascinating cross-cultural period, including animal mummies, Greek mummy tags, Greek inscriptions, coins, statues, cosmetic containers ... as well as mummy masks. A search of the online catalogue would indicate that we have more than 50 Ptolemaic items, and over 180 Roman ones.

We tend to associate mummy masks from the Ptolemaic period with the large, separate gilded cartonnage masks such as those on show in the House of Death (see below), and the Roman period with the flat mummy portraits painted on wood.⁹ However, a particular type of mummy mask (as part of a mummy case) was found in Hawara, dating from the Roman period, and this is clearly the type we have with EC480.

The style of EC480 is very similar to that of a mask in the Brooklyn Museum (accession number 69.35). This is a first century AD mummy cartonnage of a woman made of linen, gesso, gold leaf, glass and faience, probably originating from Hawara. It measures 23 x 14 x 9 inches, and comprises the head and top half of the body (down to the waist). Like our mummy face, it has an elaborate hairstyle and wears a necklace (this was formerly inlaid). The eyes are inlaid with glass, rather than painted on. Some cracks and chips were restored before the piece was acquired.¹⁰

It is Petrie that excavated gilded masks and cases at Hawara in 1888. These date from the Ptolemaic period to the early second century AD:

‘The masks were derived from pharaonic traditions of belief, in which the mask served as a substitute for the head of the deceased, endowing the individual with the attributes of deities, and thereby assisting his or her passage to the afterlife...Gilded masks with individual portrait features date back to the earliest years of the Roman occupation of Egypt’ (Walker, 2000: 66)¹¹

Walker suggests these were made for people of relatively high social status. The illustrated examples shown include one similar to EC480 and the Brooklyn mask; this time from the Petrie Museum (UC 28084). This mask shows ringlets in the hair, large gold ball earrings, and a gold necklace with pendant balls (see p.67).

There are other Hawara mummies with gilded masks in Cairo, Manchester and the British Museums.¹²

Mummy masks as Egyptian icons

The mummy mask is one of the classic icons of Ancient Egyptian history; in particular since the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb and his wonderful funerary mask of gold. It weighs 10 kg. The blue stripes are glass; the eyeliner and eyebrows are of lapis lazuli, the eyes of obsidian and quartz. His beard of kingship is made of lapis lazuli and gold. His collar is of lapis lazuli, quartz and green feldspar.¹³

Indeed, a quick computer search for books or websites on Ancient Egypt will bring up many images of mummy masks, and in particular of Tutankhamun’s mask.

⁹ Such as W946 in the House of Death. See S.P. Ellis Graeco-Roman Egypt (Shire 1992: 46)

¹⁰ <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3778>

¹¹ S. Walker ‘Gilded masks from Hawara’ in Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt (ed. S. Walker, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000)

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=t9RM6G->

[nHOoC&pg=PA66&lpg=PA66&dq=susan+walker+gilded+masks+from+Hawara&source=bl&ots=YL1QHI7GOi&sig=cYYoO8dt7SRu0dy9cCxOrEHLAro&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4ysnjofYAhVF26QKHVQ0AJcQ6AEILTAB#v=onepage&q=susan%20walker%20gilded%20masks%20from%20Hawara&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=t9RM6G-nHOoC&pg=PA66&lpg=PA66&dq=susan+walker+gilded+masks+from+Hawara&source=bl&ots=YL1QHI7GOi&sig=cYYoO8dt7SRu0dy9cCxOrEHLAro&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4ysnjofYAhVF26QKHVQ0AJcQ6AEILTAB#v=onepage&q=susan%20walker%20gilded%20masks%20from%20Hawara&f=false)

¹² See ‘A young child from a wealthy family’ in Ancient Lives, new discoveries by J.H. Taylor & D. Antoine, British Museum, 2014, pp 150-169).

¹³ See: <http://www.timetrips.co.uk/ep-tutmask.htm>;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutankhamun%27s_mask#Beard

As we will see below, the Egypt Centre often uses masks from the collection in its publicity.

Other cartonnage masks in the Egypt Centre

The online catalogue lists 97 items of cartonnage in the collection: mainly parts of mummy cases, but also 11 masks, 4 of which are on display.

In the Body Coverings Case, three splendid gilded cartonnage masks are displayed together:

W917 was the cover image for the 'Face of Egypt' exhibition, which took place in 1996-97 at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. It showcased items from the Wellcome collection (this was just before the museum got its dedicated building and was renamed the Egypt Centre), as well as Swansea Museum, Cyfartha Castle, Carmarthen Museum and the University of Wales Aberystwyth.¹⁴

W917 also appears on our educational visits leaflet.

W918 was originally in the Tabor collection. Like EC480, there is a necklace of round beads around the neck.

W919 has holes in the ears for earrings.



Left to right: W919, W917, W918 (Body Coverings case, House of Death)

In the mummification case, we can see **W920**, a damaged Ptolemaic mask of cartonnage and gilt. Just the upper half remains. On the forehead, the wedjet eye is visible, and there is an inscription from the Book of the Dead.

¹⁴ The exhibition catalogue with accompanying postcards is for sale in the EC gift shop.



W920 (Mummification case, House of Death)

And in store, we also have the following partial or badly damaged cartonnage masks:

EC 581,592,593,1135,1466,1841.

Conclusion

An examination of a damaged mask in the storeroom has highlighted a particular style of mask not currently on display in the galleries. We have also been able to consider the various components of cartonnage. Modern techniques have been able to analyse the composition of plaster and glue, and scans can now reveal the secrets of recycled papyrus.

The use of masks is a universal human characteristic, and was a key element in the Ancient Egyptian system of beliefs. Furthermore, Egyptian mummy masks are now among the most potent and recognisable symbols of that great civilisation.