

Beautiful Burials, Beautiful Skulls: The Aesthetics of the Egyptian Mummy

Abstract

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The aesthetics of the Egyptian mummy provide a case study for exploring the relationship between aesthetics and archaeology – and specifically, the challenge of accessing aesthetics from an ancient viewpoint when it is the aesthetic standards of the modern world that have shaped how archaeological material is selected, collected, conserved (or otherwise), recorded, and interpreted. In the late 20th and early 21st century, many archaeologists have rejected aesthetics – the word, the concept, or both – because of its long conflation with connoisseurial appraisal, a practice that privileges judgements of (universal) beauty and has hence applied Western standards to non-Western art. However, a number of archaeologists and anthropologists of art have argued for the usefulness of aesthetics as an interpretive category for understanding ancient artistic practices from an actors' perspective.

The funerary art of Roman Egypt – which I have elsewhere characterized as a 'beautiful burial' – displays a number of distinctive traits that hint at the aesthetic aims and values of its makers and users. One example is widespread use of a colour we would term pink, but which was perceived as a form of red in antiquity. This reflects a technological change to lead-based pigments; both bright (pink) and dark (maroon) reds dominate mummy masks, shrouds, and coffins, evoking a range of colours associated with the solar horizon and, perhaps more broadly, life force. The use of plaster as a modelling material on coffins and mummy masks was another technological innovation with aesthetic consequences: mould-made plaster faces and hands allowed artists to replicate the effect of sculpture, which was a premier memorializing form in the Roman world. Other aspects of funerary practice in Roman Egypt maintained, or in fact elaborated upon, long-standing concerns with ritual embalming, elaborate linen wrappings, and the seclusion and hiddenness of the wrapped and coffined corpse. Aesthetic experience, like any cultural value, can be expressed without recourse to public visibility.

The beautiful burials of Egypt became the beautiful skulls of nascent race science during the European Enlightenment. 'The most beautiful skull' was how 18th-century natural scientist Johann Blumenbach described the remains of a woman from the Caucasus, which he used to help classify the Caucasian race. The anatomical dissection and analysis of the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptians dominated the study of mummies from the 18th century onwards, and its influence remains today in the forensic aesthetics of CT-scans, three-dimensional facial reconstructions, and

analyses such as histology and DNA sampling. The aesthetics of the Egyptian mummy presented in museums and the media are thus almost entirely to do with the physical remains of the corpse – quite the opposite of the ancient actors' intent. Questions of race, which fuelled the anatomization of mummies in the first place, continue to confront scientists, archaeologists, and curators in the presentation of forensic research, such as facial modelling. The awkward formulations to which many scholars resort in their discussions of race skirts the question of why the topic is so sensitive – and ignores how deeply research on Egyptian mummies has been implicated in the formation and implementation of race science. Where mummies are concerned, the aesthetic regimes of the ancient and modern worlds do not merely run counter to each other: the latter has all but obliterated the former, raising the aesthetic to a problem of ethics as well.

Suggested reading:

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