

Forensic artists put different faces on 2,800-year-old mummy

June 30 2009, By William Mullen

When the 2,800-year-old mummy of an Egyptian court singer went on display at Chicago's Oriental Institute in February, Emily Teeter, the curator, wished she had a way for visitors to see the young woman's face so they could better understand her.

It didn't take long for that face to reappear after nearly three millennia. Two artists stepped forward offering to do portraits of the performer using separate police forensic methods normally employed to recreate the faces of unidentified, cold-case homicide victims.

The artists, Joshua Harker of Chicago and Mike Brassell of Baltimore, worked independently and unaware of the other's efforts, each using highly detailed CT-scan images of the skull of Meresamun, a singer who died roughly 800 years before the birth of Christ.

Using forensic artists to recreate a mummy's face is not new, but Teeter said she thought it was important to have at least two different artists do the work as a "control," in case the artists produce wildly different looking [faces](#).

Side by side, the finished drawings by Harker and Brassell aren't exactly identical twins, but they bare strong resemblances, differing only in that Harker's Meresamun has a slightly more prominent nose and stronger chin than Brassell's.

"They are so close that we feel pleased that we're giving people a pretty

good idea of what Meresamun looked like in life," said Egyptologist Teeter. She is installing the likenesses in the exhibit, which runs through Dec. 6.

"It was a surprise for me personally to see her as this robust, 29-year-old beauty that she was."

Gil Stein, the Institute director, agreed.

"She was a babe -- a very attractive woman," he said.

Born into a high-ranking family, Meresamun was a singer and musician in the ancient city of Thebes, working in the most sacred, off-limits area of the great temple of Karnak, the bedroom of the god Amun.

Her name means "Amun-loves-her." She died at age 29 or 30. Since then she has been inside her ornately decorated coffin, which the Institute bought in Cairo in 1920. Teeter, who has studied her for the last 20 years, has turned her into one of the most documented lives of an individual [mummy](#) on record.

Her coffin has never been opened, but last year Meresamun went through powerful CT scans at the University of Chicago Hospital, revealing she was 5 feet 5 inches tall and very healthy until her sudden death, which left no sign of trauma or lingering disease.

"She must have caught some sort of infection and died," said Teeter.

Having a true-to-life image of a mummy's face serves no real scientific purpose, Teeter said. But when the exhibit opened she was looking for a way to allow visitors to connect with Meresamun as a real person.

It didn't take long to find help. As soon as the exhibit opened, both

Harker and Brassell called her, asking to try to reconstruct the face from CT scans of Meresamun's skull. Harker, who said he does some police work but specializes in historical and archaeological digital facial reconstructions, is trained in the technique called the Gatliff/Snow technique, using known average tissue depths at key points on the skull, building up a three-dimensional face digitally on a computer.

"The skull drives everything," Harker said. "You get the facial landmark information from the skull, adding tissue depth markers in the key areas. It shows you everything, the arch of the eyebrows, shape of lips, location of facial muscles."

Brassell, a full-time forensic artist at the Baltimore police department, uses a slightly different but similar technique he was trained in at the FBI academy. The major difference is that he does his facial drawings as two-dimensional, free-hand drawings instead of on a computer.

"It is all measurements. Doing one is nothing more than math, just a matter of putting all the stuff in," said Brassell, who had done one other mummy face for a Baltimore museum before Meresamun.

"It is a lot different than working these cold case homicides, which are kind of depressing. The reconstructions themselves are the same, but a mummy is fun, because putting a face on one is always a good outcome."

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Citation: Forensic artists put different faces on 2,800-year-old mummy (2009, June 30) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-forensic-artists-year-old-mummy.html>

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