

REVIVAL OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SHROUD: STUDY AND RESTORATION OF A PAINTED FUNERARY SHROUD FROM ROMAN EGYPT

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The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts holds a small collection of Egyptian funerary shrouds from the Graeco-Roman period (nine items including fragmentary pieces). The most significant of these objects is the group of the so-called 'Saqqara shrouds' dated to the 2nd century AD. Only six shrouds of this type survive in museums, in Moscow, Berlin and Paris. The composition of the 'Saqqara shrouds' comprises three figures: the deceased is represented in the centre, flanked by two gods of the Netherworld. This composition evokes the motifs of the ancient Egyptian scene of 'psychostasia', with main figures of Anubis as 'psychopomp', and Osiris as ruler of the Underworld. The whole scene represents the transition of a deceased from this world to the afterlife.

Moscow funerary shroud *Inv. 1,1a 5747* is unusual in its iconography since in the centre there are two figures instead of one.¹ A young woman in a long pink tunic with dark purple *clavii* is depicted holding a small boy by the hand. The child wears a white toga with dark purple stripes. Their faces seem to be portraits, although the face of the woman is partly damaged. There seems little doubt that they were mother and son. This shroud came to the museum in 1911 from the collection of Vladimir Golenischev, who probably acquired it in Cairo in the late 1890s. The shroud was ravaged by time as well as damaged by previous restoration: in the 19th century it was mounted on canvas using an inappropriate adhesive that caused further damage.

In October 2015 the Department of Ancient Orient and the Conservation Department initiated a project to restore the shroud. As the Pushkin Museum does not possess a well-equipped conservation laboratory, specialists from various institutions were invited to conduct research and tests. The museum's conservators and curator thus worked in collaboration with the experts from the *Grabar Russian Art Scientific and Restoration Centre* in Moscow. They also cooperated with a team of scientists from *Moscow Lomonosov University* (Schools of Microbiology and Palaeoanthropology). Other international scholars and specialists in the field also participated in the project as consultants. Moscow specialists received a detailed conservation report from Dr. Patricia Dal-Prà, who shared her experience in the restoration of the Saqqara shroud at the Musée du Louvre. Dr. Florika Zakharia from the Department of Textile Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art came to Moscow in April 2016 to give consultations and lectures on the topic.

Participants in the project used a wide range of examination and analytical techniques, including visible light and ultraviolet (UV) examination; infrared reflectography (IRR); radiography; and pigment and medium identification. The project also included a search for comparanda and a study of the fabrication methods of similar shrouds. These examinations have revealed painted details invisible to the naked eye as well as pigment mixtures used for producing the perfect colours.

With reflected infrared photography, details that are usually difficult to make out with the naked eye could be seen: the woman's features and those of her child appear sharper, and the eye of Anubis as well as the intricate details of his clothing could be seen clearly. During UV examination, the luminescence of different pigments and organic materials used during previous conservation treatments were noted and captured with ultraviolet photographs. The white pigment on various parts of the shroud have different luminescence: the woman's tunic has a bluish glow; however, the figure of the mummy has a glow typical for white lead. The luminescence of the pink dress is characteristic for red organic pigments. Earlier restorations conducted in the 19th century were also detected. Organic materials were clearly used for the damaged figure of Anubis, notably a gelatinous glue used in the 19th century to consolidate the shroud. This glue soaked through the paint layer in areas and resulted in dark spots on the surface. Use of strengthening compound has caused whitish stains. Losses are significant on the Anubis figure and the underlying canvas can be seen. The UV photography presents the current state of the image in the most objective way, showing numerous losses of the paint layer that can't be seen on regular photographs.

New photos of the burial shroud were taken under natural light and these allow the viewer to admire the skillful work of the ancient artist, while photos under raking light show the imperfections of the surface of this second century piece. These images reveal a lot about the current state of the shroud because the raking light, falling at a very narrow angle, emphasizes the various details of the surface. The radiographic examination of the shroud revealed a very interesting fact: the little boy's figure was painted later than the woman's, indicating that the shroud initially had a 'traditional' three-figured composition. The additional image of a child can probably be explained by the unexpected and simultaneous, or perhaps closely consecutive, deaths of a woman and her son. A similar composition of a parent (mother/father) with a child can be seen on certain funerary stelae from Roman Egypt.²

During conservation treatment, the textile was strengthened, removed from the lining and transferred to a new fine cotton canvas. This final stage of the restoration was extremely difficult and could be compared with a microsurgical operation! By July 2016, the examination, tests and conservation treatment were complete. In November 2016, the shroud was finally installed in the permanent galleries. Previously displayed vertically, hanging on the wall like a painting, the shroud is now displayed inclined to meet conservation requirements.

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This conservation and research project has shed new light on this interesting object with a unique double portrait. Using modern methodologies, conservators, scientists, and scholars have thus assembled additional information on the famous Saqqara shroud of Moscow.

Additional information about the project is available here: <http://shroud.arts-museum.ru/index.php#info>.



Fig. 1: Moscow Shroud 5747 before conservation.



Fig. 2: Conservation treatment in progress.

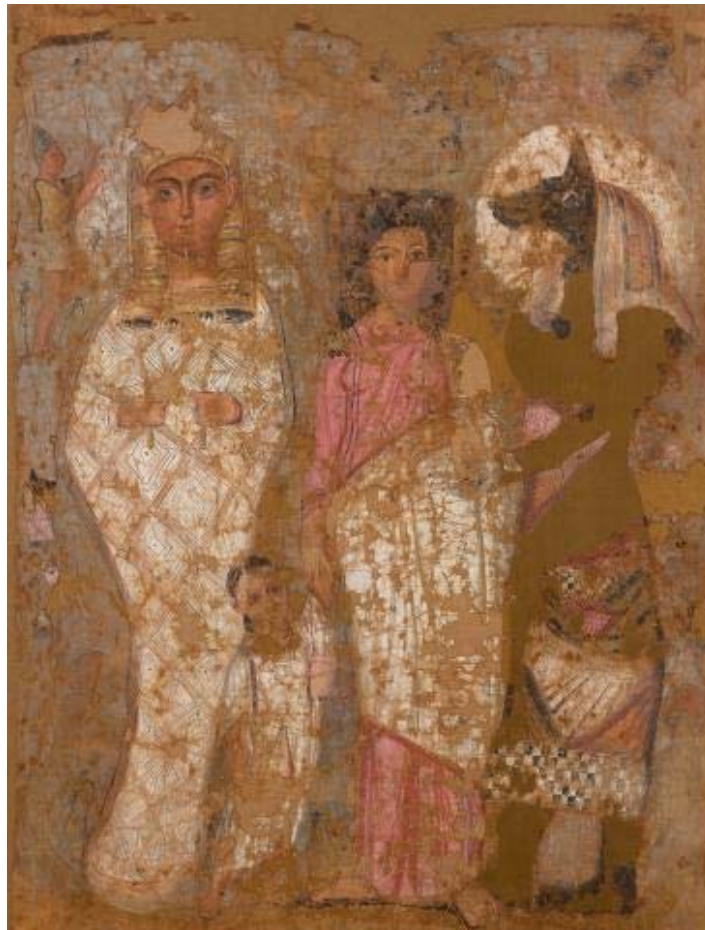


Fig. 3: Moscow Shroud 5747 after completion of the conservation treatment.

¹ See the description of this shroud by Klaus Parlasca in K. Parlasca and H. Seemann (eds), *Augenblicke. Mumienporträts und ägyptische Grabkunst aus römischer Zeit* (Munich, 1999), 246.

² See, for example, Louvre N 146 (acquired in 1827 from the Drovetti Collection): N. Bel, C. Giroire, F. Gombert-Merice, M.-H. Rutschowskaya and P.-L. Gatier, *L'Orient Romain et Byzantin au Louvre* (Paris, 2012), 391, fig. 384.