

Objects in Focus Ancient Egypt

The decoration of an ancient Egyptian coffin

This coffin is displayed among the Fitzwilliam's wonderful collection of Egyptian antiquities, beside other examples of ancient funerary objects.



This coffin was made for a man called Pakepu, who worked in the funerary industry in ancient Egypt. It was found at Luxor, close to the Valley of the Kings.

The coffin is made of wood and is about 2,600 years old. Some details of its decoration show us the workings of the artist who painted it. The quality of the painting is not very high, so it is likely that Pakepu was not very wealthy.

This coffin was originally fitted inside another coffin, a bit like Russian dolls. This was the normal practice of the time in ancient Egypt.

How was the coffin painted?



The basic colours of the decoration are red, yellow, green and blue on a white background.

The paints are made from ground up minerals mixed with plant gums and resins. Inscriptions on the coffin give the name of the owner, Pakepu.

Looking closely at the foot end of the coffin, we can see that the **paint was applied rather carelessly**, especially some of the green and red paints.

There is even a place where **the red paint has run down**, which shows that the coffin was horizontal when it was painted.

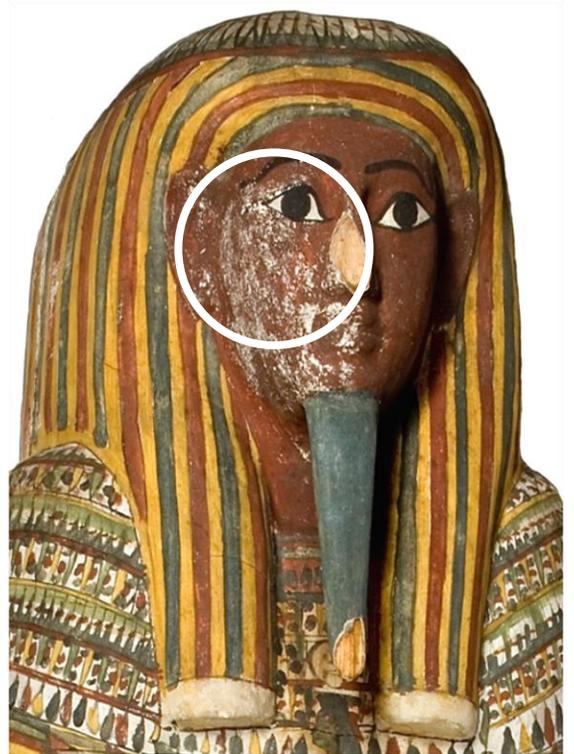
We can also see how the artist used **small black lines to mark how the horizontal stripes should be set out**.



How skillful was the artist?

The **red colour on the face** is more **patchy** on one side than the other.

It seems that the artist was running out of paint when he worked on the right side of the face, so he added water to thin it down. This also tells us that the artist painted the left side of the coffin first before moving round to work on the right side.



The **stripes on the head vary in thickness** and are quite uneven, and the paint has not been carefully applied in some places. These details suggest that the decoration was not painted by one of the best coffin artists. Maybe Pakepu was not a very rich man and could not afford anything very expensive.

When was the coffin painted?

The **decoration runs across the join between the lid and box of the coffin**, and that shows us that the coffin was already closed, with the body inside, when it was painted



Behind the Scenes at the Museum Meet Helen Strudwick, Senior Curator Ancient Nile Valley

Helens main interest is the study of ancient Egyptian coffins and other objects from Egyptian tombs. Since 1985, she has also directed excavations in private tombs at Luxor.



Map of Fitzwilliam Museum and the Egyptian Coffins

