



Learning from human remains: Seianti's skeleton

Reconstructing Seianti

Professor John Prag:

I'm Professor John Prag, er, at the Manchester Museum, I'm Keeper of Archaeology at the Manchester Museum, and something which I've been doing for years is working with other people on facial reconstructions.

What interests me about facial reconstruction is not so much putting the face back on the skull. Yes, you – suddenly you're looking at somebody from two and a half thousand years ago, whatever. But, right from the start, what has interested me is to use this as a tool to answer historical archaeological questions.

Richard Neave:

My name is Richard Neave. I trained as an artist and I would describe myself as a forensic-stroke-medical artist. I spent most of my life working in hospitals and medical schools and probably know more about the inside of the body than I do the outside of it.

This is a head which has been half built on the skull and half has been left bare. And this is a sort of demonstration model which has been prepared so we can see the difference between the part of the face that has been rebuilt and the part of the face that hasn't. And it shows the basic principles and how these pegs, which are inserted all over the skull, these indicate the average thickness of soft tissue which you're going to get at this point and will control to a certain extent, the thickness of, shall we say, the tissue that lies over the top. And here you can see these little points showing which are the ends of those pegs just showing through.

John Prag:

One of the important things about facial reconstruction done properly, by a trained medical artist, trained in the world of anatomy as much as in the world of the art school, is that it is totally objective. The skull is the armature for the face, the skull dictates the shape of the face. We know the thickness of the flesh from measurements that have been taken for over a century now, we know them for eight different ages, different sexes, fat and thin and so on. And having established that information from the skull, from the rest of the skeleton, from the burial circumstances, etc., you then build it up, totally objectively.

Richard Neave:

What I do is to recreate as precisely and as accurately as possible, the anatomy based on known anatomical science. The subjectivity comes in on just a basic skull, would be if one was using colour, what colour eyes would you use? Given that that is not part of the problem because you know that they're going to have dark eyes if they are say Mediterranean and you can say reasonably certain that they have darkish eyes and so on and so forth. Then the subjectivity is on the surface markings like folds, creases and hair, hair line. The exact shape of the tip of the nose. The exact configuration of vermilion shape of the lips. You can get a rough idea, but the exact shape of those lips is pretty arbitrary.

John Prag:

One of the things that made Seianti so interesting, with this probable portrait of her reclining on the coffin, was the whole business of the face and the body in Etruscan art. Greek sculpture, Greek art, tends to show idealised figures. Etruscan art, the more you look at it, the more you see that the faces are really very individualised. The bodies, when they do the bodies properly, when they take trouble over the bodies, these are flabby men with paunches and double chins. Now, you wouldn't show yourself on your coffin if you didn't really look like that, at least, that's what I believe. So, it seemed that the Etruscans would provide us with a lead into real portraiture, the beginnings of real portraiture in, well, in Western art.

Richard Neave:

We had one big problem, of course, in that we were given to understand that she was considerably older than it subsequently turned out she was. So what you see here is mark 2, if you like. Mark 1 was the same lady, but aged between 80 and 90, I think. So in some ways much more character in the face. One was able to build into it all the kind of things that would happen to a face when it gets to that age. I must confess I – I was rather – I was rather sorry when we discovered that in fact she was younger, because it meant that we were going to have to completely re-jig the whole thing, which meant actually taking that original face and stripping off the years.

We are looking at a woman, I suspect she may have had a different expression on her face. It may have been harsher, it may have been more mellow. Her eyes may have had a little bit more hooding to them, who knows? She lived in a fairly warm climate, a lot of sunlight. She might have had rather more creases and wrinkles on her face. But generally speaking that I think is a fair representation of what she would have looked like.

Very often you can look at these things and say well, yes, you see people wandering around like that. You know, it's a recognisable type of face, it's a recognisable type of person, which gives it a certain believability. There's nothing which jars. And yes, I think if that was a forensic one, I would expect it to be recognised in due course, yes.

John Prag:

You put them together and your first feeling is, "Well, they're quite similar." And then you start looking more closely and you start seeing the differences. She is rather plumper, for a start, on the reconstruction than on the sarcophagus. And there are – she's got an extra double chin, that sort of thing, the mouth is a slightly different shape, the lips on the portrait are slightly plumper and more attractive. And the real difference is, here, the profile of the nose, where the reconstruction has quite a hollow at the bridge of the nose, whereas the portrait has it almost straight, your beautiful, classical profile.

Well, Seianti has been prettified a little bit by the sculptor, for the next world. But, otherwise, as you look at it, and as you look at it with a measured comparison, you realise that they are the same person.

Because we know that the sarcophagus was made to order for her, because it has her name cut in the clay while it was wet, not afterwards, while it was wet, we therefore now know, from comparing the reconstruction with the figure that is reclining in clay on the sarcophagus, we know that there, in that figure, we actually have the first, I think, named, identifiable portrait in Western art. That is, really, again, very exciting. It was what we hoped we might get, we hoped we might get a portrait, we hadn't really worked it out, or it hadn't dawned on us that if we got it right, then we really would hit the jackpot and that, I think, is what we've done.