

A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

PHARAOHS OF THE SUN

Akhenaten Nefertiti Tutankhamen

THE SEVENTEEN-YEAR REIGN OF THE PHARAOH AKHENATEN WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY PERIOD IN EGYPTIAN HISTORY. DURING THIS SHORT ERA, A NEW ARTISTIC STYLE WAS FORGED; A NEW, MONOTHEISTIC RELIGION WAS CREATED; AND A NEW CAPITAL CITY WAS FOUNDED. IT WAS A TIME OF UNPRECEDENTED CHANGE AND INNOVATION THAT OFFERS UNLIMITED CHALLENGES TO ART HISTORIANS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS.



NOVEMBER 14, 1999 – FEBRUARY 6, 2000
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Profile of Akhenaten

Probably from Amarna

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1353–1336 B.C.

Limestone

Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin 14512

PROFILE OF AKHENATEN

One of the most striking aspects of this phase, often called the Amarna Period (after the site of Akhenaten's new capital), was the dramatic change in artistic style from millennia-old traditions. Instead of the usual taut, idealized representations of the pharaoh, depictions of Akhenaten show a curiously long, exaggerated face with full lips, a pendulous chin, and a thin neck. When his full body is shown, his torso is narrow, his arms are spindly, and his hips are oddly rounded. Other members of his family are also represented in this new manner.

What caused this revolution in style? Akhenaten himself must have sanctioned the change. Did this seemingly distorted form reflect the way he actually looked? Or was the change welcomed as a refreshing departure from old norms? The most extreme form of the style was short-lived, and by the end of Akhenaten's reign the style was tempered, yet it still featured soft, round forms and a special delicacy. Soon after Akhenaten's death, Egyptian artists reverted to their old conventions, although a fondness for increased naturalism persisted.

This image is rendered in sunk relief, where the image is cut into the background. This technique allowed for more rapid carving than raised relief. Speed was important to Akhenaten's artists, who decorated thousands of blocks

STELA OF THE ROYAL FAMILY

In one of his most startling endeavors, Akhenaten reorganized Egyptian religion so that a sole deity, Aten, became the focus of worship. In place of the multiplicity of gods and goddesses, represented in human, animal, and composite form, he centered his attention on the light from the sun. Aten was portrayed as neither a human nor an animal, but as a plain disk with life-giving rays emanating from it. A relief from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, included in this exhibition, shows Akhenaten in the form of a sphinx worshipping the disk of Aten with its rays.

Here, Akhenaten and his family are basking in the protective rays of Aten. Akhenaten, seated on the left, is shown with his wife, Nefertiti, on the right. Akhenaten holds one daughter, and two daughters sit with their mother. The tender warmth of this relief, expressed both literally, in the rays of the sun, and figuratively, in the emotional bond of the family, is unprecedented in Egyptian art. The rounded forms of the adults, the charming gestures of the girls, and the easy grace of the composition combine to form a masterpiece of Amarna relief carving.



Stela of the royal family

Probably from Amarna

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1353–1336 B.C.

Limestone

Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin 14145

HEAD OF NEFERTITI

Akhenaten's queen was a noted beauty. Her very name, Nefertiti, meant "the beautiful one has come." She was an important part of the king's court. In many depictions, she is shown alone, worshiping the solar disk, without the expected presence of her husband, Akhenaten. She had six daughters, one of whom died at a relatively young age. The royal family group was very important in the art of the Amarna Period, and it appears more frequently than at any other time in Egyptian art.

In a remarkable archaeological discovery, the house of a sculptor was excavated at Amarna. His name was Thutmose, and in his house a series of plaster models and unfinished stone portraits were found. The plaster models are fascinating for their degree of naturalism and individuality. This incomplete stone head, from the workshop of Thutmose, is recognizable as a portrait of Nefertiti. Preserved are the black guidelines that direct further carving of the eyes, ears, and neck. Her lips have red coloring. The surface had not yet received its final polishing. This head would probably have been set into a complete statue of the queen made of other materials.

The discovery of the sculptor's house at Amarna is only one of the important finds made at the site of Amarna, located midway between the traditional centers of Memphis and Thebes. Akhenaten named his newly founded city Akhenaten, "the horizon of Aten." Archaeologists have explored the site since the mid-nineteenth century, and one of the most complete pictures of life in an Egyptian town has emerged. The city features grand temples to Aten,

elegant palaces for the royal family, complexes for state business, and numerous homes for the wealthy and for more humble workers.



FISH VESSEL

This delightful vessel in the form of a fish is made of colored glass. Artisans in the New Kingdom perfected the craft of glassworking, and it seems to have been a particular specialty of craftsmen at Amarna. Before the invention of glassblowing in the early Roman period (around 50 B.C.), which allowed for mass production, glassmaking was an exacting craft for elites.

Glass was made by melting sand, lime, and other ingredients together. Colored glass was created by adding trace amounts of other minerals, such as copper and cobalt. Molten glass was wrapped in strands around a shaped core attached to a metal rod. Additional colored strands might be added and then pulled with a sharp tool to create a feathered pattern. The vessel slowly cooled, the rod was broken out, and the sand core was carefully scraped out. Glass vessels such as this one would have been extremely valuable, and the fish shape is very rare.



Fish vessel

Amarna, house immediately east of N.49.20
New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1353–1336 B.C.
Core-formed glass
The Trustees of the British Museum, London, 55193

Youthful Nefertiti

Amarna, house P.47.2
New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1353–1336 B.C.
Quartzite
Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin 21222

DIGGING DEEPER



Explore the questions and problems surrounding the creation of the new artistic style in the Amarna Period. Organize a team of students to support the view that the new conventions for portraying the human form were based on Akhenaten's actual body type. Others might argue that the style was created to celebrate Akhenaten's break with the past and his new religion.



Discuss the representation of Aten, the light of the solar disk. Examine how it functions as a unifying element in the composition of the stela of the royal family. Address the problem of making the invisible visible. Are there other ways to represent the sun's rays?



Investigate the process of creating a stone sculpture. Include the evidence of the plaster models from Thutmose's studio and the guidelines remaining on the youthful Nefertiti.

(cover)

Sculpture of Akhenaten (detail)

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1353–1336 B.C.

Yellow stone

Musée du Louvre, Paris, N 831



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