Akhenaton and the Amarna Period

Akhenaten was a pharaoh of the 18th dynasty who is best known for ushering in a distinctly new art style known as Amarna Art.

Figure 1: Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their children

This relief illustrates an intimate portrait of Akhenaten and his family in the Amarna style of art.

- The Amarna Period was centered around the capital city of Amarna and noted for its artistic style, which drastically shifted from conventional styles of art.
- The human body in the Amarna style is portrayed more realistically, rather than idealistically, though at times depictions border on caricature.
- Common features are an elongation and narrowing of the neck, a sloping of the forehead and nose, a prominent chin, large ears and lips, spindle-like arms and calves and large thighs, stomachs, and hips.
- The decoration of the tombs of non-royals was quite different from previous eras, and clearly worshiped the Aten over other gods and goddesses.
- Not many buildings from this period have survived the ravages of later kings, partially as they were constructed out of standard-size blocks which were very easy to remove and reuse.
- Much of what we know of the Amarna period today comes from the discovery of the Amarna Letters: a cache of over 300 tablets recording select diplomatic correspondence of the Pharaoh.

Note:

Polytheism is the belief in the existence of many gods.

Monotheism is believing in a single god, deity, spirit, etc., especially for an organized religion, faith, or creed.

A lingua franca is a common language used by people of diverse backgrounds to communicate with one another, often a basic form of speech with simplified grammar.
Figure 2:
A relief portrait of Akhenaten.

Akhenaten represented in the typical Amarna period style.
New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, circa 1345 B.C.

Figure 3:
Artist’s sketch: Walk in the Garden; limestone; New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, c. 1335 BC

A relief of a royal couple in the Armana style. The figures are thought to be Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Smenkhkare and Meritaten, or Tutankhamen and Ankhesenamun.
Akhenaten was a pharaoh of the 18th dynasty who was known before the fifth year of his reign as Amenhotep IV.

He ruled for 17 years (1353-1336 BC) and is especially noted for abandoning traditional Egyptian polytheism and introducing a relatively monotheistic worship centered on the Aten, a kind of solar deity. In the end this change was not accepted and, after his death, traditional religious practice was gradually restored. During his reign, Akhenaten built a city for Aten that is known today as Amarna, and ushered in a period of art, known as The Amarna Period, centered around this capital city and noted for its artistic style, which drastically shifted away from conventional styles of art.

Although the worship of Aten was completely suppressed after Akhenaten’s death, the artistic legacy had a more lasting impact.

**Amarna-style Painting and Sculpture**

This art is characterized by a sense of movement and activity in images, with figures having raised heads, many figures overlapping and many of the scenes busy and crowded. The human body is portrayed more realistically, rather than idealistically, though at times depictions border on caricature. For example, many depictions of Akhenaten’s body show him with wide hips, a drooping stomach, thick lips and thin arms and legs. This is a divergence from the earlier Egyptian art which shows men with perfectly chiseled bodies (Figure 2). Some scholars suggest that the presentation of the human body as imperfect during the Amarna period is in deference to Aten.

Sculptures from the Amarna period are set apart for their accentuation of certain features. Many works depicted important people with an elongation and narrowing of the neck, a sloping of the forehead and nose, a prominent chin, large ears and lips, spindle-like arms and calves and large thighs, stomachs, and hips (Figure 1).

Like previous works, faces on reliefs continued to be shown exclusively in profile. The illustration of figures’ hands and feet showed great detail, with fingers and toes depicted as long and slender. The skin color of both males and females was generally dark brown, in contrast to the previous tradition of depicting women with lighter skin. Along with traditional court scenes, intimate scenes were often portrayed. In a relief of Akhenaten, he is shown with his primary wife, Nefertiti, and their children in an intimate setting. His children are shrunken to appear smaller than their parents, a routine stylistic feature of traditional Egyptian art (Figure 0).

The period saw the use of sunk relief, previously used for large external reliefs, extended to small carvings and used for most monumental reliefs.
Tombs

The decoration of the tombs of non-royals was quite different from previous eras. These tombs did not feature any funerary or agricultural scenes, nor did they include the tomb occupant unless he or she was depicted with a member of the royal family. Decorations clearly worshiped the Aten, with excerpts from the *Hymn to the Aten* often present in the tombs; there is an absence of other gods and goddesses and no mention of Osiris or the underworld.

Architecture

Not many buildings from this period have survived the ravages of later kings, partially as they were constructed out of standard-size blocks, known as *talatat*, which were very easy to remove and reuse. In recent decades, restoration work on later buildings has revealed large numbers of reused blocks from the period, with the original carved faces turned inwards, greatly increasing the amount of work known from the period. Temples in Amarna did not follow the traditional Egyptian design: typically smaller, they had sanctuaries open to the sun, no closing doors, and contained a large numbers of altars.

Amarna Letters

Much of what we know of the Amarna period today comes from the discovery of the *Amarna Letters*. In 1887, a local woman uncovered a cache of over 300 tablets recording select diplomatic correspondence of the Pharaoh. They are predominantly written in Akkadian, the *lingua franca* commonly used during the Late Bronze Age of the Ancient Near East for such communication.