

# Amarna Period and Afterward

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

The Amarna Period, covered in this lesson, was a time for many big changes. In this lesson, you will explore:



### BIG IDEA

The Amarna Period is a short period of time during the reign of the pharaoh Akhenaten, marked by major political, religious, and stylistic changes.

## 1. Time Period and Location: The Amarna Period

The Amarna Period occurred during the reign of the pharaoh Akhenaten, which began in 1353 BCE and ended with his death in 1336 BCE.

This lesson explores the locations of Amarna and Thebes. Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III, had chosen Thebes as Egypt's capital, and it still was the capital when Akhenaten came to power. Interestingly, when things started to change, Akhenaten decided to move the capital to a new location, which he named Amarna.

## 2. Influence and Change: The Amarna Period

So, what influenced the Amarna Period? It began with Amenhotep III, who was pharaoh in the 18th dynasty. His son, Amenhotep IV, was eventually his successor.



### DID YOU KNOW

Amenhotep IV was named successor only because his brother, Tuthmosis, died before he could take over.

This shift in power caused major changes politically, religiously, and stylistically. Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten, which was a nod to his favorite deity, **Aton** (or Aten). Aton, who took the form of the sun disk, was a minor deity in this region. Aton is not to be confused with Ra, who is the sun god. Under Akhenaten, Aton became the principal deity of a new sect within the Egyptian religion created by Akhenaten himself.

The reason for this change? Nobody could say for sure. But this is an example of early **monotheism** or **henotheism**. Monotheism is a belief in one god. Henotheism is a belief that there is a principal god, but there also may be other minor gods.

Amenhotep IV, now named Akhenaten, moved the capital of the Egyptian Empire from Thebes to Amarna. This move broke the tradition of having the burial sites, or the Acropolis for Akhenaten, on the west side of the Nile. Because of the location of the new capital, these burial sites were now on the east.

This was all substantial for several reasons. They were bold moves, to say the least, not met with overwhelming enthusiasm, particularly from the priestly class. At this time, the priests associated with the worship of Amun at Thebes had become extremely powerful. One argument is that Akhenaten forced a move to Amarna in order to undermine their authority.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

In order to understand how upset ancient Egyptians were about the worship of Aton, you might consider religious and political beliefs in the present and how opposed people are to belief systems that are not their own. In this regard, ancient Egyptians are not so different from people today.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Aton**

Or Aten; the disk of the sun in ancient Egyptian mythology.

##### **Monotheism**

The belief in one god.

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## 3. Changes in Art

Adding fuel to the fire, Akhenaten altered the stylistic elements of Egyptian art significantly by eliminating the traditional canon. Some of the stylistic changes that we can observe included:

- Slanted, downturned eyes
- Elongated face
- Exaggerated facial features
- Frequent use of the ankh, a symbol that means “life” or “eternal life”
- Rendering of the pharaoh as androgynous

As opposed to the masculine, athletic figures seen in past time periods, the pharaoh was now depicted with a narrow chest, thin arms, wide hips, big belly, and spindly legs. Interestingly, these stylistic elements are found predominantly in representations of Akhenaten and his children, but not the queen.

One of the most debated questions regarding the Amarna Period is the degree to which we can consider portraits of Akhenaten to be accurate representations of his appearance. Keeping in mind the highly political nature of the move to Amarna, it is quite possible that Akhenaten did not resemble his portraits that much. Rather, the difference in appearance signals a difference in values, both political and religious.



#### DID YOU KNOW

These new representations have led some, such as the Canadian scholar Alan Burridge, to pose a theory in 1995 that these are actually realistic depictions of the physical abnormalities associated with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder affecting the connective tissues. Marfan syndrome can be passed down to children, which could also explain why only the children are shown in a similar way. This is only one of the many theories related to possible diseases that may explain the unusual appearance.

## 4. Examples of Changing Artwork

As you look at examples from the Amarna Period, you can see the stylistic changes that took place during this time.

➞ EXAMPLE Below is a **sunken relief** of Akhenaten with Queen Nefertiti and their children. Sunken relief was popular during the Amarna Period.



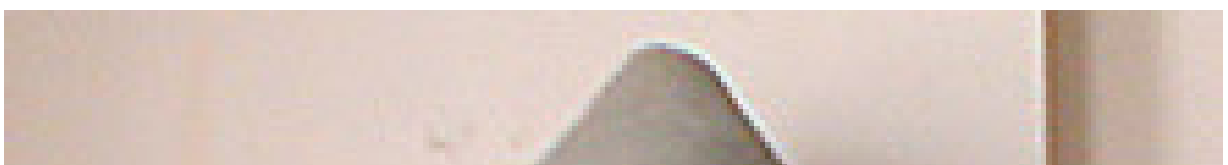
Akhenaten and his family

1353–1336 BCE

Painted (originally) limestone, sunken relief

Most interesting is the unusual subject matter in the piece above. Notice that it lacks formality. This is an intimate scene of a family moment. Two of the kids are swarming around on the queen, while the third is being petted on the head by Akhenaten and pulling him in for a kiss. The event takes place under the watchful gaze of Aton, the sun disk, sending rays of light upon the family, each one ending in an **ankh**, the symbol of life.

➞ EXAMPLE This next image is a colossal image of Akhenaten.







Colossal figure of Akhenaten

1353–1336 BCE

Carved sandstone (13' high)

➞ EXAMPLE Here is another image of Akhenaten.







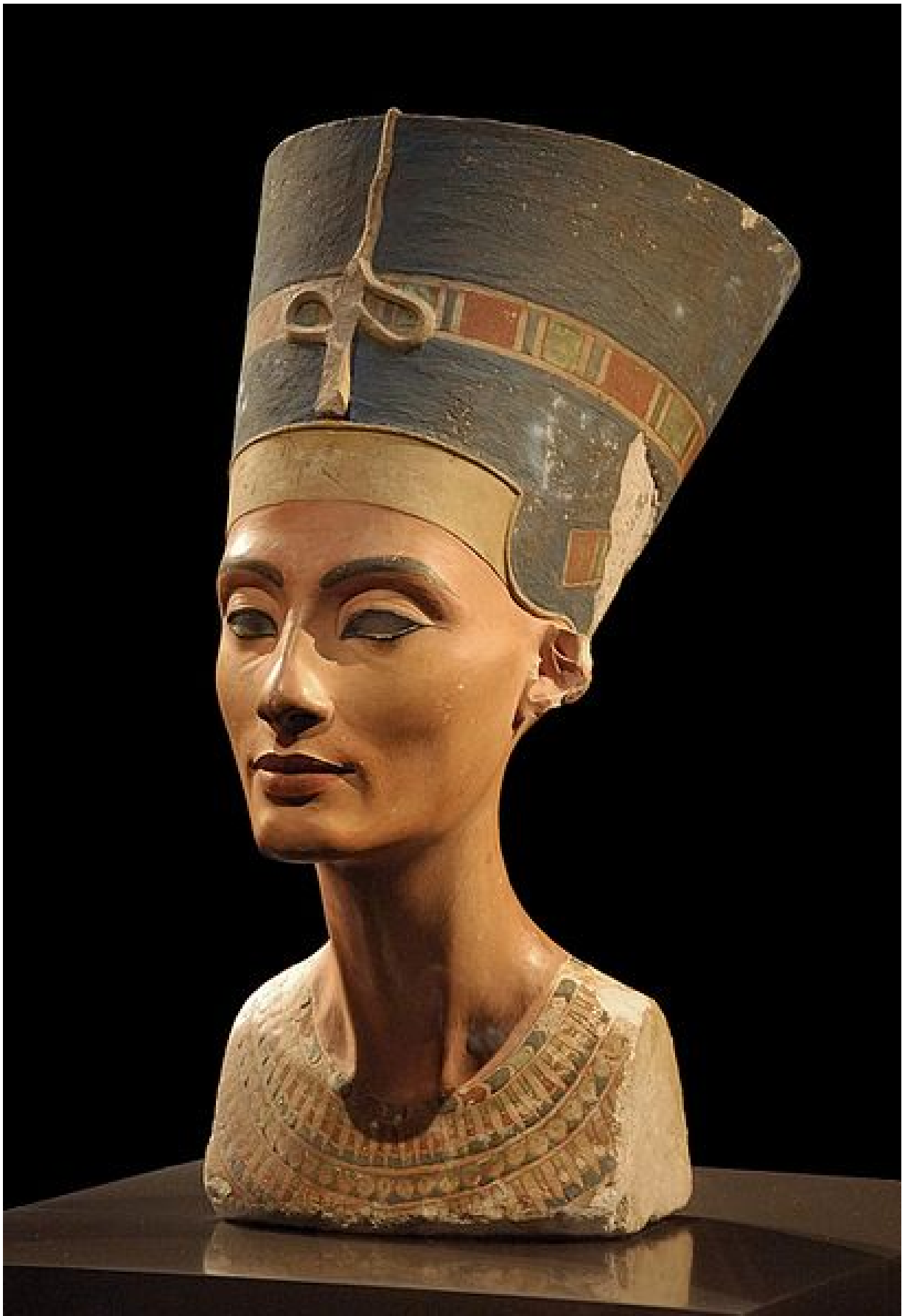
Image of Akhenaten

1353–1336 BCE

Carved stone

Notice, in the above image, the unusual stylistic elements referred to in this lesson; it is a very different sculpture of the pharaoh. The large ear, depicted here, is another physical abnormality of Marfan syndrome.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Next is an image of a bust of Queen Nefertiti.



**Bust of Queen Nefertiti**

**1353–1336 BCE**

**Painted limestone**

Notice above, the striking contrast to the representations of Pharaoh Akhenaten. We have no way to know what Nefertiti actually looked like; however, it is likely that this bust is an idealized likeness. Her neck is long and extremely thin, and her face is exactly symmetrical. There is some thought that maybe this bust functioned as a model for artists to make other artistic works portraying the queen.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Sunken Relief**

A design cut into the surface where there is no point or part higher than the surface itself.

##### **Ankh**

Egyptian key of life or the key of the Nile; a hieroglyphic of a looped cross with a handle.

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## 5. Tutankhamun

With the eventual secession of Akhenaten's son, Tutankhamun, informally known as King Tut, the major changes of the Amarna Period began to fade away. The royal court was moved back to Thebes, and there was a shift in stylistic elements of artwork that began to return to traditional ways. Tut's reign, however, was short-lived. He died when he was only 18 years old.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Even Tut's name reflected the change. Originally, he was called Tutankhamen after his father—but the spelling was changed to Tutankhamun with the return of the priestly class of Amun, who is Ra. So, even the name change suggested that they were moving away from the Amarna Period.

The mask of Tutankhamun is one of the most recognizable artifacts from ancient Egypt. It was discovered in the early 20th century. The tomb was largely untouched, which gives us a fantastic opportunity to see the burial chamber of the pharaoh the way it would've looked in its time.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the mask of Tutankhamun.





Mask of Tutankhamun

1332–1322 BCE

Gilded (gold), semiprecious stones

This mask and chest piece give us a stylized interpretation of the young pharaoh's appearance. Notice the following characteristics in the mask and painted chest:

- Gold inlaid with enamel/semiprecious stones
- Realism in facial features
- Some qualities seen in Amarna Period
- Shift toward traditional stylistic elements
- Figure stiffened up



## SUMMARY

Several substantial changes took place during the Amarna Period. In this lesson, you learned about **the time period and location of the Amarna Period**

This was a time in history of much **influence and change**, beginning with Pharaoh Amenhotep III and his son, Amenhotep IV, his eventual successor. Not only did Amenhotep IV change his name to Akhenaten, a nod to his favorite deity Aton, he also changed the location of the capital from Thebes to Amarna.

**Changes in art** and elements of art began to take place as well. This was the result of Akhenaten eliminating the traditional canon. In this lesson, you explored some **examples of changing artwork**.

Finally, you learned about the shift in power to **Tutankhamun**, known as King Tut. Major changes of the Amarna Period began to fade away, the royal court was moved back to Thebes, and there was a shift back to traditional stylistic elements of artwork.

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### Sunken Relief

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