The Art of Amarna: Akhenaten and his life under the Sun

The Amarna period, roughly 1353-1336 BCE, introduced a new form of art that completely contradicted what was known and revered in the Egyptian culture. The pharaoh Amenhotep IV not only changed his name from Amenhotep to Akhenaten, and the religion of ancient Egypt from polytheistic to monotheistic, but he also challenged the norm of Egyptian society by depicting his reign in a vastly different way from the rulers who came before him. Previous to Akhenaten’s rise to the throne, Egyptian art was stagnant, focused heavily on permanence both of the object and of the subject (most pertinently, the pharaoh) itself.
When Akhenaten became the Egyptian pharaoh in 1353 BCE, he took it upon himself to change the standards of art and culture. This was intended to aid in the solidification of the singular god Aten, as well as to separate the reign of Akhenaten from his predecessors. What Akhenaten chose, however, for the artistic community was drastically different from what had once been. Naturalistic physical features, familial affection, and the singular god Aten replaced the unrealistic human proportions, rigidity, and god-given leadership images of the past. Before Akhenaten's time, the pharaoh in particular was routinely depicted with wide, broad shoulders, a strong body, and an emotionless, ageless face (Figure 1). Always the standard royal headdress and false beard were depicted, and the posture appeared to be rigid and immovable—as though the pharaoh himself was immovable from the throne. Each image was similarly crafted despite the age of the pharaoh, and forged in permanent mediums to endure throughout the ages. These attributes spoke to the pharaoh's strength as a ruler and the longevity of his reign, and of Egypt.
Akhenaten, however, introduced a much more ambiguous form that broke away from the traditions of the past (Figure 2). The portrayal of his body was feminine in nature, making it so that he looked quite androgynous—both masculine and feminine. His torso became slim with hips seemingly wide enough for birthing, and his neck, face, and fingers were elongated. Akhenaten did choose to maintain the beard and diadem of Egypt, as well as the crook of the pharaoh, but his imperfections were highlighted rather than hidden—as noted in his overly long forehead and pudgy belly. There are rumors that Akhenaten was a very sickly man and thus his elongated skull and rounded belly may be attributed to illness. These details included in the art introduced a new sense of realism that had not been present in the past. Images of Akhenaten did not exude the strength of rulers past, making it all too easy to differentiate his images from those of his predecessors.
The body of Akhenaten is further altered as his posture is much more fluid than had previously been seen in Egyptian art. His artists attempted to focus on creating a more genuine vision of the pharaoh, breaking away from the traditional stationary depictions to show movement and emotion (see Figure 3 for comparison).
Instead of rigidity, the focus of Amarna pharaoh art is on the depiction of Akhenaten as a good and kind father, active and actively playing with his children. In _Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their children blessed by the Aten_ (Figure 4), Akhenaten is depicted with his famous wife Nefertiti and three of his children by her—two girls and a boy. Both the pharaoh and his queen are with their children in a buoyant, upbeat manner rather than a strict, professional one, and they are, more importantly, interacting with them directly rather than through the traditional wet-nurse. This emphasis on family relations was intended to show the ruler of Egypt as more interested in day-to-day activities and the brief moments of life rather than the eternal nature of his reign as his predecessors stressed. By emphasizing the family, Akhenaten attempted to introduce to Egyptian culture the idea that the role of the pharaoh is secondary to the role of a father, as a good leader must be a good caregiver first.
In almost every known depiction of Akhenaten, there is a solar disk shown above him, a representation of the sun god Aten. Though Aten existed in the Egyptian religion before the Amarna period, he soon rose to be known as the highest of all gods as Akhenaten attempted to erase all signs of the former pantheon and make Aten the lone god in the sky. Moreover, pharaoh worship lessened tremendously in art (though was not removed completely), and was replaced by depictions of Akhenaten worshipping Aten, thereby displacing the idea that the pharaoh was a god in his own right. With this new belief, depictions of Akhenaten were further distanced from images of the past as his role became more submissive to the will of the god, and thus his depictions were less leadership based.

Although the Amarna period did not last long after Akhenaten's death around 1336 BCE, this period was undoubtedly one of the most intriguing and significant in Egyptian history. The shift of the divine structure had an astonishing effect on the way the culture was depicted artistically, thus creating a terrible backlash when Akhenaten's son, Tutankhamun, came to the throne a short while later. Not only did Tutankhamun attempt to erase his father from Egyptian history, but he shifted Egyptian art back to the old ways so quickly and harshly that many objects from the Amarna period were lost or destroyed. His haste was to the relief of the Egyptian people, but to the incredible disappointment of modern Egyptologists and art historians. Much of Akhenaten's motives are now lost, thus creating a widespread fascination and appreciation for the brief period while it lasted.

**Featured image:** Akhenaten depicted as a sphinx at Amarna, solar rays bathing him. [Wikimedia CC](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Akhenaten_(Teil_el-Amarna)_001.jpg)

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ANCIENT IMAGE GALLERIES
Akhenaten, known before the fifth year of his reign as Amenhotep IV (sometimes given its Greek form, Amenophis IV, and meaning "Amun Is Satisfied"), was an ancient Egyptian pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty who ruled for 17 years and died perhaps in 1336 BC or 1334 BC. He is noted for abandoning traditional Egyptian polytheism and introducing worship centered on the Aten, which is sometimes described as monolatristic, henotheistic, or even quasi-monotheistic. An early inscription likens the Aten to the sun. The Amarna period, roughly 1353-1336 BCE, introduced a new form of art that completely contradicted what was known and revered in the Egyptian culture. The pharaoh Amenhotep IV not only changed his name from Amenhotep to Akhenaten, and the religion of ancient Egypt from polytheistic to monotheistic, but he also challenged the norm of Egyptian society by depicting his reign in a vastly different way from the rulers who came before him. Previous to Akhenaten’s rise to the throne, Egyptian art was stagnant, focused heavily on permanence both of the object and of the subject (most pertinently, the pharaoh) itself. Relief portrait of Akhenaten in the typical Amarna period style. Wikimedia, CC. When Akhenaten became the Egyptian pharaoh in 1353 BCE, he took it upon himself to change the standards of art and culture.