AKHENATEN’S LEGACY

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Figure 1  Bust of Akhenaten, white limestone, height 21 inches, Mansoor #1
History certainly has its quirks! Take an Egyptian father and his son. The son, Egypt’s King Tut, is practically a household word. Millions of words have been written about the pharaoh Tutankhamun. However, if it were not for the chance discovery of his intact tomb, we would scarcely know the name of this insignificant ruler of Egypt who died when barely nineteen years old. Ironically he is better known than his truly significant father, Akhenaten [Figure 1 – picture of Akhenaten #1], who shook Egypt to the roots when he decided to worship a single god, Aten, to change the conventions of portraiture in sculpture and painting, and to rebuild Egypt’s capital 200 miles downstream, on a vacant site that is now called Amarna (from an Arabic name given it by 18th century Bedouin squatters). Father and son lived in Amarna until the father’s death. Together they left a legacy of art, mystery, splendor, and ideas that live on in history. Part of the father’s legacy was of course his own son. Another part of Akhenaten’s legacy was a whole city, carved from the wilderness near the beginning of his seventeen year reign, and abandoned when he died. This short occupation and abandonment was an unprecedented boon for later archaeologists, giving a clear timeframe for most materials found in Amarna.

Imagine having to construct and administer an entire city in the course of just a few short years, and having to do it about 1350 years before the Christian era. Implementing the unprecedented decision to move his Egyptian capital and the royal palace to a point midway between the old capitals of Lower Egypt (Memphis) and Upper Egypt (Thebes) was certainly a herculean task [Figure 2 – Map of ancient Egypt]. Saying that he needed an uninhabited location along the Nile. Akhenaten ordered the construction of a sacred city of more than 20,000 persons, perhaps as many as 50,000, including the king’s officials and administrators, architects, sculptors, and scribes, along with their support groups. All these people had to be moved, housed, and fed, and the rest of the infrastructure had to be built for this new ruler of a country left to him by his deceased father at the height of Egypt’s power and influence.

The Amarna period in Egypt’s long and tumultuous history lasted not quite twenty years, but its huge impact on the Egyptian story is belied by its brevity. What more would we like to learn about Amarna and about its architect and protagonist, the extraordinary ruler Akhenaton who fathered an obscure king, now better known than any other, called King Tut? The answer is, “Lots more, because so much remains a mystery.”

Everyone loves a mystery, it is said; and scandalous questions concerning the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten and his immediate family contribute to the overall uncertainty about his life, activities, and death [Figure 3 – head of Akhenaten #2]. Did he have relations with three of his daughters, fathering two children with one of them? Was Smenkhkare, Akhenaten’s successor, also his son, or was he his half-brother, or perhaps one of his wives, and/or his lover? Was Queen Tiye, Akhenaten’s mother, also his consort? How did Akhenaten die? These are not frivolous questions, and there are well documented reasons for asking each of them.
Figure 2  Map of ancient Egypt, showing Memphis, Amarna, and Thebes
More prosaic but still burning questions include, When did he die, in 1336 or 1334 BC? Where is he buried? Where is his mummy? Why did he decide to stop worshiping the other gods of Egypt and change the state religion to the worship of one sun god, Aten? Why was his reign accompanied by a radical change in art style of the period? What accounts for the disappearance of Kiya, Akhenaten’s secondary wife?
What is the real parentage of Tutankhamun? Did the beautiful Nefertiti bear all six of Akhenaten’s daughters? [Figure 4 Nefertiti # 14] These are some of the mysteries involved with Egypt's Amarna Period.

Figure 4    Head of Queen Nefertiti, pink limestone, height 9 inches, Mansoor #14

The baked earth of Akhenaten’s new capital in upper Egypt, then called Akhetaten and now Amarna, held most of its secrets for three thousand years, but it has
perhaps reluctantly been giving up these secrets, yielding to a triad of armaments in the egyptologist’s arsenal: archaeological excavation, technology, and morphological examination of art treasures.

“One must look below the surface in order to find truth!”

**Archaeological exploration and excavation** continues, in Thebes where rulers of the 18\(^{th}\) dynasty were buried, including Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. It continues too in Amarna, the site of that sacred city first built by the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten and then abandoned some 20 years later during Tutankhamun’s reign, when the cult of Amun was re-established in Egypt, along with the worship of multiple gods. Following the abandonment, items were retrieved for use elsewhere, the tombs nearby were pillaged of portable objects, and the closed up buildings were left to decay. A few villagers remained over the years, using materials from the site for construction, fertilizer, and fuel.

An extraordinary discovery was made in 1887, when a villager digging around in the abandoned city discovered a cache of nearly 400 cuneiform tablets, diplomatic correspondence from kings and overlords in Babylon, Mitanni, Hatti and elsewhere, and these are now known collectively as the Amarna letters. They have much to tell us about Egypt’s relationships at the time with neighboring states. Some of these important records were copies, and some must have been brought from Memphis and were part of the archives of Akhenaten’s father.

Some years later the house and workshop of an official master sculptor named Thutmose was found, and through the years of the 20\(^{th}\) century a picture of life and death in the one time Egyptian capital and ceremonial city of Amarna has been drawn, and redrawn as new discoveries fleshed in more details. Government buildings and temples have been located and excavated, as well as palaces, cemeteries, gardens, public buildings, grain silos, bakeries, sculptors studios, simple mud-brick homes, and even zoos.

Barry Kemp a Cambridge University archaeologist who has been digging in Amarna for several years and adding piece by piece to what is known about the region, maintains a web presence with periodic news about discovered artifacts and information ([http://www.amarnaproject.com/](http://www.amarnaproject.com/)). His nuanced interpretations reveal many details about life in Amarna during Akhenaten’s rule. For example, examination of village community chapels built to honor family heads indicates a lack of Aten iconography, suggesting that the religious heresy of the royal family and accompanying changes in art and iconography was not so much in evidence in the context of traditional family religion. The zealous purges of worship attributed to Akhenaten’s rule were apparently less thorough than previously thought.

Another example comes from a study of Amarna’s firewood, of which huge amounts, tons each year, would have been required for cooking, heating, and various manufactures. This would have quickly destroyed much of the local woody vegetation,
after which local needs would have been met by imports from elsewhere. It follows that growth and cutting of local trees must have been carefully managed, and quantities of wood must have been imported to augment local production. We also know what kind of trees were used for wood in Amarna, since the species of tree can be identified from its charcoal residue. The great majority turns out to have come from the Nile acacia; the tamarisk tree comes in a distant second. In this information there are clear implications for the local ecology and how it changed with Amarna’s fortunes.

With regard to some of the more prominent questions, archaeology has also been working towards answers. In 2008, for example, Dr. Zahi Hawass, Egypt’s charismatic head archaeologist, recovered two previously lost pieces of a limestone block from Amarna indicating that Akhenaten was father to both Tutankhamun and his half-sister Ankhesenpaaten, and that King Tut married his half-sister while still living in Amarna and while he was still named Tutankhaten after the one god Aten.

“Sometimes it’s the little things that are the most important in solving a mystery!”

**Science and technology** have made remarkable advances in recent years, benefiting us all. And from DNA “fingerprints” and mapping of the human genome, to GIS cartography and detailed satellite pictures of the earth’s surface, these advances have been vital to archaeologists in general, and useful for answering some of the many controversial questions that remain about the Amarna period. Through technology we have learned some important things about the Egyptian dynasty to which Akhenaten belonged and more is sure to be forthcoming in the near future.

It’s often the little things that matter--that can solve a mystery, and technology is especially useful for the little things. Only a year ago, for example, one of four unidentified female mummies was shown by CT scan to be a celebrated 18th dynasty ancestor of Akhenaten, the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut. A box of her internal organs was scanned and found to hold a single molar tooth. Of the mummies scanned because they were possible candidates, one lacked a molar tooth! That one then was Hatshepsut. This majestic woman was about 50 when she died, obese, likely diabetic, and she may have succumbed to cancer. Now we know also who she was. All of this was learned without unwrapping the mummy or opening the box.

The likely mummy of Akhenaten himself has recently been studied with new scientific techniques, including a CT scan of an unidentified mummy from a tomb known as KV 55. Fewer than 100 feet separate this modest and looted tomb found in 1907 from Tutankhamen’s later discovered untouched tomb. The former was long thought by some to contain Akhenaten’s mummy, perhaps claimed from its original resting place in his Amarna tomb and brought to the Valley of the Kings at Thebes when Tutankhamen’s capital was moved there after Akhenaten’s death. A 2007 press release from Dr. Hawass revealed that CT scans indicate Tutankhamen and the unidentified mummy share physical similarities, such as an unusually elongated and egg-shaped head, minor spine curvature, impacted wisdom teeth and a cleft palate. Moreover the KV 55 mummy is shown to be male and between 25 and 40 years old. Akhenaten should have been at least
35 at his death, so unless the mummy in KV 55 is Smenkhkare, who could have been as young as 25, it is most likely Akhenaten [Figure 5, head of Akhenaten #7].

Figure 5  Head of Akhenaten with “Nubian wig”, pink limestone, height 5 inches, Mansoor #7

In 2006 a CT scan of Tutankhamen demonstrated that he most likely died of a broken leg that got infected rather than being murdered by a blow to the head as had been popularly assumed. A couple of loose bone fragments in Tut’s skull had led to the popular theory, but lacking embalming resin, it turns out they must have been dislodged after death, perhaps through mishandling of the mummy. This was strongly corroborated when the scan showed no skull fractures.

A DNA lab has recently been established in the Egyptian Museum, to carry out comparisons on samples drawn from mummies, and another lab is in the planning stages, so we can expect some very exciting news in the coming years about who is related to who and how.

Science and technology are rather recent contributors to revelations about the Amarna period in Egyptian history. In the earlier days of Egyptology, it was mainly knowledge of the Egyptian script, an artist’s eye, and meticulous record keeping that informed the developing narrative of its history. It was these things along with the
plundering of ancient sites by early archeologists who would send their stolen artifacts back home to museums, and looting by local villagers who would sell artifacts they found to dealers in art and antiquities. Today, interestingly enough, science and technology are being used also to verify or invalidate the authenticity of antiquities whose provenance is unknown or unreported.

“Is the beauty of an artifact more important than the information it holds about its makers?”

Art and Artifacts, when carefully scrutinized can reveal much of interest about their makers. From morphological studies of objets d’art, both beautiful and prosaic, have come revelations less startling but in the final analysis sometimes just as important as those learned from scientific analysis of their substance or from the analysis of associations these artifacts have with other items and contexts related to their discovery and excavation, that is to say, with their provenance.

Many artifacts are acquired without provenance. We may have an idea of where they could have been originally found and as to what period of time they belong on the basis of style, but unless their discovery and acquisition was carefully recorded in the process of archaeological excavation they are essentially without provenance. This is the case with a significant portion of the art and artifacts that represent the Amarna period; and it is the case with the Mansoor collection.

The Mansoor Amarna collection was originally acquired, a few pieces per year, between the early 1920s and the late 1930s, by a well-respected antiquities dealer, M.A. Mansoor of Cairo, Egypt. He got them from a traveling seller of artifacts who journeyed from Upper Egypt to Cairo a couple of times a year with antiquities dug up by a farmer who had found them in sands near Amarna. The collection once contained 106 sculptures, bas-reliefs and other artifacts, along with a number of smaller fragments, all from the Amarna period. While there is a clique of art historians for whom the collection remains unauthenticated, in fact it has been authenticated by such distinguished
Figure 6   Princess figurine, pink limestone, height 14 ½ inches, Mansoor #17
Egyptologists as Dr. Etienne Drioton, Mme. Christiane Noblecourt and Dr. Pierre DuBourguet of the Louvre Museum among others, as well as by such scientists as Dr. Harold J. Plenderleith, former Director of the British Museum Laboratory, Prof. Leon Silver of the California Institute of Technology, and Prof. Robert R. Compton of Stanford University.

Figure 7  Head of a Princess, daughter of Akhenaten, pink limestone, height 6 inches, Mansoor #25

The subjects of the collection are primarily Akhenaten, his primary wife Nefertiti, and their daughters, referred to as princesses [Figure 6 Princess figurine # 17]. Most of the sculptures were superbly made by a skilled artisan, likely one of the three or four
master sculptors in Amarna, while a few less finely crafted, may well have been the work of assistants or apprentices employed in the workshop of the master sculptor.

Early in Akhenaten’s rule, the style of royal art made a major deviation from the earlier traditional stylistic features characterized by idealized proportions and heroic physiques rendered with a rather static stiffness. The new style is said by some to represent honesty to the point of caricature; others call it relaxed, realistic, and natural [Figure 7 Princess head #25]. Whatever its characterization, it was quite different from what had gone before. Even within the Amarna timeframe and new approach to art we can distinguish at least an early and a later style. The villa and workshop of master sculptor Thutmose was excavated early in the 20th century. His work is exquisite, realistic, and comes later in the Amarna style. The master sculptor Bek was both prolific and early in the development of Amarna art, having first served Akhenaten’s father Amenhotep III before receiving new orders from Akhenaten, and apparently following them with considerable enthusiasm. It is possible that the Mansoor Amarna collection derives from Bek’s workshop. Some pieces from the original collection have been sold to King Farouk or reside in museums, including the Louvre and the Denver Museum, but the remaining pieces have their own stories to tell.

Figure 8 Bas-Relief of two seated Princesses, pink limestone, 7” by 8”, Mansoor #40
For example, two very similar limestone reliefs in the collection, can be seen in Figures 8 [Princesses relief #40] and 9 [Princesses relief #39], and are referred to as The Princesses. The young women are thought to be two of Akhenaten’s six daughters. Both strongly resemble a fresco fragment from Akhenaten’s house in Amarna currently in England’s Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology [Figure 10 Ashmolean Princesses]. Can one determine the order of creation of these scenes? Which of these three similar images was the model for one or both of the other two. The girls in the painted version have unusually elongated necks perhaps attributable to the individual painter’s style, or possibly an innovation in the later Amarna art style. One may note that Akhenaten apparently had a spindly elongated neck in reality. The neck and body proportions are rather more realistic in the reliefs of the Mansoor collection. An ancient copyist might have innovated the long necks, especially if they characterized the painting style, or if using long necks as a model, he might have worked at correcting their proportions. A modern forger might have repeated neck proportions found on his
prototype model, but would not likely have corrected them. From this we can deduce only that the Mansoor pieces are not 20th century forgeries, a fact already attested by numerous scientific reports. But there is other evidence bearing on the question of which of the images preceded which.

Figure 10  The Princesses, painted fresco from King’s Palace, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

Given that a distinction between the left foot and the right was lacking in earlier Egyptian art, but became a characteristic of the Amarna period and afterwards, a fact noticed by Cyril Aldred, it is notable that the distinction is made in the Ashmolean painting and on one of the reliefs, but not on the other relief (Figure A). One can conclude that the relief without the distinction is likely the earlier and that it could have served as the model for one or both of the other images.

On the Ashmolean fresco it can be seen that not only have the feet been corrected to reflect the later Amarna art style, but also that bracelets not present in either Mansoor relief have been added, suggesting again that the Mansoor pieces, one earlier than the other, were both made earlier than the Ashmolean painting. Moreover on the Ashmolean painting the ear regions of the princesses have been damaged. The Mansoor reliefs both include earrings on the princesses and are in agreement as to type, so we are in a position to know what sort of ear ornamentation is missing from the Ashmolean image.
A note may be in order here, that copying of art was standard practice in ancient Egypt. Not only were multiple copies of some sculptures made, but also models were needed for copyists to reproduce a scene in the large or in another medium, in addition to the fact, learned from excavated workshops, that apprentices were assigned models to copy as part of the practice of their apprenticeship. Another case of multiple reproductions again gives information about which came first. A painted relief in the Berlin Museum, called “Stroll in the Garden” [Figure 11 Berlin Museum] is very similar.

Figure 11 “Stroll in the Garden,” Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Berlin Museum.
Figure 12  Bas-Relief of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, white limestone 12” by 8”, Mansoor #37
Figure 13  Bas-Relief of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, white limestone, 13” by 9”, Mansoor #38
to two Mansor reliefs [Figure 12 Mansoor relief “stroll” #37], [Figure 13 Mansoor “stroll” #38]. All three images depict a woman holding a trio of flowers in her right hand as if offering them to the man standing with a staff in his right hand. This scene is frequently interpreted as Smenkhkare and Meritaten (supposedly a son and daughter of Akhenaten by different wives), but instead it probably represents Akhenaten and Nefertiti. The painted relief of the Berlin Museum would be the latest of the three and would have been copied from one of the Mansoor’s reliefs, though distinguishing the left foot from the right. Figure 13 most clearly shows no distinction between left and right feet, and is likely the earliest of the three. It also reveals that the earlier intent was to show Nefertiti offering up the flowers for Akhenaten to smell.

It seems that several, at least, of the Mansoor bas-reliefs reflect the earliest part of the Amarna Period and predate the Ashmolean “Princesses” and the Berlin Museum’s “Stroll in the Garden.” In fact some of the Mansoor sculptures may have served as models for other craftsmen to copy from. This collection of Amarna pieces, with 106 sculptures and reliefs is large and may well have been retrieved from a single workshop. The early dating of the pieces, the large number of them, and the quality and style of the pieces all suggest the workshop of Bek who served Akhenaten and his father before Yuti and Thutmose came onto the scene. Bek would surely have seen Akhenaten as a youth, and the Mansoor collection has four images of a younger Akhenaten than appear in any illustrations in the popular literature (Figure 14 head of Akhenaten, #10). Bek’s workshop has not been found by the archaeologists, and the reason may well be that it was actually found long ago by a farmer who ultimately delivered its contents piece by piece to M.A. Mansoor.

Part of M.A. Mansoor’s legacy to his seven sons and three daughters was his collection of antiquities from the Amarna period, and its indispensable information for our fuller understanding of the life and arts of the time. Another part was his Coptic heritage; his direct descent from ancient Egyptians of dynastic times. The 18th dynasty’s Amarna period was itself a time overseen in Egypt by the pharaoh Akhenaten, who had six daughters and one son, and who left the rest of us with an abandoned city, many works of extraordinary art, and some fascinating mysteries to contemplate about his own progeny and theirs.
Figure 14  Head of younger Akhenaten, white limestone, height 7 inches, Mansoor #10)