

The Time Period and Artistic Style of Amarna Art

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Abstract: In the late eighteenth dynasty, a swift and gigantic change in religion led by Akhenaton had not only affected the course of the Egyptian society, but also gave birth to an art form later known as Amarna art. This period is referred as the Amarna period. However, the beginning and ending time of Amarna art are still vague and controversial. The artistic style of Amarna art has been constantly miscomprehended in contemporary documentations and the interpretation is deeply influenced by the reception of temporal society. Nevertheless, since the essential function of Egyptian art in the ancient time was to eulogize the Egyptians' religious ideology, the reason of transformations that occurred in art could always be traced back to religion. Therefore, when seeing Amarna art through Egyptian religion, it can be interpreted as a unique style that was brought to life for Akhenaton's religion reformation and eventually died off with the ending of the Amarna period.

Keywords: Amarna Art, Artistic Style, Beginning Time, Akhenaton, Tutankhamun, 18th Dynasty, 19th Dynasty

1. Amarna Art's Beginning Date

Throughout the history of 3,000 years, never a time had caused subversive changes both in religion and art of Egypt like the Amarna period. Amenhotep IV, who is later known by his Atonist name Akhenaton, introduced ideas which modified the religious belief that had guided Egyptian philosophy and "shaped its institutions since the advent of Menes"¹. By doing so, he did not only create the world's first monotheistic religion, but also bestowed the great alteration on the form of painting and sculpture. The divinity and the serenity once dominated the conception of illustration ever since the beginning of the Old Kingdom disappeared, instead, a harmonious casual scene depicting the daily life of Egyptian people was introduced to the mainstream.

Traditionally, Amarna art is used to refer to the controversial art style developed in the reign of Akhenaton (Amenhotep IV) (1353 – 1337 BC). It was named after the name of the modern town, Tell El-Amarna, where the king constructed his new capital around the fifth year of his reign². As has been commonly defined and stated, like in the Gardner's Art through The Ages³, the beginning of Amarna

art is considered to be at the time of Amenhotep IV's (Akhenaton) accession to the throne and, according to some experts, the fourth year to be exact⁴. Many other scholars may expand the birth time to the latter reginal time of Akhenaton's father, Amenhotep III. They believe there might be a time of co-regency between the two kings. The solution to this historical controversy is of profound importance for the understanding of the art of the period and its previous and later development.

Towards the reginal end of Amenhotep III, art form in this period began to evolve, demonstrating signs of naturalism and realism. More affluent outlining in depiction of the movement and more audacious colors choice all reflected a willingness to experiment and a search for new forms of expression. Though the Egyptian art achieved its climax at the time, it betrayed no principles of the tradition, no paintings or sculptures, not even the experimental, had ever exceed the limitations. No novel style of the Amarna time had ever been found stood side by side with while they should if the joint reign exists considering the later Ptolemaic period when Egyptian art and Greek art come to a

¹ Cyril Aldred, *Egyptian Art in the Days of the Pharaohs, 3100 – 320 B. C.* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1986), 172.

² Jaromír Málek, *Egyptian Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999)

³ Fred S. Craner and Christin J. Mamiya, *Gardener's Art through the Ages* (PRC:

Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd, 2005).

⁴Dimitri Laboury, "Amarna art," In Kathlyn M. Cooney, Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles (2011), <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz0026vj6m>

compromise⁵, suffice it to say that Amarna art did not start at the final time of Amenhotep III.



Figure 1. King Narmer shown on the palette with standard posture, 3,000 BC – 2920 BC, from Temple of Horus in Nekhen, Egypt.

In ancient Egypt, one must know its belief before understanding their art. Since the early stage of the Old Kingdom, after Menes united Egypt as an empire, gods of the Egyptians began to be associated with their pharaohs. Kings were believed to be the incarnation of Horus and worshiped by the Egyptian people as the living god. Picture showing from the Palette of King Narmer (Figure 1) is not only a blueprint of the formula for figure representation which will dominate the Egyptian art for 3,000 years, but also a testimony of “the state policy that established the pharaoh as a divine ruler”⁶. Rely on such, the Egyptian art began to be bond with domestic belief and serve as a tool for the purpose of religion⁷.

Nevertheless, the alteration in Egyptian’s belief, even the slightest one, can be reflected in the presentation of art. At the end of the Old Kingdom, a religious crisis started to sweep through the entire empire. Stripped off the divinity, pharaohs were no longer being viewed as god but his human son. After the following turbulence of the First Intermediate Period, a new concern of the pharaohs emerged in the Middle Kingdom which kings were “portrayed as the shepherd of his people”⁸. As a response, the “realism” characterized art flourishing all through the Middle Kingdom beautifully demonstrated the new religious significance. Regarding to this tight bound between the Egyptian art and the Egyptian’s religious belief, one simply cannot change without altering the other. Therefore, when considering the initiation time of Amarna art, only the time when a significant feature of the art which is associated significantly with the conception of the religious idea and steadily went through the entire period appeared can be determined as the beginning year of the style.

⁵ Málek, Egyptian Art.

⁶ Craner and Mamiya, Gardener’s Art, 39

⁷ Olivia Zorn, *Wie erkenne ich? Die Kunst der ÄGYPTER* (Geben Sie die erste Bewertung für diesen Artikel ab, 2004).

⁸ William J. Duiker and Jackson J. Spielvogel, *World History, Volume I (USA)*: Cengage Learning, 2010), 19.

As radical as his religion theology might be, Akhenaton introduced, what was later referred as Amarna style, “informality and naturalism”⁹ into the Egyptian art creation, thus produced a new form of art with its remarkable features that shocked the entire country. Among all those features that one may find distinguishable, the only one that possesses the religious significance and remains unchanged throughout the period is the image of a radiant sun disk which represents Aton, the only god being officially worshiped during the Amarna period.

The rise of the Atonism, which is referred as “the sun god’s cult” by Edward F. Wente (1976), can be traced back to the regnal time of Amenhotep III, when the god was still described as Re-Hor-Akhty, who was represented in his traditional form as a hawk-headed figure with a large sun-disc on his head and was identified with the Aton, the sun-disk, already. At the beginning of the reign of Amenhotep IV, he did not terminate the cult of Amun immediately, on the contrary, the commencement of his time bore the evidences of continuity with the traditional ideology and artistry. Amenhotep IV continued his father’s unfinished work at the third pylon of temple of Amun¹⁰. However, the modification of the construction in Karnak stopped at the end of his first regnal year, new blocks extraction sites were opened at *Gebel el-Silsila* for his first sanctuary, whose style remained conventional, at Karnak dedicated to the sun-god Re-Hor-Akhty who was still depicted in the conventional form then. However, during the king’s second year, with the change of “Re-Hor-Akhty” (divine falcon human body) to “Ankh-Re-Hor-Akhty” (radiant Aton), new temples erected without roofs as a new form of architecture and the artistic formality of temple relieves began to transform¹¹.



Figure 2. Temple Relief: Falken-Anton and King Amenhotep IV, probably dates from the first two years of the reign of Amenhotep IV, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (ÄM 2072), Karnak.

The iconography of the blocks from those temples (Figure 2) reveals, probably for the first time, the radiant solar-disc, representing Ankh-Re-Hor-Akhty, began to appear accompanied with his dogmatic image during that time.

⁹ Katharine Stoddert, ed., Joan K. Holt, ed., and Sara Hudson, ed., *Treasures of Tutankhamun (USA)*: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 22.

¹⁰ Robert Vergnienx, “Les premières années du règne d’Aménophis IV (ou le proto-amarnien),” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1996), vol. 140, no. 3, pp. 813-820, 813.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 816.

Moreover, it is from that time appears “a thematic character of ‘naturalism’ and a change in king’s iconography”¹². The relief image corresponds to the style of Amenhotep III, and yet already tends to the new religious idea. As evidences from the Old and the Middle Kingdom suggest, a new religious idea introduces a coherent art form. Though it was not until Amenhotep IV’s fifth reginal year the sun-disk replaced completely all the anthropomorphic forms of the sun god, it was, until further evidence suggests otherwise, in his second year the Amarna feature started to show, therefore, the beginning of a new art.

2. Amarna Art in Tutankhamun Period

In 1922, a team of excavating crew had been working in the Valley of the Kings on a mission for six full seasons, and “season after season had drawn a blank”¹³. After the excavation of roughly constructed workmen’s huts, on the evening of November 3rd, the team director decided “to clear away the three feet of soil that lay beneath them”¹⁴ to give a last try. The next morning, the tomb of Tutankhamun was found and a time after the Amarna period was revealed.

Like the beginning time of the Amarna art, when it comes to the ending time, confusions and arguments still stand. Scholars usually draw the line at the time of Akhenaton’s decease or expand to include the reginal time of Tutankhamun, few others appears to consider to run through the end of the 18th dynasty, at the end of the reign of Horemheb as the finish line. However, unlike his predecessor, Tutankhamun’s miraculous intact tomb can give us a profound inspection and an insightful comprehension of the problem.

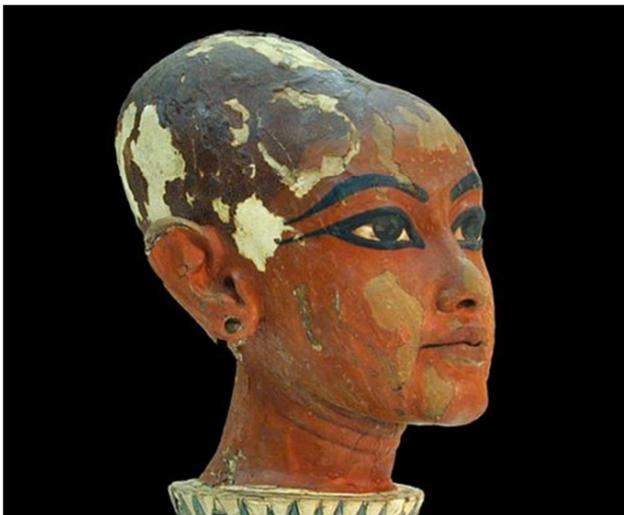


Figure 3. A wooden bust of Tutankhamun representing the pharaoh in Amarna art style with an elongated skull. 18th dynasty, New Kingdom, the Egyptian Museum (JE 60723), Cairo, Valley of the Kings.

Tutankhaton, later took on the name Tutankhamun, was believed to be born, raised and may even be crowned at Akhetaton (Amarna) around 1334 BC at age nine and ruled Egypt nearly ten years at the time of his death. In his tomb, many artifacts, in their complete Amarna style, were found. In the antechamber displayed an exquisitely made throne. On its back inlaid a charming picture of the king and the queen, depicted in Amarna style with the solar-disk prominently featured above the scene. A wooden bust, initially found in the corridor, which illustrates the king, as the infant sun god at the moment of his birth¹⁵ with features that are uniquely reminiscent to those of the Amarna period such as the elongated skull (Figure 3). Moreover, statuettes that were found in the treasury chamber, which illustrated the king under the conventional religious scene but the body figure of the king bore the distinctive features of Amarna art. However, as for other pieces, the return to orthodoxy is appeared to be complete. There is a little connection to the art flourished under Akhenaton with the golden mask and coffins of Tutankhamun, and all of those emulates were exquisitely made following the formality that had been inherited from the old time. There are offering scenes carved on the back of the chairs, on the front of the trumpet, and on the sides of many caskets, showing the traditional ideal form of the king standing in front of Amun or Osiris and accepting god’s blessing, which is no different from the traditional artifacts.

This mixture of the Amarna style and the conventional style corresponded to the vigorous religion restoration that swept through the entire country during Tutankhamun’s reign. Probably around the third year of his reign, Amarna was abandoned as the capital in favor of Memphis and the royal couple altered their name from Tuankhaton and Ankhesenpaaton to Tutankhamun and Ankhesenamun as an official statement signifying their switch in devotion from Aton to Amun. At this point, the country went back to its former path from the deviation of the Amarna period. However, even the activities connected with the restoration of the old religion is considerably accounted tremendous, there is no significant evidences on outright attack upon the Aton or Akhenaton¹⁶.

During the transient time of Tutankhamun, the traditional art, coming back with the religion restoration, made a compromise with Amarna art. Most of the artifacts found in Tutankhamun’s tomb evidently documented this coexistence. The one that stands out most is a golden shrine found in the antechamber. It was used as a sanctuary for the vulture goddess Nekhbet. Every exposed surface of it are covered with scenes contained the king and the queen and inscriptions all in relief. Though it was built strictly according to tradition, the style of those scenes is a distinctive combination of Amarna art and the traditional art. The content of those scenes is what was typically promoted in Amarna art which describing the incidents in daily life of the king and the queen with a signature casual relaxed style and

¹² Vergnienx, “Les premières années”, 816.

¹³ Polly Cone, ed., *Wonderful Things: the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb* (USA: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Gilbert, Holt, and Hudson, *Treasures*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

informal postures (Figure 4). However, the absent of the sun-disk and the standard formality followed in the illustration of the human figure proportion suggest that all the traditional disciplines had been restored to the Egyptian religion as well as art. In fact, lots of paintings and sculptures found in the tomb all demonstrate a certain degree of this coexistence, the traditional figure description contained in the “naturalistic” style both in causal scenes and conventional scenes. This unique compromised formality of art constituted the art style during the time of Tutankhamun and had never been seen ever since.

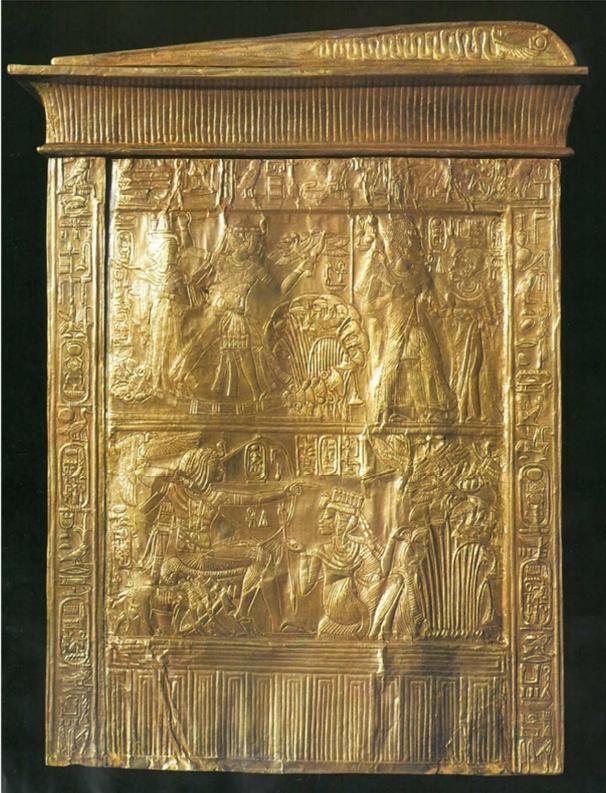


Figure 4. Side view of the golden shrine found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, covered in causal scenes of the king and the queen, 18th dynasty, New Kingdom, Valley of the Kings.

During that instable era, most of the artists migrated with the royal family to Thebes and established their workshops there. These artists were trained under the art style and techniques during the Amarna period, thus made them estranged and unfamiliar with the traditional art methods and rules. When they were requested to abandon what they had learned and practiced a lifetime and switch back to the conventional art style in suiting the restoration movement, inevitably, inadaptation and confusion showed up and reflected in their work, resulting on the inconsistency and instability on the artistic skills and depictions which can be observed on some scenes carved on the shrine and the poorly illustrated wall-painting of the burial chamber. This fluctuation showed an effort made by the artists attempting to unite Amarna art and the traditional art and find a balance point between them. Therefore, the art created during this

period is uniquely different from Amarna art and the traditional art. With its own style and features, it cannot be seen as the end or extension of the Amarna art other than a whole new art period itself.

3. Not So Naturalistic Style

Although the earliest modern day records of the encounter with Amarna art dates back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was only until the middle of the nineteenth century that the first appraisal of its particularity was published by the founding fathers of Egyptology¹⁷. Along the development of its study and the gradual restoration of the missing pieces of history, two distinctive questions on Amarna art have been continuously grasping the attention of scholars. The first one is whether the metamorphosed depiction of Akhenaton's body figure as well as the rest of the royal family is actual presentation of physical deformities or just part of the expressionistic style of the period¹⁸ and the second one is whether the style of Amarna art is “naturalistic and realistic” or it is more inclined to “expressionistic”. However, to understand these questions, we must look back to the purpose the art serves, the religion.

As an art form which documented probably the world's first religion revolution, Amarna art was instigated by Akhenaton mainly to express his religious ideas. Akhenaton raised the god Aton to supremacy, becoming the central god of Egyptian state religion, and eventually banned all other idols. The essential aspect of this revolutionary ideology was to introduce “a monotheistic and abstract concept of godhead”¹⁹. Presentation of the new god was no longer in anthropomorphic form but as rays of light extending from a sun-disk as an abstracted form, which was considered to represent the conception that all creation was emanated from the god and existed within the god. This obscure image of god, stripped away the identities and sexualities input in gods during the old time, was asexuality and a synthesis of all the ancient gods. As the new image of god was defined, Akhenaton declared himself as the sole intermediary between the Aton and the Egyptian people, only through him that god's people could be heard²⁰. The Egyptian people were to worship Akhenaton, only Akhenaton and Nefertiti could worship Aton directly.

Under this religion ideology, Akhenaton was regarded as deity himself and worshiped by his subjects. As well based on the religion, the femininity combined with the masculinity which displayed in all Akhenaton's depictions might be a mere implication of his divinity associated with Aton who as well does not have a specific sexuality like the old gods. Moreover, from the political view, in order to break away

¹⁷ Erik Hornung, “The Rediscovery of Akhenaten and His Place in Religion,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, vol. 29, pp. 43-49, doi: 10.2307/40000483.

¹⁸ Craner and Mamiya, *Gardener's*.

¹⁹ Cyril Aldred, *Egyptian Art in the Days of the Pharaohs, 3100 – 320 B. C.* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1985), 172.

²⁰ Craner and Mamiya, *Gardener's*.

from the traditional ceremonial centers, Akhenaton constructed a new capital in shifting political power. And since art has always been the most effective media to convey messages, the same thing needed to occur correspondently in art too. An introduction of a new figure depiction standards could be this political announcement of the coming of a new era to the Egyptian people.

In 2010, a project using genetic and molecular approach, led by Dr. Zahi Hawass (2010), has not only successfully established the family relation of king Tutankhamun but also revealed “no signs of gynecomastia and craniosynostoses or Marfan syndrome”²¹, diseases that can cause the exact abnormal body figure like illustrated in Amarna art, in their family. More to this, this project also confirmed the mysterious mummy found in KV 55, a small, undecorated and undescribed tomb in the Valley of the Kings, is the father of Tutankhamun, the heretical pharaoh Akhenaton²². Again the skeleton of the king shows no sign of feminine physique. These results can seem to formally settle the disputes on the enigmatic image of Akhenaton, concluding that the particular representation is an artistic royal decreed style which is “related to the religious reforms of Akhenaton”²³.

These evidences uncovered by modern technology clearly noted the fact that the Amarna art is not demonstrating the same conception of “realism” as in today’s definition. The Egyptian art usually had their kings and the royal families represented in an idealized fashion. Even though during the Amarna period, its art demonstrated a typical style that can be found “grotesque” and very different from the conventional expression thus leaving the misleading impression of “naturalism” or “realism” to the descendants, there is hardly any change in the view of reality that the Egyptian artists had held for hundreds of years or the conceptual core of the Egyptian art which is to ideally represent the royals in accordance with the temporal religious conception as the subjects to their kings. Therefore, its portrayal of human figure seems more “stylized” than “naturalistic” and since the art of that time as well reflects the conceptual reality as the traditional art does, there is no reason to name or classify it as “realism” or “naturalism”.

Largely due to the restraint that religion had put on art in ancient Egypt, essentially Amarna art is no different from the traditional art. What really differs it significantly from the traditional art is the effort showed to replay the eternity in art with instantaneity. Traditionally, “time” and “eternity” are two sheering parts in Egyptian’s belief, which were described as “*nhh*” and “*dr*”. The meaning of these words, as rendered in the Book of the Dead, are “endless occurrence/recurrence” and “changelessness”. Those consistent formalities of rigidness and restraints put on the art content are all based on their view of the eternity. Before the Amarna period, the Egyptian people united their art style within a stiff figure posture to elaborate the eternity it was made to convey. The

conservative depiction of movement is consisted with the idea of “*dr*”, the repetitive scene is an expression of “*nhh*” and through all of them displaying the eternal authority, divinity kingship of the pharaoh. However, during the Amarna period, because of the fail in dealing with the afterlife in the new theology, the once serious art style began to loosen, plus with the propagation of the novel conviction that what came after death would be an exact copy of what was in life, more and more depictions of daily life began to emerge, the once restrained sense of movement and intimacy started to flourish. Artists during Amarna period started to capture and focus on the minutiae of life such as the royal couples playing with their children, animals and birds flocking beneath the sun, a piece of offering dropping on the table (Figure 5). They used sophisticated details to document the instant movement, replacing the tension stalled in the traditional depiction thus to celebrate day-to-day activities under the new religion’s influence. “Eternity” was no longer remained in the art as “instantaneity” had infiltrated every depiction and relief.



Figure 5. A gesture of Akhenaton’s hand at the moment he dropped the offering which is a very unique transitory gesture in Egyptian art. 1349 BC – 1336 BC, Gift of Nobert Schimmel, 1985 (1985.328.1).

Therefore, as Gay Robins stated “it is doubtful whether any of the categories that have been devised for the artistic styles of other cultures should be applied to the art of ancient Egypt”²⁴. The distinctive art style during Amarna period may be best applied under its own title as the Amarna style.

4. Ephemeral to Everlasting

After the death of Tutankhamun, followed by the evanescent reign of Ay, the throne fell into Tutankhamun’s military commander Horemheb’s hand and it was at this point that “the curtain finally fell on the drama of the Amarna period”²⁵. Horemheb erased all of the signs as well as documentations that had suggested the existence of the

²¹ Zahi Hawass et al, “Ancestry and pathology in king Tutankhamun’s family,” JAMA, 2010;303(7):638-647, doi:10.1001/jama.2010.121., 638.

²² Ibid., 641.

²³ Ibid., 644.

²⁴ Robins, The Art, 165.

²⁵ Málek, Egyptian Art, 302.

Amarna period. All the names and images of Akhenaton, Tutankhamun, and Nefertiti was chiseled from monuments. Akhetaton, the capital of Akhenaton, was completely abandoned and dismantled. Temples dedicated to Aton that had been built in Kanark was torn down brick by brick, and buried in the pylon of the Karnak site. As the kingdom's old gods been restored to their original positions, the form of art had inevitably retracted to tradition completely and all what could even slightly indicate the association with Amarna art were vanished.

Novelty was superseded by convention in the following days. Orthodox was once again presented with formalism and hardness of contour replacing the relaxation and freedom posing in the gesture and motion²⁶. Certain exotic elements were expunged from the feast, music, and family scene as the "traditional value" made its way back. However, recollections of the innovation and experimentation of the Amarna art can still be felt in Egyptian Art where its legacy "enhanced rather than detracted from earlier traditions"²⁷ through the following 19th dynasty.



Figure 6. Ramses II wears the blue crown, sitting on a throne in his meticulously carved robe, 19th dynasty, New Kingdom, 1278 BC, Museo Egizio, Turin, Karnak.

The obsession of details had been preserved after the Amarna period and continued to flourish in the 19th dynasty. The cameo of those flirtatious wrinkles floating on the lithe, transparent garment was precisely adopted and transported onto sculptures, as typically shown in the granite statue of Ramses II in the Museo Egizio in Turin (Figure 6), where the feature had never been significantly demonstrated before. As the depiction of pharaohs ricocheting back to convention, however, characteristic of the temporal technique was significantly influenced by the Amarna style, peeling off the camouflage, the extraordinary sense of movement and speed, a general "looseness" and freedom of expression with a notably more sensual aesthetic composition of single figures as well as of entire scenes²⁸ inherited from the Amarna period was continuously directing the development of the Egyptian

art and to have a lasting influence for centuries.

Is there really an end? Maybe, after all the revolution that Akhenaton once promoted disappeared progressively after his death. However, for post-Amarna art, never again had it escaped the shadow of that heretical period. In this perspective, the legacy of Akhenaton has outlived its time to everlasting.

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²⁶ Aldred, *Egyptian Art in.*

²⁷ Málek, *Egyptian Art,* 307.

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