

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

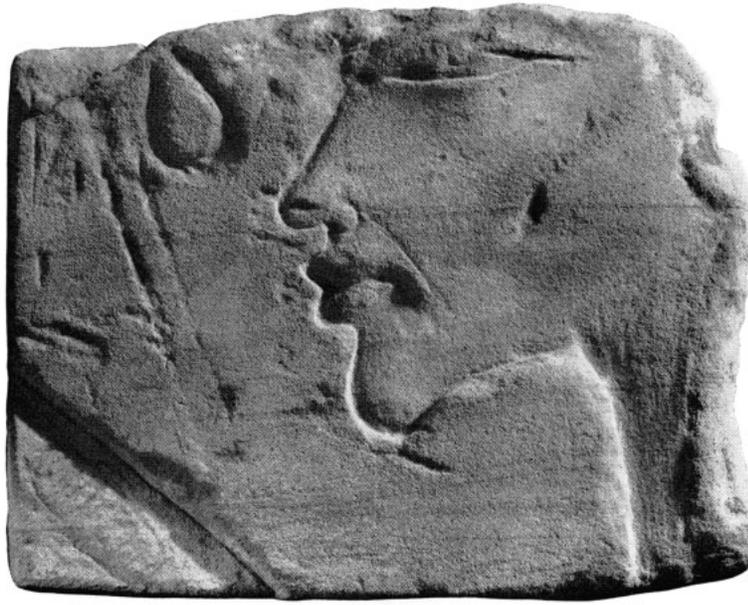
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Sandstone Relief: Head of King Akhenaten
Egyptian, ca. 1350 B.C. Length 8 in.
Gift of the Wunderman Foundation. 63.1050

JAMES HENRY BREASTED in his *History of Egypt* called Akhenaten the first individual in human history. Certainly the startling change which the heretic king brought about in Egyptian religion and art set him apart from all the other pharaohs. By no means all that he introduced vanished with the reaction which set in at the end of his seventeen years of rule. The extraordinary compositions of the battle reliefs in the Ramesside period owe much to experiments with spatial relationships undertaken with his encouragement. While in some ways the new art continued a development which had been taking place in the earlier part of the 18th Dynasty, the remarkable alteration in the appearance of the human figure makes us acutely conscious of a break with tradition. This is to be found first at Thebes in the reliefs and statues created for a new structure outside the eastern enclosure wall of the great Karnak temple of Amon whose place is usurped by Aten in the form of the sun's disk. Difficulties with the suppressed priesthood of Amon soon caused the king to break with Thebes and to build a new capital at Amarna in Middle Egypt.

Akhenaten tells us that he personally instructed his artists in the new ideas and one can only suppose that his own physical characteristics influenced the strange appearance of the new sculpture. The small sandstone block which we owe to the generosity of the Wunderman Foundation presents the altered style at its best in a fine head of the king. Here we must see more an adoption of new conventions than a shift to a realistic point of view. An apt comparison has been made to the expressionistic tendencies in modern art. The elongated eye, slender neck, full lips and pendulous jaw appear less bizarre than in the colossal statues of the king made for the Karnak shrine. Here the forms are softened by a delicacy of cutting not always to be found in work in sandstone, a medium less tractable for nuances of surface modelling than the limestone which was used increasingly at Amarna for relief sculpture.

The king evidently raised his arms in adoration of the sun-disk. Part of the life-sign extended by one of the rays of the sun to the king's nostrils appears in front of the face. Since the badly rubbed inscription on Akhenaten's arm gives the early form of the name of the Aten it may well be that this relief belongs to the time of the early work at Thebes.

W.S.S.