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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,

IRVINE

Akhenaten Beyond the Binary: Function, Gender, and Material Culture

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Art History

By

Alejandro Concas-Rivas

Thesis Committee:

Assistant Professor Luiza Osorio G. Silva, Chair

Associate Professor Lyle Massey

Associate Professor Chelsea Schields

2025

DEDICATION

To my mom, who always believed in me, especially when I didn't believe in myself.

To my sister, whose strength and unwavering support continue to inspire me.

To my husband, Alexander, whose lived experience has taught me more about gender than any book ever could, and whose continued bravery in a binary world never ceases to amaze me.

And to Grandma Joy, whose sacrifice made it possible for my mom, my sister, and me to pursue and complete our college education.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Akhenaten Beyond the Binary: Function, Gender, and Material Culture

by

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Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Professor Luiza Osorio G. Silva, Chair

This thesis examines the visual and material culture of the 18th Dynasty pharaoh Akhenaten through the intersecting frameworks of gender and function. While Akhenaten's reign has attracted sustained scholarly and popular interest, much of this attention has centered on his religious reforms or sensationalized biographical narratives. In contrast, this study addresses a significant gap in Egyptological scholarship: the lack of critical engagement with Akhenaten's image production through art historical analysis and gender theory. Existing interpretations have largely neglected the role of material culture in shaping ideological meaning, and few have examined Akhenaten's androgynous depictions through a performative or functional lens.

Combining visual analysis with the methodological insights of gender studies and the function-based framework proposed by Rune Nyord, this thesis explores how Akhenaten's imagery operated within broader ideological and ritual systems. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that Akhenaten's ambiguous representations are not reflections of reality.

Rather, they serve a deliberate theological and political purpose by aligning his image with the gender-fluid nature of the Aten, the solar deity he elevated to exclusive worship. Through case studies of reliefs and elite tomb scenes, I demonstrate how repetition, mirroring, and interchangeability were employed as visual strategies to collapse boundaries between king and god, male and female, mortal and divine.

These images functioned as active agents within the Atenist program, materially reinforcing Akhenaten's reconfiguration of divine kingship and social order. By prioritizing function over form and centering the role of gender performance, this thesis offers a new interpretive model for understanding Amarna-period visual culture. It also critiques the methodological blind spots of traditional Egyptology, which has often resisted theoretical innovation and overlooked non-normative masculinities. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader conversations in art history and visual studies about how material culture not only reflects but constructs gender and identity. Akhenaten's visual program, far from being an artistic anomaly, offers a case study for rethinking gender, image agency, and the performative nature of kingship in ancient Egypt.

Introduction

Two people in headdress stand before us, worshipping the sun [figure 1]. Their bodies are elongated and androgynous. What is their gender? In a striking departure from earlier Egyptian art, this scene presents a visual language that feels unfamiliar yet deeply intentional. Both figures blur traditional gender boundaries; their bodies are nearly identical. Akhenaten, with his exaggerated features and ambiguous physique, mirrors the queen behind him, Nefertiti, rendering their forms almost interchangeable. This image appears to disrupt conventional markers of masculinity and femininity within Egyptian visual culture. Akhenaten's depiction prompts broader questions about gender and its fluidity: is this image of ambiguous bodies an isolated anomaly, or does it point to something deeper about the construction of identity, power, and the body in the 18th Dynasty and, more broadly, in Egypt's New Kingdom? This image will remain central to my analysis, and I will return to it later to examine how its visual strategies intersect with the broader ideological and theological shifts of this period. To understand the stakes of such visual and ideological departures, we must first consider the broader historical context in which they emerged.

Akhenaten, an 18th Dynasty pharaoh, implemented one of the most radical religious transformations in Egyptian history by abandoning polytheism in favor of exclusive worship of the Aten.¹ This ideological shift was not confined to theology and may not fully account for the radical transformation of artistic production and material culture, which likely responded to a broader range of political and cultural factors. Much of the scholarship on Akhenaten remains outdated and speculative, often disconnected from material evidence.² Non-specialist narratives continue to prioritize myth over historical accuracy, obscuring the visual and material realities of

¹ Sara A. Abdoh, "Sculpture and Technology: A Proposed New Approach for the Amarna Artistic Style," *International Journal of Visual Design* 15, no. 1 (2021): 1.

² See Review of Literature section below for a fuller discussion of previous scholarship on Akhenaten.

his reign.³ This study addresses this gap by centering Akhenaten's material culture production as the primary source of analysis. By critically reassessing past interpretations (both academic and pop culture), it aims to demystify Akhenaten and move beyond the sensationalized portrayals that have historically dominated discussions of his reign. I examine both function and gender as performative categories, arguing that Akhenaten's material production was deliberately constructed to reshape the cultural milieu and align it with the new Atenist religion.⁴ This research employs an art historical approach that combines visual analysis with a function-based framework, as conceptualized by Rune Nyord in *Seeing Perfection* (2020), along with gender studies.⁵ A function-based framework analyzes objects not primarily for their formal or aesthetic qualities, but for what they do: how they were used, what roles they played in social, religious, or political contexts, and how they shaped meaning or experience for their users or viewers. I analyze images and primary textual sources (including tomb reliefs, temple inscriptions, and the great hymn to the Aten) to reconstruct a more nuanced and updated perspective of Akhenaten. Now, I turn to a literary review of the field to better understand how scholars have approached Akhenaten's reign and its material legacy, highlighting both the methodological blind spots that have shaped dominant interpretations and the emerging critical frameworks that challenge them.

Review of Literature

³ See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Knopf, 1939); see also the literature review section below for a fuller discussion of non-specialist narratives.

⁴ To elaborate on my definition of gender and function as performative categories: gender is not an inherent or static quality that one is born into. It is routinely acted out and repeatedly enacted through everyday practices, cultural norms, and visual forms. These performances are shaped by a multitude of cultural forces, including language, objects, images, and social expectations, which continually construct and reinforce gendered roles within a given society. Similarly, function is not an intrinsic or fixed property of an object. Rather, function is performed: it emerges through the object's use, context, and cultural framing. Just as gender is constituted through repeated acts, function becomes apparent through an object's activation in specific contexts whether ritual, domestic, or political.

⁵ Rune Nyord, *Seeing Perfection: Ancient Egyptian Images beyond Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Although scholarship on gender in ancient Egypt exists, it remains a relatively new and underdeveloped subfield, emerging around 1986.⁶ Early studies, though progressive for their time, primarily focused on queenship and framed gender strictly within the male/female binary, often relying exclusively on methodologies rooted in Egyptology rather than drawing from broader fields like gender studies.⁷ During the 1990s and early 2000s, Egyptological scholarship addressing gender and identity predominantly focused on women and female identity.⁸ In New Kingdom studies, gender is often examined in relation to kingship, particularly through the figure of Hatshepsut, another 18th Dynasty ruler like Akhenaten.

As a biological woman, Hatshepsut adopted male iconography to legitimize her reign. This fusion of masculine and feminine elements in her self-representation highlights the constructed and performative nature of gender. Scholars like Kelly-Anne Diamond and Uroš Matić have examined how Hatshepsut's strategic use of masculine iconography and titles asserted political authority within a patriarchal system while occasionally retaining visual markers of her biological femaleness.⁹ Scholarship like this has been foundational in creating space for gendered interpretations of royal imagery in ancient Egypt. Since the early 2000s, scholarship in Egyptology addressing gender and identity beyond the male/female binary has slowly but steadily emerged. This trend has revealed how indispensable gender analysis is, not only for understanding identity or representation, but for interpreting the very structures of ritual, political power, and spiritual authority in ancient Egypt. Rather than a niche or secondary concern, gender offers a lens that clarifies how legitimacy and ideology were constructed and

⁶ Carolyn Graves-Brown, "Introduction: Gender, Sex, and Loss of Innocence," in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt*, ed. by Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2008), x.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., x-xi.

⁹ See Kelly-Anne Diamond, "Hatshepsut: Transcending Gender in Ancient Egypt," *Gender & History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 168–188; Uroš Matić, "(De)Queering Hatshepsut: Binary Bind in Archaeology of Egypt and Kingship Beyond the Corporeal," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23, no. 3 (2016): 810–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43967042>.

performed. This insight helps frame the methodological contributions of Thomas A. Dowson's *Queering Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt* (2008). Dowson employs reflexive archaeology, arguing that archaeologists are inevitably, and often unconsciously, shaped by their own cultural contexts, which influence how they interpret the past.¹⁰

This approach may explain why Egyptological scholarship has been slow to incorporate research that explores gender beyond the binary. Greg Reeder's work, *Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep* (2008), also addresses these gaps within Egyptology. Reeder's research examines an image of two men, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, depicted in a close, nose-to-nose embrace [figure 2]. When the tomb of these two men was discovered in 1964, scholars initially interpreted the pair as brothers or twins, neglecting the possibility of an intimate relationship.¹¹ Reeder's work challenges these assumptions by questioning what cultural and academic biases have prevented alternative interpretations.¹² The skeptical and resistant reception of Reeder's work, particularly within Egyptology and related archaeological fields, highlights a broader discomfort with queerness and non-normative masculinities within Egyptological discourse. This discomfort points to a broader disciplinary hesitation to engage with gender as a central analytical category, despite its relevance to core areas traditionally prioritized in Egyptology, such as kingship, theology, and ritual. Reeder's experience illustrates how resistance to gender critique has hindered the field's ability to develop a more methodologically well-rounded and critically informed perspective. These dynamics still persist in contemporary Egyptological scholarship.

¹⁰ Graves-Brown, *Introduction*, xv.

¹¹ Greg Reeder, "Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep," in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt*, ed. by Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2008), 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, 153.

Research on Akhenaten and gender remains notably underdeveloped, particularly when compared to studies on figures like Hatshepsut. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on the performance of female kingship within a male-coded system. In contrast, Akhenaten presents a more ambiguous case: a biologically male king whose representation blurs gender boundaries in a distinct and unconventional manner. Unlike Hatshepsut, who adopted masculine visual conventions to legitimize her rule, Akhenaten's imagery disrupts gender categories entirely, not as political camouflage but as a deliberate visual strategy. This divergence highlights the need for a new analytical framework that integrates theories of gender performance and visual function. Although decades of foundational scholarship have made it relatively acceptable to study Hatshepsut through the lens of gender, Akhenaten remains largely neglected in this regard. Research on female-bodied figures generally aligns with the patriarchal foundations of Egyptology, while studies addressing non-normative masculinity (such as Reeder's work) often encounter resistance, revealing a persistent double standard in the field.¹³ Stephanie Lynn Budin's *Gender in the Ancient Near East* (2023) is among the most significant recent contributions to the conversation on gender in Egypt and the ancient Near East.¹⁴

Although Budin's book offers an important intervention, its limitations also underscore my argument. Budin devotes a chapter to nonbinary identities titled *Gender Bending*, but her discussion of ancient Egypt is notably brief.¹⁵ Although Budin briefly addresses Hatshepsut, Akhenaten is entirely absent, revealing a broader tendency to exclude or overlook non-normative masculinity in Egyptological discourse. Additionally, Budin relies heavily on philological analysis, largely neglecting material culture as a mode of interpretation. This reinforces the

¹³ Uroš Matić, "Out of Touch: Egyptology and Queer Theory (or What This Encounter Should Not Be)," in *Von der Quelle zur Theorie: Über das Verhältnis zwischen Objektivität und Subjektivität in den historischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Anne-Sophie Naujoks and Jendrik Stelling (Leiden: Mentis, 2018), 183–195.

¹⁴ Stephanie Lynn Budin, *Gender in the Ancient Near East* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175–246.

broader disciplinary divide between text-centered approaches and those that prioritize material culture, especially forms of evidence that challenge fixed or binary constructions of identity. Without integrating gender and object analysis, interpretations of the ancient past risk remaining partial or incomplete. These omissions support two central claims of my research: first, that scholarship on Akhenaten and gender remains underdeveloped; and second, that when Akhenaten is addressed, his representation is rarely examined through material culture and visual analysis.

More substantial scholarship on Akhenaten, such as Donald B. Redford's *Akhenaten, The Heretic King* (1984), remains widely regarded as foundational.¹⁶ However, Redford's book primarily focuses on religious developments and archaeological discoveries, providing little to no visual analysis of material culture or discussion of how material objects functioned within Akhenaten's reign. Although his study is now over four decades old, it continues to shape scholarly discourse. More recent work by Barry Kemp, particularly his archaeological excavations and interpretations of the Amarna site, has emerged as the most updated and authoritative study of the period.¹⁷ Kemp's contributions offer a broader and more materially grounded understanding of Amarna, yet even his work often stops short of applying art historical or gender-theoretical methodologies to Akhenaten's image production. As such, there remains a critical gap in scholarship that rigorously integrates visual analysis, material function, and gender performance into the study of Akhenaten's reign. While foundational, Redford's *Akhenaten, The Heretic King* (1984) reflects the scholarly attitudes of its time, notably describing Akhenaten as "hermaphroditic," a term rooted in outdated medicalized assumptions about bodies and gender

¹⁶ Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹⁷ See Barry J. Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti: Amarna and Its People* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

identity.¹⁸ Although not ill-intentioned, this language reflects a scholarly moment that lacked the tools of gender theory and the awareness of its own cultural biases. Such language underscores the need for new approaches that reassess Akhenaten's image through contemporary frameworks, which I aim to achieve in this thesis.

Redford's language becomes even more problematic in his conclusion, where he describes Akhenaten as an "effete monarch" based on his supposed interest in art, sculpture, and design, as well as his absence from traditional battle or hunting scenes (an assertion that remains speculative and unsupported by evidence).¹⁹ The term effete is inherently loaded, carrying connotations of weakness and femininity, implying that masculinity is inherently superior and femininity inherently deficient. This language choice reflects broader cultural biases and reveals how Redford's interpretation is intertwined with homophobic and gendered assumptions.

More concerning is that Redford presents this assertion on the second-to-last page of his book, positioning it as part of his overarching conclusion. This placement suggests that Redford intends to leave readers with a final, lasting impression of Akhenaten as an effete monarch. By framing Akhenaten's supposed creative interests as signs of weakness or deviance, Redford reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal narratives that dismiss alternative expressions of authority. Additionally, equating creativity and aesthetic interests with inadequacy serves to delegitimize Akhenaten's reign through a narrow, biased perspective. These academic blind spots have shaped not only scholarly interpretations but also broader cultural perceptions of Akhenaten. To fully grasp how Akhenaten's image has evolved, it is essential to examine his representations not just in academic discourse but in popular culture as well.

¹⁸ Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*, 104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

Early European encounters with Akhenaten's legacy during the 19th and early 20th centuries significantly shaped modern interpretations.²⁰ A surge in interest in Akhenaten emerged during the 1890s, largely fueled by the expanding reach of mass media.²¹ Advancements in printing, combined with a growing public appetite for historical narratives, led to widespread yet often dramatized portrayals of Akhenaten's reign that overshadowed material evidence.²² This surge, alongside advancements in printing and image reproduction, allowed information to circulate beyond the confines of evidence-based Egyptology. Films, fiction novels, and illustrated newspapers further fueled public fascination with ancient Egypt (an allure that extended even to figures outside the field).²³ Despite his expertise in psychoanalysis rather than Egyptology, Sigmund Freud developed a personal fascination for Akhenaten.

In his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud speculated that Akhenaten's religious reforms influenced the development of Judaism.²⁴ This claim, while influential, lacked Egyptological rigor and contributed to widespread misconceptions.²⁵ Although Freud was an authority in psychoanalysis, works like this ultimately compromised the integrity of Akhenaten's historical legacy. Freud is just one among many examples, Egyptologist Dominic Montserrat identified seventy-one literary treatments of Akhenaten published between 1890 and 1998, ranging from quasi-academic works to poetry and books aimed at children and young adults.²⁶ Montserrat's list in *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy, and Ancient Egypt* excludes films, stage productions, and screenplays that further reinforce romanticized, Orientalist narratives about Akhenaten.

²⁰ Dominic Montserrat, *Akhenaten: History, Fantasy, and Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Knopf, 1939).

²⁵ Montserrat, *Akhenaten*, 105-107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 185-188.

This widespread cultural saturation, coupled with speculative theories like Freud's, contributed to the mythologization of Akhenaten, often distorting historical accuracy. Although likely unintentional, such interpretations function as microaggressions, subtly undermining Akhenaten's historical legitimacy and perpetuating long-term misconceptions with tangible consequences. In non-specialist narratives, material culture (the physical evidence) rarely enters the conversation. Although material culture initially served as a catalyst for public engagement through mass media imagery, it has been largely sidelined, receiving minimal visual analysis from an art historical perspective. Tracing these key moments in historical scholarship helps dismantle entrenched myths and reorient the study of Akhenaten toward material culture, emphasizing function over form. Building on this critical reassessment of the literature, I now shift toward methodology to outline how I approach the material itself.

Methodology

Defining Material Culture in This Study

In this thesis, I deliberately use the term material culture instead of art to describe the objects I analyze. The ancient Egyptian language lacks a term that directly corresponds to the modern Western concept of art, which only emerged after the Renaissance and the eighteenth century.²⁷ The concept of art is tied to Western ideals of aesthetics, creativity, and individual expression, ideas that do not fully align with the cultural context of ancient Egypt.²⁸

While ancient Egyptian creations and those from other ancient cultures may possess qualities we now find beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, labeling them simply as art can be misleading. Such terminology risks overlooking critical differences in how these objects were made, their intended purposes, their cultural significance, and the contexts in which they were

²⁷ John Baines, "What is Art?" in *A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art*, ed. Melinda K. Hartwig (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

produced.²⁹ These objects were not created with the same assumptions about aesthetics or individual creativity that define the modern Western notion of art.³⁰

When I refer to material culture, I mean the physical objects and images created, used, or valued within Egyptian society, regardless of whether they were intended to be art in a modern sense. This includes a wide range of objects (both utilitarian and ceremonial) that served religious, political, and social functions. While ancient Egyptians did not conceptualize their objects as material culture any more than they did art, this definitional shift allows me to engage with these materials on their own terms. It moves the focus away from modern aesthetic judgments and toward the roles these objects played in shaping ideological, theological, and lived experiences.

This framing is central to my methodology. Conceptualizing Akhenaten's image production as material culture allows me to shift the analytical focus away from questions of style, authorship, or aesthetic value, and toward function, use, and presence. By emphasizing function and presence, I treat images and objects not as passive reflections of reality, but as active, performative agents within a broader ideological system. Rather than viewing them as aesthetic objects lacking function beyond visual appeal, this approach reframes the inquiry moving beyond what these objects looked like or who made them, and instead asking what they did and how they operated within their cultural context.

Methods

While aware of the limitations inherent in applying contemporary frameworks to ancient contexts, I argue that such tools, when used thoughtfully, can illuminate dimensions of

²⁹ Karen Sonik, "Art/ifacts and ArtWorks: De-Colonizing the Study and Museum Display of Ancient and Non-Western Things," in *Art/ifacts and ArtWorks in the Ancient World*, ed. Karen Sonik (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 2-3. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/100091>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Akhenaten's reign that have been overlooked or misunderstood. Critics may argue that such frameworks risk oversimplification or misrepresentation, particularly when modern concepts like gender fluidity are retroactively applied. Yet without interpretive tools, we lack meaningful ways to engage with the complexities of ancient material culture. Our interpretations are inevitably shaped by our own temporal and cultural positions. While these methods are not perfect, they offer productive entry points for exploring the past.

A compelling example of this approach is found in Budin's *Gender in the Ancient Near East* (2003), where she uses gender as a critical lens to analyze ancient contexts that existed before the development of modern gender theory. Though I critique aspects of Budin's work, I nonetheless view it as a model for how contemporary theory can be used thoughtfully to illuminate ancient cultural systems without reducing them to modern identities. Her work demonstrates that, when applied reflexively and contextually, such frameworks can reveal nuanced insights into ancient constructions of gender and identity.

My research does not seek definitive answers or singular truths. Instead, it aims to expand the field by introducing new questions and interpretive possibilities. Acknowledging the temporal and cultural distance between our present and the ancient world, I approach this work not to impose fixed conclusions but to offer one of many possible readings; readings that might encourage deeper engagement with how meaning was constructed and embodied in ancient Egypt. Even if such interpretations invite critique, that process is integral to the advancement of scholarship. The act of questioning, rather than simply reaffirming established narratives, is what drives the field forward and opens new space for future inquiry.

This study acknowledges the inherent biases within historical research, particularly in Egyptology. Egyptology has historically prioritized textual evidence over material sources and

rely on Western frameworks that reinforce conventional assumptions about gender and identity.³¹ These methodological limitations have shaped both the scope of inquiry and the narratives constructed about the past. By focusing on material culture, this research challenges fixed interpretations of Akhenaten's reign, emphasizing the fluid and dynamic nature of ideological change. It achieves this by centering visual analysis, and by treating function and gender as performative categories. These tools provide a more nuanced, historically grounded understanding of how meaning was produced and embodied. Through this framework, the study resists reductive readings and presents the most compelling, methodologically rigorous body of evidence possible.

While form is important, this research prioritizes function as the primary lens of analysis, revealing how material production actively shaped ideological shifts. Earlier Egyptological approaches have often emphasized iconography and style, frequently detaching images from the cultural and ritual contexts that informed their original use and significance.³² Such studies tended to prioritize form over function, viewing objects as static aesthetic artifacts rather than as active participants in religious and social life. The idea of prioritizing function over form is not new; Zainab Bahrani, for example, makes a compelling case for this approach in *The Graven Image* (2003) concerning the ancient Near East.³³ Nyord's *Seeing Perfection* (2020) is one of the first works to apply this framework systematically and influentially within Egyptology. His work

³¹ Nyord, *Seeing Perfection*, 1; Robert Stevens Bianchi, "On the Nature of Forgeries of Ancient Egyptian Works of Art from the Amarna Period," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 20, no. 1 (2000): 12; Jana Esther Fries, "Always the Same Old Stories? The Representation of Prehistoric Women and Men in Scientific Communication, Popular Culture and the Media" in *Gender and Change in Archaeology: European Studies on the Impact of Gender Research on Archaeology and Wider Society*, ed. Nona Palincas and Ana Cristina Martins (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), 347-349. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52155-3>.

³² Nyord, *Seeing Perfection*, 3.

³³ See Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

represents a crucial methodological shift, positioning Egyptian images and objects as active entities within their cultural context, rather than passive reflections.³⁴

Nyord argues that ancient Egyptian images function as active participants in reality, rather than passive representations.³⁵ Their ontological presence shaped religious and social experiences, making them integral to the lived environment rather than mere symbolic depictions.³⁶ Nyord's functional-ontological approach draws from broader art history and visual studies theories that consider the agency and presence of images, including W. J. T. Mitchell's image agency theory and Alfred Gell's model of art as a social agent.³⁷ Nyord conceptualizes ancient Egyptian images as more than static representations; rather, they were perceived as activating the presence of the depicted subject within their intended context, shaping ritual and religious experiences.³⁸ Following this framework, material culture transforms from passive objects to active entities with agency. If these objects are considered active entities, then the key questions become: what are they doing, and how do they function in relation to the humans interacting with them? If images and objects function as active agents shaping reality, then this framework can also be applied to gender. Like material culture, gender is performed, reiterated, and embodied through visual and material representation. Thus, Akhenaten's image becomes a site where function and gender intersect, challenging rigid categories and inviting alternative interpretations.

Building on this intersection, Akhenaten's visual representations combine elements of masculinity and femininity. This concept is addressed by queer theory, which deconstructs

³⁴ Nyord, *Seeing Perfection*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁸ Nyord, *Seeing Perfection*, 54.

heteronormative frameworks and reveals how these assumptions shape understandings of sexuality, gender, and identity. Queer theory argues that this binary framework is a construct of heteronormativity: the dominant societal norms that position heterosexuality as the natural and preferred sexual orientation while marginalizing other identities.³⁹ Heteronormativity reinforces the male-female binary to naturalize heterosexuality, shaping societal understandings and perpetuations of gender roles.⁴⁰ Deconstructing heteronormativity creates space to move beyond restrictive binary interpretations, enabling a more nuanced and expansive conversation.

Central to queer theory is the notion that gender is not inherently biological but is constructed through social and cultural factors, including discourse, norms, and material culture.⁴¹ Queer theory employs performativity to examine how gender is constructed through the repeated enactment of societal norms.⁴² Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I examine how gender is not a fixed reality but is produced through repeated performance.⁴³ Although this is a modern theoretical framework applied to the past, it remains valuable because the construction of gender is not bound by time. Every culture, consciously or not, engages in creating gender norms. Viewing Akhenaten's image through this lens allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the evidence.

Butler's theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not an innate identity but a series of repeated behaviors shaped by societal norms.⁴⁴ In other words, what is perceived as natural or real about gender is, in fact, a product of social repetition and reinforcement.⁴⁵ Butler argues that, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted

³⁹ Uroš Matic, "(De)Queering Hatshepsut: Binary Bind in Archaeology of Egypt and Kingship Beyond the Corporeal," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23, no. 3 (2016): 811.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stephanie Lynn Budin, *Gender in the Ancient Near East* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2023), 115.

⁴² Mark Graham, *Anthropological Explorations in Queer Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), 12-13.

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse...⁴⁶ The notion of gender as a surface inscription parallels the production of material culture. Just as gender is constructed through repetition and visual coding, ideology is similarly inscribed onto the surfaces of statues, reliefs, and other objects. If gender is a constructed performance rather than an inherent trait, its visual representation becomes a critical tool for shaping and reinforcing ideological beliefs. The body, whether real or sculpted, becomes a site where gender and identity are negotiated and performed through visual means.

Analysis of Data

Applied to Akhenaten, his androgynous or ambiguous bodily depictions, which blur distinctions between traditionally male and female forms, can be read as a disruption of Egyptian gender norms. However, this raises a critical question: whose norms are being disrupted? Although the representation clearly departs from conventions of royal male portrayal, it is less certain whether divine figures were subject to similarly rigid gender structures.⁴⁷ If the Aten, the sun god worshiped by Akhenaten, embodied fluid or composite traits, then Akhenaten's self-presentation may reflect not a rejection of gender boundaries, but rather an alignment with a divine mode of being that transcends binary categorization.⁴⁸

These depictions, which emphasize nontraditional bodily forms, do not merely alter existing conventions; they actively reshape gendered expectations, demonstrating how material culture can be employed to challenge societal norms. This disruption may serve a functional purpose within Akhenaten's religious ideology, aligning with the Aten's conceptualization as

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 186.

⁴⁷ Betsy M. Bryan, "New Kingdom Sculpture," in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt: Volume I*, ed. by Alan B. Lloyd (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 927-929.

⁴⁸ Abdoh, *Sculpture and Technology*, 6.

both mother and father, encompassing male and female aspects.⁴⁹ By embodying both masculine and feminine traits, Akhenaten's visual presentation may reinforce his divine association with the Aten as a unified creator embodying both male and female potential.

I present a reading of the source material that suggests the Aten may possess both male and female traits, making this duality a reality for Akhenaten. His androgynous representation could serve as an earthly reflection of the Aten's nature, visually embodying the deity's dual-gendered essence. The great hymn to the Aten, the longest surviving text dedicated to the Aten, could be considered the premier and foundational text of Atenism.⁵⁰ The great hymn to the Aten was transcribed from the rock tomb of Aya.⁵¹ The following passage is particularly relevant to the topic at hand:

Oh you who cause semen to develop in women,
Who make "liquid" into people,
Who keep a son alive in his mother's womb
And quiet him so that his tears dry up-
You nurse in the womb!
Who give breath
To keep all creation alive.
When (this child) emerges from the womb
To breathe on the day of his birth,
You open wide his mouth and provide his needs

The textual evidence suggests that the Aten could be understood as both mother and father, embodying a totalizing, self-sufficient creative force. The passage describes the Aten as the initiator of life, responsible for causing semen to develop in women and turning liquid into people, which aligns with a traditionally male/creator role. However, the text immediately shifts to a nurturing, maternal function, describing the Aten as one who nurses in the womb, sustains

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ronald T. Ridley, "The Cult of the Aten," in *Akhenaten: A Historian's View* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2019), 125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2ks6z5p.9>.

⁵¹ Transcribed from the rock tomb of Aya and it was originally published by Norman de Garis Davies in *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, vol. 6, *Memoirs of the Egypt Exploration Society* 18 (London, 1908); Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 78-83.

life before birth, and soothes an unborn child's tears. This duality continues as the Aten is depicted as the entity that opens the child's mouth upon birth and provides for its needs, reinforcing the idea that the Aten is both the giver of life and its sustainer. The combination of insemination, gestation, and postnatal nourishment within a single deity challenges conventional gender distinctions. Further reinforcing this notion, the Aten always appears alone, without a male or female counterpart (a notable departure from other Egyptian gods, who typically appear with consorts or divine partners) emphasizing its nature as an all-encompassing being that embodies both maleness and femaleness.⁵²

This theological concept is directly reflected in Akhenaten's visual representation, particularly in his androgynous bodily depictions, which blur the boundaries between traditionally male and female forms. Akhenaten's non-traditional features (wide hips, a rounded belly, elongated limbs, and softer facial features) along with depictions of him nurturing his daughters can be read as a visual embodiment of Aten's dual-gendered creative power.⁵³ By blurring the visual distinctions between male and female, Akhenaten actively alters gendered expectations, reinforcing and more explicitly aligning himself with the Aten's dual-gendered creative power. This artistic and ideological shift serves to legitimize his connection to the Aten, presenting not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate theological statement. Having established the conceptual framework of function and gender performativity, I now turn to my case studies to demonstrate how these theories manifest in Akhenaten's visual program.

Case Studies

Case study 1: Talatat from Karnak

⁵² Ridley, *The Cult of the Aten*, 178-179.

⁵³ Abdoh, *Sculpture and Technology*, 3.

This case study examines the material culture produced before the Amarna period, focusing on a talatat (a carved block) from the early years of Akhenaten's reign. In his fifth year, Akhenaten relocated the capital from Thebes to a site 150 miles north on the east bank of the Nile, now known as Amarna.⁵⁴ Although this relief predates the official establishment of Amarna, it already demonstrates many of the visual strategies that Akhenaten would fully develop later in his reign.

The talatat from the second pylon depicting part of the decoration of a pylon possibly the southern gateway [figure 3], is small yet visually dense, packed with imagery that is particularly relevant to my argument.⁵⁵ Talatats, Akhenaten's standardized masonry units, were small, lightweight, and easily transportable, making them ideal for rapidly constructing large-scale buildings.⁵⁶ After Akhenaten's reign, later pharaohs repurposed these talatats, dispersing fragments of Amarna imagery across Egypt's architectural landscape.⁵⁷ My research indicates that little to no scholarly work within Egyptology or art history has focused on this specific talatat. I have located only one photograph of this talatat, accompanied by a brief description, revealing significant gaps in existing scholarship on Akhenaten. Although the sheer number of surviving talatat makes comprehensive publication a daunting, perhaps even unattainable task, this particular example stands out for its visual and ideological significance. The underrepresentation of this talatat in scholarship underscores the need to revisit and update the study of Akhenaten's material culture.

⁵⁴ Donald B. Redford, "The Razed Temple of Akhenaten," *Scientific American* 239, no. 6 (1978): 138. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24955870>.

⁵⁵ Although modern scholarship often italicize artwork titles, the names applied here are not original titles but labels assigned by modern scholars to otherwise untitled objects; accordingly, I omit italics for ancient works throughout this paper.

⁵⁶ Donald B. Redford, "Akhenaten: New Theories and Old Facts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 369 (2013): 18. <https://doi.org/10.5615/bullamerschoorie.369.0009>.

⁵⁷ Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*, 67-70.

A critical question to consider in relation to this case study is audience: who would have seen or engaged with this image? This talatat was found in the second pylon within the temple of Amun at Karnak, though it is believed to have originally been part of the southern gateway at Karnak.⁵⁸ The systematic dismantling and reuse of building materials by later pharaohs prevented this fragment from being discovered within its original architectural context. The limited published scholarship makes it difficult, if not impossible, to determine what other scenes or images may have accompanied this talatat. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that this image did not exist in isolation; rather, it functioned as part of a larger system of interconnected images. What other images might have been in visual or ideological conversation with this talatat? Even if surrounding elements remain unknown, considering the potential context allows for a more nuanced interpretation of its function and significance within the temple space. Additionally, the scale of the image plays a crucial role in determining how it would have been perceived and understood.

All talatat were small in scale, requiring close proximity for their visual details to be fully perceived. Given their size, individual talatat were likely not intended for broad public display from afar. Instead, the imagery may have been intended for intimate viewing or possibly not meant for direct observation at all. Rather than existing as isolated visual statements, I believe, these small-scale images functioned within a broader ideological framework. As Egyptologist Luiza Osorio G. Silva notes, large-scale temple reliefs in the New Kingdom were often not fully visible to viewers and were not necessarily intended to be seen in their entirety.⁵⁹ Their impact did not rely on visual accessibility but on their embedded presence within the ritual and spatial

⁵⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁹ Luiza Osorio G. Silva, ““That He May Behold”: Constructing Presence through Sight in Ancient Egyptian Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 106, no. 4 (2024): 80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2024.2357440>.

environment.⁶⁰ The limited visibility of talatats may have enhanced their ritual function, lending ideological power even when they were only partially or briefly seen. Just as talatats served as modular blocks in temple construction, their imagery likely operated in a similar modular fashion with each piece contributing to a larger ideological narrative. This image may have been one element within a constellation of visuals that, together, reinforced and articulated Akhenaten's ideological program.

This talatat [figure 3] is divided into three primary sections, forming a carefully structured visual narrative: the central panel flanked by panels on the left and right. The right panel features hieroglyphic inscriptions accompanied by vertical lines, visually suggesting an architectural space.⁶¹ This framing device emphasizes the sacred context of the scene, anchoring it within a defined ritual environment rather than an open, undefined space. In the central panel, Akhenaten presents various herbs to the anthropomorphic form of the Aten, depicted with a falcon head adorned with a sun disc.⁶² This early form of the Aten's iconography indicates that the relief likely dates to between the first and fifth years of Akhenaten's reign, preceding the complete shift in Atenist representation. After the fifth year, following the move to Amarna, the Aten was primarily depicted as a genderless disc, devoid of anthropomorphic traits.⁶³

The anthropomorphic form of the Aten closely mirrors Akhenaten's body, featuring soft curves, a protruding belly, and elongated limbs. If the Aten is understood as a single divine entity embodying both male and female aspects, Akhenaten's androgynous depictions may visually reinforce this ideological shift, aligning his body with the Aten's transcendent form. This mirroring is not only theological but also gendered, as Akhenaten's soft, androgynous features

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*, 65.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ray Smith Winfield and Donald B. Redford, *The Akhenaten Temple Project. Volume 1: Initial Discoveries* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1976), 85.

visually embody the Aten's nonbinary generative power. This direct doubling effect blurs the line between mortal and divine, reinforcing the theological principle that Akhenaten and the Aten share a unique, interconnected relationship. That relationship is partly visualized through the king's departure from conventional masculine form, suggesting a gendered re-coding of kingship. The seam between the central and left scenes further emphasizes the theme of interconnectedness and interchangeability between Akhenaten and the Aten.

One of the most striking visual elements of this relief is the mirroring of Akhenaten's form with that of the Aten, a possible strategy that reinforces the divine connection between king and god. This mirroring operates on both symbolic and spatial levels, with Akhenaten and the Aten occupying parallel positions within the composition, establishing a visual interchangeability that underscores the king's role as the Aten's earthly representative. The emphasis on bodily likeness implies that the Aten's form is not independent but a divine reflection of the king, reinforcing the idea that Akhenaten functions not merely as a servant of the god but as an earthly extension of the deity. This doubling effect is likely not just an artistic convention but a deliberate visual strategy. It further blurs the boundary between god and king, reinforcing the fundamental tenet of Atenism: that Akhenaten and the Aten are inseparably linked, their identities merging in both form and function. Bahrani's argument about doubling and duplication as a strategy, as outlined in *Graven Image* (2003), provides a valuable framework for interpreting Akhenaten's visual representation.

There is evidence that images functioned similarly in both the ancient Near East and Egypt, particularly through strategies like repetition and mirroring, not merely as artistic conventions but as means of establishing presence and asserting ideological authority. This is supported by the aligned readings of Bahrani's *The Graven Image* (2003) and Nyord *Seeing*

Perfection (2003) who both emphasize the active role of images and statues in ritual and ideological contexts.⁶⁴ In her discussion of the altar of Tukulti-Ninurta, Bahrani emphasizes that doubling creates a continuous presence, rendering the represented figure as an active participant within the ritual or ideological framework rather than a static image.⁶⁵ This strategy links the object's function to its form, making repetition integral to the image's effectiveness and meaning.

Applying Bahrani's insights to Akhenaten's reliefs, the mirroring of Akhenaten's form with the Aten can be interpreted as a similar strategy of presence. This visual repetition could be deliberate, serving as a calculated effort to solidify Akhenaten's ideological link with the Aten, making their identities appear intertwined and inseparable. Furthermore, extrapolating out from Bahrani's argument, it becomes apparent that this talatat is likely part of a larger system of images. The presence of multiple interconnected images would only amplify the doubling effect, creating a broader network of visual and ideological reinforcement. As Bahrani describes with the altar of Tukulti-Ninurta, Akhenaten's use of mirroring and repetition possibly functions as a deliberate visual mechanism to assert divine authority. Through these strategies Akhenaten's imagery actively establishes and maintains presence, reinforcing his connection to the Aten and asserting his ideological authority as a divine intermediary.

Building on Bahrani's argument on doubling as a strategy for establishing presence, my proposed notion of doubling and interchangeability aligns with Matei Tichindelean's analysis in his 2019 article, *Digital Reconstruction of the Akhenaten Torso in the Brooklyn Museum*.

Tichindelean's research offers further evidence that repetition and mirroring were deliberate strategies employed to assert ideological authority and divine presence, rather than mere artistic conventions. He argues that Akhenaten's self-representation frequently blurred the boundaries

⁶⁴ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 199-201.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

between mortal and divine, presenting the king as the living manifestation of the Aten rather than a mere devotee.⁶⁶ This fusion of identities was not merely symbolic but also functioned as a deliberate visual and ideological strategy. This strategy not only asserted theological alignment, but also introduced a gendered logic presenting Akhenaten's image as one that intentionally embodied both masculine and feminine traits to reflect the Aten's composite identity. A key piece of evidence supporting this concept is the Brooklyn Museum's Akhenaten torso, featuring a fragmented cartouche on the lower back. Tichindelean emphasizes that this inscription explicitly links the Aten's identity to the king, reinforcing their interchangeability. The text reads, "Re lives, Har-akhty, who rejoices on the Horizon in his name, 'Shu, who is Aten."⁶⁷

This merging of Akhenaten with the Aten (both visually and textually) suggests that his image was deliberately crafted to collapse distinctions between king and god. The repeated artistic and textual interweaving of their identities during Akhenaten's reign makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the king's human form and his divine representation.⁶⁸ While Tichindelean's analysis focuses on the technical and digital reconstruction of this sculpture, my research expands this discussion by examining how these visual and textual strategies operated within a broader ideological framework. Rather than merely illustrating religious devotion, these artistic choices actively shaped Akhenaten's theological and political agenda, reinforcing his claim to exclusive divine legitimacy within the Atenist order. His visual presentation, deliberately fusing masculine and feminine features, was not simply a personal aesthetic or bodily reality, but a performative assertion of divine gender duality. In this way, gender fluidity becomes not incidental, but central to the ritual function of

⁶⁶ Matei Tichindelean, "Digital Reconstruction of the Akhenaten Torso in the Brooklyn Museum," *Studies in Digital Heritage* 3, no. 1 (2019): 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 23.

these images, visually collapsing boundaries between king and god and reinforcing Akhenaten's divine embodiment of the deity's dual generative power. While the first case study demonstrates how Akhenaten's image was crafted to enact this convergence, I now move to my second case study, which employs these same visual strategies within a private tomb context.

Case Study 2: Panehesy's Tomb

An adoration of the living Aten relief from the tomb of Panehesy (Amarna Tomb 6) [figure 1] blurs conventional distinctions between the divine and human, king and queen, and male and female. Panehesy was a high official in Akhenaten's court and held as many as seven titles including intimate of the king.⁶⁹ The tomb's decoration includes scenes of the royal family, offerings to the Aten, and depictions of Panehesy receiving rewards from the king.⁷⁰ An adoration of the living Aten depicts Akhenaten and Nefertiti standing beneath the Aten, its rays extending downward with hands offering ankh symbols, signifying the life-giving power of the solar deity.

Akhenaten and Nefertiti dominate the scene, their prominence contrasting sharply with the smaller, less significant figures that occupy the relief. Positioned centrally beneath the Aten, they are visually emphasized as the primary recipients of the sun god's divine presence. Their bodies are depicted with elongated, curvilinear forms, exaggerated bellies, narrow limbs, and wide hips. Their gender expression, conveyed through their attire and physical presentation, is almost identical; both figures are sartorially identical, with their hair styled in the same manner, effectively erasing distinctions and challenging traditional gender binaries. Their anatomical features are also strikingly similar, further blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity. This visual ambiguity can be read as a deliberate gendered strategy: rather than depicting fixed,

⁶⁹ Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna, Part II: The Tombs of Panehesy and Meryra II* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1905), 29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

binary gender roles, the image performs a merging of masculine and feminine forms that mirrors the composite gender identity attributed to the Aten itself. This androgyny may symbolize Akhenaten's divine role as both the father and mother of Egypt, mirroring the Aten's all-encompassing nature. Just as the Aten lacks distinct gender markers, Akhenaten's androgynous imagery may be intended to emphasize his close connection to the deity. This gendered mirroring functions ideologically, positioning Akhenaten's body as an active site where the fluid and generative power of the Aten is visually performed. Textually, Akhenaten is referred to as the "beautiful child of the Sun-disc," alluding to the sun god's dual role as both mother and father, reinforcing its genderless representation.⁷¹ In this framework, Akhenaten and the Aten appear nearly interchangeable. The composition further emphasizes this divine connection.

The queen closely mirrors the king, with only slight differences in scale and positioning relative to the Aten. Akhenaten appears larger and closer to the Aten, while Nefertiti stands slightly behind him, maintaining contact with the sun god but positioned at a slight distance. Their mirrored representation and close proximity to the Aten suggest that their roles extend beyond mere royalty; they function as intermediaries between the divine and the mortal world. This idea is further supported by the presence of domestic garden shrines maintained by elites and high officials in Amarna. According to Egyptologist Salima Ikram's research, these shrines were dedicated not only to the Aten but also to the royal family: Akhenaten and Nefertiti equally.⁷²

⁷¹ Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*, 166.

⁷² Ikram, Salima, "Domestic Shrines and the Cult of the Royal Family at El-'Amarna," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 75 (1989): 100-101. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3821901>.

Their veneration alongside the Aten indicates that the royal couple was viewed as direct conduits of divine power.⁷³ This alignment not only elevates their political and spiritual authority but also introduces a gendered theological logic, where both king and queen jointly embody and transmit divine power beyond the binary, expanding gender as a category that is not only social but spiritually meaningful. Building on this idea, I argue that their simultaneous worship reinforces their ideological interchangeability and elevated status within the Atenist religious framework. This visual and ideological interchangeability is further emphasized through the Aten's iconography itself. The radiating lines of the Aten's rays within the relief create a strong vertical emphasis, drawing the viewer's gaze toward the divine source while simultaneously leading downward toward the royal figures. These rays act as visual conduits, both physically and symbolically linking the Aten to the king, reinforcing his divine connection and emphasizing the interchangeability between Akhenaten and the Aten.

The image in Panehesy's tomb fulfills multiple functions (religious, socio-political, and personal), reflecting his status and role within Akhenaten's court. Religiously, the imagery reinforces Atenist theology by highlighting Panehesy's devotion to the Aten and his close association with the royal family. Beyond its religious significance, the image may have functioned as both a political and social statement. Scenes of Panehesy receiving rewards from Akhenaten visually assert his privileged status, reinforcing his authority and legitimizing his role both in life and beyond. As a high official, his proximity to the king signified elite status, and the tomb's decoration commemorated this connection, securing his legacy within society. The images also function as posthumous validation, ensuring that Panehesy's deeds and royal favor were remembered long after his death. Given that this private tomb was likely commissioned by Panehesy himself rather than Akhenaten, its visual alignment with Atenism raises compelling

⁷³ Ibid.

questions. Does this suggest that elites actively embraced Atenist ideology? This privately commissioned imagery complicates that narrative, implying that elements of Atenism may have had greater traction among high officials than previously acknowledged. While firm conclusions are difficult to draw, such evidence opens valuable lines of inquiry into the permeability and dissemination of ideological constructs beyond the Akhenaten's inner circle. An adoration of the living Aten image thus provides a critical case study for applying methodologies of function and gender performance, illustrating how artistic form was not only shaped by ideological purpose but also deeply informed by gendered visual codes that constructed identity. While this analysis centers on Akhenaten, fully understanding the Atenist ideological framework also requires attention to Nefertiti's role within it.

Nefertiti's Role in Atenism

Although my research focuses on Akhenaten, neglecting Nefertiti's role in Atenism would be a significant oversight. Nefertiti's presence within this religious framework is undeniably significant, and omitting her entirely would invite valid critique. However, fully incorporating Nefertiti into this discussion would expand the scope of my research beyond its intended focus. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge Nefertiti's highly significant position during the Amarna period. Nefertiti is frequently depicted alongside Akhenaten in worship scenes, often as an almost equal partner, reinforcing her centrality within the Atenist religious framework.⁷⁴ In some instances, such as the tomb of Panehesy case study [figure 1], the Aten's rays, symbolizing life, extend to both Akhenaten and Nefertiti, visually asserting divine favor upon the royal couple. This suggests that the concept of interchangeability may also apply to Nefertiti, particularly in compositions where the royal couple and the Aten form a cohesive

⁷⁴ Ridley, *The Cult of the Aten*, 145.

triadic structure. Another relief that suggests interchangeability is the royal chariot passing the sentries from the tomb of Mahu at Amarna [figure 4].⁷⁵

This image provides compelling evidence of interchangeability between Akhenaten and Nefertiti. The royal couple is depicted sharing the same chariot, their bodies overlapping and entwined in a manner that feels deliberate. The space they occupy seems too confined for two figures; their visually compressed and intertwined forms convey an impression of unity or fusion. This spatial compression blurs distinctions not only between their bodies but also between concepts of power, gender, and identity, suggesting a shared role or mutual embodiment of ideological authority. Their mirrored postures enhance the sense of equivalence and interchangeability, collapsing their identities into a unified visual entity that reinforces ideological unity. This collapse of individual distinction through spatial and visual merging reflects not only shared political authority but also a visual deconstruction of rigid gender binaries, making gender itself part of the ideological project. Additionally, the triangular composition formed by Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and the Aten supports the concept of a triadic structure.

The Aten's rays extend downward, connecting both figures with equal emphasis. The triangular configuration functions not only as a formal device but also as an ideological statement. Positioned at the apex, the Aten visually asserts its dominance and divine authority, while Akhenaten and Nefertiti occupy the base, receiving and channeling divine power. This compositional arrangement suggests that Nefertiti's role is not merely supportive or secondary but integrally linked to the Atenist ideological program. The scene indicates that Nefertiti's alignment with Akhenaten transcends conventional representations of queenship. Her presence is

⁷⁵ Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna. Part IV: Tombs of Penthu, Mahu, and Others*, ed. F. Ll. Griffith (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1906).

not merely symbolic or decorative; rather, gender becomes instrumental in visually constructing identity and legitimizing divine authority through her integration into the Atenist triad. She is presented as an active participant within the Atenist framework, sharing in Akhenaten's ideological authority. Her mirrored role does not merely reinforce the king's dominance, but reflects a reconfiguration of gendered power, wherein both male and female embodiments jointly materialize divine authority. The concept of interchangeability is reinforced by their visual and spatial unity, implying that their roles were designed to be mutually reinforcing rather than strictly hierarchical.

Incorporating Nefertiti into this analysis is particularly compelling when considering the interchangeability between a male-gendered body, a female-gendered body, and a non-gendered body (the Aten). This suggests that within the framework of Atenism, gender is not a fixed or biologically determined state but a fluid, performative role enacted visually through posture, spatial arrangement, and iconographic strategies. Rather than illustrating idealized femininity or traditional queenship, Nefertiti's visual presence functions as part of a broader strategy that reimagines gender as flexible and co-constituted. This visual strategy suggests that Atenism's divine hierarchy transcended traditional gender binaries, employing repetition, mirroring, and interchangeability to construct a new ideological order. In this framework, divine power is not exclusively tied to masculinity but instead exists as a fluid, performative entity embodied by both king and queen. Although this interchangeability between king, queen, and god presents an intriguing avenue of exploration, my focus remains on Akhenaten. With this in mind, I now return to the central arguments of this thesis to consider the broader implications of Akhenaten's visual and ideological strategies, particularly how gender and function intersect to redefine the material culture of Amarna.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through the case studies, Akhenaten's visual and material culture utilized deliberate strategies of interchangeability and ideological assertion that challenge conventional interpretations of his reign. Examining these images through a framework that prioritizes function and gender visibility reveals how Akhenaten's artistic program actively constructed and reinforced his ideological vision through deliberate visual strategies. These visual strategies were not isolated choices; rather, they formed part of a cohesive framework aimed at blurring the boundaries between the divine identity of the Aten and the embodied form of Akhenaten, while potentially suggesting a redefinition of gender and identity. The implications of this approach reach beyond the individual case studies, challenging established methodologies and inviting fresh perspectives on the complexities of Akhenaten's reign. However, this approach diverges sharply from much of the existing scholarship on Akhenaten, which has long been limited by outdated methodologies, speculative interpretations, and a reluctance to engage with Egypt's material culture on its own terms.

By reevaluating Akhenaten through the lenses of function and gender, this study reframes his artistic and material culture as active ideological instruments rather than passive reflections of belief. Egyptology, as a discipline, has frequently resisted theoretical innovation, favoring its own insular frameworks over broader art historical and visual studies methodologies.⁷⁶ This tendency has led to stagnant interpretations of Amarna art, where the significance of Akhenaten's androgyny, the function of Atenist imagery, and the broader strategies of his reign have often been misunderstood, dismissed, or romanticized. My research aims to serve as a corrective measure, arguing that Amarna's visual culture was not simply the byproduct of religious zealotry

⁷⁶ Christina Riggs, "In the Shadows: The Study of Ancient Egyptian Art," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 112, no. 4–5 (2017): 293.

but an active, performative force that shaped reality. By recognizing material culture as active agents within ideological systems rather than static images or objects, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Akhenaten's reforms were visually and materially reinforced. In this framework, gender analysis is not a peripheral tool but a central method for interpreting how power, divinity, and identity were visually constructed. The androgynous representations of Akhenaten, his mirroring with the Aten, and the visual interchangeability between royal figures in my case studies all reveal how gender functioned as a core ideological strategy in reshaping traditional forms of authority and spirituality.

Moreover, my interdisciplinary approach carries broader implications, extending beyond ancient Egyptian society to contemporary discussions about how visual culture shapes and reflects gender and identity. By employing methodologies that challenge heteronormative and Western constructed assumptions, scholars can generate more inclusive and dynamic interpretations of the past. However, this effort requires a careful balance; while broadening our analytical frameworks, we must remain mindful of the risks of retroactively imposing contemporary understandings of gender and identity onto ancient societies. Doing so risks reducing complex identities to oversimplified, easily digestible narratives.

History is rarely straightforward; it exists as an entangled web of narratives, identities, and performances. Embracing the complexity of the past opens new pathways for understanding the present. Rather than viewing Akhenaten's reign as an anomaly, my research argues that its ideological and visual radicalism offers valuable potential for reinterpreting broader patterns in Egyptian history. By treating the material and visual culture of Amarna as a critical case study, rather than as a mere curiosity, we may uncover new methodologies that reshape not only our understanding of Akhenaten but also our approach to ancient Egyptian visual culture as a whole.

How might a deeper understanding of gender performativity and functional analysis in ancient Egyptian material culture transform our broader understanding of the ancient world?

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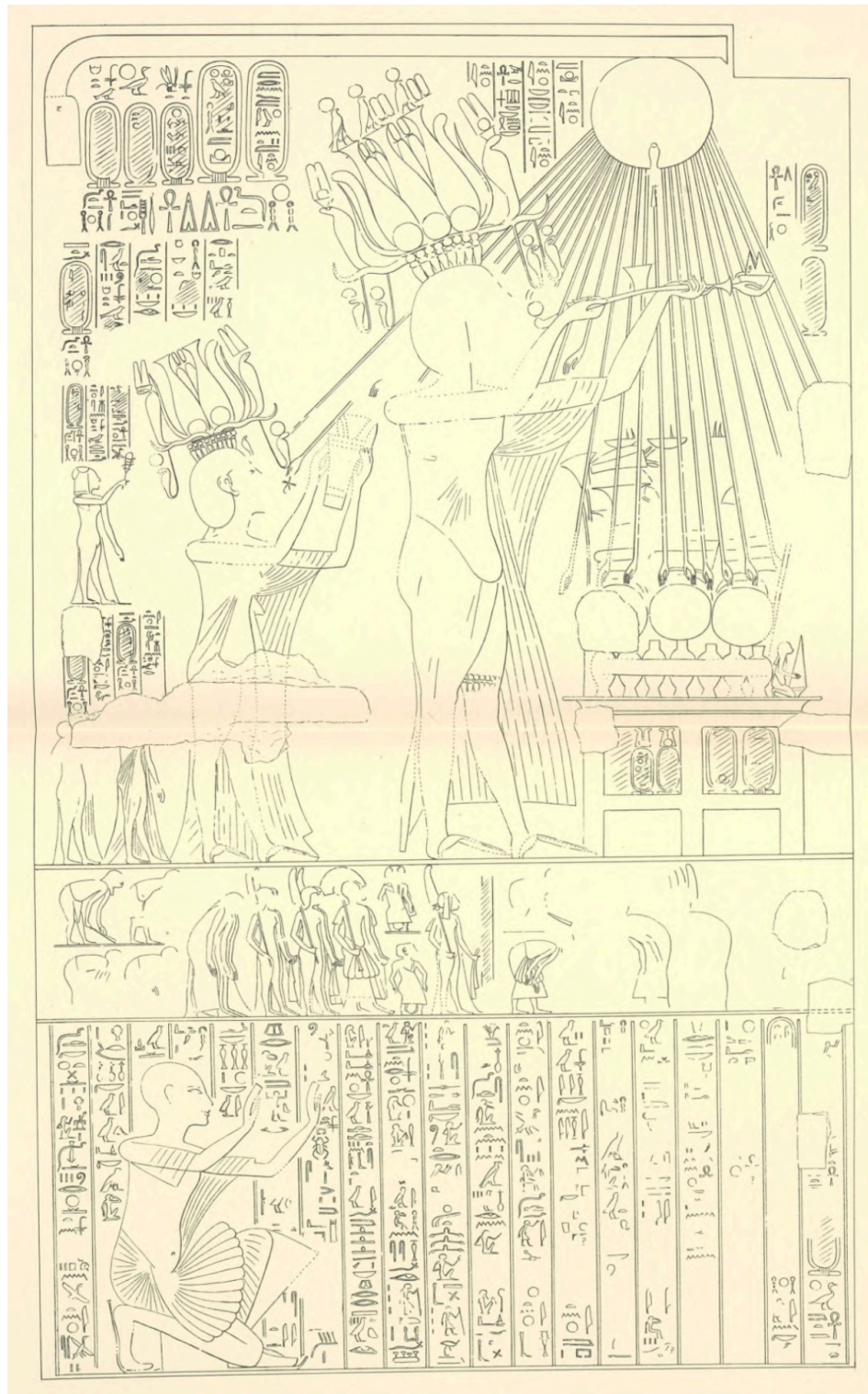


Figure 1: An Adoration of the Living Aten. From Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna, Part II: The Tombs of Panehesy and Meryra II* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1905), pl. 8.



Figure 2: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep embrace in the offering chamber (Photo: Greg Reeder). From Greg Reeder, *Same-sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs, and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep*, *World Archaeology* 32, no. 2 (2000), 206, pl. 7.



Figure 3: Talatat from the second pylon depicting part of the decoration of a pylon, possibly the southern gateway. From Donald B Redford, *Akhenaten, The Heretic King* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 65, fig. 4.6.

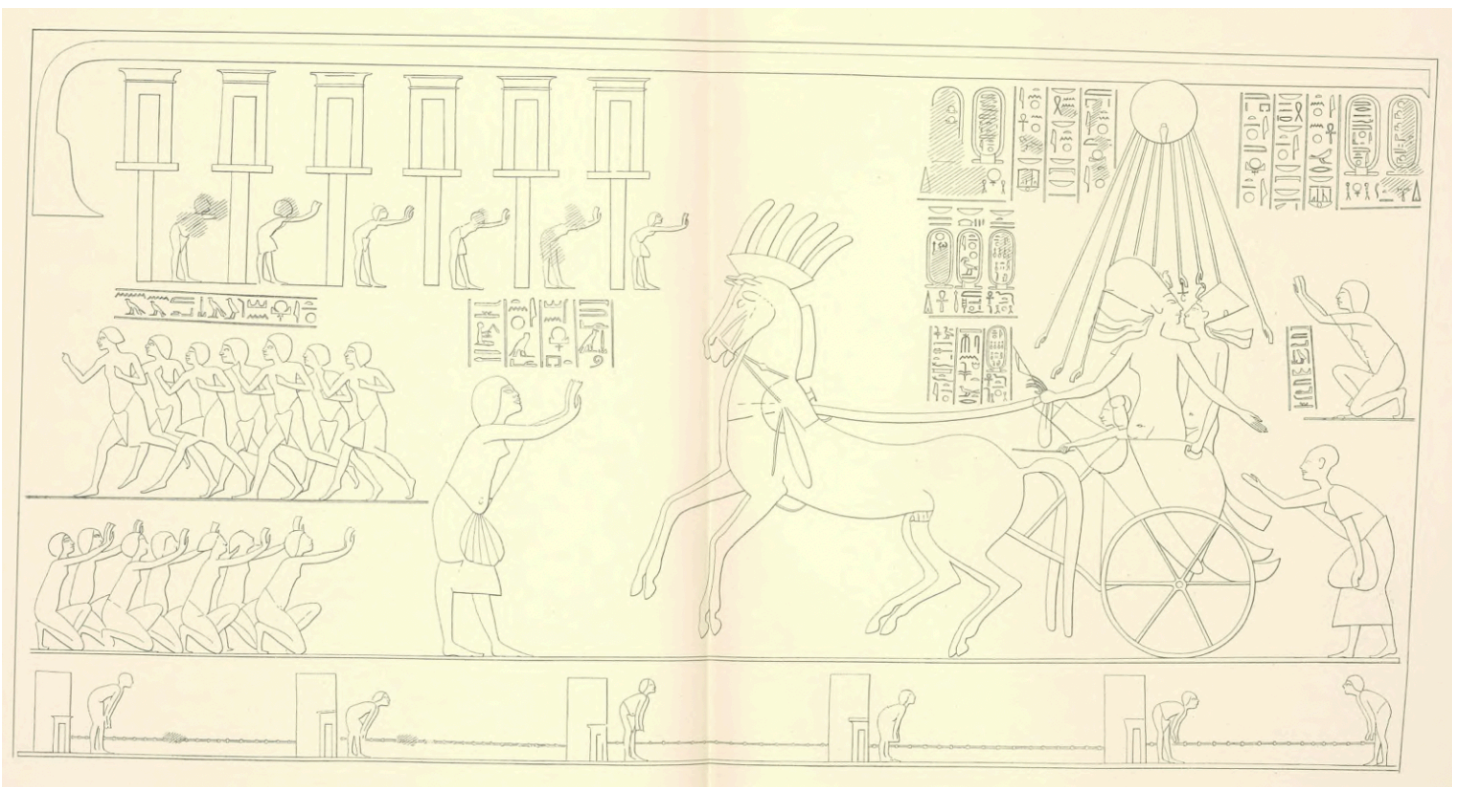


Figure 4: The royal chariot passing the sentires. From Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna, Part IV: Tombs of Penthu, Mahu, and others* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1906), pl. 22.