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Kitchen Scene

James Romano: You're now looking at a case with four reliefs from the site of El Amarna, the capital of King Akhenaten and his wife, Nefertiti. Look at the relief in the lower left-hand corner of the case. It shows a detail of the royal kitchen. Most traditional Egyptian art gives us no hint of the way the king really lived. But during the short reign of Akhenaten, we get these remarkable little snapshots of what life was like in the royal palace.

Take a look just to the left of center of the relief. There is a man who has his hand extended just in front of his face. Well he's one of the royal cooks or bakers and he's baking loaves of bread. But, unfortunately, he's put too much wood into the fire and the flames are lapping out—those thin wispy things—and he's throwing his hand in front of his face to protect himself. You'd never see that in earlier Egyptian art.

Or look at the far right of this relief. There is a rectangle that's hanging off the wall. Inside that rectangle—which is sort of, if you will, a locker—you will see pairs of shoes. This is where the kitchen workers would put their shoes when they came to work. And just below that is the janitor whose job it was to sweep up the floors in the kitchen, so people wouldn't slip and fall during the rush to get the royal bread on the king's table for dinner.