

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

ROMAN LAMPS

AH 18

The three lamps in this collection are typical of those used in the Mediterranean region in Roman times. They are all made of clay.

Oil, usually olive oil, was poured into the lamp through the hole in the centre and a wick ran through the oil and out through the spout. Sometimes the end of the spout was blackened from the flame.

Archaeologists have spent a lot of time classifying - and arguing about! - the different forms of lamps. The patterned lamp in this box belongs to the Picture Lamp category. Lamps of this kind were made using an upper and a lower mould. The mould for the upper surface often had a picture on it - perhaps an animal, or gladiators fighting, or a god. A thin layer of clay was pressed into both halves, which could then be joined. Once dried sufficiently, the lamp was removed and it could then be smoothed and finished off. If you look carefully at this example you can see where the decorated upper section has been joined to the lower, plain bowl. Before firing they were often dipped in a slip (a thin slurry of clay) that gave both the inner and outer surface a glaze and stopped the lamp from absorbing the oil.



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The other brown terracotta lamp belongs to the Circular Lamp category. This kind was made on a potter's wheel. It is still possible to see the spiral ridges inside this pot which were made by the potter's thumbs as the clay was turned. The impression of the potter's wheel can be seen on the base of the lamp. After the circular body was complete a small hole was made in the side and a simple nozzle attached. The join marks are still just visible.



The third example is an unusual design - a globular shape, with a short rounded nozzle. The join between the upper and lower parts is visible as a ridge running around the sides. Usually lamps had a concave upper surface so that any oil dripped when the lamp was being filled would be able to drain into the central reservoir. This round-shouldered lamp would, perhaps, have been rather messier to fill!

