Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

GRAECO-ROMAN LAMPS AH50A

Lamps like these were widely used in the Ancient World to provide artificial lighting. Simple oil lamps are known to have been in use from at least 3,500 BC, but pottery versions came into common use around the eighth and seventh centuries BC. The earlier lamps were very basic wheel-spun saucers with a wick at the edge; these developed into pottery lamps with enclosed bodies, like the three examples here.

Individual lamps would not have provided much light and many would have been needed to illuminate a room. Some lamps have two spouts so that two wicks could be used to make the room brighter. They sometimes gave off a sooty smoke. The teardrop shape lamp in this box has a blackened spout where it has been stained by smoke.

The fuel, which was normally vegetable oil (often olive oil made from olives as you can see in the picture on the right), was poured into the lamp through the hole in the centre and a wick made of fibre ran through the oil and out through the spout. The part of the wick that poked out through the spout could then be lit to provide a small flame. A tablespoon of oil would burn for about two hours. Keeping the oil filled up would have been a very important job.



The Ancient Greeks were the largest producers of these lamps, adding handles and eventually a glaze to the surface, which helped to stop the oil seeping into the clay. During the Hellenistic period (third century BC to first century AD), moulds were used to make the lamps, making it much easier and cheaper to produce large quantities of them. The clay was hand pressed into the mould in two halves that were then put together and fired in a kiln. Some of the plainer, mass-produced lamps are known as firmalamps or factory lamps, whereas others are called picture lamps and are decorated with mythical characters, floral or animal designs. If you look closely at the two rounder lamps you will see the join where the decorated top piece has been attached to the bottom half.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

GRAECO-ROMAN LAMPS AH50A

All three of the lamps in this box are decorated.

The large-bodied lamp is decorated with a vine leaf pattern around the top and has a handle decorated with straight lines. It has suffered some damage and is missing something, can you guess what?



The black lamp has a leaf pattern on the top surface. It looks as though they might be palm leaves. There is no handle on this lamp now, but it is possible that it has broken off at some stage.



The teardrop shaped lamp is decorated with bands of square shapes and has high ridges along the top for decoration. It has a small triangle sticking up instead of a normal handle.

