READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

GRAECO-ROMAN LAMPS AH50B

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.

The fuel, which was normally vegetable oil (often made from olives like the ones in this picture), 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.



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 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 easier and cheaper to produce large quantities. The clay was hand pressed into the mould in two halves which 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.

All three of the lamps in this box are decorated.

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The large pale lamp has little evidence of a pattern left, although you can see some faint leaf-like patterns around the hole on the top. It has a handle, making it easier to hold and carry around. This lamp has suffered a great deal of damage, as can be seen from the cracks over its surface.



The smaller red lamp is beautifully decorated with an animal figure around the central hole. What kind of animal do you think it looks like?



The lamp with the long spout is less delicate than the other two. It has a simple raised line design and no handle. The owner of this lamp would probably have carried it in the palm of their hand.

