Roman Lamps

Lamps have been found throughout the Roman world from all periods of its history. Like their modern counterparts, these lamps allowed people to lengthen their day or conduct business in dark places. Archaeologists find these artifacts in a variety of contexts, such as houses, shops, temples, and other buildings.

Typically, lamps were ceramic. Some wealthy Romans may have owned lamps made from bronze. The lamp was filled with oil, which would be soaked up by a wick made from plant fiber. To use the lamp, the wick would be lit on fire and the oil would keep it burning for a long time. Some lamps still have the soot marks from the wick’s flame.

Can you see these marks on the lamp to the left?

Like modern lighting fixtures, ancient lamps came in different sizes and with unique decorations. This provides some insight into the personalities of the owners. For example, Romans might purchase a lamp which depicts a favorite activity, sports team, good luck or religious symbol, or even just something they found beautiful.

What do you think the lamps below say about their owners?
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DIRECTIONS: Decorate this lamp to show off your personality. Get inspiration from examples in the Penn Museum's collection. Then, follow the steps on the following pages to create a useable Roman-inspired lamp.

THINGS YOU WILL NEED:
Roman Lamps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay</th>
<th>Sculpting Tools</th>
<th>Olive Oil</th>
<th>Matches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Use <a href="#">this recipe</a> to make your own air dry clay at home.</em></td>
<td><em>You can use toothpicks, teaspoons, chopsticks, etc.</em></td>
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**STEP ONE:** Plan out the design for your lamp. You can use the blank lamp on the previous page!

**STEP TWO:** Use your hands to shape the base and top of your lamp. Make a bowl shape with a spout for the base. Make a flat circle for the top.

*Pro-tip:* We recommend keeping it smaller in size – something that would fit in the palm of your hand.

**STEP THREE:** Transfer your design from step one onto your “top” piece of clay using your tools. You can experiment with found materials to make designs in your clay (our beveled edge is the imprint of a vase rim).
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STEP FOUR: Attach your top and base, smoothing the edges where they meet. You can add a handle, if you wish. Use a tool (we used a pen with the cap on) to poke a filling hole in the top. Set aside to dry (the timing will vary depending on the clay you are using). Pro-tip: if yours dips in the middle like ours did, put a pen or chopstick through to prop it up as it dries.

STEP FIVE: Create your wick. We cut a small piece of paper towel and rolled it to create ours. You could also use a piece of fabric or dried plant fiber. Fill the lamp with olive oil using the small fill hole. BE SURE TO PUT YOUR LAMP ON A PLATE OR DISH in case the oil leaks (ours did).

STEP SIX: With the help of an adult, carefully light the tip of your wick. How well can you see in the dark by the light of your lamp? Try reading or writing a letter to a friend – Roman style!

The Emperor Tiberius interpreted his lamp extinguishing without warning as a good luck omen. The author Suetonius writes that Tiberius “entered battles with considerably greater confidence whenever it happened that…his lamp suddenly and without human agency died down and when out” (Suet. Tib. 19). We suggest you play it safe and have an adult ready to help you put it out when the time comes.