The harnessing of fire by early cultures must have been a momentous event. In addition to fire’s many uses, the ability to light a given environment increased working hours as well as improved safety for communities after dark. The discovery of combustible fuels such as animal and plant oils not only changed economies but also led to the creation of the first lamps. Very early lamps of stone are known from Europe in the Paleolithic period, perhaps as early as 15,000 BCE. The first handmade lamps of terracotta followed thereafter, and were very basic, usually saucer-like, with linen wicks that draped over rims or were threaded through pinched spouts. Lamps developed rapidly from there.

*While we take this opportunity to illustrate some of the Museum’s rarely seen objects, some have not been photographed in recent years. To compensate for older photography and to show further examples, we use a few objects from the art, antiques, and antiquities markets for illustrative purposes. Authenticity of these objects is not established.*

— Text by Benton Kidd
Curator of Ancient Art
I. OIL LAMPS OF THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

In the ancient Mediterranean, olive oil became the chief fuel for lamps, but other types of fat could burn as well. Lamps most commonly had one wick hole, but multi-wicked lamps also survive in substantial numbers. The latter would have used more oil, and were perhaps used more infrequently, or on designated occasions. While most lamps of antiquity sat on flat surfaces, some clearly could be suspended from stands or hung as sconces. Molds for forming the two parts of the typical terracotta lamp also survive, while other mediums such as glass, bronze, and even precious metals, are known.

As time progressed, the forms of lamps became more sophisticated and decoration increased. By the Classical period of Greece, many lamps were at least slip-painted, while relief decoration became the norm in Roman lamps, illustrating a variety of subjects. It is difficult to discern whether such symbols had meaning; sometimes images are clearly religious, while others seem generic, such as plants and animals. Hunting, fighting, and erotic scenes were all common.

Molded, “plastic” lamps, in the shape of heads, animals, sandaled feet, etc. seem whimsical but they may have carried more symbolism than we realize.

Alternatives To Olive Oil:
Tallow And Wax Use In Antiquity

The use of tallow (beef or sheep fat) in lamps is known north of the Alps in the Roman Empire, where olive oil was not as readily available. It may have been used elsewhere as necessary, but evidence is lacking. Tallow use rapidly increased in Europe as the Roman Empire disintegrated and olive oil export ceased. Beeswax could also be used and did not produce the smell of tallow. By the Middle Ages, tallow and wax candles were commonplace, and decorative holders, particularly for churches, proliferated. Ultimately the wealthy also had fine candleholders among their brass- and silverware.
MYTHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS

Lamp with Head of Medusa
Roman, ca. 100–125 CE
Turkey
Pottery
Museum purchase (65.79)

Lamp with Nike or Victory
Roman, 1st century CE
Greece
Pottery
Museum purchase (59.29)
MYTHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS

Lamp with Silenus
Roman, 1st century CE
Pottery
Museum purchase (67.66)

Lamp with Nereid Riding a Sea Creature
Roman, late 1st c. CE–early 2nd century CE
Possibly from Sicily
Pottery
Museum purchase (70.111A)
ANIMALS AND HUNTING

Lamp with Barking Dog
Roman, ca. 50–100 CE
Pottery
Gift of K.J. Hewett, Ltd. (60.39.1)

Lamp with Dog Attacking a Boar
Roman, ca. 25 BCE–50 CE
Turkey
Pottery
Museum purchase (65.76)
GAMES AND SPORTS

Lamp with Gladiators
Roman, 1st century CE
Pottery
Museum purchase (64.5)

Lamp with Boxer
Example from antiquities market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not established.
SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Lamp with Erotic Scene
Roman, 1st century CE
Pottery
Museum purchase (70.160)
Ex coll. Townsend

Lamp with Erotic Scene
Roman, 2nd–3rd century CE
Palestine, Hebron
Pottery
Museum purchase (68.146A)
MULTI-WICK LAMPS

Lamp with Bust of Isis and Six Wick Holes  
Roman, 1st century CE  
Egypt  
Pottery  
Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein (58.15.2)

Lamp with Two Wick Holes  
Roman, late 1st century BCE–early 1st c. CE  
Palestine  
Pottery  
Museum purchase (68.298)

Lamp with Seven Wick Holes  
Byzantine, 5th century CE  
Palestine  
Pottery  
Museum purchase (68.153B)
MOLDED SHAPES

Lamp in the Form of a Sandaled Foot
Roman, 1st c. CE–2nd century CE
Turkey
Pottery (82.264)
Weinberg Fund (82.264)

Hanging Lamp in the Form of a Resting Dog
Roman, 3rd century CE
Palestine(?)
Pottery
Museum purchase (70.120)
LAMP MOLDS

Mold for Upper Portion of a Lamp
Byzantine, 5th century CE
Tunisia
Stucco
Museum purchase (75.54)
LAMPS OF GLASS AND METAL

Conical Sconce with Blue Decoration
Roman, ca. 350–400 CE
Palestine
Glass
Museum purchase (68.415)

Lamp with Scrolled Handle
Byzantine, 6th–7th century CE
Near East
Bronze
Museum purchase (70.314)
II. LIGHTING FOR RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Besides utilitarian purposes, lighting has long held religious significance in many faiths. Excavations of religious sanctuaries in the Graeco-Roman world are often rich in lamps, and though necessary for lighting, they may have played a role in ritual. Some suggest that the presence of lamps in graves had significance for the journey into the Underworld. With the adoption of Christianity by the fourth century CE, lamps increasingly bore religious symbols or inscriptions. The chi-rho, the initial letters in the Greek ΧΡΗΣΤΟΣ (Christ), was among the more common (see the Museum’s lamp mold, above). One of the most recognizable symbols of Judaism, the menorah, was also an oil burning lamp, but with glass cups, as ancient mosaics attest. Even today, oil lamps can still be found in Orthodox churches, particularly in the sanctuary.

In other faiths, such as Hindu, Sikh, and Jain religion, oil lamps are also traditional. Fashioned of various metals such as bronze or brass, multi-wicked lamps are regularly found in temples or homes, suspended on chains or displayed on flat surfaces. Typically only one wick is lit, but all are burned on certain special occasions such as Aarti, Diwali, or Karthikai. These lamps go by a number of names including diya, deya, deepa, deepak, and more. Some lamps can be symbolic of the gods themselves, or associated beings. The garuda bird is known in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religion, and is the vehicle of either Vishnu himself, or simply a powerful, protective symbol. Nandi, usually in the form of a bull, is typically the guardian of Shiva, one of the principal Hindu deities. Religious practice in Japan also incorporates lighting into the rituals of Buddhism and Shintoism. Portable shrines (butsudan or kamidana), used both in temples and in homes, usually feature an altar with candles, in addition to other accoutrements.

Historically, mosques have also been lit by fine oil lamps, of glass or metal, usually suspended on chains but some can also sit on flat surfaces. The most famous examples, of enameled and gilded glass, were sometimes commissioned by the sultans and caliphs themselves. Those could adorn other contexts, such as palaces and upscale tombs.
Diya Oil Lamp
with Five Wick Holes
India, Hindu, 18th century
Karnataka, India
Bronze
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Eilenberg
(63.3.26 A–B)

Example from art and antiques market
for illustrative purposes. Authenticity
not established.
Example from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not established.
Oil Lamp in the Form of Nandi
India, Hindu, 18th century
Brass
Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling
and Deborah S. Booker (76.284)

Example from art and antiques market
for illustrative purposes. Authenticity
not established.
Pair of Altar Candlesticks
Japanese, ca. 1850–1900
Bronze
Gift of Dr. William D. Curtis (66.13A & B)

Example from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not established.
Hanging Oil Lamp
Islamic, 18th–19th century
Iran (?)
Brass
Gift of Dr. William D. Curtis (66.86)

Example from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not established.
Mosque Lamp
Attributed to Egypt or Syria, 14th century
Colorless glass, with yellow tinge; enameling and gilding (91.1.1539)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891
III. LUXURY LIGHTING IN GILDED AGE AMERICA

While whale oil and candles lit much of the Western world from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, alternate fuels such as kerosene, camphene, and natural gas were introduced in the later nineteenth century. America’s Gilded Age (ca. 1870–1900) saw the rise of luxury good dealers, including lamp makers. Such dealers first made oil and gas lamps, and later transitioned to electricity. The first electric grids appeared in the US by the 1880s, and early electric lamps could be highly decorative and costly. The designs of Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) are among the most well-known and sought after by collectors. Others such as Handel, Stickley, and Bradley and Hubbard were also synonymous with quality.

“Tulip” Lamp (Tiffany Studios, American, 1878–1933)
Ca. 1910
Leaded glass, blown glass, bronze (2011.99.3)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard L. Chilton Jr.
Bradley and Hubbard “Banquet” Oil Lamp, ca. 1870, and Cold-Painted Metal/Slag Glass Electric Lamp, ca. 1910

Examples from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not established.
Candle Sconce
(Bradley and Hubbard
American, 1852–1940)
Renaissance Revival Style, ca. 1870
Brass, glass, silverying
Gift of Irene S. Taylor (72.285 A)