

# ARTFUL LIGHTING

## A Short History

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, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

Greece

Pottery

Museum purchase (59.29)

## MYTHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS



**Lamp with Silenus**  
Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE  
Pottery  
Museum purchase (67.66)



**Lamp with Nereid Riding a Sea Creature**  
Roman, late 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE-early 2<sup>nd</sup> 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, 1<sup>st</sup> 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, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

Pottery

Museum purchase (70.160)

Ex coll. Townsend



## Lamp with Erotic Scene

Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE

Palestine, Hebron

Pottery

Museum purchase (68.146A)

## MULTI-WICK LAMPS



### **Lamp with Bust of Isis and Six Wick Holes**

Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

Egypt

Pottery

Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein (58.15.2)

### **Lamp with Two Wick Holes**

Roman, late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE-early 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE

Palestine

Pottery

Museum purchase (68.298)

### **Lamp with Seven Wick Holes**

Byzantine, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Palestine

Pottery

Museum purchase (68.153B)

## MOLDED SHAPES



### Lamp in the Form of a Sandaled Foot

Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE

Turkey

Pottery (82.264)

Weinberg Fund (82.264)



### Hanging Lamp in the Form of a Resting Dog

Roman, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE

Palestine(?)

Pottery

Museum purchase (70.120)

## LAMP MOLDS



### Mold for Upper Portion of a Lamp

Byzantine, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Tunisia

Stucco

Museum purchase (75.54)

## LAMPS OF GLASS AND METAL



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



**Lamp with Scrolled Handle**  
Byzantine, 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> 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, 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Karnataka, India

Bronze

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Eilenberg  
(63.3.26 A-B)

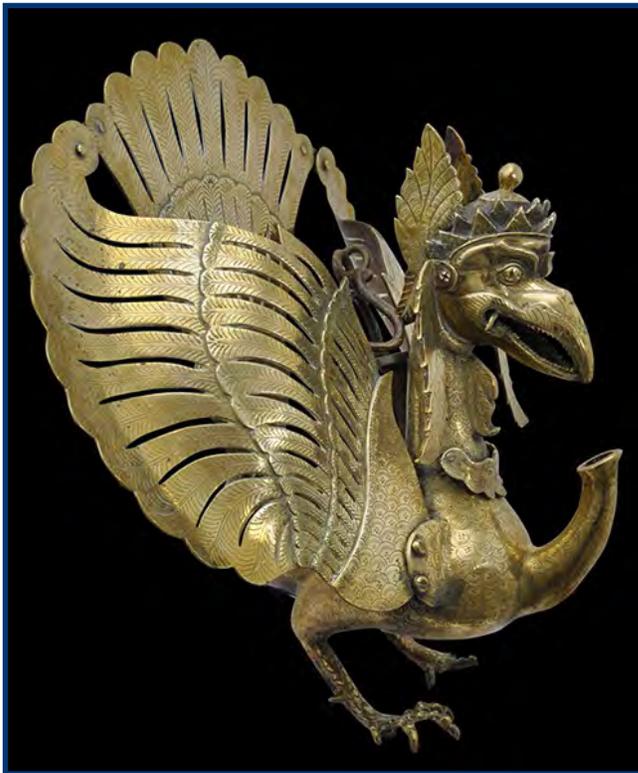


*Example from art and antiques market  
for illustrative purposes. Authenticity  
not established.*



**Hanging Oil Lamp  
in the Form of a Garuda Bird**  
Indonesia, Hindu, 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Java  
Brass

Gift of Mrs. Josefa Carlebach (69.80)



*Example from art and antiques market  
for illustrative purposes. Authenticity  
not established.*



**Oil Lamp in the Form of Nandi**  
India, Hindu, 18<sup>th</sup> 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, 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century  
Iran (?)  
Brass  
Gift of Dr. William D. Curtis (66.86)



*Example from art and antiques market  
for illustrative purposes. Authenticity  
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**Mosque Lamp**

Attributed to Egypt or Syria, 14<sup>th</sup> 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, silvering  
Gift of Irene S. Taylor (72.285 A)



*Example from art and antiques  
market for illustrative purposes.  
Authenticity not established.*