



The Roman Games

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The Roman Empire was certainly known for its extravagance, and some of its heftier expenditures went to the construction of arenas and the spectacles they contained. Various referred to as the “games” or “blood sports,” they were *ludi* to Romans and generally featured gladiators, venators, and criminal executions as their main events. Chariot races were held in separate facilities known as *circuses*.

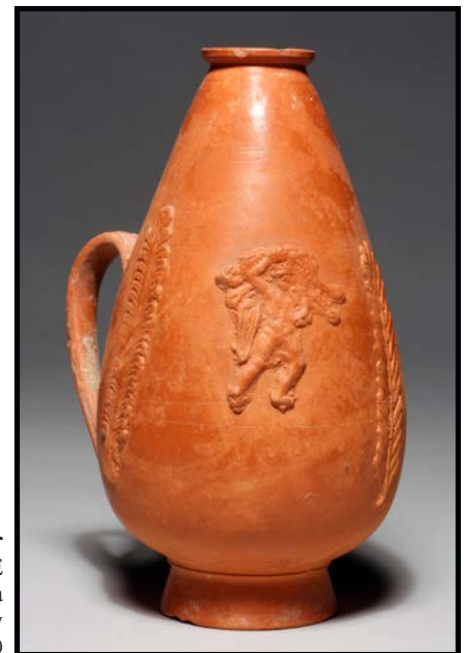
Scholars suggest as many as 135 days annually were devoted to games, often held in conjunction with religious or imperial commemorations. Staged in mammoth amphitheaters by the state or wealthy benefactors, the games

were held across Rome’s empire. Among the more well-known were Rome’s *Ludi Magni* (“Great Games”), which were also said to be the oldest. Celebrated in honor of the god Jupiter, these opulent games unfolded from the 9th to the 15th of September and featured events

such as chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, gladiators, and even Greek drama. Many cities across the Mediterranean have extant remains of great amphitheaters, including El Djem (ancient Thysdrus in Tunisia) where the surviving structure once seated 35,000. The Museum’s small red-slipped jug, a souvenir from a *venationes* (wild beast hunt), also comes from El Djem. Venators, like gladiators, were trained fighters, but their opponents were wild animals rather than men. Though armed, remarkable venators are known to have strangled animals with bare hands. The jug shows a venator lifting a panther over his shoulders, indicating that he has killed it. Wild cats and bears seem to have been the most popular opponents for venators, but elephants, boar, and even ostriches are known. Roman North Africa was known for rival schools of venators, while mosaics



[The amphitheater at El Djem, Tunisia.](#)



African Red Slip Jug with a Venator
Roman, 3rd c. CE
El Djem, Tunisia
Pottery
Gift of Prof. and Mrs. David Soren (73.208)

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MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

of the region also show the grisly *damnatio ad bestias* (“condemnation to the beasts”), an execution method for certain criminals who were placed naked in the arena with wild animals. Such was the terror of those confronted with this manner of execution that many were said to have committed suicide in unthinkable ways rather than face the beasts. One infamous lion reportedly mauled to death 200 victims.

Like venators, gladiators were usually slaves trained to fight in the arena. Gladiators fought other men, usually pairs armed differently. The different weaponry was representative of the men’s various origins, such as Thracians or Greeks or Myrmillones (from Gaul). Many gladiator types are known, but the Museum’s figurine represents a *secutor*, or pursuer, usually paired with the *retiarius*, who entered the arena armed only with a net and trident. The secutor had to keep his distance from the net, and therefore pursued slowly, rather than moving aggressively forward like the retiarius, who continuously tried to cast his net over the secutor. Secutors carried the tall square shield and short sword (now broken) seen here. They wore full helmets, which were smooth on the exterior so retiarii could not get a grip on them. The gladiators represented on the lamp are probably *hoplomachi* or *Thraeces* who wore long greaves and plumed helmets, while carrying small shields. Regardless of type, it is a myth that gladiators always fought to the death. They were taught to wound and disable, but not to kill unless so ordered by their sponsor. Losing half the fighters was expensive and therefore less common.

Situated between the Palatine and Aventine hills, Rome’s immense Circus Maximus may have once accommodated as many as 200,000 screaming fans. Though various events were held there over the course of its history, the Circus Maximus became synonymous with chariot races. In the heyday of the races, Rome’s teams included the Whites, Reds, Greens, and Blues. The driver’s clothing was colored according to his faction, which helped fans track their favorites. Teams could enter up to three chariots per race, and there was careful coordination between team members regarding tactics they would employ to cause rivals to crash. Stakes were high, and betting on winners was widespread. Records indicate fights between overheated fans broke out frequently during the races.

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Figurine of a Secutor Gladiator
Roman, 1st c. CE
Terracotta
Museum purchase (76.33)



Lamp with Gladiator Scene
Roman, 1st c. CE
Pottery
Museum purchase (64.5)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Races usually consisted of seven laps, but sometimes less depending on the number of races run on a given day. Chariots typically had two horses (*bigae*) or four horses (*quadrigae*). Showoffs sometimes ran up to ten, but that was far more unusual.

Roman drivers wrapped the reins around their waists, a potentially deadly scenario in a crash since one could be dragged to death unless he could free himself, but he might well be run over too. Races were run around a *spina*, a raised area in the center of the circus that contained the lap counters but also statuary and obelisks. At either end of the *spina* were *metae*, or turning posts, which were often crash points. The renowned driver Scorpus was said to have won 2,000 races all before he was thirty, *until* he was killed by a collision with a *meta*. Cupids run the whimsical race on the Museum's sarcophagus fragment (below), but we can still see that the reins are around their waists. The *spina* is visible in the center, along with lap counting devices (in the form of eggs and dolphins), and two *metae* are on the right end. Other objects on the *spina* include (from right to left) a column topped by a winged Victory, an obelisk, an altar, and a "pavilion" topped by an eagle. The Victory and pavilion are perhaps commemorative (to notable victors of the past?). We believe this *spina* is actually a representation of the one in Rome's Circus Maximus and the obelisk commemorates Augustus' capture of Egypt in 30 BCE. The site of the Circus Maximus is today a park. ■



[Circus Maximus](#), Rome, Italy



[The Obelisco Flaminio](#), now in the Piazza del Popolo, was once part of the dividing barrier (*spina*) at the Circus Maximus.



**Front Panel from a Child's Sarcophagus
Showing a Chariot Race**

Roman, late 2nd-early 3rd century CE
Carved in Italy (?)
Thasian marble

Silver Anniversary Gift of UMC Development Fund
Board and Boone County Community Trust (83.65)

Visitors to the Museum are **REQUIRED**
to wear masks and practice social distancing.
Groups are limited to no more than 6 individuals.

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