



A small bedroom lamp depicting lovers on a couch. 1st century AD. £295.



A grey coloured lamp with an actor's mask. 1st century AD. £135.



Small 'factory' lamp. 1st century AD. £75.



Buff terracotta lamp depicting a standing figure, possibly a philosopher. Late 1st century AD. £175.

Collecting Roman Pottery Lamps - a fascinating study of social history in antiquity

by Vincent McCarthy

The Romans had no real system of street lighting in their towns and cities, public buildings and theatres generally being lit by torches and tallow candles during the hours of darkness. In the home they used oil burning lamps to provide illumination, but the fuel, oil from olives, nuts or fish was expensive especially in the further outposts of the Empire. Oil lamps tended to be smoky and not very efficient so in practice the Romans generally slept when it was dark and rose when it became light.

The houses of wealthy citizens were often lit with bronze lamp stands holding a number of separate lamps. These stands were very decorative pieces of furniture in their own right and are rarely found nowadays. Some very fine examples can be seen from excavated houses at Pompeii. The Naples museum displays some superb lamps both in bronze and pottery which are fine examples of Roman first century art. Most houses had to be contented with pottery oil lamps which outnumber bronze types more than a hundred to one. The light output from a single lamp was not great and every home needed dozens of individual lamps. Hence oil lamps were made and used in vast numbers and are fairly common finds around the Mediterranean regions. The simplest form was an enclosed vessel with a hole for a linen or flax wick at one end and a filler hole in the centre.

During the Greek period most lamps were wheel made in the same way as their pottery vessels. The Romans found a simple method of casting clay lamps in two piece moulds of soft lime stone or gypsum thus obviating the need for elaborate decoration to be added, especially on the face (discus) of the lamp. During the first century AD many fine examples can be found decorated with all the popular deities; gladiators in combat, galleys in full sail, chariots drawn by galloping horses and much more. Most are of thin fabric and quite fragile so are not too easy to find and can be expensive, say £150 or more depending on condition and subject matter. Some bedroom lamps have lively erotic scenes which are very sought after these days and can fetch £500 or even more.

As we enter the second century the style of the lamp becomes more compact and sturdy, usually with the addition of a small circular or fin type handle. A great many lamps are simple and undecorated and can be bought quite cheaply nowadays. £45 to £60 will get an example in good condition. The decorated types are, however, the ones most collectors are looking for. All areas of Roman life are depicted on these little artefacts. Domestic scenes, dinner parties, animals, gods and goddesses, arena and theatre scenes, comic themes with the addition of lively eroticism.



A dark brown lamp depicting a goat. 1st century AD. Named CMSA on the base. £150.



A 1st century lamp depicting a donkey mounting a lion. Oh the Roman sense of humour. £300.



Buff terracotta lamp, rather rubbed, depicting an erotic scene. They were earthy people. 1st-2nd century AD. £325.



A 2nd century lamp depicting Mars. Maker's name LMADIEC on the base. £150.



A cream coloured lamp decorated with a lively and cheerful looking goat. Possibly referring to Pan. 2nd century. £165.



An unusual design featuring Eros riding on a goat. 2nd century AD. £95.



A buff lamp with the busts of Sarapis and Isis. 2nd century AD. £95.



Pale reddish brown lamp with a leaping boar. The Roman's were very fond of hunting these creatures. 2nd century AD. £145.

Many lamps bear the imprint of the maker on the underside in abbreviated form or a factory mark from Italy or Gaul. Occasionally we come across the name of the owner or a witty slogan or motto. Many lamps are coloured with a glossy brown slip. This can be rubbed or worn in surviving examples. These second century lamps can be bought for between £100 and £200 in nice condition. As always an appealing subject in a superb state of preservation will be expensive. We may also find larger lamps with several nozzles to hold a multitude of wicks. (Obviously before the advent of smoke alarms!) These however are scarce and are not cheap.

From around the third century North Africa became a major producer of lamps, often in a distinctive orange-red coloured local clay which makes a pleasant change from the buff or brown colour of Italian products. African lamps are often of larger size and give scope for very ornate decoration. Gods and goddesses of Eastern origin appear, as well as the usual arena and theatre scenes. Animals are also featured, the lion and hunting hound being common. Hunting was a popular pastime. We also find birds. The cockerel was a particular favourite.

Most Tunisian lamps are decorated, sometimes profusely. Plain examples are unusual. Geometric forms of circles and diamond shapes are common as are leaf and branch designs, used as a decorative border around the central motif. The maker's marks remain imprinted on the base, often a footprint or palm branch and occasionally the owner may have scratched his own name as proof of ownership. Around the fourth century we find Imperial portraits

similar to those on coinage and possibly copied to express loyalty to the emperor. Most North African lamps are heavily potted and many have survived. Prices reflect this and pleasing examples can be bought for £100 or less.

With Constantine the Great the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion and references appear on lamps. In North Africa an attractive and large type of lamp appears around 400AD. This form is made in polished reddish clay and is of a pear shape with raised fin handle. The discus often bears the Christian motifs of the Chi Rho, the fish or the lamb. Such examples are sought after by collectors and can easily make £200-£300 each in good condition. A popular lamp from Egypt is in the form of a frog. Realistically modelled, the frog degenerated into quite abstract forms by the fourth century. Prices range from £25-£50 depending on realism.

In the Eastern Empire we find smaller lamps made in pale buff clay, often with geometric motifs and sometimes a simple Christian cross incorporated in the design. Made during the 5th and 6th centuries in Palestine and Syria these are readily available for as little as £25 each. Simple clay lamps continued into the Byzantine and Islamic periods. These can be added to round off a collection at little extra cost.

Roman lamps are suited to the collector as they tend to be of a uniform size, 4-6 inches long and do not take up a lot of space. I first came across terracotta (baked clay) oil lamps around 30 years ago and remember the tingle of excitement as I imagined an ancient Roman penning a letter or lighting his way to bed. The feeling is still with me today.



A dark brown lamp decorated with a walking lion. 4th century AD. £110.



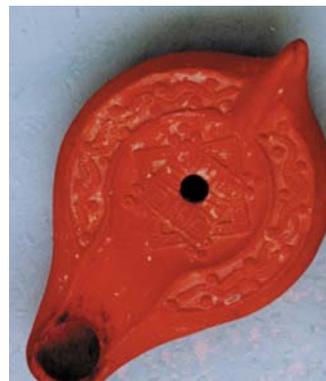
A large redware lamp with a Christian monogram. 4th-5th century AD. £195.



A pale buff lamp with simple scroll decoration. 6th century AD. from Palestine. £30.



A large redware lamp decorated with fishes. Possibly Christian. 5th century AD. £185.



A redware lamp with geometric motifs. 5th century AD. £95.



A Tunisian redware lamp with a bird. 5th century AD. £125.