

Roman Oil Lamp

People have been using oil lamps since prehistoric times. There was no electric light in ancient times, so if you wanted to see in the dark, you needed a lamp.

The earliest oil lamps were simply a bowl of oil with a wick hanging over the side. Later on, a small pinch was added to the side of the bowl to hold the wick in place, and oil lamps became more safer and more efficient.

You are going to make the kind of lamp that was used throughout the ancient world, including Rome. The shapes and sizes varied through time and from place to place, so you can experiment with different shapes if you like, but the basic design remained the same.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Roman_oil_lamp_in_Museu_D._Diogo_de_Sousa_\(12\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Roman_oil_lamp_in_Museu_D._Diogo_de_Sousa_(12).JPG)

Warning: you are about to make a REAL oil lamp! Your teacher can light the wick with a match or lighter, but always remember to be extra careful around fire. You should NOT light this oil lamp without adult supervision!

You will need:

- Air-drying clay
- Two pencils
- Rolling pin
- Clay tool/knife
- Olive oil
- A scrap piece of linen or cotton cloth (NOT man-made fibre like nylon as it will melt)
- An apron or shirt to protect your clothes if required



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How to make your oil lamp



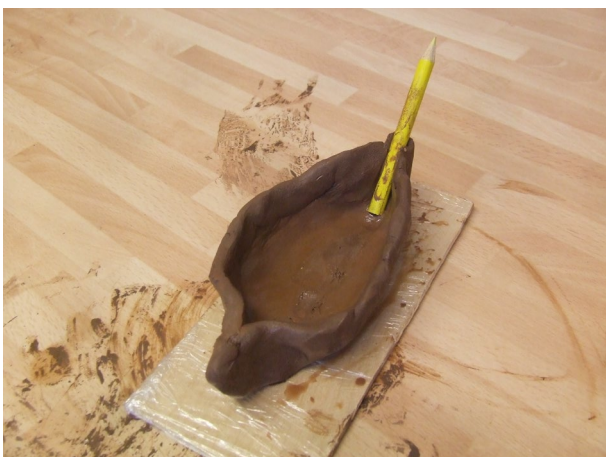
1

Roll out some air-drying clay to an even thickness, a little under 1cm thick, and cut out a circle 10-12cm diameter. This will form the bottom half of the lamp



2

Fold the edges of the circle up to form the sides of the lamp. When they start to bunch together make a pinch to form a spout and, opposite the spout, another pinch to form the handle. You should end up with something that looks like a long thin jug, with sides about 3cm tall.



3

Dip your fingers in some water to smooth the clay as you work. It is important to make sure the spout doesn't get squashed closed, so put a pencil in it to keep the shape.

Make sure that the top edge of your lamp is nice and even all the way around.



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4



When you're happy with the bottom part of the lamp roll out some more air-drying clay, again to an even thickness just under 1cm, and cut out a piece roughly the same shape as your lamp, but around 1cm bigger all the way around. This doesn't have to be very exact, as long as it's bigger than the bottom part of the lamp.

5



Make the top edge of your lamp wet by dipping your fingers in water and running them over it. Then take the piece of clay you've just cut out and lay it onto the top of your lamp like a lid.

Very carefully cut off the excess clay around the edge, leaving a few millimetres of the top overhanging the bottom part. Make sure that the top is joined to the bottom part with no gaps.

6



With wet fingers, smooth around the join between the top and bottom until you can't see the join, making sure that you haven't left any holes where the two halves meet.

Then take your other pencil and make a hole through the top into the lamp. It doesn't matter exactly where you make this hole, but it shouldn't be too near to the spout.



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If you want to, you can decorate the lamp.

Now leave the lamp to dry. This might take several days, but make sure that it's really properly dry before trying to use it.

It's a good idea to leave the pencils in the lamp while it dries because they'll help it to keep its shape, but give them a small gentle twist from time to time to stop them sticking to the clay.

Once the clay has dried, varnish the lamp. I have found a spray-varnish to be the easiest.



8

To make the wick take a piece of linen or cotton cloth about 8cm square and tightly roll it.

It is **IMPORTANT** that you only use natural-fibre linen or cotton, and not man-made fibre like nylon which will melt instead of burning nicely.



9

Push the wick through the spout of the lamp until about 1cm of wick is left poking out. It needs to be a fairly good fit, but if you find your wick is *too* tight in the spout, take it out, unroll it, trim some of the fabric off and try again.

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Very carefully pour olive oil into the hole in the top of the lamp until it is nearly full.

Olive oil was used by the Romans and other ancient people in their lamps, but you could use different sorts of oil. Olive oil gives off black smoke, so you could use modern lamp oil instead if you like.



11

After ten minutes or so you should see the oil travelling up the wick. This will take a little while, but wait until the oil has reached the end of the wick.



12

Once the wick is completely soaked with oil, it will be ready to light. Remember that it's a naked flame, so be careful where you put it. Blow the lamp out when you've finished using it, and don't leave it burning when you're not there. In between uses you might find you need to pull a little bit more wick through the spout, and you'll certainly need to refill the lamp from time to time.