

History of Oil Lamps

‘Lux perpetua’…ceaseless light….

A very brief (but hopefully illuminating!) history of oil lamps…

They have existed from pre-history to the present. No one knows with any precision when the first light from an oil source was used, but from archeological findings, we know that ancient man was using hollowed out stones, seashells and other natural objects in the Stone Age, 10th century B.C, filled with animal fats or moss with pine pitch.

In biblical times, the use of the oil lamp was widespread, and was a frequently used metaphor and symbol in many biblical passages. Perhaps not remarkable given its purpose and necessity in ancient times, the oil lamp played an integrally important role in the histories and traditions of many faiths and cultures around the world—and many of these traditions continue to the present day.

The first ‘mass produced’ object in human history was probably the oil lamp, occurring in the times of the ancient Greeks and Romans, between the first and third centuries A.D. Made from molds, terra cotta clay lamps were commonly used, burning olive oil or animal fats, with wicks made from twisted woven cotton or linen. As time passed, the evolution of the shape of the oil lamp also changed, from bowl-shaped to saucer-shaped, and then from saucer with a nozzle to a closed bowl with spout. Some lamps held four or more wicks. In addition to clay, lamps were made from bronze, stone, alabaster and granite, often with elaborate designs and religious symbols.

Over centuries of use, the design of the oil lamp did not undergo major change until the 1700’s, but one historical footnote is of interest…the oil lamp used by Leonardo da Vinci was invented in 1490. The flame was enclosed in a glass tube placed inside a water-filled glass globe. Leonardo’s lamp not only burned more steadily, but also produced better illumination, due the diffusion of the light by the water.

Beginning in the 1700’s, oil lamps became much more efficient when a Swiss chemist, Aime Argand, invented a lamp using a round burner and circular wick. This design allowed for a strong draft of air to reach the flame which intensified the light, and the flame was further enhanced by use of a glass chimney. In the mid-1800’s paraffin oil or kerosene was introduced, taking the place of whale oil and vegetable fats, further improving the quality of the illumination. At the

same time, however, new and giant strides were being made in the search for better illumination with the introduction of natural gas and the dramatic arrival of electricity and in 1879, the electric light bulb. The flame of the intrepid and ancient oil lamp was flickering, but not extinguished, thank goodness!

Today

we have gorgeous, ultra pure paraffin oils in gem colors and everlasting fiberglass wicks and a diversity of lamp designs… but what has not changed is the human attraction to the flame itself. An oil lamp is a moveable hearth, a spiritual and religious symbol, and it is there whenever a light is needed—for romance, for celebration, for reflection, in memory of, or to light the way in the dark….

As

was said in ancient times to announce the first hour of evening…"It is lamp lighting time"…

We hope this will become your evening tradition, as it is ours.