

## ***Lamp in the Shape of a Comic Mask, unknown Roman artist***

### **Lamp in the Shape of a Comic Mask**

Unknown artist  
Roman, A.D. 75–125  
Bronze  
2 3/4 x 6 7/8 x 2 3/4 in.  
96.AQ.193  
Gift of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman

### **Background Information**

The body of this Roman lamp is decorated with the form of a **theater mask**. The mask represents the “**Leading Slave**,” a sly and resourceful **stock character** from Roman comedy, and shows the typical features of a scoop-shaped beard, snub nose, and furrowed brow. (For more information about slavery in ancient times, see the section “Slaves” on the BBC website *Ancient Greeks: Athens* at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient\\_greeks/athens/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/athens/) and “Slaves & Freeman” on the PBS website *The Roman Empire in the First Century* at [http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves\\_freemen.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html).)



Most of the mask’s hair is covered by a kerchief, from which short tassels of corkscrew curls emerge at the sides. A wreath of ivy leaves and berries decorates the mask and continues around the base of the handle of the lamp. Masks and other images drawn from the theater were a popular motif for Roman furnishings and interior decoration.

Ancient oil lamps like this one all operated on the same principle. The body of the lamp held fuel, usually olive oil, and a nozzle held a wick. In this instance, oil was added through the open mouth of the mask, and the nozzle for the wick emerges from beneath the beard.

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### **Questions for Teaching**

Take the time to look closely at the work of art and describe what you see.

What kinds of lines do you see here? (*straight, curvy, short, deep, shallow*) Where do you see them?

What kinds of shapes do you see here? (*circle, triangle, crescent, oval*) Where do you see them?

What emotion do you see on this mask? What do you see that makes you say that?

This lamp is in the shape of a specific type of theater mask. Ancient Roman audiences would have recognized the mask as depicting a character called “Leading Slave,” who is a sly and resourceful stock character from ancient Roman comedy. What stock characters appear in movies and TV shows today?