

'Seize the Clay': Moulding Material Culture

This exhibition is an exploration of Roman mould-made ceramics. It looks at the process of creating pottery and how it was used as part of the everyday in Rome.

We are constantly finding mould-made pottery in excavations, but how do we uncover the lives of those who interacted with them? This exhibition aims to uncover the experiences of both those creating pottery and those who used the final products, in order to uncover a deeper understanding about the lives of everyday individuals in ancient Rome.

This exhibition follows a mould-made ceramics workshop lead by Graham Taylor (@pottedhistory) for undergraduate students of Classics and Ancient History undertaking the Roman Everyday module.



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Making the Mould

What is the mould? A mould is a tool used by a potter to make the manufacturing process easier, faster and cheaper. It not only provides the shape of the finished clay product, but also gives it a specific design. Whereas the process of using a mould is very easy, making the mould itself requires a high level of skill.



A mould and stamp



Lamp mould, The Met, 35.11.8a,b

Why is this difficult? The craftsmen who made moulds were far more skilled than the workers (usually slaves) who used the mould to make a clay product. Mould-makers would make finely-detailed stamps, which required a high level of precision and artistic skill.

1. Segment of vessel mould
2. Stamp for decorating a mould
3. Coin moulds

How is it made? First, a mock version of the final product (without any designs) is made for size. Then, clay is pressed around this to form the mould. Before it is fired, stamps are used to create an inlay design, which appear on the outside of the finished product.



Assortment of stamps

The Process

Once the moulds had been made, workers – usually slaves – would push the clay into the indentations of the dry moulds. Statues and some lamps would be moulded in two halves and pressed together – this had to be done quickly, but with precision, as many were produced in a day. As clay shrinks when it dries, the potters would have been able to remove the piece without smudging the designs.

Different styles and products brought their own difficulties. The lamps needed to be hollow on the inside, and holes were needed for the air to leave. If this were not done, when the lamp was fired in the kiln, the air pocket would expand and the lamp would explode. For statues, there were a lot more intricacies: for example, a really vulnerable area when extracting the product, we found, were the legs and feet.



4. Replica (unfired) statue of Venus showing the two sides joined together
5. Replica (unfired) lamp before the holes are added using a separate tool
6. Selection of Roman lamps

The Products



After exposing the clay to temperatures of over 1000 degrees, the hardened product came out of the kilns, taking on a variety of forms: bowls, stamps, lamps, votive figures...

Samian bowls [7] are one example of mould-made pottery. Stamps were pressed into a mould that was then used for mass production. These wares were brought out in the ancient world for dining and general household use. They are found throughout the Roman world and seem to be common, not as elite as some have previously thought. They are decorated with various images such as mythical beasts, flowers and foliage.

Lamps [8] have been found all over the Roman world, including in temples and tombs. They could exhibit a variety of images, such as animals, gladiators and gods.

Votive offerings [9] could take many forms, varying from statuettes of divinities to body parts such as uteri and feet.



A Samian bowl replica [7] in the process of being made, having just had the foot ring attached. The bowl now needs to be stacked with other specimens and fired in the kiln. It would typically be painted and finished before sale/display but here has been shown as a work in progress.

7. Samian bowl replica (unfired) and ancient fragments
8. Lamp
9. Replica unfired votive uterus

Use and impact

How lamps functioned: Oil was added into a central hole in the body of the lamp and a wick was placed into the nozzle then lit. Wicks could be made of anything fibrous (e.g linen, flax or papyrus). The Romans used these lamps as a source of light, as you might torch or candle today.

Temples: Lamps made for common votive offerings to the gods and goddesses in temples as light was believed to be a blessing.

Tombs: The majority of lamps in collections have been found in tombs. It was common practice to leave lamps as a burial gift to the departed in the hopes the light would lead the dead spirit to the afterlife.

Imagery: Lamps and other objects may have acted as souvenirs, allowing the owner to 'take away' an experience with them to reminisce on in the future, or to allow others to experience it vicariously. Dynamic designs such as that on the Colchester cup (mould blown glass) show how Romans may have experienced visual culture. In a world of purely static imagery, rotating the design would have possibly been the only opportunity for a Roman to interact with 'motion' media.



A lit Roman lamp

10. A replica (unfired) lamp showing Pegasus
11. Replica lamp with wick showing a charioteer.
11. Lamp decorated with a frog
12. A replica of the Colchester cup decorated with a scene of chariot racing; the chariots race when the cup is spun