

# stories about light at the Acropolis Museum

The Acropolis Museum invites its visitors to discover artifacts in its collections that tell little stories about light. Stories about the light of the sun that so impressed ancient man that he deified it, but also about the light that he himself created. Stories about the daily light that dispels the darkness inside and outside his home, about the sacred light that burned in the temples of his gods and about the ritual light that accompanied the key moments of his life.

This is an activity organized in parallel with the exhibition "Light on light: an illuminating story" being presented at the Municipality of Athens Technopolis from 25 June to 9 September 2012.

## sunlight



The chariot of Helios



The chariot of Selene

Metope 14, Parthenon Gallery



For the ancient Greeks the god Helios was the personification of sunlight. They imagined him as a young man dressed in clothes made of light with a bright halo around his head, who drove his fiery chariot across the sky and oversaw all from above. His presence in the collections of the Acropolis Museum, like that of his sister, the moon goddess Selene, is strong.

On the eastern pediment of the Parthenon, the chariots of Helios and Selene frame the scene of the goddess Athena's birth. Helios rises from the waters of Oceanus while Selene sinks into them, indicating the time of birth: dawn of the 28th day of the month Hekatombaion (around mid August).

Helios is depicted once again on the east side of the Parthenon, this time on metope 14. His quadriga has just risen from the sea, as indicated by the fish leaping among the wheels of the chariot and the water bird below the horses' hooves.

Marble sphere 1st floor



In later years the Sun was merged with other gods such as Zeus, Dionysus, Osiris, Serapis and Mithra, and worshipped as ruler of the world. As such he is also depicted on a marble sphere that bears magic symbols, allegorical scenes and incomprehensible inscriptions and was buried at the Theater of Dionysus in some magical ritual.

# Artificial light



1st floor,  
showcase 32,  
nos. 9, 12, 10



1st floor,  
Archaic Gallery,  
(Acr. 190)



1st floor,  
showcase 42



Ground floor,  
showcase 2,  
no. 121



Ground floor,  
showcase 2,  
no. 47



Ground  
floor,  
showcase 5,  
nos. 22, 10



The most popular means of artificial lighting were oil lamps. Made in different shapes, sizes and materials, they illuminated houses, shops, workshops and public places. They were essential to religious celebrations, night-time rituals and funeral ceremonies and often comprised offerings in the graves of mortals or the sanctuaries of gods.

Oil lamps were usually clay vessels, with or without handles and with an opening at the top, through which oil was poured into the interior. At one end was a projection with a small hole near the edge, through which the wick passed. Lamps with many wicks were used where there was a need for stronger lighting.

Sometimes oil lamps were very elaborate vessels, expensive offerings in the sanctuaries of the gods. In this category belongs a marble, multi-light lamp in the Acropolis Museum, with alternating heads of women, rams and goats.

Another elaborate lamp, this time of bronze, was found in the Erechtheion. This lamp has the form of a battleship and is incised with the inscription "ἱερόν της Αθηνάς", indicating that it was a sacred object belonging to the goddess Athena.

Certain lamps took the form of a statuette representing gods, humans, animals and others, such as this lamp depicting Telesphorus, a daemon in the form of a small child who was considered to be an attendant of the healer god Asclepius, and protector of patients in convalescence.

At other times the tops of lamps were decorated with reliefs of subjects taken from worship, mythology, and public and private life. Some scenes were particularly daring, such as one depicting a couple engaging in sexual intercourse on a bed with a canopy.

Torches were the most common means of illumination in exterior spaces. In the Acropolis Museum we see them in scenes decorating loutrophoroi, nuptial vases found in the sanctuary of Nymphe. They are depicted in the night-time procession in which water was brought from a spring for the wedding bath, and in the procession after the wedding when the groom led the bride to his family home.