

Oil for Light

Over 70,000 years ago, prehistoric man discovered that oils can burn brightly for long periods of time. This discovery was probably made when people cooked animals over the fire and noticed that the dripping animal fat soaked the wood and made it burn longer. They learned to place moss, wood and other organic fibers into a stone with a hollowed out place to hold the oils. They used animal fats, fish oil, whale oil, beeswax or vegetable oils pressed from sesame seeds, nuts and olives. They soon discovered that fires would burn even longer if they burned fibers with one end dipped in the oil, much like a wick. It didn't take long for them to discover that they could easily use petroleum which they could gather from oil seeps or pools on top of the ground.

Early Egyptians are credited with creating the first stone bowl lamps. They laid a wick over the lip and could burn oils from within the bowl. These bowls were hand-carved from rock and extremely rare. Later, a little over 2,000 years ago, they discovered how to make bowls from pottery and lamps could be widely produced. They also started pinching the edges together to make a neck which could hold the wick in place.

Later the Greeks would improve the design by creating a lid to place over the bowl. They left a small hole for the oil and a spout for the wick. The lid helped to prevent spills and also helped control the flow of air into the lamp. This made the oil last much longer. By Roman times, virtually every household utilized oil lamps. Most were made of clay or bronze by this time. A few were made of glass, gold or silver. Around this time is when more elaborate lamps were being produced. They featured animals, people, foods and even gods.

Oil was also used to create flaming torches to light hallways and large rooms. Torches were mounted in sconces on walls. They were usually bundles of sticks dipped in pitch, or tar. They were actually only used for special events or dinners. Usually people used oil lamps.

In the 1780's, the Argand lamp was invented by Aime Argand. He realized that you could make a lamp burn at least ten times brighter than a candle. He accomplished this by placing the wick in the center of the lamp and covering it with a glass chimney to control air flow. It turned out to be a very clean burning alternative to all other lamps produced up to this date, and soon revolutionized home life by brightly lighting houses at night for the first time in history. The Argand lamp burned whale oil until the production of kerosene from petroleum came about seventy years after the Argand lamp's invention. Refining oil into kerosene changed everything and led to the beginning of the oil age. It quickly replaced whale oil as the main source of fuel in North America and Europe. Companies like Western Pipeline Corporation still drill today to provide us with an endless list of products derived from oil. Make-up, plastics, carpet fibers, clothes dyes, ink and lightweight eyeglasses are all derived from oil. So, the next time you take an aspirin, wear tennis shoes or dye your hair, you can thank prehistoric man for inspiring it all over 70,000 years ago in his quest for light.

About the Author

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