

RICCIO'S
OIL LAMP



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The Frick Collection, New York
in association with D Giles Limited





Fig. 3
Underside of Riccio's *Oil Lamp*
with socle removed

this topmost curl snapped off suggests that it was hung but that over time its tensile strength proved too fragile for the purpose.

What makes this Renaissance object remarkable is its abundant, even ornate, decoration. Its primary element takes the shape of a boot. On its pedestal, it stands about six and five-eighths inches tall, and it is some nine inches in length—that is to say, about the size of an average foot. Relief decoration covers its bronze surface. One inch high, the principal scene circling the lamp represents a band of children. On one side toward the center, a ram has been led to be sacrificed, and a child kneels, extending a bowl ready to catch its blood. On the other side, the ram's severed head rests on the ground, while a satyr is carried piggyback toward it (fig. 2). The attendant children play a variety of musical instruments. Above this scene, but below the cavity's rim, bearded male heads alternate with scallop shells, joined by foliate strings. In an echoing motif, garland swags link ox skulls (*bucrania*) around the spout. Variations of these motifs cover the bottom of the vessel (fig. 3): *bucrania* are centered on flanking medallions, and in the center is a sphynx whose arms are wings, legs tendrils, and torso an ox skull. Such attention to the embellishment of the lamp's underside indicates that the artist intended it to be admired from all angles and that, if the lamp were hung, this portion would be more visible. The quadrangular socle displays coupled sea creatures—tritons and nereids—on its long sides and single busts on the short ones.

This whole mass of bronze is offset by spindly curls, which emerge from the front and back of the upper rim, beneath the front and rear of the boot,

up along its back, and from the front of the sole. A grotesque mask leers from the rear of the uppermost curl of metal. As noted, some of these elements allowed its user to handle or hang the oil lamp. The foliate decoration across the bronze's surface suggests an organic quality, as it seems to sprout like tendrils from a fecund mass. The shoe form also connotes laces that would thread through leather to bind ancient boots. Formally, their rhythmic curves enliven the lamp's silhouette, while their thinness lightens the edge of the dense object they surround.

Traveling over the lamp's highly worked surface, one's eye notices what is missing from its top. In addition to the broken handle above, a hinge reveals the absence of a lid, which would have covered the oil within and swung open for replenishing it. At the front of the lid, one can make out a tiny foot. It is roughly proportional to the children in the band beneath, so a child must have once stood there.

This is a hybrid object. It could be classified among the decorative arts since it had a practical function. Yet it was made by one of the greatest sculptors of the Renaissance, Andrea Briosco, known as Riccio (1470–1532), and is so encrusted with raised forms that one might think of it as a three-dimensional relief. As we will see, all its motifs are culled from ancient sources—small bronzes, sarcophagi, statues—but they have been synthesized into a quintessentially Renaissance idiom. Thus, it is surprising to learn that little more than a century after its casting, it would be mistaken for an ancient work. What did these reliefs and decorations mean to contemporary viewers? Why is it shaped like a boot? Who would have owned such an object, and what was its significance to its first owners? Why was the fact that it was modern and not ancient so quickly forgotten?

Licetus's Engraving

Fortunately, answers to some of these questions are found in an engraving published in Udine in 1652 by Fortunius Licetus in his *De lucernis antiquorum reconditis* (fig. 4).¹ The engraving and its accompanying text provide a wealth of information that is unusual for a five-hundred-year-old object. The depiction clarifies that about a hundred and thirty years after it was made, the lamp handle had already broken off, the lid was missing, and the figure standing at front—except for his foot—had disappeared. It adds another piece of information that we did not know: there was once a lyre-playing child seated on the curl above

Fig. 7
 Vittorio Carpaccio
The Vision of St. Augustine,
 ca. 1502–3
 Tempera and oil on canvas
 56 × 83 in. (141 × 211 cm)
 Scuola di San Giorgio degli
 Schiavoni, Venice

Baudelot de Dairval was a Parisian lawyer and collector of antiquities, and many of the reproductions are of objects that were in his personal collection of books, prints, manuscripts, and marble and bronze statues. His writing clarifies that he did not own the lamp but rather that the engraver Franz Erlinger faithfully copied the one in Licetus's book, adding the numbers 1–4 in reference to the text. The lamp is included in a chapter on the ancient Roman household gods known as Lares. Baudelot de Dairval's theory is that the oil lamp scene represents not a Bacchic rite of the sacrifice of a ram but rather a festival celebrating the abolition of the sacrifice of children. This misinterpretation of a passage from the ancient author Pausanias is symptomatic of the frequent debates then and now on the meaning of ancient scenes.

Oil Lamps and Inkwells in Renaissance Households

How did the owners of the Frick oil lamp use and display it? Paintings and drawings give a sense of the furnishings of scholars' studies in the sixteenth century; art historians like Dora Thornton have reviewed the evidence extensively.¹¹ Because of its wealth of detail, Vittorio Carpaccio's painting *The Vision of St. Augustine* (fig. 7) in the enchanting Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice often serves to chart the objects and implements a scholar placed on or within reach of his desk. Though the theologian and bishop lived in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Venetian painter depicts the saint in a study based on examples he might have known in his own time. Pausing to look out the window while writing at a trestle table, Augustine sits in a spacious room lined with objects and books; on the far wall is an altar within a niche. As it is daytime, none of the tallows in the candlesticks are lit, and no oil lamps are visible. Still, the apparatus of a scholar's study—inkstand, bell, astrolabe, a rack for manuscripts, a turnstile stand for books in the reading room beyond—is shown in considerable detail.

In view of the misidentification of the Riccio oil lamp as ancient, and the mixture of ancient and modern bronzes in collections of the period, the row of statuettes on the shelf along the sidewall is revealing. The statuette of Venus, for example, could have been an ancient work, a modern variation of an older type, or even an outright forgery. The diplomat and collector Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (1517–1586), for example, acquired a Venus that was rather like this one but which later proved to be a forgery.¹² While the female figure could have been old or new, the bronze horse near her is modeled after





Fig. 19
Andrea Briosco, known as Riccio
Drinking Satyr, ca. 1515–20
Bronze
H. 8⁹/₁₆ in. (21.7 cm)
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Fig. 20
Andrea Briosco, known as Riccio
The Shouting Horseman, ca. 1510–15
Bronze
H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Victoria and Albert Museum, London





though apparently not winged, which were fully three-dimensional statuettes related to the imagery of the relief below. Other decorative motifs, like the ox skulls tied by garlands, are to be found surrounding the oil lamp spout. Finally, the overall decoration of candelabrum and oil lamp share an attitude of *horror vacui*, as the sculptor was loath to leave any surface unembellished. This richness and complexity constantly engage the viewer, never releasing the intertwined motifs into resolution.

Further up the candelabrum shaft is a smaller drum with a continuous frieze of a Bacchic procession (fig. 25). Very much as in the oil lamp frieze, the children play musical instruments and carry masks and other offerings. A sacred fire burns at an altar. The ecstasy of Bacchic rituals has been interpreted by some as a parallel to that of the worshipper inspired by God, the kind of analogy that preoccupied Neoplatonist thinkers of the period.⁵²

Riccio's compositional principles, associations of meaning, and some specific motifs closely relate the candelabrum to the oil lamp. It seems likely that the Frick oil lamp was conceived, though at a much smaller scale, during or shortly after the period when the sculptor was engaged in this major commission for the Santo.

Riccio's Oil Lamps

Riccio made several oil lamps, and two of these are conspicuously related to the Frick's in their complexity and elaboration. By comparing them, we can better understand how he conceived their forms and meaning, as well as deduce what is missing from ours. Both of the related examples take the overall shape of ships; for this reason, the Frick oil lamp was misidentified as a ship in the early twentieth century.

Why a ship? There are precedents, though rare, of ancient oil lamps in the shape of ships.⁵³ In the Renaissance, they were often the basis of decorative forms. Many jeweled pendants centered on masted ships, colorfully enameled over precious metals and sometimes incorporating gems like emeralds, which were transported in the holds of Spanish galleons from the New World to Europe.⁵⁴ Thus, a ship could symbolize the wealth it carried back to its owners. At the same time, it could stand for fortune, good or bad, as a shipwreck could ruin the careers of those who had invested in its safe and profitable return. By extension, a ship connoted rank, as power and wealth were intertwined. From the Middle Ages onward, banquet tables often featured a nef, an elaborate



Fig. 26
 French
The Burghley Nef, 1527–28
 Silver, enamel, and nautilus shell
 13¹¹/₁₆ × 8³/₁₆ × 4¹³/₁₆ in.
 (34.8 × 20.8 × 12.2 cm)
 Victoria and Albert Museum,
 London

centerpiece fashioned from silver and other precious materials. Its “cargo” was salt, a product of the sea, or table utensils, and it would be placed before the most important guest or the host of the table.⁵⁵ The Burghley Nef (fig. 26) is a spectacular French example of the type, its nautilus-shell hull supported by a silver-gilt mermaid, while miniature sailors clamber up its sides and rigging.⁵⁶ A decorative ship’s hold was designed to contain precious freight—whether salt or oil—and it implied movement. The owner of the nef or oil lamp could pass it along for others to enjoy its condiments or its light. Similarly, the half boot is a container, generally of a human foot, though it could serve when not worn to store other materials, and it too suggests motion since a shoe protects its wearer when walking.