Performing Arts in Art Information and Questions for Teaching

Incense Burner Shaped as a Comic Actor Seated on an Altar, unknown Roman artist

**Incense Burner Shaped as a Comic Actor Seated on an Altar**

Unknown artist
Roman, about A.D. 1–50
Bronze and silver
9 1/8 x 5 1/4 x 5 1/4 in.
87.AC.143

**Background Information**

In this work, an actor is depicted sitting on an altar decorated with garlands and reliefs of winged **demigods**. The figure and altar form the body of an **incense burner**, which is called a **thymiaterion**. The figure’s eyes are inlaid with silver, and his right hand once held a detachable wig. Depictions of actors sitting on altars are found in both **Hellenistic** and Roman art, and some scholars have suggested that these may allude to a specific scene in an unidentified play.

The actor wears the typical costume and mask of a **Greek New Comedy** slave, with a rolled hairstyle, snub nose, and wide-open mouth. (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 & Freemen” 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).)

The altar that the character is seated on is hollow. The top of the altar pivots open to allow incense to be put inside; the bottom has air holes to facilitate the burning of the incense. The smoke from the incense would have risen through the actor’s hollow body and issued from his mouth.
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Questions for Teaching

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

What do you see here? (man, mask, silver eyes, costume, ribbon, animal feet, altar, garland, toga, tunic, wig, etc.)

What is this character doing? (sitting, waiting, performing, speaking, etc.)

If we could unfreeze this figure, what might he say?

How would you describe the facial features on the mask? (exaggerated, dramatic, scary, etc.)

Describe in detail what the character is wearing. (toga, wig, sandals, mask)

The figure is based on a fictional stock character from ancient Greek and Roman theater. What stock characters appear in movies and TV shows today?