



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

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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/ and "Slaves & Freeman" on the PBS website *The Roman Empire in the First Century* at 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?