Holy Smoke
Incense and Incense Containers
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“And the Lord said unto Moses: take unto thee sweet spices: stacte, onycha, and
galbanum; with these, pure frankincense. Of each there shall be a like amount, and thou
shall make it an incense, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together;
pure and holy.”

—Exodus 30:34–35

Such were the instructions given to Moses to make incense
for Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, but equivalent religious
practice dates long before the Book of Exodus was written (ca.
600 BCE). Incense (from L. incendere, “to burn”) had been
offered to Egyptian gods as early as Dynasty V (ca. 2450 BCE),
and the smoke ascending heavenward was a means of placating
and communicating with the gods. The use of incense in religion
continued in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, followed
by the Christian church. In the latter, the smoke of burning
incense is analogous to the prayer of the faithful rising to
heaven. Psalm 141 (verse 2) corroborates the analogy: “May my
prayer be directed as incense in thy sight...” Buddhist and Hindu
worshippers are likewise no strangers to incense, and numerous
burners survive from Pre-Columbian societies as well.

The earliest censers (incense burners) in the Museum’s collection are
from the Iron Age of ancient Palestine. A miniature shrine group* once
used for the worship of the fertility goddess Astarte, includes two censers,
both blackened from use. Though unclear what incense might have been
burned in these vessels, frankincense is one of the most referenced in ancient
literature. Frankincense was, however, quite expensive and had to imported
from the Arabian peninsula or sub-Saharan Africa, where the resinous trees
of the Boswellia genus grew. The value of frankincense is apparent in the
New Testament account of the Magi’s gifts, which implies that the incense
is an equivalent gift to gold. The Greek historian Herodotus reported that
Babylonians offered in excess of two tons of frankincense annually to the god
Bel, and Plutarch’s account of Alexander’s life includes a humorous story in

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which the future king is scolded by his teacher, Leonidas, for using too much frankincense during a sacrifice. Leonidas told his pupil that, until he had conquered the land where frankincense originated, he should be frugal with its use. When Alexander conquered Gaza, a major hub through which luxury goods like incense passed to the Mediterranean, he allegedly sent Leonidas 500 talents worth of frankincense (25,000 lbs!), with a note saying “be more generous with your offerings to the gods.”

Other less costly incense options from the Mediterranean would have been native plants such as sage, saffron, storax, terebinth, or aromatic woods such as cedar. Labdanum, a sticky resin from varieties of rockrose, was also popular. Shepherds combed the beards of their goats and sheep that had grazed on the plant to collect the resin adhered in the animals’ hair. Other incense required recipes of multiple ingredients, and identification of some of those can be difficult today. Scholars still debate the precise identification of the ingredients named in the above Exodus account. An Egyptian incense known as kyphi contained up to sixteen components, some identified by words with unknown equivalents in modern languages. A Byzantine censer in the Museum’s collection may have burned any of the aforementioned ingredients, but as a humbler vessel, it probably did not burn the most expensive. Suspended and swung during use, such censers are known as thuribles. Thuribles are still carried by clergy in both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Pre-Columbian Colima culture of western Mexico is poorly documented and known mostly through ceramics from shaft graves that dot the region, but many ceramics were removed from the graves long ago and thus have little context. Dogs are among the most recognizable elements of Colima iconography and their images may have served as symbolic soul guides for the deceased in the Underworld. But dogs were also a protein source in life, so were they also symbolic food offerings for the dead? Not all Colima dog figurines are censers, so the reason for the pairing in this example is unclear. Perhaps incense was used at funerals, and thus both had connections to death? The incense used was most likely the resin of the copal tree (Protium copal), and the indigenous Nahuatl language still refers to scented smoke as copalli. Another Pre-Columbian censer in the Museum’s collection may also be linked to death and the afterlife. Censers (Sp. incensario) have been found in both temples and tombs of the Maya, but the symbolism of the

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Museum’s example may indicate the latter. If that interpretation is correct, the projecting jaguar would be a god of the Underworld while the spikes would represent the ceiba tree, the roots of which were said to extend into the Underworld. The Mayan word pom is still in use today for copal incense.

In Chinese and Japanese culture, incense is also used in religion but personal use has developed into an art form. Known as xiangdao in Chinese, the incense ceremony involves specific paraphernalia including utensils and various censers. The Japanese ritual, or kōdō, is one of the three classical Japanese arts of refinement, along with flower arranging and the tea ceremony. Both the Chinese and Japanese ceremonies emphasize the holistic relationship between scent, the senses, the spirit, and nature. The Museum’s three-drawerled kodansu once held paraphernalia used in kōdō, which could include games such as guessing aromas or matching like aromas, a tradition dating back to the fifteenth century. Incense games became a “way” (dō), and ultimately coalesced into kōdō, or the “way of the fragrance.” The benefits derived from the proper use of incense came to be known as the “Ten Virtues of Kō,” which included everything from nourishing the spirit to curing loneliness to purifying the body. Various types of incense could be used, but kōdō has traditionally included fragrant wood chips from the Japanese jinko tree, also known as agarwood. Today agarwood has become increasingly rare from overharvesting and thus exorbitantly expensive. Other materials such as sandalwood and cinnamon bark are substitutes.

The Chinese are sometimes credited with creating stick incense, also known as joss sticks. These were made originally by adhering powdered incense mixed with gummy resins to a bamboo stick. Various ingredients have been used over time, including the famed agarwood, but less costly ingredients are sandalwood, camphor, cloves, cinnamon, anise, etc. The Museum’s Buddhist lion (or “fu dog”) figurine is an incense stick holder.

*see “Spotlight,” Museum Magazine, Winter 2021