



## Holy Smoke Incense and Incense Containers

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

*“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 be 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



Ptolemaic pharaoh making offering of incense  
Temple of Horus, Edfu, 3<sup>rd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BCE  
Photo: Rémi

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edfu26.JPG>



**Censer with Perforated Sides**  
Palestinian, Iron Age IIB–Iron Age IIC  
Ca. 800 BCE  
Allegedly from Mt. Nebo area (Jordan)  
Pottery  
Museum purchase (68.64G)

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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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**Censer with Hook**  
Byzantine, 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century CE  
From Hebron area (Palestine)  
Pottery  
Museum purchase (71.81)



**Incensario (censer) in the Form of a Standing Dog**  
Colima Culture, ca. 300 BCE–300 CE  
From western Mexico  
Terracotta  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Milton Fischmann  
(66.123)



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

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-drawer *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](#)



**Incensario (censer) with Jaguar Head**  
Mayan, Late Classic period  
7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE  
From Guatamala, perhaps the Lago de Amatitlán region  
Terracotta  
Gift of Philip Pearlstein (82.434)



**Kodansu or Incense Box with Drawers**  
Japanese, Somada School, ca. 1800-1825  
Lacquer, mother-of-pearl, silver  
Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.15)



**Incense Holder in the Form of a Buddhist Lion**  
Chinese, Kangxi reign, 1662-1722  
Glazed porcelain  
Gift of Mrs. D. David McLorn (76.95)

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