HOLY SMOKE
CENSERS ACROSS CULTURES

EDITED BY
BEATE FRICKE

HIRMER

Byzantine Censer, Syria,
16th century, copper alloy,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Rogers Fund, 1963.

Censer with cover, Japan, 1750, stoneware covered with glaze (Bizen ware), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mrs. V. Everit Macy, 1923.

Censer, Italy, 15th century, copper-gilt, 22.2 × 11.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1910.

Censer with floral design in red paint on white background, Egypt, ca. 3850–2960 BCE, pottery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1907.

Incense burner, Costa Rica or Nicaragua, 7th–12th century, ceramic, 81.3 × 31.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979.

Bronze bowl from a thymiaterion (incense burner), Etruscan, late 4th century BCE, Bronze, height: 11.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1903.

Figure with Incense Burner, Mexico, 2nd century BCE–3rd century CE, ceramic, height: 48.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of The Andrall and Joanne Pearson Collection, 2005.

Figure 1
Peruvian Copal.
Myvision, Adobe Stock,
No. 482694966.

INTRODUCTION: CENSERS ACROSS CULTURES

Beate Fricke

A chunk of copal [Figure 1], grains of incense—applying heat to these substances produces not only swaths of smoke but also intense fragrant odors. These "vibrant matters" have intense impacts on both sight and smell, obscuring vision through billows of smoke and creating, through dominant odors, an alteration of sensual experience that can shift perception of space, and even sometimes of time.[1] But these substances, to produce such dazzling effects, have to be heated by fire. This requires a vessel that can hold the transformative, but also sinister glow of burning charcoal. Such vessels for burning resin are called censers, or thuribles, and can come in all kinds of shapes, sizes, materials, and designs. Some are extremely simple, others lavishly ornamented. They were made across the globe. Figure 1

The burning of incense is, in fact, one of the most pervasive religious practices both today and throughout history. Fragrant incense smoke filling the air is an aspect found in almost every cultic tradition, whether polytheistic or monotheistic, whether in the ancient Near East, or medieval Europe.[2] Censers are thus ubiquitous among religious paraphernalia on a truly global scale. They were produced in very simple shapes and materials as well as elaborate and expensive luxury objects. Surprisingly, however, little scholarly attention has been given to censers and the rituals they facilitate.[3] Censers were involved in rituals of opposed and often very distinct spheres from the private to the public, from the sacred to the profane. Censers can heal, cause miracles, cross religious boundaries, or become integrated into new rituals. Censers and the incense required for their use connect the different yet intrinsically interlaced spheres of trade, health care, religion, ecology, philosophy, politics, and art.

Censers therefore invite us to think about the intersection of these domains. The study of censers is particularly timely in the fields of the history of religion, art history, archeology, material culture, and anthropology. The combination of the solid censer and the ephemeral smoke produced by the burning of incense offers a fertile ground for examining questions central to all of these fields of study regarding the relation between the material and the immaterial, and between artifacts, biotic substances, and codified practices. Centering the censer thus not only places the object in a constellation of other religious artifacts, but also relocates the importance of rituals that have long been placed at the margins of the study of religion, art, and cultic practices.

Through these objects we can discern traces of a shifting historical, artistic, and religious record. This is true in spite of the fact that, where most pre-modern religious cultures are concerned, we have scant and scattered written information about their making and use. Yet their forms themselves reveal the ways in which the contexts and spaces through which the objects circulated changed over time in response to new patterns of making, consumption, and cultural exchange. These material records of multiple nodes and modes of contact between people, places, and epistemologies make themselves visible in changes to the censers' morphologies and ornamentation. Examining this material and visual record can thus suggest not only how these objects reflect history, but also change how history is perceived and

recounted: an analysis of forms like those of censers demands that we rewrite objects' stories as traces of a lost past, which manifests itself in a variety of structural, ornamental, and material details.

Working in the field of ancient American art, the art historian George Kubler had little recourse to primary sources which described the process of making the objects that he studied. Few textual sources described how these objects were used and received. In the face of these challenges, Kubler introduced a theory of morphology paired with temporality. He suggested that we examine objects as formal chains that stretch over time. Every now and again, he argued, a "prime object" will emerge that seems to have been triggered by a significant change in the trajectory of what he termed "the chain of objects." This object could then trigger a change itself. These prime objects enable us, Kubler suggested, to analytically crack open otherwise "voiceless" objects, since they draw our attention to an event, or a moment of contact/rupture, which demands analysis. He wrote, "The history of art in this sense resembles a broken but much-repaired chain made of string and wire to connect the occasional jeweled links surviving as physical evidence of the invisible original sequence of prime objects."[4]

In a certain way, although Kubler claimed to use morphology as a category, his notion of the prime object nonetheless reintroduced the concept of the creative, individual artistic mind through the back door. In singling out a specific object in a series and attributing uniqueness to that object, as *pars pro toto* of its maker's work, Kubler indirectly claims that change occurs through artistic will and invention, even though the object-makers he studied remained anonymous and forever unknown. Their objects, however, in his analysis, stood in for them. When examining censers, however, we find an abundance of preserved objects that have similar appearances, functions, and modes of production though they also differ in significant ways. Is there a prime object among them, or are subtle changes in the censers *not* attributable to intentional modifications in a morphological chain? Do they demand that the art historian, archeologist, or anthropologist not seek a prime object, or individual artistic will?

Censers are so often objects that come down to us without makers, users, or contexts or documentation. They thereby form an ideal case for inquiry into what is increasingly at the core of important new fields of study in art history, archeology, and anthropology, which seek to address the imbalance of fractured archives as well as disjunctions between cultures of the written word and those that, supposedly, did not have it. We have incredibly large groups of objects. In very few cases, however, do these tell a story of artistic intentionality or of aesthetic choice. In this sense, they ask us to think beyond a Kublerian model, accounting for variability outside of categories that reify the prime object as the only site where meaning is made or where choices matter. It is this volume's contention that censers can tell stories, which the gaps in the written documentation and the lack of historical records and liturgical primary sources have obscured. Censers are a particularly ideal case, because they were so ubiquitous as to not require comment (and this was true across cultures).

Would it not thus be more apt—and more interesting—to try to understand how these objects were not unique, but instead part of an entangled web across space and time? For this, we would have to consider how they were embedded into networks of actions, materials, and knowledge production. We will never fully understand the entire network of objects, or see the

full mosaic of moving parts in which entities like the censers examined in the following volume traveled. We will also never fully comprehend the actions or motivations of the human actors involved in their production and distribution. But we can still gather bits and pieces of these stories by reading and inspecting the material objects themselves. By taking the objects themselves seriously as narrators, we can try to clarify parts of their lost histories. While Kubler's focus was on the artist who produced a "prime object," we might gather more analytical results by shifting the focus from a prime object to the dispersed *tesserae* of a mosaic—to be read formally or perhaps with the aid of non-invasive technology—that we can never fully reconstruct. Such was the goal of the conference that generated this volume.

This volume proposes to explore these commonly used yet seldom studied objects from a comparative perspective. This investigation entails consideration of the material fabrication of censers themselves and their subsequent significations, as well as the role of the incense as it vaporizes over the course of religious ceremonies. By comparing censers across cultures, we aim to unveil resemblances and differences in various religions, so that we can better understand the peculiarities and distinct qualities of censers in specific traditions. Through these objects we also hope to interrogate dominant narratives in art history defined by exclusive categories like "the era of art" or by retrospectively delineated periods or artistic developments aligned with specific dynasties, geographic regions, or dates.

Comparing objects with similar functions and comparable uses in different cultures can open up a number of new perspectives: a new usage, or a previously unimagined story or intent, as well as practices that were not recorded in written documentation or specific archives. However, in this volume we have not tried to simply compare censers from different cultures. Rather, we have invited experts to write their histories from specific points of view coined by their particular scholarly subfields. We hope that as a group, the contributions gathered together here will ignite new ideas, point out novel lineages of thought, and develop a power they do not have on their own when relegated to a specific academic niche. We hope to build a basis from which future comparative approaches can depart. Emerging from this volume, we hope, is a better grasp of the role of sensorial elements in the fostering of the devotional practices of world religions. Acknowledging the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the profound questions provoked by the censer as object and as site of action, this book aims to unite scholars from different fields of study in an exploration of the censer and its materiality, ontology, and presence.

My personal interest in this topic was sparked by a group of seemingly inscrutable censers that seemed to be a dead end. A group of early Christian bronze censers with relief scenes depicting the life of Christ on their exteriors plays a unique role in the history of censers, although we cannot say with certainty where, when, or for whom these objects were made. Because of these uncertainties, these censers have often been ignored in spite of their significance as some of the earliest objects to depict key moments of the life of Christ and connect them to liturgical moments in the Christian religious cult. Until now, scholars have assumed that they were produced from the sixth through the twelfth century, probably in the Syro-Palestinian region [Figures 2 and 3].[5] On the basis of their iconography, the dating around 600 for the earliest examples seems plausible. These icono- Figures 2–3

Figure 2
View of the Crucifixion, the Women at the Holy Sepulchre and the Annunciation from a censer with New Testament scenes, 6th–9th century, bronze, 10.9 × 10.8 cm, Basel, Antikenmuseum, inv. no. BRE 644.

Figure 3
Baptism of Christ, from censer with scenes from the life of Christ, 6th or 7th century, bronze, 11.43 × 12.1 cm. Richmond, VA, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 67.27.

graphic details include the long tunic worn by Christ in the scenes of the crucifixion and some potential analogies with the church of the Holy Sepulcher in the scene of the entombment. Certain details, such as the number of angels present in the scene of the baptism and the various positions of Mary in the birth of Christ, could speak of a moment in Christian art when iconographical traditions were not yet precisely fixed. Alternatively, maybe the makers of those censers did not strictly follow their models, or perhaps various workshops and craftsmen modified these models over time. None of the preserved bronze censers are actually very similar to one another. They seem to have *either* been cast with forms that were subsequently lost, *or* their production was so plentiful that a profound loss means many still survive but none of the same model.[6]

These objects thus point to numerous intriguing ambiguities and recent discussions of them situate these objects at the heart of important current discursive debates in art history, including the role of global mercantile exchange, religious intersection (Christian, Islamic, and Jewish), and the junction between the rising Christian cultures of Latin, Greek, and Syrian heirs of the Roman Empire.[7]

These censers inspired me to try to think through these objects by inviting scholars from very different subfields of art history to discuss censers writ large in order to analyze their use and changes in their appearances throughout different time periods and cultural contexts. My hope is that volumes like this initiate, foster, and contribute to a critical dialogue across the subfields of art history—a dialogue that will enable us to develop new narratives and theoretical frameworks based on collaborative empirical analysis in front of the works and within their cultural contexts.

In the following book, Claudia Brittenham's contribution reveals the crucial role that smoke and fire played in the Mesoamerican tradition. She unfolds the multisensory experience of *copal* in rituals that combined the use of censers and braziers with chant, prayers, dance, costumes, offerings, and other potent substances. Her examples, encompassing three millennia, include fixed incense burners, spiked hourglass *incensarios* used in conjunction with ladle censers and portable objects, as well as the reception of the use of incense in the Florentine Codex.

Kiersten Neumann discusses the apparatuses used for burning incense from West Asia, with a focus on censers of the Neo-Assyrian period, but including earlier, contemporary, and later censers from neighboring regions. Written sources show censers were both portable and fixed. Relief sculpture, textual prescriptions, and material culture demonstrate the importance of incense burning in Assyrian rituals.

Karen Stern rethinks the role of censers and ritual acts of burning incense within the devotional practices of Israelites, Judahites, and Jews throughout the ancient, medieval, and modern eras in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Her contribution discusses the design, presentation, and use of censers in writings, as well as floor mosaics, oil lamps, and manuscripts.

Milette Gaifman shows the importance of incense burners in ancient Greek art (fifth century BCE) by analyzing how censers were presented in pictorial imagery. As these depictions reveal, Hellenic censers were variously placed on supports, carried in sacrificial processions, or were freestanding objects that articulated social status and social differences in cultic and profane sites. These

thymiateria were an essential element of ritual experiences and the incense burner was linked with youthfulness, seduction, and the female sphere.

The chapter by Nathan Dennis discusses the censer's allusion to the womb of the Mother of God in Early Byzantine and Coptic devotion. He emphasizes the strong relationship between sight, sound, and smell for a metaphorical interpretation of censers depicted in wall paintings, as well as censers used in rituals and depicted in written sources such as hymns and songs included in rituals and theological writings.

In her chapter, Margaret Graves uses a close reading of a Middle Eastern censer which surfaced in Sweden in 1943. She suggests that the so-called Gövle censer should be attributed not to Khurasan, but to the metal-casting traditions of the central Islamic lands. She does so by revealing connections between its making and use to practices, formal patterns, and production techniques of the early Islamic era. She supplements the analysis of the censer with thoughts on the role of censers and incense in Islamic magic.

Beate Fricke analyzes depictions of censers in paintings (e.g., by Rogier van der Weyden) as well as written sources describing the use of censers, and a selection of censers to address the shifting roles and forms of censers in late medieval Europe. Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries in the Latin West, censers were depicted with increasing frequency, featuring significantly in the ornamentation of liturgical spaces, including glass painting, reliefs on portals and tombs, as well as standing figures that embellished liturgical furniture such as pulpits.

Allison Stielau takes as a starting point Sandro Botticelli's painting depicting *The Punishment of Korah* and continues with an analysis of censers, painted and sculpted altar panels, woodcuts in printed books, and religious tracts. Both Catholic theologians and supporters of the Reformation discussed the role of incense and censers in devotional practice. Embedding censers as "potentially unruly objects" into narratives of rebellion and transgression reveals just how specifically coded messages around censers and their use could be in the early modern period.

Yao Ning focuses on the censer and the visualization of smoke emanating from a censer in a portrait of the Ming emperor Xizong (1605–1627). She connects her observations with the belief that incense smoke has the capacity "to connect the celestial realm with the earthly world." She analyzes the description of incense and its smoke in written treatises and shows that the revival of Daoism and reconsiderations of the renewed interest in Song aesthetics impacted the representation of longevity in the Xizong portrait.

The different types of written sources in Greek and Roman Antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages including the Islamic world are discussed by Beatrice Caseau. She emphasizes the complexity of incense and the important changes regarding the substances used to create fragrant smoke. Her contribution also discusses the recent results from chemical analyses of incense residues from the fourth century BCE to the sixteenth century CE.

Jaś Elsner's afterword points out the synesthesia of religion and the ways "the scent-scape, sound-scape and light-scape in any given site [...] create a powerful sacral atmosphere [...] through collective embodied experience." He considers censers as gadgets "for the instrumental transformation of natural materials into something else," reading censers as devices that

link body and embodied subjectivity through material objects to an invisible world and to imaginations of a different kind.

The conference and the book have received substantial support from the European Research Council (ERC) project "Global Horizons in Pre-Modern Art" based at the University of Bern. The initial conference that generated this book was planned and organized by myself together with Ittai Weinryb in Bern, Switzerland, in 2019.[8] Francesco de Angelis, James A. Doyle, Aden Kumler, and Nina Macaraig all participated, but have decided not to publish their conference papers in this volume.

For line- and copyediting I am very grateful to Andrew Sears, Sasha Rossman, and Jonathan Hoare. For their indispensable help with everything from images and assistance with the preparation of the peer review, I am deeply indebted to Alessandra Fedrigo, Elena Filliger, and Joanne Luginbühl. Zumrad Ilyasova oversaw the final stretch of the publication with greatest care and attention. My own contribution to this volume, the discussion of censers in the Latin West, has gained several sparks of inspiration from discussions with my team in Bern—especially valuable were comments and suggestions by Katharina Böhmer, Ivan Foletti, Aaron Hyman, and Carlos Rojas Cocoma. Last, but not least, the entire chapter has particularly benefited from thoughts, ideas, and inspiration from Andrew Sears. Both, Andrew and Zumrad are now moving on to new shores. Andrew Sears to Washington (National Gallery) and Zumrad Ilyasova to London (British Museum)—I will dearly miss them as colleagues in Bern.

Kaj Lehmann has enthusiastically let himself be inspired by ideas from the use of incense for the design of the conference flyer and now the publication of the proceedings. This book, wrapped when sold and shipped, leaves traces of charcoal, as did and do censers. His idea emphasizes the intimate connection of content, containing wrapper, and the bookboards holding the content in place; however, odor and ideas are equally capable of transgressing such thresholds. I am immensely grateful to Elisabeth Rochau-Shalem at Hirmer-Verlag for her support with this project and for guiding me with my team through the production press. There are few presses who are willing to take on an ambitious design for an academic book, and Kaj Lehmann and I are very happy that Rainer Arnold and Hirmer-Verlag supported our ideas and facilitated their realization.

The pandemic not only impacted the writing of several authors gathered in this volume, but also the breadth of the different subfields to be covered in the book. The contributions assembled in this volume are not considered as substitutes for important missing subfields from Asia, Africa, or the Americas. The pandemic and its impact on the ability of scholars to do research on the ground explains some of the gaps in scholarship on the history of censers we could not fill: we had solicited several contributions for which research needed to be done in East and South Asia, as well as in Africa, and the Americas. There is, therefore, a problematic imbalance between the subfields covered in the volume, in which some subfields can draw on long-lasting traditions in scholarship and firmly established archival traditions that are lacking in other fields. We hope, however, that this volume will ignite scholarly interest in these fields so the gaps can be soon be filled.

ENDNOTES

1 Bennet 2010.
2 See the contribution of Beatrice Caseau as well as her important publications on this topic. Furthermore see also Barker 2009; Darvill 2008; Groom 1981; Frère and Hugot 2012; Miller 1969; Montúfar López 2016; Pfeifer 1997. For the history of smell see Robinson 2019.
3 A significant part of the extant scholarship focuses on European and/or Christian censers and the related rituals—for a good overview on the extant scholarship regarding European censers and Christian rituals involving incense see Westermann-Angerhausen 2014, 19–46; for a broader temporal and regional focus see also Caseau and Neri 2021; Le Maguer-Gillon 2022; Sales-Carbonell 2017.
4 Kubler 1962, 40.
5 Richter-Siebels 1990.
6 Ibid., 229–38 and the first chapter in Flood and Fricke 2023, 22–51.
7 Elsner 2022; 2021; Fauvelle 2017; Heng 2014; 2021; Keene 2018; Zimo et al. 2020.
8 The conference was initially organized and held in collaboration with Ittai Weinryb. He was a key part in the conception of the original idea for the conference, and the initial phase of planning the volume. Not editing this volume together was a personal decision by him, and I owe him many important ideas and suggestions.

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Incense burner, Northern Italy, ca. 1530–40 CE, bronze, 34.3 × 21.1 × 17.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982.

Circular limestone incense burner, Cyprus, (year unknown), limestone, 8.6 × 7.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76.

Censer, Germany, 11th–12th century CE, copper alloy, 23.5 × 11.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1909.

Incense Burner of Amir Saif al-Dunya wa'l-Din ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi, Iran, 1181–82 CE, bronze, 82.6 × 22.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1951.