



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.



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



SWINGING THROUGH TIME: CENSERS IN THE LATIN WEST

Beate Fricke

In the left panel of Rogier van der Weyden's *Bladelin Altarpiece* (ca. 1460), the Roman emperor Augustus holds a censer and swings it with his right hand, while the fingers of his left touch the fur around the brim of his hat [Figure 1]. His fixed right elbow appears to be stopping the movement of the vessel, which continues to sway from the four metal chains held together at the top. The gray hairs of his beard and the foliated decoration of the censers' handle intersect, as if the shock of the vision appearing in front of the kneeling emperor has caused a sudden movement or, rather, an abrupt standstill; he has sunk to his knees in adoration of what he sees in front of his inner eye.

What he sees is the Madonna seated on a stone bench surrounded by a golden mandorla. Rays of light emanate from the Virgin's apparition, pouring through the window frame into the domestic interior in which Augustus kneels. Mary appears to the emperor in the right part of the window, which comprises a series of frames: the opened wooden shutters, the vertical axis of the central mullion, and the glass tracery at the top embellished with an eagle on each side. Below Mary's stone throne, these frames guide the viewer's eyes from the interior into the exterior, encouraging the eye to wander through the fertile fields of a cultivated landscape with soft hills and a few bushes and trees.

This painted scene is a fiction inspired by the widely circulated *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*), a collection of Christian legends of saints with a detailed account of Christ's life compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the second half of the thirteenth century. According to Stephan Kemperdick, van der Weyden relied heavily on Voragine's text, which states that the emperor had been urged by the senators to ask the Tiburtine Sibyl whether a more powerful ruler than himself would ever be born. Then at noon on the day of Christ's birth, the Madonna and Child appeared on an altar in the sky. The Sibyl revealed the power of the child to Augustus, and as a reaction to this divine revelation he made a sacrifice of incense, a Roman practice for worshiping the gods, thus implying that he no longer wished to be worshiped as a god himself. In van der Weyden's painting we see the emperor kneeling before this vision, framed and offset by the window, while making his offering and holding his crown in reverence. The Sibyl stands to the side, interpreting the heavenly sign while three men from the emperor's entourage act as witnesses.¹

Voragine's legend is just one source of inspiration among many; as Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen has emphasized, the altarpiece's overall composition combines events from different times and regions in a kind of atemporal "super-vision" framed by the fifteenth-century Flemish cityscape in the background [Figure 2].² In the central panel, the commissioner—the wealthy Pieter Bladelin (ca. 1410–72), who climbed Bruges' social ladder from a city tax collector to the treasury secretary of Burgundy and the

Figure 2



Figure 1
Rogier van der Weyden,
Bladelin Altarpiece, left wing
panel: Vision of Augustus,
ca. 1460, oil on oak panel,
93.5 × 41.7 cm, Berlin,
Gemäldegalerie, in
Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van der
Weyden. Das Gesamtwerk*
(Hirmer 1999), 242.



Figure 2
Rogier van der Weyden,
Bladelin Altarpiece, ca. 1460,
oil on oak panel, 107.7 × 218.8 cm,
Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, in
Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van
der Weyden. Das Gesamtwerk*
(Hirmer 1999), 242–43.



treasurer of the Order of the Golden Fleece—is shown in a scene that exists beyond time and space, as he kneels and venerates the birth of Christ and wears a dark robe that suggests his humility. On the right wing is yet another vision: the celestial apparition of the Christ Child as the star guiding the three kings of Bileam from the east towards Bethlehem. Each of these depictions revolves around various valences of visual revelation. At the same time, the altarpiece reveals the Flemish painter’s knowledge regarding how to use a censer. Some painters might even have been involved in designing these liturgical tools, as possibly suggested by the print by Martin Schongauer [Figure 3], while others demonstrate in their painting evident ignorance of the role of the middle chain to lift the lid, the metal cover would be too hot to touch in this case. [Figure 4].

Figure 3

Figure 4

Yet if we return to the left panel featuring Augustus, we can see how this artwork’s metanarrative depends on more than things seen or witnessed. Shifting our attention from the window frame and lighting effects—painterly strategies that privilege the visual—and instead pursue the traces of painted smoke and their imagined scent, we encounter another layer of sensory meaning. A fine line of smoke billows out of the top of the censer’s flamboyant metal tracery and wafts in the air towards the open windows, although it does not overlap with the rays of light emanating from Mary. Rather, smoke and light encounter each other at the window frame, which reveals itself as a threshold between the visible world and the imaginary realm of the emperor’s vision, between the carefully depicted reality of a private sleeping chamber in the house of a very wealthy tradesman and the divine sphere of Mary and Christ’s apparition. At the same time, these categories of visible and invisible are at odds with each other, since according to the painting’s system of artifice it is the vision that is most “real” and illuminating compared to the earthly space that is shown to be as ephemeral as the disappearing smoke. Light and smoke’s intersection thus highlights both a connection as well as a disjunction between spheres of reality and its perception. It is the censer and its smoke that links and calls into question notions of order: between the real and imaginary, past and present, spaces of the profane and sacred.

This chapter will explore how censers came to take on this type of mediating function and how their transcendental liturgical function came to elide with their role as “art” objects that, whether real or depicted, innately challenged spheres of perception and depiction. By tracing the *longue durée* history of censers’ uses in Latin liturgies from Late Antiquity to the time around 1500, this contribution seeks to probe how the functional and ritual came to inflect late medieval notions of the artistic.

The extant corpus of censers is quite heterogeneous because of differing materials, locations, and original contexts; numerous objects can hardly be contextualized at all since they have lost any record of their provenance. Yet as we shall see, a close reading of the use, shape, and materiality of specific examples of censers are allowing us to better understand the original functions they might have had.

The initial close reading of the fifteenth-century painting showing a Roman emperor leads us to brief remarks on the use of censers and incense in the first centuries of Christianity in the Latin West in both public and private realms. After looking into the written sources describing the use of the censers, this chapter turns to the analysis of selected censers. Particularly lavishly ornamented censers with complex iconographical programs

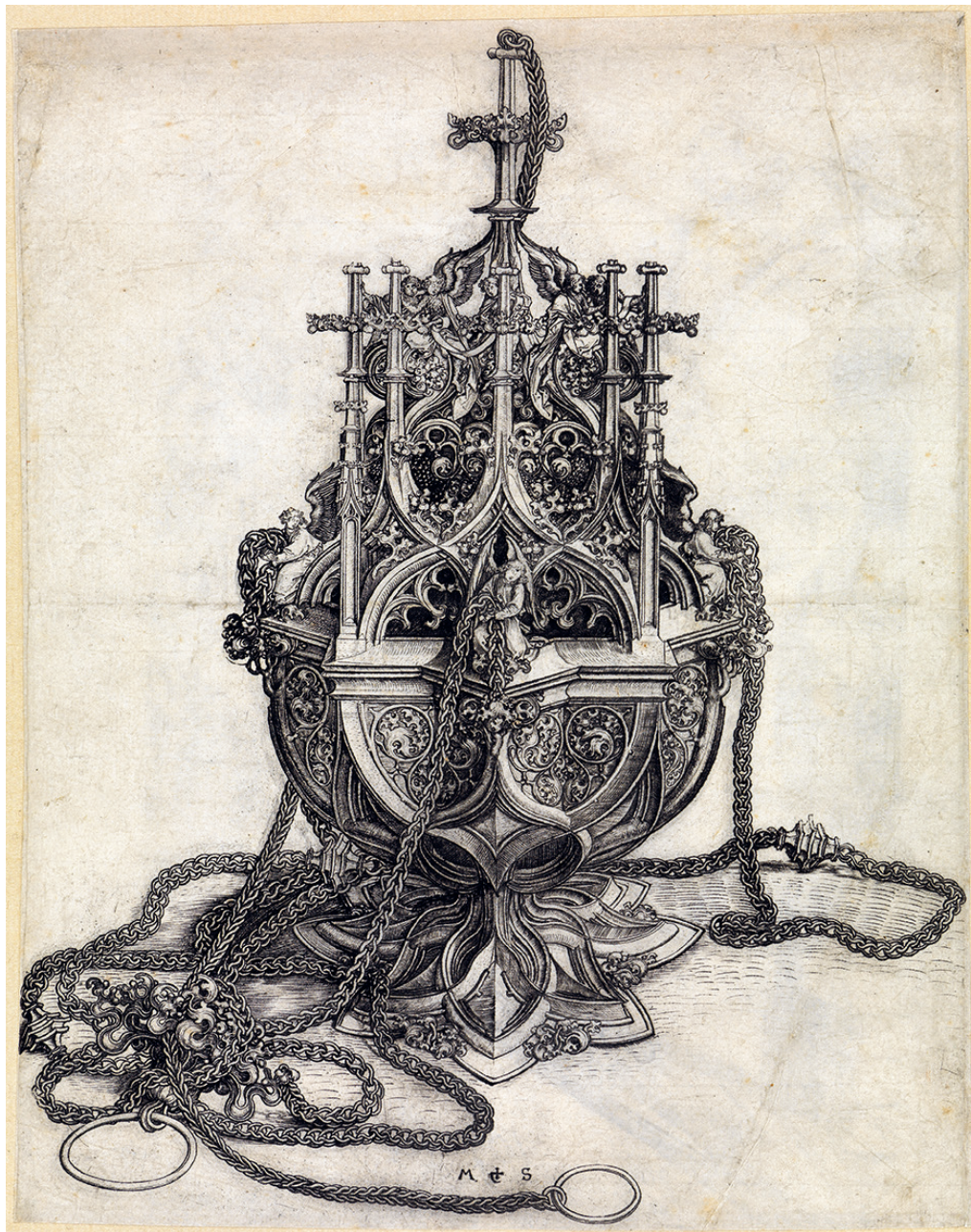


Figure 3
Martin Schongauer, censer,
second half of the 15th
century, copper engraving,
26 × 20.7 cm, Kunsthalle
Karlsruhe, inv. no.1953-37.

Figure 4
After Hugo van der Goes,
Death of the Virgin, last quarter
of the 15th century, panel,
25 × 36 cm, Prague,
Prague Castle Picture Gallery.



have survived from two periods in the Latin West: the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. Therefore, especially during the twelfth century, and again in the fifteenth, such use came to be understood on a metalevel, i.e., the censers refer in their decoration to mankind's relationship between micro-macrocosmos, as well to the actual practices in which they were involved, and this was especially the case for liturgical censers in sacred contexts, whose makers seem to have understood the ways in which their creations navigated and connected object, ritual, space, art, and ideas about creation. Emphasizing the symbolic function of the liturgically used object, these craftspeople invited the user/ beholder of their vessels to transgress thresholds, like the smoke emanating from their artful creations.

Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the censers experience a significant rise in being depicted in the ornamentation of liturgical spaces, they feature prominently in glass painting, are depicted in reliefs on portals, and on tombs, and decorate standing figures embellishing liturgical furniture such as pulpits. This overview about censers in Latin liturgies shows that the relationship between the Roman and the Christian use, and the profane and sacred realms much like in the painted altar wing by Rogier van der Weyden (Figure 1), hinges upon the relationship between vision, smoke, and smell. Connecting these different periods in one painting created a unique kind of visual timewarp. This timewarp enables the beholder of the Flemish altar to travel into the past, not only pre-Christianity but also to switch mentally between Roman/pagan and Christian/sacred religious practices, as well as between religious and profane customs in which the use of incense, and therefore objects like the censer, played an important role.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC USES OF INCENSE ACCORDING TO WRITTEN SOURCES

Van der Weyden's altarpiece, rather than showing an incense offering in its usual medieval pictorial form, a gift from the Magi, presents us with a quite unique scenario that blends time and space. On the one hand, we see incense used by Augustus in the private, domestic, and pagan space of a bed chamber. On the other, this vignette appears on an artwork made for a public Christian altar; it asks us to consider the typological relationship between the pagan past and the liturgy taking place before the painting. While this entanglement of pagan and Christian, private and public, might seem to be at odds with each other, censers have a long history of use between these contexts, as evidenced by extant written sources from Roman and Christian contexts alike.

Censers were made for daily use in private and public rituals such as caring for the ill or tending to the soul of the deceased; they were also deployed in profane and sacred spaces, from churches, chapels, or tombs to households, public monuments, and baths. This multifunctional context contradicts much early scholarship by both historians and art historians, both of whom dealt little with interrogating the origins of censers' uses and often assumed that sacrificing incense was generally condemned by Christians and not practiced in early liturgical performances.³ In Pliny's letter to Trajan that was written during prosecutions of Early Christians in the Roman Empire, for instance, Pliny suggested that people suspected of being Christians were encouraged to venerate images and offer incense and wine:

Those who denied being or having been Christians I thought I should release, since they called upon the gods with a formula recited by me and offered incense and wine before your image, which I had brought for this purpose together with the images of the gods, and also reviled Christ—things which real Christians, it is said, cannot be forced to do.⁴

Figure 5

The extraordinary variety of extant incense burners in various forms (some open, some closed) and made from an array of materials including precious metal suggest that they were, in fact, widely used in both Christian empires succeeding the Roman Empire—the Latin West and in the Greek East—since antiquity.⁵ Many of the early censers, whether in box form with animals on top of them, or those shaped like fruits, heads, or busts, were probably intended for private environments as quality functional objects, rather than for religious services [Figure 5]. This is likely also the case with so-called “smoking pans” with handles or stems.⁶ Especially towards the fifth and sixth centuries we can observe an increase in ornaments on censers that can clearly be identified as Christian, such as the Chi-Rho sign, heads of saints, or inscriptions. However, neither their decoration nor their form tell us how and where they were used.

Figure 6

Egon Wamers has shown in his survey of pre-Carolingian censers that open bowls as well as rarer examples with a hinged top were often outfitted with three chains conjoined in a stable hook [Figure 6].⁷ Regardless of iconography, the types of contexts and performances within which such early examples were used cannot be determined.⁸ What is certain, however, is that many were discovered in subsequent centuries as burial accessories; while this does not necessarily aid in deciphering their initial uses and contexts, it does help to situate their ritual potential.⁹ Less often, one finds vessels in the form of heads. Either faces or masks, usually four on one object, can sometimes be found as adornments of censer basins with and without chains. The preserved Early Christian censers could have been used in both sacred and profane contexts; together with the depictions of their usage, most of them relate to burial practices and ideas of cleansing.

Figure 7

Some censers can indeed be attributed to Early Christian contexts. While the earlier Christian examples often feature hexagonal forms, with saints depicted in medallions on their lateral sides [Figure 7], later examples from the sixth through the twelfth century favored depictions of Christ’s life unfolding as a story around their bodies [Figure 6]. Considering the implications of this shift in form and decoration might also help us to better understand their intended function. Hexagonal forms with figural decoration, common among censers produced up to the sixth century, suggest a strong connection to the architectural spaces in which they were likely used, such as baptisteries, mausolea, martyria, or church buildings with a hexagonal footprint or a rotunda at their core. Such a shape eventually disappeared around the turn of the seventh century and gave way to rounded forms bearing figurative ornamentation, yet another indication that censers engendered reflection upon not only the spaces and ways that they were deployed, but also their status as artwork able to transcend the geographical and temporal.¹⁰



Figure 5
Censer, Italy (?), 11th to
14th century (?), copper alloy,
10 × 11.9 cm, New York,
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Rogers Fund, 1967.



Figure 6
Censer, Byzantium, Syrian (?),
Palestinian (?), 7th century,
cast bronze, engraved,
9.2 × 10.3 cm, Geneva, Musées
d'art et d'histoire. © MAH
Genève. Photo: Bettina Jacot
Descombes.



Figure 7
Hexagonal censer, 582–602,
sheet silver and copper,
13.9 × 9.5 cm, Munich,
Bayerisches Nationalmuseum,
inv. no. 65/46. Photo
no. D96442, Bastian Krack.

Figures 8–9
Figures 10–11

In particular in the twelfth century [Figures 8 and 9], and especially since then (Figures 10 and 11), censers became nodal points in the liturgy with the potential to build bridges between the beholder and the event. Such a role is echoed in their decoration, with certain examples bearing references to the Heavenly Jerusalem and scenes embellishing the lunettes circling the base that show the Old Testament events thought to foretell Christ's sacrifice. Such typologies might be understood to bridge not only time but also the object with the spectators and building surrounding it.

Because of the transgressive properties of the censers themselves, the sparse medieval textual sources like inventories can limit interpretation, but the availability of written records around the use and meaning of incense itself can help us to better understand how the vessels might have been understood. Towards the late eighth century, the Carolingian liturgical use seems to have evolved from the stationary installation of vessels for burning incense towards a more active mobilization of the “moving parts” of Christian liturgy; liturgical spaces, in other words, came to be filled with movement and sound (sung and spoken words) as well as odor and smoke. The fire-safe use of liturgical handheld censers stands in a direct relationship to the “dramatization of the liturgy” in ninth-century France, to use Jungmann's words.¹¹ One decisive moment in this shift was the instruction given in the primary source describing the liturgy to wave censers in a motion drawing a cross and crown in the air.¹² Unlike previously, when they were either placed or hung at prominent places in the church and carried only during celebratory processions, around the turn of the millennium they were more often dramatically swung during mass and had to be frequently opened up to be refilled with fresh incense. An *ordo* from the end of the ninth century describes that two *thuriferari* (“incense-bearers”) with a censer should stand next to the lector while he reads the text of the gospel.¹³

Aligning with this handheld use came, too, innovations in censers' designs. Earlier examples from the fourth through the eighth century had chains fixed to the edge of the bowl, thus precluding the placement of a lid (Figure 6). This particular example must have been stationary because it offered its user no protection against heat and fire and, moreover, such an open composition would have made it impossible to move the censer around or swing it while in use. According to surviving censers and depictions showing their use during the period, the chains on most surviving vessels rarely exceeded double the height of the bowls. These kinds of short chains would have sufficed to carry the burner, but they would not have been ideal for swinging the bowl; they would quickly have become dangerous and caused a fire. Other censers from this earlier period that did have lids connected the upper and lower portions with a hinge (Figure 8).¹⁴ In order to refill these and place new incense on the hot coals, one would have had to open the censer from a particular position, a difficult task to accomplish without burning oneself and certainly clumsy if it were incorporated into the liturgical performance. Finally, the fixed placement of these pre-1100 examples was also a priority when the objects were not in use. While the bases are generally quite heterogeneous, from socle-like rings to sets of feet, almost all censers from this period feature some kind of integrated component at the bottom that allows them to stand in one place.



Figure 8
Goibert-Censer, Cologne,
end of the 12th century,
bronze, 21.6 × 14.2 cm,
Trier, Domschatz, in
Hiltrud Westermann-
Angerhausen, 2014, S. 14.

Figure 9
Reiner of Huy, censer, second
quarter of the 12th century,
bronze, 16 × 10 cm, Lille, Musée
des Beaux-Arts, in *Ornamenta
ecclesiae. Kunst und Künstler
der Romanik* (exh. cat. Cologne,
Schnütgen Museum), ed.
Anton Legner, vol. 1 (Cologne,
1985), 477.



Figure 10
Arnolfo di Cambio, Tomb of
Riccardo Annibaldi, frieze
fragments, marble, Basilica
di San Giovanni in Laterano,
Rome. © Katharina Böhmer.



Figure 11
Arnolfo di Cambio, column,
1265–67, marble, 105 cm,
Florence, Palazzo del
Bargello o del Podesta
gia del Capitano del Popolo.
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MATERIALITY AND MORPHOLOGY

The use, function, and performative capacity of medieval censers was also intimately intertwined with the materials out of which they were made. While most of those that survive are bronze or ceramic, as Westermann-Angerhausen has demonstrated, according to medieval textual sources like inventories, it seems as though precious metals were used most often. Censers made of precious metal were, however, a short-lived phenomenon, their material composition making their status all the more fleeting; they were an easily financially convertible resource, resulting in them being subject to theft and looting; they were also lost to accidents such as a fire. Of the approximately 110 incense burners that appear in treasury inventories of churches between 800 and 1300, Bernhard Bischoff has counted nine golden ones, forty-four silver, and some others that were gilded with an unknown substrate.¹⁵ Only thirteen incense burners of non-precious metal are listed in the inventory, though five of those are specifically mentioned as gilded. Around fifty censers are listed with no material assigned. Several of these, however, correspond in terms of content or context with other silver objects listed in the inventory, so it can be deduced that the majority of these were also made of silver. Since some church inventories were used or made in overlapping contexts, it could well be that some objects are named multiple times; the mention of censers in these sources thus has little statistical value and only helps us to gain a general impression about the types of materials used. It seems as though bronze was the most common material of choice for censers not made of precious metals, as evidenced by their use in rural and urban parish churches across Scandinavia, the Lower Rhine region, Westphalia, and south into Switzerland.¹⁶ There are strikingly few preserved medieval bronze censers, especially in the Catholic regions of Western Europe, since in the early modern period they were often replaced with more expensive works made from the new reserves of precious metal coming from the Americas. Despite this historical and historiographical bias against purportedly lesser materials, there is evidence from early in the Middle Ages that censers' perceived value did not necessarily come from the raw material. In an 811 inventory of Staffelsee, a partially gilt silver censer is described as presented on the altar together with another made of non-precious metal.¹⁷ The latter had an antique pedigree and was probably perceived to have had the same value or status.

The written source that speaks most elaborately and knowledgably about the materiality, shape, and by extension performativity of medieval censers comes from Theophilus Presbyter.¹⁸ The pseudonym veils a craftsman and monk who compiled detailed descriptions of medieval arts and the techniques of their making, from painting, to glass painting, to metalwork. Composed of three volumes with elaborate accompanying prologues, his tract is commonly known under the title the *Schedula diversarum artium* ("List of Various Arts") or *De diversis artibus* ("On Various Arts") and was probably written down between 1100 and 1120. The prologue for the third book shifts the attention of the reader from the ceiling, walls, and windows of the liturgical built environment towards the "vessels of the House of God without which the divine mysteries and services of the offices cannot continue." He continues by listing them: "These are they: Chalices, candlesticks, censers, cruets, shrines, reliquaries for holy relics, crosses, covers for gospel books and the rest of the things which custom necessarily demands for the ecclesiastical rites."¹⁹

After a long description of a goldsmith's workshop, he turns to a description of technologies with so much detail that the author clearly speaks from the perspective of significant experience in executing these techniques and observing their making. The same attention is given to the description of making two censers in chapters 60 and 61, one repoussé and the other cast. Both censers consist of a central core and hang from four chains, with a fifth chain included to lift the lid. The forms, Theophilus notes, take the shape of complex "architecture" and are inhabited by two different types of figurines. In the case of the repoussé censer, adornments come in sets of fours; the four rivers of paradise pour water from their vessels, and below are the four symbols of the evangelists.²⁰ The two stories of a cruciform architectural structure form the upper part of the censer's body and are crowned with a central octagonal tower, whose openings are animated by winged angels. Theophilus concludes this passage with a fictive dialogue with himself as a student, wherein it is discussed that a censer could take a form that would represent Heavenly Jerusalem: "but if anyone wants to put more work into it so as to make the censer of more precious craftsmanship, he can represent the city which the prophet saw on the mountain in the following way."²¹

The architectural form in Theophilus's description of the repoussé censer in chapter 60 also shows strong analogies, as Westermann-Angerhausen has pointed out, to what is probably the most sophisticatedly elaborated cast censer still extant from the Latin West: that crafted by a certain Gozbertus [Figure 8]. The censer surfaced in a parish church in a village in the Ardennes in 1845 and was brought to the cathedral of Trier, where it has been kept since. Although the architectural structure resembles Theophilus's description, the iconography of the Gozbertus censer reveals striking differences. At the core of the Gozbertus censer are scenes related to the Eucharist: Melchizedek with bread and wine; Solomon's throne on the top. The round bottom half, surmounted by a three-leveled structure with a cruciform ground plan, houses thirty-seven figures: twelve prophets on the bottom half, twelve apostles, and eight angels in half figures on the crenellated upper part surround Solomon on his throne at the top. The last five of the thirty-seven figures are represented in scenes of offering: Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Abel with the lamb, and Jacob receiving Isaac's blessing. Prophets and apostles adorn the lower and upper parts, but now with a typological structure, linking figures from the Old and New Testaments. The cast censer emphasizes a strong connection between the cast, connections between liturgy, and the connection of different layers of time (Old and New Testaments).

In juxtaposing Theophilus's passage with the Gozbertus censer in Trier, we begin to see how even detailed written sources describing objects differ to the still extant objects. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that the censer not only linked temporal and liturgical spheres, but rather embodied the combining of the spheres through its own materiality and form. In another contemporary text also written in the twelfth century, Honorius of Autun draws a parallel between the body of Christ and a censer, since both were material entities in their own right as well as vessels. According to Honorius, if the fire inside the censer represented the Holy Spirit within Christ, the incense was his divinity:

And indeed, the thurible [censer] signifies the body of the Lord; the incense, his divinity; the fire, the Holy Ghost. If the thurible is golden, it points to his divinity, which surpasses all things. If it is silver, it shows his humanity, shining with the holiness of all. If it is of copper, it declares his flesh, frail for our sake. If it is of iron, it represents his dead flesh which overcame death in resurrection.

If the thurible has four chains, it signifies that four elements composed the body of the Lord, which was full of the four virtues: prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance. A fifth chain, which separates the thurible into two parts, designates the soul of Christ, which was separated from his body by death. If, however, the thurible has three chains, it signifies that human flesh, a rational soul, and the divinity of the Word become the one person of Christ, and the fourth chain which separates the parts is the power which in death laid down the soul for the sheep. But if the thurible is held by only one chain, it designates that he himself was born of a virgin without stain, and alone is said to be free among the dead.

The ring, which ties all these together, is the divinity by which all these things are contained, and whose majesty is in no sense confined.²²

Honorius interprets the different materials from which a censer could be made and the number of chains as different potential representations of Christ's appearance. The twelfth century is the period in which the materials used for the creation of liturgical objects were often chosen according to an allegorical meaning and interpreted accordingly. Several texts such as the short tracts on "The twelve stones" describing the qualities of twelve different kinds of stone or school texts produced for Latin students, such as Alain de Lille's *Complaint of Nature* or his *Anticlaudian*, employ such iconographic readings of the qualities of materials for understanding the creation of liturgical objects.²³

Particularly emphasized in the written primary sources, and equally striking and characteristic for the use of censers in Latin liturgies, is that ornamentation of the censers themselves evoke the actions in which they were involved and the experiences that they allowed: the sensorial perception of smoke, its smell, and the invisibility caused by the smoke juxtaposed with the material sheen of the metal. For example, the connection of the prayer with the liturgical sacrifice of the Eucharist aligns with the depicted moments of sacrifice on the censers. According to Honorius of Autun "the smoke of the spices represent[s] the prayers of the saints."²⁴ In a long line of clerical writers, Durandus, bishop of Mende, follows in his symbolic interpretation of incense his predecessors such as Gregory the Great and Bede the Venerable; according to his description, the censer was the heart of man that should be "open above to look upward and closed below to retain."²⁵

MERGING MOMENTS OF TIME—CONNECTING SPHERES
THROUGH CENSERS AND SENSES

During the twelfth century, the censer made by Reiner of Huy placed not a king from the Old Testament, but an angel on the tip of the bronze censer with the Hebrews, who refused to worship the statue of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar [Figure 9]. He threw them into a burning furnace, where flames instead spared their flesh:

The angel of the Lord went down with Azarias and his companions into the furnace: and he drove the flame of the fire out of the furnace and made the midst of the furnace like the blowing of a wind bringing dew, and the fire touched them not at all, nor troubled them, nor did them any harm.²⁶

With this biblical verse in mind, one can see how the gilded figures of the three Hebrews and the angel in their midst are surrounded by billowing smoke from the charcoal in the censer, and how the sweet smell of incense ensures the beholder that the three young men are spared from the punishment. The slits in the angel reveal a loss of what would have been the angel's wings. They would have crowned the tip of the censer and contributed further to the dispersion of the smoke emanating from it. The three young men are sitting on a bench framing the censer's upper edge. The roundels decorating the upper half provide openings for the smoke and are filled by birds and beasts. A long inscription surrounds the middle of the censer, which is divided in two parts, and provides the name of Reiner of Huy:

I, Reiner, give this sign so that you give your similar prayers when my death has been accomplished, and I ask that the prayers rise (like the smoke of incense) to the face of Christ.²⁷

Heidi Gearhart has recently pointed our attention to the connection between this censer and the writings of Rupert of Deutz, a monk and exegete who taught in Liège in the twelfth century. According to Rupert, the different gestures and poses depicted on Reiner of Huys's censer represent "different aspects of the holy life: grace, action, and salvation." The three characters are described by Rupert: "Sidrach is my noble one, Misach the one who laughs, and Abdenago the one serving in silence." Gearhart convincingly argues that the censer functioned "as a gift for the sake of his soul when Reiner is gone, it is a sign and request for future spiritual benefits."²⁸ This inscription also emphasizes a strong connection between terrestrial and celestial spheres made through the smoke of incense. The smoke rising upwards from the censer accompanies the prayers, or leads towards a vision, and connects the earthly and the divine realms.

Around the turn of the fourteenth century, there are instances in which censers again became stationary objects, depicted within static media like sculpture, an artistic act that endowed such compositions with the transgressive properties of actual censers from the time. Such a shift is especially visible in a group of marble ensembles sculpted by the Pisano family (Figures 10 and 11). One is a tomb frieze from the circa-1289 tomb of Riccardo Annibaldi showing figures carrying censers in a funerary procession, where we can see in particular a male figure blowing into a carefully half-

opened censer. Because he holds the censer within his hands, the carvers have emphasized its portability; the censer must have been the sort that had a suspended container holding coals within the larger body of the censer, thus preventing the heating of the exterior. The second example, attributed to the school of Nicola Pisano and now in the Bargello National Museum, probably served as an ornamental column supporting a pulpit. Again, we see three male figures, probably clerics or acolytes. One carries a tall bottle, and the other two censors of different types: one has a globular shape with long chains held in the figure's left hand; the other is a half-opened *navicula* held in the figure's right hand. Liturgical acts here are frozen into a columnar triad around which actual people would have moved and carried similar objects. In doubling the performance of censers and juxtaposing the static with the movable, spheres of time and space, of the terrestrial and celestial, seem to come together to produce a new set of order, neither here nor there, timely nor timeless. Smoke, blurred vision, and imagination is both frozen in time and leads the beholder to contemplate the relationship between the timeless and the ephemeral.

The blurring of such purported dichotomies brings us back to the fifteenth-century Northern European context that was our point of departure. Northern Europe in the fifteenth century provides a context in which paintings were conceived to embody a dialectic wherein close observation of the "natural" paradoxically belied painting's own reality and inherently signaled the temporal, divine, and performative expanses beyond it. Censers, we have seen, developed similarly, and their proliferation across paintings of the late Middle Ages suggests something of their status as an instrument able to communicate the blending of different spheres between which censers and painted alike are hinged. In one *Death of the Virgin* painted by the Master of Amsterdam, for example, we see two mourners activating a censer by pulling up the lid and adding new resin to the glowing charcoal, a specific moment that ushers in the contemplation of the mystery of Mary's death: where her body went, and the time(lessness) of her death and eternal life [Figure 12].

Figure 12

Yet as Allison Stielau has articulated around the famed engraving of a censer by Martin Schongauer, we should be wary about too easily ascribing a particular function to censers when depicted in other media, such as prints [Figure 3]. Schongauer, according to Stielau, displayed a "sensitivity to the way that objects can function as more than mere iconographical or anecdotal accessories."²⁹ That the censers in such late medieval paintings were not just pictorial motifs or conceits, but rather active agents in the performative logic both within and beyond the depicted scene, can be observed in another work from the same period [Figure 13]. Made in Bruges around 1490, the painting shows scenes from the life of St. Augustine. In the foreground of the central vignette, depicting him receiving the miter (the sign of his new office), we find three liturgical tools placed on the floor: a bucket, a censer, and a paten? These displaced, movable, and perhaps scattered objects stand in strong opposition to the stationary built environment around them. Unlike stained glass or the depicted altarpiece which remain in situ—much like the painted panel itself—objects like censers here are shown with the potential to move. Moreover, they can move outside of themselves. Smoke here is not depicted visually but implied, the empty space around the censer thus allowing the viewer to imagine through her or his

Figure 3

Figure 13



Figure 12
Master of the Amsterdam
Death of the Virgin, The
Death of the Virgin, ca. 1500,
oil on panel, 57.5 × 76.8 cm,
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.
Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 13
Master of Saint Augustine,
Scenes from the Life of
Saint Augustine of Hippo,
Bruges, ca. 1490, oil, gold,
and silver on wood,
137.8 × 149.9 cm. New York,
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Cloisters Collection. Public
Domain / Creative Commons
Zero (CC0).

sense of sight, and with the mind's eye, how visual acuity is a fleeting tool much like smoke.

Returning to Rogier van der Weyden's painting at the beginning of this contribution, we begin to see the censer not as an iconographical tool, nor as an object in its own right necessarily, but rather an invitation to transgress thresholds [Figure 1]. One of these transgressions was temporal, for instance between the Roman and the medieval, as well as the Roman and Early Christian, as van der Weyden's altarpiece indicated. By staging a sensorial encounter of visual and olfactory impressions, van der Weyden invites the imagination of the beholders of this altar to reflect upon the thresholds between public and private, between profane and public, between here and elsewhere, and between the past, the present, and the future. The censer is the liturgical tool, the (depicted) smoke the visual and sensual hinge, bridging different periods, religions, the inner and the outer space for the beholder.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This chapter benefitted tremendously from the revisions, critique, and comments by Andrew Sears. Furthermore, the discussion with the members of the Global Horizons project, the current guests Ivan Foletti, Carlos Rojas Cocoma, and Aaron Hyman, the members of the Inheritance of Looting project, and the team of the Ivory project lead by Manuela Studer was helpful for restructuring and rewriting a first draft. Elena Filliger was an important support for finding the images and completing the footnotes, for which I am very grateful. This paragraph is based on the excellent description in Kemperdick 2012, 124–25.
- 2 Westermann-Angerhausen 2012, 24.
- 3 Tertullian, arguing in favor of prayers instead of incense, wine, or an animal as sacrifice, a position repeated by Augustine in his commentary on the psalms. See Westermann-Angerhausen 2012, 18. For an overview see Tonnochy 1937.
- 4 Brief X 96: C. Plinius to Emperor Trajan: "qui negabant esse se Christianos aut fuisse, cum praeceunte me deos appellarent et imagini tuae, quam propter hoc iusseram cum simulacris numinum adferri, ture ac uino supplicarent, praeterea male dicerent Christo, quorum nihil posse cogi dicuntur qui sunt re uera Christiani, dimittendos esse putauit. alii ab indice nominati esse se Christianos dixerunt et mox negauerunt."
- 5 The overview in Braun (1932) is still useful; Eder 2000 calls fourteen of the nearly one hundred censers she catalogues from the Late Antiquity and Early Christian periods silver censers.
- 6 See the discussion of Islamic censers with handles used in wealthy private contexts compared to Coptic and Byzantine precedents in Aga-Oglu 1954, 28–31.
- 7 E.g., the six-sided bowl with three chains and hanging hooks in Munich, Prähistorische Staatssammlung, Wamers 1983, figs. 11 and 12, 40; on typical chain-hangers see Wamers 1983, 39–42.
- 8 Pelka 1906, 16, no. 32, fig. 23; Witte 1910, including 140–44; Braun 1932, 609–61; Eder 2000, 3–4.
- 9 See Witte 1910, 105–6; Richter-Siebels 1990, 240–42.
- 10 Eder 2000. Eder's catalogue includes sixteen hexagonal thymateria, eleven made of bronze dating from the fifth to the sixth/seventh century and five made of silver dating from the fifth to the early seventh century, and one seven-sided bronze censer from the sixth/seventh century. The round censers include twenty metal censers made of copper, bronze, or brass dating from the fifth to the eleventh century with no figurative decoration, five round silver censers decorated with busts, and four figurative ornamented cylindrical bronze censers and six undecorated bronze censers of cylindrical shape dating from the fourth to the tenth century.
- 11 This conclusion and the following paragraph follows Westermann-Angerhausen 2014, 47–56.
- 12 Westermann-Angerhausen 2012, 7 and n. 6. Westermann-Angerhausen cites Pfeifer 1997, 65–66 and Jungmann 1958.
- 13 Ordo sec. Rom. N. (Andrieu II, 218 PL 78, 972): "Thuribula per altaria portantur et postea ad nares hominum feruntur et per manus fumus ad os trahitur." See also Jungmann 1958, 1:578 and n. 67.
- 14 See Ross 1962, no. 45–49; on a further example for many: the six-sided vessel with a hinged lid in Berlin, see Kat. Berlin 1983, no. 35, 56 (Victor H. Elbern).
- 15 The following information and paragraph are based on Westermann-Angerhausen 2014; Bischoff 1967; copper is more common than ore, thus in Kremsmünster we find "De aeno deaurata." This list was put together under Abbot Sigimar in the first half of the eleventh century (Bischoff 1967, 47), a censer from the Prüm treasury inventory of 1003 is listed as "Metallinum" (Bischoff 1967, 82).
- 16 On the material iconography, see Lein 1997, 67; 2001, 9–24 and n. 14. In Scandinavia, the particularly high number of objects with secure provenances convincingly demonstrates that preserved censers made of bronze were mainly from parish churches, see Westermann-Angerhausen 2014, 47–56.
- 17 Bischoff 1967, 91: "Inuenimus ibi turabulum argenteum per loca deauratum I pensantem solidos XXX. Alium etiam tura bulum cuprinum antiquum I."
- 18 I owe Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen suggestions and inspiration, for an excellent analysis of the censers in the *Schedula*. See Westermann-Angerhausen 2016.
- 19 Theophilus Presbyter 1986 [1961], prolog, 3rd book; see also Speer 2013 and Gearheart 2017.
- 20 Westermann-Angerhausen has repeatedly emphasized the evident analogies to surviving censers showing similar iconography with the juxtaposition of Evangelist symbols and the personifications of the rivers of paradise. Westermann-Angerhausen 2016. Most of the examples discussed by her are preserved at the Schnütgen Museum, originate from Westphalian or Rhenish churches, date to the twelfth century, and are made of bronze (with the exception of a circa-1200 silver censer preserved in Trebnice).
- 21 Theophilus Presbyter 1986, 112, referring to Apoc. 21.
- 22 Honorius Augustodunensis, *Gemma Animae*, PL 172, cap. 12, "De thuribulo. Thuribulum namque significat corpus Dominicum; incensum, eius diuinitatem; ignis, Spiritum sanctum. Si est aureum, signat eius diuinitatem omnia praecellentem; si argenteum, demonstrat ipsius humanitatem omnium sanctitate nitentem; si cupreum, declarat eius carnem pro nobis fragilem; si ferreum, insinuat eius carnem mortuam in resurrectione mortem superantem. Si quatuor lineas habet thuribulum, significat quatuor elementis constare corpus Dominicum, quod quatuor virtutibus, prudentia, fortitudine, iustitia, temperantia fuit plenum. Quinta linea, quae thuribulum abinvicem separat, designat animam Christi, quae se morte a corpore sequestraverat. Si autem tribus lineis continetur, significat quod humana caro, et anima rationalis, et uerbi diuinitas una persona Christi efficitur, quarta quae partes dividit, est potestas quae animam pro ovibus in morte posuit. Si uero tantum una linea sustentatur, designat quod ipse solus absque sorde a uirgine generatur, et solus liber inter mortuos praedicatur. Circulus, cui haec omnia innectuntur, est diuinitas a qua haec omnia continentur, cuius maiestas nullo termino clauditur."
- 23 The twelve stones are the subject of several anonymous texts dating to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including Bern, Burgerbibliothek A0091-11, A0092-26, and A0092-27; Cod. 410; Cod. 416. For a good overview, see Meier 1975.
- 24 Honorius Augustodunensis, *Gemma Animae*, PL 172, sp. 546. "Post haec thuribulum accipiens, altare thurificat in figura angeli qui in Apocalypsi cum aureo thuribulo altari astiterat, de quo fumus aromatum in conspectu Domini ascendebat. Quia Christus magni consilii angelus in ara crucis se pro nobis obtulit cuius corpus thuribulum Ecclesiae fuit. Ex quo Deus Pater suauitatem odoris accepit et propitius mundo existit. Fumus aromatum, orationes sanctorum sunt, quae super aram Christum per ~haritatis odorem, vel illuminationis Spiritus Sancti carbones incense ad Deum ascendunt."
- 25 Tonnochy (1937) has shown the importance of Durandus's *Rationale diuinorum officiorum* for the medieval use of censers. Durandus, *Rationale diuinorum officiorum*, lib. 4, ch. 10, 1: "diaconus postea thuribulum accipit, ut incenset Episcopum, vel sacerdotem moraliter instruit, quod si digne uolumus incensum orationis offerre, turibulum Incarnationis debemus tenere ... per thuribulum enim Verbum accipitur incarnatum." Then follows the symbolism of the chains, copied almost word for word from the *De Sacra Altaris Sacrificio* of Innocent III, about I 190. "Per thuribulum autem cor humanum competenter notatur, quod debet esse apertum superius ad suspiciendum, et clausum inferius ad retinendum. ... Sicut enim thus in igne thuribuli suauiter redolet, et sursum ascendit; ita opus bonum, vel oratio ex charitate, ultra omnia thimiamata fragrat. Adhuc turibulum cum incenso corpus Christi suauitatis odore plenum, carbones Spiritum sanctum, thus boni operis odorem designant. ... Thuriferarius uero ceroferarios et alios

antecedit, ad notandum quod thuris significatio sanctis utriusque Testamenti communis est. Per thuribulum. autem cor humanum competenter notatur, quod debet esse apertum superius ad suspiciendum, et clausum inferius ad retinendum, habens ignem charitatis et thus devotio- nis, sive suavissimae orationis, seu bonorum exemplorum sursum tendentium, quod per fumum inde resultantem notatur. Sicut enim thus in igne thuribuli

suaviter redolet, et sursum ascendit; ita opus bonum, vel oratio ex charitate, ultra omnia thimiamata fragrat. Adhuc turibulum cum incenso corpus Christi suavitatis odore plenum, carbones Spiritum sanctum, thus boni operis odorem designant.” Durandus, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, lib. 4, ch. 6, 6.
26 See Gearhart 2013.
27 “Hoc ego Reinerus do signu(m) quid michi vestris exequias similes debetis morte

potito et reor esse preces veras (vras?) timiamata xp(ist)o.” Translation by Heidi C. Gearhart, *ibid.*, 106.
28 *Ibid.*, 117.
29 Stielau 2014, 32.

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