

The History of Incense

Many and I mean many years ago, someone somewhere (presumably a caveman) needed to keep the flame going in his fire pit. So, in quickness he grabbed anything he could. Amongst the sticks, there were various leaves and woodland debris. Hastily, he threw all of his findings into the fire. The aroma that swirled all around him was quickly intoxicating. The earliest form of incense was born. A new sensation was started.

Since the beginning of time incense has played a significant role in the human existence. Ever since the beneficial invention of fire, mankind has found that many materials release an odor when burnt, some very pleasing, and others not so much. These aromatic scents often accentuate the senses. Some experts believe that the burning of items such as cedar, berries, roots, and resins gave us our first true incense. Incense relics that are thousands of years old have actually been found all over the world. So, it is pretty safe to bet that incense has been a part of many different cultures for a very long time. It is because of this information that the exact origin of incense cannot be traced.

The basics of incense are really quite simple. It is a combination of aromatic elements and a heat source. Incense has always had ties to the religious and medical aspects of various cultures, and still does today. The name Incense is actually derived for the Latin verb *incendere*, meaning to burn.

Incense is believed to be an essential element in any offerings made to the gods. Therefore, the trading market for these herbs and spices was very popular. The market demanded only the best scents and the need for prompted the market to consider these items an asset. For many of the early years before Christ, Frankincense was actually worth more than silver and gold's value. The use of Frankincense can be traced all the way back to the Ancient Egyptians, Persians, and Assyrians. This popular fragrance and its uses were learned by the Romans. This knowledge was gained through the contact that they had with the Eastern nations. The Frankincense trade thrived for some fifteen hundred years. The peak of this time was during the Roman Empire.

The decline of the Frankincense trade occurred shortly after this time. This was because of the heavy taxes of the trade routes, and the fall of the Roman Empire. Simply the demand was no longer great enough.

Frankincense is now more commonly known because it was one of the gifts brought to baby Jesus in celebration of his birth. The three Wise men brought three gifts: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. The gifts of Gold and Frankincense were considered "fit for a King". The Myrrh, which is bittersweet, symbolized the new Messiah's fate.

Incense has always been a major contender in scared traditions and in that of healing/cleansing, mood setting (even being considered the forefather of aromatherapy), and even purification. Obviously, considering the era, scented aromas then became dedications to the gods.

It was believed that sending pleasurable scents would be very satisfying to the gods, and in return, the wishes and prayers of the sender would be granted. The burning of incense was also extremely popular after death.

Another interesting fact of incense is that when the tomb of Tutankhamun was found, they made an amazing discovery. In the Valley of the Kings at Thebes, archeologists found huge quantities of oils, perfumes, and you guessed it, incense around his mummified body.

Religious documents prove that these incense herbs and leaves were considered gifts from the various gods. They considered the scents to be divine grace.

Incense use also has many sacred traditions that are still present today. The Native Americans are just one example of the many traditional cultures still using incense as part of their rituals, especially the purification ceremonies. They have used their smudging techniques for thousands of years. Smudging is the name given to the sacred smoke bowl blessing. This bowl consists of various herbs and resins. The Smudging ritual also pertains to all spaces and tools that will be used for various ceremonies. It is very important.

In the aspect of Smudging, the aromatic combinations of these materials are used to cleanse any negative energies, heal the sick, bless the masses, and attract positive forces to the area. Some of the more popular plants and herbs used are: Cedar, Sage, Sweetgrass, and Tobacco. Each of the various elements has a specific energy that is related or tied to it. These herbs and plants are also known as "Sacred Plant Helpers".

In present day religions, incense also has a very important relevance. It is used in preparation of prayer and also for rituals. For many Eastern Churches incense is sacramental. The burning of incense today still has the same meaning that our ancestors believed. Incense burning symbolizes faith.

The science behind incense and its effects on the human body are very interesting. Every time we smell something, our brains are deciphering on a subconscious level. Some of the questions it is trying to solve would be: Do I recognize this smell? Or "Is this smell pleasing to me?" All of this information is then stored in the limbic system of the brain. In fact, every scent you have ever smelled is located here, including the mental notes of responses and reactions to that scent. The aromatic smell that burning incense releases stimulates the olfactory nerves. This stimulation is able to produce effects of various states such as physical, emotional, and psychological based on the fragrance. Hence Aromatherapy.

Incense and Aromatherapy go hand in hand. With the correctly scented incense, you can actually use its healing powers to: reduce and calm anxiety, stress, and fear, alleviate insomnia, accelerate healing. You can also help stimulate and renew energy, cleanse the atmosphere, and prepare for meditation and prayer.

The ingredients of incense actually exist in many different forms. It can be raw woods, chopped herbs, pastes, and powders. It can also be in liquid form. When the finer powders and pastes are used for incense, a neutral binding additive is mixed with the other ingredients. This additive helps to hold the incense together in a more traditional form such as a stick. This additive also helps in two other ways; it extends the burn time and allows for an even burn.

Incense was introduced to China by Buddhist monk's in the year 200 CE. China was the first to introduce incense in stick form, also known as Joss-stick. This occurred during the Ming Dynasty 1348-1644. Shortly after this, incense was commonly used by the masses, and it was no longer restricted to just medical and spiritual rituals.

Incense became so vastly popular and in Japan, it soared. They were so devoted to incense that they actually had entire schools committed to the creation and making of incense. The Japanese referred to this practice as Koh- Do, translated as the way incense. The Incense cones were actually invented by the Japanese. These new style incenses were revealed to the rest of us in the late 1800's. In fact, a fun little tid-bit is that the incense was actually showcased at the World's Fair in Chicago, Illinois.

As with any scented product, the first consideration is the scent throw. However, when it comes to incense, scent takes second place. This is because for many incenses, scent throw does not become evident until the incense is burnt. The first consideration for many incense creators is the item that will house the scent, ie stick, cone, herbs, etc.

Respectfully speaking, incense in its earliest relevance was related to the 5 elements relating medicinal purpose with actual plant parts. Here is a list of the five elements and the some correlating fragrance of standard incense used by the Buddhist monks.

