

PRESS RELEASE

# FRAGRANCES OF CHINA

THE CULTURE OF INCENSE IN IMPERIAL TIMES

**MUSÉE CERNUSCHI**  
MUSÉE DES ARTS DE L'ASIE  
DE LA VILLE DE PARIS

**EXHIBITION**  
**9 MARCH –**  
**26 AUGUST 2018**

**INFORMATION**  
**WWW.CERNUSCHI.PARIS.FR**



Chen Hongshou, *Woman perfuming her sleeves over a incense burner*, Ming (1368-1644), 129 x 47 cm (detail). © Shanghai Museum

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PARFUMS



# PERFUMES OF CHINA

## THE CULTURE OF INCENSE IN IMPERIAL TIMES

### CURATORS

Eric Lefebvre, director of the Musée Cernuschi  
Li Zhongmou, vice director of the Shanghai Museum

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[www.cernuschi.paris.fr](http://www.cernuschi.paris.fr)



*Eighteen scholars*, Anonymous, ink and colours on silk, 134.2 x 76.6 cm. Ming dynasty (14th-17th centuries AD), Shanghai Museum © Shanghai Museum

This exhibition presents a novel approach of Chinese civilisation through the exploration of the art of incense and perfume in China from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bringing together close to **110 art and archaeology objects together for the first time**, it will take you on a journey through Chinese civilisation.

**A selection of ceramics, drawings, bronzes, and paintings from the collections of the Shanghai Museum is presented for the first time in Europe alongside some twenty pieces from the Musée Cernuschi collections.** These exceptional loans will immerse visitors in an original and sensorial discovery, punctuated with olfactory experiences throughout the chronological progression of the exhibition.

Endowed with increasing symbolic qualities through the ages, perfume provides a fitting outlook on many aspects of Chinese culture. **From its significance in liturgical practices to its association with the art de vivre of intellectual circles, incense has given rise to a great variety of artistic productions. From incense burners to incense tables, the history of perfume in China is an opportunity to explore some of the most**

**superb artistic creations in a great variety of mediums.** The pieces presented here will give visitors a broad overview of Chinese craftsmanship, from bronzesmiths to lacquer painters to bamboo sculptors. Lastly, a collection of works by the greatest painters, such as Chen Hongshou and Qiu Ying, depicts elegant ladies, hermits and scholars and their relationship to incense, whether used for toiletry, meditative, or ritualistic purposes.

The exhibition is supported by Dior Parfums and presents the exclusive creations of its perfumer François Demachy.

*This exhibition was made possible thanks to the generous collaboration of the Shanghai Museum.*



### AN HISTORICAL AND OLFACTORY VISIT

#### Incense and ritual practices from the Han to the Tang dynasties (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 9<sup>th</sup> century AD)

The first part of the exhibition is devoted to the early years of incense use in China, mainly during practices closely linked to ancestor worship, the idea of the afterlife, and Taoist and Buddhist beliefs.

From the start of the Han dynasty (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), proof that odoriferous substances were burned among sacred or non-religious contexts is attested by the prevalence of incense burners among funerary objects. The appearance of the *boshan lu*, a incense burner in a shape evocative of a mythical mountain, points to the emergence of new practices and beliefs. The use of incense during Buddhist ceremonies reveals its ritual and symbolic functions, and opens up onto the evocation of the Silk and Perfume Roads.

The spread of Buddhism was highly instrumental in the use of incense in China since the first centuries of our era.

Scenes sculpted and painted at the time show us how perfume played a major part in ceremonies, during which it was placed at the feet of statues of Buddha. The adoption of Buddhism by the imperial court led to the creation of vast sanctuaries and to the organisation of ceremonies in which incense was particularly instrumental in the representation of imperial piety.

#### Perfume and scholarly culture under the Song and Yuan dynasties (10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries)

The blossoming of scholarly culture under the Song dynasty (10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century) resulted in considerable growth in the culture of perfume by promoting the use of incense within literati practices. In addition to becoming the subject of poetic evocations, incense also prompted a wealth of expert literature on its components and production, and was considered a medium for meditation by scholars. The introduction of incense in the material culture of the elites gave rise to a number of creations, particularly ceramics, with the renowned kilns of the Song and Yuan eras outdoing each other in the elegance of their incense burners and incense boxes and vases.



Painting depicting the burning of incense, round silk fan, Anonymous, 24 x 43 cm, Yuan dynasty (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), Shanghai Museum © Shanghai Museum



Incense burner with pair of birds, bronze, Han dynasty (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), 19.4 x 9.25 cm, Shanghai Museum © Shanghai Museum



Openwork tripod incense burner, 5-coloured ceramic and gold, Jingdezhen oven, Ming dynasty (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), 8 x 15.5 cm, Shanghai Museum © Shanghai Museum

### **Lifestyle and incense use under the Ming dynasty (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

The literati uses of incense, which appeared under the Song and were codified under the Ming, deeply influenced the way perfume was appreciated in China. Conversely, incense became inherent to the image of the scholar, as can be seen in the many paintings depicting pavilions and gardens used as backdrops for literary and artistic activities, where incense is ubiquitous alongside painting, calligraphy, music, and chess.

Since the Han era, perfumes were used both for spiritual and non-religious purposes, and played a specific part in both women's and men's toilettes. These customs lived on throughout the following dynasties, particularly Ming (1368-1644), during which the culture of incense was evoked in the paintings, ceramics, goldwork, lacquerware, and jades presented in the three rooms respectively devoted to lifestyle, private worship, and personal care.

A painting by Chen Hongshou sums up the spirit of the time: it shows an elegant lady reclining on a bed and spreading out her sleeves over a duck-shaped incense burner. This poetic masterpiece also serves as a very precise evocation of the use of perfume in Ancient China.

### **Perfume at court and in scholarly studios under the last dynasty (14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

From the Song era onwards, the emperor's birthday marked the occasion for incense offerings, which played a specific role in ceremonies associated with longevity wishes. Under the Ming dynasty, imperial manufactures became instrumental in the increased production of Jingdezhen porcelain. Under the Qing, incense became so important within the imperial system that it came to be considered as state property and a fund of money.

This section of the exhibition shows the evolution of tastes at court through decorative diversity, be it floral or animal, or of Buddhist or Taoist inspiration. The era was also marked by the appearance of new forms of objects made to hold incense sticks and perfume hair and hats, while the principles of furniture specifically designed to burn incense and conceived under the Ming dynasty became a cornerstone of incense-burning practices in all homes.

#### **An olfactory visit**

Olfactory experiences are available to visitors throughout their visit, during which they will discover ancient incense recipes from the greatest eras of Chinese history up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Six dynasties, Tang, Song, Ming and Qing.

François Demachy, Perfumer - Creator for Dior Parfums, created reinterpretations of perfumes based on ancient Chinese formulations translated and selected by the exhibition's scientific advisor, Frédéric Obringer (CNRS). Several points of information, such as the origin of the recipe, its main ingredients, and the method used to burn the incense, are presented alongside them to complete and document the olfactory exploration.

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# FRAGRANCES OF CHINA

## THE CULTURE OF INCENSE IN IMPERIAL TIMES

### Practical information

**MUSÉE CERNUSCHI**  
Musée des Arts de l'Asie  
de la Ville de Paris  
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75008 Paris  
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#### Opening hours

Open every day 10.00 – 18.00,  
except Mondays and some  
public holidays.  
Admissions close at 17.30.  
Late night visits on Friday  
until 21.00.

#### Entrance fees

Full price: 9 €  
Reduced rate: 7 €

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youth 17 and under, disabled  
visitors and their assistant.

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collections.

#### Access

Villiers or Monceau Metro stations  
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## MUSÉE CERNUSCHI

### MUSÉE DES ARTS DE L'ASIE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS

The rich history of the Musée Cernuschi since it opened to the public in 1898 has brought together a collection of nearly 14,000 objects from China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea. While it is widely known as a reference institution on the art and archaeology of Ancient China, it has also established itself as a privileged centre for the exploration of Far Eastern art and of the cultural exchanges that link China to Japan, Korea and Vietnam. At a time when its artistic scenes are flourishing, the Musée Cernuschi offers an approach of contemporary artists and works informed by our knowledge of their cultural context.

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