

Tracing the Past and Present: A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Incense Burner Culture with a Case Study of a Qing Dynasty Copper Ding-Style Incense Burner with Gold and Silver Inlay

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The Chinese incense burner, a cornerstone of material culture, embodies distinguished craftsmanship and reflects sociocultural evolution across ritual, religious, and domestic life. Through analysis of a Qing-dynasty copper Ding-style censer with gold and silver inlay, this paper examines its antique form, masterly technique, and decorative motifs. It demonstrates how such objects synthesize the cultural ethos of the Kang-Qian era by uniting Ming-Song literati classicism with consummate imperial artistry. This case study thus provides a focused lens on the critical interplay between elite taste and technical execution in the history of Chinese craftsmanship.

Keywords: Chinese incense burner, Ding-style censer, Qing Dynasty crafts, gold and silver inlay, material culture

Introduction: The Incense Burner—A Cultural Bridge Connecting Ritual and Custom

The practice of incense burning in China originated not from mere olfactory pleasure but from ancient beliefs in nature worship and rituals for communicating with spirits. Early records in classical texts such as the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents* describe acts like “taking mug wort and offering fat” or “burning firewood on the Altar of Heaven,” where rising smoke was regarded as a medium bridging heaven, earth, deities, and humankind. Initially, the vessels used for these purposes were simple stoves for burning oracle bones or sacrificial offerings. As society evolved, the use of incense expanded from state-level ceremonies into aristocratic life and religious practices, eventually permeating the daily activities of scholars and common households.

It was during this process that the incense burner emerged as a specialized vessel. Owing to its unique function and profound spiritual significance, it has become a brilliant gem in the history of Chinese arts and crafts, serving as a tangible link between sacred rituals and secular customs.

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Formal Evolution: From Communicating with Heaven to Scholarly Elegance

Archetypes and Foundations: Pre-Qin and Han Dynasties

While Neolithic pottery vessels, such as *gui* and *dou*, may be considered precursors, their role in incense burning was likely subsidiary. Specialized bronze vessels designed specifically for burning aromatic substances were fully developed during the peak of Bronze Age culture. Their forms were later unified and standardized under imperial authority for ritual use. A classic emblem of this era arose from the myth of the “Islands of the Immortals,” a belief famously pursued by Emperor Qin Shihuang and later symbolized during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. This symbolism culminated in masterfully crafted gilt bronzeworks known as *Boshan* censers.

Integration and Synthesis: Wei-Jin to Sui-Tang Periods

Following the Han Dynasty, new trends were catalyzed by cultural imports along the Silk Road. Buddhist tradition, brought by traders and monks, introduced rituals of offering incense to the Buddha, which necessitated specialized equipment. This led to the popularity of handheld portable incense burners, frequently depicted in frescoes illustrating official ceremonies.

Meanwhile, wealthy households employed an increasingly varied array of models. These included older *Boshan* types as well as newer forms, such as the “round-belly on a flaring cylindrical foot” design. A general aesthetic preference shifted towards simplified silhouettes, moving away from the complex mythological narratives of the Han in favour of functional, minimalist styles well-suited to mediation and the mobile lifestyles of traveling preachers.

Culmination and Refinement: The Literati Influence of the Song Dynasty

The inward turn of Song dynasty culture and the ascendance of the scholar-official class led to a profound transformation in the incense burner’s function and aesthetics. Incense burning was elevated to one of the “Four Arts of the Scholar’s Study” alongside tea tasting, painting, and flower arranging. Shedding much of its earlier religious and mystical associations, the incense burner became an essential object of scholarly refinement, aiding meditation and artistic inspiration within the private space of the study.

Synthesis Elaboration: Ming-Qing Eras

Ming Qing period synthesis technical elaboration incense burner history and patrons mastered integrated aesthetic previous pushing decorative new complexity refinement early landmark production censers reign perceived shortage imperial batches burners cast imported metal alloys (暹罗–Thailand) based designs referenced from classic typology enduring paradigm influenced centuries. Craftsmanship, Qianlong intensified ornate splendor virtuosity. The era was valued for its magnificent intricacy and unprecedented diversity of materials, which extended beyond ceramic and jade to include bamboo and ivory. Concurrently, formal innovations flourished in vessel shapes.

A Case Study: A Qing Dynasty Gilt Bronze Inlaid Tripod Censer

A representative example is offered by a finely cast mid-Qing period bronze censer (overall height c.a. $\approx 26\text{cm}^2$)



Figure 1. Example A Qing Gilt Bronze Inlay Decor Tripod-Type Censer Note Author collection.

This object exemplifies the conscious archaism (*fanggu*) of the Qing period, reviving the classic form of a Zhou dynasty ritual bronze *ding*. Its design is characterized by three slender, slightly splayed columnar legs, which support a compact, globular body, a vertically straight neck, and a pair of prominent, upward-projecting U-shaped loop handles (*er*).

The primary decorative focus is a gilt zone on the lower body. This area features an intricate grid pattern into which silver wire has been meticulously inlaid. The compartments of the grid are filled with *huiwen* (key-fret) motifs, which are further accentuated by the addition of sinuous, inlaid golden dragon designs. The entire surface exhibits a soft, even patina of malachite-green and earth-brown hues, a result of natural ageing over time, possibly due to either burial conditions or prolonged indoor preservation.

As a whole, this censer stands as testament to the superlative craftsmanship of a high-level, court-associated workshop. It perfectly encapsulates the technical ambition and syncretic aesthetic ideals of the era, where virtuoso skills were employed to create objects that harmoniously blended faithful antiquarian models with contemporary Qing sensibilities into a magnificent synthesis.

Conclusion

The Chinese incense burner chronicles China's cultural evolution. A Qing Ding-style burner, fusing the literati's reverence for antiquity with supreme craftsmanship, epitomizes this journey. More than a functional object, it is a microcosm of the Kang-Qian era, where cosmology, scholarship, and imperial ambition converged.

As this study affirms, such artifacts crystallize the dialogues of tradition and innovation that define Chinese history.

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