

how to spend it

A perfume blogger on the scents that stirred the senses of the Magi

Gold, frankincense and myrrh continue to resonate today



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I'm intrigued by how the contemporary houses continue to interpret and reinterpret ingredients that have exercised a pull over perfumers since ancient times. Frankincense and myrrh – and, conceptually at least, the “gold” note – have been valued (and not just at the holiday season) since before Cleopatra and Antony frolicked along the Nile. And what's clear from the sheer number of fragrances that include one or more of these three notes is that their sensual appeal hasn't diminished one bit.

Gold's monetary value is self-evident; but its hypnotic, dazzling associations are what perfumers prize. Most “gold” accords fall in the realm of rich oriental notes: spice, amber, balsam, tobacco, vanilla. Perfumer Ralf Schwieger thinks Guerlain Nahéma evokes molten gold with its warm oriental accord of tonka bean, sandalwood and vanilla. Isabelle Doyen – who actually considered the gifts of the Magi as an inspiration for a fragrance trio in the Annick Goutal collection – rendered gold as a voluptuous amber accord in Ambre Fétiche. But floral notes can also suggest a precious-metal effect: in Christian Dior's J'Adore (third picture), Calice Becker wove rose and violet, freesia and orange blossom together to create what I think of as a luminous, “golden” note.

The dry balsamic scent of frankincense – a resinous material from Boswellia trees native to the east – conjures visions of censers, chants and burning candles. As a perfumery note, it's remarkably versatile, and plays well both with the dark heft of an oriental fragrance and the sparkle of a citrus cologne. I love how Atelier Cologne Bois Blonds pairs the brightness of incense with citrus; and Hermès Eau de Gentiane Blanche (first picture) uses frankincense to support an accord that reminds me of green stems and ivy leaves. It can impart a soft glow to spices, vanilla, and patchouli as well; Caron Parfum Sacré's spicy roses are modulated by the balsamic dryness of incense, creating a sophisticated perfume that I'd wear in the office or to a dinner party. And Comme des Garçons' Incense Series Avignon mixes frankincense with sombre amber and woods, which I'd wear if I were really going for a midnight mass feel.

Myrrh's provenance (a gum resin obtained from Commiphora myrrha trees native to Yemen and Somalia) is as exotic as its actual scent (a mélange of liquorice, burnt wood, and warm bread). A few millennia ago it was so esteemed as both perfume and medicine that its value by weight was equal to that of gold. These days it's less expensive, but just as powerful – even

dominating – as a fragrance note. But I think it's sometimes precisely the element needed to convey a languorous sensuality. Donna Karan Gold wraps white lily in it to give sensual heft to a fresh floral; and a hint of myrrh in Annick Goutal Grand Amour (second picture) likewise transforms sunny mimosa, jasmine and honeysuckle with a bit of seductive darkness.

But not all myrrh interpretations are so heavy lidded and exotic. Among my favourites is Serge Lutens' La Myrrhe; I love how, despite having comparatively a huge dose of it, it somehow retains an astonishing radiance. Through the careful balance of myrrh, aldehydes (aroma materials that give lift and effervescence) and a lush white floral, the balsamic darkness of this mysterious, ancient note is as transparent as the finest of silks.

Victoria Frolova has been writing her perfume blog, www.boisdejasmin.com, since 2005. It began as a hobby – her interest in perfume had been kindled while growing up in a family of chemical engineers – but it quickly turned into a full-time undertaking. Her blog is so-called because, she says, “the scent that never fails to move me is the aroma of jasmine in the warm evening air.”