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# The History Of Frankincense And Omani Scents



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**Aftab H. Kola follows his nose to the Land of Frankincense to enlighten us on the fragrant cultural history of traditional Omani incense burners.**



For centuries, the southern reaches of Arabia have been famously fragrant. Greek, Latin and Arab authors penned tales of a land redolent with scent and spice. Oman's Dhofar region has UNESCO status as the 'Land of Frankincense' and is known for the high-quality golden of its sweet golden resin, while bukhoo (oud) – the indelible scent of Arabia – and the smoke of other rich varieties of incense can be found in every souq or local marketplace and in every Omani home, contained in a humble vessel with a long and equally rich history.

### **Scent of the Sultanate**

In Oman, the fragrances of frankincense and bukhoo permeate the air – be it in government buildings, commercial establishments, and shops. Omani homes are censured daily, with colourful traditional incense

burners smoldering to emanate their sweet, fulfilling fragrance throughout the space.



Incense burners (also known as majmar) have even been immortalized in sculpture across the capital and are part and parcel of Omani tradition. Considered a regular household item, Oman's thriving incense industry has also flamed the flourishing of local businesses who craft the vessels in which it burns.

A sector which initially identified as a home-based industry has now broadened in scope with investment in resources that recognize the value of the craft's history and the socio-economic returns it generates for local craftspeople in a Sultanate that has always been supportive of its local craft industries.

A traditional clay receptacle called a 'censer' or 'brazier', majmar designs are usually decorated with engravings and adorned in bright colours, with motifs differing according to the various region in which they're made.

### **Blending culture and craft**

Oman's craft traditions reflect the social, cultural, and environmental ethos of the nation, with the success of the local incense industry an example of its thriving grassroots economy. Also known as almebkharah, majmar production forms an important strand in this craft heritage. These elegantly designed clay vessels have a firm surface that protects the coal, and an open space between the metal base and burning area. The traditional burner sits firmly on the surface, buttressed with sides that prevent the coal from falling out.

Although improvements to its design have evolved over the centuries, more recent refinements have been mostly of the decorative variety. Placing the golden frankincense crystals or bukhoo in the burner elicits a refreshing waft of delicate fragrance. While some recent versions have been outfitted with electrical fittings that enable the user to plug it in and do away with the bother of live coals or special start-up bricks, the old ways in which Omani majmar are crafted are as old as the mountains.

Using clay extracted from the soil of local villages, the art is similar to pottery-making, with the majmar prepared

over outdoor kilns and ovens fired with the fuel of dried palm fronds.

### Early designs



At Sumhurum Archeological Park in Dhofar, international and local archaeologists were able to retrieve simple round limestone incense burners with three or four legs and the classical small cubic or rectangular basins. Ancient incense burners had incised decorations on the surface walls, and stone incense burners came in tub shapes with truncated pyramidal bases that supported a parallel piped tub with various religious motifs and symbols on the outside. Though these early incense burners were of a rough exterior, function-wise they were very effective – with common materials of the day such

as clay, limestone (found in the Dhofar region), and basalt often used.

Majmars are a common market item in Oman; the best place to buy these traditional vessels are at the souqs – with Muttrah Souq showcasing them in a variety of designs. Popular souvenirs among tourists to the Sultanate, different variations on design can include a cup-shaped silver bowl fixed to a silver tray and topped with a perforated hinged silver lid that allows the fragrant smoke to permeate the area.

### **Defining landmarks**



Those with a keen eye have probably noted more than a few large-scale majmar sculptures hidden in plain sight



around the capital in an effort to reinterpret the Sultanate's cultural traditions in new ways. The most prominent is a scaled-up model of a traditional incense burners that stands sentinel on the hillside of Al Riyam Park and is staple sight along the Muttrah Corniche. The former majmar roundabout at Wadi Kabir was another testament to tradition but was sadly brought down a decade ago to pave the way for a fly-over.

### **History meets innovation**

In recent years, there have been attempts to lend a contemporary touch to the otherwise traditional Omani incense burner. A smart incense burner developed by Omani entrepreneur Khalid Al Harthy, called Teeb Incense Burner, was made available in the markets a few years back. It claims to be fully safe, of high quality and operates automatically with three different timing settings, such as quick use, intervals, and fixed time.

While innovation will surely continue to bring forth the new, age-old traditions still hold strong – and the custom of welcoming guests with a warming waft of fragrant scent will always remain one of the most treasured hallmarks of Omani culture and hospitality.