

# AWAY WITH WORDS

## SMELLS LIKE...?

A sense of smell is powerful. It can act as a survival mechanism; a bad smell can warn us we are in danger. A sense of smell can help us to instantly recall memories and emotions. Imagine the sensory experience of using these large Chinese incense burners.

### Talking points

Examine the decoration to find motifs and meanings.

### Creative Challenges

Sensory writing, character and symbol creation.

### KEY WORK



Incense burners, Mid-Qing Dynasty, probably Qianlong period (1736-1795)

# INCENSE BURNERS

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**DATE** Mid-Qing Dynasty c. 1736-1795  
**SIZE** 167.6 cm x 50.8 cm  
**MATERIALS** Copper, cloisonné enamel,  
gilding; wood

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** China

## THE INCENSE BURNERS

These towering pagoda-style Chinese incense burners are located in the space called the Smoking Room inside the Wallace Collection.

In the 19th century Sir Richard Wallace and his friends would come to this room to smoke their cigars or fill their pipes with tobacco after eating dinner. Can you imagine how smoke-filled and stinky the room would have been? The room was covered in beautiful tiles, rather than wallpaper or the silks found in other rooms in the house, because this made it easier to clean off the tobacco stains and dispel the strong smells.

By contrast these beautiful objects come from China and were used to fill the air with a delicate fragrant aroma. Incense burners were placed in Buddhist temples, royal palaces or used by artists and scholars to inspire them when they were practising their music or calligraphy.

These particular incense burners were probably intended for a palace. The four-clawed dragon in the pierced gilt panels suggest that they might have been intended for a prince or a noble. Only the emperor could use the symbol of a five-clawed dragon.

They are decorated with cloisonné enamel, an ancient decorating technique in which enamel is separated by strips of flattened wire placed edgeways on a metal backing. On the burners you can see dragons; various flowers, including the lotus and the peony; cranes; and the Shou character for longevity.

Incense sticks were placed in beds of sand and burnt in vessels inside. The incense smoke would then escape through the holes.

## GLOSSARY

### **Qing Dynasty**

The Qing Dynasty was the last imperial dynasty of China. It was established in 1636 and ruled China until 1912.

### **Cloisonné enamel**

An ancient decorating technique in which enamel is separated by strips of flattened wire placed edgeways on a metal backing.

## VOCABULARY

aroma	clean
bouquet	crisp
perfume	sharp
fragrance	spicy
whiff	flowery
redolent	fresh
piquant	earthy
pungent	intoxicating

## DISCUSS



- How many animals and birds can you see? How many flowers? Can you find any patterns? What do they look like?
- How many dragons can you see? Count their toes - the number of claws gives a clue about whom the incense burners belonged to.

## ACTIVITIES



- Madame Nez, a world famous perfumier, has invited you to create a new perfume inspired by the incense burners. Write an ingredients list and recipe. How would you describe the scent?
- Draw a dragon, and give it a name and a character. Are they happy or sad, young or old, wise or silly, brave or cowardly, fierce or friendly? Look up the poem by Ogden Nash called 'The Tale of Custard the Dragon'.
- Find this symbol on the incense burners. It is the character for longevity. By surrounding themselves with positive symbols, people believed that these things were more likely to come true. What qualities or ideas do you think are needed to create a peaceful and happy world? Select one quality and design a symbol for it.



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