

Kōdō 香道

Japanese Way of Incense

Kōdō, the Japanese Way of Incense, is a refined and ancient art that originated in the 6th century when a piece of fragrant wood drifted ashore on Awaji Island and was presented to the Emperor. This serendipitous event marked the beginning of Japan's incense culture, even though no incense wood is native to the country. The prized aloeswood, central to Kōdō, hails from Southeast Asia and India. Interestingly, aloeswood develops its rich fragrance as a defence mechanism, releasing aromatic resin in response to insect damage. This resin, over time, transforms the wood into a material of great value, becoming the foundation of the elegant practice of Kōdō.

In Kōdō, "incense" refers to this aloeswood, which is gently warmed rather than burned. This method prevents the release of smoke, allowing the pure, subtle fragrance of the wood to be fully appreciated. The incense is prepared in a ceramic censer, where a small piece of charcoal is nestled within a carefully sculpted ash mound, topped with a mica plate. A tiny chip of aloeswood is placed on the mica, and its fragrance is savoured.

The experience of Kōdō is not merely sensory but also intellectual. To prolong the enjoyment of incense, participants engage in poetical games that draw from Japanese classics such as "The Tale of Genji." These games challenge the mind and spirit, encouraging a deep connection between the participant, their poetical imagination, and the cultural heritage of Japan.

Kōdō predates the tea ceremony, and its sophisticated etiquette and protocol significantly influenced the development of Chanoyu, the Japanese tea ceremony. In Japan, Kōdō is considered more formal and elite than the tea ceremony, reflecting its deep roots in aristocratic culture. This ancient practice continues to be a symbol of refinement, embodying the Japanese aesthetic and spiritual pursuit of harmony and elegance.

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