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Frankincense, myrrh still draw sales, without the kings

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 23, 2010 10:23 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Myrrh (left) and frankincense resin sales tend to double around the holidays at Ritual Arts in Allston. Oil extracts of each are also sold in bottles - separately as frankincense (left) or myrrh (right) or blended (center).

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Those seeking a last-minute Christmas gift, fit for a king, need look no further than Toni Fanning's Allston shop, where two items hold an iconic place this time of year: frankincense and myrrh.

The aromatic resins that tradition holds the Three Wise Men brought to the new-born Jesus (along with gold) are tucked amid the candles, jewelry and spell-making supplies in Ritual Arts, a metaphysical and spiritual retail store on Harvard Avenue that Fanning opened 28 years ago.

During the holidays, Fanning says, she sells more than twice as much frankincense and myrrh as she does the rest of the year. She has yet to draw any kings or magi, even when she used to sell gold dust, too.

"We've had many wise people come through," she said chuckling. "But, three – all at once? I'm not sure."

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The [Gospel of Matthew story](#) is retold each year at Christmas. The tale of the three Orient men who traveled over “field and fountain, moor and mountain” is also passed on musically, through the famous Christmas carol, “We Three Kings,” written in the 1850s and remixed countless times over, including on holiday albums by the [Jonas Brothers](#), [Beach Boys](#) and the [Barenaked Ladies](#) featuring [Sarah McLachlan](#).

But, while gold is still highly valuable, common and its relevance universally understood, frankincense and myrrh are rare finds in contemporary households, and despite representing two-thirds of the first presents ever given to one of the most famous people to ever walk the planet, neither has become a popular mention on Christmas wish lists.

Nonetheless, Ritual Arts sells between 15 and 20 pounds of frankincense and 10 to 15 pounds of myrrh annually, according to Fanning.

"It's not a very common thing to sell," she said. "But, we sell if more than you would think."

The store is among a select few – including Horai-San shop in Brookline and Seven Stars in Cambridge – in the area that carry the resins.

Each of the hardened resins harvested from small trees grown mostly in the southern Arabian peninsula and northeast Africa are sold by the ounce, and customers typically buy frankincense and/or myrrh for their pleasant aroma when burned. Historically, the two resins have also been used in perfumes and herbal medicines, and they are still used similarly today.

The resins can be burned separately, or in concert, and apart from simply smelling nice, they are used in meditation or in spiritual and religious rites.

Fanning said she has seen the price of each rise over the years, with myrrh having always been the more expensive of the two. She used to sell each for around \$3 per ounce, but that has climbed over the years to its current going rate of \$4 per ounce for frankincense and \$4.50 per ounce for myrrh.

Aside from inflation, price fluctuations are most often the result of natural wildfires or other factors, sometimes man-made, that damage the respective plants that frankincense and myrrh are cultivated from, she said.

Several years ago, Ritual Arts also used to carry small vials of gold dust, but "very rarely did people buy all three," Fanning said, adding that she no longer sells the gold dust because of how expensive gold has become in recent years, reaching record highs this year, depending on how you do the math.

At most retailers with a solid selection of incense, frankincense and myrrh can be found as incense in stick form, especially around the holidays when the Three Wise Men story is rehashed and curiosity rises about the scents, said Fanning. However, finding either in an oil form is less likely and finding them in their more raw, resin form is even more difficult, she said. Ritual Arts carries all three forms.

Though frankincense and myrrh sales are up compared to the rest of the year, they are down when compared to past holiday season sales, which Fanning blames on the economy.

Burning the hardened resins is a much more involved process than burning

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stick incense or using the oils. Resin burning requires that coals be heated properly – to a high enough temperature so that the resin burns and releases its natural scent, but not so hot that it releases an unpleasant burning smell – and a bowl that can handle the heat.

"It's a process," Fanning said. "In this day and age, a lot of people don't want to go through that, even though I think it produces the most desirable results."

She said there isn't any certain customer type that buys frankincense and myrrh, but she has had both Buddhist and Christian monks purchase the resins for religious use.

As for the possibility that any kings have stopped by, "if they've been in here, they haven't told us," she said.

Ritual Arts, 153 Harvard Ave. Open until 8 p.m. Thursday; opens Friday at 10 a.m. For Friday's closing hours, call the shop at 617-787-4157.

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