

Liquid gold

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Frankincense and myrrh, not oil, were once the Mid-East's wealth

Harried holiday shoppers lashed by inflation can take some comfort in knowing that even the three Wise Men would be hard-pressed in their gift buying this year.

Almost everyone is aware that gold has soared in price, but so have the other two gifts associated with the first Christmas — frankincense and myrrh, according to the National Geographic news service.

Oil distilled from the two aromatic resins mostly goes into perfumes. Its

price has doubled in the last two years to \$75 a pound, according to Joseph J. Ferrari, a vice president of Fritzsche Dodge and Olcott, a New York fragrance manufacturer.

"THE STEEP price is forcing more and more in the industry to go with chemical synthetics that can produce the same distinct odor as frankincense and myrrh," said Ferrari.

"At \$75 a pound, it's just not practical anymore to put real frankincense into a spray that evokes the smell of Christmas or a sachet for the drawer."

Peter N. Lombardo, executive vice president of Robertet, a New Jersey firm that supplies raw materials to perfume manufacturers, concurs. He estimates that the perfume industry imported only a few thousand pounds of the two resins last year.

Somalia and Ethiopia furnish most of the frankincense that reaches the United States. Saudi Arabia and Somalia supply the myrrh.

The sweet smell of the two aromatics was waiting from those areas long before the three Wise Men followed the Star of Bethlehem.

In the first millennium before Christ, frankincense and myrrh were to the Middle East what petroleum is today," said Dr. Gus Van Beek, an archaeologist with the Smithsonian Institution. "Ancient writers referred to the people of this incense kingdoms as the wealthiest race in the world."

Smoldering frankincense was used to honor the gods. Myrrh anointed the dead, supposedly cured the sick and perfumed the body.

Sculptured incense ships still set sail on the walls of Queen Hatshepsut's temple near Thebes. Acknowledged by some as "history's first great woman," she renewed Egypt's trade with Punt, an ancient realm on the African coast, near present-day Somalia.

THE TRADING expedition returned with aromatic myrrh and 31 live myrrh trees to be transplanted in Egypt. The queen gave thanks for the successful mission, "her limbs fragrant as the dew of the gods with ointment and myrrh."

Frankincense was especially popular

with the Romans, who used it in religious ceremonies and burned it in funeral pyres. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder reported that a whole year's production of Arabian frankincense was used at the cremation of Poppaea, wife of the Emperor Nero.

Myrrh, however, was used when Jesus was entombed. According to the New Testament, Nicodemus wrapped the martyred Jesus in "a mixture of myrrh and aloes." (John 19:39). Thus, one of the gifts that welcomed Christ into the world went with Him to the



Sheila Rosen Seitzman

Tasting snowflakes

As I walked outside, the early winter snow fell lightly on my face. Though large in size, the snowflakes appeared to be weightless until one alighted on my eyelashes. But "in a wink of an eye" it disappeared leaving barely a trace of moisture.

I stuck out my tongue with an inner glee to catch some of the pure snow, remembering those childhood admonitions of "Don't eat yellow snow!"

Then I realized it was not the snow, but the moment that I wanted to savor.

THERE HAVE BEEN a few moments in my life when I wished that time would stop and I could find a way to "bottle" an awareness in order to recapture it later on. These instances are usually simple flashes rather than momentous occasions.

My earliest memory of this happening was when I was a young girl lying on the lawn outside the house where I grew up. I recall fluffy clouds ever so slightly walking across a bright blue sky. I closed my eyes and could feel the grass tickling my arms and legs.

I don't know what made me feel so content or susceptible to the beauty of that particular day, but I vividly recollect promising myself I would remember that moment forever.

The premier of winter's snow offers a fantasy that many people are able to share. It occurs before this white precipitation is associated with harsh cold air or hazardous, slippery road conditions.

This is a magical time when every one of us can be in awe that each snowflake has a unique design. We try to grasp the significance of such short-lived beauty and then begin to ponder about our own place in life.

I DROVE OFF into the floating snow knowing that I could hold on to the sensations of the day because, through writing, I had found a way to "bottle" memories. Due to the weather, the cars in front of me were travelling slowly.

Ahead there was an old woman, hunched over her cane, tediously walking the last few steps to her mailbox. She was wearing that familiar, nondescript grayish-brown coat that ended a few inches above her ankle high boots. Her face almost hidden by the scarf on her head, was parallel to the ground. The arch of her body resembled a fetal position.

As I passed by, I saw this old woman stand up as straight as she could and lifting up her face in an ageless gesture, she stuck out her tongue to taste the snow.

The writer, a resident of Orchard Lake, was born and raised in New York City. She is a speech pathologist and had a private practice. She is the mother of three daughters and is married to a patent attorney.

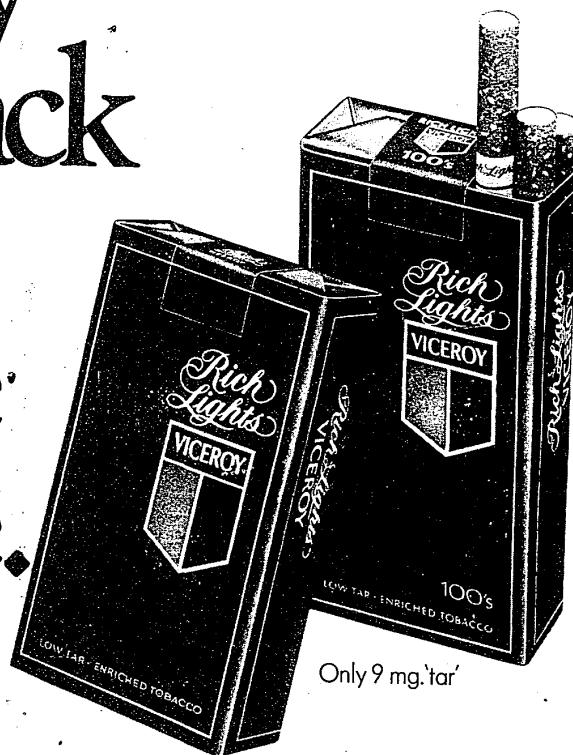
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