

A Study on Visual Symbols and Cultural Connotations of Portable Incense Burners in the Song Dynasty

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Received: 14 July 2026; **Accepted:** 16 August 2026; **Published:** 25 August 2026

Abstract:

As a type of artifact integrating practical functions and cultural symbolic significance, portable incense burners reached a critical developmental stage in the Song Dynasty. Based on a systematic review of the origin and evolution of portable incense burners, this paper takes abundant depictions of portable incense burners in Song paintings including *Listening to the Zither* and *Barbarian Kings Worshipping Buddha* as research cases to analyze their visual symbolic features covering shape and ornamentation. Meanwhile, it thoroughly explores the underlying cultural connotations from multiple dimensions such as religious beliefs, literati aesthetics and social life. This research comprehensively reveals the unique historical and cultural values carried by Song portable incense burners, offering a new perspective for in-depth understanding of Song society and culture.

Keywords:

Song Dynasty Portable Incense Burner, Visual Symbol, Cultural Connotation, Song Dynasty Painting

1. Introduction

Distinguished by its unique cultural charm in Chinese history, the Song Dynasty witnessed prosperous social economy and flourishing art, alongside people's rising pursuit of quality life. Against this backdrop, the portable incense burner, a special craft article, played a vital role in daily life and evolved into a distinctive carrier of Song culture. Literally meaning movable incense burners, portable incense burners served multiple functions including religious sacrifice, literati gatherings and domestic aromatization. Research on Song portable incense burners facilitates thorough exploration of Song religious beliefs, aesthetic tastes and lifestyles, thereby uncovering the rich connotations and unique glamour of Song culture in an all-round way.

2. Origin and Evolution of Portable Incense Burners in the Song Dynasty

2.1. Tracing Early Forms

The origin of portable incense burners dates back to ancient times, with its

embryonic form closely linked to the bronze ritual vessel *dou*, a tall-footed plate for food storage. *Guo Yu · Wu Yu* records that “wine goblets, meat *dou* plates and rice bamboo containers” were used in feasts. Early portable incense burners borrowed the outward flaring rim, deep belly and tall foot structures from the *dou*, laying a foundation for their subsequent development. Functionally, they were not originally designed for incense burning; instead, they gradually evolved into dedicated incense burners as the demand for incense culture grew over time.

The spread of Buddhism in China became a key driver for the advancement of portable incense burners. The Buddhist ritual of “incense procession”, which required devotees to hold incense burners while circumambulating Buddha statues, made portable burners an indispensable ritual tool. Buddhism prevailed across the Northern and Southern Dynasties, popularizing incense processions and boosting the use of portable burners. Most burners of this era were metallic with long handles, known as magpie-tail censers. *Fa Yuan Zhu Lin* (A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden) records: “Handled incense burners are called magpie-tail censers.” Their prototype originated in West Asia, spread via India to Central Asia, and gained popularity throughout China. The earliest depiction of a magpie-tail censer appears in a Western Qin mural in Cave 69 of Bingling Temple, Yongjing County, Gansu Province, followed by frequent appearances in Buddhist statues of the Northern and Southern Dynasties [1].

2.2. Evolution from the Tang to Song Dynasty

In the Tang Dynasty, portable incense burners retained core structural features of previous generations while generating new variations. Ceramics gradually emerged as mainstream materials for portable burners, thanks to advances in ceramic craftsmanship. Ceramic burners grew popular for their low production cost and high plasticity in shaping. In terms of form, Tang portable burners inherited the basic silhouette of magpie-tail censers with increasingly diverse furnace bodies and richer decorative techniques. For instance, many burners featured carved patterns and painted ornamentation, transforming them from mere functional tools into artistic craftworks.

Portable incense burners ushered in their golden age during the Song Dynasty. Booming economy, an expanding civilian class and the universal prevalence of incense culture across all social strata fueled mass demand for portable burners. No longer confined to religious rituals, they permeated every aspect of civilian life, including wedding ceremonies, teahouses, taverns and Buddha worship. *Dong Jing Meng Hua Lu* (Reminiscences of the Eastern Capital) documents diverse retail channels for agarwood in bustling capital districts [2]; *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* depicts a shop sign reading “Liu’s Premium Agarwood and Sandalwood Fragrance Shop”. As a core medium of incense culture, portable burners diversified dramatically in the Song Dynasty.

3. Case Analysis of Portable Incense Burners in Song Paintings

3.1. Portable Incense Burner in *Listening to the Zither*

Painted by Emperor Huizong Zhao Ji, *Listening to the Zither* captures portable incense burners within literati domestic scenes. On a tall black side table beside the zither player rests a portable incense burner: entirely white, lidded as an enclosed aromatherapy censer, fitted with an underlying tray. Its streamlined, minimally

decorated silhouette embodies the restrained, subtle, simple and elegant literati aesthetic unique to the Song Dynasty. This understated design harmonizes perfectly with the tranquil, refined ambiance of zither appreciation, reflecting Song literati's pursuit of minimalist beauty [3].

Functionally, curling smoke from the burner cultivates an ethereal, transcendent atmosphere in the painting while purifying air and elevating spatial elegance in real life. In Song literati studies and salon gatherings, portable burners were routinely lit to refine the environment, allowing scholars to immerse themselves in literary creation and artistic exchange amid lingering fragrance. The incense burner in *Listening to the Zither* vividly encapsulates the Song literati's pursuit of refined living and spiritual depth.

3.2. Portable Incense Burner in Barbarian Kings Worshipping Buddha

Housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Song scroll *Barbarian Kings Worshipping Buddha* depicts tribal chieftains and foreign rulers paying homage to Buddha, illustrating the ritual use of portable incense burners in Buddhist ceremonies. One figure holds a round vessel with a wide flat rim, identified as a portable incense burner. Distinct from the censer in *Listening to the Zither*, this specimen features a broad circular mouth, straight cylindrical belly and elongated trumpet-shaped tall foot—nearly identical to unearthed portable burners from Cizhou Kiln, representing mainstream folk styles of the era.

Culturally, the burner underscores the central role of portable censers in Song Buddhist culture. As a vital prop for incense processions, it embodies devotees' piety toward Buddha. Beyond fulfilling ritual norms, incense burning with portable burners symbolizes spiritual communication between worshippers and the Buddha. Multiple figures carrying individual burners in the scroll also imply latent status symbolism: variations in burner form and material likely signified disparities in users' social rank and identity.

3.3. Supplementary Depictions of Portable Incense Burners in Other Song Paintings

Portable incense burners also appear in numerous other Song artworks. Paintings depicting civilian daily life place them in teahouses and taverns as ordinary household articles, ranging from plain utilitarian models to elaborately ornamented specimens that signal owners' refined taste. In religious-themed scrolls, burners closely matching the silhouette in *Barbarian Kings Worshipping Buddha* recur repeatedly, confirming their widespread ritual application. Collectively, these pictorial records form a multifaceted visual archive of Song portable incense burners, supplying comprehensive iconographic data for academic research.

4. Visual Symbolic Characteristics of Song Portable Incense Burners

4.1. Formal Features

4.1.1. Classification of Overall Silhouettes

Song portable incense burners feature diverse forms, primarily categorized into tall-footed flaring-rim burners, handled censers and modified variants. Popular across northern Song territories, tall-footed flaring-rim burners resemble tall goblets with an

open structure, defined by wide curved/flat rims, cylindrical bellies and flared trumpet-shaped tall foot rings [4]. Their balanced proportions convey dignity and steadiness: the broad rim facilitates handheld transport and contains scattered incense ash; deep cylindrical bellies hold ample aromatic materials for sustained burning; wide flared feet stabilize placement while enhancing visual grace.

Handled censers, though less prevalent than tall-footed flaring-rim types, retain distinctive aesthetic value, inheriting partial structural traits of ancient magpie-tail censers with extended grips for mobile incense processions. Excavated artifacts and painting records show furnace bodies in round and square configurations paired with slender or robust carved handles adorned with intricate patterns to boost artistic value.

A range of modified variants coexisted alongside the two mainstream types. Some featured petal-shaped bellies or unique curved profiles, catering to diverse functional and aesthetic demands across social groups.

4.1.2. Integration of Function and Aesthetics in Form

Every structural detail of Song portable incense burners balances practical utility and Song aesthetic standards. Functionally, wide rims and elevated feet of tall-footed burners prioritize easy handling and stable placement, responding directly to real-world usage scenarios [5]. Aesthetically, their silhouettes mirror core Song cultural values of restraint, subtlety and minimalism. Fluid unadorned lines and harmonized proportions cultivate understated elegance. Many burners forgo elaborate carving entirely, relying solely on graceful contours and proportional balance to create artistic appeal. This seamless fusion of utility and aesthetics elevates portable burners from functional wares to fine craftworks, making them quintessential visual symbols of Song literati culture.

4.2. Ornamental Features

4.2.1. Diverse Decorative Craftsmanship

Song portable burners showcase sophisticated decorative techniques reflecting master artisans' superior craftsmanship. Carving stands as the most widespread method: take Northern Song Yaozhou Kiln carved flower-and-bird burners as an example—artisans wielded knives like brushes to sculpt porcelain bodies with forceful, layered incised lines that generate rich three-dimensional texture. The mold-print technique, another mainstream process, standardized decorative motifs via prefabricated molds, boosting mass production efficiency while creating unique patterned surfaces.

Polychrome painting represented a distinctive decorative tradition, employing vivid mineral pigments to render lively, unrestrained imagery with great expressive freedom. Additional techniques including appliqué sculpture and openwork carving were frequently combined to create layered, multi-dimensional decorative effects.

4.2.2. Symbolism of Decorative Motifs

Ornamental patterns on Song portable burners carry profound cultural symbolism, mirroring prevailing social values and spiritual pursuits. Floral motifs dominated decoration: peonies symbolized wealth and prosperity, lotuses represented purity and integrity, and chrysanthemums stood for longevity and perseverance. Exquisitely rendered blooms beautified burners while expressing popular aspirations for a

fulfilling life.

Animal patterns were equally prevalent: dragons and phoenixes signified auspiciousness and authority; red-crowned cranes embodied longevity and good fortune; fish symbolized surplus and abundance. These animal designs enhanced ornamental appeal while encoding layered cultural metaphors.

Other recurring motifs included narrative scenes adapted from historical tales and myths (conveying moral edification) and geometric patterns (creating ordered, rhythmic visual harmony). The combination of all motif categories encapsulates the full spectrum of Song social culture embodied within portable incense burners.

5. Cultural Connotations of Song Portable Incense Burners

5.1. Religious Belief Dimensions

5.1.1. Portable Burners in Buddhist Culture

Portable incense burners occupied an irreplaceable position in Song Buddhism. Incense procession constituted a core Buddhist practice, with portable burners serving as mandatory ritual tools. Devotees holding burners circumambulated Buddha statues, expressing piety through incense burning and facilitating meditative spiritual communion with the Buddha. Widespread Buddhism and frequent temple rituals in the Song Dynasty drove soaring demand for portable burners, stimulating continuous innovation in manufacturing craft. Surviving Song Buddhist paintings and unearthed temple burners prove that portable censers transcended utilitarian status to become iconic symbols of Buddhist faith, carrying devotees' comprehension of Buddhist doctrines.

5.1.2. Connections Between Portable Burners and Taoism

Beyond Buddhism, portable incense burners maintained close ties with Song Taoism. Incense burning formed a central component of Taoist rituals, as Taoists believed smoke conveyed worshippers' prayers to celestial deities. Movable portable burners were widely deployed during Taoist rituals: priests carried them while pacing to generate solemn, mystical ritual ambiance. Taoist aesthetics centered on natural harmony, aligning perfectly with the simple, unadorned silhouette of Song portable burners. Motifs including Bagua trigram and Taiji yin-yang symbols on many burners further evidence their intimate integration with Taoist culture. The dual religious application of portable burners embodies the harmonious coexistence of pluralistic faiths in the Song Dynasty [6].

5.2. Literati Aesthetic Dimensions

5.2.1. Portable Burners and Literati Lifestyle

Song literati pursued refined living standards, with portable incense burners becoming indispensable household objects that defined their unique taste. Elaborate burners adorned scholar studies, and reading amid curling incense emerged as a fashionable pastime. Lingering smoke enveloped studies in serene elegance, sharpening concentration for literary and artistic creation and transporting scholars to transcendent spiritual realms [7]. Portable burners also anchored literati salon gatherings: scholars gathered to appreciate fragrance, recite poetry and paint, with incense serving as a medium for emotional exchange and artistic dialogue. Through

collecting and using portable burners, Song literati expressed their love for refined life and pursuit of inner spiritual fulfillment.

5.2.2. Literati Aesthetic Ideals Reflected by Portable Burners

The form and decoration of Song portable burners materialize core literati aesthetic values. Song scholars advocated natural minimalism and rejected excessive ornate carving, preferences directly reflected in the burners' streamlined contours and muted unglamorous surfaces. Compared to Tang burners, Song specimens prioritized artistic conception over lavish ornamentation, using sparse patterns and subdued color palettes to deliver implicit, restrained beauty [8]. Many are decorated only with simple floral or geometric motifs arranged in balanced, graceful compositions that evoke fresh subtle elegance. This minimalist aesthetic also informed material selection: literati favored ceramic burners for their mild, delicate texture, which resonated with Taoist and Confucian ideals of natural harmony. As physical manifestations of Song literati aesthetics, portable burners exerted lasting influence on subsequent artistic creation and aesthetic theory.

5.3. Social Life Dimensions

5.3.1. Universal Popularity of Portable Burners in Civilian Life

Beyond religious ceremonies and elite literati circles, portable incense burners permeated ordinary households across Song society. Economic expansion and a rising civilian class elevated public demand for quality of life, disseminating incense culture to all social tiers. Portable burners served domestic sacrificial rites honoring ancestors and daily air purification for comfortable living environments. Song literary texts and paintings document ubiquitous burner usage in urban and rural households alike. Their mass popularity stands as tangible evidence of Song economic prosperity, improved living standards and the pervasive influence of incense culture.

5.3.2. Hierarchical Reflections Embodied by Portable Burners

Despite universal prevalence, portable burners varied drastically in material, form and ornamentation across social strata, mapping the rigid class structure of Song society. Aristocrats and wealthy merchants owned premium burners crafted from precious gold and silver, inlaid with gemstones and pearls, boasting intricate custom designs that showcased elevated social standing and financial power. Constrained by limited resources, common civilians relied on plain ceramic burners prioritizing functionality over decoration.

The *History of the Song Dynasty · Records of Carriages and Robes* imposed strict material and craft regulations on ritual wares for government officials; while portable burners are not explicitly named, the dynasty's universal hierarchical artifact code applied equally. Imperial court ceremonies and aristocratic banquets featured exquisitely crafted status-signifying burners, whereas civilian household models focused purely on practicality. Material and decorative disparities in portable burners mirror Song economic stratification and material manifestations of feudal rank systems. Visible visual differences on portable burners enable instant judgment of the user's social identity, rendering the censer a subtle marker of class distinction.

6. Inheritance and Influence of Song Portable Incense Burners

6.1. Impacts on Subsequent Development of Portable Incense Burners

Song portable incense burners exerted far-reaching influence on post-Song censer evolution. Yuan Dynasty burners retained the core silhouette of Song tall-footed flaring-rim and handled censers yet shifted toward denser, more ornate decorative patterns, reflecting the aesthetic temperament of Yuan society. Ming craftsmen inherited Song structural strengths while innovating novel forms and decorative techniques: the renowned Ming Xuande bronze censers absorbed Song portable burner design logic while integrating distinctive Ming artistic preferences. Qing Dynasty burners absorbed limited Western aesthetic influences yet retained clear Song stylistic echoes within traditional craft production, preserving the Song legacy of minimal silhouette and subtle ornamentation. Ceramics remained the dominant material across later dynasties, alongside continuous refinement of metallic burner craftsmanship, creating a multi-material production landscape originating from Song innovations.

6.2. Value in Cultural Inheritance

Song portable incense burners constitute irreplaceable carriers of traditional Chinese culture. The religious, aesthetic and social information encoded within them delivers invaluable physical evidence for researching Song civilization. Studying these artifacts deepens understanding of Song spiritual temperament and cultural characteristics, illuminating the developmental lineage of traditional Chinese culture.

Their cultural significance remains prominent in contemporary society: major museums preserve Song portable burners as core exhibits, allowing audiences to appreciate their artistic charm and grasp the profundity of Song culture. Furthermore, Song burner design philosophies inspire modern craft designers, who extract traditional silhouettes and decorative motifs to create contemporary works that blend classical charm with modern taste, sustaining and revitalizing the cultural connotations of Song portable incense burners today [9].

7. Conclusions

Portable incense burners of the Song Dynasty integrate practical utility and symbolic cultural meaning, their developmental trajectory reflecting sweeping social shifts and cultural flourishing of the era. Tracing their evolution from primitive prototypes through Tang modifications, the craft reached its pinnacle in the Song Dynasty. Iconographic records from Song masterpieces *Listening to the Zither* and *Barbarian Kings Worshipping Buddha* supply vivid visual data for analyzing their formal language. Song portable burners feature abundant visual symbolic traits: categorized into tall-footed flaring-rim and handled silhouettes that perfectly merge function and aesthetics; equipped with diverse decorative techniques and motif systems laden with layered cultural metaphors. Their multi-faceted cultural connotations span religious belief, literati aesthetics and civilian daily life, serving as microcosms of Song society as a whole.

Beyond shaping the development of portable incense burners in subsequent dynasties, Song specimens carry enduring weight in cultural inheritance. In-depth research on Song portable incense burners facilitates comprehensive comprehension of the richness of Song civilization, supports the inheritance and promotion of

outstanding traditional Chinese culture, and delivers precious design references for modern cultural creation and artistic design, enabling traditional heritage to shine through dialogue with contemporary aesthetics.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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