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CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of the Premodern World

Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova

CONVIVIUM XII/1 2025

Exchanges and Interactions
in the Arts of the Premodern World

Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova

Journal of the Department of Art History of the University of Lausanne, of the Department of Art History of Masaryk University, and of the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic

Editor-in-chief / Ivan Foletti
Executive editors / Zuzana Frantová, Michaela Hojdysz, Katarína Kravčíková, Janette Rendeková
Abstracts editor / Johanna Zacharias
Typesetting / Kamila Severová
Layout & cover design / Kristýna Smrčková
Publisher / Brepols publishers, Begijnhof 67, 2300 Turnhout & Masarykova univerzita, Žerotínovo nám. 9, 601 77 Brno, IČO 00216224
Editorial Office / Seminář dějin umění, Filozofická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno
Print / Tiskárna Didot, spol s r.o., Trnkova 119, 628 00 Brno
Typeface / Blacker Pro, Blacker Sans Pro (Zetafonts type foundry)

E-mail / convivium@earlymedievalstudies.com
www.earlymedievalstudies.com/convivium.html

Published / May 2025
Reg. No. MK ČR E 21592
ISSN 2336-3452 (print)
ISSN 2336-808X (online)

Convivium is listed in the databases SCOPUS, ERIH, "Riviste di classe A" indexed by ANVUR, and in the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) of the Web of Science.

MUNI ARTS RE:CENT Center for Medieval Visual Cultures and Research Communication

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BREPOLS

SCENT AND SENSE IN MEDIEVAL MATERIAL CULTURE XII/1

edited by
Elina Gertsman

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Gratias vobis maximas agimus!

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INTRODUCTION

“NOT LIKE POISON”

Scent and Sense in Medieval Material Culture

ELINA GERTSMAN

Elina Gertsman / Case Western Reserve University / exg152@case.edu

"The woman saw that the tree was good for food: She began to observe it." With these words, Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans, a twelfth-century Tosafist and poet, opens his exegesis on Genesis 3, 6 — the verse that describes Eve's transgression and humanity's fall from grace. Rabbi Joseph's focus on Eve's sense of sight is perfectly in line both with the Torah text itself and with contemporaneous commentaries on the verse.[1] But then he turns his attention to another sense, one considered to be much less fallible: olfaction. R. Joseph has Eve say, in contradistinction to the divine command of Genesis 2, 17 not to eat the deadly fruit from the tree of knowledge: "How beautiful is this fruit; how sweet is its smell – it is certainly not like poison."[2] This casually deleterious assessment of olfaction is surprising, not least because other Tosafists considered this sense to be uncorrupted. Smell's special status stemmed from that very same verse, Genesis 3, 6, and the two subsequent verses, which mention all other senses ostensibly sullied by the Original Sin: after all, Eve touched and tasted the apple, saw the tree, and heard the sound of God's voice.[3] Smell goes unremarked; it seems it remained pure. But in Joseph's estimation, the scent of that fruit, in effect, leads to banishment from Eden and all the postlapsarian troubles endured by humankind.

These troubles, too, were often signaled by smell: the perceptible smell of death and decomposition brought into this world by Eve's transgression; the figurative stench of moral corruption precipitated, ultimately, by the Original Sin. Famously, and at least according to her biographer Thomas of Cantimpré (d. 1272), Christina the Astonishing – a holy woman from the town of St Trond who stunned her neighbors by performing such purgatorial travails as climbing into boiling cauldrons and rolling on the ground with her shockingly pliable limbs twisted into a ball – fled to the forests to avoid "the stench of men."[4] That such stench was the result of spiritual failures rather than of poor hygiene, is made explicit across contemporaneous texts, of which we cite just two. When Gauthier de Coinci (d. 1236), then the prior of Vic-sur-Aisne in France, compiled his *Miracles de Nostre-Dame*, he included a striking incident in the story of a young man who promised himself to the Virgin but

1 The celebrated French scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, or Rashi (d. 1105), glosses sight as judgment, bringing in the auditory sense, as drawn from Genesis Rabbah 19, 3: "She approved the words of the serpent – they pleased her and she believed him," see *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, Morris Rosenbaum, Abraham Morris Silbermann eds, London 1929–1934 [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.3.6.1?lang=en; accessed on March 1, 2025]. Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) explains it as an interior sensation, commenting that Eve "saw in her heart;" see *Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Pentateuch*, H. Norman Strickman, Arthur M. Silver eds, Jerusalem 1988–2004 [https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Genesis.3.6.1?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en; accessed on March 1, 2025].

2 Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor on Gen. 3, 6 [https://tinyurl.com/mr3u6hfz; accessed on January 8, 2025]. Bekhor Shor's commentary on the Torah left an important mark on French medieval Ashkenazic thought.

3 Tosafists, in evoking the additional soul received by the Jews at the beginning of Sabbath, also suggested the burning of incense at the conclusion of the holy day in order to cover the stench of hell fires, tamped for the Sabbath and reignited at its close. See Tosafot on Beitzah 33b.

4 Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina of St. Trond, Called Christina Mirabilis*, Margot King transl., in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff ed., Oxford 1986, pp. 184–189. See Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Chicago 2002, pp. 241–247.

married his girlfriend instead. An irate Mary appeared to the poor man just as he contemplated consummating his marriage and threatened him in what Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has dryly characterized as a "rather non-ladylike word game" on polyptotic iterations of the French word for "stench:"

> "If you fill up with the stinking stench of this female stinker, you will stink and be full of stench in the stinking depths of hell for your stinking stench."[5]

One well-known episode from the *Zohar*, a Kabbalistic treatise likely composed by Moses de León (d. 1305), elides somatic and spiritual smells: here, two journeying companions – R. Yitzchak and R. Yehuda – meet a wondrous child, Yanuqa, who refuses to come to them for a blessing because the two neglected to recite Shema, the essential Jewish prayer, that day. When the companions, astonished, ask just how the child knew about their error, Yanuqa says: "By the smell of your clothes I knew when I came near you."[6] If the first five words of the Shema itself were likened to the fragrant petals of the rose, then the limbs of those who did not recite it were said to become "filled with all kinds of evil disease" that here clearly permeated the traveling rabbis' garments.[7] Like the Messiah, who will be able to use the sense of smell to "judge on that basis, sensing who is right" (Sanhedrin 93b:7), so did the wonder child Yanuqa assess the two companions by way of a simple sniff to declare to his mother that he "found them lacking."[8]

Smell as a visual trope is yet to be thoroughly explored in art historical scholarship. Its study is, admittedly, a difficult enterprise: one cannot hang one's hat on iconographic readings of ephemeral substances. Certainly, fragrant aromas are implied in numerous garden images that spread across the late medieval universe of poetry and romance: for instance, mint and fennel in the Garden of Pleasure of the *Roman de la Rose* – a place perfumed above all with the scent of the eponymous flower **[fig. 1]**. In turn, the language of gesture was often used to visualize foul odors. For medievalists, the go-to images are

5 "S'en la pullente pullentie / De la pullente t'enpullentes, / Es santines d'enfer pullentes / Seraz pullens enpullentés / Por tes pullentes pullentez." i Mir 21, "Miracle of the Bridegroom" (translation mine). On Gauthier's use of paronomasis see Pierre Kunstmann, "L'Annominatio chez Gautier: vocabulaire et syntaxe", in *Gautier de Coinci: Miracles, Music and Manuscripts*, Kathy M. Krause, Alison Stones eds, Turnhout 2006, pp. 101–112.

6 *Zohar 3*, Balak, 186a–186b. Here and further, citations are from the Pritzker edition, translation, and commentary. See *The Zohar* vols 1–12, Daniel C. Matt ed., Stanford 2003–2018. In general, scents loom large in the *Zohar*. Divine omnipresence is alluded through smell in *Zohar* 3, 67a ("If the priest is worthy that those above are in a state of joy, so too at that moment issues a rapturous light, scented with fragrances of mountains of pure balsam above, and it spreads throughout that place. The fragrance enters his two nostrils, and his heart is calmed."). Jacob and Elijah bear supernal fragrance with them wherever they go (*Zohar* 1, 142b and 2, 44a). See a brief discussion of aroma in Zohar in Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, Stanford 2005, 302–304.

7 Fragrant rose: Zohar 3, 233b, on evil disease filling one's limbs: Zohar Hadash Aharei Mot 48a; on the possible connection between the "evil spirit" / "evil disease" and the bad smell of the companions' clothes, see Jonatan M. Benarroch, "'The Mystery of Unity': Poetic and Mystical Aspects of a Unique Zoharic Shema Mystery", *AJS Review*, 37/2 (2013), pp. 231–256.

8 Based on Isaiah 11, 3: "He shall not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive."

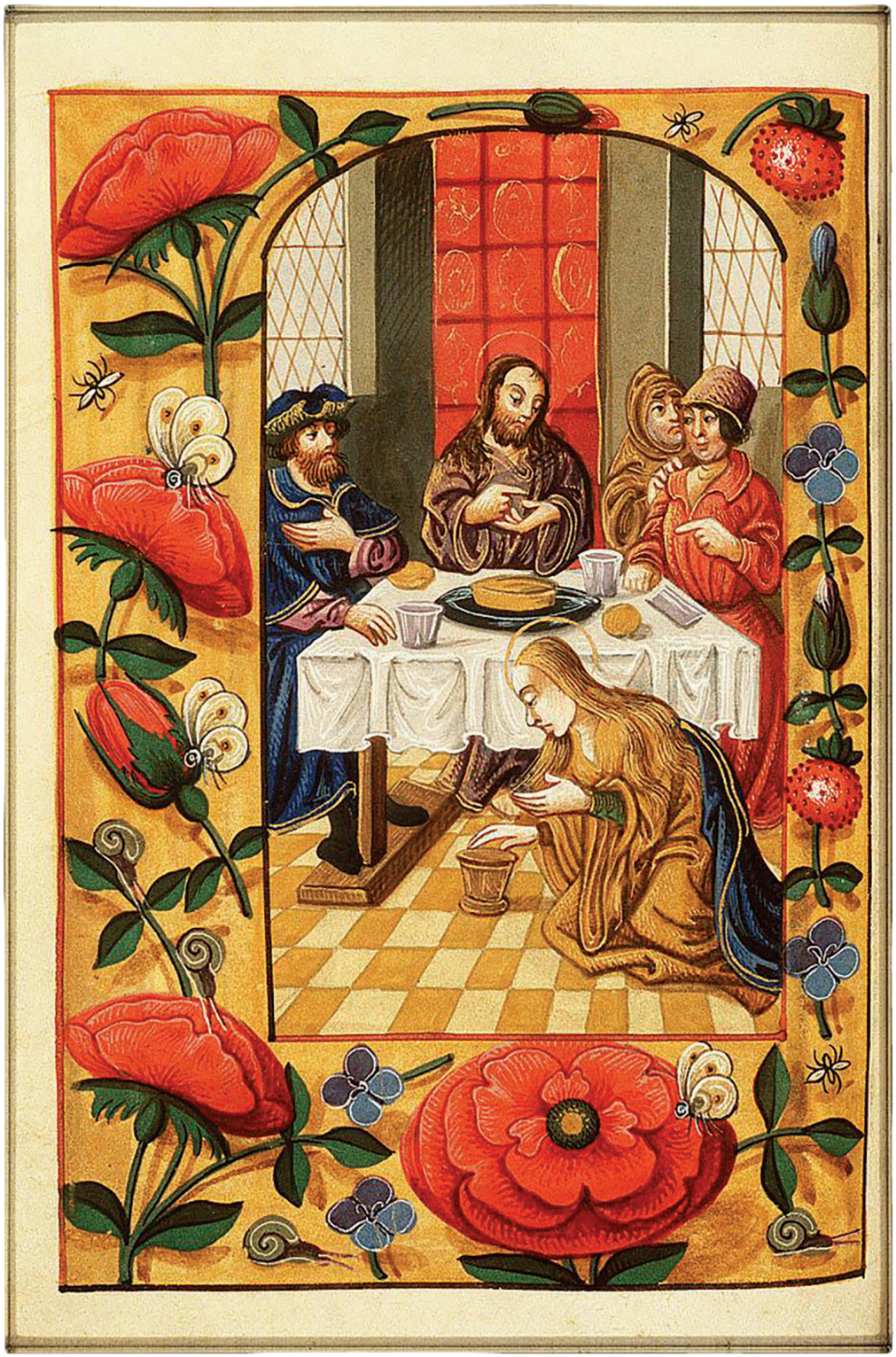
[fig. 1] Robinet Testard, *The Fragrant Garden*, from Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, *Roman de la Rose*, France, ca 1490–1500 / Bodleian Library (Oxford), MS Douce 195, fol. 13r

[fig. 2] Raising of Lazarus, detail of the left wing, Diptych with Scenes from the Life of Christ, Germany, Thuringia or Saxony, ivory, ca 1350–1375 / Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund 1984.158

those that figure the Raising of Lazarus and in which the man – who amounts to little more than a reanimated putrid corpse — stands surrounded by disgusted onlookers who cover their noses and mouths in an attempt to shield themselves from the risen man's stench. Some of the most poignant iterations of this narrative are carved in ivory, the elegance of the medium providing a fitting contrast with the implied rankness of the scene **[fig. 2]**.[9] Representational strategy becomes a bit trickier in the images that seek to evoke both types of scent at once: the episode that involves Lazarus's household in Bethania is one of them. In John's version of events (12, 1–7), Jesus attends a supper at Bethania where Lazarus's sister Mary pours a pound of spikenard ointment over his feet, much to the indignation of Judas Iscariot. As "the house was filled with the odor of the ointment," Jesus comes to Mary's defense: "Let her alone, that she may keep it against the day of my burial." The burial mixture proper is described a few chapters later; it is supplied by Nicodemus, who brings a compound of "myrrh and aloes" (Jn. 19, 39–40). John also notes the presence of Lazarus at the table with Christ, the man who was recently dead supping with the man who is soon to die. In late medieval Netherlandish manuscripts, the visualization of this episode, which describes the aroma of ointment but implies the odor of death, is often surrounded by complex borders painted with fragrant flowers, already cut down **[fig. 3]**: echoes of the oil's scent, allusions to the smell of decay.[10]

9 For the assessment of this scene within the context of the entire diptych, see Elina Gertsman, Barbara H. Rosenwein, *The Middle Ages in 50 Objects*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 180–183.

10 Further on images of plants in the margins of such manuscripts, see Anne Margreet W. As-Vijvers, "Flowers of Meaning: The Interpretation of Marginal Decoration in Southern Netherlandish Manuscripts from Around 1500", in T*he Green Middle Ages: The Depiction and Use of Plants in the Western World 600–1600*, Claudine A. Chavannes-Mazel, Linda IJpelaar eds, Amsterdam 2022, pp. 286–301.



[fig. 3] Supper at Bethania, Book of Hours, South Holland, ca 1470–1480 / Koninklijke Bibliotheek (The Hague), ms 130 E 5, fol. 105v

But these are, in a way, uncomplicated images, the effortless reifications of crucial events in which the sense of smell is but a corollary, not a predicate, of a sacred narrative – and one in which odor marks physical rather than moral florescence or decay. Conversely, the present collection, *Scent and Sense*, explores those images and objects that take smells precisely as their predicates, directing the inquiry on their tropological and often paradoxical meanings and on their place in the medieval economy of remembrance and reflection. The intertwinement of scent and memory – an altogether medieval notion[11] – is echoed by modern-day cognitive and physiological theories, which suggest that smells trigger the strongest emotions and the strongest memories because their repository is located in our limbic system.[12] The persistence of odor memory anchors rituals but also personalizes them by associating specific smells with specific words or actions – gestures, environments, utterances, movements.[13]

Throughout the Middle Ages and across a staggering variety of sources, both the notion of smell and the olfactory sense responsible for smells' discernment have been put through an exegetical, doctrinal, and mystical wringer by scores of philosophers, physicians, and theologians.[14] Ephemeral and fleeting but emotionally, spiritually, and physiologically potent, olfaction was deeply embedded in humoral, anatomical, and cognitive theories. Odors could heal and odors could harm; they could purify and they could taint. As this volume makes clear, Judeo-Christian tradition did not hold a monopoly on using scent to frame the spiritual lives of its devotees. Essays here draw from several religious cultures of the global medieval world – Buddhist, Jewish, Christian (both western and eastern), Islamic – and offer a broad temporal span of several centuries. Authors engage with visual production of different kinds: from objects that emit smell to the representation of such objects, from monumental architectural structures and liturgical furnishings to illuminated miniatures in codices and paintings from palm-leaf manuscripts. All share an interest in the theoretical and metaphorical underpinnings of the olfactory sense, but all are thoroughly anchored in the material universe of the medieval cultural eco-system.

11 See, for instance, Avicenna, who cites in his Canon medicinae, Venice 1595 (iii.1.1.6, 1:433) a story about fetid pestilential air that wafted from an Ethiopian battlefield and caused those who inhaled it and became ill to forget their own names and the names of their children. Avicenna gleaned the story from Galen. See Katelynn Robinson, *The Sense of Smell in the Middle Ages: A Source of Certainty*, New York 2019, p. 128.

12 See Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York 1990, pp. 3–64.

13 See Hand Distel, Robyn Hudson, "Judgement of Odor Intensity is Influenced by Subjects' Knowledge of the Odor Source", *Chemical Senses*, 26/3 (2001), pp. 247–251; Rachel Herz, Julia von Clef, "The Influence of Verbal Labeling on the Perception of Odors: Evidence for Olfactory Illusions?", *Perception*, 30/3 (2001), pp. 381–391; and Donald A. Wilson, Richard J. Stevenson, *Learning to Smell: Olfactory Perception from Neurobiology to Behavior*, Baltimore 2006, p. 205.

14 See *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott eds, New York 1994, pp. 51–93. On smell in early Christianity, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, Los Angeles 2006.

[fig. 4] Spice Container, or Hadas, Limoges (?), France, gilt copper, 13th century / Victoria and Albert Museum (London), 2090–1855

By way of introducing this volume, I would like to take a close look at a striking – and, as far as we know, unique – thirteenth-century object, a copper container for spices, or *besamim*, used during the ritual of Havdalah at the close of Shabbat **[fig. 4]**. Now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the spice container has remained something of a cipher for many years, its origins unknown and its very function debated. Wrought in the shape of a tower, engraved, pierced by keyhole-shaped openings, and topped by a pyramidal roof, the object arrived to the V&A converted into a Christian reliquary (V&A 2090–1855).[15] But it is most certainly a Jewish liturgical object made for the separation ceremony that concludes the day of rest and is meant to provide

15 I use the term "conversion" purposefully, borrowing it from Philippe Buc's seminal work on such reconfigured artefacts that bear emphatic witness to their original morphology (Philippe Buc, "Conversion of Objects", *Viator*, 28 [1997], pp. 99–143). The container came from the collection of Ralph Bernal, who was the heir of a prominent Sephardic family; on Bernal's collections, see Christie & Manson, *Catalogue of Works, Bernal Collection*, London 1855, particularly no. 1288 on the tower. Jewish objects so "converted" feature prominently in church treasuries; Hila Manor recently showed that this is precisely what happened to Torah finials that were confiscated from a community fleeing Sicily in the fifteenth century and that were then transformed into bourdons to serve in liturgical rituals at the Cathedral of Palma ("'Holy to the Lord': The Material Conversion of the Cammarata Finials", *Religions*, 14 [2023], no. 12, p. 1502, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121502).

comfort to the soul.[16] When stars appear in the night sky and mark the start of the new week, blessings are said over wine, lights, and aromatic spices whose fragrance is subsequently inhaled. The container, which medieval sources also called *hadas* – Hebrew for "myrtle," the most common herb used in the ritual – draws into its orbit a constellation of questions raised across the five essays published here: about the visualizations of scent; about the instability of its meanings; about the unreliability of its definitions; and about our inability to pin it down ontologically.

Besamim containers present us with a rare opportunity to tease out the multisensory potential inherent in medieval artefacts that would have appealed to the participants' minds and bodies simultaneously. Intricate and complex in design, they were certainly made to please the eye. But they were also meant to be touched, held aloft; the blessing over the spices was to be spoken and heard; most importantly, the sweet smell of herbs was to be inhaled and savored. The container was a potent locus for a broad range of responses rooted in theological, mnemonic, and sensual associations between the tower form and the smell of spice that evoked lost locales – the Garden of Eden and the land of Israel, both expectantly attainable and eschatologically fraught. Its semiotic potential, although heretofore largely ignored by scholars, is rich and redolent with possibilities.[17]

As Adam Bursi and Sonya Rhie Mace show in their contributions to this issue, objects and images that reify the complicated concept of smell are

16 See, e.g., Maimonides (d. 1204), who writes in his *Mishneh Torah* that "a blessing recited over fragrant spices (...) is to cheer the soul, which is saddened at the departure of the Sabbath." Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Eliyahu Touger trans., Jerusalem 1986–2007, Shabbat 29:29 [parallel edition at https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Sabbath.29?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en; accessed on March 1, 2025].

17 For the most recent review of literature on this object, see Elina Gertsman, "Housing Scent, Containing Sensorium", *The Medieval History Journal*, 26/2 (2023), special issue: *Materiality in the Medieval and Early Modern Period: Worlds Within Things – Ways of Knowing and Narrating*, pp. 246–272. Parts of the present introduction are drawn from this article; I thank Anne Lester, guest editor of the special issue, for her permission to reproduce these sections here and Michaela Zöschg at the V&A who has been extremely generous in granting me access to the spice tower for close study. Having emerged from a mire of debates on whether or not its form was influenced by Christian art (see, e.g., Mordechai Narkiss, "Origins of the Spice Box", *Jewish Art*, 8 [1981], pp. 28–41), it has become an unlikely flashpoint for those who wish to argue about its origin. The tower has been variously attributed to Spanish and French workshops: the former because of its quasi horseshoe-shaped arches, the latter because of the unmistakable echoes between these same arches and the pierced openings that characterize the limousine metalwork of the 1200s. For the Spanish origin, see, e.g., *La Vida Judía en Sefarad*, Elena Romero ed., Madrid 1990, p. 211, or Michael Keen, *Jewish Ritual Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1991, p. 68, no. 48, based in part on Bezalel Narkiss, "Un objet de culte: la lampe de Hanuka", in *Art et archéologie des Juifs en France médiévale*, Bernhard Blumenkranz ed., Toulouse 1980, pp. 187–206, where Narkiss points out the tower's horseshoe-shaped arches; for the French origin see Nicholas Hatot, "Brûle-parfum pédiculé (haddas?)", in *Savants et Croyants. Les Juifs d'Europe du Nord au Moyen Âge*, Nicolas Hatot, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger eds, Rouen 2018, no. 4. The object is most likely French: xrf imaging recently identified the material composition of the container as pure copper – a telltale sign of Limoges metalwork. But the misidentification of its origin has led some scholars to question the tower's function. For instance, Vivian Mann hesitated to define this object as a *besamim* container but on purely conceptual grounds: because she believed it to have been made in Spain, and because she understood medieval Spanish Jews not to have used spice containers, she did not think that this "Spanish" object was a spice container; see, e.g., "Sephardic Ceremonial Art: Continuity in the Diaspora", in *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World 1391–1648*, Benjamin Gampel ed., New York 1997, pp. 285–286, repeated in Mann's review of "Remembering Sepharad: Jewish Culture in Medieval Spain", *The Medieval Review*, 9 (2004), p. 2 [scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/15791/21909; accessed on March 13, 2025].

at times as fugacious as the scents themselves, constituted by traces, visual whispers, descriptions, and synesthetic substitutions. This is particularly the case for objects made and used by a minoritized culture, whose material patrimony is often subject to wholesale destruction. The spice tower itself bears no remnants of its original contents, its function discernable strictly through its form. But it finds extensive discursive echoes in textual sources. A Havdalah container, for instance, is mentioned in the halakhic code *Or Zaru'a* written by Isaac ben Moses of Vienna (d. ca 1250–1260), which references a glass vessel for spices then in possession of Isaac's teacher, r. Ephraim of Regensburg.[18] Medieval use of *besamim* containers, referred to as *hadas*, is also borne out by the instructions laid out in the customs book, *Sefer Minhagim*, penned by R. Jacob ben Moses Moellin (d. 1427), to "take the cup in the left hand and the *hadas* in the right and recite a blessing over the spices" during the Havdalah.[19] Moellin's contemporary R. Israel Isserlein of Regensburg (d. 1460) similarly had a container referred to as a *hadas*. One of his disciples described a ceremony that included a silver-wrought spice box, in detail:

> "When he began the blessing of *miney besamim*, he took the glass [of wine] in his left hand and the *hadas* in his right hand. When he finished the blessing, he smelled it and gave the *hadas* to his wife and then he held it in his hand, and while holding it, he let his sons and daughters-in-law and his great-grandchild (?) to smell it, then he gave it to the young men [his students] to smell. And as I remember he waited until all of them had a chance to smell it. When it was hard for him to stand, he sat down and waited until all of them smelled it and he said all the blessings, in order; this is how I remember it."[20]

A Yiddish *Sefer Minhagim* from northern Italy (Paris, BN, MS Héb. 586, fol. 22r) offers an image of just such a *hadas* in the form of a tower, capped with a pointed roof, its sides pierced with small windows **[fig. 5]**.[21]

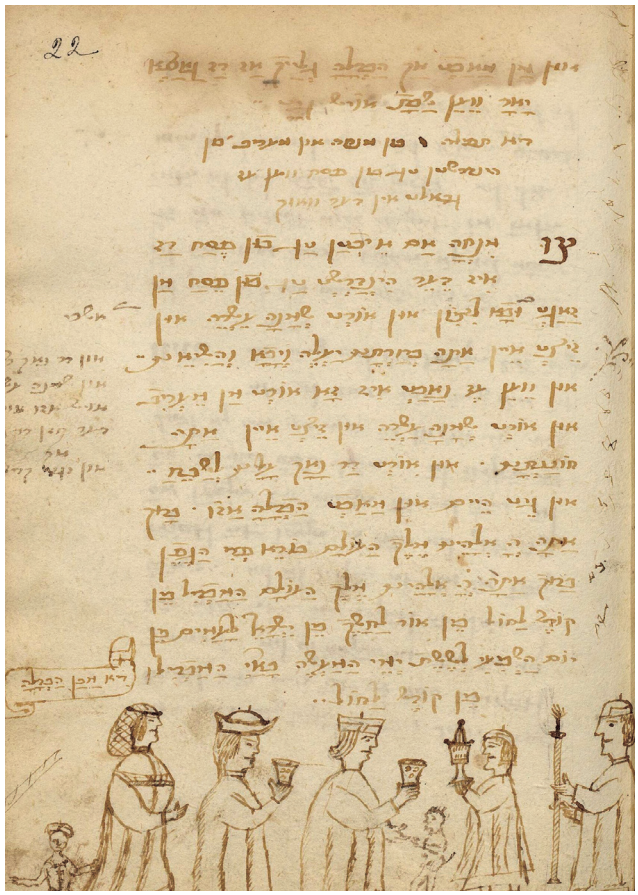
The mnemonic function of the French *besamim* container is predicated by its very medium twinned with its form and its olfactory performance. Like the substrate of the Golden Haggadah, as explored by Reed O'Mara in her contribution to this volume, that indexes and nods to the book's visual imagery as well as to the Seder context in which the book is used, the copper

18 Isaac ben Moses, *Sefer Or Zaru'a*, vol. 2, Zhitomir 1862–1863, p. 92.

19 Jacob Moellin. *Sefer Maharil: Minhagim shel rabenu Jacob Moellin*, Shlomo J. Spitzer ed., Jerusalem 1989, fol. 19d, quoted in Franz Landsberger, "The Origin of the Ritual Implements for the Shabbath", in *Beauty in Holiness: Studies in Jewish Customs and Ceremonial Art*, Joseph Guttman ed., New York 1970, p. 182, where he interprets hadas as an actual sprig of myrtle rather than a container.

20 Joseph ben Moses, *Leket Yosher* , vol. 1, Jacob Freimann ed., Berlin 1903, p. 57. My profound thanks to Leah Cooper for her help with translating the passage.

21 Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy*, Leiden 2004, passim 18, 36, 45, 69, 75. Images of more elaborate tower-shaped spice boxes are not found until the 1500s. For example, the Nuremberg Miscellany (Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 8° Hs. 7058 [Rl. 203]) includes a havdalah scene featuring just such a *hadas* on fol.29r; see Naomi Feuchtwanger-Sarig, *Thy Father's Instruction: Reading the Nuremberg Miscellany as Jewish Cultural History*, Berlin 2021, pp. 250–266.



[fig. 5] The Havdalah Ritual, *Sefer Minhagim* (Book of Customs), north Italy, 15th century / Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), MS Héb. 586, fol. 22r

container holds signification specifically attuned to its material makeup. The series of waves that encircle its sides – outlining the cornice of its roof, dividing its "floors," and finally thickening and washing over the bottom of the structure – suggest an allusion to the cast metal of the molten sea, a container from the court of Solomon's Temple, the First Temple lost to the invading forces of Nebuchadnezzar II.[22] In turn, the form of the tower, consistently foregrounded in the *besamim* container and its later avatars, expands the allusion to the entire city of Jerusalem, which frequently appears in medieval Jewish images as a collection of towers – as we see, for instance, in the contemporaneous Worms Mahzor (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 4°781/2, fol. 73a). Here, towers form an entire architectural ensemble around Jerusalem's Gates of Mercy, the gates most proximate to the Temple precinct; they recall nothing more than a collection of elegant *besamim* boxes, their conical roofs ready to be flipped open to receive spices **[fig. 6]**. And little wonder: the Havdalah ritual, which invokes God as "my strength and might, and (...) my deliverance," is knotted around a specifically Jewish

22 1 Kings 7, 23–26 and II Chron. 4, 2–5.

[fig. 6] The Gates of Mercy, The Worms Mahzor, vol. 2, Würzburg, Germany, ca 1280 / National Library of Israel (Jerusalem), MS Heb. 4°781/2, fol. 73a

conception of the tower as a divine abode, symbolic of God's strength and protection. Psalms praise God who "hast been a refuge (...) a tower of strength in the face of the enemy" (61, 4) and as "my rock, and my fortress (...) my high tower" (18, 3).[23] Proverbs 18, 10 equates the name of God with "a strong tower (...) set on high" into which "the righteous run."[24] *Midrash Tehillim*, a commentary on the Psalms known since at least the eleventh century, glosses this verse in terms of exilic yearning for God's protective power: "In exile I am in sorrow, and I enter synagogues to pray. May my prayer be for me a tower of strength."

The loss of Jerusalem and the loss of the Temple that God inhabited make the tower form all the more poignant as a mnemonic device inasmuch as the

23 *Midrash Tehillim or Schocher Tov*, Shlomo Buber ed., Vilna 1891, 71.3, discussed and translated in Ilia Rodov, "Tower-Like Torah Arks: The Tower of Strength and the Architecture of the Messianic Temple", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 73 (2010), pp. 65–98, sp. p. 81. The dates and place(s) of the compilation of this midrash are debated. In addition to Buber's introduction to his edition, see Leopold Zunz, *Ha-Derashot be-Yisra'el ve-Hishtalshelutan ha-Historit*, Hanoch Albeck ed., Jerusalem 1974, pp. 266–268. Some of its source material might date from as early as the Amoraic period, and the process of its editing continued beyond the eleventh century.

24 See also ii Sam. 22, 2–4, Ps. 18, 51; Isa. 5, 2. More on the tower shape, see Shubert Spero, "Towers of Spice, Towers of Salvation: An Inquiry into the Logic of Explanation", *Jewish Art*, 15 (1989), pp. 116–118.

city was recalled daily, in prayer (that included the recitation of Psalm 137, 5, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem") and in domestic practice, at least as prescribed by the Talmud: "A person may plaster his house with plaster but he must leave over a small amount in it without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple" (Bava Batra 60b:14).[25]

The sweet smell of spices also called to mind the city and its Temple, strengthening the synecdochic relationship between the tower and the architectonics of the lost city. The power of smell to evoke devotional memories is explored in the contributions of Elisabeth Sobieczky and Tera Lee Hedrick to this volume, both demonstrating the ways that smells toggle between the sensual and the mnemonic in Christian devotional culture. Recognition of particular smells plays a significant role in recall: experiments have conclusively proven that specific smells are more efficient at retrieving "autobiographical memories" – that is, memories that have personal significance for each individual – than are visual or auditory cues.[26] These memories may not necessarily be of things experienced but also of things described, discussed, and imagined: such as the sweet smells of Paradise, common to Jewish and Christian conceptions of Eden, or aromatic odors that drifted through the Temple – an olfactory anchor keyed specifically to Jewish liturgy.

Spices and resins were used in ancient Temple ceremonies and burnt as offerings. Exodus 30 offers detailed instructions both for making anointment mix for the priests and the ark, and for compounding spices. The exact recipe was a closely guarded secret, and the admixture was prohibited from secular uses.[27] The ultimate sources of spice lay in the Garden of Eden. The Jewish apocryphal treatise Life of Adam and Eve, also known as the Apocalypse of Moses, offers a fascinating speech that Eve delivers to her children and that includes memories of expulsion from the garden, where seeds and spices are treated as sources of sustenance:

> "(...) your father Adam wept before the angels opposite paradise and the angels say to him: 'What wouldst thou have us to do, Adam?' And your father saith to them, 'Behold, ye cast me out. I pray you, allow me to take away fragrant herbs from paradise, so that I may offer an offering to God after I have gone out of paradise that he hear me.' And the angels approached God and said: 'JA'EL, Eternal King, command, my Lord, that there be given to Adam incense of sweet odor from paradise and seeds for his food.' And God bade Adam go in and take sweet spices and fragrant herbs from paradise and seeds for his food. And the angels let him go and he took four kinds:

25 On evocation of the city in microarchitectural objects, see Mimi Levy Lipis, *Symbolic Houses in Judaism: How Objects and Metaphors Construct Hybrid Places of Belonging*, London 2011, sp. ch. 2.

26 Distel/Hudson, "Judgement of Odor" (n. 13); Herz / von Clef, "The Influence of Verbal Labeling" (n. 13); and Wilson/Stevenson, *Learning to Smell* (n. 13), p. 205.

27 On sacrificial incense burning at the Temple, see Deborah A. Green, *The Aroma of Righteousness: Scent and Seduction in Rabbinic Life and Literature*, University Park 2011, pp. 73–77.

crocus and nard and calamus and cinnamon and the other seeds for his food: and, after taking these, he went out of paradise. And we were on the earth.[28] (29, 2–7).

The return to Paradise will also be marked by the scent of spices – and particularly of myrtle. *Midrash Gan Eden* portrays the arrival of the righteous souls through the two heavenly gates, where they are greeted by gleaming angels, given a sprig of myrtle, and sent on to the blessed lands redolent of honey, milk, wine, persimmon, cedar, and myrtle roses.[29] As the souls ascend from the terrestrial to the celestial Eden, they are sacrificed by Archangel Michael on the altar and the emitted aromas of their righteous actions are inhaled by God himself.[30] In this context, we might better understand the exigences of sweet smells that premised righteous souls, sniffed out by the Messiah, or righteous deeds, sniffed out by Yanuqah – or, for that matter, of the aromas that wafted from Isaac's son Jacob, who wrapped himself in smelly animal skins to mimic the scent his brother Esau all the better to deceive his blind father and secure his blessing.[31] In grappling with this problematic episode in Genesis 27 – which stands at the heart of O'Mara's contribution to the volume – rabbis, including the celebrated Rashi, concluded that what Isaac could really smell was Jacob's virtuous soul infused with Edenic fragrances.[32] In this way, the scent of spices kept in the *hadas* and breathed in at the close of Shabbat implicatively bound together the Eden of the past and the Eden of the future, paradise lost and paradise remembered, one to be ultimately regained, along with the celestial Jerusalem, a messianic city knitted around a rebuilt Temple.[33] Spices both evoked banishment from God's presence – not

28 Apocalypse of Moses, 29, 3–7 [https://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/apcmose.htm; accessed on March 13, 2025]. Adam's death is also associated with spices: "And God sent seven angels to paradise and they brought many fragrant spices and placed them in the earth, and they took the two bodies [Adam's and Abel's] and placed them in the spot which they had digged and builded" (40, 6–7).

29 Compiled in *Otzar Midrashim*, Julius Eisenstein ed., New York 1915, which includes a range of shorter midrashim. See also Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash II*, Jerusalem 1938, rpt. 1967, p. 52. Here, again, Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions intertwine. Gershom Sholem suggests that the work was written by Moses de León, the same author who wrote the Zohar, and must therefore be a late thirteenth-century Iberian treatise (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1961, pp. 183, 200, 241–242). Paul Mandel argues that elements of the tradition encoded in the midrash, particularly that of the sacrifice of the souls, is indebted to medieval German rabbis, specifically Judah HeHasid and Eleazar of Worms ("The Sacrifice of the Souls of the Righteous Upon the Heavenly Altar: Transformations of Apocalyptic Traditions in Medieval Ashkenaz", in *Regional Identities and Cultures of Medieval Jews*, Talya Fishman *et al.* eds, Liverpool 2018, pp. 59–61).

30 Jellinek, Bet ha-Midrash III, Jerusalem 1938, p. 131. Discussed in Charles Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes de la Cabale, Les Rites Qui Font Dieu*, Paris 1993, pp. 198–199, and Joel M. Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah*, Detroit 2005, p. 226.

31 Genesis Rabbah 65, 22.

32 E.g., *Midrash Tanhuma*, John Townsend ed., Hoboken 1989: Toldot, Siman 11, 4. For the dating of this text, see the introduction to his edition in Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, vol. 1, pp. xi–xii. For Rashi: see *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.27.27?lang=bi; accessed on March 1, 2025].

33 On architectonics of the tower and its relationship with spices, see Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8, 13, transl. Joshua Schreier [full parallel text available at https://www.sefaria.org/Shir_HaShirim_Rabbah.8.13.1?lang=bi; accessed on March 13, 2025]. The midrash was compiled around the sixth or seventh century, although it, like others, contains much earlier sources; see further Elliot Kiba Ginsburg, "Fragrance, Olfactory Symbolism and the Song of Songs", in *The Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*. Vol. 1, Yudit Kornfield Greenberg ed., Santa Barbara 1989, pp. 237–239.

only topographical but also metaphysical – and suggested aroma as a transcendent means to reclaim divine presence; the small *hadas* tower thus enclosed within its evocative form the scent of heaven and the scent of loss, the scent of hope and the scent of expectation.

Scent as a vehicle for evocation – represented, indexed, remembered, embraced, and defied – stands at the heart of this volume, which offers something of a perfume sampling menu. The collection is arranged chronologically and spans centuries and geographies, its sites and objects tethered to one another through the notion of fragrance. The boundaries are nevertheless set at the seventh and the fourteenth centuries, and in the eastern hemisphere. Adam Bursi brings us to Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina in search of the elusive aromatization of holy sites where scent was used as a commemorative marker, used for veneration and memorialization: a marker that was as evanescent as it was fraught. Perfumed columns smeared with aromatic saffron mixture provided an olfactory stimulus of sorts, strengthened by visual triggers inherent in the distinctive yellow-and-red color of the mixture. But intersensory cues do not always work in concert, and sometimes stand at odds with one another: a point made abundantly clear in Sonya Rhie Mace's article, which focuses on paintings from eleventh-century India and Nepal, and explores the semiotics of color and scent that trip up the association between the two. Marking the body of Buddhist nun Utpalavarṇā, blue pigment in these images both refers to the agreeable fragrance of the woman's skin – that of blue lotus, *Utpala* – as the sign of goodness and contravenes it by virtue of visual associations between the color blue and transgressive, demonic beings. This striking color thus played a tug-of-war with associative memories of its viewers, recalling first the nun's name and then its origin in the sweet-smelling flower – grounding the smell etymologically, the linguistic move we saw already at work in the naming of *hadas*. This smell, in its turn, recalled the gold of the anther from which the perfume was derived: the gold that stood decisively in contrast with the color of Utpalavarṇā's body, a blue implying untamed danger. One readily thinks of Bekhor Shor's characterization of the Edenic apple: beautiful, with a sweet smell "certainly not like poison," and yet pernicious to the utmost degree. The suspicions lashed to sweet smells, in fact, may have been responsible for some perfumed columns described by Bursi to be later washed, stripped of their scent.

Where the visual and the olfactory did not controvert one another, the web of mnemonic association between the two was no less complex, all the more so when other senses were involved. Elisabeth Sobieczky studies a remarkable twelfth-century lectern from south Germany whose design was rooted in the concepts of allegorized transformation and impermanence: reflective colors of the lectern and their intermittent radiance framed the preacher's spoken word – evanescent, as all spoken words are – and enveloped in the

incense smoke piped through the channels constructed inside the rostrum itself. Like scented breath, smoke emerged from the mouths of the four evangelists' symbols carved around the lectern, triggering allusions to heavenly fragrance: fragrance of Paradise, fragrance of knowledge, fragrance of wisdom. The complex construction transformed the lectern into a mnemonic device of sorts, a theological machine that, through the very nature of its multisensory performance, fixed the transitory in the minds of its parishioners and offered a glimpse of the sensory macrocosm. It offered, too, a sensory intimacy – the herb-infused fume had not only an olfactory but also a tactile quality – the kind of intimacy that was also at play in the censing of late Byzantine churches, as explored in Tera Lee Hedrick's contribution. Here, however, scent and smoke remained the only means by which the laity could access the divine. Visually and auditorily cut off from the holy mysteries that took place at the altar, the congregation was also severely restricted in touching and tasting the Eucharist. But the smell of smoldering herbs and resins – unlike the contained scent of spices in the *hadas* – was uncontrolled, all-pervasive, and therefore universally accessible. Moreover, not only the smoke but also its vehicle, the censer, acquired a demotic quality, having been brought into laity's homes, the aroma of incense now binding ecclesiastic and domestic spaces, associated both with the sacramental and the familial. That Hedrick's examples range so widely, from Serbia to Syria and beyond, stands witness to the widespread phenomenon that centered smell in church and in home, with scent defining one space now generating memories of the other.

If Mace's and Bursi's essays inquire into vicarial substitutions for and descriptions of scents – be they visual or discursive or archival or associative – and if Sobieczky's and Hedrick's articles focus on objects as vehicles for olfactory effects, the final contribution to the volume embraces a multi-pronged approach to the subject, analyzing the way that scent was represented, exuded, and evoked to engage the totality of the beholder's sensorium. Reed O'Mara's essay explores the fraught image of Jacob and Esau that appears in the Golden Haggadah, a richly illuminated Iberian manuscript for Passover use: another instance of liturgy – of prayers and benedictions, of commentary and poetry – brought into domestic space. Smell inhered in the book's parchment folios, was evoked in its images and its texts, and formed a constituent part of the Seder during which the haggadah was used. Altogether, the olfactory sense was a predicate of the ritual that was framed by remembrance, both private and shared, performed by the Jewish communities that used the manuscript: of slavery in ancient Egypt, of persecutions in medieval Europe, of other Passover meals – recent and long past.

Scent and Sense, thus, takes a holistic approach to its subject, crossing religions, territories, and media of the medieval world writ large. Its inquiry, nevertheless, is tightly focused on the multivalent relationships between

olfaction, material culture, and remembrance that manifest themselves along an extraordinarily varied spectrum of thought. Rooted equally in ritual and knowledge, metaphysically potent yet making a claim for absolute truth, the sensorial ephemera studied in this volume exist on the brink, infused with fraught self-contradictions, tethered to the divine but all the while remaining – like any memory – inherently untrustworthy. Just as naming a scent facilitates its recall – a narrative technique fixing a fleeting, unstable phenomenon – so, one hopes, this volume, by naming the complex dialogues between art, scent, and recall, will anchor them in the minds of its readers and stimulate further work on this complicated and fascinating topic.

ARTICLES