SACRED CONNECTIONS

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SARAHCROWN

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SACRED CONNECTIONS is the solo exhibition by GABRIELE GRONES at SARAHCROWN Gallery in New York. The exhibition features a new series of oil paintings on canvas that explore the diffusion and significance of the symbology associated with the four sacred plants among Northeast Native Americans in various cultures.

Central to the installation is a complex polyptych dedicated to the cedar tree, accompanied by additional works highlighting sage, tobacco, and sweetgrass.

These paintings were produced during Grones's artist residency at RU -Residency Unlimited, Brooklyn, 2023.

Gabriele Grones













Cedar (Haida Bird Mask), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Nuu-chah-nulth Mask), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Haida Portrait Mask), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Chugach Mask), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Tlingit Transformation Mask), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Tsimshian Headdress Frontlet), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm)

Cedar, Sage, Sweetgrass and Tobacco A Visual Journey

Gabriele Grones is an artist whose work revolves around the study of symbols and their use in art across various cultures. His latest project focuses on the four sacred plants used by Northeast Native Americans: cedar. sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco. Through the exploration of common iconographies in various cultures. Grones aims to understand the connections and variations in the symbolic language of different civilizations, whether through syncretic cultural interactions or in an autonomous way. The exhibition features an articulated polyptych of paintings in oil on canvas dedicated to cedar, along with other paintings referring to sage, sweetgrass, and

tobacco. These works capture and evoke the cultural richness of these symbolic trajectories.

Cedar

The word cedar derives from Ancient Greek κέδρος (kédros), originally to identify species of plants now classified in the genera Cedrus and Juniperus. The common origin identified various plants with aromatic woods and the name was similarly applied to citron and also the word citrus is derived from the same root¹. As a botanical clarification, Western Red Cedar (and to a lesser extent Yellow Cedar)-which features in ceremonies in the Pacific Northwestbelong to the Cypress family, whereas in the eastern provinces members of the Juniper

family, which have similar characteristics, are also used for ceremonies. Western Red Cedar is considered a sacred plant by many Native American communities, it is used by numerous tribes as an incense and purifying herb. Cedar is especially associated with prayer, healing, dreams, and protection against disease. Cedarwood is still used to create artifacts and ceremonial objects, like the masks and headdress that open the installation, featuring (from left to right) a Haida bird mask², a Nuu-chah-nulth mask³, a Haida portrait mask⁴, a Chugach mask⁵, a Tlingit transformation mask⁶, and a Tsimshian headdress frontlet7. (p. 2)

Not only masks are traditionally carved in

a wide range of other ritual objects, like rattles. Most often associated with shamanic practices on the Northwest Coast, raven rattles⁸ (p. 5) are held oriented with the bird's beak pointing down when used in dance. Additionally, rattles are used to channel a shaman's spirit guide and can be used in healing ceremonies. Much of the symbolism associated with this rattle comments on the transmission of power from one figure to the next-the raven to humankind in general and the kingfisher to the prone figure on the raven's back. The prone figure is personified with a face of a wolf, perhaps another guide of the owner of this artifact. Rattles are considered extremely

cedarwood but also

personal objects and bear specific symbolism and power known only by those who understand their meaning. As symbols of power, rattles are also kept by clan leaders. Carved in two pieces and assembled using wooden pins to secure the halves, a rattle usually contains small stones or seeds. Polychrome adornment exhibits the pale blue pigmentation common during the late nineteenth century. It is common for raven rattles to be further adorned with feathers, fur, and beads, particularly along the seam of the two halves and at the handle base. The raven rattle depicted in the installation refers to a Tsimshian artifact from the 19th century. Cedar is an intensely

fragrant plant due to the presence of aromatic substances in the resin. Since the time of the ancient Egyptians such plants were used in embalming processes due to the balsamic aroma. Chips of cedarwood⁹ (p. 5) are collected, along with other plants, in a basket from the New Kingdom period.

The sepulchral aspect returns in the Noli me tangere (Touch Me Not) episode from the Christian gospels. It is the Latin version of a phrase spoken (according to John 20:17) by Jesus to Mary Magdalene when she recognized him after his resurrection. Noli me tangere¹⁰ (p. 5) is also one of Beato Angelico's frescoes decorating the convent of San Marco in Florence, from 1438-1440.







Cedar (Cedarwood Chips), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Noli Me Tangere), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm) Cedar (Rattle), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm)







Cedar (Cèdres de Salomon), 2023, oil on canvas, 8x10in (20,3x25,4cm) Cedar (Marinid Arch), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Japanese Courtesans), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm) Gabriele Grones Sacred Connections

In the background of the garden we can identify four trees, each with a specific symbolism in Cristian tradition: cypress, symbol of mourning, but also of immortality. Palm, symbol of martyrdom, but also of victory and glory. Olive tree, symbol of peace and also of Christ's holy anointing. Cedar, symbol of mercy but also of immortality. The following image. Mt. Liban. Tronc d'un des Cèdres de Salomon¹¹ (p. 6), refers to one of the earliest surviving photographs of non-Western civilizations, taken by the photographer Ernest Benecke in 1850-1853, documenting Middle Eastern cultures. Native to the Lebanon Mountains, it once formed extensive forests there. It was introduced to Europe in

the 16th century, mainly as an ornamental plant because of its grandeur. It is believed that cedarwood was extensively used in the construction of the great palaces of antiquity. In the Bible the cedar of Lebanon is mentioned several times to symbolize nobility, royalty and strength. After incense, it is the most frequently mentioned tree in the Old Testament (70 times). Its fame is linked to that of King Solomon who "spoke of plants, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that comes out of the wall" (1 Kings, 5:6) and asked Chiram, king of Tyre for plenty of them to build the Temple in Jerusalem. The Biblical reference is suggested by the Judgment of Solomon¹² (p. 8), sculpture

attributed either to Niccolò di Pietro Lamberti¹³ or to Nanni di Bartolo¹⁴ from the early 15th century. It stands at the corner of The Doge's Palace in Venice, next to Porta della Carta. It is also believed that Minos' labyrinth in the palace of Knossos in Crete was built with cedarwood. The painting representing a Minotaur comes from an Attic kylix¹⁵ (p. 8) from ca. 515 BC, and it refers to the maze and its construction material. The Statue of Zeus at Olympia was a giant seated figure, about 12.4 m (41 ft) tall, made by the Greek sculptor Phidias around 435 BC at the sanctuary of Olympia, Greece, and erected in the Temple of Zeus there. The statue was a chryselephantine







sculpture of ivory plates and gold panels on a wooden framework. Zeus sat on a painted cedarwood throne ornamented with ebony, ivory, gold, and precious stones. Here, too, cedar was used for its material gualities but also for its symbolic value as a noble and valuable plant. The statue was lost and destroyed before the end of the 5th century AD, with conflicting accounts of the date and circumstances. Details of its form are known only from ancient Greek descriptions and representations, such as in a coin¹⁶ from the National Museum of Archaeology in Florence (p. 8). A Panel with cusped arches¹⁷ (p. 6) from the 14th century made of cedarwood, is a particular example of

Marinid architecture which shared many characteristics with that of Andalusia. In both traditions, carved wooden friezes, usually placed near the ceiling above panels of stucco, constituted an important part of interior decoration. Here, an arcade of tall cusped arches is inscribed with the Arabic word نمی for good luck-forward and backward-below each arch. The panel is possibly from a Qur'anic school in Fez. The subjects of the following painting is a Japanese cedar panel¹⁸ from early Edo period depicting elite courtesans (p. 6). They are individualized both by their languorous body language and by their clothing. Their faces are only minimally described. Two girls enjoy reading a scroll,

perhaps a "morning after" letter from a lover. The splendidly described fabrics of the kosode, including the costly techniques, contributed to the aura surrounding the lives of these high-ranking courtesans. The use of cedarwood in creating sacred sculptures is here documented by a Japanese Zaō Gongen¹⁹ (p. 11), the protective spirit of Mount Kimpu in the lovely Yoshino range south of Nara. This figure of ferocious mien is carved of a single block of Japanese cedar (sugi), but for its separately carved limbs. His right foot is raised in a bounding leap as he brandishes a now-missing vajra in his raised right fist. He wears the Hindu dhoti, a long cloth wrapped around the

Cedar (Minotaur), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Zeus Coin), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Judgment of Solomon), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm)

waist and between the legs that, like the long scarf draped over the left shoulder, flutters with the figure's energetic movement. His hair sweeps back in flamelike tufts to frame the face. The powerful expression, with brow bulging and mouth open in a roar, is made riveting by inset crystal eves, including a third in the center of the brow. The baroque sculpture of Saint John the *Baptist*²⁰ (p. 11) by Juan Martínez Montañés is also carved in cedarwood. specifically Spanish cedar. The artist is one of the greatest Spanish sculptors of the first half of the 17th century. Based in Seville, he carved numerous wooden statues and reliefs that were painted and integrated into large altar screens (called

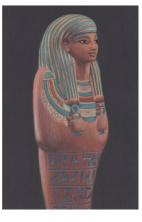
retables) for churches in his native region or to be shipped to the New World. The third example of cedarwood carved artifact is a shabti. a funerary figurine used in ancient Egyptian funerary practices, placed in tombs among the grave goods. The work represents one of the Shabti of Yuya²¹ (p.11) found in the burial in the Vallev of the Kings. The deceased was provided with funerary equipment from the finest royal workshops, as demonstrated by this superbly carved object. The text on these mummiform figurines states that the shabti will substitute for the spirit in any obligatory tasks it is called upon to perform in the afterlife. This noble wood was used in the creation

of elite funerary and devotional equipment, also as support for funerary portraits. The Mummy Portrait of Bearded Man²² (p. 11) comes from the Favum portraits: naturalistic painted portraits on wooden boards applied on upper class mummies from 3rd century Egypt, when the area was under the Roman empire. They belong to the tradition of panel painting, one of the most highly regarded forms of art in the classical world. The Fayum portraits are the only large body of art from that tradition to have survived. The image represent a portrait painted in encaustic (wax) pigment on a cedar of Lebanon wood panel.









Cedar (Zaō Gongen), 2023, oil on canvas, 8x6in (20,3x15,2cm) Cedar (Saint John the Baptist), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Fayum Portrait), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm) Cedar (Shabti of Yuya), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x4in (15,2x10,2cm)

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Sage

The use of sage as a purifying and healing plant is widespread in various cultures. The plant's name seems to derive from the Latin word salvus, meaning healthy, precisely in reference to its medicinal properties. The first painting refers to the episode of the Flight into Egypt²³ (p. 13) from the Pisa pulpit by Giovanni Pisano from 1302-11. According to a Christian legend, sage is linked to the events of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt. To evade Herod's soldiers, Mary asked some plants to protect and hide Jesus, but only sage agreed to cover the child with its leaves and thus save him from death. The second painting represents a mortar²⁴ (p. 13) by German goldsmith Wenzel

Jamnitzer from 1550. It is decorated with sculptural ornaments, including the life-casts of sage leaves.

Sweetgrass

Sweetgrass is one of the most representative herbs in Native American cultures, but similar species of herbs are also found in many other traditions. Some of the oldest depictions of grass come from fragments of Minoan vases²⁵ (p. 14) from the 16th century BC. The use of long blades of grass for the creation of ritual objects is diffused throughout the Americas and is present here in two paintings of feathered headdresses: a white feathered²⁶ and a mixed color feathered cap²⁷ (both p. 14) from the Amazon region, where the woven grass forms the inner frame

Tobacco

A painting reproducing photographs of tobacco plants²⁸ (p. 15) comes from a work by German photographer Carl J. Kleingrothe. who focused on agricultural subjects in late 19th century Asia, documenting the trade and the spread of plants, due in part to the cultural influence of colonial empires such as the Spanish Empire with ramifications from the Americas to Southeast Asia. The last two paintings show 18th century Chinese snuff bottles: a glass bottle in white and red²⁹ and a decorated porcelain bottle³⁰ (both p. 15). These are only few examples of the rich variety of such objects, from the Metropolitan Museum collections.

Gabriele Grones





Sage (Flight into Egypt), 2023, oil on canvas, 8x6in (20,3x15,2cm) Sage (Mortar), 2023, oil on canvas, 6x6in (15,2x15,2cm)







Sweetgrass (White Feathered Cap), 2023, oil on canvas, 8x10in (20,3x25,4cm) Sweetgrass (Colored Feathered Cap), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Sweetgrass (Minoan Vase Fragment), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm)

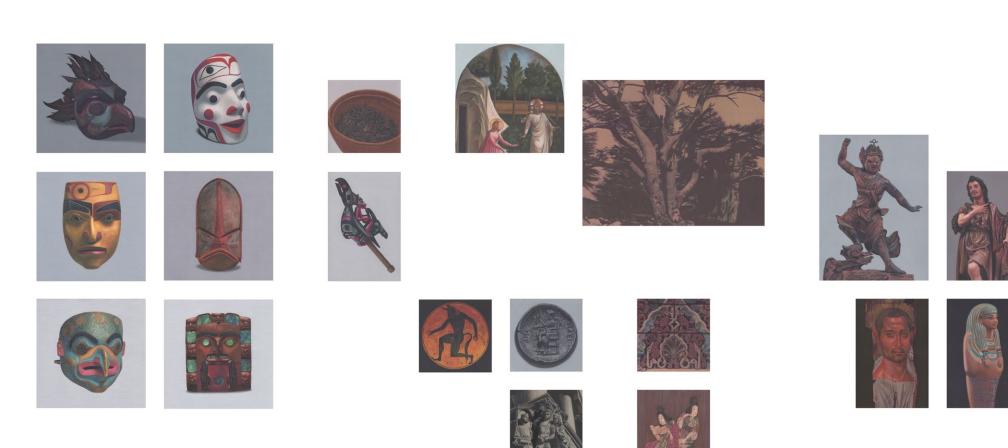






Tobacco (Asian Tobacco Plants), 2023, oil on canvas, 8x10in (20,3x25,4cm) Tobacco (Chinese Snuff Bottle), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm) Tobacco (Chinese Snuff Bottle), 2023, oil on canvas, 4x4in (10,2x10,2cm)

Gabriele Grones Sacred Connections



Cedar, 2023, oil on canvas, installation dimensions 24x54in (61x137,2cm)

Notes

1. Andrews, A. C. 1961. Acclimatization of citrus fruits in the Mediterranean region. Agricultural History 35: 35–46.

2. Bird Mask. 19th-20th century. British Columbia, Canada. Haida culture, Wood (cedar), paint, feathers, copper, whalebone, string, iron nails. Dimensions: H. 16 1/2 x W. 6 3/4 x D. 16 in. (41.9 x 17.2 x 40.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1979.206.771. A special thanks to Christine Giuntini, Conservator at The Met. for the precious help on the study of this artifact.

3. *Mask*, Joe David (First Nation, Nuu-chah-nulth/ Tla'oquiaht, born 1946), 1981–88. British Columbia, Canada. Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) culture. Wood, pigment. Dimensions: 4 1/2 x 2 in. (11.4 x 5.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2011.154.44.

4. *Portrait Mask*, Robert Davidson (Native American, Haida, Alaska, born 1946), 1977–78. British Columbia, Canada. Haida culture. Wood, pigment. Dimensions: H. 9 1/2 x W. 6 1/2 in. (24.1 x 16.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2011.154.47.

5. Mask, 1860. Alaska, United States. Chugach culture. Wood, vegetable fiber and pigment. Dimensions: 16 $1/2 \times$ 8 $1/2 \times 4 1/2$ in. (41.9 × 21.6 × 11.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: L.2018.35.65.

6. *Transformation Mask*, 1820–30. Alaska, United States. Tlingit culture. Wood, paint, metal coins, native-tanned skin. Dimensions: H. 8 x W. 7 1/2 x D. 2 in. (20.3 x 19.1 x 5.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2002.602.2a-d.

7. Headdress frontlet, ca. 1820–40. British Columbia, Canada. Tsimshian culture. Wood, abalone shell, pigment, and nails. Dimensions: $7 \times 6 \times 2$ 3/4 in. ($17.8 \times 15.2 \times 7$ cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2019.456.22.

8. *Raven Rattle*, 19th century. Skidegate, British Columbia, Canada. Tsimshian culture. Cedar, pebbles, polychrome. Dimensions: L. 12 3/16 × D. 4 1/16 × W. 4 1/8 in. (31 × 10.3 × 10.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 89.4.611. 9. Chips of Aromatic Wood. New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Thutmose II to Joint reign, ca. 1492-1473 B.C. Eavpt, Upper Eavpt, Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, below the Tomb of Senenmut (TT 71), burial 2, in basket, MMA excavations, 1935-36. Wood (including cedar) Dimensions: L. of one chip: 3 cm (1 3/16 in). The Metropolitan Museum, New York, Accession Number: 36.3.198.

10. Noli me tangere is one of the frescoes by Beato Angelico that decorate the convent of San Marco in Florence. It is located in cell 1 of the East corridor, external side, in the row of cells from which the decoration is believed to have begun. It measures 180x146 cm and is certainly one of the master's autograph works. dating back to 1438-1440. The Florentine convent of S. Marco, formerly of the Sylvestrine monks, was entrusted to the Dominicans of Fiesole by Pope Eugene IV on January 21, 1436. The building, which was seriously deteriorated, was radically rebuilt and transformed by Michelozzo starting from 1437 on behalf of Cosimo of the Medici. The works continued until 1452, starting from the cells and continuing

with the arrangement of the cloister, the chapter house (finished in 1442) and the library (1444). Meanwhile, the church was completed and consecrated at the beginning of 1443. The second cloister was arranged later. The pictorial decoration, entrusted to Angelico, must have proceeded almost parallel to Michelozzo's works, until his departure for Rome in 1446-47. According to Ciaranfi and Pope Hennessy, the master continued to work in the convent even after his return from his stav in Rome. We can therefore overall establish a period of activity from 1438 to 1446-50. Despite the perplexity of scholars such as Van Marle and Muratoff, the fresco in question, already referred by Bazin to the "Master of the Annunciation", is defined by Baldini as "high quality". Pope Hennessy has absolutely no doubts about Fra Angelico's authorship.

11. Mt. Liban. Tronc d'un des Cèdres de Salomon, Ernest Benecke (German (born in England), 1817–1894). Printed by Imprimerie photographique de Blanquart-Évrard (French, active 1851–55), Lille, France, 1850–53. Salted paper print (Blanquart-Évrard process) from paper negative. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 46.122.4.

12. Judgment of Solomon, sculpture given either to Niccolò di Pietro Lamberti or to Nanni di Bartolo, 14th century. It stands at the corner of The Doge's Palace in Venice (Italy), next to Porta della Carta.

13. Niccolò di Piero Lamberti, also known by the nickname "il Pela" (Florence, ca. 1370 – ca. 1425). Little is known about his life. In 1415 Niccolò moved to live and work in Venice. Here he completed the crowning of the façade of the Basilica of San Marco.

14. Nanni di Bartolo, also known as "il Rosso" ("the redhead"), was a Florentine sculptor of the Early Renaissance, a slightly vounger contemporary of Donatello. His dates of birth and death are not known, but he is recorded as an active master from 1419 to 1451. At least from 1424 to 1439 he seems to have worked in Venice and the Venetian parts of north Italy, both spreading Florentine style, but also accommodating it to the local lingering taste for International Gothic elements.

15. *Kylix*, ca. 515 a.C., Museo Arqueológico Nacional de España, Madrid, Spain.

16. Coin of Hadrian with Olympian Zeus, 1st–2nd century. Museo archeologico nazionale, Florence, Italy.

17. Panel with Cusped Arches, 14th century, Morocco. Wood (cedar); carved and painted. Dimensions: H. 19 in. (48.3 cm) W. 121 in. (307.3 cm) D. 2 3/4 in. (7cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1985.241.

18. *Courtesans*, early Edo period (1615–1868), Japan. Mineral pigments on cedar. Dimensions: 69 x 28 1/2 in. (175.3 x 72.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1990.231.

19. Zaō Gongen,

Nanbokuchō (1336–92) or Muromachi period (1392– 1573), 14th century, Japan. Wood (cedar), gilt bronze, colored beads, and crystal. Dimensions: H. 30 in. (76.2 cm); W. 24 in. (61 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2002.446a–c.

20. Saint John the Baptist, Juan Martínez Montañés (Spanish, 1568 Alcalá la Real – 1649 Seville). ca. 1620–30, Seville, Spain. Polychromed wood (cedar)

with gilding. Dimensions: H. 60 5/8 x W. 29 5/8 x D. 27 5/8 in. (154 x 75.2 x 70.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 63.40.

21. Shabti of Yuya, New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Amenhotep III, ca. 1390-1352 B.C. Egypt, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Valley of the Kings, Tomb of Yuya and Tjuyu (KV 46), Davis/Quibell & Weigall excavations. 1905. Cedar, paint, Egyptian blue. Dimensions: H. 28.5 cm (11 1/4 in.); w. at elbows 7.8 cm (3 1/16 in.); d. at foot 5.4 cm (2 1/8 in.). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 30.8.57.

22. Mummy Portrait of a Bearded Man, 220–235, Egypt, Fayum. Encaustic on cedar of Lebanon wood panel. Dimensions: 18 11/16 × 7 1/2 in. (47.5 × 19 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California. Accession Number: 79.AP.141.

23. Flight into Egypt, Giovanni Pisano (Italian, Pisa, ca. 1248 – Siena, ca. 1315), detail from the Pulpit of Pisa Cathedral, 1302–11. Marble.

24. *Mortar*, Wenzel Jamnitzer (German, Vienna 1507/8 – 1585 Nuremberg), ca. 1550. Bronze. Dimensions: diameter at rim: $4\,15/16 \times 6\,1/2$ in., 51.142oz. (12.5×16.5 cm, 1450g). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 2016.492.

25. Terracotta vessel fragment with grass motif, Late Minoan I, ca. 1600–1450 BC. Terracotta, dark-on-light ware. Dimensions: 17/16 x 1 5/8in. (3.7 x 4.1cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 11.186.47.

26. Feathered Headdress, 20th century, Carajá culture, Brazil. Feathers, vegetable fibers. Dimensions: H x W x D: 12 x 11 3/8 x 14 1/4 in. (30.5 x 28.9 x 36.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1978.412.79. A special thanks to Christine Giuntini, Conservator at The Met, for the precious help on the study of this artifact.

27. Feathered Headdress, 19th–20th century, Brazil. Feathers, vegetable fibers. Dimensions: H. 12 x W. 10 1/2 in. (30.5 x 26.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1979.206.1018. A special thanks to Christine Giuntini, Conservator at The Met, for the precious help on the study of this artifact. 28. Sumatra, Tabaksblad (Tabakpflanzen, Tabaksboom Tobacco crop tree), Carl J. Kleingrothe (German, 1864, Krefeld – 1942, Frankfurt), 1885–1900. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

29. Snuff Bottle, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 18th–19th century, China. Glass. Dimensions: H. 2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm); W. 1 13/16 in. (4.6 cm); D. 1 in. (2.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 1971.117.12a, b.

30. Snuff Bottle, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 19th century, China. Porcelain with red bone stopper. Dimensions: H. 2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Accession Number: 21.175.353a, b.





