

Fragrance and Perfume in West Europe

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Creativity at Work:

Fragrance and Perfume in West Europe

By: Brian Moeran

November 2008



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Abstract

Fragrance and perfume connect with our most basic and primitive window on the world – our sense of smell. Animals use their sense of smell to find food, sense danger and mate. So, too, do human beings. Mothers and their babies bond through smell. Smell triggers memories buried long in our unconscious, probably because our sense of smell is linked directly to the limbic system, the oldest part of the brain, which is the seat of emotion and memory. Throughout the ages in Western civilization, fragrance has been used to communicate spirituality, passion, and both masculinity and femininity.

Keywords

Classification; Fashion; Fragrance market; Fragrance production; History; Language.

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Fragrance and Perfume in West Europe

Fragrance and perfume connect with our most basic and primitive window on the world – our sense of smell. Animals use their sense of smell to find food, sense danger and mate. So, too, do human beings. Mothers and their babies bond through smell. Smell triggers memories buried long in our unconscious, probably because our sense of smell is linked directly to the limbic system, the oldest part of the brain, which is the seat of emotion and memory. Throughout the ages in Western civilization, fragrance has been used to communicate spirituality, passion, and both masculinity and femininity.

The flowering of modern perfume may be traced back to the court of Louis XIV (1643-1715), whose palace at Versailles had numerous bedrooms, salons, staterooms and ballrooms, but no bathrooms. The function of the vast quantities consumed at court, both then and in later decades, was first and foremost one of masking – of covering up both human and environmental odours. Perfume added one more layer to the linen undergarments and silk coverings that made the body beautiful (and clean). Even today, in our age of soaps and detergents, deodorants and antiperspirants, plumbing and mains sewerage systems, masking remains one of the primary functions of fragrance. To smell clean is to *be* clean.

Thus the story of fragrance is a story of hygiene, the body, appearance, dress and social status. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, European cities like Paris were still unhealthy and dirty. Air circulated poorly in narrow streets filled with dust, mud and garbage. Sewers were rare and inhabitants added the contents of their chamber pots to the streets below, while excrement was frequently dumped into streams that flowed down these same streets. Fragrance was thought of as therapeutic. It not only disinfected the contaminated city air, but also strengthened the body and renewed the mind.

Against this background of filth and the occasional epidemic, bathing began to be recognised as beneficial, although initially it was still believed that hot water weakened the body's vigour and stole its energy. After 1830, however, a lukewarm bath was seen to be the most hygienic form of cleanliness since it allowed the skin to breathe. Since the use of heavy fragrances aroused suspicions about the state of the wearer's cleanliness, people began to wear lighter, flowery perfumes. Nowadays marketers ring the changes at will, since the physical issue of hygiene has been resolved by the use of soap and toiletries, and fragrances have become primarily a socio-cultural adornment of the body.

A History of Modern Perfume

The history of modern European perfume traces its origins in Arab civilization. In the fifth century, an Arab perfumer, Avicenna, pioneered the distillation of

rose water, which was used on the body, as well as for perfuming rooms and interior gardens. Fragrance thus came to play a significant role in people's everyday lives. Arab perfumers set up business in Granada when the Moors took over the south of Spain and, from the eleventh century, the crusaders brought back knowledge of Oriental fragrances and their use to Europe.

The first alcohol-based eau de toilette was *l'Eau de la Reine de Hongrie*, manufactured from around 1390 in Montpellier in southern France. While Venice was then the major trading port for spices and other fragrance materials, Montpellier – and later Grasse – gradually became a major production centre of both materials and perfumes. Originally known for its gloves – which were perfumed in order to overcome the smell of urine in which the leather was softened – Grasse benefited from a climate that enabled the cultivation of such exotic flowers as jasmine, orange and tuberose' used in perfume making. The twin professions of glove making and perfumery did not become separate until 1724.

At the 'perfumed court' of Louis XV, courtiers changed their fragrance every day and *eau de cologne* became a great success. Originally prepared by Florentine nuns as *Aqua de Regina*, the formula was procured by an Italian émigré apothecary who manufactured the fragrance in Cologne from 1729 as *Eau de Cologne*. The world's oldest extant fragrance, 4711, took its name from the number of the house in Cologne in which its manufacturer lived and is still made by his descendant two hundred years later.

The passion of the 'Queen of Flowers', Marie Antoinette, for perfumes of various kinds led to the emergence of the first major perfume houses in Paris: Houbigant and L.T. Piver. During the French Revolution, perfumes and other luxury goods were frowned upon – although some, like the *Parfum à la Guillotine*, enjoyed short-term popularity. However, when Napoleon Bonaparte became the first Emperor of France in 1804, attitudes once more changed. This was partly because, as a result of the Revolution, perfumed soaps and other luxury products had spread from the narrow confines of the court to the newly emergent bourgeoisie; partly because of Napoleon's own fondness for *eau de cologne*.

For the bourgeois man, luxury was no longer a sign of aristocratic indolence but one of his own useful labour. He transformed the private sphere of his home, together with his wife or mistress, into a display of luxury and wealth. As a result, fragrance came to be used primarily by women, rather than by both men and women as hitherto. The bourgeois woman's colourful clothes, made-up face, floral perfumes and the décor of her sumptuous apartment revealed her as a feminised object of display. This renewed fascination for perfume in the nineteenth century was helped by the invention of the vaporizer, as well as of the '*hydrofère*' through which scented preparations were diffused in bathwater. The bath itself became a space of women's privacy and intimacy, and the bathroom thus a site of men's voyeuristic fantasies about

women's sensuality and nakedness. Such fantasies appear still in contemporary perfume advertising.

Napoleon I left his mark upon perfume in a number of ways. Famous for his addiction to *eau de cologne* – he is said to have consumed sixty half-gallon bottles a month – he imposed its use on his family and court and so instigated a renewed fashion for fragrances which rivalled that of earlier royal courts. The refreshing blend of rosemary, neroli (orange flower), bergamot and lemon that makes up *eau de cologne* was used in numerous ways: diluted in bath water, mixed with wine, taken as a mouthwash, and even eaten on a sugar lump in times of stress. Napoleon's first wife, Josephine, was herself fond of heavy, animal scents and spent a fortune every year at Lubin and Houbigant, her favourite perfume makers. When summarily dismissed, in an act of olfactory revenge she drenched the walls of her dressing room with so much musk, civet, vanilla and ambergris (smells that the Emperor disliked) that their combined scents still hung in the air of the château de Malmaison seventy years later.

Napoleon also encouraged the break-up of the old guild of glove-makers and perfumers. As a result, perfumers could independently create any scent or perfumed product they wished. Fragrance ceased to be an accessory used to enhance such luxury items as boxes, wigs, gloves, handkerchiefs and other fabrics in the way that it had done hitherto and became a desired product in itself.

Napoleon's edict led to a rapid increase in the number of new perfume makers in France. Some were located in Paris, but many others set themselves up in the town of Grasse (the 'city of perfumes') in Provence, where they could have direct access to the materials they required. The development of an irrigation system around Grasse in the 1850s enabled extended cultivation of rose, jasmine, lavender, violet, tuberose and orange blossom which were all used in perfume manufacture. Upgrading of facilities at the port of Cannes also allowed increased imports of other important perfume ingredients such as patchouli, sandalwood, vetiver and ylang ylang, and a railway link between Grasse and Paris enabled the commercial distribution of finished perfumes throughout the country. As family-run, craft-based concerns of earlier times developed into full-scale industries in the mid-nineteenth century, some fragrance companies set up their own plantations in foreign lands in order to standardize and control the cultivation of flowers essential to perfumes.

Napoleon also encouraged research into organic chemistry, a scientific field that was to revolutionise perfume creation and the perfume industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Before this, perfumes were composed of high quality natural raw materials, which amounted to perfumes in themselves. From 1830 onwards, however, chemists began to try to isolate some of the more interesting molecules in plant oils. One of these was geraniol, extracted from the essence of citronella, but with the scent of a rose; another was menthol, crystallised from essence of mint.

After their success with these isolates, chemists then tried to recreate fragrances, using fossil materials like oil and coal. This they achieved through synthesis and discovered that phenyl ethyl alcohol, a derivative of benzene, for example, replicated the subtle scent of a rose; and benzyl acetate, derived from toluene, that of jasmine.

From this, chemists proceeded to invent artificial fragrant molecules – like vanillin with its scents of leather and smoke, and ionine with its scent of violets – and so expanded in hitherto unimagined ways the richness of the perfumer's palette. It is the invention of new molecules that has revolutionised twentieth century perfumery and given rise to a new profession: that of the perfume blender, who no longer combines plain, simple scents, but orchestrates fragrances into symphonic chords and harmonies. In this way, perfume blenders have introduced a new culture of scent in which – according to Baudelaire – perfume, fashion and poetry shared the same goal: to invent an ideal that surpasses nature.

Modern perfumery, therefore, has changed our ways of smelling things. Coincidentally, it was born more or less at the same time as Impressionism, which changed our ways of seeing things. The first great modern perfume, *Jicky* by Aimée Guerlain, was launched in 1889, the same year as the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower. What made it both great and modern was that *Jicky* no longer attempted to imitate the scent of flowers, but instead made use of a composition of both natural and synthetic ingredients to create a multi-faceted perfume that aroused emotion. Thus has the modern perfumer become both chemist and poet, both technician and interpreter of scents.

While synthetic products were revolutionizing perfume blending by the end of the nineteenth century, the fragrance industry itself was turned upside down by the arrival of a new breed of perfume-maker, the couturier. Paul Poiret, who claimed to have liberated women from their corsets, was the first to market a fragrance as a complement to his lines of clothing, in 1911, although he failed to put his name on the bottle label. Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel pushed this idea to its logical commercial conclusion when she launched *Chanel N° 5* in 1921. Forever since the link between fashion and fragrance has been inseparable, as Chanel was quickly followed by other great names in fashion – Worth's *Je Reviens* (1932), Caron's *Fleurs de Rocaille* (1933), and Jean Patou's *Joy* (1935). After the war, they were joined first by Pierre Balmain's *Vent Vert* (1945), and Nina Ricci's *L'Air du Temps* (1947), and then by a host of other French couturiers, including Jacques Fath, Christian Dior and Hubert de Givenchy.

The purpose of couturier-inspired perfumes is to give consumers a 'whiff' of *haute couture*. Fragrance is the first step along the consumer catwalk of fashion – cheap enough for most women to buy, expensive enough to imbue them with a sense of luxury and exclusive social status. Once so launched, it is reasoned, those same women will purchase accessories (belts, handbags, scarves) by the same fashion houses and then, finally, the expensive clothes that they produce and reproduce every season highlighting the fashion year. In this

respect, fragrance – embodying the transience of our sense of smell – is subject to the transience of fashion, although the quality of any one perfume is measured by its longevity.

In spite of their designer names, products like *Romance* or *Rush* are not actually made by Ralph Lauren or Gucci. Only three perfume houses still employ their own in-house blenders: Chanel, Guerlain and Jean Patou. The rest contract their work to large blending companies like Firmenich, International Flavors and Fragrances (IFF), Proctor and Gamble, and Takasago, so that the creation of modern perfumes (often based on the invention of new molecules) is primarily a money-spinning exercise.

Perfume Production

There are various methods by which the flowers, fruits and plants used in perfumery are transformed into essences, absolutes and resinoids. One, the oldest form of extraction, is by macerating flowers in fats and oils. Another similar method is that of *enfleurage*, still suitable for treating fragile flowers like jasmine and tuberose. A third extraction process is by steam distillation (which produces essences), and a fourth uses volatile solvents (which produce *concretes* of plants and *resinoids* of balsams, gums and resins, both of which can be further distilled into *absolutes*). Expression is used solely for extraction of citrus oils from fruits such as oranges, lemons and mandarins.

Essential oils, absolute essences and resinoids are produced by raw material processing companies, often based in Grasse. Although most materials are extracted and distilled in their factories there, some are so fragile that they have to be initially processed in their country of origin before being shipped either to processing companies or directly to perfume manufacturers who may then process the materials further before blending into what is known as a concentrate (the composition of both natural and synthetic ingredients blended according to specific formulae). This concentrate is then mixed with beetroot-derived refined alcohol and left to rest in huge stainless steel vats for between a few weeks and three months. The exact proportion of alcohol added depends on the product required. Perfumes have a concentration of oils greater than 22%. *Eau de Parfum* has a 15-22% concentration, *eau de toilette* 8-15%, and *eau de cologne* less than 5%.

After maceration, the liquid is filtered to produce a transparent liquid, which is then pumped via numerous pipes from the vats to automated bottling machines located on the floor above. This is followed by packaging and individual product quality control before the perfumes are stored and shipped to retail outlets around the world.

The particular skills that are necessary for perfumers to succeed in their job are, first and foremost, a normal sense of smell and an interest in perfumery. Long training and a good memory are also essential. A perfume is usually imagined before it is made. In other words, a perfumer will put together a

number of different ingredients from memory to fit a particular idea. S/he then writes them down and only then will the perfume begin to take physical form as s/he starts to weigh and blend the raw materials.

When a cosmetic, household or personal product company wants a new perfume, it creates a brief – usually in the form of a synopsis, sometimes accompanied by a photograph or video. The brief describes the target market, gender, age, social category, and personality of the perfume’s wearer, the family of fragrances to which the new perfume should belong, and its relation – if any – to known perfumes. The company then invites between five and ten suppliers like Firmenich, Givaudan Roure, Quest International, Takasago, or IFF, to compete with one another to win the competition for manufacture of the new perfume.

These suppliers instruct their perfumers who proceed to come up with samples, which are then commented on by the client and sent back to the supplier to be modified. These ‘mods’ – as they are called – are then sent back for further comment. Very occasionally a perfumer will have to do as many as one thousand modifications for a – very fussy – client. It takes about eighteen months from the initial brief to the client’s final decision (although some briefs have taken as long as eight years to fulfil) and a further year before the fragrance is launched. The creation of a perfume, then, is a collaborative effort between perfumer and client – what one might call ‘human chemistry’. An average perfume has sixty to one hundred ingredients; more complex ones 300. Estée Lauder’s *Beautiful* is said to hold the record at 700, with a formula that is twelve pages long.

The Fragrance Market

The fragrance market is divided into ‘prestige’ and ‘mass’ segments. Between one and two hundred new fragrances are launched every year, but only five per cent of these establish themselves in the market within a year of their launch. When someone in the perfume industry does create a hit, copycats follow fast and furious. 1993 was the ‘Italian season’. Proctor and Gamble introduced Laura Biagiotti’s *Venezia*. Unilever launched *Vendetta*, L’Oréal Giò, and Lauder *Tuscany per Donna*.

The mass market is made up of popular brands like *Charlie* (Revlon) and *Exclamation!* (Coty), as well as celebrity fragrances such as *Curious* (Britney Spears), *Sheer* (Paris Hilton) and *Glow* (Jennifer Lopez). Couturier, jewelry, luxury goods and fashion house perfumes make up the prestige market and account for about eighty per cent of the total value of all sales. The proportion of women’s to men’s fragrances is approximately two to one in most parts of Europe. France has the highest annual fragrance sales in Europe, at about €1.4 billion, followed by Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom (all over €1.2 billion).

Regional and national identity, as well as age, gender and social class influence fragrance preferences and usage. Although three quarters of all women in France (and Spain) use fragrance at least once a day, there is an even higher penetration rate among those living in or near Paris and along the Mediterranean coast. In Spain, teenagers are the main consumers; in Germany women in their early twenties; and in Italy those in their late 20s and early 30s. Men tend to use *eau de toilette* when they are young, and shift to *eau de cologne* as they get older, until the age of sixty when fragrance usage decreases – except in Italy where men over sixty use *more* fragrance. Perfume itself constitutes only two per cent of the women’s fragrance market, which relies predominantly on sales of *eau de toilette* and *eau de parfum*.

Brand preferences also tend to vary by country where locally manufactured brands may be very popular. Thus, while the French prefer French perfumes such as *N° 5* (Chanel), *Le Male* (Jean-Paul Gaultier), *J’adore* and *Eau Sauvage* (both Christian Dior), in Germany, *Jil Sander*, *Boss* (Hugo Boss), and *Cool Water* (Davidoff) are among the most popular fragrances. Similarly, Giorgio Armani’s *Aqua di Giò* and Laura Biagiotti’s *Roma* were among the best selling woman’s perfumes in Italy in 2001. Chanel *N° 5* ranks consistently high across Europe in terms of overall sales.

The Language of Perfume

Because human beings’ ability to perceive smells has progressively declined over the ages, and because Kant, Hegel, Rousseau and other Enlightenment philosophers associated smell with a degree of animalism and corresponding uncivilised primitivism, people have had great difficulty in imagining and describing the sensuality, exoticism or intoxication of a fragrance. Moreover, European – and many other, though not all – languages lack a rich and complex vocabulary with which to describe smells. As a result, we are obliged to resort to similes and analogies: something smells ‘like a rose’; a perfume is itself an *Allure*, a *Scandal* or *Obsession*.

For some people – chefs, chemists, doctors, and whiskey distillers among others – being able to talk about smells is an essential part of their professional jobs. They need to be able to communicate their olfactory understandings to others and so develop a more or less limited vocabulary with which to achieve their aims. This difficulty with language affects both the creation and sale of fragrances. It makes it virtually impossible for a client to explain to a perfumer clearly and succinctly what he or she wants – known as “the tip of the nose phenomenon”. This is why clients sometimes use images in their briefs, and even send perfumers to out of the way places to experiences for themselves the particular scent of a Moroccan sawmill, for example (for *Fémininité du Bois* by Serge Lutens).

If it is virtually impossible for the non-specialist to find the exact words to describe the difference between a ‘green floral’ and ‘aldehydic floral’ scent, or

indeed to distinguish between them, it is also virtually impossible to advertise a particular fragrance, other than by resorting to a carefully constructed cultural 'image system' that makes use of eroticism, femininity (or masculinity), desire, and transience. The image system of perfume calls into being a complex system of representations, as well as an intricate network of social, cultural, psychoanalytical and personal associations. Perfume thus becomes 'a promise in a bottle'. Perfumes like *Sublime*, *Pleasures*, *Diva*, *Audace* sell us aspirations to be more than we are. It speaks to our vulnerabilities, rather than our strengths.

Those who talk about fragrance invariably draw parallels between perfume, cookery and music. Their vocabulary is littered with terms like notes, ingredients, scales, glazing and harmonies. A perfume is composed of *notes* – a word borrowed from music to indicate the characteristic odour of a particular material. The world of perfumery allows for more than 2,000 notes, but many of these are variations on a theme. Thus, there are about 20 different rose notes to choose from (Bulgarian, Moroccan, Turkish, French, etc.).

Because individuals – including perfumers themselves – smell the same smells very differently, it is necessary for them to establish a language of common reference. To this end they have classified perfume notes along two complementary axes. On the one hand, they are grouped by the *physical* materials from which they are taken. Thus, jasmine, rose, and iris are known as *floral* fragrances and lemon, bergamot and grapefruit as *citrus*. Other groups include *fern* (lavender, wood, coumarin, oakmoss, etc.), *chypre* (named after a perfume created by Franois Coty in 1917 and standing as a family of its own), *woody* (sandalwood, cedar, vetiver, etc.), *oriental* (vanilla, musk, and other animal notes), and *leather* (smoke, burnt wood, tobacco). Each of these seven families reflects the sense impressions conveyed by particular fragrances, whose attributes are further distinguished by sub-fields such as 'spicy floral', 'aromatic woody', 'green chypre', and so on.

On the other hand, notes are grouped according to their *chemical* properties. When a perfume is rubbed onto the skin, the combined fragrances of scent and body vaporize into the atmosphere. Notes are generally divided into three categories, depending on how quickly their smell lingers before evaporating. These are *top* or *head* notes, *middle* or *heart* notes, and *bottom* notes or *drydown*. Lighter molecules, like citrus and fruity notes, evaporate quickly; top notes thus reach the nose first. Heavier molecules, associated with resins and woods, evaporate more slowly and so reach the nose later.

There are, then, two important properties of fragrance. First, it must have *diffusivity*. How it spreads is what matters – witness the *sillage*, the wake of a perfume left by a woman walking down the street. It must also have *substantivity*. What matters here is how long it lasts on the skin, although such lingering depends on the individual and is affected by ethnic and racial background, skin type, and sheer individual chemistry. Fragrance and perfume themselves, then, speak a language that expresses, modifies and redefines the body's presence in the world.

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See also: Care and maintenance, Accessories, Fashion designers, Cosmetics and skincare

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