

The Fragrance of Paradise

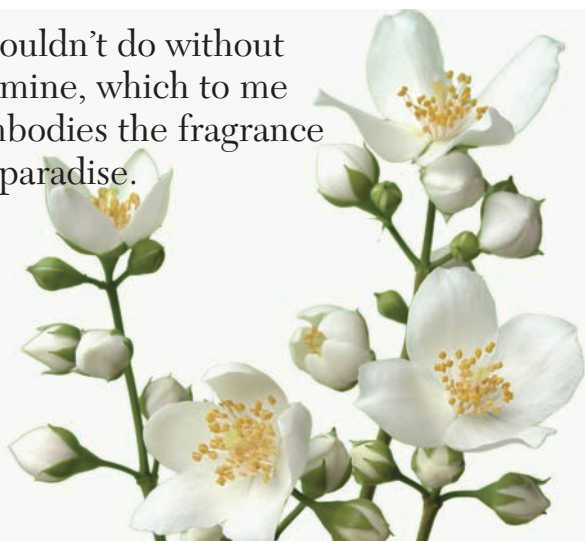
An interview with Michel Roudnitska

Michel Roudnitska comes from a unique fragrance heritage. The co-manager of Art et Parfum carries on his father Edmond's legacy as an eternally curious perfumer and artist. In 2000, Roudnitska launched *Noir Epices* (Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle) in tandem with *Parfum de Thérèse*, his father's posthumous olfactive tribute to his wife. In the years since, Roudnitska has formulated a range of niche scents, including *Amoureuse* (Parfums DelRae) and *Ellie* (Ellie D). The perfumer recently took some time to discuss the ways in which his interest in multimedia projects has informed his perfumery, his creative process, the subjectivity of fragrance, signature and the state of the fragrance industry.

P&F: How have your interests outside of perfumery—such as photography and sculpture—shaped your work in fragrance creation?

Roudnitska: My passion for photography, graphic arts, and multisensory performances deeply influenced my approach to olfactory creation; the opposite is also true. In fact, it is a constant back-and-forth between these various spheres of expression, and this allowed me to approach perfumery from quite a different angle and with a broader view.

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Michel Roudnitska

I first began classifying my images according to their form and examining how all these forms could be linked to our various kinds of emotions. I then tried to combine these forms with one another to create complex visual compositions ("*parfums d'images*"), based on my experience in olfactory composition. This research led to a kind of cross-reference table between the visual forms and the "olfactory forms," which are rooted in the common emotions they can elicit.

It was after this stage that, in 1996, I had the idea of creating olfactory performances in which I could finally synergize all these elements in one cohesive unit. The fragrances that I composed for these shows were particularly expressive and innovative, because I had complete creative freedom with no budgetary constraints. It is from these scents that the majority of my perfumes were born, such as *Noir Epices*, which was inspired by the theme of fire and the Spice Route. This explains why my compositions are sometimes difficult to categorize applying the various olfactory tables generally used in our profession.

P&F: Can you explain your creative process by discussing the creation of one of your favorite scents? How do you take risks and assert your vision when working with clients? How do you revise?

Roudnitska: Over the last 15 years, I have had complete freedom to create some 20 original creations. Some, by chance, were embraced in their original form by my clients (*Noir Epices*), others were slightly modified (*Shiloh*). But it is true that most of the time I must start more or less from scratch to fulfill a specific request.

So it is a process that will take one or two years, during which time I'll first locate the essential raw materials which correspond to the client's tastes and, from that collection, select those which stir emotions in me, as well. From that point, I research the possible accords between these ingredients and start to build two or three olfactory forms, which I then present to the client.

Once the general direction is indicated through the choice made in this phase, I enter into a freer phase or tune in more deeply to my own sensitivity and intuition to completely bond with and internalize this composition. I can also introduce other components that I deem useful, to give character to this new fragrance. After that, it becomes a succession of posted trial samples and e-mailed commentary in return, which guide me in making adjustments accordingly.

If I put greater emphasis on working with niche brands, it's very much because I'm often dealing with people who are passionate about the perfume, with very specific ideas of what they want, and who are generally the only ones making the decisions.

For *Bois de Paradis* (Parfums DelRae), which is one of my favorite creations, I was absolutely set on including the exotic gourmand fruity note which gave it that addictive quality. It took a certain amount of time for my client to get used to this unusual note, but in the end it was that which gave this perfume its unique signature.

For *Ellie*, on the other hand, the conflict was my own—I had to force myself to come up with much higher proportions of musk than I usually used. My client, though, was absolutely set on having this musk overdose, thus I had to take on the challenge and find a very personal way to use these ingredients to remain in keeping with my own tastes. I admit that I myself was quite surprised with the result and the overall positive reception the perfume received.

P&F: In the past you've spoken about the subjectivity of fragrance—given that, how do you know a fragrance is on the right track or, later, that a fragrance is complete?

Roudnitska: It's true that enjoyment of perfume is very subjective and that inter-individual differences are much greater in scent than in the other sensory domains. That's why it's very hard to work when we have more than one person to satisfy (without even mentioning panels!) whose opinions often greatly differ. In this case, there is a greater risk of losing the inspirational energy behind the idea, and research can become erratic.

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P&F: Do you believe your fragrances have a signature? If so, what is it?

Roudnitska: It's very difficult for me to answer this question because I'm too close to the subject. Still, it's quite possible that the way in which I approach perfumery (first with my father's very distinctive instruction, then by my olfactory performance approach) led me to develop a different signature.

We sometimes compare styles of perfume-making to those of painters, thus we can speak of impressionist, baroque, naturalist, or realist perfumery ...

If I had to establish myself on some descriptive scale, I would say that I'm rather inspired by symbolism, Japonism, and, above all, the "Nabis" school, especially Gauguin, with whom I share the taste of the tropics and expressive colors, as well as his back-to-beginnings approach. I do indeed like to give character to my perfumes, to create them such that they give off clearly definable forms while remaining elegant, with a feeling of cohesiveness.

P&F: What are some of your favorite materials—natural and synthetic?

Roudnitska: I very much like woody notes for their depth, especially cedarwood and its derivatives, vetiver, and cashmeran. These constitute the bottom notes of most of my perfumes. As for flowers, I couldn't do without jasmine, which to me embodies the fragrance of paradise, but also, of course, rose and violet. Spices, particularly nutmeg and cinnamon, give me the fire of sensuality, tempered just-so by the gourmand freshness of orange and tangerine.

P&F: Given your fragrance heritage and distinguished career in your own right, in what ways have you seen perfumery change over the decades, particularly in regard to the fragrance industry's lament of insufficient innovation?

Roudnitska: In my opinion, the most important phenomenon in perfumery over the last decade is the appearance of niche brands. This trend corresponds to the need created by the democratization of famous luxury brands, which left a void in the high-end market.

The repeated launches of multiple "clones" and "flankers" of existing successful products, combined with the demands of globalization, have led to perfume becoming commonplace. In wanting to limit risks by producing more consensual perfumes, the major brands no longer played their role of creators of innovative fragrances.

Since early this century, it has been the work of Serge Lutens, Annick Goutal, Artisan Parfumeur, Frédéric Malle, Parfums DelRae, etc. that has brought a true qualitative revival to perfumery that would have made my father very happy. He would have enjoyed even more the appearance of the first "parfums d'auteur," paying homage to their true creators.

P&F: What aspects do you see as defining perfumery today?

Roudnitska: The contemporary fragrance market is suffering from three excesses:

There are too many similar perfumes, creating a lot of confusion for the public. Even niche fragrances are now adding to the confusion with their many new brands.

Too many products (detergents, household products, etc.) are now scented—not by necessity, but simply to make them more attractive. The consequence of this is a trivialization of perfume, smelled anytime and anywhere, which leads to a saturation of the senses, and a lot of chemicals being spewed out into nature.

The safety regulations necessary for such massive use of these olfactory ingredients are becoming more and more complex. The consequence is that many genuinely natural products will no longer be available and composers' creativity will be seriously compromised.

P&F: How do you think perfumery will evolve in the future?

Roudnitska: In the state of economic and ecologic world crisis in which we now live, the fragrance industry is facing a genuine challenge for the future. There will be a complete paradigm shift in societal values. Sustainable development and fair trade are being progressively introduced into our industry, but things will have to go further.

More and more people are becoming aware that we are living on a planet with limited resources (we have probably already reached the oil peak!) and that it will be impossible to maintain the same rate of production

growth over the next 30 years. As the cost of energy and raw materials (natural and synthetic) used in perfumery inexorably increases, we must establish our priority: more quality and less quantity.

Our lifestyles and the notion of luxury will have to change drastically: more social relationships and fewer goods, needs that are more spiritual and less materialistic. Fragrance creation will have to return to its essence: an artistic expression of beauty and authenticity, meant to nourish the soul.

In such a context, the only brands which will survive will be those with a genuinely ethical attitude toward their suppliers, creators, and clients, but, above all, those with the legitimacy to defend this approach. The concepts of fashion and advertising will also have to change: the Internet now lets the consumer get a genuine appreciation of fragrances from other passionate consumers, instead of via conventional marketing briefs.

I believe that Web sites and blogs dedicated to perfume will play an increasing role in this educational evolution of a mature and responsible consumer, being able to choose which values he or she wishes to embrace.

P&F: What perfumers and fragrances do you see as particularly innovative?

Roudnitska: One of the most creative perfumers alive today is clearly Jean-Claude Ellena. Almost all of his fragrances, from *Eau de Bulgari* to *Terre d'Hermès*, brought about a genuine improvement in composition, with a very pure means of creating "watercolor" fragrances, partially inspired by my father's signature, but taking the notion of purity even further.

P&F: How do you stay innovative, how do you continue to grow as a perfumer?

Roudnitska: My ability to be innovative depends largely on the pleasure I take in creating, the freshness and enthusiasm with which I approach new research. Creation of a perfume, to me, is an act of love in which I am emotionally involved. This means that it often requires a woman to inspire it, one who can bring me to refine this perfume to its very highest expectations.

It is also very much tied to my other research in various domains, such as image work and music, but also to my travels and my spiritual path. To be able to constantly call oneself into question in everyday life by putting personal development techniques into practice is also an evolutionary factor in artistic creation.

This form of expression, though, is simply a means of better knowing oneself and drawing ever nearer to one's own inner truth.

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