

Annie Buzantian

Find Your Own Way: Remembering perfumer Elie Roger

If you have the gift, you have to find it your own way so you can stand on your own two feet all the time.” Firmenich perfumer Annie Buzantian still recalls this key piece of advice from her former mentor, Elie Roger. Elie, a beloved and respected colleague, passed away last November, following a career that lasted from 1946 to his retirement in 1991.

Elie worked first in Grasse, France, and then held positions in New York and Paris. Nominated to the elite rank of master perfumer in 1978, he created a number of world-class fragrances, including *Wild Country* (Avon), *Knowing* (Estée Lauder) and *Clinique Wrappings* (Clinique/Estée Lauder Co.). In 2001, Elie received the American Society of Perfumers’ Lifetime Achievement Award. In addition to his creative legacy, he leaves behind a second generation of perfumery; his daughter, Odile Bonghi, is also a perfumer.

Discovery of Style

“He was so friendly and human,” Annie says of Elie. “He was very generous with his knowledge: he shared and encouraged and had great belief in me—more than I did at the time. He believed that women could bring a different perspective and approach.” Elie’s combination of encouragement and creative prodding helped Annie flourish as a perfumer. “He was there in every way for me. He is responsible for who I am and what I do today.”

Self-reliance was a keystone of Elie’s creative philosophy, says Annie. “He never gave me anything. He always guided me or gave me his point of view, but never imposed his point of view.” Annie recalls Elie telling her, “I don’t want to influence you. I don’t want you to become me; I want you to become you. Find your way. You will get there.” And, she adds, “I always did.” Now a mentor herself, she says, “I try to do this with young perfumers. I try to give them ways to find their own way,

rather than imposing my own point of view: ‘My way is not necessarily yours. You have to discover your own style.’”

Tradition, Modernity and Reinvention

Elie’s career was unique in that it spanned eras of both traditional and modern perfumery. “He was able to adapt, grow, change,” says Annie. “The way you survive in our business is being able to reinvent yourself. Sometimes, when you feel you’ve figured yourself out, you better change.”

While Elie was well-versed in classical perfumery, Annie says he was able to adapt his art as styles changed. “He was very versatile,” she says, discussing his formulation for the floral-aldehydic *Wrappings* (1991). “It was such an avant-garde and forward fragrance that it’s almost more relevant today than it was in its time,” she says. “It’s still a very valuable and valid fragrance for today. It’s amazing.”

You Will Know When It’s Done

One of the most important lessons Elie imparted to Annie was a sense of humility. “My biggest lesson was my first win, when I was so proud and full of myself,” she says. Annie recalls that Elie told her, “Don’t think just because you made one fragrance you’re now a famous perfumer.” While she was initially upset by his seeming lack of enthusiasm, she now admits: “He brought me back to reality. As time went by, I gave him so much credit. That put everything into perspective. He thought that just because you did one thing, it didn’t mean *you’re there*. You have to constantly work for it. He taught me the discipline of work.” Today, when she finishes a project, Annie thinks to herself, “OK, well, let’s try it again.”

When Annie worked with Elie, she would ask the same thing as each project came to a close: “Elie, when do you know that a fragrance is finished?” She still recalls his reply: “The day will come that when you open that bottle and you will know. You don’t have to have anyone tell you. You know it. You open the bottle and smell it—‘oh, yes, this is it.’ You know you have something good.”

“And he was absolutely right,” says Annie. “When I smell something toward the end of a project I think: It’s done. You know it; it’s great.”

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