

# The *Other Sense*: Fragrance as Art Form

Museum of Art and Design exhibition belies fragrance's unique subjectivity, giving perfumery its creative due.

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From its inception in the 19th century, photography's status as an art form was fiercely debated. Some claimed the best works belonged in galleries beside paintings. Others declared it mere folk art or, worse, simply utilitarian. New York's Museum of Modern Art didn't hold a photography exhibition until 1937. And it wasn't until the early 1990s that works by Alfred Steiglitz and Man Ray began to command six-figure sums. Today, photography's place among other media in the art world is firmly established. For Chandler Burr—author of *The Emperor of Scent* and *The Perfect Scent*, and the Museum of Art and Design's (MAD; [www.madmuseum.org](http://www.madmuseum.org)) curator of olfactory art—perfumery is due for a similar reconsideration.

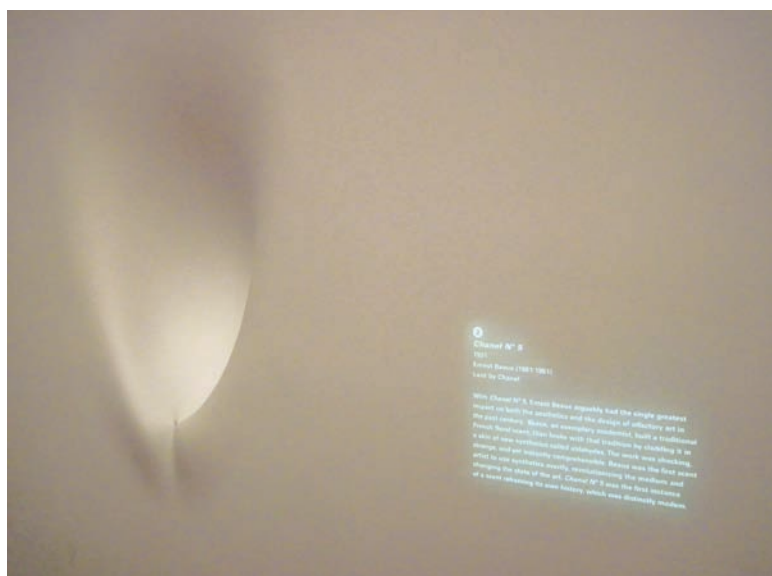
“At MAD, we are always looking to push boundaries and question the hierarchies in art by exploring the materials and processes behind groundbreaking work,” says Holly Hotchner, MAD's Nanette L. Laitman director. “There has not been the exploration or recognition of olfactory art as there has been of art that stimulates the other four senses.”

During a press breakfast kicking off “The Art of Scent: 1889–2012,” on view at MAD through February 24, Burr stressed that fragrance must be allowed to come under critical scrutiny. Asked by an attendee if fragrance is too subjective to be judged, the curator explained that olfaction is not uniquely subjective compared to any other sense. Thus, serious perfumery criticism, academia, appreciation, and development of a critical and aesthetic vocabulary are valid and sorely overdue.

**“Exploding” fragrance:** “The Art of Scent” represents a unique foray into the formal appreciation of perfumery. The exhibition tackles the challenge of presenting materials that aren't visual by displaying 12 scents by 15 perfumers in a cleverly minimalist space designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Texts and explanatory notes are projected onto the gallery walls and floor. Scents are dispersed from apertures concealed at eye level in dimples in the space's white walls. Visitors lean their faces into these recesses—one per perfume—which triggers a diffuser that delivers the scent by pumping a concentrated stream of warm air through scent-infused beads. Hissing softly through an aperture, the intensity of the odor is determined by the visitor, who can lean closer or farther for extended dispersals or more minimalist experiences.



Texts and explanatory notes are projected onto the gallery walls and floor.



Chanel No. 5 and 11 other scents are dispersed from apertures concealed in recesses in the space's white walls.

The quality of the scent in this setting contrasts sharply with smelling on-blotter. One MAD guide said the technology “explodes the scent.” For comparison, the exhibition has a separate space in which visitors can smell the 12 fragrances on-blotter and record their own scent impressions on touch screens.

**An olfactory timeline:** “The Art of Scent” presents 12 perfumes in chronological order, highlighting great leaps in fragrance innovation, ingredients and “stylistic developments”

over the past 120-plus years. The scents' perfumers are also profiled, giving a sense of unique authorship and artistry. The perfumes presented are:

- *Jicky*, created by Aimé Guerlain in 1889, is touted for its subtle effect and incorporation of the synthetics  $\beta$ -linalool, coumarin and ethyl vanillin, and its status as “one of the first true works of olfactory art.”
- No fragrance exhibition would be complete without *Chanel No. 5*, created by Ernest Beaux in 1921. Beaux’s aldehyde-tinted twist on a French floral scent helped change the art of perfumery.
- *L’Interdit*, created by Francis Fabron in 1957, “transformed nature into an abstraction” with the use of synthetic molecules, the exhibit declares.
- *Aromatics Elixir*, formulated by Bernard Chant in 1971, represented postwar perfumery in the United States. The scent, the exhibit says, is “filled with shadows and ornamentation.”
- Breaking down the boundaries between fine and functional fragrance, *Drakkar Noir*, formulated by Pierre Wargnye in 1982, deployed the detergent-oriented dihydromyrcenol to create the cleanness of the fragrance.
- The classic *Angel*, created by Olivier Cresp in 1992, married ethylmaltol and patchouli to formulate what MAD declared an “illogical, startling, ingenious work of art.”
- *L’Eau d’Issey*, formulated by Jacques Cavallier in 1992, highlighted the cultural demands of Japan, which tends toward muted scents. Inspired by water, Cavallier sought clarity and purity.



Mane perfumer Ralf Schwieger showed off the art of fragrance creation during MAD’s open studio days.

- *pleasures*, created by Annie Buzantian and Alberto Morillas in 1995, displayed the advent of CO<sub>2</sub> extraction, which allowed perfumers to create unique naturalness within perfumes.
- Burr's selection of Cresp's *Light Blue* from 2001 reflects an approach to perfumery marked by keeping various elements (Sicilian lemon impression, cedar) distinct from one another while united in a single fragrance.
- *Prada Amber*, by Carlos Benaim, Max Gavarry and Clément Gavarry in 2004, was selected for its restraint, control and neo-Romanticism.
- *Osmanthe Yunnan*, formulated by Jean-Claude Ellena in 2006, was included, according to Burr, for its ethereal quality, at once everywhere and nowhere.
- Finally, *Untitled*, formulated in "neo-brutalist" manner 2010 by Daniela Andrier, uses naturals such as galbanum to create a manipulated naturalness. One visitor happily declared it the scent of "nothing."

**Creating Trésor:** The exhibition also provides a unique look at the fragrance development process by presenting various mods that led to the creation of *Trésor* by Sophia Grojsman. Each mod was served up on a card; one side features a peelable backing, beneath which the scent is embedded, while the other includes a description of the mod and Grojsman's thought process at that stage of development.

"I was trying to create a perfume for myself," Grojsman said of her first mod. Among the materials she used were orris, rose otto, heliotropin, geranium leaf, musk ketone,  $\alpha$ -ionone and vetiver. Mod two includes vetiver, sandalwood, Galaxolide, Veramoss and ethyl vanillin to create "depth, complexity and warmth," according to Grojsman. Of the third mod, the perfumer said, "I went to Paris to have a meeting with Elizabeth Carré to discuss my creating a perfume for Lancôme. I naturally put on my scent. Elizabeth came over to kiss me and said, 'What is that?'" Carré insisted the scent be developed for Lancôme. Grojsman notes in her comments that little changed between mod four and the final scent. Of the fragrance she says, "Just smell it!"

**Perfumers meet their public:** Finally, in addition to the exhibition, "The Art of Scent" provides visitors several opportunities to attend workshops and lectures by perfumers.

"Through hands-on making, dialogs, and lectures these opportunities open up the often secretive world of perfume and scent-making to the novice and expert alike," MAD noted.

Events have included Carlos Benaim (IFF) on *Spicebomb*, Yves Cassar (IFF) on naturals and more. MAD also includes an Open Studios space that "fosters dialogue between artists, designers, and museum visitors." Many perfumers Ralf Schwieger and Alex Lee have participated, producing work in full view of the public while also interacting with visitors. Schwieger recently told the museum, "perfumers don't relate directly to consumers so much these days ... but what I'm really liking here is the discussions about art, because there are many artists coming here so they are just discovering or considering perfume as an art form. Because many artists or people working in the field don't think about it so much this way. So it's really interesting. I think it's a really good thing that the museum had the idea to do this."



A view of the gallery and several fragrance dispersal recesses.



For comparison, the exhibition has a separate space in which visitors can smell the 12 fragrances on-blotter and record their own scent impressions on touch screens.



A series of dispensers issued cards featuring scent strips and accompanying explanatory text describing various mods formulated by Sophia Grojsman during her development of *Trésor*.

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