

Biogenesis of a Perfume^a

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There are three periods in a perfumer's life. In the beginning, they start with an enthusiastic fever. After the first year of training they dream of writing a book to teach perfumery. A few years later they are sure to be a creative genius, piling up thousands of raw materials to create fascinating accords and has a very hard time with stupid people who always criticize their perfumes; evaluation people, marketing people, even customers.

Now, much later, I can tell you that after 52 years of trying to understand perfumery, I have become very modest. My most important quest has been to define what the essential building blocks of a perfume are and what useless elements are just "piled up" in a formula.

Two things are very distressing for a creative perfumer. One is that they will be obliged to show the product just achieved. The other is that somebody who will put a lot of money into it, seriously risking the loss of his or her good reputation will put the perfume on the market.

The financiers of perfume fall into several categories. The first group understands perfumery. They are marketers with a good sense of their consumers. They have a very good nose, but never admit it. This type of financier will help in the selection of the best trial, pointing out weaknesses the perfume could show. They will help to solve these little problems if there is an understanding and cooperation within departments. This type of person values teamwork.

The next group of financiers are the geniuses, usually aesthetes or high-fashion designers. This person knows exactly what they want; the smell of rust, the smell of a wet dog or, I have actually been asked this once, the smell of a bicycle at springtime. The perfumer will fulfill their evaluation services, pulling from their shelves the adenydic-flowery or flori-oriental the genius deserves. However, the genius may introduce to you new ideas that can be used in future creations.

The last group of financiers are the bosses of very important perfumery businesses. Unfortunately for this

group, they must report to their president and to the board. Because of this, they will never take the chance to select anything without opening the marketing umbrella. These people are always looking for extreme originality but feel obliged, most of the time, to select a "me-too" product.

The science of perfumery marketing was once a joke. One day, Arnold L. Van Ameringen, the founder of IFF, created his odor evaluation board. I found the idea terrific. Very quickly, Ameringen was amazed to notice the board was becoming the best marketing tool.

When a perfumer can rely on such a technically perfect team, creation becomes easy. The problem is that our customers also have their marketing teams, and two marketing teams working on the same project makes the life of a perfumer very difficult.

Perfume Creation

Let us start from a white sheet of paper or a blank computer screen. This is ideal. We can start anything, go anywhere and let out imagination work. The achievement of a perfume can take months or years. As we are often given only a few days to answer even the most important briefs, we had better look for one of the accords we have already firmly completed. The average creative perfumer starts a new creation nearly every day, if they have good rhythm, leaving them with full drawers of new projects.

To create a perfume is easy. There are several ways to operate:

- Starting from a fragrance theme, an accord
- Starting from the impression given by the perfumes of two women sitting nearby in a theater row or dinner table
- Beginning by taking a classical accord and enhancing so much of one component that it becomes a concerto
- Using research products, captive chemicals or specially processed naturals—One of my coworkers extracted a wonderful tuberose note from the fat corps used in Grasse for the old enfleurage process,

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but with no flower at all, just two percent of benzyl salicylate, and the product was like a natural-dreamed flower

Regarding new research chemicals, there are treasures in the shelves of chemical specialists, but the problem is that when selecting these products, we are relying on the odor descriptions of people who are not trained perfumers. That is why the iso bornyl cyclo hexanol, described as a green rosy smell by the German patent, was discovered again, years later, by people at Givaudan calling it sandella. For the same sort of reason, amyl cinnamic aldehyde was considered the best jasmine body and was widely used until I discovered the Descollonges people had patented, at the same time, hexyl cinnamic aldehyde. In 1952, a de Laire chemist made it for me, allowing me to make the Mayciane line.

There are other ways to work. There is the lazy way. A perfumer takes a classical accord and works around it. While easy, the result may not be as original as the hundreds of recent creations appearing lately on the market. A lazy perfumer may also take the idea of a friend, preferably a dead one.

If you are a well-known and very successful perfumer, everybody will find your creations so original. If somebody with too good of a nose or too precise of a memory complains, you could always quote the French poet, Alfred de Musset, whom, when accused of imitating Byron, said, "Even growing cauliflowers is imitating somebody!"

There is another type of perfumer, the taboo perfumer, which I would like to discuss. The taboo perfumer never creates ordinary perfumes; they only achieve masterpieces. They have never heard of any other existing perfumer and go on working alone. They are convinced that their ideas

are original. For instance, if they put patchouli and hedione in any of their creations, they assume any other perfume containing those ingredients is a copy. This is how life is: for thousands of years, your ancestors and yourself have been slapping a goat skin stretched across a bucket when, suddenly, one of your friends rushes in, out of breath, shouting that he has just invented the drum.

Methods, guidelines and theory: Our art is so mysterious that most perfumers cannot explain the procedures used in building their creations. Our methods could be compared to the art of cooking; a sort of empiricism. I believe this is not taking our profession seriously enough. I am convinced that a few rules comparable, to what is called harmony and counter point in music, should exist in perfumery. So far, nobody has succeeded in defining them. There is one theory that states that for every perfume note there are several levels. This is what musicians call octaves. An example of these levels are damascones, rose oxides, Otto of rose, geranium, rose absolute, rhodinol, geraniol and phenyl ethyl alcohol. It is possible, by comparing perfumery to painting, to imagine an intercommunication of tones, like colors.

Like a painter, a perfumer, consciously or not, builds their palette, which is a catalog of preferred tones and products. And like a painter, if they accumulate too many elements, they will achieve an awful confusion of gray and sad tones.

Conclusion

Lasting power is not easy to reach and nobody can predict how or why it happens. I do not believe in the theory of fixatives. We all know the many songs we hear day in and day out that we hear and quickly forget. However, from time to time, one of those songs stick in our heads and we go on whistling it all day. I can assure you that the authors of such songs did not employ any fixative ingredients to get such a result. The main idea in perfumery is not to make a perfume you or your collaborators would like, but rather to make a successful perfume. Remember Louis Amic's quote using a poker machine as imagery for a perfume's five elements; name, fragrance, bottle, distribution and financial support.

"If five cherries come up, you will have a success, but four cherries and a banana signals a failure."

—Louis Amic

Having completed a fragrance that the managers and customers like, the task turns to color and pricing as well as the development of bases for the soap, body crème, bath line and talcum powder. In my opinion, the technical part is by far more difficult than creating a luxury fragrance. The credit of such creation rarely lies with the perfumer, but rather with the other four cherries in the five-cherry elemental scheme. One day, a colleague will introduce you to someone who is the "creator" of your fragrance.

References

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