

Fragrance: Creativity and the Job

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Jean-Claude Ellena has headed a group of perfumers that have been known for a philosophy of perfumery based on two principles:

1. The number of materials that a perfumer can know well and use effectively is limited somewhere in the range of 400.
2. The most effective way to practice perfumery is as a group where a composition is openly discussed with a team as a way of developing the most effective and economical fragrance formula.

In this article he explains this philosophy.

The Publisher

The Perfumery Team concept developed about ten years ago in a small group of perfumers working together at Lautier in Grasse. The team concept has completely transformed our creative approach to perfumery and led us into the following policies:

—*Selecting odoriferous substances.* Although there exist thousands of perfumery materials from synthetic origins and a few hundred natural ones, today about 1000 to 1200 materials usually make a perfume composer's palette collection.

Our inability to assimilate intrinsic knowledge of thousands of odoriferous substances (quality, durability, intensity), a need to master perfume composition, has led us to *select no more than 400 aromatic raw materials*, both synthetic and natural. It is interesting that

computer statistics on daily aromatic raw material use in perfumery give a list of 600 items, fifty of which make up 80% of volume used annually. Our collection, although restricted, does remain open to new materials.

—*Computer technology* has rationalized our thinking with a new habit to anticipate desired answers to specific questions.

—*Chromatographic detection technology* refined in the 1970s enables a more accurate study of the leading classic perfumes. It yields plentiful and vital information on substances used (or missing) and even more on a composer's style. Each piece of information from a GLC is like a musical note separated from its melody: it is at the same time accurate and incomplete. Only the olfactory feeling will combine it back into its melody line (olfactory shape).

—*Freedom from depending on a particular supplier.* In fact, many now supply the market with similar materials under different names, with some costing twice as much as others. Only full, systematic, olfactive, chemical and physical analysis of odoriferous substances used—or offered—has allowed us to reduce the number of substances in our collection and profit from competition for cheaper material prices.

These policies put a premium on the creative art in perfumery and reduce the tendency to use special materials only for fancy and esoteric purposes.

Training of Perfume Composers

Our aims are to free the beginner from the primitive sense of smell (I like it . . . I don't like it) and to avoid a rigid odour classification system based on series, notes, families or just a few formulations or diagrams of well-known 'olfactive constructions' which would not lead to the creative art but instead to the past.

Our choice is rather to lead the beginner to a dialogue with the perfume materials and even more to speak the language of perfumes. They can be described in terms of dimension (a flat, linear odour . . .), mass (heavy . . .), volume (rich, full . . .), tactility (rough . . .), taste (bitter, sour . . .), sensitivity (violent, nervous . . .), hedonism (youthful, sparkling . . .), erotism (warm, sensual . . .), while also being defined with names of flowers, fruit, resins, woods, herbs, minerals, chemical bodies. Petit-Robert, a famous French dictionary, lists about 500 words related with the sense of smell.

It is obvious that such impressions will depend on human reactions linked with various traditions, customs, conventions shaped by prejudices of any given society. For instance, the Japanese will reject the smell of civet which suggests decaying flesh and prefer ambergris smelling somewhat like fish. Africa and the Middle-East will choose spicy, warm, heavy, strong scents while Scandinavians will be tempted by light, floral fragrances to fill their endless winters.

We are all deeply impressed by olfactive images. A geranium-cinnamon combination will unconsciously suggest the smell of soap, the very ingredients of the Palmolive Soap in the 1950s. Coca Cola recalls Shulton's Old Spice, and U.S. pastry, Faberge's Brut. Seashore smells will be called to mind by amyl salicylate and orange blossoms combined, Ambre Solaire's basic ingredients.

Olfactive stereotypes lie deep within us. Chrysanthemum means death. Violet means cheapness unlike rose and jasmine. Sometimes the stereotypes will depend on names only. For example, patchouli with its vulgar smell today will spell out youth. In spite of such differences, perfumes tend to become international and widely accepted as the basis of a universal language of fragrances.

When explaining a perfume composition to a beginner, it must be emphasized that it is not just a sum of more or less sophisticated odoriferous substances. It will be necessary for the beginner to understand that there exists a special touch (style) in perfumery. The style of Lanvin's Arpege has nothing to do with that of Van Cleef

Arpel's First, neither has Rubinstein's Men's Club with Dior's Eau Sauvage, nor Monsavon's with Procter & Gamble's Camay, although ingredients used (the words . . .) are often the very same. As with music, painting and literature, even though notes, colours and words be the same, we find the style treatment, form and the musical, pictorial or literary arrangement offer unlimited variety.

How to 'Write' a Perfume

We try and approach the problem visually and rhythmically, almost like an olfactory ballet.

Quantity, quality, and combination of fragrances will directly influence the way they are perceived. A simple style, an unsophisticated formulation will yield a simple unsophisticated perfume. Complexity will turn out a complex perfume.

Let us take, for instance, the Muguet (Lily of the Valley). Two olfactive writings are described in Table I. The simple accord Number 1 has only been given a bold outline: just six ingredients whereas over a hundred could be used to recreate the original.

Table I. Muguet (Lily of the Valley)

Quality	Quantity		Intensity
	Olfactive Writing Simple No. 1	Olfactive Writing Sophisticated No. 2	
Ylang Ylang oil	1%	1%	3
Indol	20	1	5
Hexyl cinnamic aldehyde	10	6	3
Benzyl acetate		8	3
Hedione		9	2
Piperonyl propanal		1	3
Rhodinol	10	8	3
Citronellyl acetate		2	3
Geraniol		2	2
Phenyl ethyl acetate		1	2
Phenyl ethyl alcohol	15	12	2
Cyclamen aldehyde		1	3
Phenylacetic aldehyde glycerol acetal		12	1
Hydroxycitronella	44	36	2
	100%	100%	

Intensity scale: 1 weak, 2 and 3 average (medium), 4 and 5 very intense (strong).

The smell duration of all ingredients are similar.

In both writings, the Lily of the Valley characters are very close. However, the way they are perceived depends largely on action sequence (rhythm) and olfactive shades of each ingredient. In the first writing, olfaction unfolds in six shapes (see figure 1). The fourteen stages in the second will prove softer, not so abrupt as the first (rhythm) (see figure 2). One advantage with the first though: clarity and spontaneity.

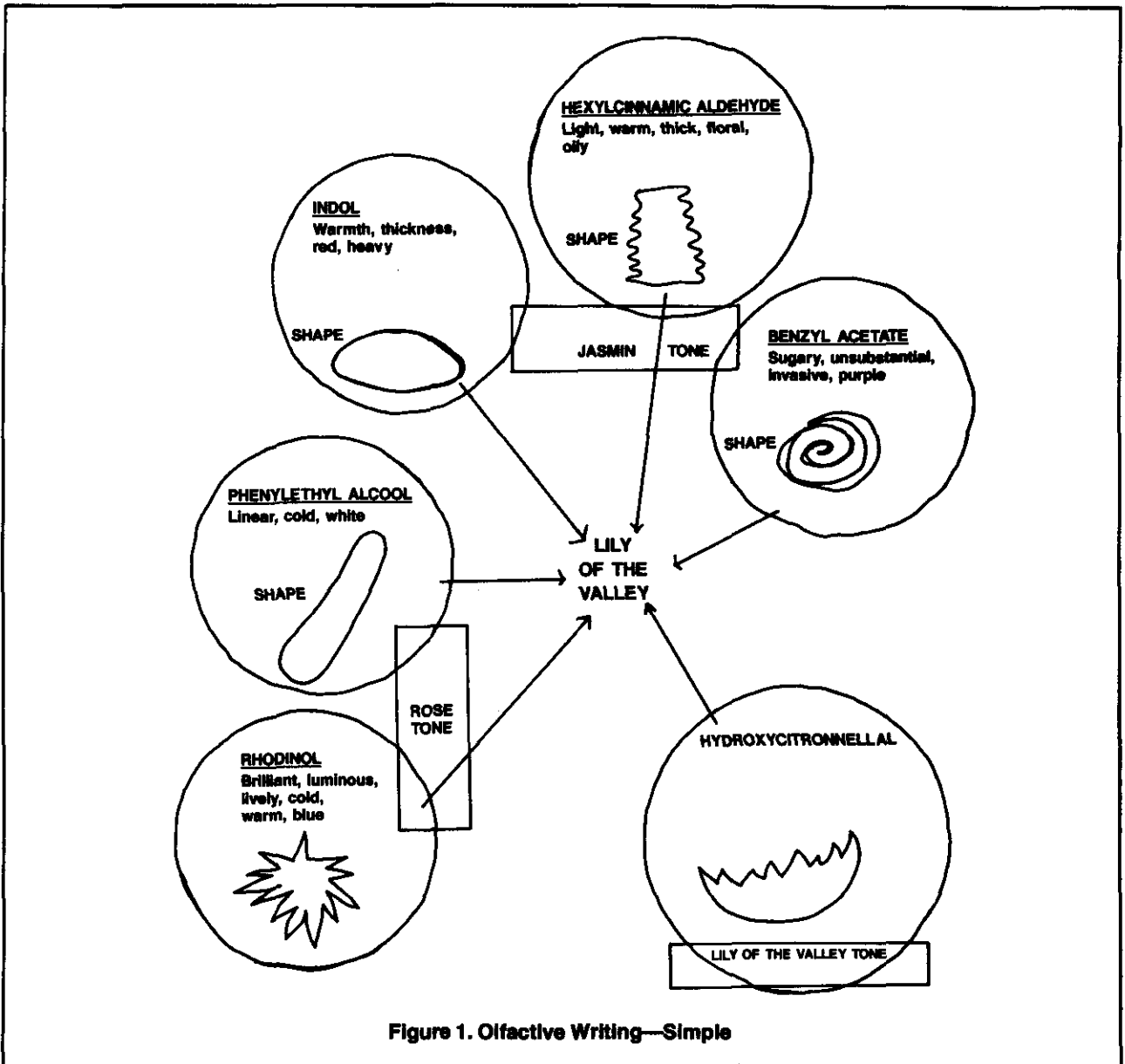


Figure 1. Olfactive Writing—Simple

Now, it is just a matter of taste and style.

While intensity, quantity and duration are in fact mathematical data, quality of each substance contributing to the final Lily of the Valley fragrance is shown and explained in figures 1 and 2.

They attempt to give a further shape and color dimension to the individual ingredients.

Exchange and Communication at the Creative Level

Dialogue and communication are of primary importance within our team of creative perfumers. So, olfactive creation is closely related to our ability to link bits of olfactory information that had never been associated before (imagination). This quest is, indeed, a daily search: conjuring the smell of a pillow of recollections, of some-

one's hair and skin, a bush of jasmine at sunrise, a rose garden at dusk, a wood fire, a peat fire, a green, yellow or red apple, a rain, tree barks, the heath (a barren land), a forest, flowers, fruit, herbs, vegetables, pastry, resins, cities and lands is to serve creation.

We cannot create out of nothing, and richness in our olfactory compositions will be the result of our exchanges and criticism. One composer will describe myrrh oil in these words: a warm and bitter resin note. Another: a dense and dry wheat and wood fragrance. Thus, combining our perceptions will only add richness to our palette.

We believe that, where the perfume composer wields new ideas, peers will be there at the application level—not to point out there is a little too much of such and such substance—but rather

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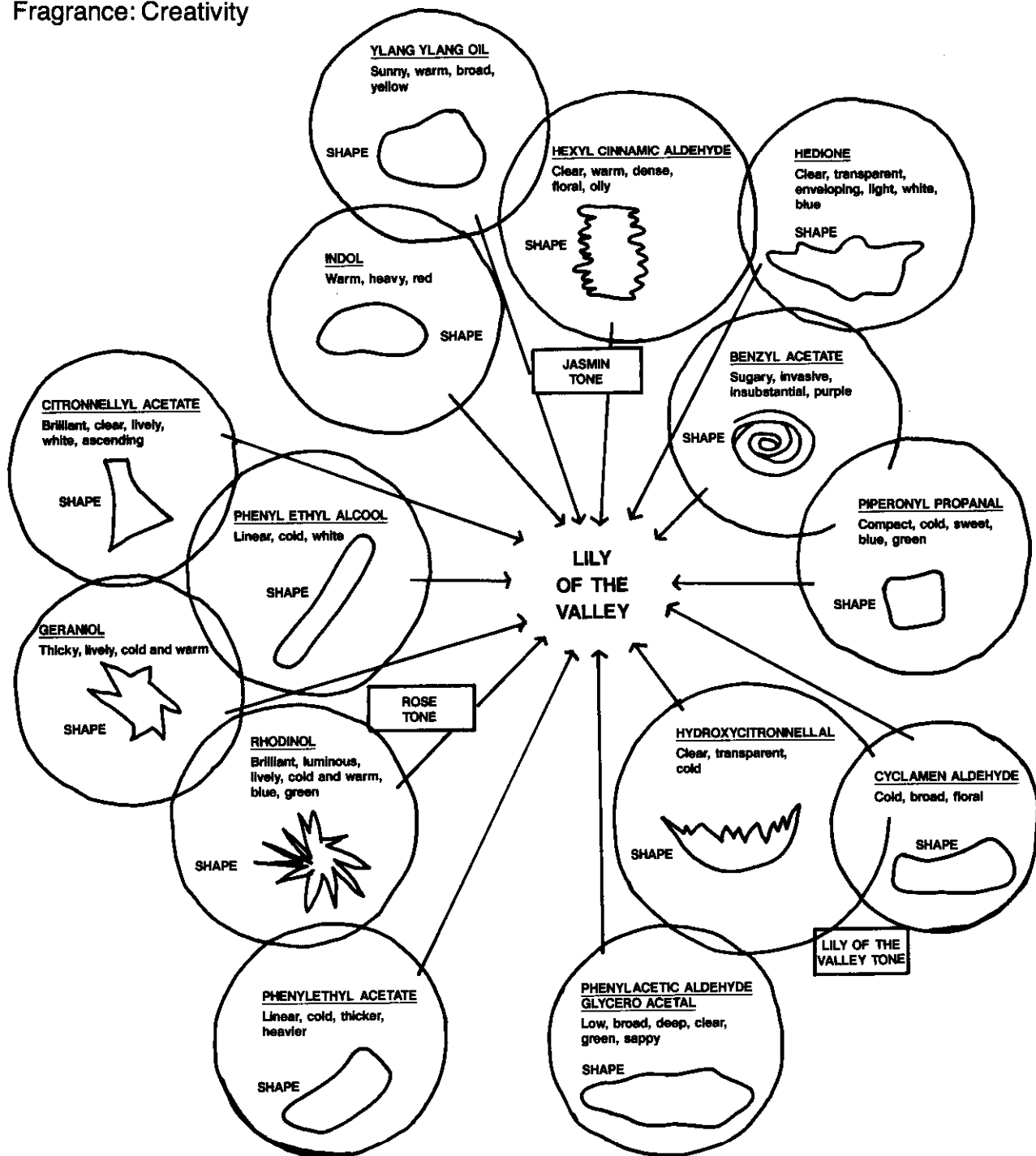


Figure 2. Olfactive Writing—Sophisticated

to help clarify the thought toward a quicker and clearer fulfillment of the olfactory form the composer has in mind.

Being open minded with each other, our interchanges bring progress to everyone.

The Buyer Approach

The marketing department's task is to quantify markets (products, market share, distribution

methods) or conduct sociological and psychological studies about tomorrow's requirements. The perfumer's approach is based on what is the very essence of life: a permanent exchange of information. Cells, organs, systems, organisms exchange information. There are other kinds of exchanges, such as:

—Music, the language of sounds, from the simple

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human voice, to polyphony, musical compositions where voice and instruments converse. The musical theme in free jazz is an example of creative communication.

—Perfume, the language of fragrances, ranging from a single odour, to simple formulations popular in the 18th Century to today's sophisticated sometimes gaudy blends is also a type of communication.

Our aim is, therefore, to widen the spectrum of the perfume to be designed through sharing our olfactive and aesthetic knowledge (experience) of both products and markets.

Common Language

Whenever asking for a perfume, people tend to use just a few vague words which, out of context, could mean different things. How does one intend a "cool" perfume: citrus cool? peppermint cool: lilac cool? a cool touch? feeling cool? A "soft" perfume: sweetly soft? vanilla soft? feeling soft? musk soft? soft opposing strong?

This shows how important the exchange is between the production manager, the marketing office, the man in charge of promotion, and the perfume designer, the very architect—or choreographer—of the olfactive form.

Such communication proves all the more vital today since putting a perfume on the market, and its eventual success, rests obviously on quality and looks of the product but also on the image *created*.

The success of a project depends on integration and participation of all concerned. In the biology of a living organism, no particular cell, organ or system plays a leading role. Each merely receives or sends out information, internal as well as external information. There is no hierarchy, but simply organizational or complexity levels. However, no level may integrate unless it is informed on what the final project will be and, in fact, may take part in choosing what the final project will be. This shows what living systems have known to develop self-managed structures. We have used this as a guide in our Perfumery Team concept.

This work is dedicated to my father.

Acknowledgement

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