PERFUMER & FLAVORIST

Presented at the World Perfumery Congress
May 14-17, 1991, Palma de Mallorca

The Essence of Creativity

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Creativity is the essence of our work. But it is difficult to explain because it is essentially subconscious.

Mozart, who centenary we're celebrating this year, was at a loss to understand where his musical ideas came from. The great composer wrote: "When I feel good, or when I am taking a drive, or walking after a good meal, or in the night when I cannot sleep, thoughts crowd into my mind. Where and how do they come? I do not know, and I have nothing to do with it. I keep the ideas that please me in my head and hum them; at least others have told me that I hum them. Once I have the theme, another melody comes, linking itself to the first one to fit the needs of the composition as a whole."

Certainly we are not geniuses like Mozart. For us, creativity is much closer to Thomas Edison's famous definition: "1% inspiration, 99% perspiration."

Thinking of how best to approach the subject of creativity with you, I turned to the psychologists who study it and found many interesting insights. For instance, creativity has no consistent relationship with intelligence. Of course, there must be a minimum 120 IQ. Beyond that, no correlation has ever been found between intelligence and creativity. Psychologist Robert T. Brown says trying to measure creativity is like trying to come to terms with a difficult but persuasive lover, whom reason tells one to abandon, yet who satisfies an inescapable need.

About all we can say with absolute assurance is that creativity consists of at least four components: the creative product, the creative process, the creative person and the creative situation. Most of the writings on creativity in perfumery have focused on the creative product, the perfume.

0272-2666/91/0005-0101$04.00/00—

Perfumer & Flavorist (ISSN 0272-2666)
An Allured Publication
Volume 16, Number 5
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1991

Little has been said about the creative process. Why is that?

The reason seems obvious. The perfume is singular and concrete. It can be smelled, worn, touched and seen, while the processes involved in its creation are many, complex and terribly abstract. Most of them go on inside the perfumer's head.

The Creative Process

Imagine a perfume company wanting to launch a new fragrance: Exactly what happens in the mind of the perfumer? What are his sources of inspiration? How does a fragrance develop from concept to finished product?

After listening to the initial presentation, the first thing is to let the mind wander—to play freely with the ideas and allow images to form. The clearer the request is in the mind of the marketers, the easier it will be for the perfumer to translate.

Eventually an olfactive image develops. There may be elements of some accord you used in the past, elements of some type of fragrance you particularly like, olfactive impressions from your past experience. You instinctively know what these elements are conveying. Even before you begin the process of experimentation that will make the fragrance a reality, you have a feeling for the shape of this olfactive form, down to its color and tonality.

Exactly how you integrate these images in your mind with the accords which comprise the perfumers palette, is a purely individual process. We can, however, draw a more detailed picture of the creative process as it applies to our field by looking at each creative step.

Since the creative process comes into play when we are searching for a solution to a problem, creativity is first a response to a problem. Second, it is a response that breaks away from established mind-sets or stereotypical solutions and engages in unconventional thinking. Third, the response creates relationships among disassociated elements, harmonizing what is usually seen as contradictory and resulting in a novel product.

Limitations of Creativity

While our aim is to create something new and exciting, the product can't just be unusual. It must also be effective, useful and an appropriate solution to the problem. Every novel response is not a beautiful creation. Sometimes the result in bizarre, rather than creative. But something that is new, fresh, original—*and* worthwhile—is truly creative. That is the result we all strive for.

Of course, the perfumer's creativity is bounded by certain parameters. We are not free spirits, who can go off in any direction searching for the ultimate fragrance that will seduce and draw to it every person as surely as the tides draw the sea. We are constrained by the marketing plan for the product, the opinions of our evaluators and the desires of our clients.

The name, the design of the bottle and the targeted market limit and shape our efforts. If all these elements were as clear as a crystal perfume bottle, we would be able to fill it easily with a wonderful fragrance. But how often does that happen?

For me, it occurred recently with Eternity for Men.

The Calvin Klein team brought an unorthodox twist to the creative process with its plan for Eternity. There was no technical discussion. No elaborate marketing presentation. Instead, we were shown two black and white photographs. One was a beach shot. There were some figures in the distance but the predominant feeling was one of open space, sea and sky—freedom. The other photograph was a warm, candid shot of a father hugging his young son.

The team gave each photo a one-word caption: the first was "wow." The second was "nuzzle." Instead of chypres and fougeres, we were being asked to create in response to a new glossary of terms.

Calvin Klein specifically requested a linear fragrance, integrating the "wow" effect on top and the "nuzzle" effect that would last forever. At first it seemed like an impossible contradiction. But resolving or harmonizing impossible contradictions is a key element in the creative process.

With such a clear message, there was time to think and elaborate. To let the mind drift and look for the "wow"—for light, airiness...something fresh and immediate that attracts your attention. For the "nuzzle"—something sensual, but

not sexy, warm, tender, loving. I wanted to create a fragrance that a man could really live with every day.

Rather than building a traditional scent with topnote, middle note and dryout, I decided to create two separate linear accords. One fresh, sparkling, airy and clean with impact—the wow effect. The other sensual, warm and reassuring, without being overtly sexy—the nuzzle element. I wanted the combination of these two linear accords to provide an impression of simplicity and clarity.

For the "wow" topnote, I looked for something exciting—even revolutionary. I remembered a fragrance that had struck me while on a trip in the south of Spain and I began to analyze it. Then I started looking for that other factor—something that would make the freshness last.

As an accent to the topnote, Idecided to use an accord that smells of clean laundry and fresh air. But every time I submitted it for evaluation I was told, "it smells like shampoo." I couldn't find my way out of that shampoo until I researched the problem and discovered that most people connect shampoo to a fruity smell. So I went into my formula, found a note that smelled like pineapple and removed it. Then I looked for something that would have the same impact and chose a new ozone note. That clicked as the perfect finishing touch.

Throughout my involvement, the Eternity project was clearly focused. More typical is the experience I had recently trying to develop another fragrance for an American designer. The original concept as presented to me was an open, airy scent that had the connotation of sailing on windswept days. I was hard at work on that, when the client switched to a romantic concept. While I was trying to harmonize sailing and romance, the client discarded the first notion and turned to something purely romantic, and I was set adrift. What went wrong? I guess I was on one boat, and everyone else was on another sailing away without me.

As perfumers we become frustrated because the customer's ideas evolve and change as additional marketing research is received. But active failure often turns out to be success. Today, I'm drawing on the work I did on that sunken sailboat to develop a new fragrance.

Whether we succeed or fail, the creative process taps many levels of functioning, sharing many attributes of dream and fantasy. By processing this material through our logical thinking, we are able to translate it into a creation. More than anything else, creativity, then, is an associative process—a function of memory, inspiration and environment coming together and interacting in new and original ways.

Components of Creativity

Although creativity is one, inseparable process, for the purposes of our discussion I'm going to isolate those three essential components and look at each one individually. First is olfactive memory.

Because our particular memories belong to us alone, as unique as our fingerprints, they allow us to synthesize our idiosyncratic experiences into truly original combinations.

At my first meeting with Ernest Shiftan, the renowned IFF perfumer, he asked me to recall some of my vivid memories of smells.

I was immediately carried back to the unique pungent scent of combined fruits and herbs used in holiday celebrations in my native Morocco. I remember the smell of jasmine petals and of orange flower water that joyous celebrants splashed on passersby, the special taste of cedarwood tar that impregnated the water sold from goatskin sacks in the streets, the aromas of the open markets where cumin and coriander mix with ripe peaches and apricots, the cloying smell of hashish in suffocating alleys, the nauseating trail of burning incense, not to mention the unexpected butyric note of hundreds of shoes lined up outside the mosque at prayer time.

I believe that these earliest, deeply rooted olfactive memories of the pungent herbs and spices of Morocco have influenced my creative work in men's fragrance. The fruity notes I favor in women's fragrances also originated there.

Let me give another example of how important our earliest olfactory memories are to us as creative perfumers. In the 70s an American perfumer, who, it is important to note, came from an Italian background, created a famous French men's cologne. An exaggerated celery note was the cologne's most salient trait, imparting not only novelty, most of us thought, but enormous power. Only one person objected to this note. He was the manager of our Italian subsidiary who, recognizing the main ingredient, re-named the cologne the minestrone fragrance.

Olfactive memory, as we said, is the first component of the perfumer's creative process. Now let's look at the second: inspiration.

Broadly speaking, the most fertile source of inspiration for the perfumer is nature. First the senses are bombarded with stimulation. The great perfumer Roudnitzka liked to imagine walking through a field of lilies-of-the-valley just after a heavy April shower. Of course we see the field, the delicate white flowers against the rich green, the sun shimmering on wet leaves. But even more deeply, we inhale this event. With every breath, we draw it inside us. We perceive a myriad of scents—the wet earth, the greenness of the flower.

These impressions are recorded in memory as images which incorporate not only the physical perception of the smell but also the perfumer's association to it—such as youth, freshness, and the exhilaration of spring. These physical sensations, along with the images and emotions they evoke, constitute the perfumer's olfactive view of the world which will be reflected in his creation.

Today, of course, we find nature in the chemist's lab more often than in a field of flowers. At IFF our very passionate and brilliant Dr. Mookherjee has pioneered the Living Flower Technology that captures the smell of the flower in vivo and allows its analysis. Dr. Mookherjee can analyze the most exotic flowers—one of a kind blooms from all corners of the globe. Flowers whose absolutes are unthinkable, such as lilies, orchids and frangipane are no mystery to him.

Our goal is to understand nature in a scientific way and

bring it to the consumer in the form of strong impressions of fresh flowers. Exemplary here are the freesia used in Eternity and Claiborne, and the cymbidium kanran orchid, a very rare kind of cold weather orchid that grows in the mountains of Japan, used in Red Door. New synthetic constituents allow infinite variety and strong character. Although not necessarily cheaper, many aroma chemicals are much more powerful than a lot of essential oils. These living flowers are not intended to replace the absolutes. Instead they are a wonderful complement to our palette.

But inspiration doesn't come through the olfactory sense alone. The creative perfumer is inspired by perceptions from all the senses—from seeing, hearing, tasting and touching. Our work is such a total sensual experience that we borrow words from other senses to describe our creations. How often have you called a fragrance "sweet," "green," "powdery" or "bitter"? Even the great French poet Beaudelaire described "perfumes fresh as children's flesh, sweet as oboes, green as prairies."

Whether it's triggered by nature, by the chemist's formulas, by the customer's marketing plan or by a combination of all these factors, inspiration almost always comes to us from many senses at once in what is called supersense, or unity of the senses, and we transfer one sense modality to another by what is called synesthesia.

The challenge, then, is to make it happen, and that brings us back to the 99% perspiration.

In creating a new fragrance, I usually start by shaping and mixing the basic accords to give a general shape to the notion in my head. From this I try to isolate a hook that will provide the recognition factor and accentuate it, sometimes magnifying the accord three or four times to create a powerful signal. In the process, I also eliminate elements that are not contributing to the total shape of the fragrance. The aim is always simplicity in formulation and complexity in perception, because the more complex an odor, the more memorable it will be.

The work is an intense series of trials and errors—of formulating, smelling, evaluating and re-formulating—performed under extremely high pressure. When I was creating Eternity for Men, the competition was narrowed down to two perfumers. Every couple of days, the two of us would have to go to Calvin Klein together to have our fragrances evaluated. It was very much like being in a marathon race. One of us would take the lead, then drop behind, then regain the lead... As you can imagine, I became very stressed out with the project. I ate, slept and lived Eternity so much that I woke up in the middle of the night three nights in a row with a recurrent dream.

I was in the sea clinging to the side of a sailboat which was going around in circles. But the boat was so slippery, I couldn't hang on. I would lose my grip, sink under the water

and disappear as the boat circled around me.

Every morning I woke up from this nightmare at exactly 4:24. I began to think I was going crazy, then we went to the country for the weekend. When the nightmare woke me up there, I was relieved to see that the clock said 3:24. Maybe I wasn't crazy after all, I told myself, until I realized that we had forgotten to move the clock in the country ahead for Daylight Savings Time. It was really 4:24.

I asked my wife, who is a psychoanalyst, for an explanation. "The dream is obvious," she said, "The sailboat is Eternity and you're anxious about missing the boat. If you want to know why you're waking up at 4:24, look at your formula number." My formula number was 4924.

The third and final essential component in the perfumer's creative process is: environment—both professional and physical.

First the professional environment. I am fortunate to be working at IFF, a company shaped by two master perfumers—Shiftan and Chant. Not only were they role models to emulate, but at IFF they established an environment that encourages creative freedom: freedom to formulate and freedom to use raw materials with very few restraints.

IFF's strong commitment to research in new aroma chemicals and living flower technology has been a major impetus in my creative work. IFF is also exploring the psychology of smell. In our newest program, Aromascience, begun at Yale University, we are trying to establish the effect fragrance has on moods—why people wear one fragrance or another and what psychological responses certain fragrances evoke.

The professional environment naturally goes hand in hand with the physical one. Although I create in an Amereican environment, I was born in Morocco and educated in France. When I came to the United States as a young perfumer, Eau Sauvage was my favorite cologne: elegant and understated. But I quickly discovered that citrus notes were not appreciated in the United States. Americans want immediate character.

A few years later I had created Polo, a quintessentially American fragrance, and initially somewhat shocking to me in its bluntness, I must confess.

American perfumery reflects the character of the American consumer: big, bold, aggressive, direct and impatient. Americans go directly to the heart of the fragrance and require instant gratification. Linear fragrances are the most popular because they please immediately, give the perception of value and do not disappoint over the long run.

In one of the most successful creative exercises at IFF, we used Georgia O'Keefe's floral paintings for inspiration. This renowned American artist took flowers and magnified them into bold, often erotic, paintings, because she said, "Nobody sees a flower really...It is so small...we haven't time." This, more than anything, sums up the challenge to American perfumers—to deliver an exaggerated message without knocking out the consumer.

Strength is one distinctly American preference. The other is sweetness. Just consider the volume of soft drinks that Americans consume. In fragrance, though, I think the national preference for sweetness reflects Americans' earliest olfactory memories. Generations of American children have been raised on Dr. Spock and diapered with the sweet-scented Johnson & Johnson baby powder. In Europe, on the other hand, children are first exposed to the drier citrus notes of colognes or lavenders.

Oriental scents form an important segment of the fragrance market in the US.

While musk notes appeal to Americans of all ages, American women are unresponsive to chypre notes. Except for a peculiarly American dislike for violet, American women's taste for floral notes corresponds with the general tastes of European women.

Though as an American perfumer I always keep these preferences in mind, I try not to let them determine or constrict the way I create a new fragrance. Personally, I place much more importance on sociological trends.

Taste in fragrance reflects the mood of the nation. During the Yuppie years in the United States, fragrances were aggressive and overtly sexy. The names alone, Obsession and Passion, created an unmistakable statement. Then the trend shifted to a mood of romanticism and wholesome family values, and the fragrance market shifted with it toward subtler, less aggressive statements. Today we see the market beginning to shift again from cozy and romantic to exotic. Witness the new fragrances being marketed as per-

sonal adventures.

Whatever the prevailing trend, the American marketing world proceeds at a manic pace, and creativity in American perfumery has adapted to it. It is incredible that so many superb creations have been composed in such a highly pressured environment. The strength and character of American fragrances has amounted to a veritable revolution in international perfumery that is being felt around the world. Even the Spanish, traditionally so conservative, are beginning to adopt such ideas. Just look at the success of Caroline Herrera in Spain. And that's only the beginning. In September, Herrera for Men will be launched simultaneously in Spain and the United States. Anticipation is high that this new fragrance will bridge the old and new worlds, uniting the European taste for classic citrus colognes with American power and diffusion.

Conclusion

We should remember that creative perfumery is not the domain of the perfumer alone. It reflects the interaction of significant personalities. In America, no single individual has influenced the industry more than Estee Lauder, the first true grande dame of American fragrance.

Before Lauder, American perfumery did little more than translate French creations. Then came "Youth Dew," which achieved the strength of a perfume in a cologne and brought to the masses what the French had traditionally reserved for the elite.

Lauder's inspiration has always been the classic fragrances, and it has been the perfumer's task to take her direction and taste and create new American classics from them. Her perfumes have, in turn, become inspirations for the rest of the world. For example, Private Collection inspired Giorgio, and after decades of resistance, even the French finally embraced her democratic concept with Opium.

By dissecting the influences upon creation in our industry, I hope that I haven't given the impression that these elements function independently of one another. All of these factors—memory, inspiration, environment, clients, colleagues and competitors—typically come into play, motivating the perfumer to synthesize personal impressions, feelings and fantasies in a finished perfume.

Creativity is, essentially, an evolutionary process. As Douglas Hostadter, a computer scientist, wrote: "If you look at the history of science, you will see that every idea is built upon a thousand related ideas."

The same is true in perfume. Polo preceded Drakkor Noir, Drakkor Noir preceded Cool Water, and Cool Water preceded Eternity for Men.

Studies in creative problem solving indicate that innovative solutions evolve incrementally and usually add up to that familiar ratio: 99% perspiration, 1% inspiration. But no matter how much perspiration we expend, the creative process frequently ends in disappointment, frustration and even anger when a fragrance or formula is rejected. Luckily, we all have strong egos—we must have them to survive the realities of the commercial perfumery industry.

In the best of all possible worlds, the creative perfumer is free to translate his dreams, however dramatic, daring and original they may be. When the grand perfumes like Guerlain and Chanel were created in the early 20th century, perfumers enjoyed the freedom to create whatever they wanted—without regard to cost, marketing strategies or the personal tastes of evaluators. But today's perfumers must be mind readers, and interpreters of other people's dreams—as often as their own.

More and more experts have come between the perfumer and the product. Marketing mavens, financial wizards and professional evaluators and salesmen pass judgment on a new fragrance at every stage in its construction. Their expertise is often vast, but their judgment is more typically intellectual and logical than creative. As a result they can guide the perfumer in a wrong direction.

The *danger* of trying to second-guess and satisfy so many "cooks" is that creative perfumery will become a lost art, as, increasingly, perfumers dilute their ideas just to gain acceptance.

The *challenge* in these fiercely competitive times is to satisfy the commercial requirements of the customer without sacrificing our artistic vision of our creative integrity. As perfumers we must first believe in our own creative ideas and instincts. Then we must urge our customers to trust our experience and expertise.

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