

Concerning the Circumstances Favorable to the Creation of an Original Perfume

By Edmond Roudnitska, Art et Parfum, Cabris, France

Read by Paul Johnson,
P. Robertet, Grasse, France

When we reflect on the origin of creativity, in whatever field of endeavor, our thoughts turn first to the imagination.

For the person who is endowed with imagination, everything serves as a pretext for imagining—in other words, for executing projects of the mind in a preferred field or fields. This becomes all the more rapidly a game because being experienced in this type of gymnastic one practices it with success and consequently with pleasure. And the imaginative person, gifted with taste, will naturally be drawn in the direction of artistic creation.

Associations of Ideas

The imagination operates, mainly, by *association of ideas*. The most insignificant detail—occasionally even one that is alien to the field of perfumes—can trigger a first association of ideas, which can entail another such association, which may in turn instigate a third, and so on. This is how the process of creation develops progres-

sively and is enriched on its course by all the ideas that have grafted themselves onto the initial idea and onto the subsequent ones. It is the very nature of an active mind to be constantly at work and to snap up everything that comes within its reach.

What it is striking about the human brain is the immense development of its cortex, which is the *organ of association* for such data as are memorized in the paleencephalon. This cortex is a “combiner” of information; it is what makes it possible to “imagine,” because to imagine is to associate the memorized data in an original manner.

Well classified memories are favorable to useful association of ideas and it is essentially through this form of activity that our mind evaluates, utilizes and constructs its inventions. The expression “to have ideas” is nothing but a succinct way of saying “to form associations of ideas.” Inasmuch as these associations of ideas are dependent on our mental aptitude, on the de-

gree of stress on our memory and on the needs of the moment, a creator who strives to be effective is well advised to accept the discipline of a good mental hygiene.

Thus, the starting point for original research in the field of perfumes is generally an association of ideas, and at times intuition. An artist, who is by definition a sensitive person, is constantly stirred by everything and anything, and by the constant play of an imagination that permits no respite. This demonstrates that the most difficult part is not just having ideas but knowing how to exploit them properly, how to sort them, how to classify them and then to select those that are worthy of being put into a lengthy process.

As far as the role of *intuition* is concerned—intuition being a superior form of imagination, in artistic creation and particularly in composing perfumes—it is at once so essential and so subtle and requiring such meticulous explanation, that I refer the reader to the in-depth study which I devoted to this faculty in my *Aesthetics at Issue (l'Esthétique en question)* in which seventeen pages deal with it exclusively.*

Working with a Method

In the perfumer's research work, a methodical mind is all the more necessary because the huge mass of materials and their possible combinations entails a very high risk of haphazard and undisciplined sensory stresses.

It is from the very outset of a new career that the mind of the composer must be trained methodically, because in composition there are no set rules to prevent making directional errors; there are only principles. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid getting into bad habits.

This method consists, among other things, in educating one's olfactory sense: first, by systematic study and frequent rehearsal—just as the musician must play scales—of the repertory of materials, of which new aspects are discovered each time, and occasionally new possibilities; second, by the coherent classification (and therefore subject to revision) of these materials, which classification can only be suggested to the beginner and left to a personal choice. It is also in a methodical manner that one best proceeds to study the typical combinations of certain substances, by relying on exercises that range from the simple to the complex and that increase progressively in difficulty. The training of the olfactory sense, and of the olfactory memory and of the imagination, is carried out simultaneously with these exercises.

Among the principles which are useful, it is well to recall that in an olfactory composition each component is not necessarily significant by itself, that often it only becomes significant by way of its relationships with the other components and particularly with the *integral* formula.

It appears obvious that if the composition of original perfumes is to be built upon solid foundations, it is essential to have an in-depth knowledge of a great number of materials and a correct appreciation of the proportions in which they can be harmoniously blended. For these reasons, good results in this activity will only be achieved by dint of strenuous and unremitting work, without buckling under the strain. I have never failed to mention this to all the young people who have sought me out, and they have always seemed to accept this of their own volition.

Sources

Generally speaking, artistic creation depends upon invention and has its origin in an idea or in an emotion and it is thus that all forms of artistic creation have many features in common, ample evidence of which may be found in the relationships that exist between artists in different fields of activities. What causes artistic activities to differ from one another is the *matter* of each art. However, if one does not actually manipulate the diverse messages of sound, of sight or of smell by means of related techniques, the artistic motivations are nevertheless comparable and this is what brings about a common language to artists and causes them to use polyvalent terms. For indeed, we speak just as meaningfully of hot or cold colors, or of a cool or warm perfume, of a hot or cool voice, of the fresh complexion of a woman, as we do of the brilliant tones of a musical score.

The invention of a new perfume can have as its initial intuition a combination where particularly noted features of the materials used have been exploited to give them an expressive value, thus enabling the construction of a form that one might have imagined from this starting point.

One can also foresee giving an original direction to one or several materials, for example, by attempting to couple harmoniously apparently antagonistic notes. A flash of intuition will have sufficed to think up the conditions of this unusual harmony. By an effort of mental transposition the way will have been opened for this harmony to take up the general form of a perfume. After this general form has been imagined, it will then be necessary to give it a concrete expression.

One might still be tempted by the "long shot" of substituting a material that is logically barely

*Presses Universitaires de France 1977, pages 100 to 117.

suitable for another material in a composition in which the latter material plays a decisive role. In these last two cases, the creative process has been triggered by the idea of a *challenge*.

A good example in which the composition of an original perfume was the result of a challenge is that of Crêpe de Chine. This particular instance involved the difficult task of incorporating high levels of pungent aliphatic aldehydes in a delicate Coty chypre complex without upsetting it. This success could only be accomplished with a very confident taste, with a consummate artistry and with a professional expertise. It was necessary to transform the "architecture" of Coty's chypre, which was based upon a delicately jasmine-scented atmosphere which seemed to envelop the entire composition in a diaphanous and delightful veil. If one were to make excessive use of jasmine in a chypre composition, the only result would be to make it heavy.

Coty had already raised an unsurmountable barrier for his imitators, because no one after him has ever been able to create a chypre as fine, as light, as ethereal as his, not even his successors, although they must have had his formula.

It must be said to the credit of the creator of Crêpe de Chine that, not only did he succeed in preserving a certain jasmine-scented aura in combination with a mossy background, woody notes, methylionone, and crystals but that he also had the idea of gambling on an important addition of rose in part replacement for jasmine, in order to absorb a high level of aliphatic aldehydes. Logically this admixture of rose ought to have imparted heaviness to the compound, but on the contrary it blended so well with these aldehydes that gave it a boost and furthermore enabled it to "marry well" with the jasmine itself, without detriment to its freshness. The creator doubtless remembered the example of Ernest Beaux who, while desirous of preparing a rose, finally came up with N° 5 by neutralizing a high proportion of aldehydes with a high proportion of jasmine.

The creator of Crêpe de Chine crowned this work through the discreet admixture of styrallyl acetate, which was a vigorous top note that helped to tone down the aldehydes, while giving pep and a sensuous touch that complemented the original character of this new angle on the chypre theme.

In the majority of cases, the initial motivation of the artist is the result of a pretext, often grasped on the spur of the moment: a pretext for combining colors, graphic elements, sounds, noises, aromatic substances, a pretext for moulding clay or for chiselling into marble to ex-

tract from it the envisaged form, a pretext for transforming mere words into a poem, a song or an epic.

One of the driving forces of creation continues to be *inquisitiveness*; so whatever it may be that excites and maintains this inquisitiveness is profitable to the artist and the artist's work.

As far as chance is concerned, in my book *Aesthetics at Issue* (page 121) I pointed out that relying only on chance in the creation of a work of art is a very naive attitude. The chance occurrence is but one of the thousand pretexts an artist can claim. Chance occurrences are legion to the extent that they no longer represent much of a rarity. Art is knowing how to turn this to advantage.

Perseverance

To be sure, composing a perfume with artistry is tantamount to assembling aromatic notes deliberately and consciously, thereby achieving unity, harmony and meaning for this assemblage, but the road to this achievement is paved with numerous failures. Just like anyone else I had to pay my dues dearly for the inexperience of my youthful years, dues made all the heavier by serious moral and material anxieties. In those days I too had to rely partly on chance and I was no luckier in this than others.

Today, after so many trials, after so much effort to overcome and take advantage of them, after more than a half a century of close and passionate scrutiny of olfactive forms and after such a multiplicity of reflections on the ways in which they manifest themselves, I feel more at ease in their company. With my imagination well trained now to work these forms mentally, I have eliminated chance from my work.

When I have an idea for a perfume, it immediately finds expression in a vision of the perfume constructed upon this idea—in other words, I get a glimpse of the completed, definitive form that the desired perfume might assume. It is with this image in mind that I start to work. I begin, first of all, by writing down on my pad the names of the materials that already strike me as being able to contribute jointly to the materialisation of this image. I quickly classify them in the order of their assessed roles—that is to say, in increasing proportions, which lays the groundwork for a rough formula. I then meditate on this outline, by imagining the scent that the mixture of these substances might have. And it is then that I am actually in the state of mind which was described by Henri Bergson and to which I have referred in my above-mentioned chapter on intuition. It is as if I become an integral part of the mixture as imagined in this rough formula. I identify with it.

I would be tempted to say that "I've got it under my skin," or that I "feel" it in the same way that a mother must feel the child that she is carrying.

I then allow my thoughts to incubate: I keep the imagined form constantly in mind and I am on the alert for anything that might contribute to its becoming a reality. The process of incubation continues for some time: the time that my thoughts require for clarification and for eliminating any such absurd notions as might have crept in, and above all the time in which I will have impregnated myself thoroughly with this form, so that it becomes "my thing" and so that having concentrated at great length on my rough formula, I "scent" it just as if its constituents were already mixed under my very nose. This is the moment when I am ripe for writing down clearly and efficiently the formula of my first "trial."

From here on, start a series of trials which will be all the fewer if well thought out and spaced out. Thus I give them time to mature and consequently avoid discouraging false moves.

At all the stages of experimental work, it is the soundness of *judgment* that is decisive for the proper comprehension of the data observed, and a close estimation of the proportions and of their consequences that ensures the progress and success of the experiment. Therefore, it is of major importance that this judgment be trained properly, that it be exercised unceasingly in order to develop it, and to put it to the test boldly and without fear. It is the lack of judgment that explains all cases of failure and that jeopardizes progress. But a sound and shrewd judgment will also make it possible to heal any blinding vanity. By definition, judgment makes the investigator become shrewd; it allows a clear personal perception of the relative nature of things, especially the relative nature of success.

The perfumer's palette is so overcrowded, that I have quite often emphasized the need to think in simple terms and to formulate simply. This will make it easier to understand better the numerous interactions that occur within the compound. Furthermore, if the formula is clear, this compound will be understood all the better by the public. The more encumbered the formula of a perfume, the less chance its composition has of being original because it runs the risk of tending towards a "mille fleurs." A formula that is too rich because it is overloaded with "heady" and expensive substances, the presence and proportions of which are not justified from the technical point of view, will be poor in aesthetic value. True simplicity, which gives great composers that touch of class, is not the result of a display of

ostentation in the midst of poverty, but rather a show of modesty in the midst of wealth.

Taste

The second prerequisite for any ability to create in the field of perfumes is that of *taste*. To say that the composer must have taste would appear to be a truism. To demonstrate that this taste can be well formed or deformed, and that it must be informed, enlightened and developed, is another truism. Nevertheless, it is a vital necessity, frequently neglected or even misunderstood, which explains why there is still such a limited number of people with taste in a profession that ought to exalt this faculty.

If there are such things as inborn taste and acquired taste, the latter matures slowly with the help of a progressive patient and willful training. One must expect to see one's personal taste questioned, if one wishes to delve deeper into the understanding of values and continue along the path of progress. Learning to subdue one's pride is also an integral part of a person's education. Human relationships would certainly be easier if this education had developed in each of us a love of the beautiful, an abhorrence of the ugly, and most of all a *critical sense*; had these reactions been made instinctive in us by means of an inculcated moral strictness that would rule out any concession to ugliness, to mediocrity, to complacency or to vulgarity; had we been trained to practice, in all circumstances, the religion of quality through the gradual raising of our ideal by the initiation to more and more beautiful works of art, thereby making us more sensitive and more vibrantly responsive each day to every harmonious, original and *expressive* arrangement, to every aesthetic value—in other words, to see to it that our aesthetic consciousness becomes a major feeling.

If we unfortunately observe today that taste is disappearing, that it is being denatured in the true sense of the term, this is *because human nature can no longer express itself freely*. Increasingly, and more and more universally, it is being influenced, fenced in, regimented, manipulated and subjected to violence by forces which do not act disinterestedly, which are sometimes in opposition with one another, but the final effect of which is to converge in such a way as to deprive each of us of the freedom to think and to feel. These forces come at us from all sides: profit-making groups, political powers, various pressure-exerting social groups, the herd instinct or snobbery and so on. In other words, all are tendencies to overwhelm by power or by force of numbers.

Under these circumstances, the definition of taste—to be particularly sensitive to the relationships that link the parts to the whole and to the harmony that results—becomes a mockery.

The foremost effect of the various stresses, more or less underhanded, which are brought to bear against the freedom of taste, is to alter the *critical sense* of human beings and to impair their judgment. Still the sovereign human quality judgment crowns all those other qualities that make a thinking and responsible human being, free to choose and to decide. To have taste is also to be capable of discerning the defects in a work of art, which implies being capable of judgment.

To judge a perfume is, above all else, a matter of taste. Taste evolves under the influence of the environment, but this fact must not prohibit judging the environment. Taste evolves chiefly with the acquisition of learning, with the knowledge of facts and of aesthetic accomplishments, which makes it possible to analyze them and to provoke instructive comparisons. It is thus that each of us can progress along the road of beauty and of art. To deny the usefulness of this training would be like refusing to admit that a symphony is better appreciated after one has studied music.

To say only about a perfume that it is pleasant, is to limit oneself to its sensual aspect, that is, to judge as a glutton rather than as a gourmet. Pleasantness is by no means negligible, but it is only the beginning of those satisfactions that a great perfume can offer. Beyond what is merely pleasant, the person of taste will seek an original form, one that is unique and recognizable; this person will appreciate a form all the more insofar as it is beautiful, which is to say harmonious, and thus will feel more intense pleasure.

By way of conclusion, a little anecdote. With a great measure of caution, so as not to run the risk of ruffling my feelings, some journalists asked me one day whether I feared that my concept of perfume as a work of art might be a bit obsolete these days, and whether I thought that it might still be understood by today's public.

I believe my answer was quite clear.

When I refer to perfumes as works of art, I am not extolling this or that particular creation, and certainly not my own. I wish simply to speak of perfumes that are *original* and *well constructed*, because these features suffice to characterize a work of art. But original and well-constructed perfumes are timeless, because they can be made in all eras and in all styles, regardless of price, since in order to create them it suffices to have technical knowledge, imagination, taste and talent.

One would truly have to hold the public in contempt to think that such perfumes would not

be understood by the public today. Just which original and well-constructed perfume, if any, has the public rejected in our time? And which are those that have enjoyed a long life span on the market without being original and well constructed? I do not think that it would be possible, in all good faith, to mention a single one in either case. No one can seriously believe that triteness, mediocrity or vulgarity can be a guarantee of durable success today, or that quality is an obstacle to success. Those perfumes that have a long life span on the market have the necessary qualities; the ones that do not have these qualities may, with much backing from advertising, create an illusion for a short while, but not for long because the cost is too high. It was a Frenchman living in the United States, Raymond Loewy, who wrote a famous book. Its title: *Ugliness Sells Poorly*.

This was my answer to those journalists: "For original and well-constructed perfumes to be surpassed, it is quite simple: all that is needed is more know-how, more creativity, more talent and just as much good taste. I shall be the first to rejoice if I see it happen."

Address correspondence to Edmond Roudnitska, Art et Parfum, B. P. No. 8, Cabris, 06530 Peymeinade, France.



An extra unexpected bonus for delegates was a chance to see the lift-off of the space shuttle on Friday morning. It was clearly visible from the Conference Center.