

Edmond Roudnitska: Le parfum

Synopsis based on the 6th edition (2000)

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Warning

There are many myths and misconceptions about perfumery. Hardly surprising, if one considers that the great perfume composers of the past closely guarded their trade secrets from the outside world. To make things worse, most reference books on perfumery were written by unqualified authors. So if we wish to unveil the true identity of perfumery, we're facing a steep hill to climb. Our efforts will be directed to perfume lovers in general, as well as to the lawyers and legislators of this world. One of the main purposes of this book is to demonstrate that a *beautiful perfume*¹ is subjected to the same law on

¹ With the expression "beau parfum" Roudnitska refers to the masterpieces of perfumery.

artistic property (dated March 11, 1957) that protects visual and audile works of art in France. Perfumes are part of our national cultural and artistic heritage, and it is our task to defend them from the lethal effects of plagiarism. More than that, we need to actively support and encourage the craftsmen who preserve this heritage for future generations.

The perfume profession is currently dominated by profit rather than good taste; there are but a few exceptions. Perfumery is no longer in the hands of composers, and *olfactory violence*² (a phenomenon not unknown to past generations) now reigns supreme. The industry is entrapped in a competition for the strongest, most concentrated perfume: as soon as a new fragrance hits the market, a group of snobs will hail it as their new holy grail – regardless of its trivial or vulgar form – and find their allies in a small number of weak souls, who will eagerly follow their example. Meanwhile, they overwhelm the silent majority of people with good taste.

We have to give perfumery back to its real composers – people with talent – and re-educate industry professionals and the disoriented public alike; since the third edition (1990) of Le Parfum, the first timid signs of this revolution are slowly becoming apparent. One final recommendation: if we wish to save the art of perfumery for future generations, we need to give priority to product quality, rather than investing all our energy in sales volume.

Coda

The search for beauty is no trivial pursuit: it's the foundation on which morals are built. Which is why aesthetics should be the basis of any type of education: the fact that we have long neglected this discipline explains why our teachers, politicians, engineers, and captains of industry often lack a good sense of judgement, which is an essential requirement in selecting our objectives and the best means to reach them. The ability to distinguish beauty from ugliness is of fundamental importance.

² The author speaks of "violence olfactive" to address the overwhelming effect of certain fragrances.

Chapter 1: History

Etymology - The French noun "parfum" seems to have its origin in Mediterranean languages, where the verb "perfumar" (Provençal, Venetian) or "perfumá" (Milanese) were in use. Several derivatives of the noun "fumus" are known in classical and neoclassical Latin (effumo, suffumo, transfumo, affumo) but there are no occurrences of the verb "perfumare"; this seems to indicate that the latter is a relatively recent compound.

I. Perfume in Ancient Times

There are various historical and biblical references to the use of perfume in Ancient times. Egyptians and Assyrians attributed metaphysical and cosmic meaning to perfume, while in India it was essentially restricted to religious ceremonies. The manufacture of perfume in Egypt was at its peak in the period of the Ptolomeans, when the main factories were located in Alexandria, and raw materials – mostly of vegetable origin – were imported from Arabia, Persia, China, and India. Embalming the dead required perfumes, as did therapeutical and religious practices. Women applied fragrant unguents to the body, and dyed their hair and face; this cosmetic use was later extended to Greece, where flower extracts were added to the range of balms, resins, and spices already in use. The first profane use of perfume is generally attributed to the Greeks.

Many of the fragrant materials used in Greece (and later in Rome) were imported from the East, routed through Egypt. Here's an overview of ingredients used in the Classical world:

incense	myrrh	styrax	sandalwood	musk
amber	costus	camphor	clove	pepper
nutmeg	cardamom	ginger	vanilla	

With the intensification of the spice trades, the sacred and precious character of perfumery was on the wane. In Rome in particular, perfumes were used for almost anything: baths, clothes, atriums, and lamp oils were heavily scented; the immoderate use of perfume in Roman orgies is legendary. The fall of the Roman Empire made an end to the secular use of fragrances: during the Middle Ages, they were once again restricted to religious ceremonies. In this period, the greatest contributions to perfumery came from the Arab world, with

the rediscovery³ of the coil and the alembic; these instruments were used for the distillation of aromatic plants, and eventually enabled the discovery of alcohol.

The leisurely use of fragrances was reintroduced in the West by the Crusaders: perfume gradually became associated with luxury, and Venetian merchants in particular practiced a flourishing trade in aromatic substances. The lack of personal hygiene meant that perfumes were long used to cover up malodours; in France, this habit evolved into a form of social self-expression. As an indelible part of French court life, perfume became an object of prestige; this phenomenon was further stimulated by 17th century French monarchs, who gave new impulses to the perfume trade, and attracted notable Italian perfumers to their kingdom.

The early 18th century saw the light of the original *Eau de Cologne* by Jean-Marie Farina, and the founding of the *Corporation des Parfumeurs* (1730) in Grasse. The first famous names in the perfume industry, Houbigant (1775) and Lubin (1798), were soon followed by companies such as Piver, Guerlain, and Laugier, all established during the French Restoration.

François Coty, a key figure in the modern perfume industry, started his career in the early 20th century. The great economic success of his perfume house, as well as that of others (Guerlain, Houbigant, Roger & Gallet, Bourjois, Caron, and Millot) inspired contemporary fashion designers to launch perfumes of their own. Paul Poiret was the first *couturier* to venture in the world of fine fragrances: although his *Parfums de Rosine* were not the success he had hoped for, several young fashion designers quickly followed his example. The early 1920's saw the launch of Coco Chanel's first perfume, *No.5*, which became a worldwide success in 1925.⁴ The list of designers who trailed in Chanel's wake grew rapidly; nowadays, it would be quicker to name those who haven't launched a perfume yet.

Since the 19th century, chemistry has played a fundamental role in the expansion of the perfumer's palette. With the advent of synthetic materials, the structure of perfumes gradually became more complex. The creative freedom of today's perfumers is primarily obstructed by commercial restraints.

³ Paolo Rovesti's research suggests that distillation instruments were used in the Indus Valley as early as 5000 years ago.

⁴ Parfums Chanel came under guidance of the Wertheimer group in 1925.

II. Modern Times

Perfumes belong to fragrance *families*, which in their turn are the offspring of a small number of masterpieces. About fifteen of them were created over a period of seven decades: the first *chef de file* of modern perfumery was Coty's *L'Origan* (1905). From the same house came the beautiful and idiosyncratic *Chypre* (1917), which gave its name to a whole new fragrance category. Millot's *Crêpe de Chine* (1928) was one of many successful takes of the original Chypre theme: rose partially replaced jasmin, while the combination of styrallyl acetate and fatty aldehydes made a superb debut of their own. The concept of adding large quantities of grassy aldehydes to a Chypre came about with the creation of Chanel's *No.5*: it gave way to a new breed of potent, dissonant perfumes known as *aldehydic* perfumes. Lanvin's *Arpège* is an example of a very fruity, aldehydic fragrance; countless other creations followed, resulting in a myriad of leathery, woody, spicy, sweet, green, fresh, and marine variations on the aldehydic chypre-theme.

As *No.5* was taking the world by storm, another remarkable creation saw the light: Guerlain's *Shalimar*. A warm, ambery perfume with balsamic and vanillic notes that became characteristic of a new family of Amber fragrances.⁵ Similarly, the Lily of the Valley-theme was taken to new heights with the launch of Dior's *Diorissimo* (1956), while Dior's *Eau Sauvage* (1966) opened new paths for the fresh and androgynous *eaux de toilette* that are so popular today.

In short, we can distinguish the following basic fragrance groups:

floral	chypre	tobacco	woody
green	spicy	fruity	fresh
ambery	aldehydic		leathery

We're waiting for truly new olfactory forms to emerge in perfumery. It's not a matter of discovering new *materials*, but rather of imagination and spirit:⁶ merely mixing new ingredients does not necessarily lead to a new form. We've seen many violent, often vulgar creations in the past few years. But since 1988, the first timid reactions against this sensorial brutality have become manifest: many young women, who were sadly unable to explore the true beauty of past creations, now tend towards lighter fragrances. We're on the verge of a new era.

⁵ Often referred to as *Oriental*s in the Anglo-Saxon world.

⁶ The latter term is a literal translation of the French "esprit".