PERFUMUM
THE PERFUMES OF HISTORY

ENGLISH TEXTS

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The desire to capture and create perfumes, and to preserve them and enjoy their fragrances for as long as possible, has been a part of human culture since the dawn of time. Perfumes have been used in sacred and secular rites, and for bringing people together as well as for raising social barriers. Their creation requires an understanding of ancient treatises on botany and medicine, and requires costly raw materials that once travelled along caravan routes from Asia to Europe. From antiquity to the present day, perfumes have always had many meanings and functions, forming bonds with divinities and protecting against foul odours that filled the air, as a means of hygiene and an instrument of seduction.
The Ancient World

Perfume had a variety of uses in ancient Mediterranean civilisations: the fumes of fragrant resins such as incense and myrrh were a means for communicating with the gods, with, and it was a remedy against disease, but also a symbol of luxury in body care, with ointments based on oils or animal fats, and expensive essences imported from the Orient.

The glass, alabaster and terracotta containers found among funerary objects point to the importance of perfume not only in everyday life but also for the hereafter. The bodies of the dead were sprinkled with sweet-scented balsams and, in Egypt, perfumed substances were an essential part of the rite of embalming.
The Middle Ages

Taking from Jewish and Graeco-Roman tradition, perfumed incense and oils were used in Christian Europe in holy places and during liturgical rituals. Sweet smells evoked the presence of God, with whom they were inextricably associated. In secular life, where all forms of hedonism were set aside, perfumes were used for their protective and therapeutic properties, particularly against such epidemics as the plague.

Perfume was a symbol of opulence and linked to the joys of life in Islamic civilisation, on the other side of the Mediterranean. Here, innovation was being brought to the knowledge of the ancients, and the refinement of the art of distillation led to the creation of the first alcohol-based perfumes.
The Modern Age

The Renaissance witnessed a gradual secularisation of the symbolism of perfume, and it began to be used in many ways by the higher social classes, especially in Florence and at the Court of Catherine de’ Medici. Ancient treatises began to circulate in printed editions, new formulas were concocted for individual scents, and alcohol-based perfumes were developed. In the field of the decorative arts, perfume containers of the most exquisite elegance were created.

In the seventeenth century, supremacy in the field of perfume production shifted towards France. New fragrances were designed, with increasingly light, floral notes, preserved in glass or porcelain bottles, or diffused in interiors by pot-pourris and perfume heaters.
Raw Materials, Treatises and Books of Formulas

Musk, civet, castoreum and ambergris were the four animal essences that dominated perfumes in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Used as medicaments or as aphrodisiacs, they are strong, consistent fragrances, and their use, like that of spices, increased as trade routes were opened up with Asia and Africa.

The long journeys of these raw materials ended on the shelves of spiceries, the pharmacies of the time. The pricey essences were used both in pharmacopoeia, which was based on ancient treatises, ranging from Theophrastus to Dioscorides, through to Pliny and Galen, and in cosmetics. Books of formulas for domestic use began to circulate in the Renaissance, with recipes for medicines and elixirs of life, but also for sweet-scented waters and fragrant pastes.
Perfumes in Finery

Perfume is a means to acquire social distinction, but it also creates a sort of protective bubble that shields against stenches in the air. The affectation of perfuming not only the body but also gloves, shoes, berets, and fans, as well as other clothing accessories, and especially those in leather, first came about in Italy, before spreading to the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century. The favourite fragrances were long-lasting and powerful, of animal origin: musk, ambergris, civet, and castoreum. These fell out of favour only in the eighteenth century, when more delicate scents became fashionable. Johann Maria Farina created Eau de Cologne, a citrussy perfume that enjoyed lasting success. Flowery notes dominated and sweet-smelling powders were also used on hairdos and wigs, and little sewn sachets were filled for use under garments or in wardrobes. Also snuff was perfumed with jasmine or orange blossom.
1880-1910

Many perfume bottles made until the end of the nineteenth century, such as Acqua di Felsina, used simple shapes with large labels covered in texts and drawings. The first signs of changing tastes came with the universal expos, where bottles inspired by archaeological finds or Art Nouveau were presented, such as that of Bouquet Nouveau. In the early twentieth century, the French perfume-maker François Coty was one of the first to appreciate the importance of offering his creations in bottles of exquisite taste. He commissioned the glassmaker Lalique to create a bottle for L’Origan, and later many others, including the splendid Cyclamen, creating a partnership between perfumers and glassmakers that has lasted to this day. Lalique soon became the artist of choice for maisons such as Houbigant, Heraud and D’Orsay, for which he created the spectacular Leurs Ames bottle. Other makes, such as Guerlain, turned to Baccarat, the creator of the majestic flacon for Jicky.
1920-1930

The collaboration between the great perfume-makers with Lalique and Baccarat continued in the 1920s. Now came the first perfumes by the great couturiers, who commissioned stunning bottles that conveyed the stylistic elements of their designs. Just as the linear shape for No. 5 reflects Coco Chanel’s “effortless chic”, so the label on Arpège recalls Jeanne Lanvin’s love for matching mother/daughter outfits. Schiaparelli’s crazy bottle for Shocking reflects the exuberance of her dresses and her love of surrealism, while Jean Patou’s sophisticated elegance resonates in the perfect proportions of the flacon for Joy.
1940-1960

The 1950s brought some of the most famous bottles made by illustrious glassware artists, such as *Diorissimo* (Baccarat), and *L’Air du Temps* and *Femme* (Lalique), with a design based on the majestic shape of Mae West. Together with these, there were simpler, mass-produced bottles that made up for their simplified shapes with decorative inserts in plastic and fabric, such as those for *Miss Dior*, *Rive Gauche*, *Miss Balmain* and *Youth Dew*, the launch of which, in 1952, marked the rise of the American perfume industry. The female figure inspired romantic flacons like the ones for *Chamade*, heart-shaped with a stopper that recalls Cupid's dart, and *Interdit*, which Givenchy had made for his friend Audrey Hepburn, who long opposed its sale (“Non! Je vous l’interdis!”).

The white bottle for *Anaïs Anaïs* reintroduced the taste for opaque glass, which became hugely popular in the following decades.
1970-1990

In the 1980s, perfumes pandered to the desire to show off, and the bottles adopted luxuriously rounded shapes and extremely fine decorations, with sanding, reliefs, and impressions, as we see in *Paris*, *Vanderbilt*, *Fleur des Fleurs*, and *Ombre Rose*. Also coloured glass became a dominant trend, as in the bottles of *Fahrenheit*, *Joop! Homme* and *Cool Water*, while the one for *Xia Xiang* shows an effective fusion of rounded forms and colour. An extravagant array of decorative elements adorned the stoppers, which took centre stage in the 1990s with plant compositions for *Byblos*, *Cabotine* and *Jais*, while Kenzo's *Jungle L'Elephant* flaunted no less than an elephant. *Moschino* went back to a long-forgotten trend: that of the figurative bottle, this time in plastic, with Popeye's eternal fiancée Olive Oyl.
2000-2010

The bottles of the new millennium spoke of luxury and exclusiveness, with a riot of gilded elements on the bottle, stopper, and label, as in the case of *Mahora, Theorema, J’Adore, Jubilation XXV*, and *Black Orchid*. The success of flamboyant stoppers continued, as we see in *Daisy* and those of the Nasomatto and Mona di Orio lines. The partiality for an opaque bottle that hides its content turned into an authentic trend with *Narciso Rodriguez, Feminité du Bois, Hypnotic Poison*, and *Guet Apens*.

Artistic perfumery, which appeared at the dawn of the third millennium, brought with it a more complex vision of perfume, and this was reflected also in the bottles, which now ranged from the most exuberant glam of *I Love NY* through to the restrained sobriety of *Acqua di Parma and Benjoin*, designed by Lalique for Prada. With their exquisitely vintage shapes, the bottles of *Anonimo Veneziano, Raquets Formula*, and *Rubj* reveal a desire to restore the artistic dignity that the consumer society appears to have taken away from perfume in recent decades.