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CREATION IN THE PERFUME WORLD

by

Jean-Claude Ellena
Perfumer, Hermès

November 10th, 2009
Report by Sophie Jacolin
Translation by Rachel Marlin

Overview

Creating a perfume is difficult to describe, because words cannot adequately evoke a scent. And yet language is at the heart of this creative process. Words enable the perfumer to classify fragrances according to various aspects, such as intensity, warmth and degree of complexity. Words also enable him to evaluate fragrances and to make them memorable. Terms like 'woody' or 'milky', influence the perfumer when he is inventing a new perfume. Jean-Claude Ellena explains that one creates a perfume from our memory of fragrances. At Hermès he has developed his own style which is natural and simple, and therefore in contrast to the diktats of the perfume market. He has abandoned all consumer tests of his creations and decides the price of his concentrates himself. Such freedom is rare in this business, but it is justified by the success of his perfumes.

TALK : Jean-Claude Ellena

Learning the language of perfumes

I am a self-taught perfumer. I started at the bottom. At the age of sixteen, I was a worker in a perfume company near Grasse. I distilled the essences and transported the barrels. I liked the atmosphere. A few years later, in 1968, I started studying at the school in Geneva which had just been opened by Givaudan, a famous industrial perfumer. It was here that I really understood what it meant to be a perfumer.

First steps into the perfume world

It takes about seven years of apprenticeship to create a perfume for the first time. Normally, one's first perfume is intended for a hygiene product. The most well-known perfume school in France is the ISIPCA (*Institut supérieur international du parfum, de la cosmétique et de l'aromatique*) in Versailles. 1,500 people apply to this school every year but only 15 are accepted. Those selected have to have a degree in chemistry which personally I do not consider essential. When they graduate three years later, the students actually know very little about the perfume world. They really get to know the profession when they start working in the industry.

When one walks into a perfume laboratory for the first time, one is struck – sometimes negatively – by very strong smells. There are thousands of bottles on the shelves containing natural or synthetic scents. A beginner's first job is to memorise them all. In fact, one creates a perfume from memory, by associating objects with a particular smell, and not by mixing essences to see what the end result is. This work involving memory takes two to three years, like learning a new language. For a beginner, this approach using one's sense of smell is quite simple : one distinguishes the smell of oranges from orange essence, and roses from rose essence. However, it becomes complicated when one starts working with synthetic scents : for example, the synthetic citronellol smells of both lemons and roses. Phenylethyl alcohol smells of roses, but 'commercial' roses as in a flower shop, with a touch of lychee.

Analysing the scents

Once one has mastered the memory stage of the learning process, one can start analysing fragrances. Scents can be flat, horizontal, vertical, hard, soft, affectionate, thick or thin. One has to learn to put words to smells which do not designate a particular natural element which has a specific smell. One also has to memorise how long each scent lasts. The amyl acetate molecule, for example, which smells of bananas and can be found in its natural state in Beaujolais wines, only lasts a minute. However, in those sixty seconds, the scent is interesting and it may be put into a perfume to create a fleeting impression. On the other hand, the scents associated with synthetic musk, oak moss and patchouli last several days. The intensity of smells is also part of the composition of a perfume. Some are weak, but are interesting. Others are strong and last, whereas others lose their intensity quickly. Some scents remain stable over time, whereas others may change.

Each perfume maker has his own scent classification. Personally, I have the following categories : flowery, fruity, woody, herbaceous, spicy, soft, animal-like, marine and mineral. There are sub-categories within each of these. Flowery scents, for example, vary from rose-like flowers (such as peonies, lily of the valley, rose and hyacinth) to white flowers (jasmine, orange blossom and sweet pea), yellow flowers and anis-scented flowers (lilac and mimosa). Among the spicy scents there are 'hot' spices (such as cinnamon, cloves and hot pepper) and 'cold' spices (cardamom, nutmeg and black pepper). The same distinction exists in cookery between so-called 'long' and 'short' spices. These classifications enable the perfumer to organise his memory of scents. They are merely an aid, a guide to avoid becoming lost in the maze of scents.

Chemistry and the art of perfumery

As far as I am concerned, whether a scent is chemical or natural is no important. I choose the scent for its smell.

Chemistry first played a role in the perfume industry at the end of the nineteenth century. Perfumers immediately discovered the advantages of using synthetic molecules. Guerlain, for example, quickly adopted the vanillin molecule, which was created in 1870 and became Guerlain's hallmark. Chemistry led to a very interesting trend in the perfume world : it enabled perfume to be regarded as an art. Chemistry produced scents which no longer had a rapport with nature. Previously, perfumers had tried to reproduce natural scents from which the essences could be extracted, such as lily of the valley, lilac and sweet pea. Because of chemistry, perfumers were able to create 'abstractions'. At Guerlain, *Jicky* (created in 1889) and *Shalimar* (created in 1921) are examples of complete abstraction.

Conversely, chemistry makes it possible to reproduce scents from flowers whose essence cannot be extracted, such as lily of the valley, lilac and sweet pea. Surprisingly, the lily of the valley scent, recreated today, is different from how it was perceived and interpreted in 1900. The scent from this flower which we think we smell has changed.

From middle-class cooking to molecular cooking

Descriptions of perfumes have changed considerably with time. From the end of the nineteenth century until the 1970s, perfumery was bourgeois, just like middle-class cooking, with complicated, heavy and full-bodied recipes. A perfume could include up to 400 components (compared to today, where I use no more than 30 elements). Perfume manufactures in the early period used many ingredients, overloaded formulas and made use of 'left-overs'. *Chanel n°5*, *Shalimar* and *Heure Bleue* are prime examples of these complicated, dense perfumes. I like this way of perfume-making, but it is the complete opposite of the way I make perfume. In the 1970s, technical ways of making and describing perfumes were introduced. They were inspired by marketing and guided by market research. Manufacturers developed instruments to assess scents objectively and not subjectively. In other words, a perfume had to be reliable and able to be measured, and to have a constant fragrance so that it could be marketed more easily. These two elements of creating perfume still apply. My style is different from both of them.

Even today, market research occupies an important place in the perfume industry. Consumers are asked to give their reactions to a creation, sometimes even to compare it to leading perfumes in the market. They have to fill out forms corresponding to different aspects of the perfume (such as its freshness, whether it is flowery, feminine, masculine, woody, spicy, and so on). Technological progress now makes it possible for perfumers to take one aspect of a perfume and make it more flowery, fresh or less masculine. In so doing, they are helping destroy the original creation.

Purity as a means of description

Flowers have between 400 and 600 molecules. There are about 500 in a rose. My art consists of producing this rose scent with the least number of molecules. Today, I can create a rose scent with two molecules which do not necessarily exist in the rose, or a jasmine scent with three molecules. The famous perfumer Edmond Roudnitska who created *Eau Sauvage* and *Diorissimo* used the word rose *qualia* to signify the faint scent of a rose. This *qualia* can be made from two molecules, geraniol and phenylethyl alcohol. The combination of these two molecules produces an infinite variety of rose scents, such as spicy rose, fruity rose, rose with a touch of tea, and so on.

The more I increase my mastery of this profession, the fewer number of products I use to make perfumes. I now work with less than 200 raw materials (either natural or synthetic) and my formulas have very few components. I never use more than thirty components in my

perfumes. I am careful to make my creation intelligible so that people can guess the ingredients in my perfumes. I think that this approach enables people who smell my perfumes to take even more pleasure in doing so, because they go beyond the superficial aspect and enter into the heart of my creation.

A magician perfumer

The skill which I have gradually acquired in creating perfumes allows me to give the illusion of smell using very few elements. Illusion is key, and, in my opinion, it is much more important that the true scent itself. If one smells rose essence, one would certainly not be able to recognise the smell of real roses. But if you were to smell the rose scent which I create from two molecules, one would undoubtedly know that it was a rose. It is this work as a sort of magician which enables me to create a perfume. I invest as much of my time, if not more, than perfumers did in the past with 300 components. I can spend months attempting to find the right balance between various ingredients. This is my vision of perfume, my style and the way I work. Unlike 'technical' perfumes, I create progressive perfumes. Duration of scent is important in my creations. Some only last a few hours, others much longer. It is a choice of creation. Sometimes, I include scent variations which allow the perfume to smell differently with the passage of time, with a succession of different scents. I like structuring perfume so that it changes and takes on diverse forms.

Hermès : a free hand to express myself

I started working for Hermès five years ago and I am now the only perfumer there. I have four perfume ranges at Hermès which allow me to express myself differently.

The 'Hermessences' collection, sold exclusively in shops, is the result of very personal olfactory research. I am totally free to express myself in these perfumes. They are my sort of 'olfactory poems'. Since this collection is not widely distributed, I would be happy even if only one person bought a perfume from this collection ! These are very simple perfumes which have a single theme or fragrance. The 'Cologne' collection also gives me total freedom of creative expression without venturing too far from the usual characteristics of colognes, namely as fresh, light fragrances which are easy to wear. The 'Jardins' collection currently exists in three different perfumes : *Jardin en Méditerranée*, *Jardin sur le Nil* and *Jardin après la mousson*. Finally, our 'showcase' perfumes, which are sold to volume retailers, are our way of making ourselves known to the general public. These perfumes have to please a wide audience. In this range, I feel more pressure from the market which I could do without. However, this feeling does not adversely affect my creativity. When I started working for Hermès, I refused all market tests for my creations. It was a prerequisite for my joining the company. Hermès is one of the rare companies which allows this approach. If we launch a perfume, it is because my company's president and I are convinced it is good. We are not naïve. I am aware of the market and I want to send out a message to it. I work around this compromise and it has brought me success, notably with our perfumes *Eau des merveilles* and *Terre d'Hermès* which is, depending on the month, the third or fourth bestselling masculine perfume in France.

Telling the story behind a scent

To illustrate how I create a perfume, I would like to describe the 'birth' of the latest perfume in the 'Jardins' collection, *Jardin après la mousson*. This perfume was supposed to evoke Hermès' theme for the year – India. This creation is not part of a mental abstraction but is composed of real components. I went to Kerala, to find inspiration, and it was there that Idecided the perfume that I was going to create. During my first trip, the Indians with whom I spoke talked a great deal about the monsoon and its importance for them. I returned two months later to experience the monsoon at first hand. It is a season of regeneration, rebirth, bloom, a moment when the skies and the earth interact. During the monsoon, nature is still fragile and flowers are hardly open. This idea of fragility was interesting for a perfume. The

monsoon is also the time when colours and smells are the clearest, the purest. I started working on the idea of dewdrops on flowers. The rebirth associated with the monsoon also suggested a smell of sap, a little unripe and very light. These sensations were the opposite of the usual impression of India, full of vibrant colours and hot spices. I was looking for another way of describing India, fresh and natural, rather than as cold, spicy smells.

I had to tell a story about smells, but how could I evoke in a perfume the idea of water which is odourless ? I translated this feeling using fragrances from the longose flower, a white flower which has a typically Indian and slightly spicy smell, and with hints of ginger inspired by the drink which is always offered to guests in India. I assembled and structured these elements according to my own style. I worked from fragrances which I had memorised and experimented with scent illusions. From just a few molecules, I tried to create the effect of water, the illusion of water and the emotion associated with water. Some people like it, others do not. It does not matter. I want the perfume to be authentic.

DISCUSSION

Sources of inspiration for a perfumer

Question : *Why did you feel the need to go to India to create* Jardin après la mousson ? *Was your imagination not sufficient inspiration ?*

Jean-Claude Ellena : Before I worked for Hermès, I created the Hermès perfume *Jardin en Méditerranée*. Hermès asked me to go to Tunisia to visit the garden of Leïla Menchari, an artist who designs the Hermès window displays for our shop on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris. I was not convinced that this trip was worthwhile. I thought that my imagination was enough. Nevertheless, I went to Tunisia, and my ideas changed. I could not have created the same perfume had I not visited Tunisia. This trip allowed me to see things differently and to put aside pre-conceived ideas. Similarly, I could have treated the Indian theme in a more conventional fashion, with a more oriental twist, creating a hot and spicy perfume, but my experience there allowed me to take on a more sincere approach.

Inspiration may sometimes follow a rather surprising path. I created the perfume *Eau d'hiver* for Frédéric Malle using my own name. I drew my inspiration from the song *Couchés dans le foin* by Mireille which evokes cheerfulness, sun, heat and honey. I wanted this perfume to be light. This feeling of lightness gradually became more important. My tests made me think of calling it 'clouds' which conveyed the idea of comfort, transparency and mistiness. When I presented my perfume to Frédéric Malle and told him about my approach, he suggested the name *Eau d'hiver* which was the exact opposite of my initial inspiration ! Nevertheless, I was attracted by this paradox of a soft, caressing, warm and light fragrance which could be worn in winter.

Q. : *Are you inspired by other artistic areas ?*

J.-C. E. : Since I am self-taught and intuitive, I nurture other arts. I greatly appreciate Chinese and Japanese paintings. When I went to China in the 1980s, I was moved to tears by Chinese calligraphy. I am very struck by the empty spaces in Chinese painting which speak volumes to me, much more so than the filled spaces. I am very attracted by the idea of emptiness and space which partly drive my creative vision. I also love the literary works of Jean Giono, less for their *Provençal* nature than for his imagination and ability to put scents into words. When I was very young, I read books by Henri Laborit who made a huge impact on me. Recently, I was delighted to discover Nicolas Bouvier who makes the slightest detail come to life. I turn artistic and intellectual coincidences and meetings to my advantage. This is how I develop my feelings.

Q. : *You compared perfumes to cooking. I believe that you collaborated with the chef Pierre Gagnaire.*

J.-C. E. : Pierre Gagnaire invited me to taste a series of dishes which were inspired by my perfume *Terre d'Hermès* which he liked. He cooked a dish of red meat in straw and added tangerines. I had never imagined mixing straw with tangerines, but it worked extremely well. When I got back to my laboratory, I was eager to try it out ! It may be the next theme for a future perfume or part of a perfume.

Reading, expressing oneself and listening

Q. : *What place does language have in your activity which is so difficult to put into words ? Do you share the same language with your colleagues or expert critics ?*

J.-C. E. : I am very interested in this question of language. I have worked with the laboratory of cognitive sciences at the University of Louvain in order to give structure to the language used in the perfume world. I came to the conclusion that it is neither necessary to talk in a very technical way about perfumes, nor to know the perfumes in order to talk about them. The most important aspects are to listen and to smell. I once carried out a test where I had to recognise several perfumes which a non-specialist was describing to me (we both had a series of bottles in front of us containing the same fragrances). The test worked very well when people were able to listen, and very badly when people were influenced by their preconceived ideas. We tried out this test on couples : an old couple, who could not stand each other any more, did not get a single answer right. A young couple, who were clearly very much in love, got all the answers right, using very few words. This shows the power of listening. Perfumers understand each other very well because they have their own 'language'. If I say to a colleague that a perfume 'lacks nerves' or that it is 'flat', he understands what I mean straightaway. However, sometimes perfumers are so sure of what they are saying that talking with other professionals is fruitless.

Hermès and the perfume world

Q. : *Making perfume is not one of Hermès' original activities. Why did it get into this business, and what place does perfume occupy in the company's current products ?*

J.-C. E. : Originally, Hermès made saddles, and then it diversified into other areas such as silk, tableware and clothes. It started developing perfumes in the 1950s because the owners were convinced that there was a place for perfumes. For a number of years, perfumes were the only activity in the company not to have an artistic director. Jean-Louis Dumas, who was president when I joined the company, encountered some problems with the perfume activity because it was a discipline which was different from the other traditional and craft professions practised at Hermès. This situation encouraged our meeting and led to the creation of the position of artistic director for perfumes, the job I occupy today.

Perfume accounts for 7 % of Hermès' total turnover. Perfume turnover was 55 million Euros when I started working for the company. Five years later, it is 120 million Euros. Hermès Parfums exists in its own right and occupies a place in the manufacture of perfume. Every other product sold by Hermès is a perfume. It is a very important activity for the image of the company.

The virtues of discrete marketing

Q. : *To what extent are the various lines and themes of perfumes imposed on you ? Are you subject to budgetary constraints ?*

J.-C. E. : I enjoy quite a large margin of freedom in the four perfume areas I mentioned earlier. The launch of the 'showcase' perfumes comes from work carried out by marketing and sales teams on sectors where Hermès has to position itself in order to generate revenue. The themes are not communicated by written briefs, but by very basic instructions defining

the desired perfume, such as 'feminine' (for *Eau des merveilles*) and 'earthy' (for *Terre d'Hermès*). The perfumes in the 'Jardins' collection are associated with the theme chosen for the year. In the 'Hermessences' collection, I make suggestions when I think they are necessary. Sometimes I propose two perfumes from which the president, the product development director and myself have to make a choice. The launches of new perfumes, of course, correspond to an economic rationale and Hermès' future development goals. One has to be careful to market products which are not going to put other products, already on the market, in the shade. For example, it would not be appropriate to launch a new masculine perfume while *Terre d'Hermès* is proving to be so successful.

I decide the price of the concentrates. I have to be aware of what is happening in the market to do this. However, I can allow myself some leeway which other perfumers would not accept. For example, even if a perfume concentrate is very expensive, I can structure it so that it becomes very diluted, by 4 or 5 %. I cannot express my creative ideas with cheap materials. Therefore, I use costly materials for which I compensate by using a perfume structure which can be diluted. The opposite is true in large perfume companies where the standard concentration rate imposed on creators is between 15 and 20 %.

Q. : *What sort of interaction takes place with Hermès during the creation of a perfume ?*

J.-C. E. : Firstly, creating a perfume is a long process. I work in a small laboratory in the south of France with an assistant. When I create a formula, I weigh it and I get the result forty minutes later. I correct it, I weigh it again, I get a new version, and so on. I can only do seven or eight tests in a day. It is impossible for me, like a composer, to play my music and then correct it straightaway. I throw away 90 % of my experiments. I am the only judge of my work. I always have eight to ten projects going on at the same time. These are either perfumes requested by Hermès, or projects which I feel deeply about.

I took nine months to create *Terre d'Hermès*. During the first month, I researched an idea. I had the idea of creating a fragrance which was both woody and milky, with the wood evoking the masculine side, and the milk the feminine, Mother Earth side. This play on words guided me. After a month's work, I presented a rough perfume combination to Hermès. They found the theme interesting, but thought it was too narrow, unclear and not fresh enough. The choice of words is very important in the creation of a perfume. The exercise is so difficult to put into words that I have to construct a speech at the same time as I create to justify my creative approach. Most of the time, I am not surprised that what I have concocted results in comments.

The project progressed after a number of meetings. Two months later, I presented the latest tests of *Terre d'Hermès* and informed them of my decision not to go any further in the creative process with this perfume. I realised that my creation had become too elitist. It was interesting from an olfactory point of view, but was not likely to attract a very large clientele. My president, who knows me well, took the news with a smile, whereas my marketing director seemed more worried ! In the end, I went back to the drawing board and took on a new direction, but still concentrating on the woody tones. I appreciate this way of working, being able to talk and feeling a sense of trust. It is much more constructive than the briefs which the marketing departments of some companies hand out, and which never mention scents.

Q. : *Does the fact that your president and your marketing director are not perfumers make your dialogue with them about your creations less productive or enriching ?*

J.-C. E. : It is just as well that they are not perfumers ! Two perfumers would find it very hard to create a perfume together. Each one would dig in his heels. I work with people who know perfume and the perfume industry, but who are also shrewd consumers. They help me to understand the consumer's point of view. I look at their faces when they smell my perfumes. I observe their facial expressions and listen to what they say.

When does one turn one's back on the market ?

Q. : *Your style of creation allows the client a certain degree of freedom. Is this not in sharp contrast to the monolithic vision of the perfume market which has imposed perfumes such as* Angel, Opium *and* Poison *on the customer ?*

J.-C. E. : I really want the client to interpret my fragrances on a personal level. I anticipate 'weaker' moments in my perfumes so that clients can take the time to get used to them and make them their own. This is very important to me, but is totally out of step with the market. I am lucky that Hermès lets me do what I want. It is a company which knows how to listen and appreciates its artists. However, this freedom comes with a price : success. My perfumes have to sell. However, Hermès does not want to become a perfume giant like Dior or L'Oréal.

These days the market is full of perfumes which are linear, stable and reassuring for clients. Our perceptions of perfume are blurred by advertising which uses techniques for selling exclusive perfumes on perfumes which are sold for mass consumption. We carried out a survey a few years ago to get a better understanding of consumer behaviour. Exclusive perfumes were presented to customers who ordinarily bought mass consumption perfumes : they rejected them, complaining that their scents changed fragrance too much with the passage of time. Conversely, clients used to wearing exclusive perfumes tested mass consumption perfumes. They said that these perfumes did not correspond to their personality. They said that they liked perfumes which changed, like a person's mood, over the course of a day.

My refusal to test perfumes on the market is almost inflexible. In the past, I worked for large companies which tested perfumes systematically. Some of my creations, having undergone twenty market tests, were completely distorted and spoiled. It was as if I had started off with a square and at the end of the tests, the square had become a circle. The end result smelled of nothing in particular. It smelled 'nice' but not 'lovely'. It was as if these perfumes did not convey a message any more. This is why I decided to abandon market tests and go with my own instincts. Clearly I realise that my perfumes must find a place in the market. *Terre d'Hermès* has a 3,5 % share of the French market and is judged to be a success. Perhaps my creative approach would have been different if I had followed the idea that I had to produce a perfume which would appeal to 50 % of men.

Q. : *In spite of your independence with regards to the market, your perfumes still have to sell and consequently be in keeping with the spirit of the times. How do you react to this apparent paradox ?*

J.-C. E. : I have often asked myself this question but I have not yet found an answer. A few years ago, I was in charge of a team of perfumers in which one perfumer created only perfumes reminiscent of the 1970s which did not appeal to clients. He refused to change as he considered the 1970s to be the golden era of perfume creation. I had to dismiss him as he was not in synch with the age in which he was living. I have always been a bit frightened that I might not be in touch with the times. I immerse myself in other arts, I grab ideas out of the blue and note them down in a notebook which I always carry wherever I go… but I have still not found an answer.

Presentation of the speaker :

Jean-Claude Ellena : perfumer for Hermès since 2004. Prior to this appointment, he created perfumes such as *First,* for Van-Cleef & Arpels (the first perfume made by a jewellery maker) ; *Eau de Campagne* for Sisley ; *Eau parfumée au Thé Vert* (which began the tendency for perfumes whose main ingredient is tea) for Bulgari ; *Déclaration* for Cartier ; as well as numerous other perfumes for niche brands, such as Frédéric Malle, the perfume artisan. Jean-Claude Ellena's aim is to bring together sensitivity and understanding.

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