

Call for Papers

The Perfumer:

The evolution of a figure since the Renaissance

January 28 – 29, 2021

Palace of Versailles Research Centre

International conference organized by Alice Camus (Guerlain / CRCV) and Érika Wicky (Université Lumière Lyon 2 / LARHRA).



« Au grand parfumeur » (détail), gravure, 1682 © BNF.

A culmination of knowledge and practices documented since Antiquity, perfumery (the art and process of making perfume) has a rich and complex history, many aspects of

which remain to be explored, because its historiography is still relatively recent and still in the process of development (Reinarz, 2014). Research on this subject opened up in the 1980s in studies focused on the body, its care, and its adornment, such as those of Georges Vigarello (1985) on the evolution of hygiene practices and those of Philippe Perrot (1984) on the artifices used on the body to conform various socially constructed images. These analyses of hygienic practices, cosmetics, dress accessories, and luxury goods led to the study of the history of perfumery. Annick Le Gu  rer's pioneering work on the history of perfume and perfumery (1988 and 2005) has been expanded and deepened in studies by Catherine Lano   (2008), Eug  nie Briot (2015) and Rosine Lheureux (2016), centered on the Ancien R  gime and the nineteenth century in France. Holly Dugan's work (2011) focuses on the perfumes of the modern period in England, while Anna Messinis (2017) explores the long history of Venetian perfumery. Located at the crossroads of several fields of study, including the history of the body, science, luxury and consumer practices (Roche, 1989), the history of perfumery has benefited from advances in research in many areas. It was nurtured in particular by works devoted to the history of olfactory sensitivities (Corbin, 1982, Halliday, 1999) and to the historical anthropology of the senses (Classen and Howes, 1994), which shed light on the social and cultural conditions that led to the development of perfumery as a craft and an industry.

Drawing from this growing field of research, the purpose of the conference is to study the history of the professional perfumer, analyzing how the image of the perfumer emerged during the Renaissance in Italy, how it was further constructed during the seventeenth century in France and England, and how it continued to evolve to the present day. Under the Ancien R  gime, when trade in most European countries was regulated by corporations and states, the assertion of the perfumer's identity was often undermined by a legal struggle to become the sole holder of the right to manufacture and sell perfume products. Since its recognition, this profession has undergone metamorphoses evident in the way they affected each of three operations that have defined the perfumer throughout history: creating, manufacturing and selling perfumes (Gobet and Le Gall, 2011). Indeed, perfumers have had to adapt to changing trends in fragrance use and to distinguish themselves from their competitors at different times in their history by manufacturing and marketing not only scented waters, but also other perfumed products such as gloves, the creation of which was their first vocation, then sachets, cosmetics, hair powders, soaps, and even more recently, scented candles. The evolution of the use of perfumes, sometimes prophylactic, hygienic or hedonistic, also affected perfumers,

who in turn allied themselves with other areas of activity, collaborating with apothecaries, hairdressers and chemists, followed by artists and fashion designers. The need to meet a growing demand also motivated the development of new processes and the invention of new formulas, transforming the perfumer's work.

The industrialization of perfumery in the nineteenth century marked a major turning point in this history, accelerating the pace of innovations that, like the extraction of volatile solvent and the emergence of synthetic raw materials, revolutionized perfumery, transforming not only the practical, but also the social status of the perfumer. First a craftsman, he could become an investor, even a public figure (Briot, 2015). The profession of perfumer, exercised under the Ancien Régime in the context of family establishments, then expanded on a larger scale to factories in the nineteenth century and lastly to the multinational companies we know today. This profession was thus confronted with an increase in the scale of production, leading to the multiplication of actors, including specialized workers and marketing experts. The boom since the 1990s in so-called niche perfumery, based on a very limited production and the assertion of the creator's uniqueness, contributes to the on-going history of the perfumer.

This conference will offer a multidisciplinary approach to the history of perfumers, their profession, their social status and their representations, through the presentations of specialists from diverse backgrounds: historians, art historians, literary scholars, philosophers, perfumers and professional in the contemporary world of perfumery. The multidisciplinary approach will provide a detailed and nuanced vision of the figure of the perfumer at different moments in his historical evolution by drawing on a wide range of historical, literary and artistic sources (professional documents, legal documents, inventories, etc.). This conference also seeks to highlight the links between the exercise of the profession of perfumer and the socio-cultural environment of his or her time.

Exploring the history of the figure of the perfumer opens up many avenues of research, for which the following are some examples:

- **The training of perfumers:** whereas perfumers were once, like other craftsmen, trained as apprentices, the creation of schools of perfumery in the early twentieth century entailed a standardization of training methods and the development of a specific pedagogy.

- **The institutional history of perfumers:** guilds, corporations, unions and companies played a significant role in defining and regulating the trade as of the sixteenth century. Addressing the role of the perfumer at various turning points of the profession highlights the institutional causes of differences in the profession among the various European countries.
- **The perfumer and other professionals:** while the definition of the perfumer's profession was built in part by excluding other professional practices, it also benefited from rivalries and associations with other professions. For example, the expansion of the American market at the end of the nineteenth century benefited from the popularity of drugstores (Bogard, 1983). We can thus consider the history of the perfumer through his relationships with other professions, such as the glove-makers and the tanners, but also the chemists, apothecaries, hairdressers, milliners, designers, etc.
- **The perfumer's clientele:** some perfumers served powerful customers; Pierre-François-Pascal Guerlain, for example, supplied the Empress Eugénie. Others sold fragrance products to anonymous customers. Client analysis reveals multiple commercial and economic choices and practices.
- **The perfumer's location:** the perfumer is also defined by the areas where he practiced, from cultivating raw materials in Grasse during the Ancien Régime, to selling his products in famous shops in London, Milan, Paris or Versailles (Coquery, 2011), then moving to factories near big cities to manufacture his products in the second half of the nineteenth century.
- **The cosmopolitan perfumer:** in the sixteenth century all perfumers in England were Italian or French (Dugan, 2011). In the eighteenth century, Italian perfumer Jean-Marie Farina, produced the famous Eau de Cologne in Germany. Since many other perfumers have crossed borders in this way, the national rivalries that were expressed especially at the Universal Exhibitions of the nineteenth century can be contrasted with the figure of a cosmopolitan perfumer.
- **The perfumer-poisoners:** a well-anchored image associates the perfumers of the Renaissance with poisoners. For example, René Bianchi (also known as René le Florentin), who was the perfumer for Catherine de Medici, was notably accused of the murder of Jeanne d'Albret, mother of Henry IV. Many historical novels of the nineteenth century, such as *La Reine Margot* [*Queen Margot*] by Alexandre Dumas (1845), took advantage in their stories of this figure of perfumer-poisoner and reinforced the image.

- **The amateur perfumers:** in parallel with professional creation, the domestic manufacture of perfumes coexisted, from the great noble families of the Ancien Régime to the dandy aesthete Des Esseintes, the main character in Huysmans' novel *À rebours [Against Nature]*.
- **The perfumer as historian and theorist:** in the nineteenth century, the history of perfume was essentially written by perfumers who, like Eugène Rimmel, author of the *Livre des parfums [Book of Perfumes]* (1867), usually dedicated one or more introductory chapters to their essays. Several perfumers devoted themselves to theorizing on their practices, such as Septimus Piesse (1856), who developed a system of olfactory creation based on the model of music theory and Edmond Roudnitska, whose essay *L'Esthétique en question : Introduction à une esthétique de l'odorat [Aesthetics in question: Introduction to the aesthetics of smell]* (1977) defends the artistic character of perfume.
- **Strategies for enhancing the value of the perfumer's activity:** to enhance the value of their activity, perfumers have often insisted on the scientific nature of their practice and sometimes on its artistic dimension. A fin-de-siècle emphasis on the creative dimension of the perfumer's profession, reinforced in advertising posters and packages designed by recognized artists like Alphonse Mucha, seems to be part of what Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (2012) have identified as a process of "artification".
- **Women as perfumers:** Although leading figures in the perfume industry, such as Helena Rubinstein (Fitoussi, 2019) and Estée Lauder, for example, have recently been the subject of historical studies, other women perfumers, such as Germaine Cellier, remain little known. In the wake of the colloquium on the theme "Women in perfumery", held in Grasse in March 2019, we will look at the feminization of the profession of perfumer. We can also trace their history in noting that women who were perfumers have not always been marginalized: there were eight in Lisbon in 1551 (Kennett, 1975).
- **Perfumers and the idea of style:** if the creation of perfumes can in some ways be considered an art, each perfumer can be distinguished by his individual style and originality. We will thus try to determine what the perfume says about its creator, and how some perfumers articulate their own style with a brand identity. In addressing these issues, we will continue some aspects of the reflection initiated at the 2014 Symposium, *La création olfactive [Olfactory Creation]* organized by Chantal Jaquet,

Roland Salses and Didier Trotier as part of the Kôdô Program of the National Research Agency (ANR).

- **Perfumers and politics:** Balzac explored the ambitions of bourgeois merchants during the Restoration in his story of the fictional perfumer, César Birotteau. In his novel, *Je suis un affreux bourgeois [I am a frightful bourgeois]* (1926), Clément Vautel depicted the ridiculous behavior of a perfumer with ultra-conservative convictions. These literary representations of the perfumer, along with biographical studies of François Coty (Winock, 1994) and other perfumers, suggest there is more to be explored regarding links between perfumery and politics.
- **Singular and exemplary figures of perfumers:** often erected as models for the originality of their products, their social positions, even the relationships they maintained with a brand, several perfumers, such as Aimé Guerlain and Ernest Beaux, have helped shape their profession. How will their contributions continue to shape the figure of the perfumer? Well beyond an apology or a biography, an analysis of the nature of their contributions to building the figure of the perfumer is necessary.

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Georges Vigarello, *Le propre et le sale. L'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen-Age*, Paris, Seuil, 1985.

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Place : Auditorium of the Palace of Versailles.

Admission is free, but registration required

Proposals for papers, in French or in English, of about 3,000 characters, should be sent to Alice Camus (acamus@guerlain.fr) and Érika Wicky (erika.wicky@univ-lyon2.fr), **before June 15, 2020**. They must be accompanied by a short bio-bibliography.

This Symposium will be the subject of a later publication, in the form of a collection of works.