



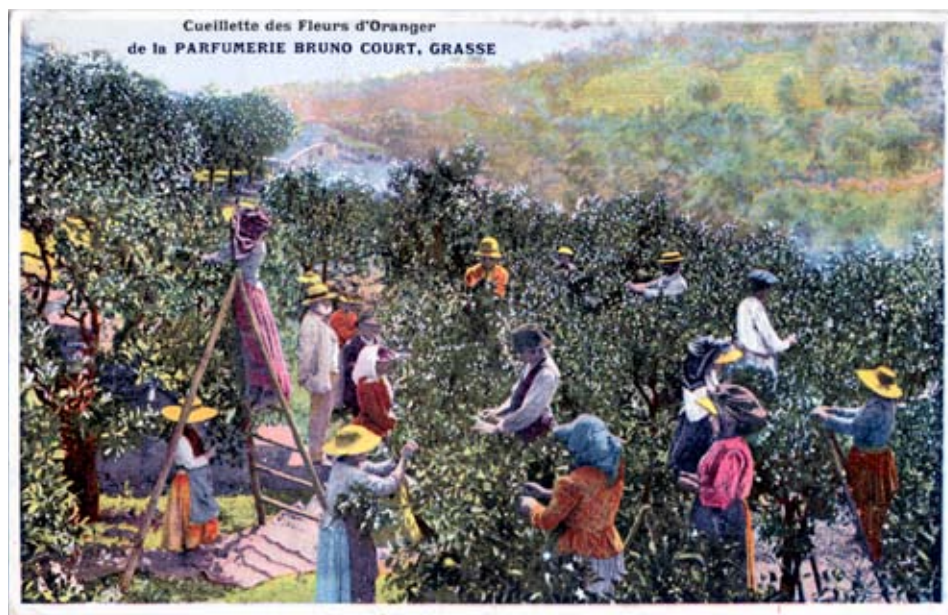
Mandy Aftel

There is far more to **Mandy Aftel** than meets the eye, she is an alchemist in the truest sense of the word. She masterfully composes with natural ingredients that then fill the air with the music of her exotic perfumes. If you are ever fortunate enough to visit her immaculate northern California studio, she will enchant you with her passion for this ancient art form.





I find that plants have an inherent beauty that is reflected in their aromatic component. Natural aromas are richer and more nuanced precisely because they are real and simply too inviting for me to resist. The names themselves seduced me — ambergris and costus, ylang ylang concrete. Choya loban, orange flower, boronia, civet, tonka bean, champaca. Even those I recognized — jasmine, sandalwood, frankincense, myrrh, bitter orange, vetiver — conjured up ancient civilizations and exotic customs, long journeys and sensual torpor. The endless variations on each theme fanned my obsession. Once I discovered rose absolute, I had to try not only the Bulgarian version but the Russian, Moroccan, Turkish, Indian, and Egyptian as well.









In searching for historical information, the first perfume book I found was *The Book of Perfumes* by Eugene Rimmel, published in 1865. Discovering it, with its elaborate illustrations and royal blue and gold tooled leather cover, was like finding a jewel. Gradually I assembled more than two hundred rare and antique books on perfumery; to my knowledge it's the finest existing collection in the world.

Until the 1880s, all perfumes and fragrances were created from plant — and some animal — materials. The displacement of natural essences by synthetic materials in commercially produced fragrances began at the turn of the last century. Unlike the natural essences, synthetic fragrances were cheap, colorless, stable, and consistent, and these qualities — and their “modernness” — made them irresistible to industry. Eventually synthetics were used almost exclusively, and the demand for the naturals dwindled.



TIP

“IF YOU HIT THE BULL’S-EYE EVERY TIME, THE TARGET IS TOO NEAR.”

—WENDELL CASTLE





My reading often suggested experimenting with a new oil or way of combining ingredients. Every time I came upon a passage in one of my books that introduced a new essence to me, I had to track it down and start working with it. I loved the complicated histories of the materials and their complex characters — at once delicate and harsh, fresh and decaying, floral and fecal — which made the perfumer's palette so intense. I literally had to get my hands on them. The sweet, the foul, the spicy, and the putrid — I found them all alluring. I loved the way they smelled and the way they looked, some like liquid rubies or emeralds in the light, some thick and pasty, other light and thin.

To create with essence is to encounter the deepest nature of a thing, which is in some sense greater than the thing itself. Working with essences, you dive deep in order to touch the universal. Irreducible and narcotic, they transport you into the polymorphous intensity of the present, in all its inchoate sensuality. Essences are at once specific and collective, earthly and otherworldly.

Music is the best metaphor for capturing the way great perfume is created. Individual essences are in fact called notes and are blended together to form chords. The place where I compose my perfumes is called a perfumer's organ: a unit consisting of a semicircular series of stepped shelves lined with hundreds of bottles of raw perfume materials arranged by scent category.



Sitting at the organ, I construct fragrance creations in much the same way that a musician chooses musical notes and composes chords. The musical scale serves as an analogy to the perfumer's palette precisely because its tones do not all fit together in easy consonance, but embody discord of various degrees. The same is true of the idiosyncratic traits and competing intensities of the essences. Musical concepts like tone, vibration, and harmony resonate in perfumery as well, where the relationship between essences structures a blend, just as musical structure depends largely on the relationship between tones.

Music also captures the way scent is experienced — not all at once but unfolding over time — a quality that in perfume is referred to as duration. In this unfolding lies that unparalleled power of these arts over memory and emotion. Music and scent can calm us, or they can arouse our passions — and in our ecstasies, exalt us. They seize us, they transport us to the highest realms, feeding a desire for intoxication. They alter our consciousness in a way that symbolic systems like language cannot, nor can their most transcendent effects be fully expressed by language. They are ineffable.



FAVORITE QUOTE

"PUT YOURSELF AT
YOUR OWN DISPOSAL.
LIVE LIFE AT FIRST HAND.
MAKE THE WORLD
YOUR SALON."

—MINA LOY





I create perfume — and people wear it — because beauty and art are a vacation from reality. Beauty brings about a morally valuable state in the mind of the beholder. A well-proportioned and beautiful perfume can make those who smell it long to enter a realm of such beauty and perfect proportion. The power of beauty may derive from its ability to minister to this longing. The beautiful object creates, in the mind of those who attend to it, the spiritual home that reality does not provide. Beauty sustains an inner life. It feeds us.



WHERE WOMEN CREATE would like to thank Mandy Aftel for her involvement in our Winter Issue. To learn more about Mandy visit www.aftelier.com.

