

Introduction

What Is Natural Perfumery?

Just as music is art to be heard, and wine is art to be drunk, natural perfume is art to be smelled. It is a form capable of the highest degree of aesthetic expression. Its raw materials are the plant and animal essences that people have used since ancient times for pleasure, ritual, and romance—not the synthetic approximations of which most contemporary perfumes are composed. Natural essences evolve on the skin as they interact with the chemistry of the wearer and evaporate into the air. Natural perfume blends modulate over time, as each note gives way to the next. In contrast, the static, one-note persistence that lingers behind the wearer in an elevator or restaurant loudly announces the presence of a synthetic fragrance.

Natural essences are the atoms of perfumery, the building blocks of which complex and evocative scents are created. They are, in a sense, substances in their most concentrated but least material form, containing the whole nature and perfection of the physical substances themselves, those substances, however, cannot be reduced to a single element. They include traces of various elements, elements that shift with minute changes in nature and circumstance. This is why Moroccan rose smells different from Bulgarian rose or Egyptian rose, or for that matter why Moroccan rose itself varies discernibly from season to season. In some highly complex essences like jasmine, numerous chemical substances, sometimes many hundreds, have been isolated, and still there are many more elements that have not been identified. With all the chemical analysis in the world, natural substances cannot really be pinned down to a formula and replicated in a laboratory. Only nature can create the smell of jasmine at nightfall. This is why the cost of one pound of synthetic jasmine is \$28, and the cost of one pound of natural jasmine is \$1200. Synthetics can approximate the dominant qualities of the natural essences, but they cannot capture the irreducible complexity, nor therefore the subtlety or softness of their odors.

Natural essences possess a compressed vitality, a bioactive power that cannot be measured or replicated by chemical analysis but manifests itself in their potent effect on our emotions and states of consciousness. It also can be seen in Kirlian photography, a technique of taking pictures by means of electricity that was discovered by the Russian electrical technician Semyon Kirlian in 1939. An object is placed directly on photographic paper or film laid atop a metal plate to which a high-voltage current is applied. This records the energy field that surrounds living organisms and appears as bright colors or haloes surrounding the objects. A photograph of a freshly cut leaf reveals a colorful aura that diminishes over time until the leaf dies. The same strong energy field that radiates outward is also visible when pure essential oils are photographed on a testing strip. The energy field takes distinctive shapes that correspond to people's descriptions of the scents--heavy, soft, sharp, bright, and so on. The field, which is lacking altogether in photographs of synthetic essences, is an inherent life force that distinguishes natural materials from inert ones.

The power of natural essences derives not just from their irreducible earthiness but from their complex history. Myrrh is set down in Exodus as one of the main ingredients of the holy anointing oil of the Jews, along with cassia and cinnamon. Kyphi, the famous ancient

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Egyptian perfume composed of as many as sixteen ingredients, including cardamom, spikenard, cinnamon, saffron, frankincense, myrrh, raisins, wine, and honey, was reputed to cleanse the body, soothe the spirit, sweeten the breath, restore powers of imagination, induce sleep, and increase receptivity to dreams. Holding a vial of essential oil to the light and admiring its jewel-like color, inhaling its complicated fragrance, one imagines the people and places that have known and used it, the history and rituals in which it has played a part. And those who not only experience the essences but experiment with them participate in ancient traditions of sorcery, healing, and alchemy.

The Perfumer's Art

Smell is the most primitive of our senses, and our response to certain odors is deeply embedded in the unconscious mind. “The basic type of receptor cell [for olfaction] found in primitive animals has changed very little in evolution, remaining much the same in groups of animals as diverse as insects, birds, fish and mammals.” (*Perfumery: Practice and Principles*, Calkin and Jellinek, p.75). The development of human olfactory tissue is closely linked to the pituitary gland, which plays a key role in sexual activity and reproduction. Rudimentary perfume blending takes place within both the insect and plant worlds. For example, plants make their presence known to insects by producing distinct, alluring scents, which draw certain insects exclusively to their nectar and pollen. These scents mimic the pheromones of the insects, playing on their sexual responses. Human beings not only participate in this universal process of call and response, but they partake of the same organic elements to do so. And it is with these same materials that the natural perfumer works her alchemy upon the senses.

Natural Perfumery, Aromatherapy, and Synthetic Perfumery

Natural perfume borrows from both aromatherapy and synthetic perfumery, but is distinct from each. It shares aromatherapy's insistence on working with essential oils for their complex biodynamic powers. But in aromatherapy, blends are created for therapeutic more than aesthetic purposes. On the other hand, while natural perfumery shares with synthetic perfumery the intention to create “wearable art,” the synthetic blends carry none of the depth or transformative power of the naturals.

Yet natural perfumery is an art that was cut short before it came to fruition. Although for a long time perfumes were made exclusively of natural essences, they tended to be limited to blends for scenting handkerchiefs and those for simulating the scents of certain flowers that resisted distillation. The fragrances for scenting handkerchiefs--Alhambra, Bouquet d'Amour, Esterhazy Bouquet, Ess Bouquet, Eau de Cologne, Jockey Club, Stolen Kisses, Eau de Millefleurs, International Bouquet of All Nations, Rondeletia--were repeated changelessly by every perfumer and usually sounded more interesting than they smelled. Like the floral imitations, most were heavy floral mixtures fixed with civet, musk, or ambergris; perfumers exploited little of the range of contrast and intensity offered by the essential oils then available. It wasn't until the first decade of the twentieth century that perfumers began to venture beyond their timid beginnings to create scents that were conceived not in imitation of nature but as beautiful in themselves. This period of creative ferment coincided with—and was, to a degree, spurred on by—the introduction of synthetically formulated

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perfume ingredients. The synthetics were offered by the same suppliers who sold natural ingredients but were only too happy to avail themselves of consistent quality and steady supply that they could buy and sell for less. Thus there never has been a true “golden age” of natural perfume, because perfumery emerged as an art form in tandem with the birth of the synthetics, and the incredible palette of natural essences remained largely untouched, awaiting discovery.

Comparative Categories	Aromatherapy	Natural Perfume	Synthetic Perfume
Primary Concern	therapeutic	aesthetic with therapeutic benefits	aesthetic
Aesthetic Aims	simple	create beauty	create beauty
Ingredient Sources	essential oils	essential oils, concretes and absolutes	mainly, if not totally, synthetic fragrance
Typical Number of Essences	around 5	9 to 30	over 50
Structure	not a consideration	designed around volatility of top, middle and base notes	can manipulate structure
Drydown on Skin	not a consideration	evolves with body chemistry	synthetic
Duration on Skin	not a consideration	couple of hours	day or more
Duration in Bottle	some carrier oils go bad	ripens with age in alcohol	can go bad
Composition	intricate orchestration of elements and trace elements	intricate orchestration of elements and trace elements	mixture of single- aroma chemicals
History	over 4000 years	over 4000 years	100 years
Lineage	linked to nature, alchemy and ritual	linked to nature, alchemy and ritual	linked to developments in chemistry
Cost	essential oils are less expensive than absolutes	Most expensive and luxurious	most perfume chemicals are not expensive

Frequently Asked Questions

- *Why doesn't natural perfume last as long?*
Natural perfumes never last as long as synthetic ones because chemical ingredients last longer on the skin. A perfume that lasts more than a couple of hours on the skin is almost certainly created from synthetics.

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- *Why does natural perfume cost more?*
Natural perfumes are made from the most expensive and luxurious essences. They are created by hand from raw materials in small batches; sometimes it takes a great deal of material to render a tiny amount of essence, and some of the material is rare or difficult to procure.
- *Why does one batch of a natural blend smell different from another?*
Each batch of essential oils, concretes, and absolutes smells slightly different, depending on growing and extraction conditions of the raw materials; therefore each blend of a given set of ingredients will vary.
- *How do I know if a perfume is truly all natural?*
Certain natural materials elude current extraction methods, e.g., lily of the valley, freesia, wisteria, peach, plum, cantaloupe, caramel, apple, apricot, banana, cherry, dewberry, gardenia, honeysuckle, lilac, mango, peony, strawberry, violet, tulip, lily, heliotrope, orchid. Their inclusion in a perfume blend is a tip-off that the fragrance is synthetic. Also suspect are inexpensive blends containing ingredients that are exceptionally costly (over \$6,000 per pound) in their natural form, e.g., orris, jonquil, narcissus.