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Isabelle Reynaud Chazot, Alice Camus, Sophie-Valentine Borloz, Erika Wicky,
Olivier R P David, Thomas Fontaine

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THE NOMEN PROJECT

Classification of fragrant compositions for historical purposes Representing, reconstituting, reconstructing or reinventing an ancient "perfume"?

Project dates:

October 2022 - July 2023

Project launched and run by the Osmothèque and its Scientific Committee

**Authors: Isabelle Chazot, Alice Camus, Sophie-Valentine Borloz, Olivier David,
Erika Wicky, Thomas Fontaine**

The "Des cheveux et des poils" exhibition at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris (5 April - 18 September 2023) features a "reconstitution of a powdered rose perfume" to evoke a scent used to perfume wig powder in the 18th century. The cartel states that the perfumer who made this perfume "smelled the inside of an eighteenth-century poudroir containing remnants of powder used to whiten hairstyles and wigs". No details are given of the historical source or its analysis. Such inaccuracies are not uncommon, and the labels accompanying the perfumes on display often do not do justice to the work of historians and perfumers. These inaccuracies betray a terminological and conceptual vagueness surrounding olfactory reconstitutions, a vagueness that is not at all anecdotal in view of the growing scale of undertakings of this type. Over the last few years, olfactory compositions or devices claiming a more or less mimetic link with a vanished scent have proliferated, both in museums and as part of scientific, commercial, educational or event-based initiatives. The idea is to offer visitors the chance to smell a scent that comes directly from the past, so that, for a whiff, they can abolish the distance of time and physically experience the *air of yesterday*.

These initiatives have the obvious advantage of promoting olfactory education and culture among the general public, and making people aware of the sensory component of history by highlighting it. They also highlight the richness of our olfactory heritage, as well as the expertise of the perfumers who manage to preserve it or to present interpretations of it. The fact remains, however, that they involve very different approaches, depending on the historical sources on which they are based, the historical period concerned and the means used. Remaking a vanished perfume for which we have the formula, recreating an ancient perfume through archaeological analysis, or drawing inspiration from literary or visual sources to recreate the smell of a place or an era are operations which, however interesting they may be, are no less dissimilar, both in their aims and in their methods.

Despite these discrepancies, there is still a great deal of terminological vagueness in the field. Various projects are grouped together under the all-encompassing term "reconstitution", without this really providing any information about the methodology used. Museums sometimes go so far as to gloss over the work of olfactory reconstruction by giving visitors the chance to smell odorants labelled simply "Kyphi" or "What you could smell at Versailles", without giving any further details. This ambiguity can introduce doubt as to the status of what the visitor is given to smell, and also has the disadvantage of obscuring the singularity and interest of the different proposals. A "reconstituted" fragrance (sometimes called a "perfume") conceals, behind the imprecision of its name, all at once the scientific rigour that governed its development, the expertise of the creator that gave rise to its formulation and the historical and scientific research that nurtured both approaches.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding and to enhance the value of the know-how involved, it is necessary to adopt a more refined terminology, making it possible to distinguish between the different types of approach and to highlight their characteristics. While there is inevitably a grey area between the different categories, this classification exercise is intended as a first step towards clarifying practices, which can only be of benefit to the general public, the perfumers and the experts called upon for these reconstructions. It should be emphasised that this nomenclature is not intended to be either evaluative or prescriptive; the aim is not to measure the deviation from a standard ideal, which would be the original scent, but to propose a vocabulary to describe different ways of approaching the revival of a vanished scent.

It is with this in mind that the Osmothèque, with over thirty years' experience in the conservation and reconstitution of ancient perfumes and a keen observer of the international olfactory scene, and with the support of its Scientific Committee, is proposing the RARIE model, a five-entry bilingual classification that covers most of today's reconstitutions.

1. Scope of application

Before presenting these different categories, a few preliminary remarks are in order to clearly define the scope of the RARIE model. Firstly, it is not a proposed classification of odours, but a theoretical framework that applies only to actual olfactory creations that claim a historical dimension. By historical dimension we mean an explicit desire to reproduce a disappeared odorant element that had a proven existence in the past. Secondly, this classification is not limited to perfumes alone, but extends to olfactory reconstructions as a whole. It should therefore make it possible to characterise both attempts to recreate a specific perfume identically and attempts to give the smell of a place or environment. Thirdly, it is based on the methods employed and the sources and resources available to carry out this undertaking, and not on an olfactory assessment of the result. It is therefore constructed on the basis of criteria that are as objective as possible, without recourse to aesthetic or hedonic assessments of the finished product. And fourthly, it is purely descriptive, enabling different types of product to be distinguished and valued, and not prescriptive or evaluative. To sum up, the RARIE classification proposes to characterise and classify any olfactory creation that responds to an explicit desire to recreate a scent or perfume from the past, according to the information made available on how to go about it. Intended to better inform the public, this classification aims to incorporate good museum practice in terms of olfactory devices.

2. Graphical representation

The RARIE classification is made up of five distinct categories: Repesée (“Re-weighing”), Adaptation, Reconstruction, Interpretation and Evocation. It is based on a dual mode of characterisation, both textual and schematic. In addition to the lexical descriptions, there is a graphical representation model that provides a quick and concise overview of the 'profile' of each project, making it easier to compare both between the different categories and within each of them. This model takes the form of a Kiviat diagram with fourteen criteria divided into two hemispheres (see example below). These hemispheres correspond to distinct types of criterion, which themselves have different realizations. The left hemisphere groups together criteria that depend on the presence of a formula, or *at least* a recipe; it therefore mainly applies to approaches aimed at remaking a perfume, in the sense of an olfactory creation for which the odorant dimension may or may not be the main objective, meeting an aesthetic, hedonic, prophylactic and/or hygienic goal. Conversely, the right-hand hemisphere brings

together criteria that apply to attempts at reconstruction that could be described as more 'evocative', based on less specific sources. It therefore lends itself particularly well to work on odours or olfactory atmospheres that have not been scientifically and systematically recorded in the past. It should be noted, however, that the boundary between the two hemispheres is by no means hermetic: the rigorous recreation of a recipe may require some imagination and, conversely, an artist's view, as long as it claims historical value, is often accompanied by a reflection on the raw materials to be used or the methods to be implemented. So, above all, we are talking about dominant trends that allow us to sketch out a form of descriptive sheet for the different creations, based on the information we have about them.

The criteria used for both hemispheres are as follows:

Left hemisphere	Right hemisphere
<p>Description of the raw material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exact name 10/10 • Name of raw material without further details 8/10 • Unclear mention of the raw material 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	<p>Use of primary historical sources (archives, eyewitness accounts, specialist texts)</p>
<p>Current existence of the raw material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The raw material still exists and can be used 10/10 • The material no longer exists as is and must be replaced 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	<p>Use of secondary historical sources (literature, visual representations)</p>
<p>Part of the raw material to be used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The part of the raw material to be used is precisely indicated 10/10 • In the absence of precision, interpretation is based on a comparative element 8/10 • In the absence of precision, the interpretation is absolute 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	<p>Site visit</p>
<p>Proportion of ingredients</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quantity is indicated accurately 10/10 • The quantity is indicated vaguely 8/10 • The quantity is not specified and the interpretation is absolute 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	<p>Collaboration with specialists in the period concerned</p>

Processes used <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The techniques are specified in full 10/10 • Some techniques are not specified and require interpretation 8/10 • No technique is indicated and interpretation is absolute 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	Scientific and/or educational purpose of the approach
Tools and instruments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tools are specified in full 10/10 • Some tools are not specified and require interpretation 8/10 • No tool is indicated and interpretation is absolute 6/10 • Not relevant 0/10 	A commercial approach
Similar tools used <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tools are all identical 10/10 • Some tools are not identical and are replaced 8/10 • No two tools are identical and all are replaced 6/10 	Creative freedom for the perfumer

Each criterion is given a score between 0 and 10, which provides a graphical representation of its importance in the context of the project in question.

3. The RARIE classification

a. « Repesée » or « Re-weighing

Repesée occurs when the perfumer is in possession of a formula detailing the raw materials, proportions and techniques used. It concerns nominally identified perfumes, generally associated with a perfume house and a perfumer-creator. Because of the need for a formula (and not a recipe), it applies only to fragrances dating from the end of the XIX^e century to the present day. It is based on the perfumer's ability to remain as faithful as possible to the original formula and not on a creative gesture.

Example

The perfume *L'Origan* (François Coty, 1905) by Coty was reweighed by the Osmothèque on the basis of the 1905 formula. The majority of perfumes remade at the Osmothèque are "repesées".

Graphical representation (in progress)

b. Adaptation

Adaptation is aimed at a specific perfume, for which the perfumer has a recipe (or even several recipe variants), with all that this implies in terms of vagueness about raw materials, proportions and techniques. In addition to the information provided, there is a not negligible amount of invention, experimentation and creation. The term adaptation applies mainly to perfumery before 1880, as well as to domestic perfumery (home preparations, perfumed sachets, etc.).

Example

Mesopotamian Perfume of Tapputi - 2022: This is the result of a collaboration between the *Scent Academy* and the *Fragrance Culture and Tourism Association* in Turkey. Bihter Türkan Ergül, president of the former and vice-president of the latter, directed this project. She is also a perfumer. The team is made up of around fifteen people, including academics. The aim is to recreate a perfume whose recipe is written on an Assyrian tablet evoking the perfumes of Tapputi, a perfumer at the court of Assyria in the second half of the XIII^e century BC. The team raised a number of important issues: some fragments of the tablet have disappeared, and some of the raw materials mentioned no longer exist.

Graphical representation (in progress)

c. Reconstruction

The term reconstruction is used to describe the process of remaking a perfume on the basis of residues that can be analysed (chemical, archaeo-botanical, chromatographic, etc.). It presupposes the intervention of the perfumer to fill in the gaps (relating to techniques, in particular). It can be combined with interpretation, when a recipe is also part of the available sources.

Example

Cleopatra's perfume - 2019: In 2012, archaeologist Robert Littman and his colleague Jay Silverstein, both professors at the University of Hawaii, discovered an ancient perfume factory dating from the 3rd century BC on the site of the city of Tell El-Timai in Egypt. Excavations revealed several bottles, some of which contained dry residues. Their analysis enabled a list of ingredients to be drawn up. Dora Goldsmith and Sean Coughlin, German specialists in ancient Egypt, were asked to recreate the perfume based on these ingredients and on recipes contained in ancient Greek texts. The reconstructed perfume contains myrrh,

cardamom, cinnamon and olive oil. It was presented as part of an exhibition at the National Geographic Museum in Washington.

Graphical representation (in progress)

d. Interpretation

Interpretation comes into play when the sources used do not aim to produce the perfume, but simply bear witness to its presence (e.g. literary, pictorial or accounting sources). The aim is not necessarily to reproduce a specific perfume whose existence has been attested, but rather to convey an "air of the times", what the perfume of a particular person or object might have been like. It is therefore largely based on the perfumer's own creative work, but also involves recourse to historical sources.

In view of the development and popularity of approaches of this type, it is worth distinguishing a sub-category of interpretation: **atmospherisation**. Atmospherisation is a variant of interpretation applied to the smell of places. It is based on the use of various sources, to which *headspace* analysis techniques can be added, to recreate the olfactory atmosphere of a space at a given time. Depending on the sources available and the use to which they are put, this approach can tend more or less towards reconstruction or interpretation.

Example

The Perfume of Marie-Antoinette - 2005: the perfume of Marie-Antoinette, the "Sillage de la reine", is a project created under the direction of the Château de Versailles. In 2005, to accompany the publication of a book by Élisabeth de Feydeau, *Marie-Antoinette's perfumer*, Jean-Louis Fargeon, came up with the idea of creating a perfume based on historical elements written by the Parisian perfumer Jean-Louis Fargeon. Fargeon supplied the court in the 18th century^e and left a book containing various recipes. Based on these sources, perfumer Francis Kurkdjian, then with Quest International, created a fragrance. His work was not based on a specific recipe, but was inspired by a collection of recipes. The fragrance was created from natural ingredients, including rose, iris, jasmine, tuberose, orange blossom, cedar, sandalwood, tonkin musk and ambergris.

The communication surrounding this project used the term "re-interpretation"; within the RARIE classification, we propose instead to speak of "interpretation".

Graphical representation (in progress)

e. Evocation

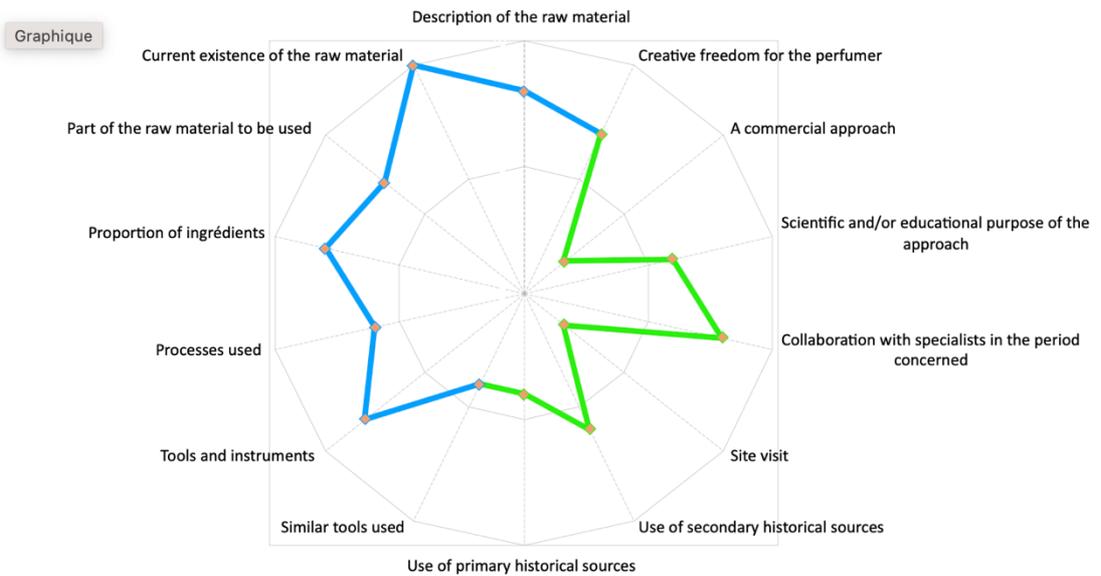
Evocation is a work of the imagination oriented towards the past. It is therefore based almost entirely on the perfumer's creative work, since any sources are used only to provide the initial inspiration. It is an entirely original work, aimed at sharing a resolutely subjective apprehension of the source element.

Example

The “Gardens of Writers” brand, created by Anaïs Biguine, offers olfactory universes inspired by literary figures of the 19th or 20th centuries. Although the creation is nourished by readings, visits to places of life and biographical information, it is above all a question, for the perfumer, of giving an account of an emotion of reading, of the encounter between an artistic universe and an individual sensibility of reader. Anaïs Biguine invites, in her own words, to discover “romantic temperaments”, and not to give to smell the perfume that such a historical figure could have worn. Thus, his perfume George, inspired by George Sand, is radically different from the Les Nuits project of Maison Astier de Villatte, in that it is less a question of reconstructing the perfume of George Sand as a historical figure than the perfume of George.

Graphical representation (in progress)

Example of a graphical representation:



Engagement :

- This work is the fruit of reflection by the Osmothèque and its Scientific Committee between September 2022 and July 2023, with a view to establishing a definitive classification.
- The lexicological proposals in this article, which have already been submitted to experts for approval, will be compared in the coming months with the practices of other specialists, perfumers and historians in particular, who have embarked on these approaches to reconstructing the smells and fragrances of the past. It is therefore a working document that marks a stage in a process of reflection that will need to be developed further.
- The Scientific Committee is open to dialogue in order to create a reference tool that can be used by everyone.
- The approach is not intended to be exhaustive, and not all the examples analysed by the Scientific Committee have been mentioned.

- This provisional result is accompanied by a monitoring project which aims to identify current initiatives to reconstitute smells or perfumes from the past and to analyse the method used on the basis of the information provided.
- The current phase of the NOMEN project has been deposited on HAL in a bilingual French/English version.
- A scientific article is currently being written to pursue the lines of thought opened up in this first document and will be published in autumn 2023.

Outlook:

We might well ask what is behind this renewed interest in reconstructing the smells and scents of the past: beyond the sensory experience that complements or enriches contact with works of art in museums, what are our contemporaries seeking through these olfactory experiences?

This historical, anthropological, sociological and philosophical questioning will be the subject of further reflection in an attempt to provide some answers.