

FROM NICHE TO NICHE, THE EVOLUTION OF FRENCH PERFUMERY

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Michael Edwards' 'Fragrances of the World' guidebooks have been described as 'the only comprehensive, historically accurate, factually reliable and artistically consistent database of fragrances in existence.' There was therefore quite a buzz at this year's BSP One Day Symposium in May 2019 (see event report on page 10) around his presence and a high level of anticipation for his keynote presentation.

Edwards proved to be a wonderful speaker, with the names of industry "icons" that he knew personally and dropped casually into the conversation. His book has been updated with eight new chapters and new 'legends' added, eventually settling on a range of 45 iconic French perfumes from Fougère Royale 1882 to Portrait of a Lady in 2010.

It was clear that the initial spur for the writing of the original book was his passion for perfume but also in response to the question, 'why did perfumers never speak about their work like artists or musicians, for example?' They were, he felt, 'people of the shade', largely invisible and unacknowledged. Edwards acknowledged Guy Robert and Edmond Roudnitska who opened doors for him in terms of meeting and interviewing other creative perfumers.



Michael Edwards with Virginie Daniau

Historic perfumers that made an impression included Paul Parquet, 'a genius' and 'one of the greatest perfumers of his generation', according to Ernest Beaux. Parquet is still widely regarded as the founder of modern perfumery. Following closely on Parquet's coat tails was Aime Guerlain, 'another genius' producing Jicky in 1889, a 'masterpiece of contrast and balance' which heralded the modern Orientals. The perfume was named after his brother's son and this was not so unusual in a time when male and female perfumes were interchangeable.

Edwards believed that Francois Coty was much underestimated in the perfumery world and there is still a question mark over whether the three extraordinary perfumes attributed to him were actually his creations, namely L'Origan, Eau de Chypre and Emeraude. It was pointed out, however, that no one else has ever claimed these perfumes for themselves but the question does remain. Edwards considers that Coty's lack of official training made him bolder in terms of trying new accords and distillation methods. His career was fascinating and his influence wide ranging, for example, he was the first to use market research and to look at more attractive packaging/bottling. Members of Coty's staff went on to found Lancome and Dior and even Saint Laurent was backed financially by someone who had started out with Coty. Although Coty died a bankrupt, his legacy lived on.



Edwards also asked the question, 'without Coty would Jacques Guerlain have been so creative?' Guerlain created L'Heure Bleu in 1914 for his wife Lily, Mitsouko in 1919 'perfecting the modern chypre', Shalimar for the Paris Exhibition in 1925 and his last creation Vol de Nuit in 1934. It was felt that Guerlain lost his creative muse when his wife died.

In 1921 there was Ernest Beaux with No 5 although it is thought that the jasmine inspired scent was created before Ernest Beaux ever met Coco Chanel. This perfume started as a niche perfume, very highly priced and with limited distribution, only mass produced after the war. Coco is a perfume that Edward's felt was 'so contemporary' even today. Interestingly, he mused that No 5 may have been influenced, to some degree, by Coco Chanel's involvement with the Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovitch as Beaux had worked for the Russian Royal Family.

In the years when the stock exchange collapsed came Joy, created as a gift from Patou to clients in America who had lost some of their wealth and could no longer travel to Paris to buy. Henri Almeras created Joy in 1930 and was told to use the most expensive materials available for it. It became available in 1934. Je Reviens, by Maurice Blanchet, came along at a similar time and this remains one of Edward's favourite perfumes.

In 1944 Edmond Roudnitska created Femme – a wedding gift from Marcel Rochas to his wife. Only 109 bottles were made originally. Germaine Cellier 'a woman who did what she wanted' created Bandit in 1944, Fracas in 1948 and then Vent Vert. Fracas was the last of the great niche perfumes from this 'darling of American socialites'. After the second world war, women were given gifts of perfume as never before and more floral based perfumes entered the market e.g. Francis Fabron with L'Air du Temps and Diorissimo, 'a marvellous perfume' by Roudnitska. Roudnitska presented Diorissimo to Christian Dior who liked the perfume but was a superstitious man and to him Lily of the Valley was a fetish. If the flowers were not in bloom he would have them embroidered onto fabrics.

The 1960s saw the first of the celebrity fragrances with Madame Rochas, created by Guy Robert, leading the way. These were perfumes with wide appeal and easy to wear; it was the time of Fidji by Joséphine Catapano. The latter inspired Charlie which changed the world of fragrances as women started to buy perfumes for themselves rather than relying on men buying it for them. So came the era of Calandre for Paco Rabanne and of Dioressence, pioneering fruity florals, followed by Oscar and Chloe. In 1977 came Opium by Raymond Chaillan with Jean-Louis Sieuzac; opulent and oriental with a bottle inspired by samurai legend. The name caused great consternation at its launch and it became black market for a time. It was the first major blockbuster but was accused, by Estee Lauder, of being 'Youth Dew in tassles'.



In 1979 there was Nahema for Guerlain 'like a perfume version of Ravel's Bolero'. Sophia Grojsman, a prolific perfumer, created Paris for YSL and also Tresor for Lancome. Women were changing, with renewed interest in woody Orientals and strong chypre notes and fragrances like Escape, Obsession and Poison became popular.

With Thierry Mugler and Angel we entered 'a world of the fair – candy floss, lights and sawdust'. At the end of the 90's Calice Becker created J'adore and Jacques Polge's Coco Mademoiselle overtook Chanel 5 in popularity with No5 almost in danger of being discontinued.

Edwards concluded by celebrating the rise of artisan fragrances which have proliferated rapidly since 2009, taking us right up to Dominique Ropion and Portrait of a Lady in 2010.

An absolutely riveting keynote by Michael Edwards and I'm sure those not familiar with his will be desperate to read the new edition. It was a privilege to be there to meet the man and hear his address.

The 33rd edition of Fragrance of the World is available from September 2019.