

A CHANGE IN THE AIR

PERFUMES HAVE LONG BEEN TARGETED AT EITHER MEN OR WOMEN, BUT THE RISE OF GENDER NEUTRALITY IS CAUSING THIS SECTOR OF THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY TO RETHINK ITS FORMULATIONS AND MARKETING STRATEGIES. *ESQUIRE SINGAPORE* ASKED PARIS-BASED *MAGIQUE*, AN OLFATORY STUDIO THAT SPECIALISES IN THE CREATION OF SENSORY EXPERIENCES, TO GAIN INSIGHTS FROM PERFUMERS AND FASHION CREATIVES ON THEIR VIEWS OF THIS TREND AND HOW IT IS IMPACTING THEM.

WORDS BY MAZEN NASRI & PHILAE' ROLLET

NOTES FROM THE PERFUME INDUSTRY

Olivier Pescheux

Givaudan perfumer

Creations:

34 boulevard Saint Germain Diptyque, Amber Sky Ex Nihilo, Arpege Pour Homme Lanvin, 1 Million Paco Rabanne, Balmain Homme Pierre Balmain, Higher Christian Dior

ESQ: In hindsight, do you find that trends, current events or cultural movements have an impact on your creations?

OLIVIER PESCHEUX: It's hard to answer with certainty. Nevertheless, perfumers are like sponges absorbing the air of time (Nina Ricci's L'Air du Temps is one of the most accurate names you can find). Hence every societal movement leaves its mark on creations, in a more or less obvious way. It's still too early to know in what ways the current health crisis will leave its mark in perfume, but it will leave its mark, that's for sure.

ESQ: Do you attribute gender to certain notes and raw materials?

OLIVIER PESCHEUX: Not really, but it's true that I perceive rose as rather feminine simply because it has been used a lot and in significant quantities in women's fragrances in the West. That's less true in the Middle East, where the rose also perfumes men. Lavender is rather masculine as it's used a lot in *fougère*, the favourite family of men's fragrances. It's interesting to note that in Brazil, lavender is also feminine. So it's more of a cultural affair. I'm trying to fight against this natural and cultural leaning, and on the contrary, I use this challenge to fuel my creativity.

ESQ: Do you believe the future of perfume is genderless?

OLIVIER PESCHEUX: I don't think gender will disappear in perfume. However, the growth of alternative (or niche) perfumery, which doesn't know genders, shows that this societal construct is going to fade. Feminine notes are getting more and more woody. We might think that men's fragrances will borrow more feminine codes such as floral notes and vice versa. But as always, the future will tell.



Yann Vasnier

Givaudan perfumer

Creations:

Anima Dulcis Arquiste, Comme des Garçons Series 2 Red: Palisander, Robbaco & Mandarin Jo Malone London, Aldehyde 44 Dallas Le Labo, Elae Maison Trudon, Toy Boy Moschino, Plum Japonais Tom Ford

ESQ: How have trends, current events or cultural movements influences your creations, if at all?

YANN VASNIER: Yes indeed some of my creations could be influenced, certainly those more directly linked to a particular story, a specific idea, a special shade or colour association which could be more or less current, but in general, they are essentially based on combinations of raw materials, molecules, that should remain valid or could be easily reshaped.

ESQ: Are scents gendered?

YANN VASNIER: No, not at all, especially if you study them one by one, you can always find facets of different tonalities. The combination of certain notes will of course characterise a gender more. A sweet luscious tuberose might require a lot of woody amber and aromatic notes to move towards masculinity, but the notion of working on a flower for men, a *fougère* for women, has existed for a very long time.

ESQ: Is the future of perfume genderless?

YANN VASNIER: Ultimately, the concept of gender in perfume is quite modern, but its stereotypes have become deeply rooted. However, perfume being embedded in the private sphere of society, we may see it evolve faster and with more ease than in society at large.



Feature

Marie Schnirer*Maelstrom Paris perfumer*

Creations:

Phoebus Compagnie Royale des Indes Orientales, Orangerie Musicale Chabaud, Pavillon Rouge Jovoy Paris ~ Rose Agathe Panouge, Thousand Lakes V/SITEUR

ESQ: Do current events or cultural movements have an impact on your creations?

MARIE SCHNIRER: Inspiration is endless and cannot be separated from the world around us, whether it be in a conscious or unconscious way. On the other hand, it is difficult to measure the direct impact of trends, current events and cultural movements on my creations; for me, they are factors of personal enrichment and vectors of emotions, which will impact my creative process. If I wanted to intellectualise this creative process, I would say that it is a two-step process. Firstly a general and permanent work on the understanding of the world and our environment, and secondly a transcription of the emotions it brings us. It is during this second stage that my creative process begins.

ESQ: Would you say a particular material is masculine or feminine?

MARIE SCHNIRER: When you study a raw material, you can dissect it into multiple scents and associate a variety of adjectives with it. Like a rose essence that will be at once floral, green, citrusy, leathery and honeyed. All these facets make a raw material as feminine as it is masculine. Consequently, there are as many tools, musical notes, colours, which, when combined together, will create a potentially gendered whole.

ESQ: Where is perfume heading? What's the trend?

MARIE SCHNIRER: From my point of view and from a marketing standpoint, non-gender is a third gender. It's no longer masculine and feminine, but masculine, feminine and unisex. A so-called unisex fragrance allows for greater creativity as it doesn't have to conform to gender stereotypes.

**Nathalie Feisthauer***Independent perfumer*

Creations:

Putain des palaces État Libre d'Orange, Honour Man Amouage, Rêve Van Cleef & Arpels, Eau des Merveilles Hermès Paris, with Ralf Schwieger ~ Absinthe Boréale Maison Crivelli

ESQ: Are fragrances created in response to society?

NATHALIE FEISTHAUER: Of course! I soak up what's going on around me and somehow it shows up in my creations. For instance, I wondered a lot about whistleblowers when this phenomenon first started to appear. I can now say that this movement, which is both surprising and in tune with the times, has had an impact on the way I work and communicate with my clients. Now it has become much easier and more common to discuss the composition of a perfume in a transparent way. Today, my big question is how this COVID-19 crisis that we are all going through will affect my work.

ESQ: Do you believe in assigning gender to certain notes?

NATHALIE FEISTHAUER: Yes and no. It is true that a form of tradition attributes certain raw materials such as floral notes more to women, and others such as woods, for example, more to men. There is a cultural influence on scents, a part of common knowledge. However, a growing number of brands, especially niche brands, are taking more freedom regarding this distinction. A customer may like a perfume and wear it just because they find it beautiful, regardless of gender.

ESQ: Do you believe the future of perfume is genderless?

NATHALIE FEISTHAUER: No, I don't think so. People are free to like all kinds of perfume. The most important is that a person enjoys a perfume, that it makes them feel good, whether it be with 'commercial' perfumes from well-known brands or with genderless ones, often reflecting a perfumer's creative vision for a niche brand.

Feature

NOTES FROM THE FASHION INDUSTRY**Achilles Ion Gabriel***Camper Lab art director*

ESQ: Fashion has always been an artistic translation of society. Do you find this applies to perfume?

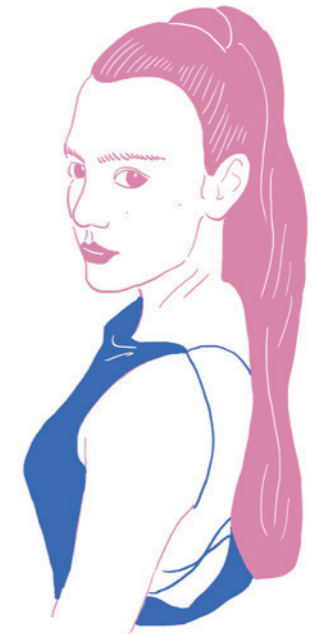
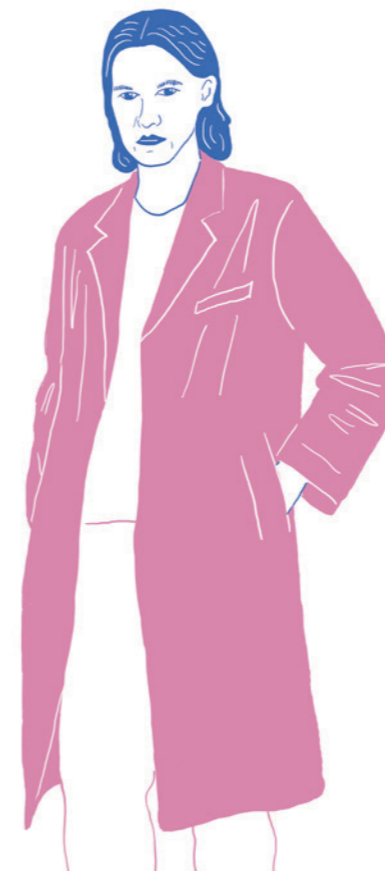
ACHILLES ION GABRIEL: Quite often fashion is a caricature of life, while perfume serves as a caricature for mood. I don't think perfumes are artistic translations of society. Perfumes operate usually on the individual level while fashion is lacking the individuality and is desperately trying to belong to something, a group, a movement, 'a circle of insiders'. Fashion with its trends is very superficial. It lacks depth and uses inspiration without understanding it. I hope we are heading to a different, more meaningful, direction.

ESQ: In your opinion, do perfumes have a gender?

ACHILLES ION GABRIEL: Some do. But perfumes are more about personality than gender. I don't care about the gender-targeting in perfumes, it's slightly old-fashioned, but we should remember that the world is still very conservative. It takes time for things to change.

ESQ: Do you believe fashion and perfume will become genderless?

ACHILLES ION GABRIEL: More 'gender fluent'? Yes. We shouldn't forget that, physically, male and female bodies are different. The same cuts don't work for everyone. Also we will always see fashion and perfume that is 'meant' for either one of the genders. I do hope we go for a much more unisex approach with both fashion and perfume.

**Lena Novello***Fashion stylist & journalist*

ESQ: Are fragrances an artistic translation of society? Or are they entirely separate?

LENA NOVELLO: Fashion acts as a catalyst for popular culture. It takes up the underground codes from the streets to the catwalks. If the streetwear culture dominates fashion and luxury today—with the artistic direction of Virgil Abloh at Louis Vuitton for example—nothing promises that it will still be so tomorrow as it is in perpetual renewal. The frantic pace of its production—three collections or more per year—is its most convincing witness. A perfume is less subject to this phenomenon of immediacy which is specific to the fashion world because it refers to immutable symbolism. There is something much more timeless in a smell than in a cut, a pattern, a textile process or a colour. Between perfume and fashion, I see a reflection of society but which evolves at two speeds.

ESQ: Should fragrances have a gender?

LENA NOVELLO: Smells are just as stereotypical as the rest of the traits that determine our identity. What we call 'feminine' is associated with the values of delicacy and fragility which manifest themselves in sweet, flowery and fruity scents. On the contrary, a woody smell referring to the imagination of strength and solidity responds to the characteristics of a 'masculine' olfactory signature. In a way, perfumes have a genre that society has imposed on them, but these stereotypes are not fixed.

ESQ: Is genderless perfume the future?

LENA NOVELLO: If we look at the fashion industry today, we see that unisex collections and fragrances are increasing. Gender is no longer a deterministic factor of the identity of a garment or a smell, it becomes a much more fluid and hybrid concept. We are looking less for a piece or a perfume in what it represents in the gendered world, but more for what it refers to in terms of artistic and cultural values. However, I do not believe that we should neutralise the 'feminine' or the 'masculine' in favour of a 'neutral' gender, but rather imagine their pacific co-existence in each of us, in the way we dress and smell.

Feature

**Wanju Jo**

Freelance knitwear designer

ESQ: Fashion tends to reflect the zeitgeist. Do you think fragrances follow the same inspiration?

WANJU JO: Yes, definitely. When you wear perfume, it brings you images and memories. Each time I wear my uncle's old destroyed sweater, I feel like I become a rockstar who lived in the free-spirited '90s. Perfume has a strong power of interpretation that's similar to fashion. One of the founders of Diptyque, Christiane Gautrot, is also a textile designer. I don't think creating perfume and clothes has a big difference in the way of getting inspired and translating society.

ESQ: In your opinion, do perfumes have a gender?

WANJU JO: I don't think perfumes have a gender. No gender, no age, no limit. I've seen lots of my designer friends wear different types of perfumes at the same time. It depends more on your mood and personality. It's not about being female or male.

ESQ: Is genderless fashion the way forward?

WANJU JO: We use different sizes for men's and women's clothes. But we use the same inspirations. I've used lots of beautiful women's vintage sweaters to design men's sweaters. I believe fashion will become genderless. Fashion is all about defining who you are and what you like. There are no boundaries with gender. It's more about the personality that you have. We will concentrate more on defining who we are and what we want in the near future of fashion.

Dustin Muchvitz

DJ & transgender model

ESQ: Fashion has always been an artistic translation of society. Do you find this applies to perfume?

DUSTIN MUCHVITZ: I think there's a correlation between both. You can clearly see the evolution of perfume alongside society's. You can easily distinguish which fragrance belongs to which era, but it feels more timeless.

ESQ: Should perfumes have a gender?

DUSTIN MUCHVITZ: It's mostly how people project themselves that makes perfumes gendered, but I think you can enjoy a scent without wondering if it's meant for your gender, if you identify as one or the other.

ESQ: Do you believe fashion will become genderless?

DUSTIN MUCHVITZ: I've seen it become more and more genderless, with fashion houses moving away from traditional gender-binarism towards even more inclusive shows.



Feature



Eau Sauvage was first introduced in 1966, and it was Dior's first perfume for men.

THE ALCHEMY OF GENDER

Yohan Cervi—a French perfume historian and co-founder of Maelstrom, an independent perfume laboratory based in Paris—goes back in time to discover how societal norms construct our perception of fragrances.

“Careful, sir, that’s a woman’s perfume you’re trying on there.” That’s a remark I often hear from sales advisers in well-known perfume stores, daring to try so-called feminine fragrances on my skin. Do scents have a gender? You must admit that clichés have a tough time, fuelled by advertising campaigns that accentuate feminine and masculine traits, and very clearly separated male or female shelves. Finding its roots in religious practices, perfume gradually found use in the therapeutic, became an alternative to bathing and then to the aesthetic. For centuries, perfume in the West escaped any notion of gender, but modern times decided otherwise. At the end of the 19th century, perfume houses tried to imitate elements of nature and seduced their well-off clientele *soliflores* (perfumes representing the scent of a single flower) by proposing imaginary fantasies. Each woman had to choose her perfume according to her character or the image she wished to convey, making the art of perfuming oneself appear to be a very feminine tendency.

Perfumery experienced a meteoric rise during the 20th century, notably made possible by the emergence of couturier-perfumers such as Paul Poiret, Coco Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin, Jean Patou, then Christian Dior, Hubert Givenchy and Yves Saint Laurent, who interpreted their collections into fragrances. The codification of olfactory notes further developed, with women’s fragrances emphasising floral, citrus and chypre (woody/mossy) accords, later followed by sweet and fruity ones. Meanwhile, men rarely perfumed themselves, with the exception of eau de cologne whose virtues were traditionally hygienic. The men’s market surfaced in the '50s and '60s with fresh and woody notes, reminiscent of the toiletry and grooming world. These scents avoided playing an ambiguous tune, to reassure these gentlemen and comfort them

in their virility. These gendered stereotypes are cultural and no particular predisposition exists; it’s all an affair of personal taste—men are not more sensitive to vetiver nor are women to vanilla. In India, men perfume themselves with jasmine, whilst in the Middle East men are fond of roses as women are of oud.

Several great Western classics of perfume have caught the attention of the opposite sex, such as Caron’s Tabac Blond (1919) and Dior’s Eau Sauvage (1966), both popular with women, or Guerlain’s Jicky (1889), appealing to the dandies of the French belle époque. But aside from these rare examples, perfume gradually became an object of seduction for the other sex, further accentuating its gendered character in our collective imagination. The past few decades have seen a bit of movement, though. In 1994, Calvin Klein’s CK One was already daring to mix it up, followed by Hermès with its Eaux Fraîches collection. Alongside this, *parfumerie confidentielle*, better known as ‘niche’ perfumery, quickly freed itself from these preconceived notions, giving more room for emotions rather than gender.

The private collections of the big maisons like Dior, Chanel and Guerlain followed suit. As a result, today men finally have the courage to go for perfumes with rose, amber or gourmand notes, and women dare to try perfumes with woody notes. The latest example: *Mémoire d’une Odeur* by Gucci, a gender-neutral fragrance in line with recent ‘gender fluid’ movements. Some bestsellers in niche perfumery have also been favoured by both men and women, including Bois d’Argent by Dior, Santal 33 by Le Labo and Baccarat Rouge by Maison Francis Kurkdjian. Ultimately, perfumery stays in tune with its time by breaking away from its old shackles and following society’s new-found freedom in individuality and personal empowerment. ■