

'H' as 'Hand Made'

a chapter from the Smellavolario, pindaric dictionary of perfume, ed. Associazione ORABLU

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Though we're today surrounded by the most sophisticated technologies, we ought to observe that whatever is built, modelled, mixed or blended, is eventually made by human hands.

Interacting physically with the matter, whatever it is, using tools or not, and transforming it at our will, has always been the driving force in all the fields of activity in which humans have all along competed, be it in art, in science, engineering or architecture.

He who works with his hands is called a craftsman: he can transform his thoughts, his mental projects into tangible or intangible forms simply through his skilful and experienced labor.

'Intangible' artisans are by definition the perfumers, makers of worlds connected with the ephemeral; they're able to penetrate and awaken our innermost emotions.

The first evidence of the obtaining and use of natural essences comes to us from the Bronze Age: the first laboratory for the production of essences was discovered in Pyrgos (Cyprus), featuring sections for steam distillation and oil maceration of the essences. The hand of man not only has been using nature wisely, but has also forged the machines which allowed man to take possession of nature's products, to develop technologies and necessary knowledge.

The first ones to put pen to paper, or rather, to carve on the walls of the ancient temples a complete process for the production of a scented product, were the Egyptians: the kyphi, the holy incense that was burned in the evening in their temples (frankincense was burned in the morning and myrrh at noon), was produced according to the procedures that were considered so precious and sacred as to deserve to be preserved for the eternity: the choice of plants and their treatment, their mixing and cooking, was all meticulously regulated.

If obtaining the essences and using them was a unique craft in the ancient times, with the end of the roman empire a separation occurred between the essence making countries and the countries that consumed them: the "perfumers" in the West began to mix the essences that they would buy by trading with the Middle East countries, the main gateway at that time for scented raw materials.

Later, the scented products gained new energy in Venice, the most famous of the Maritime Republics, where the craft of perfumery developed. It benefited from the privileged trades of the Serenissima.

The venetian artisans of essences, so-called "Muschieri" because of their massive use of animal musk, soon became highly esteemed for their products.

Hence, the story restarted with the appearance of these new characters who knew how "to handle" the essences and change the odorous mixtures through their deep knowledge of the materials.

For a long time "tailoring" fragrances remained a manual affair, deep, laborious in the true sense of the word, when production was not yet submitted to the law of large numbers and of sales on a large scale. If the value of "handmade" was implied, the value of the perfumers' work depended only on a single factor: time.

Time to evaluate the characteristics of a smell, like its power or fragility, to understand how it would behave in the mix, if it would lose or rather prolong the perfume's invisible life.

The parameter "time" and the value "handmade" definitely go together, they cross and merge.

In my opinion, the "handmade" in perfumery today can be summed up in the perfumer's drafting up the recipe of his mixture.

Through his continuous testing and experimenting to appropriately dose the raw materials and to find the proper relationship between the odors, he will see his mental projects finally taking shape in the material world that's inside the bottle with the scented liquid.

The result will be that those material substances will eventually return intangible as soon as the person abandoning himself to the emotions aroused by that smell obtained, will spray it onto his skin and by that gesture will cause it to vanish.

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