

Interview/
Jean-Claude Ellena
Perfume up against the market

Jean-Claude Ellena has been the in-house perfumer at Hermès since 2004. Before joining Hermès, he created a number of perfumes including *First* (1976) for Van Cleef & Arpels, *l'Eau parfumée* (1992) for Bulgari and *Déclaration* (1998) for Cartier. At Hermès he created the *Hermessence* collection (sold exclusively in the Hermès stores), *Un Jardin sur le Nil* (2005), *Terre d'Hermès* (2006) and *Kelly Calèche* (2007). In 2008, he created the third part of the Parfums-Jardins d'Hermès collection, *Un Jardin après la Mousson*. He has also created scents for the Artisan Parfumeur, the Editions Frédéric Malle and The Different Company.

In September 2007, Jean-Claude Ellena published the new version of *Que sais-je ? Le Parfum* with the Presses Universitaires de France that followed on from the original that was written in 1980 by the perfumer Edmond Roudnitska and most notably the creator of *Eau d'Hermès* in 1951, the first perfume ever brought out by Hermès. Jean-Claude Ellena has also published *Mémoires de parfum* (with Josette Gontier, Equinoxe, 2003).

Olivier Assouly: What is the status of our sense of smell and our "olfactory culture" given the predominance of sight and the visual in a culture of images? Is not the sense of smell really the poor relation of the senses in the West? Has this had an impact on the variety and wealth of fragrances?

Jean-Claude Ellena: It so happens that in the West, sight takes precedence over smell. I can see two reasons for the relative poverty of smell as a sense: the standardisation of smell and as such of scents and a general acclimatisation to scents. Wherever you go in Europe, the taste of strawberry and vanilla is stereotyped and identical and I mention this as archetypes of taste exist that are more like caricatures of taste. These caricatures of taste are, by definition, much more prominent, and when one eats strawberry or lemon flavoured yoghurt we recognise strawberry or lemon but we do not taste the variety of fruit or any other subtleties. Training the sense of smell starts with the sense of taste and we have all the stereotypes that shape taste in our memories. The same stereotypes that have been unified by taste can be found in perfume. One example surprised me recently when they launched tea-flavoured yoghurts that were strangely like one of my perfumes, *l'Eau Parfumée au Thé* from Bulgari. On eating this yoghurt I had the impression that I was tasting the perfume and the reason for this was simple: they have made an Earl Grey version but the only thing I could taste was the bergamot flower and not the tea at all. It was merely a caricature of the tea. This conditions a standardisation of archetypes that then guides our choice of scents.

In addition, we have seen a more general process of acculturation since American tastes appeared in perfumes in the seventies. In order to conquer the American market that was one of the largest at the time, perfumers created perfumes that corresponded to American norms and tastes and which were nevertheless sold in America and in Europe as French perfumes. The strategy of the big groups such as Saint-Laurent and Dior was to impose this acculturation based on American olfactory references.

OA: *But how were these olfactory types identified?*

JCE: This was done by taking archetypal American scents and modifying them. For example, Saint-Laurent's *Opium* is a "copy" of Estée Lauder's *Youth Dew*: what happened was an amusing game of mirrors. *Opium* was a worldwide success stealing market share from *Youth Dew* to the extent that Estée Lauder brought out *Cinnabar*, a perfume inspired by *Opium* that was a commercial failure.

OA: *Do you think that the culture of smell takes a back seat to sight in the West?*

JCE: I think smell is quite important but that it is overlooked for a number of reasons. It is particularly important in our relationship with others but remains an unspoken code. The spoken codes are visual.

It is true that today, sight takes precedence over smell and to sell scent it is often enough just to put an image to the scent. The public buys the visual rather than the scent. This is all the more true as in big perfume stores one encounters such a "wall of noise" in terms of scents that it is impossible to truly appreciate one in particular. I must add that by creating caricatures, we have conceptually stripped the olfactory of meaning. We are in the same situation as wine. In Jonathan Nossiter's, *Mondovino*, a winemaker says: "I make vertical wines", then adds: "I don't like horizontal things". In perfumes, things are comparable in as much as we have produced smooth perfumes, with no real signature (horizontal). This is why, in parallel with mass perfume production there is a niche perfume industry that we will cover further on and a "parfumerie d'auteurs", being produced by people like Hermès and Cartier.

OA: *What was your initial training?*

JCE: I learned my trade on the ground in a company that manufactured natural raw materials. So I had real physical contact with raw materials. Later on I will talk about the importance of this physical, sensual, non-intellectual contact with materials. Then in 1976, I went to

the Givaudan school that had just opened in Geneva for a three-year training program. I ended up only staying nine months as I really needed a more direct approach. It was later on that I began to intellectualise what I was doing. This move towards intellectualisation and conceptualisation came slowly over time. I moved from the process of acquiring know-how to gaining knowledge.

It seems to me that current training structures do not train perfumers but technicians who acquire knowledge about the profession. In the same way that one becomes a chef, one becomes a perfumer through experience and contact with one's peers. This means that educational institutions alone are not sufficient and that they must be completed with education by one's peers. Unfortunately most industrial manufacturers want to hire people who are operational straight out of school and this doesn't work very well.

OA: *So in what way did your particular journey eventually become decisive in the way you approach your work today?*

JCE: In the beginning, everything happened in Grasse in an environment that was totally dedicated to perfume and industries that manufacture natural raw materials. This is why I mentioned the physical, carnal relationship with materials. This experience was decisive in terms of how I perceive my profession and the work I do today. I am at ease with natural raw materials while they may be intimidating for young people leaving schools as they are not used to handling them.

This is a paradox for at least two reasons. One is that natural raw materials are complex while synthetic materials are very simple. We can compare them as we would a wall to a brick. Building with a wall that has already been built is more difficult than building with bricks as a starting point as they are easier to handle. In addition, with a natural product you have to free yourself from the origins of the material. You must take the smell as the smell. We try to embellish natural origins but the truth is that roses don't smell like roses as in the scent of the flower.

It becomes the concept of the smell when we

realise that we can use roses beyond the scent of the flower, when it becomes abstract, conceptual. This is the point at which I actually become a perfumer and much more skilful. In any case, it is a slow profession that requires a huge amount of time unless you want to do imitations but that's another day's work.

O.A: What is the ideal manner to in which to "construct" a perfume given that the perfumer works within a business whose motivations are economic rather than purely aesthetic. The architect, Tadao Ando, when asked "How would it be to design a building with no constraints?", answered that it was unthinkable, unless architecture was to be considered, wrongly, as an art form.

JCE: I agree with him on this point. Just like architecture, we want perfume to be an art form but for economic reasons it is reduced to something that is not an art. We have to work with this constant pull from both sides, that actually makes it interesting. Ideally the first stage covers technique, knowledge, imitations, an accumulation of skills that can not be avoided. Then we enter the phases of analysis and synthesis that is another form of knowledge. So far we have covered technique and reason. In the last stage we enter the domain of the emotions and here one must be open to other forms of art. Exchanges with painters, dancers and musicians who have the same intellectual approach can often answer questions for me. All of this goes in to the ideal creation of a perfume.

It is taken for granted that the economic is linked to the technical and the aesthetic linked to the emotional. Once this is taken on board, it is possible to shake off the economic aspect so as to dedicate oneself entirely to the aesthetic. As a perfumer, I can make a beautifully smelling perfume at a tiny cost. This is to say that the problem is not the equation between the emotional input and the price. I have made very expensive perfumes as the raw materials were very expensive. It takes a long time to get over the cost issue, once one is over it the question remains: could I have made the same scent for less money?

In addition, the constraints are not so much

linked to costs as to supplies. If I work for a big retailer, aiming for a broad cross section of the market, we need to get supplies in for the possible sale of millions of bottles of perfume. The availability of materials is a piece of data that I keep in my mind just like the odours of materials and their cost. When I write a formula, I can calculate the final cost to within ten percent. This comes from experience.

OA: Do marketing and sales techniques have a strong, even deal-breaking influence on the development of a "jus"?

JCE: Current commercialisation is poor as what is sold is the visual. The olfactory "noise" in the bigger stores prevents the potential customer from smelling anything and as a result, the feeling or emotion isn't transmitted. What's more, marketing has given rise to an elliptical approach to the market. It is constantly working with a rear-view mirror which means producing through comparison with other products and once we have to compare, it becomes merely a question of performance. There is another problem I would like to bring up and that is the dependence on the bottle. In marketing, the bottle is more important than the perfume doubtless because the visual is easier to grasp than the olfactory. At the beginning of the 20th century, François Coty revolutionised the market by launching the idea of a bottle for a perfume that was aimed at a very elitist clientele; an idea that exists still today for the mass market. I imagine that it is perfectly possible to change the code and propose not one but two, three or five perfumes per bottle to the mass market in as much as developing five formulae is no more difficult than developing one. This would mean selling an actual scent and not a bottle.

OA: What is your take on the prevalent marketing method that involves the systematic testing of a product before it is put on the market?

JCE: I don't understand it. I have worked with these tests. It is what I refer to as working on the cursor. Perfumers have become technicians where they only need to adjust the scent

according to the test results. We know how to make a console with cursors that say fresh, sweet, feminine, masculine, woody, etc. But the objective is to take two hundred percent market share I find we tend to spend a huge amount of money for a minimum risk.

In theory, testing is aimed at limiting the level of uncertainty in terms of the market, to protect oneself using a method, but there is more than one example of a product that performed well in tests that never fulfilled expectations once on the market. I can't explain it but it is a fact.

OA: Is it possible to reconcile high level creativity with mass-marketing and mass consumption of perfumes?

JCE: I don't think it's possible. I think we are moving more and more towards mass produced perfumes with their own codes and more elitist perfumes with different codes and the question is where we place ourselves. It is the same thing with wine, there is no reason for this to change.

OA: How can we nourish and educate rather than merely exciting the olfactory sensibility of individuals in the knowledge that it is absolutely essential to develop this sensibility in order to appreciate more complex and richer perfumes?

JCE : It would be necessary to sensitise the general public through all sorts of actions and by the way, I admire the work done by oenologists in explaining about wine, and no doubt we should take their lead. The Fédération de la Parfumerie should ask itself these questions and perhaps find some solutions. There have been exhibitions about perfume but they have been too rare and limited.

Distribution has an educational role to play in perfume. We know that a client spends around seven minutes in Sephora while they can spend half an hour in a boutique. In a boutique, the sales person can advise, initiate, educate. This is what we try to do at Hermès but only in our own stores as we can ensure the quality of the exchange that the staff will have with the client. We are working more and

more in this direction with people who are trained in perfume and not just in sales. A sale happens because the seller was able to put forward the qualities and uniqueness of a perfume. In this regard, Hermès is a good "house" to be with as it is a craftsman's house and the craftsman always has his say. What a craftsman has to say is always more interesting than what a salesperson has to say.

The stores will gain in terms of client loyalty and also the presence of another clientele. In big perfume retailers it is merely a question of pure consumption due to the lack of time. It is really the lowest level of consumption. For me it is just like the Fnac where a few years ago you could have a real exchange with a specialist who enjoyed their job but that now there is no dialogue left. You can only get information about the availability of a product.

I would like to come back to your question on training olfactory sensibility as it is, as you said, absolutely essential to the appreciation of more complex and richer perfumes. In my opinion, in perfume, complexity and richness are a means to mask a lack of creativity. The more complex and rich perfumes are, the more they resemble one another. But in fact, ideally what I consider to be the true values of perfume and luxury are simplicity, rightness, distinction and high standards. There is a marked difference between wine and perfume. Wine is a material that is transformed by man. The scent of grape juice contains 400 molecules and when it is transformed into wine it contains 1800 molecules in which case we can talk of complexity and riches. The craftsman transforms a material, grapes, into wine. Just like at Hermès, where the craftsmen work on leather to transform it into a Kelly or a Birkin bag, by rendering it more complex and giving it meaning. In perfume we are not dealing with a transformation but the composition of materials like in music or painting.

OA: But couldn't one reply that blending varietals in wine-making is comparable to this composition of materials in perfume?

JCE: No, as if I take the example of roses, I could work with different varieties of rose that are like varietals, but if I combine only roses I

will always end up with a rose scent and not a perfume.

OA: *In your opinion, does the emergence of niche perfumes –the expression is far from apt– show the saturation of the mass market that has resulted in the appearance of a demand for higher standards from certain quarters? I feel that in as much as the term amateur (as in perfume-lover, someone who can classify and discern) to that of consumer (who enjoys without knowing why), can we compare perfume-lovers to wine-lovers?*

JCE: Yes, of course. I like the word *amateur* and we could even go a little further and term them connoisseurs, those who know. The *amateur*/lover is discerning and can classify but the connoisseur knows even more. In any case, this follows on from a demand for uniqueness from a clientele that is dissatisfied with neutral, smooth perfumes with no signature. The same goes for wine, the wine-lover looks for a wine that has character and not just a woody taste or vanilla taste. This demands a certain amount of work and it is extraordinary to meet amateurs that produce this work. Today we see the emergence of perfume blogs where the bloggers are real perfume lovers. For example, there are a number of blogs about me with very in-depth analyses of my work. To begin with they were “amateurs” but unfortunately big companies noticed their work and started inviting them to launches and promotional events. In the end, a certain dependence will develop. But it is nevertheless true that I have read some very detailed and very pertinent work that I encourage greatly. While we’re on the subject, I think it is necessary to warn certain journalists who are at risk of being eaten up if they don’t take a more critical stance. They obviously depend on advertisers. They pretend to criticise between the lines, but not everyone reads between the lines.

OA: *To get back to wine, Anne-Sophie Breitwiller who is currently finishing a thesis on perfume at the CSI (Centre de sociologie de l’innovation) and who also works at the IFM, has shown how wine developed from the vine*

as a natural product. In fact, at the start of the 19th century, there were attempts made to produce wine from dried raisins and at the end of the same century they introduced legislation strictly forbidding calling a product wine if it was not entirely produced from natural grapes, so not from raisins and with no added chemicals. Anne-Sophie Breitwiller has clearly outlined that, on the contrary, perfume took off with the advent of organic chemistry –it was you who pointed out that vanillin had transformed perfume at Guerlain– and that what was forbidden in wine manufacturing became not only the norm in perfume but the condition for its progress and sophistication.

JCE: Yes, chemistry did transform perfume. It is thanks to chemistry that it became an art form: through chemistry it freed itself from its origins and became something abstract, conceptual and artistic. Before the introduction of chemistry, perfume was very close to nature, it was named for flowers or bouquets of flowers and was made from natural materials. The beauty of perfume resulted essentially from the beauty, rarity and cost of the materials. Lavender was cheap and rose expensive so rose was seen as an extraordinary scent while lavender was seen to be commonplace. Chemistry freed up all of that and opened the door to other options.

For marketing and ecological reasons, we maintain a discourse on the advantages of the natural. It definitely has an economic interest and I’m sure there is a market for this. However, the natural interests me when I can change the way the raw material is perceived. At the moment for example, I am working with vanilla and lavender. For example, lavender is codified in terms of cleaning and sanitary products. So I have gone back to natural lavender that I reworked during distillation to remove some of the olfactory characteristics that are sweat and urine smells. In addition, I have gone back to natural vanilla without using vanillin. So the vanilla is different from the stereotype we are used to and what interests me is to incite curiosity. A new scent is not enough, there must be a composition and the perfume must be beautiful. There is a whole

scene to set in appearance terms that I find amusing.

OA: Does cultivating one's taste in the broad meaning of the term –olfactory as well as taste– encourage the development of one's critical sense?

JCE: I am absolutely convinced of this, I would even write a manifesto on the subject. Developing one's taste and sensibility is the best way to civilise man. With "La pensée de Midi", Albert Camus shows us that reason wins out over emotion in the Western World and that it is time to take stock of the importance of sensibility in the process of civilisation. It is one of my dearest beliefs and one I defend with pleasure.

Reason has always been essential to research in perfume. One only has to refer back to the huge chromatographic and analytical work that has been carried out on odours in nature. There has been some extraordinary work done on capturing the scent of flowers in situ but it has produced an aberration. When you smell the product of this capture it is banal in the extreme, it corresponds to the photo of a flower by an amateur photographer. The photographer will remember the beauty of the actual flower but the photo is so commonplace that to someone else the beauty is lost.