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Fleeting Fragrance The History, Preservation and Display of Perfumed Costume

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ABSTRACT

Fragrance-like style-is one of the intangible aspects of costume history that we often wish had been preserved. Garments were perfumed both to impart a pleasurable impression and to mask disagreeable odors from use or from production processes such as tanning and dyeing. Expensive gloves were traditionally perfumed, as well as lace collars, silk stockings and shawls. Both historical and modern attempts have been made to create scents that please the wearer and attract the oppoiste sex, while (preferable) also repelling osquitoes and moths! Unintentional perfuming also occurred, which we sometimes may be lucky to find in our museum collections.

How do we describe and identify the transient odors of museum objects, and at what cost can they be preserved and presented for the public? This lecture includes samples of reconstructed historical scents presented in costume exhibitions at the Royal Danish Collections.

Key words : fleeting fragrance, perfumed costume

Ⅰ. Introduction

Scented garments have always been an integral part of the well-appointed wardrobe, and intime these garments have found their way into museum collections. Unfortunately, this intangible aspect of costume is rarely documented. A number of known uses of perfuming fabrics and clothes is presented here, Learning to investigate and identify which scents have been used on various garments is a kind of detective work which is part of our responsibility as cultural caretakers, involving very basic ethical considerations. Conveying this new information to historians and museum guests is not only important, but also gratifying - and fun. Reconstructions of perfumed historical costume have a great popular appeal, adding new facets to the museum visit and an unusual, uniquely private, experience for the museum guest.

The practice of perfuming leather, gloves, linens, gowns, wigs and handkerchiefs is common throughout recorded human history-and perhaps one of the very first expressions of human culture. Much of this evidence has been lost, but with an increased knowledge and awareness of costume perfuming, we can reacquaint ourselves, and our museum guests, with an important aspect of daily and ceremonial life.

It is not yet known exactly how the sense of smell works. It might be the size, shape, spin, wave

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length or vibration of particular molecules matching or interlocking with special receptors in the nose that cause us to react or recognize a smell. Only a few molecules are necessary for us to experience or identify scents, and characteristically, the worse a smell, the less it takes to notice it. Our sense of smell is - or used to be - so important that, unlike other nerve cells, the olfactory neurons constantly replace themselves.

The Encyclopedia Britannica states that perfumes are substances which by reason of their fragrance gratify the sense of smell. The word perfume comes from (Fr.) per fumar meaning pleasant-smelling or literally, from the smoke: the oldest way of imparting a smell. Fragrances were once considered to be the souls of objects, and thus spiritual in themselves.

Ⅱ. Identification

Most dogs can be taught to recognize smells, far more than humans. Today, computers can learn to identify components of smells, which may be the future solution for finding and identifying scents in museum costume collections. As electronic noses now find drugs and explosives, check the freshness of seafood, control the quality of cheese and wine, and monitor the quality of air in ventilation systems, surely the museum world could also enlist their help. Until then, a professional perfumer can be of great assistance in identifying fragrance residues in museum costume collections, as well as teaching us basic skills in identifying smells we are likely to encounter.

It is thought that we can discern only seven basic smell qualities:

1. ethereal (like cleaning fluid)
2. prickly (like vinegar)
3. floral (like roses)
4. minty (like peppermint)
5. camphor (like mothballs)
6. musk (like angelica root)
7. rotten (like rotten eggs)

Another classification of smell elements includes garlic-like, aromatic, burnt, animal, and billy-goat smells, but without a doubt our ability to discern different smells is culturally defined: smells from before our time are like foreign languages to us.

Finding and recreating historical recipes of perfumed mixtures is not difficult for a perfumer, even though the amounts and variations of the individual ingredients and the order in which they are blended can alter the final result, as does exposure to light, air, and time. When historical objects which we expect to have been perfumed no longer smell, it is because there are too few odor molecules left for us to perceive. However, if we isolate the object, the rate at which its volatile smells are disappearing can be halted, after which we may be able to identify those that remain. Failing that, piping air from the object through a sensitive computer nose might identify the components of a smell pattern that we no longer can register with our noses.

Ⅲ. Perfume Ingredients

Perfume is made of the volatile oils of a large variety of plants, grasses, spices, herbs, woods, and flowers, the most important of which are bitter orange blossoms, jasmine, and rose. It is generally said that the Arabian philosopher and doctor Avicenna (980-1037) developed the technique of distilling the aromatic oils from flowers, known as attar or otto, though the process is also described in the Indian

Ayur-Veda, one of the world's oldest medicinal systems, practiced for the last 5000 years. Before distillation only fragrant resins from bark were used, generally burned for fragrant smoke or in the form of perfumed oils and salves. Perfume and incense were used in ancient India and also in Egypt 4000 years ago. In Italy and Greece perfume was also important, but its use disappeared with the decline of the empire. In 1190 perfumers in Paris were granted a charter, and the first modern perfume, known as Hungary Water (rosemary), was made there in 1370 for Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. Catherine de Mdici introduced perfume to France, which quickly became the European center of perfumes, and cultivation of flowers for perfume became a major French industry. By the early 1800s the production of perfume had became so great that it was accessible for everyone, no longer reserved for the nobility.

Perfumed oils are found in flowers, leaves, stems, barks, roots, rhizomes, fruits, seeds, gums and resins. We recognize names like patchouli, jasmine, cloves, bergamot, vetiver, cinnamon, sandalwood and balsam, which are still in use. Each ingredient has its own history of production, trade and use. For example, frangipani, often linked with perfumed leather gloves, stems from the 16th century Italian marquis Muzio Frangipane. The scent stems from the flower of the red jasmine, but was also blended with heliotrope, citronel, rose, coumarin, cinnamon, sandalwood and musk. Gloves scented with frangipani were very expensive; Parisian scented gloves were part of the exclusive bridal trousseau for a Danish princess in 1666.

Synthetic fragrances can mimic natural substances or create completely new ones, for example lily of the valley and gardenia, which do not yield oils. The fragrant aldehydes smelling of fruits and berries are cheap in their synthetic form, while others are extremely expensive. Floral scents have also been synthesized - rose and orange oils are called acetals and are cheap substitutes. The chemist William Perkins created synthetic coumarin, the smell of new-mown hay, important in men's colognes. In 1898 Tiemann discovered an aldehyde of citral and created ionone, a synthetic smell of violets, whose essential oil had never before been extracted. Instead, it was traditionally been taken from the root of the iris, which was called violet or orris root. Roger & Gallet's - world's first - violet perfume was an instant success in 1900.

Ⅳ. Revival, Recreation, Preservation

Once the components of an historic garment's scent have been identified, the question would naturally be whether to try to revive or recreate it. Fixatives are always used to increase, depthen or prolong the odor of perfumes. In principal, reapplying a fixative to a perfumed object might indeed revive the remnants of the original perfume, but this cannot be recommended because of the uncertainty about the correctness of the result and what effect such a treatment might have on the aged and perhaps degraded object. However, if the original ingredients of a scent have been identified, there is no reason why the scent could not be recreated separately and presented to the public as a suggestion of how the object might originally have smelled. Using the original fixative creates a long-lasting scent on a modern, suitably neutral material. A series of such reconstructions of historic scents are presented here:

- ambra: used for soft leather gloves and boots, ca 1450
- rosewater and musk: used in laundering Henry

VIII's linen shirt, 1515
- lavender and violets: woman's chemise ca 1580
- civet: leather gloves, ca 1600
- frangipani: leather gloves from Paris, 1666
- rosewater and rose essence: Cassanova's handkerchief, 1750
- vetiver: Indian muslin ca 1800
- cologne: Goethe's handkerchief ca 1825
- Macassar oil: men used large amounts of perfumed hair oil from the mid-1800s
- patchouli: Kashmir shawls ca 1860
- sandalwood, patchouli, musk and ambra: Poiret's "Oriental" perfume, 1920 collection
- rare woods and spices: Japanese sachet for perfuming kimonos, 1995
- Kanebo perfume: microcapsules of perfume in stockings of nylon thread, 1998
- perfumed textile finishings, strawberry, lemon and rose, for use in children's clothes, 1999, and peppermint-scented athletic socks, 2001.
- Korean business suits with built-in aroma, lavender, peppermint and pine,1999. Unfortunately I don't yet have a sample!

It must always be considered whether an identified or unidentifed smell of a museum object is a valuable and desirable part of its historical value. We may be the last ones to experience an object's fragrance or odor, and it thus becomes our responsibility to document and preserve this according to museum policy. We must make sure that scented objects don't contaminate each other, whether we find their smell pleasant or not, just as we ourselves are careful not to contaminate the articles we handle by using hand lotion or perfume. Therefore, scented objects must be isolated from other objects physically in suitable packaging. Destroying an object's scent by airing, washing, dry-cleaning or other methods must be a conscious decision, and documented as such.

Secondary perfuming - that is, unintentional perfuming - may also be encountered in museum textiles. Perfumed smoke from burning juniper, cedarwood, and cinnamon in fireplaces would have scented garments worn in 17th century Danish castles. When vulcanized rubber was invented, the refraicheur became popular, allowing perfume to be sprayed not only on the neck and shoulders, but unavoidably on clothing as well. Dyeing fabrics and yarns blue with indigo traditionally used urine, without rinsing, so those who wore the traditional black and blue clothing had to wear scents or carry flowers to relieve the odor. Other secondary smells in costume collections include smoke from fires and tobacco, horse-smells, mold, cosmetics, deodorants, disinfectants and textile production chemicals. Note! Many of the most common chemicals in modern fragrance products are known to be harmful to one's health, which may account for the increasing number of perfume allergies.

Ⅴ. Conclusion

Documentation of evidence of perfuming is of paramount importance. The more we know about former traditions, the more we will find. Though we might not yet be able to identify stains, powder residue, pulverized leaves and flowers, it is our responsibility to preserve this evidence for the future.

Preserve samples in clean and non-contaminating containers, preferably glass, which can be stored with the object in the dark.

Recreated scents used on new textiles must be kept separate from actual historical objects, though they might be exhibited adjacent to them.

Sharing and publishing our findings is our responsibility when documenting the objects in our care, both for colleagues and the general public.

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