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MARCH 2011

SEARCH

IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS Found in Translation

Olivia Giacobetti uses her sensory alchemy to make scents of memories *by DENISE HAMILTON*



After watching Yves Montand play a perfumer in the French movie *The Savage* when she was 10, Olivia Giacobetti vowed to devote her life to FRANCIS GIACOBETTI fragrance. At 17, she apprenticed with Robertet, one of the world's top fragrance firms. By 23, she'd composed her first perfume—Petit Guerlain. In 1990, Giacobetti started her own firm, Iskia. She's created perfumes for Diptyque, L'Artisan Parfumeur, Hermès, Frédéric Malle and others. Her creations are known for impeccable structure and ethereal translucence. Recently, she spoke about her inspirations and creative process.

How did growing up in an artistic milieu (your father was a noted photographer and director) affect you? What are your first scent memories?

My father is a real aesthete—he gave me a taste for beauty but also a sense of freedom. As a child, I wanted to tell stories. I dreamed of circuses, of dancing, of writing. But I owe my profession to my mother, who pointed out my strong attraction to scent and helped me realize my dream. She wore several drops of Youth-Dew, and her skin smelled like gingerbread. That was my first perfume memory. Olfactory memory is indelible. Over time, we may forget a face, a voice but never an odor.

While studying classic perfumery, I sometimes was shocked to rediscover childhood memories. The first perfume I fell hard for was Kiehl's Musk. I was six; my father brought some back from New York. It's still the odor of America for me. Later, I adored Serge Lutén's *Féminité du Bois*. It's an all-encompassing woods, profound and magisterial. Perfume came into my life as something so obvious I barely had to think of it. Today, it's a passion—it's like breathing. I love the poetry that encompasses the world of scent, the subtlety and depth of language, the instinctive animal link to our emotions.

Is there a scent "signature" that unites your perfumes, whether pale florals (*En Passant*); ethereal, incensy, resinous woods (*L'Ether*); or sublime evocations of humble fruits (*Philosykos*) and vegetables (*I Love les Carottes*)?

Maybe there's a sensibility or a music that runs from one perfume to another, but I'm not aware of it. I look for simplicity, clarity and precision, but I also leave room for emotion. Perfume without poetry and emotion loses all meaning. I love perfumes that are alive, that have strong themes, but I try to compose them with delicacy, with the stark power of a black-and-white image. I don't like fuzzy, indeterminate perfumes, nor do I like elemental notes that clumsily imitate nature. Many perfumes leave me totally indifferent—they're like a film without a script.

Are there certain molecules or notes that you reach for regularly?

Of course! Like a painter who, from year to year, works with his blues, his yellows, I assemble a personal library of accords, effects, keys. In photography, there is light—there's depth. In perfumery as well.

When you created the *I Love New York* collection for Honoré des Prés, you walked around NYC sniffing everything, experiencing all the different smells. Would you consider doing the same thing in L.A.?

I don't know Los Angeles, but I'd love to discover it.

What are the challenges of working with all-natural ingredients?

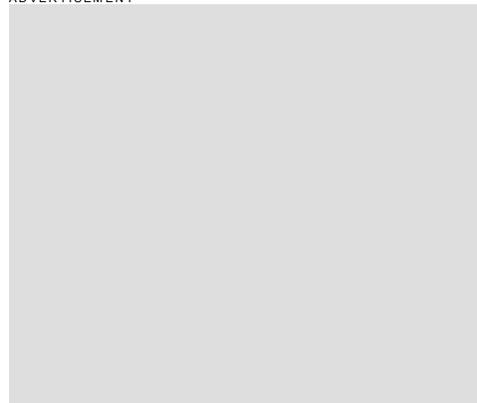
Natural perfumes permitted me to explore a new creative path. The big difficulty in natural perfumery is to be deprived of essential raw materials, limited to 200 components instead of the 2,000 in classic perfumery. It's like painting without primary colors. But it's thrilling to create an olfactory form with so little.

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Fredéric Malle lists the perfumer's name on the bottle, right below the name of the fragrance. This is a break with tradition. And the general public is increasingly aware of "noses" today. Is a new business model evolving?

For things to evolve, the entire perfume industry would have to be redefined. Most perfumers still work for large corporations and cannot claim the status of independent artists. Frédéric Malle did something new putting the names of the perfumers front and center, but this has no bearing on copyright. Ultimately, F.M. still works in the same manner as other brands. Certain perfumers are lucky to be presented to the general public, but for the moment, the industry remains highly secretive. Still, I like this profession in the shadows. I'm totally independent, and what counts is the trust and creative freedom I receive.

As a novelist, I'm fascinated by how others create. Please give us a peek into your process.

I always imagine the perfume in my head, then I choose the ingredients and the quantities. Before starting, I need to dream about it, to tell myself its story and have an extremely precise idea of what it should be. Words help me to define its temperament, colors, texture, music, emotions. For example, a perfume *eau*, but what kind? A little rainwater? No, not a sad *eau*, but pale and salty, a fresh *eau* that dries on skin in the sun. I like starting with very little, a kernel, then I begin to drape it in layers. It can take days, weeks, months to realize the initial idea.

There's a creative intelligence and "space" around your perfumes. Can you explain how you build the architecture of a perfume?

The architecture of perfume starts from the moment it's sprayed and begins to evaporate. I imagine filling a space determined by the weight of the ingredients, their force or lightness. All this to form a balance between heavy and light, complex and simple, light and shadow. And it's this equilibrium, this harmony, that will create the worst or the best! Certain perfumes unfurl image by image, each accord disappears to leave room for the next until you reach its heart. Others are round, compact. Their notes evaporate almost at the same rate. They're linear from one end to the other.

How does perfume trigger an emotional response in humans?

It's a world of symbols that touches the unconscious. Smell is the only sense that transmits information directly to the emotional part of the brain. Analysis comes later. And it's physiological. I strive to understand why certain odors disturb us, touch us, reassure us or disquiet us. Certain odors come from the dark recesses of time. Others are a part of our cultural heritage.

What scents or places or experiences provide your own triggers?

I'm inspired by odors that touch me, that shock me, that make me nostalgic, that remind me of other people, other places. Inspiration is everywhere—the smells of childhood, of life. A blinding white shirt in full sun, an Indian dance, steaming rice, bewitching incense drifting through a Malaysian temple. Ten years later, that incense inspired L'Ether de IUNX. To me, incense evokes uplifting prayer; it's pure, profound, intoxicating. I like everything that burns: wood, resins, dried leaves, hot ashes, barbeques, the smell of earth and sun-warmed herbs.

Like a vocabulary of emotions, perfume becomes a living language for me. Educating one's sense of smell means becoming more aware, looking at things differently, pausing where others hurry past. I write down my impressions and keep everything I come across in my travels. In Mali, I broke the bark of a yellow wood that tasted of quince, collected cooked seeds, burned rope; in Japan, I found soft rubber that smelled of Christmas and a neon pink ribbon that smelled like dolls; in Mexico, driftwood, fresh cactus and black corn. Large cities are kaleidoscopes of odors. Istanbul smells of roses and dust, New York of laundry fumes and cinnamon. Paris is electric heaters, fresh bread and wet sidewalks. Katmandu is dry woods and cucumber. Tokyo is grilled food, metal and plastic.

You created the first true fig perfume, then several others, including Diptyque's Philosykos. Is this fruit symbolic?

The fig is absolutely my totemic tree, the one from my childhood. I love the perfume of the fig tree in full sun, the magical odor of its leaves, the sweetness of its overripe fruit, the white milk at the tip of its stem. This evokes my first memories of the Mediterranean, my first taste of happiness. Twenty years later, I created Premier Figuier for L'Artisan. I received a fig tree for the launch, and later, I planted another one for the birth of my daughter. Each year we eat its fruits.

What was the genesis of Dzing!, a fragrance that makes leather, old books and barnyards smell ethereal, inviting and also provocative?

The inspiration was a Gypsy circus, a circus of perfumes! I wanted to recapture the mix of sweet fumes, animals and warm hay, to create a disturbing accord at once animalic and sacred, a mix of force and marvels. I imagined it like an animal trainer's perfume in a magical universe.

What's next?

Plenty of things, I hope. Unfortunately, perfumery projects are confidential until they see daylight.

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What a great interview and insight into the work of a perfumer, I feel like I actually know her after reading this, and her perfumes too!

Posted by: [Qwendy](#) | [03/05/2011 at 09:23 PM](#)

Great Interview - I really love all the perfumes from Olivia Giacobetti. Iris Hermes and Vamp A NY Honoré DES Prés are my favorite. !!

Cindy

Posted by: [Cindy](#) | [03/08/2011 at 10:30 AM](#)

I wish she could create the same perfume in the movie of "PERFUME" the story of a murderer.^_^

Posted by: [Robert Bernwell](#) | [09/24/2011 at 06:05 AM](#)

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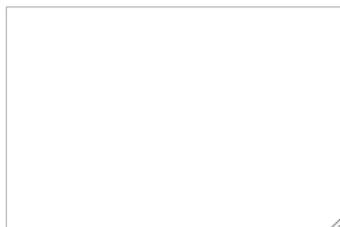
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