

# ARTISTIC SCENTSIBILITY

**From Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* to The Rolling Stones' *Emotional Rescue*, the arts are fertile ground for olfactory inspiration.**  
Lucia van der Post reports. Photograph by Omer Knaz





**W**hen Luchino Visconti was filming the wonderful ballroom scene in *Il Gattopardo* (the film of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel of the same name – *The Leopard*), it is said he wanted the set to be suffused with the scent of orange blossom.

When somebody remonstrated that it would be pointless because film-goers wouldn't be able to smell it, he is rumoured to have replied, "Maybe not – but they will know." In other words, he believed the power of scent was so great that somehow, subliminally, the ballroom scene wouldn't seem the same if it wasn't awash with that deliciously voluptuous aroma. And much more recently, in Wes Anderson's film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the concierge M. Gustave H (played by Ralph Fiennes) leaves a trail of his favourite scent, *L'Air de Panache*, wherever he goes. Anderson famously had hip Parisian scent boutique *Nose* devise 1,000 bottles of what it thought *L'Air de Panache* would smell like, which he then gave to members of the film crew.

The making of a great perfume is, of course, an art in itself ("*le huitième art*", it's been dubbed by Octavian Coifan, who used to write a wonderful perfume blog, though alas no longer), and just as many of the great perfumers (Jacques Guerlain, Coco Chanel and today Jean-Claude Ellena and Frédéric Malle, to name but a few) had close friendships with artists, so many great perfumes are inspired by works of art – whether films, paintings, literature or music.

Then when I think of the relationship between the visual artists and scent, Salvador Dalí comes to mind. In 1983 he created his own perfume – called, but of course, *tout simplement Dalí* (still produced by Les Parfums Salvador Dalí at £49 for 50ml EDP) – as a tribute to Gala, the wife and muse he loved passionately. He always said that scent for him was the "most beautiful messenger" of memories and happy moments. It has a sumptuous bouquet of jasmine, rose and incense, all housed in a voluptuous bottle inspired by the lips and nose of the goddess Aphrodite, whom he had just finished painting.

Contemporary Icelandic artist Andrea Maack, meanwhile, is the only fine artist I know of to have her own fragrance range today, each perfume being an olfactory interpretation of her work. Most evocative perhaps is her scent called simply *Coal* (£85 for 50ml EDP), which is based round an original charcoal drawing. She started by handing out her fragrances at art shows, mimicking traditional perfume launches, but they were so successful that stores asked to stock them.

But even over a century ago, in 1912, art was inspiring perfume. The impressionists were prominent at the time, and the hazy play of light and shade that distinguishes their works is generally thought to have inspired Jacques Guerlain, himself a great art collector, to create his wonderfully powdery *L'Heure Bleue* (£75.50 for 75ml EDP), which perfumer Roja Dove thinks is one of Guerlain's greatest achievements. Rich with notes of musk, bergamot, anise, neroli, carnation and iris, it is many a Guerlain fan's all-time favourite. Later Guerlain also devised the woody oriental *Vol de Nuit* (£76.50 for 93ml EDT), to which Luca Turin of

Clockwise from far left:  
**Imaginary Authors** *A City on Fire*, \$85 for 60ml EDP. **Jardins d'Écrivains** *La Dame aux Camélias*, €115 for 250ml EDC. **Amouage** *Honour Woman*, £170 for 50ml EDP. **Guerlain** *Vol de Nuit*, £76.50 for 93ml EDT. **James Lavelle & Azzi Glasser**

**Build and Destroy**, £80 for 30ml EDP. **By Kilian** *Liaisons Dangereuses*, £175 for 50ml EDP. **Mark Buxton** *Perfumes Emotional Rescue*, €140 for 100ml EDP. **Roja Parfums** *Diaghilev*, £750 for 100ml parfum. **Les Parfums Salvador Dalí** *Dalí Dalí*, £49 for 50ml EDP

Perfumes: *The A-Z Guide* fame gave five stars. The fragrance was released in 1933, two years after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's wonderful novel about flying at night that inspired it. Saint-Exupéry is alleged to have worn no scent but Vol de Nuit for the rest of his short life (he died in 1944, at the age of 44).

"Perfume awakens the thought," said Victor Hugo, and of course literature is steeped in olfactory references, going back as far as the *Song of Solomon* with its erotically charged poetry – "I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet-smelling myrrh" – and its intensely perfumed garden. James Craven, perfume archivist at Les Senteurs, also reminds me of two great novels (Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*) that are suffused with a sense of how the power of scent affects every aspect of our lives. Here, he says, "we are in the gifted hands and brains of two novelists who use words and images precisely and exquisitely to convey smells". In *Buddenbrooks*, the final chapters express how powerfully the smell of death comes to invade the house of a once-prosperous family, symbolising the rottenness at the heart of German society (which, of course, is precisely why the Nazis banned Mann's books), and in *Thérèse Raquin* a rotten smell is used as a metaphor for the corruption that the novel exposes.

Sometimes the relationship is transposed when noses are inspired by certain novels. By Kilian's *Liaisons Dangereuses* (£175 for 50ml EDP) is an homage to Choderlos de Laclos' shocking literary exploration of the amorality of some sections of French society in the late 18th century, while Frédéric Malle's *Portrait of a Lady* (£210 for 100ml EDP) is inspired by the classic Henry James novel. Les Senteurs' Craven thinks *Portrait of a Lady* is Dominique Ropion's "most sublime achievement". It is certainly a sumptuous and interesting oriental rose, using as it does great quantities of Turkish rose absolute blended with raspberry, cassis, clove, cinnamon, patchouli and amber.

Meanwhile, *Jardins d'Ecrivains* is a French perfume house founded in 2011 by Anaïs Biguine, who, besides being inspired by gardens, has a deep love of French literature. It has just six perfumes, of which the most obviously inspired by literary masterpieces is *La Dame aux Camélias* (€115 for 250ml EDC). The novel's main character is based on Marie Duplessis, who, before she was *La Dame aux Camélias* for Dumas, *La Traviata* for Verdi or a lover for Liszt, was considered to be the most elegant woman in Paris.

Another operatic heroine, Puccini's immortal *Madame Butterfly*, was the inspiration for Amouage's *Honour Woman* (£170 for 50ml EDP). Created by Alexandra Carlin and Violaine Collas, it's a bittersweet confection of tuberose, lily of the valley and gardenia, with a deep, sensual base of frankincense, opopanax, leather and amber.

From opera to ballet, and Roja Dove's heady *Diaghilev* (£750 for 100ml parfum), a perfume that captures all the passion, energy and creativity that lay behind the performances of the Ballets Russes. Dove came up with the scent at the time of the V&A's 2010-11 exhibition about the great founder of the ballet company, and it is a powerful, modern chypre with top notes of bergamot, lemon and orange and base notes of oakmoss, patchouli, vanilla and vetiver, while at its heart lie rose and jasmine. When the fragrance



From top: Frédéric Malle *Portrait of a Lady*, £210 for 100ml EDP. Guerlain *L'Heure Bleue*, £75.50 for 75ml EDP. Andrea Maack *Parfums Coal*, £85 for 50ml EDP

*By Kilian's Liaisons Dangereuses is an homage to Choderlos de Laclos' shocking literary exploration of the amorality of some sections of French 18th-century society*

song of the same name. Similarly, Azzi Glasser, the "nose" behind Agent Provocateur perfumes and co-collaborator with Bella Freud on the designer's collection of fragrances, has a track record of working with avant-garde artists. She recently brought out *Build and Destroy* (£80 for 30ml EDP), a limited edition of 300 bottles of eau de parfum created with the electronic musician James Lavelle.

Imaginary Authors is another enterprising perfume house that is taking a more contemporary approach. "Life is a series of blank pages," says the home page of its website, "and it is up to one's self whether to fill those pages with tedious prose or wildly imaginative storylines." The house was born from the concept of scent as art, and art as provocation, and just as a good book can change one's view of the world, so too its perfumes are meant to make us reassess the world we live in. There are too many imaginary narratives and authors behind its scents (each \$85 for 60ml EDP) to list them all here, but almost all are great dramatic tales. Take *A City on Fire*, a perfume devised for a menswear store in Portland, Oregon. "A brilliantly dark graphic novel, *A City on Fire* is the story of two matchmakers. Rupert literally fabricates matches in a factory on the waterfront while Frances writes a dating column for the city's newspaper. Both are recluses who haunt the night's shadows, observing clandestine activities from afar but never partaking. That changes one fortuitous evening when they both witness the same high-profile murder and are forced to come together as unlikely vigilantes in order to save their own names." Fact and fiction blend. Is there such a

tale? Is there such an author? Does it matter? Like all the very best scents, the eaux in the bottles capture complex narratives. "The hope is they not only invigorate and intoxicate," says the Imaginary Authors website, "but also take you to new places." It may be a lot to ask of a little bottled fragrance, but one has to admire the ambition. That's what the best art is always about. ♦

#### OLFACT AND FICTION

**Amouage**, 14 Lowndes St, London SW1 (020-3031 9874; [www.amouage.com](http://www.amouage.com)) and see Harrods and other stockists. **Andrea Maack Parfums**, [www.andreamaack.com](http://www.andreamaack.com) and see Avery Fine Perfumery and other stockists. **Avery Fine Perfumery**, 27 Avery Row, London W1 (020-7629 1892; [www.averyfineperfumery.com](http://www.averyfineperfumery.com)). **By Kilian**, [www.bykilian.com](http://www.bykilian.com) and see Les Senteurs and other stockists. **Fortnum & Mason**, 181 Piccadilly, London W1 (0845-602 5694; [www.fortnumandmason.com](http://www.fortnumandmason.com)). **Frédéric Malle**, [www.fredericmalle.com](http://www.fredericmalle.com) and see Les Senteurs and other stockist. **Guerlain**, [www.guerlain.com](http://www.guerlain.com) and see Harrods and other stockists. **Harrods**, 87-135 Brompton Rd, London SW1 (020-7730 1234; [www.harrods.com](http://www.harrods.com)). **Imaginary Authors**, [www.imaginaryauthors.com](http://www.imaginaryauthors.com) and see Roullier White and other stockists. **James Lavelle & Azzi Glasser**, see Liberty. **Jardins d'Ecrivains**, [www.jardinsdecrivains.com](http://www.jardinsdecrivains.com) and see Roullier White and other stockists. **Les Parfums Salvador Dalí**, [www.parfums-salvador dali.com](http://www.parfums-salvador dali.com) and see Fortnum & Mason and other stockists. **Les Senteurs**, 2 Seymour Place, London W1 (020-7183 5842; [www.lessenteurs.com](http://www.lessenteurs.com)) and branch. **Liberty**, Regent St, London W1 (020-7734 1234; [www.liberty.co.uk](http://www.liberty.co.uk)). **Mark Buxton Perfumes**, [www.markbuxton.com](http://www.markbuxton.com) and see Liberty and Nose. **Nose**, 20 Rue Bachaumont, Paris 75002 (+331-4026 4603; [www.nose.fr](http://www.nose.fr)). **Roja Parfums**, 020-7893 9797; [www.rojaparfums.com](http://www.rojaparfums.com) and see Harrods. **Roullier White**, 125 Lordship Lane, London SE22 (020-8693 5150; [www.roullierwhite.com](http://www.roullierwhite.com)).

launched, both the bottle and the box featured an image of the Léon Bakst painting that was on the cover of a programme for the Diaghilev ballet.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, a movement called *Le Cinéma Olfactif* brings together the mediums of scent and cinema. For each movie, perfumer Mark Buxton develops a fragrance to be diffused in the screening room. Buxton – who made his name with the first *Comme des Garçons* fragrance and who is one of the founders of the Parisian scent boutique *Nose*, where he co-created *L'Air de Panache* for Anderson – was inspired by *Mood Indigo*, the film of Boris Vian's great 1947 novel *L'Écume des Jours*. Just as the story has two moods – it "starts as romcom and ends as tragedy", as one critic put it – so does the *Mood Indigo* perfume (€115 for 50ml EDP, from March). First Buxton uses the brightness of freesia, water lily and pepper to bring to mind two people falling in love, and then, as the tale turns to dark tragedy, there come the base notes of incense, smoky woods and camomile ("there's something sad about camomile, even something dead," he once said).

And, as if to emphasise that it isn't only classical art, music and literature that can be a source of inspiration, Buxton's *Emotional Rescue* (€140 for 100ml EDP), a sensual floral musk, was inspired by the Rolling Stones