

# IS YOUR PERFUME BOTTLE HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?

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There's a common perception floating around the blogosphere that there are simply too many fragrances released each year and that the market has become saturated, not only with original work but with flankers and flankers of flankers. There's a note of desperation in these voices: "how can anyone experience so many perfumes" or "they all smell alike". Some bloggers even claim their reviews will help hapless perfumistas navigate the torrid waters of excess, kind of an "I've smelled it all and can guide you so you don't have to waste your money" approach. And yet, no one has ever complained that there are too many songs recorded, too many novels written, paintings painted or bottles of wine imbibed. I can understand why perfumers would dread competition, but why is the rest of the perfume world so quick to denigrate what could be viewed as a positive trend?

Contemporary perfumery is only about 120 years old, a mere flash in the pan compared to other arts. Yet the history of perfume stretches back thousands of years. The difference is that perfume is ephemeral. All that remains of this legacy are some odd biblical references, a bottle retrieved from the ocean floor (Titanic) and an exhumed vial (Israeli tomb). Even a vintage commercial perfume still in production varies from its original formula. You blink and it's gone. Literally. The process of perfume creation is volatile, cyclical and evolutionary. It says a lot about culture, but only in that moment. As such, perfume must reinvent itself for that moment as well. There's bound to be overlap and repetition, as with other arts, but with great production there's also progress.

One sign of progress has been the birth of niche, artisan and experimental perfumery in the last 20 years as an alternative to commercial, mainstream fragrances. Marching to the beat of their own drums rather than to market research studies or focus groups, these perfumers have pushed boundaries; perhaps not as hard because society has had to catch up to the notion of fragrances being "interesting" rather than simply smelling nice. It's also related to the education of the nose. People who have smelled and worn a lot of perfume can appreciate different approaches, so why do they tend to be the most vociferous critics of excess? Even perfumers have embraced this malaise with names like "I Hate Perfume", "escentric molecules", "Agonist", "Blood Concept" or Etat Libre d'Orange's creed, "vive le parfum est mort". Seems everyone loves to hate perfume.

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Perfume writing and criticism have been around for an even briefer time, the majority of work having been done in the last 10 years. Compare that to criticism in other disciplines and the difference becomes clear. There are no founding fathers like Marx or Freud to provide a framework for critical thinking. It's a bit like the wild west, with sheriffs, gun-slingers and saloon operators. Perfume bloggers are on the edge of an expanding frontier that has just opened up. No wonder it can feel overwhelming at times. The good news is that not all readers expect reviews of every fragrance and most can handle the plethora of choices.

Although commercial perfumery is fully established, the medium as an art form is still in its infancy, breaking out of a fairly rigid mold. It was just a few years ago that some critics declared perfumes could not be made with natural essential oils alone or fragrance-as-art only began with the discovery of synthetic aroma molecules. Such polemical declarations make one wonder about underlying intentions; perhaps a fear that corporal enjoyment (especially the kind offered by perfume) will make one appear naive. Make no mistake, our sense of smell is still taboo. Does the notion that there are too many perfumes come from this place of fear? On the inside we love it and want more, but on the outside we struggle to maintain composure. If that is the case, better to remain silent than defensively back ourselves into a corner. In a culture of excess it seems contradictory to rail against such a surplus, since perfume itself is an extravagance and not a necessity.

As a perfumer, I guess I'm guilty of contributing to this excess. I make perfume because I am driven to explore the infinite realm of scent combinations from the ground up. It's not only a form of creative self expression, but an hermetic study and extension of my obsession with all things olfactory. Blending with aromatics allows me to approach a scent construct from an analytical perspective since I am assembling the building blocks. Nevertheless, a finished perfume, even one that I have created, is a mystery and I'm always left wanting more. The more I smell, the more I want to smell. That is my personal conundrum. So when I encounter certain existential gripes, I feel like quoting Wittgenstein's last line in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "that which cannot be said must remain in silence".

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