

L'Absolu

the essentials of essence

spring 2025 | issue N°9



L'Absolu

Beyond the bottle lies a universe of artistry, tradition, and innovation. L'Absolu is for those who appreciate perfume as an experience — one that lingers on the skin and in the soul.

With exclusive interviews, deep dives into olfactory trends, and explorations of the most coveted compositions, we invite you into the world of fragrance in its absolute purest form.



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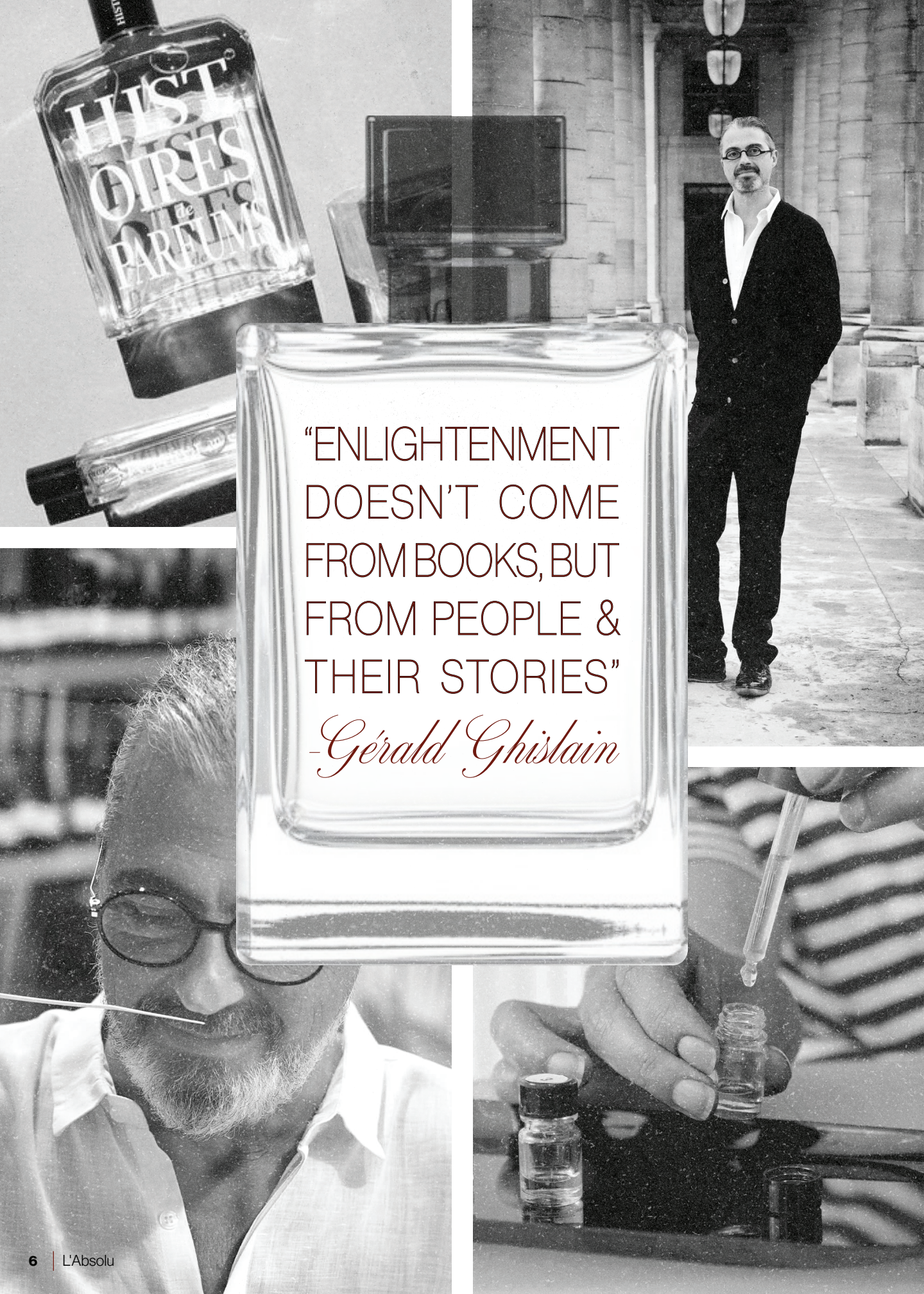
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"ENLIGHTENMENT
DOESN'T COME
FROM BOOKS, BUT
FROM PEOPLE &
THEIR STORIES"

-Gérald Ghislain

A CONVERSATION WITH *Gérald Ghislain*

We spoke with the creative force behind Histoires de Parfums to learn about storytelling and rule-breaking in the art of perfume.

Your interest in fragrances goes far beyond the scents themselves. I imagine you are passionate about plants, about history, about culture, philosophy and a lot more. Do you consider yourself a Renaissance man?

I'll have you know I'm not that old. Histoires de Parfums has been around for 20 years sure, but calling us Renaissance is a bit of a stretch. Jokes aside, I see what you mean and I don't know if I think of myself as a Renaissance man. I am just very curious and can't rest. I need different projects, not just to be busy but to keep my mind young. I love going from an idea to another, jumping from owning a restaurant to launching a perfume line to opening a sex shop to owning a flamenco club. I just want to experience everything life has to offer and if that makes me a Renaissance man, then yes I am, but I always felt Renaissance men were kind of dull men, locked up in their towers, drinking up all the knowledge of the elders and talking to the stars. I don't care for the knowledge of books. I mean, I love reading books but what I want to say is that the knowledge I value is that of the street." The knowledge of experience, of meetings, of traveling, of eating. You can learn a lot from just eating foreign foods.

The creation of scent is unfamiliar to most of our readers. Can you distill the process for us a bit?

Hmm, I wouldn't say a lot of it comes from talent. The issue and beauty of perfume is that it's both an art and a craft, and the thing with arts is that talent is everything and nothing. What matters is being creative and having a clear vision of where you want to go. Mastery is something anyone can learn but real talent is using this mastery to serve your vision in a way no one has ever done before.



My perfumes always start with a vision, an image, a story. Once this is settled, then I get to designing the scent and work until the reality matches the image I had, and if I don't do it myself, I'll hire someone to do it better like Julien Rasquinet for Fidelis or Luca Maffei for This is not a blue bottle 1/5.

In theatre, you'll have a stage director, a writer, a scenographer, someone for the lighting. Cinema's even more huge. And in perfumery, you'll have perfumers of course but also evaluators, assistants and creative directors, and you can't really be one and all, the same way you can't really write, direct and star in your own play. You can but it will be one-dimensional in that you're stuck in your own head and vision. But once you bring someone else in, the plot thickens and unfolds.

Creating a perfume takes mastery of course, because it enables you to not find the most efficient way to go from a point A to a point B, but to actually see all the different ways you could choose. It's like if you were to play the guitar but only knew one song. Sure you'll sing it superbly and in different tunes and styles but in the end, it's just one song. But if you master your instrument, you can play anything you want. Most people think with arts that technique, mastery and rules are somewhat of a cage, when they actually allow you to be completely free.

How much science is there to perfume creation? Do you need to first learn fundamentals, like certain notes pairing well or never mixing others, the same way designers learn color theory and design best practices? Or are you usually making up your own rules and following intuition?

Yes and no. Perfume isn't much different than cooking. That's how I fell into it. There aren't rules to cooking; it's a lot of trials and errors but ultimately, if someone could put pineapple on a pizza and make it work, there's nothing a perfumer can't do.

I always follow my ideas. They're not always good but the point of chemistry in perfumery is that it enables you to almost magically, seamlessly blend any of two things together and make it work. Look at Irrévérent for instance, in our En Aparté collection. It's built on a lavender and oud accord. How random is that? I always saw jasmine and oud, rose and oud, sandal and oud, vetiver and oud and I got bored and thought, "Why not lavender, it could be fun." And after many trials and many errors,

Irrévérent was born and it works out perfectly.

The history of perfumery is all about breaking the rules and glass ceilings. There are so many perfumes that are big successes today that shouldn't have been born because they weren't by "the book," because they overdosed this or that ingredient. Look at the first Guerlain perfumes: They were so packed with vanilla that Coty, Guerlain's competitor, said the only thing he could come up with that much vanilla was crème brûlée. And here's the food again.

The bottle is an important part of a perfume's experience. How closely do you oversee the design of your bottles and packaging?

I follow the design so closely that I'm surprised I'm not in the bottles yet. I love anything that has to do with design and that is something you can really see when you come into one of our flagship stores in Paris or Milan.

Design is how art comes into your everyday life and as it turns out, perfume is an art. I can't imagine a perfume without a bottle, or a bottle without a proper shape or color, because that's what you'll associate with the perfume. That's even the first encounter you'll have with the perfume before you spray it. And I'm a visual person. I also think in colors or shapes or textures and more often than not, ideas for perfumes came from seeing a painting or a street scene, and I'll just go back to my design team with a broad picture and we'll start working from there. But my ideas are very precise, which means that I have to oversee it as closely as I can to make sure that this idea comes to life and not anything else. For instance, we just released 1/6 as part of This is Not a Blue Bottle collection, which is our more

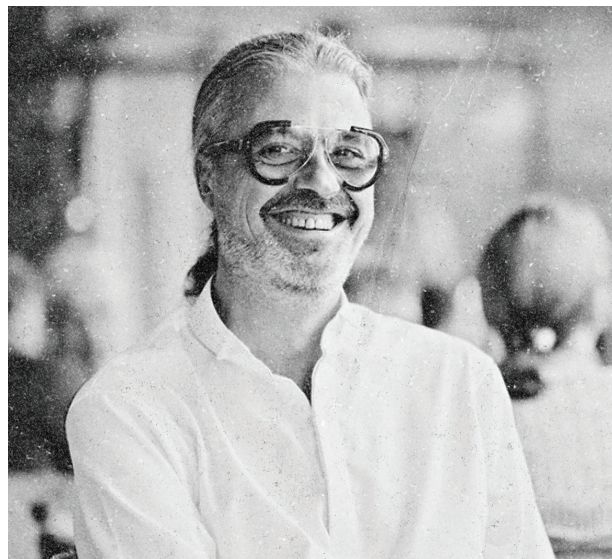
artsy line inspired by Magritte, existentialism and Klein blue. Our point with this collection was to emphasize emotions over reason, art for the sake of art, perfume for the sake of perfume, beauty for the sake of beauty. We wanted to find a way for the customer to smell a fragrance without being influenced by anything, and we went so far as to blur the lines between perfume and design because the first perfume of the collection 1/1 is literally a blue bottle. It has no name, no branding. It's nothing but a blue bottle.

Why blue? Blue can be anything you want. Because this is a color in which you can dream. The sky, the sea, the eyes of a lover. It can be a summer's sky or a winter's one, it can be a nice provençal seashore or a colder one. Blue can be anything. The challenge was really to implement, through a creative design in tone with our identity, a way the customer would not be influenced by anything exterior to them. We just give them a perfume, a color, an energy, and the rest is up to their sensibility.

You aim to tell your stories through your perfumes, but it seems that people find their own stories within them as well. Are you disappointed or thrilled when a reviewer or consumer interprets your fragrances differently than you do?

On the contrary, I love it. That's what I keep saying over the years, that's the sense of our motto: "stories to be read on the skin," meaning on YOUR skin. Once you wear them, our stories become yours. That's the point of art. Once it's out in the world, it no longer belongs to the artist. I love the fact that your vision is different than mine. This way it broadens the spectrum of possibilities and realities.

Most people think with arts that technique, mastery and rules are some what of a cage, when they actually allow you to be completely free.



"I would love to create the scent of the future. The perfume of someone who isn't born yet."

Perfume is intimate. My perception and memories of roses aren't yours, the same way we could both make love to the same person and have two totally different experiences and opinions. But that's the beauty of it, that it paints an even bigger picture than you imagined in the first place. It's really great to see that a small idea or memory I had turned into a perfume that touched the lives of people in more ways than I could think of. That's what brings stories into life.

We all know from experience how smell is connected with memory. What is your strongest memory associated with smell?

I have two. When I was a child, we lived in Morocco and there was no French bakery in our neighborhood, so my mother would bake her own bread and brioche twice a week. Once all the doughs had risen, we'd go with the nanny to the public oven. It was a sort of communal hearth where everyone could come and bake their cakes, bread, pastries you name it. And I remember the smell of this place so distinctly: the flour, the yeast, the orange flower water and caramelized sugar of the brioche buns... it was a delight.

My other vivid memory also comes from my childhood. My father was a jockey so every Sunday we'd go to the racecourse and just before the race, the jockeys and horses would all come together and the air was thick with the smell of leather, horses, fresh plowed grass. I know it will sound weird, but this is one of the smells I find most comforting. That's actually what I love most about perfume and what I was telling you about with our scent memories being unique. Some people would find this smell of horses and sweat absolutely disgusting, but I don't.

Histoires de Parfums is about these personal stories, my personal stories with Sade, George Sand and Hemingway – but they become your stories because you can't and won't appreciate a smell the same way I do. All I can do is tell my story through a perfume to the best of my ability, and hope that you'll find your own truth in it.

Is there a specific story you've been dreaming to tell through your perfumes, that you haven't been able to yet, whether it's too complex or you haven't been able to quite capture it the way you want to?

There is and this has been following me for years. I would love to create the scent of the future. The perfume of someone who isn't born yet. To create a perfume of a generation we do not know, of words we haven't heard yet, of cultural tropes and references we couldn't fathom.

It's not just about creating an abstract perfume but really finding a way to travel into the future and bring back their life lessons and insights and put them into a perfume. And it's even more pressing that our future changes shape every week. It has never been more uncertain, so the possibilities have never been more infinite somehow. I hope I'll find a way to capture this...

Interview by Tobias van Schneider



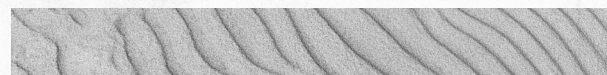
A Scent for Every Soul

CHOOSE WHAT CALLS TO YOU, & FOLLOW THE PATH TO YOUR NEXT SIGNATURE SCENT.

Do you find yourself drawn to sunwarmed landscapes or crisp, open air?

Golden & Warm
(desert dunes, countryside, aged wood)

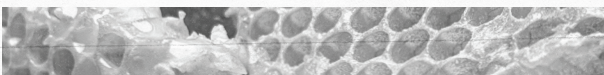
Crisp & Open
(ocean mist, alpine breeze, morning dew)



Are you drawn towards candle-lit evenings or glimmering sunlit afternoons?

Cozy Evenings
(ancient libraries, leather, burning embers)

Warm Afternoons
(honeycomb, french picnics, cashmere)



Are you drawn to the whisper of sacred smoke or the depth of aged spirits?

Sacred Smoke

Aged Spirits



Serge Lutens
Ambre Sultan
(amber & resins)

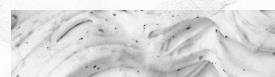
Histoires de
Parfums 1740
(leather & spice)



Do you prefer radiant amber resins, or indulgent gourmands?

Radiant Resins

Rich Gourmands



Guerlain Shalimar
(ambery vanilla
& bergamot)

Aftelier Cacao
(dark chocolate
& sweet orange)



Do you seek invigorating wild landscapes or the poetic elegance of floating petals?

Untamed Nature
(overgrown herbs, tall pines, citrus groves)

Delicate Flowers
(moonlit gardens, silk petals, intoxicating blooms)



Is your life energy grounded by earth's gentle pulse or pull towards the sun?

Earth's Pulse

The Rising Sun



Hermès Un Jardin
Sur Le Nil
(mango & lotus)

Creed Silver
Mountain Water
(snowcaps & musk)



Do you fill a vase with romantic bouquets or put fresh-picked flowers in your hair?

Crystal Vases

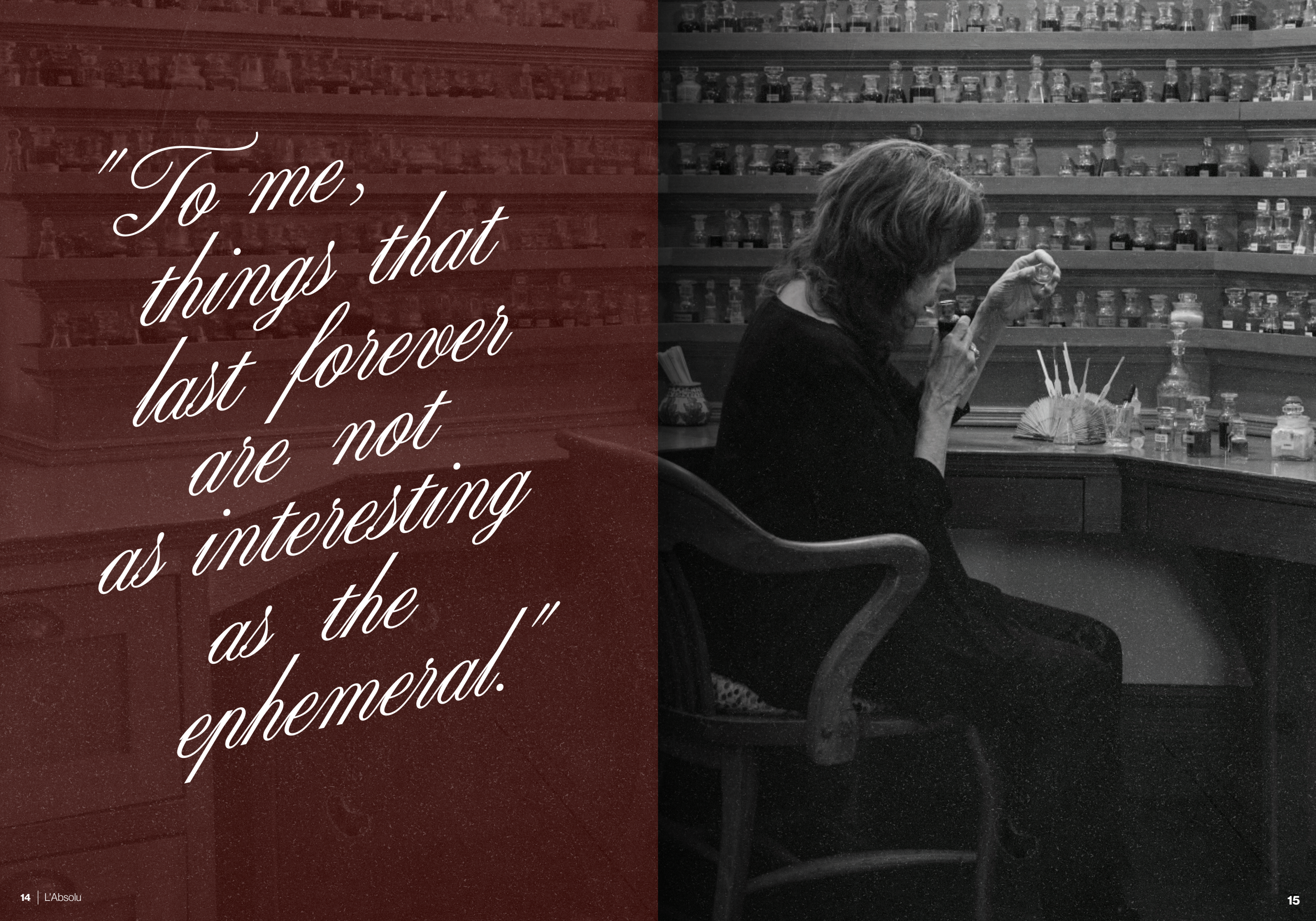
Flower Crowns



Chanel No. 19
(powdery iris
& green notes)

Diptyque Eau Rose
(fresh cut roses
& chamomile)





*"To me,
things that
last forever
are not
as interesting
as the
ephemeral."*

MEET THE MAKER:

Mandy Aftel

Mandy Aftel delights in blends of natural scents that celebrate the beauty and corresponding underbelly of nature, while working with historic and modern materials to capture a breadth of human experience that spans centuries.

In July Mandy was announced as the winner of the 2022 Art and Olfaction Septimus Piesse Visionary Award, in honour of her “exceptional vision with regards to how scent is used, developed, or imagined.”



You have a very strong connection with nature – what does this give you?

I cannot stop being overwhelmed by the beauty of nature and its capacity to restore. Nature is the original perfumer. I find being amongst nature and really focusing on each smell makes you feel so alive in that moment and is also very humbling. You have had many facets to your career: you have been a weaver, trained as a therapist, and you are an author; it was while researching a novel that you became fascinated with scent. What did you find so intoxicating?

I was reading these books about scent from the turn of the century and became so immersed in the

topic and how far-reaching scent was into all areas of our lives, from food to gardening, beauty and sexuality. It connects cultures, all over the world, across the whole of history. At the time I had no idea where it would lead me thirty years later – where it is still leading me. I feel very fortunate.

Does this fascination with smell go back to your childhood?

I have always been really curious, and I was fascinated by all smells. I didn't find things icky, such as bodily smells. I still enjoy all smells, even so-called 'bad' ones; they remind you that you're alive.

What is it particularly about natural scent that you're drawn to?

Natural scents have a lot more variation and depth to them compared to synthetic. They are thrilling to work with. They don't broadcast themselves as strongly as synthetics do, or last as long; if you walk into an elevator and smell someone's perfume lingering, that is synthetic. You often have to lean in close to smell a natural scent on someone, which creates a really personal and sometimes sensual connection. To me, things that last forever are not as interesting as the ephemeral.

How do you begin to create a perfume from scratch?

Each perfume I create contains an idea that I want to communicate – it's like a message in a bottle. I start by focusing on two essences that have a high contrast and think about them having a conversation; I see essences almost like beings. Then I concentrate on the feeling that I have, weave little bits together and build in experiences.





What kind of feelings might you work into a fragrance?

I created 'Memento Mori' when someone important had left my life; they hadn't died, but I was in mourning. I concentrated on the smell of their body and worked out my grief through creating the fragrance. It is about memories and a vanishing beauty. It has really resonated with people; it ended up being one of my most popular fragrances.

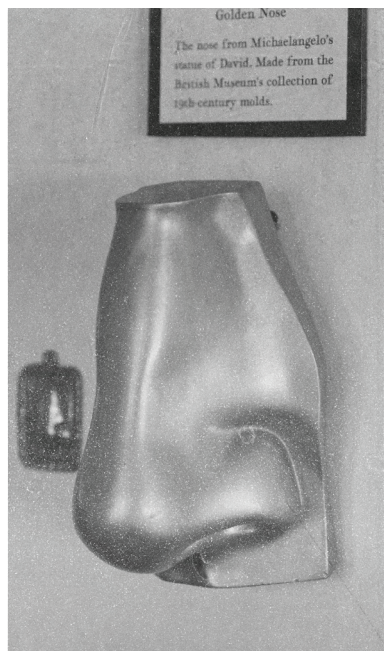
You have talked before about your fascination with the darker and even ugly side of beauty – does beauty need that edge to indeed be beautiful?

There is this putrid smell in jasmine and other heavy white flowers, like orange flower or tuberose and I find it fascinating. I love that they are beautiful, but that they also have this funky little dirty aspect too. I find that ying and yang element gives its beauty a sense of completeness and it makes it more fascinating.

You delight in pairing unusual fragrances, such as mushrooms and tuberose – what is the inspiration behind that?

I noticed that once the top floral notes of the tuberose had lifted, there was a dark, earthy note that lay beneath it that was shared by the mushrooms. I wanted to build on that shared layer. While you often associate tuberose with a feminine perfume, in this blend it became a very unisex fragrance.

When you make – or even wear a perfume – the first thing you smell are the top notes; they are the ones that seduce you and pull you in. Then you encounter the middle layers; the spices and florals, which are deeper, richer essences. If you get as far as smelling the base notes – which you really have to lean in to smell, those notes are the ones that have been in man's spiritual life since the beginning of time.



Some of the oils and resins that you use are hundreds of years old – there's an element of bottling time involved in your work.

Yes, there is something really thrilling about touching something that someone else has touched and smelt across the centuries. It gives you that feeling of travelling through time. I made perfume for Leonard Cohen, and he liked very old, biblical resins made from incredibly old, and expensive botanicals [eight varieties of oud were used, from hojari frankincense to benzoin and opopanax] that were around \$55,000 per kilo. It was important to him to feel this connection to these timeless materials.

Your collection includes hundreds of natural essences, from a 100-year-old bottle of sandalwood oil to a 16th century symbolorum, all of which you share with visitors in the museum you created – the Aftel Archive of Curious Scents – next to your home. What does your museum mean to you?

I love my museum so much; I'd happily sleep in there. Everything is so beautiful, and it gives me a huge thrill to share it with visitors; I come out

to meet everyone. Since the pandemic, we gave everyone little white gloves to put on, and it actually gave people more courage to touch, read and smell these ancient books. People don't often get a chance to encounter these kinds of materials. There is this lineage through time that we can share with people across the globe.

What are some of your recent additions?

One thing I bought over lockdown was a beautiful antique pomander which was an item carried by rich people during the plague. I found this beautiful one from France that was shaped like an egg, decorated with gold opium poppies and tiny rubies, that when you open it, reveals the cavity where you would put the scented cloth or cloves or whatever, and it has a monkey playing the violin. It's incredibly special.

Interview by Hole&Corner



Editor's Note

Perfume is more than a scent — it is a story, a signature, an invisible trace of who we are. It lingers in memory, weaving together time and emotion with an artistry as fleeting as it is profound. To those who understand its depth, fragrance is not merely something we wear but something we experience, an alchemy of raw materials, tradition, and innovation that speaks to the soul.

At L'Absolu, we believe perfume is the highest form of wearable art. In this issue, we journey into the ateliers of master perfumers, unravel the secrets of rare and coveted ingredients, and explore the way scent shapes culture, identity, and desire. Whether you are drawn to the smoky embers of a well-aged oud, the luminous clarity of citrus in the morning air, or the intoxicating mystery of an unfamiliar accord, there is always more to discover — more depth, more nuance, more beauty.

This magazine is for the connoisseurs, the collectors, and the endlessly curious. Thank you for taking this journey with us.

Claire Thessen

EDITOR IN CHIEF



