

The Power of Perfumes



From India to Egypt, from the Greek city-states to die Roman Empire - Everywhere, fragrances are originally consecrated to the gods. Their powers are sacred and mysterious. As peoples meet and conquer one another, perfumes spread, their uses diversity. Employed for healing and sometimes as amulets, their increasing use lends them magical powers. Used by the general public today, they are held to be seductive and to lend the wearer his or her own personal note. Today, perfumes exert all of their powers...

Power of the gods

Scents reveal divine presence; the gods smell good! Among the Egyptians, perfumes are held to be the exudation of , "divine perspiration." In Greek mythology, each god possesses his or her own scent. Hera exudes the scent of ambrosia; Adonis, the lover of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, is born from the bark of a tree that secretes a fragrant resin: Myrrh. Christianity



adopts these olfactory symbols for numerous saints, who are characterised by a wonderful scent. There are thousands of scents in the gardens of the gods. For Buddhist monks, the garden of the gods smells like sandalwood, rose and saffron; among the Greeks, the "River of Perfumes flows" in the Elysian Fields; for Christians, Eden is a garden of grasses and flowers rich in wonderful scents, while only fetid, nauseating and suffocating odors dominate in hell. In Mohammed's paradise, there is a small lake, "whose waters are more fragrant than musk."

In modern-day India, corpses are still burned on a pyre of sandalwood, even though this millennium-old tradition may very well cost the family of the deceased a small fortune, as it allows the smoke from the fire to accompany the deceased's soul to the other world. In Christianity, the importance of scents still manifests itself in ritual acts, e.g. in baptism and extreme unction.

Healing, protective power

The roots of today's aromatherapy – healing through plants – date far back into the antiquity of ancient Egypt. The most famous composition used by Egyptian apothecaries was kyphi, a blend of scents that was mainly used for fumigations. However the Egyptians - and later the Greek physicians - also mixed it into beverages to produce a remedy, a panacea that was superior to all other medicines. This recipe, whose composition always differed greatly, included juniper berries, terebinth resin, cinnamon, cardamom and saffron. Aromatherapeutic salves: In Greece, these were the unguent oils that were used by the athletes at the Olympic games. In the modern-day Islamic world, in Morocco for example, scents and perfumes are an omnipresent aspect of daily and religious life.

Magical power

No festival or celebration would be complete without perfumes: At banquets in ancient Greece, the wines, according to Apicius, were perfumed with rose and violet and, according to Plinius, with cinnamon,



gentian, lavender and wormwood, which is reminiscent of the taste of several of our modern-day apéritifs. The Romans, who also loved their feasts, released doves who would sprinkle the guests with their delicately perfumed wings as they flew away.

There is an intimate relationship between witchcraft, perfume and festivals. In the year 1770, for example, the English parliament decreed that any woman, regardless of her age, rank or standing, be she spinster or widow, who does use perfumes or other cosmetics to infatuate, seduce or induce the marriage of a subject of us Gracious Majesty shall suffer the legally prescribed punishments for witchcraft and other fraudulent maneuvers and such marriage shall be declared null and void."

Seductive power

Whether they were courtesans or respectfully married – It was the women of ancient Greece who made the most lavish use of perfumes. Wrapped up as they were with the rituals of relaxation and beauty, they played the game of seduction to the hilt, coloured their lips, cheeks and eyes, used special products to care for their skin, groomed their hair with perfumed oils and massaged their bodies with fragrant ointments after bathing. It was this intensive usage that bestowed upon perfumes an erotic value.



In Greece, Aphrodite hastened to a rendezvous with her lover Adonis, pricked herself on the thorns of a rose bush, and her blood dropped onto the white roses and transformed them into deep red blossoms, which became the symbol of love. In Central Europe, carnations were considered to be an aphrodisiac because of their strong scent, like citronella in Yugoslavia and musk throughout the Western world.

So the scent that attracts us is part and parcel of the game of seduction. For Freud, the resulting aesthetic perception is a stimulant. Judge for yourself whether this is the answer to the eternal power of perfumes.