

# The Stages of Public Acceptance of Natural Perfumery – An Evolution Unfolds in the Manner of Top Middle and Base Notes in a Perfume

by Anya McCoy, 29 May 2008

All truth goes through three stages.

First it is ridiculed.

Then it is violently opposed.

Finally, it is accepted as self-evident.

*-Schopenhauer*

This is an article with a happy ending – a romp through time and noses from 2005 to now – with thanks to Schopenhauer for describing the process perfectly.

## The First Stage – Ridicule

In late Spring 2005 perfume bloggers wafted out across the Internet, writing in a giddy and groundbreaking manner about sampling and reviewing perfumes, discussing the ascent of niche houses and other lovely bits of minutiae, gossip and fun. I wandered into this fragrant party early on, discovering *Now Smell This*, *Bois de Jasmin* and many other blogs. Friendly as could be, the perfumistas welcomed the notion of natural perfumes as I posted about them, since the majority of them had never come across this form of perfumery either by name or sniff.

I had been on [Basenotes](#) on and off mostly as a reader, not a participant for years, but the blogs were something very different from the forums, and I fell right into the rhythm of the chat there.



Luca Turin, a respected perfume critic with publications to back that reputation and cult status due to Chandler Burr's book *Emperor of Scent* (2003) declared natural perfumes inferior to modern mainstream perfumes (those containing synthetic chemicals.) in [his blog](#) in 2005.

Fast forward a few months to December 2005 and the eruption of ridicule and anger on Luca Turin's blog after he received 40+ natural perfume samples I sent him, all gathered from perfumers I know and submitted in hopes he would "eat his Panama hat" if he found one of them to be exciting and equal to what he regards a great perfume.

Many of his fans who posted on the blog then felt free to add to the criticism. Many admitted they had not even sampled natural perfumes which were limited in distribution, but stated they were against them in theory.

Others had sampled them and found them so different from modern perfumes they admitted they just didn't "get it" – the perfumes lacked volume, staying power, strong sillage and fantasy accords. Some declared them hippie-ish blends. The "natural perfumes" found in health food and New Age stores were not natural perfumes in the true sense, in fact, many are blends that contained synthetics or were just poorly-constructed amateurish blends.

For the most part the natural perfumers who submitted samples to Turin created their perfumes with a high-end market in mind, a luxury market that is very different from the health food store market. Made with wildly-expensive aromatics and packaged - for the most part - in high-end crystal bottles, these natural perfumes as defined by those creating them, aspire to fulfill a niche market that responds to the demand for artisan natural products of high quality and artistic accomplishment.

This market natural perfumers aimed for was counter to what Turin wrote a few months later in his [NZZ Duftnotes](#) article of April 2006:

There are now officially four kinds of perfumery: normal, niche, vintage and natural. Where's the natural stuff? In health stores, next to the rock-salt lamps.

and:

Natural perfumers claim not to be bound by the aesthetic criteria of classical perfumery: if it survives EU regulations and New Age nonsense, their art may yet deliver on this promise.

Thus a crack appeared in the wall erected to mock and ridicule natural perfumery.

The perfumers who sent their samples to Turin for evaluation typified the spectrum of accomplishment in their attempts at producing a professional perfume. Some were copies of [Guerlain](#) scents, others may have had a touch of synthetic chemicals in them due to the naivety of the perfumer in sourcing what they thought were pure and natural aromatics.

Still others just fell flat in execution, which can happen even with well-known modern perfume houses.

In early 2006, several aspiring perfumers who use aromachemicals joined the [natural perfumery group](#) I host on Yahoo and proceed to attack our art stating that we “couldn’t make perfumes without synthetic chemicals” among other condescending and dismissive remarks. They soon left the group or were unsubbed due to the disruptive nature of their comments in a forum devoted to a form of perfumery they didn’t understand or wish to understand.

As with any new art, natural perfumery now found itself under attack on many perfume forums. Witty and stinging internet blogging on the subject became the norm. All this reminded me of historic precedents of how the public and critics angrily ridiculed painters when they invented Impressionism in Paris:

It is still hard to imagine why a police riot squad had to be called out at the time of the Impressionists' first self-organized auction in 1874, but the idea of painting suburban landscapes with smokestacks, ballet dancers backstage, and mistresses posing with puppies was anathema to the French public who repeatedly ridiculed all eight of the independent salons between 1874 and 1886.”

Matthew Kangas

Indeed, the only thing to be learned from the critics was how to suffer the sting of their attacks and carry on just the same, accomplishing a task which more than any other required serenity. Yet this is easier said than done. The reviewers' blatant injustices or perfidious insinuations, their cruel sarcasms or vulgar mockeries find artists particularly vulnerable since their selfless devotion to their ideals leaves them ill-prepared for such baseless assaults. .... To arise in the morning of a beautiful day, filled with eagerness and joy for the work ahead, and to read at the breakfast table shameless and stupid criticisms which accuse one of painting in a state of delirium tremens...that is more than enough to ruin the day if not the entire week.

Rewald, "The History of Impressionism"

A more modern analogy to the brave natural perfumers putting their new art out there might be Bob Dylan taking an electric guitar to the Newport Folk Festival in 1965:

“His 1963 and 1964 performances had made him popular with the Newport crowd, but on July 25, 1965 Dylan was booed by some fans when he played alongside an electric blues/rock and roll band while headlining the festival. It is usually said that the reason for the crowd's hostile reception was Dylan's 'abandoning' of the folk orthodoxy{..}

*Newport Folk Festival, Wikipedia*

Impressionism survived – and thrived. The same can be said of Bob Dylan - a movement or individual artist going against the expected and creating a new artform from their creative muse. So, also, would the natural perfumers as the few short years since the furor of 2005.

## The Second Stage – Opposition

(with some ridicule still present, like a persistent top note)

In June of 2006 I reopened Mandy Aftel's Artisan Natural Perfumers Guild, which had closed mainly because when she started it in 2003, the timing was premature due to the fact there wasn't a critical mass of natural perfumers nor enough public recognition or demand for the perfumes. With the relaunching of the Guild, Professional Perfumers, Suppliers, Associates and Enthusiasts found a common ground for their networking and industry in the Guild. The increasing recognition of the art by bloggers who regularly interviewed natural perfumers and reviewed their perfumes grew day by day.

Suddenly, a year later a more public backlash mildly reminiscent of the initial revolt against the Impressionists took place:

Jean-Pierre Subrenat, Chairman of the World Perfumery Congress, took umbrage against natural perfumery and the Natural Perfumers Guild in June 2007, a mere one year after the Guild had re-opened. In the closing remarks of the WPC in Cannes, Subrenat said:\*

And that brings me to another anomaly of our our profession, the self-described “natural perfumers.” It seems that in recent years a new breed of wannabe perfumers became more vocal than ever. These people, all of them without perfumery training are honoring themselves with the name “perfumer”.\*

As Subrenat bemoaned the existence of all self-taught natural perfumers, it should be noted that acclaimed perfumers such as Francois Coty, Edmound Roudnitska and Jean Carles were self-taught and Roudnitska and Carles went on to teach others.

Natural perfumers *are* for the most part, self-taught. Mandy Aftel was self-taught because of thousands of hours of reading, experimenting, formulating and self-discipline were necessary so that an obsessed artist could refine her craft. Subsequently, Aftel published the book *Essence and Alchemy*, a groundbreaking and inspiring book on natural perfumery, now published in eight editions worldwide.

He continued:

When we see consumers rejecting traditional perfumery and traditional distribution in favor of smaller and smaller niches, and even following the latest awful trend .... which is mixing their own perfumes – we know that we have a problem because after that will be...to stop consuming.”\*

*\*Perfumer and Flavorist magazine August 2007 p. 42-44*

## **The Third Stage – Acceptance as Self Evident**

In the ensuing two-and-a-half years since the initial ridicule and firestorm on Turin's blog, many perfume bloggers and perfume forum participants have had a chance to sample natural perfumes, and acceptance and positive reviews have resulted for the most part. These perfumistas have been receptive to the educational information about natural perfumes and what they are supposed to be, which is a very different aesthetic from perfumes made with aromachemicals.

Every new art needs to communicate the thought and passion behind the technical and artistic aspects, and by now natural perfumery writers had a chance to catch up and publish the *raison d'être* behind their perfumes.

Several natural perfumers such as Dominique Dubrana of Italy and Mandy Aftel have been singled out for awards. Dubrana rates four stars (out of five) in *Perfumes: The Guide* by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez (2008.) Magazine and newspaper articles now join the internet buzz reporting on natural perfumes and do a lot to educate the general public – a very different community from the internet perfumistas – as to what natural perfumes are and how to evaluate them.

The acceptance grows daily and the fears of Mr. Subrenat may only be calmed by the fact that big perfume houses typically associated with his accepted form of traditional perfumery are making moves towards natural perfumery – but if that comes to fruition has yet to be seen.

So the bloggers and forum members were drawn into the story behind the perfume – how naturals are complex chemicals that need to slowly evolve on the skin, how they are not in competition for longevity with synthetics, but meant to be enjoyed for their evaporation rate on the skin, and most importantly -- how they do not diffuse out a huge cloud of sillage. If the perfume wearer is looking for those attributes, and accepts the differences, then there was a successful communication in educating the public as to the aesthetic differences in our natural perfumery artform.

By conducting skin tests which are a required component of natural perfume evaluation, they let their noses tell them, not somebody else, whether a perfume has beauty and good structure. They're noting that it evaporates sequentially, telling the story that it is created

to tell. They're accepting natural perfumes as an artform in its own right, the third stage according to Schopenhauer.

The demand for natural, in fact "all natural" products by consumers is a fast-growing market trend. When natural perfumers took up the flasks and pipettes and began blending a few years ago it was not to meet a market quota or in the search for riches. Far from it, it was the passion and inner voice and love of the beauty of natural aromatics and how they connect us to our past that moved most of them. The acceptance and potential piece of the financial market will be an added lagniappe in their quest to create beautiful natural perfumes. As they move forward in their art in the coming years it will be as confident in their creations and as willing to get them out into the public arena as Monet or Dylan, and the liquid natural art will be entrenched in history as breaking ground in the same manner. From rude dismissal to heated opposition, then moving forward into acceptance as a valid and honored creation born of an artist's vision, natural perfumery has come a long way in a few short years and the future looks impressively, electrically exciting. ■



### **About the author**

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