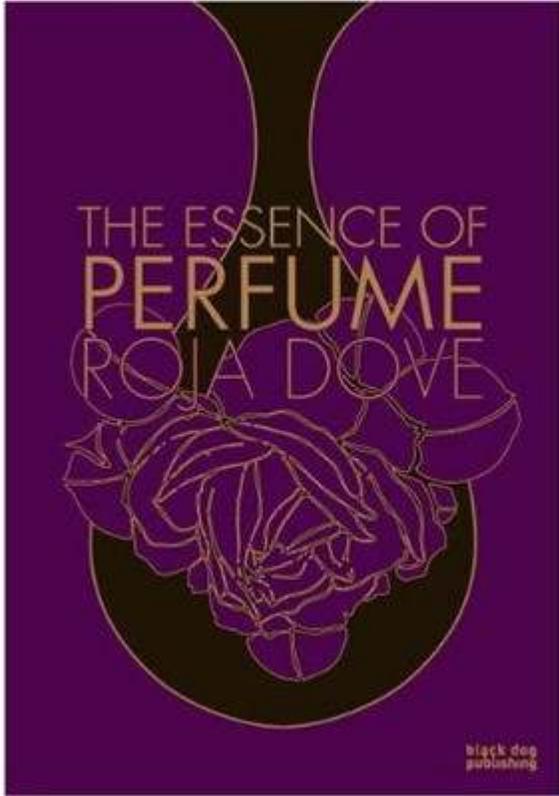


Book Review: The Essence of Perfume - Roja Dove

by Anya McCoy, 16 February 2009



The Essence of Perfume

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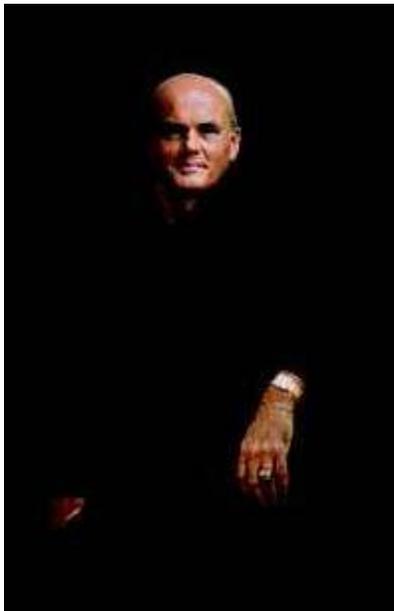
The understated dustcover gives little hint as to the gorgeous photos and illustrations included in Roja Dove's book The Essence of Perfume. It reminded me of how a glorious perfume can be hidden in a dark, elegant bottle such as the iconic Joy parfum flacon. Dove has been a legend in the world of perfume for years as the owner of the glamorous salon The Roja Dove Haute Parfumerie in the Urban Retreat in Harrods. Previously he worked at Guerlain and his naming, by Robert Guerlain as the "the world's sole *Professeur de Parfums*" practically begged he author a book on perfume. The *Professeur* title is apt: he's the type of theatrical and engaging professor that finds his classes overbooked because every student wants to sit in and be transported and educated by a maestro.

In the foreword, Dove proves he is not a slavish defender of the mainstream perfume industry, despite his long tenure in same:

“Today the industry is dominated by a few soulless corporate giants who churn out vast numbers of new fragrances every year. [...] But a small renaissance has begun, as not everyone wants to smell cheap. Consumers are waking up to the idea of individuality once more; the cognoscente is turning its back on mass-marketed fragrances. There is a revival in creative perfumery: shifting the craft back to the genius of the master perfumers. The art of perfumery is once again in the hands of the gifted.”

Yet he does not mention L'Artisan or Annick Goutal or any of the other niche houses. Why? He simply wishes to create a book that focuses on the classics. It's his prerogative and he is the *Professeur*, so perhaps he will offer that course next semester.

He proceeds to delve directly into the sense of smell in the first chapter. He touches briefly upon the way we detect odors and the psychology and “gut” reactions that occur. The fumes really start to waft in the second chapter on “The Birth of Modern Perfumery.” It's becoming evident that the book is laying out the rudimentary basics of perfumery for the layperson or perfumistas alike, and is functioning as a sort of textbook. The details are wonderful and the chapter is beautifully illustrated, so it is something I would recommend for beginning students of perfumery, or the perfume lover who likes to get wrapped up in the details of the art. The chapter ends rather abruptly, after just touching upon the advent of synthetics in perfumery.



Dove then proceeds to illustrate the methods of extraction used in the aromatics industry. How does the petal or the wood get to the point where it is an ingredient in a perfume formula? Five easy-to-follow flowcharts illustrate distillation, solvent extraction, expression, enfleurage and tincturing. The chapter quickly, easily and succinctly gives the

reader a look at the methods without boring them or weighing them down with details. Again, Dove is skirting the line between being a *Professeur* or a pop-book writer, and it is very deftly achieved.

Next are the raw materials: naturals, synthetics and aldehydes. Dove introduces a new term for what is generally known as the fragrance “family” – he prefers “facet.” No explanation is given for this new term, he just tells us that there are 17 primary facets in perfumery, and it is linked with how they share a commonality with other ingredients and how they affect the way a fragrance will smell. I have seen the families whittled down to as few as a half dozen, or expanded, most notably by Guerlain, into dozens. This new twist intrigues me.

I cannot find a list of the facets, so quickly flipping the pages I find: animal, spice, aromatic, resinous balsamic, hesperidic, fruity, floral, powdery, wood, powdery balsamic, fresh green, essential oil (for nutmeg? – that’s an obvious spice to most)), moss, soft balsamic. OK, that’s thirteen – what did I miss? Ah, the hint it’s expanded upon in the next chapter. I’m getting ahead of myself – and the author. Instead I will linger a bit in the natural section, enjoying the beautiful photos. Dove provides the botanical nomenclature, at times a bit of the history and availability information, and finishes with the scent properties of the raw materials.

I find I disagree with Dove’s assertion that natural isolates are to be classified as synthetics. If they’re just “obtained by removing one small olfactory element from a natural scented oil” how does that make them synthetic? Ylang Ylang is subjected to several sequential distillations aimed at selectively providing different scent profiles, yet they are all natural. A small point, but I would place the natural isolates under the natural absolutes and oils. Of course, synthetic isolates would be in their appropriate category.

Dove’s descriptions of reconstructions (aka reconstitutions), synthetic and aldehydes is a bit sparse, and it may leave the student – and perhaps the perfumistas – wanting more. Again, I have some differences of opinion with his descriptions, but that is a small point and does not detract from the quality of what he is presenting. I’ll leave it for the more nitpicky to debate whether linalool occurs only in coriander, whether all aldehydes are synthetic, and that ionones are all synthetic. I want to dive headfirst into a part of the book that calls me like a Siren’s song – *The Perfumer and the Rudiments of Perfumery*.

Let me just mention at this point that the main heft of the book – and it is hefty at four pounds – is the next territory to explore – looking at the major perfumes, decade by decade in the 20th Century. You’ll enjoy this glimpse into the perfumer’s world to get a look behind the scenes at one of the most secretive professions on earth, even though there are no surprises and no real secrets revealed. Dove describes the need for developing a comprehensive scent memory, where the perfumer needs to know the volatility of the aromatics, and perfume structure. It’s not instructive, but it is informative.

Next he introduces the perfume pyramid, which he terms triangle – where the fragrance

families show their facets – finally we get into the remaining, missing facet terms unnamed in the first chapter. Dove's triangle is attenuated much as the typical pyramid with five layers of volatility: deep base, base, heart, head and top. Now he introduces the term families, introducing what he designates the "main harmonies or families in feminine perfumery – Floral, Chypré, and Oriental, and three in masculine perfumery, Fougère, Chypré, and Oriental.

From this point on, Dove focuses on feminine perfumery. Now the facets fully unfurl, first in the Floral family. Single florals, floral bouquet, aldehydic floral and green/fresh florals round out the facets. Next on to six variations on Chypré, four on Oriental, only one Fougère, one for Hesperidic, three for Aromatic – turn the page, and we're in a section on the facets again. Nice descriptions, pretty photos, but it would have been helpful for a chart to help illustrate this new paradigm. That's my only negative about this section, but it's a small one, and I'm anticipating getting on to Chapter Six, anyway, the meaty, lush heart of the book – The Classics.

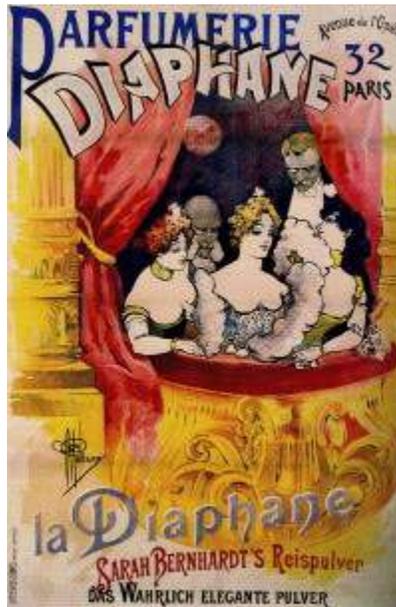


Dove's definition of what makes a perfume a classic is close to the norm: it should be something that has never been smelled before, or something that changes the perception

of what a perfume should be are two criteria he cites. In this vein, he opens the classics section of the book discussion with a brief – very brief – mention of Houbigant's Fougère Royale and with a more in-depth look at Guerlain's Jicky.

Then you can “settle in for a good read” as the book commences with “A New Century.” I am a casual student of perfume history, so many of the tidbits offered here are new to me, and some are eye-opening, while others cause a little laugh: “In 1902 a scent named *Le Bon Vieux Temps* (The Good Old Times) was launched which mocked an older generation.” That’s a humorous way to kick off a new century and a new style of perfumery, by tweaking the old(er). I recall all of the references made to “old lady” perfume or “granny perfume” in the perfume forums and blogs, and know that even though they may be referencing the classics of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, no perfumer (to my knowledge) has intentionally created in the early-21st century perfume to mock the mid-20th century perfumes.

Back to the early 20th century - the new perfumery world was pioneered by notably Francois Coty and Jacques Guerlain, and one of the seminal forms of this new art was exemplified with the release of Coty's L'Origan in 1905. It is surprising and very interesting to read that many perfumers were “frightened of” or “dismissed” the absolutes that had recently appeared on the market, but that Coty loved them and was “one of the first to exploit them.”



The Dove-decreed classics of each decade are beautifully presented in both photos and writing, and you recognize that whether or not you agree with his choices, there is nary a sour note in the bunch. The choice of Jennifer Lopez as the iconic representation opening the 2000's may be a bit disconcerting, but Dove's based that choice on his perspective that celebrity scents “have become a phenomenon.”

Included are a few pages on his own perfumes, the Roja Dove Trilogy scents released in

2007, Scandal, Unspoken and Enslaved. In Chapter 7, The Houses that Created the Classics., he quite lovely and nostalgically writes of Balmain, Jean Patou *et al.*, and gives us glimpses into the worlds not-often seen or talked about by perfumistas, even in the chatty online forums or blogs. Brief as they are, it's nice to see them all gathered together in a historic panorama of houses and noses that shaped 20th century perfumery. The photo of Edmond Roudnitska sniffing a flower is sweet, and Dior's direct gaze is a glimpse into his soul, since his eyes are the focal point of the photo, not the seams of the model's silk stockings, just his eyes.

The concluding chapter on The Bottle Makers is a visual feast, as one would expect - glorious photos of Baccarat and Lalique creations, alternating between voluptuous, seductive and whimsical. It's fitting the book closes with representations of the last finishing touch the aesthetics that often seduce us before we smell the juice. After all it is the glass industry that responded in the early 1900's to create artistic receptacles for the new style perfumes made by Coty *et al.* The book ends as if a stopper has been firmly placed inside a flacon, sealing the juice within. ■



About the author

Anya McCoy is President and Owner of the Natural Perfumers Guild, and artisan perfumer of Anya's Garden.