'No ordinary honey'; As scents become more daring and powerful, a look back to the original 'sex perfume'

It is only the faintest suggestion of a refined perfume that should ever be allowed to hang even for a moment about the belongings of a well-bred girl," cautioned one Victorian authority - namely, the stern matron behind the influential manual The Well-Bred Girl in Society. "And even such a casual use of the merest whiff of a dainty and impalpable essence should be rare; to wear any redolence up on her person in sachets is unpardonable."

Oops. As daring and exuberant dressers like Iris Apfel influence mainstream fashion and personal style, it's only natural that an influence on perfume follows. After several years of consumers favouring the airy, watercolour fragrances that mirrored the pared-down mood of ready-to-wear (which is to say well-behaved and pleasant but inoffensive if they're noticed at all), the air is once again rife with perfumes that have an undeniable presence. Not to wish for more billowing clouds of cloying gourmand or elevators that suffocate with sweetness, but well-crafted scents that announce themselves can have their moments.

I've turned that corner myself, looking for more assertive perfume. The intoxicating PHI Une Rose de Kandahar from Swiss chemist Andy Tauer is one, a favourite of Simon Dooley, who owns Etiket, a Montreal apothecary specializing in unusual and independent scents. (The more accessibly priced counterpart would be Halifax's The Seven Virtues, with their Noble Rose of Afghanistan blend.) At Calgary-based online boutique Indiescents, it's limited editions like Inevitable Crimes of Passion and Dirty Honey from British microperfumery 4160 Tuesdays that are the draw.

Both of these stockists also feature Ex Idolo, the passion project of London-based Canadian creative director Matthew Zhuk. His scent 33, named after the key ingredient of rare 33-year-old oud, is an acquired, sometimes love-it-or-hate-it note.

Tom Ford is largely responsible for popularizing the ingredient more typical of heavier Middle Eastern perfume traditions for Western tastes through his private-blend collection and oud, in turn, has piqued interest in other unusual, less polite blends.

It's fitting then that in the new English translation of French novelist Philippe Claudel's acclaimed Parfums: A Catalogue of Remembered Smells, the entry "le sexe feminin" comes between entries on soap and sewage.

This order of things makes perfect sense since in perfumery, sexy is earthy - it's dirt under fingernails.
assistant professor of art history in Maryland, considers Elsa Schiaparelli's practice and creations, and why when in 1937 the designer created both her signature shade of hot pink and her brand's debut perfume, she named both innovations "Shocking."

"No shrinking violet would be attracted to the warm, sensual animalistic notes of ambergris, civet, and musk and the fruity spice tones patchouli and vetiver blended with such classic perfume ingredients as rose, jasmine, syringe, magnolia, and gardenia," is how perfume historian Richard Stamelman explains the scent, whereas earlier critics cut to the chase and dubbed it, "the first sex perfume."

Shocking's original formula has changed over the decades but I finally had occasion to make up my own mind when I recently experienced it firsthand for the first time, after a friend gave me a small but pungent decant from an intact early bottle. The saucy flask was meant to make the perfume application experience unabashedly sensuous - surrealist artist Leonor Fini designed a bottle inspired by the proportions of Mae West, who was both a top Schiaparelli client and the era's top silver screen superstar known for sex appeal. To apply even a dab of Shocking one must first grasp it - her - by the curvy torso.

Yet even without the foreplay, the stuff provokes a visceral reaction.

Perfumer Jean Carles formulated what the designer requested be an impudent scent. This is a euphemism. Under heady flowers, tarragon and thick honey pool with the animalic smell of sweaty thoroughbred stables, and flares the nostrils. The best description of why Schiaparelli's funky combination feels frenzied comes from olfactory adventuress Lizzie Ostrom (of scent website and alter-ego Odette Toilette): "This is no ordinary honey but that made by a hive of oversized bees serving their queen in a mania." The pong is narcotic and, possibly, lewd.

It is invisible but by no means silent. I cannot say Shocking had a transformative effect but its strange redolence registered fantasy even in tweed overcoat and clunky winter boots, under which were layers of practical cable knits and corduroys. A dab and they may as well have been slips of lace and satin garters.

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