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Fragrance in the Middle Ages

By Barbara D. Diggs

If asked to imagine the smell of the medieval world, most people would probably crinkle their nose in disgust. The Middle Ages have a reputation for being one of the smelliest periods in history. And it's not unfounded: the gutters of medieval cities and villages brimmed with all kinds of malodorous refuse, from tangled piles of animal entrails to human waste to the occasional bloated carcass of a horse or pig. But the sanitation problems of the time didn't mean that the people were indifferent to the foul odors around them. To the contrary, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, fetid odors were indicative of disease, low social rank, and moral corruption.

Home Sweet Home

The well-kept medieval and renaissance citizen had a deep appreciation for beautiful fragrances, and took great pains to surround his home and body with pleasing scents to stave off bad smells. For medieval and renaissance housewives and servants, keeping a house sweet-smelling was an endless battle. Cottages and castles alike tended to be damp and musty. Chamber pots and privies left a lingering stench, even when emptied regularly or discreetly situated, and it wasn't unusual for servants or other household members to occasionally

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...OD SCENTS

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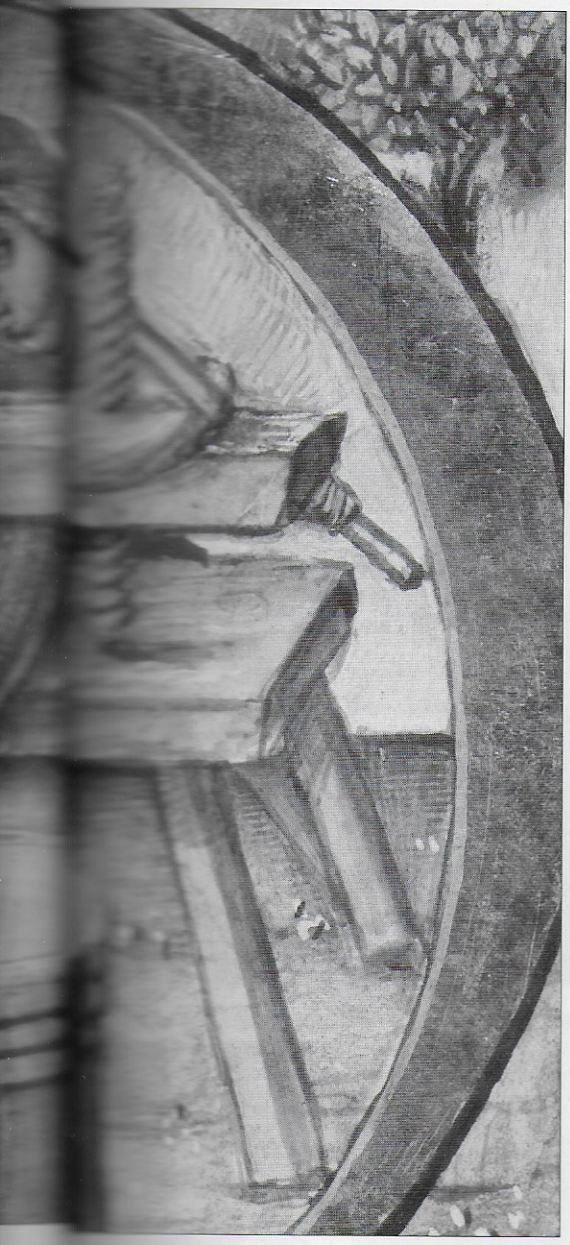

...ove, pressing herbs, from 16th century manuscript of Pliny's Natural History. Right, ...nymous, 15th century, from Castello ...ogne, Val d'Aosta, Italy.

use a corner to relieve themselves. The presence of dogs and cats and the unpleasant smell of tallow candles were also frequent contributors to the olfactory hullaballoo.

One of the most common methods of countering these offensive scents was by strewing fragrant herbs or rushes throughout the house. Thomas Tusser, author of the popular housekeeping manual, *Five Hundred Good Pointes of Husbandrie* (1573), recommended twenty plants for strewing including basil, balm, chamomile, lavender, germander, thyme, and hyssop. The leaves and stems of Sweet Flag (Acorus calamus) were also popular for strewing as they released a refreshing lemony scent when stepped upon. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, ordered that his hall be strewn with fresh May blossoms in spring and fragrant rushes in summer, while Elizabeth I, centuries later, preferred her chambers to be odorized with the "merrie" scent of scattered meadowsweet.

Homes were perfumed by placing nosegays –small bouquets of fragrant flowers or herbs–in various rooms about the house, or by sewing handfuls of aromatic leaves, such as agrimony and woodruff, whose fragrances intensify as they dry, into pillows and cushions. In well-to-do homes, dried juniper, briar or pine branches were burned in braziers or over a low fire to disperse a pleasant woody aroma throughout the house. Furniture, oak floors and wood paneling were polished with the seeds of Sweet Cicely (Myrrhis odorata) or Sweet Fern (Myrica asplenifolia), which imbued the wood with the bittersweet scent of myrrh.

Going Medieval on Laundry

Although bathing occurred with more regularity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance than is often assumed, wearing sweet-smelling garments was believed to be a healthier way of smelling pleasant as opposed to dousing the body with water. In a prosperous household, clothing was sometimes sprinkled or washed with "sweet

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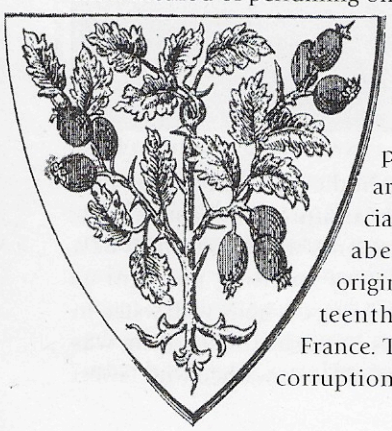
water" made by combining rosewater with other fragrant plants and spices. King Edward IV enjoyed the violet-like aroma of orris root, and his linens were routinely boiled in water that contained several roots. More commonly, clothes were perfumed by being stored in cedar chests with dried rose petals or lavender flowers scattered over them.

Clothes were also scented by laying them alongside sachets stuffed with fragrant herbs. Sir Hugh Plat, in his housekeeping treatise *Delightes for Ladies* (1609), recommends filling such "sweet bags" with finely beaten Lignum Rhodium to impart an exceptional scent to linens. A more elaborate sweet bag recipe is described in Gervase Markham's *The English Housewife* (1615): "Take of orris, six ounces, of damask roses as much. Of marjerom and sweet basil each an ounce, of yellow sanders two ounces, of cloves two ounces, of citrou peeles seven drams, of ligium aloes, of Benjamin, of storax, one ounce, of musk one dram. Bruise all these and put them into a bagg of silke or linen but silke is best."

Scenting the Body: Plants and Pomanders

As manufactured perfumes did not appear in general usage in most European countries until the seventeenth century, people of the Middle Ages and Renaissance scented themselves by literally decorating their bodies with flowers and herbs. Dried rosebuds were strung into necklaces, fragrant lemon balm stems were woven into chaplets, sachets of aromatic herbs were tucked into sleeves or bodices. Rosewater, that all-purpose solution, was often splashed on as perfume, and some women paraded about in necklaces and bracelets made of hardened beads of scented gums "large as nutmegs and coloured with lamp-black." The most common method of perfuming oneself, however, was by wearing a pomander.



Although pomanders are often associated with Elizabethans, they originated in thirteenth century France. The word is a corruption of "pomme d' ambre," which translates colloquially to "apple of ambergris" (ambergris being a strong, musky-smelling substance derived from the intestinal tract of sperm whales). The typical pomander was made by pounding various aromatic herbs, roots, gums, and spices together with rosewater to form a fragrant paste. The paste was then shaped into a ball and slipped into a small perforated container made of elaborately-wrought silver or gold, which was hung from a belt or around the neck. A simpler form of pomander was an orange, lemon, or apple studded through with cloves and rolled in powdered spice.

***The Collection of Ambergris*, painting by Giovanni Battista Naldini(1537-1591). Location : Studiolo, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy.**

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A pomander shaped as an orange, vermeil (silver or bronze gilt), 16th century German.

Pomanders were popular less for their ability to perfume the wearer than for their perceived ability to protect the wearer from the plague. At the time, it was often theorized that the plague was caused by breathing "corrupt air." Many believed that inhaling pungent or otherwise fragrant odors would counteract the bad air's harmful effects¾hence, the carrying of the pomander. Still, being agreeably perfumed was a large part of the pomander's appeal. One sixteenth-century pomander recipe promised that by steeping an ounce of garden mould in rosewater for several days, then adding fragrant ingredients such as labdanum, storax, ambergris, and musk, one would "smell as sweet as any lady's dog." Fortunately, society lapdogs were as thoroughly perfumed as their owners during this period.

The Development of "True" Perfumes

While medieval and early renaissance women raided their gardens for fragrant flowers and herbs, professional perfume making in Europe was waking from a centuries-old sleep. The art of perfuming had existed, indeed, flourished in Europe since antiquity, but Western advancements in perfuming halted with the rise of Christianity in the fourth century. Early church leaders denounced perfume –along with all sensual pleasures– as a frivolity leading to wanton behavior and the fires of hell. Many Christians took this censure so seriously that not only did they swear off perfumes, they abstained from washing altogether. By the sixth century, the Church had loosened its strictures on the evils of scent, but the damage was done. Perfuming in Europe had virtually disappeared.

The art reemerged in the eleventh century as the Crusaders returned from the East with foreign seeds, roots and gums, as well as the newly-developed Arabian technique for distilling essential oil from roses. A few centuries later in 1320, Italian chemists perfected the distillation of alcohol. With these two innovations, the stage was set for the creation of the first "true" perfume: a solution composed of herbal essential oils and alcohol, the same basis used for perfume today.

The first known true perfume, called "Hungary Water," was created around 1370 for Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. According to legend the perfume was made by a hermit who promised that his concoction of distilled rosemary, grape spirit, lemon balm, and otto of mint would preserve her beauty until her death. Several years later, the nuns of the Carmelite abbey of St. Just became famous for a perfume created for King Charles V

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of France, which was made of distilled angelica root, balm leaves, and other essential oils.

Perfuming in the Renaissance

Although France is typically credited for the development of modern perfumes, it was renaissance Italy where perfume making first took serious hold. Trade between Venice and the East caused an explosion of availability of exotic spices and flowers. By the sixteenth century, true perfumes were in general usage among the Italian aristocracy; indeed, it was unthinkable that any cultivated person would leave home without being perfumed literally from head to toe. Shirts, stockings, gloves, shoes, and even coins were scented, and distilling herbal essences was considered part of the ordinary course of chores in most large homes of the period.

Snark / Art Resource, NY

Gathering of balsam resin, from *Le livre des Simples Medicines*. France, late 15th c. From the Bibliotheque de l'Ecole de Medecine, Paris, France

In keeping with the spirit of the Renaissance, Italian perfumers competed fiercely to design the most original and exquisite fragrances, sometimes with bizarre results. In *Les secrets de Maistre Alexis de Piedmont* (1580), one of the many perfume-recipe books of the era, the master advised persons desiring an exceptionally delightful toilet water to "take a young raven from its nest, feed it on hard boiled eggs for forty days, kill it, then distill it with myrtle leaves, talcum powder and almond oil." Less eccentric suppliers of perfumes were monks, whose centuries-old experience in preparing herbal medicinal tonics made them ideal perfumers. The pharmacy of the monastery of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, a perfumery still churning out natural fragrances today, supplied the de' Medici family with all their perfuming needs.

The Italian zeal for perfume reached France when Caterina de' Medici married Henry II of France in 1533, and brought her personal perfumer, Renato Bianco, with her from Italy. Legend has it that Bianco's formulas were so prized that his atelier was connected to Caterina's chambers via secret passageways so he could transport his fragrances without them being stolen. He was also rumored to prepare her poisons as well as her perfumes, and allegedly murdered Queen Jeanne d'Albret of Navarre, at Caterina's bidding, by infusing d'Albret's leather gloves with perfumed poison. (An autopsy later showed d'Albret died of natural causes.)

Caterina selected the Provençal town of Grasse –now legendary for its rippling fields of rose, jasmine and lavender– to produce perfumery flowers and herbs. Grasse was also then the center of industry for tanning leather, and the perfume and leather industries quickly became linked. Before long, Grasse was renowned for its production of perfumed leather gloves as well as its bottled scents. By the late seventeenth century, France had supplanted Italy as the perfuming capital of the world, a distinction it holds to this day.

So, should we imagine the smell of the Middle Ages and Renaissance with a crinkled nose? We certainly don't have to. These periods consisted of a hodge-podge of scents, ranging from dreadful to exquisite. Instead of focusing on the stinks and stenches, why not imagine a fifteen-century housewife pulling a tumble of garments from a cedar chest, brushing away stray petals from a tunic, and smiling at the rising, delicate scent of rose.

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