VERSAILLES

THE SOUL OF FRENCH PERFUMERY

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ESPACE
RICHAUD
From 4 November 26
to 7 February 27

A JOURNEY
TO THE HEART
OF ELEGANCE
AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

L'OSMOTHÈQUE
CONSERVATOIRE INTERNATIONAL
DES PARFUMS

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EXHIBITION SPONSOR MANE

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« Giant perfume bottles » Le Dix by Balanciaga and Nina by Nina Ricci – The Osmothèque collection, World Perfume Archive
© Adèle Kiffer – City of Versailles

An invitation to an olfactory experience

"Scent, accord, note, palette, hint, nuance, composition, creation, etc": perfumers' vocabulary directly recalls artistic creation.

Together with the management team at The Osmothèque - World Perfume Archive, which moved into new premises on Rue Saint-Simon in the city center a few months ago, we wanted to shine a spotlight once again on the historical links between Versailles and the use of perfumes. For this unique exhibition, curated by Anne-Cécile Pouant and Priscillia Pamart with the support of the staff at the Espace Richaud and the city's Cultural Affairs Department, I wanted it to take place in the historical setting of the Espace Richaud to underline the importance our team attaches to reviving the perfume industry in Versailles.

After exploring the ancient origins of perfume, the exhibition shows how the manufacturing secrets contained in various treatises, dating back to as early as the 16th century, gradually resulted in the development of perfumes, which first became popular at the royal courts.

French perfumery went through its first golden age in the 19th century, with the emergence of legendary "maisons" (perfume houses) and the development of the town of Grasse, which supplied Paris with natural raw materials. The Roaring Twenties were another key moment, as great fashion designers entered the perfume scene. Perfume bottles then became true works of art, showcased at the 1925 International Exhibition of Decorative Arts.

Today, with 1.2 billion bottles sold worldwide and 700,000 people employed directly or indirectly in France, the perfume industry is a major economic sector and continues to contribute significantly to France's global influence.

The exhibition "The Soul of French Perfumery – a journey to the heart of elegance and craftsmanship" recounts this fascinating story and showcases objects and reproductions of forgotten perfumes from The Osmothèque's collections.

Versailles plays a vital role in this epic tale about perfume, from its early use at court to the many experts, perfume houses and major institutions still involved in it today.

The evocative power of a perfume is unparalleled and offers a wonderful opportunity to travel back in time. This exhibition, unique in many respects, takes you on a journey both historical and olfactory.

François de Mazières
Mayor of Versailles
Chairman of Versailles Grand Parc

History of perfume, perfume of history...

Perfumes represent an immensely rich heritage that inspires the whole world and of which France is the undisputed ambassador.
We chose Versailles as the setting for this exhibition because, from the 17th century onwards, the royal city was a theater of power as well as the birthplace of a certain kind of elegance 'à la française', which undoubtedly is the most intimately expressed by perfume.
We invite you on a journey through two thousand years of history: from ancient rituals in honor of gods and the powerful to the golden age of the 20th century, including the royal and imperial courts that played a decisive role in its influence.

As you walk through the exhibition, you will discover how France became the world's leading reference through the unique craftsmanship of its artisans and exceptional perfumers, its recognized expertise in the cultivation and processing of perfume plants, the audacity of its pioneering perfume houses as well as the creativity of its fashion designers, who brought perfume into the world of fashion and lastingly established it as the ultimate accessory to an outfit.

This exhibition was made possible thanks to generous loans from institutions and private collectors. In addition to unique perfume bottles bearing witness to the genius of master glassmakers and various craftspeople who put their talent at the service of the art of presentation, you will discover rare and precious objects: finely crafted pomanders, a unique collection of old treatises, a Louis XIV silver perfume box, the deeply moving Journal of the King's Health, a Louis XV perfume fountain and a travel kit that once belonged to Napoleon.

The uniqueness of this exhibition lies in that it is curated by The Osmothèque, a leading institution dedicated o preserving the olfactory heritage, which has been based in Versailles for nearly 40 years. With The Osmothèque's expertise in reproducing forgotten perfumes based on their original formulas, the exhibition not only displays the perfumes but also enables visitors to smell them.

In the course of history, perfumes gained recognition and today embody a major art form in the cultural heritage of France, which deserves to be celebrated in keeping with its prestige.

Anne-Cécile Pouant et Priscillia Pamart
Exhibition Curators
The Osmothèque, World Perfume Archive



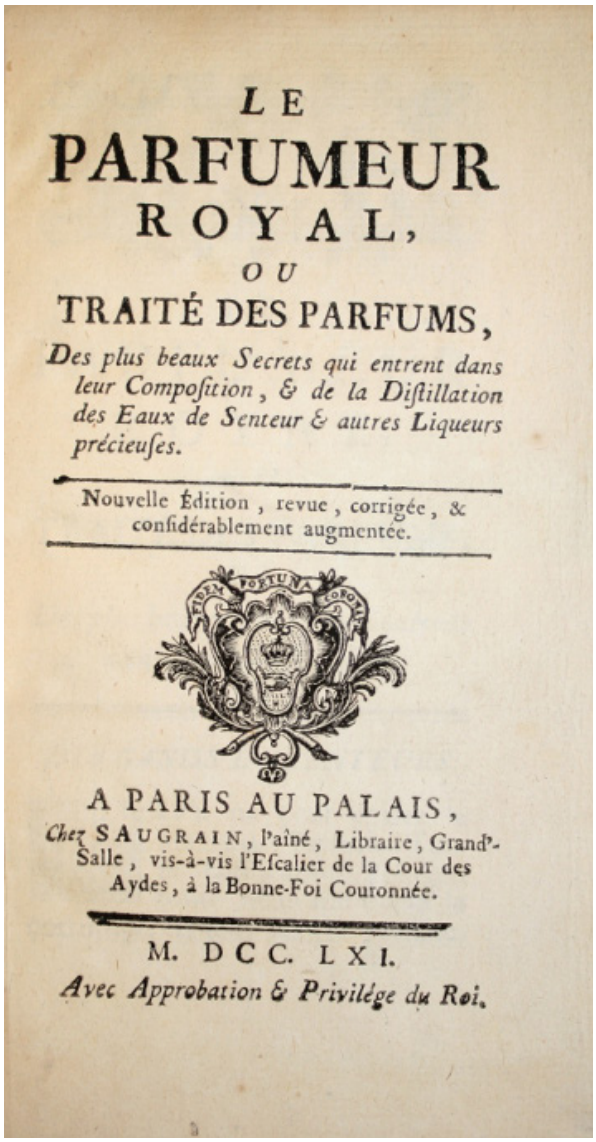
Device for discovering the fragrance of raw materials for perfumery © Adèle Kiffer - City of Versailles

A journey to the heart of elegance and craftsmanship

"Who ruled scents ruled the hearts of men". The perfume by Patrick Süskind.

The City of Versailles and The Osmothèque present "The Soul of French Perfumery" exhibition, starting 4 November 2026 at the Espace Richaud. The exhibition, an olfactory experience, offers a unique journey through more than two thousand years of the history of perfume.

With the support of the City's services, to begin with the Espace Richaud, The Osmothèque's collections will be exhibited off-site. They will be displayed with a selection of perfume-related objects on loan from leading cultural institutions and private collectors: apothecary jars, pomanders, perfume bottles, travel beauty cases, perfume fountains, stills, perfumer's organs and more.


LE
PARFUMEUR
ROYAL,
OU
TRAITÉ DES PARFUMS,
Des plus beaux Secrets qui entrent dans leur Composition, & de la Distillation des Eaux de Senteur & autres Liqueurs précieuses.
Nouvelle Édition, revue, corrigée, & considérablement augmentée.
A PARIS AU PALAIS,
Chez SAUGRAIN, l'aîné, Libraire, Grand'-Salle, vis-à-vis l'Escalier de la Cour des Aydes, à la Bonne-Foi Couronnée.
M. DCC. LXI.
Avec Approbation & Privilége du Roi.

The Royal Perfumer by Simon Barbe, 1761 edition, private collection of Éric Cothenet.

Journeying through history, art and scent, the exhibition goes back to the origins of perfume, its evolution over the centuries and the gradual development of a French model based on a combination of craftsmanship, creativity and innovation.

Perfume is seen in turn as a sacred offering, a symbol of power and distinction, a product of personal care and hygiene providing protection against unwholesome air and epidemics, then - with industrial development – as a consumer product that became increasingly widespread throughout society, and finally as a true work of art in which the packaging and its contents interact to showcase the perfume houses' creativity.



French Perfumery at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris. The Osmothèque collection, World Perfume Archive.



French Perfumery at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris. The Osmothèque collection, World Perfume Archive.



17th century pomander © Château de Chamerolles, Conseil départemental du Loiret.



17th century pomander
© Château de Chamerolles,
Conseil départemental du Loiret

Exhibition lay-out

At the origins of perfume, a sacred language that became a prerogative of the powerful

The exhibition starts with the origins of perfume, particularly when associated with sacred rituals. In ancient civilizations, fragrant substances were burnt as offerings and formed part of religious rituals. Among The Osmothèque's treasures is kyphi, a precious perfume from ancient Egypt which was used for sacred and therapeutic purposes.

Perfume gradually developed from its initial ritual use to become an attribute of power and a sign of refinement. The exhibition takes visitors on a journey through the royal courts where perfume became an object of desire and distinction. Over the centuries, prominent figures in power helped to shape tastes and customs, making perfume a marker of status and elegance.



« Turtle » perfum bottle, 1914 © Château de Chamerolles, Conseil départemental du Loiret.

Perfume and royal courts

This history has a strong significance for Versailles because, from the 17th century onwards, the royal city was a place where a certain vision of French refinement took form. At court, appearance, finery and ceremonial practices played an important part in gaining power. The dual nature of perfume, both intimate and spectacular, was one of the most distinctive expressions of this.

When perfume bottles became works of art

The exhibition then focuses on a decisive period in the history of French perfumery: the 1920s and 1930s when the French perfume industry revealed all its glory and exported all over the world.

The bottles designed by Lalique and Baccarat thus bear witness to a true golden age in the art of perfume presentation. Glassmakers, crystal cutters, gilders and other craftspeople put their craftsmanship at the service of what was now a precious object.

The bottle no longer merely a perfume container. It also formed part of the perfume's identity and was a fully-fledged work of art.

The introduction of organic chemistry into perfumes

This artistic effervescence deeply transformed the perfume industry. With the development of organic chemistry, perfumers had access to a much wider range of olfactory notes. New creative opportunities became available to them.

The perfume industry gradually moved beyond simply imitating nature to explore compositions that were more

abstract. Perfumes were becoming a true work of art, based on imagination and in-depth knowledge of olfactory formulation.

From perfumery to haute couture

The exhibition also describes the emergence of the great haute couture houses that helped shape the French perfume industry.

Lubin, Houbigant, Piver, Guerlain, Coty and Caron all took part in this transformation, supported by visionary entrepreneurs and the development of new techniques of creation.

Then the Parisian fashion designers took hold of perfume.

Following in the footsteps of Paul Poiret, the first to associate fashion and perfumery, Gabrielle Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin and Jean Patou embarked on the adventure. After the war, many of the maisons de haute couture followed suit, including Dior, Piguet and Balmain.

The encounter between perfume and haute couture deeply transformed both worlds. Perfume became an olfactive expression of a style, a haute couture house or a frame of mind. The creative process was no longer just based on olfactory composition: it combined a name, a story, a perfume bottle, an image and an aesthetic vision.

From this combination of craftsmanship, industry and creation gradually emerged what is now one of the most renowned expressions of French expertise.



Detail of « Parfums de Rosine » demonstration kit, around 1925. The Osmothèque collection, International Perfume Archive
© Adèle Kiffer – City of Versailles



CH. RAGOT & Cie

ANCIENNE MAISON HUGUES AINÉ FONDÉE en 1817

GRASSE A.M.

Preserve, pass on, inspire

Through the exhibition, The Osmothèque offers a glimpse of, and above all, an opportunity to smell, a unique heritage. As the only world archive dedicated to olfactory heritage, it has over 6,000 perfumes in keeping including many creations that are no longer in production, as well as formulas, raw materials that are rare or no longer exist, and artefacts bearing witness to over two thousand years of perfume history.

The exhibition also highlights the skills that helped make French perfumery a reference throughout the world: cultivation and processing of perfume plants (particularly in Grasse), fragrance houses with roots in the history of chemistry, as well as glassmakers, crystal cutters, gilders, designers, advertising professionals and craftspeople.

Their complementary nature gave rise to a unique ecosystem where materials, techniques and creativity interact to create olfactory artworks.

An exhibition to see... and smell

By displaying part of its collections off-site, The Osmothèque offers the public an opportunity to discover history that they can not only look at but also breathe in and smell.

From ancient offerings to contemporary perfumes, from sacred rituals to unique perfume bottles, from royal courts to haute couture houses, "The Soul of French Perfumery" exhibition goes back on the key milestones of a time in history where power, art, innovation, industry and craftsmanship converged.

Activities in connection with the exhibition

Various conferences and activities have been programmed alongside the exhibition to give visitors the opportunity to explore the different topics covered by the exhibition in more detail and discover more about the history and the olfactory heritage preserved by The Osmothèque.

For more information on the program of conferences and activities organized in connection with the exhibition, see the Agenda on www.osmothèque.fr and versailles.fr.

Conférences at The Osmothèque :

• 17 November, 7 p.m : *Tuberose, from Mexico to the Palace of Versailles* with Gabriela Lamy.

• 28 November, 10 a.m. and 2 p.m : "Fabulous Cologne" workshop. Creation of an Eau de cologne in collaboration with the House of Farina of Cologne, with Alice Villa (House of Farina).

• 1 December : Olfactory conference *Gabrielle Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli : Three fashion designers who left their mark on the world of perfumery*, with Elisabeth de Feydeau.

• 9 January 2027 : *Perfumers at the French court, from King Louis XIV to King Louis XVI*, with Alice Camus.

• 12 January : Early "Nuit de la lecture" : Candlelight readings of *The finest passages from literature on the subject of perfume.*

• 26 January, 7 p.m : *18th century perfume-related objects*, with Clara May.

• 2 February, 7 p.m : *Perfume at the 1925 Decorative Arts Exhibition*, avec Priscillia Pamart et Thomas Fontaine.

Entry fees informations on **osmotheque.fr**

Gallery talks :

• 6 December and 24 January, 5:30 p.m.
10€, From age 12.

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Informations

Espace Richaud
78 boulevard de la Reine, Versailles
Wednesday to Friday from noon to 7 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Entry fee: 7€ / 5€

The Osmothèque,
World Perfume Archive
8 rue Saint-Simon, Versailles
Osmotheque.fr
Booking required

Exhibition sponsor

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