

*Eugénie Briot*

---

## From Industry to Luxury: French Perfume in the Nineteenth Century

The production of perfumery articles became an industry in the nineteenth century, and their broader social diffusion invites questions about the accuracy of perfume's identification at that time as a luxury product. The innovations generated or adopted by perfumers, whether they involved new extraction methods or the use of synthetic compounds, not only introduced new creative possibilities but also allowed wider margins on sales. The shift from artisanal fabrication to industrial manufacturing accompanied relatively steep increases in the price of perfumes. Nineteenth-century perfumers developed marketing strategies to build the value of their products and to position them as luxury goods.

**T**he nineteenth century was a crucial time in the evolution of the perfume market, as it was the period when perfume products turned from being items of exceptional use into a broadly distributed, more widely consumed commodity.<sup>1</sup> According to historian Alain Corbin, sensitivity to bad odors increased as better hygienic practices became a more routine part of daily life in the second half of the century, due to the diffusion of water networks and the integration of bath amenities within houses and apartments.<sup>2</sup> Perfume products, especially perfumed toilet soaps, figured among the powerful purifying agents in this

<sup>1</sup>In the context of my research, which deals exclusively with the olfactory aspect of cosmetic products, I have restricted perfume products to all fragrant toiletries: alcoholic extracts, toilet waters and vinegars (used to perfume the water used to wash oneself), eaux de Cologne (whose use was often therapeutically as well as hygienically prescribed), lotions, hair oils and pomades, rice powders, fragrant wardrobe sachets, and soaps. These last items represent a massive part of the industry's products. I have thus excluded makeup products from the field of my investigations.

<sup>2</sup>Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille: L'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1982); Jean-Pierre Goubert, *Une histoire de l'hygiène: Eau et salubrité dans la France contemporaine* (Paris, 1986); Georges Vigarello, *Le Propre et le sale: L'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen âge* (Paris, 1985).

hygiene revolution, one consequence of which was that the bourgeoisie were able to differentiate themselves more clearly from the common people. However, although technological and cultural changes did further the development of the perfume industry, their impact was not sufficient to account for the widespread consumption of scented products. Beginning in the 1860s, the innovations generated or adopted by perfume manufacturers, including new techniques for extracting raw materials and, after 1880, the discovery of new synthetic compounds, also increased productivity, greatly lowering production costs and expanding consumption among new categories of customers.

These developments in the perfume industry radically reshaped a differentiated market, not only opening it to democratization, but also permitting a luxury sector to emerge. Both phenomena converged and reached their height in the 1890s with the emergence of perfume bazaars and the pressure felt by traditional perfume producers to reaffirm the value of their products and brands. As Geoffrey Jones emphasizes in his book on the beauty industry, the expansion of the markets in the nineteenth century pushed producers to “assure consumers of the quality of their products and to make them attractive.” Manufacturers’ strong incentive to differentiate products that were “once sold as commodities” led to the emergence of brands, which functioned as “conveyors of information” and “sources of value for firms.”<sup>3</sup> Traditionally an expensive product whose value was based on the estimated price of its raw materials, by the 1880s perfume had become affordable as a result of mechanization and the introduction of synthetic compounds. In spite of the lowering of their costs, some producers decided to maintain their original high prices by renaming and conferring a symbolic value on products that had become available at lower prices. The emergence of a luxury market, which shifted the value of products from their basis in the cost of raw materials to a symbolic level, is the focus of this article.

I will analyze the Parisian market, then the largest in Europe, looking at both the democratization of access to perfume products and the new segmentation of the market.<sup>4</sup> Patents registered in the Institut national pour la propriété industrielle, the records of the Académie des sciences, technical treatises, and professional reviews or inventories were evidence of these market changes. In analyzing the course of the sector’s industrialization, I consider the scientific and technical aspects, not from an internal perspective but, rather, as they relate to the management strategies of Parisian perfume producers, who, faced with a

<sup>3</sup>Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Oxford, U.K., 2010), 18 and 74.

<sup>4</sup>Eugénie Briot, “La chimie des élégances: La parfumerie parisienne au XIXe siècle, naissance d’une industrie de luxe,” PhD diss., Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, 2008.

newly segmented market, developed their product's image of luxury. My study is also based on a perusal of approximately sixty producers' and retailers' catalogs from the 1830s and the 1910s. Together with examples from the women's press, the catalogs' listings give an account of the products offered to consumers that complements the perfume producers' handbooks of formulas. Manuals of manners and the women's press were both powerful prescriptive agents whose distribution expanded considerably during the nineteenth century. Thus, as well as the perfume producers' and retailers' catalogs and advertisements, I examined about twenty-five manuals of manners published between 1804 and the 1910s and looked at articles that appeared in the women's press, mainly those published in *Le bon ton* between 1836 and 1879 and *Le petit messenger des modes* between 1842 and 1896. I also drew from a corpus of nineteenth-century novels as sources for the article.

In exploring how perfume producers and retailers built their image of a luxury item, I reveal the main characteristics and leading actors of the perfume business, before reviewing the factors that were involved in production development. I also trace the parallel evolution of the products' prices and the segmentation of the market. Finally, I recount the commercial practices and management strategies that Parisian perfumers developed to build an image of luxury for their product, despite its loss of intrinsic value.

### A Highly Competitive Environment

In 1810, the perfume trade in France represented slightly less than 2 million francs. By 1912, the value of its assorted products had risen to 100 million francs. From 1880 to 1890, production shot up, rising in value from 45 million francs in 1878 to between 70 million and 75 million in 1889.<sup>5</sup> Alfred Picard's report on the Universal Exhibition of 1900 in Paris gives the figures for the production of perfumery items: 12 million francs in 1836, 45 million francs in 1878, between 70 million and 75 million francs in 1889, 80 million francs in 1900.<sup>6</sup>

In 1789, the perfume trade was dealt a heavy blow by the outbreak of the French Revolution, but it recovered during the nineteenth century

<sup>5</sup>At the same time, the population of Paris, the first consumers of these products, grew considerably as well (from 547,000 inhabitants in 1801 to about 4 million in 1901), but the growth occurred at a slower rate than the consumption of scented products. The expansion of the total French population (from 28.25 million in 1801 to 38.96 million in 1901) was also less rapid.

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Picard, *Exposition universelle internationale de 1900 à Paris: Le bilan d'un siècle (1801–1900)*, vol. 5: *Industrie chimique, Industries diverses, Economie sociale* (Paris, 1906), 115.

and the number of Parisian perfume houses greatly increased, bolstered by new laws that gave free rein to the manufacture and trade of perfumed products. In 1807, the *Almanach du commerce* recorded 139 perfume houses that were engaged in fabrication and boutique trade. The number remained stable at around 130 houses until the 1830s, but by 1840 the *Almanach-Bottin du commerce* recorded 151 perfume houses in 1840, 206 in 1850, 270 in 1880, and 356 in 1914.<sup>7</sup> From 1855 on, the perfume business, according to the *Almanach-Bottin du commerce*, was divided into producers and retailers, followed later by the addition of raw-material suppliers. An estimate of the precise number of Parisian perfume houses is difficult to establish, because some of their names were listed under several categories. The *Almanach* gives an estimate only of the number of perfume houses in the capital but does not take into account the many shopkeepers for whom perfume was only a side activity. Registration in the *Almanach du commerce* occurred at the discretion of the retailer and was largely a means of promoting his or her name. A report on the Universal Exhibition of 1889 gives a far higher estimate, listing the number of perfume producers as reaching over 300 and the number of Parisian shopkeepers as about 2,000.<sup>8</sup> When it came to the capital's establishments, the *Statistiques de l'industrie* and the *Résultats statistiques* give only complementary data on the industry's growth, since only the perfume producers were the subject of a special census.<sup>9</sup> Perfume retailers did not always appear as a distinct category within the group labeled the "outfit and clothing trade." However imprecise these different sets of data, they are enough to prove the sector's density and dynamism. They also reveal that the

<sup>7</sup>*Almanach du commerce de Paris* (1797–1838), then *Almanach-Bottin du commerce* (1839–1856), then *Annuaire et almanach du commerce, de l'industrie, de la magistrature et de l'administration* (1857–1903).

<sup>8</sup>Picard, *Exposition universelle internationale de 1900*, 242n6.

<sup>9</sup>Chambre de commerce de Paris, *Statistique de l'industrie à Paris résultant de l'enquête faite pour les années 1847–1848* (Paris, 1851), 829; 102 perfume manufacturers were registered. Chambre de commerce de Paris, *Statistique de l'industrie à Paris résultant de l'enquête faite pour l'année 1860* (Paris, 1864); 197 perfume manufacturers were registered. Préfecture de la Seine, Service de la statistique municipale, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1881 pour la ville de Paris et renseignements relatifs aux recensements antérieurs* (Paris, 1884); perfume manufacturers were not registered as a distinct group. Préfecture de la Seine, Service de la statistique municipale, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1886 pour la ville de Paris et le département de la Seine, et renseignements relatifs aux dénombrements antérieurs* (Paris, 1887), 70; 210 perfume manufacturers and 392 comb, brush, and perfume retailers were registered. Préfecture de la Seine, Service de la statistique municipale, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1891 pour la ville de Paris et le département de la Seine, et renseignements relatifs aux dénombrements antérieurs* (Paris, 1894), 280; 232 perfume manufacturers were registered. Préfecture de la Seine, Service de la statistique municipale, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1896 pour la ville de Paris et le département de la Seine, et renseignements relatifs aux dénombrements antérieurs* (Paris, 1899); perfume manufacturers were not registered as a distinct group.

structure of the trade was based on a division between retailers and producers. To these two categories was later added that of raw-material suppliers.

Large flower farms were developed in the eighteenth century, mainly in Grasse or Cannes, to supply Parisian perfume manufacturers with the raw materials they required. The Chiris factory was established in 1768, then Lautier in 1795, Roure in 1820, Mero in 1832, Robertet in 1850, and the Société des parfums naturels de Cannes in 1883. Some perfume houses, like Piver, integrated their own raw-material factories into their businesses. In a competitive environment governed by the need to reduce costs, integrating production, possibly down to the level of managing the raw materials, was the strategy adopted by most perfume retailers, especially after 1850. None of them, however, could produce the entire range of essences necessary for perfume production; thus, they had to resort to more than one supplier. As a result, the perfume houses became highly dependent on one another. By 1914, about thirty raw-material suppliers were specializing in the production of synthetic compounds in France, mainly in the Parisian suburbs. The biggest were the De Laire factories (founded in 1876) in Issy-les-Moulineaux. However, the suppliers' businesses operated in the shadow of the Parisian perfumers, whose most famous brands had by then become widely recognized.

Historical studies of the perfume business have ignored the existence of hundreds of retailers, traders, and manufacturers operating in nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>10</sup> Historians have identified about twenty emerging figures for whom sufficiently documented sources are available: Louis Toussaint Piver, Alphonse Honoré Piver, Lucien Toussaint Piver, Pierre François Pascal Guerlain, Aimé Guerlain, Jacques Guerlain, Edouard Pinaud, Jean Baptiste Gellé, Félix Prot, Paul Prot, François Rigaud, Antonin Raynaud, André Monpelas, Félix Millot, Armand Roger, Charles Gallet, Alexandre Bourjois, and Victor Klotz, to name a few operations. Through their successes, these major figures represented the sustained growth of the perfume sector; the pioneers were the model for César Birotteau, a character imagined by Honoré de Balzac in 1837.<sup>11</sup> A man of modest origin, Birotteau, and real-life people like him, owed their considerable fortunes to their own hard work and perseverance. In the first years of the nineteenth century, for instance, Louis

<sup>10</sup> See the excellent work of Rosine Lheureux-Icard, "Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910 d'après les marques, dessins et modèles déposés à Paris," Master's thesis, Ecole Nationale des Chartes, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Honoré de Balzac, "Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau" [The Rise and Fall of César Birotteau], *La Comédie humaine: Œuvres complètes de M. de Balzac*, vol. 10 (Paris, 1844; 1st ed. 1837).

Toussaint Piver started out as one of Pierre-Guillaume Dissey's shop assistants, before becoming his associate in 1813 and then taking over the business upon Dissey's death in 1823. Between 1813 and 1823, the company's capital rose from 20,000 francs to 160,000 francs.<sup>12</sup> In 1810, the Dissey business turnover reached 35,000 francs, amounting to 2 percent of the national perfume trade. In 1862, Alphonse Honoré Piver, Louis Toussaint's fifty-year-old son, who had been the firm's director since 1844, could pride himself on a turnover of 1,920,000 francs, fifty-four times the company's record in 1810.<sup>13</sup> Another successful perfume entrepreneur, François Rigaud, born in 1829 in Riom (Auvergne), started in the perfume business in 1859. Receiving nothing but affectionate advice from his large family, he relied "only on his hard labor and perseverance to raise his social position."<sup>14</sup> In the 1890s, Rigaud provided six million of the seven million francs of the total share capital put up for the new firm, Rigaud, Clermont et Cie.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Félix Prot was only twelve years old upon entering Pierre François Lubin's perfume house in 1824. Twenty years later, he assumed leadership of the business.<sup>16</sup> Antonin Raynaud, born the son of a butcher in 1827 in Grasse, became an apprentice at Violet's at the age of sixteen, before entering the Legrand perfumery as a partner in 1857 and taking over the business in 1860.<sup>17</sup>

Besides these examples of self-made success, there are the perfumers who belonged to dynasties. The careers of most of the perfumers from humbler origins were overshadowed by the major figures, and the profession's reputation for accumulating fortunes was always based on the fame of the great names. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, perfumers played a visible role in public life, both as representatives of high bourgeois society and, sometimes, as influential individuals.

A sign of their rise in social status was the appearance at the end of the century of several Parisian perfumers among the members of high society listed in the *Tout-Paris* yearbook.<sup>18</sup> Beyond their inclusion in a select social network, perfumers were also distinguished for their skills

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Robert-André, "A la Reine des fleurs," *La Tribune Piver*, Revue d'information, no. 6, 2nd term 1960, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Julien Turgan, "Parfumerie L. T. Piver," *Les grandes usines, études industrielles en France et à l'étranger*, vol. 4 (Paris, 1865), 130.

<sup>14</sup> F. Rigaud, conseiller général du canton de Neuilly, candidat républicain, Election législative du 23 février 1896—Neuilly-Boulogne, série Z, 2 Z 282, Municipal Archives of Neuilly-sur-Seine (hereafter NSS).

<sup>15</sup> Convention pour la constitution de la Sté Rigaud, Clermont et Cie, ancienne maison Rigaud, fabrique de parfums et de produits pharmaceutiques, série Z, 2 Z 42, NSS.

<sup>16</sup> Lheureux-Icard, "Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910," 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Tout Paris: Annuaire de la société parisienne* (Paris, 1885–1939).

and professional success, either by their peers on the occasions of the Universal Exhibitions or by the state in the form of Legion of Honor awards. Alphonse-Honoré Piver, for example, was knighted in 1867 and was made an officer in 1878.<sup>19</sup> His son, Lucien Toussaint Piver, was knighted in 1900. Aimé Guerlain received a knighthood in 1892, as did Paul Prot, Félix Prot's son.<sup>20</sup> None of these men belonged to the founding generation of the perfume houses they managed, nor did either Antonin Raynaud, who was knighted in 1890 at the age of sixty-three after forty-seven years in the business and thirty as the head of the Legrand house, or Victor Klotz, who was made an officer once he succeeded the head of the Pinaud house.<sup>21</sup> François Rigaud was distinguished as the founder of his perfume house.<sup>22</sup> Some perfumers also became elected representatives, revealing the influence that their fame conferred on them in city life. In October 1893, for instance, Rigaud was elected as a regional councilor of the Neuilly canton.<sup>23</sup> In February 1896, he was also elected as a deputy of the Seine department.

The success of the perfume business enabled the Parisian perfumers to take advantage of their fame to promote their names as brands, thus enhancing the value of their products. In the competitive environment they experienced at the end of the century as a result of investments by newcomers, perfumers could either try to dominate by achieving cost reductions so they could widen their margins, or they could differentiate their products by conferring a highly symbolic value on them. Capitalizing on their names was among the first, and best, ways to achieve dominance, together with technical innovation and carefully considered management strategies.

### Major Technical Innovations behind Cost Reductions

Like many other sectors, the perfume industry benefited during its initial development from a new source of energy—steam power—which perfume manufacturers came to rely on more heavily after the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, Gellé & Taveau's soap factory in Neuilly-sur-Seine, beginning in 1851, owned a 4-horsepower (HP) steam machine that delivered 4.5 atmospheres of pressure.<sup>24</sup> In the final twenty years of the century, power quickly increased: in 1880, Roger & Gallet's

<sup>19</sup> Alphonse Honoré Piver, LH 2174/43, Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN).

<sup>20</sup> Lucien Toussaint Piver, LH 2174/44; Aimé Guerlain, LH 1222/26; Paul Prot, LH 2231/53; all AN.

<sup>21</sup> Antonin Raynaud, LH 2275/24; Victor Klotz, LH 1404/31; both AN.

<sup>22</sup> François Rigaud, LH 2329/38, AN.

<sup>23</sup> F. Rigaud, conseiller général du canton de Neuilly, candidat républicain, NSS.

<sup>24</sup> "Etablissements dangereux, insalubres et incommodes," n5: "Savonneries—Fabriques de parfumerie," n3: "Gellé," 1669 C, NSS.

factory, located in Levallois-Peret since 1863, adopted a 6-HP steam machine, soon to be replaced by a 20-HP machine. At the turn of the twentieth century, the power used by this factory, which then employed 600 workers, rose exponentially from 70 HP in 1895, to 200 HP in 1900, and then to 500 HP in 1905. In 1903, the Gellé factory, with only 400 workers, was powered by 165 HP.<sup>25</sup> In the same year, De Laire, in Issy-les-Moulineaux, deployed three Roser generators to produce steam, which was driven through two machines.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it was on the basis of this new energy, delivering unheard-of levels of power, that the different industries of the perfume sector developed and new treatments of raw materials emerged.

Perfume producers did not necessarily play a direct role in conceiving their new equipment. Their manufacturing processes were similar to those of other industries, such as pharmaceuticals, soap-making, or distillation of raw materials, and they sometimes ingeniously adapted machines that had been designed for other purposes to the needs of their industry. Confronted with an increasing demand for violet-scented products, for example, Pinaud & Meyer began to use the Vapart grinding machine to crush iris roots in their Pantin factory in the 1880s. Although the machine was not designed for that purpose, it proved to be a great help in the manufacture of iris-root powder.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, other manufacturers, including Alphonse Honoré Piver, developed their own machines or processes. By allowing new treatments of traditional raw materials, these improvements, or inventions, offered creative possibilities to the perfume producers' olfactory palettes. They also considerably raised productivity, as the reports of the Universal Exhibitions reveal:

Every day, ancient know-how, founded on empirical data, tends to disappear in front of the progress of science. . . . Since 1878, the substitution of mechanical work for manual work has increased again, resulting in more savings, regularity, and rapidity in producing. Producers use steam alembics, infusing devices, extracts shakers, grinding and pulverizing machines, hydraulic presses, pomade mixers, saponification boilers, a whole range of devices specific to toilet soaps (designed for shaving, perfume and mixing colors, grinding, moulding, casting, packing), etc. Steam rooms, tanks, sinks, containers, mortars, dryers, racks, etc. can be added to this equipment.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Département de la Seine, *Etat des communes à la fin du XIXe siècle, Levallois-Perret* (Montévrain, 1903), 124.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Julien Turgan, "Etablissements de la parfumerie Ed. Pinaud, Meyer et Cie successeurs," *Les grandes usines: Études industrielles en France et à l'étranger*, vol. 14 (Paris, 1882), 4–6.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Picard, *Exposition universelle internationale de 1889 à Paris: Rapport général*, vol. 5, *Le mobilier, le tissu et les vêtements (groupe III et IV de l'Exposition universelle de 1889)* (Paris, 1891), 241. All translations in this article are mine.

Such technological innovations enabled spectacular increases in productivity. Among the helpful inventions was the “automatic dryer,” patented by Alphonse Honoré Piver in 1864, which turned white soap into perfumed soap within a few days, whereas previously the drying process alone had taken more than a month. With this invention, soap fabrication in Piver’s factory rose to six thousand pieces a day.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the “rational saturator,” invented by the same manufacturer, allowed the *enfleurage* (a process of exposing grease or oil to fresh flowers that convey their perfume to these substances) of 800 kilos of hot grease to occur per day; another device enabled the *enfleurage* of cold grease to take place within twenty-four hours, instead of thirty-five days.<sup>30</sup> Beginning in 1883, the extraction of aromatic raw materials by volatile solvents partly replaced traditional water distillation, leading to low-temperature treatments that were more sparing of the scent of fragile flowers, such as jasmine, and enabled manufacturers to save money on production. The Société des parfums naturels de Cannes soon specialized in this technique, describing it as “realizing a more complete extraction of scents, and, as a consequence, a reduction in the cost price, by substituting the technique of methodical extractions to the one of repeated *enfleurages*.”<sup>31</sup>

Economic considerations, rather than arguments for quality, convinced the Society’s client producers to adopt the new techniques. The innovation that most strengthened the perfume producers’ fortunes, however, was also the most discreet and went unnoticed by consumers. The adoption of artificial olfactory compounds in large quantities by perfume manufacturers, beginning in the 1870s, caused upheaval in the industry. Piperonal, smelling of heliotrope, was a case in point. The synthesis of piperonal did not result from research undertaken specifically for perfumery. The chemical was discovered to have a pleasing scent by chance. After it was synthesized in 1869 by the chemists R. Fittig and W. H. Mielk, piperonal began to be produced industrially in 1874 and in quantities in 1886. The scent of heliotrope was first listed in perfumers’ catalogs in the early 1880s.<sup>32</sup> It appeared in the 1878 Guerlain catalog in the form of a soap (*sapoceti*), but then the 1882 catalog opened with a full-page engraving of a bottle of white heliotrope extract.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Turgan, “Etablissements de la parfumerie Ed. Pinaud, Meyer et Cie,” 134.

<sup>30</sup>Paul Poiré, “La savonnerie et la parfumerie,” *A travers l’industrie* (Paris, 1897, 2nd ed.), 318.

<sup>31</sup>Société des parfums naturels de Cannes, *Extraction des parfums par les dissolvants* (Paris, 1885), 3.

<sup>32</sup>It was indeed entirely new in perfumery. “In the field of perfume production, an even more interesting case can occur when an artificial product brings a new olfactory note that perfumers did not have before: as is the case of piperonal, terpineol, phenylacetic acid,” Septimus Piesse, *Chimie des parfums et fabrication des essences* (1903), 192.

<sup>33</sup>Guerlain, *Prix-courant de Guerlain, Parfumeur breveté (S.G.D.G.), 15 rue de la Paix, Paris* (Paris, 1878), 5, 13, Guerlain Archives, Levallois-Perret (hereafter, GA).

Literature reflected the adoption of heliotrope in fashion, inspiring the diffusion of this scent across social groups: in 1884, for example, it was the perfume of choice for respectable young ladies like Chérie, a general's granddaughter and the subject of the eponymous novel by Edmond de Goncourt, or like Louise Thibaudier, a banker's daughter, featured in Emile Zola's *La joie de vivre*.<sup>34</sup> Twelve or fifteen years later, however, it had become the perfume worn by disreputable fictional characters. Alfred Jarry writes about Ubu's wife in his play *Ubu roi*: "Before, she was drunk from seven in the morning and perfumed herself with brandy; now that she perfumes herself with heliotrope she doesn't smell worse." And its adoption for wear by a low-class swindler in Luis d'Herdy's novel *L'homme sirène*, associating it with the lower classes, signaled the end of the scent's popularity.<sup>35</sup> Between 1879 and 1899, the price of one kilogram of piperonal dropped dramatically, to 37.5 francs, one hundredth of its former price. In this case, the synthesis of a potentially fashionable scent carried to industrial development led to gains in profitability, before a drop in its price resulted in larger-scale social diffusion that was synonymous with greater success. Eventually, it was adopted by populations whose tastes were more questionable. Economic and social factors thus interacted to explain and generate the fad of heliotrope-scented products, followed by their downfall.

The drop in production costs affected all the artificial compounds used in the perfume industry: coumarin, smelling of new-mown hay, fell from 2,550 francs per kilo in 1877 to 55 francs in 1900; the price of vanillin declined from 8,750 francs in 1876 to less than 60 francs in 1906.<sup>36</sup> Natural musk, which cost from 1,200 to 2,000 francs per kilogram in 1871 but with the capacity to cost more, depending on its quality and origin, was synthesized by chemist Albert Baur in 1889.<sup>37</sup> Initially available for 2,000 francs per kilogram, the price fell to 100 francs per kilogram once its patent expired.<sup>38</sup> Through the savings they provided, synthesized artificial olfactory compounds played a major role in the huge expansion of the perfume industry in the nineteenth century, a point emphasized by the perfumers themselves:

<sup>34</sup> Emile Zola, *La joie de vivre* (Paris, 1884), 164, 347, 394, 516, 521.

<sup>35</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (Paris, 1900; 1st. ed. 1896), 86; Luis d'Herdy, *L'homme-sirène* (Paris, 1899), 82–83.

<sup>36</sup> Lucien Toussaint Piver, *Exposition universelle internationale de 1900 à Paris: Rapports du jury international*, Groupe XIV: "Industrie chimique," Troisième partie, Classe 90: "Parfumerie" (Paris, 1902), 456; Henri Coupin, *Promenade scientifique au pays des frivolités, étude pittoresque des frivolités fournies par la nature à la mode, à la parure et au luxe* (Paris, 1906), 366.

<sup>37</sup> Eugène Rimmel, *Le livre des parfums* (Paris, 1990, 1st ed. 1882), 248.

<sup>38</sup> Coupin, *Promenade scientifique*, 364.

Thanks to chemical compounds, perfumers and soap-makers could establish products at much lower prices, which immediately brought in new customers. One of the outstanding features of the social history of our time is the ascent of the humble classes towards a well-being, a luxury, as we could say, until then reserved only to the privileged. This trend was particularly obvious in the case of perfumery. Today, the humblest craftsman uses perfumed soap, which he or she can obtain at infinitesimal prices. The use of eau de Cologne, aromatic vinegars, eau de toilette, handkerchief extracts, is widespread. This growth of production was made possible thanks to the resort to artificial products that, for a modest price, offer perfumers a considerable olfactory power.<sup>39</sup>

### A New Segmentation of the Market

The drop in raw-material costs opened new market segments to more affordable products. Some perfume producers, like Agnel, or perfume bazaars, like the Galeries Saint-Martin, for instance, which opened at the beginning of the 1890s, chose to specialize in the sale of cheaper products. At the same time, department stores, such as Le Bon marché (established in 1852), the Grands magasins du Louvre (1855), or La Samaritaine (1870), mentioned their perfume departments in the *Annuaire et almanach du commerce* in 1885, arguing that their good prices were the main reason to buy from them. The sources neglect to estimate the volume of these cheaper products, which were intended to be diffused more widely, compared with the global volume of perfume sales. But if probate inventories did not list these low-status objects, novels mention their use by humble people, like Chérie's maid in Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie* (1884), whose soap was perfumed with the balsamic smell of benzoin, or like the pork butcher Quenu's shop attendant in Emile Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), whose hair pomade was scented with jasmine.<sup>40</sup>

A perusal of the archives of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, which holds a rich collection of commercial documents from nineteenth-century perfumers, reveals the prominence of perfumery bazaars at that time. These must be distinguished from department stores, whose sales of perfumed products did not seem to have been as considerable. The department stores attracted numerous customers who were

<sup>39</sup> Piesse, *Chimie des parfums*, 193.

<sup>40</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Chérie* (Paris, 1884), 83–84. The action in this chapter of the novel probably takes place at the beginning of the 1860s, as Chérie's father had been killed during the Crimean war (1853–56), and Chérie was six or seven years old at the time. Chérie's taste for heliotrope-scented perfumes, however, is very typical of the 1880s, since this raw material was not used by perfume producers before the mid-1870s. Emile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris, 1998, 1st ed. 1873), 135. The action in this book takes place in 1858.

seduced by the newly established sales rules of these establishments, such as fixed prices and cash payment. Perfume departments, however, were introduced in the stores rather belatedly in the 1880s and were not given the amount of advertising space in the catalogs that they were allotted in other venues. Huge department stores like Au bon marché or Aux trois quartiers never allotted more than one page to perfume products in their catalogs, nor did perfumes account for a significant portion of their sales.

Thus, the bazaars became the agents of a massive diffusion of perfume products in nineteenth-century Paris. The first perfume bazaar, Galeries Saint-Martin, was founded at the beginning of the 1890s by businessmen Baudis and Manilève a dozen years after perfume departments were first opened in the stores. The bazaar was located on boulevard Saint-Martin within a short distance of Place de la République, where the department store Les Magasins réunis had been built in 1866. The perfume bazaars soon flourished: Galeries Saint-Martin was followed by the Grande parfumerie parisienne, the Parfumerie des galeries Saint-Germain, the Grande parfumerie de Rennes, the Grande parfumerie, and the Parfumerie Moncey. Every Parisian arrondissement seemed to have benefited from its own perfumery bazaar. Not only had the bazaars become ubiquitous by the early 1900s; their range of perfumes had also grown more impressive than any found in the department stores. They sold the products of all the perfume producers, as well as their own brands, at much lower prices than those charged in the stores (their own brands generally went for half price), and they advertised in leaflets that mainly displayed price lists. Lubin toilet water, for instance, sold at 2.25 francs in the Lubin boutique of the rue Royale but retailed for 1.85 francs at the Galeries Saint-Martin.<sup>41</sup> The products were sold at stands on the pavement from nine in the morning until ten at night, or even until as late as midnight.

These innovative techniques had been anticipated in 1843 by Balzac in *L'illustre Gaudissart*: "Our century will link the reign of individual force, with many original creations, to the reign of uniform force, which by leveling, trimming products, swamping markets, and obeying a unitary idea, is the last expression of societies."<sup>42</sup> Facing the "uniform force" Balzac had described, traditional shopkeepers in general were compelled to imitate, then to adopt, practices like fixed prices and cash payment. The case of perfume, however, was unique: as the market expanded and became more competitive, the various segments were re-distributed in accordance with two opposing strategies. On the one

<sup>41</sup> Lheureux-Icard, "Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910," 88.

<sup>42</sup> Honoré de Balzac, "L'illustre Gaudissart" [1833], in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1843), 318.



Promotional engraving for the Mignot boutique in the 1860s. (Source: Parfumerie, Album “Imagerie de parfumerie,” Actualités, série 120, Archives of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris.)

hand, there were the department stores, perfumery bazaars, and a few small perfumers, like Agnel, that chose to make their products more accessible and opted for a policy that favored sales volumes. On the other hand, there were the traditional perfumers, who charged higher prices and benefited from wider margins, depending on the ability of consumers to pay more for their products. By attaching different prices to the same products, depending on whether they were distributed in traditional boutiques or in department stores or bazaars, a perfumer addressed customers in two ways. The first, representing an affordable entry into the market, relied on products such as toilet soaps, pomades, oils, lotions, and eaux de cologne—which were less expensive than eaux de toilette or extracts. The second way to apportion the market depended on distribution channels.

Traditional perfumers adopted an alternative to democratization: maintaining a constant selling price, regardless of the drop in production costs. Because perfume products were easily interchangeable, image became the main factor upon which value was built. The care taken by the manufacturers to promote their products, and the decision to sell the items in richly decorated boutiques, was intended to impress wealthier customers with the symbolic value and desirability of perfumes, in order to justify their high prices.

A letter sent to Charles Gallet in 1862 about the Collas perfumery illustrates the latter approach. Armand Roger noted that “eau de Cologne is retailed at 12 francs per litre but costs only 2.90 francs per litre to produce,” and that “it is sold wholesale at 8 francs per litre but costs 2.40 francs to produce.”<sup>43</sup> The margin on this product thus rose to 70 percent in the wholesale sales, and 76 percent in the retail sales. In both cases, the producers obviously chose to bet on high prices, rather than on large quantities, and conceived of their goods as luxury products, rather than as widely distributed items. Balzac’s description of his character, the perfumer César Birotteau, rejoicing at the comfortable margin that the particularly cheap bottles discovered by his assistant Popinot for his *Huile céphalique* will provide him, makes it clear that the profitability of this business was well known in the nineteenth century: “‘Four sous!’ said Birotteau. ‘Do you know that we could use oil at three francs, and make a profit of thirty sous, and give twenty sous discount to retailers?’”<sup>44</sup> Birotteau gave himself a margin of 1.50 francs on the wholesale price and 2.50 francs on the retail price in his boutique, *A la Reine des fleurs*. François Rancé, a real-life wholesale merchant from Grasse, did not hesitate to exhort his clients to grant themselves the largest possible margins on his products: “To the many dealers of perfume products (especially pomades and oils) for whom these are nothing but accessory items that make the selling of other goods easier, I urge these gentlemen to always raise their demands to higher prices (as much as their business may allow them to).”<sup>45</sup>

Some perfume retailers, on the other hand, chose to expand access to their products by setting low prices. This was the route taken by department stores, perfume bazaars, and brand-name producers like Agnel. P. Pradal, in his *Manuel complet du parfumeur*, regretted that the perfume industry did not follow the new rules of modern business: “Selling in quantity instead of selling expensively, diminishing one’s profit in retail to increase it wholesale, is an axiom the whole enlightened business nowadays agrees on, but which it is not applied enough to the perfume trade.”<sup>46</sup> Most perfume producers, on the other hand, understood that setting a high price on a product strengthened its symbolic value and social desirability, in the same way that other image factors, such as the elegance of the product itself, the quality of

<sup>43</sup> Henri-François Soulié, “Roger & Gallet, Paris: Chronique d’une doyenne de la Parfumerie française,” unpublished ms., 1985, 90, cited in Lheureux-Icard, “Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910,” 23.

<sup>44</sup> One sou was equivalent to 0.05 francs. Balzac, “Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau,” 288.

<sup>45</sup> François Rancé, *Prix courant des parfumeries de la fabrique de François Rancé* (Grasse, n.d.).

<sup>46</sup> P. Pradal, *Nouveau manuel complet du parfumeur* (Paris, 1863), 1.

its distribution, and the praise generated through its promotion, added to its appeal. These perfume producers bet on a strategy of exclusivity, which was based on maintaining high retail prices that seemingly would have been hard to justify in the context of the falling costs of both raw materials and labor.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, there is not enough documentation to form an estimate of the profits that were returned to producers as a result of their investments in industrial equipment. Thus, I am unable to calculate exactly the cost structure they used to justify the prices they set. Nevertheless, the dramatic drop in the prices of raw materials highlights the fact that, on the eve of World War I, the intrinsic value of the perfume products consumers could buy was considerably degraded. A perusal of the Coudray house catalogs between 1850 and 1876 yields an example of the growth of the producers' margins. Between 1850 and 1862, the prices of eaux de cologne and lavender waters, products that were comparable based on their use of the same bottles of equal capacity (most bottle models were kept) did not vary, nor did the prices of perfume extracts change from 1862 to 1876. From 1868 to 1872, however, the catalogs of the Coudray house revealed a sharp drop in the prices of raw materials submitted for sale: one kilo of Orient rose essence fell from 1,200 francs to 1,000 francs; that of ylang-ylang, from 1,800 francs to 1,200 francs; vetiver essence, from 1,200 francs to 800 francs; and the price of one kilo of patchouli was halved, dropping from 400 francs to 200 francs. Yet, at the same time, the prices of some of the most utilized essences rose: amber, for instance, went from 80 francs to 160 francs, and musk grew from 120 francs to 160 francs. The greatest drops, however, affected the most expensive and popular raw materials, like Orient rose essence. A drop in costs of at least 15 percent thus occurred in the composition of a heliotrope extract made according to a formula by Septimus Piesse, one of the most famous perfumers of the late nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> With the advent of synthetic compounds in the 1880s, the drop became all the more spectacular. In the case of Guerlain, the prices of eau de Cologne impériale, eau de Cologne musquée, eau de toilette Guerlain, and eau de violette remained remarkably stable: none of these prices varied at all between 1878 and 1910.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, even while their production costs were diminishing significantly, producers maintained their retail prices and widened their margins. By disconnecting the intrinsic value of their products from their

<sup>47</sup>The analyses of Rosine Lheureux-Icard highlight a relative decrease in salaries between 1847 and 1892. Lheureux-Icard, "Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910," 67.

<sup>48</sup>Septimus Piesse, *Histoire des parfums et hygiène de la toilette* (Paris, 1890).

<sup>49</sup>*Prix courant 1878, Prix courant 1882, Prix courant 1904, and Prix courant vers 1910*, GA.

retail prices, the producers introduced elements that were external to the product itself, making it more desirable to consumers and shifting its value to symbolic grounds.

### Management Strategies for Building an Image of Luxury

The management strategies that perfume producers used in order to build the value of their products were incorporated both in their offerings and in their product distribution and promotion. In a highly competitive environment, differentiating one product from another became a critical imperative.

There was considerable rationalization of product ranges and brands. Until the beginning of the 1880s, each perfume in the perfumers' catalogs was offered in several different bottles, as many as twenty for some products. (For instance, the eau de Cologne rectifiée no. 18 listed in the perfume producer Violet's catalogue in 1865 was packaged in eighteen different ways.) The price of the bottle itself determined the final price.<sup>50</sup> During the last decades of the century, the mere presentation of products in catalogs reflected a trend toward more rational organization: publications classified their displays according to product ranges, rather than kinds of product. All the products perfumed with the same scent, whether they were soaps, pomades, or hair oils, appeared together on one page. One style of decoration, color, and drawing created a unified presentation. Product ranges were called "parfumeries": "parfumeries à l'héliotrope" or "parfumeries *Délicia*" were displayed, for instance, in 1880 by Roger & Gallet, whose first range of products was their *Violette de Parme*, which encompassed eight different items. The whole profession joined in the effort to rationalize their products, limiting the number of references in catalogs and promoting some of their product ranges by building and articulating them like brands.

The products' elaborately decorated packaging was also factored into the prices. With improvements in color printing and glass-bottle manufacture, packaging became all the more decisive. The labels' designs were often delicate and ornate. L. T. Piver's labels, for example, were engraved either by Alexandre Brongniard Fils, the director of the Sèvres porcelain factory, or by his pupils.<sup>51</sup> Perfumers did not hesitate to highlight the decorative aspects of their products, which suggested both artistry and luxury. From the mid-nineteenth century, a considerable

<sup>50</sup> A la reine des abeilles (Paris), *Catalogue général de la fabrication des savons et parfums de Violet* (Paris, 1865).

<sup>51</sup> Jacqueline Robert-André, "A la Reine des fleurs," *La Tribune Piver* 5 (1st term 1960): 9.

amount of money was invested in presentation. In 1856, *L'Illustration*, in its regular column "Review of the Industry," underlined the fact that, with an annual turnover of 900,000 francs, the Maily house in Neuilly spent more than 100,000 francs on printing, embossing, satin-wrapping, and gilding their labels.<sup>52</sup> Maily emphasized the fact that its factory made its own envelopes and boxes. At this time, the famous jeweler René Lalique also began creating bottles for L. T. Piver's Aeterna, Scarabée, Misti, and Ilka perfumes.<sup>53</sup> In 1907, François Coty hired Lalique to design a bottle for L'Effleur perfume, followed by an appointment to design fifteen more.<sup>54</sup> The Roger & Gallet house soon employed him too.<sup>55</sup> Although it is hard to evaluate what percentage these expenses represented within the cost structures of the firms, the elaborately decorative packaging certainly played an essential symbolic role.

New forms of promotion helped to differentiate products as well. In addition to their traditional ads, some perfume houses ran advertisements called "Faits-Paris," which were disguised as society gossip columns and cost double the amount of regular ads. It was preferable that such advertising not be too visible and not be revealed for what it was, because praise was all the more valuable when it appeared to come from a lady of the highest society, not from the perfumer himself. For this reason, no mention of price appeared in the Faits-Paris. This type of ad, more than any other form of promotion, was an efficient way to build the brand's association with aristocratic society.

The perfumed card, another promotional device, appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, benefiting from progress in printing techniques. The cards were widely distributed due to their low cost and were also printed as calendars or train timetables. New consumers were thus reached through promotions of a name or a brand outside the confines of the perfume boutique, providing a means for perfume retailers to solicit the customers within their catchment area, and to raise awareness of their products outside the customary boundaries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new practice developed: customers were offered free trial samples of perfumes. A label was affixed to an ornate cylindrical glass tube, which was sometimes attached to a cardboard

<sup>52</sup> Elisabeth de Feydeau, "De l'hygiène au rêve: L'industrie française du parfum (1830–1939)," PhD diss., Université de Paris IV, 1997, vol. 1, 192.

<sup>53</sup> G. Champtocé, "Les enveloppes, les emballages . . .," *Les emballages en parfumerie, Revue des marques de la parfumerie et de la cosmétique*, special issue, Paris, 1925, quoted by Lheureux-Icard, "Les parfumeurs entre 1860 et 1910," 218.

<sup>54</sup> Ghislaine Sicard-Picchiottino, *François Coty: Un industriel corse sous la IIIe République* (Ajaccio, 2006), 74.

<sup>55</sup> Association pour la promotion de la culture à Bernay, *Roger & Gallet: Parfumeurs et créateurs, 1806–1989*, Exposition du Musée municipal de Bernay, 3 juin–3 sept. 1989 (Bernay, 1987).

support. This sampling technique was soon followed by a more refined one that emerged in the 1910s and took off in the 1920s and involved the distribution of miniature bottles. While this promotional strategy was relatively expensive, resulting in narrower distribution than the perfumed card, it greatly contributed to building the luxury image of perfume houses and differentiating a brand from its competitors.

With the development of public transport and Parisians' increased mobility, perfume makers promoted their products through sampling or broadened the scale of their advertising campaigns in response to the expanding customer catchment area.<sup>56</sup> Perfume products could be purchased through large perfume bazaars that offered an assortment of several brands, in department stores, and in producers' own boutiques. Promoting a brand thus also meant promoting its point of sale, where the margins realized were much bigger. In this respect, the space and visibility allotted to engravings representing boutiques in the perfume producers' catalogs emphasized the importance of these specialized stores.

Establishing boutiques enabled producers to satisfy the tastes of their most elite customers. With no way to make customers aware of perfumes from a distance, boutiques were the most accessible locations for broadcasting the availability of their products in the nineteenth century, and they were particularly efficient elements of brand-building. As the market expanded to include new groups of consumers and distribution channels, and as the commercial geography of Paris evolved, Parisian perfume retailers adapted their strategies to accommodate the shifts. The older perfume houses underwent a significant evolution in their approaches to establishing new points of sale. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the boutiques were located in the central areas of the capital. Between 1820 and 1855, there were about ten perfumers on the rue de Richelieu and close to twenty on rue Saint-Honoré. The perfume territory was bounded on the east by rue Saint-Denis and rue Saint-Martin, and there were eleven perfumeries on each.<sup>57</sup> These four streets housed the highest number of perfume retailers in the first half of the nineteenth century, corresponding to the distribution of fashion and novelty boutiques in the same area as cafés, tea rooms, opera houses, covered passages, and boutiques, all contributing to the neighborhood's upscale ambience. After Georges Haussmann (the prefect of the department of the Seine that included Paris) opened boulevards running from the Place de la République to La Madeleine, perfume retailers left the capital center for the new areas that then drained off the

<sup>56</sup> Dominique Larroque, Michel Margairaz, and Pierre Zembri, "Nombre de voyageurs transportés dans Paris et sa région de 1871 à 1996," *Flux* 50 (2002): 92.

<sup>57</sup> Archives of the Société Française des Parfumeurs, "Notes concernant l'histoire des parfumeurs parisiens," vol. 1.

elegant customers. Perusal of the *Annuaire et almanach du commerce* and the *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1886 pour la ville de Paris et le département de la Seine* confirms the general attractiveness of these places, whose establishments were emblematic of the triumph of a leisure class.<sup>58</sup> The case of the Piver perfume manufacturer, which moved its boutique several times before opening five other branches in Paris, revealed the merchants' desire to establish a presence in this emerging shopping area. In the mid-1860s, Alphonse Honoré Piver owned six boutiques in Paris.<sup>59</sup> While maintaining his place Vendôme location within the boundaries of what was formerly considered elegant Paris, near rue Saint-Honoré, he located his other shops near the newer boulevards.

As the established zone of perfume retailers moved north and west into areas less traditionally given over to the sale of luxury products, the decoration of the boutiques located within it became more elaborate. Since nineteenth-century Parisian perfumers posed as arbiters of good taste, they were bound to conceive and diffuse boutique models that strengthened the belief their customers had in them. The most important locales for displaying their merchandise to passers-by were the shop windows, which the proprietors widened to take up the full extent of their stores' façades. The development of glass-casting techniques after 1860 permitted much larger window panes to be fabricated. Showcases, display cabinets, counters—in oak or precious woods—mirrors, pots, and scales made up the main furniture of the perfume boutique.<sup>60</sup> The quality of the materials, the comfort of the furniture, the attentiveness of the personnel were illustrated in an engraving representing the Piver boutique in the 1860s, where no fewer than seven salesmen and saleswomen are depicted waiting on four customers in an arrangement designed to convey the utmost luxury.<sup>61</sup> The Orsay Museum collections contain studies for the decoration of the Piver boutique, as well as a drawing of a showcase designed for Millot by the famous École de

<sup>58</sup> *Annuaire et almanach du commerce, de l'industrie, de la magistrature et de l'administration*, (Paris, 1857–1903); Préfecture de la Seine, *Résultats statistiques du dénombrement de 1886*.

<sup>59</sup> Jacqueline André, "A la Reine des fleurs," *La Tribune Piver, Revue d'information*, 1–12 (1959–62).

<sup>60</sup> The restoration of the Houbigant boutique at 19 faubourg Saint-Honoré to its appearance in 1885 in order to celebrate its centenary, in 1955, shows "a heightened piece of furniture for cashiers, counters, drawers, inner showcases and chairs in lemon tree wood ornate with amaranth mouldings, an inlay parquet floor, and a decorated ceiling." Press book on the 1955 reconstruction of the 19 faubourg Saint-Honoré boutique, *Actualités*, série 120—Parfumerie, Houbigant, Archives de la Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Paris (hereafter BHVP).

<sup>61</sup> A. Hermant, "Grandes industries de France: Maison de parfumerie de M. A. Piver," *Le Monde illustré*, 17 oct. 1863, 351–52, *Actualités*, série 120—Parfumerie, Piver, article de presse, BHVP.

Nancy artist Hector Guimard.<sup>62</sup> A boutique like the Cherry Blossom, located at 12 boulevard des Italiens, featured picturesque elements, such as a rock, water, a mirror, and greenery.<sup>63</sup> No detail of this spectacular setting was overlooked. In 1893, the perfumer Alexandre Bourjois, for example, registered a patent for a fan-shaped device that displayed bottles in an original way.<sup>64</sup> During the second half of the century, the boutique evolved in the direction of more comfort and decoration, progressively losing its links with the manufacturing activity with which it had long been associated. Boutiques in which perfume was sold were described by the women's press. The opulent surroundings of a boutique and the deferential welcome with which customers were received were part of a product's price. At the same time, the price itself was part of the item's image, contributing to its desirability, in line with the effect postulated by Thorstein Veblen.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, owing to its impermanence and lack of intrinsic value, perfume's worth was largely subjective, whether it was based on the judgments of consumers themselves, on the prescriptions of the women's press, or on the manuals of manners. That worth was expressed by the system of symbols directly surrounding the perfume itself—its name, bottle, label, advertisements, the boutique in which it was sold—that combined to convey a particular image. The commercial rhetoric itself became the way to describe perfume. Balzac, for example, depicts the character César Birotteau thinking of his new Essence Comagène:

The perfumer, lost in his computations, was meditating as he went along the Rue Saint-Honoré on his duel with Macassar Oil. He was reflecting about his labels and the shape of his bottles, working out the structure of the corks, the color of the placards. And yet people say there is no poetry in commerce! Newton had not made as many calculations for his famous binomial as Birotteau made for his Comagene Essence—for by this time the Oil had become an Essence

<sup>62</sup> Hector Guimard, *Modèle de meuble pour le salon de la parfumerie Millot, Exposition Universelle de Paris, 1900* (3.3 m × 1.5 m), Musée d'Orsay, GP 2087; Albert Besnard, *Projet de décoration pour la parfumerie Piver, 1900*, watercolor, pencil, beige paper, gouache (0.315 m × 3.040 m), Musée du Louvre, fond Orsay, RF36526.

<sup>63</sup> The Cherry-blossom boutique is the subject of an article in *La Construction moderne* in 1893: "As to the rock, it does not seem out of place in this severe boutique, for it brings a lively note with its water effects, its mirrors and greenery points. At night it presents an entirely different aspect, maybe more pleasant, with its effects of electric light of various colors." G. Hennequin, "Boutique de parfumerie, à Paris, boulevard des Italiens," *La Construction moderne* (Paris, 1893), 126–27.

<sup>64</sup> Société A. Bourjois, Certificat d'addition du 12 octobre 1893 au brevet d'invention pour "Un genre de boîte présentant en éventail les flacons et autres objets," brevet no. 230 732, 9 June 1893, Archives de l'Institut National de la Propriété Industrielle, Paris.

<sup>65</sup> The Veblen effect as described by Harvey Leibenstein in "Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in the Theory of Consumers' Demand," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 64 (1950): 183–207.

again; he went from one description to another but did not perceive their actual value. His head spun with his computations, and he took this activity of unclear thought for the substantial work of real talent.<sup>66</sup>

Whether symbolic or formulated, the discourse surrounding the product came first. Its presentation, promotion, and distribution were carefully designed to construct its symbolic value and enhance its desirability to consumers. In the general context of falling production costs that resulted from the lower prices of raw materials and the industrialization of the sector, it became all the more necessary to link perfume to the image of luxury. The introduction of perfume in distribution structures like department stores, which charged more attractive prices than the perfume boutiques, pushed perfumer producers to adopt strategies of differentiation and distinction. What the product lost in intrinsic worth had to be gained in symbolic value.

### Conclusion

The end of the nineteenth century was an age of transition, combining unique cultural, technological, and economic conditions within the perfume industry and a marketplace favorable both to a dramatic development of the perfume-manufacturing sector and to the emergence of new management strategies. The emphasis shifted from the fragrance itself to the display of the praise surrounding it. The new management strategies were particularly efficient, since they enabled perfume producers to launch their names in a luxury market and to succeed in maintaining high prices, despite the growth of the sector, by building the value of their products and brands. Collaboration, while not explicitly spelled out, was a common occurrence among traditional Parisian perfume producers at a time when their group cohesion was reinforced by the organization of Universal Exhibitions and the foundation, in 1890, of the *Chambre syndicale de la parfumerie française* (Chamber of French Perfume Producers) under the presidency of Aimé Guerlain. Perfume producers did not follow the example of other luxury sectors, such as that of the silversmiths, who used the argument that plated silverware offered their customers the best price: “Why, when fortune nowadays relies almost solely on interest, immobilize several hundred thousand francs? You can get exactly the same visual result with a few dozen thousand francs.”<sup>67</sup> By positioning their product as a

<sup>66</sup> Balzac, “Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau,” 266.

<sup>67</sup> Christoffe’s catalog, 1862, quoted by Louis Bergeron, *Les industries du luxe en France* (Paris, 1998), 68.

luxury, perfumers built the image of a profession whose social success and wealth became proverbial and formed part of their professional group identity.

The commercial and marketing practices of traditional nineteenth-century Parisian perfume producers showed the originality of their strategies, which were influenced by the fact that perfume items avoided the traditional opposites of genuine and fake, natural and artificial, on which any estimation of the value of goods is generally founded. In this century of synthetic colorings, papier-mâché, and nickel silver, whose tasteful work was likely to introduce objects into the category of *demi-luxe*, nothing enabled anyone to distinguish a perfume exclusively compounded of raw materials of natural origin from one that integrated artificial products. On the contrary: artificial products were likely to enhance the olfactory quality of perfumes. Thus, perfume avoided the fate that befell other good that were separated into luxury or demi-luxe categories.

Perfume is thus a particularly useful subject for discussing the criteria of luxury and social desirability. Indeed, neither its work value nor its exchange value is an effective way to estimate this product's worth. Should perfume represent a utility, Jean-Baptiste Say would define it in this way: "By production is meant the creation, not of substance, but of utility."<sup>68</sup> In the case of perfume, utility is mainly social, making it difficult to assign to it a monetary value. Because it leads us to rethink the categories and foundations of the value of objects, perfume paves the way for fruitful studies on the management of other luxury products.

From the beginning of the interwar period, however, the utility model was broken by the alliance of perfume production with couture houses that began after 1910 with Paul Poiret's Parfums de Rosine. Perfume thus found itself attached to names like Gabrielle Chanel, Jean Patou, or Jeanne Lanvin, which rested on strong, extremely visual identities. The new names in the business, by turning perfume into a fashion accessory, capitalizing on the fame of a brand, and accessing more powerful communication means, finally eclipsed the old perfume houses. Apart from Guerlain and Roger & Gallet, little remains today of the nineteenth-century Parisian perfumers' original fame.

. . .

EUGÉNIE BRIOT is assistant professor at the Institut de recherche en gestion, Université Paris-Est–Marne-la-Vallée. She is interested in industries that deal in luxury goods, especially the links they maintain with their heritage and history.

<sup>68</sup> Jean-Baptiste Say, *Traité d'économie politique* (Paris, 1972 [1st ed., 1803]), p. 5.