

THE SCENTS OF ARABIA

Arabian fragrances are becoming increasingly popular. From oud to amber, the aromas of the East are making their way to the West

IT IS A PROVEN FACT THAT SMELLS EVOKE EMOTIONAL reactions. This is not an invention of savvy marketing executives: the human olfactory receptors are connected to the limbic system, the most primitive part of the brain, thought to be the seat of emotion. A pleasing perfume triggers a happy emotional reaction in both the wearer and the audience. But scents and senses are subjective. A floral scent with amber notes may be the olfactory equivalent of chocolate to some, but to others it's burnt toast.

The Middle East's distinctive fragrances trace back to regional flowers, woods, resins and spices. Modern perfumery, on the other hand, originated in France and Italy and focused on local flower and citrus scents. This history guarantees a place for floral scents within the West's fragrance industry.

But in this era of globalisation, the scents of Arabia are making inroads into the fragrances of the West, in one of the most exciting trends in the current global perfume industry. Ingredients such as Omani frankincense, the black iris of Jordan, the roses of Ta'if in Saudi Arabia and Persian saffron are being introduced to Western audiences, with designers such as Giorgio Armani, Christian Dior and Tom Ford championing the trend.

The truth is in the numbers. According to a 2011 report by Global Industry Analysts, the global perfume market is projected to reach sales of a massive US\$33 billion by 2015. Perfumes manufactured in Arabia currently account for \$270 million of global sales, rising by nearly 20 percent in 2012. And it's these figures that are driving and inspiring Middle Eastern perfume manufacturers such as Abu Dhabi-based Yas Perfumes.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The black iris of Jordan, scented oud, the roses of Ta'if in Saudi Arabia and Persian saffron are some of the signature scents of Arabia.

In recent months, Yas Perfumes has seen increases in their fragrance exports. While many of their clients are Arabs within the Gulf region, the "Royal name of perfumes" is seeing strong interest from various different foreign markets. "The main difference (between Arabian and others scents) is that the ingredients are composed largely by organic recipes," says Mustapha Al Omar, Yas Perfumes' sales manager. "For example, Arabian scents include oud, musk, amber and so on in a heavy concentration of oil."

These are the scents of the old souks of Arabia, where oud mingles with musk, frankincense, and amber. The contemporary perfume boutiques in upmarket shopping malls evoke this exotic heritage, with these strong scents floating from the doorways. Just like the characters from *1001 Arabian Nights*, the names of the perfumes – Mukhallat al Quds, Haneen, Al Hareem – conjure up images of traditional Arabia.

Arabia's place in the history of perfumes is firmly entrenched with trade routes for fragrant goods believed to have existed as long as 4,000 years ago. The craft of perfumery is an essential part of the culture, and in many ways Arabian scents link the past and present of the perfume industry.

The process of extracting oils from flowers by distillation, the procedure most commonly used today, was developed by Avicenna, a Persian polymath. Until this discovery, ▾



THE FUNDAMENTAL INGREDIENT FOR MANY ARABIC PERFUMES IS FRANKINCENSE. THE GUM RESIN IS EXTRACTED FROM THE BOSWELLIA TREE, GROWING IN SOMALIA AND SOUTHERN COASTAL ARABIA

liquid perfumes were mixtures of oil and crushed herbs or petals. Using distillation, Avicenna created essential oils, making him the father of aromatherapy, as well as an instrumental figure in the development of the perfume industry.

The fundamental ingredient for many Arabic perfumes is frankincense. The fragrant gum resin is extracted from the Boswellia tree, growing in Somalia and southern coastal Arabia, primarily Oman.

The resin is tapped from the trees by slashing the bark, allowing the resin to bleed out and harden. These resin potions are given the poignant name of tears. Different varieties of Boswellia trees produce different types of resin. Resins are graded and hand-sorted for quality.

The dry balsamic scent of frankincense is lighter than many base notes. It is considered to be an incense perfume – it's all in the name. Incense fragrances are based on aromatic biotic material which releases fragrant smoke when burned. Often the perfumes are blended with softer fragrances, to give a hint of spice or smokiness. Amouage Tribute Attar is one such smoky, leathery frankincense-based fragrance. Then, L'Artisan Passage d'Enfer blends frankincense with lilies for a bright, sweet, earthy aroma. Meanwhile, Armani's Prive Bois d'Encens is a top-notch treat.

Yas Perfumes choose oud over frankincense, found in the Oud Yas, Yas Al Malaki and Zayed scents. "The most popular scent is Oud Yas," Al Omar says. "Oud or agarwood is a highly sought after wood in the perfume industry." Oud comes from the wood of the agar and it is produced to ward off a particular mould infection.

Each tree has a maximum production of around 32ml of essence, the quantity contributing to its high value. "Superior quality oud is purchased at astronomical

prices," confirms Al Omar. Half a kilo of oud costs almost the same as a kilo of gold.

This liquid gold has made great gains in popularity, from East to West. On its own it has a dark, exotic flavour. Arabian Oud Shah Gold is a notable combination of perky floral notes with the sharp underlying oud scent, and other fragrances such as Pure Oud Eau by Kilian, Oud Intense by Comptoir Sud Pacifique and Sensuous by Estée Lauder follow in its footsteps.

The origins of musk are somewhat less tasteful. Originally coming from the gland of a male musk deer, the class now includes plants emitting similar bouquets, and artificially created substances. Musk has been a popular perfume fixative since ancient times, and is one of the most expensive animal products in the world. As obtaining the deer musk requires killing the endangered animal, synthetic musk is now used almost exclusively.

Musk is a love or hate fragrance, perhaps due to the high level of anosmia associated with the scent – musk should feel fierce, wild and strong. Good examples of musk can be found in Frederic Malle Musc Ravageur, CB I Hate Perfume Musk Reinvention and Yas Perfumes' Musk Yas.

Unlike oud, frankincense, and musk, amber is a fictional fantasy. It is an entirely synthesised scent; a combination of benzoin, labdanum and vanilla. It can be a refined, decadent scent, but the flip side is cloying. Atelier Ambre Nue is a mellow introduction to the scent, while Hermessence Ambre Narguilé for a sweeter, deep taste. Rawaa by Arabian Oud offers an interesting amber and oud mix.

Parisian perfumery The Scent of Departure takes a novel approach to perfume, creating "a world map of smells", which represent major cities across the globe. "Each city is an adventure for your senses," explains fragrance designer Gérald Ghislain. "A new language to hear, new meals to taste and most important, new scents to smell." He describes The Scent of Departure range of fragrances as "a line of scented memories".

"The Arabian Gulf has a delicate cuisine, inspired by fresh spices: cardamom, mint and saffron," says Ghislain. "Abu Dhabi and Doha fragrances were big challenges. Doha is the lightest one, with elegant yellow tangerine, jasmine and rose. Abu Dhabi strikes with its brilliant layer of bergamot and a mysterious amber."

"Arabic perfumes are an exotic and rich combination of incense and oils but without the alcohol base that is normally used in Western perfumes," concludes Al Omar. "Their fragrances are strong and spicy but unique and there is bound to be one that will appeal to your senses." 🌿



FROM TOP: The fundamental ingredient for many Arabic perfumes is frankincense; Oud Yas and Yas Rose perfumes.

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