Reflexive Perfumery: A Virtual Tour of the Osmothèque with Christophe Laudamiel

Given the IFRA's increasing chokehold on some of perfumery's most commonly used materials, the fragrance industry has found itself at somewhat of a crux. Reformulations of countless classics have stripped them of their original charisma, and perfumers and creative directors alike have publicly voiced concern over their ability to work within such progressively challenging confines. On the one hand, this has led to the escalation of exciting guerrilla and underground perfumery; on the other, it has necessitated a greater effort to forge ahead with new materials and resources. Consequently, what has emerged is a time for reflection upon perfume's historic development as a method by which to diagram the path ahead. And now, for U.S.-based perfumers, this capacity to reflect has been enriched through transatlantic access to the fragrance world's greatest archive, allowing for the ability to sniff back through history in order to look toward the future.

On January 21, **The Academy of Perfumery and Aromatics**, **The Goethe-Institut**, and **The Institute for Art and Olfaction**, collaborated to host an evening of bygone perfumery curated by **Christophe Laudamiel**. The event, which drew an estimable crowd of perfumers, writers, aficionados, and newcomers alike, offered a privileged glimpse into the Osmothèque—the official archive of perfumery based in Versailles, France. The evening served as an occasion to survey perfume's trajectory through a virtual tour and sniffing session of some of the archive's most famous holdings, introducing lost fragrances, original formulas, and reconstructions of ancient blends.

The two-hour event included a comprehensive lecture by Laudamiel as well as the opportunity to sniff some of the most rare compositions in perfumery. Furthermore, the night served as an inauguration of sorts, as one of the first events in which the Osmothèque's contents became available in North America. Considering that these items have never left Versailles, their journey across the ocean is both significant and telling.

Opening his talk with an extensive self-introduction, Laudamiel traced the distinction between his role at the New York City-based non-profit Academy of Perfumery and Aromatics and his more commercial role as the nose behind such mainstream hits as **Abercrombie & Fitch's Fierce** (2002), **Tom Ford's Amber Absolute** (2007), and **Ralph Lauren's Polo Blue** (2002). Discussing his work on **fragrances** for the avant-garde **S-Perfume** as well as the forward-thinking **Humiecki & Graef**, he painted a picture of an industry that is largely retrogressive in its approach to production, noting the way that much of today's niche perfumery reverts to a traditional aesthetic rather than moving forward and innovating. Yet this outlook is appropriate given Laudamiel's responsibility with the Osmothèque's archive as his talk intimated the importance of tracing olfactory lineage as a way to erect new, progressive bridges between the past and the future.

Laudamiel further articulated the importance of the archive's international expansion and the recent acquisition of a 501C status as a means by which to virtually extend the walls of the archive so those outside of Versailles can gain access to its resources. Citing the role of the U.S. in the production of key ingredients commonly used in modern perfumery, Laudamiel's talk implied the geographical and historical displacement of France as the central hub of perfumery—a gesture that maps onto the necessity to break away from tradition and expand toward more global notions of artistic creation. Consequently, the archive's new mobility can perhaps be read as a way to concretize tradition, outlining past olfactory achievements, but also functioning as way to actively engage genealogy—a method by which to read patterns and shifts in the industry as a series of signposts for the road ahead.

Next, Laudamiel provided some of the backstory for the Osmothèque itself—a space that Luca Turin has amiably referred to as "The Perfume Museum." The initial concept for the archive was proposed in 1976 by **Jean Patou** perfumer, **Jean Kerléo** in which a committee was established to discuss the possibility of such an archive. In 1986, Kerléo was entrusted with a collection of classic perfume formulae to be reconstructed, occasioning in the support of both the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Versailles and the Comité Français du Parfum. 1990 saw the official formation of the Osmothèque, opening with a collection of official recreations from original formulae as well as acquisitions from the vaults of **Chanel**, **Guerlain**, and others.