

how to spend it

A top fragrance blogger ruminates on the wonder of wood

How exotic woods are getting a feminine makeover



Image: Alain Beulé

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The scent was the first thing I noticed, even before I could marvel at the stained glass windows, the Venetian mosaic floors and the intricate Mughal frescos. It was sweet and warm, reminiscent of dry roses and fresh cream. Persistent, yet light, it had a presence of its own inside the lavish reception room of the Lakshmi Vilas Palace in Gujarat, India.

“The decorations in the Darbar Hall are carved out of precious Mysore sandalwood,” explained the liveried palace attendant, pointing to a delicate filigree of beige wood. In perfumery, “precious woods” is a composite term for many aromatic woods besides sandalwood: the raw, silky dryness of cedarwood, the burnt roses of guaiacwood, the liquorice bitterness of vetiver, and the petal freshness of rosewood. Given their kaleidoscopic complexity and impressive tenacity (as attested by the 200-year-old fragrance that still fills the halls of Mughal palaces), woods have become indispensable in modern perfumery. Above all, I find them fascinating for their role in redefining gender in scents.

Until the last decades of the 20th century, woods mainly took centre stage in masculine scents. Feminine fragrances featured flowers, fruits and sweet oriental notes, with leather and green mosses making an occasional appearance. A paradigm shift occurred in 1989 when Guerlain presented Samsara (first picture) with its unprecedented 30 per cent sandalwood overdose. In 1990, it took a daring visionary, Serge Lutens, to reinterpret the classically masculine note of cedarwood in *Féminité du Bois* (second picture), a fragrance for Shiseido. In 1993, Thierry Mugler conceived *Angel* (third picture) and suddenly the bitter chocolate radiance of patchouli (a leaf that smells of wood) acquired a new meaning – patisserie, rather than headshop. These fragrances, with their bold accent on woods, established an entire fragrance family and changed our expectations of a feminine scent.

Among contemporary fragrances, the selection in woods has grown tremendously, and a woman who wants to eschew “sugar and spice and everything nice” has plenty of choice. *Les Eaux Boisées* range, from Serge Lutens, includes several compositions where a backdrop of cedarwood supports a variety of accords from violets (*Bois de Violette*) to musk (*Bois et Muse*). *Vétiver Tonka* by Hermès reinterprets the earthy richness of vetiver as an abstract dessert worthy of Ferran Adrià. The woody note is set against a luscious accord of candied

fruit, cereal notes, and a touch of tonka bean caramel. Even Frédéric Malle's Lipstick Rose, a fragrance that is on the surface a floral, derives its powerful character from woods. What could have been a lighthearted coquette is instead a dramatic *femme fatale*. Finally, there's nothing to stop a woman from appropriating something from the masculine fragrance counter. Guerlain's Arsène Lupin Dandy and Prada's Infusion de Vétiver offer woods interpreted as the olfactory equivalent of a perfect martini. Those craving a potion along the lines of a double whisky would enjoy the incense-veiled woods of Andy Tauer Lonestar Memories and Comme des Garçons' 2 Man.

As I walk through the Lakshmi Vilas Palace, its magical scent reminds me of a daring fragrance classic that was inspired by exotic woods and faraway lands. It is the product of a collaboration between a renegade fashion designer and a genius perfumer. Bois des Îles, created for Coco Chanel in 1926 by Ernest Beaux, wove a startlingly masculine accord of vetiver and sandalwood into a bouquet of rose and jasmine. Almost a century later, Bois des Îles retains the surprise and excitement of its bold, confident, and utterly elegant composition.

Victoria Frolova has been writing her perfume blog, www.boisdejasmin.com, since 2005. It began as a hobby – her interest in perfume had been kindled while growing up in a family of chemical engineers – but it quickly turned into a full-time undertaking. Her blog is so-called because, she says, “the scent that never fails to move me is the aroma of jasmine in the warm evening air.”