

Michael Edwards Discusses Luxury Fragrance History, Niche Fragrance's Future

Luxury always needs to evolve and “keep itself relevant.”

By [Pete Born](#) on November 21, 2019

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Michael Edwards has been breathing perfume history since starting on his first annual Fragrances of the World reference guide in 1984.
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Glimpses of the resultant accumulation of knowledge — as well as quips — poured out during Edwards' talk conducted last week in Manhattan. The purpose of the meeting, held by the Perfumed Plume Awards for [Fragrance](#) Journalism organization, was to promote publication of his latest book, “Perfume Legends II.” A near capacity crowd of 95 people turned out at the Society of Illustrators headquarters, according to Lyn Leigh, cofounder of Perfumed Plume.

The 360-page, large-sized volume is an update of the original, landmark version “Perfume Legends,” which was published in 1996. Edwards said he was originally motivated by a paucity of materials showcasing perfumers talking about their work.

“The whole purpose of the book is to provide us with a framework in which we start understanding how perfumery has evolved over the last 100 years,” Edwards said. “We never had that before,” he asserted. “What we had was a lot of myths being propagated, but there has never been an in-depth analysis of what they did.”

Edwards said he expects to do an American version of Perfume Legends, perhaps in two years. This new book focuses on largely French feminine perfumery, like the original. "Legends II" covers 52 perfumes, starting with the landmark Jicky by Aimé Guerlain in 1989 to Portrait of a Lady in 2010 by Frederic Malle and perfumer Dominique Ropion.

Edwards investigates the role of the early pioneers, particularly Francois Coty, who laid the groundwork for the modern [fragrance](#) industry. "He was the mastermind who turned perfumery from a rough sketch into a work of art," according to celebrated perfumer Edmond Roudnitska. For the new edition, Edwards has added eight new scents that he considers legendary fragrances.

Among the highlights are a 10-page exploration of the rise of Coco Chanel and the creation of her most famous scent, No. 5.

One eye-opening tidbit came from the chapter on Opium, which reveals that Yves Saint Laurent seized upon the controversial name when the packaging designer Pierre Dinand showed him an ancient inro box in which Japanese samurai warriors kept their medicines and opium pills. They clipped them onto their belts before going into battle. The packaging idea inspired the name of the perfume that changed the way fragrances were marketed in the Seventies and Eighties.

In response to a question from the audience, Edwards ticked off a couple of other cases where packaging was closely allied with the fragrance story. One was another Dinand project, Paco Rabanne's 1969 women's scent Calandre, which means "grill" in French. It was inspired by Rabanne's vision of the Sixties being a decade of sexual freedom for women, with free-spirits roaming around the open roads without a care. Edwards noted, "when Rabanne was asked 'What do you imagine the perfume will be?' by the people at [fragrance supplier] Roure, he said, 'Imagine you have a young girl and a man and they drive together. They go through a forest and stop. No one is around. He makes love to her on the bonnet [hood]' of the car. Dinand responded by designing a bottle inspired by the grill of a Rolls-Royce.

The second part of Edward's presentation consisted of a question and answer session with Rodrigo Flores-Roux, senior perfumer and vice president of perfumery at Givaudan Corp. Edwards was asked to share his thoughts on the current state of perfumery.

"We live in the best of times and worst of times," he replied. "The best of times — we have creativity exploding, for instance. The worst of times — major brands find it so tough to innovate because they cannot afford it. If they go wrong, their share price gets savaged by Wall Street."

Moreover, the definition of luxury has lost its permanence. "We tend to think it will last forever," he said. "It won't. The taste of luxury is a moveable feast. What was luxury 30 years ago seems faded." Luxury always needs to evolve and "keep itself relevant."

Then there are financial pressures. "The cost of raw materials has exploded," he said, adding that ingredients like oakmoss and lylral can be problematic. They are suspected allergens

and are forcing companies into difficult reformulation choices. “They are tearing their hair out trying to reformulate and there is no substitute,” he said of Lyréal.

“So we are seeing a whole new evolution of luxury,” Edwards continued. “Many of the great brands of the Eighties and Nineties have become almost mass-tige. Limited editions are so pervasive; flankers so frequent. The aspirational qualities don’t last.”

But then Edwards turned to a brighter page. “On the other hand, I’m fascinated by the explosion of creativity, the opportunity that is taking place in the niche fragrances. For me, niche is the nursery school of the future.”