

Parfums d'Orient (Perfumes of the East)

Institut du monde arabe
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imarabe.org

Exhibition from 26 September
2023 to 17 March 2024



'Asâr al-Tabrizî, *Mihr in a hammam in Khwarazm, Mihr wa Mushtari* (Mihr and Mushtari), Shirâz (Iran), copy dated between 1540-1550. Ink, gouache, and gold leaf on paper. Copenhagen, The David Collection
© The David Collection, Copenhagen

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From 26 September 2023 to 17 March 2024, the Institut du Monde Arabe will present a one-of-a-kind exhibition that immerses visitors into the heart of one of the world's most stunning perfume civilisations, from the Earliest Antiquity to the present time.

From the trade routes of Arabia where incense, amber, oud, and spices were transported to the rituals that have travelled the course of centuries, this unique event will invite visitors to experience a genuine journey of the senses through the East.



Incense burner, Mosul (Iraq), mid-13th century.
Cast brass, silver-inlaid, London, The Nasser
D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art
© The Khalili Collections

Balsamarium (bust of a Nubian), 2nd century,
Cast bronze, Lyon. Museum of Fine Arts of
Lyon © Lyon MBA



In an exhibition pathway spanning 1000m², around 200 heritage and contemporary pieces of art — manuscripts, miniature works, textiles, paintings, photographs, video installations — will take visitors on a trajectory where they can see and feel just how essential fragrances have always been to the Arab world, from the High Atlas to the shores of the Euphrates.

Punctuated with surprising, scented devices, the exhibition engages all the senses and invites visitors to immerse themselves in the fragrances specially created for the occasion by perfumer Christopher Sheldrake for an innovative and exquisite olfactory experience.

An immersion into the fragrances of the East

Visitors are invited to embark on a marvellous adventure to explore the perfumes of the Arab world. From fields of rare essences to the perfumer's workshop, from the streets of a medina to a hammam, and finally the sacred space at home, this ancestral culture that is still vibrant today unfolds in a show of aromas and spices. As such, the exhibition recounts the close relationship that ties perfumes into the Arab world. It sheds light on their long relationship, the characteristic fragrances of their bond, and the various traditions playing an essential social role that bring them together.



Denis Dailleux, *Cueillette dans les hauteurs du Moyen Atlas* (Harvesting in the altitudes of the Middle Atlas). Middle Atlas (Morocco), 2015
Film photography. Artist's collection
© Denis Dailleux

The rarest and most precious essences

From Arabia to the most remote corners of Asia, and from the Mediterranean Basin to the Middle East, visitors will discover the origins of the rare and precious essences to which Arab merchants owed their renowned reputation. Since the Earliest Antiquity, Arabia — land of incense, grey amber, and myrrh — has played a major role in the perfume trade. Floral essences of rose, saffron, and jasmine grow from the Mediterranean Basin to the Middle East, while humans have had to face unmeasurable risks to collect other raw materials from East Asia. The origin of certain materials, such as grey amber and musk, were for a long time kept secret, thus allowing the Arabs to maintain a monopoly over their trade. Together with oud wood, these have always been and continue to be the most cherished essences in perfumery.



Mohamad Al Riyashi and Riad Fahami,
Muscat, Oman, 2023, Vladimir Antaki. Muscat
(Oman), 2023, Photography © Museum of the
IMA / Vladimir Antaki

The fragrances of the city

The journey then takes visitors to the medina where they will discover the many ways perfume has been used in the public space. They will witness the important role fragrances occupy in the Arab-Muslim society. As the city is a place for mingling and exchanging, all types of olfactory products can be found there with a range of specific uses: cosmetic, therapeutic, and religious. Visitors will walk through the perfume souk, then go to the baths before heading to prayer. Perfumers are very often apothecaries and have a well of highly respected knowledge. In order to create a perfume, a series of phases must be mastered, most notably distillation, a process dating back to Antiquity which was perfected by Muslim savants starting in the ninth century.

As a sign of the high esteem in which perfume makers are held, their district is always located at the heart of the souk, nearest the main mosque. This proximity reflects the essential role of perfume in the purification rituals prescribed by Islam which take place at the hammam, a venerable place of social interaction.

The spiritual dimension given to perfume makes it possible to reflect upon how its use relates to the sacred and to underline



Yumna al-Arashi: Shedding Skin. Beirut, (Lebanon), 2017
Video projection 8 min, Artist's collection
© Yumna AL ARASHI

the continuity and disruptions between pre-Islamic Antiquity and the Muslim world of yesterday and today. The history of perfumes begins in Ancient Egypt, where they were used to communicate with the gods. Then, in the Jewish and Christian religions, they were also used as an intercessor with God. Before Islam, perfumes belonged to God, but the Arab-Muslim culture offered them to humans as well as exclusive use over them. With the onset of Islam, popular culture became the one to bestow magical virtues on incense fumigation.

In the private quarters of an Arab-Muslim home

At the end of their journey, visitors will enter a home and witness how perfumes are used in private, even their most intimate and secret applications. First, perfume is a key component of socialising as shown in the ancestral rituals for receiving guests who are adorned with perfume by their hosts. It is thus an integral part of the hospitality ceremony and essential in Arab culture. Every home has its flower water diffusers or incense burners.

Finally, the doors are opened to the most private space: the alcove. Perfumes arouse desire and are included in a series of seduction rituals. Safran, musk, and amber are often cited for their aphrodisiac properties and appear in Arab poetry to praise the beloved. Fragrances are diffused in different spaces to arouse desire: solid perfumes are hidden in locket or

openwork boxes placed around the room in order to disperse a tantalising scent.

The heritage and contemporary works in the exhibition along with the sourcing of raw materials for perfumes attest to the importance of fragrances, ointments, oils, balms, waters, and fumigations in cultural, social, and intimate practices. Their dialogue recounts how perfume irrigated traditions and permeated daily life in the past and how it continues to do so in the present. *Parfums d'Orient* is the living mark of a deeply rooted ancient culture.

On the sidelines of the exhibition

A wide range of cultural offerings — concerts, conferences, workshops, film projections, literary events..., — will be organised alongside the exhibition from October 2023 to February 2024.

More information at imarabe.org