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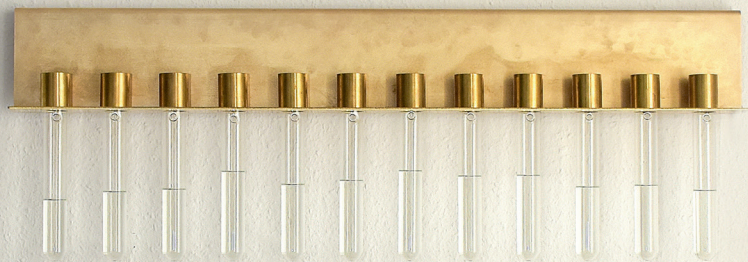
Design Directions 2024  
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Focus on Scent



# Scent & the Legacy of Covid-19







**Opposite page and above**

*Scent clock – There is something in the air* by Patrick Palcic |  
Photos Nikolaus Brade

**Left**

*Litterae Odorum* by Patrick Palcic | Photo Nikolaus Brade

**Below**

*Living with Scents* exhibition at the Museum of Craft  
and Design of San Francisco curated by Elisabetta Pisu  
and Clara Muller | On view February 11–June 5, 2022 |  
Photographed by Henrik Kam

Two years after the Covid pandemic hit Europe, we are finally starting to develop a better understanding of its impact on our sense of smell. Here, Charline Ronzon-Jaricot discovers how this unique moment in history has affected our relationship with scents and the industries that depend on it.



It became apparent early on that one of the prime indicators for Covid-19 was its impact on our sense of smell. More than two years into the pandemic and a significant part of the global population has experienced temporary anosmia, the loss of the sense of smell. But Covid didn't just affect people's perception of scents. Mandatory masks and lockdowns also reduced our olfactory experiences. Sarah Burri, Perfumier at Cinquième Sens, Creation and Consulting, for the fragrance house Cinquième Sens, talks about the dichotomy of the impact of Covid; though our sense of smell diminished, we became more aware of its importance. She explains: "I think that Covid collectively diminished our sense of smell because of wearing masks and being scared of smelling other people". As a perfumer she used to smell people's fragrance trails when she passed them, "Now I don't do it so much as I am too scared of catching the virus." Yet, despite this, Burri also believes that "People became more aware of how primordial this sense is, for all of those who lost it."

Lizzie Ostrom, also known as Odette Toilette, is a producer, curator, consultant and author specialising in scent experiences. She says: "Anosmia and other smell disorders weren't taken seriously even by some in the medical profession and there was a limited palette of treatment options. Now GPs are more aware of how to respond and signpost smell training kits and make referrals when someone comes in with long term smell loss or distortion." Certainly Covid-19 has helped to evolve treatments for anosmia. For Lizzie Ostrom: "Smell is so important in so many areas of our daily lives, and we're only just starting to realise the things it does for us."

Preoccupation with the home and wellbeing as a result of successive lockdowns has had ramifications for the scent industry. With people staying at home, fragrance brands couldn't rely on direct experience of perfumes to promote ►





**Spread clockwise from left**

Portrait of Jeanne Doré, co-founder of Nez magazine |  
Photo Romain Bassenne

*Flavour of the Month* event organised by Odette Toilette |  
Photo Ruby Walker

Portrait of Odette Toilette by Max Oppenheim for Wired

Portrait of the perfumer Sarah Burri by Shannon Barro

*Odor per Imbrem* by Patrick Palcic | Photo Nikolaus Brade



sales so had to reinvent themselves. Ostrom explains: “Covid accelerated an already-in-motion move towards discovery sets of perfume.” Jeanne Doré, Co-founder of the magazine *Nez* confirms this: “The main consequence is the increase of digital sales, and the multiplication of sample kits, subscription boxes, and gifts. There are also more virtual experiences to replace the presence in shops.”

The consumer’s approach towards perfumes has also changed. Jeanne Doré explains: “Fragrance sales have not decreased that much, because people realised they could wear a fragrance for themselves and not for others. Wearing a fragrance that you really like, and that you chose, not because of the brand or the ad, but because of the smell, can bring you joy, strength and happiness, even if you are alone at home.” Burri has also noticed a change in the way perfumes are chosen: “They are looking for more intimate scents with less trail.”

The wellbeing industry has also immeasurably aided the scent industry’s survival. “We’re seeing fragrance moving away from the alcohol-based formulations which dominated the 20th century, and towards other formats. Scented products are now marketed alongside wellness ones” explains Ostrom. “Scented candles and home fragrance really shot up, though I believe that traditional department store pillar scents struggled to find as much relevance as culturally we’ve moved on so much in two years,” she adds. Lockdowns made many reconnect not just with themselves but also with nature and this too was reflected in a demand for specific scents. “During the past year, we saw an increase of ‘naturalness’ in fragrances; green, floral, herbal, fresh notes are more present. People are looking for more authentic smells in their everyday products, closer to reality and away from chemicals,” explains Doré.



These changes have not just been in production, but are also reflected broader cultural shifts. The increasing interest in all things olfactory is notable in the art and design scene where cross pollination is encouraged across disciplines. These shifts are reflected in the bi-annual magazine *Nez*. Doré explains: “Our ambition is to bring together all the various cultures and practices connected to olfaction and perfume. This is a collective of multidisciplinary experts, including journalists, scientists, perfumers, historians and artists, whose mission is to reveal to the greatest number, and in the most accessible and relevant ways, the richness of a sense which has long been overlooked.”

Another key event for olfactory culture this year was the exhibition *Living with Scents* at the Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco. Curated by Elisabetta Pisu and Clara Muller and supported by *Nez*, it gathered design projects exploring the sense of smell and perfumes created in the past decade. One of the featured designs was Patrick Palcic’s *Scent clock*, created in 2021. This piece, with its twelve scent vessels, releases a different scent every hour, suggesting a new approach to the perception of time through fragrances rather than numbers. The work was created at a moment when time was suspended and opportunities to use our sense of smell were restricted. When it comes to olfactory experiences, perhaps the most compelling lesson of Covid-19 has been realising the importance of scents, the pleasure they can provide, and just how much they can affect wellbeing and happiness. ●

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