

Art, Adornment, Abstraction

Thinking Perfume

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Some perfumers and users of perfume have claimed that the more complex perfumes should be appreciated as artworks and not merely as adornments. This essay contributes to the recent philosophical discussions of the issue. Part I explores the relation between adornment and art as Stephen Davies conceives of them. Part II examines the arguments Chiara Brozzo and Cynthia Freeland give for the current existence of art perfumes. Part III offers one kind of formal case for art perfumery by exploring some limited structural analogies between perfume and music. Part IV proposes a set of distinctions among types of art perfumes. Part V discusses whether certain perfumes can be both art and adornment. | *Keywords: Art, Adornment, Abstraction, Perfume, Music*

Thinking Perfume? To many people, perfume might seem a mere adornment, hardly worthy of thought, let alone a serious discussion of its art status.¹ Such things as perfume, body decoration, and clothing have traditionally been ignored by mainstream philosophy. Yet, given Stephen Davies' recent philosophical analysis of the role of adornment in various societies, even if perfume were primarily adornment, it would still raise significant aesthetic issues, including the possibility that some kinds of perfumes might merit being considered works of art (Davies, 2020). For example, one could, as I have done elsewhere, draw upon Dominic Lopes' idea of 'local analogies' to argue that something like 'art perfumes' might eventually emerge in the way 'art quilts' emerged in the 1970s, although I concluded that perfumes currently remain works of design not art (Lopes, 2014; Shiner, 2015, pp. 375–392; Shiner, 2020, pp. 229–243). But Chiara Brozzo has challenged my claim that art perfumes are only a future possibility, basing her case that some perfumes should already be considered art on both the aesthetic properties of certain innovative niche perfumes, and on the existence of networks of informed appreciators who treat them as artworks (Brozzo, 2020, pp. 21–32).

¹ This perspective probably reflects long-standing gender prejudices as well as Kant's and Hegel's denial that the sense of smell can be a basis for reflective aesthetic judgments (Kant, 2012, p. 67; Hegel, 1975, p. 38). The treatment of perfume as a trivial cosmetic is not true of all cultures; perfume is highly respected in Islamic societies (Thurkill, 2017, p. 116).

Brozzo's claims have recently been reinforced and extended by Cynthia Freeland (Freeland, 2021). This essay reviews and enlarges their arguments that some perfumes are art and explores its relation to Davies' work on adornment.

Part I sets the stage by exploring the relation between adornment and art as Davies conceives of them. Part II examines the arguments Brozzo and Freeland give for the current existence of art perfumes and suggests their case could benefit from an enlarged formal perspective and a conceptual framework for distinguishing among types of perfumes. Part III offers one kind of enhanced formal case by briefly exploring some limited structural analogies between perfume and music. Part IV proposes an informative set of distinctions among types of perfumes with the aim of giving greater specificity to the concept of art perfumes. Part V addresses the issue of whether certain perfumes can be art and adornment at the same time.

1. Adornment and Art

Stephen Davies characterises adornment or decoration as intentionally “making something special by aesthetic enhancement,” which can be either making it beautiful or making it awesome (sublime) (Davies, 2020, pp. 16–17). Moreover, such aesthetic enhancement needs to be noticed as well as be perceived by the targeted audience as intended to be noticed (Davies, 2020, pp. 19–21) Davies' response to the question of how adornment relates to art differs depending on whether he is considering the issue from the perspective of Western or of certain non-Western cultures. In the West, Davies points out, artworks can sometimes contain decorative elements or be used decoratively, but normally they are “treated as self-contained wholes and [...] not regarded as adornment” (Davies, 2020, p. 31). Yet Davies recognizes exceptions, e.g., “paper folding, quilt making, needlepoint, and flower arranging as seriously practiced in some cultures, might be accepted as art forms” (Davies, 2020, pp. 32–33). As for perfume, Davies considers it only as part of the history of cosmetics (Davies, 2020, pp. 107–117). After exploring the pervasiveness of adornment and decoration in the culture of Bali, including the use of adornment in many Balinese art forms such as gamelan music, he asks, “by allowing that Balinese offerings are works of art in their own right, are we denying their decorative character”? (Davies, 2020, p. 198). He replies that Balinese art forms are indeed decorative since they are “inevitably functional, being intended to please and entertain the gods” (Davies 2020, p. 198). Accordingly, Davies concludes that the Balinese are “a people who turn the arts into adornments and make decoration into art” (Davies, 2020, p. 200). But he restricts the general possibility of art works becoming adornments to “the broader context of a religion-infused, ritualistic style of life” (Davies, 2020, p. 199).

I would suggest that what Davies ascribes to Bali, is true not only of some arts in other non-Western cultures, such as calligraphy in the Islamic world, but increasingly of some arts in Western cultures. Davies himself mentions as exceptions to the traditional polarity of the fine vs. the decorative arts, not

only paper folding and flower arranging (Japan), but needlepoint and quilt making (Europe, America) (Davies, 2020, p. 32). All quilts were once classified as folk or decorative art in the West, but since the 1970s some kinds of quilts have been widely accepted as works of art and shown in fine art museums. Similarly, there is no longer a fixed line between the fine and the decorative or 'minor' arts with respect to many other pursuits; in recent decades arguments have been made in favour of repositioning some instances of fashion, comics, and video games into the category of high art (Smith and Kuber, 2013; Meskin and Cook, 2012; Nguyen, 2020). In each case, one ceases to treat entire practices as belonging to either fine art or decorative art but grants higher art status to individual works or certain types of works based on their artistic and aesthetic properties.

2. The Case for Art Perfumes

What are the implications of this interpretation of Davies's work on adornment for the art status of perfumes? Obviously, most perfumes are works of art in the small 'a' sense that includes any creation that requires skill and imagination, as when we call cooking, carpentry, or teaching 'arts'. The more difficult question is, are perfumes works of art in the capital 'A' sense, namely, works intended to be appreciated in ways similar to the ways Westerners appreciate more established art forms? An initial problem with saying 'yes' is that to most people the very term 'perfume' suggests the idea of adorning one's body with a scent rather than experiencing it for itself as a 'work of art.' But, since in some cultures adornment or decoration can become art just as art can be used for adornment and even in the West there are a few arts that are treated as both art and adornment, it seems appropriate to investigate the possibility that some perfumes or kinds of perfumes are not only used as adornments but also currently experienced as art.

Chiara Brozzo builds her case for treating some perfumes as art by first showing that various experimental perfumes produced by small 'niche' companies can satisfy both Nick Zangwill's aesthetic definition of art and Jerrold Levinson's historical/contextual theories. For Zangwill, something is a work of art if it has been intentionally endowed with aesthetic properties based on a configuration of non-aesthetic properties (1995), and Brozzo points out that perfumers create configurations of odour molecules ("notes") that evaporate at different rates, resulting in a new scent that can be appreciated for its aesthetic properties (Brozzo, 2020, p. 22–23). Levinson's definition of fine art requires that something be intended for 'regard-as-a-work-of-art' in any of the ways in which previous works are or have been so regarded, a definition that comes in two versions. The 'intrinsic' version requires close attention to form, *op. ess* to emotional suggestion, and awareness of symbolism. Brozzo offers a variety of examples that satisfy the intrinsic version, including the way the niche perfume *Dzing!* symbolizes through exemplification the properties of a circus with scents of leather harness, hay, and fur (Brozzo, 2020, pp. 23–24).

In the 'relational' version of Levinson's definition, to be regarded as art is to be regarded in the way works in an established art form are so regarded, but

historically in the West scent creation has not been widely regarded as an art form. Nevertheless, Brozzo claims that an art form she calls “art perfumery” has come into existence. I had claimed that for something like art perfumery to exist would require an established practice of creating perfumes to be appreciated for their “innovative structural complexity” as well as “an expressivity and symbolism that challenge the receiver’s expectations” (Shiner, 2015, p. 391). Brozzo uses these very criteria to develop her argument that ‘art perfumery’ *already* exists. She gives examples of niche perfumes that reflect innovative structural complexity, such as Christopher Sheldrake’s use of unusual notes like absinthe in *Douce Amere* (Brozzo, 2020, pp. 25–26). She also shows that currently there are many perfumes that manifest an expressivity and symbolism that goes against the receiver’s typical expectations of what a perfume should smell like, such as *Secretions Magnifiques*, which gives off odours simulating sweat, semen and other bodily fluids involved in the sex act (Brozzo, 2020, p. 26).

An equally important aspect of Brozzo’s argument, and one that is elaborated more fully by Cynthia Freeland, is that not only do perfumers *create* perfumes that manifest unusual expressivity and unconventional symbolism, but that many knowledgeable admirers of perfumes *evaluate* perfumes in these same terms (Brozzo, 2020, p. 28; Freeland, 2021, pp. 3–4). In addition to many serious print reviews, there are also a number of online perfume blogs with a wide following of informed amateurs (Turin and Sanchez, 2009, p. 2018).² As Freeland points out, the best of these perfume reviews are similar in structure to standard reviews of high art forms, whether of painting, installation art, or music, since they draw attention “to specific features, commenting on how they work together to create certain effects, offering comparisons to relevantly similar or distinct works” (Freeland, 2021, p. 9). Freeland concludes that some members of the audience for creative niche perfumes “treat perfume not so much as a means of adorning the body but as facilitating imaginative experiences and creative self-expression” (Freeland, 2021, p. 11).

By combining the argument that some perfumes are intended to manifest structural complexity and challenge our expectations regarding expressivity and symbolism, with the argument that there now exist networks of informed reception that evaluate perfumes for these same qualities, Brozzo and Freeland are led to conclude that art perfumery already exists (Brozzo, 2020, p. 28, 30; Freeland, 2021). On the whole, I find their case in favour of the current existence of an implicit category of ‘art perfumery’ convincing, although I believe we need to distinguish between a claim that perfume in general is an art form and the more limited claim that there is a subset of perfumes that constitute ‘art perfumery.’ Equally important, I believe Brozzo’s and Freeland’s case for art perfumes needs to be enlarged in two respects: first, I believe it could use an augmented formal argument based on perfume structure to supplement Brozzo’s rather brief remarks on form, and second,

² Among the better-known blogs are Basenotes, Now Smell This, Bois de jasmin, and Fragrantica. On the increasingly well-informed international audience for artistic perfumery see (Mignot, 2021) and (Jacquet, 2010).

both Brozzo's and Freeland's accounts of art perfumery and its reception need a conceptual framework for identifying the different *types* of art perfumes and their relation to non-art perfumes, thus giving greater specificity to the concept of art perfumery. In the next section, I propose one way to strengthen their formal case.

3. Perfume and Music

Just as the perception of some similarities between Amish quilts and abstract paintings led to the proposal that some quilts are works of art and part of an art category that came to be called 'art quilts', I would suggest that some formal analogies between perfumes and music could help us justify treating certain kinds of perfumes as part of the category "art perfumery." Obviously, it would be preposterous to claim that a single perfume, however complex, could equal even minor compositions of classical music. What interests me here are a few structural parallels between simple musical compositions and the way the best perfumes are composed. I will focus on two structural parallels between perfume and music in general that derive from the fact that both music and perfume are temporal arts. The noted perfumer, Jean-Claude Ellena, once remarked that it is only by "creating a pattern, a melody," that "I create an olfactory form" (Ellena, 2007, p. 54). But the structural parallels between perfume and music go beyond perfumers' frequent use of musical terminology such as 'melody', 'harmony', 'notes', 'accords', 'dissonance', etc. As the neuroscientist, Charles Spence points out, recent empirical research suggests, that some musical terms in perfumery are not entirely metaphorical.³ As in the case of a musical score, a perfume formula's horizontal dimension or 'melody', is made up of a succession of olfactory notes (kinds of scents) of differing lengths (evaporation rates) and intensities, whereas the perfume (ac)cords are vertical 'stacks' of notes, as it were, forming sets of integrated and usually harmonious odours (Allégret, 2016, pp. 25–30). For example, among the many early notes in Sophia Grojsman's famous perfume, *Paris*, are bergamot and violet, quickly followed by lily of the valley, all of which soon fade into Grojsman's powerful iris-inflected central rose accord, and, after a long period, that accord slowly fades in turn as notes of musk, sandalwood, and amber come to the fore before they too disappear.⁴ Knowledgeable perfume appreciators, like knowledgeable music listeners, are likely to attend to the beauty of the way each formal structure is arranged so as to offer a suite of olfactory experiences that are at once sensuous and intellectual. Of course, these structural similarities between perfume formulas and musical scores are not

³ Already in 1857, Septimus Piesse's *Art of Perfume* proposed a list of correspondences between notes on the musical scale and particular scents (Piesse, 1857). Piesse's proposal has been examined experimentally by Charles Spence (Spence, 2021, pp. 5–6). Spence also reports studies that have found people tend to match certain scents with certain timbres at a greater than random rate (Spence, 2021, p. 21). For more research on music/perfume parallels see (Deroy, 2013). For some insightful general remarks on music/perfume relations see (Jaquet, 2015, pp. 39–61, 155–169).

⁴ I only mention a few of the notes in *Paris*; reviewers' lists differ in length and distribution among the top, heart and base notes compare Allégret (Allégret, 2016) to Ayala Moriel (Moriel, 2008).

only limited, but quite general. Only a handful of musical compositions have a structure similar to that of most perfumes, in which individual elements appear and disappear one after another.⁵

But I believe the limited and very general formal similarities between music and perfumes become more evident if we focus our attention on what are called ‘abstract perfumes’ and purely instrumental music. The latter are perfumes that do not seek to smell like some familiar scent in nature or everyday life – roses, grass, leather, or even such untoward odours as sweat or semen. Rather, their scent is dominated by odours derived from a variety of unique artificial olfactory molecules.⁶ I would suggest that at one end of the spectrum of more or less abstract perfumes one might put Geza Schön’s *Molecule 01*, which is composed solely of the artificial molecule Iso E Super. At the other end of the spectrum of perfumes that are not intended to smell like some identifiable thing in nature, one might place the famous *Chanel No. 5*, which, although it contains a variety of generally floral and other scent notes, is dominated by aldehydes. As the critic, Luca Turin, suggests, the heavy dose of aldehyde molecules in *Chanel No. 5*, gives “an abstract, marmoreal, blue-white radiance to what would otherwise have been a lush but relatively tame floral” (Turin, 2006, p. 54).⁷ Abstract perfumes, then, provide aesthetic satisfaction to knowledgeable perfume users primarily through the structuring of the perfume’s elements and the unfamiliar scents that result rather than by evoking associative responses to representational or semantic indicators.

The notion of “enhanced formalism” that Peter Kivy used for absolute music offers a particularly attractive approach to the comparison of abstract perfumes and music.⁸ Taking some liberties, one might substitute ‘abstract perfume’ for ‘absolute music’ at the beginning of his definition of enhanced formalism: “the doctrine that absolute music [abstract perfume] is a sound structure [smell structure] without semantic or representational content, but nevertheless, a sound structure that sometimes importantly possesses the garden variety emotions as heard [smelled] qualities of that structure” (Kivy, 2002, p. 101).⁹ In an abstract perfume, the length, intensity and variety of its notes and accords are integrated into a complex structure and sequence of

⁵ For example, Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite*.

⁶ Tania Sanchez writes, “the art of abstraction in perfumery” means “the creation of a new smell for its own qualities, and not for any fidelity to things already known” (Turin and Sanchez, 2018, p. 9). By artificial molecules, I do not mean synthetics which simply offer cheaper (jasmine) or more environmentally friendly (musk) substitutes for natural odors, but new scents.

⁷ For a review of another abstract perfume, *Odeur 53* (1998) which has 53 artificial molecules, see (Frolova, 2005).

⁸ The term “enhanced formalism” was first used by Philip Alperson (Kivy, 2002, p. 90).

⁹ The extent to which perfume structure might “possess garden variety emotions” (Kivy, 2002, p. 101) as smelled qualities is both complex and controversial. Of course, Kivy’s views on music are also controversial. Garry Hagberg has argued that Kivy gives away too much since absolute music does have some semantic content in the broad sense that the resolutions at the end of a piece of counterpoint, for example, can be experienced as isomorphic with our attempts to integrate the narrative of our lives (Hagberg, 2021, pp. 366–76). Similarly, many abstract perfumes may have a few notes that are representational.

unusual olfactory qualities that the trained and discerning smeller can learn to perceive, in ways similar to the way a trained and discerning listener can appreciate the pattern of notes, chords, and sound qualities of a piece of absolute music. Sometimes, one can say of an abstract perfume's purely olfactory elements and structure what Kivy says of some absolute music: it may deeply move or excite us simply by its formal beauty (Kivy, 2002, p. 129). Kivy's remark reminds me of the perfumer, Marina Jung Allégret's, description of a successful perfume accord as evoking "a memorable aesthetic emotion" which she likens to the emotion associated with "a musical phrase" (Allégret, 2016, p. 45).

Of course, there are also many *disanalogies* between perfume and music. In the matter of notes, for example, the music composer has far more creative and expressive options than the perfumer, since the composer can specify such things as length, whereas the perfumer's notes are molecules that evaporate at a fixed rate. Moreover, unlike the opening of most musical works, when a perfume is first released, all its notes are present (Ellena, 2011, pp. 147–149). As for, the typical duration of a work, most instrumental pieces last under ninety minutes, yet can pack in enormous complexities of structure, rhythm, and timbre, whereas the typical perfume for wear is designed to slowly unfold over several hours or most of a day and only the most highly trained noses can follow their development. Another disanalogy is that the internal repetition of entire passages is central to music, but extremely rare in fiction and painting (Kivy, 2002, p. 153), and almost non-existent in single works of the perfumer's art. Since a perfume is made up of notes and accords that evaporate over time its development is basically a one-way process. Taken together, these differences critically limit the expressive capacities of most perfumes compared to most works of music, whether classical or popular.

Having explored two formal analogies and several disanalogies between perfume and music, let's turn now to the task of offering greater specificity to the concept of art perfumery by suggesting a framework for distinguishing among types of perfumes.

4. The Span of Art Perfumery

If only *some* perfumes are art, two questions arise: how should we think of non-art perfumes, and are there any significant differences within the category of 'art perfumes'? Establishing a framework for answering those questions will provide a second augmentation to the case for art perfumery. Since most of the criteria for identifying art perfumes that we have discussed so far, such as innovative formal complexity, openness to emotional suggestion, or challenging symbolism, are scalar, I suggest that we think of all perfumes as forming a continuum that stretches from what I will call 'Artists' Perfume-like Works' at one end to 'Standard Design Perfumes' at the other. I base the continuum on two criteria. First, the degree of the perfume creator's freedom, e.g., artists' extensive freedom vs. designers' many constraints (design briefs, hedonic and cost limits, safety and environmental regulations). Second, the receivers' norms of judgment, e.g. whether the perfume manifests innovative

structure, unusual emotional resonance and symbolic suggestion vs. conventionally pleasing scents for adornment. Between the two ideal types of Artists' Perfume-like Works and Standard Design Perfumes, I place the Niche Art Perfumes emphasized by Brozzo and Freeland as well as a few Mainstream Art Perfumes that seek a balance between adornment and cognitive/sensory interest. A brief look at some further characteristics and examples of each of these four types will help sharpen the concept of 'art perfumery'.

4.1 Artists' Perfume-like Works

These are not perfumes *per se* but perfume-like olfactory works freely created by professional artists and typically exhibited in art galleries or museums as single instances. For example, among Clara Ursitti's pioneering experiments in various forms of olfactory art is her series, *Self-Portraits in Scent* (1994-), made up of simulated smells of her own body odours and exhibited as single works, often in glass vessels. Martynka Wawrzyniak's perfume-like work, *Smell Me* (2012), used odours from her skin, hair, and tears, and the gallery set aside a small room visitors could enter and be bathed in her odour. Sometimes an artist conceives of a perfume as part of a larger installation work, such as Lisa Kirk's *Revolution Pipe Bomb* (2007) which included a commissioned perfume consisting of the simulated smell of tear gas, smoke, burned rubber, gasoline, decaying flesh, etc. The elixir was presented in limited edition vessels made of silver, gold, and platinum, shaped like pipe bombs, and initially displayed in MoMA's PS1 art gallery within a "revolutionary's laboratory" (Pollock, 2011, p. 94).

What might be considered a subcategory of artists' perfume-like works are works by professional perfumers acting in the role of artists. In 2021, the Olfactory Art Keller Gallery in New York presented *Perfumers Gone Wild*, an exhibition of works by seven perfumers in various stages of their careers. They were invited to create scents "without a brief, [or] the technical requirements and economic considerations that usually come with developing a perfume." The pieces in the show would not be "perfumes, but pieces of olfactory art, intended to be experienced, analyzed, explored and shared as objects of aesthetic appreciation" (Olfactory Art Keller, 2021). Among the works from the show that particularly stand out is one inspired by Richard Serra's huge iron sculptures, Carlos Benaim's perfume-like *16 Ton*, which "stacks the heaviest molecules from the International Flavors and Fragrances collection on top of each other" (Olfactory Art Keller, 2021)

The kind of boundary-crossing work done by the perfumers participating in the *Perfumers Gone Wild* exhibition, has been going on for over a decade among a handful of experienced perfumers who regularly operate in a dual fashion: creating niche or mainstream perfumes for adornment under commissions that include a design brief, but at the same time, freely creating other scent works that are intended purely as art to be presented in galleries or museums. The best known of these figures is Christophe Laudamiel who has designed many commercial scents intended for wear, but who also has a strong artistic practice, with formal representation by art galleries in Berlin and New York.

For Laudamiel's 2017 solo exhibition called *Over 21* at the Dillion and Lee Gallery in Manhattan, he arranged ten canisters of synthetic scents around a dining table and visitors were invited to dip perfume blotters into a small hole in the top of each canister and write down their impressions.

But 'artists' perfume-like works', are not the same thing as 'art perfumes'. As the perfume critic, Tania Sanchez puts it, "art perfume" does not mean a "concept perfume" by a visual artist who commissions "a smell like rotting meat and genitals" for her next installation work. Rather, "art perfume" means a perfume for perfume collectors, for "people interested in the messages in perfume, in how wearing it changes the way we live and think" (Turin and Sanchez, 2018, p. 10; Cleary, 2020). Yet a few artist-commissioned perfumes could also be considered "art perfumes" since they have been intended for wear and are sold in limited editions, such as the series of *Biography Scents* commissioned by Anicka Yi. Even the very expensive perfume vials that were part of Lisa Kirk's *Revolution Pipe Bomb* installation, could have been opened and the contents daubed on the wrist by the owner, although apparently none of them did.¹⁰ But, typically, artists' perfume-like works are single works intended to be appreciated for themselves as art, whereas the art perfumes that are the focus of interest in this essay are perfumes that are intended from the beginning to be worn, to be *both* art and adornment.

4.2 Niche Art Perfumes

I would suggest that the few artist-commissioned perfumes that are intended to be worn shade off in the continuum of perfumes into artistic niche perfumes (although not every niche perfume has artistic ambitions). Niche Art Perfumes are the kind of art perfumes that Brozzo and Freeland give as examples of art perfumery, scents that are created by perfumers working independently or for small companies that place a perfume's innovative structure and challenging expressive and symbolic aspects on an equal footing with, or even above, use for adornment. Obviously, no matter how high the artistic ambitions of niche perfumers, if the small firms that sell niche perfumes are to be economically viable, their perfumes will have to adhere to safety regulations and pay some attention to the audience that wants to wear fragrances, not just discuss and write about them. As Freeland points out, niche perfumes in general have become so successful that mainstream perfume houses have begun buying up niche companies, with the result that the perfumers who work for them are often no longer as free as they once were (Freeland, 2021, p. 5). A closely related category to niche perfumes is that of "artisan perfumes," a term used by Luca Turin for the work of those self-taught amateurs who sell directly to the public over the Internet (Turin and Sanchez, 2018, pp. 17–19). Of course, like the work of amateur photographers, a great deal of amateur perfumery work is tritely conventional, but some works rise to a level worthy of attention for their artistry.¹¹ There is even

¹⁰ In 2019, I asked Kirk whether anyone who bought one had actually opened the "pipe bomb" perfume vial and she said she had not heard from anyone who had.

¹¹ Most amateur perfumers make perfumes just for the challenge of it. The writer, Megan Volpert, describes her own experiences in *Perfume* (Volpert 2022).

an annual Golden Pear award given by the Los Angeles based Institute for Art and Olfaction for the most artistically interesting niche and artisan perfumes.

Naturally, those who choose to buy niche art perfumes or artisan art perfumes tend to delight in wearing a scent primarily because its structure, expressivity, and symbolic reach stimulate the imagination. As Freeland puts it, “wearing a genuinely artistic perfume involves attending to a creative work that is meant to offer and sustain an artistic experience: something that is expressive and evocative, meant to be engaged with on both sensory and cognitive levels” (Freeland, 2021, pp. 10–11). As examples of niche art perfumes, Freeland calls attention to the Canadian company, Zoologist Perfumes, which names all its scents after animals. Some Zoologist Perfumes are quite pleasant to wear, such as *Chipmunk* with its notes of hazelnut and cedar, but *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, has a harshness that makes it a long shot for most people who would probably leave it in its bottle for an occasional sniff in the company of like-minded aficionados of scent (Freeland, 2021, pp. 8–10).

4.3 Artistic Mainstream Perfumes

Just because a perfume has been created on commission for a mainstream fashion or cosmetic company does not mean it would automatically fail the test for being an art perfume. Most writers and curators who have claimed art status for perfumes have included in their lists of art perfumes a few of the most aesthetically complex and innovative mainstream classics. Thus, just as museum exhibitions of contemporary art quilts have sometimes included outstanding examples of older innovative quilts, it makes sense that the *Art of Scent 1889–2012* exhibition of perfumes at New York’s Museum of Art and Design included *Jicky* (1889) and *Chanel No 5* (1921) alongside several contemporary mainstream works (Pollack, 2011, p. 92). Similarly, there are exceptional recent mainstream perfumes that one might want to consider artworks, such as Christine Nagel’s *Twilly d’Hermès* (2017) (Turin and Sanchez, 2018, pp. 273–274). Like most commercial perfumes, its design adheres to strict safety, environmental, and economic guidelines, but it is also outstanding for its formal complexity, expressiveness, symbolism, and originality. According to Robert Stecker’s and Stephen Davies’ respective definitions of art, each of which combines aesthetic and historical/contextual criteria, only those instances of design, such as cars, furniture, or fashion, that meet a “higher standard” (Stecker, 2003) or furnish “superb examples” (Davies, 2015) will qualify as high art (Stecker, 2003, p. 151; Davies, 2015, p. 379). Nagel’s perfume, *Twilly d’Hermès*, would seem to match both of those criteria.

4.4 Standard Design Perfumes

At the other end of the perfume continuum, the Artistic Mainstream category shades off into that of ‘Standard Design Perfumes,’ a category which includes the bulk of commercial perfumes. The latter are characterized by their designers accepting the constraints of a design brief (often with the commissioning firm asking for changes along the way), and by the usual safety, environmental, and economic considerations. Above all, design perfumes must stay within a safe hedonic range that will appeal to a large audience that wants

to use them for adornment. Obviously, these characteristics also apply to some extent to the category of Artistic Niche and Artistic Mainstream perfumes that we just considered. But the perfumes' that belong in the two art perfume categories reflect higher artistic ambitions, greater imaginative reach, and superior structural complexity than standard design perfumes. But one should not think that in calling the bulk of commercial perfumes, 'standard design perfumes,' I mean to denigrate them. In my view, works of design are not intrinsically of lesser cultural importance than works we call fine art. Calling the bulk of perfumes standard design perfumes is a way of underlining the fact that adornment trumps such artistic aspects as complex and innovative form or unconventional and challenging emotional and symbolic resonance. As Glenn Parsons argued in *Philosophy of Design*, a key difference between art and design is that artists are primarily concerned with helping us understand the world, but for most professional designers, changing the world in the sense of creating something new that is aesthetically pleasing and serves a function well is at the heart of design (Parsons, 2015, pp. 101–102). In the case of design perfumes, most of the big firms that commission the perfumes and write the design briefs are not only likely to intervene at various stages to make sure the perfumer is on the desired track toward marketability, but they must approve the final formula. This is one reason that usually only the name of the commissioning firm (Estée Lauder, Calvin Klein, Yves St. Laurent, etc.) appears on standard design perfumes (and even on some niche and mainstream art perfumes) and not the name(s) of the perfumer(s) who designed them.

But the relation between art and design is fluid. Many encyclopedic fine art museums collect formally remarkable works of design as fine art. Moreover, some designers, like Phillipe Starck, design pieces that are barely functional and more like sculptures meant for contemplation (*Juicy Salif*) or, like Ron Arad, design pieces that are basically conceptual art (Sudjic, 2014, pp. 151–168). In the world of perfumery, a parallel figure to Starck and Arad is Christophe Laudamiel whose creative practice moves with ease among all the major types of perfumes I have proposed, from Artists' Perfume-like Works through Artistic Niche and Artistic Mainstream Perfumes to Standard Design Perfumes.

5. Art or Adornment?

Freeland has recently argued that my decision to consign nearly all perfumes to the category of design (Shiner, 2020, p. 241), runs the risk of making the category of art perfumes itself occupied by only a few "esoteric gallery perfumes." (Freeland, 2022, p. 251). Her critique applies even more pointedly to the position on art and perfumes taken by the Olfactory Art Keller Gallery. As we saw, when Olfactory Art Keller invited a group of practising perfumers to submit works for *Perfumers Gone Wild*, it told them their works would not be considered perfumes at all but works of olfactory art (Olfactory Art Keller, 2021). Moreover, in the Spring of 2022, when Olfactory Art Keller sent out a call for proposals to be included in a new show entitled *Portraits in Scent*, the call specified that "the artworks will be sold as artworks and buyers will be instructed to not wear them. These are not perfumes" (Olfactory Art Keller,

2022). There are practical reasons for Olfactory Art Keller to exclude all perfumes from what it considers ‘olfactory art.’ As the first gallery in the United States specializing in olfactory art, Olfactory Art Keller already has its hands full supporting the recognition of olfactory art as an independent art form, so that exhibiting even the most aesthetically challenging niche perfumes as art might muddy the waters, especially since to most people, the term ‘perfume’ primarily suggests adornment.¹² In general, the gallery’s position on perfumes strongly implies that art and adornment are mutually exclusive. Stephen Davies might agree.

Although Davies has admitted that not only in Bali, but even in the West a few art forms can be both art and adornment, he seems keen to maintain “the separation [...] between art and adornment,” and has explicitly rejected two proposals for expanding the list of arts that can also be adornments (Davies, 2021, pp. 512–513).¹³ On the other hand, I have been arguing throughout this essay that some kinds of perfumes can be art as well as adornment. Of course, someone might be a collector of art perfumes without ever putting them on, but only sniffing them from a bottle or a blotter. But I would suggest that wearing a perfume is an equally good way to appreciate its artistic properties, especially its formal ones, since these typically emerge during a perfume’s temporal development on the skin. Of course, simply putting on a perfume is not necessarily the same thing as adornment in Davies’s sense of intending an aesthetic enhancement of the body. There are multiple motives for wearing a perfume: masking body odor, seduction, social status, expressing identity, etc. Yet, since ancient times, whatever other motives people have had for putting on perfumes, they have typically also viewed them as aesthetic enhancements.

But one might still object that although a perfume collector believes a certain perfume is a work of art *and* wears it as an aesthetic enhancement, such an individual cannot focus on it as art and as adornment at the same time but can only experience the two in alternation. Even if that charge were true, which I doubt, it seems a rather thin objection to regarding some perfumes as both art works and adornments. Moreover, unless one is a radical subjectivist in ontology, the objection leaves standing the fact that it is the same perfume that is experienced at one moment as an artwork and the next as adornment. Indeed, most of the perfumes that Brozzo, Freeland, and I offer as examples of art perfumes are, in fact, treated by knowledgeable perfume appreciators and wearers as both art and adornment. That is why I have suggested that we conceive of all perfumes as located on a continuum stretching from those singular artists’ perfume-like works not intended to be worn to those design perfumes produced in multiples and intended solely for wear as adornment, with certain niche art perfumes, artisan art perfumes, and mainstream art perfumes that are *both* art and adornment occupying the centre of the continuum.

¹² The gallery was opened in 2019 by Andreas Keller, a distinguished philosopher of perception who has written an important book on olfactory perception (Keller 2016).

¹³ See the proposals of Julia Minarik (Minarik 2021) and Eva Dadlez (Dadlez 2021) and Davies’ reply (Davies 2021) in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

6. Conclusion

I set out by considering Stephen Davies's analysis of the place of adornment in various societies and argued that his analysis supports the view that perfume is not only of considerable aesthetic interest, but that some perfumes have the potential to be art. Then I examined Chiara Brozzo's and Cynthia Freeland's case for the art status of some perfumes, suggesting that Brozzo's case could be strengthened by augmenting its formal dimension, something I did through a discussion of some highly limited parallels between perfume and music. Then I expanded upon Brozzo's and Freeland's equally important argument, drawn from the existence of networks of knowledgeable perfume appreciators, by proposing a set of interpretive categories, ranging from 'artists' perfume-like works' to 'standard design perfumes' that clarify the place of various types of art perfumes among all perfumes. Finally, I responded to sceptical doubts that perfumes can be both art and adornment in Davies' meaning of the term adornment. I conclude that art perfumery in the sense of the creation of perfumes that are both art and adornment does indeed exist – and it seems to be thriving.¹⁴

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