

KETTLE'S YARD

The Six Senses: Smell by Lizzie Marx

'A great celebration of the senses' is how Linder Sterling describes her work. 'It sometimes veers into absolute excess, a form of compulsive consumption that can never be satisfied'.¹ Her hunger for the sensory takes hold not only in her final pieces, but also throughout her process. As Linder says, 'I often work inhaling the smell of must from the archive – no wonder I'm obsessed with perfumes! There's a moment when the paper is being moistened with the glue, after, perhaps, thirty or forty years of lying on a shelf in someone's bedroom or kitchen, then suddenly all sorts of perfumes and tobacco odours are released by the glue'.²

Old books have a wonderfully alluring smell and the [Morgan](#) and the [Bodleian](#) libraries have been working on preserving that distinctive scent. The Morgan is reconstructing the smell of the library when it was completed in 1906. The scent given off by the books is isolated within miniature bell jars and a wax needle captures the molecules from the books. Then, by analysing the molecules, a profile of the atmosphere can be reconstructed so that the scent of a 1521 copy of the Golden Legend is now preserved. At the Bodleian, it is the scent of the Magna Carta that will be reconstructed.

Linder is also interested in the way in which odours are closely connected to memory, and their ability to even make us defy time by regressing to earlier moments in our life. Marcel Proust describes this sensation in *Swann's Way*, where the narrator gives an account of an experience in which he tastes a morsel of madeleine soaked in a spoonful of tea. The aromas and tastes transport him back to his childhood, on Sunday mornings at Combray with his aunt Léonie, whose madeleines were served the very same way.³ That sensation of time travelling from a scented trigger is familiar to us all. It may not be by means of a morsel of madeleine, but from another aromatic food, or from a perfume someone once wore. For Linder, it is conjured through cigarette smoke. She says it 'transports me back to my childhood in 1958, when everyone around me smoked.



Library, Kettle's Yard, featuring Linder's reconstruction of Jim Ede's potpourri and Linder, *Hel Uncumber*, 2020, fabricated with Jochen Holz and commissioned by Kettle's Yard for *Linderism*. Photo: Matthew Booth.

I work as much with time as I do with anything else but I'm a haphazard time traveller: cookery books, rose and ballet annuals, copies of *Vogue* and *Men Only* steer my course'.⁴

Sensory atmospheres, historical reconstructions, and memory are some of the themes that I am researching for my PhD and for an upcoming exhibition taking place at the [Mauritshuis](#) in The Hague. The dissertation and the exhibition explore smell in seventeenth-century Dutch art. This means looking at how something invisible like smell is made visible, what sorts of odours are portrayed in works of art, and what meanings can be gained from them. While contemporary artists like Linder use scents as a medium in their art practice, this cannot be said for artists in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the linseed oil they used in their paints was certainly odorous, but it was not intended to play a significant role in a work of art. However, that does not mean that there are no parallels between the practices of contemporary artists and artists of the past with regards to smell. Certain connections can be made between the scents of the seventeenth century and the twentieth century by focusing on potpourri. In two differing contexts, potpourri offers a glimpse into the roles that smell can play in works of art. It also gives some insights into the limitations as well as the possibilities of this way of seeing and experiencing art.

KETTLE'S YARD

As part of the *Linderism* exhibition, Linder has been exploring the domestic life of Jim and Helen Ede when they were living in Kettle's Yard. Linder found that Jim Ede's creative exploits extended beyond curating his home with an extraordinary assemblage of artworks and found objects. He also created his own fragrance, in the form of potpourri. In a letter to Jeremy Lewison in 1979, he shares his recipe:

*'any strong strange blunt (not sweet) perfume I could find (travellers from the East bringing sandalwood, etc.) – also a few handfuls of incense from various monasteries here or in the East – lots of lavender plucked + dried – and when all this assembled quite a decent helping of Cognac...'*⁵

Linder has reconstructed the recipe and made it available to sample within the house among Ede's collection. The curatorial scheme that Ede devised has always been faithfully preserved at Kettle's Yard, but now its environment is preserved too. As heady aromas diffuse through the rooms, the spaces and their atmospheres are returned to their former state over forty years ago.

What is remarkable about Ede's recipe is what is missing: how much is a 'decent helping' of Cognac? Where precisely can the monasteries here or in the East be located? Smells are often subjective, so what does Ede consider to be a 'strong strange blunt (not sweet) perfume'? Alyce Mahon has considered the potpourri to be a 'portrait' of Ede, and not only is it the combination of the ingredients in the potpourri but also the way in which he made the potpourri that makes it truly personal to Ede.⁶ The choreography of constructing the recipe, the estimations of the ingredients, the harmony of the aromatics, they are all truly unique to him.

This style of recipe writing echoes the directions published in seventeenth-century recipe books, or books of secrets. They are fascinating compendiums. One of the most popular examples comes from Girolamo Ruscelli, or Alessio Piemontese, as he was known. His *Secreti* was first published in Venice in 1555, and it was translated and frequently republished throughout the seventeenth century. There are recipes on how to make pigments for painting, how to preserve food, how to be protected from the plague, and even how to dream of wild beasts. As perfumery became an occupation in its own right towards the end of the seventeenth century, there are books that publish exclusively aromatic recipes. Toothpastes, powders for the hair, soaps, scented brooches, scented leather fans and gloves, and scented tobacco are just some of the recipes available. There are also recipes for potpourri. In one example, the recipe calls for rosebuds, rosewater, musk, and cloves. The dried rosebuds are immersed in rosewater until it is entirely soaked up. Pulverised musk and cloves are then mingled with the roses and after they are dried in the sun, they are made into a powder.⁷ The blend is then dispensed into fine linen bags, which could be stored in linen cupboards, as illustrated by [Pieter de Hooch](#).



Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Women Beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

In the spotless townhouse, two richly dressed women are placing a stack of crisp, pristinely pressed, white linens into a robust cupboard. Although the little sachets are not pictured in the scene, the presence of their fragrance in the room is implied, so that the eyes are dazzled by the linens' whiteness, and the sachets bring the women's noses pleasure too.

Reading through the seventeenth-century recipe and Ede's formula for making potpourri can be informative just by the questions that they raise. But the recipes have a great deal of presumed knowledge that we may never be able to reconstruct, such as Ede's immeasurable glug of Cognac. We have to accept that it is unlikely that we will ever fully grasp the relationship that Ede or the women in De Hooch's painting had with various smells. Smelling the potpourri can never faithfully transport us back to Kettle's Yard in the 1970s when Ede concocted his recipe, and it cannot take us further back to the seventeenth century: we were never there in the first place.

However, the process of reconstructing recipes can still be enlightening. We can gain more of an understanding about historical practices and methods, and we can develop an idea of the atmospheres in which people in the past existed and how these atmospheres might have shaped their experiences. In the case of the seventeenth-century recipe, we can get closer to those answers by exploring the context of the linen that the potpourri fragranced. The Dutch took great pride in their linen, as outside of the city in the fields near Haarlem a vast industry was dedicated to bleaching which made textiles fresh and gloriously white.

KETTLE'S YARD



Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, c.1670–1675. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

[Jacob van Ruisdael](#) frequently painted scenes of the bleaching fields. He depicts the landscape with great sensitivity, where swathes of white fabric are laid out in the fields and tended to by little figures. Ruisdael beautifully brings out the forms made by the textiles, as the white lines delineate the space with a soft striped pattern that gently guides the eye across the landscape. The beauty of this scene explains why the fields attracted a number of visitors who came to view the spectacle. During the periods when the linens had been cleansed with water and were left to dry, it made for a very pleasant spring or summertime walk.

It was also in the green spaces away from the urban centre where the roses in the potpourri recipe could be encountered. In a Dutch townhouse, potpourri transplanted the scents from outside into the domestic space. Perhaps the scents in the cupboard forged a connection between the linens and the fields outside of Haarlem. The potpourri may have even harnessed memory to return to the bleaching fields, to the time and place when the linens were at their freshest. Diffused in De Hooch's painting, there may be a fragrant atmosphere that reinforced the linens with pleasant memories.

In the case of the potpourri at Kettle's Yard, the intentions were probably different. Ede writes about using 'strange' scents from the East and fragrances that came from monasteries. His blend did not aim to evoke the scent of fresh linen; he intended to bring the scents of the spiritual or the unfamiliar into his domestic space. The recipe suggests that the curatorial scheme in Kettle's Yard is not only about the objects but also the atmospheres in which they dwell, and Linder's reconstruction has given us the opportunity to consider whether the potpourri has an

influence on the experience of viewing the collection. How might looking at a [Ben Nicholson](#) or a [Henri Gaudier-Brzeska](#) change when Ede's homemade fragrance lingers? Just as the women in De Hooch's painting may have been transported outdoors through their sense of smell, the visitors to Kettle's Yard may have been transported far away through the potpourri's fragrance. It has been possible to trial whether that sensation can still be felt today through Linder's reconstruction.

Odours are mostly invisible, and it often feels as if they do not have a place in the largely visual world of art, but that does not mean that we should forget about them entirely and the role that they play. There are many other odours to study and sensory narratives to be revived in works of art, and there will be more odours to experience in contemporary art too, if works of art are explored with the eyes as well as the nose.



Upper extension landing, Kettle's Yard, featuring Linder's reconstruction of Jim Ede's potpourri and Ben Nicholson, *Still Life with Knife and Lemon*, 1927, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge, copyright Angela Verren Taunt. Photo: Matthew Booth.

KETTLE'S YARD

Notes

¹ D. Ades and L. Sterling, 'Linder in Conversation with Dawn Ades', in Linder, Ridinghouse, London, 2015, p. 19.

² Ibid.

³ M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, C. K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin (trans.), Vol. I, The Modern Library, New York, 2003, pp. 60–64.

⁴ Ades and Sterling, 'Linder', p. 19.

⁵ Letter from Jim Ede to Jeremy Lewison, 9 August 1979, Kettle's Yard Archive KY/EDE/2/42.

⁶ A. Mahon, 'The Language of Flowers', in J. Boaden et al., *Linderism* (exh. cat.), Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2020, p. 62.

⁷ A. Piemontese, *Secreten, van den vermaerden heer Alexis Piemontois*, G. W. Doornick, Amsterdam, 1658, pp. 171–172.