

History in Focus

1. Follow Your Nose

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Pair with March 2022 Issue of the AHR

Muffled footsteps, then a door opens to the outside. You hear the open air. Keys jangle, the door gets locked. Now footsteps on the pavement—you're walking down the sidewalk. Crows call occasionally in the distance.

Marieke van Erp (0:21)

Yeah, I mean, I think it would be great of, you know, after listening to this podcast that people would maybe, you know, stop for a moment and ask themselves, "Well, what am I smelling right now?" Walk up to your bookcase and grab a book and smell it. And how is it different from maybe another book. Try an old book and a new book, or, you know, grab the spices in your kitchen cabinets, or stick your nose in your fridge and see what's there. Just stop and smell the roses, or the trash cans. You know, it's all there, and it's it's super amazing.

Daniel Story (1:02)

I love that.

Sofia Ehrich (1:03)

Stop and smell the trash cans.

Marieke van Erp (1:06)

Stop and smells the trash cans.

Laughter all around.

Daniel Story (1:15)

Hey, this is Daniel Story. You're listening to History in Focus, a new podcast by the American Historical Review. This is episode one: "Follow Your Nose."

Okay, how about just start by introducing yourself.

Mark Bradley (1:46)

I'm Mark Bradley. I'm the new editor of the American Historical Review, and I teach history at the University of Chicago. I've been a loyal reader of the American Historical Review since I was a graduate student. And not just like loyal, but like, I've used it in instrumental ways for work as I was a doctoral student. I teach articles from it all the time, as part of the seminars that I teach, you know. It's just, there are certain things, you know. Some people, it's the Beatles, for me, it was like, you know, the AHR. And so the idea that suddenly, you could just do this, you know, anybody could do this (you didn't necessarily have to be connected with a particular institution). But I think it was really that, like, wow, you could suddenly do this. And, you know, for a publication that had been just enormously important for me as I've been coming up.

Daniel Story (2:34)

You've certainly come to the AHR with vision for how the journal might continue to evolve and, in some ways, transform itself. And I wonder if you could encapsulate some of that vision, and some of the changes that are coming to the journal?

Mark Bradley (2:51)

Well, I think, you know, part of the AHA's idea about opening the editorship up was also about wanting to create a moment where the journal itself could be rethought. And none of this meant as a critique of what people have been doing in Bloomington for 50 years. I mean, they had built a really, really fabulous journal. It's the leading historical journal in the world, and they made it so, right. So the question is, 50 years on, where do you want to go in the next step? And I think this kind of position, and the shifts, just gave us sort of space in which to think about that in ways that were generative for a variety of kind of stakeholders in the journal. And so coming into it, you know, talking to the search committee, talking to members of council, talking to people, you know, at the AHA itself, and then talking to you know, Alex Lichtenstein, who was the fabulous editor before me, about what the journal ought to look like, there was an incipient vision in what Alex was doing. And his word for talking about it was "decolonize." And you know, that that's a fine way of thinking about it. But I think what Alex was up to there was, again, just sort of thinking about kind of breaking this open you know, or turning the kaleidoscope around or whatever, you know, kind of phrase you want to use to to rethink what was happening. And, you know, that means rethinking who's in the journal, that means rethinking what kinds of subjects, and that's chronological, that's geographical, that's methodological, that's topical. But it also means rethinking, I think, if you really want to keep pushing that along, who it is who does history. And so we do as professional historians, but you come to realize that a lot of people do history in ways that we have been less good at engaging about over time. There's more public facing work that professional historians are

doing now that I think ever before and that's fabulous, but that too wasn't really getting captured in the pages of what the journal was doing.

So the big innovation, I think, for us, it's this AHR History Lab, which will launch in the March 22 issue. And thinking about that as a kind of middle of the journal space, where we could open up the pages in different kinds of ways to collaborative projects, and collaborative projects, again, that we're speaking to, how do we rethink the way in which we're doing history in the early 21st century.

Sometimes it's easier to explain a new project by talking about a particular intervention in it, rather than talking about the big architecture, so let me give you an example. We wanted a project to launch the lab that would show this more capacious sense of how we do history. And we happened upon a group in Europe, their name is Odeuropa. And they had just received a big 2.8 million euro grant to do a project on historical smells in European history. So the project has historians at the helm, there are social and cultural historians who are leaders of it. But it also involves computer scientists, and it involves chemists, and it involves heritage people, and it involves curators, and it involves a whole variety of people who are connected to museums and public history. It's really a collaborative collection of scholars who are coming together to think about smell and the sensorium in writing history.

Daniel Story (6:35)

I wonder if one or both of you want to take a crack at just answering the simple question, what is Odeuropa?

Marieke van Erp (6:44)

You think that's a simple question?

Marieke and Daniel laugh.

Okay, so the basic answer is that it's an EU-funded research project, in which we try to trace smells through time in text and images, in order to investigate their historical and museological significance. And what we want to do with it, the big, the big goal of that, is to sort of, I guess, you'd say reinstate smell as an important part of our cultural heritage, because it's very often been overlooked.

I'm Marieke van Erp. I lead the Digital Humanities Research Lab at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Cluster in Amsterdam. On Odeuropa, I have a dual

role: I'm the project manager, and I'm also a researcher on language technology and semantic web technology. So language technologies, really, try to develop tools that can recognize references to smells in texts. Semantic web technology is how do we model this? How do we represent this sort of in a database? How do you create a database for smell that talks about people experiencing smell, that talks about, you know, the smells actually being referenced in paintings and in texts? Maybe also the chemical proponents of it. So how do we bring that all together and make that findable again?

Sofia Ehrich (8:27)

My name is Sofia, Ehrich, and I'm currently the Olfactory Events Manager on the Odeuropa project. So I work directly with museums, but also with any collaborations we have on Odeuropa. So that can be a workshop. So like, we just had our malodor workshop at the end of last year, which was with another research institute. Or last year, which we have the scents that we will be smelling today, was a museum in Ulm, Germany. And so that was a close collaboration with a museum. So I work with that and with the events. And then I also like to do a bit of research. So like today, I was looking into how smell has been portrayed or depicted in artworks. So that's kind of some of my research that I do as well as kind of a practical side of bringing smell into museum and exhibition spaces.

Daniel Story (9:36)

Okay, so I want to ask about, I don't know, the process, or workflow, for lack of a better way to say. You know, like, what's the starting point for a particular scent initiative or project, and how do you move from, I'm guessing, historical sources of different kinds to the chemistry part of it. How do you get to that point and bringing the scent into the modern world?

Sofia Ehrich (10:00)

So that's a really also a difficult question. I would say it's it's case by case. So if we're thinking about the Ulm Museum project, which we did last year, and it's coming into this year as well, that was something that we made bespoke scents for. So you can kind of take this process of looking at an artwork and ending with a scent, or you could start with a different type of artifact. So it could be anything: it could be an environment, it could be a sculpture, it could be a painting, could be a book. It really varies.

I can go into a little bit more detail about Ulm, and how we kind of did that process. So we already had the collaboration in place with the Museum Ulm, and I, along with Caro Verbeek and Lizzie Marx, met with the curators of the Ulm Museum, which is Eva Leistenschneider. We worked very, very closely with her and the rest of the team there on choosing artworks within

their permanent collection that could be related to olfactory means or olfactory heritage. This was a bit difficult in the beginning because we unfortunately could not go to Ulm because of the pandemic. So we had to do this via Zoom actually. We looked within their permanent collection and took lots of notes. And then the three of us together along with Inger Leemans, who is our project lead, tried to narrow it down to about 10, 10 scents, seven artworks, I believe. And then we brought in IFF, International Flavors and Fragrances, to kind of look at our choices of artworks, because we're not the chemists that are putting together the scents. International Flavors and Fragrances to do that for us. We kind of worked together to get sort of a brief in mind is how we call it. He then, Bernardo Fleming at IFF, could talk with the perfumers about how to kind of create this atmosphere or bespoke scent for the artwork.

Marieke van Erp (12:25)

Yeah, because the idea of that is that, you know, we're doing this with all this knowledge. But you know, by documenting it, by creating these briefs, by asking the perfumers to tell us how they go about it, and also interacting with the museum staff on, you know, what they are comfortable with, we hope to make it easier for other institutes to also start using scents in their exhibitions.

Daniel Story (12:53)

Okay. All right. So I have had this package, you know, for a few weeks now, and I'm opening it right at this moment. I'm very excited

You hear Daniel open a small, padded envelope and pull out a few bags of as yet unidentified items.

You want to tell me what I have here?

Sofia Ehrich (13:13)

Yes. So this is a point in scent technique called a Wispy. You could actually pop open the top if you want.

A slight airy pop as Daniel open the top of one of the Wispys.

And if you look inside, there's like a little metal sponge inside, and you drop three drops of pure scented oil. So it's it's very, very strong liquid, it's not diluted at all. And then when you pop it open, you can see there's a little kind of looks like where spray would come out. When you press this down like this, then scented air comes out. So no liquid comes out of this. It's just air.

Daniel Story (13:58)

Okay, so I'm holding "Orange Blue" right now. And so you're telling me if I push this down, I will smell this scent.

Sofia Ehrich (14:04)

Yeah.

You hear air coming out of the Wispy and the sound of Daniel sniffing the scent.

Daniel Story (14:05)

Oh, yeah.

Marieke van Erp (14:07)

And it also helps to sort of wave it in front of both your nostrils.

More Wispy and sniffing sounds.

Daniel Story (14:16)

It's a very pleasant smell, at least to me. I'm going to be pretty terrible I think at describing these. It kind of smells sweet to me, but I don't know that I can say much more than that.

Sofia Ehrich (14:24)

This is for a specific artwork, which is called "Orange Blue" by Ellsworth Kelly, and it's from 1964-1965. It's quite big, actually, if you look at it in person. It's probably about five feet tall. So it's a good size. It is two colors only, orange and blue. And the orange part of the artwork looks a bit like a cake or a cheese, so it's round. To me it looks like a cheese. But yes, so that this takes up about a third of the artwork and the rest is just blue.

Daniel Story (15:11)

I guess describing smells is a little bit of a skill in the same way that maybe describing the taste of wine is? How do you handle sort of lay people like myself who might have pretty minimal vocabulary for describing smell?

Marieke van Erp (15:28)

I mean, I think it's part of the process. Especially with the language technology package, we're really trying to analyze loads and loads of text. And what we're finding is sort of words that

aren't really used as much anymore, that have to do with smell, that we find in 18th century texts. And also within the project, actually, within the team, we are continuously educating each other on how do we talk about smell? And what is it? So for example, increasing the data model, that is the how do we represent smell. That's basically been a process that has continued as a red thread in different parts of the consortium over the first full year of the project. And that wasn't just done by the semantic web researchers. Almost everyone in the project was involved in this. It was a going back and forth between the art historians and the museologists and the semantic web researchers on, you know, okay, we can represent this in a computer model, because, you know, computers really like boxes, and like, really like categories. But of course, the world isn't categories. So you know, what is still acceptable? There's this constant, sort of friction between between the two. But also, yeah, what do you mean, when you say this. You know, language is so amazingly flexible, and efficient, but also imprecise, for that very same reason. This is really one of the core things we're trying to do. And then we also start almost every meeting with a smell session. Even though we are all at home, and we've only been able to see each other very little in person, we have an amazing team that, you know, would come up with kitchen cabinet smell sessions, you know, so that at the beginning of a meeting, we would all smell cinnamon or rosemary, and then one of our team members would explain the significance of that and also what that does for you. Or you know, to smell a book, grab your favorite book, because one of our researchers, Cecilia Bembibre, did a lot of research into the smell of books. And actually people like Professor Asifa Majid from Oxford and Ilja Croijmans here in the Netherlands, they have been looking into the language of smell from wine experts, coffee experts. Yeah, it's been quite a challenge, but it's actually also required us to be super creative.

Sofia Ehrich (18:04)

That can bring us to our next scent. So you can grab "Limbo," I guess is what I titled it. I'll just have you, have you smell it? And tell me what you think.

More sounds of air coming from the Wispy and sniffing.

Daniel Story (18:19)

Oh, wow. Interesting. Okay. Well, my first thought was it almost has a leathery sort of smell. Like if the other one was kind of a almost a sweet taste, this one leans more savory to me.

Sofia Ehrich (18:36)

Yeah. Very valid.

Marieke van Erp (18:38)

You like it?

Daniel Story (18:39)

Do I like it? I it's it's a little more off putting than the other but I wouldn't say it smells bad. So what artwork does this attach to?

Sofia Ehrich (18:49)

Okay, so this is an interpretation, scent interpretation, of the smell of hell.

Daniel Story (19:00)

Maybe I should be more off put than I am.

Marieke van Erp (19:03)

Well, I think also this was, if this is the first version...

Sofia Ehrich (19:08)

It is.

Marieke van Erp (19:08)

We didn't think it was off putting enough. That's one of the feedbacks we gave to the perfumers.

Daniel Story (19:15)

I see.

Sofia Ehrich (19:18)

Yeah, so this is an artwork by Martin Schaffner called "Anastasis," or "Christ in Limbo," and it's from 1549. And this is a depiction of the gates of hell. So you really see in this image, you see bricks. Well, could be brimstone, that give off kind of probably a sulfurous smell. There is a lot of smoke, especially in the top left corner, so you kind of see this like, burning smoke coming out. And also, there's a gate on the bottom right and a dragon breathing fire, which could also be sulfurous. It's a bit dark as well. So we have this kind of dim and brooding image. And yes, as Marieke said, the scent was not so convincing for our test tour audience. Many said that if that was hell, they would be fine going there, if that's what hell smelled like. So that's definitely not what we wanted.

Daniel Story (20:29)

Right. It does put me a little bit in mind have a nice peaty, you know, scotch or something.

Marieke, Sofia, and Daniel laugh.

Marieke van Erp (20:37)

Yeah, I think it's also quite clear that we're not just interested in nice smells. This project is not about perfume, even though that is, you know, a part of it too. But one of the things we also did, for example, Sofia organized this malodor workshop in December. 'Cause that's also part of our heritage. A lot of smells were used to hide other smells, for example, hide body odors, or in times of the miasma theory, which I'm sure Dr. William Tullett will be able to tell you about, you know, that people were using smells to ward off diseases or other bad things. But different people have different relationships to certain smells. Some of it is very cultural. Some of it is very personal. You know, can we find more of these instances in the past, in past records.

William Tullett (21:35)

So I think the thing is, with smell, as with any other aspect of sensory history, like sound, or taste, or touch, anything really beyond the visual, there's lots of material in all the kind of classic textual sources that we're used to using as historians. So once you start to look for smell in, I don't know, 17th century religious sermons, for example, you know, or the records of urban governance, or in even images and visual culture, you will find lots and lots of material for thinking about smell. It's just that we haven't really bothered to consider it. But I think what is most unique about, well not unique about smell, but one of the things that it really draws attention to is the way that historians can't just use texts, or it's not in their interest to just use text, right. So we can find lots of references to smell in historical texts. But if we want to take smell seriously as a subject, then we need to integrate material culture, we need to integrate the built environment, we need to integrate landscapes, because they are all in their own way historical archives, historical resources that we can use to understand the past.

My name is Dr. William Tullett. I'm an Associate Professor in Sensory History at Anglia, Ruskin University in Cambridge, and I'm a work package leader and one of the main historians on the Odeuropa project.

Yeah, I mean, I suppose we could think about walking down, you know, a 17th century street, maybe somewhere between the City of London and Westminster in the 17th century, particularly maybe, you know, near Cheapside, or an area like that.

You hear the low rumble of a noisy street—indistinct voices in the background and the subtle sounds of horses hooves. You hear footsteps too—you're walking again.

And you would have encountered a whole series of different smells, whether that's the smells of urban waste, not just human waste, but animal waste; the smells of animals themselves;

A horse and carriage pass close by and then move on quickly.

the different sorts of produce that might be for sale along that street; the smell of manufacture and industry, ranging from leather working and metalworking to all kinds of other kinds of trades and industries that might characterize an average European Street in the 17th century.

Sound of metal striking metal to one side of you. As you pass, the sound recedes.

You might smell the smells of people's perfume if you passed by somebody who was particularly rich or who was carrying something like a pomander, which is a small perfumed ball of paste, which is both a luxury object and something that's used to protect against plague. So you could encounter all kinds of different smells really. Thinking about, you know, the vast array of textual sources we have, alongside objects and images and so on, allows us to appreciate all those different sensory affordances, the smells that might have been present, because often those smells aren't described in texts. And a really good example of that is the smell of smoke from wood fires, right?

Subtle sounds of a crackling wood fire grow louder.

You know, the the smell of different forms of heating lighting, which was so common that people probably didn't talk about them, or certainly in the sources that I've read don't talk about them very much. But they're smells that would have been around people all the time.

The streetscape slowly fades away.

Daniel Story (24:50)

So that leads me to what is probably the obvious question here. Why smell? What do we as students of history gain by taking smell seriously in our study of the past?

William Tullett (25:04)

One of the things that we're doing on the Odeuropa project in particular is we're trying to unite not just the kind of more data driven approaches to text and images, you know, with image recognition and natural language processing, you know, scouring texts and images for past mentions of smells, but to unite those with more material approaches that involve actually trying to recreate or reconstruct smells. And this is an approach this controversial. It's controversial because, traditionally, our notions of historical time and our kind of self identity of historians relies on a certain idea of historical distance. The past is in the past, and we study it from a distance. Smell is useful because it challenges that kind of sacred cow and asks us to maybe reconsider the role that our own bodies actually play in research.

The other reason I think taking smell seriously is useful is because it messes with our conception of historical time. And there's been a kind of shift over the last 10 years or so, in the way that people who study the past think about temporality. And today, we're much more likely to talk about time as polysynchronous. You know, we live at the kind of intersection of past, present, and future. We're more likely to talk about time as something that percolates, you know, rather than flows. Smell, it gets us to think in that kind of way, because the experience of smell is an experience that reaches into the past, and is about the present, and is about the future all at the same time. You know, every time we smell something, we're using a series of cultural expectations that have built up over time, and we're often using smell to anticipate the future. So I think smell fits with that shift in the way that people who study the past, or some people who study the past, the way that they're thinking about temporality.

And finally, if we think about smell as just a theme, another theme, within cultural and social history, right, which is kind of the traditional way of thinking about a lot of this stuff, then it does offer us a new way of understanding historical shifts, causes, and agencies. And in those historical shifts, smell is something that has enormous agentive potential to cause change. Two examples. One is the Great Stink of London in the 19th century, right? This is a situation that, as David Barnes has pointed out, where the sanitary condition of London has gotten absolutely terrible, mainly because there was institutional inertia and inaction. Nobody wants to be responsible for it, nobody was sure where responsibility lay. The Great Stink happens, and suddenly, people are pushed into saying, right, okay, the Metropolitan Board of Works, you can have responsibility for doing this. We're going to give you the powers to solve it. Another example is Liverpool, again, in the 19th century, imports vast quantities of Canadian oil, which smells horrible. In fact, it stinks of onions, supposedly, and the Liverpudlian populace are really, really annoyed about this, they don't like it, the smell just covers the whole town. And they write petitions, they use all the kinds of means we would expect from 19th century popular politics. But that doesn't work. So what they do is they take a canister of this oil, and they

smash it in front of the council chambers, thus releasing the smell directly into the the noses of those in charge of urban governance. And that produces change. They then realized we need to do something about this. My point is that smell can have this kind of role as an agent in historical change. Those are two very extreme examples, but there are lots of other examples as well. As historians, we tend to think about meaning. We tend to think that representation. We think about those things a lot. They are the crux of what we do. But meaning making occurs in a material context. And smell helps us understand that material contexts, that might actually be beyond meaning, but which gives context to the meanings that we find in historical documents.

Mark Bradley (29:18)

So for our purposes, it seemed just like an ideal set of partners to launch this, right, because you've got straight up scholarly history, the way in which many of us do; you've got people who are working in public facing ways to think about that kind of history, both writing it and disseminating it; and then you got scientists like in little lab coats who are, you know, recreating, based on historical scholarship, what particular smells would look like? So it just seemed like there were a lot of pieces of what we were trying to do with the Lab that that kind of project could showcase. And so that's the one, you know, that we've started with. But it speaks to a sense of, in other projects, you know, people do history in all kinds of ways. Community activists do history. Archivists do history. Short story writers do history. Architects do history. You know, again, there's just a really, really large realm of people who are engaged in thinking about how history works. And I think part of what we want to do is do some translation work. Like, okay, a visual artist, for instance (and we're going to have one component of the lab will be thinking about the way in which history and contemporary visual art have worked together), what are practices in these other fields by which people are thinking through historical questions, and are there ways that their practice differs from our practice, but that we can productively think about. They've gotten to a certain place that maybe we can't get in the ways in which we think about how history is written or thought about, and can we learn, in that sense, from some of these other ways that people are engaged, so that it's not just collaborative projects, but that what comes out of it is for a reader, for instance, to be able to say, you know, that makes me think differently about work that I'm doing right now, that I wouldn't have thought about, right. And I'm getting there because maybe it's somebody who's just working in a different space and time, but maybe it's somebody who's working just in a different field over time, so that you know, in the ideal sense that it would kind of cross fertilize into people's own work or their own teaching in particular kinds of ways.

The sound of open air and footsteps again appear subtly in the background.

Daniel Story (31:37)

You can catch the inaugural edition of the AHR History Lab in the March 2022 issue of the journal, complete with a conversation on the study of historical smells. A big thanks to Marieke van Erp, Sofia Ehrich, and William Tullett, for taking us on this olfactory adventure. You can learn more about the Odeuropa project, including find a full list of team members as well as information about upcoming events, at the website odeuropa.eu. That's ODEUROPA dot EU. History in Focus is a production of the American Historical Review, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by me, Daniel Story. You can find more information about the episode, including music as well as an episode transcript, at americanhistoricalreview.org. And thank you, listener, for joining us for the start of this new podcasting journey. I hope you'll stick around, and maybe spread the word. So until next time, don't forget to stop and smell the roses, or maybe the trash cans.

Footsteps grow louder and then fade to silence.