

# Restoring the smells of Europe's past

Bringing to life the sights and sounds of European history is commonplace, but how about the smells? Thanks to a novel collaboration between AI, sciences and the humanities, the scents of old Europe are being rediscovered.



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What did Europe smell like hundreds of years ago? This is a question that is rarely considered when discussing our cultural heritage. In other words, smell has been ignored. “The sciences and humanities have suffered from a hierarchy of the senses,” states Inger Leemans, project lead of the EU-funded ODEUROPA project. “Our goal is to put smell as a cultural experience on the international research agenda, to be investigated through transdisciplinary collaborations.”

By drawing on visual and written evidence in Europe's libraries, archives and museums, ODEUROPA is identifying and even recreating the foul and fragrant aromas that wafted through the air in Europe between the 16th and early 20th centuries. Such scents can be anything from incense and tobacco, or strewing herbs and smelling salts, to elaborate recipes for pomanders (scented jewels), the smell of the Amsterdam canals, or even the much described smell of hell.

Scientists, historians, AI experts, perfumers and heritage experts have joined forces to analyse tens of thousands of historical images, such as paintings, for their associations with smell. They are also analysing historical texts in English, Dutch, German, French, Italian, Latin and Slovenian, ranging from old medical formulas and cooking manuals to novels and travel journals. Semantic web technology will help to bring all this information together.

Reproducing historical smells is no small feat. In close collaboration with heritage institutes, ODEUROPA is developing ‘nose on’ workshops, an olfactory guided tour (‘Der Nase Nach!’, Museum Ulm), an urban smell tour (City Sniffers, Amsterdam

Museum) and a hackathon (National Library Ljubljana). For these events, heritage scents are presented to the public's noses.

“We are trying to decide if it matters academically whether we preserve authentic smells with the right chemicals, recreate them from historical recipes or try to evoke a historical experience by creating a similar effect today,” comments Dr Cecilia Bembibre, leader of the heritage science team under ODEUROPA. Another issue is that our reactions to smells have changed considerably with the passage of time. “We don't have historical noses. We just don't smell in the same way now, and some smells mean different things.”

Ending in December 2023, the 3-year ODEUROPA (ODEUROPA: Negotiating Olfactory and Sensory Experiences in Cultural Heritage Practice and Research) project aims to demonstrate that smells and smelling are key to strengthening and promoting Europe's cultural heritage. A major component is drawing attention to how the meanings and uses of different smells have changed over the years. The know-how gathered in the project about these historical smells will feed into the European Olfactory Knowledge Graph (a database where people can query historical scent information) and an online encyclopaedia with storylines about heritage scents, significant smellscapes, 'noses' and identities.

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## Keywords

ODEUROPA, smell, scent, odour, aroma, smelling, cultural heritage, semantic web, history

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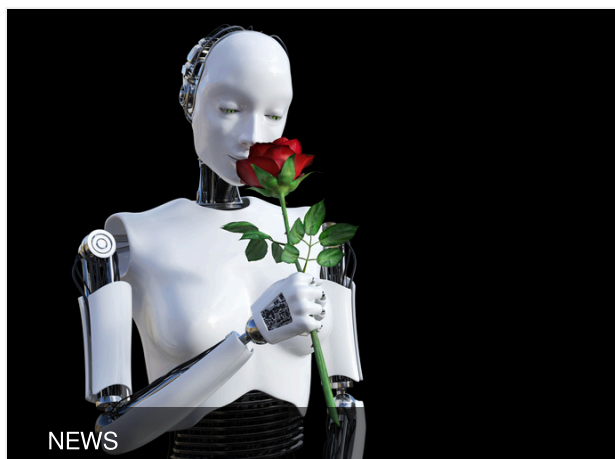


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