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FASHION

Now You Can Smell Like The Louvre

Cult French brand Officine Universelle Buly has partnered with the museum to release a line of scents inspired by some of the world's most famous artworks



PHOTO: COURTESY OF OFFICINE UNIVERSELLE BULY

By Grace Cook

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Last summer Ramdane Touhami, the 45-year-old co-owner of cult French beauty emporium Officine Universelle Buly (also known as Buly 1803), assembled a cast of eight perfumers in Paris's Louvre Museum. The 226-year-old museum was closed, but the troupe had gathered at Touhami's request with one common goal: to browse the Louvre's 35,000 exhibited artworks and choose any one to reinterpret as a scent.

"I love the idea that someone could say, 'Oh I wear Venus de Milo,' or 'I wear The Valpinçon Bather,' or 'The Lock,'" says Touhami. His project with the Louvre has taken some 12 months to come to fruition, eight of which were spent figuring out how his team could legally sell a perfume or a candle inspired by a work of art. (The trick was to illustrate the artworks on packaging and products, without using the exact images.)

The Officine Universelle Buly for The Louvre collection of perfumes, postcards, candles and scented soap sheets will debut on July 3 at the Louvre and Buly stores across Europe, the United States and Asia. (They will be available for six months in the museum and for a full year in Buly stores and on its website). The collection is part of the museum's new strategy to raise additional revenue from commercial merchandise and by extending its global reach.

"In my dream, in 20 years, you will go to the museum and see a Fragonard painting and say, 'I wore a perfume that smelled like this once,'" says Touhami, who relaunched the Buly brand with his wife Victoire de Taillac in 2014. Since its revival, Officine Universelle Buly has been renowned for its inventive curiosities like perfumed matches and scented rocks. Touhami and de Taillac began with one store on Rue Bonaparte; they now have 17 apothecary-style stores worldwide, with retail destinations in New York, Hong Kong, Tokyo and London, to name a few. The company says it plans to open a store in Rome.

What exactly does a Fragonard smell like? Lily, apple and chestnut, according to the French perfumer Delphine Lebeau; she interpreted French artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard's "The Lock," which art historians believe was painted between 1776-1779.

"The Lock" is about "lovers' desire, it's a timeless topic," Lebeau says. "There is a nice contrast...with this very bright light and in the background it's much darker. I felt some kind of tension, some kind of emergency, because of the desire." Lebeau chose to incorporate the scent of lilies. "For me [it's] very intense, sensual and intoxicating, but also very bright," she says. "When you leave a lily in the room, the smell is almost overwhelming." Velvety chestnut accords symbolize the deep ruby red curtains, while the apple perched on the table is represented literally: "I added an apple note because it is a forbidden fruit, of course."

For each chosen artwork, the Louvre provided the perfumers with historical information from its curators. Lebeau additionally read art journals that suggest that "The Lock" is depicting not lovers, but a rape. She dismisses the theory. "For me there is something very soft" about the

painting she says. “I don’t feel any fear at all. I very quickly decided not to look deeper into the historical side and just allow myself to be guided by emotions.”

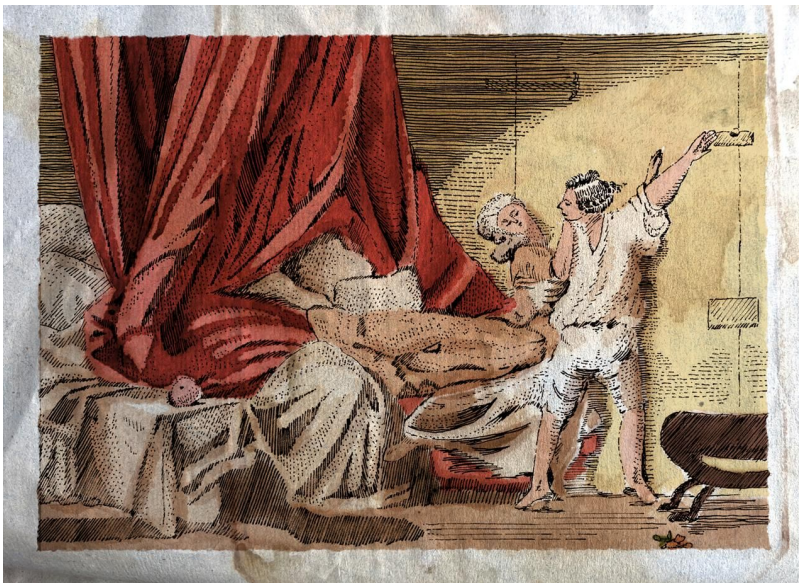


PHOTO: COURTESY OF OFFICINE UNIVERSELLE BULY

This rejection of historical theory was, to some extent, supported by the Louvre. “It was important for us that they had a personal and specific view on their choice of artworks,” says Adel Ziane, director of external relations at the Louvre, who spearheaded the partnership with

Buly. “Not to give them a specific way [of doing things]. Too large an influence of all the elements could have [averted] their approach. It really was a carte blanche.”

Inside the Louvre, the collection will be displayed on an old French postcard booth Touhami sourced specially for the occasion. “It’s a 19th-century tourist store reinvented,” he says. “So we are also doing postcards of the art scented like the perfumes. You see the painting, you’re going to have the postcard that you can scratch and smell, it gives you another layer of imagination.”

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