

***Olfactory knowledge:  
Learning through smell from the 18th century to the present day***

***International Conference***  
**October 22-23, 2026 - Maison française d'Oxford (United Kingdom)**

**Organizers:**

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According to Condillac, smell is “of all the senses, the one that seems to contribute least to the knowledge of the human mind” (1754; Jaquet, 2010). This perception is well grounded in language as illustrated by the French expression *flair*, a favored metaphor for approximate or intuitive knowledge. Such a popular belief will be questioned during this interdisciplinary conference by testing it against uses and practices through the study of the objectification of olfactory knowledge since the 18th century, whether it be expressed through texts (treatises, books, formulas, etc.), images (illustrations, photographs, paintings, etc.) or objects (olfactometers, etc.).

Beyond the knowledge necessary for survival (air and food quality) and the social stereotypes conveyed by olfaction (Hsu, 2020; Corbin, 1982), olfactory knowledge is an integral part of many scholarly, medical, artisanal, and domestic practices. Although the use of smell has been questioned since the end of the modern period (Roberts, 1995), the objectification of the senses through instrumentation has not completely eliminated the use of organoleptic expertise and olfactory assessments (Kiechle, 2017). For example, these have continued to play a key role in the characterization of materials, the classification of plant and fungal species, and even the development of medical diagnoses. In the field of crafts, olfaction is most often tacit knowledge, but documents such as technical treatises remind us that smell has also often been used to indicate adulterated materials or advanced chemical

transformation processes. At the same time, the emergence of synthetic raw materials, which encouraged creativity in perfumery (Briot, 2015), paved the way for the formulation of aesthetic judgments based on smell (Jaquet, 2015).

Since the 20th century, perfumers and oenologists have reinforced the idea of olfactory expertise, which has become institutionalized. Schools that emerged in the mid-20th century have enabled the implementation of sensory teaching methods such as the Jean Carles method, whose comparative approach to raw materials remains a major component of perfumery training. Alongside this expertise, other professions have continued to rely on the sense of smell, such as doctors or firemen (Candau, 2010). Today, several associations train citizens to recognize pollutants so that they can report them and better protect themselves. From a hedonistic perspective, numerous training courses are also offered to non-professionals who wish to develop their sense of smell in order to better appreciate wines, spices, coffees, or perfumes. Most museums now use olfactory reconstructions and immersive devices for sensory education based on emotions.

There is therefore no clear chronological break in terms of duration, nor any exclusion between tacit and prescriptive knowledge. On the contrary, the uses of smell invite us to reconsider these relationships and their multiple combinations: by refocusing attention on the observation of the uses of olfactory knowledge in multiple contexts, this multidisciplinary conference will allow us to reconsider the status of this sense, considered inferior in the general economy of knowledge since the “olfactory revolution” identified in the 18th century (Corbin, 1982) to the most recent advances in neuroscience.

### **Non-exhaustive research topics could be explored:**

- Language: Can we talk about a language specific to smells? Is the olfactory universe sufficiently systematic to define a possible form of olfactory communication? Does olfactory discourse demonstrate universalism or, on the contrary, linguistic variations reflecting different modes of perception? In what way is language the witness or vector of olfactory knowledge?
- Air: As the primary act of olfaction, how does breathing, i.e. the interaction of bodies with air, enable us to qualify odors, either good or bad, and to observe and understand airborne toxins (pathogens, pollution, etc.) in various environments (indoor/outdoor air, public space, workspaces, etc.)?
- Physiology: How has the understanding of the olfactory system through time influenced conceptions of its ability to provide reliable knowledge?
- Olfactometry: Whether measuring odors or olfactory sensitivity, how have these objectification approaches transformed our relationship with olfactory knowledge? What instruments and technical devices have been used for these operations? How has the measurement of olfactory sensitivity fueled racial stereotypes (Dias, 2004)?

- Teaching methods: How do we learn to smell? What teaching methods and tools have been developed to train olfactory experts?
- Expertise: How is olfactory expertise evaluated and recognized? Are certain professional areas of expertise linked to olfactory knowledge? What about expertise that proves to be erroneous or whose reliability is called into question by controversy?
- Sensory hierarchies: How is olfactory knowledge viewed in relation to other senses? How does it relate to other sensory knowledge? How does olfactory knowledge influence social judgments? What happens when the weakness of human olfaction leads to the use of other olfactory experts, e.g. animal expertise?
- Gender issues: Considered less reliable, but also intuitive, even emotional, olfactory knowledge has often been viewed through the lens of gender stereotypes. How does this relationship with femininity relate to the evaluation of olfactory knowledge? Is it viewed differently in the domestic sphere?

**This international conference aims to stimulate collective interdisciplinary reflection and is open to all disciplines in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, as well as specialists in medicine, chemistry, architecture, etc.** We welcome contributions from young researchers and established specialists in their fields. Proposals for papers in French or English, approximately 3,000 characters in length, accompanied by a short bio-bibliography, should be sent to Rémi Digonnet ([remi.digonnet@univ-st-etienne.fr](mailto:remi.digonnet@univ-st-etienne.fr)) and Érika Wicky ([erika.wicky@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr](mailto:erika.wicky@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr)) before April 15, 2026.

This international symposium is organized by the Junior Professorship Chair “Olfactions” (University of Grenoble-Alpes / LARHRA). It will be hosted by the Maison française d’Oxford (CNRS). It is supported by the Alexandre Koyré Center (CNRS/EHESS/MNHN, Paris), the ECLLA research laboratory (Jean Monnet University of Saint-Etienne), the Health-SHS Chair of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, and the Institut Universitaire de France. Contributors’s travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.

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