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What's That Smell? Rare Books and Artifacts From a 1906 Library

By

RANDY KENNEDY

Novelists have always known, maybe because their lives are so bound up in books.

Vladimir Nabokov wrote:

“Nothing revives the past so completely as a smell that was once associated with it.”

For many people, the smell of books, in particular, is one of memory's most powerful messengers, especially as the printed page gives way to the digital.

The aroma of paper and buckram in a **West Texas county library** where I worked as a teenager has stayed with me for decades, bringing back my youth with a Proustian punch whenever I catch a whiff of an old book.

Over the past year, a Columbia University preservation expert and a curator at the **Morgan Library & Museum** in Manhattan have been engaged in an unusual poetic-scientific experiment in the little-visited olfactory wing of history, trying to pin down the powerful connection between smell and memory — in this case, collective memory.

“People in my field are interested in what makes buildings significant,” **Jorge Otero-Pailos**, professor and director of historic preservation at Columbia, said in an interview on Wednesday. “In fact, people's memories are what make buildings culturally significant. And smell is the most direct way to those memories, but we pay so little attention to it.”

Over the last year, he and seven graduate students have been conducting a project in collaboration with the Morgan, with the help of Christine Nelson, curator of literary and historical manuscripts at the library.

Their goal is perhaps someday to be able to convey a sense of the building's history beyond just its look and feel. Their primary tool is a sampling device that looks like a contraption out of Jules Verne: a crystalline dome with plastic tubing snaking from its side.

The sampler is placed gently on objects — rare books, furniture, carpets — to capture the escaping molecules that create a distinct smell.

During visits to the library late last month, the class went spelunking with Ms. Nelson through the vermilion-hued **private study of John Pierpont Morgan**, the financier and collector who built the library in 1906, on Madison Avenue near 36th Street, to house his immense trove of rare books and art. (The library's three buildings were united with a modern addition by Renzo Piano in 2006.)

“Under normal circumstances, we would have been kicked out of any museum if we were behaving the way we behaved: We were on all fours, putting our heads under Morgan's desk, smelling his cigar box, the aromas inside his personal book vault, which were still very strong,” said Mr. Otero-Pailos, who has been exploring the role of smell in preservation for almost a decade.

He grew interested in the Morgan not only because of its role as one of the premier repositories in the world for rare books and manuscripts, but also, he said, because “it's such an important building for the history of America, and yet there are really a very small group of people who know about that significance.”

“It's one of the places where the shape of the American economy was decided, through the power of Morgan,” he added.

Ms. Nelson, who has worked at the Morgan for 26 years, said: “One of the reasons I was very drawn to working with this project was that for years people have come to me and said: ‘Oh God, it must smell so great where you work! I remember that old book smell from my favorite library so well.’ Everybody has some sort of olfactory memory of a library that probably had an effect on their lives.”

She added: "For me as a librarian, I've always thought about the question: Is there really a single old-book smell? I feel very strongly that there's not, and now I'm going to get to see the proof."

That proof is being percolated over the next few months in a Manhattan lab at International Flavor and Fragrances, a company that produces smells and tastes for everything from colognes to detergents and candies.

Carlos Benaim, a master perfumer with the company who has been involved in the Morgan project, said that the thousands of molecules that were trapped in the glass-bell sampler would be categorized to determine which of them constitutes the smell profile of objects and surfaces from the Morgan.

"It's a lengthy process that will take several months of in-depth work, especially for this many objects," Mr. Benaim said.

Besides books like a 16th-century calfskin-bound volume of Jacobus de Voragine's "The Golden Legend," what does a shelf of Circassian walnut that Morgan undoubtedly drew volumes from smell like? Or a box of his cigars, Havanas by Pedro Murias, circa 1910? Or a 1905 Otis elevator?

For that matter, what might these things have smelled like during Morgan's time or, for the rare volumes, centuries ago when they were new from the printer and binder? And could there be some Gilded-Age perspiration still lingering somewhere in the mix? During the 1907 financial panic, Morgan famously locked a group of bankers in the library overnight to force them to come to an agreement to save the economy.

The project, which drew attention after an article in the art blog *Hyperallergic*, may end up some day recreating these smells as a way to help visitors experience the library in a different way, possibly through an olfactory exhibition or sensory gallery, Ms. Nelson said.

"When we started this, we didn't really know where this would go, and we still don't, quite; it's still an experiment," she said.

Describing the project as "a scientifically informed art," Mr. Otero-Pailos added: "One thing we're not doing is trying to create old-book perfume. That's not the end goal. In the end, we're after meaning, historical meaning, cultural meaning and how to do that is something we hope to figure out."

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