



November 21, 2011

When the Box Itself Is the Thing

By VICTORIA GOMELSKY

BARCELONA — Tucked amid the elegant Art Nouveau buildings that line the Passeig de Gràcia here — chief among them Casa Batlló, Antoni Gaudí’s psychedelic masterpiece of Modernism, known by locals as the House of Bones for its skeletal, multicolor facade — is Regia, an 83-year-old perfumery offering an eclectic selection of high-end fragrances.

Visitors seeking a more historical perspective on scents, however, are advised to walk the length of the Regia boutique to a tucked-away room in back. Home to the Museum of Perfume, the space holds nearly 5,000 essence and perfume vessels dating from ancient Egypt to the present day.

That the museum, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary, lies mere footsteps away from Gaudí’s fantastical residence is serendipitous. Both attractions make the same point: The artistic value of a beautifully crafted exterior is not to be underestimated.

“Every bottle has a story, of the designer, the manufacturer, the history of when it was made,” said Josep Planas, a third generation member of the family that founded Regia and the museum. “You can see the evolution of the bottles. That’s the most important thing.”

The oldest vessels in the collection, makeup palettes once used by Pharaoh Amenhotep I, date from the 16th century B.C. The newest bear the great names of 20th-century perfumery: Shalimar by Guerlain, Miss Dior, Chanel No. 5. In between, sharp-eyed visitors will find a leather holster fitted with two 18th-century essence containers that belonged to Marie Antoinette, a box of 12 ampules made by the Florentine firm Santa Maria Novella for the Medici family, and a bottle with a sun-shaped stopper called Le Roi Soleil, designed by Salvador Dalí.

The presence of so many extraordinary receptacles leaves visitors with the curious impression that containers are often more important — and unquestionably longer lasting — than the things they contain.

Few people know that better than Marc Rosen. In “Glamour Icons,” Mr. Rosen’s new coffee-table book about his career as a perfume-bottle designer, he argues that it is possible to draw an entire history lesson from the changing silhouettes of perfume vessels over the years.

“I divided the chapters into decades because I wanted to show people how the definition of glamour, and hence the bottles, has changed with the times,” Mr. Rosen said.

“The bottles underscored the fashions of their time periods, from the early Lalique bottles, to the great Oriental influence of the 1920s, to the Art Deco-inspired ’30s, to the end of the ’40s and Dior’s New Look,” he said.

Applying an anthropological rigor to the history of perfume bottles wasn’t, however, Mr. Rosen’s only motive in publishing “Glamour Icons.”

“I wanted to remind people of how important the bottle is in the equation of success,” Mr. Rosen said. “A person identifies with that bottle. It says something about their sense of taste and social status, and each time they pick it up, it reinforces that.”

Throughout the book, Mr. Rosen evokes a time when women applied their makeup at dressing tables topped by perfume trays heavy with decanters made of Bohemian cut glass. By the second half of the last century, as women began to join the work force, such leisurely beauty rituals fell by the wayside, he said. The notion of the keepsake bottle fell out of favor, too.

But a few contemporary perfumers are bringing it back. At Bond No. 9, a boutique New York City-based firm founded by Laurice Rahmé in 2003, a series of limited edition scents have long celebrated the art of the bottle. This holiday, the firm is introducing its most precious fragrance yet: the new \$7,500 Fantasy Stone Fountain of Peace, which comes in a tall, curvaceous 42-ounce spigoted amphora vitrine encrusted with Swarovski crystals in varying shapes and sizes.

A few minutes from the flagship Bond No. 9 shop in Greenwich Village, Robert Gerstner, co-owner of Aedes de Venustas, a perfume and home fragrance boutique, is taking an equally studied, if more modestly priced, approach to packaging for his first signature fragrance, due out in the spring.

“The ‘juice’ itself tells a story, and it should be in sync with the bottle,” Mr. Gerstner said. “We chose a fairly simple bottle with a heavy bottom so when it’s in a client’s hands, it’s heavy and luxurious. We wanted to create a packaging so special that the customer wouldn’t even think of throwing it out.”

Mr. Gerstner makes a good point. The growing focus on sustainability means that luxury providers are increasingly looking at containers through green-tinted glasses.

“My idea is to make the packaging have an afterlife,” said Robert Bergman, president of Bergman Associates, which recently launched a new agency, Mpakt, to focus exclusively on modern packaging design. “A box turns into a pencil cup or a ring box, something you really want to keep.”

For collectors of high-end watches, there is no question that the finest presentation cases are intended to live on. Take, for example, the new Colosimo safe from German manufacturer Döttling. The company, founded nearly 100 years ago in Maichingen, drew its inspiration from American bank safes of the 1920s, whose indestructibility the miniature safe recreates using steel doors with radial bolts and a complex lock mechanism that requires a personal code to gain entry.

Security, however, isn't really the point.

“Most people leave the door of the safe open,” said Markus Döttling, the fourth-generation owner of the company. “They like to look at the mechanism of the lock.”

That the aesthetic value of the container trumps its functional purpose is obvious when talking about the decorative art items created by the 20th century's greatest jewelers, who lavished as much attention on smoking accessories — like matchboxes and cigarette cases — as they did on their jewels.

Lee Siegelson, an estate jeweler in New York, offers two items that he describes as sterling examples of Art Deco finery: a platinum, diamond and sapphire cigarette case by Cartier, circa 1930, and a pâte-de-verre, enamel and gold vanity case by Ostertag, circa 1925.

“Not many firms have continued to make such things,” Mr. Siegelson said.

“They express a different time and a different era.”

For a truly over-the-top gesture, Mr. Siegelson suggests using the cases, which retail for \$100,000 and \$125,000, respectively, as unconventional gift-wrapping.

“I have a pair of Boucheron Art Deco earrings in lapis; why not put the earrings in the case?” he said. “What a romantic gesture.”