

# From Oriental, to Amber

## Why it was time to rename the Oriental fragrance families

by Clayton Ilolahia, Communication & Evaluation Consultant, Fragrances of the World

Changes to Michael Edwards' Fragrance Wheel are as rare as comets, so when they occur it is for good reason. The last change was in 1998 when Michael added the Water family to account for the exponential growth in fragrances with marine notes.

In June of this year, Michael sent out the media release, 'It's Time to Change', announcing that Fragrances of the World is replacing the word Oriental with Amber in all English language classifications. The families that used the outgoing word in their descriptions have been updated to

Floral Amber, Soft Amber, Amber and Woody Amber.

There has been a lot of discussion, particularly in the US and the UK where our work is used extensively, about the term Oriental being outdated and, in some contexts, offensive. In 2016, Barack Obama enacted legislation banning the word in government documents as a description for people of Asian heritage.

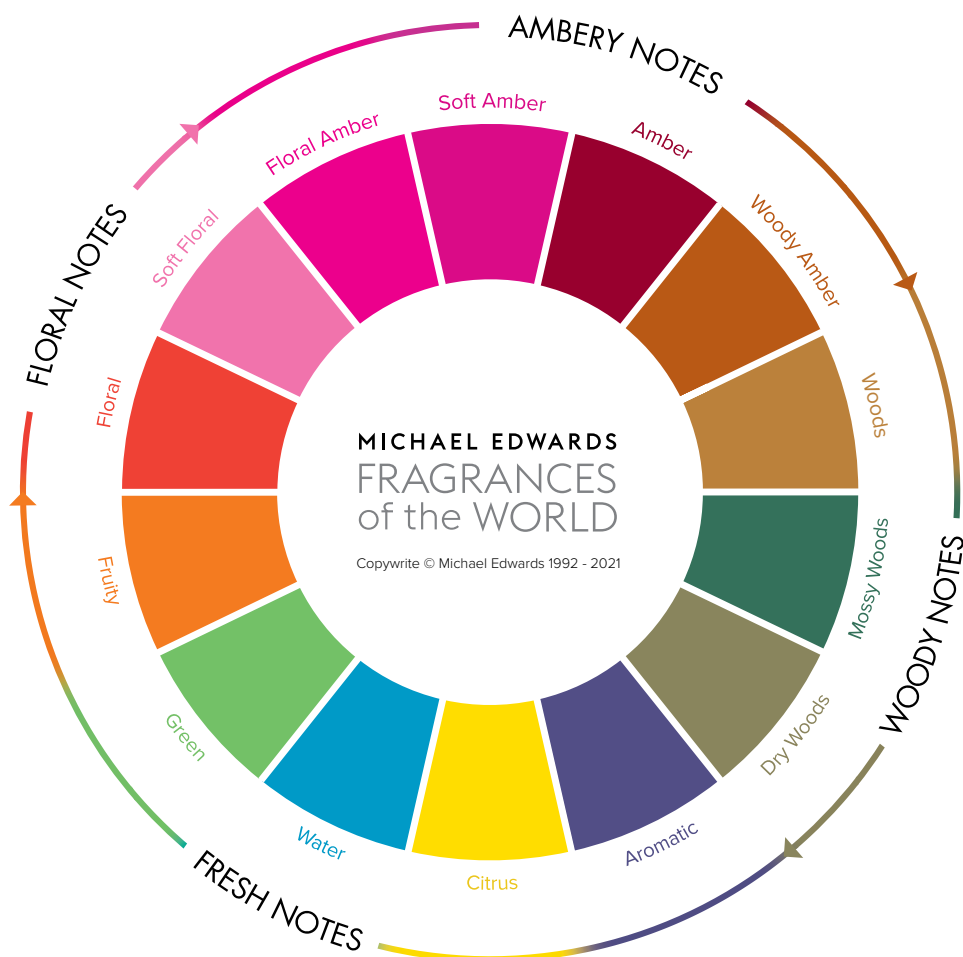
Many will be familiar with the oriental sensuality evoked by such fragrances as Opium and Shalimar. We noticed that

younger people do not make the same association. In a world now connected by global travel and the Internet, the fantasy of 'the Orient', as it was once portrayed, bears little resemblance to the modern cities of Shanghai, Tokyo or Seoul.

Critics point out the word is a reminder of colonialism, of a time when Anglo countries saw themselves as the centre of the world and everything east was exotic. "Terms which indicate a direction on a sphere are intrinsically ridiculous: Near East, Far East, Western Hemisphere, West Indies..." said biophysicist and writer Luca Turin, who added, "Oriental was never particularly descriptive. If anything, the 'Orient' gave us sandalwood, patchouli and oud, none of which screams Shalimar."

Within the context of perfumery, the term Oriental was never intended to be offensive, but perceptions change.

Perfumers, evaluators and marketing executives from leading oil houses were asking for our opinion. Some of their



*There has been a lot of discussion, particularly in the US and the UK where our work is used extensively, about the term Oriental being outdated and, in some contexts, offensive.*

clients wanted to avoid using the word to describe their fragrances.

These concerns sent us on a journey of enquiry. Opinion was divided. One perfumer traced the word's origin back to English literature from the Middle Ages, where it was used in a complimentary way to describe a place of splendour and abundance. Another contact in China said that amongst his peer group, there was no objection to the word.

Sue Hyun Busto, a Korean-American fragrance publicist living in the UK, pointed out: "In the US, the Asian-American experience varies. Even amongst our community, the ideology about race and identity is so different."

LA Times writer Jayne Tsuchiyama wrote: "Most Asian Americans have had racist epithets hurled at them at one time or another, but Oriental isn't in the canon." Unlike other racial slurs, the sting lies not so much in the word itself, but a version of history and stereotypes the word upholds. Taiwanese-born American perfumer Yosh Han argues that: "Oriental is an outdated term with colonial roots. Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism* offers a critique on the West's perception of the East. But what is the East, except othering, exoticising and fetishising? 'Oriental' has no olfactive meaning and in fact, no other industry uses this term."

Committed to change, our next step was to define new language. Amber was a front runner because the word was already established. Oil distilled from Baltic amber was in use as early as the 17th century. Frenchman Georges de Laire was the ground breaker who developed the first synthetic perfume bases in the late 19th century. De Laire launched *Ambre 83* in 1889, which Symrise describe as "an intricate blend of synthetic Vanillin, along with natural ingredients including vetiver, patchouli and jasmine". This led to Guerlain creating *Jicky* in the same year. Then perfumes like *Shalimar* and *Tabu* used the sensuality of amber to communicate stories about the exotic Orient. These oriental accords blended vanilla with woods, spices, balsams and resins, musk and floral notes. Amber accords from this period were much the same. In his 1931 book, *Le Livre du Parfumeur*, perfumer Félix Cola's formula for *Ambre Synthétique No 3* contained nitro musks, vanillin, benzoin, tolu balsam and lesser quantities of incense, vetiver, patchouli and isoeugenyl acetate (a spicy-floral note).

The advance of chemistry has widened the spectrum of ambery notes perfumers



#### THE AMBERY FRAGRANCE FAMILIES:

##### Amber

Sensual blends of golden resins, opulent flowers and sweet vanilla.

*Example:* Amber Absolute - Tom Ford

*Notes:* Patchouli, sandalwood, vanilla, labdanum, incense

##### Floral Amber

Imagine luminous flowers warmed with spices, resins, and vanilla.

*Example:* La Vie et Belle Eau de Parfum - Lancôme

*Notes:* Pear, blackberries, iris, Sambac jasmine, orange blossom, gourmand notes, patchouli

##### Soft Amber

Incense casts a spell on sweet spices and resins, to create softly sensual fragrances.

*Example:* Rouge - Comme des Garçons

*Notes:* Beetroot, ginger, pink pepper, geranium, Akigalawood, patchouli, labdanum, incense

##### Woody Amber

Spicy amber accords woven with potent wood notes of patchouli, oud, and sandalwood.

*Example:* Golden Oud - Mizensir

*Notes:* Bulgarian rose, Assafi oud, papyrus, Cetalox, amyris

use today. In addition to the amber notes found in classics like *Shalimar*, the industry often uses amber as a simple way to describe ambergris as well as a group of related "woody-amber" ingredients. In Michael's classification system, ambergris is much like musk, it is a supporting note shared by all families. His Woody Amber family encapsulates the use of modern woody-amber ingredients. We still recommend that the industry refines its language around amber notes to avoid the potential of confusing consumers.

Since Michael announced the update of his *Fragrance Wheel*, the response has

been overwhelmingly positive. A majority of oil houses have started talking about change, and numerous global brands have begun replacing oriental with amber in their product marketing and training content. We expect these changes will happen quietly, whilst the US Fragrance Foundation and media sites like Scent Festival, ÇaFleureBon and Fat Mascara champion the change through their digital media channels.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." – Margaret Mead