



Kaleidoscope House, collection of Marie T. Kelle.

## Scents & sensibility

PENELOPE GREEN

I AM fumbling with the little white plastic door of the new Elton John Scentport from Bath & Body Works, and pondering the device's significance as a mile marker in the curious recent history of home fragrance when compared with (a) Elton John's scented rocks; (b) Method Home's Aroma Pill, a dome of white plastic and glass the size of a child's hand, created by Karim Rashid; and (c) Glade's Scented Oil Light Show, an opaque obelisk that emits both coloured lights and sugary smells and was designed for the "tween" market.

Scents are careering about my house like bumper cars - the cat has sneezed himself to sleep - but I'm still "layering", as those in the multi-million-pound air-care industry like to say, trying to find my "signature scent". In the process I'm setting out more delivery systems than the Ministry of Defence: here a scent diffuser from Alora Ambiance (a ceramic jar filled with scented oil and wooden skewers), there a candle called Scene from Apothia that smells like juniper and pears. "Light the candle, live the life," its package exhorts. But will it match the sofa?

Once upon a time, only the fashionable rich and bohemian recognised the air as a decorative frontier. They made homes that smelled faintly of field-flower potpourri from Cherchez or bitter orange potpourri from Agraria, or more vividly, of the cloying, oily greenness of a silver-capped Rigaud candle.

The low end was a spritz with lemon-scented Glade. "It was all about problem-solution," said Tammy Maier-Jones, a manager with that company, which is celebrating its 50th year. But high and low collided a decade ago, as potpourri went mass (Glade still sells a potpourri spray), along with decorating.

Middle-aged boomers embraced the New Age and its legal mood enhancers, and words such as aromatherapy entered the popular lexicon. "For a generation obsessed with technology and their homes," says Annette Green, president emeritus of the Fragrance Foundation, "scent was another way to control their environment. It was the final frontier." Such a stew created an appetite across the board for all manner of scent systems - for devices such as the Scentport, a

sleek silver-and-white plug-in diffuser that hits stores this month - and for homes that now preen with more perfumes than an 18th-century French aristocrat.

"What we've learned from our ethnographies, from our consumer research, is that today air care is about setting moods, creating ambiance," says Maier-Jones. "For many people, scent is now part of the style of their homes - it's a signature, just like the furnishings."

Eric Ryan is co-founder of Method Home, a maker of cleaning products packaged in design-forward shapes created by Rashid, and now of air-care objets. The company's Aroma Pill reinterprets Glade PlugIns as an object of desire, Ryan says. "Since air space has become a kind of decorating space we wanted to make this elegant little object where someone would walk into your living room and see it and say, 'What's that?' and you'd say, 'Omigosh, it's my plug-in.' " The Aroma Pill comes in five fragrances, including lavender and lemon grass. Its design fits nicely in habitats styled with a neo-Seventies flair.

"It's about marking your turf," says Allan Mottus, a consultant to the beauty industry. "It's like a fetish, that you have to imprint your environment with all these fragrances. On the other hand, scented air is so ubiquitous outside of the home, in stores for example, that I think it's become like muzak."

He's not wrong - since February, and using a device made by ScentAir Technologies, a number of Starwood Hotels have been perfuming the air in their lobbies as part of their "sensory welcome programme", says Nadeen Ayala, a company spokeswoman. "It's a way to embrace and express our brands' voice." Starwood's Westin Hotels are spiced with white tea, its Sheratons with fig and bergamot, and the W hotel lobbies change seasonally (last spring, it was cut grass). The white tea "welcome" has been so popular, Ayala continues, that the hotel is now selling the stuff in candles, scent diffusers and potpourri.

But we're getting ahead of the story. Looking back, maybe it was the Great Rigaud Recall of 1990 that broke Rigaud's high-end dominance, when a rash of explosions forced the company to recall all of its totemic red and green candles manufactured in 1989, leaving proud homemakers scrambling for other options. Meanwhile, at the low end, 1989 was a banner year as Glade created its PlugIns, ushering in the era of continuous - and flame-free - fragrance. ("People didn't want to be spraying all the time," Maier-Jones explains.)

In the years that followed, the potpourri bowl grew dusty - as merger money ceded to dot-com money and the taste for traditional decor gave way to a sleeker, younger look - and the candle industry went berserk. Beginning in the early 1990s, scented candles flaunting celebrity, society and company names multiplied like viruses, issuing from everyone from Elton John to Glade, which entered the candle market in 1995.

There were tribal allegiances: Diptyque moved into the Rigaud territory, particularly for members of the fashion press, says Linda Wells, editor of Allure magazine and author of *Allure: Confessions of a Beauty Editor*. The labels were graphic and iconic; the scents piquant; the prices, which still hover around £30 a candle, exclusionary. (During his time at Gucci, Tom Ford used Diptyque's fig candle as a brand enhancer, burning it in his homes, offices and every Gucci boutique.)

An investment banker named Harry Slatkin became the Candle King, extending a business started by his brother, Howard, a decorator who created candles named for his clients - Deeda for Deeda Blair, Susan for Susan Gutfreund, Yasmin for Princess Aga Khan - into Slatkin & Co, a home fragrance empire. "Since Harry, every socialite seems to have her own candle company," Wells says. "Jennifer Creel, Marjorie Gubelmann, Blaine Trump, they're all doing it. Or else

everyone's making those scented sticks in the jars, though I'm not sure how I feel about looking at those on the front hall table.

"I think what I'm really pining for is an upscale Febreze Scentstory," she concludes, referring to Procter & Gamble's fan-powered gizmos that "play fragrance stories" on little scented discs.

It is Slatkin whom we must thank for the scented rock. "I made them for Elton," says Slatkin. "You can't just do potpourri for Elton John. I couldn't give him a bowl of dead flowers. Let the flowers stay in their fields! These are made of resin and they look like amber beads. I think they look so chic in a room." You can even wash them, he adds.

In his new role as president of home design for Limited Brands, which includes Bath & Body Works and the White Barn Candle Co, Slatkin has extended the Elton John name from candles and rocks into a fully fledged home fragrance line for Bath & Body Works. It is for this that Slatkin has invented the Scentport, which thrills him, he says. "It's going to be the iPod of the industry," he adds.

There is a poignancy to all this effort if you consider, as Pamela Dalton, a psychologist who studies human odour perception, points out, that a nose can only distinguish a scent for so long. "Companies say it's the product failing, but it's simple olfactory adaptation," Dalton says.

And in the end, says Italian-born decorator Milly de Cabrol, "all these smells are a bit overwhelming, no? In Italy my mother used to peel an orange and put it on the cooker, that was lovely. These days people seem to have lost it." If de Cabrol had a candle, what might it smell like? "A Milly candle would be really sexy, like my perfume, Carnal Flower. Or else I'd like it to smell like roast chicken, with a bit of garlic and rosemary."

### **The smell of success**

1961 Jacqueline Kennedy begins giving Rigaud scented candles as gifts, irrevocably altering the atmosphere in living rooms on both sides of the Atlantic.

1976 Cherchez opens on Lexington Avenue, New York, selling hand-stuffed fabric bags of potpourri. During the first week, Mrs Leonard Bernstein buys the entire stock.

1977 US department store Henri Bendel gives Agraria, the maker of potpourri that will one day sell for £35, its own boutique, selling air fragrance items such as those pictured, bottom.

1989 Air-freshener company Glade invents PlugIns.

1990 Due to a rash of exploding glass canisters, Rigaud recalls all of its totemic red and green candles made the year before.

1996 US fragrance house Harry Slatkin makes the first celebrity and charity candle, carrying Elton John's name, to benefit the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

1999 Jo Malone opens her flagship store on London's Sloane Street, selling her candles, the most popular scented with her signature Lime, Basil and Mandarin fragrance.

2000 Miller Harris is founded by parfumeur Lyn Harris, known for candles with smells like figue amere (salty fig).

2000 The fire service reports that, this year alone, more than 2,000 house blazes were caused by candles. Ten people died and more than 900 were injured.

2002 Harry Slatkin invents scented rocks.

2004 Reed diffusers flood the market at all price points. Ilio, one of a slew of companies created around this new "system", develops scent diffusers for the kitchen, in cucumber, toffee and lemon, "because you're not cooking in there all the time".

2005 Public concern in the UK over reports of carcinogens from the soot of paraffin-based candles leads to a slew of alternatives including Timothy Han candles - [www.timothyhan.com](http://www.timothyhan.com) - made from soy and vegetable waxes.

2006 Glade creates PlugIns with added lights, targeted firmly at the lucrative "tween" market, and the architect Zaha Hadid designs a prototype kitchen of the future featuring "scent diffusion technologies" which can be programmed to dispense a personalised selection of smells.

*PENELOPE GREEN AND GABY SOUTAR*

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