



Beauty Aids in Renaissance Italy

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Since the beginning of time, people have felt the need to make themselves more appealing by using herbal aids. The ancient Egyptians are among the first people documented to have utilized fragrances for both secular and non-secular use. The temples were filled with the heavy odors of incense made from resins, flowers and herbs to please the senses of the gods and goddesses. Nobles of the time would often place cones of fat scented with fragrant oils and resins on their heads that would melt with their body heat in a sort of natural time-release.

In Medieval times, it was commonly believed that a pleasing scent was a “healthy” scent as well as masking foul odors. They were used in living area, on personal items such as pomanders and on their bodies, both to help fight disease and enhance personal appeal. Medieval man possessed a deep knowledge of and a great appreciation for the fragrances of the natural world. Herbs, flowers and perfumes formed a large part of every day existence and were inextricably linked with magic and medicine. Many of the elixirs and potions for beauty aids contained fragrance as an integral part of the “healing” or “active” ingredient.

We have many sources we can turn to for guidance in what exactly those elixirs and potions might have contained. This information can be gathered from private letters describing and recommending various recipes and concoctions for every manner of use. There are extant treatises on the subject by various physicians, and even sermons given by priests denouncing the very use of such aids. We can also gain some understanding of their everyday use by reading some of the literature of the time. All these help give a clearer picture of what was popular to try and what was essential to everyday life. To read some of these is to find vapor and herb baths, potions for infertility, elixirs prescribed for all manner of ailments and formulas for cosmetics and other beauty aids. Scented garlands decorated homes and bodies. Every herb, every tree and every flower had its own special quality.

Essential oils were the distillation or enfluerage of a substance



to capture the scent of the particular flower, herb or fruit. They are the building blocks of the many forms of perfumery: incense, perfume, cologne, scented waters and scent bags. With the addition of musk obtained from the musk deer, civet from the civet cat or even musk obtained from the muskrat (inferior to the musk deer), scents of the day were complex and were comprised of a tonality that is still imitated today. A balanced scent is usually comprised of three tones: the light or high tone, the middle tone and the base tone. Consider these tones as if they were music; no one should overpower the other but when perfectly blended, it presents a harmonious and complex fragrance. The use of orris root and benzoin was common to not only impart scent but also as natural fixatives and preservatives.


The earliest essential oil is probably “Oil of Roses”, otherwise known as “Attar of Roses”, thought to have originated in the Arab world. This process was most likely brought to Europe through the increase in trade with the Middle East, perhaps helped along by the Crusades. Rose oil or rosewater was widely adopted and they often formed the base of many period recipes.

By the mid-1400s to early 1500s, perfuming was utilized for much more than just one’s person in Italy. They often scented their clothes, bed and table linens, hand-washing water and some of their clothing accessories such as gloves, handkerchiefs and jewelry in the form of pomanders. Consider this quote from Pietro Aretino’s book *Dialogues*:

“...They had set out a table very prettily, spreading over it a cloth that looked like white damask, perfuming it with lavender more pungent than the musk the muskrat makes...”

or this quote from Baccaccio’s *Decameron* referring to various fruited and “flavored” waters:

“Without permitting anyone else to lay a hand on him, the lady herself washed Salabaetto all over with soap scented with musk and cloves. She then had herself washed and rubbed down by the slaves. This done, the slaves brought two fine and very white sheets, so scented with roses that they seemed like roses; the slaves wrapped Salabaetto in one and the lady in the other and then carried them both on their shoulders to the bed . . . They then took from the basket




silver vases of great beauty, some of which were filled with rose water, some with orange water, some with jasmine water, and some with lemon water, which they sprinkled upon them.”

Also in the beginning of the 1500's many of the remedies, beauty aids and potions began to be assembled into a "book of secrets" published by many of the physicians of the time. Isabella Cortese, Alessio Piemontese otherwise known as Girolamo Ruscelli, Giovanni Marinelli and Michel Nostradamus, among several others, all offered these collections. Their works contained easy to understand language aimed at not only noble but also the emerging middle class women, who desired to make themselves more beautiful despite all the preaching and cautions directed against cosmetics as a whole. It is interesting to note that these books also included everyday cures and first aid remedies, making them more valuable to the household as a whole.

Methodology

When I first started to investigate the field of herbalism, I didn't immediately find a lot of period material available. But I dug a little deeper in other areas beside what is devoted specifically to herbalism, and I found an abundance of information under period women's studies, household descriptions and collections of writings of the period. I also found as a good starting point, the book *"The Elixirs of Nostradamus"*. This was my stepping stone to other works of the period. The more I researched, the more fascinated I became with these new "scientists". At this time in cooking, it was just assumed that the cook knew what quantity was needed of each ingredient to make the dish a success. In contrast, these formulas often give measurements of each ingredient so that the result could be achieved with much more regularity. I also found it intriguing that the author would usually "sell" his product by making fabulous claims before the actual ingredients and processes were discussed. In some of the descriptions, I was reminded of a stereotypical "snake oil salesman" making outrageous statements so that you would buy his items for sale. One of the concoctions in Nostradamus' book contains literally deadly ingredients and yet he states *"that your own family will not recognize you, you will be so beautiful"*. The juxtaposition of the scientific approach of the



directions to make the potions and the boastful statements of the author makes for fascinating reading. It was difficult to make a decision on which items I wanted to make because they were all so interesting. Some items were eliminated because they contained dangerous or unable to obtain ingredients. Others needed special equipment or circumstances that were not available to me to be able to complete them. But five really caught my eye and met all the physical and aesthetic requirements that I had set for myself.

Hand-washing water

At cultured tables, a meal always started with scented water to wash the hands. These were often scented with flowers, herbs or fruits or a combination of any of the three categories. Here is one period recipe from Hugh Plat's *Delightes for Ladies* 1594, on the subject of making scented waters with essential oils:

“Diverse sorts of sweet handwaters made suddenly or extempore with extracted oyles of spices. First you shall understand, that whensoever you shall draw any of the Oyles of Cinnamon, Cloves, Mace, Nutmegs or such like, that you shall have also a pottle or a gallon more or lesse, according to the quantity which you draw at once, of excellent sweet washing water for your table; yea some doe keepe the same for their broths, wherein otherwise they should use some of the same kinds of spice. But if you take three or foure drops only of the oyle of Cloves, Mace, or Nutmegs (for Cinamon oyle is too costly to spend this way) and mingle the same with a pinte of faire water, making agitation of them a pretty while together in a glasse having a narrow mouth, till they have in some measure incorporated themselves together, you shall find a very pleasing and delightful water to wash with and so you may alwaies furnish yourself of sweet water of severall kinds, before such time as your guests shall be ready to sit downe.”

I chose to make my handwashing water using rose oil as a base with orange oil and oil of cloves.

My redaction:

2 cups distilled water
5 drops of rose oil



1/2 orange flower water

Place water into a large jar, add essential oil and water. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend water with oil. Before using always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly.

Perfume


The first true perfume extract in the modern sense was not created until the 10th century A.D., when the famous Islamic physician, Avicenna, first discovered the process of distilling oil from the petals of roses. This essence, diluted with water, became rose water, the first modern perfume. It is easily the most widely utilized scent of the period, either alone or in combination with other scents.

There is also a mention in Nostradamus' book while talking about other formulas for scented beads or tablets. From "How to Make an Aromatic Long-lasting Paste"...pg. 30

To all aromatic mixtures are added roses, which are the best things for imparting scent...

In my research, I discovered that there was an almost commonly accepted way of performing a floral enfluerage: Take petals only, reduce them to a smaller size by shredding them and then adding enough water to cover them and repeatedly heat and simmer them alternating with allowing them to steep, so I followed those instructions with my roses. These roses were a gift to me for my birthday and I thought that it would be a great way to preserve and remember that gift by using the petals in this project. They were not homegrown roses so therefore I would never use them in cooking, due to the danger of potential pesticide contamination. But for my perfume and rose beads they were quite acceptable.

I took 4 large handfuls of rose petals and minced them finely, put enough water in a pot to cover them and simmered them in an old pot for 6 hours over low heat. At the end of the time I turned off the heat and let them steep overnight. The next day, I took a masher and tried to break up the petal shreds and then simmered them over a low heat for another 2 hours and then let them steep overnight. The third day, I mashed them first and then let them simmer for another 2 hours. By this time the petal mash was pretty thoroughly broken up. I then strained the matter from the liquid and used this liquid as the basis for my perfume. The scent



was now concentrated and had infused the house with the scent of roses. I added some powdered orris root as a fixative to preserve the aroma.

In my first attempt to make perfume, I read that home distillation is discouraged, if not illegal, in some parts of this country. Many sources suggest adding essential oils to a grain alcohol base (like Everclear or vodka). Vodka was preferred by those sources for its lack of scent. I chose to make a perfume using vodka. When I presented this perfume at last year's Kingdom Arts and Sciences Championship, I was informed that because vodka was derived from potatoes, I shouldn't use it. They suggested that I use grain alcohol like Everclear. This year, I decided that I would use my own homemade rose base but I would make some perfume in three different fashions, each utilizing the rose liquid and a mixture of orange water, orris root and Egyptian musk oil. In the first version these were added to a base of distilled water; the second to the grain alcohol and the third to vodka. I did this so that I could see the comparison in the composition and final outcome.

My redactions:

For the scented water


½ cup of rose water
1/4 cup of orange blossom water
1 teaspoon of benzoin
14 drops of Egyptian musk oil
Enough distilled water to fill the rest of the bottle

Add essential waters and oil to a half cup of water in a large jar. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend the water with the rest of the ingredients. Add water slowly, and shake thoroughly between each addition. Before using always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly

For the perfume using grain alcohol:

½ cup of Everclear or other grain alcohol
½ cup of rose water
1/4 cup of orange blossom water
1 teaspoon of benzoin
14 drops of Egyptian musk oil
Enough distilled water to fill the rest of the bottle

Place the grain alcohol in a large jar, add essential waters and oil.



Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend the grain alcohol with the rest of the ingredients. Add water slowly, and shake thoroughly between each addition. Before using, always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly.

For the perfume using vodka:

½ cup of vodka

½ cup of rose water

1/4 cup of orange blossom water

1 teaspoon of benzoin

14 drops of Egyptian musk oil

Enough distilled water to fill the rest of the bottle

Place vodka into a large jar, add essential waters and oil. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend vodka with rest of the ingredients. Add water slowly, and shake thoroughly between each addition. Before using, always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly.

Rose Beads

Because I made my own rosewater, I had the petal matter from that process. I really didn't want to just discard this paste so I thought I would go ahead and make rose beads from this matter. It certainly would have been easy to just make them into tablets that could be placed within pomanders or other jewelry but I wanted beads. I saw a formula for rose lozenges in the *Manual de Mujeres en el qual se contienen muchas y diversas recetas muy buenas*, "Manual of Women in Which is Contained Many and Diverse Recipes That Are Very Good". This was written anonymously around 1500 AD.

Here is the original entry in the Spanish manuscript.

Receta para hacer pasticas de perfume de rosas

Tomar una libra de rosas sin las cabezuelas, y siete onzas de menjuí molido. Echar las rosas en remojo en agua almizclada y estén una noche. Sacar después estas rosas y expremidlas mucho del agua, y majadlas con el menjuí. Y al majar, poner con ello una cuarta de ámbar y otra de algalia. Y después de majadas, hacer vuestras pasticas y ponedlas cada una entre dos hojas de rosas, y secadlas donde no les dé el sol.

Here is the English translation



Recipe for making rose-scented tablets

Take a pound of roses without the flower heads, and seven ounces of ground benzoin. Put the roses to soak in musk water for a night. Remove these roses afterwards and thoroughly squeeze out the water, and grind them with the benzoin. And when grinding, put with it a quarter of amber and another of civet [musk]. And after [they are] ground, make your tablets and put each one between two rose leaves, and dry them away from the sun.”


My redaction:

4 oz of ground rose petal paste
½ oz. of powdered orris root
¼ oz. of ground benzoin
10 drops of rose oil

I took the rose lees from the rosewater and mixed it with the orris root and benzoin. I added just a little rose oil and then thoroughly mixed up the ingredients with a fork. Then I rolled the mixture into balls. I got 34 balls out of the paste. I let them rest for about 2 hours to let them set up a little. When I went back to check them and pierce them so that I could string them as beads, I noticed that a few of them were cracking. I thought that they needed to be rolled just a little more and as I was trying to close up the crack I discovered that as I pressed them, liquid started to come out. I ended up, pressing each one again, removing the excess liquid and then re-rolling them. It took over 3 hours to get them to the point where they felt much more solid and did not have cracks in them. I finally pierced each bead with a pin and stuck those pins in a base to let the balls dry without deforming by touching a flat surface. Once dry, I strung them into the necklace you see now.

Hand “Soap”

This hand soap formula was taken from an excerpt from Isabella Cortese’s, *I secreti della Signora Isabella Cortese*, “Book of Secrets”, originally published in 1556, and was included in *Women in Italy, 1350 to 1650* as an example of the many recipes that were available in Italy at the time. Isabella was one of the first women to be a well respected scientist and alchemist in period. Her treatise on alchemy and cosmetics was reprinted seven times between 1561 and 1599. Her marketing strategy was ingenious; she would sell



her book to a noblewoman but would caution the noble not to divulge her secrets to her friends. Isabella would then in turn sell her book to all the noblewoman's friends (usually nobles themselves) each with the caution not to share their secrets, so that instead of selling one shared book, she sold many books.

At first, I was unable to locate the original Italian for this formula. Isabella's book was recently reprinted in Italian in 1997 and thus copyrighted. I found the book for sale but the price was 60 Euros and my budget would not permit me to acquire it. I searched the internet and finally came across a French website, (that I had to translate) that offered a scanned copy in pdf form of their original dated 1584. Now that I have it as a pdf, I am looking forward to puzzling out the Italian and trying out several more of her "secrets".

Here is the the Italian wording for this:

Per far belle le mani

Prendi del fugo di limone, e altratanta acqua odoriferia e metti a bollir alfuoco, e come bolle mette ui dentro della polvere delle fugaccie dell'amandole e fa che diventi come unfaone, e lavati con quello le mani che fara belle and bianche.

Here is the English translation as presented in *Women in Italy, 1350 to 1650*.

To beautify your hands

Take some lemon juice and the same quantity of perfumed water and place it on the fire to boil. While this is boiling, pour in some powdered almond skins and {stir}, turning it into a soap. Wash your hands with it, and it will make your hands white and beautiful.

My redaction:

½ cup of lemon juice
½ cup of orange blossom water
1/3 oz.of powdered almond skins (skins from 1 lb of almonds.

Soak raw almonds overnight. The next day carefully remove the skins and place on a cookie sheet. Once all the skins are removed, place the cookie sheet in the oven at 200 degrees with the door



slightly open for about an hour or until all the skins are dry. Once thoroughly dry, place skins in an air-tight container. When ready, put skins in a mortar and pestle and grind to a powder. I did the first batch this way but then for speed, I did the rest of the skins in a spice grinder.

Next, bring the lemon juice and orange blossom water to a boil, and add the powdered almond skins. Simmer this mixture over medium heat until it begins to thicken, then remove from the fire. Pour the finished product into a small mold and let it set up. It took quite a while to set up, possibly due to the high humidity when it was made. It did set up though as you can see without any further assistance.

When I made this, I didn't really know what it would turn out like. I wasn't sure if it would be a lotion or a bar soap or something in between. I figured out that the amount of powder could not support much in the way of liquid so I chose this beginning amount. I really like the scent of the two citrus fragrances together.

I know that in period that they would have had an abundance of almond skins from all the various daily uses of almonds. These skins were saved from the almonds used to make both the Marzipane Tart and the almond milk used in the Chicken Ambrogino. From now on I will not blindly discard the skins. Once I have many more skins, I may try this once again and have enough to increase the amounts to make a larger batch.



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