

In search of scents lost: new project explores Europe's smelly heritage

November 17, 2020

ODEUROPA will find references to smells and scents in literature and historical paintings using cutting-edge artificial intelligence techniques.

A new, € 2.8M international research project, funded by the [EU Horizon 2020 programme](#), will capture the smells of Europe as part of our cultural heritage.

ODEUROPA. *Negotiating Olfactory and Sensory Experiences in Cultural Heritage Practice and Research* is the first European initiative to use artificial intelligence (AI) to investigate the importance of scents and smelling, and to discover how scents have moulded our communities and traditions.

“Smells shape our experience of the world, yet we have very little sensory information about the past”, explained Inger Leemans, project lead of ODEUROPA and professor of cultural history at VU University and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Cluster (KNAW-HuC). “ODEUROPA will dive into digital heritage collections to discover the key scents of Europe and the stories they carry, then bring them back to our noses today”.

ODEUROPA will find references to smells such as disease-fighting perfumes, tobacco or the stench of industrialisation in historic literature and paintings using state-of-the-art AI techniques. “We want to teach the computer to see a smell”, explains **Peter Bell**, professor of digital humanities at FAU, and part of the team using machine learning and computer vision to train computers in analysing scented objects and olfactory information in historic images. They will work with computational linguistics experts at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, led by researcher **Sara Tonelli**: **“Our goal is to develop a ‘computer nose’ able to trace scents and olfactory experiences in digital texts over four centuries and seven languages”.**

An archive of the smells and their meaning, created by semantic web experts and cultural historians, will be stored online, accessible to all. In addition, some of the historic scents will be brought back to life by heritage scientists and perfumers, and shared with museum visitors in a

series of public events in the next three years.

The ODEUROPA team is an international consortium with expertise in history, art history, computational linguistics, semantic web, computer vision, heritage science and chemistry. These are the partners:

1. [KNAW Humanities Cluster](#) (The Netherlands)
2. [FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg](#) (Germany)
3. [Fondazione Bruno Kessler](#) (Italy)
4. [EURECOM – Sophia Antipolis](#) (France)
5. [Anglia Ruskin University](#) (United Kingdom)
6. [Jožef Stefan Institute](#) (Slovenia)
7. [University College London](#) (United Kingdom)

The visual and olfactory identity logos for the project were created by designer Kate McLean and perfumer Frank Bloem. The scent logo is a smell that combines key scents of Europe and will be shared in museums and events.

More information:

See our website: odeuropa.eu

Follow the project on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/odeuropa>

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The scent logo is available upon request.



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