

# **Almost Fragrant Pseudobotany: A Bouquet of Encounters With Faux Flora Across Time – A Visual Essay**

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Artificial flowers – also known as ‘faux flora, forever flowers and permanent botanicals’<sup>1</sup> are everyday objects. They dwell under the artificial lights of open-plan offices, root into windowsills, eternally unwatered, and adorn graves across the seasons. Once you start paying attention, they seem to be sprawling everywhere. But what smell would guide you there, helping you find them? Imitation flowers often gesture towards smell by mirroring its source visually and even haptically. And yet smell, a central property of flowers, is strangely neglected.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Hardie, ‘But They’re Only Imitation...? Plastic Flowers That Can Disgust and Delight.’ In *Provocative Plastics: Their Value in Design and Material Culture*, ed. Susan Lambert (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 179.

In this essay, we look at the cultural history of a less domesticated and stationary and more mobile variety of imitation floral life that was very popular until the early second half of the twentieth century: artificial flowers that were worn on the body as accessories: as pins or as millinery elements. They grew on hats, hairdos and buttonholes.

When city dwellers left their homes, often adorned with artificial flowers on their hats and lapels, they cut through the fresh air, that ‘turbulent medium,’<sup>2</sup> by adding whiffs of seasonal and not-so-seasonal flowers emanating from carefully crafted textile and synthetic buds to the urban smellscape. The organic surfaces of their flower adornments were often meant to carry perfume through mechanical contraptions, to soak them up, to diffuse them. People moved through the city as ‘channels, containers, and filters for airs and the things they hold.’<sup>3</sup> And so did their companion imitation flowers.

In the bouquet of vignettes that follows, we will travel to the almost forgotten production sites of artificial flowers, to sites of consumption where fabricated flowers and perfume were sold side by side, and to the virtual vaults of Intellectual Property Law.

We became interested in smell when doing object-based artistic research on historical fashion in a museum depot – a space where olfaction is always suspicious and important because it may carry hints of decay. The depot

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee, ‘Condition—Suspension’. *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 2 (2015): 210–23. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.2.04>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 1:** Building front and entry of the former artificial flowers factory, Kunstblumenfabrik Lumpe.

is also a site where whiffs and traces create an opening into the everyday life of bygone times and people. At the depot, artificial flowers can be found on hats and headpieces, but also as decorative elements for other accessories and even full outfits. The leaves often give way easily to the touch, and the stems, often wrapped in a greenish material, smell like old books. The flowers themselves are different. Their origin is often the animal kingdom. Silk and paper, wax and paper, felt and paper – the mixes are dry and acidic, powdery and sweet. Dusty and sometimes even rusty.

Curious where rust, paper, and fabric would lead us, we decided to go on a scavenger hunt that led us across

the cultural history and fashion(ing)s of artificial flowers in the German-speaking world. What started with flowers and leaves so delicate and brittle to the touch led us through an abandoned factory, a perfume and flower store closed due to the pandemic, and, finally digital property law vaults – the smells had always just disappeared as we approached them.

The images you see here captured some multisensorial ghosts, and many more storylines – or should we say bouquets?

### The Smell of Abandonment in the Factory and the Absence of Smell in the Archive

If one is to look for production facilities of artificial flowers, only very few of these are still operational in Germany. The ‘Kunstblumenfabrik Lumpe’, an artificial flower factory in Trutzhain (about 100 km north of Frankfurt), was forced to close due to economic reasons in 2003. Since then, this *sleeping beauty* awaits her prince. In the original German title ‘Dornröschen’ one would find even more florets and thorns. However, instead of a fairytale castle, a lost visitor will only find dust and cobwebs at this once busy production site. Despite the signs of decay many of the working processes are still visible, the traces of molding, forming, steaming still echo through materials and special tools left behind in the low ceilinged and cold rooms of the factory. The process of punching, dyeing and mounting the artificial flower leaves has remained virtually the same for 250 years. When one compares the left behind tools at ‘Kunstblumenfabrik Lumpe’ to the tools of the ‘fleuriste artificiel’ described by Denis Diderot



**Figure 2:** Samples photographed at the factory in 2021 (left) and Fleuriste artificiel from the *Encyclopédie* (right).

in his *Encyclopédie* (pictured on the right)<sup>4</sup> one recognises that very little has changed in this profession since the eighteenth century.

In the factory, flowers are not grown, they are produced. Artificiality concerns not only materiality but also breaking the plants down into their constituent parts and reconstructing them in a rationalised manner. For example, a natural daisy is composed of many single petals around a pistil. In the imitation, the leaves are fabricated by a punching form and the pistil is replaced by a cotton ball that could be soaked with fragrance. This artificial odour remained on the mimetic version for about three months.

<sup>4</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, n.d. [1751–1772]). <https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/encyclopédie0922>

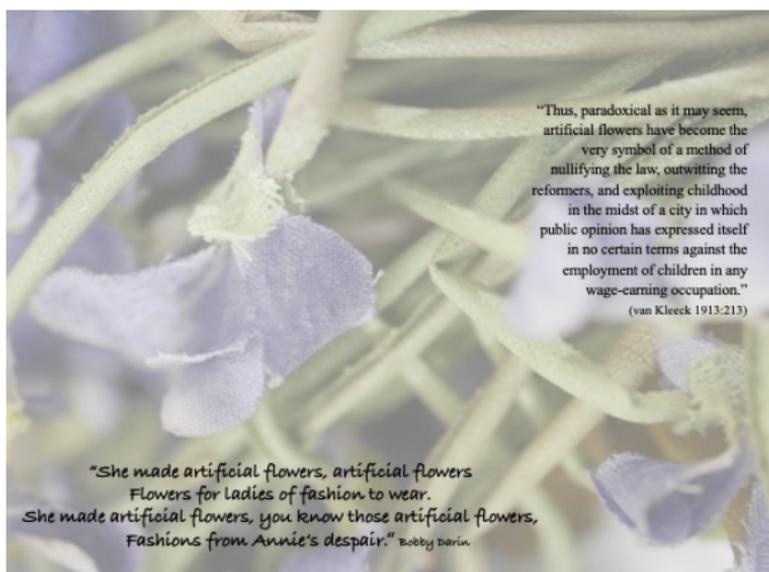


Figure 3: Bobby Darin and Mary van Kleeck.

Today the smell of mould and humidity dominates the former factory – a smell of tristesse, decadence and decay.

Neither the smell, nor the thought that, in fact, one stands on the grounds of a former barracks camp – one that was a Nazi prisoner of war camp during World War II, a US Civil Internment Camp for Nazis post-1945, a camp for Jewish displaced persons after 1946, and, after 1948, a camp for German displaced persons from Eastern Europe (one of them the founder of the factory) – vanish.

The fragility and tenderness of artificial flowers does not convey the reality of the harsh manufacturing conditions as described in Bobby Darin's 1961 swing song, 'Artificial Flowers', about an orphan forced to work in sweatshop conditions.<sup>5</sup> The production was traditionally organised

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<sup>5</sup> Bobby Darin, 'Artificial Flowers' (song) from *The Bobby Darin Story* (1961).



**Figure 4:** Wire, paper and linen flowers (c. 1910) for hat trimmings or dress accessories.

through home-work systems, also known as cottage industries, and workers were only paid for each piece they produced. Male factory owners mostly employed women without professional training, housewives and their children, labouring in a chemical smellscape smelling of dye and other potential toxins. Mary van Kleeck who investigated women's working conditions in the early 20th century wrote: 'frequently the dyeing is done in a corner of the same room in which the girls work and the odor of the wood alcohol is unpleasant and even, as many believe, positively injurious.'<sup>6</sup>

### Parfum Lehmann, Berlin

Kantstraße, Berlin West End, off the famous Kurfürstendamm: this is a site of more pleasurable smells that are preserved on purpose. Lehmann's 'Parfum und Künstliche Blumen' ('Perfume and Artificial Flowers'), is a well-established shop selling perfume according to weight (once per gram and now per millimetre) and

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<sup>6</sup> Mary van Kleeck, *Artificial Flower Makers* (New York: Survey Associates, 1913), 131.

artificial flowers since 1926. Unfortunately, it could not be entered at the time of writing. Covid-19 had placed the city in shutdown, its silence echoing that of the museum depot.

The shop leaves the passerby with a choice of several vistas, all framed by late 1950s curved shopfront features and brass trims: on the right side of the door, the shop windows are overgrown with orchids, arrowroot, roses, cacti. The orchids are *phalaenopsis*, and on closer inspection it becomes clear that these plants are not photosynthesising, but fabric based. And so are the *strelizia*, the poppies, the lilies, all arranged in vases dating from the 1950s onwards. This is why this flower shop looks so much more alive than the others on Kantstrasse, where the lockdown's slow to nonexistent business has taken its toll.

To the left, golden fabric is draped over a stair-like structure exhibiting large bottles of perfume. To this day, customers bring their own containers and carry home creations like 'Lambada' or 'Bahia', pure fragrances like linden blossom or velvet, or individual mixes.

The newspaper TAZ relates that the business, now owned by the third generation of the Lehmann family, keeps records of the olfactory preferences of all their customers including those who have passed on: an archive of fashionable smells, individual preferences and the olfactory history of Berlin, its citizens and visitors.<sup>7</sup> Artificial flowers, still occupying half of the shop floor were a later

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<sup>7</sup> Jana Janika Bach, 'Düfte Mit Persönlicher Note'. *TAZ Verlags*, 27 November 2015. <https://taz.de/Duefte-mit-persoelicher-Note/!5254748>



**Figure 5:** Shop front, Lehmann's, Parfum und Künstliche Blumen, Berlin. The business has been selling (fragranced) artificial flowers since 1926.



**Figure 6:** Details from Lehmann's window display.



**Figure 7:** Bricolage made from a 1920s velvet flower head piece detail (photograph) and patent specification for a vase holding a synthetic flower and motorised butterfly dispensing perfume.

addition to the shop's stock, sold as an alternative means of wearing the perfume that would otherwise have travelled home in bottles. And as plants do, they took root even after the trend faded.

And while both travelling and airborne substances have become concepts charged with mixed affects during a pandemic spreading a potentially deadly lung infection, a third window, displaying old black and white photographs, suggests that it does not need to be that way: the 'Tropfer' (a dripper), installed during an earlier iteration of the shop's life near Bahnhof Zoo, would disperse the parfum du jour – a new one each day, using the skin and fabric of passersby and potential customers to travel and float with the wind. Some, however, preferred artificial flowers rather than necks and revers to be the carriers of these perfumes.

But how to make the scents stay alive on the felted or silky leaves?

## Botanising Patents

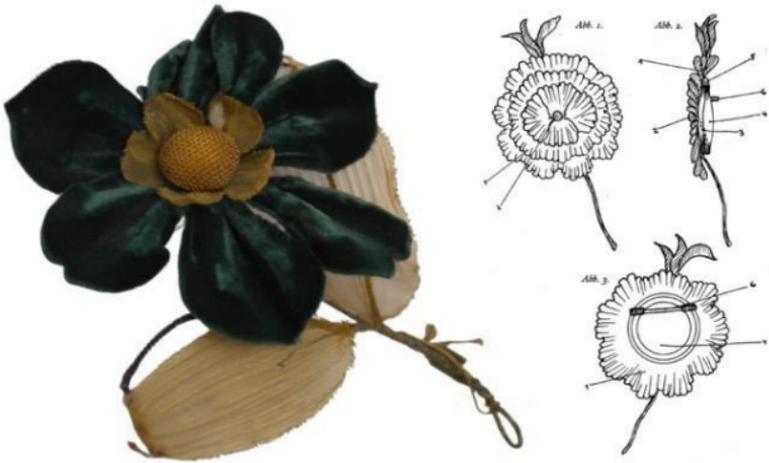
There is a surprising undergrowth of artificial flowers that have taken root in patent databases – many from the United States, the UK, and Germany and stemming from the first to early second half of the last century.

Intellectual property law is a ‘form of commodification rooted in Western liberal philosophy that creates regimes of scarcity by recognising some types of material expression as the property of individual, collective, and corporate actors. Using rationales such as the valorisation of original individuated expression (copyright), novel innovation (patent), investments in creating fields of commercial meaning (trademark), and the making and merchandising of distinctive personas (celebrity), the law legitimates various entitlements.’<sup>8</sup> Anthropological studies of intellectual property law often cross into ethnobotany, the privatisation of plant genetic materials in an era of tremendous biodiversity loss, question what exactly the ‘public sphere’ constitutes in any given cultural context and across economic asymmetries.

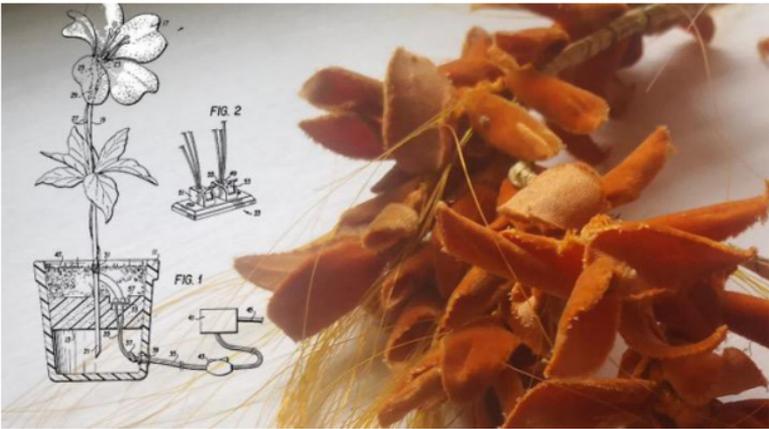
Not unlike other taxonomies of the plant kingdom, blueprints of artificial flowers sitting in the vaults of patent databases have been organised into different taxons, following a tree model of organising patent specifications. One such taxon is that of artificial flowers equipped with mechanisms used to disperse fragrances.

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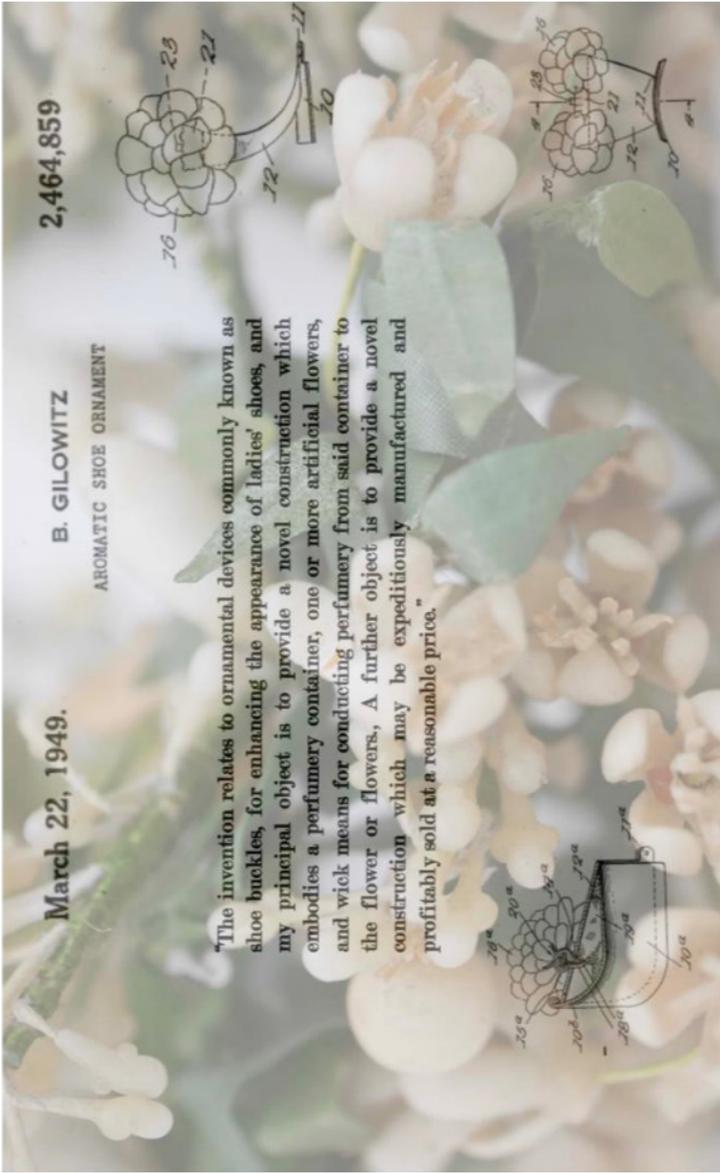
<sup>8</sup> Rosemary J. Coombe and Susannah Chapman, ‘Ethnographic Explorations of Intellectual Property’. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–45.



**Figure 8:** Velvet and linen flower pin (1930s) and a technical drawing used for patent application detailing an artificial flower pin with perfume-carrying cushion in the centre.



**Figure 9:** Wreath made of velvet leaves and grain from the 1920s meeting a patent specification for a vase with perfume reservoir.



**Figure 10:** Aromatic shoe ornament patent (1949) against a background of artificial myrtle from a bridal ornament.

The drawings that accompany the patent specifications depict mechanisms that add an olfactory dimension to faux flora are accurate and detailed, showing cross-sections and multiperspectivity that renders them botanical as much as technical. The actual sources of odours – oils, creams, alcoholic carrier substances – that can be used remain often underdetermined. From the perspective of intellectual property law, this makes sense: the less defined and fixed those sources are, the more is covered by the patent. As a resource for historical textile research, patent specifications occupy an unusual and often overlooked position. They draw together technological and legal worlds and put forward imaginaries about moving bodies in dressed up worlds, trying to stabilise the volatility of fragrances.

Please have a closer look at the legal-botanical drawings in this essay. On closer inspection their botanico-technical specificity becomes apparent; suggesting close kinship between the two epistemological worlds, making them available to the world of legal reasoning.

The cross sections reveal hollow stems and a variety of contraptions used to disperse fragrances (about which we mostly learn little): illuminated silk flowers are being patented here, the light fixture being a source of warmth, diffusing the fragrance.

Another patent offers a vase with a semiporous stopper and wire so fragrances can travel up to the floral leaves.

None of the contraptions, mostly intended to be worn close to the body, hold the fragrance forever. Here, the imitation flowers, vibrant as they may be, undergo the same changes as their photosynthesising siblings. The labour of patenting, all about stabilising, regulating, owning, merely extends time a little. The smell of complex

perfumes becomes faint, mingles with paper. Becomes a note within the bouquet of a different archive.

### Authors' Note

All images and collages were made by the authors, using our own photography from our private collections and the research project 'Dresses in motion' (<https://kw.uni-paderborn.de/fach-textil/kleidung-in-bewegung>; <http://www.susanneschmitt.org/#/kleidung-in-bewegung>) and patent documents freely available through the German Patent and Trade Mark Office as well as the European Patent Office: [Depatisnet.dpma.de](http://depatisnet.dpma.de) and [worldwide.espacenet.com](http://worldwide.espacenet.com).

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