

Art is in the House

— ACTIVITY

The olfactory imagination

By Liliane Moisan



Let your sense of smell awaken your creativity and nourish your inspiration !

Smells : Our relationship to smell is subjective, i.e. it changes from one person to another. While some people appreciate the smell of the skunk, others hate it! Our perceptions are influenced by our personal preferences, by our culture, but also by the context. A smell of cheese, for example, will not have the same effect on us if it comes from a camembert... or a pair of socks ! Thus, the same smell may seem pleasant or unpleasant depending on the situation in which we encounter it. Sometimes neglected, smell is our most primitive sense. It has been a very valuable tool throughout the evolution of humans by helping us, among other things, to identify the foods we could safely eat. Although it is nowadays rare to use our nose to ensure survival, odours nonetheless have an immense power.

Why are smells so closely linked to our memories ? An odour is first detected by specialized receptors in our nasal cavity. These cells then send a signal to the brain, which in turn analyzes the information. Unlike the other senses, which stimulate dedicated areas of the brain, the sense of smell is processed in an area that is also responsible for memory and emotions. This explains why smells are so evocative and manage to revive our memories. We associate them with moments in our lives, with people we've known, with activities we've done, jobs we've held, and so on.

Required material:

Small containers, paper, pencils and... odorous everyday objects !

Course of the activity :

1. Every family member grabs a small container in search of odours in the house (toothpaste, spices, perfume, coffee, household product, essential oil, etc.). They take hold of a small amount of this material in their container. Comforting or unpleasant odour, whether it be related to a person or a time of day, do not hesitate to be original !
2. Family members then gather around a table. At first, each person keeps his or her own container.
3. Everyone closes their eyes and absorbs the odour in front of them by smelling the content inserted in the container.
4. We start a timer (5, 10 or 15 minutes, depending on what suits you) and then write a short text based on that smell. Does it make us think of a particular moment ? An anecdote ? Does this smell remind us of a person ? An activity ? A place ? Does this smell enable us to feel a particular emotion ? Joy, love, disgust ? The text can take all forms, mixing truth and fiction, drawing on the intimacy of the author or featuring a character.
5. When the timer rings, the pencils are put down. Each person passes his or her container to the person on the right. Repeat the third step until everyone has written a short text on each of the smells.

Sharing texts and comeback:

- A first person reveals the odorous material he has chosen. Has everyone guessed what it was ?
- Each person reads out loud the text they wrote about this odour.
- Once everyone has read his or her text, we can try to identify the differences and similarities. Did the same smell provoke positive texts to some people and negative ones to others ? Did one smell prove to be very inspiring for some and very ordinary for others ?
- Is there an image, a comparison, an element of someone's text that particularly touched us, surprised us, amused us ? Why ?
- The exchange continues until all the smells have been identified and all the texts have been read.

Note for smaller children: Younger children can be asked to draw or tell orally what the smells are evoking for them. If you made up a story based on this smell, where would it take place ? Whose story would it be ? Describe how you feel when you smell that odor ?