

# CASE STUDY

4

*In Search of Lost Scents:*  
Early Research in Employing Olfactory  
Methods for GLAM Initiatives  
(2015-2019)





# Case Study

Portrait Caro Verbeek by Myra May.



## Caro Verbeek

Curator of Mondrian and De Stijl, *Kunstmuseum Den Haag*, the Netherlands

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### WEBSITE:

<https://research.vu.nl/en/persons/caro-verbeek>

*In Search of Lost Scents - Reconstructing the volatile heritage of the avant-garde* was a research project carried out as part of Caro Verbeek's creative industries PhD (supervised by Inger Leemans) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The project was a collaboration between the university and IFF (International Flavors and Fragrances) who developed the olfactory materials and compositions, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, who provided a venue and helped assess the questionnaires. This project served as the inspiration for the olfactory events carried out throughout Odeuropa.

### *Who is Caro Verbeek?*

As part of her PhD, Caro Verbeek was the curator and coordinator of the [In Search of Lost Scents](#) project at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (2015-2019). Verbeek is currently the curator of Mondrian and De Stijl at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the Netherlands, and is an assistant professor at the [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#), where she teaches her course [Knowing by Sensing](#). Additionally, she creates olfactory tours and interventions for museums. Some of Verbeek's projects include [Can You Smell Abstraction?](#) at the [Kunstmuseum Den Haag](#) (2021-present), and [The Museum of Smells](#) at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2018). Verbeek was also the co-curator of [Odorama](#) (2015-2021) which was a collection of presentations and talks focussed on sensory topics and accompanied by scents which took place at [Mediamatic](#), Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



Bernardo Flemming developing scents at the IFF lab. Photo courtesy of Caro Verbeek.

### *What advice would you give to GLAM professionals that want to use olfactory storytelling?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** *You see more when you smell.* That has always been my adage. When you include smells in storytelling people won't just learn about the smells of the past but it will also alter their gaze and they will see different details, pay more attention to the overall atmosphere, the materials, and the facial expressions.

### *What kinds of scents were created for In Search of Lost Scents?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** We produced 12 scents to accompany specific artworks that are on view at the Rijksmuseum. The most popular scent was modelled after Jan Willem Pieneman's painting of [The Battle of Waterloo](#) (1824). Its creation was historically informed but also based on visual cues of the painting like the weather conditions, horses, and gunpowder. The second most popular scent accompanied the Rijksmuseum's [Beuning Room](#) (c.1745). Its creation was historically informed and was created to communicate contrasts and combinations of smells within the space. The smell included resins and spices which were burned in the fireplace to fight mildew as well as some of the scents from the streets that would have entered through the room's window.



The Battle of Waterloo, Jan Willem Pieneman, 1824, oil on canvas, h 567cm x w 823cm x l 822.7cm. Free of Rights. Photo courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



Room from an Amsterdam canal house, anonymous, c. 1745-c. 1748, mahogany (wood), h 460cm. Free of Rights. Photo courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

*The Heritage Scents of In Search of Lost Scents:*

**The Battle of Waterloo** | [Eau de Cologne](#), gun powder, anxiety sweat, damp earth, horse, leather

**The Beuning Room** | Resins, mildew, fireplace, lime tree, horse, canal

*\*These scents were created by IFF in collaboration with the [Rijksmuseum](#) as part of In Search of Lost Scents.*

*During the guided tours, how did different groups respond to the smells and the space?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** One of the goals of the project was to better understand what adding an olfactory dimension to storytelling actually does to different target groups, like adults, children, and people of other abilities. The tour guides I trained told me that those who are usually very quiet became very talkative and that children seemed to have a much longer attention span. They noticed that participants also spent much more time in front of each artwork.



Caro Verbeek giving an olfactory tour through the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo courtesy of Caro Verbeek.



A visually impaired individual experiencing the scent of *The Battle of Waterloo* in front of the artwork during a scent tour. Photo credit Cathelijne Denekamp.

### ***Visitor Reflections on In Search of Lost Scents:***

Visitors found the exhibition engaging and that the scents featured in the exhibition expanded their understanding about the act of seeing itself. Seeing could also be made possible through stimulating other senses. Visually impaired participants found the use of *The Battle of Waterloo* scent particularly helpful when understanding the artwork:

“Your story was like an explosion of scents rousing my mind’s nose. When finally you made us smell it, I recognised it even though I hadn’t experienced it before. That made an impact.”

“Smelling and listening stimulated my creativity. The multi-sensory way of delivering a story resulted in a very sensational state of mind. I already realised I could ‘see’ through my sense of hearing. But after today I know I can also ‘see’ by my sense of smell.”

“What I remember most clearly of the tour is The Battle of Waterloo. Its size and complexity were illustrated by your footsteps, story and the scent.”

Cultural heritage professionals also found the guided tours beneficial:

“To me the scent helped render the tour even more interactive. It stimulated interaction between me and the visitors, but also amongst themselves. Almost every visitor felt the urge to share what they perceived.”

*Besides scent, what other modes of sensory engagement were used during the tour?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** When I conducted tours for the visually impaired, I brought items to touch like a pomander and a bottle of Eau de Cologne. I also often used sounds to create a sense of space and dimension. For example, to indicate the size of Jan Willem Pieneman's painting of [The Battle of Waterloo](#) (1824), I audibly walked its length on the floor. This way everyone knew what they were dealing with.

*What was the biggest challenge of using olfactory storytelling and how did you solve it?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** I found the distribution method most challenging. One of the methods we used were blotters and I found it difficult to plan out how to prepare the blotters, hand them out, and then get rid of them again. We worked with sleeves and put 15 blotters in each sleeve, 15 minutes before the event. The tour guides were trained by me in order to do that. They carried a plastic bag so the blotters could be disposed of immediately.

*How does engagement with smells contribute to worthwhile storytelling in GLAMs?*

**CARO VERBEEK:** There is much more engagement with the objects in the museum BUT also with each other! People are very interested in the different ways the scents are perceived in relation to the objects on display and share their experiences even with total strangers and feel connected to the past and other people simultaneously. Blind and low sighted people said it helped them imagine what was being displayed and depicted and it emphasised the characters involved in the stories. Overall the experience is more memorable.



Caro Verbeek giving an olfactory guided tour.  
Photo credit Cathelijne Denekamp.