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Laura Bosetti Tonatto, the Woman Who Creates Perfumes for Queen Elizabeth

An interview with Italy's most famous "nose" who numbers celebrities and even the Vatican among her clients, to learn more about her passion

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Laura Bosetti Tonatto in Saudi Arabia. All photos courtesy of Laura Bosetti Tonatto.

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But it's not only about celebrities, "I held a course for women in jail on how to make perfumes; we sold them in some of Torino's exclusive profumerie. This project moved me deeply because inmates aren't allowed to wear perfume. One woman, a Sicilian, fainted after we produced an orange blossom perfume. She hadn't smelled this very Sicilian scent for 20 years and was overwhelmed."

In December 2021, soon after she received a second commission from the Vatican, opened a second store in downtown Rome and created both a new home scent for Frescobaldi and seven perfumes for the Belmond Hotels, I interviewed Laura Bosetti Tonatto to chat about

her life, her many achievements and her perfumes.



Laura Bosetti Tonatto

A professional “nose” since 1986, Laura was the first perfume maker in Italy to create custom-made fragrances. She is still one of the few women “noses” in the world.

Born and raised in Torino into an affluent and international family, her paternal grandmother Ippolita, an artist with a particularly acute sense of smell, recognized Laura’s similar trait when her granddaughter was only three or four years old and encouraged their shared gift. “It was our secret, our conspiracy,” Laura says.

Laura trained in Cairo and then in Grasse, Provence, with her second mentor Guy Robert,

undisputedly one of the greatest “noses” of all time, before creating her own perfumes on Milan’s fashionable *Via Brera* where Armani, Caroline of Monaco, movie actress Ornella Muti and singer Ornella Vanoni were among her early clients.

After a brief period of collaboration with Unilever and L’Oréal, Laura returned to working for herself, but not only creating perfumes. Since 1993 she’s organized exhibitions and given seminars about the history of perfume and how to recreate “historical” scents by consulting ancient, medieval, Renaissance and Napoleonic texts. In addition, since 2006 Laura has been Adjunct Professor at the University of Ferrara teaching “Perfumes: Art and Production” and “Aromacology”. She’s also pluri-honored by the Italian and French Governments, the French Academy in Rome and UNESCO.

What do you think influenced you to seek out a sense of the exotic and led you to your passion?

“When I was 18, I went to Cairo to visit my mother’s sister. My aunt had married Samir Karrara, an Egyptian engineer who, after studying in Torino where they met, designed viaducts, bridges and roads all over the world. I loved him very much. When I was a child, he’d send me letters, especially from Indonesia, with pressed butterflies and tropical flowers inside. Soon after my arrival Uncle Samir, who knew about my love of perfume, took me to the Bazaar Khan-el-Kalili, which had a street lined with perfume makers. There he introduced me to a handsome 40-year-old ‘nose’ named Hassan. After begging him every day for more than a month Hassan finally agreed that I could help him. I owe 80% of my training to him.”

Since you’re *torinese*, why Rome?

“It’s true, I’m a seventh-generation *torinese*, but Rome is the city of my heart, of my rebirth after a difficult life experience. In 2015 I opened my first Roman shop and created my first “Roman” perfumes inspired by *The Bible: Nardò della Maddalena*, *Rosa Mistica* and *Incenso delle Chiese di Roma*, an immediate bestseller. I’d be incapable of administering a business located in more than one city.”



Flora, inspired by a painting by Francesco Melzi.

What was the breakthrough of your career?

“It was in 2005 when the Director of The Hermitage, Mikhail Piotrovsky commissioned me to create a perfume inspired by Caravaggio’s “Lute Player,” permanently on display there. I love Caravaggio because of the many rebuses hidden in his paintings. A decade later in 2015, I created *Lavanda di Leonardo* based on a recipe hidden in the lines of Da Vinci’s *Atlantic Codex* (Sheet 807r, Vol. III). Then in 2019 Piotrovsky asked me to create another perfume, this time for *Flora*, another painting in The Hermitage by Francesco Melzi, Leonardo’s favorite disciple.”

How do you create your perfumes?

“I begin by creating the formula in my studio on *Via dei Coronari* near my first Roman shop at No. 57. When I’m satisfied and have registered it, I send 5 grams to Grasse. There they produce 100 kilos of essence using my formula. Once I approve Grasse’s sample, my

perfumes are produced in my lab in Verona. My perfumes are the colors of their ingredients; I never use dyes.”

How long can a fragrance last?

“An essence can last six months maximum; a perfume many years because its essence is added to alcohol, a very efficient odorless preservative. A perfume’s high quality can last if it’s kept away from heat and out of direct sunlight.”

How many perfumes and other products do you sell?

“More than 800. I’ve created some 55 perfumes plus their matching hand and face creams, body lotions, soaps, shower gels, cosmetics, candles, home scents and sanitizers. I love all my perfumes; they’re my children. They’re all available from my website:

www.essenzialmentelaura.it.”

Besides the perfumes you sell in your shops, do you still create personalized perfumes for private clients?

“Yes, my most prestigious private client was and still is, Queen Elizabeth II. It took me a year (2008) to perfect my first perfume for her. I created twelve fragrances for her to choose from. She narrowed those down to a possible four and then to one: rose-and-amber-based. Only I know its formula; I’m not allowed to let anyone else even smell it. Then in 2011 the British Foreign Office asked me to create a scent for the 60th anniversary of her reign. It’s called ‘Lilibeth’, her family nickname.



Laura's creation, inspired by the Bible, "Nardò della Maddalena".

Besides Elizabeth II, several Saudi princesses have also been my clients for a long time. They introduced me to the magical, very rare rose, Taif, which survives in the desert at 50° degrees Centigrade during the day and at -10° Centigrade at night. Every year the princesses invite me to its harvest and give me a kilo of its petals for my perfume production. They also introduced me to helping less fortunate women. There's no income tax in Saudi Arabia, but everyone must donate 10% of his or her earnings to charity. The princesses head a foundation called 'Alnagda', which means 'rebirth', to help women who are abandoned, battered, or ill, as well as widows with children."

Like the princesses, do you help other women and children?

"When I still lived in Torino, I held a course for women in jail on how to make perfumes; we sold them in some of Torino's exclusive *profumerie*. This project moved me deeply because inmates aren't allowed to wear perfume. Perfume bottles are considered dangerous because they're made of glass and alcohol is inflammable. One woman, a Sicilian, fainted after we produced an orange blossom perfume. She hadn't smelled this very Sicilian scent for 20

years and was overwhelmed.

Since 2000 I've created a collection of home fragrances called *Sotto lo stesso cielo* (*Under the same sky*); all the proceeds go to support OAF-1 (*Organizzazione di Aiuto Fraterno-1*) a Torino-based non-profit, which supports children and young people in Italy and The Third world, especially in Brazil and Mozambique.”



Ethnos.

I've read that several hotels have commissioned fragrances from you. Can you tell us more about this?

“That's right; San Clemente Palace on the Venetian lagoon's namesake island (2003); Milan's Park Hyatt (2003), voted by 'WALL PAPER' 'the best fragrance ever created'; the Hotel Danieli in Venice (2008); and (2016) my Mytha Scent Collection Anthology of seven fragrances created for Turkish billionaire Ferit Şahenk's Doğuş Group's hotels: D-Maris Bay in Dacia; the Capri Palace; The Aldovrandi in Rome; Villa Magna in Madrid; The Argos in Cappadocia; Villa Dubrovnik; and Il Riccio Beach House in Bodrum, a resort town on the Turkish coast.”

Besides individuals, museums, and hotels who else have you produced perfumes for?

“Wine producers; Lancia cars; scents mentioned in literature for London's Waterhouse

Bookstore; Rolls Royce; Montegrappa pens; scents inspired by films for Italy’s weekly magazine *Panorama*; for Italy’s embassy in Tokyo inspired by Botticelli’s *Primavera*; Montblanc pens; scents inspired by Italian opera for the music publisher Ricordi’s 200th anniversary in 2008; Vinitaly; and Nepresso, to name a few.”

What are your latest creations?

“My new store at *Via del Campo Marzio 35* and a home scent called *Laudemio*, based on the flora and fruits near and in the Frescobaldi family’s olive groves (2021). It has the same name as the family’s olive oil and is the closest combination of taste and smell that I know. In addition, a line of perfumes and related products for the Belmond Hotels: the Splendido in Portofino, the Caruso in Naples, the Villa San Michele in Florence, the Cipriani in Venice, and the Timeo in Taormina. Like the Doğuş Group’s perfumes, they’re meant to remind the guests of the location after their departure.”



I Giardini, inspired by the Vatican Gardens.

What are you working on now?

“Although still in the planning stages, cosmetic products inspired by the farm and gardens of Castel Gandolfo’s Vatican Palace, where for centuries the popes–until Francis–spent their summers away from Rome’s suffocating heat. I feel very honored because just last year I

finished a project to create three perfumes for the Vatican Museums. They're on sale there and in my shops.

An obvious inspiration was the Vatican Gardens. There Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1913) built its *roseto* or rose garden—Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's favorite meditation spot—so rose and jasmine, so ubiquitous in Rome, are the predominant fragrances of my *Giardini*.

My *Terra Marique* or *Land and Sea*, was inspired by the Museums' frescoed Gallery of Maps. On one side of the Gallery are Italy's regions with the Tyrrhenian coastline; on the other, those along the Adriatic Sea. This scent, a mixture of flowers, orange blossom, woods, pastures and the sea, evoke Italy's landscapes.

In November 2019, after extensive redesigning, Pope Francis reopened the Vatican Ethnological Museum, which houses over 80,000 objects and works-of-art, often made of wood and/or leather. They're from all over the world, especially Oceania and Amazonia. He renamed it *Anima Mundi* or *Soul of the Earth*. At its inauguration the Museum's Director Father Nicola Mapelli, said: 'When we display objects, we don't display a dead reality, but something that expresses the spirit of a culture through its art.' So my *Ethnos* with its masculine scents of leather and wood, mixed with honey, (because honey has nourished almost all civilizations), aims to achieve this ideal."

Up to now you've told me about Laura Bosetti Tonatto the "nose", but I'd also like to know more about the person. For example, a "nose" has similar talents to a sommelier, so what are your favorite wines?

"Sauvignon Blanc from the winery Baron de Ladoucette in the Loire Valley; *Romanée Conti*, a very special red from Burgundy, and Frescobaldi's *Nipozzano*, a splendid Chianti."

What is a smell that you dislike?

"Butcher shops."

What is your favorite flower?

"Roses. My mentor, Guy Robert, taught me that to make a memorable perfume you need only two ingredients, but one must be a rose. There are so many different roses, all with

different scents to choose from. Every country has its rose. To the rose you can add amber, bergamot, violet, rocket. Every perfume belongs to a world of its own.”



The collage of the Mary Magdalene paintings as a backdrop to the shop counter.

Since several of your perfumes have been inspired by art, do you have an art collection?

“Yes, paintings of St. Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of perfumers. The majority date to the Roman Baroque period. The backdrop of my counter at the *Via dei Coronari 57* shop is a collage of my paintings of her. We’ve reproduced the collage on our wrapping paper.”

Many women always wear the same perfume; what about you?

“I like to try out on myself some of my perfumes, but I usually wear the one I’ve worn for more than forty years—one I created in Egypt at Hassan’s shop. Its ingredients are moss, amber, orange blossom and tuberose. I can change their percentages, but the ingredients remain the same. It’s not for sale. It’s mine and mine alone.”

[Lucy Gordan](#)**Lucy Gordan***Italian Hours*

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican; European... [\[More\]](#)

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