

The definition of femininity

CHANEL IS A NAME ASSOCIATED BY ALL WITH WITH LUXURY AND ELEGANCE. HOWEVER, AS PAUL BENCH EXPLAINS, THE POWERFUL PERSONALITY AND VISION OF COCO LIE BEHIND THE NAME.

Chanel has come to embody something of an independent force in fashion, perhaps because of its many associations and parallels with the struggles of the last century. Chanel pioneered change, not only in fashion but in a wider context of social change and formed a lasting paradox that simultaneously challenged and heeded convention. This tradition is upheld by the current arbiter of Chanel chic, Karl Lagerfeld, in his last collection for the label. Such chic is born out of instinct and experience, both of which were the result of Coco Chanel's troubled early life, her subsequent intrigues and affairs and her determination.

Though for decades Chanel as a fashion label has been synonymous with elegance and wealth, the early life of Chanel the woman was less auspicious. She was born Gabrielle Chanel in 1883, the second child of an unmarried couple in the Loire Valley in France. Her father was a street vendor and her mother a farmer's daughter. Upon the death of her mother, at the age of 12, Chanel was sent to an orphanage and later, at 18, to a boarding school. This was the beginning of a flirtation with the privileges of wealth, but here she was made to clean the stairs, in a lesson in humiliation that was to spur her angry determination for personal freedom and a more general emancipation of women through their clothing.

The rollercoaster of Chanel's life as a designer began when she met the textile heir Etienne Balsan at age 25. She was invited to become his mistress, and in order to escape the provinces, moved to his palatial residence just outside of Paris. It was here that Chanel developed her personal style and obstinate disregard for current fashions, asserting her independence through her clothes. She attacked the accepted style and beauty of the belle époque. Sometimes she dressed in a boyish way, with unplucked eye-brows and jodhpurs, and sometimes more like a governess in a cape and tie.

It was not long before her style was recognised and she began to realise that she could make money from her ethos and impeccable eye. Balsan was persuaded

to fund a millinery studio, and it was here that Chanel met her next benefactor and lover, the polo-playing coal mine heir Arthur Capel. He funded Chanel's move to Rue Cambon, which has been the iconic home of Chanel ever since.

With financial backing, Chanel truly consolidated her style and ideas about forms of modern womenswear into beautiful and desirable clothes that were both shocking in their newness and comfortable in their inoffensive elegance. In 1913 she opened a boutique in Deauville and in 1915 another in Biarritz. Her look was established. She favoured fabrics and cuts that were influenced by menswear with the twin elements of quality and a cut that flattered the wearer, allowing them to move, but without exposing or manipulating the body's form. Jersey tunics, flannel blazers, straight skirts and linen summer dresses were all popular and the staple look was established with a three-quarter length jacket, ankle length skirts with a fabric belt and a blouse that matched the jacket lining.

Her aim was to present a totally new way of dressing for women: one that freed them from the male-dominated image of femininity and allowed them to dress in a comfortable, elegant way. This was executed through a combination of male-influenced features and fabrics that were remnants of her past lovers and current friends. Tweeds, smart sportswear, trousers, and the braids and buttons of male military uniform all featured. She dominated the youth culture in the roaring twenties with party dress that demanded luxury while still allowing room to do the Charleston. She also created sport and beachwear that paid heed to practicality but looked effortlessly fashionable.

Chanel's aim was to liberate women from their dependence upon men. She loved men, and never forgot her early benefactors, but she asserted her independence at every turn, and would not be manipulated into a male version of femininity. It is this aggressive independence that creates the delightful Chanel paradox when it is teamed with her version of femininity and desire. Her impoverished early life is similarly juxtaposed with her later obsession with quality which necessitates wealth. However, unlike later designers that have been



enthralled by the riches of aristocracy and formed it into luxurious pastiche, Chanel cultivated her own brand of understated luxury, always with an undertone of playful satire that challenges the observer should they choose to see beyond the obsessively controlled details and cuts of the clothes. She designed with principles in mind, both of life and aesthetics, and applied these to an expanded range of beach- and city-wear as well as evening dresses in tulle that appeared simple in construction and were set with jet beads.

The little black dress of crêpe de chine and intended for dancing became another enduring icon. *American Vogue* called this 'the Ford of fashion', and it was the first sign that Chanel had created what would later be termed 'timeless clothing'. It was the adherence to basic principles that formed the foundation of such clothing as well as the attention to accessories and styling (before the word was coined) which created the overall vision of the Chanel look. Chanel's clothes made quibbles over hem length obsolete and were the first not just to suggest wealth and status but to express a larger concern for a modern attitude, suitable for a modern life.

As a relatively new but established designer she was in integral part of a burgeoning scene of international creative talent that would feed off its own creative thinking and shape the early part of the last century. She socialised with Diaghilev, the impresario of the famed Ballet Russe, and produced costumes for two of Jean Cocteau's plays, *Antigone* and *Orphée*. She was friends with artists and was also reported to have played cards with Winston Churchill, all the time playing down her exciting lifestyle, preferring to observe from afar. This has built an enduring legacy of mystique that the customer can buy into. She always used herself as the primary arbiter and role model for the way of life her clothes represented. Chanel was a living mannequin, living proof of the dream of the term chic, embracing both traditional convention and a bohemian glamour.

It was at the age of 40 that Chanel launched her assault on the world of perfume, producing one of the first perfumes to be primarily artificially constructed, creating a more lasting and delicate fragrance. This was teamed with the iconic bottle, in a masculine, square form with a large stopper, and the simple name, #5. The fragrance could be the most successful fragrance of all time, and still retains the same packaging today.

The outbreak of war in 1939 signalled an end to the glories and glamour of Chanel's past success when combined with the death of her then lover Paul Iribe, the world economic crisis, striking workers and the attention of the press turning to the more eccentric design of Elsa Schiaparelli. These factors all led to the closure of her boutiques, but the intrigue continued.

'FASHION IS IN THE AIR, IT IS TO DO WITH IDEAS, WITH THE WAY IN WHICH WE LIVE'



Karl Lagerfeld has continued Coco's tone with these recent designs.

In 1954 Chanel launched her come-back. She adopted the tailored suit as the armour for her new battle, in delicately toned tweeds in her trademark black, grey, pale pink and biscuit. The jackets were not close fitting and the skirts were not full. Accessories were brooches with fake, brightly coloured jewels and a hand bag with a chain shoulder strap that was later to form the staple accessory of many wardrobes and be copied worldwide. The collection was not well received by most press at the show in her old Rue Cambon salon. They thought Chanel was looking back to her old work, yet she had accurately predicted the future. The 1960s paralleled the 1920s in many ways, with straight cut dresses and an emphasis on youth, movement and clothes that reflected an active lifestyle.

It was the blueprint from this collection that Chanel as a company was to build on after her death in 1971, relying on the timelessness of her garments, until Karl Lagerfeld took over the design direction. In the 1980's he used Chanel's history of satire to create a double C logo and repeat it as patterning on garments, and by the 1990s had returned to the company's tradition of light fabrics and elegant neatness. He recreated the Chanel aesthetic into the iconic suit of an age of empowered women and power dressing, and has more recently adopted a more overtly feminine aesthetic, but with typical humour in the Chanel advertisements, which include evening dresses and heels teamed with surfboards and a beach setting.

The last season from Chanel for Autumn/Winter 2005 shows all the accents of the company traditions, with the key look being formed from a long tweed coat over leggings that form a current trend across the board. Hats are woollen and cloche like, belts are comprised of fine chain and the Chanel trademark Camellia fabric belts also form bows at one hip of the trousers and leggings, the latter being cut 'too long' to enable them to be ruched up. Evening dresses are straight with round necklines encrusted with pearls or knee length and billowing in chiffon. The colour palette throughout is the Chanel staple of black, white, grey, pale pink and biscuit.

Chanel said, 'Fashion is not something that only exists in clothes. Fashion is in the air. It has something to do with ideas, with the way in which we live, with what happens around us.' It was with this belief that Mademoiselle Chanel, Coco to her friends, set out to create clothes to fit a world and a lifestyle in which she believed, and which is continued today via Lagerfeld and represented by the suitably controversial Kate Moss. This rebellious elegance is surely set to continue well into the next century and adapt to the changes this may bring. □