

#### Episode #4 Show Notes: Coco Chanel: A Primer

Many years ago, when I was taking my first tentative steps down what was to be a long and winding career path, I lived in a little apartment with bare white walls, cinderblock bookcases, and a particle board dining table onto which I threw a rich burgundy tablecloth. The tiny kitchen was dark, and the appliances and the plastic countertops were a dingy avocado green—a shade that had been out of fashion for thirty years. A tenant before me had snuffed his cigarette on a prominent spot of the counter, making a perfect circle of a burn. For the nine years I lived there I covered that burn mark with a strategically-placed telephone book I never once used otherwise. It was a sad little habitat, but a setting in which to dream of what my life would be “someday.” I was certain “someday” wouldn’t look like stark white walls and imitation walnut cupboards.

In that first apartment there was one real piece of furniture: an overstuffed loveseat upholstered in beautiful cream damask. That loveseat cost a fortune at the time—it took me a couple of years to pay for it—and it looked completely out of place in my featureless, dated little living room. But I wanted one fine thing to come home to. Honestly, I spent more time looking at that loveseat than I did sitting on it. At the end of my work day I would turn the key in the lock, swing wide the door, and behold! There it was—the loveseat—an auspicious symbol (at least I hoped) of things to come.

After one year at my first professional job, I bought something else that was a tremendous splurge: a genuine knock-off of the classic Chanel 2.55 bag. I could never in a million years afford a *real* Chanel bag (not even used!) but I could approximate the look with a bag that, while not Chanel, was still very dear for a person from humble beginnings just starting out in the world. I loved everything about the Chanel look: the pearls!! The chic tweed jackets, the elegant correspondent shoes, the quilted leather bags with the woven chain straps—these were all the elements of style one would ever need to look neatly put together no matter the occasion. I knew nothing about Chanel the woman; but I did know Chanel the look, and it appealed to me then as it does now. What was revolutionary about her designs in the 1920s is fundamental today. Timeless.

Was Coco Chanel a paragon of virtue? No. By all accounts she had a long-standing love affair with a German intelligence officer during WWII, and by some accounts she was a Nazi sympathizer, although this has been disputed. She was opportunistic, relying on the favors of wealthy aristocratic men to open doors to their world for her. In old age she was described as gruff and desperately lonely. She was, however, a prominent citizen of Circa 19xx Land, and a sharp, resourceful survivor who built an empire that exists to this day.

What I have come to admire most about Coco Chanel was not her style instinct, or her entrepreneurial spirit and acumen; it was her ability to burst back onto the fashion scene after years of living away from it. Much of what we recognize today as the Chanel look was created upon her comeback in 1954. At 71, she was a comeback kid—an inspiration for those of us who have lived half a century and not yet arrived!

~ Jennifer Passariello, Circa 19xx

### Gabrielle Chanel's Biography in Seven Bullets

- Born in 1883 in a poorhouse in France, Chanel was the daughter of an unmarried peasant and a street vendor. After her mother died, her father left, and she was sent to an orphanage in a convent, where she lived until she was 18. It was there that she learned to embroider and sew.
- Her first career ambitions were directed toward the stage. She wanted to become an actress. She picked up the nickname “Coco” when she became known for singing songs on stage with “Coco” in the lyrics. Unsuccessful, she gave up her dreams of show business and sought work elsewhere.
- Her career in fashion began when she designed hats. With financial backing from men who kept her as mistress, principally Etienne Balsan and Arthur “Boy” Capel, she opened her millinery shop in Paris in 1913. She met with success rather quickly, as her designs took off. She started selling clothing as well.
- She introduced a number of revolutionary ideas to the world of women’s fashion, such as borrowing simple, tailored features from menswear, doing away with corsets and constrictive lines, utilizing jersey (a poor fabric used primarily for men’s underwear) for jackets and skirts, and bringing the “little black dress” into the fashion lexicon.
- Chanel worked with the French-Russian chemist and perfumer Ernest Beaux to develop Chanel N° 5, so named because it was the fifth iteration of the scent presented to her, but “5” was also her lucky number.
- During WWII she closed her fashion house and retreated to \_\_\_\_, where she lived with \_\_\_\_\_. In 1954, at the age of 71, she came out of retirement. During this period she designed the tweed suits that we know so well today. In 1955 she introduced her famous quilted bag with the woven chain shoulder strap called the 2.55 Bag, so called because it was designed in February of 1955. This was a reworking of an earlier design inspired by the shoulder bags soldiers had used during the war.
- She died on January 18, 1971. As she laid on her bed her last words to her maid were, “You see, this is how you die.”

Recommended resources:

*Coco Before Chanel*, 2009 film starring Audrey Tautou as Chanel. (French with English subtitles).

*Chanel and her World: Friends, Fashion, and Fame*, book by Edmonde Charles-Roux

*Chanel's Riviera, Glamour, Decadence, and Survival, in Peace and War*, book by Anne De Courcy

◆ Must see: The House of Chanel has produced a fantastic series of short films on their founder: her life, her inspirations, her creations, her business, and her style. There are currently 28 chapters (episodes), but more may be on the way. Each one is visually stunning. [The first episode](#) is on Chanel N° 5, the iconic perfume.

### Chanel's Wit and Wisdom

#### On life...

"I am not young, but I feel young. The day I feel old, I will go to bed and stay there. J'aime la vie! I feel that to live is a wonderful thing!"

"Don't spend time beating on a wall, hoping to transform it into a door."

"A woman who cuts her hair is about to change her life."

"You can be gorgeous at thirty, charming at forty, and irresistible for the rest of your life."

"True generosity means accepting ingratitude."

"How many cares one loses when one decides not to be something but to be someone."

"There are people who have money and there are people who are rich."

"Some people think luxury is the opposite of poverty. It is not. It is the opposite of vulgarity."

"Look for the woman in the dress. If there is no woman, there is no dress."

"I invented my life by taking for granted that everything I did not like would have an opposite, which I *would* like."

"Nature gives you the face you have at twenty; life shapes the face you have at thirty; but at fifty, you get the face you deserve."

#### On love...

"I only drink Champagne on two occasions, when I am in love and when I am not."

"Great loves too must be endured."

"I never wanted to weigh more heavily on a man than a bird."

"Women have always been the strong ones of the world. The men are always seeking from women a little pillow to put their heads down on. They are always longing for the mother who held them as infants."

On success...

"In order to be irreplaceable one must always be different."

"If you're sad, add more lipstick and attack."

"I don't care what you think of me. I don't think of you at all."

"The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud."

"Success is often achieved by those who don't know that failure is inevitable."

"Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends."

On fashion...

"It is said that women dress for other women, and out of a spirit of competition. This is true. But if there were no longer any men, women would no longer dress at all."

"An elegant woman should be able to do her marketing without making housewives laugh. Those who laugh are always right."

"The time comes when one can do nothing further to a work; this is when it has reached its worst."

"Fashion is at once both caterpillar and butterfly. Be a caterpillar by day and a butterfly by night. Nothing could be more comfortable than a caterpillar and nothing more made for love than a butterfly. There must be dresses that crawl and dresses that fly. The butterfly does not go to market, and the caterpillar does not go to a ball."

"One can get used to ugliness, but never to negligence."

## How to Dress Like Chanel

Take a quick online shopping jaunt over to [chanel.com](http://chanel.com) and you will discover that authentic Chanel does not come cheap. I found a beautiful ready to wear tweed jacket there in classic Chanel style for over \$12,000. Nnnnnope. Not going to happen. Even if the classic pieces last a lifetime (and they probably do), most of us will never live long enough to justify that level of investment in a single piece. There's good news, though: Chanel's influence on fashion is so pervasive, that even much more affordable labels have pieces that represent the genre well.

Shopping list:



A crisp white button-down shirt with a posable collar



A horizontal-striped sailor top



Tweed jacket



Jeans



A little black dress



Quilted bag with chain strap



Pearls and chains of varying lengths



Beige/black two-tone shoes



Camelia flower pin

Chanel's thoughts on style...	...tips for us...
"Fashion changes but style endures."	Buy classic pieces that are well made and are devoid of features that are characteristic of a particular era or season.
"Simplicity is the key note of all true elegance."	Avoid bold prints in favor of solid colors. Choose simple lines to create a simple foundation for accessories.
"Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman."	Never dress carelessly—especially if you are going into a situation in which you need to leave an impression.
"It is always better to be slightly underdressed."	Choose clothes that are stylish <i>and</i> comfortable; you can't look elegant if you appear to be trying too hard. Your style should appear effortless.
"Elegance is when the inside is as beautiful as the outside."	Be kind.

## Chanel at Home

Coco Chanel was part of a smart set of creatives and aristocrats, and as such, she lived in many beautiful places. She is most associated, however, with three: A flat above her boutique in Paris, an apartment at the Hotel Ritz nearby, and La Pausa, a villa she designed in the French Riviera.

### The flat above the boutique

- In Chanel's day it was the place where models presented collections to wealthy clients. Today it's also used for fashion shoots and press interviews.

From the online NPR article, "Take a Tour of Coco Chanel's Paris Apartment," by Susan Stamberg: 'To enter Chanel's universe, you climb a curved staircase, up steps carpeted in beige, with white trim. When new collections were presented, Chanel watched them being modeled from these stairs. During the show, she would sit perched on the fifth step down from her apartment, in front of a wall of mirrors. Looking down, she could see the models and the audience reaction to the clothes — without anyone seeing her.'

- The flat above the boutique isn't large, in fact the rooms are quite small, but the décor is opulent. Interestingly, there is no bedroom; Chanel never slept there. At the end of the day she walked back to her apartment at the Ritz.

### The apartment at the Ritz

- You can rent the "Chanel Suite" at the Ritz for the night—though it will cost you about the same as a mid-priced car. It is not, however, the actual suite in which she lived. She lived in suite 302; the suite that now bears her name was moved down one floor to suite 202, which has a better view.

From TheGoodLifeFrance.com: 'Enter through the softly swishing door of the Suite and you step into a room that is unmistakably Chanel. The colour palette is black, white and shades of beige. At 188m<sup>2</sup> (2024ft<sup>2</sup>) the two-bedroom, two-bathroom suite is larger than many homes. While luxurious, the living room is comfortable and is an idyllic spot to lounge with a glass of wine or sip a cup of coffee, soaking up the ambience. In front of the ornate fireplace is a comfy suede sofa trimmed with brass nail heads, a design based on Chanel's sofa from her rue Cambon apartment. It's a spacious room with several seating and designated work areas. The large windows provide plenty of light. An immense sparkling chandelier showcases the decorative soaring ceiling. Several small bookcases contain books on Chanel as well as objets d' art. There are sketches by Karl Lagerfeld in the entrance and throughout the suite are never-seen-before archive photos of Chanel during her time at the Ritz. It is in effect, a mini Chanel museum.

The living room separates two spacious bedrooms, the ultra-posh bedding begs you to lie down for a quick afternoon nap. Here you'll find gilt-framed mirrors, more photos of Chanel, and the holy grail, lacquered Coromandel screens gleaming with a rich patina. Chanel started collecting antique Coromandel screens during her days with her English polo playing lover, Boy Capel. She owned dozens...

...Both bathrooms scream Chanel: sink faucet handles are engraved with her name, deep tubs are perfect for relaxing, there is plenty of natural light. The vanity table stands ready to hold your collection of Chanel products. These are functional bathrooms, they aren't fussy. The fluffy towels are a soft peach, a signature of the Ritz Paris.'

- Chanel called the Ritz her home for 34 years, and it's where she died.

#### La Pausa

- The name of the house refers to the legend that Mary Magdalene "paused" near here on her journey from Jerusalem following the crucifixion of Jesus.
- The house is ideally situated, with views of the French border with Italy on one side, and Monaco on the other.

From *Chanel's Riviera* by Anne De Courcy: "Much of the house was made of white marble. There were large fireplaces in each room, with Eighteenth century English Oak floors and paneling, and Tudor and Jacobean furniture. The main colors were white and beige. Even the piano was beige. 'It is only possible to relax if one is not diverted by colorful backgrounds,' said Chanel. In the living room there were three large beige leather sofas as well as pieces of Provencal and Spanish furniture (then completely out of fashion).

"Her bedroom was done up in beige taffeta with a blue rug on the floor. Her bathroom next door was in white opaline...In the main room, heavy beige silk curtains hung at the huge windows framing their view of Monte Carlo seen through a grove of orange trees. Dark green blinds kept off the extreme heat of summer. In the dining room, with its enormously long table, white taffeta curtains matched the white walls. Each bedroom had an en suite bathroom and each bathroom also had another, separate entrance, so that a servant, summoned by electric bell, could slip in and out unnoticed to run a bath or pick up clothes to wash. In the bedrooms there were antique Italian beds with gold mosquito curtains and heavy rugs on the oak floors."

#### Style motifs in each home:

- Neutral color palettes; beige, white, black, and gold were featured prominently.
- Enormous lacquered screens (of which she had many).

## How to Break Through When it Seems too Late

Chanel re-entered the fashion world at the age of 71, after having shuttered her business during the war. The literature on Chanel offers several reasons for her re-emergence onto the fashion scene when she had previously assumed her career as a designer was over: was it falling sales of N° 5? Jealousy over the rise of Christian Dior and a perceived threat to her legacy? Boredom? Maybe a combination of all three. Whatever the case, Chanel simply announced that she was back, then threw herself into her work.

But what if you aren't "Chanel"? What if you haven't ever had your breakthrough, and now it seems too late. What do you do?

- Push through the notion that there is such a thing as "too late."
- Study the world you want to step into and how to be relevant. What is valued in that space? What are the trends at play? The technologies?
- Be BOLD! Jump in without apology. Be willing to reach out and connect with people who are already doing what you want to do. Also, be willing to look foolish, because...life is too short to care about looking foolish.
- Work really hard. Throw yourself into what you do. Make it your life's work, a new life style.
- Change your thinking: *why NOT you?*

## Favorite Thing of the Week

My favorite thing this week is the Rue de Paris necklace by Coco Chanel. Originally part of Grace Kelly's personal jewelry collection, only three were originally made back in 1928. Now you can get a replica—and it is a stunner! My mom gave me the Rue de Paris last Christmas, and you can currently get it through QVC.