The Great Emancipator
CHANEL

Gabrielle Chanel remains the touchstone of fashion because she invented the clothes to express the new reality of the independent, successful woman.

By Anne Hollander
Photographs by Douglas Hopkins

For women in the 1980s, an elegant suit is unsurpassed as the sign of the highest status. Beautiful suits are worn not only by holders of prestigious jobs and high public office, but also by public wives and ladies of conspicuous leisure. In the language of fashion the word *suit* is still firmly linked to the name of Chanel—the woman who brought the garment to its present eminence. Although Gabrielle ("Coco") Chanel has been dead for more than a decade, her great contribution to modern women's clothing has never been more noticeable. In the mutable world of fashion, her suit remains an undisputed classic.

Chanel is chiefly and rightly remembered as a stylistic innovator rather than as an inspired craftsman. Her suit was a masterpiece of taste, not a monument to the art of couture. Nor was it a sudden inspiration: the Chanel suit originated before the First World War and was perfected in the 1920s. Then, in 1939, at the height of its fame, "Mademoiselle," as she was always known, closed down the House of Chanel with the outbreak of World War II. For the next decade and a half, Chanel designed nothing. When she began again, in 1954, the original suit was only slightly revised, and Chanel easily continued the same train of sartorial thought she had begun so long before.

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The style of dress Chanel promulgated was simple, supple, slightly ingenuous, and neat. It is not surprising that her most abiding fame has been in America, where modern women first seized personal independence and a direct path to worldly power. Her restrained suits with soft blouses demonstrate a perfect mingling of female sexuality with straightforwardness. That combination is her contribution: clothes for the modern woman who is intensely sexual, utterly rational, practical, and perfectly charming—the absolute equal of men who also possess those qualities.

Misfortune's Child

Chanel's career as a fashion designer was slow to start. She was thirty before the First World War broke out and in her fifties at the peak of her fame, a decade that ended with the start of World War II. She emerged as a potent cultural figure only after a long apprenticeship spent opposing nineteenth-century habits of thought, sexual attitudes, and all their visual expressions—not by a conventional apprenticeship inside the limited atmosphere of the couture itself.

Chanel was born in Saumur, on the Loire River in western France, in 1883, the illegitimate daughter of a peddler father and a peasant mother. Her mother died when Gabrielle was twelve, and a week later her father abandoned her and a sister, Julia. Gabrielle spent the rest of her childhood in a grim and strict provincial orphanage; it was a desolate experience, one she would

Gabrielle Chanel (in 1928) took her ideas from functional, working-class garb. Here she wears a sailor's cap and servant's waistcoat, and with characteristic nonchalance has adorned them with lavish jewels.

ROGER SCHALL

never discuss. On her own very early, she was able to develop her opinions, seek her fortune, and establish the terms of her life without having to struggle against any of the middle-class restrictions that so inhibited many gifted women of her day. Humdrum needlework, the stage, or being kept were her main options, and she had a fling at all of them before opening a hat shop, in 1913. It was set up by a lover as a diversion for her, but when it actually succeeded, she rose to the status of independent businesswoman.

Dressmaking followed hats. Her quick success was a matter of taste and flair plus good connections, formed through her lovers, and an expert staff. Her clothes evolved from the look she had adopted in the days of her first amorous successes—a flat-chested, ingenuous look in which the feminine body was all the more captivatingly suggested by the fact of its being not much emphasized.

Chanel was, however, never a feminist, even in that period of widespread suffragist agitation. She was committed to the idea of *l'amour*—meaning both sex and love—as the ultimate feminine beautifier, and to a kind of sexual self-respect. For a woman, practical success was never to preclude the sovereign aim of being seductive.

The ideas Chanel had about design were rooted in her early poverty and a lifelong abhorrence of upper-middle-class pretentiousness. By 1907, for example, fashion was following a trend toward simplified shapes and reduction in volume; Poiret began offering simply cut tunics to be worn over uncorseted torsos with harem-draped skirts. Trains, whalebone, padding, and bustles were receding into the past. Taking their place was a luxurious exoticism—egrets, monkey fur, turbans, heavy lace—that still looked expensive and difficult to maintain. The Chanel version of the new direction ran to unadorned straw hats and loose-fitting jackets made of plebeian jersey, suggesting not only the elasticity of youth but also the very daring freedom of poverty.

As a rebellious poor French girl on the rise, she seems to have hated being taken for a woman who desired the trappings of the *haute bourgeoisie.* Her remarks about style are usually attacks on anything deliberately demanding or too careful. "Do you fancy those women in brocade who look like old armchairs when they sit down?" she asked rhetorically about the use of boning and heavy dress fabrics. She found great satisfaction in the tone of upper-class English life, which she had encountered very early as the mistress of the English playboy Arthur Capel, from 1912 to 1918. She learned a great deal from British understatement, tempered emotion, and love of country ease. She was to translate all this into her own gallicized and eroticized version of the tweed suit.

A Complete New Image

The independent and perverse spirit driving Chanel away from the look of kept-woman opulence finally thrust her into the leadership of the *garçonne* fashion, the French version of the flapper look. In Chanel's early years as a designer—around 1913–17—her clothes were simple and handsome, but certainly no more so than those from the same period by Callot, Vionnet, Lanvin, and Patou—designers who in many ways were far superior to Chanel as originators and as craftsmen. But Chanel was the first couturiere to sell a complete image and show how to create it. In large part the image was founded on the Beau Brummell principle that clothes while they are being worn must seem not to matter at all.

The suit began around 1925 as an almost skimpy skirt, pullover, and jacket usually made of jersey, worn with a simple cloche or beret—but also worn with ropes of huge pearls and cabochon emeralds. Riches were thus treated with ostentatious scorn, as modesty of cut and fabric were emphasized. An evening costume might be the same easy jacket, top, and skirt, but covered entirely in black sequins. For day wear, a girlish bow at the neck and an ingenue hat tended to undermine the deep seriousness of the other great dressmakers, whose costly expertise showed in artful and elaborate piecing and draping. The signs of luxury in Chanel clothes are always satisfyingly primitive; peasantlike, she preferred gaudy, rich ornaments on the surface of a simple structure.

School uniforms and work clothes, the waitress's dress and the sailor's sweater, were Chanel's basic inspiration. It was perfect clothing for the fashionable *garçonne* type. This modern ideal was a girl purporting to have done what Chanel herself actually accomplished: become economically independent. Chanel designed real clothes for this ideal—without making her look masculine, vulgar, or drab.

The clothes evolved from the look she had adopted in the days of her own first amorous successes—flat chested, ingenuous, and inexpensive.

This 1926-style suit, made by the House of Chanel in 1973 from one of its early patterns, still looks contemporary.

JEWELRY/CHANEL ACCESSORY COLLECTION

Most great French designers were continuing in the couture tradition of inimitable inventiveness, presenting women as exquisite, amazingly made objects. Chanel's suits seemed to favor the immediate appeal of soft textures, seductively blended colors, and a caressing fit suggestive of real bodily pleasure. With all this, Chanel's insistence on big fake jewelry, or real jewels worn gypsy style as if they were fakes, shows that she understood the keen attraction of a touch of coarseness—especially in combination with refined elements. Such a blend existed in her own personality.

A Free Woman's Role

Chanel's success as a designer was inseparable from her personal success. Like no other couturiere before her, she exemplified her views of women, money, sex, and clothes, demonstrating them publicly in the most influential circles of her time. That in itself is the feature of Chanel's career that keeps her memory alive. The suit, beautiful as it is, has made its mark on fashion history only because Chanel herself made a mark on cultural history.

Before the First World War, a girl like Gabrielle Chanel might be the mistress of a rich socialite, but she had no entree into his social sphere. She might see his gentleman acquaintances and their mistresses under private circumstances, but she was snubbed or ignored by sisters, mothers, and wives and had no official social existence. Similarly, a *modiste,* as an artisan and tradeswoman, would be equally unacceptable in society, no matter how personable she was. A gentleman did not dine with his tailor, or a lady with her couturiere. After the war, old social hierarchies were rearranged. To succeed as she did, Chanel had to shift her ground, and society helped her by shifting its own priorities. In the Paris of the twenties, Chanel became acquainted with avant-garde painters, composers, and performers, and especially with their inspiring genius Misia Sert, a powerful figure in that milieu, who helped educate her in literature and the arts. In those postwar years, artists rose abruptly on the social scale. As a member of their elite Paris world in the days of Picasso, Stravinsky, Cocteau, and Diaghilev, Chanel acquired a portion of its social luster. The dress designer was now accepted as a distinguished creator, and so she had access to the new social world where art and society met.

The timelessness of the Chanel look is embodied in this suit—either an original of 1927 or a clever copy (see box, this page).

SUIT/GENE LONDON; EARRINGS AND PEARL NECKLACE/TIFFANY & CO.; OTHER JEWELRY/CHANEL ACCESSORY COLLECTION

THE MYSTERY SUIT

When the Manhattan costume dealer Gene London announced three years ago that he had acquired a 1927 Chanel day suit, he caused an immediate sensation in fashion circles. Never mind that his sale price was an outrageous $25,000. What really set costume experts to buzzing was that it had been years since anybody had seen a Chanel day suit from that period. Women loved them so much that they simply wore them out. But London's suit was a gem with every sign of authenticity. The supple, deliciously soft fabric of navy and beige wool jersey had held up beautifully over more than fifty years, attesting to its quality, and the construction and detailing were exquisite. It even had the Chanel label sewn into an inside seam of the chemise.

London called it "the find of a lifetime," and Judy Straeten, formerly an assistant curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute and now London's associate, recalls, "As soon as I saw that suit, I knew it was a real Chanel. It was obviously a period piece, the tailoring was up to French couturier standards, and it had the Chanel label." Even Mark Walsh, a respected costume dealer in Yonkers, New York, and a London competitor, called it "definitely Chanel. The shape, the way the bandings are put in, the buttonholes, the cuttings, the slicings. Everything's correct about it."

Case closed? No. "Coco was copied from the moment she started," says Suzanne Urban, speaking for the House of Chanel, which will not put its imprimatur on the suit. "Much of the copy work was *very* good." Nor does the presence of a label offer conclusive proof. Joanne Olian, curator of costumes at the Museum of the City of New York, says, "American women cut them out the moment they left Paris, for customs reasons." Later, some women sewed the labels back in, some never bothered, and others occasionally "upgraded" a garment by adding a classy label. Several curators point out that authentication would be established if the suit could be compared with other Chanel day suits of the same period—that is, provided they existed.

London says he bought the suit for seventy-five dollars from a woman whose name and address he just can't recollect. His associate, Straeten, has a better memory, but adds only, "She was a woman from the New Jersey suburbs who just didn't know what she had."

If no authority will say that the suit is by the great couturiere, neither will any say that it is not. What they do emphatically insist is that London's price is ridiculous. "It's just plain price gouging," says Edward Maeder, costumes curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "You could buy four eighteenth-century gowns for that." Mark Walsh adds, "Top—absolutely top—dollar for London's suit is thirty-five hundred dollars. Twenty-five thousand is pure hype." But London couldn't care less. "I'm not forcing anyone to buy it," he replies. "It's mine. I own it. I can set my own price." —*Ava Plakins*

Other designers, such as the great Madeleine Vionnet, stayed in their ateliers and let their creations speak for them on the bodies of other women. Chanel lived in the limelight among princes, painters, dukes, and poets, wearing her clothes and expounding her principles. She is the most quoted designer in history, and her words were usually memorable. She said, "I wanted to give a woman comfortable clothes that would flow with her body. A woman is closest to being naked when she is well dressed." And on fashion: "A fashion that does not reach the streets is not a fashion. The more I am copied the better." About the fashion of the late 1960s, which she hated, Chanel would say, "Women no longer dress to please men. They dress to startle each other." Very rich and at the crown of her career in 1931, she had the pleasure of refusing to

The suit in 1983. It will probably remain just as fashionable into the twenty-first century.

ROCOCO CHANEL?

When the Chanel fall and winter couture collection for 1983 made its debut, last month, the label inside the clothing read simply "Chanel"—not "Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel." This was presumably meant to reassure the faithful that even though Lagerfeld has taken over as couture designer, Coco's classic look will not die. But fashion aficionados wonder how a decidedly avant-garde designer can maintain a look that is not his own, let alone one that is by now virtually etched in stone.

Lagerfeld has always been controversial and ahead of his time. Only last October, his collection for Chloe included dresses cinched at the waist with foot-wide corsets and embroidered with giant motifs of pianos, electric guitars, trumpets, and tubas. But what really had people worrying was the memory of last fall's Chanel ready-to-wear collection. Not only had the suit jacket been made shorter and the skirt made so narrow that the *New York Times*'s Bernadine Morris reported that the models were forced "to mince and wriggle rather than stride down the runway," but the quilted handbag had been made larger, and the made-for-walking shoe heels were much higher. "*Ro*coco Chanel," sneered the *Washington Post*'s Nina Hyde. And while credit for the fashions went to the young designer Hervé Leger and two assistants, it is no secret that Leger is a Lagerfeld protégé.

So, the folks at Chanel are a tad edgy. Suzanne Urban, Chanel's American spokeswoman, says, "We're trying to tread a very fine line between tradition and innovation." With asking prices of $3,000 for a ready-to-wear suit, and $6,000 to $15,000 for its couture counterpart, Chanel must be cautious. Still, Lagerfeld may well breathe some fresh air into the house. Says Hyde, "A lot of people have been concerned that Lagerfeld means the end of Chanel, but the house is too smart to throw out the suit. It works, and Karl is likely to continue with it, even with all the monkey business he does. It's a challenge for him to work within that formula. It doesn't look like what he does for Fendi or Chloe. But it's *his*, all right." —*A.P.*

marry the duke of Westminster, England's richest nobleman, after a highly publicized affair involving jewels, yachts, and all the rest. She remained "Mademoiselle" until her death, at eighty-seven, in 1971, mistress of herself and her profitable business.

Chanel has become a hero because she pioneered a twentieth-century version of the ideal adult female life. She was not particularly nice or good; she treated her staff badly and paid them poorly. She seems to have lied habitually about her past, claiming, for example, that she had grown up in a lovely farmhouse in the care of two aunts while her prosperous salesman father traveled the world on business. But she demonstrated some startling kinds of female strength: toughness, ruthlessness, and business acumen. She was a new kind of female achiever in the arts of pleasing—a hardheaded and beautiful tycoon.

Youthfulness for All Ages

Significantly, two of Chanel's ideas, rather than any of her designs, had the most lasting effect on female looks. The first was that actual youth and beauty are irrelevant to an attractive style of dress. After her own triumphs in early middle age, she returned as an ageless beauty of seventy-one to eighty-seven, aided by the methods she had always advocated: simplicity, comfort, decorum, with a touch of barbaric, sexy luxury. Her famous suit in the post-1954 versions had an artless air, with its braid trimming and neat pockets. She used navy blue with beige or white, like Sunday best for a *jeune fille*. All this, worn with simple hats, turns out to be stunningly becoming to lined and pouchy faces or aging figures.

Chanel's other great idea was that anything good ought to be copied and worn by many. This is a modern idea, quite at odds with the established tenets of couture, but it has become the foundation of the huge ready-to-wear fashion business that brings elegance to millions. All through her career Chanel welcomed imitation as a measure of success. This makes her another kind of hero, a pioneer of good fashion for everyone. She was the first to articulate belief in equality of taste, if not of income, beauty, or youth. In this she set another standard: she believed that a fundamental self-respect should be expressed in any woman's clothes. The means to achieve this should be made available to women at any level of society.□

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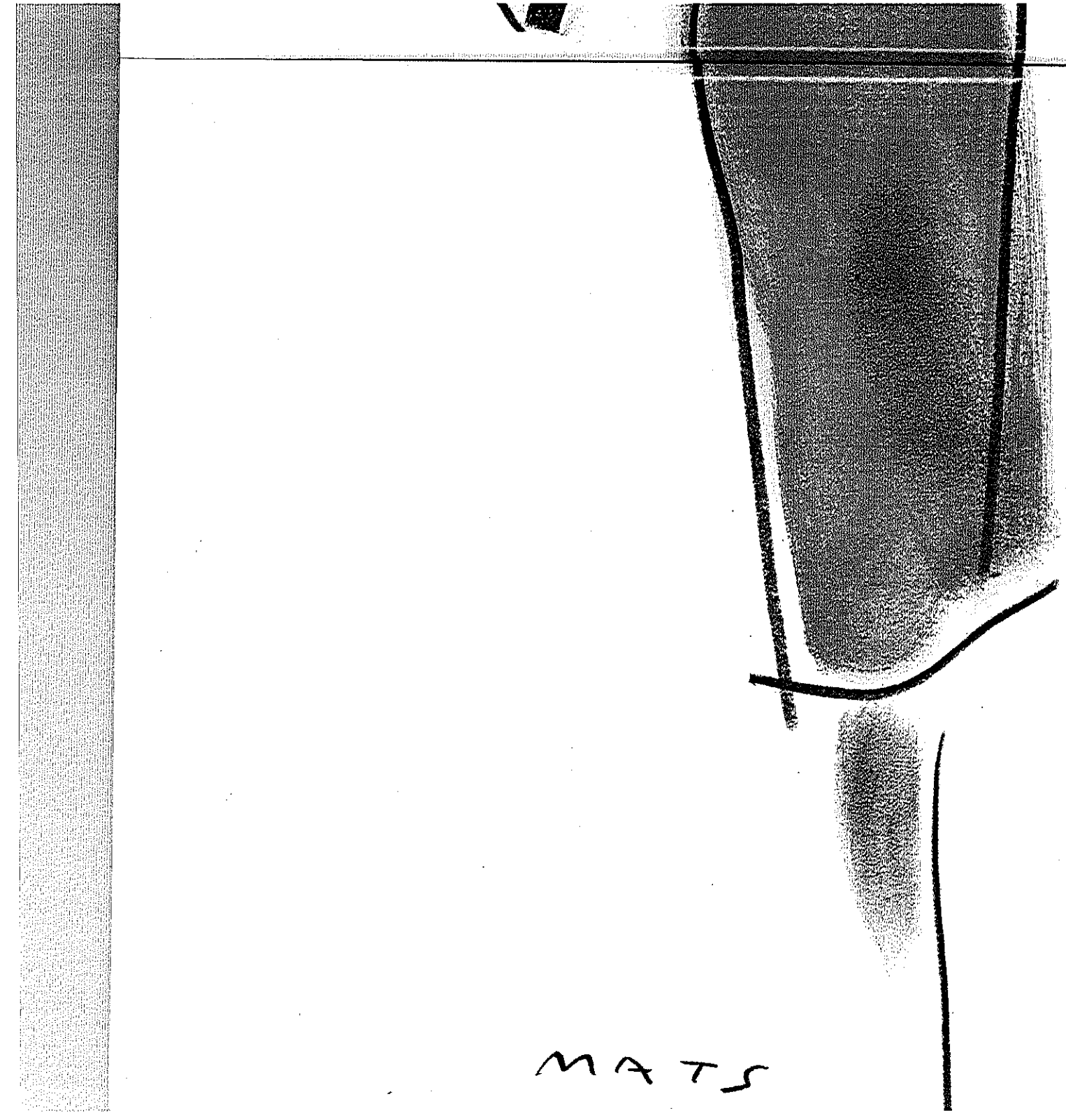
ACCESSORIES/CHANEL BOUTIQUE/ACCESSORY COLLECTION. MODEL/VIBEKE; MAKEUP/MICHAEL REIMER; HAIR/HISAO/SUGA; STYLING/ELAINE DOMINGUEZ

SUIT, ACCESSORIES/CHANEL BOUTIQUE/ACCESSORY COLLECTION MODEL/VIBEKE; MAKEUP/MICHAEL REIMER; HAIR/HISAO/SUGA; STYLING/ELAINE DOMINGUEZ



The 1954 comeback suit, though updated, shows that Chanel never strayed from the long course of her sartorial thought.