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Who Was Coco Chanel?

Fashion designer Coco Chanel, born in 1883, in France, is famous for her timeless designs, trademark suits and little black dresses. Chanel was raised in an orphanage and taught to sew. She had a brief career as a singer before opening her first clothes shop in 1910.

In the 1920s, she launched her first perfume and eventually introduced the Chanel suit and the little black dress, with an emphasis on making clothes that were more comfortable for women. She herself became a much revered style icon known for her simple yet sophisticated outfits paired with great accessories, such as several strands of pearls.

As Chanel once said, "luxury must be comfortable, otherwise it is not luxury."

Early Life

Famed fashion designer Chanel was born Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel on August 19, 1883, in Saumur, France. Her early years were anything but glamorous. At age 12, after her mother's death, Chanel was put in an orphanage by her father, who worked as a peddler.

Chanel was raised by nuns who taught her how to sew—a skill that would lead to her life's work. Her nickname came from another occupation entirely. During her brief career as a singer, Chanel performed in clubs in Vichy and Moulins where she was called "Coco."

Some say that the name comes from one of the songs she used to sing, and Chanel herself said that it was a "shortened version of cocotte, the French word for 'kept woman,'" according to an article in The Atlantic.

Coco Chanel's Fashion Empire

Around the age of 20, Chanel became involved with Etienne Balsan, who offered to help her start a millinery business in Paris. She soon left him for one of his wealthier friends, Arthur “Boy” Capel. Both men were instrumental in Chanel’s first fashion venture.

Opening her first shop on Paris’s Rue Cambon in 1910, Chanel started out selling hats. She later added stores in Deauville and Biarritz and began making clothes.

Her first taste of clothing success came from a dress she fashioned out of an old jersey on a chilly day. In response to the many people who asked about where she got the dress, she offered to make one for them. “My fortune is built on that old jersey that I’d put on because it was cold in Deauville,” she once told author Paul Morand.

Chanel became a popular figure in Parisian literary and artistic worlds. She designed costumes for the Ballets Russes and Jean Cocteau’s play *Orphée*, and counted Cocteau and artist Pablo Picasso among her friends.

In the 1920s, Chanel took her thriving business to new heights. She launched her first perfume, Chanel No. 5, which was the first to feature a designer’s name. Perfume “is the unseen, unforgettable, ultimate accessory of fashion. . . . that heralds your arrival and prolongs your departure,” Chanel once explained.

The fragrance was in fact also backed by department store owner Théophile Bader and businessmen Pierre and Paul Wertheimer, with Chanel developing a close friendship with Pierre.

A deal was ultimately negotiated where the Wertheimer business would take in 70 percent of Chanel No. 5 profits for producing the perfume at their factories, with Bader receiving 20 percent and Chanel herself only receiving 10 percent. Over the years, with No. 5 being a massive source of revenue, she repeatedly sued to have the terms of the deal renegotiated.

In 1925, Chanel introduced the now legendary Chanel suit with collarless jacket and well-fitted skirt. Her designs were revolutionary for the time—borrowing elements of men’s wear and emphasizing comfort over the constraints of then-popular fashions. She helped women say goodbye to the days of corsets and other confining garments.

Another 1920s revolutionary design was Chanel’s little black dress. She took a color once associated with mourning and showed just how chic it could be for evening wear.

The international economic depression of the 1930s had a negative impact on Chanel’s company, but it was the outbreak of World War II that led her to close her business. She

fired her workers and shut down her shops.

After the war, Chanel left Paris, spending some years in Switzerland in a sort of exile. She also lived at her country house in Roquebrune for a time.

At the age of 70, in the early 1950s, Chanel made a triumphant return to the fashion world. She first received scathing reviews from critics, but her feminine and easy-fitting designs soon won over shoppers around the world.

Relationships and a Marriage Proposal

Beginning in 1920, Chanel had a short-lived relationship with composer Igor Stravinsky. Chanel had attended the notorious world premiere of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" in 1913.

Around 1923, she met the wealthy Hugh Grosvenor, Duke of Westminster, aboard his yacht. The two started a decades-long relationship. In response to his marriage proposal, which she turned down, she reportedly said, "There have been several Duchesses of Westminster—but there is only one Chanel!"

Nazi Collaborator?

During the German occupation of France, Chanel got involved with a Nazi military officer, Hans Gunther von Dincklage. She got special permission to stay in her apartment at the Hotel Ritz in Paris, which also operated as German military headquarters.

After the war ended, Chanel was interrogated about her relationship with von Dincklage, but she was not charged as a collaborator. Some have wondered whether friend Winston Churchill worked behind the scenes on Chanel's behalf.

While not officially charged, Chanel suffered in the court of public opinion. Some still viewed her relationship with a Nazi officer as a betrayal of her country.

When and How Coco Chanel Died

Chanel died on January 10, 1971, at her apartment in the Hotel Ritz. She never married, having once said "I never wanted to weigh more heavily on a man than a bird." Hundreds

crowded together at the Church of the Madeleine to bid farewell to the fashion icon. In tribute, many of the mourners wore Chanel suits.

A little more than a decade after her death, designer Karl Lagerfeld took the reins at her company to continue the Chanel legacy. Today her namesake company is held privately by the Wertheimer family and continues to thrive, believed to generate hundreds of millions in sales each year.

Famous Movies, Books, and Plays on Coco Chanel

In 1969, Chanel's fascinating life story became the basis for the Broadway musical *Coco*, starring Katharine Hepburn as the legendary designer. Alan Jay Lerner wrote the book and lyrics for the show's song while Andre Prévin composed the music. Cecil Beaton handled the set and costume design for the production. The show received seven Tony Award nominations, and Beaton won for Best Costume Design and René Auberjonois for Best Featured Actor.

Several biographies of the fashion revolutionary have also been written, including *Chanel and Her World* (2005), written by Chanel's friend Edmonde Charles-Roux.

In the 2008 television movie *Coco Chanel*, Shirley MacLaine starred as the famous designer around the time of her 1954 career resurrection. The actress told WWD that she had long been interested in playing Chanel. "What's wonderful about her is she's not a straightforward, easy woman to understand."

In the 2008 film *Coco Before Chanel*, French actress Audrey Tautou played Chanel in her early years, from childhood to the founding of her fashion house. In 2009, *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* detailed Chanel's relationship with the composer.