

GABRIELLE CHANEL. FASHION MANIFESTO

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Fashion manifesto

Gabrielle Chanel devoted her life to creating, perfecting and promoting a new type of feminine elegance. She designed for an active and emancipated woman, like herself, according to principles of comfort, simplicity and ease of movement. Chanel rewrote fashion conventions with personal conviction, transforming women's wardrobes with her innovative ideas, pioneering approach to fabric and construction, and utmost consideration of the female form.

For Chanel, haute couture was both an area of experimentation – she worked directly on the mannequin, never sketching first – and a creative space, fuelled by her interactions with the artistic, intellectual and literary circles of her time. The strength and timelessness of her creations arose from an ability to harmonise function and form, marrying her design instinct with the quest for a new ideal grounded in the reality of women's lives.

Throughout her career, Chanel's design style became a template for modern living. She remade the ordinary as elegant, combined masculine and feminine, real and imitation, austerity and excess. Against the short-lived novelty of contemporary trends, Chanel remained consistent and assured of the continuing relevance of her aesthetic, revealing the flexibility and force of a singular style.

Towards a new elegance

Gabrielle Chanel began her career as a milliner, before opening boutiques in the French coastal resort towns of Deauville (1912) and Biarritz (1915), where she was inspired by the sense of liberty that characterised upper-class social life. The first to wear her own creations, Chanel produced designs that reflected her personal circumstances, taste and ambition. Loose slipovers, chemise dresses and sports clothes formed a *gamine* style that countered the restrictive fashions of the previous century with their stiff fabrics and complicated undergarments.

The hallmarks of Chanel's style were simplicity, practicality and a relaxed elegance. Rejecting any superfluous ornamentation, Chanel designed balanced, straight forms that respected women's bodies and allowed them to move with ease. She introduced an aesthetic of streamlined modernity to fashion that resonated with the dramatic changes to women's social roles following the First World War. Chanel's youthful designs, in fluid supple materials such as machine-made jersey, were characterised by a surprising blend of minimalism and precision, laying the foundations for a new form of elegance that she defended throughout her career.

The emergence of a style

In the 1920s and 1930s, Chanel staunchly affirmed her own aesthetic choices and personal conception of fashion. Exhibiting a refined elegance, her designs were uncluttered, the materials fluid, lightweight and often monochrome. Her palette was subtle, and while black, white and beige dominated, occasionally more vivid tones such as midnight blue and fiery red appeared.

In her quest for simplicity, Chanel's use of printed or embroidered decorations and patterns, was measured and restrained. Flowers, however, were an exception to the rule. Whether a single fabric bloom or fluttering petals, cut out and inlaid by hand, Chanel's flowers conveyed an idea of natural youthfulness that was unanimously acclaimed by the press. Delicate chiffons and silk voiles printed with small or abstract floral motifs were produced by the Tissus Chanel factory, which the couturière established in the late 1920s.

Chanel's suits and coats of the period were inspired by sportswear and borrowed from codes of male elegance and dandyism. Transforming techniques and materials previously foreign to haute couture, Chanel created casual outfits from common fabrics such as wool and tweed. Her garments were radical in their practicality, but

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also highly refined, with distinctive cut and proportions. From this tenuous equilibrium, Chanel developed a signature style that was immediately identifiable.

The invisible accessory of the modern woman

In name, design and scent, CHANEL N°5 was a radical departure from convention. Created in 1921 for Chanel by perfumer Ernest Beaux, the abstract and mysterious scent differed from available fragrances, which often sought to emulate a single floral scent. A composite fragrance, Chanel N°5 contained no less than eighty ingredients. The alliance of flowers, including ylang-ylang, jasmine, *rose de mai* (*R. x centifolia*) and notes of wood and spice, accentuated by aldehydes – synthetic compounds used for the first time in large quantities – made for an indefinable formula.

Named after Chanel's lucky number, its presentation was equally innovative. Contrasting the ornate decorative styles typical of the era, Chanel made use of a clear square bottle with sober, angular lines and simple typography. Enclosed within a minimalist white cardboard box with black contours, the graphic design possessed a revolutionary purity.

Designed as an extension of her clothing and echoing her vision of modernity, Chanel made N°5 the signature of her fashion house. Immediately successful, it soon became the world's bestselling perfume. By the 1950s, a simple sentence – in the guise of an intimate confession from Marilyn Monroe – increased its renown and turned it into an iconic scent.

Modernity and chic

In October 1926, Chanel's simple black, calf-length *crêpe de chine* dress caused US *Vogue* to declare the arrival of, 'a sort of uniform for all women of taste, from all backgrounds regardless of their walk of life'. Dubbed the 'Ford of Fashion', after the popular American motor vehicle, Chanel's little black dress, as it became known, was as universal in its appeal as it was transformative.

As early as 1919, Chanel had recast black as a stylish option for women that could be worn from afternoon through to early evening. Freeing it from an association with shop assistants and service, and earlier connections to mourning dress, Chanel promoted black as the ultimate symbol of modernity. Stripped of ornamentation, the colour drew attention to the line.

Although not the only designer to use black, Chanel employed it in an endless variety of forms throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and again in the 1960s. In line with her credo of minimalist simplicity, Chanel helped to equate black with elegance and understatement. Yet it was an understated luxury – differentiated by hand-sewn finishes, superior fabrics and construction techniques specific to haute couture. Today, the little black dress remains an archetype and one of Chanel's major legacies.

Expression of stark luxury

In the 1930s, Chanel's focus on 'line' reached its peak. Her dresses discreetly accentuated the female form through harmonising proportions and materials. Motivated by sentiments of elegance and freedom, as well as her quest for simplicity, Chanel's designs expressed the tension between garment and body, described in French as the 'allure'.

Chanel's evening wear demonstrated a subtle mix of inventiveness and classicism. She created fluid and romantic lace and chiffon dresses, with inlaid decorations inserted into the cut to better emphasise form. Without ever disrupting the line, she experimented with asymmetry, enveloping volumes, uneven lengths and, daringly, transparency – drawing from lingerie conventions. Chanel's designs were seductive but never superfluous; frills were only slightly gathered, folds barely sketched, and swathes of fabric remained light and floating.

Chanel also utilised a unique array of embellishment techniques to imbue her designs with a stark luxury. In a gesture at once reductive and all-encompassing, she covered the entire surface of sheer fabrics with beads or sequins, employing a monochrome palette to emphasise the austerity of the line. Earlier, this interplay between

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restraint and profusion was expressed via unicolour embroideries, feathers and fringing, but also in the nuance of hand-sewn details and specialist couture finishes.

The Chanel suit

In 1954, aged seventy-one, Gabrielle Chanel reopened her fashion house. Repudiating the constraining 'New Look' style, she advocated for restrained chic and utility in clothing.

Chanel's post-war suit, a synthesis of the principles that contributed to her prewar success, was the culmination of her vision of modern femininity. All aspects of its construction were defined with the female body in mind – a perfect balance of silhouette, materials and purpose. In 1959, *Vogue Paris* announced: 'Every suit holds the secrets of Chanel luxury. And this luxury is in the details'.

The Chanel suit was the embodiment of freedom. Without padding, the lightweight jacket hung straight like a cardigan. The skirt, instead of hugging the waist, rested on the upper hips, tilting slightly backwards and hanging below the knee; it was comfortable, supple and allowed for greater ease of movement.

Fabric was also crucial. Tweed – plain and textured, or sometimes handwoven, was a hallmark, chosen for its luxurious feel and specially produced in a variety of shades. Trims and braids in contrasting colours added to the distinctiveness of the design and delineated the silhouette, while pockets, decorative and functional buttons, and a hidden gilt chain became further signatures.

The Chanel codes

Accessories were fundamental to Chanel's conception of a harmonious silhouette. They reflected her pragmatic vision of fashion and helped in the codification and unity of her style.

Launched in February 1955, the quilted 2.55 bag, was designed to be functional. Its chain link strap, often entwined with a leather band to avoid the jangling of metal, allowed it to be carried by hand or over the shoulder. The bag's interior, lined with red leather or grosgrain, included multiple pockets where various items could be stored, including a compartment for lipstick. Made of lambskin, jersey or silk satin, the 2.55 was also available in three sizes to suit the different activities of a woman's lifestyle.

From 1957 onwards, the two-tone slingback shoe completed the Chanel 'look' and added the ultimate touch of elegance to any outfit. After several trials with various shoemakers, Chanel adopted the model made by Raymond Massaro. A perfect balance of form and function, the shoe was made of beige leather, which had the effect of lengthening the leg, while its black satin ensured against wear and made the foot appear smaller. The elasticated strap and moderate heel guaranteed convenience and comfort.

In praise of adornment

As early as the 1920s, jewellery played a central role in Gabrielle Chanel's design lexicon and was in contrast to the austerity of her clothing designs. Combining real and faux gemstones, pearls and metals in a variety of forms, Chanel rejected fine jewellery conventions to give costume jewellery a new status. She played with the contrast between sobriety and excess, wearing accumulations of 'pearl' strands and glass and rock-crystal sautoirs in combination with earrings, bracelets and brooches, and encouraged others to do the same. Chanel also took liberties with placement, often pinning a brooch on the cuff of a sleeve, the hip or shoulder, or brim of a hat.

Chanel's design references ranged from the historical, religious and exotic to floral forms, as well as personal motifs taken from her own symbolic repertoire: the lion (she was a Leo), ears of wheat and stars. Jewellery helped to establish the Chanel house codes and extended to the use of gilt chains and buttons. From the 1950s onwards, Chanel also introduced lurex lamé, a new fabric imitating metal, into her cocktail and evening wear. These sparkling fabrics echoed the glittering embroidery of her clothing from the 1920s and 1930s, with the advantage of being both light and flexible.

The sources of creation

To realise her creations, Gabrielle Chanel surrounded herself with talented jewellers whose innovation and skill matched her ambition. In 1924, she called upon the talents of Count Étienne de Beaumont to design her first costume pieces. Around 1933, she commissioned Fulco di Verdura to design gold jewellery with large-coloured cabochons that drew upon his Sicilian heritage and the splendour of Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna, Italy.

Working with Maison Gripoix in the 1930s, Gabrielle Chanel developed jewellery inspired by the world of botany. Flowers, leaves, acorns and other motifs were transcribed into multicoloured glass paste, both opaque and translucent, and set in metal. During the same period, goldsmith François Hugo produced jewellery and buttons from non-precious materials for Chanel.

The expression of historical influences culminated in opulent pieces designed for Chanel by goldsmith and jeweller Robert Goossens. During the 1960s, Goossens found inspiration in art from the ancient empires of Byzantium and Persia. Mixing precious and inexpensive stones, Goossens introduced rock-crystal and turquoise to Chanel's design vocabulary. Using the forms, materials and cloisonné settings of antique jewellery, he even produced replicas of a Byzantine reliquary cross and an eagle-shaped ornamental clasp from the sixth century.

The revived allure

Just as the suit was Gabrielle Chanel's emblematic piece from 1954 onwards, the evening dress was her exercise in style. Chanel proposed a relaxed version of formal dress that was discreet and refined. Without ever straying from her principles, she revisited the foundations that had governed her aesthetic and punctuated her career.

In the 1960s, Chanel's cocktail dresses, a compromise between day and night, recalled the simplicity of her little black dresses of the 1920s, executed in lace, velvet and silk, as well as nylon and other synthetic fabrics. As before, she offset austerity by adding whimsical touches of ornamentation – a gilded metal belt, or jewel illuminated with coloured stones.

In this spirit of continuity, sequin embroidery was profuse and monochrome, echoing the 1930s, while the lightness of chiffon and tulle embodied the qualities of fluidity and motion she had sought early in her career. Faithful to her hallmark colours, Chanel also continued to utilise ivory and gold, vibrant reds and elegant black.

Until her final 1971 spring–summer collection, Gabrielle Chanel never stopped reinterpreting, updating and

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perfecting her rules and principles. This consistency of vision, and her capacity to balance function, form and elegance, is what keeps her work timeless and relevant today.