

Life of “Coco” Chanel

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The life of Gabrielle “Coco” is the ubiquitous rags-to-riches story. She was born on August 19, 1883, at Saumur, Maine-et-Loire, France. She lost her mother, who worked at a poor house, at six and her father left her, along with her four siblings, sometime after. Her two aunts brought her up in Auvergne, teaching her to be a good-mannered girl and to sew. She would later disown her birth at Semur and claim that she was born at Auvergne in 1893 (Joseph). Gabrielle had a knack with fashion at an early age as she dressed up her dolls in curtains but she never really mastered the art of needlework. She was more of an outdoor child, playing outdoor sports and loving to ride horseback. As a child, she was quite a tomboy, and looked masculine and thin. This was quite unusually in the late nineteenth century and her friends called her “Cocorico” (cock-a-doodle-do) which later became “Coco” (Transcription Topic).

When she was sixteen, Coco became friendly with a rich cavalry officer, Etienne Balsan, and went to live in Paris. She worked at a cabaret during 1905 to 1908, where she adopted the name “Coco” (Wallach). Through Balsan, Coco got into the Parisian high society and throughout her life, she became friendly with many famous people, including Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, Stravinsky, Picasso and Misia Sert (Madsen, 1991). As she worked in the cabaret, Coco fell in love with a shipping and coal magnate, Arthur “Boy” Capel but she knew that he would not marry a cabaret dancer. But, she managed to convince Capel to fund the military boutique that she set up in 1914. The racecourse crowd flocked to her story that stocked her typical hats shorn of the cumbersome designs that Parisian women earlier wore.

At a time when women’s fashion was still conservative and stiff in corsets, Coco’s masculine designs of polo jersey and turtlenecks, in which she was comfortable herself,

was a revolution. Her store became a success, much because of the high society contacts of Capel, and she expanded to other places like Deauville and Biarritz (women's history). Her comfortable dresses were also a sort of a rebellion against her convent upbringing that imposed tight-fitting corsets and long dresses with petticoats.

In 1922, she introduced the Chanel 5 perfume that became and still is hugely popular. She partnered with Pierre Wertheimer in her perfume business with 70 percent ownership and also her lover. The perfume is perhaps one of the most memorable of Coco's creations. She also designed jewelry that was described as "barbaric" and became a rage.

Coco's signature dresses, cardigan jacket, launched in 1924, and "the little black dress" (Madsen, 1991) in 1926 became greatest hits. During the War, the Nazi Occupation of Paris hit the fashion industry. Coco, herself, went out of circulation, as she served as a military nurse. This was also the time when Italian designer Schiaparelli was entering European high fashion and it seemed Chanel had retired into oblivion. Coco's name was marked with some disgrace then as she became friendly with a Nazi Officer, with whom she could live in the Ritz Hotel even after she wound up her business (women's history).

But, Coco Chanel was not one to give up as long as was alive and she returned to the scene in 1954 and her casual clothing, much of the designs nearly the same as it was for a time from then on, became popular once more. According to some fashion critics, her return was motivated when Dior was reintroducing the corset-based dresses that she had earlier rejected. Initially, Coco Chanel's revival of the 1930s fashion did not get a good press review in Europe but it was a great hit in America, particularly in the

Hollywood. But very soon her designs were getting copied all over in Paris. Coco did not react to the piracy of her designs, saying "I am not an artist. I want my designs to go out on the street" (quoted in Joseph).

The pea jacket and bell bottom pants that she introduced became a fashion craze. Much of her popularity hinged on the fact that her dresses were immensely comfortable and practical. For example, when Chanel wore bell bottom trousers that made it very convenient for her to jump into a gondola, in Venice, women all over the world grabbed it as a very useful dress. All her dresses, like the chemise, pleated skirts, jumpers, jersey suits, trench coats, turtleneck suits, cardigan suits, defined the changing lifestyle of feminine culture in Europe. Women were getting into the workforce and needed clothes that were fashionable as well as comfortable and convenient. At the same time, true to the Parisian culture, Chanel's dresses, like the strapless dresses or "the little black dress", defined the carefree nature of Parisian women. Chanel innovated with the long forgotten woolen jersey to convert it into a soft, body-hugging dress. She introduced the gypsy skirt, combined with embroidered silk blouses and shawls. Perhaps because of this that Jean Cocteau said, "If Mademoiselle Chanel has reigned over fashion, it is not because she cut women's hair married silk and wool, put pearls on sweaters, avoided poetic labels on her perfumes, lowered the waistline or raised the waistline and obliged women to follow her directives; it is because--outside of this gracious and robust dictatorship--there is nothing in her era that she has missed." (quoted in Joseph). Chanel herself said, "Fashion is always a reflection of its own time, but we forget this if it is stupid" (quoted in Charles-Roux).

By the 1960s, Chanel designs had achieved a standard and Coco herself did not tamper much with the basic designs. Her jackets were short, straight and collarless and her skirts were a little flared and were mostly knee length. Coco continued to do all her designs despite the soaring sales of her stores, worked with her models and was extremely tough on her own designs, often ruining dresses if she thought a particular dress was unwearable. She herself wore a wide-brimmed Breton hat, a pair of scissors hanging in a string round her neck. Because of severe arthritis, she had great difficulty to move her fingers yet a small defect in a design did not escape her eyes.

As Joseph said,

“Whether it is a 1930s suit, 1960s suit, or a "millennium" suit, the classic Chanel suit has "boxy" lines. The typical suit also has braided trim and a slim skirt lined with a gold link chain. The buttons either resemble coins or are gold with the double "cc" logo displayed amid them. There is always a ribbon sewed in the waist of the skirt to prevent the blouse from slipping and the zipper is placed on the side of the skirt to enable comfort. In a sense, wearing a Chanel suit is like wearing a customized ornate costume, made to fit so that when the wearer moves, the suit still maintains perfect grace and elegance.”

Coco's love life nearly ran parallel to her success as a fashion designer. She herself said, “There's time for work. And there's time for love”. Numerous Parisian and Hollywood big shots had courted her some time or the other. Even the Duke of Westminster courted her to the point of nearly marrying her and when it fell through, Coco only said, “There have been many Duchesses of Westminster. There is only one

Chanel". In 1969, Katharine Hepburne played her part in the Broadway hit, which led her to be called only by 'Coco'.

She died in 1971 at 87, at the pinnacle of her success. When she died, Coco's business earned \$160million a year. Her clients included big names like Princess Grace, Queen Fabiola, Marlene Dietrich, Ingrid Bergman and almost the entire Rothschild and Rockefeller families.

As Edmonde Charles-Roux said, Coco Chanel was "from another century" but she revolutionized women's fashion through the twentieth century. At a time when women dressed in a conservative manner, Coco's designs were dramatic in the functionality. The designs represented the changes that women's lives in general were going through. Women were coming out of their closeted lives and becoming professionals. The simple yet elegant designs of Coco's dresses epitomized the revolutionary changes.

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