

Art and Fashion in the 20th Century: Coco Chanel

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When it comes to fashion, a lot of importance is placed on the design, style, form, colour and pattern, and of course who will wear it. Fashion is a way of re-writing history; it continually rotates to make old styles new; not always as completely different or new, but opposing, improving or transforming the fashion to make improvements on previous clothing designs. The designs by French designer, Coco Chanel, are significant styles to be considered when thinking about alterations from previous fashions to current fashion. Dr. Ulrich Lehmann (1999; 301) considers fashion to work through methods of quotation. “It wilfully cites any style from the past in a novel incarnation or present rendition. Clothing types may be retained, yet their appearance is renewed by using past elements. Fashion thus constitutes an aesthetic rewriting of history.” In this essay, fashion designs by Coco Chanel will be explained with significance to fashion in the 1920s and post World War 2. Chanel’s designs will be researched and discussed with ideas of the change in fashion during her time, as well as aspects from today’s fashion.

Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel, better known as Coco Chanel, effectively changed many fashion designs throughout the early 1900s. Rival designers such as Paul Poiret and Elsa Schiaparelli formerly named Chanel’s style as classless, cheap and common, but Chanel undoubtedly continued to gain her place within the fashion world. Her style has certainly not languished in obscurity, but flourished into a trend during her time, and continues to be utilised in some of today’s fashion. Chanel claimed that “fashion fades, only style remains the same” and with her use of monochrome fabrics, oversized costume pearls and cuffs, fashion is imitated and revised (Jones, 2007; 11) (Leong, 1993; 26, 28).

Chanel first learnt the skills of a seamstress while living at a Catholic orphanage in Aubazine, France. After leaving the orphanage, at eighteen, Chanel continued in the textile industry with a local tailor. Meanwhile she sang in social venues, and was given the nick-name ‘Coco’ (Müller-Ramirez, 2000). A strong business reputation was gained for Chanel from the start of 1910, where she designed and created hats; these were then bought and worn by French actresses. Chanel soon became a mistress to a wealthy English man, who provided her with connections to open her own millinery shop in Deauville, 1913 (Ash and Wilson, 1993; 119). Later in 1916 Chanel eventually opened a boutique in Biarritz, Paris, where she designed and sold sportswear for women, made from jersey knit (Müller-Ramirez, 2000).

Although jersey knit was traditionally used for men’s underwear, Chanel soon created a status for both knitwear and costume jewellery to be a fabric with more dignified connotations. She achieved this through the use of jersey material which created a new-fashioned and relaxed style of women’s clothing (Baudot, 1999; 74). Chanel soon started to change certain fashion styles, such as those of the Belle Époque (Baudot, 1999; 50-53), where women could hardly move in the tight, cramped clothing, such as corsets. Valerie Steele (in Ash & Wilson, 1993; 120) states that from 1906 to 1916, fashion

was characterised by such radical experiments in dress and behaviour that it created a true fashion revolution, especially with the Belle Époque.

Baudot (1999; 74) states that Chanel's aim and desire was to make women aware that they should be able to choose fashion for themselves which would be comfortable, with a new style and philosophy to fashion. Chanel believed that women's fashion should be part of a woman's way of living, comfortable and practical, but also fashionable. "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening" (Blanchard, 2007; 13) (Picardie, 2010). Chanel challenged herself and others with women's clothing. She changed the dress code, by not wearing the current trends of clothing, but designing her own and being different, highlighting comfort, new accessories and importantly, aesthetics (Buxbaum, 1999; 27).

Some critics initially labelled Chanel's new style of clothing as 'poor chic', however it became very popular with the post-war generation of Parisian women, rather than the constrained clothing that was entirely impractical. The 'chic' style was established because Chanel used sailor like shirts, trousers and tweed jackets, which were mostly from her boyfriends. She re-fashioned male clothing by combining jersey wool into women's clothing and including accessories of large fake jewellery pieces and fake pearls, thus creating a completely new philosophy and fashion for women of the 20th Century (De la Haye and Tobin, 1994; 16). One of Chanel's unexpressed philosophies was that the clothes did not really matter; it was the way a person looked with the fabrics and accessories that counted (Wilcox, 2007; 59). Her style was without a doubt successful, as it revolutionised the way women felt about their bodies and also their lifestyle. Her style and ideas of how fashion should be were certainly unique, and became more and more influential in society.

One of Chanel's competitors and influencers in the fashion industry, Paul Poiret, also sought to emphasise simplicity, naturalness and comfort in women's clothing. However, Poiret utilized artistic ideas within his clothing and attached heavy embroidery of pearls, coloured beads and rhinestones, which somewhat defeated the purpose of the garment being practical or simple. Chanel considered this idea a bit incongruous; as she wanted to keep her garments free from objects, ideally for the mobility of the fabric, hence the idea of separate accessories, like jewelry (Buxbaum, 1999; 27). Chanel's clothing and accessory designs were formed in response to her own personal requests. They related to an image that she wanted to create for herself. She would design for every occasion, whether it was formal or casual (Baudot, 1999; 77). Chanel set out to purge many previous fashions, and with the help and support from fans or female customers, her style soon developed into a popular and characteristic fashion for women.

One of her many successes was her 'Little Black Dress' or the 'Ford dress' 1926. It became a very popular idea and style, since it could be easily changed by accessorising with diverse designs of jewellery; thus making the use of the dress versatile for several occasions, day or night (Buxbaum, 1999; 41). Countless remakes and advancements of the little black dress have been designed over

the years to suit many different occasions, and it continues to be a popular garment today; given that most people know that 'black' agrees with anything (Ames, 2007-2011). According to Ali Basye the *little black dress* had become a trendy phrase in advertising by the mid-1930s, and was advertised as the ideal piece of clothing that every woman should or must have (Basye, 2010-2011). From 1926, Chanel declared 'black' to be the only appropriate colour or tone for a standardized, economically perfect attire; this was somewhat influenced by World War II and the practicality of clothing, work and everyday living (Buxbaum, 1999; 27, 41). To some degree Chanel was also influenced from having worn the monotone clothing while in the orphanage; and much later she wore black clothing to mourn the loss of her lover.

From hats and hairstyles to dresses, jackets, pants, shoes, blouses, accessories and perfume, Chanel excelled with her place in the fashion industry with the ideas of movement in clothes or freedom. Although there were many other famous designers, Chanel's styles and designs seemingly became more popular, perhaps since she was female and designed for the female clientele. Other women wanted to look like Chanel, to be comfortable with a new type of fashion design. Celebrities have always been admired by society and especially had a big influence with fashion and identity. Similarly Chanel was indeed recognised as a celebrity, rather than a dressmaker (Ash and Wilson, 1993; 123).

Steele (in Ash and Wilson, 1993; 122) discusses that certain ideas during the modernist movement affected both the decorative arts and fashion industry. Some of these ideas came from the concept that 'less was more', and also that ornamentation was unnecessary or even ugly. In this sense, Chanel's style of simple clothing suited well as a typical fashion for the modernist movement. Chanel was successful in synthesising, publicising and epitomising her style and look, which many other women also developed. Indeed the period between the First and Second World War could be described as 'the golden age of couturiere' (Ash and Wilson, 1993; 122).

In conclusion and without a doubt, Coco Chanel has indeed changed many aspects in the world of fashion, during her time and certainly has influenced several styles today. However in saying this, one must understand that Chanel did not single-handedly change fashion or influence all of fashion today; but it is clearly seen throughout the history of fashion that many designers, both male and female, have all had a part in changing fashion and influencing one other (Ash and Wilson, 1993; 120). As previously discussed, fashion constitutes an aesthetic re-writing of history, often using past quotations, elements and renditions (Lehmann, 1999; 301).

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