

# Elegance

The Beauty of French Fashion

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CHANEL



**I**t's no secret that I love Coco Chanel – I've already written an entire book about her colourful Parisian life. Her revolutionary designs changed the way women dressed forever, while her rags-to-riches story goes to show that with hard work anything is possible.

Coco Chanel's resilience and determination to forge ahead in life was a product of her difficult childhood. Born Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel in 1883 in Saumur, a town in western France, Chanel faced a series of hardships in early life. Her parents struggled to make ends meet and provide for their family, and this only intensified when Chanel's mother passed away in 1895. Her widowed father made the heart-breaking decision to send twelve-year-old Chanel and her sisters to an orphanage run by nuns in central France, hoping a better life awaited them there.

This turned out to be the most fortuitous event in Chanel's life: at the orphanage the nuns taught her to sew. The intricacies of hand-sewing ignited her interest in fashion and self-sufficiency, and would later inspire her in the foundation of the Chanel empire.

On leaving the orphanage, Chanel found a job as a seamstress, but also moonlighted as a cafe singer. It was at the cafe that Chanel acquired the nickname Coco, and left behind her difficult past as Gabrielle. A new name presented the opportunity for a new beginning. Chanel became the centre of a flourishing social scene, befriending the cafe's upper-class patrons. However, realising she lacked the voice to become a professional singer, she decided to stick with the one thing she knew how to do well: sew.

In 1910 Chanel opened a millinery boutique on rue Cambon. She sold her hats to the wealthy women she had befriended in

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**'Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman.'**

– Coco Chanel

her cafe days. Her business was a success, and she opened a second boutique in Deauville in 1913 using money borrowed from her lover at the time, Arthur 'Boy' Capel. In 1915, Chanel again expanded, opening a third boutique in Biarritz, and was able to repay the entirety of Capel's original loan.

One of Chanel's first clothing designs, a jersey dress, was the result of necessity – she was shivering on a chilly trip to Deauville in Normandy and needed something warm to wear. The design was simple and chic, and repurposed jersey fabric traditionally used for undergarments. Here was a dress that defied the traditional and restrictive women's fashion silhouette with its stretch fabric and fluidity. It was groundbreaking, and Chanel's clients began requesting similar liberating looks. The popularity of the jersey dress prompted Chanel to step away from millinery and instead focus on women's clothing, a decision that would prove to be very wise.

By the 1920s Chanel was worth millions and had almost 2000 employees working in her atelier. She famously said of her wealth, 'My fortune is built on that old jersey that I'd put on because it was cold in Deauville.'

In the decade that followed, Chanel was able to manifest a timeless look that is still worn and referenced today. Her designs offered a new style of haute couture – a style that allowed women to embrace their independence and dress for themselves. The Chanel look was elegant yet refined, simple yet detailed, comfortable yet classic.

Chanel brought straight lines to the forefront of fashion at a time when over-the-top frou-frou looks reigned. She transformed black – a colour typically worn during periods of mourning – into a covetable wardrobe staple with instant



CHANEL

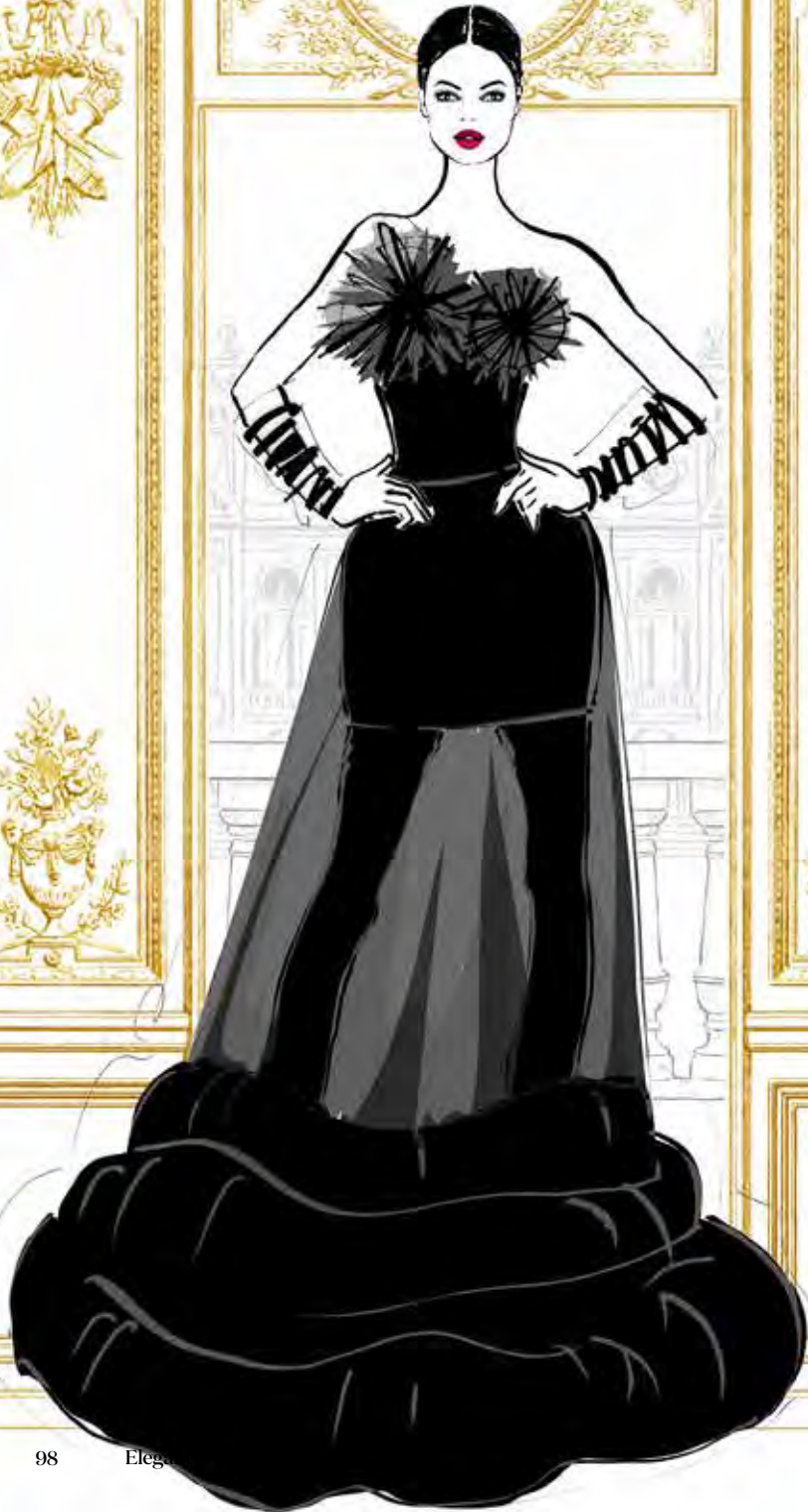


CHANEL





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