

Google Arts & Culture

# Coco Chanel: The Woman behind the “Little Black Dress”

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Coco Chanel, AFP Photo, 1969, Fonds de  
Dotation Françoise Giroud

## How to Make the Most of This Lesson

This lesson serves as a **roadmap** for your journey through a rich and exciting collection of online content made available by **Google Arts & Culture's partners**. You will explore photographs, slideshows, audio recordings, and more. The images in this lesson are just a sample of what's available to you via the **Google Arts & Culture** website.

You can complete this lesson independently or with fellow students, a teacher, or another adult. The content is accessible to a wide range of ages, but it's especially geared toward students ages 14 to 17.

## Your journey in this lesson will take you through three major topics:

Chapter 1: How Coco Chanel Got Her Start

Chapter 2: The "Romantic" Period of the 1930s

Chapter 3: A Lasting Contribution to Fashion's Fabric

## You'll see some helpful signs along the way:



Estimated time for completing the chapter



Audio recording or video



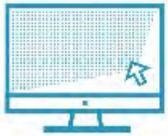
Link to more online content



Learning activity

# Tools for Learning

Below are tools for learning that you may need for Digital Discovery lessons:



A device that connects to the Internet (a computer or tablet)



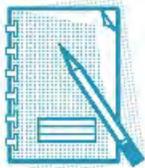
A tool for writing your responses and big ideas (pen, pencil, computer, etc.)



Art supplies (markers, crayons, paint)



Scissors



A notebook



Scrap paper

**Explore!** Google Arts & Culture pictures are **big**. If you want to explore a picture in greater detail, click on the magnifying glass symbol and zoom in with the zoom slider. By dragging the white box around, you can see even **tiny** details.

## Welcome to *Coco Chanel: The Woman behind the “Little Black Dress”*

In this lesson, you will learn about the life and business of Coco Chanel, one of the most iconic names in the fashion world. You'll find out how Chanel transformed the world of women's fashion from the early 1900s until the 1970s and how the house of Chanel continued after her death. At the end of the lesson, you will consider what is relevant to young people when it comes to what to wear.

### What Will You Do?

1. Find out about Chanel's early life.
2. Learn how Chanel got started in the fashion industry.
3. Understand Chanel's guiding design principles.
4. See how some of Chanel's designs became a permanent part of women's fashion.
5. Explore how the house of Chanel continued after Chanel's death.



(L-R) Fashion designer Coco Chanel w. Duke Laurino of Rome on beach at the Lido, LIFE Photo Collection

## What's in this lesson?

1. Learn about how Chanel's ideas inspired radical changes to women's fashion.
2. See how simplicity became equated with luxury and elegance under the Chanel label.
3. Understand the impact of World War II on Chanel's business.
4. Find out how new interest in Chanel's designs after World War II led to her ideas spreading globally.

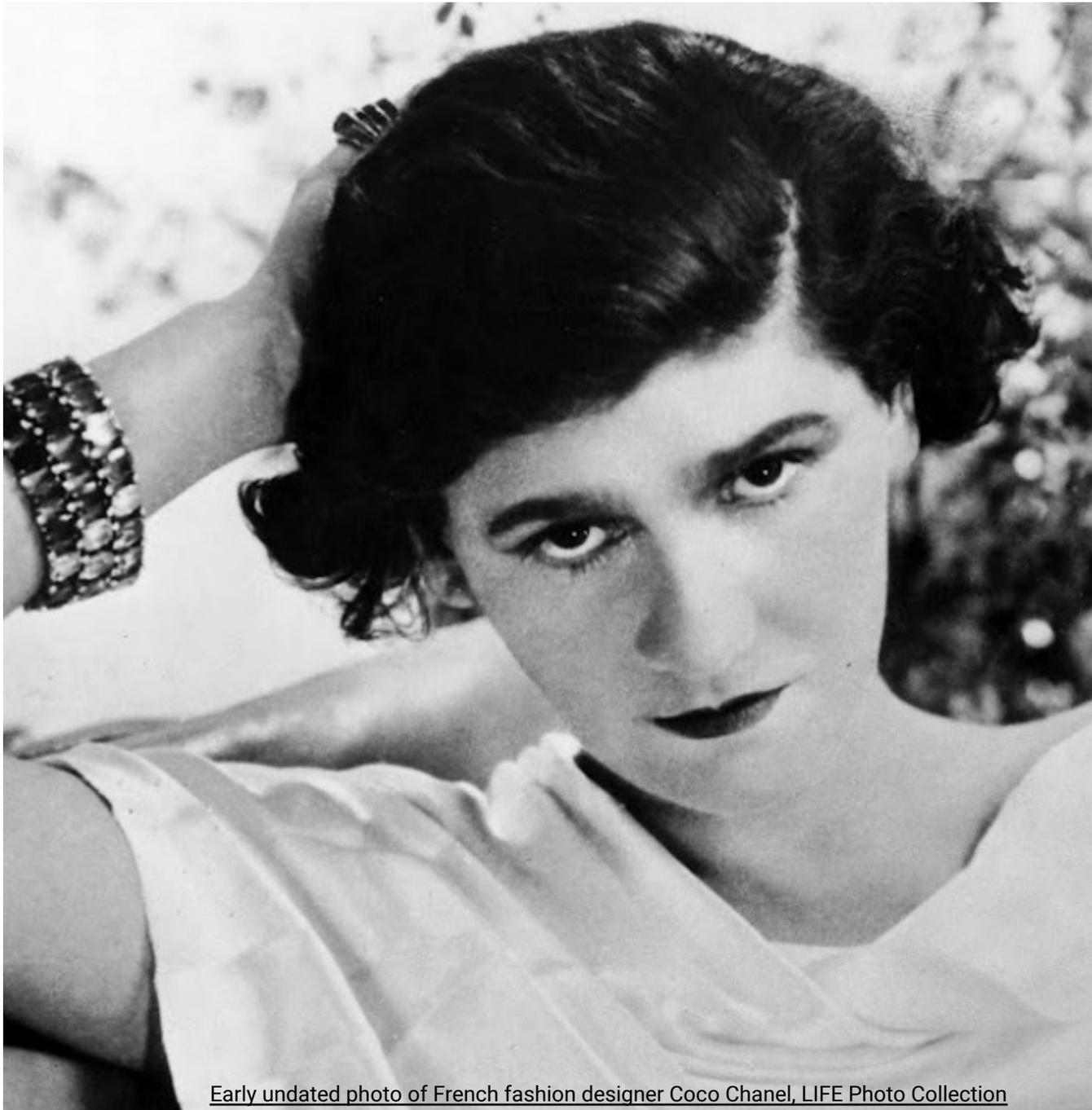
## By participating in this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Explain why Chanel is important to the fashion industry.
2. Identify the key elements of Chanel's designs.
3. Analyze how Chanel's legacy continues to inspire the fashion world.

### Vocabulary

haute couture, separates, chiffon, tulle, shirring, ready-to-wear clothing

*Need help with some of these terms? See the glossary at the end of this lesson.*



Early undated photo of French fashion designer Coco Chanel, LIFE Photo Collection

## How Coco Chanel Got Her Start



*What is this chapter about?*  
Chanel's early career



*How long will this chapter take?*  
1 hour

# Chapter 1: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

## Consider

1. What does “fashion” mean to you? Do you spend much time thinking about what to wear every day? When you put something on, are your choices ever motivated by style, or do you tend to pick something comfortable?



## Discover

2. What do you know about women’s fashion during the 1800s or earlier? Do you think women’s choices at this time were motivated by style or comfort?

# Chanel's Beginnings

Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel (1883–1971) was born to a poor family in rural France. Her mother died when she was very young, and her father gave her up to an orphanage. As a young woman, Chanel worked in a shop and then spent a few years singing in a café. It was there that she became known as “Coco,” after a song that she frequently performed.

Chanel was also a seamstress. In 1910, a wealthy acquaintance financed her first hat and clothing store. Chanel designed and sold comfortable yet stylish women's jersey knit clothes, a very unusual choice for women's clothing at the time. Women's fashion had always been uncomfortable and formal, with a great deal of “body shaping” elements such as those shown at right. Women were drawn to Chanel's clothes because they provided relief from discomfort.



Learn more about the fashion of the mid-1700s to late 1800s in [this exhibit](#).



## Women's New Roles

During World War I (1914–1918), women took on new roles and responsibilities in society. Many joined the workforce because so many men were overseas fighting the war.

After the war, women continued to be more active. They needed clothes that suited their new lifestyle. Chanel's functional forms played into this need. Chanel became a leader in the postwar **haute couture** world. Her monochromatic look—designs were typically black and/or white—was considered modern. In the past, black had typically been worn by shop clerks or people in mourning.

By the 1920s, Chanel was a leader in the fashion world. Her businesses were worth millions. One of the mainstays of her fashion empire was her famous perfume, Chanel No. 5. She also made accessories, makeup, and jewelry.



See another dress from this period [here](#).



Learn about the significance of the "little black dress" [here](#).

This Chanel dress from 1926 reflects two trends of the period—a shorter hemline and a comfortable, tubular shape.



## Simple but Glamorous

Chanel stressed comfort and simplicity in her clothing. Her designs were practical—many of them were inspired by men’s clothing and military uniforms. Chanel later claimed that

*“all her life, all she did was change men’s clothing into women’s: jackets, hair, neckties, wrists.”*

Functionality was key. As a result, Chanel introduced the concept of **separates**—pieces of clothing that could be mixed and matched. Simple and adaptable, Chanel’s pieces could be worn in various ways at different times of day.



Read more about Chanel’s modern designs in [this exhibit](#).

See an example of the dress *Vogue* magazine referred to in 1926 as the “uniform of the modern woman” [here](#).

View another ensemble from this period [here](#).



Day Ensemble  
Coco Chanel for Chanel, c.  
1928, The Kyoto Costume  
Institute

## The Height of Elegance

The 1920s were a time of excess in many areas, as postwar recovery, new ideas, and new inventions led to increased consumerism. Many people rebelled against prewar mindsets, particularly in regard to women's roles. New ideas also made their way into the fashion world. Typical women's evening wear of the "Roaring '20s" featured shorter hem lengths, beading, bright colors, and heavy embroidery.

Chanel, however, continued to design dresses with minimal ornamentation and simple, flowing forms, such as the evening dress shown here. Her evening wear followed the same principles as her day clothes but with more luxurious fabrics, such as lace or silk **chiffon**. Though simple, Chanel's designs were considered the height of elegance.



See one of Chanel's early evening dresses [here](#).

View another of Chanel's 1920s evening dresses [here](#).

Read more about the fashions of the 1920s in [this exhibit](#).





## Chanel Red

Though black and white played a prominent role in Chanel's designs of the 1920s, Chanel also experimented heavily with shades of red. In 1924, Chanel created her first red lipstick shade. She continued to use the color so frequently that it became known as "Chanel red." She said of her choice of red in her designs:

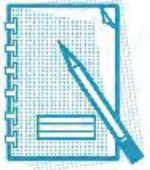
*"I find comfort with beige because it is natural. Not dyed. Red, because it is the color of blood and we have so much of it inside ourselves that it should be shown a little on the outside."*



See a later version of a Chanel red dress [here](#).

# Chapter 1: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



Look at the first page in this chapter.

- What do you notice about those body-shaping elements?
- Then, look at the photographs of Chanel's clothing.
- How do those designs differ from that first slide?



Coco Chanel, Man Ray, 1928, Oscar Niemeyer Museum

# Chapter 2:

## The “Romantic” Period of the 1930s



*What is this chapter about?*  
Chanel’s designs of the 1930s



*How long will this chapter  
take?*  
1 hour

# Chapter 2: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

## Consider

1. Research definitions of the word *romantic*. How might clothing designs be called *romantic*?

## Discover

2. In what ways might the fashion industry be impacted by major world events?



# The Romantic Period

During the 1930s, Chanel went through what has been called her “romantic period” due to her frequent use of lace and **tulle**, which were seen as more ornate fabrics. On the surface, some of the designs created during this period might appear more elaborate and fussier than Chanel’s earlier work. However, as with all Chanel designs, the romantic period pieces gracefully follow the wearer’s form. The extremely detailed finish work gives these pieces their glamorous look.

Take, for example, the lace dress shown here. The way in which the edges are cut and sewn—a technique called **shirring**—creates the flounces that give the piece movement and volume. Hand-sewn details such as these were extremely time consuming and characteristic of couture. Some Chanel pieces of the period are more revealing, so they were typically accompanied by a jacket, cape, or wrap for modesty.



Find out more about Chanel’s romantic period in [this exhibit](#).

This dress features shirring in the back and a wrap to cover the neck and back lines.

Evening ensemble, Coco Chanel for Chanel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art





Many of Chanel's evening dresses of the 1930s continued to be black. To this black dress, she added white through a "corsage" of silk flowers. This dress is constructed of lace, which allows for maximum movement and comfort.

As you have read, Chanel didn't use corsets to give the bodice of her dresses structure, but she did sometimes incorporate boning to ensure that shoulder straps would stay put.



To see this dress in its entirety, click [here](#).

View more dresses from this period [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).



This Chanel dress from the 1930s has two unusual details for Chanel's designs of the period. The first is the embroidered slip that you can see beneath a sheer overlay. This was very daring for the time. The second is Chanel's use of red, white, and blue in the sash, thought to be a patriotic reference to the French flag.



Read more about the details of this dress and see it in its entirety, [here](#).

# The Iconic Suit

Chanel first started creating women's suits out of jersey material during her earliest years as a fashion designer. During the 1930s, she took suits a step further, introducing the concept of the women's three-piece suit.

Her suits were like her other pieces—created for ease of movement and comfort. This 1937 suit is fashioned from loosely woven tweed and has high-cut armholes for mobility.



See another suit designed by Chanel during the late 1920s or early 1930s [here](#).



Suit, Coco Chanel for Chanel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

## The End of the 1930s

The dress shown here features a sleek, fitted bodice complemented by a full skirt, adorned with fireworks made from sequins. It was created for a high-society birthday party in the summer of 1939. The celebration of that summer would soon come to an end, however. Not long after, the world was torn apart by German leader Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland and the subsequent outbreak of World War II (1939–1945).

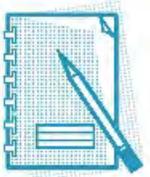
Chanel closed her fashion house with the outbreak of the war. She didn't reopen until 1954. At the reopening, the French press deemed her designs unchanged and thus old fashioned. However, the American fashion world embraced Chanel, launching a new era in her career.



Learn more about Chanel and other icons of the fashion world in [this exhibit](#).

# Chapter 2: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



Review the designs in this chapter against those you saw in Chapter 1.

- What differences do you notice?
- Do you think the pieces from the 1930s are “romantic,” based on your research into the word’s definitions?



Chanel Close Up, Loomis Dean, LIFE Photo Collection

# Chapter 3:

## A Lasting Contribution to Fashion's Fabric



*What is this chapter about?*  
How Chanel's designs spread around the world



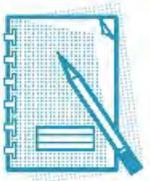
*How long will this chapter take?*  
1 hour

# Chapter 3: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

## Consider

1. From what you've learned, why do you think Chanel's designs became popular? Why might women continue to wear them?



## Discover

2. How might a company created more than 100 years ago continue to be relevant today?

# Chanel's Postwar Career

Chanel was 71 when she reopened her fashion house in 1954. Demand for her fashions in the United States surged, particularly for Chanel suits, which could be worn in either business or formal settings.

American singer Barbra Streisand sits with actors Marlene Dietrich and Elsa Martinelli in Chanel suits at a Chanel fashion show.



See more Chanel suits from the 1960s [here](#) and [here](#).

## Ready to Wear

Chanel sold her patterns to **ready-to-wear clothing** manufacturers in the United States, and suits in her signature style soon spread across the globe.

Postwar details Chanel introduced in her suits became hallmarks of her label—braiding, a Chanel logo, and gold buttons with a lion motif. Chanel also began incorporating more color into her repertoire.



See an evening suit from this period [here](#).





Day ensemble in black, brown, white, rose, and green knit wool, Museum of the City of New York (left); Tailleur Chanel pour l'opéra "Vol de nuit de L. Dallapiccola, Opéra-Comique, 1960 front view, Centre de National du costume de scene (right)

# The House of Chanel Continues

Chanel died in 1971, but her fashion legacy has continued. Several designers have led Chanel. One of the best known was Karl Lagerfeld (1933–2019), who worked under several labels but became most famous for his work for Chanel. Today, the brand is owned by the descendants of one of Chanel's early business partners. It continues to focus on both high-end couture and ready-to-wear pieces, along with accessories and other goods. Elegance paired with functionality continues to be a guiding principle of the label.



Read more about the role Chanel played in the history of fashion in [this exhibit](#) about iconic women designers.

Read more about Chanel and others in the history of haute couture in [this exhibit](#).

Karl Lagerfeld, shown here, became famous for his work under the Chanel label.



"Karl Lagerfeld: Visions of Fashion" - installation view, 2016, Fondazione Pitti Discovery



This updated version of a Chanel suit was designed by Karl Lagerfeld in 1990. What do you notice about its details?



Read more about how this suit reflects Chanel traditions [here](#).

See one of Lagerfeld's takes on the "little black dress" [here](#).

Find out more about Karl Lagerfeld [here](#).

# Chapter 3: Wrapping Up

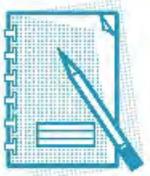
Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



- What do you think might be the most important considerations in continuing Chanel's legacy?
- How do you think that legacy would be interpreted by a current clothing designer?

# Digital Learning in Action

So, what did you learn? Read the questions and complete the learning activities below to extend your learning based on what you just experienced.



**Reflect** Answer these questions:

- What were Chanel's fundamental guiding principles?
- Why did women embrace Chanel's fashions?
- What Chanel principles do you think will last forever, if any? Explain your answer.



**Summarize:** Choose one of the pieces you've seen in this lesson. Write a 3–4 sentence paragraph that describes the piece and how it reflects what you've learned about Chanel's designs.



**Create:** Now that you've learned about Chanel's design principles, think about your own. If you were to create a line of clothing for people your age, what would you focus on? What do you think is most relevant to today's teens when they choose clothing, shoes, or accessories? Consider availability, cost, comfort, and style. Write a short paragraph that describes a plan for a clothing line that might appeal to teens today. In your plan, be sure to include three key principles that you believe should inform your designs.

# Glossary

- **chiffon:** a light, sheer fabric most often made from silk or nylon
- **haute couture:** the exclusive and trendsetting fashions created by top designers
- **ready-to-wear clothing:** clothing made for the general consumer market and sold in stores; also known as “off the rack”
- **separates:** women’s garments that cover only part of the body and can be mixed and matched with other pieces
- **shirring:** in sewing, decoratively gathering fabric through parallel lines of stitching
- **tulle:** a sheer and stiff net made from silk, rayon, or nylon