

COCO CHANEL

A new movie reminds us: Coco Chanel is still one of the most influential designers of our time. **by Kate Daley | photographs by Tracy Shumate**



Coco Chanel built an empire on her simplistic yet feminine sensibility.

In the new biopic *Coco before Chanel*, French starlet Audrey Tautou plays Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel—the woman who brought us the little black dress, the collarless tweed suit and fashionable costume jewellery. Thirty-eight years after her death, Chanel and her celebrated designs continue to be the heart of one of the world’s most successful luxury brands.

Before she became famous, the designer suffered a period of hardship. She was born in central France in 1883 to an unwed couple and her mother died young, leaving her to spend several years in a monastery orphanage, where she learned to sew. She acquired the skills of a seamstress, but her fashion career didn’t begin right away: She adopted the name Coco during a stint as a singer. She was in her twenties when she became the mistress of the aristocrat Étienne

Balsan, who helped her open her first hat shop in 1910. And from then on, Coco’s rise to 20th-century icon was fast, furious and always controversial. Her year-round tan, outspoken manner and high-profile lovers were almost as shocking to the French elite as her impoverished background.

Above all, though, she was a savvy businesswoman who challenged the notion of fashion. She was the first to create sportswear, and she used cheap jersey fabric at a time when women’s clothing was made only from heavy, structured materials like wool. Her designs spanned menswear-inspired suits to beautiful couture pieces. Today’s iconic quilted handbag and two-tone ballet flats also stem from her drafting table. And that’s not all she was known for. In 1921 the bestselling fragrance Chanel No. 5 was launched, and a bottle of it is still sold every six seconds worldwide.

Though she died in 1971, Chanel’s original creations are constantly drawn from and developed, holding true to her famous mantra: “Fashion moves on, style remains.” ■

Chanel said she created the legendary No. 5 perfume to smell like a woman.



Be inspired by these affordable ways to get Coco Chanel’s style.

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- 1 | Pearls, by Feetfirst, \$24.
- 2 | *The Gospel According to Coco Chanel*, by Karen Karbo, \$25.
- 3 | Dress, at Winners, \$80.
- 4 | Ballet flats, by Browns ID, \$118.
- 5 | *Coco before Chanel*, Sony Pictures Classics. 6 | Chanel No. 5 Classic Perfume, \$193 (15 mL).