

Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel

Myth and mystery surround the story of Chanel, often crafted through her own imagination and recounting of stories — frequently of doubtful authenticity, although widely circulated as being true — such as the anecdote regarding how each morning, with an alert from the Hotel Ritz doorman that Mademoiselle was approaching her atelier on foot, her staff would run out and spray the street with No 5 perfume!

Undeniable, is the creative vision of Gabrielle Chanel (1883-1971) that has influenced women's fashion and fragrance for the past 100 years. Born in a peasant village in the south of France, she spent her youth in an orphanage and then a Catholic boarding school — worlds of black and white simplicity that indelibly influenced her later designs. At age 20, she became a shop clerk and tailors apprentice in the garrison town of Moulins. There, in a small music hall, with illusions of a theatrical career, she sang the only two songs she knew, “Ko Ko Ri Ko” and Qui qua vu Coco. The crowd would call for an encore by chanting “Coco, Coco” and the nickname remained. Never married, her liaisons with prominent men not only supported her ventures, but inspired her creativity through their diverse backgrounds.

In 1906 she became involved with horse breeder Etienne Balsan, who introduced her into the society related to the sport of horse racing. Among Balsan's friends was wealthy businessman Arthur Capel who financed her in a millinery shop at 21 rue Cambon in Paris, where she attracted a theatrical clientele, receiving free advertising in fashion magazines with her hats modeled by famous actresses and opera stars. This led to a shop in the beach resort of Deauville in 1913, followed by a full couture house in Biarritz in 1914, with 60 employees. Women found new independence during the war years — short hair and shorter hemlines, and Chanel took an opportunity to establish her fashion house at 31 rue Cambon. Her collection of 1916 was an immediate success. After Capel's death in 1919, Chanel was drawn into a circle of avant-garde artists including Picasso, Stravinsky, Diaghilev and Cocteau. In 1920 she entered aristocratic society through a liaison with Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich of Russia, first cousin of the last Tsar Alexander II, and introduced a Russian flavor to her growing luxury brand, featuring fur trims, Cossack blouses, and elaborate trims of metallic embroidery. Chanel's fascination with Russian aesthetics made a lasting impact on her creations through her entire career, especially in her accessories. This influence would eventually be mistakenly identified by fashion editors as “Byzantine.” Such also was Mlle. Chanel's fascination with Russian royal exiles and their culture, and at the insistence of the Duke she would commission his sister Her Imperial Highness Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna of Russia to supply the House of Chanel with traditional Russian style hand embroideries, eventually pioneering the more economic approach of mechanical embroidery through Kitmir; the Duchess's textile shop. The partnership with Kitmir and Chanel lasted until 1925 and is now referred to as Chanel's “Russian Period.”

Through her participation in the 1925 Paris Exhibition, the Chanel style was adopted internationally. From 1925 to 1930 her designs reflected English style and fabrics influenced by her affair with the richest man in England, The Duke of Westminster:

In 1931, Chanel was paid \$1,000,000 to design the screen costumes for Gloria Swanson in “Tonight or Never”, and later designed for the French cinema. She made entire wardrobes obsolete in 1936 by dropping hemlines to the ankle, and popularizing the embroidered white lace evening gown. In 1939, with war imminent, she closed her salon and moved into the Ritz Hotel until De Gaulle marched into Paris in 1944. After the war, Chanel self-exiled to Switzerland and wouldn't present a collection in Paris until 1953.

1923 Harper's Bazaar

“To my mind, simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance...A really well-dressed woman in her afternoon clothes should be able to pass through a motley crowd unnoticed, but should create a mild sensation on entering a drawing-room among the knowing elite.”

In February of 1923, Harpers Bazaar published an interview that Mlle. Chanel had granted the famed photographer Baron Adolph de Meyer: “My establishment is a maison de luxe. It caters to the women of leisure, and only to those whose atmosphere is pervaded by luxury. I am not interested in any work done for the masses nor in any work produced in quantities, or at a cost available to all. I want to sell to very few, and remain prohibitive.” Chanel proclaimed.

“As she sat in her own room surrounded by piled up materials, fascinating embroideries, furs, and garments of all kinds, all in a heap, she impressed me as the quintessence and incarnation of our modern times, combining the woman refined and elegant with a genius for commercial enterprise, which has made this almost slip of a girl become in a very few short years an arbiter of fashion and the owner of one of the most individual dressmaking establishments in Paris. She is modern to her pink finger tips, goes straight ahead, ruthlessly dislodging accepted tradition, should she find tradition to have outlived itself. In her many enterprises, for besides her Maisons de couture in Paris, Cannes, and Biarritz, she directs her own factories

of perfumery and keeps an active eye on the weaving of her own textiles, she is her own manager,” wrote Meyer.

No 5

Though in exile and far from his lavish Russian palaces, Grand Duke Dmitri was one of the higher ranking surviving Romanovs. By August of 1922 newspapers worldwide reported that he had renounced his claim to the Imperial throne to marry Gabrielle Chanel. It was during her short-lived affair with the Duke that Chanel met and worked with the Czar's perfumer Ernest Beaux, to create the now legendary No.5 scent.

Chanel's inner circle of the time not only included exiled Russian royals but also Dadaists, innovative musicians, and other influential and expressive artists who pushed and challenged the boundaries and conventions of contemporary art. With No 5, Chanel abandoned her almost religious relationship with simplicity, and revolutionized perfume making through Ernest Beaux's use of aldehydes, thus making No 5 an abstract scent — impossible to decipher. There are endless myths of how No 5 was chosen by Mlle. Chanel, and also how its name came to be. By some accounts it was the fifth sample she was presented, by other accounts it was her lucky number; others have quoted her saying it was because she presented her collections on the 5th day of the 5th month of the year, and the list goes on.



For its bottle, Chanel used a design of pure transparency that would be the opposite of the over-elaborate fragrance bottles then in fashion. The No 5 bottle did not need to be ornate for it was its precious and expensive content that mattered. It has been widely speculated that the bottle design was inspired by the simple rectangular lines of the toiletry bottles used by the men in her life, and she wished to reproduce that form in expensive, delicate glass.

Chanel's original No 5 was not designed for wide release; it is important to remember that Chanel was “not interested in any work done for the masses nor in any work produced in quantities.” This first Chanel No 5 bottle, produced c1921, differed from the bottle known today, being of very thin glass in square form with a narrow silhouette, delicate rounded shoulders, and a small flat square stopper with rounded corners impressed with an interlocking “C” logo in the center. By some accounts, these were first gifted to preferred clients, then made available for purchase only in a Chanel boutique through 1930. The bottle was presented in a ground breaking Art Deco metal container void of ornamentation, with only a subtle stamped branding visible upon lifting the cover. These came in both a chrome or gold washed finish, channeling Chanel's Russian-influenced fashion collections that featured silver and gold metallic embroidery.

Chanel and No 5 were perfectly timed. By 1924, Gadabout would write for the British Daily Chronicle: “One of the things that visitors to Paris always notice is the lavish use of perfume among women, even the ‘very best’ people. In Paris, a woman friend tells me, practically every famous dressmaker has his or her particular scent, and this is ‘passed on’ to their clients. Chanel has several perfumes especially made for her; so have Poiret and Molyneux. They all put only numbers and not names to the perfumes. The famous milliner, Marthe Regnier, has a special perfume on her hats. In fact, you can almost say that every woman advertises her dressmaker by her scent.”

There is much speculation regarding the designer and the manufacturer of the original bottle. In “Nancy: La Cristallerie Oubliée” by Gerard Caussaint published in 2020 an example of the original stopper is pictured as having been found among a group of others produced in the Cristalleries de Nancy factory. There is no documentation to prove it, but this finding has led to speculation of possibility that the firm produced at least the stopper. Cristalleries

de Nancy was established in 1920 — leading one to wonder, how probable it would be that Mlle. Chanel would commission such a newly established firm to create the delicate flask that would hold her precious perfume. In “Masterpieces of the Perfume Industry” (2000) perfume historian Christie Mayer Lefkowitz attributes the design to Julien Viard and the manufacturing to Depinoix glassworks. She writes that the attribution came to her via Julien Viard's daughter: “Jeanine Depinoix maintains that the first Chanel flacon was designed by her father, sometime between 1913 and 1918.” However, it has been widely chronicled that through much of the 1910's Mlle. Chanel had an aversion towards women that wore perfume and only began changing her mind after Misia Sert pushed for her to release “Eau Chanel” in 1919.

Comparisons have been drawn between the original No 5 to some of Rene Lalique's simpler models. Coincidentally, in 1924 when the bottle design changed for No 5, Lalique manufactured the “A Travers la Voilette” bottle for Parfums Isabey. This bottle, which in shape is the mirror image of the original No 5 model, also has the same diagonal mold mark on the shoulder. Only one example of Chanel No 5 is known to bear a Lalique signature — however the signature is not molded, but rather in script, thus making it difficult to authenticate it. In “Chanel Solitaire” (1971) Claude Baillén recounts intimate stories shared by Chanel... “She invented the perfume — Number 5 — which was to obsess the world. The name was a chance, not premeditated: she called it that because it was the fifth bottle and five is a pretty number. With a wave of the hand she annihilated the hideous Lalique flacons with fancy stopper, meant to be kept, and invented the plain throw-away bottle marked with a neat black figure, servant of the most exclusive sense, the sense of smell.” Not much context is provided in this account from Mlle Baillén, but was Chanel presented with samples by Lalique that she rejected?

A recent account told by monsieur Ben Solms to the Perfume Bottles Auction credits the original bottle design of No 5 to Grand Duke Dmitri, who chose to fashion the bottle form after an Imperial vodka flask. And, like all things royal, it would have a monogram — only not on the bottle, but rather on the stopper, as interlocking Cs for Coco Chanel. It was through Aimée de Heeren that M. Solms would learn this account. Aimée was a Brazilian socialite living in Paris (secretly a spy for the Brazilian government) and had been a close friend to Duke Dmitri and Coco Chanel before WWII. Years after the war Aimée and Chanel reconnected and just before her passing, Chanel gave her a Romanov diamond brooch that Duke Dmitri had gifted her during their c1921 affair. That diamond brooch would eventually be sold by Aimée to help pay for M. Solms' “Cremerie de Paris” building which he still owns. The centuries old building was special to Chanel as it was Duke Dmitri who took her there first. She remained fond of the place through her entire life due to an iron staircase rail that features a fancy number 5.

Les Parfums Chanel

Anticipating the incorporation of “Les Parfums Chanel” with the Wertheimer Brothers in 1924, the original bottle proved too thin to sustain mass production and distribution. A new design in rectangular form gave the bottle a substantial wall, square faceted corners and a flat, thicker “gem-cut” faceted stopper. These and other models were produced by Cristalleries St. Louis 1923-1925, as well as Verrieres Brosse, who continue production today. In 1959 the bottle design of 1924 became part of the permanent collection of modern design at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Under Parfums Chanel — No 5 evolved into what is believed to be the most successful perfume of all time. Despite this, to this day the emblematic No 5 bottle has been deemed not sufficiently distinctive by the U.S. Trademark Office.

By December 1924, Americans could purchase Chanel No 5 at Bonwit Teller — a perfume created for the most exclusive and “knowing elite” began its worldwide conquest. No 5 and Chanel's other fragrances would become licensed products that benefitted from the couturier's name. The famed and distinctive No 5 bottle known today was no longer an exclusive Coco Chanel “maison de luxe” creation. Mlle. Chanel grew resentful of the success of Parfums Chanel as her agreement with the Wertheimer Brothers left her with only 10% ownership of the company. Legal battles and controversial efforts by both parties ensued in a fight over control of Les Parfums Chanel. This battle has been dramatized in the Apple TV series “The New Look” (2024). Eventually the Wertheimer's would settle with Mlle. Chanel financing her return to fashion and making her one of the wealthiest women of the time. Today, ownership of the House of Chanel rests entirely in the hands of the Wertheimer family.

The historical significance of Chanel's first No 5 presentation is undeniable, as it also marked the first appearance of Chanel's iconic logo, which in turn influenced future fashion houses. Due to the fragility of the bottle and the limited quantities produced — very few examples of the 1921 No 5 model have survived. An example appeared on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London as part of the “Gabrielle Chanel. Fashion Manifesto” (2023-2024) exhibit with the support of the House of Chanel, with no design or glass maker attribution; cementing its “Who Done It?” status.



5 Important and Exceptionally Rare c1921 Chanel No 5 clear glass perfume bottle of square form and narrow silhouette, paper label, square stopper with intaglio molded monogram of interlocking "C's" on surface, molded "Chanel-Paris" on bottom. Modernist nickel-plated metal case, "Chanel-Paris" stamped on inner lip. Presentation later known as "Flacon Série Luxe Pour Le Voyage-Étui Métal" under Parfums Chanel and available in 6 sizes. Bottle 3 1/4 in. Case 3 1/2 in.
\$20,000-\$30,000

