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Opening Extract from...

Coco Chanel

The Legend and the Life

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MADEMOISELLE IS AT HOME

'When my customers come to me, they like to cross the threshold of some magic place; they feel a satisfaction that is perhaps a trace vulgar but that delights them: they are privileged characters who are incorporated into our legend. For them this is a far greater pleasure than ordering another suit. Legend is the consecration of fame.'
Coco Chanel, 1935

Left: Cecil Beaton's painted sketch of Chanel in her private apartment, 1969.
Above: Chanel, reclining on her beige sofa. Roger Schall, 1938.

The House of Chanel stands at 31 Rue Cambon, a shrine to its dead creator, yet also a living, thriving temple of twenty-first-century fashion, the destination for pilgrims who travel here from all around the world. Outside, dusk falls on a grey wintry afternoon in Paris, the darkness and the drizzle mingling into an early twilight, the shadows of the surrounding buildings lying heavy on the narrow street. Inside, the air is perfumed and warm in the ground-floor boutique, a cocoon of luxury lined with cream surfaces and silvered mirrors, the customers hovering like hummingbirds above glass cases of enticing jewel-coloured lipsticks, or swooping on rails of silk-lined tweed jackets. Their eyes dart towards the film projection of the latest collection, comparing what they see in the shop with what is portrayed on the screen (and perhaps in their mind's eye, a vision of themselves transformed, dressed all in Chanel). You can watch the video reflected in the mirrors, too; the porcelain-faced models riding on a white and gold carousel. But instead of wooden horses galloping in a ceaseless circle, there are the famous symbols of Coco Chanel: pearls and camellias and the interlocked double-C logo, as globally recognisable as the Stars and Stripes or the swastika. As the carousel revolves on the screen, the reflections in the mirrors are also spinning, and for a few seconds everything is in movement; nothing seems solid at all.

This is as you would expect in the heart and headquarters of an international fashion brand, where mutability is integral to its business of selling new stock every season; yet there must always be something immediately familiar, suggestive of an iconography that denotes heritage and enduring value. The contradictions of such an enterprise are unavoidable – it's a balancing act between constant change and constancy – as is evident in Coco Chanel's own observations on the business of fashion: 'A dress is neither a tragedy, nor a painting; it is a charming and ephemeral creation, not an everlasting work of art. Fashion should die and die quickly, in order that commerce may survive … The more transient fashion is the more perfect it is. You can't protect what is already dead.'

And yet Mademoiselle protected her house, and here it still stands. Beside the entrance to the boutique is another doorway, closed to the public by a discreet dark-suited security guard, though not to select couture clients, who ascend Chanel's mirrored staircase when they come for private fittings in the hushed salon on the first floor. Not a trace of dust or dirt marks the floor, black and shiny as a lipstick case, and the ivory walls are perfectly smooth, as befits a ceremonial

space where pieces from the current couture collection hang on gilt rails, veiled in white shrouds like novitiates. Beyond here, the staircase continues to rise through the centre of the house, up to the place where Chanel watched her fashion shows unfold, hidden from the audience below, yet seeing everything beneath her, perched on the fifth step from the top of the spiralling stairs.

Pause for a moment on the staircase, and it gives you the strangest sensation. The mirrors are simultaneously reflecting from all angles; there is no escape from the sight of your body bisected, slivers of face and limbs. So you must watch yourself as you climb the flight to the second floor, to the unmarked mirrored double doors that lead into Mademoiselle Chanel's private apartment. Open the door, and it is as if she has never left the building; for here is her sanctuary polished and preserved, decades after her death on 10th January 1971.

You might call it a mausoleum, yet it feels too alive for that, for these rooms are still filled with her presence, along with her possessions. On the other side of the door is an entrance hall, the walls lined with early eighteenth-century Coromandel screens, their dark red lacquer patterned with a mysterious Oriental landscape, where women in kimonos fly on the back of white birds, and men are carried by fishes and turtles. There are pale mountains and wraiths of clouds and lakes on the screens, waterfalls and temples and precipices, a world beyond the walls of this Parisian apartment; and the sound of the city is silenced by the softness of thick beige carpet, the view concealed by the mirrors that reflect the Chinese screens.

The hall seems hermetically sealed, the way out hidden by mirrors, but two life-size Venetian blackamoors gesture to go on, past a pair of reindeer that stand to attention on either side of a bunch of gilded wheat in a silver vase. The statues point into the salon, but the reflection of their painted eyes and pointing hands is multiplied in a series of mirrored images, upending all sense of direction, skewing perspective within these looking-glass walls. Another door leads from the hall to the dining room where Chanel entertained guests, six beige suede-upholstered chairs at a walnut table; two lions on the tabletop; two gilt and crystal-encrusted mirrors in the alcoves; the ceiling curved like the vaulting of a Romanesque church. A smaller sitting room is lined with more antique Chinese screens, watched over by a stone statue of the Madonna and Child, his eyes at the door, hers cast down to the ground. But there is no bedroom in the apartment, for Mademoiselle slept across the street, on the top floor of the Ritz, with a view over the rooftops of Rue Cambon. Her hotel room was unadorned

– white cotton sheets, white walls, austere like the convent orphanage where she was educated – but her apartment remains as ornate as it was in her lifetime. The walls are lined in gold fabric; not that much can be seen of them, for they are covered with books and screens and mirrors, conserved like the inside of a holy sanctum, or the final resting place of an Ancient Egyptian queen.

If the mirrored staircase is the backbone of the House of Chanel, then Mademoiselle's salon – the largest of the three main rooms in her apartment – is its hidden heart. The outside world is not entirely excluded, for there are windows reaching from floor to ceiling, overlooking Rue Cambon to the school on the other side of the street, where children still study in the first-floor classroom, just as they did when Mademoiselle Chanel lived here. But did she look out of the window at them, or keep her eyes fixed on the treasures within these walls? There are yet more Chinese screens hiding the doors (Chanel hated the sight of doors, she said, for they reminded her of those who had already left, and those who would leave her again). Look closer, and you could lose yourself within their intricacies, drawn into a landscape of boats and bridges, of graceful women kneeling beside the water; a place where serpents and dragons fly through the air, above unicorns and elephants; where the trees grow leaves like fine white lace, and camellias are perpetually in blossom.

You could spend days in this room and never want to leave, such is the wealth of its riches. Two walls are lined with leather-bound books: antique editions of Plutarch, Euripides and Homer; the memoirs of Casanova and the essays of Montaigne; *The Confessions of St Augustine* and *The Dialogues* of Plato; the complete works of Maupassant and Molière in French, Shelley and Shakespeare in English; and two volumes of a weighty Holy Bible, published in London by the aptly named Virtue and Co. (If you happen to take down Volume Three of Shelley from the shelf, it falls open at a well-thumbed page from the poet's preface to *Julian and Maddalo*: 'Of the Maniac I can give no information. He seems, by his own account, to have been disappointed in love. He was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses. His story, told at length, might be like many other stories of the same kind: the unconnected exclamations of his agony will perhaps be found a sufficient comment for the text of every heart.')

In front of one of these walls of rare books stands Mademoiselle's roll-top desk, where her cream-coloured writing paper and envelopes are still in the compartment where she kept them. Above is a gilt-framed painting of a lion,

signifying Chanel's astrological sign of Leo, in commemoration of her birthday on 19th August, although she was less willing to remember the year of her birth, 1883, adjusting it when it suited her purposes; even tearing it out of her passport. 'My age varies according to the days and the people I happen to be with,' she told a young American journalist in 1959, when she was 76. 'When I'm bored I feel very old, and since I'm extremely bored with you, I'm going to be a thousand years old in five minutes …' Beside the lion is a vase of crystal camellias; on the leather desktop is her tortoiseshell fan, engraved with the stars that she constantly reworked into her jewellery designs, and a pair of her spectacles. Try them on, and the room dissolves into a blur of gold and red and shadows; quickly take them off again, to stop the walls from closing in.

Chanel standing beside her antique Coromandel screens, decorated with white birds and camellia branches. Boris Lipnitzki, 1937.

The drawers of the desk are unlocked; two are empty – and much was emptied from here, mysteriously vanishing on the night of Mademoiselle's death; shadowy figures stealing down the mirrored staircase, disappearing with bags of her belongings, including most of her precious jewels (the priceless ropes of pearls and necklaces of rubies and emeralds, her dazzling diamond rings and bracelets). But the right-hand drawer still contains a few of her personal possessions: a pair of sunglasses in a soft leather pouch, another fan, this one even more delicate, fashioned in paper and fragile wooden frets, and a sheaf of photographs of Mademoiselle Chanel. The first is of her in 1937, elegant in a white jacket and pearls, standing beside the Coromandel screen in the hall. Her eyes do not look into the camera lens, but gaze sideways, towards something or someone unseen, somewhere beyond the screen, beyond the white birds and camellias.

There are several more photographs in the drawer: Chanel as a young woman astride a white horse, head held high to the camera, but her eyes hidden in the shade of a wide-brimmed hat. A man stands beside her, her lover Boy Capel, his hands lightly touching her foot in the stirrup; they are dressed in near-identical riding outfits, a boyish tie her only addition to the crisp white shirt and trim jodhpurs. Twenty years on, and Boy Capel is gone, while Chanel is balanced on the shoulder of her friend Serge Lifar, a handsome ballet dancer, his hair as glossily dark as hers. She is wearing her strands of pearls over a black sweater and white trousers, and smiling in the light of a Riviera morning. Sunshine dapples her face again in a picture of a younger Chanel on a countryside road, where she is standing beside her car, nonchalant in a striped matelot top and navy sailor trousers; a reminder of her life beyond Rue Cambon, of her villa beside the sea in the south of France. And then there is the photograph of Chanel in 1920 with her lover, the Grand Duke Dmitri, cousin of the Russian tsar, one of the assassins of Rasputin. He is as handsome as a movie star; she is more beautiful than any of her models, hair cropped short, tanned skin glowing against iridescent pearls and white satin dress, gazing into his eyes.

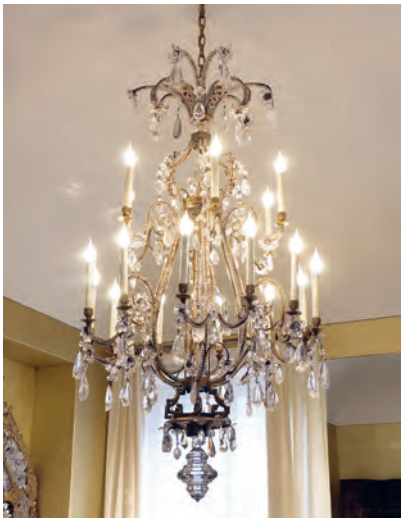
But mostly the pictures show Chanel alone: poised by the fireplace, or reclining on the long beige-suede sofa in the salon, studying a book, her hand hovering over a page of cryptic Indian illustrations. You cannot read her expression in these photographs of a solitary woman, the elegant lines of her face impassive, her eyebrows arched, a cigarette in her hand, its smoke rising like a decoy.

Writing paper, envelopes, spectacles, a tortoiseshell fan, photographs and a collection of Tarot cards, as Chanel left them, on her desk.

And so you go back to searching the room, trying to decode the cipher, looking for clues that might explain its owner's enigmatic face. There are bunches of dried wheat on either side of the marble fireplace, and two more made of gilt-covered wood on the mantelpiece, emblematic of good fortune and prosperity. A golden lion raises its paw to a Grecian mask, a woman's face with eyes as dark as Chanel's; and in the centre of the mantelpiece is a first-century headless torso of Aphrodite, its marble curves reflected in the looking glass, so that it seems to be one of twins. The Baroque mirror above the fireplace is vast, almost reaching the high ceiling, framed by pillars of cherubs and grapes. Its reflections are refracted by yet another mirror, of darker, smokier glass, which hangs above the suede sofa; leaning against the faded gilt frame is a gold crucifix (a double-barred cross, typical of those seen in the Spanish holy town of Caravaca, a former stronghold of the Knights Templar). Beside the cross is a painting of a single wheatsheaf by Salvador Dalí, one of Chanel's many artist friends.

You could go on searching for meaning here, noting the quilted cushions on the sofa (diagonal quilting, the same pattern as her famous handbags); hunting for the lions in the room; counting the pairs of animals. There are the two bronze deer by the fireplace, almost life-size, a buck and doe, their cloven feet sinking

Left: Chanel studying a book of Indian illustrations given to her by her lover, Boy Capel. Jean Moral, 1937.
Right: A fortune teller's ball and two of the gold dressing-table containers that Chanel received as a gift from the Duke of Westminster.



Chanel designed the chandelier in the salon of her apartment: her iconography is hidden in the wrought-iron frame and crystals; G is for Gabrielle, double C for Coco Chanel, and 5, the number which made her fortune. Right: The elaborate chandelier in Chanel's dining room.

into the carpet, and another tiny pair beside the sofa, in painted metal, with vases of pink flowers on their backs. Two camels on a side-table, two frogs (one glass, one bronze); two lovebirds made of pearl in a tiny jewelled cage; two porcelain horses, on either side of the smoky mirror; two golden fire-dogs in the empty hearth. Once you start looking, the doublings are everywhere: a second Grecian mask, staring at its twin from across the room; two Egyptian sphinx; two ceramic bowls on top of a bookshelf, one containing a broken shard of crystal; two clocks, one on the desk, which has stopped at 3.23, on the eleventh day of an unnumbered month, the other suspended, miraculously, on a mirrored wall between the two windows, its hands motionless at 1.18, a winged and vengeful angel of death wielding a scythe above the clockface.

A collection of symbolic objects is scattered throughout the room: a Catholic icon, a Buddha holding a spray of roses in his hand, another Buddha beside a strange mythical creature (part lion, part dog, part man, with an expression on his face of a sorrowful Caliban); a crystal glass cross, a mariner's navigational tool, a single bronze hand made by Diego Giacometti; a pack of Tarot cards (the number five is on top, Chanel's lucky number, illustrated by a picture of a green tree, its roots visible above the ground). There is evidence of great wealth, and perhaps of great love: Chanel is said to have discovered her taste for

Coromandel screens with the first and foremost love of her life, Boy Capel, the Englishman who also introduced her to theosophy and literature. Then there are the weighty solid-gold boxes engraved with the crest of a crown, a gift to Chanel from the Duke of Westminster, who showered her with jewels during their decade-long love affair, although there is no further sign of him here in the apartment apart from a novel by Alexandre Dumas, borrowed from the ducal library. The boxes stand empty on a low table in front of the sofa, flanked by a pair of fortune-teller's glass globes: one is in white quartz, cool to the touch; the other of gold-flecked resin, unexpectedly warm beneath the hands. Gaze into the glass, and nothing is clear; both globes contain only the faintest reflections of the chandelier that hangs from the middle of the ceiling. It is a magnificent creation – designed by Chanel herself – adorned with dozens of crystal orbs and stars, camellias and grapes; sparkling from a black wrought-iron frame. Look long enough, and the hidden letters and numbers in the frame begin to emerge from the abstract pattern: at the top of the chandelier there are Gs for Gabrielle, Chanel's name at christening; double Cs for Coco Chanel, the name under which she became famous; and fives – the number which made her fortune, as the label on the perfume that still sells more than any other brand in the world.

Walk back to the desk, and dare to sit down on the beige suede-upholstered chair where Mademoiselle used to work; run your fingers over the marks of her pen still visible in the multiple scores and angry scratches on the ink-stained leather desktop. The hands of the clocks are fixed for ever, the room is silent, the cream linen curtains are still; nothing moves across the mirrors, the gleaming light from the chandelier remains caught in time, as if preserved in amber. You cannot see the reflections in the mirrors when you are writing at the desk, only the eyes of the painted lion in the gold frame, the hands of the blackamoors, disappearing through the half-open door; but the hairs on the back of your neck are prickling; and perhaps, if you could turn around quickly enough, who on earth might be reflected in the looking-glass walls?

'Sometimes, when the boutique is closed, we feel her presence,' said my guide to the apartment, on my first visit here, glancing over her shoulder at the sound of a creaking door, the murmur of voices on the staircase, nervous as if she were being watched. 'After dark, even when the lights are on, you might glimpse her in the mirror, or hear her footsteps in the drawing room, very soft and quiet, too quick for anyone to catch up with her …'

Chanel in her apartment. Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1964.