Coco Chanel Biography

Coco Chanel

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Biography

Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel (1882-1971) was noted for her free-flowing, loose-fitting designs for women's clothing, first introduced in 1919, and again in 1954.

In 1919 French designer Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel released women from the tight corsets of the era and introduced them to comfortable jersey clothing. In 1954, after fifteen years of retirement and just six months before her seventy-first birthday, she made a comeback and freed women once again from highly structured, constricting designs--this time the clothing of the "New Look." Critics were lukewarm, but women, particularly American women, loved her casual, softly shaped clothes and snapped them up. These designs ushered in a new relaxation in fashion that continues today.

Early Years

Little is known of Chanel's early years except that she was orphaned as a young child. She started in fashion in 1910, making hats in Paris. Chanel opened her first dress shop in Paris in 1914 and closed it in 1939 at the onset of World War II. But in the period between the world wars she revolutionized women's fashion with her straight, simple, uncorseted, and, above all, comfortable "Chanel Look." She also popularized short hair for women in the 1920s and introduced shorter skirts. She created her famous Chanel No. 5 perfume in 1922.

Later Years

In 1954 Chanel said her competitive spirit was aroused because Parisian high fashion had been taken over by men. "There are too many men in this business," she told a magazine interviewer in May 1954, "and they don't know how to make clothes for women. All this fantastic pinching and puffing. How can a woman wear a dress that's cut so she can't lift up her arm to pick up a telephone"" She had a knack for knowing what women wanted, and women responded enthusiastically. In the 1950s her famous Chanel suit--a collarless, braid-trimmed cardigan jacket and slim, graceful skirt--was an enormous hit. She also popularized pea jackets and bell-bottom trousers plus magnificent jewelry worn with sportswear.

In 1969 Coco Chanel's life was the basis for *Coco,* a Broadway musical starring Katharine Hepburn. Chanel died in 1971, working to the end on a new collection.