



Followers of fashion on the eve of World War I found themselves with an unusual variety of options. A look at the fall 1913 issues of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* reveals that the venerable (read "frozen in amber") House of Worth was grappling with the issue "to corset or not to corset" and assuring its clients that good taste still existed. At Poiret, where the corset had been banished several years earlier, such styles as Empire-waisted evening gowns with trained skirts over divided pantslike underskirts were considered forward-looking yet required the services of a maid to fasten up and a gait restricted to small, mincing steps. Page after page was filled with clothing constructed of complicated pastiches of patterned fabrics and swaths of embroidery, beading, and, or sometimes in combination with, lace.

In striking contrast was the *Vogue* report from Deauville, including not one but two images of a belted cardigan-like tunic, unattributed, but by the young milliner Gabrielle Chanel. The caption read: "not a *mondaine* at Deauville but possesses a heavy coat of bright colored *velours de laine*." The antithesis of everything else available, these relaxed, bulky coats were not so much designed as devised by a woman who abandoned corsets because you could not laugh while wearing them. After World War I not just fashion but everything associated with the old order would be suspect. Chanel did not design well for women because she was a woman; she invented how modern women should dress because she epitomized the independent rule-breaking new woman.

As if isolating a gene, Chanel stripped clothing down to its most basic function, the chemise dress or the soft suit, removing but hardly abandoning all extraneous forms of decoration. One by one she added back as discrete ornaments an entire, and enduring, vocabulary of accessories. As was the case with her earliest creations, her hats, her individual taste, her scorn for pretension, and a razor-honed pragmatism guided her versions of jewels, bags, silk flowers, and shoes.

In 1924 Chanel single-handedly created a whole new category of couture must-haves when she offered a pair of faux-pearl earrings, one white and one black (recalling those worn to great effect by the heroine of Max Beerbohm's 1911 novel *Zuleika Dobson*). An instant success, they were followed by a choker of large baroque pearls worn high on the neck; *Vogue* featured the choker in no fewer than five separate fashion photographs and drawings.

Even as the pearls continued to be popular, along came "Chanel crystals." These were faceted-glass stones, mounted in silver-tone metal, made in all lengths, and worn with her deceptively simple silk frocks. By 1927 the crystals were so identified with her that *Women's Wear Daily* described a Lanvin purse as having an ornament of Chanel jewels. By inaugurating her faux jewels with pearls and crystals, Chanel was subversively referencing the two most ubiquitous totems of wealth: the string of natural pearls and the diamond rivi re. Up until the recent invention of the cultured pearl, pearls had always been the costliest jewels, with diamonds running a close second. Wearing one, a few, or many strands of either immediately broadcast one's status as wealthy, wealthier, or royal.

Next, in 1928, came jewels such as a sautoir of rock crystal cut in geometric shapes, which is as classically spare, bold, and modern as the Chanel perfume bottle, the mirrored staircase, and the jersey chemise. Two collaborators would be associated with Chanel's modern-style jewelry: Count  tienne de Beaumont, who had begun working with her in 1924 (but was let go when she found out he had been selling copies of the designs he made for her on the side), and artist Paul Iribe, whose 1932 designs of real diamond shooting stars, bowknots, and other pieces were featured in a renowned exhibition in Chanel's private apartment.

By the end of the 1920s, however, another Chanel jewelry style was emerging, described as Gypsy-like, hinting of Byzantine, Mughal, or Renaissance inspiration, and developed by a new collaborator, Fulco di Verdura, a Sicilian-born count starting out his career as an artist and hired originally to design textiles. Among Verdura's earliest creations for Chanel were brooches in the

shape of Maltese crosses cut from sheets of gold, with holes pierced to accommodate assorted faceted and cabochon semiprecious stones in a cacophony of colors. Verdura, who would become a great jeweler in his own right, was perhaps most famously responsible for Chanel's enameled cuffs, set with crosses like the brooches or with starbursts or collage-type arrangements of stones. Such real pieces were copied by Maison Gripoix for sale in the rue Cambon, where the staircase to the salon was flanked by cases of "jewels" of every description.

It was not the jewels themselves that were modern, hinting as they did of the past; it was the way Chanel wore them. Even in her full-length portrait by Cassandre a necklace of sizable rubies connected with gold links is slung to the side as if unimportant. In the past etiquette dictated that unmarried women avoid wearing valuable jewelry, as it might look as though they were trying to lure a husband, and many successful women made a pretense of being married so as to comfortably move about in society—a shadowy male in their background earned them the right to satisfy convention and be addressed as "Mme." There was simply no precedent for an internationally successful woman who flouted marriage and went around heaped with an assortment of jewels that just may have been love tokens from a series of increasingly grand paramours. There was a male swagger to her offhandedness with these feminine ornaments. As the 1930s progressed, Chanel jewelry became more elaborate until, by the end of the decade, the dominant necklace was a bib dripping with jewels, often Mughal inspired.

When Chanel staged her comeback in 1954, she offered, in addition to tweed suits, all the sorts of accessories she herself wore every day. Criticisms that her designs were from the past were justified, given that virtually every piece had its roots in the 1920s and '30s. What the critics failed to glean was Chanel's genius for producing items that seem incapable of ever going thoroughly out of style. Unlike other designers for whom accessories completed a silhouette or furthered a decorative effect, Chanel made individual pieces that were exercises in devising the single perfect item, be it a flower, a hair bow, or a shoe. She did not show a batch of new pieces every season; instead, from time to time she added a new item to her working vocabulary.

The first pocketbook to be so well known as to be regularly described as a Chanel bag appeared in 1925. Her practical streak showed in its pouch shape, capacious enough to hold all the things that would never fit in the prevailing envelope bag. The first version of a quilted pocketbook appeared in 1927, the prototype for the more contemporary version of 1955. She showed a tweed bag in 1928 and a knit purse in 1929. Her man-tailored belts with simple jeweled buckles, popular during the 1920s, were supplanted in the 1930s by gilt-metal filigree examples (and in the 1950s by chain-link versions). Silk flowers, which she had used in the 1920s to punctuate her streamlined designs, were a taste she never abandoned, and gradually, during the 1930s, she came to favor the camellia. Black hair bows, a schoolgirl touch not unlike her white collars and cuffs, surfaced as well during the 1930s.

Two pivotal items entered her lexicon during the 1950s: the chain-handle bag and the black-tipped sling-back shoe. As usual, these were adaptations rather than new designs. In coming up with a practical convertible shoulder or crook-of-the-arm handle for her quilted bags, Chanel drew on the chain handles of her youth. Her black-tipped sling backs, made for her by Raymond Massaro, were descendants of the two-toned spectator shoes in which she was often photographed during the 1920s and 1930s. Paring away, she reduced the shoe, stripping off the perforated decorations, cutting out the sides, and even compressing her two favorite colors, beige and black, into one item. Chanel jewelry of the 1950s and 1960s, produced by Gripoix and by a new collaborator, goldsmith Robert Goossens, included copies of pieces she had been seen wearing for decades.

After Chanel's death in 1971, her house lumbered along acquiring a genteel patina. When Karl Lagerfeld signed on as creative director in 1983, he not only changed the House of Chanel, he

changed all of fashion. Whereas Chanel tweaked an item until she got it right and then left it at that, Lagerfeld expanded the parameters of every imaginable aspect of her work and her persona. Nothing contrasts more with Chanel's idiosyncratic winnowing and reduction of design basics over a lifetime than his twenty-plus years of kaleidoscopic expansion of the Chanel idiom, drawing on a whole search engine of references, past, present, and future. No detail has escaped his inventive scrutiny. Even the threads of the famous Chanel tweed have been deconstructed and then stitched together in the subtlest of painterly embroideries.

The Lagerfeld-for-Chanel high-wire act is most dazzling when it pits the classic against the hip, adding another dimension to a story already abounding in paradox. It begins with a middle-aged spinster who creates clothes like those worn by schoolgirls and sporting gentlemen, showers her expensively simple styles with jewels that mock those of established matrons, is wildly successful selling to just such women, and is copied to the extent that her look becomes a worldwide uniform for a creature not unlike herself, the working woman. Then, as she ages, her clothes appeal to ever younger women, until by the beginning of the Swinging Sixties, she is approaching eighty and the Chanel suit—complete with the earrings, chain belts, hair bows, purses, and shoes as worn exactly by her—is taken up by young-mother First Ladies and Andy Warhol acolyte-superstars. Under Lagerfeld's direction the reach of Chanel has extended even further, becoming the latest logo coveted and worshiped by teenagers and hip-hop celebrities alike.