

January 2021



Dear Club Members,

When there is uncertainty about what to wear for an occasion it's hard to go wrong with a Little Black Dress. Dress it up for evenings, dress it down for the daytime, the often quoted fashion advice is that every woman's wardrobe should contain a black dress of some kind. . .

On the 10th January 1971, 50 years ago, fashion designer Coco Chanel died. Chanel revolutionised fashion in the 1920's, prior to World War I the silhouette was still mostly corseted, and relatively formal. Chanel popularised a sporty, more casual look, that still influences fashion today. Her looks coincided with a shortage of raw materials at the end of the War and global recessions, and with the advent of new fabrics and manufacturing technologies.

She was born to a poor family in France in 1883, aged 12 her mother died, and her father placed her in an orphanage. The nuns at the orphanage taught her to sew, a skill that led to the foundation of her entire career. Upon reaching adulthood she supplemented her work as a seamstress by singing in cabaret clubs, however her singing talent was limited, and she became the mistress of a French ex-cavalry officer, and heir to a textile empire, Etienne Balsan. During this relationship she began to design and create hats, as a way to occupy herself, but in 1910 she became a licensed commercial milliner. She opened her first shop in Paris that same year. In 1913 she opened her first boutique, financed by one of Balsan's friends, Arthur Capel, with whom she was having an affair.

The business went from strength to strength, with the opening of further boutiques, and the commissioning of costume designs for the Ballets Russes. In the 1920's she launched the iconic perfume, Chanel No. 5, in a partnership with department store owner Théophile Bader and businessmen Pierre and Paul Wertheimer. The deal only gave Chanel 10% of the profits, which became a source of great conflict later in her life.

By the 1930's she was being flown over to Hollywood to design costumes for the film industry, and actresses like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich became private clients.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 reveals the distasteful side to Chanel's personality and behaviour. She instantly closed all her shops, putting 4000 women out of work. There is a suggestion this was retaliation for a labour strike in 1936 when her workers had campaigned for better wages and working conditions. She'd long been acquainted with many of the members of high society, and at the time many of these elites were strongly anti-Semitic in their views. In common with many of them she believes that Nazism was a force for good because it opposed the communist government in Russia. Throughout the war she lived in the Hotel Ritz, along with many high level German military staff. She attempted to use the German seizing of all Jewish property to regain the profits from Chanel No. 5, as Wertheimer was Jewish. However, in anticipation of this move the Wertheimers had signed over the rights to Felix Amiot, so she was unsuccessful.

During the War it is highly likely that Chanel acted as a German agent, documents released in 2014 reveal that she was directly involved in a plan for the Third Reich to take control of Madrid. She had a close relationship with Winston Churchill, and it's suggested that his personal

intervention was the only thing that prevented her from being prosecuted for her activities during the war. Instead she fled to Switzerland, where she continued to design for the Chanel brand. The brand itself was now owned by the Wertheimer family. A settlement was reached to pay her dividends from the wartime profits from Chanel No. 5 sales, and a continued royalty from the perfume sales, plus a stipend to pay her expenses. In 1983 Karl Lagerfeld took over as chief designer, and the fashion house continued to expand, the net income in 2016 is thought to be around €1.3 billion. One important thing to note on this, the profits from the current Chanel company go to the Wertheimer family. The very Jews who she actively worked to exterminate, are now the people who benefit from her brand, image and legacy. Chanel herself escaped all punishment, and consequences for her actions due to her links with the rich and powerful. She lived out her life in luxury, spending time with the rich and the famous, and being lauded for her designs.

Your fibre this month is inspired by that iconic little black dress... but because the story behind it is one that requires a bit more in depth though I encourage you to look deeply at your fibre. Look at it in different lights. I think you'll be surprised.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading-

Article from the 1931 edition of The New Yorker-

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1931/03/14/31-rue-cambon>

Coco Chanel as a Nazi Agent-

<https://www.heyalma.com/yes-lets-keep-reminding-people-that-coco-chanel-was-a-nazi-supporter/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviapinnock/2020/10/01/coco-chanel-nazi-connection-matter-for-fashion-today/?sh=4c86ba2654a5>

<https://www.biography.com/news/coco-chanel-nazi-agent>

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12143439-sleeping-with-the-enemy>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/books/review/excerpt-sleeping-with-the-enemy-coco-channels-secret-war-by-hal-vaughan.html>

Her fashion and style-

<https://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/coco-chanel-life-in-pictures>

<https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/coco-chanel-fashion-50-years/index.html>

<https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a26551426/history-of-chanel-tweed-suit/>

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chnl/hd_chnl.htm

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% 19 micron Merino

30% Tussah Silk

20% Ramie