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Book Review: Fashioning Coco Chanel

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BOOK REVIEWS
Fashioning Coco Chanel


Spectators are drawn to the grandeur of a Chanel runway performance, captivated by the clothing design, models, and theatrical staging. Embedded in the drama of a Chanel show is the vision of its original founder, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel (1883–1971). When we hear the term “Chanel,” we think of the Chanel suit, strings of pearls, the little black dress, and basic, classic style. Individuals who look to Chanel haute couture understand that a legacy exists behind the label, and we want to know the woman who can be classified as one of the most influential fashion designers of the twentieth century.

Rhonda Garelick takes up this task in her biography, Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel and the Pulse of History. In opening her book, Garelick establishes that “[a]lthough Chanel was born in rural poverty and raised in an orphanage with little formal education, by the time she was thirty her name was a household word in France… By 1930, when Chanel was forty-seven, she employed 2,400 people and was worth at least $15 million – close to $1 billion in today’s currency” (xiv). The book follows Chanel’s successful career, but Garelick wants to approach the designer’s life through an examination of her relationship with politics and history, recognizing that “[w]hat remains to be considered is how her work and art themselves partook of European politics, and what her many intriguing love affairs might offer beyond their anecdotal value” (xvi). This approach is reminiscent of Caroline Weber’s Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution (2006), in which she invites the reader into the Queen’s wardrobe and melds clothing into the fabric of French politics. Garelick’s analysis and narrative is not as compelling as Weber’s, though she achieves her goal when focusing on the First and Second World Wars.

The early stages of Chanel’s career coincided with the First World War, when active women turned to the more practical styles that she promoted. Chanel utilized jersey, a textile of the masses, and converted it into desirable, wearable clothing for the upper reaches of society, while emphasizing thin bodies rather than prewar curvaceousness. The war generated opportunities that enabled her business to prosper and its context offers the reader a tangible understanding of Chanel’s place in history. “Thin, androgynous, simply dressed in striped naval-uniform-style suits, or schoolboy sports clothes and blazers, the ‘Chanel woman’ conjured the silhouette of the war’s millions of soldiers – the young men dying just out of sight of the general population” (87).

Unfortunately, as the book continues, the figure of Chanel is lost to the reader. Garelick structures individual chapters on Chanel’s romantic interests, including the exiled Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich Romanov, poet Pierre Reverdy, the wealthy Duke of Westminster, and French illustrator and nationalist, Paul Iribe. There is one chapter dedicated to her female friendships, in particular with society force, Misia Sert, but the majority of writing focuses on her male companions. In her quest to discover what these relationships “might offer beyond their anecdotal value,” Garelick outlines the lives of these men, their political convictions and connections, and their influences on Chanel. The result of these chapters is a repetitive narration where the men reside in the foreground of the story while Chanel rests in the background and her design history comes through as something of an afterthought. Garelick informs her readers that Chanel was known to bend the truth of her own past, which indicates that
Throughout the book, Garelick emphasizes Chanel’s connections to men who were nationalist and anti-Semitic, and that Chanel shared those sentiments. It was therefore no surprise to the reader that once the Nazi occupation of Paris had been established, Chanel returned to her home at the Ritz, a converted “Gestapo barracks” (327), to reclaim her residence (though she was demoted to smaller rooms) and live side by side with the ascendancy.

The most distressing story revealed by Garelick involves the reminiscences of sisters Viviane Forrester and Lady Christiane Françoise Swaythling, whose aunt, Louise, was a Jewish woman relegated to a maid’s quarters. Stepping out of a chauffeured car occupied by her Nazi boyfriend, Chanel entered the unoccupied home of the sisters’ aunt and claimed some antique furniture in order to cash in on the plunder. Chanel was also involved in Nazi schemes, including an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a settlement with Winston Churchill in 1943. Garelick places all aspects of Chanel’s involvement with the Nazis on the table, making the two chapters on fascism and the Second World War the book’s pinnacle.

Today, we want to know the sordid details of her fascinating story along with the origins of her influence upon our material lives. Garelick emphasizes just how prominent and lasting her artistic ideas remain. Many clothing articles that appear among us as everyday attire for women originated with Chanel seizing men’s clothes and converting masculine fortlrightness into feminine ease. As for the woman behind the runway spectacle, we are left contemplating an individual of immense artistic talent, controlling in nature, unlucky in love, and disturbing in her political associations and beliefs. Even after one digests this fine volume, there is still more to contemplate about this complex woman. How much she was a product of her time or one who shaped her surroundings remains open to debate.

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