

INTERNET

Chanel defines house style in haute couture vocabulary lesson

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Chanel's little black dress

By SARAH JONES

French couturier Chanel is schooling consumers on its design lexicon in the latest edition of its Inside Chanel series.

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"The Vocabulary of Fashion" flips through an imagined dictionary of Chanel terminology, which includes notable codes such as pearls, the camellia and tweed. Throughout this video, the brand documents the details that both house founder Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel and present creative director Karl Lagerfeld incorporate in their garments and accessories, providing proof of Chanel's enduring, timeless aesthetic.

"In the process of recounting the elements of Chanel's vocabulary, the brand allows for a direct juxtaposition of Coco Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld," said said [Thoma Serdari](#), Ph.D., founder of [PIQLuxury](#), Co-editor of [Luxury: History Culture Consumption](#) and adjunct professor of luxury marketing at [New York University](#), New York. "This is not intended as a comparison against a scale of success but rather as a reminder that Coco, the creator of the language, catalyzed the creation of a brand, within which Karl Lagerfeld creates today."

"It shines equal quality and intensity of light on both designers since they both address cultural imperatives of their own time," she said. "This is where Chanel maintains its advantage today: Lagerfeld's creations incorporate cultural intelligence that resonate with contemporary society, a trait that has been prominently celebrated in each one of his fashion shows. The brand gives him the tools that Coco put in place and he helps advance the brand in a direction that ensures its longevity and future."

Ms. Serdari is not affiliated with Chanel, but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

Chanel was unable to comment directly.

Branded definitions

Chanel's video was published to social media as well as the brand's Inside Chanel microsite.

The fourteenth chapter begins with a sketched shot of Chanel's buildings on Rue Cambon. Zooming in, the camera takes the consumer inside of an upper floor, where a book lays on a table.

As if by magic, the animated book opens by itself, and a voiceover begins to read text as it appears on the page. First, the female voice explains that "Chanel is a vocabulary, a set of canons, a discipline. A grammar."

Flipping to the definitions, the book first explains "the handbag." Inspired by the saddle bags with straps used by the military, Chanel made her own version of the "essential" lined with grosgrain, eventually adding the now-iconic quilted pattern and a chain-link strap in 1955, creating the 2.55.



Inside Chanel "The Vocabulary of Fashion"

As the voiceover talks, the video sketches the article of clothing or accessory mentioned, illustrating the signature look.

Next is the little black dress, which the virtual encyclopedia explains was fashioned after nuns' habits. This new style, which freed women from corsets, lives on to this day and is reinterpreted by Mr. Lagerfeld in textiles such as jersey or silk.

Costume jewelry, which is defined as "the illumination of Gabrielle Chanel," incorporates gemstones and crystals. These take influence from Venetian and Byzantine eras along with bygone days in England and Russia.

The camellia makes an appearance in many Chanel designs, as Coco Chanel selected it as her emblem. This scentless flower depicted in white serves as a brightness to the black attire popularized by Chanel.

Chains are used liberally as belts or jewelry, reinterpreting the metallic links with the addition of leather or embellishments. A chain is positioned at the bottom hem of Chanel jackets to perfect the form.



Video still from Inside Chanel "The Vocabulary of Fashion"

The inspiration behind the two-tone shoes is then revealed, as the narrator explains how beige lengthens the leg while black hides spots. The two colors also break up the foot, making it look smaller.

Much like the camellia, pearls serve as a light against Coco Chanel's preferred black, and she would not go to her workshop without a strand as her fashionable armor. Mr. Lagerfeld continues to experiment with pearls in his design, making them a "shimmering signature."

After seeing the Duke of Westminster's hunting garb in tweed, Ms. Chanel was inspired to work with the traditionally Scottish textile. Made into women's suits, the narrator says, "The tweed jacket never goes out of style."

The parting note of the glossary is a quote from Ms. Chanel, who opines, "Fashion passes, style remains."

The Vocabulary of Fashion - Inside Chanel

"With its latest video, Chanel is re-establishing its own brand," Ms. Serdari said. "This is a very straightforward message articulated at the opening of the video with the phrase: 'Chanel is a vocabulary, a set of canons, a discipline, a grammar.'

"What Chanel is, in other words, is a well-defined brand," she said. "This is extremely important, not only in the

context of the previous 13 chapters that spoke to individual elements of Chanel's mythology and heritage, but most importantly in the context of today's fashion world and the challenges a lot of fashion brands face as they try to preserve their heritage while also move into the future.

"This is a delicate task and is best accomplished when the set of rules are clear, when the DNA can be broken down to specific elements and when the grammar set in place allows the creative director to speak the language of contemporary fashion rather than an antiquated and tired reworking of elements from times past. Chanel, the brand, has evolved from specific points of departure but continues to explore their relationship with contemporary culture proposing creations that are both recognizable as Chanel staples and innovative applications of the original."

In a brand statement, Mr. Lagerfeld explains, "Mademoiselle Chanel handed us down a style. And the style she advocated never dates. Chanel's success was knowing how to get across the elements of her identity. Timeless music built around five notes by which women instantly recognize the essence of Chanel: luxury and refinement."

Inside look

The Inside Chanel series, launched in 2012, takes a detailed look at elements that make up the Chanel brand. These explore both the label's history and the life of its iconic founder.

Chanel previously shared the personal inspiration behind its color codes with a social video.

The label's "The Colors," the eleventh chapter of Inside Chanel, focuses on the shades that appear as a common theme throughout the label's fashion, accessories and beauty lines. This video helps Chanel showcase the consistency it has maintained, even with multiple designers at the helm ([see story](#)).

Chanel's efforts to open up its brand to the world have had measured impact on its desirability and positioning.

A recent Luxury Institute study surveyed affluent women from seven of the world's wealthiest nations to gain insights on which brands hold the most clout in terms of quality, exclusivity, social status and overall ownership. Chanel and French leather goods maker Herms were ranked as the two fashion houses most worth their premium asking prices, followed by Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton and Prada ([see story](#)).

Chanel was also ranked the most desirable luxury brand among wealthy Chinese women in a Promise Consulting survey, largely due to the label's dive into its heritage through exhibits across the country ([see story](#)).

"Let's not forget that the audience in this case is varied," Ms. Serdari said. "These videos are produced both for the audience at large but also for in-house consumption. It is extremely important for brands to update their own archives. Speaking of archives, let's think of them in their most abstract meaning."

"This series of videos itself is a digital archive that has already incorporated material from the original paper archives, has enriched them with a narrative, storyline and contemporary graphic design and has released them to the new generation of customers but also fashion designers who can learn from them," she said.

"Exploring a brand's heritage for the sole purpose of flaunting it is a useless exercise—arrogant at its worst. To reflect on a brand's heritage, update the format of its archives and draw lessons that can be useful within and without the brand is a test of the brand's respect towards its audience, internal and external."