

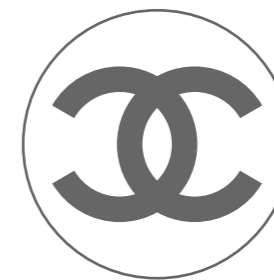
# BEING COCO

AS FRENCH ACTRESS AUDREY TAUTOU STEPS INTO COCO CHANEL'S CHIC SHOES IN HER ROLE AS THE CELEBRATED STYLE ICON, KEMPINSKI UNVEILS THESE TWO FAMOUS MADEMOISELLES

WORDS ALEXANDRIA GOUVEIA



“MOONLIGHTING AS A CABARET SINGER, SHE ACQUIRED HER NICKNAME “COCO” AFTER THE THE PET IN ONE OF HER DITTIES.”



**D**raped in exquisite rich pearls and layered in a chic tweed skirt suit, Audrey Tautou, in *Coco Avant Chanel* (Coco Before Chanel) is a dead ringer for classic French designer Coco Gabrielle Chanel.

While they may share a nationality and similar aesthetic traits that is seemingly where the comparisons begin and end. While one is demure and chooses a life of privacy away from prying paparazzi, the other not only transformed the way women dressed, but was also alleged to be embroiled in scandalous Nazi affairs.

#### BEFORE COCO

Audrey Tautou was born on August 9, 1978, in Beaumont, Puy-de-Dôme, France, to a dental surgeon father and teacher mother. Her upbringing was a comfortable and conventional one, but that's not to say the new face of Chanel No.5 didn't have to work hard for success.

Starting her career on a star search competition, Tautou quickly revealed her raw talent winning the contest's Best Young Actress award and, in the process, catching the attention of director Tonie Marshall who went on to cast her in her first role in *Venus Beauty Institute*.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. On the day of the audition Tautou got lost in Paris' maze-like alleyways and arrived more than one hour late. Consequently she was told she couldn't try-out and her puppy dog eyes filled with tears. A sensitive Marshall, so taken aback by Tautou's charm, gave her another chance and ultimately the role for which the actress went on to win a Cesar – France's equivalent of an Academy Award.

TV and minor film roles steadily flowed, but it was French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet who changed her life forever. Enchanted by the star, the director asked her to audition for his new romantic comedy and was so moved by Tautou's audition he asked her to redo certain scenes purely for his enjoyment. She was automatically cast as the lead role of Amelie in the eponymous French movie.

*Amelie* became the most successful French film in the US thanks to Tautou's undeniable on-screen charisma. She was nominated for eight awards for her role and won five. Predictably, the US fell in love with the unassuming actress who followed in the footsteps of Gerard Depardieu and Catherine Deneuve, going on to star in her first Hollywood blockbuster as Agent Sophie Neveu in the *Da Vinci Code*.

Offers for epic titles rolled in, but Tautou turned them down in favour of French films. Refusing to move stateside, the star still resides in her humble apartment in the Parisian quarter of Pigalle. No slave to Hollywood, that's not to say she won't star in blockbusters, Tautou jumped at the opportunity to portray Chanel in what is predicted to be an international hit.

Similar looks aside, Tautou was the obvious choice to play the protagonist and was immediately drawn to the role. “I feel attracted by fabulous heroines who are different from the rest of society. I've always been fascinated by stories in which a little toad becomes a princess,” Tautou coos in lullaby like tones

#### ENTER CHANEL

“A young uneducated woman who dreams of entering the world while exacerbating her differences and ignoring everything of the extraordinary destiny awaiting her,” Tautou summarises succinctly the tumultuous life of Chanel.

Born out of wedlock to vagrant parents – her father was a travelling salesman – Chanel was one of six children. After her mother's death to Tuberculosis, 12-year-old Chanel was sent to a Dickensian style orphanage where she trained as a seamstress.

At 18 she left the orphanage and took up work at a local tailor. Moonlighting as a cabaret singer, she acquired her nickname “Coco” after the name of the pet in one of her ditties. During this time Chanel flirted with her clients – she herself proclaimed to have a “hot little body” – and soon she started an affair with French millionaire Étienne Balsan who lavished her with all of life's riches. During their high-profile relationship Chanel discovered her passion as a milliner and with the help of her wealthy beau opened her first shop in 1912.

Thanks to Balsan and then her new beau Arthur “Boy” Chapel – an illustrious English polo player and her first great love – she acquired customers among women of society. Celebrated French actresses soon sported her signature hats.

However, it wasn't until the First World War that Chanel became renowned for her liberated clothing range. Following the war, women became more involved in work and everyday chores. Chanel, therefore, designed clothes they could move in with ease, without sacrificing their feminine attributes. =>



Top left Chanel transformed the face of women's fashion  
Left The new Coco, Audrey Tautou Right Coco (right) with elite fan Lady Abdy



## Chanel No. 1

### IN CHANEL'S WORDS

**"A WOMAN HAS THE AGE SHE DESERVES"**

Chanel was renowned for always looking a decade younger.

**"A GIRL SHOULD BE TWO THINGS: CLASSY AND FABULOUS"**

With no shortage of suitors, Chanel was clearly both.

**"THE BEST COLOUR IN THE WHOLE WORLD IS THE ONE THAT LOOKS GOOD ON YOU"**

In the words of a true style queen.

**"I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW A WOMAN CAN LEAVE THE HOUSE WITHOUT FIXING HERSELF. YOU NEVER KNOW, BUT MAYBE THAT'S THE DAY SHE HAS A DATE WITH DESTINY. IT'S BEST TO BE AS PRETTY AS POSSIBLE FOR DESTINY"**

Reasoning behind her unremitting impeccable appearance.

She replaced corsets with casual elegance and introduced trousers and simple suits. In 1926 she designed the number one staple for every woman's closet – the little black dress. Chanel brought chic and understated glamour to the masses.

By the 1920s she had her own maison de couture and famously expanded her range working with jersey – a material previously only used in men's underwear.

While the Great War helped to establish the stylish grisette, the Second World War brought about her demise. Taking early retirement, after citing it wasn't a time for fashion, she took up residence in the Hotel Ritz, Paris, where she stayed for more than 30 years.

It remained her home during Nazi occupation and was the scene of her affair with Hans Gunther Von Dincklage, a German officer and Nazi spy.

The relationship had a profound affect on Chanel's popularity. She was accused of war crimes and sympathising with Nazis. During interrogation about her alliance with Dincklage, Chanel characteristically retorted: "Really, monsieur, a woman of my age can not be expected to look at his passport if she has a chance of a lover."

It is believed Chanel was involved in a startling offer to Hitler's secret police chief to broker a deal with Winston Churchill to end the war. The farcical operation was called Modellhut (fashion hat).

While Chanel was only questioned for three hours, her reputation among the French was ruined. As such, the designer moved to Switzerland in a self-imposed exile. She eventually returned to her homeland in 1954, aged 74, which would also mark the return of her fashion collection. The collection wasn't a huge hit among Europeans still bitter over her misdemeanours. However, it was popular in the US, making the Chanel brand a worldwide and au courant label.

The acclaimed designer died in 1971, aged 87, with no heirs. In 1983 Karl Lagerfeld was lured from Chloé to work as creative director where he remains to this day, keeping the legacy that is Coco Chanel alive.

Today fans still make pilgrimages to her Paris apartment, which is preserved exactly as she left it and constantly referenced for style. As she herself once said: "Fashion fades, only style remains the same."

With the release of *Coco Avant Chanel* we are left with one question, a question, in fact, that Chanel herself would ask with every stitch she sewed: is it essential? Is the film essential or just another monetary enterprise? With Tautou appearing as a convincing Chanel counterfeit, the answer is yes, the inspiring biopic is necessary.

Chanel was the only person in her industry to be named on *TIME* Magazine's 100 most influential people of the 20th century, yet little is known about her determination and rise to success. Chanel proved that education or class needn't be barriers when it comes to achieving your dreams. She was an innovator, one of the first high-profile women to really live like a man. If it wasn't for this film many wouldn't know that she not only revolutionised women's fashion, but also helped women to realise they no longer had to take a back seat. Tautou explains: "I'm very happy with the script because it's about Chanel's youth and the elements which tell us why her style is what it is today." ■



Top Chanel showing off her 'hot little body'  
Left The icon at work