

Chanel No. 5

The Quintessence of Modernity

The American architect Louis Sullivan said, “Form follows function.” If that is true, then the architecture of Chanel No. 5 is perfect. So was the architecture of many a Chanel hat and dress.

With her array of fashion products—hats, clothes, perfumes, jewelry—Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel (1883-1971) practically invented our modern ideas of classic simplicity, elegance, and comfort. She extended the incomplete fashion revolution started by designer Paul Poiret, helping to liberate women socially. There was Before Chanel and After Chanel.

Function

As a container, the clean lines and simple form of the Chanel No. 5 bottle offer ease of use. What is revolutionary is the functioning of the scent itself.

Aromatics of many kinds—sweet herbs and spices, floral extracts, distilled essential oils (animal or vegetable in origin)—have held a valued, even sacred place worldwide since ancient times. The word “perfume” came into English from the Latin *per* (through) and *fūmus* (smoke or vapor), referring to the Roman custom of burning dry incense or aromatic oils.

In the modern perfume industry, synthetics began to be developed around 1900. This was at the same time that modern art was developing a taste for abstraction. Before World War I, however, heavy floral admixtures (chypre, gardenia, heliotrope, iris, jasmine, lavender, rose) were still fashionable.

In 1921, Chanel hired Ernest Beaux, a perfumer in Grasse. He was experimenting with synthetics. For No. 5, he successfully blended 80 natural and artificial ingredients to produce a unique, unprecedented perfume.

Form

The bottle evokes the cube; but more than Cubism, its radical, sculptural abstraction seems aligned with the De Stijl school of Mondrian and others. A chiseled rectangular solid. Jewel-like. Simple. Astonishingly unlike the elaborate, self-consciously ornamental Art Nouveau *flacons* (flasks) of Lalique and others, popular since the 1880s. Almost pharmaceutical, it hints at an industrial chic.