

SELECTION OF TEXTS FROM THE CATALOGUE

Paula Luengo

“(…) By then Picasso and Chanel, both in their thirties, were already famous in their respective fields. Picasso had left behind the days of hardship in Montmartre and was starting to become one of the most sought-after painters in Paris thanks to the connections of his Chilean patron Eugenia Errázuriz, who had introduced him to his new dealer Paul Rosenberg. Chanel, too, had enjoyed great success: having started out as a milliner, she had established Chanel Modes in Paris in 1910 and had opened the Maison Chanel in Deauville in 1912 and her fashion house in Biarritz in 1915.

But the designer’s true fame came after the outbreak of World War I when women joined the labour force – until then exclusively a male preserve – and their apparel needed to be more practical, regardless of their social class. Chanel opted for loosely fitting garments and shortened dresses to facilitate freedom of movement during the women’s working day. She also added large, functional pockets they could keep objects in and slip their hands inside. Gabrielle was a pioneer in adopting these changes in her designs without forsaking elegance in the slightest. She often drew inspiration from male clothing, and even set a trend for short boyish haircuts à la garçon. Chanel and Picasso were close contemporaries, and both were extremely hard working – or, rather, they were driven by an urge to create until the end of their days, often going against the established canons. Chanel stated of Picasso that he ‘destroyed, but then he constructed. He arrived in Paris in 1900, when I was a child, already able to draw like Ingres, whatever Sert said. I am almost old and Picasso is still working; he has become the radioactive principle of painting. Our meeting could only have happened in Paris’.

(…) Chanel frequented the company of Picasso and his wife, especially while the artist was collaborating actively with the Ballets Russes in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Proof of their friendship is an anecdote about the costume ball hosted by Étienne de Beaumont in 1920, which Misia, Sert, and Picasso decided not to attend because Chanel had not been invited, despite her involvement in making the costumes. However, all four went with the chauffeurs to the entrance to Beaumont’s residence to watch the guests arrive and enjoy the spectacle. On another occasion, New Year’s Eve in 1920, Chanel threw a party at her couture house on 31, Rue Cambon, to which Picasso naturally went, as did many of the city’s bohemians: Serge Lifar, Satie, Jacques Lipchitz, Georges Braque, Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet, Misia and Sert, Caryathis, Blaise Cendrars, and the group of young composers known as Les Six.

Her following home, the private mansion at 29, Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré also became a meeting point for the avant-garde. In the summer of 1921, Pablo, who had moved for the season to Fontainebleau with Olga and their son Paulo, returned to Paris to work and stayed in a room in Gabrielle’s place because he could not bear the loneliness of his apartment. In June, they both watched the premiere performance of Cocteau’s ballet *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower) from Misia’s box. From that year onward they often coincided at *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, the fashionable nightclub. The archives of the Musée Picasso in Paris hold an invitation from Chanel to the Picassos for dinner at her home and a photograph the artist kept of Gabrielle, both

dating from that period. In turn, Picasso gave Chanel a signed copy of the 1920 book with thirty-two reproductions of his designs for the costumes and sets of Manuel de Falla's ballet *Le Tricorne* (The Three-Cornered Hat), of 1919."

Marika Genty

"The work of Gabrielle Chanel, like that of Pablo Picasso, is based on the paradoxical definition formulated by Baudelaire in 1863: 'Modernity is the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal, the immutable'. Acutely sensitive to what passes, to what is transitory and doomed to disappear, they gathered its spirit and translated it into their art. Diverting, lightening, subtracting, removing, recomposing, broadening the scope of its experience, multiplying versions and variations – everything is possible when your name is Chanel or Picasso. 'Dare' would be their motto, that of two characters for whom freedom was the only compass and work the only requirement. Were they even aware that they were inventing a new language, that of modernity, whose manifestations would become universal?

(...) It was Chanel's vision of her times that decided her future. 'All that I had seen bored me, I needed to cleanse my memory, to clear from my mind everything that I remembered. And I also needed to improve on what I had done and improve on what others were producing. I have been Fate's tool in a necessary cleansing process'.

Insatiably curious, her selective eye took in the smallest detail. Maurice Sachs compared Chanel to 'a kind of strange goddess with scissors and pins, whose seven pairs of eyes could look in all directions at once, and whose seven hands could tailor a hundred divine models every season'.⁹ This intelligent gaze, which in time became a *fait accompli* for both artists, is at the origins of their executive prowess, of their ability to turn a painting or an outfit upside down and disrupt its proportions.

(...) In both Picasso and Chanel, experimentation was permanent. They let themselves be surprised by their surroundings, they took advantage of chance and indulged in a game of combinations, inventing and modifying the balance of things over and over again.

(...) We find the same spirit in the idea of the *petite robe noire*, the 'little black dress' which was born from a mischievous quip uttered by Gabrielle during an evening at the opera: 'These colours are impossible. These women, I'm bloody well going to dress them in black'. With her monochrome treatment of black and play on contrasts, textures, materials, and sheens, Chanel married black with elegance and through this radical choice she renewed the use of black, previously limited to mourning or the domestic sphere, to emphasise line and proportions. 'Suddenly, ornamentation gave way to line, and a garment appeared whose only origin was the logic of a designer faced with the needs of an era'. As in painting, its use demanded great precision, and Chanel knew it: 'Women think of every colour, except the absence of colours. I have said that black had everything. White too. They have an absolute beauty. It is perfect harmony. Dress women in white or black at a ball: they are the only ones you see'. Monochrome participates in the construction of space, as in Picasso's work. Chanel perceived its inexhaustible possibilities of invention, and throughout her life, she ceaselessly demonstrated its breadth and depth."

Juan Gutiérrez

"(...) Direct comparison between Chanel's designs and Picasso's oeuvre, proof of their formal similarities, and the suspicion that there are deep ties that bind the work of both invite us to momentarily cast aside categories and consider each object, each garment, and each painting to be an expression of a common language stemming from shared aspirations and influences. The features

that, either formally or conceptually, make it possible to relate Chanel's designs to Cubism are outlined in the following pages. The approach is simple and by no means original: it consists in demonstrating the validity of the theoretical language that describes the aesthetic of the revolutionary movement by briefly surveying the fashion designer's contributions. If there was indeed a Cubist fashion, as Martin suggests, Chanel was the designer who succeeded most effectively in summing up its essence and, like Picasso in the field of artistic representation, in projecting it on a large scale to convert its language into one of the most widely disseminated twentieth-century style codes.

Harold Koda points out in the introduction to the catalogue of the Chanel retrospective held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2005 that today it would seem out of place to imagine a woman clad in Poiret's fashions of around 1907 viewing Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 'The disjunction felt in the juxtaposition', Koda states, evaporates if we picture her dressed in Chanel. The image would be somewhat anachronistic, as Chanel opened her first boutique in 1910 in Deauville, but it may be inferred from the disapproval received by Picasso's seminal work, which was incomprehensible even to Georges Braque and ignored by collectors until the 1920s, that the painter's genius was several years ahead of the change in taste to which fashion would adjust through the medium (returning to Adorno's idea) of figures like Chanel.

It is telling that the first owner of *Les Femmes d'Alger* should have been Doucet. The attention fashion designers lavished on cultural change, and the emergence of new practices and aesthetics, secured them a position at the forefront of the artistic and social avant-gardes. This explains why the major changes witnessed in fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century were aligned with Cubism 'long before Cubism had become the Establishment'. Indeed, Martin makes an interesting point in his analysis: that Cubist fashion – which preceded Chanel, as it can be sensed around 1910 in the designs of Callot Soeurs and Lucile – was proof of the viability of the aesthetic shaped by Braque and Picasso.

As for Chanel, it is commonly accepted that she was part of the 'Cubist generation' on the grounds of her age and the severity of her style. Beginning in 1917, the year Misia Godebska introduced her to the *Tout-Paris*, Chanel played an active part on the avant-garde scene. Her close relationship with Igor Stravinsky, Jean Cocteau, and Pierre Reverdy, which extended to admiration for their works and various forms of collaboration, attests to her fondness for transgression in art. Her wish to break moulds is credited by her biographers to her own temperament and to how she coped with the experiences of her youth. The world she created was based on her intuition and met her needs; it was driven by a tenacious observation of modernity that, as Edmonde Charles-Roux argues, 16 possibly stemmed from repudiation of her past and the aim of crafting a persona tailored to her personality, her body, and her time."

Birgit Haase y Maria Spitz

"(...) In mid-March, Picasso sent his friend the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who was in Paris at the time, 'the verses the ballet dancers have written for me', which included the words 'we are waiting for Picasso / to propose to Khokhlova'. This was practically official confirmation of the beginning of his liaison with the dancer Olga Khokhlova, who was ten years his junior.

The daughter of Lydia Khokhlova (née Vinchenko) and Stepan Khokhlov, colonel in the Russian Imperial Army, Olga had grown up with three brothers and a sister in St Petersburg, where she had received a traditional upperbourgeois education and instruction in a wide range of subjects including classical dance. In 1911, at the age of twenty-one, she had passed the difficult audition for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and had been touring Europe and the United States with the company ever since,

although this did not meet with the wholehearted approval of her conservative family. In 1917, at the peak of her career as a ballet dancer, Olga met Pablo, who was probably as drawn to her upbringing as he was to her attractive appearance. She was a beautiful, elegant young woman with regular features, long auburn hair, green eyes, and the lithe and graceful figure of a dancer. Her fashion sense is apparent from the earliest photographs, including the one shown here: like her fellow ballet dancer Maria Chabelska, who appears standing next to an elegant Jean Cocteau, Olga, beside a well-dressed Picasso, is decked out in the fashion of the day. Her dark-coloured outfit of softly falling fabric consists of a thigh-length bodice with a light-toned sailor collar and wide belt, and a skirt reaching slightly above the ankle, apparently with side pockets. The ensemble and accompanying accessories – a wide-brimmed hat and bow-trimmed high heels – conjure up the illustration of an early Chanel outfit featured in the July 1916 issue of the fashion magazine *Les Éléances Parisiennes*.

At that point, Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel was running successful fashion houses in Paris, Deauville, and Biarritz, where she sold exquisite modern and casual creations of an apparent simplicity in keeping with her much-cited phrase, ‘luxury is not the opposite of poverty, it is the opposite of vulgarity’. The soft, stretch knit and jersey fabrics for which she had a particular penchant offered a practicality, versatility, and comfort that matched the demands of the ‘new woman’ setting post-World War I trends, which the couturiere had herself come to embody years earlier.

It is no longer possible to ascertain whether Olga’s outfit in the 1917 photograph was designed by Chanel; but it is most certainly in line with the designer’s style, and there is evidence that, by 1920 at the latest, Picasso’s wife had become a regular customer of the couturiere. Many years later, the composer Igor Stravinsky recalled Olga, whom he met in Rome in 1917, as follows: ‘she had many new robes from Chanel to show, besides Picasso, and suddenly the great painter was to be seen at every cocktail party, theater, and dinner’. His words appear to chime with the reproach, often repeated by some of Picasso’s later biographers in particular, that the painter’s relationship with Olga had led him away from the bohemian art world towards an increasingly sophisticated lifestyle. Be that as it may, there is no question that, even before he met Olga, Pablo liked to dress elegantly of his own accord, and already had access to high-society circles through the agency of his patron, Eugenia Errázuriz. He was proud of his conquest of the beautiful, well-bred Olga, whom he introduced to his mother in Barcelona in July 1917. This was where he bought his bride the black muslin dress with embroidered flowers of different coloured silk and metal threads that she wears in the famous portrait *Olga in an Armchair*, painted a little later in Paris.”

Dominique Marny

“(…) On 13 October 1922, Cocteau wrote to his mother from Pramousquier: ‘It is a joy to greet Antigone again. She is a person who bears little resemblance to our elegant modern women. And yet she carries elegance to the point of death’. After re-reading the original text, he embarked on a process that would last until the end of his life, that of ‘toning up the skin of the myths’. In this he was an innovator, the first of his generation to take this path. The war and post-war years gave rise to the Cubist, Dada, and Surrealist movements. Refusing to belong to any chapel, Cocteau championed classicism instead.

(…) From 10 November onwards, Cocteau concentrated on the organisation of the production. First of all, the set, which he wanted to give to Picasso. In 1917, the two artists had worked together on *Parade*, a *ballet réaliste*. Under the aegis of Diaghilev, they conceived a fairground universe for which Cocteau wrote the libretto and Picasso created the stage curtain and costumes. Erik Satie was in charge of the music. Presented at the Théâtre du Châtelet in the middle of the war, the show caused a scandal. So what! Cocteau was well aware that his rendezvous with the Spaniard was certainly one

of the most important artistic encounters of his life. They met in 1915, in Montparnasse, a neighbourhood frequented by countless artists and writers (among them Amedeo Modigliani, Moïse Kisling, Chaim Soutine, Tsuguharu Foujita, Constantin Brancusi, Blaise Cendrars, and Max Jacob). The place still had a slightly rural feel, rents were cheap, and locals could chat in their favourite cafés: *La Closerie des Lilas*, *La Rotonde*, and *Le Dôme*. Picasso's studio was located at 5bis, Rue Victor Schoelcher. 'It must have been the moment of an inimitable encounter, "Written in the stars"! You became my guide and I could no longer commit a breach of my personal morality without fearing the black arrow of your eye', recalled the poet in a letter he sent his friend on 6 July 1961. In the meantime, he drew portraits of the painter, who inspired him to write an ode and several poems. For his part, Picasso made two portraits of Cocteau. Two years after the beginning of their friendship, they coincided in Rome (February 1917), which further strengthened their ties. And when, on 12 July 1918, Picasso married the dancer Olga Khokhlova in the Russian church of Saint Alexandre-Nevsky on Rue Daru, Paris, Cocteau was their best man along with Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob.

(...) If one looks at the events that were shaking up society in the 1920s, it is easy to understand why the character of Antigone so appealed to Cocteau. Her youth, her purity of soul, her rebellion against the established order, her determination not to give in to male dictates, and her loyalty to the memory of her brothers were bound to resonate with the times. Morals had changed. During the 1914–18 war, women replaced the combatants, running farms, factories, and businesses and in so doing, acquiring an independence that they meant to keep. They studied more ambitiously, played sports, drove cars, danced to jazz tunes, and chose to marry for love rather than to abide by a contract between two families. Cocteau responded to these upheavals. He sought out the company of creative and independent women like the fashion designer Gabrielle Chanel, whom he met through their mutual friend Misia Godebska, a celebrity of the Tout-Paris and muse to famous artists. Chanel was one of the first to modernise women in the twentieth century by freeing them from the corsets, petticoats, lace, guipures, and falbalas that had hindered them for centuries. With the help of her partner Boy Capel, she started her career designing hats before turning her attention to clothing. Appreciating simple materials, she decided to shorten dresses and skirts, chose to cut them from wool jersey and silk jersey, favoured ease over ornament, and imposed black for evening wear. In parallel to her rapid rise in the world of couture she was fascinated by the art scene and dreamed of working with artists. This she achieved through Misia, whom she met in 1917 at the home of Cécile Sorel, an actress who made and destroyed reputations and was attracted to the discreet dressmaker. Sorel introduced her to Serge Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballets Russes, of which she herself had become the eminence grise. Since the troupe's first appearance on the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet in 1909, their prowess had become proverbial. Women swooned every time their star Vaslav Nijinsky performed in shimmering sets that conjured up an imaginary Orient. Chanel soon became involved with the company. 'It was by means of visible splendour that she helped the secret splendour of the artists. It was without it ever being said and without wanting to be talked about that she has been the companion of all our research', wrote Cocteau, who admired her talent, her success, and her modernity, and added: 'Everywhere, behind the thinker and the interpreter, one finds her in the modest shadow. Her friendship for Picasso, for Dalí, for Stravinsky, for Pierre Reverdy, for myself, in a sense outweighs the extraordinary good fortune of her reign over the couture'. When he imagined the costumes for Antigone, he thought of the woman he nicknamed 'the Black Swan'. Oedipus's daughters had to be well turned out, so he asked for the help of the greatest dressmaker of all time."

“In 1924, just as the Olympic Games got under way in Paris, Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes premiered one of its most popular ballets of the 1920s. *Le Train Bleu* (The Blue Train), named after the overnight train from Paris to the Côte d’Azur, celebrated the hedonism of the newly fashionable beach – its games, flirtations, secret liaisons, and chic. The music was by Darius Milhaud, a member of the young composers’ group known as Les Six; the set’s Cubist-style bathing cabanas by the sculptor Henri Laurens; the libretto by Jean Cocteau, and the front curtain – a blow-up of the gouache *Two Women Running on the Beach (The Race)*– by Pablo Picasso. But to a considerable extent the success of the ballet was due to two remarkable women: Bronislava Nijinska, who choreographed it, and Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel, who designed a collection of up-to-the-minute sportswear as costumes.

Neither woman ever acknowledged the other, and apart from a costume fitting lost to the historical record, it is unclear if they ever exchanged a word. Yet it seems only logical that they respected one another, in spite of the conflicts – almost certainly exaggerated – that Chanel’s biographer Edmonde Charles-Roux attributes to the two. In February 1924 Diaghilev took Anton Dolin to Chanel’s celebrated salon at 31, Rue Cambon to be fitted in what he called ‘a kind of vest-pants creation in a wool jersey material, with no sleeves and open at the front’. Nijinska must have followed at some point, and like Dolin, was likely overwhelmed by the bustle of ‘mannequins changing costumes and jewellery’ as Chanel stood ‘giving orders and being obeyed like a general in command of a small army’ while she ‘snipped away with her scissors’.

However, Nijinska viewed Chanel’s many liaisons (including her relationship with Igor Stravinsky), she must have respected her drive, professionalism, and hard work. In her atelier Chanel was like the choreographer in her studio, an artist and an artisan, wrestling day in and day out with the materials that would coax her vision to life. Fabric was to Chanel what movement was to Nijinska, the fundamental material of an art realised through the human body. Both, too, were perfectionists. In her biography of Chanel, Charles-Roux speaks of the ‘maniacal concentration [...] [and] sometimes infuriating pernickety [Chanel] brought to her work [...] measuring the freedom of movement of a sleeve, gauging the length of a skirt, vigorously denouncing this or that fault which she then proceeded to assail with great snips of the scissors’. Nijinska drove her dancers equally as hard, insisting that steps, gestures, and phrases be repeated over and over until they passed muster both artistically and technically.”