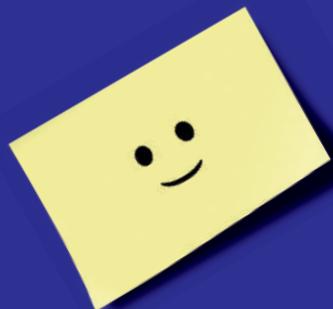




A HISTORY OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY
IN 50 OBJECTS

Edited by **CLAUDY OP DEN KAMP** and **DAN HUNTER**



30 Chanel 2.55

Jeannie Suk Gersen

FREUD SAID THE purse was a symbol of female anatomy, a receptacle for the mysterious and hidden. A woman who went out into society carrying one was clutching her womb, so to speak.

The Chanel 2.55 bag—timeless object of purse-envy—was a kind of rebirth. It was not the first bag created by Coco Chanel. Her first, in 1929, caused scandal. Having become “fed up with holding my purses in my hands and losing them,” and inspired by military satchels, she sewed on an extended strap to allow women to carry the bag hands-free and over the shoulder. Making a shoulder bag socially acceptable for ladies offered new freedom of movement and a nod to sexual liberation in Jazz Age Paris.

Chanel was famous for many things, including her romantic liaisons with the likes of Stravinsky and British royalty. Her 2.55 bag, named for its appearance in February 1955, had a secret zippered compartment in its front flap for keeping love letters. The bag’s long shoulder straps were made of linked metal chains, and its quilted leather body resembled the pattern on jockey jackets. Its inner lining was the burgundy color of Chanel’s childhood Catholic-school uniforms. Inspired by her girlhood impressions of horses’ bridles and harnesses, and of the keychains of the caretakers at her orphanage, the bag expressed both freedom and restraint, mastery and submission. As *Vogue* noted in 2013, “The genius of the Chanel bag can be found in its versatility—it has managed to be the perfect accessory, be its wearer in jeans or black-tie, artfully disheveled or painstakingly put together, for more

than half a century, invading not only our wardrobes but our cultural consciousness as well.”

The bag was part of Coco Chanel’s fraught 1950s comeback, 15 years after she closed her business as World War II began. It proved to be an emblem of Chanel’s own ability to rise again, unscathed, after her wartime collaboration with the Nazis. In a social set in which anti-Semitism was pronounced, Chanel had been a secret agent for the Germans and mistress to a German intelligence officer. She had also tried to exploit the Nazi Aryanization of property, by suing her Jewish business partner and backer, Pierre Wertheimer, in an attempt to legally exclude his rights to the Chanel No. 5 perfume empire—unsuccessfully, as he’d already signed over control to a non-Jewish proxy before fleeing France for New York so the company wouldn’t be considered Jewish or abandoned.

After the war, Chanel was somehow spared the public shaming, to which many French women who’d slept with the enemy were subjected, with head-shaving and forced march in the streets. After brief investigation by French authorities of her wartime activities, and following a post-war Swiss self-exile, she was back in Paris at the age of 71 reviving the House of Chanel. The ease of Chanel’s reintegration into French society has struck many as puzzling, with some crediting the possible intervention of her friend Winston Churchill, her name’s close association with French chic, and the desire of postwar France to forget and move on. But it was, most practically, her former partner Wertheimer’s decision to financially back her again, despite her

wartime conduct, that enabled Chanel's reestablishment. (The Wertheimer family owns the controlling interest in the Chanel company today.)

For all the French forgiveness, it was the Americans who rapturously embraced her return. *Life* magazine declared that "Chanel is bringing in more than style—a revolution," and the *New York Times* remarked that "the look of her return collection was just what American women wanted." Hers was the look of modernity, combining simplicity, ease, line, and movement. If the French found it somewhat familiar by then, the American reception gave Chanel a second life.

The French Syndicate of Haute Couture was the association that controlled who was permitted to use the designation of "Haute Couture," and organized protection of those fashion houses from design piracy. Soon after her comeback, Chanel resigned her membership in the organization because of an intense feud on the issue of design copying. The Syndicate had strict rules to restrict copying. Her fellow couturiers went to great lengths to guard against piracy, even requiring steep security deposits from potential buyers before allowing them to view collections. But Chanel had perennially thumbed her nose at such anxieties by releasing drawings of her designs to the press, inviting seamstresses to come sketch and take notes, and openly encouraging the copying of her work. "Let them copy. I am on the side of women and seamstresses not the fashion houses," she proclaimed. "What rigidity it shows, what laziness, what unimaginative taste, what lack of faith in creativity, to be frightened of imitations!"

The 2.55 bag's iconic status through the decades is evident in photographs of its various versions on Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Brigitte Bardot, Jane Fonda, Mia Farrow, and Princess Diana. Chanel is reported to have said both that "Fashion must come up from the streets," and that "Fashion does not exist unless it goes down into the streets—without imitation there is no success." And down into the streets the bag has gone—as counterfeits on Canal

Street. "If people can't afford to buy a real Chanel," she said, "I'd rather they bought a fake Chanel with the idea of Chanel in mind." Her preference was realized with a vengeance.

As the popularity of fake Chanel bags rose in the 1980s, Chanel, Inc. was much less forgiving of copyists than Chanel herself had been. By the mid-1990s, the company was spending millions annually to fight counterfeiting, and has since consistently pursued alleged infringers of Chanel's more than 50 registered trademarks, on handbags and other goods, through litigation, private investigations, and cease-and-desist letters. The company has even successfully sued an Indiana beauty-salon owner named Chanel Jones, to demand that she change the name of her business, Chanel's Salon. Ads in *Women's Wear Daily* have warned against using the Chanel name, in terms like "Chanel-ized," "Chanel-ed," or "Chanel-issime," saying "we are flattered by such tributes to our fame," but "our lawyers positively detest them."

The fame of the Chanel bag, though, is largely attributable to the widespread imitation and accessibility encouraged by its creator. A Chanel bag seen on a woman is more likely assumed a fake than a genuine article. At the same time, the resale market for an original 2.55 bag is very robust; its value has risen more than 200-fold in the past 15 years. The bag is both the paradigmatic original and the archetypal copy—an embodiment not only of authentic and rarified luxury, but also of fakeness, repetition, reproduction, and substitution.

Amidst the proliferation of copies, the bag's duality—going high and low, old and young, prim and louche, class and mass—has made it an ever-present, if ambivalent, receptacle for cultural meaning. In 2005, after decades of permutations of the design, the bag was reissued in near-original form for its 50th anniversary under the name, "Reissue 2.55"—as if to commemorate its origin as always already a rebirth. To mark the occasion, in 2008, the House of Chanel, helmed by Karl Lagerfeld, held an exhibition of art inspired by the bag and contained in

a mobile structure, designed by architect Zaha Hadid, that traveled to Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, London, Moscow, and Paris. The artworks, commissioned from contemporary artists, included a gigantic reproduction of the 2.55 bag, and the soundscape featured Jeanne Moreau talking about the secrets inside a woman's purse. In the blurring of fashion, art, architecture, and advertisement, the commercialization of the 2.55 as aesthetic object was a kind of rejoinder to Chanel's 50-year-old derision of "dressmakers who consider themselves artists."

If the ongoing debate about copying in fashion could have its own trademark, it would likely be the 2.55 bag. Coco Chanel's philosophy favoring copying, expressed in her famous quip that "imitation is the highest form of flattery," has often been invoked to rebuff arguments supporting intellectual property protection for fashion design, currently lacking in the United States. Referring to fashion cycles in which today's objects of desire are doomed to be replaced by tomorrow's, she once said, "The more transient fashion is the more perfect it is." But the Chanel 2.55's power is in its resuscitated longevity, if not immortality—evoking the enduring present of memory, and of forgetting. ♦

Further Reading

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Lisa Chaney (2011) *Coco Chanel: An Intimate Life*. New York: Viking.

C. Scott Hemphill and Jeannie Suk (2009) "The Law, Culture, and Economics of Fashion," *Stanford Law Review*, 61(5), pp. 1147–1199.

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Caroline Palmer (2013) "Visual History: 50 Years of the Chanel Bag on the Street," *Vogue*, 4 December.

