

A remarkable woman named Gabrielle Chanel was born in France in 1883. She would become famous with her nickname, an icon of the fashion world and one of the most influential women of the 20th century. Coco Chanel revolutionized haute couture and is still revered today. Her beginnings were humble and she was taught to sew by nuns at the orphanage where she was placed.

The budding designer's first foray into fashion came when she started to design hats. This led to the opening of her millinery shop in 1910. The career advancement of Coco Chanel was rapid and she opened her first couture house five years later. Women have a lot to thank her for. Not only did she provide an early example of a woman being successful in business, she also was responsible for getting rid of the corset! She sealed a reputation for designing clothes that were simply elegant and stylish but also comfortable.

Early successes in her range swept through high society, eventually filtering down to the woman in the street. Celebrities and aristocracy flocked to buy her creations, including the famous Coco Chanel suit. She also made the little black dress, as it came to be known, an indispensable item in every woman's wardrobe. Remarkably, she held the position of Chief Designer for the label until her death in 1971.

The range is not limited to clothes and Coco Chanel expanded into other lucrative enterprises from an early stage. The world famous Chanel no.5 perfume was launched in 1921 and costume jewelry followed three years later. Men would have to wait for their first eau de toilette until 1981 when Antaeus came on the market. Today, the product range includes clothes, accessories, watches, sunglasses and jewelry. The fashion line includes ready to wear. The company is still a big player on the world stage and is successfully led by German designer, Karl Lagerfeld.

The icon has been portrayed on the Broadway stage and on screen. Katherine Hepburn played her in the 1970 musical production of Coco with words and music by Andre Previn and Alan Jay Lerner. A film called Coco Before Chanel is scheduled for release in 2008 and stars French actress Audrey Tatou. It tells the intriguing story of her life before she achieved fame. Coco Chanel, despite an all consuming career also managed to have a very complicated love life. Her enduring legacy however, is the classic designs she brought to women's fashion.