

Fashioning Flowers

By Amy de la Haye

A rare photographic portrait, taken by Atelier Taponier c.1908, captures a young Chanel wearing a white dress that draws stylistic references from the Grecian chiton and peplos.



The edges of the skirt fabric, that encircle the body, are decorated with self-fabric flowers and the waist is similarly girdled. It is a technique that, drawing upon the modernist mantra ‘truth to materials’, does not rely upon extraneous decoration – such as artificial flowers – and was to characterize much of Chanel’s articulation of fashion flowers from the late 1920s.

This essay identifies which flowers Chanel favored, explores how and when she incorporated them into her fashion designs and own dressed appearance. With the exception of the signature camellia, it is an aspect of her work that has not previously been examined. Here, flowers are explored in relation to Chanel’s biography, classical (Greek and Roman) dress and romantic modernist expression, amidst broader fashion and socio-cultural contexts. During the 1930s flowers were the height of chic and this is when the couturiere worked with and wore them most profusely.

Permanent Botanicals

“You must love flowers and love your trade to succeed: apprenticeship lasts all your life.” Artificial flower maker, Paris, 1910 (1)

When she was about 15 years old, (c.1898) Chanel was given a leghorn hat with an artificial rose above the brim. She hated it, “It looked awful on me. I knew even then what suited me.” (2) Once independent, she defied the vogue for elaborate millinery bedecked with flowers and instead wore simple straw boaters. As a fashion designer, Chanel generally eschewed extraneous ornamentation on apparel, preferring jewelry to decorate. However, contra too many of her design preoccupations and reported speech, she adorned the fashionable body and hair with artificial flowers, in clusters as well as worn singly and in pairs.

Permanent Botanicals was the name given to describe artificial flowers, which originated in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, cultures in which flowers were worshipped and worn. The artificial flower trade emerged in Paris in the 14th

century and had become established by the early 18th: It was in this city that the craft attained its most refined and creative expression. Indeed, the very finest flowers were so true to nature, that their makers supplied artists as well as dressmakers. An early firm, established in rue de Petit Champs in 1727, was the predecessor of Maison Légeron, a family business which since 1880, and over three successive generations, has supplied flowers to the most exclusive fashion houses and brands, including Chanel. Artificial flower making flourished from the mid-19th century, when it became an ancillary to the haute couture houses and elite milliners, until the mid-20th century when hat wearing declined. Chanel also ordered flowers from the atelier of Noémie Fromentin.

Artificial flowers were originally made when the earth no longer yielded flowers. However, whilst available all year, they are mostly worn during the summer months - when those they imitate are still in bloom. Chanel applied them winter and summer, on tailored daywear, including overcoats, as well as dresses and gowns. These strategies served to partly mitigate the advanced modernity of her linear designs. By 1927 a softly tailored, black silk, garçonne suit, teamed with an ivory coloured blouse, is striking for its clean lines and elegant understatement. The sole ornament, placed on one shoulder, comprises a flower dyed to match the tonal contrasts of the ensemble and executed in raw-edged, silk chiffon. Chanel also paired flowers, one that matched the dark material of the suit and the other the lighter tone of the blouse or sweater.

In 1927 Chanel opened a London house, for whose clientele she designed fashionable ceremonial dress for elite social life that revolved around the monarchy and social season. Court presentation dresses for debutantes were conventionally full-length; Chanel's modern variants incorporated the irregular hemline fashionable that year and extended it to form the requisite train. A fulsome artificial flower was stitched to one shoulder.



Chanel's atelier also exploited the sculptural qualities of heavily sequined fabric to form self-fabric dress and hair ornaments.

Artificial flowers are scattered throughout Chanel's collections from the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s. For her spring/summer 1954 'comeback' collection she presented a strapless evening dress, with clusters of three overblown roses placed on the left waist and on each of the three pagoda-like tiers. They appear less often from c. 1960, within Chanel's work and broader international trends.

Cut Outs and Garlands

'...it is the material that makes the dress and not the ornaments that one can add.' Chanel (3)

Chanel made only occasional use of green fabrics and it appears that she considered the space in which nature's most verdant colour would be worn, informing a future biographer that, '...a green dress on a green lawn is perfectly acceptable" (4).

An afternoon ensemble, dating from 1927-1929, comprises an abstract flower printed silk chiffon dress and green wool coat, lined with the same fabric of the dress. The edges of the flower motifs have been cut out and meticulously finished to create an alluring effect of fluttering flowers.



Chanel's delicate silk chiffon dresses from the 1930s incorporate the same detailing. This skillful, labour intensive, technique, served to elevate and transform a pretty printed silk into a supremely beautiful haute couture garment.

A 1929 lace evening dress, printed with a rounded floral design, features cut-outs around the hemline of the peplum (a derivation of the peplos) and skirt. A matching circlet at the neck might be likened to Roman flower garlands that were bestowed for acts of virtue and heroism, at a time when flowers weren't gendered feminine.

Chanel's enamel flower jewellery crafted by Maison Gripoix, such as the camellia earrings and brooch in pink and white, with diamante centres and faux dew drops, might be similarly compared (c. 1937-38).

Dresses and capelets made using solid colour fabrics were also trimmed with self-fabric cut out petals. For Christmas 1929 *Vogue* recommended, 'Chanel's lovely geranium red velveteen frock trimmed with petals is a good choice for the debutante, the material is young and the long and picturesque skirt is still good for dancing.' (5) An aquamarine dress in silk tulle from her 1930 Spring/Summer collection is constructed with elongated, vertical, slightly curvilinear panels on the skirt which creates an impression of a corolla (the petal components of a flower).



Flower motifs can also be seen in the many lace fabrics used, particularly in the 1930s and '50s, mostly in black, but also in white, pale yellow, beige, ivory and flesh tones. Lace flowers were also cut-out and when lace was worn sheer next to the skin, as long sleeves or gloves for instance, the effect created was one of flowers overlaid onto the feminine body.

Wild and Abstracted Flowers

"I asked wholesalers for natural colours, I wanted women to be guided by nature." Chanel (6)

Chanel spent much of her early life occupying rural spaces and later evoked within her collections the wild meadow flowers (and also the wheat) of her youth. The definition of a wild flower is one that grows freely and is resilient, qualities that we might liken to Chanel herself. It is analogy that conflicts with the popular, moralistic and sentimental, language of flowers and much flower symbolism that has classified women in terms of transient beauty, fragility and fertility interpretations that we can find offensive today. Later in her life, Chanel recalled the London home of her 1920s lover the Duke of Westminster, '...with it's hundreds of gardeners who cultivated roses, carnations and orchids all year round. But, she said, "he preferred to pick the first daisies from the fields for me."' (7)

Printed fabrics were used extensively in the 1930s: it was the cheapest form of ornamenting fabric in a time of depression which impacted many couture clients; they were also ideal for the complex cut and styling of 1930s fashions. Chanel used prints with small, scattered designs and large flower patterns. Some depicted realistic flowers, others are abstracted but can often be likened to daisies, poppies or cornflowers. For spring/summer 1937 *Vogue* praised 'Chanel's 'Kate Greenaway innocence done in poppy-printed crepe.' (8) An artificial flower was placed on the right shoulder and there were flower cut outs along the hem.

In 1935 Cecil Beaton photographed, for *Vogue* magazine, the actress and model Mary Taylor wearing a long, full-skirted, black silk dress with sheer, 1830s style, balloon sleeves with a bunch of artificial violets on the bodice. Chanel was well read and she was superstitious: it is highly likely she would have been well-versed in the various cultural and symbolic meanings attributed to flowers, including this five (her lucky number) petal flower. In ancient Rome violets were

associated with death, but by the 19th century had become emblematic of modesty, love and faithfulness; the mauve of their petals associated with spirituality and calm.

Exotic and Cultivated Flowers

'...romantic as rose petals diamonded with dew is Chanel's idea of a really feminine dress to contrast with tailored clothes.' *Vogue*, December 1935 (10)

Chanel actively fed into the 1930s vogue for neo-romantic Victorian revival styles. Having rejected the structure and frou-frou that characterized women's fashions in her youth, she – perhaps unexpectedly - delighted in the 19th century revival that was expressed most eloquently for evening and, as in the Victorian era, flowers were used in abundance. Chanel designed gowns with long, full, skirts that were likened to crinolines, dresses with bustle silhouettes and corsette waists. Full-length lace gloves and upswept hairstyles, decorated with flowers, provided finishing touches. The couturière was photographed wearing these styles as fashion and historical fancy dress, her friend, the neo-romantic artist Christian Bérard (1902-49) illustrated them poetically and Cecil Beaton and Horst captured them photographically.

The flower most closely associated with Chanel is the camellia, which originated in China and is revered for the symmetry of its petal formation, qualities that have fed into modernist interpretations of the designer's fashion aesthetic. The flower is native to east and south east Asia: in Japan it symbolizes the divine and the coming of Spring. In the west, since the 19th century, camellias have been associated with longevity, desire and perfection and universally, like the rose, they symbolize love.

Chanel selected the pure white camellia and reproduced it in silk. She wore both these and the natural flower on her clothes and in her hair, appreciating the latter's absence of fragrance that negated any clash with her own perfume. Chanel adored the smell of flowers: her now legendary cubist flacon for No. 5 houses precious extracts of rose and jasmine, from flowers grown in Grasse. And, here parallels might be drawn with the integration of flowers and modernity in her fashion designs.

Chanel's use of all-white in the 1930s, and the manner in which her fashions were depicted within fashion print media, contributed to the neo-classical revival. For the March 1938 issue *Vogue* commissioned Horst to photograph a model wearing a Chanel gown comprising 'Drifts of white organdie. Hundreds of yards of white baby ribbon frosting to the skirt, elaborating the bodice. A circlet of white camellias for a necklace. White carnations in the hair.'(11). The same season the magazine reported that, 'Chanel binds the head with wide ribbon in which she thrusts hand-spun blossoms, chrysanthemums, camellias...' (12). The leaves of a white fan are made from feathers that would have fluttered, flower-like, in motion. (391)

A striking evening coat c.1927 (182) of black and white ombréd silk crêpe, also offered in black and brilliant green, is emblazoned with brocaded gold metal thread chrysanthemums. Chanel also exploited gold floral brocaded fabrics for skirt and capri-trouser suits in the late 1960s and her final collection of Spring/Summer 1971, included a tunic style dress with a woven design of gold roses.

Conclusion

Examining surviving garments, fashion images and portraits of Chanel through the lens of flowers – for which she is not especially well-known - has been a fascinating process, prompting fresh insights into her use of autobiographic references, design expression and personal style choices. Wild and exotic flowers were manifest within her work in the form of permanent botanicals (artificial flowers); as cut-outs and were depicted in printed and woven textiles. Her use of flowers has been likened to classical dressed appearances and it is suggested that – partly by her engagement with flowers - the couturière strayed from a purist interpretation of modernity to one that might be described as romantic. Chanel, and most notably in the 1930s, fashioned her apparel with flowers; she dressed the hair with natural and artificial blooms; decorated the body with jewellery inspired by flowers and scented it with their essences.

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