





01

A long history of success: the Lanvin fashion house is the oldest in the world. The first creations by the later haute couture salon were simple clothes for children.



JEANNE LANVIN

- 1867 Born in Paris on January 1
- 1889 Opens a hat shop in Paris
- 1908 Adds children's clothes to the business
- 1909 Adds women's clothes to the business
- 1920 Introduces a home decorations line
- 1923 Building of a dye factory in Nanterre and introduction of a sportswear collection
- 1924 Opens fashion boutiques in Cannes and Le Touquet and a perfume shop in Paris
- 1925 Creation of her first perfume, *My Sin*
- 1926 Presents the first men's collection
- 1946 Dies in Paris on July 6

JEANNE LANVIN

If one glances behind the imposing façade of Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 22, in Paris, one will see a world full of history. For this is the Lanvin headquarters, the oldest couture house in the world. Founded by Jeanne Lanvin, who at the outset of her career could not even afford to buy fabric for her creations.

Lanvin's first contact with fashion came early in life—admittedly less out of creative passion than economic hardship. In order to help support her six younger siblings, Lanvin, then only fifteen, took a job with a tailor in the suburbs of Paris. In 1890, at twenty-seven, Lanvin took the daring leap into independence, though on a modest scale. Not far from the splendid head office of today, she rented two rooms in which, for lack of fabric, she at first made only hats. Since the severe children's fashions of the turn of the century did not appeal to her, she tailored the clothing for her young daughter Marguerite herself: tunic dresses designed for easy movement (without tight corsets or starched collars) in colorful patterned cotton fabrics, generally adorned with elaborate smocking. The gentle Marguerite, later known as Marie-Blanche, was to become the Salon Lanvin's first model. When walking on the street, other mothers asked Lanvin and her daughter from where the colorful loose dresses came. The result: a flood of commissions.

Jeanne Lanvin had found her niche—and made use of her opportunity. With the help of a loan of 300 francs and the good will of her fabric suppliers, she launched her fashion lines "Enfant" and "Jeune Fille." The style of this junior haute couture (the first on sale in Paris) varied mainly in the choice of fabrics, the embroidery, and the colors. The silhouette meanwhile remained the same: a close-fitting top with a long, fluffy, flared skirt, set low on the hips. What is known today as a *robe de style* is the exclusive invention of the Parisian fashion pioneer. There soon followed women's haute couture, which beginning in the twenties was among the most distinguished in Paris. Her trademark was softly flowing fabrics, multilayered, elegant cuts, and the bold use of color.

Lanvin prized contact with the artists and the creative youth who inspired her creations. To take full advantage of her first-class embroidery department, Lanvin, always highly efficient in business and organizational matters, launched her first men's collection in 1926. Its focus was on the richly embroidered official uniforms of the Académie Française.

With the death of its founder in 1946 the house experienced a series of changes in designer, including Lanvin's daughter Marie-Blanche (1946), Giorgio Armani (1989, see page 60), and Claude Montana (1990). But only Alber Elbaz (responsible for the women's collections since 2001) and Lucas Ossendrijver (responsible for the men's collections since 2006) were able to bring the label back among the top fashion houses.



Black and white dress by Jeanne Lanvin, 1954

02

MADELEINE VIONNET

The French designer was the first to combine effortless elegance with natural comfort. She was known as the “Queen of the bias cut”—and yet she is now practically forgotten.



MADELEINE VIONNET

- 1876 Born in Chilleurs-aux-Bois, France, on June 22
- 1888 Begins tailoring apprenticeship at age 12
- 1896–1901 Runs a tailoring business in London
- 1891–1906 Cutter and director of couture in the Callot Soeur fashion studio in Paris
- 1907–12 Director of couture at Jacques Doucet
- 1912 Opens her own salon in Paris
- 1923 Invents bias cutting
- 1940 Closes her salon after the outbreak of World War II and retires to a farm in Cély
- 1975 Dies in Paris on March 2

Diana Vreeland, for many years editor in chief of American *Vogue* and known for her acid pen, called her nothing less than the “most important fashion designer of the twentieth century.” Azzedine Alaïa (see page 80) characterizes her as “the source of everything that lives on in our subconscious.” And the legendary fashion journalist Suzy Menkes quite simply finds everything about her “utterly modern.” One thing is certain: among connoisseurs of fashion, Madeleine Vionnet, member of the Paris haute couture scene of the interwar years, is considered the “mother of all couturiers.” For many, Vionnet is hardly more than a name long forgotten. Unjustly, for her artistic influence is still very much in evidence.

Although the grand master of fashion, Paul Poiret (see page 14), claimed exclusive credit for getting rid of the corset, the young Vionnet was actually the first designer to banish the armor-like garment from her creations. At the start of the twentieth century, during her time with the fashion designer Jacques Doucet, Madeleine Vionnet designed feather-light, softly draped clothing distinguished not merely by the absence of a corset. The adoptive Parisian also forged entirely new paths in her handling of fabrics. Vionnet not only experimented with cuts (she was the first to work consistently with triangular inserts, circular cuts, vents, cowl necklines, and halter necks), but also, with her exceptional feel for form and pattern, raised women’s couture to a whole new level. This fashion architect’s most important innovation was the bias cut, in which the fabric is cut and worked, not as usual in parallel lines, but on the bias, at 45 degrees to the direction of the thread. This technique results in flattering clothes that flow softly around the body, following the wearer’s movements and yet seeming to lead a fascinating life of their own. The symbiosis of body and clothes was in fact one of the most important principles in the work of this skilled couturier: “When a woman smiles, her dress must smile with her.” In this context, it is not surprising to learn of her loathing of everything fashionable: “There is something superficial and volatile about the seasonal and elusive whims of fashion which offends my sense of beauty.” And indeed, Vionnet’s love of the Greek ideal of beauty decisively influenced her working methods.

Vionnet was fascinated by classical antiquity and its draperies. Her fashion house was adorned with frescoes showing Greek beauties wearing Vionnet designs. Inspired by the fall of the drapes in ancient Greek robes, she never created her designs as mere two-dimensional sketches on paper. Her “fashion illustrations” were models in simple coarse cloth, displayed on an eighty-centimeter-tall wooden doll. For the realization of her creations, however, she used more sophisticated fabrics such as *crêpe de chine*, *charmeuse*, and silk muslin.

In spite of it all, Madeleine Vionnet, perhaps the most gifted fashion designer of the twentieth century, has found only a supporting role in fashion’s collective memory in comparison to her contemporaries Coco Chanel (see page 18) and Elsa Schiaparelli (see page 24). Perhaps it was merely her reserved manner that ensured we know the clothes but not the woman who designed them. And so her legacy today remains visible—yet nameless.



Crêpe ensemble, ca. 1931

03

PAUL POIRET

This French designer was the first great fashion revolutionary. His greatest achievement was the abolition of the corset.



PAUL POIRET

- 1879 Born in Paris on April 20
- 1898–1903 Trains as a designer with Jacques Doucet and Charles Frederick Worth
- 1903 Opens haute couture salon in Paris
- 1910–11 Textile designs by Raoul Dufy
- 1911 Creates his first perfume, *Rosine*, and sets up a school for arts and crafts with a retail boutique
- 1912 Opens a studio for packaging design
- 1913 Presents his collections in New York
- 1914 Designs a military coat for the French army
- 1921–25 Opens several branches in France
- 1929 Insolvency of the fashion house
- 1944 Dies in Paris on April 28

Every age has its own prophet—someone who knows the secret longings of his or her contemporaries and is capable of converting them into public demand. Paul Poiret, the Parisian fashion designer, was just such a visionary. His modern, corset-free silhouettes broke with everything considered to be fashionable before 1905. The Frenchman is still considered today one of the most innovative designers in the history of haute couture. Almost as legendary is his financial extravagance. He died in 1944 in abject poverty, a genius forgotten by the world.

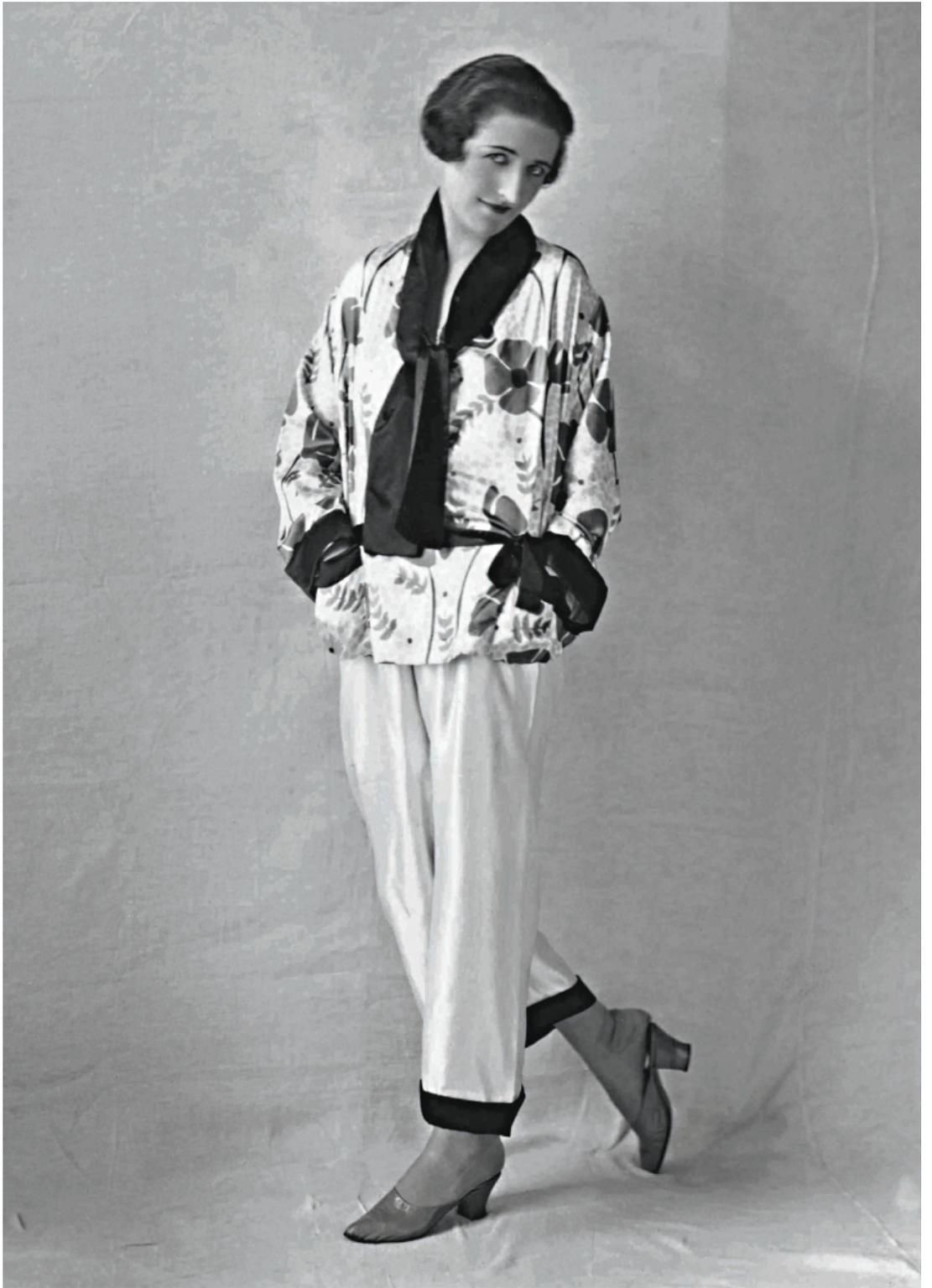
As a teenager, Poiret, the son of a cloth merchant, was already selling fashion drawings and designs to Paris fashion studios. After training with the couturiers Jacques Doucet and Charles Frederick Worth he opened his own salon in 1903. His muse was his young wife, Denise Boulet. At a time when the female body was still divided into protruding bosom and buttocks, Boulet's athletic figure served as a basis for Poiret's loosely hanging garments, draped directly on the body (he couldn't sew), for whose fit neither hoop skirt nor corset was required.

Poiret's most daring designs included pants for women, which till then were only considered acceptable, if at all, for bicycling. His culotte skirts and harem pantaloons led to riots in the streets, sometimes even resulting in the arrest of their wearers. In 1911, the designer took a step backward from the point of view of emancipation. With the design of the hobble skirt, he shackled the legs and thus the freedom of the wearer. Additional creations were "lampshade" tunics, T-shirt dresses, and the robe culotte, a kind of jumpsuit.

Above all, Poiret's designs were inspired by art and culture. When he presented his harem fashions, the stories of Scheherazade had just been translated into French. The Ballets Russes, visiting Paris in 1909, prompted his turbans, coats with kimono sleeves, richly decorated tunics, and flat slippers. His expressive color schemes seem to have been borrowed directly from the group of controversial artists known as the Fauves (the wild beasts).

Like no designer before him, Poiret had an infallible instinct for marketing. He traveled to Russia and the U.S. to present his creations in person (and pick up ideas for new designs). He complemented his fashions with perfume, makeup, nail polish, and interiors. Following the principle of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), Poiret introduced the decorated window display and gave fashion photography, then still in its infancy, an artistic direction. His legendary Oriental banquets (at one of which half-naked, dusky waiters served 900 liters of champagne to 300 guests) are considered among the first modern PR stunts.

Poiret's style, derived from Art Deco, was considered groundbreaking until the end of World War I. After that, the eccentric designer increasingly began to lose his prosperous clientele to other ambitious designers, above all Jean Patou and Coco Chanel (see page 18). In 1925, with one last grand appearance, he sealed his own demise. Deep in debt, he rented three luxurious ships to present his collection at the Paris Arts Décoratifs show. Despite the expense, his competitors could not be fought off. In 1926 he left the fashion house he had founded, and in 1929 his wife and muse finally left him. Fifteen years later Poiret died a *clochard*, a homeless vagrant, in the occupied Paris of World War II.



Ensemble consisting of softly draped jacket and pants, 1925

04

NINA RICCI

This French-Italian designer combined feminine romanticism with discreet sensuality.



NINA RICCI

- 1883 Born in Turin on January 14
- 1895 Begins an apprenticeship in couture in Paris
- 1908–28 Fashion designer for the house of Raffin
- 1932 Founds her own fashion house in Paris with son Robert as business manager
- 1945 Takes part in a fashion show at the Louvre in Paris
- 1946 Robert Ricci creates the first perfume for the business, *L'Air du Temps*
- 1954 Retires as chief designer
- 1970 Dies in Paris on November 30

To open an haute couture salon during a global economic crisis circa 1932 demanded two qualities above all: courage and experience. Nina Ricci had both. Her courage was steeled by son Robert, whose firm belief in his mother's skills persuaded Ricci to strike out on her own. As for experience, she had more than thirty years of it.

Ricci was born in Turin in 1883 and named Maria—Nina was her nickname. As a child she moved with her family to Florence, and as a teenager to Paris, where she entered into an apprenticeship as a seamstress. At only eighteen years of age she was promoted to manager of the salon, and at twenty-two she was given sole responsibility as designer. In 1908 Nina Ricci moved to a position as designer at the couture house of Raffin, whose business partner she was later to become. Her big leap followed in 1932, when at over fifty years of age she became independent, opening the House of Nina Ricci together with her son (who instigated the undertaking). The roles in this family business were clearly allocated according to talent: Robert, with his business acumen, took care of finances, and Nina, with her technical expertise and impeccable taste, was in charge of the style of the haute couture house.

Without the need for a preliminary sketch, like Madeleine Vionnet (see page 12) and Paul Poiret (see page 14), Nina Ricci worked with a light fabric placed directly on the body of the living model, after which the paper pattern was created. At a time when Elsa Schiaparelli (see page 24) was causing a scandal with her artistic extravagance, and Coco Chanel (see page 18) was transforming fashion with eye-popping sophistication, Nina Ricci's creations were one thing above all: exceptionally delightful. Not only for the wearer (the highest quality material and flawless craftsmanship were a must), but also and above all for the observer. Ricci's ensembles achieved a perfect harmony between girlish romanticism and discreet sensuality. Her masterly treatment of patterns remains legendary today (Ricci was even able to use checkered fabric on a bias cut). In other words, exactly the right thing for the crisis-shaken ladies of the Parisian upper classes.

Soon the house became a worldwide symbol of Parisian taste. Ricci, who had begun in 1932 with forty seamstresses, was able to increase that number tenfold in only five years. Thanks to Robert's skilful management, the house even survived the turmoil of World War II unscathed. And it was he who created the perfume *L'Air du Temps*, whose production marked the beginning of his partnership with the Art Deco artist Marc Lalique.

In 1954, Nina Ricci retired as chief designer at age seventy. On her death in 1970, the control of the house was first taken over by the designer Jules-François Crahay, who had already inherited the creative legacy of the *couturière*. After several changes of designer, since 2009 Peter Copping (formerly at Louis Vuitton) has been responsible for the feminine, sophisticated image of the fashion house.



Beaded dress, 1951

05

GABRIELLE “COCO” CHANEL

She came from nowhere and died an icon. The designs of this influential couturier permanently changed the look of the modern woman.



GABRIELLE “COCO” CHANEL

- 1883 Born in Saumur, France, on August 19 as Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel
- 1910 Opens a milliner’s studio in Paris
- 1911 Opens her first fashion house in Paris
- 1921 Launch of the perfume *Chanel No. 5*
- 1924 Presents first costume jewelry
- 1926 Creation of the “little black dress”
- 1939 Closes her fashion house
- 1954 Re-opens business and makes a comeback with the tweed suit
- 1971 Dies in Paris on January 10

Throughout her life she was always called “Mademoiselle,” but in reality she was the grande dame of fashion. Gabrielle Chanel, known as Coco, invented the “little black dress,” quilted handbags, the tweed suit, and, not least, the legendary logo consisting of an interlocking double-C. Her unpretentiously luxurious designs perfectly suited the female form, and her collections the spirit of a new generation.

Born in 1883 in impoverished circumstances, she grew up in the orphanage of a convent and rose in record time from a modest textile shopgirl and occasional chanteuse to a couture legend. With her numerous lovers, Chanel, who never married, had not only procured the starting capital for her later fashion empire, but above all learned through observation everything she needed for success in business: vision, discipline, strategic skill, and perseverance. She was the embodiment of the modern career woman long before they populated the metropolises of the world. And since she was her own favorite model, she actually designed for women who did not as yet exist.

With Chanel, women’s liberation was consistently turned upside down: in 1910 she set herself up as a milliner in a lover’s bachelor apartment, where she radically reworked ready-made hats of the Belle Époque. Three years later she opened a fashion salon in Deauville, another in Biarritz in 1915, and finally, in 1919, one on the Rue Cambon in Paris, still the headquarters of the house of Chanel.

For Chanel, elegance meant nothing without comfort and simplicity. She therefore created her fashions against prevailing trends, making suits with large, unladylike patch pockets whose loose fit was matched only by the material used: soft cotton jersey, previously used only in the manufacture of men’s underwear. She shortened the hems of skirts to a sensational length just below the knee, abandoned frills and flounces, and made costume jewelry fashionable. No corset was needed for her sailor blouses, lightweight sweaters, ladies’ pants, and youthful drop-waist tunic dresses. Even if she was not the first to renounce the constricting garment—Madeleine Vionnet (see page 12) and Paul Poiret (see page 14) had previously done so—it was she who ultimately banned the corset from the wardrobes of the world. As the attractive archetype of the modern woman, her approach to presenting her style to a society eager for change was highly personal. Chanel was not simply about fashion. Chanel was about a new way of life.

Like most of the haute couture houses, Chanel closed her doors during World War II. In 1954, at the age of seventy-one, out of boredom and blind rage, she finally dared to make her comeback. With his New Look, Christian Dior had revived an image of women that Coco Chanel thought she had banished decades earlier. Her weapons in the rekindled battle were tweed suits, quilted bags, and the famous “little black dress”—all bestsellers, which her successor Karl Lagerfeld (see page 70) consistently reinterpreted. Up to the present day, Chanel’s philosophy has not lost even the slightest bit of its modernity.



Coco Chanel wearing one of her designs, 1937