

Art Basel-timed exhibition of 1962 photos unearths the tough woman behind the house of Chanel

BY KATHRYN WEXLER

December 3, 2008

There sits Coco Chanel – fashion’s grandest dame -- scrutinizing a model as she dresses. A cigarette dangles from her narrow lips, her mouth is bent into a distracted frown, eyes squint through the smoky haze. Dressmakers’ scissors hang from a ribbon around her neck. The Chanel of these newly released photos on display at the SeaFair yacht at the Miami Beach Marina is more hardened seamstress than fashion diva. Snapped over three weeks in 1962 by Douglas Kirkland, a young photographer on assignment for Look Magazine, the exhibit presented by New York’s Westwood Gallery has nothing of the lacquered Chanel -- by Horst or Man Ray, say -- to which we are most accustomed. Here, Mademoiselle slouches beside a client. Eyes on the ground, her whippet-like frame makes its unheralded way down rue Cambon. Her occasional smile holds a certain charm to be sure, but it is also a jarring reminder as to why we love our Botox and our fillers. Most interestingly, this Chanel works and works, not all of it in the twinkling lights of a Chanel No. 5 commercial. One can only imagine the septuagenarian pulling nicotine-fueled all-nighters and grousing about the help. All of which might have amounted to a big, so what?

Except that more than any other fashion label in the world, the house of Coco Chanel has come to epitomize good taste, high class, social discretion. Against this magic woven into every Chanel tweed jacket, Kirkland’s Chanel is markedly human, gnarled hands and all.

Chanel’s style was transformative. She coaxed women into chopping off their hair and tossing out their corsets. She turned menswear into women’s wear, creating a brand of femininity that had no place for weighty fabrics or bustles. Her vision was brilliantly modern, truly revolutionary. Her designs encouraged a new lifestyle, one of elegant ease and verve over proper constriction and passivity.

Kirkland, in the introduction to his accompanying book, *Coco Chanel: Three Weeks, 1962* (Glitterati, \$50), is mostly gentle with his subject. He writes about her "beauty and her flair," the respect she earned and how, at age 79, her legs were "those of a young woman." But he also mentions the "growing tension everywhere in the workrooms," before her fashion shows, her rumored stinginess and "questionable behavior" during the war, a reference to her affair with a German officer (and the possibility that she spied for the Nazis, at dear cost to her reputation).

Chanel staged a successful comeback in 1954 after a 15-year hiatus from fashion. But as she aged, so did her devotees. A Chanel ensemble became something your mother and maybe her mother wore, if they were ladies who lunched.

German eccentric Karl Lagerfeld -- who has reportedly ordered copies of all of Kirkland’s photos -- put an end to the line’s fustiness when he took over in 1982. Tellingly, Hollywood stars now wear Chanel as often as Boston Brahmins.

Chanel’s original designs are more than a touchstone of the current collections; they are the very look of Chanel today. The layered pearls, two-toned shoes, quilted purses and sharply shaped suits still have a hold on us, hinting at a certain history, a rarefied world.

The mythology of The House of Chanel has two dimensions -- illustrious and elite. Kirkland’s photos show the woman in there. Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel was born poor, and by age 12 had landed in an orphanage run by nuns, who taught her sewing as a trade. She owed her first fortunes to the lovers who kept her in cash. She was, in Kirkland’s memory, a chain-smoker, gossip monger, dogged money-maker. These facts have no bearing, of course, on her status as a sartorial genius and arguably the most influential fashion designer of the 20th century. Nor do they diminish how, nearly 100 years after she opened her atelier, her style reverberates worldwide.

Chanel died in 1971, at her residence at the Ritz. She was 87. She was still working.

Douglas Kirkland’s photographs of Coco Chanel, taken over three weeks in 1962, are on exhibit during the Art Basel week. DOUGLAS KIRKLAND / WESTWOOD GALLERY, NYC