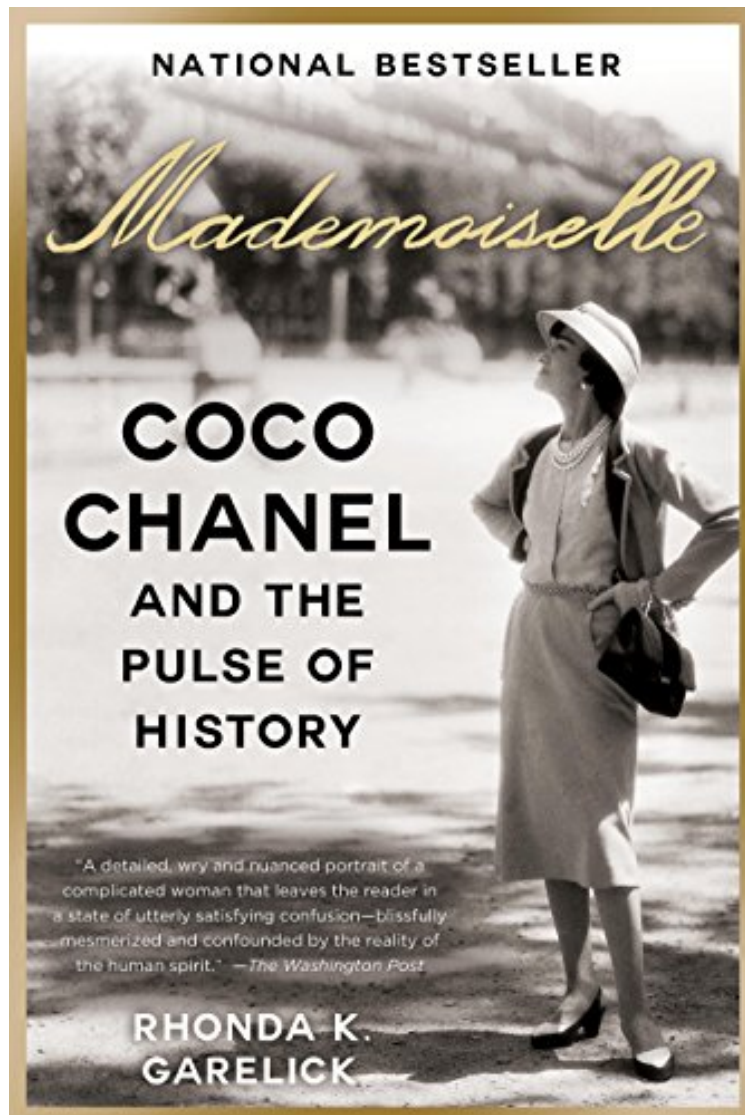


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## Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel and the Pulse of History

Rhonda K. Garelick

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**Rhonda K. Garelick : Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel and the Pulse of History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel and the Pulse of History:

59 of 60 people found the following review helpful. Unexpectedly, a page-turner!By JB NoletI thought I knew this story; as they say, 'I saw the movie...' But I didn't know the half of it. Reading on, I found myself staying up later and later, dying to know what Coco would do next. I was particularly struck by Garelick's meticulous research -- her apt contextualizing of historical events and convincing use of new information about Gabrielle Chanel's friends, to show how they affected the haute-couture designer's constantly-evolving, increasingly mercurial persona. The last third of the book makes for disturbing reading. We watch Chanel as her dynamic charisma becomes manic grandiosity and she

slips into sadistic madness without, apparently, losing her innate creative genius. She may not have been lovable (though many loved her) but Coco Chanel is an utterly unforgettable character -- the perfect heroine for a vampire movie. Without revealing any of the book's dramatic surprises, let me particularly recommend the passage where she spends several hours alone with the corpse of her ambivalently-loved friend Misia Natanson-Edwards-Sert. One thought -- I read the book on my paper-white Kindle, which cannot do justice to its many illustrations. The images are important to understanding the character, who in her own way was a visual artist. If you can, buy the physical book. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Not what I was looking for By Glenda The writer wrote this book as more of an expose than an autobiography. She also spent as much space (more if you add them together) on her lovers as she wrote about Chanel. Sometimes I wondered who's life I was reading about. The book ended at around 64% and started epilogue, biography etc. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. street smart, and whatever was propitious at the moment By GWTW46 If one hasn't read every other book written on Chanel, this is the one. Forget the rest. This one really explains her with the inclusion of her activities during WWII. She was a woman who lived by her wits, street smart, and whatever was propitious at the moment. Other books have covered the influence of the men in her life on her designs, but this give an in depth view of why she was worldly sophisticated and so naive about the people she emulated.

NATIONAL BESTSELLER Certain lives are at once so exceptional, and yet so in step with their historical moments, that they illuminate cultural forces far beyond the scope of a single person. Such is the case with Coco Chanel, whose life offers one of the most fascinating tales of the twentieth century—throwing into dramatic relief an era of war, fashion, ardent nationalism, and earth-shaking change—here brilliantly treated, for the first time, with wide-ranging and incisive historical scrutiny. Coco Chanel transformed forever the way women dressed. Her influence remains so pervasive that to this day we can see her afterimage a dozen times while just walking down a single street: in all the little black dresses, flat shoes, costume jewelry, cardigan sweaters, and tortoiseshell eyeglasses on women of every age and background. A bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume is sold every three seconds. Arguably, no other individual has had a deeper impact on the visual aesthetic of the world. But how did a poor orphan become a global icon of both luxury and everyday style? How did she develop such vast, undying influence? And what does our ongoing love of all things Chanel tell us about ourselves? These are the mysteries that Rhonda K. Garelick unravels in *Mademoiselle*. Raised in rural poverty and orphaned early, the young Chanel supported herself as best she could. Then, as an uneducated nineteen-year-old cafe singer, she attracted the attention of a wealthy and powerful admirer and parlayed his support into her own hat design business. For the rest of Chanel's life, the professional, personal, and political were interwoven; her lovers included diplomat Boy Capel; composer Igor Stravinsky; Romanov heir Grand Duke Dmitri; Hugh Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster; poet Pierre Reverdy; a Nazi officer; and several women as well. For all that, she was profoundly alone, her romantic life relentlessly plagued by abandonment and tragedy. Chanel's ambitions and accomplishments were unparalleled. Her hat shop evolved into a clothing empire. She became a noted theatrical and film costume designer, collaborating with the likes of Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and Luchino Visconti. The genius of Coco Chanel, Garelick shows, lay in the way she absorbed the zeitgeist, reflecting it back to the world in her designs and in what Garelick calls "wearable personality"—the irresistible and contagious style infused with both world history and Chanel's nearly unbelievable life saga. By age forty, Chanel had become a multimillionaire and a household name, and her Chanel Corporation is still the highest-earning privately owned luxury goods manufacturer in the world. In *Mademoiselle*, Garelick delivers the most probing, well-researched, and insightful biography to date on this seemingly familiar but endlessly surprising figure—a work that is truly both a heady intellectual study and a literary page-turner. Praise for *Mademoiselle* "A detailed, wry and nuanced portrait of a complicated woman that leaves the reader in a state of utterly satisfying confusion—blissfully mesmerized and confounded by the reality of the human spirit." —The Washington Post "Writing an exhaustive biography of Chanel is a challenge comparable to racing a four-horse chariot. . . . This makes the assured confidence with which Garelick tells her story all the more remarkable." —The New York Review of Books "Broadly focused and beautifully written." —The Wall Street Journal From the Hardcover edition.

"A detailed, wry and nuanced portrait of a complicated woman that leaves the reader in a state of utterly satisfying confusion—blissfully mesmerized and confounded by the reality of the human spirit." —The Washington Post "Writing an exhaustive biography of Chanel is a challenge comparable to racing a four-horse chariot. . . . This makes the assured confidence with which [Rhonda K.] Garelick tells her story all the more remarkable." —The New York Review of Books "This monumental biography . . . anchors Chanel's remarkable story within larger cultural, social, and political forces." —Library Journal (starred review) "Broadly focused and beautifully written." —The Wall Street Journal "Garelick can convincingly, and engagingly, illuminate a succession of parallels between fashion and politics." —The New York Times Book Review "A true coup de grace . . . a vital entry in the extensive library of Chanel

scholarship. — Yale Alumni Magazine — This is the definitive biography of Chanel. It is also the life of one of the most successful world conquerors who has ever imposed her will on a vast subject population. It is gripping, astute, and elegantly written. And if it leaves you leery of ever wearing a Chanel jacket, or carrying a Chanel bag, you will understand where the desire for it came from. — Judith Thurman, author of the National Book Award-winning *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* — In this magisterial, affecting portrait, Rhonda K. Garelick traces Chanel's history as a woman and as a designer and in doing so illuminates the troubling contradictions of twentieth-century Europe. Her book is a masterwork of original research and psychological nuance, remarkable in combining insight into her subject with insight into modernity entire. It's a Jamesian portrait of the curious mix of sadness and sadism that loneliness can hatch. It is also a deeply moving exploration of a damaged, unhappy genius striving vainly for an elusive wholeness, and, by sheer force of will and vision, remaking the world's notion of elegance in her own image. — Andrew Solomon, author of the National Book Award-winning *The Noonday Demon* — A stylish book about style, based on meticulous research and a deep understanding of French culture. Rhonda Garelick tells this extraordinary story with just the right blend of sympathy and judgment, in an utterly readable account. — Peter Brooks, author of *Reading for the Plot* and *Henry James Goes to Paris* — Garelick expertly illuminates the forces that created one of the world's most iconic brands. *Mademoiselle* is a fascinating account of the grit as well as the glamour behind the rise of Coco Chanel. — Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana* and *A World on Fire* — Garelick explores the world of Coco Chanel in intimate and intricate detail, revealing the life and times of the woman she astutely describes as understanding how the right labels can govern desire. This is a must-have book for followers of fashion and social history devotees alike. — Lindy Woodhead, author of *War Paint* and *Shopping, Seduction Mr. Selfridge* — Definitive . . . Cultural biographer Garelick . . . offers a fine psychological portrait of the poor orphaned girl [who] succeeded smashing on her own terms. — Kirkus — Delivers a probing, well-researched and insightful biography of this familiar but endlessly surprising figure. — Publishers Weekly

About the Author Rhonda K. Garelick writes on fashion, performance, art, and cultural politics. Her books include *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siecle*, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, and, as co-editor, *Fabulous Harlequin: ORLAN and the Patchwork Self*. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Newsday*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as in numerous journals and museum catalogs in the United States and Europe. She is a Guggenheim fellow and has also received awards from the Getty Research Institute, the Dedalus Foundation, the American Association of University Women, the Whiting Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Garelick received her B.A. and Ph.D. in comparative literature and French from Yale University.

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Chapter One

Early Life

If there's one thing that interests no one, it's someone's life. If I wrote a book about my life, I would begin with today, with tomorrow. Why begin with childhood? Why youth? One should first offer an opinion about the era in which one is living — that's more logical, newer, and more amusing. — Coco Chanel

Gabrielle Chanel turned her existence into a glamorous, cinematic soap opera that garnered near-constant chronicling by the press, but she always refused to offer concrete details of her earliest years. Instead, she chose to dispense occasional tidbits of truth, hidden amid the ever-changing fantasies she used to embellish the grim reality of her childhood and, perhaps, to soften for herself the legacy of a youth beset by poverty, tragic loss, and wounding betrayals by those closest to her. Ferociously determined till the very end to obscure her true origins, Chanel lived in the present tense. Such insistence upon the "now" upon the "era in which one is living" as she put it, may help account for the saving grace of her life: her startling ability to interpret the moment, to create relevant fashion for most of sixty years. Perhaps if Chanel had had a more accepting relationship to her own nineteenth-century rural childhood, she would never have become a standard-bearer for twentieth-century urban womanhood. But Chanel's modernist revolution and its ongoing power have their roots in that long-buried childhood of hers, in the flinty soil of France's Cévennes region where she was born, in her hardscrabble, peasant ancestors, and in the two major institutions that left their aesthetic, moral, and psychological stamp on her: the Roman Catholic Church and the military.

Chanel liked to tell people that she was a native Auvergnat, born in the south central region of Auvergne, in France's Massif Central — a gorgeous, still heavily rural area known for its agriculture, its myriad volcanoes — all extinct for thousands of years — and its highly mineralized water, reputed to hold curative properties. It was a slight untruth. Although Auvergne played a significant role in Chanel's life, and although her tempestuous nature often evoked comparisons with those many volcanoes, Gabrielle Chanel was actually born far from Auvergne's rugged beauty, in the northwest Loire Valley town of Saumur. The small lie was telling, though. Auvergne was, for generations, home to the Chanel family — the region where her father, Albert Chanel, was born, the region where her grandparents eventually settled. Auvergne was also the place she was conceived. Claiming Auvergne as her birthplace, Chanel tried to knit herself a bit more tightly into her family history, into the clan that, for the most part, had severed its ties to her when she was a child. She later reciprocated the gesture. In 1883, the year of Gabrielle's birth, the Chanel family's circumstances were

bleak. Judged against even the modest standards of their rural peasant world, Gabrielle's parents, Albert Chanel and Jeanne Devolle, began their life together at a great disadvantage. At twenty-eight, Albert had little in the way of steady employment. With no trade, no particular skills, and owning almost nothing, he occupied one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder of nineteenth-century France: Like his father before him, he was an itinerant peddler. But unlike his father, Albert did not restrict his travels to the family's native area of southern France. Bolder, more adventurous, and quite comfortable out on his own, he peddled far and wide, moving north and west, riding a horse-drawn cart filled with small notions and household wares. He gained his meager livelihood selling merchandise to the housewives who gathered early in village squares on market days. Albert was well suited to his profession. While he may have been a gambler, a heavy drinker, and barely literate, he was also very charming. "The stands of itinerant peddlers were above all a show," as historian Eugen Weber has written, and Albert was a natural showman. An easy talker, quick with a joke or a deft compliment, he excelled at the kind of patter that could clinch a sale. It didn't hurt, either, that he was extremely handsome. Solidly built, with a glowing tan complexion, white teeth, a boyish snub nose, thick shiny black hair, and glittering dark eyes (Gabrielle resembled him strikingly), Albert Chanel knew just how attractive he was to women. By twenty-eight, he had evolved into an accomplished seducer. What chance could a nineteen-year-old orphan girl ever have had against the onslaught of Chanel's sex appeal? In 1881, Jeanne Devolle lived with her twenty-one-year-old brother, Marin, a carpenter whom—in the absence of their parents—provided for his sister as well as he could. Vagabonding through the Auvergne town of Courpière, Albert befriended Marin and, as was his wont, sweet-talked the young man into renting him a room in the Devolle household for only a few francs. Once ensconced, it took him no time to set his sights on his host's pretty and lonely younger sister, a girl who wore her heavy, glossy hair in braids wound around her head. It was an easy conquest. Jeanne fell madly and instantly in love, and in a flash, she was pregnant. Just as quickly, Albert was gone, packing up and fleeing the menace of domestic shackles. It was the oldest story in the world, but Albert hadn't counted on the tenacity of Jeanne's family. At first, a desperate Jeanne sought refuge with one of her uncles on her mother's side, Augustin Chardon, but when he discovered her condition he grew enraged and threw her out of the house. Marin intervened to help his sister, and after a time, their uncle took pity on the girl. The family resolved to track down the elusive Albert Chanel and hold him accountable. Saving Jeanne's honor became a cause célèbre. Soon another uncle got involved, and then even the mayor of Courpière joined in the mission. With the mayor's help, their little coalition succeeded in locating Albert's parents, Henri and Virginie, and Angelina Chanel, who had settled in the nearby town of Clermont-Ferrand, close to Vichy. Although still peddlers, Henri and Angelina had entered semiretirement and restricted their selling to the town where they lived. The Devolle contingent arrived at the modest home of Monsieur and Madame Chanel and confronted the couple with news of Jeanne's pregnancy, along with a serious ultimatum: If the Chanels refused to divulge the whereabouts of their son or aid in finding him, Jeanne's family intended to pursue legal action. Seducing and abandoning a woman counted as a crime, and if convicted, Albert risked deportation to a forced labor camp. Such a turn of events could hardly have surprised Albert's parents; shotgun weddings were a family tradition. Thirty years prior, the young Henri—then a laborer on a silkworm farm—had also seduced and impregnated a local teenaged girl, sixteen-year-old Virginie, Angelina's grandmother. Then, too, outraged family members had intervened to coerce the perpetrator into marriage, after which the couple commenced their nomadic life as peddlers—a life made all the more exhausting and precarious by the nineteen children Virginie and Angelina would eventually bear. Henri and Virginie managed to scare up their wayward son, who had drifted to the eastern Rhone Valley town of Aubenas, where he was living in a room above a local cabaret. It made sense that Albert Chanel, who would always aspire toward a finer life, had settled into quarters above a cabaret; it evoked an earlier, far more prosperous time for his family. Albert's grandfather, Joseph Chanel, had once owned a cabaret in the town of Pontails, France, and the profession of cabaretier had, for a time, afforded Joseph a level of security and social stature rarely experienced by the Chanel family. "My father always wished for a larger life," Chanel told Louise de Vilmorin. Later Albert would spin increasingly elaborate tales about fictional business ventures, and tell people that he, like his grandfather, owned a cabaret, or that he had bought a vineyard and become a wine merchant. But there was no hiding from reality when his parents and the Devolle-Chardon family confronted him with Jeanne's pregnancy, now in its ninth month. Under duress, Albert agreed to recognize his child, but obstinately refused to marry Jeanne. Bitter quarrels ensued, but the young man held his ground. He found nothing so distasteful as the prospect of marriage. In the end, Albert wheedled his way into an odd arrangement that bespoke his penchant for dissembling: He would agree to pretend to be married to Jeanne, a charade that wound up involving even his boss, the cabaret owner, who played along and signed his name as a witness on the couple's faux marriage certificate. This pretend marriage perpetuated another family custom, too: Chanel women resigning themselves to whatever commitment they could squeeze out of their shiftless men. Barely twenty years old, penniless, dishonored, and about to be a mother, Jeanne had little choice but to enter into this nonmarriage. Despite everything, she loved Albert with all the passion of an inexperienced young girl. Playing house with him and their new baby seemed like a good-

shy;enough consolation prizemdash;shy;far better than losing her handsome boyfriend forever to a far-shy;off labor camp. Baby Julia Chanel was born just days after her parentsrsquo; play-shy;acted wedding, and not long after that, Albert prepared to take to the road againmdash;shy;alone. Jeanne, however, would have none of it. Knowing she could not survive on her own and equally sure she could not returnmdash;shy;disgraced anewmdash;shy;to her uncles in Courpiegrave;re, she packed up her infant daughter and hit the road right alongside Albert, clinging to him, all pride cast aside. It was to be the tableau that defined the rest of her brief life. The little family wended its way up to Saumur in the Loire Valley, where they lived in a single room in a house occupying a dark side street lined with commercial shops. Saumur owed its bustle and hum to the division of the French cavalry garrisoned there. These soldiers cut elegant figures in their fitted, gold-shy;buttoned riding jackets, and were so important to the town that Saumurmdash;shy;unlike any other French city at the timemdash;shy;kept its stores open late into the night during the week to accommodate the schedules of military men who had no wives to take care of errands for them. Although Jeanne had managed to travel to Saumur hanging on to Albertrsquo;s coattails, she found herself largely alone upon their arrival. Albert had returned to peddling at regional markets and fairs, disappearing for long intervals. Now he was selling womenrsquo;s undergarments and flannels, which, of course, required many flirtatious encounters with the local ladies. Left to provide for their infant alone, Jeanne found work as a kitchen maid and laundress, scraping stale food off dishes, carrying heavy piles of dirty sheets, bending over tin washtubs, scrubbing. Such workmdash;shy;distasteful and exhausting for anyone would have proved especially taxing for Jeanne who, in addition to having to tote a three-shy;month-shy;old everywhere with her, was also pregnant once more. Early happiness handicaps people. I do not regret having been profoundly unhappy.mdash;shy;Coco Chanel

On August 19, 1883, Jeanne went into labor and, with Albert nowhere to be found, managed somehow to make her way to the local Catholic charity hospital, run by the Soeurs de la Providence. With no family or friends present, Jeanne gave birth to her second child, another girl. Hospital employees served as the witnesses on the birth certificate, but since none could read or write, they simply made their mark on the official documents. Two days later, the local vicar baptized the baby in the hospital chapel. Two local Good Samaritans, a man named Moiuml;se Lion and a woman known as the Widow Christenet, were pressed into service as godparents of convenience. Convenience, too, dictated the childrsquo;s name: Jeanne was too spent to think, so the nuns stepped in and christened the baby Gabriellemdash;shy;meaning ldquo;God is my mightrdquo; in Hebrew. Only Lion could read or write at all, and with Albert missing and Jeanne unable to leave her hospital bed, no one corrected the small mistake on the baptismal certificate, which announced the birth of Gabrielle Chasnelmdash;shy;a misspelling of the last name that threw a near-shy;permanent obstacle into the path of this babyrsquo;s many future biographers. Years later, Gabrielle added another alteration to her original name, claiming that her baptismal certificate read ldquo;Gabrielle Bonheur [Happiness] Chanel.rdqquo; The nuns, she said, had gifted her with this middle name as a good-shy;luck charm. ldquo;Happinessrdquo; appears nowhere on those early documents. Chanelrsquo;s invention of this unusual middle name, and her attributing it to the intervention of nuns, suggest an attempt on her part to offer her child self, ex post facto, a shred of the tender concern and warm parental regard so absent in the circumstances of her actual birth. ldquo;The child I was remains with me today.???.?I have satisfied her needs,rdquo; Chanel told Louise de Vilmorin. Such would be the pattern for the first decade of Gabriellersquo;s life. Albert roved the countryside leaving Jeanne behind to care for their expanding brood. When she became pregnant for the third time, in 1884, Albert finally agreed to legitimize their union, marrying her on November 17, 1884, in Courpiegrave;re. The nicety of a marriage certificate in no way altered their relationship, although it did provide a modest dowry for Albert from the Devolle family, in the sum of about 5,000 francs, or about \$20,000 in todayrsquo;s dollars. In 1885, Jeanne gave birth to her third child and first son, Alphonsemdash;shy;once more in the charity ward, once more without Albert. This scenario, too, was part of a Chanel tradition. Virginie-shy;Angelina had given birth to Albert all alone in a charity ward, and her sisters-shy;in-shy;law had endured similar fates repeatedly. Henrirrsquo;s brothers, the Chanel boys, were well known for siring large families, but generally evinced little concern for either their many children or the exhausted women who bore them. That year, the family made its home in the town of Issoire, in Auvergne, where Albert set up shop at the local markets. They rarely stayed in one place long, and sometimes moved even from street to street within a single town. Albert preferred to station the family on the outskirts of cities, where rents were lower and he had easy access to roads. Typically Jeanne would follow Albert to the fairs, carting her children with her. The toddlers ran about with little supervision. The Chanel children did not attend school, but played together in and around the artisansrsquo; shops amid which they usually livedmdash;shy;tallow candlemakers, potters, and rope makers who wove skeins of hemp. Via the easy osmosis of childhood observation, Coco absorbed from these neighbors a love and knowledge of craftsmanshipmdash;shy;an almost unconscious, physical understanding of how the human hand lends shape and purpose to raw materials. Although largely absent and of no real help at home, Albert Chanel made his presence felt. Coco remembered her father as elusive but affectionatemdash;shy;a man who would come in, kiss her on the top of her head, and leave again, the clip-shy;clop of his horsersquo;s hooves growing fainter outside the door. She recalled his great sensitivity to smells and his love of cleanliness, which made him something of an anomaly for his class and era. Not only was clean water scarce at the time; bathing itself tended to be viewed as something of a health hazard. Albert, though, according to his daughter,

was ahead of his time in matters of hygiene, insisting, for example, that the children's hair be washed regularly with Savon de Marseilles, the traditional French soap made of Mediterranean seawater mixed with olive oil. Coco would develop a similar passion for freshness, and her preference for crisp, clean scents over heavy fragrances led to her later revolution of the perfume industry.