



Coco Chanel photographed
by Boris Lounitzki / Roger-
Viollet in Paris, 1937



*From iconic emblem to high-tech skincare active,
Gabrielle Chanel's signature fleur is now inspiring a
new heritage in sustainability*

Words by FIONA EMBLETON

Since the beginning of time, the rose has been a muse for famous artists. But ever the maverick, Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel was drawn to the camellia, an androgynous bloom with minimalist lines that mirrored her sartorial style. Originating in eastern and southern Asia, camellia is thornless, scentless and characterised by voluptuous round geometric blooms in shades of white, pink, red or yellow. That camellia lacks fragrance simply meant it never competed with the couturier's beloved Chanel No 5 Eau de Parfum.

Wearing a single white camellia like a dazzling jewel became a 'Coco-ism' – whether worn against black or pinned to the lapel of a tweed suit, a flourish famously captured in a photograph with Salvador Dali in 1937. The camellia went on to become Chanel's most recognisable leitmotif, immortalised in everything from high jewellery to embellishments on evening gowns, shoes and bags. Crystal camellia even bloomed in the chandelier and Coromandel folding screens in her private apartment on Paris' Rue Cambon.

But why would a single flower leave such an indelible mark on Chanel? Some say it all began with the bouquets of camellias presented to her by Captain Arthur Edward "Boy" Capel during their courtship. Others claim she fell in love with the bloom after reading Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias*, in which the heroine always wore a white camellia. Or perhaps Chanel, who popularised trousers for women, simply co-opted the camellia because it was worn as a man's boutonniere.

Whatever the reason, the camellia has stood the test of time. Creative director Karl Lagerfeld carried on the tradition from the moment he entered Chanel's headquarters in 1983. Likewise, Virginie Viard's tenure has paid homage to the flower on both an intimate and grand scale – from camellia-engraved buttons to an A/W20 runway famously transformed into gently curved white tiers.

Now the camellia is in the spotlight once again – this time as the focus of a sweeping research project and the key ingredient in Chanel's most groundbreaking skincare line to date. ➤