



The Cultural Significance and Impact of Virginie Viard as Creative Director at Chanel.



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BUF 3310: Contemporary Designers And Luxury Markets

Virginie Viard has become a central figure in contemporary fashion, Viard's career is a testament to the evolving landscape of fashion. The designer was born in Lyon, France. Viard is the eldest of five siblings and her father is a ski champion prior to becoming a surgeon. Her grandparents worked as silk manufacturers. Her life partner, Jean-Marc Fyot, is a music composer and producer. Robinson Fyot, her son who is currently in his 20s, walked the runway wearing a lace blazer for Chanel's Singapore 2014 show. (Verner, 2019) Viard is known for her hallmark look of all-black outfits with kohl-rimmed eyes and blunt bangs. (Ilchi, 2019) She once stated "I am tall, and I don't like to be noticed." (Chanel-ling Lagerfeld., 2019) Viard has no social media presence and her reputation within the industry is the want to remain out of the public eye. (Meet Virginie Viard, the woman set to succeed Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, 2019) She is known to be less fashion reference and more experience based. (Vogue Singapore, 2021) This paper aims to assess the cultural significance and impact of Virginie Viard as Creative Director at Chanel; exploring her influence on contemporary fashion trends and design philosophy. This analysis will provide an understanding of her contributions to the fashion industry, focusing on the Chanel Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture Show "The button" illustrating her creative soft feminine vision and highlighting the intersection of Chanel's traditions, Karl's influence, and the livability within her collections. Viard studied at a fashion school in Lyon, LeCours George, specializing in film and theatrical costume. She then became an assistant to costume designer Dominique Borg in Paris. (Meet Virginie Viard, the woman set to succeed Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, 2019) She spent a year in London and before starting as an intern at Chanel in 1987. A family friend, who was the head of protocol for Prince Rainier of Monaco, recommended Virginie Viard to Mr. Lagerfeld for the internship. (Verner, 2019) Virginie had spent decades working alongside with Lagerfeld, steadily gaining recognition for her craftsmanship and profound understanding of the Chanel aesthetic. She was then quickly put in charge of the house's embroidery and began developing a close professional relationship with Lagerfeld. She briefly left Chanel and returned in 1992. In 1997, Virginie Viard returned to Chanel as the coordinator of haute couture and was promoted to director of Chanel's creation studio, in 2000, where she oversaw the haute couture, ready-to-wear and accessories collections. (Ilchi, 2019)

To understand Viard's approach to Chanel and her livable approach to the femininity of the brand. We must analyze the company's origins. Gabrielle Chanel was born in a workhouse, she lost connection to her family and landed in foster care. She learn how to sew from her aunts. After being kicked out of the foster care system at 17, she began to work at a nightclub and was a Seamstress by day. This is where she coined the name Coco. (Bolton, 2024) "I was a rebellious child, a rebellious lover, a rebellious fashion designer, a true Lucifer. Did I have any idea of the revolution that I was about to stir up in clothing? One world was ending, another was about to be born. An opportunity beckoned - I took it." stated Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel. "Woman like Chanel, is an enormous challenge because she's always holding something back." says an interviewer; she continued to say "I think that some of that mystery clearly relates to her own sense of shame about her past. There's so much about her past that she kept hidden." (Coco Chanel Unbuttoned -

8:00 PM GMT, 2024) In 1910, Chanel opened a hat boutique at 21 years old on Rue Cambon. Her hats were worn by well-known French actresses, increasing her brand awareness. (Chanel, 2024) Her initial store was sponsored by her romantic partner; the store was named Chanel Modes. (Bolton, 2024) In 1912, she opened the first Chanel boutique in Deauville. In 1913, she began to sell ready-to-wear sportswear out of jersey, revolutionizing fashion and women's relationships with their bodies. In 1918, Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel purchased the building at her original location and established her couture house there. In 1939, during World War II, Chanel closed its couture house, selling solely accessories and perfume at the original location, 31 Rue Cambon boutique. In the year 1954, at age 71, Chanel reopened her couture house with a jersey set, with her number 5 being the first look of her collection. She went on to create the emblematic trimmed tweed suit in 1956 and the two-tone pump in 1957. The pump was created to elongate the legs and use the black tip to make the wearer's feet appear smaller. Gabrielle Chanel passed away at the Ritz on January 10, 1971. (Chanel, 2024)

Karl Lagerfeld was born in Hamburg, Germany, on September 10, 1933. (Britannica, 2024) He was a fashion designer and photographer. The designer's striking signature look featured silver hair with a velvet ribbon, oversized sunglasses, Hedi Slimane suits with high-collared shirts, and fingerless driving gloves. In 1952, he moved to Paris, and in 1954, he won the International Woolmark Prize for his coat design. In 1955, he was hired by Balmain, who put his coat design into production. He became the art director at the Jean Patou fashion house three years later. In 1964, he left Paris to study art history in Italy. He designed collections for Chloé from 1964 to 1983 and briefly from 1992 to 1997. (Harriet, 2019) Lagerfeld considered himself a "Balmain boy" due to the origins of his career. (Vogue, 2023) He began working with Chanel as the artistic director in 1983 and launched his first couture collection. Karl paid tribute to Chanel's earliest silhouette, that revolutionized fashion in his first haute couture collection. (Harriet, 2019) Karl was heavily influenced by the 18th century, and its inspiration showed throughout his work. (Vogue, 2023) Similarly to his predecessors, Karl Lagerfeld's designs often sparked controversy surrounding Chanel. In the 1980s, Chanel was infused with bold sex appeal. He sent models down the catwalk, nearly nude, wearing camellias over their nipples. In the 1990s, he capitalized on the rising influence of hip-hop, incorporating oversized gold chains and street elements. (Harriet, 2019) In 1987, Karl began to photograph many of Chanel's fashion advertisements. "He was glamorous, but when you go back to the quintessential Karl, he would always say, 'I'm just a dressmaker,' and here he is creating," stated Anna Wintour. Lagerfeld went on to create timeless looks with the brand, giving an edge to femininity, with advertisements like "Wild at Heart" shot in 1991. "Karl named it Ballerina City" Anna Wintour divulged highlighting the ballgowns, leather jackets and heavily accessorized jewelry. Ms. Wintour continued and labeled the advertisement, "One of the most celebrated images that American Vogue ever published." (Vogue, 2023) Oriole Cullen, from the Victoria and Albert Museum, stated "He combined a vast knowledge of fashion history with an insatiable interest in contemporary culture and was never shy of provoking controversy." (Harriet, 2019) "It's

between yesterday and tomorrow, we are in between. And the good thing is that fashion can go to the old world and to the new world. we have to adapt with the change of time and change is the most interesting thing, because you know; the past of Sunday, when I took over, was forgotten and now I have to push it to where the future goes.” (Vogue, 2023)

Lagerfeld referred to Virginie as his right and left hand; she served as a translator of Mr. Lagerfeld’s vision, as soon as he completed a sketch, her work began. (Verner, 2019) Virginie expressed "I love to please him but also surprise him. He is very sensitive, like all creative people, but very faithful and generous which might not be what people would guess." (Barr, 2019) "Virginie is the most important person, not only for me but also for the atelier, for everything.”(Petkar, 2019) In the Grazia profile, Virginie Viard said: “My role with him consists of making sure he feels good. Over the years, there have been tiring moments, things unspoken; but overall, always, respect and kindness. We communicate each morning by text.” (Meet Virginie Viard, the woman set to succeed Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, 2019) He cultivated a mystique around his persona, which in a sense passed the torch to Viard's mystique. Like his predecessor, Karl Lagerfeld worked until he died, February 19th, 2019. (Britannica, 2024) Loi Prigent stated, "Karl is the locomotive and Virginie is the rails of Chanel." When it came to announcing Lagerfeld's death, Chanel stated, "Viard was his closest collaborator for more than 30 years." (Meet Virginie Viard, the woman set to succeed Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel, 2019) The chief executive of Chanel, Alan Wertheimer, bestowed upon her the title of Artistic Director to ensure the legacy of Gabrielle Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld's creative work lived on. (Barr, 2019) H el ene Guillaume, editor-in-chief of fashion at Le Figaro, told Vogue Business "The Wertheimer [brothers, Chanel owners,] had chosen the logic of a smooth transition, which has paid off: Virginie Viard’s collections have had tremendous commercial success. Despite a few irregularities, her legacy is one of femininity and lightness. Thanks to the exhibitions notably on Gabrielle Chanel at the Victoria & Albert Museum, she has also contributed to anchor the company’s heritage regardless of its creative director." (Guilbault, 2024) Anna Wintour sat with Vogue Singapore in October of 2021 and stated “When I look at what Virginie is doing at Chanel, it seems to me that it's softer, more feminine. It doesn't move quite as fast as Karl’s Chanel did, but maybe that's a good thing.”(Vogue Singapore, 2021) The most important thing to highlight in this quote is the tone of speculation because while Virginie’s predecessor, Lagerfeld, was known for his flamboyant flair, critics question just that and believe she plays it “too safe.” (Bolton, 2024)

Viard kept pictures of Chanel’s ball gowns and costumes for reference. (Vogue Singapore, 2021) Viard was immersed into the history of Chanel and adopted the relaxed flowy look originated by Gabrielle Chanel. Anna Wintour said “The most important thing to realize is that although she was close to Karl. She is taking his legacy and taking Chanel and making it her own...she isn’t trying to be Karl.” (Vogue Singapore, 2021) She infuses her style more and more into the collection while adding flare to make it her own. A simple elegance with an edge of style. “ I like

simple things, you know, I like to even look at things, I know after one year you will see them in a different way.” Virginie Viard states. (Vogue Singapore, 2021) When interpreting Virginie Viard’s work there is a modern interpretation of the principality of livability. One Fashion insider noted how she created a sense of “Girl Power.” She brought a refreshing ideology of women designing for women. Virginie’s worked to create a community of empowered women within the fashion house.(Guilbault, 2024) Viard’s encourages her team to have open communications with her at all times, creating an inviting environment. (Vogue Singapore, 2021) Chanel’s Portrait of Virginie Viard by Leïla Smara displayed on the chanel’s website shows Virginie true tribute to the Chanel’s traditions. The image reflects Gabrielle “coco” Channels return and rebirth into the fashion industry debuting her Chanel #5 jersey set in 1954. (Chanel, 2024) Virginie Viard’s contributions to modern fashion trends have been profound, as she has brought a fresh yet authentic evolution to Chanel's iconic legacy. Since becoming the brand's creative director in 2019, she has subtly adapted it a contemporary aesthetics while maintaining Chanel’s essence. One of her key accomplishments has been growing Chanel’s ready-to-wear segment significantly, with sales increasing 23% in 2023 alone, as reported by Chanel’s leadership. (Diderich, 2023) Viard’s designs often fuse Chanel's timeless codes with modern comfort and versatility, reflecting the changing desires of contemporary consumers. Her work, particularly in ready-to-wear, has made Chanel’s high fashion more accessible and wearable, while still retaining the allure of luxury. The brand's Global CEO, Leena Nair, stated "Virginie is an inspiring woman very successfully creating for women everywhere, and the feedback of clients - the comfort, the silhouette, the fit - it's really positive, it's landing really well," she said. (Diderich, 2023) Despite mixed social media reactions to certain shows, Viard's ability to connect with a wide range of demographics has been a driving force behind Chanel's sustained success."Social media is one form of feedback and we look at it and we learn from it and we always have the humility and curiosity to continuously learn and improve. But if I look at some of the other numbers, client satisfaction across all geographies has gone up. Our brand equity scores have gone up across all demographics." Nair stated (Diderich, 2023) Chanel’s financial success under her creative direction underscores her influence, as the brand’s revenues reached a record \$19.7 billion in 2023. Blondiaux reported. "From a consumer perspective and a brand perspective, Virginie has been a massive contributor,"(Diderich, 2023)

The Chanel Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture Show is significant due to its intricate fusion of traditional craftsmanship and modern aesthetics, it encapsulates the traditions of the iconic fashion house. With the creative directorship of Virginie Viard the collection presents a pivotal moment for Chanel, showcasing her evolving vision while respecting the legacy left by Karl Lagerfeld and embracing the tradition of relaxed luxury introduced by Gabrielle Chanel. The 2024 Haute Couture show highlights Viard’s ability to reinvent Chanel's codes—tweed, pearls, and quilting—within a contemporary framework. This show, with its layered symbolism, innovative designs, and subtle homage to Parisian elegance, exemplifies her commitment to marrying tradition with modernity, making it a fitting representation of her body of work.

Chanel's Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture collection takes its inspiration from one of the brand's most understated yet iconic elements: the button. As the brand's traditions were woven into every facet of the show, including with a Chanel Button descending from the ceiling. The film *The Button*, directed by Dave Free and starring actress Margaret Qualley, opens the show, adding a layer of storytelling. (Chanel, 2024) One of the more prominent ideas was the revival of the balletcore trend, which informed the show's silhouettes, materials, and overall aesthetic. Balletcore, with its emphasis on fluidity, and graceful movement, mirrors the attributes of haute couture's careful craftsmanship. The dresses fitted at the around the bodice and gave way to voluminous, flowing skirts, providing a sense of movement and fluidity. The recurring floral motifs, light pinks, and subtle juxtaposition of black and white added a springtime freshness to the collection. This trend was echoed through fabrics like tulle, organza, chiffon, and lace. Using design elements like bows and opaque tights echoing Gabrielle Chanel's aesthetic.(Chanel button stars in Paris Haute Couture show, 2024) Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel's attention to detail extended to her buttons, showcasing the same level of obsession she applied to all aspects of her work. Chanel's precision is particularly notable in the intricate ballet-inspired elements. This is evident in the ornamental variety featured at the Victoria & Albert Museum's current exhibition on the designer. (Murphy, 2024) The Times London reported that Gabrielle Chanel's tweed jackets were originally inspired by the practical garb worn in Scotland by her lover,who had a love for hunting, the Duke of Westminster. (Murphy, 2024) The color palette of the collection was soft and restrained, echoing the lightness of the season. The collection was various shades of pastel shades of pinks, lavender, ivory, and mint green, accented with garments black, silver, and gold. These colors worked together to evoke a romantic, dream-like atmosphere, while the sharp black accents grounded the collection in Chanel's heritage. Virginie Viard channeled the concept of spring and rebirth, a common theme in spring collections, and highlighted camellia flowers—a flower Coco Chanel adored, a hallmark of the collection, highlighting a reflection of Gabrielle Chanel's traditions. (Chanel button stars in Paris Haute Couture show, 2024) The PG Lang cooperation released a statement in regards to the short film "At the invitation of Virginie Viard, Kendrick Lamar and creative partner Dave Free meet the world of Chanel Haute Couture for the first time, bringing to life a story about time and transmission...Actress and House ambassador Margaret Qualley plunges us into the tale "The Button" alongside actress and House ambassador Anna Mouglalis, as well as friend of the House Naomi Campbell." (Kreps, 2024)

The Chanel Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture show encapsulated Virginie Viard's ability to balance tradition with innovation. Artistically, Viard seemed to echo Chanel traditions while keeping a contemporary aesthetic through her use of light, airy fabrics and pastel color palettes. The floral embroidery and subtle detailing were reminiscent of the brand's femininity, invoking the same sense of organic beauty and soft fluidity. The attention to craftsmanship was unparalleled. Buttons designed were more than functional and were artistic statements. The embroidery and feather details added texture and intricacy, enhancing the garments with richness and edge to each look. These artistic influences aligned with the broader trend in fashion toward

the return to sustainability. This merging of past and present speaks to the collection's broader theme of continuity, both in fashion and in culture. The Chanel Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture show paid homage to Coco Chanel, especially through the white tweed jacket that opened the show. Many saw the show as reassurance of Chanel's timeless appeal, with the collection being described as one of elegance and restraint, yet youthful and fresh in its interpretation of femininity. The overall consensus was that Viard had successfully walked the line between honoring the past and evolving the brand for a new generation of clients.

In conclusion, Virginie Viard's artistic director role at Chanel exhibited a delicate balance between honoring the brand's traditions, honoring Karl's legacy while driving it toward a modern, accessible future. Her ability to subtly adapt Chanel's classic codes, like tweed, pearls, and buttons, while infusing contemporary trends, allowed her to shape a new vision for the house. The CHANEL Spring-Summer 2024 Haute Couture Show exemplifies this, blending tradition with modernity through ballet-inspired elements, fluid silhouettes, and intricate craftsmanship. Viard's dedication to keeping Chanel wearable, while still upholding its luxury status, speaks to her unique approach to femininity and livability in fashion. Viard's commercial success and positive reception from staff and clients demonstrates her strong connection with the evolving needs of women today. Virginie redefined Chanel's identity for a new generation, her respect for the legacies of Gabrielle Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld remains evident, yet her own distinct influence shines through. Virginie Viard's tenure at Chanel is a testament to her quiet strength, creativity, and ability to transform a historic fashion house while staying true to its core values.

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