

we recognize today. He made Paris glitter at night, literally creating the City of Light. He used his power to create the fashion industry.

For all his legitimate and illegitimate progeny, Louis had only one true aesthetic heir—Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel. She revolutionized style, too, but in the opposite direction. She stripped it down to what we recognize today. In giving clothes simplicity, clarity of line, functionality, emotional directness—inventing sportswear and that blank slate known as the little black dress—she allowed clothes to be animated by the wearer. Driving gloves, sunglasses, safari jackets—these are a few of the things that defy the laws of fashion. They seem to always be in style. All suggest movement, action, excitement, a life spent not standing still. They embody the essence of the modern. Coco Chanel didn’t invent them, but she paved the way for them. What she did invent was the “Chanel jacket,” a fashion classic now nearing the century mark. It covers the body sparely, without encumbering it, so as to permit action. The “decoration” (contrast borders, gold buttons) is really an intrinsic part of the garment. The jacket exemplifies how much an ounce of invention—“finishing” an edge by letting the fabric unravel to a natural fringe—can electrify the most uncomplicated design. It represents the emergence of line over embellishment as the soul of attraction. And it has pockets—something Madame believed took the ultimate step into style by conferring confidence on a woman. Style, of course, is not exclusive to women. Coco Chanel today breathes through Karl Lagerfeld, whose aristocratic attire, with its slightly sadistic starched collars, submits to a funky white ponytail and dark glasses. And that is the style of style—one bold and unexpected gesture against a perfectly proportioned backdrop.

Whatever else it is, style is optimism made visible. Style presumes that you are a person of interest, that the world is a place of interest, that life is worth making the effort for. True style, in addition to being irrevocably social, is even morally responsible. Consumption isn’t promiscuous or random, at the whim of the marketplace or the urging of marketers. Rather, it is focused on what is personally suitable and expressive.

Style is psychologically subversive; it exposes the American ambivalence over good looks. It always demonstrates that appearances do count. Deep down we suspect this, since we ourselves make judgments about others from how they look. No one should be penalized for not having style, of course, but those who have it are