



Two birds in the birdcage that inspired the 1992 L'esprit de Chanel fragrance ad starring Vanessa Paradis

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Crystal chrysanthemums

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Coco Chanel

A portrait of the woman through her cherished objects, captured by Sam Taylor-Johnson

In *Second Floor*, a new series of photographs now on view at the Saatchi Gallery, Sam Taylor-Johnson has recorded the many objects in Coco Chanel's apartment on rue Cambon in Paris. Going beyond purely visual documentation, however, Taylor-Johnson is interested in showing how these objects can transmit their owner's personhood. "There was a strong spirit in those objects," she says. "The project became about looking into the heart, soul and spirit of the woman through the things she had touched."

It would please Coco to be observed in this way, for her great ambition was to create a persona so beguiling that she could shelter behind it. She raised her nephew almost as a son and told his daughter, Gabrielle Palasse-Labrunie that she

would frequently remain indoors, because being seen too often would make her seem commonplace. She refrained from writing things down unless necessary and destroyed personal correspondence in the pursuit of self-banishment.

And so we build up a portrait from the objects Coco shared her home with: a bouquet of crystal flowers she was particularly fond of remains on her desk as she usually kept it. The desk, positioned between two windows with its roll-top closed, fulfilled her need for symmetry and light.

"All through her life, she surrounded herself with rock crystal spheres, chandeliers and mirrors," says Palasse-Labrunie. "She loved crystal for its purity, transparency and light. In her salon shaded by

screens she took care to create points of light."

The symbolism of some crystal objects, such as the camellia, which appeared for the first time on Coco's belt in 1913 and can be seen throughout the apartment, have been so closely associated with Chanel that they now also represent her: "The minute I saw the motif in the crystal vases and in the chandeliers... It was a Chanel emblem rather than a flower," says Taylor-Johnson.

Coco was inspired in her designs by the symbolism of these surrounding objects and preferred to take flights of fancy from the couch in her apartment rather than actually travel too much. In turn, they have gone on to inspire journeys of the imagination for the creative team at the house of Chanel. A birdcage with

a pair of pearl inhabitants became the centrepiece of the 1992 *Coco L'esprit de Chanel* fragrance advert, starring Vanessa Paradis. Feather-clad, she whistles from within the cage, before the ghost of Coco appears briefly, then disappears.

"A musician once told me he could tell how long a cello had not been played by playing it," says Taylor-Johnson, who believes that Coco's essence hasn't left her possessions. "The biggest surprise was the sense of mysticism and spirituality - it felt private and special." Her photographs articulate this sense of the private and special. The objects emerge from a rich darkness, sometimes only partially, but clearly and forcefully when visible. The colour palette is painterly here, and not for the first

time in the artist's work.

On her 1998 *Soliloquy* series, Martin Henschel wrote that Taylor-Johnson infused "something that is foreign to the medium of photography but enshrined in traditional paintings: the factor of timelessness". He could have been describing *Second Floor* when he wrote, "these images do not represent moments in time; instead, what they show is emblematic". The artist herself described how everything in the apartment felt timeless and unified by Coco's life-long curation. Coco, too, authored a timeless language of style in her fashions, and in her own myth, which has prevailed through her possessions and now also through these photographs. Words Agata Belcen Photography Sam Taylor-Johnson