

KINDRED SPIRITS

Sam Taylor-Johnson and JUSTINE PICARDIE explore shared connections and haunting encounters in Coco Chanel's Paris apartment

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON



A self-portrait by Sam Taylor-Johnson in Coco Chanel's private apartment, wearing clothes by the fashion house. Opposite: the staircase leading to Chanel's apartment

This page and opposite:
talismanic objects inside
Chanel's apartment



SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON

On my way to see Sam Taylor-Johnson, it occurs to me that ever since we first met, in 1997, our lives have overlapped at certain key moments. Seventeen years ago – although it seems impossible that so much time has passed – Sam was diagnosed with cancer, not long after my sister had died of the disease; both were mothers of babies when they faced the savage prospect of dying too young. Since then, our paths have crossed at other crisis points (our first marriages ended at the same time); but we've also shared the joy of discovering new beginnings (our second weddings were within a week of each other).

This may be one of the reasons I find Sam's work so powerfully moving, and also, perhaps, why our own work has sometimes shared similar inspirations. In 2008, I published my fourth book, a novel exploring literary hauntings, which was set, in part, in and around the Brontë Parsonage in Yorkshire (a site of pilgrimage for me and many others, and a place where the living and the dead can feel very close). As it turned out, Sam had just read *Wuthering Heights*, and such was my obsession at the time with the Brontës, I suggested that she go to their home in Haworth and photograph the moors where they walked. The result was *Ghosts*, her series of pictures of that wild, turbulent landscape; and although they were inspired by Emily Brontë's novel, they also seemed to me to be their own creative entity, possessed of a sense of melancholy that was suggestive of Sam's journey through the bleak ending of a marriage. (Although possibly that interpretation was more to do with my parallel experience than her artistic intentions.)

Anyway, here we are together again, in the summer of 2014, meeting to discuss her latest exhibition: an evocative series of photographs of Coco Chanel's private apartment on Rue Cambon. As it happens, I had suggested the idea to her several years ago, having been in the grip of another obsession, this time with my fifth book, a biography of Chanel; some of which I had written in the apartment itself. At the time, Sam was pregnant with her third daughter (born soon after she took these photographs, in July 2010); her first child with

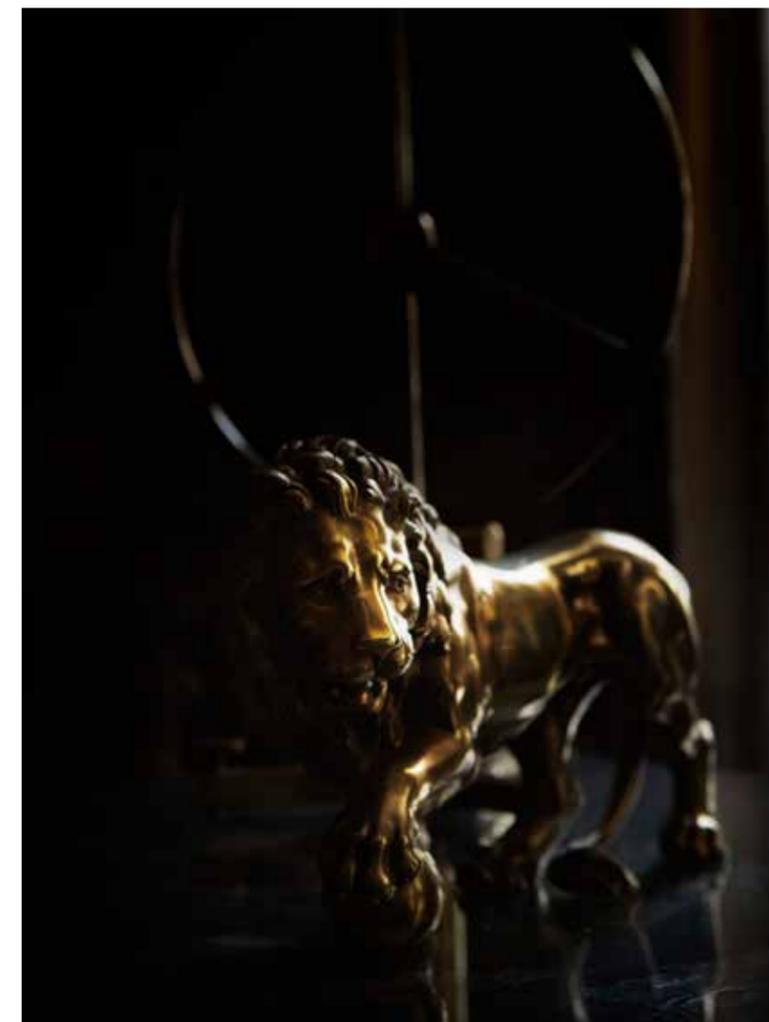
Aaron Johnson, whom she'd met as the director of *Nowhere Boy*, in which he'd starred as the young John Lennon. In the interim, Sam has had a second daughter with Aaron, born at the beginning of 2012; they married six months later; and this year she's been directing the movie version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while Aaron has starred in *Godzilla* and is now filming a sequel to *The Avengers*.

So it's been four years since she took these photographs in Chanel's apartment, on a trip to Paris with Aaron; and given that I'd been there with her at the time, it seems appropriate that we should be meeting in a private salon at the brand's London store on Bond Street, not far from Chanel's Mayfair house in the 1920s. Much has been made of the 23-year age difference between Sam and Aaron, but what strikes me today is how youthful she looks; at 47, she could pass for over a decade younger, with a boyish figure in cropped black suede jeans, her face gamine and make-up free. That

said, she's tired; it's been a tough year, she tells me, 'because doing the film, four kids, constant travel, has probably stretched me to my absolute maximum'.

But as long as I've known her, I say, she's always wanted to do it all – to seize the opportunities and face the challenges. 'As a mother to four girls, I want them to grow up knowing that a woman can work and also be a good mother,' she replies. 'It doesn't mean abandonment. Of course, it's an incredible juggling act, and I don't think you can do it

The walls themselves are lined with Chanel's memories



without a ball dropping here and there – but it's important for my girls to see me work and know that it's possible.' (Her reference to 'abandonment' is important; Sam was left by both her parents as a teenager, and her childhood in Sussex was markedly chaotic; hence the significance of her escape to art college at only 16.)

With so much else going on in her life, has she had time to think about her Chanel series? 'I think about it a lot,' she says. 'Every time I look at them individually, they're powerful photographs, but as a collection, they're a portrait of the woman.' Certainly, as with *Ghosts*, they are imbued with a sense of enigmatic presence; in this case, surrounding the talismanic objects that had been chosen and cherished by Chanel herself (a crucifix worn down by her touch, for example; or the golden lion that represented her astrological sign of Leo). Such is the potency of these things, Sam continues, that there were times when she felt that Chanel might almost have 'slapped my hand away' if she came too close. 'I felt that with her crystal ball, in particular,' she says. 'I had to put it down within a second, because it was as if I was handling part of her, that I was trying to hold on to her spirit...'

Yet what seems remarkable to me about these pictures is that they capture absence, at the same time as presence. For while Chanel might be closer than expected (a half-glimpsed ghost in a mirror?), one can also sense the losses she had suffered in her life – of her family (her mother died when she was 11; her father subsequently abandoned Chanel and her two sisters in a convent orphanage, and never saw his children again), and of the men she loved most in the world. The walls themselves are lined with those memories; the intricate Coromandel screens that were given to her by her great love, Boy Capel, who died in a car crash in 1919; his books that remain on the shelves, along with others from the library of a later lover, the Duke of Westminster; and the treasured amulets of a coupledom that was to elude Chanel (two tiny lovebirds made of pearl in a delicate jewelled cage; a pair of carved deer; a doubling of Egyptian sphinx and Grecian masks).



'The apartment reflects so much of her,' observes Sam, 'the power of her spirituality, the power of that sense of lost love and the power of her presence within it all. So you feel love, loss and spirituality – and aren't those three things the essence of life? It's hard to document them in a face as well known as Chanel's, but through her objects, there is a way of finding her. That, for me, was the biggest revelation.'

The experience of photographing the apartment has clearly been profound. 'I came out with a completely different picture of Chanel from the one I was expecting,' she says. 'I went there thinking that I would find extraordinary fashion, but not realising that she was an extraordinary woman, and a passionate woman, and a spiritual woman, as well. And I discovered that she was intelligent and self-assured and confident – all of the things I've aspired to be. And so I came away with my own personal relationship with her – and that comes from breathing in the air she breathed and seeing the objects she touched, which are still witnesses of her time.' Anyone who is fascinated by Coco Chanel is likely to be absorbed by these pictures; but equally, those who are interested in the artist will find much to intrigue them, as well. □

'Second Floor: The Private Apartment of Coco Chanel' is at the Saatchi Gallery, King's Road, London SW3 (020 7811 3070; www.saatchigallery.com), from 12 to 22 September.

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Self-portrait by Sam Taylor-Johnson, inside Chanel's apartment. Opposite: some of Chanel's treasured possessions

SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON

