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SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON
INSIDE THE HOUSE OF CHANEL



MADemoiselle IS AT HOME

The artist SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON gains a rare glimpse up the famous mirrored spiral staircase and into the private world of Coco Chanel, uninhabited now save for the ghosts of the past

By JUSTINE PICARDIE

If writing (like art) is inspired by a sense of place, then one of the most potent landscapes I have ever inhabited was that of Coco Chanel. Undertaking the research for my biography of Chanel sent me on a journey to the remote convent orphanage where she grew up in a mountainous region of central France, and onwards to the faraway Scottish Highland hideaway where she retreated with her lover, the Duke of Westminster. But perhaps most atmospheric of all is Chanel's private apartment in Rue Cambon, at the heart of the fashion house that still bears her name.

It was here that I was writing a chapter of my book – sitting at the desk where the marks of Chanel's handwriting remain visible on the scored leather top – when my friend Sam Taylor-Johnson happened to ring me. Almost as soon as I told her about the apartment, with its mirrored walls and ghostly reflections, glimpsed from the shadows as night falls, it seemed natural to suggest to Sam that she might come and photograph the mysterious interior world of Chanel. Before long, she had arrived in Paris and, like me, was intrigued by the veil between the living and the dead that one imagines as being more translucent here: not only within the apartment itself, but also on the mirrored staircase that rises from the entrance, past the couture salon and up to the doors of Chanel's inner enclave. Those doors are locked to almost everyone – the apartment is not a museum – but lose yourself in these photographs, and you enter a world without walls, where keys turn and the darkness stirs... □

An exhibition of Sam Taylor-Johnson's Chanel photographs will take place in London next year.

'Second Floor – Sofa', showing the couch in Coco Chanel's apartment on Rue Cambon, in front of a Carmandel screen



MADEMOISELLE
PRIVÉ

This page: 'Second Floor - Door', capturing the entrance to Coco Chanel's studio, where Karl Lagerfeld now works with his team. Opposite: 'Second Floor - Tapestry', showing a detail from the Coromandel screen in the apartment



The magnificent chandelier
in the middle of the ceiling in Chanel's apartment
was designed by the couturière herself,
adorned with hidden letters and numbers in the frame:
double Cs for Coco Chanel; and 5s,
the lucky number that made her fortune



This page: 'Second Floor - Building Exterior', depicting a view of Coco Chanel's room at the Ritz in Paris. Opposite: 'Second Floor - Staircase', showing the mirrored staircase leading from Chanel's apartment down to the Haute Couture salon

