

## New evidence from official records show Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel was a documented member of the French resistance during WW2.



Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/Getty Images

Coco Chanel exhibition reveals fashion designer was part of French resistance. Previously unseen documents to go on display at V&A alongside evidence of her collusion with Nazis

A major retrospective of Coco Chanel has unearthed evidence that the fashion designer was a documented member of the French resistance. The previously unseen documents will go on display, along with contradictory evidence that she operated as a Nazi agent.

The documents relating to Chanel’s activities in wartime Paris strike a serious note within what is likely to be the most glamorous exhibition of the year, with more than 50 tweed suits – including a bubblegum pink set belonging to Lauren Bacall – on view at Gabrielle Chanel: Fashion Manifesto, when it opens at the V&A in London on 16 September.

“We couldn’t do a show about Chanel and not address her wartime record,” said the curator, Oriole Cullen, who has expanded a show first created at the Palais Galliera in Paris in 2020 with a new curation that delves more deeply into Chanel’s links with Britain as well as her wartime activities.

Previously unseen documents highlight the name “Gabrielle AKA Coco Chanel” on a list of 400,000 people whose part in the resistance is backed up by official records. “We have verification from the French government, including a document from 1957, which confirms her active participation in the resistance,” said Cullen.

The museum will also display strong evidence that Chanel collaborated with the Germans in occupied Paris, including transcripts of postwar interrogation of three Nazi officials who all separately name her as a trusted source.

“The new evidence doesn’t exonerate her. It only makes the picture more complicated. All we can say is that she was involved with both sides,” said Cullen.

In contrast to the museum’s recent Dior show, which told the story of a fashion house that has outlived its founder by 66 years, the Chanel exhibition ends with her death in 1971. The exhibition is personal, and therefore, by dint of Chanel’s controversial life, political.

Cullen points to a childhood spent in a French convent after the death of her mother and disappearance of her father as having produced a character whose inclination for self-protection made her instinctively rightwing. She said the designer was “more than anything a survivor, always on the lookout for opportunities to move forward through life”.

During the early 1940s, Chanel had a relationship with the Nazi officer Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage, which she leveraged to free her nephew, André Palasse, from a German prisoner-of-war-camp.

“We did not want to ignore her wartime record – but first and foremost, this is a fashion exhibition,” said Cullen.

Many of the 100 pieces added to the show since the version shown in Paris delve into her connections with Britain. A portrait in oils of Chanel, painted by Winston Churchill, attests to a close relationship with British society forged through her romance with the Duke of Westminster. The Nazis had given the designer the code name of “Westminster”.

The show also highlights her less well-known connection to British manufacturing. On display will be a tomato red evening gown in silk velvet, with matching elbow-length gloves, made for Chanel by the Manchester Velvet company in 1932. During that decade, Coco established a company – British Chanel Ltd – for the manufacture of her designs in British fabrics including Northern Irish linens, and Nottingham lace.

“Chanel was highly exacting, so the connection attests to the existence of a high-quality textile industry in Britain, which sadly no longer exists,” said Cullen.

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