



Exclusive: Matthieu Blazy's Vision for Chanel, Revealed

With the season's hottest debut, Blazy is charting new territory for Chanel — and fashion itself — fuelled by new insights into Gabrielle Chanel's own creative process, the designer tells Tim Blanks in an in-depth global exclusive interview.

By Tim Blanks



PARIS — Exactly four weeks ago, before his debut at Chanel on Monday night, Matthieu Blazy and I were perched on a narrow balcony outside his studio high above Rue Cambon. He was enjoying a cigarette, one of the pack-a-day habit he's had since he was 20. He usually smokes alone because it gives him a few precious minutes of solitude, but on that particular Monday, I was intruding on his peace and quiet with my grilling about what he had planned for the world's most famous fashion brand, where he was appointed creative director last December. I was hardly alone in my curiosity. I can't remember another moment in my decades in fashion where a debut has generated such intense interest.

Blazy was talking about his research. "I work with this girl, Marie-Valentine, who I adore, and when we sat in the first meeting, looking at imagery, starting to talk about ideas, I said, 'We can go two ways. Either we do a clean, modern, by the codes, by the book Chanel show, and it's a first step. Or we do this show as if it was our last.' I took the last option." Let's do a show as if it was the last one. She said, 'And then?' and I was, like, 'Then we start again.'"

What would Blazy's last show at Chanel look like? First, we can hope for Chanel's sake it's years away, and then we can only hope it looks as good as the collection he walked me through on Sunday, the day before his debut. The technical mastery, the innovation, the force of narrative, the sheer confidence on display felt like everything people have been waiting for in this time of tumult for fashion. Realistically, the much-vaunted designer resets have been less new faces, more familiar faces in new places: a recipe for inevitable disappointment in some cases.

But Chanel is different. Gabrielle Chanel opened her boutique at 31 Rue Cambon in 1918. Since then, there have essentially been two acts in the story of the house. The first act was her own, the second was Karl Lagerfeld's. Then came what Bruno Pavlovsky, Chanel's president of fashion, called "an intermission" under Lagerfeld's right hand and successor, Virginie Viard. Now, said Pavlovsky, it was time for Act Three with Blazy, a 40-year-old French-Belgian whose career spans stints with Raf Simons, Maison Margiela, Celine and Calvin Klein before four years as creative director of Bottega Veneta, where he was one of Kering's brightest sparks. Was he feeling any pressure? When I saw Blazy in his studio on Sunday, he claimed he'd lost five kilos in 10 days. But his favourite artist Eric Clapton was





leaking out of the speakers. Perhaps that helped his mood of almost eerie calm. Or maybe he just accepted he'd done his absolute best.

A month ago, Blazy told me a story to deflect my curiosity: how everything started with a shirt.

Obviously, when you arrive at a house like Chanel, you have access to archives, in this case, the famed *Patrimoine*, a building on the outskirts of Paris presided over by Madame Odile Prémel. Blazy claimed he visited a couple of times and was so overwhelmed he couldn't go back. He even found himself wondering, "Fuck, what have I done?" So he turned to getting to know Gabrielle through everything that had ever been written about her. He found words activated his imagination more than images. So it was ironic that it was actually some photos of her wearing men's shirts that triggered him. Odile suggested they might be borrowed from a beau.

Blazy's research revealed that Arthur "Boy" Capel, the love of Chanel's life from 1909 until his death in a car accident in 1919 — and quite possibly for the rest of her life — would only wear shirts from Charvet, which has been dressing people of taste and distinction on the Place Vendôme since 1838. When he contacted Jean-Claude and Anne-Marie Colban, Charvet's owners, he learned that Chanel had been a customer, that she shopped a lot for Boy. Blazy proposed they do a shirt together. "You know, Matthieu, Chanel doesn't do collaborations," Pavlovsky told him. "I was like, 'It's more than a collaboration, it's almost like a *Métier d'Art*,'" Blazy countered, referring to the work of the specialist ateliers the house owns. "Like Lemarié who do the feathers, or Montex who do the embroideries. It's a very precious traditional craft."

So Chanel and Charvet made three shirts (the label reads "Tissu et technique par Charvet"), and that act of making freed Blazy from the paralysis of the *patrimoine*. "I started to really be creative, because with that shirt, I had a circle. I knew where I start, so I knew where I can go. What I also found very beautiful is that what happened with Boy showed that the whole company of Chanel is based on a love story. I don't think any of this would have happened if she was not this woman so madly in love with this man. Because she was just doing hats until she met him. After, it became a partnership when he started to pay to build the business up, but the fundamental is based on love."

"It's more than this though," Blazy continued. "I think it's about obsession. They explained to me that Gabrielle Chanel was very interested in stories of royalty, Catherine de' Medici's emblem was a double CC, so it could come from there. But what I found very interesting was that Gabrielle introduced the double CC just after Boy died, when she released the perfume. You can think about the Medici mythology, but the CC is also Capel and Chanel put together. Who knows? I'm choosing that story. We can never prove it, but it's good to have this kind of imaginative conversation." And, thanks to Blazy, you actually could imagine it in the authoritative magnetic click of the C and C closing on the new Chanel bags.

For his Act Three, Blazy imagined three chapters. The first, "Paradox," was inspired by Gabrielle's desire to be equal to men but, at the same time, to use her femininity to seduce. Blazy quoted her: "There is a time for work and a time for love. That leaves no other time." He added, "This, for me, is what defines the allure of Chanel." The Charvet shirt appeared three times. As a cotton evening shirt with a train, as a classic-collared shirt, and as a cropped blue shirt, all of them pearl-buttoned, weighted with a little chain in the hem, and embroidered "Chanel" with the cursive she used on her label in the 20s.

Blazy recounted how, on the first day of fittings, he took his own jacket, scissored it to the Chanel proportion and cut out the collar while his *petites mains* looked on in horror. But that was the first look for Monday's show, the world's introduction to Matthieu Blazy at Chanel: the new Chanel suit, a masculine shoulder, hem still roughcut, but with the little Chanel chain for weight. It was matched to trousers the way Gabrielle wore them, slightly too big, like Boy's perhaps, and a pair of Oxfords. "Immediately the paradox," Blazy mused. "The idea of seduction on a flat shoe." The accompanying





bag was a classic 2.55, but threaded with metal so it crumpled in the hand. "Crushed, but also loved," he insisted. "It's something that resists the test of time."

The more Blazy showed me, the more it was obvious that raw edges were a leitmotif. Chanel found it chic that the British aristocracy wore the same clothes till they essentially fell apart. "I thought it was very interesting to accentuate a little bit that gesture," Blazy said. "You know, we are doing fashion here." The raw edges of Paradox's final look exploded in feathers, which was Blazy's way of acknowledging one of his favourite Chanel stories. Gabrielle once told Boy that, even if he was helping to pay for her company, he never sent her flowers. For the next two days, she received a bouquet of flowers from Boy every half hour at Rue Cambon until she felt like she was living in a florist's. She cracked. Blazy felt that Chanel's role in this domestic drama had some bearing on his own pre-show state of mind, more evidence of how personally he has taken his position. "Sometimes there's that idea that too much is not enough. But let people say this show could have been edited down so the message was more clear. More clear for who? I'm not here to dissect the work for you. I'm not interested in 'the clear message.' We don't live in a world of clear messages. Ambiguity is very powerful, and sometimes it needs to be way too much, or not understood at first sight."

Blazy called his second chapter "Le Jour." The edges maybe more raw, the presence of time more pressing. The idea of the wardrobe, everything separate, pieces you can interchange, what Blazy calls "the burst of modernity" which he believed came from Gabrielle's relationship with Boy. He was looking at Art Deco but he found the silhouette way too straight, so he relaxed everything, added the black lines from the packaging of the Chanel No. 5 box. "Suddenly they were back to being architectural but still separate, it's a silk T-shirt on a micro-tweed skirt." The T-shirts are woven using a technique originally used for stockings which Blazy brought back from the 20s. The silk has an impressively compact hand.

And then Look 26, the collection's first incarnation of the classic Chanel jacket. "It's a black jacket with camellias. I think when you're at Chanel, you don't need to twist everything. We made the jacket with Lesage in the Metiers d'Arts. We developed a new yarn, and from this new yarn, we made a new tweed." The tweed looked shot, almost like a shantung, so light and so luxe it felt like a golden opening for a tux. ("I don't think the gender issue is the biggest thing," was Blazy's cryptic dismissal of my question about menswear possibilities.)

The *newness* of the fabrics throughout was startling, Blazy was equally enthralled by a silk gabardine it took three months to develop. He learned that Gabrielle had gone to a pantsmaker outside Paris to have a pair of men's chinos made for herself, not too small because she wanted to ride a horse. But given her obsession with silk, he thought it more appropriate for the world of Chanel that he recreate them in a silk gabardine. An illusion fabric, like Blazy's denim leather at Bottega Veneta? "No, it's different, more the function of silk than the look of silk. But when I saw that fabric coming out from the mill, I fell off my chair, because it looks so simple, but it's really good."

"Chanel loved natural materials, so we went to yarn that was not necessarily over-treated or overworked," Blazy explained. "It gives them a lot of life." A jacket woven from a new cotton yarn had a dryness and texture that reminded me of Weetabix, with sheafs of wheat exploding off it. Its buttons were moulded on peach pits. Chanel apparently had a curious affection for scarecrows. Another jacket, also organically toned, and also highly textured with thousands of tiny paillettes embedded rather than embroidered in the fabric (I believe heat was involved), covered a top that looked like an explosion of coloured straw filaments, haute scarecrow stuffing. It was a stunning effect. It also weighed nothing at all, just one instance of a logic-defying lightness in Blazy's fabric development.

The third chapter, "Universal," was Blazy's recognition of Chanel as a global entity, the part of the story where Gabrielle becomes "Chanel." "We are such in a global world. And when it comes to Chanel, it's so powerful on every continent, it's like Coca Cola. Everyone knows Chanel. Maybe we have to





understand, not just from our point of view in Paris, but also what story can be told to fit other, different regions. Basically the way I look at it, it needs to be universal. I want to make a dream. No age, no nation. A child looks at it. A grandmother looks at it. It should have this kind of *wow*.” It was the most conceptual in its effort to connect Chanel with the much wider world. Blazy was struck by a cover of French *Elle* from 1964 which showed a Chanel jacket with hand-painted stripes. He couldn’t fathom their origin. Biarritz? Peru? Masai? Which also meant this chapter was the most playful, the most colourful, the most technological. More transparency, more texture, a new tweed with no repetition, its structure exploded like it had been zoomed out on a laptop screen. For the finale, tweed like you’ve never seen it in another eruption of colour. “For me they are the Flemish flowers, but my team called them the pina colada, which I loved.” Another way to open up the codes. But before that moment, Blazy offered Looks 72 and 73, which he called “the two little Chanel ladies.” In their stretch bouclé suits, they were a reminder of tradition.

They also reminded me a little of the games Karl Lagerfeld played with Chanel’s codes over the years. All those supermodels in their pink and blue and yellow bouclés. Blazy never saw one of Lagerfeld’s Chanel shows. In fact, the only Chanel show he’s ever seen was the last couture show, when he went to support the team. “But somehow, you think you know the story, because you grew up with Karl. Reading so much about Chanel and looking a little bit more at the archive, I tried to avoid the imagery because then I’m not free, but I realized that what we saw from Karl was really his take on Chanel, and there were a lot of stories that weren’t told. What I found interesting is that he created a *panoply*. He created a costume to look like Chanel, and it became very much about the character Chanel. You have the codes: the jacket, the pearls, the tweeds, always juxtaposed together to create a kind of system. And he collaged it to his time. So that Chanel character could be on an iceberg, she could be on a rocket, I think it’s really magical when you think about it. It’s almost like a hero you put in different contexts, which is not to say that he did not explore it with full grace.”

But what Blazy clearly found compelling about Gabrielle was her ability to turn a costume into a wardrobe. He’d read that she had chosen to dress as a man for a costume party she attended in the 19-teens and felt so good about it that, a few days later, she wore the same look again but this time not as a costume. “I think now what we are seeing about Chanel is the idea that dressing up in Chanel is almost a panoply, a costume. I’m very interested to make it again into a wardrobe... even if you see it from 200 metres away that it’s Chanel.”

Blazy referred to Chanel’s attitude as “bric-a-brac,” a kind of pragmatic grab-bag approach to the world around her, careless of convention, like wearing her lover’s shirt or using the silk jersey his underwear was cut from in her collection. Legend has it that she made the *marinière*, the striped sailor T-shirt, fashionable, but Picasso and his cool artist crowd were already wearing them. “It’s not that she was the first woman,” Blazy said, “but what is incredible is that she wanted to belong, so she decided to wear it as well, like them. So she was very much a woman of her time. But she took a decision, ‘I love it, this is mine’, on a lot of codes.” That was the way, according to Blazy, she claimed tweed from Boy’s jackets. As for the other pillars of the Chanel brand? “Pearls were just very trendy. And everyone had camellias. They came from that book *La Dame aux Camélias*. Paul Poiret used them. Raul Dufy painted them. I was constantly wondering, where are those Chanel prints from? I started to think, could they have been from Raul Dufy? Then I went to Monsieur Colban. Did Dufy work with Charvet? Yes, yes, because he was around. So you can’t say that Chanel *created* this, because she also took the essence of what was around her. She was *practical*.”

Blazy has the same bent. He would probably credit his time with Raf Simons as an education in practical problem-solving. His challenge in this collection was making the clothes move. Skirts that hung straight swung into vivid life once the body they covered started to move. A dégradé fringe of pearls added a flapper-ish zest to the hem of a coat. An evening column posed a particular problem. In theory, Blazy saw Scarlett O’Hara draping herself effortlessly in a curtain. In practice, a drape seemingly simple but





not, drawn up to create a camellia, and repeated in the back. The challenge was enough that he felt emotional when his model tried it on and it worked.

One thing I was very much looking forward to seeing, given Blazy's history with accessories, was the new bag collection. "Gabrielle put the bag within the silhouette," he said. "She was the first one to do so. You have that silhouette and there's one item. The bag. So if you do a tweed suit, modern, something that brings it to the future, and you put a bag on it, the allure is still Chanel. The thing with Chanel is that there are a lot of possibilities. You can go very narrative, but you can also go very functional as well. And this is what interests me a lot. If you don't quilt it, what makes it Chanel? Everyone copied Chanel. Every house I ever worked in, there was always, 'Ah, that could be our Chanel bag.' We attacked the problem very differently this season. We did bags that are very narrative and bags that are very reduced to the function. I thought it was interesting to strip it out. Why is it Chanel? Because we say it's Chanel."

We'd already looked at the scrunched-up 2.55, but then Blazy pulled out another favourite. "It's a classic Chanel bag but I replaced the chain with leather and made it very soft." Soft enough to mould to his body when he swung it over his shoulder. There was a tiny metal CC for branding. It was genderless too. Matthieu already had his. Another soft satchel in suede was modelled after cushions in Chanel's apartment. There were bowling bags from the archive, and pure flights of fancy, like the Nemo bag in clownfish raffia stripes, or the tiny egg-shaped bag, almost charm-sized, which opened to reveal a little yellow chick swinging on a trapeze (birds and trapezes being something of a Chanel trope). "No one needs a new bag so you need a dream, to tell stories," said Blazy.

And Chanel needs him to tell new stories. It feels like the entire industry, in fact, is invested in Blazy's success at this point. "I think fashion is in a funny state," he agreed. "It grew very, very fast over the last years, post pandemic, and it kind of hit a ceiling. I think now what fashion needs to do is to rethink its own model, but not just when it comes to design. We've seen some houses exploding, we've seen some houses collapsing. What needs to be done is a deep work on what fashion stands for. Who is it for? What do we want? Is it media nowadays? Did fashion become media? Fashion brands play the role of the patron these days. They give money to cultural centres, which is wonderful, and promote themselves at the same time, but at the end of the day, it needs to go back to the product itself, the pleasure you have buying it, or the pleasure you have in-store trying on something that you love. Everything cannot be done just by communication, image, putting something on a celebrity. Of course, yes, but focus on the product and the story that is told. I think we are at a stage where fashion needs to re-imagine its own narrative. Luxury is not enough anymore. It's expensive and it's rare, so it's good? That's not enough."

Blazy is lucky in that the narrative he has to re-imagine is already so rich. But his immersion in Gabrielle Chanel's story has personalized it for him in an extraordinary, almost symbiotic way. It's freed him, and perhaps it's liberated her as well. "Chanel" can be Gabrielle again.

We're back on the balcony a month ago. *This* Monday night hasn't happened yet. *That* Monday night, Blazy will have another cigarette, and maybe he'll pair it with a Belgian beer. He's convinced Chanel herself might have done the same thing. "The thing with Gabrielle is that you can make up a lot of stories about her because she was so private. You can guess a lot, and I think every guess could be right. That's a little bit my motto at the moment. I can guess and I don't need to have the proper answer because it gives me creativity."

And tomorrow he will start again.

