

BELOW & OPPOSITE The Chanel 2005 – only time will tell whether it has the staying power of its predecessor the ubiquitous 2.55, commonly known as the “gilt ‘n’ quilt” bag, which has endured since 1955. Modern status seekers may well turn to the 2005, as much for its high-tech looks and indestructible appearance as for the fact that everyone will know it cost a lot.



Fashion experts tend to suspect that women will pay big money for a “label” bag – like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, or Chanel – because it is “a security blanket.” As Betty Halbreich writes in her book *Secrets of a Fashion Therapist*, “By carrying a recognizable name brand, you’re announcing your good taste (and maybe wealth) to everyone you pass on the street. Now of course I’m not trying to suggest that the only reason women buy expensive bags is that they’re insecure. Spending a lot on a bag buys you much more than status.”⁸

It also buys quality, since status bags are usually handcrafted and made of luxurious materials. Yet, ultimately, the appeal of the status bag depends on more intangible qualities. A Gucci bag, for example, comes with the related glamour portrayed in the advertisements. Status bags combine quality and cachet. They offer associative glamour through the logo or the *griffe*.

Griffe is a French word meaning claw or talon, and, by extension, mark or logo. The animal quality of clawing or imprinting a mark upon something is resonant, as if the association of the status bag marks the wearer out of the crowd. In the past, members of the ruling class often had their own symbols, colors, or monograms attached to objects they owned, and even to people who worked for them. In the modern era, a host of ordinary people also sought to distinguish themselves through the use of elite symbolism. At first this was done in imitation of European aristocrats, as, for example, when wealthy commoners invented spurious coats of arms. Later, as advanced capitalism evolved, certain consumer goods began to acquire prestige of a rather different kind.

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Now it was not enough to have one's own monogram embroidered on, say, shirts, slips and tablecloths. It was also perceived as prestigious to buy certain goods, which carry their own identifying marks.

"Monogram mania" exploded in the 1980s when conspicuous consumption was the order of the day. Yet, already by the 1950s and 1960s, wealthy trendsetters were covering themselves with fashionable logos: Hermes scarves, Gucci loafers, and so on. But what gives a particular bag cult status? According to one branding expert, a cult bag must have the following three characteristics:1] "legitimacy within the fashion industry, 2] great advertising, and 3] celebrity support." The first of these is, perhaps, the most important – or, at least, the hardest to fake, since it implies a history of excellence and prestige. Traditionally, within the fashion world, the greatest prestige has accrued to certain couture houses.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the quilted Chanel bag with the braided gold chain handle, is arguably, the status bag of all time. Mademoiselle Gabrielle Chanel (1883–1971), known as Coco Chanel, is widely regarded as the most important fashion designer of the 20th century. A recognised fashion trendsetter at the beginning of the century, even before she began designing clothes, Chanel was her own best model. When she bobbed her hair, got a suntan, and wore costume jewellery mixed in amongst her fabulous real



OPPOSITE John Galiano gave the Lady Dior bag near-cult status, with the help of Diana, Princess of Wales, who was frequently seen with hers. The bag's "listen to me, look at me" charm logo is key to its appeal, here photographed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino.



50 jewels, other women noticed and followed suit. In 1955, Chanel designed her first quilted handbag with a gilt chain, which she named the "2.55," after the month and the year of its introduction. It was made in Chanel's favorite colors of beige, navy, black, and brown and came in a choice of two materials: leather or jersey. The chain handles, braided with leather, allowed the bag to be hung over the shoulder, leaving the hands free, in keeping with Chanel's overall philosophy of design, which emphasized functionalism and mobility. The double Cs were added later, but they were congruent with the power of her name.

55 During the 1950s, fashion was changing rapidly, and Chanel offered women a sensible uniform. In place of Dior's fluctuating A-line and H-line and Y-line, Chanel provided simple, yet expensive tweed suits with cardigan jackets. Flattened gilt chains were sewn into the linings of her suit jackets, to keep them hanging neatly. Some of her jackets also featured quilted linings, in imitation of the quilted jackets worn by stable boys at the races. Her quilted handbag, therefore, derived its notable characteristics from her clothes.

65 Popularly referred to as the "gilt 'n' quilt" bag, the 2.55 bag continued to sell after Chanel's death in 1971 – although the Chanel style in general became outmoded. It was only when the House of Chanel hired Karl Lagerfeld in 1983 that the Chanel name once more became highly fashionable. Just as Lagerfeld modernized the Chanel suit for a new generation, so also did he modify many of the classic Chanel accessories. He reintroduced the 2.55 in both classic and trendy forms, enlarging the double Cs and tweaking the traditional shape. Once Lagerfeld had renewed the prestige of the House of Chanel, the signature bag



TOP LEFT & ABOVE The Chanel bag has been reworked by Karl Lagerfeld in numerous guises. Whether tiny trapezoids or a calfskin "gilt 'n' quilt," each is identifiable as a Chanel by one or more of the label's status signatures: quilting, gilt logo, and chain strap.

BELOW Even minus the logo of interlocked Cs and the gilt chain, this bag is instantly recognizable as a Chanel because of the quilting, a characteristic, too, of chic Chanel suits.



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was transformed into a symbol of upward mobility. During the 1980s, the power of the double Cs was such that some stores limited customers to three purchases at a time. Barbara Cirkva, senior vice president of fashion at Chanel Inc., affirms that “Chanel dominated the bag market in the eighties.”¹⁰

Bags: A Lexicon of Style. Steele, V. & Barrelli, L. Scribner Edition: London (1990)
regarded as an “establishment” bag, associated with the fashionist Janet Street-Porter describes eating out at a restaurant where “women kept arriving in mink, with blond streaks and gold jewelry, and all the handbags except mine had gold chains.”¹¹ However, as the 1980s slip further into the past, the stigma associated with that decade’s status symbols will fade, and the 2.55 bag may once again come into its own.

Chanel recently launched the 2005 bag, intended as the new Chanel status bag, or in Lagerfeld’s words, “the first of the next generation of bags.” The 2005 is a modern, futuristic companion to the classic 2.55 and, potentially, the “ultimate accomplice of the twenty-first century woman.”¹² Like 2.55, 2005 is a number with meaning. The numeral two indicates that it was designed two years before the millennium. The double zeroes signify the international calling code. The five, of course, was Chanel’s lucky number.

The frame of the bag is made of injected polyethylene, covered in leather, tweed, or jersey (to coordinate with Chanel suits). It opens “like one of Lagerfeld’s fans” with the CC logo “discreetly” placed on the discs on either side of the bag. Inside there are eight mesh compartments, including a special