



# Churchill on the Riviera

Winston Churchill, Wendy Reves  
and the Villa La Pausa Built by Coco Chanel

By Nancy Smith



Winston Churchill's Intrigues with the Owners of La Pausa, the Riviera Villa Built by Coco Chanel, Purchased by Emery and Wendy Reves, and Acquired in 2015 by the House of Chanel



Wendy Reves, 1987, in the courtyard of villa La Pausa, with Lena and Ivana and her “mayordomo” Flavio Berio

Dedicated to my daughter Christina, for whom Wendy Reeves is  
a childhood memory

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View of the Mediterranean from La Pausa

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View of landscape of villa La Pausa, 1987



## Prologue

The odds were formidable against any orphan born in a poorhouse becoming an icon of lasting international fame. The odds were against a girl who had little to eat during the Depression eventually playing hostess to Winston Churchill and other world leaders. The odds were against any two such girls reared in poverty being the only owners of villa La Pausa with its six acres overlooking the Mediterranean Sea on the French Riviera, the worldly paradise for the rich. But Coco Chanel and Wendy Reves were not ordinary women and their stories were extraordinary.

Coco Chanel has been much criticized for collaborating with Nazis during World War II, but she had three basic needs she was satisfying that had nothing to do with politics. Having been abandoned at an orphanage when she was 12 years old when her mother died, she felt that anything she owned could be seized and she would be left with nothing. During World War II she was determined to keep her family and property intact.

After Chanel's sister Julia killed herself, leaving a son André Palisse, Chanel passionately cared about the boy for the rest of his life. She was vague about her early years and rumors spread that she was actually his mother. Regardless, she had intense feelings for André on the same par as a mother's love and felt responsible for his well-being. She asked her friend, the Duke of Westminster, to pay for a private British school so André would be well-educated. When the duke offered to support her in establishing a Chanel boutique in London, Chanel had André run the store. When

André went to live in Pau in the south of France before the war, and Nazis were about to storm Paris, Chanel headed straight to Pau to find him. She learned he was in a prison camp and went to the Vichy government to get him released. Then learning that André was mortally sick with tuberculosis, Chanel was under intense pressure to get him released or he likely would die. By collaborating with the Nazis, she did get him freed and paid for his medical treatment so that he eventually recovered. His daughter Gabrielle Palasse-Labrunie was named for Chanel and lived to be an elderly woman.

Chanel's main properties were the headquarters of her couture business on Rue Cambon. While Paris fell in 1940, she closed down her fashion house but still had perfume sold from one office. Keeping her buildings intact was a passion for her and she wanted to live nearby. Ever since 1936 she had rented a suite at Hotel Ritz across the street. Instead of fleeing from France, she stayed in Paris to guard her properties. The only way she could remain living at the Ritz was by associating with Nazis where only officers were allowed. Hermann Göring himself appropriated the Imperial Suite. Chanel's main suite was No. 308 facing Place Vendôme, but she moved to the rear closest to Rue Cambon and lived in two small maids' rooms.

The other primary asset Chanel owned was her name. In 1924, she sold the rights to her Chanel No. 5 perfume to Pierre and Paul Wertheimer for what she considered too little a percentage of the royalties, especially after Chanel No. 5 became the most famous perfume in the world. Since the Nazi regime was confiscating businesses owned by Jews, she wanted to finesse the rights through the Nazis' Aryanization of property laws. The Wertheimers had left Europe for

America and had the French agent Félix Amiot overseeing their holdings. Chanel's Nazi friend Hans Günther, Baron von Dincklage arranged for a meeting at the Ritz between Chanel and his fellow Nazi officer Baron Vaufreland. Not only did they discuss releasing André, they also talked about making it possible for Chanel to be freed from her original perfume contract.

Chanel was dispatched to Madrid to send a message to Churchill at the height of World War II. The message was that numerous German officers wanted to end the war immediately in opposition to Adolf Hitler who was determined to prevail at any cost. In Chanel's mind, her association with Nazis was to protect André, guard her buildings on Rue Cambon, and save Europe from continued death and destruction—all noble reasons to use the Nazis for her own ends.

Wendy Reves also fought for the historical legacy of her life in tandem with her husband Emery and his colleague Winston Churchill. As the second hostess of La Pausa, she came to know Churchill and many of the figures who shaped World War II. At the end of the war, Emery wrote a landmark book about reconfiguring world order in the new nuclear age. The book was considered so revolutionary that it was admired by nuclear physicist Albert Einstein and chosen as a textbook at Ivy League colleges.

After Emery died, Wendy inherited their 41 Impressionist paintings by such artists as Renoir, Degas, and Monet. She wanted to donate them so long as a replica of La Pausa could be built so they could hang in the same context since the villa was historic, used as a meeting place for world leaders. She also wanted Emery remembered as a clairvoyant before World War II. He had been Winston Churchill's publisher and

guided European leaders, including Churchill, to warn of the impending Nazi danger. After the War, their association was no less important since an even greater danger threatened, to perpetuate humanity in light of bombs that could annihilate the world.

Wendy was headstrong in her mission to make people aware of the serious discussions at La Pausa. Eventually she felt another location was needed to reflect the gravitas of Emery's legacy and chose the College of William & Mary to which she donated the Reves Center for International Studies. This would perpetuate Emery's solution for the nuclear age, that people from diverse nations must co-exist in peace.

Coco Chanel was criticized for dealing with the Nazis. Wendy Reves was criticized for adding strings to her donation to the Dallas Museum of Art with the recreation of her villa. The two women demonstrated that they had an essential trait in common, that each was willing to stand firm against potential public criticism in order to achieve her most important goals.

# Chapter 1:

## Winston Churchill Undermines the Love Affair of Coco Chanel and the Duke of Westminster



Villa La Pausa Great Hall and Grand Staircase, with  
Toulouse-Lautrec poster at bottom of staircase, 1987

When the House of Chanel purchased the villa La Pausa on September 30, 2015, it was buying not only a magnificently situated property with wide vistas of the Mediterranean, it was also purchasing a house with a romantic history involving its two owners Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel and Emery and Wendy Reves, the publisher of Winston Churchill’s writings and his wife who was famous for providing a comfortable atmosphere in the villa where the

great statesman could be creative. It was there that he painted landscapes of Riviera life and where he wrote edited parts of his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*.

Chanel, with the help of the Duke of Westminster, purchased the property at Roquebrune east of Monaco in the south of France in February 1929.<sup>1 2 3</sup> "It is therefore an essential witness to the life of Gabrielle Chanel, which today joins the patrimony of Chanel," the House of Chanel stated in its announcement on October 1, 2015, adding that La Pausa was to be renovated in the spirit of its origins.<sup>4</sup> "La Pausa will radiate the culture and values of the House of Chanel."<sup>5</sup> In 2007, the House of Chanel even named a perfume for Coco's villa--"28 La Pausa" created by its perfumer Jacques Polge as part of its "Les Exclusifs" collection.

As to how the House of Chanel planned to use its historic acquisition, the *Telegraph* in the United Kingdom wrote, "It's surely only a matter of time before creative director Karl Lagerfeld stages a blockbuster of a fashion show there."<sup>6</sup>

The villa is imbued with a romantic spirit associated with both women who had given much of themselves to the villa amidst lavender fields. Each had ascended the stark white staircase to make their illustrious house guest Winston Churchill feel at home in his rooms upstairs. The spirits of both women could be found blended with the ethereal spot where Mary Magdalene by legend once paused during her journey from Jerusalem following the crucifixion of Jesus.

The intrigues involving Churchill and the two females who owned La Pausa were the stuff of which legends were made on the Riviera. He adored them both like a benevolent father figure and visited villa La Pausa during each of their periods of ownership, first as the best friend of Chanel's lover

“Benny”, and later as the former Prime Minister that the flirtatious Wendy called “darling dear” or “pumpkin pie.”

Winston Churchill found life on the French Riviera so appealing that he availed himself of the invitations of several owners of villas that dotted the coastline. But he found paradise in Pausa, not only because of its majestic sea views but also because of the doting he received from both owners—first from Coco Chanel who built the villa in 1930, and from Wendy Reves who was brought there in 1953 as the mistress of Emery Reves who had just purchased the villa. Churchill exercised a profound effect on both women’s lives.

His fascination came easily because they shared many common traits. Both had risen from impoverished childhoods and become strong-willed and self-sufficient. Both were successful in the fashion business, Chanel as a world-famous designer and Wendy as a renowned model, and survived quite well on their own. They each had spunk, independent spirits, and dominating personalities. They each gravitated to the famous and talented. They each met a series of men who uplifted them in the social and economic realms far higher than they could ever have achieved on their own. And they each flaunted traditional mores--neither Coco nor Wendy considered marriage a prerequisite to living with a man.

The villa was built at the height of the ten-year love affair between Chanel and Hugh Grosvenor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Westminster, and he not only paid for the villa but made it a gift by letting her sign the deed in her own name. He also furnished it with many of the antique oaken pieces from his British estate. The house was a blend of their tastes—refined, simple, uncluttered, modern—and for Coco, it caused an immediate sensation, especially among the artists who visited

her at the villa including Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, and Paul Iribe.

In living with the Duke of Westminster, Chanel felt proud that she was the enamorata of the wealthiest man in London, the owner of blocks of Mayfair and Belgravia. All the while they were together, she hoped that he would overlook her impoverished roots and elevate her to nobility—she fantasized that the little illegitimate girl reared in a convent might actually take her place in British society as a Duchess on the arm of the wealthiest Duke in the land.

In addition to much of central London, he owned an ancestral country estate dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Cheshire called Eaton Hall. With its 11,000 acres and 54 bedrooms, it would have been a noted showplace even if it had not contained a museum's worth of Rembrandts, Velázquez, Goyas, Rubens and other master artists. The dining room was large enough to seat 60 and lined with family portraits by Reynolds and Gainsborough. In the garage were parked 17 Rolls Royces. Portside were two sailing vessels, *Cutty Sark* and the *Flying Cloud*. Among the London buildings owned by the Duke was Grosvenor House, where he kept Gainsborough's Blue Boy and five Rembrandts; this family townhome eventually was leased to the United States for its American embassy and residence of the American Ambassador to the Court of Saint James.

Coco knew all about the family lineage. The title Duke of Westminster was bestowed by Queen Victoria in 1874 on the Marquess of Westminster whose noble ancestry began with the First Baronet, Sir Richard Grosvenor, 1584-1645. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke not only inherited his grandfather's title, he was nicknamed for his grandfather's racehorse—Bend'Or or

Bendor, and his closest friends like Churchill shortened the name to “Benny”.

Since his primary pleasures were fishing and hunting, Coco learned to be as good a sport as he was and spent much time at his lodge in Scotland and his Château Woolsack in France. His hunting buddy was Winston Churchill whom he’d known since they both served in the Boer War. Churchill’s ancestral home was Blenheim Palace with 187 rooms and 2,000 acres, which was almost as large as his friend Benny’s Eaton Hall, but not quite.



Hugh Grosvenor, Duke of Westminster (“Bendor”)

By his first wife Shelagh, Bendor had three children, but he was heartbroken when the second child, his only son, died at the age of 4 after surgery for appendicitis. That was the major sadness of Bendor’s life, to lose his namesake heir, and he was determined to marry a woman who could fulfill his dream of siring another son.

Initially Chanel had little or no interest in meeting Bendor—she was already the close friend of a titled noble--Grand Duke Dmitri, a member of Russia’s Romanov family, cousin of the last Tsar Nicholas II. A penniless exile, he made obvious his search for an older woman of means. He had been kept by Marthe Davelli who was running out of money trying to keep him in champagne and fancy neckties and asked Chanel if she might be interested in filling the role. So she inherited, for about a year, a noble lover. For the holiday season of 1924, her public

relations director Vera Bate talked Coco into driving down from Paris to Monaco hoping to cruise on his boat, the *Flying Cloud*, which was harbored at Monte Carlo. Vera had grown up treated as a member of the Westminster family in the household of Benny's sister, Margaret, Marchioness of Cambridge, another of the children of the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Westminster. Margaret had taken Vera as a foster child when she was abandoned by her own mother. Vera's full name was Sarah Gertrude Arkwright Bate, and as an intimate of the royal set, she was useful in bringing royal clientele to Chanel's fashion doors in Paris and later in London. Among Chanel's clients in the 1920s was Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon after she married Prince George, later King George VI.

Chanel tried to beg off sailing on the Westminster yacht, but Grand Duke Dmitri was eager to meet Bendor, so in 1923 Chanel agreed reluctantly to go cruising. After Monte Carlo, Chanel and Vera returned to the couture house in Paris to finish the spring collection, and no sooner did they arrive than Westminster followed Chanel's scent like a bloodhound to Paris.

About the same time, Vera introduced Chanel to another of her childhood friends of an even higher rank--Edward, Prince of Wales. The prince too was seen to be smitten with Chanel, even asked her to call him "David", and rumors existed that they might also have had an affair.

Chanel was particularly stunning at this stage of her life, with dark glossy hair and black almond-shaped eyes, sharply defined features, a long willowy neck and angular physique. Her simply styled fashions showed her slender lines to advantage so whether she was wearing bulky tweeds in the style of Eaton Hall, or Parisian lace, she appeared equally elegant.



Coco Chanel at the races with the Duke of Westminster, 1927

Since the Duke was born in 1879, and she in 1883, they were four years apart and in their fourth decade when they met at the height of the Roaring Twenties. In contrast to Coco who had never married any of her series of lovers, Bendor had already been married twice and was said to have philandered often. His first wife was the noblewoman Constance Cornwallis-West, the youngest child of William and Mary Cornwallis-West, who was determined to find an

important match for her daughter. At a party at Blenheim Palace, Mary asked the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, to convince Grosvenor to marry her daughter Constance. The royal warrant succeeded, and the lavish society wedding was celebrated on February 16, 1901, after which they moved into Grosvenor House on Park Lane. She gave birth to three children, but if their marriage was ever cohesive it frayed after the death of their unfortunate son; Bendor blamed Shelagh for being neglectful of the child. He was incensed that she did not even attend the boy's funeral. There were rumors that she was distracted by her affair with the Duke of Alba. Bendor himself was hardly a paragon of virtue, a longtime playboy with his own string of "nocturnal adventures."<sup>7</sup> After Shelagh became pregnant again but gave birth to a daughter, Bendor moved on. They divorced in 1919 and the very next year, the Duke married again, hoping his new wife would quickly produce the substitute heir. This second wife was Violet Mary Nelson, with whom he'd also been rumored to have had a romantic interlude while still married to Constance.

So when Bendor came across Chanel in the 1920s, the Duke was still married but willing to indulge in conquests and gravitated to the newly famous couture designer. In contrast to Bendor's top-tier aristocratic family, Chanel's parents were unwed peasants. Her mother, Eugénie Devolle, gave birth to her on August 19, 1883, in the poorhouse at Saumur, a market town on the river Loire. Eugénie was 20 years of age, and Chanel's father Henri-Albert Chanel was a 28-year old merchant. Eugénie had already given birth to a daughter Julia when she became pregnant with the next child that she named "Gabrielle" because the birth was in a Catholic hospice and the baby girl's godmother was a nun

named Gabrielle Bonheur—so the infant was baptised Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel. Eugénie gave birth to two boys and three girls, and then she died. Although years later Chanel would claim that her mother had died of tuberculosis, the death was more likely because of the three P's--poverty, pregnancy and pneumonia. Like a scene from *La Bohème*, Eugénie was trying to raise her brood, all five babies and toddlers, in a one-room flat in the railway town of Brive-la-Gaillarde on the main line from Paris to Toulouse.

After Eugénie's death, Albert took the children to the convent Aubazine, and there he abandoned them. The two brothers were sent to live with a peasant family. The three girls—Gabrielle, Julia and Adrienne--were taken in by the nuns of an orphanage abbey.<sup>8</sup> By then, Chanel had turned 12 years old, and the upheaval made her fearful throughout her life that she could lose everything in an instant and be left with nothing. "From my earliest childhood I've been certain that they have taken everything away from me, that I'm dead," she would say.<sup>9</sup>

Chanel and her sisters lived at the abbey for about six years until she turned 18. Her older sister Julia became pregnant and gave birth in 1904 to a baby registered as André Palasse - but then, just like her mother, Julia also died, and the baby boy was left an orphan. Years later, Chanel claimed that Julia had killed herself by slitting her wrists when she discovered that her husband had a mistress.

At any rate, Chanel cared passionately about this child and brought him up as her. As soon as she started seeing Bendor, she asked for help to educate him properly and the Duke paid for his tuition to an English boarding school.

Like with many vignettes about her early years, Chanel remained mysterious throughout her life and told only what

she wanted others to know. The true origins of the baby André were open for speculation, and Chanel's biographer Justine Picardie wrote that it's possible that Chanel's first boyfriend Étienne Balsan, whom she started seeing when she was only 16, may have been the actual father of André because years later Balsan was a neighbor of André and his daughters Gabrielle and Hélène. This was one of the most mysterious enigmas of Chanel's life, as Picardie concluded: "Even now, if you talk to the elderly lady who lives in a house across the road from the abbey, you might hear another story, that the baby was Gabrielle's, not Julia's. 'That's what I heard,' she says, 'but who knows if it is true?'"<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately the nuns at the convent taught Gabrielle to sew. When she and her sister Adrienne were 20, they were sent to the Nôtre Dame school in Moulins, another religious institution run by canonesses, and the Mother Superior found jobs for the girls as shop assistants in a draper's store on the rue de l'Horloge. The girls shared an attic bedroom above the shop and worked weekends for a tailor, altering breeches for cavalry officers.

For amusement, Gabrielle and Adrienne went to La Rotonde, a pavilion in a park in Moulins, where concerts were held for audiences from the local barracks, and here Gabrielle began to fancy herself an entertainer. The gatherings were "rowdy affairs - a combination of music hall and soldiers' saloon", wrote Justine Picardie, "but Gabrielle was determined to start singing on stage, and eventually found a regular slot." However, she had a limited repertoire of only two songs: "Ko Ko Ri Ko" (the French version of "cock-a-doodle-doo") and "*Qui qu'a vu Coco?*", about a sad-faced girl who had lost her dog. The audience mimicked her with barnyard cockerel calls and then they christened her with the

name of the lost dog. From those days forward, Gabrielle would be called "Coco Chanel".<sup>11</sup>

Coco was so serious about her career that she took singing lessons. She gravitated to Vichy where she distributed water to people at the spa, and then sang at night. She was 25 in 1908 when she met the elite of the infantry officers Étienne Balsan, whose family owned a fabric manufacturing plant that produced military uniforms. His brother Jacques later married the American heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt after she divorced her first husband, the Duke of Marlborough.

It turned out that Étienne was a wealthy country gentleman and talked Coco into moving into his Château Royallieu, an estate of horses and hunting grounds, situated near Compiègne. Straight from the convent and rowdy café, she found herself a mistress to a wealthy man who rewarded her by introducing her to the thick of French and British society. He also taught her to hunt and fish since his château was in the woods about eighty miles northeast of Paris, and he introduced her to actresses like Gabrielle Dorziat and Cecile Sorel, the courtesan Émilienne d'Alençon, and the dashing cavalier Captain Arthur Edward (Boy) Capel, the polo playing son of another English aristocratic family who was a friend of King Edward VII and Georges Clemenceau. Capel and Chanel began an affair of their own in 1908. Balsan knew about it and they were said to have discussed how they could manage an adult arrangement in which both men would be her keeper. They came to an agreement about which man would pay which part of her upkeep.<sup>12</sup> She was attracted to whichever man could provide financial stability, and Capel upped the ante by appealing to be her financier.

After she turned 18, Capel brought her to Paris and rented her a room at Hotel Ritz. Since she'd been designing hats as a

hobby and they were actually getting popular, he offered to finance her first shop and pay for her to live in an apartment in Paris. Balsan said he could help too and let her use his apartment on Boulevard Malesherbes to make her hats.

The entrepreneurial Chanel bought straw hats at Galeries Lafayette and decorated them, and they became the rage of the smart set.<sup>13</sup> On January 1, 1910, she set up shop in Paris and erected her sign “Chanel, modes” at 21 Rue Cambon.<sup>14</sup> She carefully absorbed everything Capel taught her about shop-keeping and style, and the simply designed whiskey flask he carried was said to have eventually inspired the bottle design for her fragrance Chanel No. 5. One night she went to a Molière play and noticed that women in the audience were dressed as elaborately as the actresses on stage. She thought to herself: “That can’t last. I’m going to dress them simply and in black.”<sup>15</sup>

Chanel was determined to be a self-reliant businesswoman who would succeed in giving women unfussy clothing. French women had just earned the right to vote in 1919, and the suffragette movement was also ripe in the United States. Women smoked openly, sometimes using long cigarette holders. Rayon had just been invented, revolutionizing the stocking trade. The best-selling book in 1922 France was called *La Garçonne* about a woman who deliberately gets pregnant and plans to rear the baby herself, “independent of the despicable society of men.”<sup>16</sup>

Chanel felt vulnerable about her liaison with Capel, but she was already getting used to sharing her men with other women, as Capel would chase others while traveling on business trips. When World War broke out in 1914, the port city of Deauville was quickly deserted, but Capel persuaded Chanel that would provide an optimum time to open a

clothing boutique there without competition since most other shops had moved away. Her shop was on Rue Gonthaut-Biron and her sister Adrienne, already an actress, helped her by wearing her hats on stage. Chanel also bought reams of Rodier jersey, previously used for men's underwear, and created women's casual loose-fitting sportswear.

She was so successful that in 1915 she opened another shop in Biarritz, the society meeting ground originally made popular by the Spanish-born Empress Eugénie, the consort of Emperor Napoleon III, for whom he commissioned the seaside "Villa Eugénie" in 1854. Ever since, Biarritz had been associated with aristocratic clientele, including King Edward VII of Britain who frequented the resort and casino on a regular basis during his reign. Eugénie's villa had burned in 1901 and was rebuilt as the 5-star Hotel du Palais, one of the most exclusive coastal hotels in all Europe. For most of the ladies that flocked there, money was no object. So Chanel had a ready-made audience for her exclusive designs and she equipped them not only with gowns for the casino but bathing suits for the ocean. One of her ensembles was featured in the American version of *Bazaar* magazine, popularizing her name across the Atlantic.

Chanel and Boy Capel even created their own logo using the C's of their names for two interlocking C's facing from each other, just like their stormy relationship, and it became the famous Chanel logo destined to become the most recognizable brand in all France.



Coco Chanel in 1909

Boy Capel and Chanel stayed together for nine years, during which he was not only her supporter but her business manager and deposited bank securities as a guarantee for her business and overdrafts. Assuming that her profits were abundant, she was surprised one day to learn that the money she believed was hers was still repaying the debts she owed Capel.

On the evening he told her this, they were on their way to dinner in Saint-Germain when he spilled the bad news. She felt physically sick and insisted they return to their apartment in Paris. Later she told a confidant, "I threw my handbag straight at his face and I fled." In a flash, she hated him for paying her way. The next morning, she went to her dress factory on Rue Cambon at dawn and told her head seamstress, "I am not here to have fun, or to spend money like water. I am here to make a fortune."<sup>17</sup>

Chanel accidentally came upon the idea of the "little black dress". This evolved from a near-tragedy one night when she was preparing to attend an opera for the first time. She had a white dress, and was styling her hair that flowed beneath her waist, wrapping it in braids. In the bathroom was a gas burner and to get the water warmer, she fiddled with the pilot

light. It exploded, covering her white dress and hair in soot.

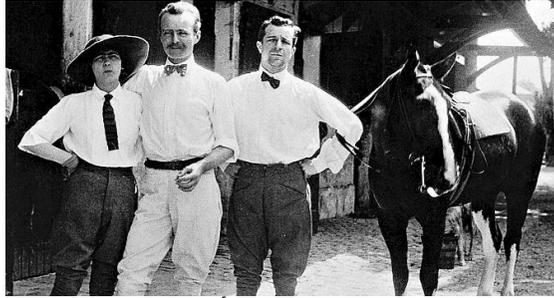
Already running late, she started cutting off the braids and slipped on a black dress and went to

the opera anyway. There the traditionally corseted ladies were fascinated, perhaps envious, to see her with bobbed hair and wearing a black sheath. A new chic Chanel style had just been formulated.

In 1918, Capel married the British aristocrat Diana Wyndham, a daughter of Lord Ribblesdale and widow of Captain Percy Wyndham who had been killed in action in 1914 and was Bendor's half-brother. Capel and Diana had



Coco Chanel's early jersey fashions from March 1917



Chanel with Étienne Balsan (right).

been married only a year and she was pregnant when he was killed in an auto crash on December 22, 1919. Rumor had it that he was anxiously speeding because he was en route to a pre-Christmas rendezvous with Chanel.

He still thought enough of Coco to bequeath her £40,000 in his will, which allowed her to move into a new villa in Garches, a suburb of Paris, and to

redesign the exterior in her preferred hues of black and beige.

Chanel's closest friend was the pianist Misia Sert whom she had met in 1917 at the home of actress Cécile Sorel. Misia provided Chanel with emotional support after Capel died. Chanel described Misia as being to Paris "what the goddess Kali is to the Hindu pantheon," in other words, "the goddess of destruction and creation" or "the St. Bernard that saves you but holds your head under water as he drags you to shore."

Misia's most important functions for Chanel were to help her get through the tremendous grief she felt of losing Capel, and then to distract her through introducing her to many more artists, some from her native Russia. Misia, born in 1872 at Tsarskoye Selo outside of St. Petersburg, was the daughter of Cyprian Godebski, a sculptor and professor at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. Her mother, Zofia Servais, was the daughter of the renowned Belgian cellist, Adrien-François Servais. After her mother died, Misia was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in Brussels, and the composer Franz Liszt was their family friend. When Misia's father remarried, the family moved to Paris.

At the age of 21, Misia married her cousin Thadée Natanson, a Polish émigré and socialist. Their home on Rue St. Florentine became a gathering place for writer Marcel Proust, artists Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Debussy, Stéphane Mallarmé, and André Gide. Misia's portrait by Renoir later hung in the Tate Gallery, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec painted her portrait in 1897.

In 1889, Natanson debuted *La Revue blanche*, a periodical committed to nurturing new talent and showcasing the work of the post-Impressionists called Les Nabis. Misia appeared in advertising posters by Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. Proust used Misia as the prototype for the

characters of "Princess Yourbeletieff" and "Madame Verdurin" in his roman à clef *À la recherche du temps perdu*, (*Remembrance of Things Past*).

Needing a benefactor, Natanson approached Alfred Edwards, founder of the foremost newspaper in Paris, *Le Matin*. Edwards had become enamored with Misia and taken her as his mistress in 1903. Edwards said he would supply money, but only on the condition that Natanson relinquish his wife to him, so on February 24, 1905, she became the wife of Alfred Edwards. Misia and her second husband lived in an opulent lifestyle on Rue de Rivoli overlooking the Tuileries Gardens. Misia's guests included Maurice Ravel who dedicated *Le Cygne* (The Swan) in "Histoires naturelles" and *La Valse* (The Waltz) to her. She also accompanied Enrico Caruso on the piano while the opera star entertained the assembled listeners with a repertory of Neapolitan songs. This artistic lifestyle continued until Misia divorced her second husband because of his infidelities in 1909.

In 1920, she married Spanish painter José-Maria Sert whom she nicknamed "Jojo". Their relationship with Chanel was so close that they took her along on their honeymoon to Italy.<sup>18</sup> While in Venice, Misia introduced Chanel to Sergei Diaghilev, founder of Ballet Russes. When José-Maria Sert had an affair with Princess Isabelle Roussadana Mdivani, known as "Roussy", Misia also entered into a lesbian relationship with her, and the three lived together in a *ménage à trois*.

Coco offered financial aid to the ballet and met Nijinsky, Eric Satie, Picasso, and Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich, whose uncle was the deposed Russian Tsar Nicholas II. Chanel and Dmitri began a year-long affair and she hired his sister Grand Duchess Marie as director of an embroidery workshop.<sup>19</sup> Chanel caught the Slavic spirit and started producing tunics,

baroque jewelry, and in 1921, perfume. She commissioned Ernest Beaux, a chemist who had worked for Rallet in Moscow, and he made five versions of the proposed perfume. She chose the fifth one and called it Chanel No. 5. Then in 1922 he produced No. 22 followed by Gardenia in 1925, Bois des Iles in 1925 and Cuir de Russie in 1927.<sup>20</sup>

Coco flaunted conventions right and left. She took to the beach and got a suntan, she dieted, she exercised, and she wore casual clothing and became the prototype of the 20<sup>th</sup> century woman.

Her 18<sup>th</sup> century townhouse was at 29 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and became a meeting place for most of the famous artists associated with 1920s “crazy years”—Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet and the Group of Six. Cocteau asked Picasso to design sets and Chanel the costumes for his production of *Antigone*. The lead actress was convinced by Cocteau to shave her head and pluck her eyebrows so as to be more in character of his vision of the Greek heroine.<sup>21</sup>

The striking looks of Coco made her an inevitable subject for art. She was immortalized in sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz and sat for a portrait by Marie Laurencin which eventually hung in the Louvre.

In 1924 Cocteau and Diaghilev collaborated on the Ballets Russes operetta *Le Train Bleu* scored by Darius Milhaud. Chanel was commissioned to design costumes, and through the Ballet Russes, she met the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky who worked with ballet master Diaghilev on the ballets “The Firebird,” “Petrushka”, and “The Rite of Spring.” Soon Chanel and Stravinsky were involved, while both he and Diaghilev were dependent on Chanel and Misia Sert’s financial support. One night as the curtain was about to go up, Diaghilev suddenly came into Misia’s box asking “Do you

have 20,000 francs? The costumer refuses to let the curtain go up until he is paid."<sup>22</sup> As a supporter of the arts and artistes, Misia also gave money to poet Pierre Reverdy. And when Diaghilev was dying in Venice in August 1929, Misia was at his side and then paid for his funeral.



Coco Chanel in 1920

In Coco's habit of transferring from man to man, she next had an affair with Reverdy, who introduced her to the avant garde movements of surrealism, dadaism, and cubism. She sponsored the publication of a volume of his poetry, with illustrations by Picasso, who during that period was spending a good deal of time at her townhome and let social activities eclipse his art. After he married Olga Khokhlova, a dancer with the Ballets Russes, one of the circle commented, "Picasso is still doing beautiful work—when he has time."<sup>23</sup> Reverdy drifted slowly from Chanel when he chose to lead a contemplative life at a monastery outside of Paris and remained a lay monk there until his death in 1960.<sup>24</sup>

Although Chanel's affair with Reverdy ended in 1926, they maintained their friendship for another forty years during which she became as famous as their mutual friends Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau, and as wealthy too. By the 1920s, she was



Coco Chanel in the 1930's

attracting customers willing to pay any price to be enveloped in her uncorseted contemporary chic.

In her desire to shock, she also marketed herself by posing for dramatic photographs. Sensing that images of herself smoking equated to appearing liberated, she seldom appeared even in formal portraits without a cigarette either between her lips or her fingers. Even when she was photographed while lying in bed at villa La Pausa, she was holding her trade-mark cigarette.

After adventuring with the growing parade of admirers, her next was the wealthiest of all—the afore-mentioned Duke of Westminster, the snobbish scion Bendor, but just like with her patterns, she cut him to size. Soon after their initial encounter in Monte Carlo, he sent her a huge bouquet of flowers and a vegetable crate at the bottom of which was a large uncut emerald. For the next five years they were together, sometimes passionately, other times downgraded to friendly. Either way, he kept showering her with jewels and fine art. Chanel told the writer Paul Morand, who eventually wrote her biography *The Allure of Chanel*, “Westminster liked me because I was French. English women are possessive and

cold. Men get bored with them.”<sup>25</sup> One night Westminster hired an orchestra from Monte Carlo to come aboard his yacht and play dancing music for just the two of them. She contributed her share of petulance to the stormy seas, and once threw a rope of pearls he’d just given her overboard, and another time tossed an emerald he’d just given her to the bottom of the sea.

The Duke was still married to his second wife Violet when he started pursuing Chanel, and in 1924, he formally separated and started bringing Chanel to his grand country estate, Eaton Hall. There they hosted rounds of parties and tennis matches, cotillions and sporting events of fishing, riding, and hunting. Bendor resented the time she was away creating fashion and insisted that she open a boutique in London to be nearer so he bought her a house in Mayfair. Chanel insisted that he also pay for her nephew André to enroll in an exclusive British school, and after the boy graduated, she had him manage her London-based business and invited him occasionally to Eaton Hall. Soon he got married, and he and his wife named their first child “Gabrielle”.<sup>26</sup>

Bendor also owned a glorified hunting lodge,



Chanel hunting with Winston Churchill, 1928

Château de Woolsack, at Mimizan in the Landes district between Bordeaux and Biarritz. While visiting this lush hunting and fishing ground, Chanel met Bendor's longtime friend Winston Churchill for the first time. On January 28, 1927, while staying at the Grand Hotel at Dieppe, France, he wrote to his wife Clementine about his adventures with Bendor, shortening his nickname to "Benny":

"Yesterday, we hunted the penwiper (wild boar). A dramatic moment occurred when he appeared from a lake where he had refreshed himself & galloped into our midst. The wire netting around a covert prevented his escape. He turned at bay. Colonel Hunter fired and missed. Benny advanced pistol in hand—but luckily on horseback—to fire the final shot. The pistol is in bad order and would not cock. The penwiper charged, grazed the horse, scattered the company and eventually made his retreat & escape into the depths of the forest. Tomorrow we hunt again...

"The famous Coco (Chanel) turned up & I took a great fancy to her. A most capable & agreeable woman—much the strongest personality Benny has been up against. She hunted vigorously all day, motored to Paris after dinner, & is today engaged in passing & improving dresses on endless streams of mannequins. Altogether 200 models have to be settled in about 3 weeks. Some have to be altered ten times. She does it with her own fingers, pinning, cutting, looping, etc."<sup>27</sup>

Clementine wrote a reply to her husband that she thought his mention of Chanel was even more exciting than the tale of the penwiper: "I should say I would like to know her. She must be a genius."<sup>28</sup>

On October 1, 1927, Churchill wrote to Clementine again from Stack Lodge, Lairg, Scotland: "Coco is here in place of Violet (the Duchess). She fishes from morn till night & in two

months has killed 50 salmon. She is vy agreeable—really a gt & strong being fit to rule a man or an Empire. Benny vy well and I think extremely happy to be mated with an equal—her ability balancing his power. We are only 3 on the river and have all the plums. Today the river was in perfect order & of course after 6 hours of grinding toil (which has nearly broken my back) not a fish wd bite. Curious creatures of caprice—these salmon! If they don't choose to be killed, nothing will persuade them."<sup>29</sup>



Villa La Pausa exterior

Knowing how much Bendor wanted a son, Chanel tried to conceive, but that proved too challenging for her at age 46 (as of 1929). Nevertheless, she wanted to create a cozy home environment, hoping Bendor would be content with her and give up his mission. Perhaps, she dreamed, he would even make her the next Duchess of Westminster—she didn't care if she were his third. If they built a home together, surely the

domestic environment would make him feel complete so that he'd not be tempted further to stray.

They'd vacationed in the South of France frequently but always stayed on his yacht or in hotel suites. So during their next visit to Monte Carlo in 1928, she suggested they scout properties and came upon available acreage that had been the former hunting grounds of the Grimaldi family that had ruled Monaco since 1375 and traced its roots to Genoa in 1070. The site was so splendid, with its wide hilltop view of the Mediterranean, that Bendor paid 1.8 million francs for the 2.6 hectares—6.4 acres—in February 1929 and gave it to Chanel, allowing her to sign the deed in her own name. The villa was completed in early 1930 at a final cost of 6 million francs.

Coco and the Duke were enchanted with the property. The land was on the sloping hills of the Maritime Alps. Below was the village of Roquebrune-Cap Martin, to the left was the small town of Menton, and to the west was the princely domain of Monaco. Some of the owners of neighboring villas were the aforementioned Jacques Balsan and his wife, née Consuelo Vanderbilt, another international socialite Daisy Fellowes, and Viscount Esmond Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News*, who sometimes had the Prince of Wales and the perennial houseguest Winston Churchill stay at his villa.

This was the land of Emperors and royalty. The deposed French Empress Eugénie, widowed after the death of Napoleon III and no longer using her villa at Biarritz, had built one at Menton on the water's edge in 1894. The Riviera earned its cachet when both Eugénie and Queen Victoria paid many visits there, Victoria until she died in 1901 and Eugénie in 1920. Other aristocrats followed their example, turning the eastern French Riviera nearest Italy into a mutually agreed

meeting ground of the moneyed classes. The Riviera was also a playground for the talented, and in the 1920s these included writers Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and the composer Cole Porter with his wife Linda.<sup>30</sup>

Once they had settled on the site, Bendor and Chanel started envisioning their ideal villa. Architect Robert Streitz was recommended by their mutual acquaintance, Count Jean de Segonzac, and they conducted the interview on the *Flying Cloud*. Three days later he brought drawings of the proposed villa containing three wings that wrapped around an open courtyard bordered with columns.



Villa La Pausa Great Hall and arches leading to courtyard

Chanel and Bendor were impressed and gave him the commission so long as he would follow Chanel's guidance to the letter. She wanted the residence to resemble a manor such as one would see in the British countryside, like Eaton Hall, except with the essentials required of Mediterranean villas

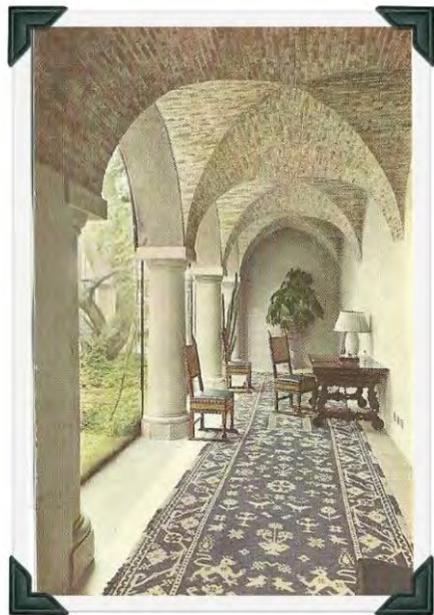
such as large windows to let in the sea breezes, a tile roof, and outdoor space for relaxing *al fresco*. And she wanted the interior to resemble the orphanage where she had grown up.

Since the land was atop a hill and sloped, a massive foundation was required to build a rock solid house. The project engineer Edgar Maggiore at first tried to dissuade her from building on the land, regardless of Bendor's having just purchased it,<sup>31</sup> but she insisted that she wanted her villa on that site and no other because of its wide Mediterranean seascape. She required that it contain more than 10,000 square feet and a dramatic white staircase such as the one she remembered at Aubazaine.<sup>32</sup> To duplicate that one as precisely as possible, Streitz visited her old orphanage where he studied the stone staircase in stark white angles that curved to the landing above. While there, he also met with the Mother Superior and asked if she remembered Gabrielle Chanel. Yes, she answered, she remembered her well, that unfortunate waif—"an illegitimate child born in the poorhouse."<sup>33</sup>

Chanel had established a boutique at Cannes in 1923, so she was very familiar with the Riviera and visited the construction site at least once a month, taking the Blue Train from Paris to Roquebrune. Before the plaster was poured on the exterior, she asked the project engineer to come to Paris so she could choose from samples of gray tints. The roof would require 20,000 handmade sun-baked tiles. When the villa was nearly completed, attention was turned to the gardens that stretched among olive and orange trees dotting the land, and she had two dozen antique olive trees transplanted from Antibes. Climbing rosebushes were planted in a variety of pastel tints to frame the flowerbeds.

The interior was the precursor of what later would be known as the minimalist style. The Duke gave Coco a variety of 17<sup>th</sup> century oak pieces from his estate in Britain, and she liked the heavy lines to be seen bare, so she placed virtually no bric-a-brac on top of the tables. Her color palette was neutral in beiges with mahogany-upholstered sofas. More beige was chosen for the silk curtains framing the arched French doors that led to the courtyard. Massive stone fireplaces reached to the ceilings in the main rooms with wide mantels, as seen in a photograph taken later of the artist Salvador Dalí posing on a mantel outstretched.

The house consisted of seven bedroom suites, including a large suite each for Chanel and Bendor, separated by a white marble bathroom. Each of the bathrooms was outfitted with a second door servant's entrance. The Duke's bedroom was covered in dark oak paneling. In Coco's bedroom was more oak paneling, windows hung with beige curtains, and a bed of wrought iron, to which she attached stars to the headboard.



Villa La Pausa courtyard loggia

Chanel and Bendor wanted Churchill to see the villa while it was under construction and had him come take a look,<sup>34</sup>

and so he saw the beginnings of the villa where he was to make multiple visits throughout the next thirty years. Once the villa was completed, Chanel wanted it to function like a first-class hotel. Under the direction of her house manager, Admiral Castelan, she had her guests treated like royalty, which pleased Churchill who boasted that he was used to no less than the best. Guests could push a button and get their breakfasts in two minutes flat, including twin thermoses of coffee and warm milk. For luncheon there was usually a relaxed buffet with a variety of meats, pasta, and other delectable French dishes.<sup>35</sup>

There were also two bungalows on the property affording privacy. Chanel's public relations director Vera Bate had married Alberto Lombardi, and was living in Italy, and they often stayed at "La Colline", one of the two guest cottages. Bendor converted another outer building into an art studio where he painted watercolors—or intended to.

Although initially he found the villa a pleasant retreat, he continued to pursue other women and by late 1929 he was spending almost no time at the villa at all. Chanel's dream of outfitting him with their home together had evaporated. Again she was being forced to tolerate his infidelities with a blasé air. But he went way too far when he boldly brought one of his pursuits aboard the yacht while he and Coco were sailing together.

Hardly had she assimilated that humility when came the *coup de grace*, that he was getting married. Shunning the orphan Coco, he had found an aristocratic woman, and even worse, this socialite was being promoted by their mutual friend, Churchill.

In keeping with Chanel's hot temper, her bust-up with Bendor was stormy. "It was at La Pausa that she finally broke

with Westminster,” wrote the historian Marcel Haedrich. “The guests slept badly that night, kept awake by sharp exchanges. Churchill had stepped in, had reminded the duke of his obligations. The duke was to marry the daughter of a chief of protocol at Buckingham Palace.”<sup>36</sup> Regardless, that winter, Chanel was again at Eaton Hall, as evidenced by another photograph of her hunting on the estate alongside her Judas--Winston Churchill.<sup>37</sup>

Churchill’s mother was the American-born Jennie, but he was a scion of the British nobility and believed that like should marry like. Therefore Chanel was deemed ineligible for consideration as a future Duchess. The woman that Churchill was egging Bendor to marry was Loelia Mary Ponsonby, and by Christmas they had announced their engagement.<sup>38</sup> Loelia had the required credentials of nobility, having spent her childhood growing up at the royal residences of St. James Palace, Park House at Sandringham and Birkhall. Her title was Lady Lindsay, née Ponsonby, the only daughter of Sir Frederick Ponsonby, later the first Baron Ponsonby.

The Duke had the gall to bring his fiancée to meet Chanel, and asked for her impression, as though wanting her to endorse the marriage. It would have made no difference what she said-- Winston Churchill was practically driving the couple to the altar and served as Bendor’s Best Man. The wedding on February 20, 1930 was publicized as one of the great society affairs of the year. But honeymooning on the *Flying Cloud*, Loelia got seasick and admitted to being an ill-suited sailor, and two days after the wedding Bendor was back in Paris with Chanel.



Coco Chanel, 1930, with her dog Gigot on the grounds  
of Villa La Pausa

Through what heartbreak she sustained, Chanel's consolation was that the deed to La Pausa was in her name only, and shortly after Bendor's publicized wedding, she

invited equal press by having the American version of *Vogue* magazine feature her estate. The issue rhapsodized that La Pausa was “one of the most enchanting villas that ever materialized on the shores of the Mediterranean.”<sup>39</sup>

Chanel’s major distraction after her breakup with Bendor was being invited to Hollywood by Samuel L. Goldwyn to design costumes for movies. She was willing to go to Hollywood since she was guaranteed a contract of \$1 million, which in 1931, two years after Black Friday launched the Great Depression, was a major incentive. She and her companion Misia Sert took the *Europa* ship to New York and stayed at the Pierre Hotel, but en route, they both caught the flu. Ten days later they took the train to Hollywood and were met by studio executives as well as Greta Garbo.

They went to a party honoring Chanel at Goldwyn’s house that was attended by Marlene Dietrich, Claudette Colbert, and directors George Cukor and Erich von Stroheim who kissed Chanel’s hand and said, “You are a seamstress, I believe?”<sup>40</sup> For *Palmy Days*, she made four versions of a dress for the starlet Barbara Weeks, and then dressed the leads Ina Claire, Joan Blondell and Madge Evans for *The Greeks Had a Word for It*. Chanel completed thirty ensembles although half of them in Hollywood and half after she returned to Paris. Chanel’s third movie project was to dress Gloria Swanson for *Tonight or Never*, and these fashions too were completed in Paris where Swanson went for her fittings. But she had found herself pregnant and gained five pounds so that the first measurements no longer fit. Chanel snapped at her, “Take off the girdle and lose five pounds. You have no right to fluctuate in the middle of fittings.” Chanel parted with Goldwyn “in a huff” after he complained that her dresses were not sensational enough. When she returned to Paris, she started

designing jewelry in real diamonds, rather than her usual costume, and held an exposition on Faubourg Saint-Honoré.<sup>41</sup> She owned so many jewels given her by the Duke of Westminster that she would glop them on all at once, even with sweaters and tweeds, and now she was turning a diamond necklace into a makeshift headband and wearing her long pearl strands behind her neck down to her skirt.

But Benny's third marriage soon turned sour when it was evident that Loelia was unable to bear children. Before Bendor and Loelia divorced in 1947, he was said to be no more faithful to her than he had been to Chanel, and he and Chanel continued to see each other, on-again, off-again, and he would continue to invite her to Eaton Hall. Legend had it that when Chanel was asked why she had never married Bendor, she answered, "There have been several Duchesses of Westminster. There is only one Chanel," but she protested



Coco Chanel, 1938, in bed at La Pausa during a visit by her friend Jean Godebski and his sister Mimie Godebska Blacque-Belair

that the statement was far too vulgar for her to have ever uttered to Bendor, and he would have laughed in her face. More likely the quote came from the time she was having lunch with Sir Charles Mendl at the British embassy in Paris and he asked her why she had turned down Westminster's proposal, assuming the Duke had proposed.

She replied that there were already “so many” duchesses already, and he said, “But there is only one Coco Chanel.”<sup>42</sup> To the left is Coco Chanel in bed at La Pausa while visited by her friend Jean Godebski and his sister Mimie Godebska Blacque-Belair. The Godebskis were a Polish family living in Paris and included Cipa, Ida, and their children Jean and Mimie, and Misia, who was Cipa’s sister. They were known for their close friendship with the composer Maurice Ravel, and invited musicians and artists to regular Sunday evening salons at their home on rue Saint-Florentine and later rue d’Athenes. Cipa’s portrait was painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, and Ravel completed his composition of “Ma mère l’oye” for Mimie and Jean.<sup>43</sup>

Chanel used the villa for entertaining and dinner parties and to bring her artist friends away from the bustle of Paris. After the stormy bust-up between Coco and Westminster, Churchill was no longer invited to La Pausa. He moved on and by 1934 had come upon a new favorite villa, Château de l’Horizon, which also treated him royally. That villa was even larger than La Pausa, and was indeed one of the largest ever built on the Mediterranean, constructed two years earlier by the American architect Barry Dierks for the actress Maxine Elliott. She was born in Maine and had become such a popular New York actress that she built her own theater, and was linked with the financier J.P. Morgan who helped her invest successfully.



Coco Chanel's dinner party at La Pausa

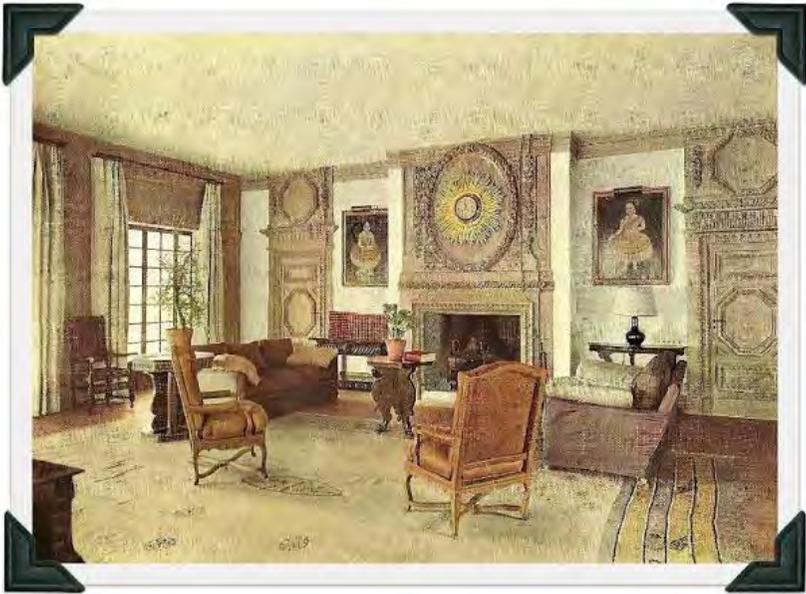
To create her white palace, Dierks built the façades of stucco pierced by numerous openings which created covered arcaded galleries. The upper floor consisted of ten bedrooms and seven bathrooms. The swimming pool was a long rectangle extending the length of the main building parallel with the coast and overlooking the sea, much like the later infinity pools, except with a chute straight from the pool to the sea below.



La Pausa's courtyard as seen from exterior



La Pausa's dining room



La Pausa living room



Actress Maxine Elliott's Château de l'Horizon where Churchill was a guest in the late 1930's

Maxine Elliott was an exuberant brunette beauty who could discuss high finance with the top stockbrokers and gravitated to the famous and wealthy. As a noted Riviera hostess, she had world-class chefs but tasted too much of her villa's cuisine and grew to 230 pounds. Churchill used his space to paint scenes of the Mediterranean at the same time he was finishing his biography of the Duke of Marlborough, just as he later used the villa La Pausa to paint and edit his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*.

Château de l'Horizon, which still exists as of 2015, was on the shores of Golfe-Juan at Vallauris, and received many international celebrities including Lloyd George, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Noël Coward and Sir Anthony Eden. To Churchill's dismay, his relaxing times at the château were interrupted by the Nazi conquest of Eastern Europe as well as Maxine Elliott's untimely death in 1940. At the outbreak of World War II, he was reappointed First Lord of the Admiralty, and after the resignation of Neville Chamberlain on May 10, 1940, he was elevated to Prime Minister. For five years that seemed interminable, he steadfastly refused to consider surrender when the British Commonwealth was the only European nation holding its own against the Nazi onslaught.

Five years of fear and sobriety behind, the mad life on the Riviera resumed after the war, when the villa was rented by Rosita Winston who gave dinner parties for celebrities like Greta Garbo, Jack Warner and Maurice Chevalier. In 1948, that villa was purchased by Prince Ali Khan and was the scene of his marriage to actress Rita Hayworth the next year. Its most recent owner since 1979 has been King Fahd of Saudi Arabia who enlarged it further, making it into a large Arab-style encampment.