Perspective
Heart of Glass

By Robert Klara Chanel No. 5's distinctive bottle is so integral to the perfume that the brand keeps showing it again and again...and again.

Sometime around 1913, a skinny and salacious Coco Chanel took as her lover one Arthur Edward "Boy" Capel. The rich young Englishman's sartorial tastes included a square-cornered whiskey decanter that impressed the young Coco—her designer's eye keener by the day—as uniquely modern. Hold that thought for a moment. We'll come back to it.

Nobody in marketing needs to be told about the importance of product consistency. It is why the Big Mac and fries you buy in Baltimore are going to taste the same as the ones dropped on your tray in Berlin or Bangkok. Consistency is all, and while this bit of branding wisdom applies most commonly to products, savvier companies have extended it to retail design, customer service and, as the images on these pages show, to advertising imagery.

Now in its 90th year of production, Chanel No. 5 is the best-selling fragrance of all time, and one with a long trail of print ads behind it. But whether the ad comes from 1968 (like the one at right) or just a few weeks ago (opposite page), there's a good chance you'll encounter the same stylistic elements therein, to wit: the bottle and...well, the bottle. Sure, beautiful models have come and gone, but the signature modernist flacon is the centerpiece. And that's no accident. "Chanel has always kept a certain kind of minimalized brand identity," noted Tilar Mazzeo, author of *The Secret of Chanel No. 5*. "It's all about the form and the line of the bottle. You're right to show these ads next to each other."

When No. 5 *parfum*—an aliphatic aldehyde with a big wet kiss of jasmine and rose—debuted in 1922, its bottle was actually delicate crystal with a rounded top. But the container proved too fragile for shipping. It was then that Mlle. Chanel recalled the shape of the whiskey decanter owned by her erstwhile English paramour and, with some modifications to the neck and stopper, turned it into No. 5's iconic container. And though the brand's marketing has taken the occasional detour into odd territory (like the 1985 ad showing a woman in a leather miniskirt atomizing her legs), its imagery has remained rooted in that bottle. "Coco Chanel wanted to mass produce the bottle in 1924 because she wanted to use that form," Mazzeo said. "It had simple lines, and she also liked the translucency—it was invisible."

Think about why those attributes work. Whether we're in the gray-scale 1960s or the digital color of today, the bottle's clean, deliberative profile still evokes the modernity and racy independence of the machine age—a theme that's proven essentially timeless. The bottle's "invisibility," meanwhile, acts as a literal window to the amber-colored perfume inside. The chic minimalism of both features reflects the sophistication of product and wearer alike with a kind of seamless visual messaging that obviates the need for explanatory copy or fawning models.

What's left is easily the most consistent visual branding that the advertising world has ever seen, one that, in Mazzeo's words "works on the soft edge of the avant-garde."

And the rounded edge of a memorable bottle.

Contrary to popular lore, it actually took quite a few years for No. 5's bottle to attain cultural icon status. "There were other bottles that looked like this during the 1930s," Mazzeo said. But when the Museum of Modern Art featured Chanel No. 5's packaging in 1959, the door to fame was nudged open. By the time this ad ran in 1968, the square bottle was all an advertisement needed to show.

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Since Chanel has long made a variety of numbered perfumes, No. 5 has always been usefully specific. But, as Mazzeo points out, it was also a kind of shorthand for those in the know. "It was part of the exclusivity," she said. "No. 5 was all you needed to say—not even Chanel."

While Coco Chanel changed the bottle in 1924 to the square profile with faceted corners, the critical addition was the "invisibility" afforded by its large, flat surfaces. These behaved as windows onto the juice itself.

The simple white label with its sans serif lettering is largely unchanged from 1924. It remains a potent visual cue for the brand because it reinforces an ethos of sleek functionality. "It goes back to the notion of minimalism," Mazzeo said, "and modernity."