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ICON OF LINGERIE

Andreas Tolke: It is almost 10 years that you own your own name again. Chantal Thomass. Again? Yes. Except I don't own my name alone. I have new partners. Before in the 1980s, it was my own company, a small company. If you want money from the bank, you have to put in your name — as it's a personalized business and the name, my name, is part of the company. The name becomes a trademark. And then, when the Japanese decided not to have me anymore, we fought, they won and kept my name. I had to buy it back 10 years ago. And to buy it I had to take partners. I did have money to pay for that. So I have 34% of my name.

AT: So you have the Chant.

CT: I have?

AT: You own the 'Chant' and the 'al Thomass' belongs to them.

CT: You can say that [laughs].

AT: So you are not a person, you're a trademark?

CT: I am used to it. It was very difficult the three years when I could not use my name, because it's my real name. So I couldn't work. I couldn't sign any design as Chantal Thomass. But I could say, "Madame Chantal Thomass." [laughs] I don't think about it anymore.

Person and trademark

AT: What changed within the last 10 years that you were able to be a person and a trademark as one?

CT: The big change is that lingerie was only a part of my job before. I did ready-to-wear, plus lingerie. And now I only design lingerie.

AT: And you did interior design as well.

CT: Yes, as well as shoes, accessories, watches.

AT: Do you think about starting in that field again?

CT: Yes, but the group now is very into my lingerie, and they don't think so much about other things.

AT: So you have to look for other partners?

CT: No, I have to find licenses. I have to find people on finance — that's a tough job. Maybe tougher than to be a designer. But I escape pure lingerie from time to time. I do bathing suits now. And I did a funny thing last season. I designed a washing machine especially for lingerie. In pink — like my stores. It's really fun. Something different to do just one time — something I really liked.

AT: Let's talk lingerie: Everybody is talking about the girls, that they are skinny and bulimic, etcetera. In your shows you work with the prettiest girls — Eva Herzigova, Naomi Campbell, all the big shots. Did something change within the last years?

Chantal Thomass epitomises femininity, sensuality, confidence and elegance. Her petite, lacy, ribbony and silky wares have garnered customers like Brigitte Bardot and other celebs. Chantal, like her designs, projects 'that certain something' that makes French style and lingerie timeless. She speaks to Andreas Tolke about who wears what, lingerie trends, and formulas for the best fits.



CT: We talk a lot about that now, but it has always been like that. All the girls at a couture show are very skinny and thin. Except right now, I think, the girls are taller and taller. They are more than 1 metre 80, but I think it's more important that they are skinny because they are very young. They are 16 and 17. But I don't think there is more anorexia in the model business than everywhere else in the world.

'The models aren't as skinny'

AT: And all these horror stories like the cotton they put in water and swallow to make themselves full?

CT: I have never seen that. I don't live with them. We have a very good hospital for anorexia in France at Madame Charité. I have been there once to talk to the girls. And when you see that — what we see in models is not as skinny as what we see in the hospital. Real anorexia is awful. They look sick; you can tell immediately that they are anorexic. The models, they look thin because yes, they diet because they know that in one month we will have the show. But it is nothing compared to what you can see in the hospital.

AT: But the women buy the lingerie as highly fashionable clothes, and they often want to look as the ads show — as result, most of the women want to be skinnier than they are.

CT: It's in all women. I would love to be skinnier than I am.

AT: What is your problem? You're a 38F.

CT: 38, sometimes 40 if I eat too much.

AT: Still — that is perfect.

CT: Women are like that. They don't know what they have. I don't know! [laughs] Like two weeks ago I said, Okay, I will stop with wine, with potatoes, pasta and all that, to loose two kilos. And I lost my two kilos.

AT: Isn't it more fun to do lingerie for a woman who has beautiful breasts and a real butt and not just a flat backside?

CT: Sure. A perfect body for me is a girl who has boobs and a butt. The nice thing is when they have tits and ass and a talle. For the catalogue I look for girls with boobs and ass, but thin. I don't like to see the bone, I hate that.

AT: Are you measuring for yourself? Can you only wear custom-made or do you have special designs?

CT: No, I wear everything in the collection, I test everything, six months or a year before.

AT: But for you all in black?

CT: We do everything in black. All pieces in the collection are done in black. I have some rare pieces with dots. And I must have one or two white, and one or two red.

AT: For special occasions?

CT: For very special occasions! [laughs] Those I don't wear so often. I prefer black. I think it is more beautiful on my skin. If you are pale, it looks so much better when you wear black.

AT: On the other hand, you have to be so creative in your job, and you restrict yourself. You have had the same hairdo for years; you've only worn black for years.

CT: Yes, but you know if you look at people in fashion, who work in fashion, they always dress the same. Lagerfeld does.

AT: He went from Yamamoto and had the big shirts, and now he wears Dior like a second skin. Then he was coming up with the gloves, he was coming up with the jewellery — so he is changing a lot.

CT: Yes, that's true. He is changing a lot, but it's always the same style since he's thin. And I am not the same every day. I have

skinny pants, I have large pants, I have long skirts — it depends. I have a whole room of black clothes in very different shapes.

Lingerie is like clothing!

AT: How sexy can lingerie get? Now we have lingerie we can see through, and which is only a string between the legs. What is the next step? Is there a border?

CT: We always can go on. It's like all other clothes: a new fabric, a new shape, a new shape of bra. It's not difficult every six months to find a new idea. And there are new techniques, new prints. I myself go to the factory to make the print, to make the lace, and it is very inspiring to see the new fabrics. Sometimes it's even a movie that inspires. It feels much easier to design lingerie than ready-to-wear.

AT: When your look at your past collections of lingerie, some pieces were very provocative and probably easier to sell in a sex shop.

CT: Yes, but not made in the same way. In the sex shops, the material was horrible: awful lace, not comfortable, not well done. I am quite classic [laughs].

EVERY SIZE CAN BE SEXY

AT: Is the challenge bigger to do lingerie for a skinny girl or a well-formed one? Does all of your lingerie work with all sizes?

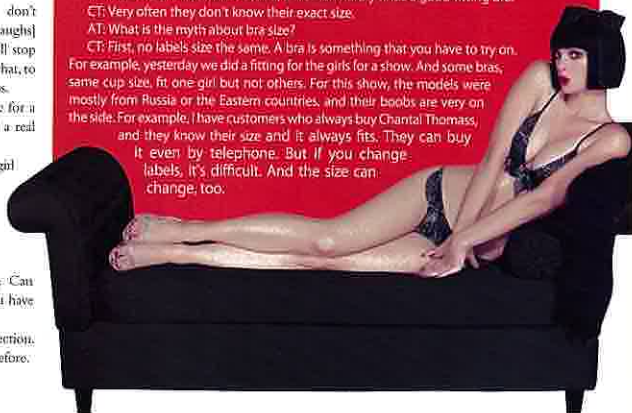
CT: For a girl like a model, everything fits, everything is beautiful. It's easy. But in each collection, we always have three different-sized bras besides the regular. One push-up bra for B-cups and C-cups and we will go to D-cups, because now young girls have bigger boobs. In the US, in Germany and even in France, even stronger women want to be sexy. Before a D-cup or E-cup just had to go with Playtex, and that was it. The young ones don't want to wear that. We have these demands even for an E-cup, and we will start it next season. Every size can look pretty and sexy.

AT: But still, as far as I understand, a woman hardly finds a good-fitting bra.

CT: Very often they don't know their exact size.

AT: What is the myth about bra size?

CT: First, no labels size the same. A bra is something that you have to try on. For example, yesterday we did a fitting for the girls for a show. And some bras, same cup size, fit one girl but not others. For this show, the models were mostly from Russia or the Eastern countries, and their boobs are very on the side. For example, I have customers who always buy Chantal Thomass, and they know their size and it always fits. They can buy it even by telephone. But if you change labels, it's difficult. And the size can change, too.



LOOK: ANDREAS TOLKE / CT: PHOTOGRAFIE WITTES