


# Vorsprung durch Technik

KARL LAGERFELD IS KNOWN AS KING KARL TO HIS FRIENDS FOR GOOD REASON. LIKE A MAGICAL BAROQUE GERMAN PRINCE, HE COMMANDS AND SHAPES ALL THAT HE TOUCHES. MORE THAN EVER, HE REMAINS ORIGINAL, OBSESSIVE AND ALWAYS OPINIONATED

**With** impenetrable eyes, emaciated jowls sucked tight and a jet black leather tie hung like a dog leash around his stiff Edwardian white collar neck, Germany's most famous fashion designer could easily be characterised as a design-conscious Rottweiler. Effortlessly dynamic – who else could pull off fingerless biker gloves at the same time as a belt buckle encrusted with diamonds? – yet evasive to the extreme (he consistently refutes his birth date) Hamburg's most famous fashionista is a hardy stalwart of both the ready-to-wear and haute couture elites. He has the pedigree but he also has a vicious bark than has left fawning models and rivals alike smarting.

From his studio in Paris, he will meticulously powder his ponytail every morning with white shampoo; yet he also childishly admits to not owning a key for his very own house. At times complex, at others just plain eccentric, there can be no doubt that Kaiser Karl is king of the catwalk. If nothing else, Karl Lagerfeld is an enigma.

Today, he is in relaxed mood at his photography studio, a sign perhaps of his multi-faceted creativity and passion for art in its entirety above all else. For the man who can boast being the director of Chanel – the most sought after and luxurious fashion house in the whole of France – life really is a non-stop blank canvas, fabric or film still. Clearly then, design must have irrevocably changed his life? "I designed my life, so it's very different," he says with trademark mystique. "I have a vision. I see that and nothing else. Maybe I'm superficial but the outcome is not that bad." It is clear that he is academically focused on the pursuit of high art, yet he also describes his look as reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin in the 1920s; but perhaps these are paradoxes in themselves. His award-winning fashion collections for Chanel, Fendi and his own eponymous label are most definitely not, however, so perhaps he is a perfectionist seeking perfection? "No, it doesn't exist," he says. "As long as you do the job, you shouldn't feel it's perfect. You always think the next one will be better. The minute you think it's perfect, you'd better stop."

I first came across Karl's work as a curious 20-something, intrigued as to his striking individual look. Like Vivienne Westwood was for the Sex Pistols and the punk movement, Lagerfeld is for today's heroin-chic waif models and counter culture youths. He has photographed a vampish Lily Allen, won over America's sweetheart Katy Perry and designed exclusively for H&M. Retrospectively, however, I had no idea that the 71-year-old worked at the heart of the Parisian couture houses as far back as the 1950s. 

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ABOVE: one of Lagerfeld's most recent ventures is his partnership with bespoke gift-giving company BOKKS



Chanel 1992: Karl Lagerfeld at work surrounded by his assistants and models

Pierre Balmain, Jean Patou, Charles Jourdan, Mario Valentino and Chloé have all benefited from his extravagance. Even then he turned heads both for the right and wrong reasons; his skirts for the 1960 season were the shortest in France.

But since those days, he has struck a fine balance between toying with trends for the high street and continuing his 50 year love affair with Paris's finest – and today, his pacing steps are most frequently heard in the corridors of Chanel's studio on Rue Cambon. "When I took over everybody said to me: 'Don't touch this, it's dead'," he boasts. "Old brands were not in then. But I took it as a challenge, and also because I liked to own it. I liked the owners, the Wertheimer family, they gave me freedom. I thought: 'Let's do it'. Now people look back on it as a sleeping beauty. Today everyone is trying to revive brands, but Chanel was the first and I made it iconic."

Despite the fashion world's famed kissy-kissy approach, I find it impossible to penetrate Lagerfeld's teutonic persona. Partly because of his tightly buttoned Tom Ford jacket – and his rigid trademark lapel of course – but partly because of his crime noir sunglasses. In a prior interview Lagerfeld once explained his logic. "Dark glasses are like portable eye shadow and the world looks more beautiful through tinted glasses," he said. For me, he will always remain a riddle.

Driven to push the boundaries of photography, publishing and perfume – as well as that of his most famous bent – Lagerfeld is perceivably at his creative zenith. "I'm always afraid to be bored," he says curtly. "I think it's interesting to do several things because one thing stimulates another. I think it's all linked and exciting – and I like all of them together. You don't ask a father which child

FOR LAGERFELD, LUXURY AND EXCESS WILL ALWAYS REMAIN A CONSTANT IN HIS LIFE: HE SHOPS AT DIOR HOMME, GALLIANO AND COLETTE; HE HAS A COLLECTION OF AROUND 300,000 BOOKS SCATTERED ACROSS HIS THREE HOMES

Alongside his brimming portfolio, one of Lagerfeld's most recent ventures is his partnership with bespoke gift-giving company BOKKS; a new concept that brings together the best luxury brands in signature Karl Lagerfeld packaging. As an ambassador, he is also the face of its inaugural campaign, which – naturally for Lagerfeld the consummate artist – he photographed himself. "I can't understand why no-one thought of the idea before," he admits staunchly. For Lagerfeld, luxury and excess will always remain a constant in his life: he shops at Dior Homme, Galliano and Colette; he has a collection of around 300,000 books scattered across his three homes in Paris, New York and Monaco; and in France, he even has his own dictionary entry (in the recent edition of *Larousse Small Illustrated Dictionary*, Karl Lagerfeld is officially a proper noun). So what can one buy the man who has everything? "I love boxes, paper, pens and coloured pencils, and things like this," he candidly reveals. "I don't expect expensive gifts. What I like is the idea that someone thought of it. The job was not to pay for it, but to find it."

It is a rare moment of unrestraint from beneath his well groomed monochrome exterior. Perhaps Karl Lagerfeld is also an expert actor, engineering his role as though it were another art form to be mastered and sold. Above all, if today's fashion patriarch was known for design pure and simple, his eulogy would be inspired. For luxury German design, flawless contours and multi-tasking genre-defining style, file under Lagerfeld. In other words: *Vorsprung durch Technik*. ✦

he prefers. Maybe he does prefer one, but he would never admit it. My big chance is that I can mix it all."

His private photography studio on Rue de Lille is a case in point. Situated above the Librairie 7L bookshop, which he also owns, it is lined with floor to ceiling shelves brimming with books and is a menagerie of ideas, concepts and possibilities. "I love to be alone with my camera," he says. "I did an exhibition in Versailles. Huge photos. They were a completely different vision of what people normally see. That's what photography is all about. It's your vision. My best photograph was an architectural picture. It's because you can photograph it alone. With fashion photography you are surrounded by lots of people. One of my other favourite photographs is of Nicole Kidman, which I took for *Vanity Fair*. She had no make-up on, wearing an old gray sweater. She was divine. This was Tom Cruise's

favourite photo, because that's how she really is."

If this was anyone bar Lagerfeld, accusations of narcissism would be levelled. But this is different: Gwyneth, Madonna, Kylie, Mariah, Nicole – as well as Tom – bow to his attention to detail; no other designer seems to inspire such adulation. Ultimately, there is one thing that perhaps elevates King Karl above his counterparts: his respect for luxury.