



PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK KOENIG / GMP / IMAGES

HOLY SMOKE: Karl Lagerfeld acknowledges the public following the Chanel Autumn/Winter 2011-2012 ready-to-wear collection show on 8 March, 2011 in Paris.

□□□ KARL LAGERFELD

Who was Karl?

Karl Lagerfeld refused to be pigeonholed, enjoying his enigmatic status. But how did he manage his evolution from coat designer to global icon? Author of 'How People Become Famous' **RAINER ZITELMANN** uncovers his mystery

KARL LAGERFELD HAD so many professions it would be unfair to identify him exclusively with just one. He once said in an interview that the job title to describe everything he did had yet to be invented.

"His profession changes like a chameleon," is how Paul Sahrer described Lagerfeld's mastery of many domains in his biography. "Fashion designer, discoverer of top models, photographer, interior designer, parfumeur, entrepreneur, silent film maker, lord of the manor, gallery owner, author, porcelain collector, advertising guru, PR man, publisher and bookseller." Lagerfeld was Lagerfeld.

Like almost no-one before or since, he established himself as a brand and narcissism as his religion. "Me, myself and I" was his motto, according to Sahrer.

During the course of his life, Lagerfeld explained, he had turned himself into a caricature, into a living work of art: "I am no longer human. I am an abstraction. I am both the puppet and the puppeteer. And that's how I like it. I have little to do with earthly problems."

Lagerfeld once greeted a journalist sympathetically with the remark, "I was once a mere mortal like you." But that's exactly what he never wanted to be. "I no longer feel like a human being." Such sentences would seem extremely odd if they came from anyone else.

But coming from Lagerfeld, we accept them, maybe because of his great sense of self-irony.

He was proud to be on a diet in which he lost 40 percent of his weight, but he also said afterwards: "When I stand in front of the mirror without clothes, it tells me that I have something of the appearance of a medical student's anatomical skeleton."

Lagerfeld claimed that he was always the first to laugh at himself in any situation – and was convinced of the therapeutic benefits of not taking yourself too seriously: "Everyone can be grotesque in certain situations. If you pay attention, you will notice it, too. As long as you are honest with yourself."

He had no fear of anyone confronting him with one of his earlier statements or →

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I AM NO LONGER HUMAN. I AM AN ABSTRACTION. I AM BOTH THE PUPPET AND THE PUPPETEER



→ pointing out his logical inconsistencies. He immunised himself against criticism by emphasising that what he said was only valid if he had just said it. "Please don't take what I say so seriously. If I say something today, I may not remember it tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll be a completely different person."

Whether Lagerfeld really wanted people to take him less seriously and not pay such close attention to his opinions is doubtful. For Lagerfeld, what came across as self-irony was more of a strategy in self-marketing. It allowed him to display a level of arrogance and snobbery that would not be accepted from anyone else. Had he ever written an autobiography, he wanted to write it in English and was adamant he would never have allowed it to be translated: "If people in France or Germany want to read my autobiography but don't know English, I say, 'Then this book isn't for them!'"

On another occasion, he explained that since most of his trips were paid for by corporations, he always travelled by private jet. "If I'm not worthy of a private jet to someone, I don't have to go there. I take that liberty. It also confirms that the companies value me and my work."

Otherwise, he'd rather stay home and read a book or do nothing.

THE BIRTH OF A LEGEND

So, who was Karl Lagerfeld? He was born in Hamburg in 1933, but cultivated an air of mystery around his true date of birth, refusing to reveal it for many years. He reported that, even as a child he was told, "You are unique." With a characteristic lack of humility, he admitted, "And I probably believed it, too."

As a student, he wanted to be different from his classmates, even if that meant them teasing him for it. "Have you ever looked in the mirror? It's your own fault," said his mother when he complained about being ridiculed by his classmates. Lagerfeld conceded, "She was right. The other boys had crew cuts, I was going for exotic blooms, with long hair and big curls."

He wanted to be different from his classmates, who turned up at school in the post-war period in worn and tatty clothes. Lagerfeld, in contrast, appeared at school with tailor-made jackets, impeccable shirts with starched collars and silk ties. Coming from a wealthy manufacturer's family, he could afford such clothes. Later he went into bodybuilding, posing on the beach with his well-toned body.

Because he loved sweets so much, he gained a lot of weight in a later phase of his life and topped the scales at over 100kg. He celebrated his weight-loss cure – he lost 42kg in 13 months – as a public event and let the whole world join in. He did nothing in secret, he shared everything with the world at large, even his diet. He even decided to co-write a book about his diet with his doctor.

His studio manager Arnaud Maillard was surprised: "I don't know what his real intention is: to write a bestseller or make himself the subject of media attention? I just can't imagine a fashion designer of his stature getting excited about the idea of publishing a book about the minutiae of his diet." But Lagerfeld's book became a bestseller and journalists flocked to interview him – about his dietary formula. "He complains for the sake of appearance, but still throws himself into the media flood," said Maillard, who worked for Lagerfeld for 15 years.

Like other self-marketing geniuses, Lagerfeld pretended to be annoyed by the media, and often claimed that he was completely indifferent to what people said about him. Of course, that was not true. He bought and read all the newspapers that contained articles about him. And he courted journalists as few celebrities do.

Paul Sahner, then editor-in-chief of the German celebrity gossip magazine *Bunte*, reported how Lagerfeld invited him to Biarritz and how impressed he was when the chauffeur who picked him up from the airport handed him a handwritten letter on egg-yolk yellow paper: "The fact that Karl, a busy man, finds the time to prepare so warmly for my stay with him, proves his extraordinary qualities as a host. He thinks of everything, just like a master of ceremonies at the court of the Sun King – fulfilling both roles himself."

In the course of his life, Lagerfeld built his public image – the Lagerfeld brand – around

a series of distinctive features. He did not establish his brand with a single conscious decision; he cultivated his celebrity over the years. "I don't put on a costume like Charlie Chaplin. My hairstyle, my sunglasses, they have all come to me over the years. Slowly but surely, I have become like a caricature of myself."

As he developed his signature style, a distinctive trademark emerged: the fingerless gloves, the powdered braid, the stand-up collar, the sunglasses, and, at times, a fan. Thanks to his iconic image, Lagerfeld certainly made life easy for caricaturists.

But the Lagerfeld brand was about far more than just his outward appearance. He also became famous for his irreverent sayings and distinctive way of speaking. Lagerfeld, said Sahner, was the grand master of staccato melodies. "He pronounces words rapidly, and frequently changes tempo from hasty to languid. Sometimes his sentences dance bossa nova, sometimes they sound almost pastoral."

At the beginning of the 1950s, Lagerfeld moved to Paris and worked for numerous fashion houses, including Balmain, Patou and Chloé. In the 1980s, he made his big breakthrough as creative director and chief designer of Chanel. The company, which had been founded by Coco Chanel, had a somewhat stale image at the time. Lagerfeld gave the label a legendary revamp and transformed it into a billion-dollar, global fashion powerhouse. "I made Chanel what it is today," said Lagerfeld. "Without me, this fashion house would have long closed. The last heir, the one who came for me, said, 'Either you get in or I close.'"

But it would be doing Lagerfeld a disservice to reduce him to the role of fashion designer for some of the world's most luxurious brands. A list of everything Lagerfeld turned his hand to would more than fill this magazine. He designed a Steiff teddy bear →

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BEHIND THE LENS: [this image] Karl Lagerfeld attends the Condé Nast International Luxury Conference at Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, in 2015; [top left] Lagerfeld at work at Chloé's studio in Paris.

PHOTOGRAPH BY (LEFT) PIERRE VAUTHIER / GEMTY IMAGES; (RIGHT) VITOZIA ZUNINO CECATO / GEMTY IMAGES



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IF I'M NOT WORTHY OF A PRIVATE JET TO SOMEONE, I DON'T HAVE TO GO THERE. I TAKE THAT LIBERTY

→ and pens for Faber-Castell as well as limited edition Diet Coke bottles, bracelets, necklaces and brooches for the Swarovski company, the famous perfume, Chloé for Women, and his own range of perfumes under his own name.

He worked as a costume designer for theatre and opera and as a photographer; he designed advertising campaigns for the Dom Pérignon champagne brand and for the Volkswagen Phaeton model; he founded his own publishing house and made a name for himself with his book collection, which included 300,000 works.

He struck the right balance between creating exclusive fashion and designing a collection and a perfume for the Swedish mass-market fashion chain H&M. He combined an air of elitism with egalitarian values: "The upper ten thousand have always been the victims of their own snobbery. Only the most expensive is good enough for them. But it is important not to look down on the 'masses.' We need to offer affordable options. You can still look chic while buying cheap."

Lagerfeld valued freedom above all else.

Early in his career, he achieved something that had eluded many designers before him, namely to work for several fashion houses at the same time. "He quickly became a man who could work with anyone. This is an enviable quality that only a few are granted," Sahnner wrote. Sahnner described Lagerfeld's eclectic approach as follows, "A camel's-hair coat for Max Mara, yes, I'd be delighted, camel hair is my favorite material. A fur coat for Fendi, wonderful, I love stuffed animals. A collection for Patou, well, that also exists as golf fashion. A costume for the lady who favours Chloé. Fabulous. It's almost ready."

He created so much because his business model gave him the freedom to focus on what he was best at – designing. He left everything else to others. And in this way, he earned much more than he would have earned with his own brand or even as a designer working exclusively for one company. With a myriad of contracts and licenses and cross-connections, he manages to get the others to take the load off his shoulders while he keeps his creative fire burning. He designs bags, shoes, fabrics, wallpaper, glasses, knitwear, furs, expensive clothes, cheap clothes – sometimes under his own name, but often not.

According to Lagerfeld, it was completely natural for him to be creative. "The more you do, the more ideas you have. Like a pianist, the more you play, the more natural it becomes to improvise. If I sketch all the time, I find new ideas." On the one hand, ideas just came to him, on the other, he didn't sit back and wait for inspiration to strike. He once explained how he was looking for a new idea for a bathing suit. He sat down and told himself

not to get up until he had designed 50 new swimsuits. After three hours, his 50 designs were ready, but he kept going anyway.

Discipline and a ceaseless work ethic were among his most important traits, despite the fact that he lived in a hedonistic world, full of seductions and temptations. Lagerfeld did not succumb to these temptations. He didn't smoke, didn't take drugs, and almost never drank. He probably knew that he needed this self-discipline because he sensed that he was prone to addiction. At certain periods in his life he regularly drank several litres of Diet Coke a day and ate vast quantities of sweets.

Fashion designer Wolfgang Joop said of Lagerfeld: "You could really take his advice to heart: You have to keep your own feelings and addictions in check, because otherwise you will become a victim of the scene. After all, many around him have become victims [...] How to deal with discipline, how to keep one's composure, he demonstrated that par excellence. In that respect, he's the greatest phenomenon I've ever met. Ingenious."

Many of his friends died of AIDS, others suffered from the consequences of excessive drug use. He observed this and abstained with iron discipline. When he praised other people, he liked to praise their self-control. For example, when describing one of the models he discovered, Claudia Schiffer, he said that unlike many other models, she had had an "iron discipline": "The others had more fun, but less discipline."

This discipline increasingly became a central feature of the Lagerfeld brand. You can't imagine him being casual about anything, and his statement on a German television talk show that "if you wear sweatpants, you have lost control of your life" was probably quoted more often than any other of the many Lagerfeld bon mots. "People tell me: 'You are German. You have lots of self-discipline.' ... I am much worse. I am an auto-fascist, a dictator, who puts myself under pressure. When it comes to me, I don't tolerate democracy. There is no discussion, I give orders. I don't suffer much from that either. Orders are orders, period."

And yet it would be a great mistake to understand Lagerfeld's indomitable willpower as meaning that he had to force himself to work. He needed discipline to resist temptation, to follow his diet – and he made sure that strict discipline prevailed in his studio, where he controlled everything with paramilitary rigor. A studio manager made sure that all of Lagerfeld's instructions were strictly adhered to. The pressure to meet deadlines was brutal.

Nevertheless, Lagerfeld frequently observed that designing came naturally. "I don't know what it is to be stressed.

I know only what it is to be dressed. I'm in the fashion business." If discipline means forcing yourself to do things that you can't stand, then Lagerfeld did not need this kind of discipline at work. "We do what we enjoy doing all day anyway," he said. "Designing is as natural to me as breathing." He thought about his work while he was asleep, dreamt about it and wrote down his thoughts when he got up. On one occasion, he reported: "I dreamed a whole collection and the next morning, I drew it completely. Everything worked out fine."

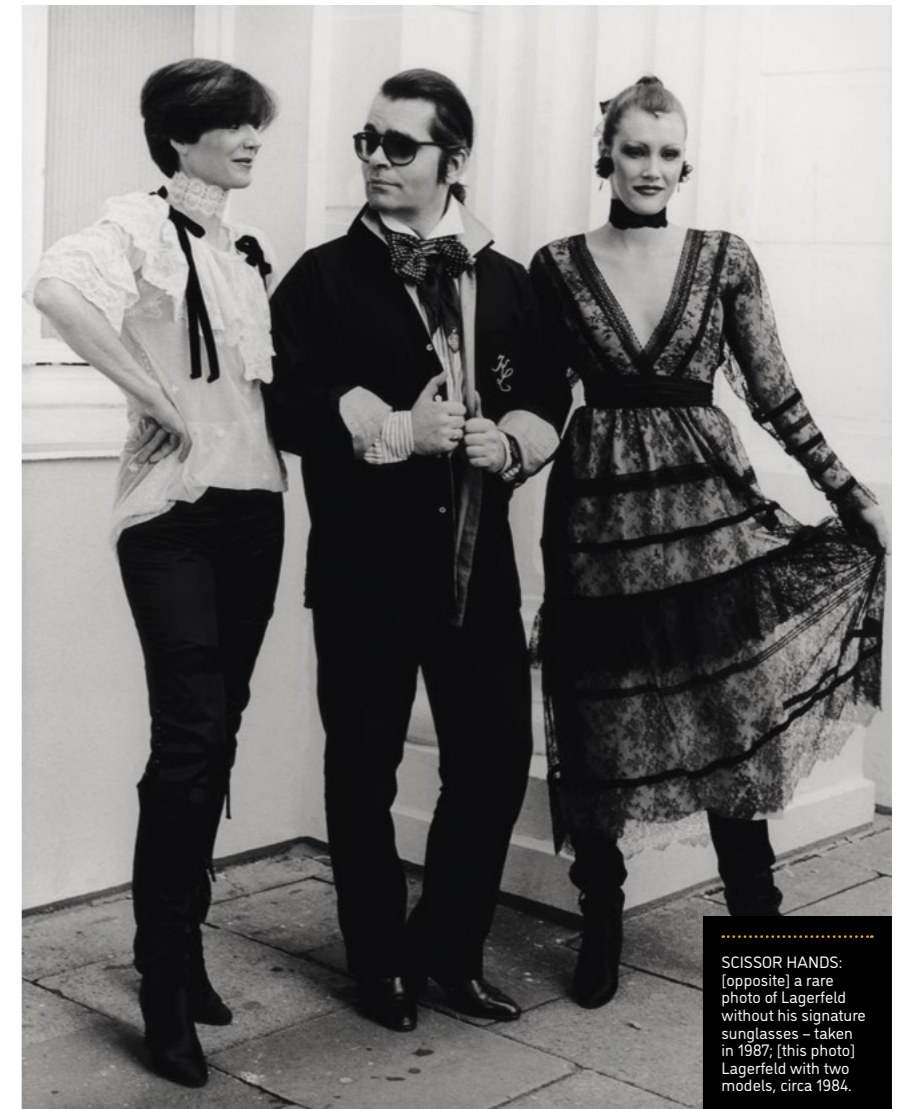
What drove Lagerfeld? Was it money, as some said? After all, he became one of the richest men in Paris and he always openly admitted that he loved making money. Or was it the pursuit of fame, of recognition? "I am more celebrated than Galliano and all the others. No one is as successful as me. No one can keep up. I can't cross the street anymore. And how the autograph hunters crowd me. Mail comes in from all over the world with requests for autographs. It's unbelievable." Having said this, he was quick to add what most famous people say in a similar vein: he was amused by the attention and claimed not to understand the public's obsession with him.

When Lagerfeld claims not to understand the excitement around him and his brand, it must be taken with a large pinch of salt. Maillard remembers walking into a Diesel store with Lagerfeld and all eyes were on him. "Finally, a group of smiling Japanese dare to approach, hand on mouth and pens at the ready. Other, somewhat intimidated customers quickly follow. Karl winks at me briefly: 'Look, even the young people know me! Not bad, is it?'"

Yes, every celebrity is sometimes overwhelmed by the hype about themselves and the loss of privacy that comes with it. But Lagerfeld, and other stars of his stature, accept these consequences, because the alternative would be unbearable: to fall through the cracks of history as an unknown, to be indistinguishable from the masses. Lagerfeld even justified his decision not to have children by saying that he considered himself an absolutely unique specimen and did not feel the slightest need to "clone this uniqueness."

In order to attract media attention, he deliberately overstepped the mark and made provocative, controversial statements. In 1993, he had Claudia Schiffer walk down the runway, wearing verses from the Koran across her chest. There were harsh protests, because Muslims interpreted this stunt as disparaging the Koran and the life of the Prophet. To calm the waves of indignation, an apology was issued. Upon reflection, Lagerfeld observed, "Scandal only hurts those who have none."

While on the one hand he sought to cause a stir with his provocative statements, on the



SCISSOR HANDS: (opposite) a rare photo of Lagerfeld without his signature sunglasses – taken in 1987; (this photo) Lagerfeld with two models, circa 1984.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ILLI PIÉRENE GUILLAUD / Getty Images; (right) Kerstine / Getty Images

other, he captured the zeitgeist with his fashion – and shaped it in his own image. If you make it your *raison d'être* to always swim against the current, you will not be successful, whether in business or in the fashion world. The same can be said of people who always swim with the current. The art lies in always staying ahead of the curve and constantly reinventing yourself – while at the same time maintaining an unmistakable brand core. "This challenges you to retain your own personality, but at the same time to develop with the zeitgeist. To create something new without repeating oneself is even more interesting."

In its Lagerfeld obituary, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* addressed the Lagerfeld phenomenon: "He invented himself, transformed himself into an art figure until he was a global brand." He was the "pioneer of an age in which staging and image are everything. Radical, free and unique."

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WHEN IT COMES TO ME, I DON'T TOLERATE DEMOCRACY. THERE IS NO DISCUSSION, I GIVE ORDERS

He didn't mind being described as a narcissist. In fact, he hardly tried to hide his narcissism. Maillard reports that Lagerfeld often did not even look at his colleagues when he spoke to them. When he answered, he looked at himself in the mirror over the shoulders of the people he was talking to. Even during fittings, he was primarily →



THE WHOLE WORLD
IN HIS HANDS:
Lagerfeld at the
Chanel Fall/Winter
2013 Ready-to-Wear
show as part of Paris
Fashion Week at
Grand Palais on
5 March, 2013.



→ interested only in himself. “His eagle eye needs only a fraction of a second to decide on a model. Unfortunately. Because despite his outstanding professionalism, the couturier gives the impression that he is not interested in anything or anyone apart from his own appearance.” He took every photo shoot as an opportunity to take portraits of himself, and after every session a new self-portrait landed on the desk of Karl’s communications manager, which he was to pass on to journalists.

When Lagerfeld was asked whether he was thinking of setting up a charitable foundation, he replied that he had nothing to gain: “All that I am begins and ends with me.” Presumably,



**THE MORE YOU DO,
THE MORE IDEAS YOU
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any other public figure would have been scolded as a ruthless egoist if they had dared to express what Lagerfeld took for granted: “I want to have a comfortable life. Without problems. I am my beginning and my end. And what I want to achieve, I determine myself. I don’t have to be considerate of anyone, I don’t have to take responsibility for anyone.”

Perhaps people forgave him such statements because they secretly thought and sometimes felt similarly, but would never have dared to say so openly? Perhaps some people also thought that, in truth, he could not have meant it that way, and that this was just one of his deliberately provocative bon mots, which should not be taken so seriously, let alone literally.

Lagerfeld’s approach to life can be summarised in two principles: boundless freedom and the irrepressible urge to constantly evolve. “Happiness,” he said, “is a question of order and discipline. I am the result of what I myself have painted and imagined, what I wanted and I decided to be.”

How did he manage to ensure that people did not get tired of him despite his omnipresence, as is the case with many other celebrities? One explanation is that he

constantly reinvented himself and thus did not become boring. He was driven by the power of productive discontent, or, to put it in his own words: “I’m never satisfied. I always think that I could do better... a better show, a better collection, everything could always be better.”

Another explanation is that despite all the interviews he willingly gave, he managed to keep something secret. Sunglasses also meant that nobody could really see inside him. The man who hung mirrors everywhere so that he could always look at himself made every effort to hide his eyes, the “mirror of the soul.”

Lagerfeld cannot be pigeonholed by what he did – no single job title does him justice – nor by the views he expressed, which he often relativised within moments of pronouncing them. With other people, the older they get, the more they start talking about the past. Lagerfeld found that depressing and once said that you could kill yourself if you thought your best times were behind you. “I only think about the future. That’s probably because of my job. I don’t know what clothes I made yesterday, and I don’t care.” ■

How People Become Famous: Geniuses of self-marketing from Albert Einstein to Kim Kardashian by Rainer Zitelmann is out now. (£14.99; AMAZON . CO . UK)