

# LITERATURE=A LA MODE



Karl Lagerfeld is not merely a prince of couture, he's also an intellectual, and as if to prove it has opened a bookshop in Paris. Lewis Jones visits him there

Kaiser Karl, they call him in Paris, and as one seeking audience at his court (or as a journalist, come to think of it, with an appointment to visit him at his new bookshop on the Left Bank), counting the hours, one, two, three, one sees why. This is not an ordinary tribute-to-celebrity wait. It's ritualised and operatic, the sort of wait they went in for at Naples in the days of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, though in fairness Lagerfeld's courtiers – gamine boys and girls exclaiming over glossy photographs ('*Oh c'est chouette, non?*') to a soundtrack of loud French rap music – are cleaner and less depraved-looking.

*C'est normale*, apparently, the wait, because though Karl Lagerfeld may not be a real kaiser, he's still a considerable figure – an ageing prince, perhaps. Now in his early sixties, he has worked in fashion since he was recruited, aged 16, by Balmain in 1954. He went on to make Chloé sexy, Fendi trendy, and in the Eighties brought a bloom back to the cheeks of Chanel (then pretty well the Miss Havisham of the Faubourg St-Honoré). He's also made squillions from his own lines of clothing, perfume, aftershave and so on. He owns castles and palaces in Brittany, Paris, Italy, Germany and Monaco (his official residence, for tax purposes).

He's been rich all his life. The son of a condensed-milk millionaire who had the Carnation concession for Germany after the First World War, he was born Karl Lagerfeldt in 1938, at Bissenmore, the gloomy family castle outside Hamburg, when his mother was 42 and his father in his sixties. At 14 he left home and moved to Paris, where he changed his name to Lagerfeld (he didn't like the 'lt'), lived alone in a hotel, enrolled at a lycée, and spent most of his time sketching clothes: 'I never went to art school, barely went to school at all, because it bored me. I'm a completely improvised person. But, as you see, it worked without [formal education]. Maybe I could have made more with myself... but it's too late.'

Despite this lack, Karl Lagerfeld is a tremendous autodidact, and is regarded in fashion circles as not only a genius but an intellectual. He is reported to be fluent in nine languages, to own a library of more than half a million books, and to talk with remarkable rapidity. As if to give tangible expression to his intellectual side he has

recently opened this Paris bookshop, at 7 rue de Lille, calling it, in the minimalist manner, '7L'. It's small, light and airy, with decorative assistants, plenty of metal, glass and blond wood – and about 300 books, mainly fashion and design, with some Cocteau, Matisse, Warhol, translations of Yeats and Gerard Manley Hopkins. I buy a book of photographs of places featured in Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and when I am finally ushered into Monsieur Lagerfeld's presence, through a series of vast studios behind the shop, I show him a picture of a grand house in the Faubourg St-Germain – perhaps the model for the one Marcel stays at in the novel. I understand he owns something similar, around the corner?

'This is rue Royale, this is not mine.' But you have one like it?

'Mine is in the rue de l'Université.' There's something a little baleful about Karl Lagerfeld – this squat and paunchy person, with his pioneering white ponytail and aviator's spectacles tinted brown at the top of the lenses, around the eyes ('my mascara'). The star of his own show, he has an engaged and energetic air, but one does not care to imagine what it might be like to be detested by him (he's a famous hater).

Does he admire Proust? 'Yes, I like the language, but I'm not a great fan of that period. I'm more into the 18th century – St-Simon, Voltaire... And Proust is too much the favourite writer of fashion designers. They've never recovered from the Duchesse de Guermantes.'

Lagerfeld habitually wears a baggy black suit, but today he's in green. 'This is an antique Austrian linen jacket. I don't wear them all the time, but I love Austrian clothes.' I have read that as a boy you declined to wear lederhosen? 'No, I loved them. I had nothing else. I don't remember life without lederhosen. For special occasions I had lederhosen in black suede with golden animals embroidered on them.'

He is reputed to own half a million volumes. Can this be possible? 'No, 230,000, only a quarter.' That's still a lot. 'More than a human being can need. That's why I have now a library [bookshop], so I can make my first choice and not buy them all, because I had a tendency to buy them all, huh?' Lagerfeld does indeed speak with fantastic rapidity.

**'Bourgeois couples buy books no one else would ever want, so we make a special table for them, books about second-rate interior designers and so on'**

spluttering slightly in his German accent when his tongue cannot keep up with his brain.

I have read that in your youth you thought of becoming a writer? Lagerfeld gives me a look of profound scepticism, just short of a glare. 'A writer?' Long pause. 'I write decently, but I've never had that pretention.' I explain that I've read of this early ambition in several articles about him. 'Pah! You want really the truth?' Yes please. 'I write pretty well, my English is not perfect, but funnily enough I write better in English than in any other language, but I never had the pretention to become a writer. I'm not *that* pretentious.'

Does he see a relationship between fashion and literature? 'They relate without relating. You can make fashion without reading, and you can make fashion reading a lot. Books can be an inspiration, but don't try to make Proust-like dresses, huh? Like many designers did. But that's nothing, that's like doing *costume*.'

You are said to speak nine languages? 'No. Decently, three or four, that's all. I'm sorry, it's OK, but I'm furious with myself that I was always too busy not to learn Spanish well, so it's only German, French, English and Italian.'

Do you read novels? 'They have to be very well written. I hate nothing more than second-rate novels. I like biographies, and books about facts and things, and poetry – a lot of poetry. I love words. The subject doesn't interest me that much – it depends how well it is written.'

What about this shop? It's an enormous place you have here – 'Huge,' he corrects. 'It's *huge*.' Yes, huge. And the shop is so tiny.

'That's the way the shop is. I cannot make the shop behind the studio, huh? Also I wanted a bookshop for a long time. Now I'm even looking for a second one in this street, to make one for the visual books, and one for the books you can read. I also want to make a shop for stationery, because I make all my stationery myself. I'm a paper freak, so I want a shop to sell paper.' Does he have a factory? 'It's not a problem.'

'In my shop we have always to propose the newest of the newest, all the time. Today you have Fnac, with 400,000 books – everything – or you have something like this, which offers a kind of pre-choice. Whenever I travel, I see something new. I like the idea of having something before other bookshops have it... It's a private venture, not to make business. It's, as the French would say, my *danseuse*, but a very professional *danseuse*, who knows what *pas de deux* means and can make an *entrechat*. It's not an amateurish thing. I hate amateurish things.'

The shop naturally appeals to the avant garde design crowd, the Followers of the Ponytail. And it amuses Lagerfeld to see the sort of people who come in on Saturday afternoons – 'Bourgeois couples, who buy books no one else would ever want, so we make a special table for them, books about second-rate interior designers and so on – only for Saturday afternoon.'

An assistant interrupts to bring him a sheet of photographic contacts for approval – 'Un peu plus de verdure, mais c'est joli, ça.'

Lagerfeld has also just set up a publishing house called Editions 7L, and he kindly presents me with a copy of its first book, an extremely lavish volume of lost Japanese photographs of the Bauhaus – 'Here,

I give this to you.' He's a great giver of books. 'The books I like I buy three copies, and if I really like it a lot I buy a few more copies to give to friends, so they can talk to me about it. I'm not here to lecture them, but I want them to be informed.'

Life is full of pleasures, particularly in Paris, and what could be more agreeable than to make little businesses out of them? Why stop at one *danseuse*? Perhaps Lagerfeld might open an art gallery, or a restaurant? 'No, I hate food. No, you put on weight. No no, I don't want to be in the food business. Rock stars go into the food business. No no no. I like *la nourriture plus spirituelle*, huh? Not smelly cooking stuff.' Are you religious, at all? 'No.'

Was fashion his first love? 'When I was very young I wanted to become a portrait artist and a cartoon artist, and then things happened and I ended up in fashion. But I like to sketch. I like things on paper, and photography and books close the circle. As long as it has anything to do with paper it's OK with me.' Does fashion stand comparison with other arts? 'You shouldn't compare. That's very



Books do furnish a shop: the interior of 7L on the rue de Lille

dangerous. The word "art" is a dangerous word. Clothes are something people wear, part of life, so that's not bad at all. They shouldn't become too serious.'

Lagerfeld has commanded much respect in his business, and some resentment, even hostility. 'Yes, but I'm totally indifferent. I always was and will be the mean stranger. In Germany I'm the one who left the country. I like to be a stranger. I don't want to be integrated, to be included. I like to be excluded, to keep my view from the outside. I can adapt, but I can never be part of anything. I'm a watcher, you see.'

Another assistant approaches: 'Très bien, ça suffit, parfait. À demain.'

Is he social, these days? 'There was a time to be social. Then I realised that I like better working life... I'm part of no milieu. That's why I can fit anywhere. I may be a very serious person, but I don't want to look like one.' Through his tobacco shades he flicks an eye over my conventional London suit, shirt and shoes, my serious Parisian tie, my lack of a ponytail. Colleagues had suggested I wear sunglasses and carry a fan for this interview. I suppose they were right. 'To look too serious is boring,' he says. A courtier giggles. Boring is the Kaiser's worst insult. Dismissed from the presence of one of the world's least likely booksellers, I go to dinner with a book. It has a terribly serious cover, but turns out to be great fun. ■

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