KARL LAGERFELD: HIS CONTRIBUTIONS, ORIGINALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGN

L. POMAZAN

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Karl Lagerfeld: His Contributions, Originality and Significance in Contemporary Fashion Design.

Liliana Pomazan.

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A Thesis Submitted to the RMIT University in Candidature for the Degree of Master of Arts (Fashion).

Department of Fashion and Textile Design.
Faculty of Art, Design and Communication.
RMIT University, Melbourne.
In memory of my mother Onorina Pomazan.

Un bel fiore é caduto a terra.
Declaration Statement.

I, Liliana Pomazan, declare that, the work presented in this thesis was carried out at RMIT University between February 1993 and March 1998. This dissertation, *Karl Lagerfeld: His Contributions, Originality and Significance to Contemporary Fashion Design*, is the result of my own work except where due acknowledgment is made and has not been submitted previously, whole or in part, to any other university.

Liliana Pomazan.
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My father, Virgilio, fully deserves my gratitude for his kind patience and understanding and my brothers, Frank and Darren, were often sources of support.

My thoughts are always with my late mother, Onorina Pomazan, who sadly did not see this work through to completion. I will always be grateful for her love, unbending support and unerring faith.

Liliana Pomazan.
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.
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Abstract.

Karl Lagerfeld's significance, contributions and original fashion designs are generated by several interrelated factors: perceptive use of historical antecedents, artistic background, love of art and design and the influence of artists and selected fashion designers. These factors had profound effects which provided a personal conceptual base for his own label, the House of Chanel, Chloé and the Fendi sisters. His various designs for these disparate labels reflect the complexity of Lagerfeld's character and display the adaptability of his individualistic talents. From the time of his 1954 International Wool Secretariat Prize Lagerfeld's life and work have described complementary arcs of remarkable and productive activity. This activity underscores an established interest in fashion, commitment to design, love of art and a discerning knowledge of history.

Lagerfeld's father was of Swedish extraction and his mother was born in the Westphalia region of Germany. Karl Otto Lagerfeld was born in Hamburg in 1938 and spent his childhood in a family castle. Little is known of Lagerfeld's early life but he probably inherited his aesthetic sensibility from his mother, whilst his business acumen seems to derive from his father, who founded the successful Glücksklee condensed milk company; later sold to the international Carnation corporation. The young Lagerfeld was fascinated by fashion and left Germany to be educated in Paris, the world's art and fashion centre.

Lagerfeld's later employment with Balmain was of considerable importance and he learnt much about the principles of fashion design. Despite his success, Lagerfeld felt stifled as the restrictive atmosphere was not conducive to his new aspirations. Soon after, Lagerfeld accepted the position of chief designer at the conservative House of Patou. This propelled Lagerfeld into a world of high fashion and inspirational examples. Lagerfeld's work at Patou forced him into close proximity with creative foment and enabled him to hone his natural predilections and gain further confidence.

Subsequently, Lagerfeld became aware of a new generation of women who seemed to feel that haute couture was, if not dead, at least ailing; they freed themselves from the constraints of formal clothing and purchased affordable and informally styled clothes. Lagerfeld, with his finely tuned sensibilities would have felt the pulses of this change. As Lagerfeld's discontent with contemporary fashion increased he left Paris in 1964 to study art history for a year in Italy, as if to re acquaint himself with earlier interest in aesthetic response and its historical applications. When he returned he designed free-lance for ready-to-wear fashion firms. Symptomatically this free-lance work was done in preference to employment in major couture houses and Lagerfeld's work developed in new directions that exhibited bold and lateral creative insights. His stylistical flourishes, suspicion of hidebound conventions and
his anti-establishment leanings, stem from the perceived restrictions and false decorum of these formative years.

In 1964 Lagerfeld was one of four fashion designers in the Chloé company and by 1970 he was their sole designer. Lagerfeld remained creatively receptive and early successes with Chloé and Fendi developed an expanding confidence with designs, material and concepts. He seemed to seek out and embody a new desire to branch out beyond past restrictions. This search led to the development of new techniques, especially for the Fendi firm, which confirmed Lagerfeld’s innovative skills and interests.

In 1983 Lagerfeld accepted an offer to act as Design Consultant in Charge of the Collections for the prestigious House of Chanel in Paris. He left Chloé in the same year and launched his own eponymous label: Karl Lagerfeld. Lagerfeld’s creations were instrumental in resurrecting the House of Chanel by redeveloping its designs into contemporary versions that were appropriate for a newly emerged and younger clientele. Simply, Lagerfeld’s contemporary fashion design transformed Chanel’s work from historical Modernist clothing to ahistorical and Postmodernist clothing. It is this form and function based evolution that is one of Lagerfeld’s most notable and under recognised achievements.

Through this evolution Lagerfeld’s creations came to embody aspects of contemporary culture and thought. These advances, though historically based, have Lagerfeld’s individual stamp: a taste for fun, wry wit, historical knowledge, a spirit of surprise and consistent adherence to high standards of fashion design.

Some of these advances result from Lagerfeld’s appreciation of Surrealist art and André Breton’s theories and principles. Like those of his predecessor Schiaparelli, Lagerfeld’s clothes speak of wider artistic pursuits. Lagerfeld’s clothes are often created within a Surrealist aesthetic; particularly Breton’s concept of convulsive beauty, the quality of the marvellous and the aesthetic principles of the veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive and magic-circumstantial. Lagerfeld’s Surrealist oeuvre consists of garments which are forceful in their shock value; a value that owes much to his tapping of Surrealist principles and aesthetics. Lagerfeld, in Surrealist form, has created several highly individualised fashion designs and his ensembles and accessories have turned the mundane into the marvellous.

Furthermore, Lagerfeld’s various haute couture collections for the House of Chanel are based on a progressive visual deconstruction of the regressive canons of Chanel’s Modernism. Postmodernism’s flamboyant character, disregard for convention and new techniques seemed to suit Lagerfeld’s trail blazing disposition. It also provided a context for his artistic leanings and made use of his love of history in ways that resonate throughout his creations. Chanel’s fashion style sprang forth, like Modernism itself, from a nineteenth century world changed by dramatic urbanisation and growing technological advances. Lagerfeld’s fashion style sprang
forth, like Postmodernism itself, from a twentieth century world changed by dramatic *globalisation* and growing *electronic* advances. The distinctions between their respective works, aims and artistic attitudes becomes more clear when we view it this way. In Lagerfeld's case this is an applied Postmodernism, one unencumbered by academic theory and limited by technical considerations. Several Postmodernist fundamental principles find a comfortable place in Lagerfeld's fashion creations: free floating signs, double-coding, eclecticism, ahistorical bricolage, fragmentation, pastiche, deconstruction and stylistic exaggeration. Lagerfeld's Postmodernist designs are characterised by an air of anti-seriousness and ironic detachment; one might say that he paid tribute to Chanel's design aesthetics and later *played* tribute to them.
Karl Lagerfeld: His Contributions, Originality and Significance in Contemporary Fashion Design.

Introduction.

This thesis is intended to give a sustained insight into the creative output, aims and motivations of Karl Lagerfeld, the contemporary French fashion designer. This investigation and cultural and artistic analysis will, of necessity, traverse many areas of inquiry and will tend to freely cross traditional and academic boundaries of thought and ideas. This is considered not only desirable, but essential, to give fuller credence to the various phenomena of the Lagerfeld empire. The research is not concerned so much with the many products bearing the Lagerfeld label, but with the seminal and quintessential aspects that go to make up what may loosely be called the Lagerfeld style or look.

The problem of style and its definition is significant one and some time needs to be spent isolating the factors that go towards the structuring and development of traits and characteristics that constitute style and visible identity. In similar fashion, the problem of content, source of content and the meaning of that, or any, particular content is also a perplexing and relevant issue. Many popular commentators are loathe to ascribe meaning or content to the product of the fashion industry. However, recent and thought provoking theories of cultural analysis have shown, or attempt to show, that cultural products, fashion included, are imbued with hidden, subliminal, understated and irreducible meaning and content. My task, in part, is to isolate these meanings and to analyse the products and the stylistic traits which throw light upon the creative motivations of Lagerfeld’s mature work.

The man himself, together with his early and his subsequent artistic development, deserves sustained investigation. I intend to give an incidental focus and concurrent flow to these issues throughout my investigation. This focus is not intended to supply a direct biographical context or sense nor is it intended to form a chronological sequence or cohesive structure; put simply, the work, without the man, misses much. The work reflects the man, almost as much as the man reflects the work, and I wish to do some credit to the clarification to this simple interaction.

Numerous myths, desires and truisms muddy the fashion waters. Parts of my investigation will analyse the credibility of selected assumptions and platitudes; not because this is of itself essential, but because in this case, at least, the process leads to doubts, and doubts lead to questions, and questions, when correctly addressed, may lead to truths or at least to accurate evaluation. Lagerfeld’s life work together with his considerable talent and output make this both necessary and desirable.
Fashion and its products have always held an important place in modern life. Much writing and journalistic excess and hyperbole have been employed in tracing the popular understanding and, indeed, the misunderstanding of fashion. Notwithstanding this, fashion as a phenomenon maintains a high profile and a high currency in the cultural stakes. Given this and its variety of ever changing forms, fashion as a cultural factor is able to sustain considerable analysis and criticism. Fashion, when considered in this way, is a strong and perennial theme in any culture.

Fashion’s significance and the significance of its products owe much, if not all, to its firm place in society. Fashion has an undeniable sociological meaning and a distinct social context; a social context which gives it a pervasive cultural meaning. Recent insights gleaned from the writings of contemporary cultural theorists, particularly those influenced by the schools of structuralism and deconstruction, have enabled a new reading of the codes of the fashion system. In recent times this new reading may be seen to stem from the writings of the French semiotician Roland Barthes\(^1\) and to branch out to contemporary cultural theorists who, like Hélène Cixous\(^2\), write on the selling of style in a Postmodernist period. Since the publication of Barthes’ works there has been an increasing acceptance of, and interest in, the study of the semiotics of fashion in relationship to politics, feminism and Postmodernism. Often, and unfortunately, fashion has suffered by being seen within the context of popular culture and has therefore not been considered fully worthy of intellectual pursuit. This sociological guilt by association has run its course and contemporary opinion has developed to the extent that fashion is now considered intrinsic to the social fabric of any contemporary society and is endowed with a language of form that carries the potential for subtle messages and meanings. Seen this way fashion has an important visual transformative function and role in society. Such readings, particularly when they clarify Lagerfeld’s intent, will be investigated and applied to his output, his sources of inspiration, his motivations and his aims.

The problems of elitism, class, wealth and social significance also bear close investigation and are worthy of analysis in this important context. We live in an age when modernity is considered to be waning; an age that has moved into an era of post modernity. The interplay and artistic tensions that mark the zones of these two oppositional concepts also make their presence felt in the work and thought of certain creative individuals. These influential relationships, their interdependence, their demarcations, and above all, their characteristics provide relevant models for the artistic sources and creative impetus of Lagerfeld. My primary intention is to show the complementary inter-relationship of art and fashion and the importance of the artistic sources that inform the style and the aesthetic motivations of Lagerfeld. Related to this aim is the important question of artistic innovation and its

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relationship to tradition in the work and thought of Lagerfeld. Lagerfeld’s relationship to the
House of Chanel forms an enticing and instructive paradigm for the study of his personal
history and the role of modernity in his mature work. Some of my investigations will
therefore focus upon Lagerfeld’s innovative developments and his maintaining of traditional
fashion forms. In this way it is hoped that his creative ingenuity may be revealed by contrast
and his post modernist collagist methods may best be elucidated.

Lagerfeld has contributed numerous original fashion designs to the couture houses of Chanel,
Chloé, Fendi and to his own signature label. Lagerfeld’s work is drawn from a well spring of
inspirations and sources comprised of elements drawn from his life-long interest in art, art
history and historical styles of fashion. He has been able to create a unique style for each
different label he has worked with thus reflecting the diverse attributes of his personality.
Lagerfeld’s development as a formidable fashion designer is linked by these fields of interest
and influence and also by his innate talent as a original and creative fashion designer.
Lagerfeld has admitted to designing as many as six hundred designs per fashion season. His
inspiration and his consistent inventiveness seems limitless whilst remaining distinctly
stamped with Lagerfeld’s unique style.

Given the recent rise in contemporary interest in fashion and its attributes, it is highly
probable that future historians of fashion and culture will be fascinated with Lagerfeld’s
achievements and his ideas on fashion. Despite the renowned volatility and fickleness of the
fashion industry, Lagerfeld’s name continues to remain prominent in this recent
development. Lagerfeld has generated many highly unusual and creative ideas; these range
from the often highly theatrical and individual haute couture garments of the early 1980s to
the translations of the eclectic aesthetic fin-de-siècle mood in art and fashion of the 1990s.
Some of his natural perceptiveness may even be gleaned in the following simple passage
where Lagerfeld describes how he saw life in the late 1980s:

   Life nowadays ... has a feeling that is baroque, overpoweringly voluptuous,
   accelerated, and down to earth at the same time. Life is bigger than life-or at least
   that’s how people should make it. 3

Even generalised comments such as these express sentiments that obviously come from an
acute observation and close interest in the world around him. The aim of this investigation is
to decipher this interest and to investigate its motivating relationship to the results of his
productive imagination.

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3 Coleridge, Nicholas, 1988, The Fashion Conspiracy, London, Heinemann, p. 188.
Thesis Outline

Topic: Karl Lagerfeld: His Contributions, Originality and Significance in Contemporary Fashion Design.

Whilst researching Lagerfeld's work and history I have discovered that scholarly and relevant literature on this topic and related material is disappointingly limited; at least within the current facilities available in Australia and the USA. Fashion and life-style magazines and some current fashion documentaries often mention Lagerfeld and his work but never in any extended or analytically useful way.

As a consequence I have attempted to formulate and to develop research methods and a context that take into account this scarcity of material. I have listed and reviewed all sources of information no matter how irrelevant they seemed at the earlier stages of my research. I have tabulated an extensive list of relevant material and compiled a data-base of this information. Important texts at the initial stages of research were The Fashion System (1967) and Image-Music-Text (1977) by the French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980). These texts supplied me with a conceptual framework and a model of approach and I based my analysis of many of Lagerfeld's designs and photographic sources upon a Barthian system of analysis and comparative structure. These texts concern themselves with a sociological view of the fundamental assumptions of the fashion industry and the imagery associated with the marketing and promotion of stereotypes; as such, these texts provided a wide and useful critical overview of the development of social roles and patterns.

Nothing of a substantial nature has been written on the subject of my topic and I my research attempts to make an original and focused research contribution to the field of study. Considerable reference material, of tangential interest, exists in secondary literature. A preliminary investigation of this and related material has provided an information base and source of reference for a more detailed analysis of primary source material as well as supplying reference material for other disciplines and other scholars.

2. Aims of the research.
It is intended that the thesis give a detailed and extensive analysis and overview of the French based fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld (b. 1939). Lagerfeld's work, despite its achievements, has received scant attention and detailed investigation. The thesis will focus upon the sources and influences that mediate the production of his original designs, collaborations and artistic output. It is intended that the thesis investigate his early artistic impetus and the relationship of the emergence of his talent to maternal input, class, aesthetic content and peer aspects. The formative time of his early training and work experience with fashion houses in
Paris is given detailed examination as it formed a base for the mature work for his own label, together with work for the *House of Chanel, Chloé* and the *Fendi* sisters.

Additionally, I aim to place considerable attention upon the nature of his design practise, his use of fabrics and other materials and his incorporation of accessories and ephemera. His aesthetics and his developed characteristics will be examined for their unique features and their relationship to the influences of contemporary art practice and historical art precedents. Lagerfeld’s unique contributions will be analysed together with the body of his works in order to isolate his significance and to stress the place of his originality and insights.

3. **Major research questions.**

The research will address the following questions.

The major research question is:

What are the major contributions and original creative works of Karl Lagerfeld and what is his significance in contemporary fashion design?

Other related questions will be:

- What are the sources and influences that mediate upon Karl Lagerfeld’s artistic output?
- How has Karl Lagerfeld’s work developed to the present time?
- What is the nature of Karl Lagerfeld’s design practice, his use of fabrics and other materials, and his incorporation of accessories and ephemera?
- How is Karl Lagerfeld’s work evaluated by his peer group?
- Where does Lagerfeld draw his inspiration and sources from?
- How has Lagerfeld achieved such international prominence and success?

4. **Sources of the data.**

The investigation into the fashion design and other creative work of Karl Lagerfeld is primarily based on qualitative data gathering and analysis using secondary source material. The limited primary sources available are generally restricted to those personal quotes contained within magazines, filmed documentaries, short interview segments and small sections collated in various fashion texts. The collected data has been broadly organised into chronological and historical categories: from Lagerfeld’s familial background through to his life in Paris as a major fashion designer. The researched data has been checked by cross textual comparison, analysed and evaluated in order to assess its validity and usefulness.

I needed to be fully acquainted with the substantive area of content analysis, as much of the information obtainable from the above primary and secondary sources which had various limitations and constraints. There are several preliminary considerations, as tabulated below, that need to be borne in mind before embarking upon an in depth aesthetic analysis of the influences and original insights contained within Lagerfeld’s artistic output.
5. Method of data gathering and analysis; qualitative content analysis; and preliminary considerations and topics.

5.1 Data and information sources.

See Literature Review for full account of texts consulted.

- I have research and fully categorised all major documentation in libraries contained within the following: interviews, video recorded sources, publicity material, photographic sources and documentation.

- I have isolate the characteristics and contributions of Karl Lagerfeld to the Fashion Industry.

- I have also researched the content of the above material in order to extract the origin of his sources of inspiration and his stylistical innovations.

5.2 Interviews and field work.

- I have interviewed the fashion model Helena Christensen.

- I carried out research work at the Shirley Goodman Resource Centre at The Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. I photographed and documented the collection of Karl Lagerfeld’s haute couture and ready-to-wear ensembles for the House of Chanel and Chloé from the Costume Collection at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

- I received information on Karl Lagerfeld and ready-to-wear visual documentation from the House of Chanel in Paris.

- I have also corresponded with the following companies: Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, Paris.

  International Relations at the Ministry of Culture, Paris.

Musée de la Mode et du Costume, Paris.

The Chloé corporation, Paris.

Karl Lagerfeld’s signature company, Paris.

Carla Fendi, Fendi, Rome.

Chanel, Australia, Artarmon, NSW.

French Consul-General, Melbourne.

Laurent de Gaulle, the Cultural Attaché French Embassy in Yarralumla, Canberra.

Nancy Pilcher, Editor-in-Chief, Vogue, Australia, Greenwich, NSW.

5.3 Evaluation and Analysis.

I have analysed and evaluated all material to ascertain subjective bias and focussed upon the following questions:

- What are the underlying purposes of the selected articles or segments of information that are contained in film, audio or textual forms? The particular information may have been descriptive or formed an explanatory examination of the particular topic.
• What sort of information has been collected and collated? Are the range of issues covered adequately? Does the information contain the differentiation and content required? My own research will not have the advantages of knowing the original purposes of various fashion directors or editors? Are there gaps in the information?
• How has the personal interpretation of the writer, etc., affected the presentation of the material?
• Which sources and qualitative characteristics of the research are most important?

All material has been evaluated and categorised in relevance to origin, either as a primary or secondary source and grouped under the following headings:
• Early beginnings.
• Class aspects.
• Formation: the early years.
• Clothing companies Karl Lagerfeld worked for.
• Elements of design.
• Use of fabrics and materials.
• Accessories and ephemera.
• Other aesthetics, attributes and characteristics such as wit, changes and variations, personal photographic involvement, sophistication, parody, cheekiness, elegance, combination of materials, advances on tradition, radical departures, classic *Chanel* designs, sculptural formal qualities, feeling for silhouettes, historical recognition, admired figures in fashion, admired figures-non fashion, insight and perception, unification of historical precedent and contemporary styles.
• Influences of art, and art and design history.
• Original contributions and influences.

7. Reliability and limitations.
The thesis is mainly based on the selected content of secondary sources and the visual analysis of relevant works. My original intention to interview Karl Lagerfeld was not possible in spite of several repeated attempts. These attempts included telephone calls to the House of Chanel in Paris, nine letters to Karl Lagerfeld and his three companies in Paris. In addition, several letters were sent to the above companies, various consulates and cultural associations in Paris, New South Wales and Melbourne.

8. Chapters.
The thesis has been organised into the following chapters, each dealing with a specific topic or influence relative to Karl Lagerfeld’s career:
- Chapter One: The Small Opportunity.
- Chapter Two: Origins, Sources and Inspirations.
- Chapter Three: Karl Lagerfeld’s Surrealist Aesthetics.
Chapter Four: From the Modernist Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel to the Postmodernist Karl Lagerfeld: Transformations in Fashion Design at the *House of Chanel*.

Chapter Five: Conclusion.
Literature Review.

Introduction.

Karl Lagerfeld, the French fashion designer, has contributed much to the couture houses of *Chanel*, *Chloé*, *Fendi* and to his own signature label. Lagerfeld's original designs are based upon several factors; his use and study of historical antecedents; his familial artistic background, his long-standing love of art and design and the influence and example of great artists and selected fashion designers. All these factors are of analytical importance. Primary source information on my thesis topic is difficult to obtain without the opportunity for personal interview. Literature on Lagerfeld's work and history is disappointingly superficial and does little credit to the scope of his work, nor does it cover the scope of his early development and the rise of his career. Fashion and life-style magazines and some current fashion documentaries often mention Lagerfeld and his work but rarely in an extended or analytically useful way. One need only scan the many anonymous articles in various journals and magazines to find examples of this superficiality. For example, a typical sample of comments may be elicited from *The Designers Talk: Passion, Whimsy and Picassos* in *ARTnews* of September 1990 by an anonymous writer.\(^4\) In this article much is made of Lagerfeld's likes and dislikes, his temperament, his favourite galleries, and the like. Nothing is mentioned which might reveal anything of his sources of inspiration, his earliest work, about his selection of material, his artistic legacy or his considerable breadth of knowledge and sensibility. The following passage is unfortunately typical of the banalities of much journalistic observation:

At home Lagerfeld surrounds himself with superb examples of 18th-century art and furniture, modern furniture, German Expressionist paintings, and photographs by such lush pictorialist masters as Steichen, Stieglitz, and Käsebier. Lagerfeld's eye may be generous, but it isn't indiscriminate: 'Second-rate kitsch I hate', he declares.

What is this discerning designer's museum of choice? No less the Louvre. 'I love the Louvre. It may sound banal, but it is just great, and I live next to it, with just the Seine in between. But,' he adds, 'there are also small museums I love.' \(^5\)

As a consequence of such disappointing coverage, I have attempted to formulate and to develop research methods and a context that takes into account the scarcity of substantial critical and historical material. Two important texts at the initial stage of this investigation were *The Fashion System* and *Image-Music-Text* by the French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980). These texts have supplied me with a conceptual framework and a model of approach and I intend basing my analysis of many of Lagerfeld's designs and


\(^5\)Ibid. pp. 130-131.
photographic sources upon a Barthian system of analysis and comparative structure. These
texts concern themselves with a sociological view of the fundamental assumptions of the
fashion industry and of the imagery associated with the marketing and promotion of
stereotypes. As such, these texts provide a wide and useful critical overview of the
development of social roles and patterns and offer much for an analysis of Lagerfeld's work.

The selected literature review is organised into the following sections: primary sources,
theoretical texts, secondary source texts and secondary source articles. The primary source
material consists of various categories of information: two photographic books by Lagerfeld,
commentaries on fashion and interviews with the fashion designer in five filmed
documentaries and a book with Lagerfeld's sketches of his close friend Anna Piaggi. Except
for Margaret Rose's book *The Post-Modern & the Post-Industrial: A Critical Analysis*6,
which discusses the concepts of post-modern theories mainly in art and architecture, the
remaining theoretical texts are intended to help formulate an analytical approach to the
understanding of the fashion styles of Lagerfeld. Rose's book is particularly relevant to my
chapter on the modern fashion design styles of Gabrielle Coco Chanel in contrast with the
contemporary and more post-modernist fashion designs for the *House of Chanel*. Texts by
authors such as the semiotician Roland Barthes and the Australian cultural fashion theorist
Jennifer Craik were included because they are important studies that supply clear and
appropriate information on the social and cultural constructs and applications of fashion and
cultural theory. I intend using aspects of these theories as a basis for the analysis of
Lagerfeld's fashion design and his related photographic work.

The secondary source texts contain sections of information on Lagerfeld ranging from minor
facts relating to his childhood, his early and later work for French and Italian fashion
establishments, his fashion links to art movements, his changing styles of fashion design and
to his views on fashion in general. The secondary source articles section focuses only on
three selected examinations of Lagerfeld. Numerous magazine articles exist on the fashion
designer and I will refer to many of them in the thesis, however I have examined three
selected articles in the literature review because of their capacity to illustrate the range from
the best to the most mediocre of popular articles. Many of the latter category are not worthy
of full analysis and comment. In contrast with the short, seemingly superficial, interview in
*Vanity Fair* written anonymously and entitled *Karl Lagerfeld*, 7 Nancy Collins' article
entitled *Scent of a Man*, 8 reveals pertinent information especially relevant to the early
sections of my thesis which puts Lagerfeld's early interest in fashion into perspective and
highlights his obvious love and knowledge of the arts. These articles also discuss his interest
in the collecting of art, artefacts and furniture which is also appropriate to the hypothesis of

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my research. In general the literature review selection illustrates Lagerfeld’s extensive knowledge and interest in art; knowledge and interest that are reflected in many of the original fashion designs that he has produced over the last two decades.

**Primary Sources.**

André Breton wrote the novel Mad Love (L'Amour fou) of 1937 for his wife, the artist Jacqueline Lamba. The book is Breton's poetic tribute to Lamba, the mother of his daughter Aube and the heroine of his famous poem the Sunflower. Mad Love is regarded as a masterpiece of Surrealist literature and is a valuable primary source text for an explanation and demonstration of Breton's concept of the marvellous. In Surrealist theory the marvellous is to be found in things that are mundane and ordinary and which exist in everyday life. Through his insights the thought provoking journey described in the book Breton involves the reader in his remarkable personal meditation upon the effects and sources of love—a topic of much theorising interest to the Surrealists in the late 1930s. According to the eminent author, editor and translator Mary Ann Caws 'It reveals much about Breton's efforts to lead a surrealist life, faithful to chance and the unforeseen ...'.

In Mad Love Breton discusses at length the three tenets of his theory of convulsive beauty; a theory that is not often explained or developed in Surrealist literature. Pages 5 to 19 of the text are of especial interest in the development of this theory and are substantially important to my own conceptual applications of the theory and form the substance of the chapter Karl Lagerfeld's Surrealist Aesthetics. The following cryptic definition is given by Breton of what the Surrealist concept of convulsive beauty means in conceptual terms:

Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be.

This new aesthetic, based as it was upon the physical sensations of shock, amusement and surprise, provided many artists, like Lagerfeld, with a range of external techniques and personal responses which were often subsequently validated by psychological research and theory. Breton's theory of convulsive beauty attempts to signify and unveil the marvellous as it occurs in everyday encounters and plumb the hidden depths of seemingly dull existence. Thus, it is hoped, simple and taken for granted occurrences in everyday life become invested with a sense of magical significance; the drabness of everyday life is overcome and the human gift of unfettered imagination is given greater licence. To be effective, in a Bretonian sense, the resultant effect must be palpable and experiential and it must add to a fuller appreciation of life and art in their most subtle forms. In my view, Lagerfeld's Surrealist inspired garments, which may be considered as serious and intentional embodiments of Breton's three principles of convulsive beauty, are imbued with his personalised interpretation of this spirit. Lagerfeld's fashion design and theory has never been discussed in this way and his view of Breton's theory forms an important insight into his creative procedure and aesthetic development. Breton's theoretical underpinning acts as an analytical

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9Breton, André, 1987, Mad Love, trans. Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, USA, preface.  
10ibid. p. 19.
format to the examination of Lagerfeld’s work; a format that attempts to come to grips with Lagerfeld’s original contributions and takes fashion beyond the restrictions of decorativeness, whimsy and functionalist inspiration.

Breton’s Mad Love is the most authoritative and insightful primary source text that delves into the importance of the marvellous and convulsive beauty in Surrealist thought. Part of my thesis rests upon the justifiable contention that Lagerfeld used selective aspects of Surrealism and that his work has connections to Breton’s concept of convulsive beauty. The concept of convulsive beauty and its component parts have had a formative impact upon Lagerfeld’s fashion design and they go some way towards explaining the originality and impact of his artistic ambitions. Lagerfeld has made consistent use of Surrealist elements in his creations for almost two decades; it is a use of that goes beyond mere wit and fun and is informed by Surrealist aesthetics-aesthetics which are examined and explained fifty years earlier in Breton’s Mad Love.


The documentary film entitled Tycoons: Karl Lagerfeld, is one of a series of films on tycoons as the title informs us. The writers of this film are Sabine De La Brosse and Pierré Desfons; Sabine De La Brosse conducted the interviews with Karl Lagerfeld, the Fendi sisters and other business executives associated with companies that Karl Lagerfeld designs for. They all attest to his talent for fashion design and discuss his acumen for finance and marketing. The president of one of Europe’s largest ready-to-wear companies, a business partner tells the interviewer that Lagerfeld is a great designer and a shrewd businessman as well—a rare high ranking designer interested in marketing as well.

We are working with a man who is very creative and knows the life-style of people and directs accordingly.11

The documentary is filmed in Paris and the country-side areas outside Paris, Hamburg, Rome and Monte Carlo. The film is based on the wealth amassed by Lagerfeld from his early years through to the very late 1980s. Lagerfeld is shown in various places including his houses, in a car, in an aeroplane, in his office at the House of Chanel, backstage before the showing of his collections and walking down the runways after the shows have ended.

The intention of the film is to inform the viewer of how multi-faceted Lagerfeld’s talent is and give an chronological account of his incredible success. The narrator tells the viewer

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about Lagerfeld's life and his work. The film shows several rare photographs of Lagerfeld as a child and young man, together with snippets of his mother and father. He discusses his journals in which he records things such as addresses, personal photographs, diary notes—all written in a German shorthand. Lagerfeld shows drawings in his journal which detail the fashion styles for each decade this century—these belong to a segment of a television show he wrote for: *The Story of Fashion* series discussed below in this literature review. We have an intimate view of Lagerfeld with one of his many close friends, Princess Caroline of Monaco, designing costumes for the Monte Carlo Ballet and Opera companies. He assumes a *royal allure* says the narrator when seen watching the ballet with her royal Highness. Lagerfeld is seen in his various roles of designer, artist, photographer, antique buyer and art connoisseur and interior decorator. The narrator says that he is

One of the most talented designers in the French capital. He was nick-named KL or King Karl by many. He cultivated a rather extravagant look.

The value of this film is in Lagerfeld's many personal views and opinions and the recounting of his past; elements which are in scarce supply in fashion journals and books. The film assists in the piecing together of Lagerfeld's past and life work. A few insights about Lagerfeld have been gathered from the dialogue with the interviewer. He speaks of fashion designing for the companies he works with and gives the clear view that this work comes easily to him. The following quote is especially relevant to this point:

I like the idea of being like three persons, that perhaps is more of a secret than talent, but it works for me. ... I must say I like life like this because I'm easily bored and to be ... more persons stimulates me ... in fact. For me designing is like breathing, I don't think about it. For Fendi (I do) a fur collection ... two ready-to-wear collections in Italy, a cruise collection. Then I do a KL collection in Japan twice a year ... I do a men's collection in Italy twice a year ... I do *Chanel* which means two ready-to-wear and two couture, then I think it's off.

Since the details of the above clothing collections were discussed, Lagerfeld has again taken on the design direction for the *Chloé* company. The narrator tells the television audience that one of the main questions that keeps being asked of Lagerfeld is, 'How does he do it?'


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14ibid.
Gabrielle Coco Chanel’s life and fashion design work have been documented in the television film entitled *Chanel, Chanel*. Appropriately Karl Lagerfeld, designer for the present *House of Chanel*, discusses Chanel’s styles and decades long influence on the world of fashion. The film was written and edited by Richard Howorth and is narrated by Diana Quick, some additional footage is devoted to a discussion of Lagerfeld’s personal work for the *House of Chanel*. Lagerfeld is filmed during an on camera interview and talks about fashion illustrations, whilst drawing to illustrate an occasional point or clarification. Lagerfeld makes valuable observations about the problems and styles of design and discusses Gabrielle Coco Chanel’s successful and not-so-successful looks in a clear and somewhat dispassionate manner, as in the following comment:

Chanel in the thirties was not called the Queen of Beige any more, but was famous for her lace evening dresses more than for everything else ... more than for her suits ... Evening dresses ... were typical for Chanel then, not at all the suits-lace dresses! Most of them were tulle and lace ... things like this. 15

Richard Howorth’s commentary encompasses Chanel’s fashion design work within a chronological framework from her early work to her more mature and influential period; it also includes information about her life, her design philosophy and her evolution in status. Much of the information in this section of the film is broadly relevant to the section of my thesis which focuses upon Chanel’s modernist style and Lagerfeld’s subsequent post-modernist work for the *House of Chanel*. The film also shows rare interview footage of Chanel discussing her thoughts on clothing and elegance and her strongly held views on fashion around her before her death. Lagerfeld places Chanel within a cultural and historical context in the latter part of the Twentieth Century; his occasional discussion of his own work within this context reveals details which show his indebtedness to particular Chanel fashion styles and approaches. Lagerfeld’s extension of these fashion approaches and his ever-changing designs based upon the classical lines of the famous Chanel suit will form part of my analytical work. His revelation about his motivations and the reasons for some of his design decisions form an important undercurrent of this documentary and it remains one of the few filmed interviews that gives more than a fleeting and superficial coverage of Lagerfeld’s involvement in the Chanel enterprise.

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As the title of this documentary suggest, the film is about Karl Lagerfeld’s life and his design work for the fashion houses of Fendi, Chanel, Chloé and his own signature company. This film is one of the few primary sources available where Lagerfeld offers the interviewer any private information detailing some of his fashion design, interior decorating work and

personal life. The film focuses on Lagerfeld’s various collections produced in the last three decades. Lagerfeld discusses his work in general terms, not in an analytical manner, and remains always guarded against giving too much of himself away. He divulges to the interviewer several of his idiosyncrasies and habits, but once again its only a teaser about his private self. Lagerfeld gives the viewer a nibble at the smorgasbord lunch rather than a four course meal.

The film consists of a smattering of chronological episodes in Lagerfeld’s life mainly as a fashion designer. He describes to the audience his feelings about his career at various times throughout his past. For example, he tells the interviewer that he accepted the offer of artistic director at the House of Patou at the young age of twenty-the position did not keep him satisfied and Lagerfeld became bored quickly with job of haute couture manufacture and the scene that encircled it. His love of fans is obvious by his use of it to enrich a dress for Patou. He has used fans ever since, incorporating the fan design in many of his outfits and hats; he also is often seen photographed holding a fan. He speaks of the photographer Helmut Newton, 'I'm his favourite house model in a way,' Lagerfeld says showing a book full of photographs of himself by the then aspiring photographer. He talks about the fashion shows of the last decade or more implying that the supermodels are a large advertising coup for the fashion houses. Lagerfeld says, 'We have to put the most important dresses on the best girls.'

Quotes about Lagerfeld's design work for the fashion houses of Chanel, Chloé, Fendi and Karl Lagerfeld will be used in related sections throughout the thesis. He speaks of working for Chanel as an enjoyable experience, this is apparent in comments like: 'I like the job the way I do it because it was never done before.' Several Chloé outfits are shown and these have several Surrealist motifs decorating the surface of the outfits, these examples will be included in the chapter on Lagerfeld's Surrealist tendencies.


Karl Lagerfeld and his fashion design work have been highlighted in a series of three documentary films entitled The Story of Fashion. The first part of the documentary film

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17 ibid.
series, *The Story of Fashion: Remembrance of Things Past*, has a commentary written by Meredith Ethington-Smith and narrated by Diana Quick. The film looks at early twentieth century fashion designers beginning with Charles Worth, the inventor of Parisian haute couture, through to several others including Paul Poiret, Fortuny, Bakst and Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel. Lagerfeld discusses historical and contemporary modes of dress throughout the documentary. The film is an excellent primary source as Lagerfeld, who rarely divulges personal opinions and thoughts, expresses his views on fashion and fashion designers throughout the past three centuries. The documentary film focuses on Lagerfeld’s diverse fashion work for the fashion houses of *Chanel*, *Fendi* and his own signature company.

The series begins with images of a bygone era and an introduction to the story of fashion by the narrator Diana Quick. Quick’s introduction begins with the following statement:

Fashion is a remembrance of things past, a memory of another age. And, it is also the future. Fashion is the shape and colour of tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. To be able to predict fashion’s next change one must go back to its past. Fashion lives for a present brief moment, then it is the past. ‘One must forgive fashion, for it dies so young,’ says Jean Cocteau.  

The viewer is transported back in time by Lagerfeld when he discusses French court dress—the first source of documented fashion design, in his view. Lagerfeld gives his personal views on the Eighteenth Century fashion stylist Rose Bertin and other fashion designers and artists. His insights and responses to period clothing, art and aesthetics are revealed and explained in ways that may be useful for tracing influences and are a valuable primary source record. Some of the views expressed by Lagerfeld provide evidence for an analysis of his creative process and method of historical examination. For example, when talking about Rose Bertin, reveals his knowledge of historical precedent and its relevance to a contemporary sense of style:

Rose Bertin, Marie-Antoinette’s dress designer, was a really creative person. And, you know, in fact Madame de Pompadour was her own stylist too. She was the one who put print and lighter materials into fashion, even for court life. And, when you see the famous Latour pastels of the Boucher paintings of Madame de Pompadour-then, suddenly she invented another use for ribbons, print, colours—and I think she was a great stylist. I think she worked with her seamstresses in a very creative way.

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19 Ibid.
During his appearance in the video production Karl Lagerfeld is shown holding a small hardback book entitled *Cabinet Des Modes*, which appears to be a prototype of the first type of fashion magazine. The magazine bears the following inscription: ‘*Cabinet Des Modes, ou Les Modes Nouvelles, Décrites d’une manière claire & précise & représentées par des Planches en Taille-douce, eluminées*.’ 20

Lagerfeld’s interest in this antique book reveals his admiration for the eccentric and often bizarre designs that are presented in this hardback book. He believes that the illustrations of modes of dress and their attention to detail are a unique record of fashionable clothing from a decadent time, a time before the French Revolution. His attraction to the extravagant designs seems to stem from a personal liking of fun and witty fashion. This may be illustrated by Lagerfeld’s remarks on the hand coloured designs in this high fashion catalogue:

> You know before the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth Centuries they did some fashion engraving but they were just flying paper—but this paper called *Cabinet Des Modes* was the first, put together, like a magazine. Sent all over the world, to the different courts, and people who were interested in Paris fashion then. And this reflects really sophisticated life of the late Eighteenth Century just three years or four years before the French Revolution started. 21

Lagerfeld expresses many personal thoughts regarding various topics in the story of fashion. For example, he discusses the fashion critic Carrie Donovan, an intuitive journalist with a *sixth sense* for establishing successful future fashion trends. Lagerfeld made the following observation of this *New York Times* critic:

> ... there are some great journalists, they have the right eye—they see the things before everybody else—for me one of the best is Carrie Donovan ... 22

Lagerfeld has recognised that pop icons are another strong force in the evolution of style, a style which did not develop from the fashion houses. Popular music stars have had a great influence on the way in which young women preferred to dress. Lagerfeld expressed the following view in regard to singers Cindy Lauper and Madonna:

> Today pop stars and things like this are influential. I think recently Cindy Lauper and Madonna are very influential for the young people especially. 23

Lagerfeld leads the viewer back in time to the origins of *haute couture*. Here, he refers to the *beautiful* dresses produced by the *House of Worth*, and the impeccable couture garments of

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20 ibid. English translation of the introduction to the *Cabinet Des Modes*: ‘Study of Fashion (or The New Fashion), Described in a clear style and precise manner, and represented by plates of hand-coloured engravings.’

21 ibid.

22 ibid.

23 ibid.
Madame Paquin. Lagerfeld understood the historical importance of the latter fashion designer, and said that:

Since the days of Marie-Antoinette, Paquin was the first important designer who was a woman. In fact in many ways she anticipated Chanel.\textsuperscript{24}

The relatively recent trend for grand fashion presentations in Paris have, in Lagerfeld’s view, necessitated the return of the hat. His reasoning for this is explained in the comment below:

Now since ready-to-wear is doing huge shows and high fashion followed there had to be hats because (of) the space where it’s shown—the big runways with all the lights. Its not like the street; in a way it distorts fashion and you need something there because it’s oversized, and the proportions are not the proportions of life.\textsuperscript{25}

Observations made by the milliner Kirsten Woodward during the period in which she produced Lagerfeld’s \textit{Pâtisserie} hat collection give insight into his attitude. An analysis and comparison of the hats will be included. These hat creations have been imbued with a Surrealist flavour as their quirky and witty details are reminiscent of Elsa Schiaparelli’s hat styles. Kirsten Woodward reinforces the view that Lagerfeld’s hat designs are intentionally clever and amusing:

There’s always a sense of humour growing through all of them (the hats). It’s not too heavy, it’s always lightened by an element of humour. \textsuperscript{26}

She offers the opinion that Lagerfeld produced distinctive styles for each of the four fashion houses, whilst retaining a discernible and recognisable signature response to the aesthetic challenge posed by the individual houses.

Another important area of innovative and creative design has been Lagerfeld’s work for the Italian \textit{Fendi} company in Rome; a company which has its fur garments designed by him. The documentary film reveals that Lagerfeld is considered to have broken all the rules in traditional fur manufacturing; having shaved or brightly coloured deluxe furs such as sable, and treating rabbit skins as if they were a top of the range elegant fur. For Lagerfeld \textit{chic} fashionable fur coats can be made from any fur and the preciousness of the material seems to be irrelevant. The rigidity of past standards of luxurious fur items has passed, and this irreverent form of interpretation has been accepted as a legitimate form in elite fashion circles.

\textsuperscript{24}ibid.
\textsuperscript{25}ibid.
\textsuperscript{26}ibid.
The documentary film provides some valuable and supporting material for analysis and comparison of Lagerfeld’s fashion design work. Lagerfeld has produced numerous styles which are appropriate to the image of the three fashion houses, and his diverse fashion designs for the three different labels are of particular interest because they reveal his characteristic stamp on the clothes that he creates. He has the ability to create different styles for each fashion house while retaining his individual and distinguishing mark. I will also analyse and compare elements of the clothes that are unique or possibly original in some way. Although it is the currently held view that in fashion circles fashion is retrospective and not original in concept, it is my premise that Lagerfeld is one fashion designer who has contributed original fashion designs, and developed existing modes of dress into innovative styles.


Karl Lagerfeld and his fashion design work features prominently in the second part of the three part documentary film series. The second film of the documentary series is entitled *The Story of Fashion: The Art and Sport of Fashion*. The film’s commentary was written by Meredith E thrington-Smith and is again narrated throughout by Diana Quick, except where Lagerfeld delivers seemingly well informed opinions concerning various aspects of fashion. Lagerfeld discusses and expresses views on several of the great fashion designers of the twenties through to the fifties; designers like Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli and Christian Dior to name a few. The film sections focusing on Lagerfeld’s personal thoughts form segments of primary source material which will be incorporated in my thesis.

In Meredith E thrington-Smith’s view the phenomenon of television has taken over from the world of fashion magazines as an influential medium. Lagerfeld suggests that the overtly rich look of the Joan Collins character of Alexis in the television series Dynasty, did not influence many women’s style of dress because the look was too hard. This look was inspired by film actor Joan Crawford and her carefully calculated styled outfits. Lagerfeld states that many women were in fact influenced by the pop stars Sade and Madonna. Lagerfeld makes valuable points and reveals many intuitive thoughts on the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli. He has designed many items of clothing based on her intellectual and witty approach to fashion design and when Diana Quick states that:
Elsa Schiaparelli’s hallmarks are outrageous elegance with hard edge chic.\textsuperscript{27} she, in many respects, could be directly applying these same observations to Lagerfeld’s work as it is manifested throughout many collections.

The documentary film highlights photography as a medium indispensable for the success of the fashion industry. Talented and creative fashion photographers such as Horst P. Horst and Bruce Weber are discussed in the film. Diana Quick makes the following statement about photography and photographers relating to the 1930s:

Photography became an enormous influence on the story of fashion. Photographers like Horst transmitted the mood of clothes and their accessories, as well as their cut. It has become a crucial link between creator and wearer ever since. \textsuperscript{28}

Bruce Weber has photographed Lagerfeld’s and other fashion designers garments, but he is more well known for his photographs for the American fashion designer Ralph Lauren. Lagerfeld sees Bruce Weber as an ‘important photographer of the Eighties.’\textsuperscript{29} Many enticing links exist between the world of the image and the world of fashion—enough similarities exist between the formal characteristics of Bruce Weber’s images and Lagerfeld’s photographs to suggest some interchange. In my view this question of the reciprocity of photography and fashion is worthy of investigation and analysis. Lagerfeld, like Bruce Weber, creates a world looking back to the past and yet they have a contemporary look about them. Lagerfeld has most probably been influenced by Weber’s vision, and I will investigate the similarities between them in order to establish causal or aesthetic links.

In addition the three themes of jewellery, shoes and hats are discussed in The Story of Fashion. Lagerfeld expresses the view that the shoe, like the hat, is as an important acccessory in the history of fashion. Meredith Ethrington-Smith expounds upon the reasons for the success of costume jewellery since it became so popular in Gabrielle Coco Chanel’s heyday:

Real jewellery has also been the glittering exclamation mark of fashion. Costume jewellery, being less valuable need not be so serious, it can afford to amuse. So it has always attracted highly individualised designers ... Fake jewellery is once again adding wit to the story of fashion. At its best it heightens the mood of a collection, or makes a witty comment on the designers’ intention.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} ibid.
Lagerfeld plays with endless ideas for jewellery in his collections, especially those for the House of Chanel. He seems to agree with the tenor of the above quotation as he employs the best jewellery designers and makers to produce both glamorous and humorous pieces for his clientele. I intend discussing several unique or unusual hat, shoe and jewellery designs from Lagerfeld's ready-to-wear and haute couture collections in my text in order to isolate reasons for this variety of approach.

Meredith Ehrington-Smith notes the universality and popularisation of perfume since its introduction to the world of fashion early in the twentieth century. She says:

What is invisible, but fashion nonetheless? The indispensable accessory which has been part of the story of fashion, ever since the early years of the century: Perfume! 31

Lagerfeld states that perfume, and the design of perfume bottles may be seen to reveal much about the tastes of contemporary society. He perceptively discusses several perfumes and their packaging, and relates them back to a particular couturier's style. For example, Lagerfeld describes the fashion designer Paul Poiret's perfume as a spice based Oriental scent which has heavy and sticky characteristics (circa 1911), and which Lagerfeld maintains is appropriate to Poiret's designs. Meredith Ehrington-Smith reinforces Lagerfeld's suppositions in the following quotation:

Fashion designers have always been involved in creating the right fragrance to echo the mood of their clothes. 32

Lagerfeld has been involved with the production of several perfumes. I will investigate the relevance of the role that his styles of clothing have on these fragrances. I will also study the role that these perfumes have in supplementing the mood of Lagerfeld's design concepts and artistic creations as outlined above, and to analyse the way packaging designs an atmosphere which are used to complement his productions.

The French couturier Jacques Fath was the young Lagerfeld's favourite designer, he discusses his admiration for this designer in the documentary film. He is in full agreement with Meredith Ehrington-Smith's views on Jacques Fath:

Jacques Fath made the new look glamorous and young, using airy fabrics and sewing flirtation into every seam. 33

31ibid.
32ibid.
33ibid.
From the information gathered from this documentary film I will investigate three areas relevant to Lagerfeld's fashion design work and photography. The first of these possible influences is Bruce Weber's photographic images for Ralph Lauren, the second is the recurring Surrealist themes in Lagerfeld's fashion and accessory designs, and thirdly, Jacques Fath's possible influence on the young designer. In many ways Lagerfeld's photographic images are compositionally and visually related to Bruce Weber's photographs. I will examine the relevant connections between the styles of these two photographers. Two books, Karl Lagerfeld: Photographer, (1990)\textsuperscript{34} and Off The Record, (1994)\textsuperscript{35}, have recently been published on Lagerfeld's photography. In the first of these he acknowledges various photographers for their creative expertise, I will look at these photographers and include in the list Bruce Weber because Lagerfeld seems to display a connection with his own photographs to Weber's stylistic interpretations of nostalgic themes. I will also compare and analyse Weber's photographs along with Lagerfeld's photographs in his second book which is evocative of the past and reminiscent of a narrative structure based upon personal thoughts, fantasies, literature and photographic precedent.

I will link several of Lagerfeld's \textit{haute couture} and ready-to-wear collections to Surrealism and its aesthetics. Karl Lagerfeld's witty clothes and accessories are particularly influenced by Elsa Schiaparelli's work from the thirties and I will further compare and analyse specific designs by Schiaparelli and Lagerfeld. Lagerfeld's admiration for Jacques Fath's \textit{couture} clothes is especially relevant to my thesis because it enables me to gain insights into some of the possible inspirations of Lagerfeld's body of fashion design work. I will use direct quotes from Lagerfeld on the art of Jacques Fath in my text which emphasise his respect for Fath's creative potential. Fath had an obvious and self acknowledged influence upon Lagerfeld himself and I will try to ascertain how influential Jacques Fath actually was, and perhaps still is to Lagerfeld's fashion design work.


Karl Lagerfeld and his fashion design work has been segmented through the final documentary film entitled \textit{The Story of Fashion: The Age of Dissent}. The film's commentary was written by Meredith Ethrington-Smith, and is narrated by Diana Quick. Lagerfeld discusses modes of dress from the forties to the eighties, the period in which this

\textsuperscript{34}Lagerfeld, Karl, 1990, \textit{Karl Lagerfeld: Photographer}, Köln, Benedikt Taschen.

\textsuperscript{35}Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, \textit{Off the Record}, Scalo, Zürich.
documentary was produced. This documentary film forms a valuable primary source because Lagerfeld not only expresses personal views regarding fashion and fashion designers in the last few decades, but also gives his views about the first fashion contest that he and Yves Saint Laurent won.

Lagerfeld expresses the following view on the requirements needed for success of the fashion designer:

One of the secrets of fashion is to do the right thing at the right moment. And there is always one designer in any decade who feels the decade better. Who, without knowing it, expresses the decade better and gets something really fine out of it. Even if five or ten years later it’s the worst thing in the world, but that’s fashion.36

I will use the above quote to discuss Lagerfeld’s own achievement in the 1980s, as he most certainly understood that decade well. He quickly changed the shape of fashion for his various labels and seemed to embody the spirit of the above quotation. It will provide a framework for analysis of the most successful of his looks and dissect their constant evolving forms.

It is rare to find details of Lagerfeld’s youth and especially thoughts on his early life in haute couture and ready-to-wear clothing. In this documentary film he talks about the International Wool Secretariat competition in which he won first place for the coat design whilst Yves Saint Laurent won the first prize for the dress design. He states that he and Yves Saint Laurent made a success out of this small opportunity. Importantly Lagerfeld describes how the competition was organised and recollects the details of that period in his life.

The last documentary film in this series entitled The Story of Fashion: The Age of Dissent has only two sections in it which may be of relevance to my thesis. Firstly, Lagerfeld’s thoughts on the beginning of his fashion design career, as primary source information about his childhood is scant, and secondly, Lagerfeld’s successful 1980s and early 1990s suit designs for the House of Chanel. Lagerfeld’s ever-changing styles for the generic Chanel suit became the object of desire by a new generation of wealthy women during his employment as sole designer for this label. Lagerfeld’s comments and opinions regarding the changes that he has continually made regarding this suit will be used. The classic Chanel suit and its contemporary manifestation will be highlighted in the text because it is the basis for a wide range of clothing in Lagerfeld’s haute couture and ready-to-wear collections. Women bought Gabrielle Coco Chanel’s suits when she returned to fashion design late in her life.

because it made them feel young again. I will attempt to investigate and analyse why the contemporary Chanel suit designed by Lagerfeld has become a great success during the last decade. Also the original modern Chanel suit will be compared to the derivative post-modern Chanel suit in the section on Lagerfeld and his Postmodern fashion designs.

Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, Off the Record, Scalo, Zürich.

Karl Lagerfeld’s book of photographs entitled Off the Record contains 166 black-and-white photographs which are selected from a spread of eight years of his work in this area. The first section of this photographic catalogue includes photographs of the apartments in which he has lived since 1952; the time when, at the age of fourteen, Lagerfeld first came to live and study in Paris. He reveals private thoughts such as his optimistic views of life from the time when he lived at his first address in Paris and his subsequent thoughts centred upon elements of his other homes prior to 1977. One of Lagerfeld’s addresses since 1977 is at 51, Rue de L’Université. He writes the following comments next to a photograph of the apartment’s facade.

The most beautiful doorway on the Rue de L’Université (designed in 1788 by Ledoux). I love these great mysterious ‘portes cochères’. They are like guardians of mystery. The great novels of French literature and countless scenes in French history take place behind doors like that. 37

These rarely expressed private thoughts and personal photographs are valuable for my thesis in that not only do they give some hint of the complexity of the man but also they supply primary source information not readily available elsewhere.

Lagerfeld has created and produced several photographic essays and series of photographs which may reveal, upon scrutiny, themes and inspirational sources of relevance in the analysis of his conceptual motivations. One such series entitled Hommage à Mary Wigman features the actor Emma Thompson. Thompson is photographed running outdoors barefoot, in a strapless black dress swirling the large skirt around her whilst staring into the camera. The overall impression of this particular series of photographs is stylistically reminiscent of filmic precursors such as that found in the film director Michelangelo Antonioni’s works such as Blow-up, Red Desert and L’Aventura. In this the series of photographs may, almost unconsciously, be seen to be revealing the source of his most influential period-the world of Swinging London-the world of new taste, of counter-culture, of the subversion of tradition and the development of alternative visions. Whilst this is much to claim for one series of photographs there are other photographs and series of images in the publication that reveal persistent and analysable trends and thematic coherence. In this sense the publication supplies visual information not available from other sources. The photographs and the

37Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, Off the Record, Scalo, Zürich, up.
images that they employ may be viewed iconographically as highly personal indications of preference, choice, fantasy and historical pastiche.

Lagerfeld's photographic essays are impressive, there are several of these in the catalogue, including the eighteen page story named *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and another fifty page cinematic-styled story entitled *NIX*. He wrote the title page of *NIX* as follows:

Claudia Schiffer Starring in
*NIX*
(which in Berlin's dialect means 'nothing')
or the simple, naive and moral story of
Greta's and Hans' trip to Berlin
A Heimat Film.

These photographic stories reminds one of the old serials in post-war Italian magazines. The images say much about Lagerfeld's stylistical evolution as a visual designer of images as much as of a fashion designer. This is also a story of transformation-Greta to Gritta, from braids to sophisticated beautiful clothes; a symbol of the designer's wishes to convert static fabric to wearable haute couture clothes.

Lagerfeld writes 'Façades hint at the magic of noble courtyards, hidden from the public eye'.38 Stylistically this comment may be applied, most appropriately, to clothing and exterior make-up, hair and accessories that hide a woman's body yet suggest something about her mind, her character or perhaps the character she wishes to become. Lagerfeld's models role-play and reinforce the fantasies that he has formulated in his overtly kinky eighteenth century effeminate male with white wig, pointed dark lipstick and eye make-up with black singlet and masculine underarm hair. Eccentric and desirable to the gay male or a fun mind frolic for the senses, perhaps here we see Lagerfeld's mind at play. Males are presented as dressed up as females yet are not portrayed as transvestites. In these revealing photographs Lagerfeld seems to yearn for a made-up male belonging to a century or a time past. Lagerfeld also displays a *tongue-in-cheek* whimsy and play with the elements of the pampered eighteenth century male; however in his photographs these males certainly do not look *limp-wristed* or effete, but seem to originate from a more sober analysis of formal and stylistic constructs and their depictions have deeper ramifications.

Consequently one can glean from Lagerfeld's photographic catalogue that the subconscious expression in his own photographs has a lot to do with the representation of past culture together with his own culture, combined with a great admiration for past modes of experience.

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38 ibid.
Karl Lagerfeld’s book entitled *Karl Lagerfeld: Photographer* is, as the title indicates, a compilation of his personal photographs. Three translated forewords are included at the beginning of this book. Each foreword is three pages long. The only other text is at the end of the book which is comprised of small copies of the large photographs with titles also in the three languages.

Lagerfeld discusses his interest in photography from childhood through to 1990. He discusses his thoughts regarding twentieth century photography and touches on film today compared with silent films. Lagerfeld expresses the following views and opinions in his foreword regarding photographers who inspired him and whom he admires:

> There is a certain melancholy in all the photos. And every one is unrepeatable. One can never take the same photograph twice. This is probably why I am so attracted to turn of the century art photography. Pictures by Alvin Langdon Coburn, Robert Demachy, Pierré Dubreuil, Gertrude Käsebier, Heinrich Kühn, Edward Steichen and above all Alfred Stieglitz made a far greater impression on me than the work of famous 1920s and 1930s photographers whose work I admire greatly and indeed collect. Many of today’s greats—from my old friend Helmut Newton to Penn, Avedon to Peter Lindbergh—have taken my picture often enough in the course of my fashion career. I always envied them their position behind the camera.\(^{39}\)

Information from the three pages of text written by Lagerfeld himself is valuable, as primary source information about him has been difficult to obtain. Interviews where Lagerfeld divulges private thoughts and aspirations are rare.

> Fashion, which is my own true form of expression, has always been and still remains a pretext for taking photos. It is a regular incentive to photography, and the connection between the two are perfectly logical. My photographs are pictures of an idealized reality where the dream world meets the truth halfway.\(^{40}\)

The valuable insights gained from this foreword will be documented in sections regarding Lagerfeld’s personal traits, artistic inspirations for his photographs and by extension his fashion design work. Many images are in fact fashion photographs of his designs from his haute couture and ready-to-wear collections. I will analyse the clothing depicted within these images as well as gleaning fresh information about the way he designs his clothes. He has not only created the clothing but given the viewer a direct opportunity to see how his clothes are considered to be worn—not from an advertising angle (although many of the photographs were created and used for this purpose) but from an aesthetic one.

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\(^{40}\) ibid. p. 11.
Anna Piaggi’s journal *Lagerfeld’s Sketchbook: Karl Lagerfeld’s Illustrated Fashion Journal of Anna Piaggi* is divided into twenty-nine sections. These include a preface by Karl Lagerfeld on Anna Piaggi, another preface by Anna Piaggi on Karl Lagerfeld and various sketch studies such as *The Parisienne from Somewhere Else*. The book contains pen-and-ink and watercolour sketches of Piaggi by Lagerfeld. The colour drawings number 154 and there are also 60 black-and-white illustrations. A few black-and-white photographs of the fashion designer and the author are included; two of which are from the making, and taking a break during the filming of *Views and Interviews*. This documentary film was written and directed by Lagerfeld in 1977.

Piaggi discusses Lagerfeld’s achievements in fashion design and also in the affiliated arts of illustration and costume design. Piaggi has dedicated her book to Lagerfeld and writes of her friend as follows:

This book presents an aspect of Karl Lagerfeld which is different from his public image as a fashion designer in the ... drawings, the hand of a true fashion illustrator in the grand tradition can be seen. Karl belongs to a special group of chroniclers of elegance which includes Eric, Christian Bérard, Willaumez, Bouché, Cecil Beaton and a few others.41

The collection of illustrations by Lagerfeld is a tribute to Piaggi which spans a period of ten to eleven years. Lagerfeld was inspired, through Piaggi’s uniquely creative presentation of clothing to draw many more than the 214 sketches published in this journal. The following quotation from Lagerfeld’s introduction in this book illustrates the reasons for some of this admiration and inspiration:

No one knows like Anna how to endow a garment with its own visual language. She knows nothing of banality. She never does what one expects and yet it is always convincing. An unexpected detail, a tautology of style, a contradictory accessory, a surprising mixture, unforeseen associations of ideas and an indispensable touch of humour create a unique appearance which has always made me want to draw it, as a novelist describes his heroine or as a director loves to film his star.42

For Piaggi, not only does Lagerfeld sketch in the *grand tradition*, but also he is

an extraordinary narrator of fashion stories, expressed with a light touch, elegance and wit.43

At the time of publication of this book in 1986, Piaggi already had a long established association with Lagerfeld that has extended for almost twenty years. She wrote of his

42Ibid., p. 7.
43Ibid., p. 12.
fashion design career beginning with his work as a young assistant at Balmain through to his later work at Patou. Anna Piaggi comments on her friend’s passions in the following quotation:

Today, in France, he gives his creative support to Chanel, but more than anything he lives for the personal adventure of his own fashion house, ‘Karl Lagerfeld’, and for Lagerfeld Parfums, one of his most deep-rooted passions, and destined to evolve even further in the future.\textsuperscript{44}

Anna Piaggi’s book was produced as a visual diary of real events in the author’s life. A life in which Lagerfeld has played a significant role. Lagerfeld has expressed the following views concerning Anna Piaggi,

Most of the drawings were done in my homes ... They cover a period of twelve years. ... Through her mere presence she has given transitory places a kind of permanence. ... Odours and colours come back to life. She has made the ephemeral endure. Every drawing is like the page of an intimate journal. ... The drawings must tell about Anna. This is her ‘chronique’: her chronicle.\textsuperscript{45}

The journal largely reflects Lagerfeld’s desire to capture an inspirational and unusually individual woman. His drawings and annotations regarding Anna Piaggi’s numerous costumes and outfits, offers a valuable insight into Lagerfeld’s interests. My research focuses on an analysis of his original and significant contributions to the field of fashion design. This primary source material will serve as a stepping stone to the centre of Lagerfeld’s motivation and seemingly limitless inspiration for his sixteen yearly showings of the collections for the houses of Chanel, Chloé, Fendi and his own signature label.

\textbf{Texts of Critical Theory}


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\textsuperscript{44}ibid., p. 13. \\
\textsuperscript{45}ibid., p. 11.
Roland Barthes’ objective in his inquiry is to show how a structural analysis of women’s clothing may be formulated. His field of interest is that body of fashion which was described in the late 1950s to early 1960s by various fashion magazines. His specific objective was the exploration and discovery of the basis of Fashion. His semiological project was an analysis of the written, described system of clothing, rather than the real, that is the visual system. The reason for Barthes' work being entirely based on written clothing and not upon what he calls real or visual system of Fashion, is that he felt that,

... without discourse there is no total Fashion, no essential Fashion. It is thus unreasonable to place the reality of clothing before the discourse of Fashion: true reason would in fact have us proceed from the instituting discourse to the reality which it constitutes.  

Barthes' text analyses the Fashion system from 1957 to 1963 and he is primarily concerned with the western modes of Fashion and its use as a semiological construct. The text focuses upon the way fashion is described in magazines and journals in the press and in advertisements in particular. He elucidates how the hidden semiological content instructs the usage and placement of fashion within an aesthetic and desire-based commodity context.

Roland Barthes began this particular text in 1957 and completed it in 1963. The methodology of this new form of intellectual art inquiry used by Barthes was originally inspired by the general science of signs developed by the French philosopher Ferdinand Saussure. Barthes is consequently often regarded as the founder of Semiology, the study of signs.

Barthes analysed the system of signs that the fashion industry uses. He discovered that society did not attain desire for clothing through the objects of clothing themselves, but through the meanings of written words selling a dream for everyone. An example of selling a dream in personal transformation is related in the following passage:

... for Fashion, clothing is not play but the sign of play; here ... by naming vestimentary play (to play the gardener; a fraudulent little hint of the Boy Scout in you), Fashion exorcises it; the game of clothing is here no longer the game of being ...  

The semiotic approach of Barthes will be used to help analyse Karl Lagerfeld's garments and their potential meanings and aesthetic context.

Why does Fashion utter clothing so abundantly? Why does it interpose, between the object and its user, such a luxury of words (not to mention images), such a network of meaning? The reason is, of course, an economic one. Calculating,

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47 ibid., pp. 256-257.
industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation; Fashion, like all fashions, depends on a disparity of two consciousnesses, each foreign to the other. In order to blunt the buyers' calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object—a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings; a mediate substance of an aperitif ... 48

Of course sociologists, such as Barthes, tend to view clothing as belonging to structures such as classes or groups within society. However, despite the undoubted interest of this form of investigation, it must be remembered that the work of Lagerfeld has also to do with projecting images which have to do with individuality, with artistic responses to post modern theories and with culture, as well with the ephemeral and the elitist nature of the multi-million dollar industry that supports him. Many concepts underlie his ready-to-wear and haute couture garments. My intention is to explore and discover their inspirations and meanings, and to attempt to draw aside Barthes' veil of images, at least as it shrouds the works of Lagerfeld.


Jennifer Craik in her book The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion, discusses the wide-ranging inter-relationship of how people adopt fashion to project their identities through clothes.

Fashion is perplexing, intriguing, irritating and, above all, compulsive. Like it or not, fashion exerts a powerful hold over people—even those who eschew it. While reactions to clothes are ambivalent, there is no doubt that clothes matter. The old adage that clothes maketh the 'person' still counts, while the wrong look for a particular occasion can have disastrous consequences.49

Her thesis is based on an ethnographic and sociological analysis of fashion within the context of the twentieth century. Her analysis is centred upon the proposition that the trickle-down theory that holds that fashion is dictated by elite designers and opinion leaders, is severely limited. Conversely, there is evidence of a trickle-up effect from below, that is from subcultures, mass consumer behaviour and the everyday bricolage of fashion items.50 Her book addresses the areas of men's and women's fashion within a broad examination of the role of fashion in gender identity.

48Ibid. p. xi.
50Bricolage is the process of using everyday objects (not initially intended to be worn) as accessories. For example, Susan Kaiser describes a student who has added safety pins as well as plastic track feed from a computer printer to his wardrobe—all in the spirit of using the tools at hand to construct a distinctive look. Kaiser, Susan, 1990, The Social Psychology of Clothing: SymbolicAppearances in Context, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, p. 470.
Trends in western fashion in recent decades suggest that fashion is a pervasive feature of everyday living, and certainly not confined to, or determined by, *haute couture* or elite socialites. Clothing the body is a technique of every social body through which the physical body is actualised in its habituses. Body parts are high-lighted, concealed and juxtaposed by clothes which determine or constrain certain gestural ranges. The attributes of the person are worn. In that sense, clothes create the parameters of a person’s living environment. Elite western fashion is just one arrangement of fashion as a body technique.\(^{51}\)

Craik develops her argument that the subjects of fashion systems are the ethnographic traces of the cultural projection of the body by several methods and processes. The basis of this theory is analysed through various key issues related to consumerism and everyday fashion, the iconisation of the body through fashion models and photography, the use of cosmetics to *make-up* the body, the nexus between fashion and gender and the role of changing fashions in underwear and swimwear as maps of the revealed body.

The book is primarily concerned in raising issues and answering pertinent questions on how people acquire knowledge regarding appropriate codes of dress; the ways in which new fashion styles modify and/or construct the established everyday codes of dress and also how the way we clothe the body contributes to the performance of the self. Some of this may be seen in the extreme in Karl Lagerfeld's commissioned creations for Barbet Schroeder's 1970s Paris based film *Maitresse*.\(^{52}\) Examples of the sadomasochistic leather garments of the whip-toting female lead actor's role as a high-class dominatrix are contrasted with the opposing costumes of the same protagonist during daylight in her *normal* life. Lagerfeld here not only displays his stylistical breadth but he plays with the role making identity and function of clothes and the attributes that they suggest. If this is true then the film offers some support for Craik's views and observations regarding the external meaning and internal expression and force of clothing. It comes as no surprise that Craik has been influenced by the writings of the semiologist Roland Barthes. She uses several other analysts to support her point of view. Craik uses a method of inquiry that incorporates cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, art history and social history to reveal the meanings of clothes in society from 1884 to 1993. I wish to incorporate some of her methods in analysing the meanings contained within Lagerfeld's fashion style. Of particular interest, are the sections regarding haute couture and the elitism attached to it, and especially, the short section on postmodernist aesthetics.

Fashion has been especially attractive to postmodernists (e.g. Kroker and Kroker 1987; Faurschou 1987; Wark 1991) because its slipperiness—the ambivalence, polyvalence, semiotic smorgasbord and excess-fits into the world view of consumerism, pluralism and masquerade gone mad—the unfettered circulation of free-floating signs. The elements of fashion that leak out of dominant theories accord perfectly with a postmodernist vision (Kroker and Kroker 1987: 16) ...

\(^{51}\)ibid., pp. 223-225.

Fashion is a visual commentary on the excess of postmodern culture providing 'aesthetic holograms' that 'introduce the appearance of radical novelty, while maintaining the reality of no substantial change'.


Lurie discusses the language and meaning of clothes from a historical perspective; a perspective developed from authors and other costume historians from the Nineteenth Century through to relatively modern times in the late 1970s. Lurie perceptively adapts psychological and sociological meanings to clothing from various eras. In Chapter 111 (3), Fashion and Time, Lurie suggests that clothing styles repeat themselves for many reasons, but especially because societies experience boredom with the status quo. Like the semiotician Roland Barthes, Lurie views clothing as a sign system, a system which has evolved its own peculiar vocabulary. Complete costumes or fashion outfits strongly indicate specific messages. The information that these messages offer have to do with the wearer's present mood, age, occupation, personality, class, sexual preference, amongst a myriad of other signals. In this chapter, Lurie discusses various eras and societies which have either reinforced that people dress in a juvenile mode or a manner which had suggested advanced maturity. Both situations coincided during the early Victorian Period. By writing the following passage Lurie reveals the contemporary attitude of the Victorians and their views of men in relation to women through the messages given by the styles of clothing worn at the time.

As the Romantic movement entered its second generation, producing the rich and highly coloured poetry of Keats, Byron and Shelley, modes began to alter. Female dress, though retaining its basic high-waisted, tubular shape, became more richly decorated and colourful. Gradually, skirts and sleeves became fuller; ruffles, trimmings and bows appeared; and young women, began to look like walking boudoir lamps. Men's clothes, though they did not change as much, also became bulkier and more colourful. ... By 1820, the early Victorian pattern was established: the elegant, inflated male and the elaborately trimmed childish female, immature in both mind and body.

The social and cultural shifts within a society are nearly always expressed in the ways in which people dress and adorn themselves. Lurie, as well as other sociologists, believes that:

These shifts in fashion are not arbitrary and whimsical, as some writers on costume have claimed, but the outward and visible sign of profound social and cultural alterations. As two American sociologists put it, 'changes in fundamental modes of dress indicate changes in the social roles and self-concepts of members of that society'.

55 ibid., p. 60.
Lurie's text analyses Western modes of dress and fashion from a sociological construct and methodology. Her work focuses upon the changing world of fashion and its distinctively individual grammar, sentences and vocabulary. This language is visually illustrated in the book by drawings, paintings, photographs and sculpture. The meanings and messages behind the wearing of clothing vary in a multitude of ways. One fascinating example of this is discussed below:

America has a history of political isolation and economic self-sufficiency; its citizens have tended to regard themselves as lucky ... Alternatively, they think of other nations as mere showplaces for picturesque scenery, odd flora and fauna and quaint artefacts. The American tourist abroad therefore wears clothes suitable for a trip to a disaster area, or a visit to a museum or zoo: comfortable, casual, brightly coloured, relatively cheap: not calculated to arouse envy or pick up dirt.\(^{56}\)

The photograph illustrating the above quotation is one of an extremely realistic, life size sculpture of a man and woman, entitled Tourists, completed in 1970 by the artist Duane Hanson\(^ {57}\).

I will partially use the sociological, and possibly the psychological approaches of Lurie to help analyse Karl Lagerfeld's varied styles of garments and their deliberate language and system of signs within an aesthetic context. Lagerfeld’s collections for the fashion house Chloé are in the poetic mode. He has stated this fact himself and may be interpreted clearly in this manner.\(^ {58}\) The language of Chloé clothing is one formed in a romantic, wistful, dreamer vein, at times nostalgic and referring back to a more desirable past.

Alison Lurie tends to view modes of fashion and costume as belonging to sociological structures such as gender, classes or groups within society from the 1800s to the 1970s. An example of this sociological framework structure may be gleaned from the following passage entitled, The Shoe as a Strategic Weapon in Chapter V111, Male and Female:

Attempts to limit female mobility by hampering locomotion are ancient and almost universal. The foot-binding of upper-class Chinese girls and the Nigerian custom of loading women's legs with pounds of heavy brass wire are extreme examples, but all over the world similar stratagems have been employed to make sure that once you have caught a woman she cannot run away, even if she stays around she cannot keep up with you ... The high-heeled, narrow-toed shoes that for most of this century have been an essential part of woman's costume are

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\(^{56}\) ibid., pp. 106-107.

\(^{57}\) Arnason, H. H., 1981, A History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Thames and Hudson, London, p. 700. Duane Hanson's Tourists, 1970 (fig. 1244), transcends even Madame Tussaud's famous waxworks in the incredible illusion of American types. The availability of new plastic mediums which can be modelled and coloured to approximate human flesh textures has facilitated the artist's task in creating the ultimate imitation of nature, although in its degree of caricature Hanson's Tourists can be seen as an obvious descendant of pop art. 'Tourists. Polychromed fibreglass and polyester, life size. Private collection.

considered sexually attractive ... The halting, tiptoe gait they produce is thought provocative—perhaps because it guarantees that no woman wearing them can outrun a man who is chasing her.  

This form of investigation is interesting and insightful but not all together suitable for my thesis. The work of Lagerfeld has also to do with creating desirable images which have to do with highly individualised concepts and with an artistic response to modern and lately post modern theories and (with) culture (as such). The fleetingly ephemeral nature of the fashion system plays an immense role in his designing work. Many diverse concepts underpin his ready-to-wear and haute couture garments. My aim is to explore and analyse their inspirations and meanings, and to partially or fully uncover some of the hidden concepts behind the works of Lagerfeld.

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Margaret Rose's book The Post-Modern & the Post-Industrial: a Critical Analysis, contains six chapters discussing the concepts of post-modern theories. The illustrations are examples of post-modern works by architects and painters from 1959 through to 1987. Rose has used a wide and diverse range of sources written by international theorists on the subject of the post-industrial and/or the post-modern. She traces and analyses the varying historical theories and concepts related to the terms of post-modern and post-industrial. Rose discovered the use of the term post-industrial as early as the year 1914 in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Arthur J. Penty's Essays in Post-Industrialism: a Symposium of Prophecy concerning the Future of Society; and, the first use of the term Postmodernism in 1934 in Federico de Onis' use of the term postmodernismo to describe the Spanish and Latin-American poetry of 1905-14 which had reacted against the excesses of Modernism. Rose examines many theories in these two related fields, such as the theories of Modernisation, Postmodernity and Deconstructionist Postmodernist. Within these theories of Postmodernism a diversity of concepts exist, for example, Postmodern double-coding, hyperreality and normless pastiche.

Rose's text has been valuable because she explains and critically analyses numerous principles and theories from writers and thinkers on Postmodernism. Major theorists such as Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Hal Foster, Charles Jencks, Peter Fuller, Kenneth Frampton and Paulo Portoghesi. In Rose's Conclusion and Summary chapter, she succinctly notes the major texts, articles and lectures on her topic; a topic based upon a symptom of contrast with, and opposition to, the ideas of Modernism. Modernism as

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61 ibid., p171.
a clutch of attributes, important as it is historically, has nonetheless lost its central relevance and inherent links with the society of today. Some of this oppositional and contrary stress may be sensed in the following passage from a 1982 text by Paolo Portoghesi entitled *Postmodern: the Architecture of the Postindustrial Society*, reads as follows:

... in which he (Portoghesi) points out, amongst other things, that the term 'postmodern' should not be thought of 'as a label designating homogeneous and convergent things', but that 'its usefulness lies, rather, in its having allowed us temporarily to put together and compare different things (including the return to history and classical tradition) arising from a common dissatisfaction with that group of equally heterogeneous things called modernity', and in which he describes the post-industrial society as a society in which the 'new electronic technology' has turned our age into an age of information and communication.  

Lyotard's and Jencks' common position on the following criteria for 'a relativity of values and/or codes post-modern codes' is common to both writers. Rose quotes Fuller from his 1988 text *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* regarding the positions of the two writers:

The post-modernists began to say that the certainties of modernism-its meta-narratives, in Jean-François Lyotard's overused phrase-could only be replaced by self-conscious incredulity about everything. Post-modernism knows no commitments: it takes up what one of its leading exponents, Charles Jencks, once called a 'situational position' in which 'no code is inherently better than any other'.

I have been interested in Margaret Rose's discussions of the major theories and their presuppositions relating to the post-modern in architecture, art history, anthropology, geography, literature and philosophy. I have found the sections on Ihab Hassan's writing from his book *The Question of Postmodernism*, particularly relevant to my thoughts regarding the basis of the post-modernist aesthetic in Karl Lagerfeld's design work of the 1980s through to the early days of 1995. Rose gives details of Hassan's set of what appear to be contrasting characteristics for Modernism and Postmodernism, these lists of attributes and characteristics, though drawn from literary and sociological pursuits, form an important repository of ideas that seem applicable to the work of Lagerfeld, especially in his later stages.

These characteristics will form a basis for critical analyses of Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel's fashion designs compared with Lagerfeld's haute couture designs for the *House of Chanel*. The former designer's clothes fitting well into Modernism and the latter displaying strong Post-modernist tendencies; for example, *Chanel's* clothes had the characteristic of *selection* of design motifs (ie. she designed in her typical less is more pared down aesthetic) compared

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62 ibid., pp. 174-175.
63 ibid. p. 159.
64 ibid. pp. 159-160.
with Lagerfeld's eclectic combination of ahistorical motifs reinterpreted into present day dress.

Secondary Sources: Texts


Nicholas Coleridge in his book The Fashion Conspiracy: A Remarkable Journey Through the Empires of Fashion interviews many fashion designers (haute couture and ready-to-wear) and the shiny-set; wealthy women who can afford to pay the earth for whatever garment takes their fancy. He has written his book in a journalistic, gossip-columnist style which is appropriate considering that he was named Young Journalist of the Year in 1984 and appointed the editor of the Harpers & Queen (British) fashion magazine in 1986. Coleridge includes many statements by Karl Lagerfeld, which chronicle some of Lagerfeld's early life in couture industry; they also reveal his thoughts about haute couture itself.

Coleridge describes first-hand the so-called fickle world of fashion ranging from the catwalks to the sweatshops of cities and countries, such as London, Milan, New York, Tokyo, Kuwait and South Korea. I will use sections of information concerned with Paris and the rituals associated with haute couture (ie. the collection showings and fittings), the customers, buyers, the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, the houses of Chloé and Chanel. Coleridge's book focuses primarily upon the superficial hype and multi-million dollar corporations involved with the selling of haute couture and ready-to-wear collections. He reveals that women ordering haute couture garments in January and July, need to allow five
weeks per year for fittings before the garments are completed; some of this may be illustrated by the following excerpt:

Buying couture does not only require money. It requires leisure and patience. Because each dress or suit is built from scratch—literally sculpted on the body with a toile—there are laborious fittings to be undergone. Sixteen is normal for an evening dress.66

Coleridge’s book is a guide to the international world of fashion, and as such provides a valuable sociological backdrop for the study of any individual designer. He has included much fascinating material on the great and famous fashion designers, especially lengthy sections on Lagerfeld. The many items of interest about Lagerfeld are scattered throughout the text and reveal more about his methods and his design practice than may be found in most journal articles—importantly, many of them seem to be drawn from Coleridge’s personal interviews; these interviews will be followed up for further information. I find this potential source of data provides valuable information considering the lack of primary source material.


Richard Martin in his text Fashion and Surrealism, describes and analyses historical developments of clothes that are obviously and directly inspired by, or copied from, Surrealism. His chosen examples range from Elsa Schiaparelli, Christian Lacroix, Issey Miyake, François Lesage, Cinzia Ruggieri, Yves Saint Laurent, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Stephen Jones, Kirsten Woodward, Doline Dritsas, Krizia, Thierry Mugler, Olivier Guillemin, Vivienne Westwood, Karl Lagerfeld and several other clothing and accessory designers. These designers have used diverse techniques that have added many original creations to their collections through the encapsulation of Surrealism’s distinctive metaphors. These have ranged from the amusing and the mundane and have led to works that are transformed into intellectually marvellous outcomes.

Martin discusses the stylistic evolution of Surrealist inspired garments and accessories from the 1930s through to modern times. Surrealist art clothes began with the famous collaboration of the Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí and the Paris based couturier Elsa Schiaparelli. Their witty and outrageous haute couture garments shocked and delighted the European public, and scandalised a new North American audience. These art clothes exemplified the Surrealist art movement’s philosophy of beauty lying in the subconscious expression of an inner reality; a reality expressed through the dislocation of diametrically opposed opposites in both life and art, as well as in writing and fashion. Famous Schiaparelli examples include the Shoe Hat, the Mutton Chop Hat, the Lips-embroidered Suit and her Circus Collection.

66ibid. p. 172-173.
Martin develops his thesis through an analysis of the use of Surrealist images and their underlying and fundamental principles. Martin's underlying aim and philosophy may be gleaned from the sentiments contained in the following statement in his book:

André Breton once expressed his admiration for Duchamp's disdain of all thesis. It is the same device that Surrealist disorientation of fashion provided: a license to redesign all existing fashion objects external to the figure. The floating, somnambulant world of Surrealist figures allowed for the misalliance of familiar objects and the revaluation of all objects, especially those which obtained on the body as fashion.67

The relevant sections of my thesis related to Lagerfeld's Surrealist inspired garments and accessories will be partly based upon Martin’s insight, research and theoretical application. Several principles of displacement, for example, may be seen in Lagerfeld's Corset Hat (1985-1986), where, to use Martin's words:

Of all the inappropriate places for this normally concealed undergarment to perch, the head is perhaps the most improbable, a disjunctive connection perfect for Lagerfeld's style of irony and decorum ... By using an archaic garment, he confirms its movement in time as well as around the body ... the Corset Hat functions with the complexity of any Surrealist object.68

Richard Martin’s Fashion and Surrealism book was written as a catalogue for the Fashion Institute of Technology’s significant Fashion and Surrealism Exhibition of 1987 in New York. As such, Martin's text offers a very valuable and object based analysis of the principles of fashion design, their sources and, importantly for my work, their relationship to other art forms. In this the text supplies many original directions and avenues for exploration. My own research will attempt a more focused application of these aims to the creative work and output of Lagerfeld.

Richard Martin and Harold Koda’s book, The Historical Mode: Fashion and Art in the 1980s draws references between fashion and art from ancient history through to our present century. They do not view this as a direct imitation or copying of styles of dress as depicted in art but as historical appropriations due to the contemporary designers' awareness of art and its various styles. Martin and Koda link designers' clothes to art periods by putting together illustrations, painting reproductions and other art pieces along-side the garments by many of the 1980s fashion designers. These designers imitated the artworks through eclectically selective eyes.

68 ibid. p. 114.
Fashion designers such as Franco Moschino for example, chose periods of history to wittily mimic in various pieces such as a 1960s Chanel classic suit transformed into his version of the Pinwheel Suit, 1988 and his 1988-89 version of a Napoleonic cavalry ensemble with a twist. Fashion design in the 1980s seemed to parallel the current postmodernist movement in art, architecture and design, by aesthetically transporting past motifs into a present day context.


Colin McDowell chronologically catalogues the styles of hats and headdresses throughout history in his text *Hats: Status, Style and Glamour*. McDowell delves into the stylistical and symbolic evolutions of headgear throughout history through to the early 1990s. In many sections of his text, he discusses the status and etiquette associated with millinery and the development of functional and protective hats. To a large extent McDowell analyses the role of hats from a symbolic perspective, and like Roland Barthes, as signifiers of periods of history reflecting their cultural and social mores. McDowell’s opinions regarding millinery are also similar to those of Alison Lurie and her investigations into the language of clothes and the meanings associated with complete clothing outfits. McDowell gives many examples of the social and symbolic significance of the role of millinery. In the following quotation, McDowell discusses the perceptive and seemingly calculated gesture and nature of Garibaldi and his political philosophy which is projected through the wearing of a simple peasant’s hat in order to promote his political cause and status:

... Garibaldi, the father of Italian unity, also captured the imagination of United States citizens with his broad-brimmed, soft-crowned hat that he was believed to have copied, as a conscious political gesture, from the field of the Italian peasant. ... the hat was used by Garibaldi as a symbol of radical, independent thought, and the slouch hat became the badge of the idealist.

The author also states, in a simple and straightforward manner, that historically a person’s class and status in society was, of course, reflected and expressed through the headgear worn. The messages and system of signs contained in the adornment of the person were, if not obvious to all in society, at least clear to the cognoscenti; those people who were aware of social groupings and rankings within that particular group.

McDowell investigates both the flamboyant and more mundane aspects of hats. His investigation acknowledges the achievements of the great milliners as well as the fashion designers who also work with headgear. He discusses the hat within the context of twentieth century fashion design—when the original haute couture hat was regarded as an essential

69 Ibid. pp. 144-145 and pp. 92-93.
accessory to complete a designer’s outfit. Excellent examples of this are the Surrealist hats designed by Elsa Schiaparelli in the 1930s which were the focal point of many outfits that she designed.\textsuperscript{72} Karl Lagerfeld has a keen eye for detecting milliners who design hats in a creative, non-conventional way. Lagerfeld’s \textit{Patisserie, 1984}\textsuperscript{73} were constructed by Kirsten Woodward, and other bold hats for his various collections were produced by the haute couture milliner Philip Treacy.

Although, McDowell's text focuses on millinery, his documentation, has great value as a concise general history of fashion. He includes details of the important events and hallmarks of fashion designers throughout the early twentieth century who have significance to my work on Lagerfeld. His concluding chapter: \textit{The Fall and Rise of the Hat} is of relevance to the main thesis of my research because it encapsulates the reasons for the demise of the hat throughout the 1960s. At this pivotal period of time, not only did millinery sales fall dramatically, but also \textit{haute couture} clothing was out of favour with the younger generation. It is probable that as a result, Lagerfeld moved away from the strict formality of designing \textit{haute couture} items to freelancing for several ready-to-wear fashion houses. His fashion designs at this time were in tune with the current anti-establishment mood of the \textit{Swinging Sixties} in London. London, at least for this decade, took over from Paris as the \textit{Mecca} of fashion and its almost world-wide influence upon young designers and followers of fashion.

McDowell enthuses about Lagerfeld’s talent as an accomplished and original fashion designer and discusses his use of millinery in his collections, as well as the innate attributes which make Lagerfeld one of the most influential and exciting designers of the latter part of this century. He describes Lagerfeld in the following way:

Vital as the design input from milliners is, it is nevertheless the couturiers who keep ahead of-and actually create-the mood of fashion. Supreme among these in terms of millinery is Karl Lagerfeld, who designs for Chanel in Paris and Fendi in Rome, as well as creating his own line. One of fashion's polymaths, Lagerfeld is endlessly creative and original.\textsuperscript{74}

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Jane Mulvagh's text \textit{Vogue: History of 20th Century Fashion,} is a collection of illustrations and photographs from the society and fashion magazine \textit{Vogue,} founded in America in 1909 by Condé Nast Publications. Mulvagh has assembled and documented the developments of fashion styles from 1909 to the 1980s. She discusses and analyses major clothing styles from

\textsuperscript{72} ibid. p. 170. Illustrations of the famous 'shoe hat' and other hat designs by Elsa Schiaparelli, 1930s. 'Elsa Schiaparelli was the madcap designer of Paris, literally and figuratively. During the 1930s her collections were famous for their originality, wit and impudence. ... Surrealism was her great love and she worked closely with artists such as Salvador Dalí to produce unexpected effects.'


each of the decades within the twentieth century and includes written and visual documentation regarding the contribution of this century's significant *haute couture* and ready-to-wear fashion designers.

Mulvagh has written a factual story which sets the cultural, economical and societal scenes for the various eras of fashion history in the twentieth century. Although, the text discusses international fashion and fashion designers, a large portion of the information is Paris based. Mulvagh discusses the shifts from one mode of excess to another of simple lines and beauty such as Mariano Fortuny's *Delphos Dress* to other extravagant designs. She stresses that fashion has gone through repetitive cycles, and that historical styles of clothing are often reinterpreted by fashion designers. As Mulvagh observed, 'Fashion rebels against the static; it is always in flux.'

Karl Lagerfeld is mentioned in the chapter entitled 1946-1956, as the sixteen-year-old would-be designer winning one of the *Wool Secretariat's* awards for:

... the epitome of the youthful chemise. The style that was to be abbreviated in the sixties had arrived.

Obviously, Lagerfeld had sensed the change in attitudes towards dress as early as his young teenage years. Later, in Mulvagh's text, Lagerfeld's work is discussed intermittently with other contemporary fashion designers.

Jane Mulvagh's *Vogue: History of 20th Century Fashion* book is written primarily as a resource of fashion, style and etiquette in western society throughout the twentieth century. The text is helpful to my work because Mulvagh discusses Lagerfeld and his contribution to the world of fashion and because she also describes his designs for the houses of *Chanel, Chloé* and *Fendi* within an historical context. She discusses many other fashion designers who left an indelible mark upon fashion itself. My hypothesis that the sources of Lagerfeld's designs are inspired by art is reinforced in small sections of Mulvagh's book:

Between 1969 and 1972 Karl Lagerfeld's work for Chloé was clearly influenced by the art deco collection he was amassing.

Another influence on the works of Lagerfeld is his close friend and muse, Anna Piaggi of Italian *Vogue*. Mulvagh does not delve into much more detail than the above short pieces of information. She does not sufficiently analyse any of Lagerfeld's styles of clothing or any other fashion designer, since her work is one of historical documentation. In the main this

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76 ibid. p. 189.
77 ibid. p. 297.
78 ibid. p. 303.
documentation is useful because it sets the fashion scene for many stylistic periods, from which I may be able to interpret the reasons for the designing of particular garments by Lagerfeld.


Maggie Pexton Murray’s book Changing Styles in Fashion: Who, What, Why describes, and at times analyses the sources of inspiration of many of the leading fashion designers of this century. She has written an abbreviated history of fashion, beginning with body coverings from primitive times through to clothing of the late 1980s. One of her premises is that fashion constantly repeats itself. This point is emphasized by the quotation below:

The most important lesson to learn about fashion is that it constantly repeats, sometimes in a slightly new way or with slightly different details, but when one least expects it, there it comes again. The little ‘Louis’ heel is the legacy of the great Sun King, Louis XIV; high ruffled collars are the descendants of Elizabethan ruffs; extended shoulders remind us of the forties, but also are reminiscent of Henry VIII and the German silhouette during the High Renaissance ...

Pexton Murray’s section on Karl Lagerfeld and his work is three pages long, and contains a portrait of the fashion designer and two photographs of his dresses. The 1983 Chloé evening dresses are witty and clever creations; brilliant embroideries of fireworks enrich the design of the garments. Another dress from the year 1986, features a faucet pouring out a shower of glass beads; this dress does not belong to a Chloé collection because he had left the fashion house in the autumn of 1983. The formal dresses pay homage to Elsa Schiaparelli’s designs of the 1930s. These specific dresses by Lagerfeld are not Surrealist, but Surrealist because of their decorative rather than psychological elements.

Pexton Murray discusses many reasons for the choices people make when deciding on clothing. These choices are often combinations of reasons, for example, geographical and historical ones, or those based on psychological desires and needs. My own views are in general agreement with the author, and James Laver’s writings on clothing mirroring society. In my thesis, I intend discussing the principles of clothing as reflectors of late 1980s and 1990s Postmodern society; and, base my analysis and comparisons of contemporary

80 ‘The late James Laver—the leading authority in Britain on the history of costume and fashion—was the Keeper of theDepartments of Prints and Drawings and of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 1938 until 1959. Among his publications were Taste and Fashion, Fashions and Fashion Plates, British Military Uniforms, Drama: Its Costume and Decor, Costume, Women’s Dress in the Jazz Age and Dandies.’ Laver, James, 1986 (reprint), Costume and Fashion, Thames and Hudson, London, p. 1.
fashion on the examples given in the quotation below. Pexton Murray writes on this area and has quoted James Laver in the following paragraph:

Apparel reflects all of society. To quote James Laver, noted English historian, 'in the perspective of costume history, it is plain that the dress of any given period is exactly suited to the actual climate of the time, and indeed bears a close relation to such things as interior decoration and even architecture.' In this context, compare the high, conical headdresses of medieval times with the high, Gothic arches of cathedral construction of the same period. As a further example, the spare, hard-edged silhouette of the 1960s in relationship to the glass-box skyscraper.81

Pexton Murray’s intention in writing this book was to design a text which would simply and clearly explain, to use her words:

...what fashion is all about. It is also designed to give you a basic understanding of the great world of apparel, what motivates it, how it functions, where fashion comes from, and why.82

Pexton Murray holds Lagerfeld’s design talent in high esteem. She wrote: ‘His heritage has yet to be understood: like Yves Saint Laurent, he is a young man still with a vast future’.83 Her book was published in 1990, and while I agree that Lagerfeld possibly has a vast future ahead of him as a prominent fashion designer; he has already proven himself to be widely talented in this area. His diverse fashion collections for his own signature label, Chanel, Chloé and Fendi have been very successful commercially for years. A large proportion of these garments have embodied an original use and creative application of the main fashion design elements. I intend to fully analyse and discuss several of these works which display these unique characteristics. The author expresses similar opinions regarding Karl Lagerfeld’s traits in the following quotation:

There is no question about the extent of his designing talent. His innovations have included loose layering, brilliant bias cuts, stunning and unusual beading. His discerning, and occasionally bizarre, workmanship of furs for the famous Fendi family of Rome, shearing, coloring, reversing skins, turning sables into sweatshirts, has achieved a fashion nonchalance about apparel that wears a slight smile.84

The body of his fashion work to date has been extensive and diverse. The diversity is based on a knowledge of the arts, and an incorporation of the principles of Modernism (up to the 1980s) and Postmodernism (late 1980s, to the present time-1990s). I intend to use in my thesis, the various sections of Pexton Murray’s text which comprise of her perceptive insights and expert opinions on fashion throughout the ages.

82 ibid., p. 1 (Preface).
83 ibid., p. 148.
84 ibid.
In her book *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, Valerie Steele develops her theory on how Paris became the fashion capital of the Western world for approximately the last 300 years. Her views on the significance of clothes are similar to that of Alison Lurie. She examines historical literature on, or associated with fashion, fashion illustrations and also the important writings of Charles Baudelaire, the late nineteenth century historian writer Louis Octave Uzanne, Honoré Balzac and Marcel Proust. The following quotation from Steele’s text remarks upon Baudelaire’s writings and their potential for fashion research.

The poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) needs little introduction, but even readers familiar with *The Flowers of Evil* may be unaware of the significance of fashion in his philosophy and personal life. \(\ldots\) (he) has a great deal to tell us about fashion, art, and modernity, if we are willing to listen. One of the benefits of studying Paris fashion is the potential for increasing our awareness of how we use fashion today. \(\ldots\) In Paris, as Baudelaire demonstrates, attitudes toward fashion have been rather different (from American views), and many Parisians have quite consciously used fashion as an adjunct to self-creation.\(^85\)

Steele also analyses paintings by nineteenth century painters not from a symbolic point-of-view but from a purely realistic portrayal of contemporary dress. Her chapter entitled *Le Five O’Clock Tea* discusses the fashionability for this ritual and its representation in many artworks of the time by Impressionist artists such as the American expatriate Mary Cassatt, and the academic painter of *elegant life* Alfred Stevens. Stevens used fashion to enhance and ‘reflect the current, fashionable ideal of beauty’\(^86\). Steele outlines Proust’s views and theories on fashion in the following passage:

‘Fashion is, potentially, a work of art’, declares Proust. ‘It is more like a musical composition, a piece of sculpture, or the highest example of western architecture than a mere body-covering or a portable status symbol’.\(^87\)

From these informative and illuminating perspectives, Steele leads us through the 1800s and into early twentieth century Paris, her last chapter is focused upon the two great women fashion designers: Gabrielle Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli. Steele discusses the basis for the emergence of Chanel’s ‘deluxe poverty’\(^88\) look, which in fact was extremely expensive, as well as her costume jewellery.\(^89\) Schiaparelli’s fashion designs were different from Chanel’s look; hers were based on humorous and surreal fantasies, but her clothes were

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 181.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 201.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 247, Chanel’s ‘deluxe poverty’ look was named by Paul Poiret, the avant-garde fashion designer of the early Twentieth century.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 247.
imbued with ‘hard, highly individual chic’. The interesting connection that Lagerfeld has with these two women is the fact that he ‘has assumed the mantle of Chanel,’ while, ‘... she (Chanel) might well be annoyed by the ... evident tribute being paid to Schiaparelli’s ‘surrealist’ accessories. In the 1930s, a hat shaped like a shoe-in the 1980s, one in the form of a chair’.

Chanel hated Schiaparelli, whom she would condescendingly refer to as ‘that Italian artist who makes clothes.’ The irony of this fact would not be lost on Karl Lagerfeld, who most likely enjoys his own joke.

By analysing Steele's text on France's conscious development of Paris as the centre of fashion from circa 1665, I was able to gain a more in depth understanding of the background of this artistic, cultural, and fashion celebrating city in which the German born and raised Lagerfeld prefers to live and work. It is important to understand the historical and physical environment of Paris, and the associated psychological hold it has on fashion followers world-wide. The lure of Parisian haute couture and designing clothes in this city obviously inspired Lagerfeld who moved there in his early teens. Diana Vreeland declared, 'Paris is still the fashion capital of the world', and while Steele is in agreement with her she puts forward the following view:

But those who would tend to credit the special genius of the French might bear in mind that Americans, Belgians, Englishmen, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Italians, Japanese, Russians, Spaniards, and Swedes have all become famous designing clothes in Paris. To the extent that Paris is still first among equals, to the structure of the fashion industry and the accumulated expertise (and prestige) of centuries than to the creativity of particular designers or to the legendary chic of Parisian women. Particularly relevant is the quality of the French textile industry and the other subsidiary métiers de la mode.

Even though Lagerfeld and his work is only mentioned on two pages in Steele's book, the author offers other valuable insights and personal perspectives on fashion in Paris. Particularly, significant is the shift from Italy as the old centre of fashion to Paris; a

90 ibid., p. 249.
91 ibid., p. 9.
92 ibid., p. 248.
93 ibid., p. 248.
94 ibid., p. 23: Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the most important of Louis XIV’s ministers, as early as 1665 recognised the possible monetary value of ‘French fashion leadership’, and stated that ‘Fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain’.
95 McDowell, Colin, 1985, McDowell’s Directory of Twentieth Century Fashion, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, p. 292. Diana Vreeland was the fashion editor for Harper’s Bazaar for twenty-seven years (1937-1962); and editor-in-chief of Vogue from 1963 to 1971. ‘Admired for her originality and her commitment to fashion, she used Vogue to educate the taste of her readers. ... On leaving Vogue she became adviser to the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.’ Important and outstanding examples of her fashion shows have been the ‘Balenciaga Retrospective, the Glory of Russian Costume, and The Manchu Dragon exhibitions.’
96 Steele, Valerie, 1988, Paris Fashion: A Cultural History, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 283, This statement was made in Diana Vreeland’s introduction to Yves Saint Laurent’s exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1983.
97 ibid., pp. 283-284.
conscious strategy employed by the court of Louis XIV. Steele’s analysis of Parisian fashion is astute, and she notes that:

The mystique of Paris fashion is obviously crucially important: ‘It just wouldn’t be the same in Omaha’. 98

Paris is a city where its people are renowned for singing the praises of vive la différence, and an environment generally encapsulated with a desire for the new free spirited views on fashion and wearing the latest material fantasy of a designer such as Lagerfeld. The designer has a freedom of artistic expression not particularly and financially viable in countries such as America and Australia, noted for their love of casual attire, and the general conservatism of the English. Lagerfeld's artistic and financial success in Paris can be attributed to the acceptance of haute couture and his near to couture standards ready-to-wear by women firstly capable of purchasing the garments, and secondly wanting to wear the garments. Parisian haute couture and designer clothes are essentially a status symbol, as is a Porsche or Maserati car. Throughout history dress was the sign marking the difference in the social classes, as Steele writes in the following statement:

Dress was the visible sign of social standing—the more elaborate the dress, the higher its wearer’s apparent social status.99

Lagerfeld's garments may not always parody the opulence of the upper classes from centuries past (depending on his fashion statement for a particular season), but his deluxe fabrics, impeccable cut, trimmings, fabric enrichment and accessories convey an overt message of wealth and luxury.

Elements of Steele's book will be used to enlarge my use of the cultural and historical vocabulary of Paris and fashion and I will seek to enhance my writing on Lagerfeld's sources of inspiration, and forms of expression within the context of the great writers, thinkers and designers of the recent and distant past.

Secondary Sources: Relevant Articles.


98 ibid., p. 282.
99 ibid., p. 28.

4. Numerous other articles as cited in text and bibliography.


The *Karl Lagerfeld*, social study article in *Vanity Fair* is a one page of inconsequential (gossip-style) information on this important fashion designer. It is written in an interview format consisting of twenty-four short questions and answers. A portrait of Lagerfeld with dark glasses, pony-tail and fan illustrates this page. On the opposite page a full colour advertisement of his newest perfume of *Sun Moon Stars* is featured. The interview is obviously linked to the promotion of this scent because of the focus of the introduction: ‘In the fashion world, the sun, moon, and stars rise for The Kaiser-Karl Lagerfeld—who proves in this month's Proust Questionnaire that he is also the style monde's philosopher king.’

In an indirect way the short interview with Lagerfeld reveals more about his character by what he does not divulge rather than the meaning behind his answers. Lagerfeld seems to possess a significantly decadent nineteenth century Symbolist mystique and spirit. He loves aesthetic beauty and dresses like the dandy of a century past, like Charles Baudelaire.

Like the great artists Henry Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, and the writer Oscar Wilde, Lagerfeld is a wilfully secretive man and as a consequence one does not know about the man behind the public image. Scores of articles in magazines say little about Lagerfeld's private life and only snippets regarding ideas for collections, interior decorating and photography.

I will use information in the article as a piece of the puzzle. Insights into Lagerfeld's character and inspirations for his work may be gleaned from these short pieces of information. For example, his often stated love of seventeenth and eighteenth century art, costume and antiques is conveyed, in a small way, through the following brief statements in the interview:

*What is your greatest extravagance? (Interviewer)*
Too many houses, too many antiques, too many servants. (Karl Lagerfeld)

*What are your favourite names? (Interviewer)*
Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI. (Karl Lagerfeld)

... *Who is your favourite hero of fiction? (Interviewer)*
Voltaire's Candide. (Karl Lagerfeld)


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101 ibid., p. 132.
Nancy Collins article *Scent of a Man* in the fashion magazine *Mirabella* discusses Karl Lagerfeld's familial background, his character and traits, as well as his style and creativity as a fashion designer, as well as his friends and his new perfume *Sun Moon Stars*. The article was written in 1994 and is three pages long with a full page black-and-white photograph of Lagerfeld by Herb Ritts and is based primarily upon a personal interview, one of the few that have been published.

In addition, Collins was permitted to interview and observe Lagerfeld at work for this article. The article has several excellent quotations of Lagerfeld's comments especially concerning his mother and father; his closely held views are rare and some of these will prove to be useful in supplementing material already in print. These sections will be used to illustrate how he gained an appreciation for art, fashion design, literature and music in his formative years.

Collins speculates that the relationship between Lagerfeld's parents was strained and that Lagerfeld took refuge from this difficult situation by sketching, painting and reading many books from his father's library. Collins writes the following about Lagerfeld's early interests and character:

> His own risk-taking began early. Always a prodigious sketcher, young Lagerfeld was fascinated by clothes, fashion magazines, the world of high style. So it was no surprise when, at sixteen, he won a prize from the International Wool Secretariat for designing a coat ... (Lagerfeld said), 'When I won, I was still in school, but my parents said, 'Go do it'.' 102

Decades later Lagerfeld's early interests are still tightly woven into the cloth of haute couture and ready-to-wear fashion. His fascination with high style and clothes have merged into every area of his life. Collins discusses Lagerfeld's appetite for art and culture which he expresses by filling his four houses with objects of art, and often by creating his own haute couture masterpieces for *Chanel*. Art, culture and music have undoubtedly inspired Lagerfeld's collections time and time again. To say that designing for these collections consume nearly all of his waking hours would not be an exaggeration.

> Lagerfeld begins each day before dawn ... He spends the early hours reading-biographies, histories, poetry, newspapers in four languages. ... Before departing for one of his four offices, he spends the morning sketching new designs for one of his sixteen yearly collections, while listening to CDs ranging from rock to Rachmaninoff. 103

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103 ibid. p. 92.
Although, Collins article was written as promotional material for Lagerfeld's new fragrance *Sun Moon Stars*, it contains several pieces of valuable information on Lagerfeld's childhood and present life which I have not come across previously in my research. Lagerfeld expresses many views upon subjects such as society and culture, the *House of Chanel* and Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel herself. These sections contain relevant information and I will include much of this material in my thesis.


Annick Post’s magazine article entitled *La Vie de la Vigie* is six pages long, with much of the page space taken up by twelve colour photographs by Nicholas Millet. The article is about one of Karl Lagerfeld’s houses, the villa *La Vigie* in Monte Carlo. Millet’s photographs consist of a portrait of the fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld; the interiors of the red salon, the dining-room, the library, the small salon; the exterior of *La Vigie* and the view from the terrace.

Post succinctly discusses Lagerfeld’s achievements and interests in fashion and interior design, and, describes him as an avid collector of books and art. Post describes Lagerfeld as a Renaissance man in the following quotation:

Karl Lagerfeld is one of the world’s most celebrated fashion designers, but his interests and talents extend far beyond the clothes which bear his name. Born in Germany, into a rich and cultured family, he is, in a sense, Renaissance Man. Fluent in four languages-German, French, English and Italian-he is a knowledgeable collector, owns many thousands of books, and is an eclectic, highly informed arbiter of taste in architecture and interior design. Professionally, he is equally individualistic and, though courted by all the top couture houses, he has consistently refused to become imprisoned by any one company. 104

Post has included the locations of several of Lagerfeld’s homes: a hotel situated in the rue de L’Université, a house in Fontainebleau called *Le Mée*, a *château* in Brittany, a *palazzo* in Rome, and two houses in Monte Carlo. *La Vigie* is one of his houses in Monte Carlo and is the focus of Post’s article. The villa has been restored to its former glory and redecorated in Louis XV and Louis XVI furnishings by Lagerfeld. Lagerfeld told *Vanity Fair* in a recent interview detailed above,105 that, Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI were his favourite names; it seems that they are also his favourite periods of style in interior design. The white villa is further described by Post as epitomising ‘the Riviera of yesteryear and has a touch of Versailles ...’106

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I will incorporate the most relevant pieces of information in Post’s article in my thesis. They are the ones in which Lagerfeld gives his views on the subject of interior design, and by extension fashion design. Post states the obvious about Lagerfeld; that he is extremely aware of image and fashion, but he is also conscious of the more fundamental aspects of design. A little of his philosophy on both of these areas of design is included in the following quotation:

For the most part, I find them (professional decorators) rather disappointing. With few exceptions—my friend Andrée Putman is one—they seem concerned only with the superficial, the cherry on top of the cake as it were. But, then, I don’t like the sort of ostentatious decoration that doesn’t relate to the people who live in it. Just being fashionable isn’t enough, and it doesn’t necessarily result in elegance. With houses as with clothes, it is all to do with the ease with which someone ‘wears’ the style.

Post’s article and Millet’s photographs of La Vigie has given me a further insight into the aesthetic sensibility of Lagerfeld’s character through his artistic expression in the interior design of his villa. I will use excerpts of the documentation to reinforce and test my ideas about Karl Lagerfeld’s sources of inspiration. Inspiration derived from art, architecture and literature which inspire his work.

**Literature Review Conclusion.**

The above selected literature review has been of assistance in supplying much needed information for the initial outline and conceptual direction of my thesis. I will evaluate the place that Karl Lagerfeld has won as the leading international exponent of a particular style; a style which has a prominent place within the world of haute couture in Paris. My investigations and research will analyse the significance and sources of Lagerfeld’s contributions to the international field of contemporary fashion design.

Lagerfeld has achieved great international success; this was heralded by the worldwide media interest in his adolescent prize award, precocious designing skill, subsequent international fame and his successful revival of the House of Chanel in the 1980s and Chloé in the 1990s. Consistent coverage of his fashion collections, from his early days with Chloé to his present work, have ensured that his vision of fashion concepts and approaches remains prominent in the fashion world at large. My aim is to show how he achieved this prominence in the capricious arena of the fashion industry in Paris. Here Roland Barthes’ text entitled The Fashion System was useful as a source on ways of looking at fashion through its

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107 ibid. pp. 92-95.
108 ibid. p. 95.
representative image in promotional literature, photographs and advertising. Thus the products of the world of fashion may be seen as signifiers of a host of involved visual and psychological meaning. Since the bulk of images and sketches of Lagerfeld’s work are reproduced as photographic images for catalogues and fashion and life-style magazines, it was appropriate and helpful to use a analytical approach, as propounded by Barthes, to approach and decode the complex threads of meaning that make up the world of Lagerfeld’s fashion design. According to this view, the Chanel suit not only signifies a personal status symbol but may also be read as an image of empowerment.\textsuperscript{109} Hidden aspects such as these supply valuable modes of comparison; modes which are relevant to an understanding of the respective works of Gabrielle Coco Chanel.

Alison Lurie discusses the meaning or language of clothing within sociological constructs. The use of these constructs leads her to attempt an analysis of what might be called the grammar, sentences and vocabulary of clothing. The extension of this approach to the fashion design of Lagerfeld has enabled a closer and richer reading of the artistic content of his creations; one which takes them away from the regions of clothing and into the realms of aesthetically inspired items that deserve a deeper appreciation than is normally given to fashion design. Valerie Steele’s important text entitled Paris Fashion: A Cultural History gives a clear and convincing overview of how Paris became the centre of the fashion world and how it still holds the reins of that power, whilst granting that international centres such as those in Milan, New York and Tokyo are viable fashion centres in their own right. Steele’s contention that Paris based haute couture would not be the same if it transferred itself to Omaha, hints at the conceptual power of her analysis and the place of Paris based fashion design. For many cultural reasons haute couture blossoms in Paris and Steele’s tabulation of these factors adds to the complexity of Lagerfeld’s consolidating vision. Karl Lagerfeld, the German expatriate, possess gifts which enable his fashion design to regenerate itself successfully from fashion season to fashion season in Paris. As Steele points out it is not only the local designers in Paris who work miracles in Paris but also a multi-cultural cross-section of talented fashion designers who migrate to this fashion Mecca. The well known inspirational power of Paris and the acceptance of people who encourage difference seems to inspire and allow the fashion world, and its stars like Lagerfeld, to shine all the more brightly.

The most difficult and essential question related to my research is: what are the elements which contribute to and shape Karl Lagerfeld’s original fashion designs? This question draws in not only the inspirational ambience of the Parisian scene, but also involves the question of Lagerfeld’s inspirational sources and artistic techniques. The listed documentary films that were viewed largely involve Lagerfeld and focus on his thoughts on various aspects of

fashion. Pertinent questions regarding the influence of Lagerfeld's early interests upon his fashion designs were raised when perusing these primary sources. Through these films, and in some related photographic texts and sketch books, one may gain an insight into the possible sources of Lagerfeld's inspiration, stimulation and aesthetic interests.

Lastly, and equally importantly, are the details of Lagerfeld's inspirational sources developed through his love of art. Harold Koda and Richard Martin's books give surveys of historical modes of dress as they relate to depictions in the fine arts and particularly to the philosophical art movement of Surrealism. These studies provide some model of approach and they highlight selected aspects of Lagerfeld's affinity with this artistic context. I will develop some aspects of the content of Lagerfeld's stylistic work, and how it developed during his career, using the two books entitled *Fashion and Surrealism* and *The Historical Mode: Fashion and Art in the 1980s*.

The books and documentary films contained within the selected literature review have given me a basis to analyse and focus upon the original components of Karl Lagerfeld's work in Paris. This has enabled the placement of relevant information within an historical and cultural context. My overall aim is to decipher the codes and vocabulary of Lagerfeld's work for the *House of Chanel*, *Chloé* and the *Fendi* sisters and discuss its broad significance and wider contributions to today's fashion world. Lagerfeld's creative intelligence imbues the aesthetic characteristics of his works. I wish to separate and distinguish his work and styles in order to analyse the unique fashion designs that make up what is known as the Lagerfeld style. Lagerfeld seems to have the happy knack of being able to easily transform and reprogram himself, *like a computer* as he puts it; to design for the four fashion houses and, as the milliner Kirsten Woodward stresses, to maintain the four different labels whilst still projecting a unique Lagerfeld stamp. The underlying aim of this thesis is the examination and definition of the nature of this unique stamp.
Chapter One: The Small Opportunity.

Karl Lagerfeld's contributions and original fashion designs are generated by several interrelated factors; his perceptive use of historical antecedents; his artistic background; his love of art and design and the influence of artists and selected fashion designers.

Lagerfeld has been influenced and inspired by several inter-connected sources that have mediated the production of his original designs or collaborations and shaped the direction of his artistic output for several decades. Lagerfeld's early artistic impetus, predominantly formed by the guiding influence of his mother, was instrumental in propelling the particular artistic ambit of his later mature work. This, combined with the formative time of his early training and work experience with fashion houses in Paris, has had profound effects and they have provided a base for his mature work for his own label and for the House of Chanel, Chloé and the Fendi sisters. His products and designs for these disparate labels reflect the complexities of Lagerfeld's character and his innate ability to function successfully within different areas of the fashion industry. Lagerfeld has managed to display an adaptability and variety that has revealed the substantial impact of his individualistic talents. Nicholas Coleridge concurs with this judgement and seems almost to write the obvious in agreement in the following statement:

One of the clever things about him (Lagerfeld) is the way he designs for so many labels, each rather differently, while maintaining a distinct Lagerfeld stamp.  

The turning point for Lagerfeld came during his teenage years. He displayed an interest in fashion design early in life. In 1954, at the age of sixteen and whilst still at the Les Cours de Dessin de Madame Norero drawing school, he entered a fashion contest sponsored by the International Wool Secretariat. Lagerfeld won first prize for the best women's coat. Pierre Balmain was one of the judges; impressed with Lagerfeld and his design talent he complimented the young designer by having his winning coat design selected for production and offered him a position as an assistant at his couture house. In the same competition Yves Saint Laurent, aged seventeen, received first prize in the dress section. It is assumed that...

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110 Coleridge, Nicholas, 1988, The Fashion Conspiracy, London, Heinemann, p.188.
Pierre Balmain's career as a fashion designer began only shortly before his full-time employment at Edward Molyneux's fashion house. After a few years he accepted a position at Lucien Lelong in 1941, he met Christian Dior there. They enjoyed working together and both had hoped of opening a fashion house together. Balmain wrote: '... the one thing which constantly buoyed up Dior and myself through our most difficult moments at Lelong was the cherished hope that one day we would set up on our own.' Later in 1946, he established a fashion house on his own, his success was immediate and he continued to be a major designer for many years.
Hubert Givenchy\textsuperscript{113} judged this section because his company went on to manufacture the winning cocktail dress designed by Saint Laurent. Lagerfeld discusses his beginnings as a fashion designer and his \textit{entrée} to his life in \textit{couture} in the following comments:

When I was in high school there was a contest organised by the International Wool Fashion Office, all over the world. And you had to send a sketch of a coat or a dress with a small sample of wool ... it was a big campaign ... and I knew later that there were 200,000 people were doing it. And six months later I got a telegram telling me that I won first prize for the coat design ... the dress was designed by Yves Saint Laurent who had won first prize ... and that was the way we started ... it was a small opportunity ... if you really want to make something, because the same contest existed two years before and two years after, and nobody knows what happened to the winners. But the same year we won the prize, we really used the small opportunity.\textsuperscript{114}

Lagerfeld was grateful for the chance to work with a well-known couturier and was interested in learning as much as possible from Balmain and other associated assistants at the company. This unique opportunity together with Lagerfeld’s long established interest in fashion has led to a lifelong commitment to the designing of clothes that have transmitted both the classical and the modern touch to his fashion collections whilst also imbuing them with rare wit, amusement\textsuperscript{115} and whimsy.

Lagerfeld’s father was of Swedish background and his mother was born in the Westphalia area of Germany. His father was a widower and his mother was a divorcée when they met. Karl Otto Lagerfeld was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1938 and spent his childhood north of Hamburg in a castle owned by his father. Nancy Collins in writing of Lagerfeld’s childhood offers the following important observation on this period:

Lagerfeld grew up outside Hamburg in a bleak castle, the only son of a wealthy can manufacturer and his flamboyant younger wife, who were sixty and forty-two


Lagerfeld probably inherited his wit, his artistic sensibility and his appreciation of aesthetics from his mother. His business acumen and his commercial aptitude seemed to be derived from his father. His father had a talent for business, he founded Glücksklee condensed milk; made his fortune and later sold the company to Carnation. In talking to Nancy Collins, Lagerfeld gives a rare insight into his feelings towards his conservative father and flamboyant mother.

His work ethic came from his father, ‘a serious businessman who could have been my grandfather’, Lagerfeld says. ‘He was very sweet to me, but when I was twenty, he was eighty-from another era’. His mother on the other hand, was right up Karl’s alley. ‘My mother was fun, witty-perhaps even a little mean-but amusing. ... even Lagerfeld admits his mother wasn’t so easy’. Her only commitments were to voracious reading and to practicing the violin three hours every morning. ‘She was very entertaining. At the same time she was retiring. She was not an eccentric or a fool-she didn’t like other people enough to make a fool of herself.’

During his formative years Lagerfeld had a disposition which leant towards art, history, languages and connoisseurship. Lagerfeld was brought up in an upper class environment and had a mother who had an artistic sensibility; these factors contributed to his appreciation of the aesthetically beautiful in art, haute couture and in his personal environment. Since he was a young boy, his practise in the area of fashion design developed into a lifelong commitment in this field. Coleridge relates how the five year old Lagerfeld was first drawn to the art and practice of fashion.

In 1943 he (Lagerfeld) he was evacuated from the bombing of Holstein to a model dairy farm in the countryside. Hanging on a wall in the dairy, improbably enough, was a reproduction of a picture by Adolfo von Menzel, the minor Nineteenth Century painter of historical scenes. It showed Frederick the Great at a candle-lit dinner in the rotunda of Sans Souci. Lagerfeld felt intensely drawn to this picture and to the style of the Eighteenth Century.

This memorable event and the resultant viewing of the painting reproduction must have left an indelible impression upon the young Lagerfeld and may, in part, explain his subsequent twin interests in eighteenth century art and haute couture. Lagerfeld has discussed his early childhood interests whilst commenting about his parent’s marital differences in an interview for the fashion magazine Mirabella:

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117 Ibid.
She (Lagerfeld’s mother) was a little offhand with my father, making funny remarks about him. We laughed at him when we shouldn’t have. Sometimes I have a bad feeling that I wasn’t nice enough to him.” At best, his parent’s relationship was complicated, a situation Lagerfeld avoided by painting, sketching and reading his way through his father’s library. ‘My parents were very different. In the end, they didn’t get on that well because he was terribly jealous. He hated the idea that she could survive him. He hated the idea of leaving her behind. Finally, I think he liked her more than she liked him.\textsuperscript{120}

From various accounts it seems that Lagerfeld was fascinated by fashionable clothing even at the tender age of four. Caroline Rennolds Milbank related one account of his earliest memories regarding the instruction of his make-believe valet on how to iron a shirt collar at the very young age of four in her book \textit{Couture: The Great Designers} \textsuperscript{121} He lived his formative years in upper class surroundings and filled up his time by practising drawing and designing clothes. In 1952, at the age of fourteen he left his native town of Hamburg to be educated in Paris, the world’s fashion centre. Nicholas Coleridge has stated that the young Lagerfeld resided in a student’s hotel opposite the Sorbonne and that he enrolled in the \textit{Lycée Montaigne}. While he was there he often accompanied his mother when she ordered clothes at the various couture houses. Later he enrolled in a drawing school called Les Cours de Dessin de Madame Norero.\textsuperscript{122} In Lagerfeld’s book \textit{Off the Record} he dedicates the introductory sections to his various apartments in Paris. In the section entitled \textit{1952-1955 14, Rue de la Sorbonne}, Lagerfeld writes a short optimistic passage about the impact of Paris on his life during these years. The passage gives a glimpse of the atmosphere surrounding the young designer during this time:

\begin{quote}
I lived in the Gerson Hotel, 14, Rue de la Sorbonne from 1952 to 1955. M. and Mme Zapusec ran a ‘boarding house’ for minors and students, with great empathy, with warm heartedness and a great understanding of budding freedom. It was like the film ‘Sous le Ciel de Paris’. I had two rooms and a balcony on the fifth floor. At the time, I felt the world was mine or would be soon.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

Although Christian Dior\textsuperscript{124} and Cristobal Balenciaga\textsuperscript{125} were considered to be the high priests of \textit{haute couture}, Lagerfeld’s 1954 prize together with his employment with Pierre

\textsuperscript{120}Collins, Nancy, November 1994, ‘Scent of a Man’, \textit{Mirabella}, p90.
\textsuperscript{123}Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, \textit{Off the Record}, Scalo, Zürich, u. p.

McDowell states in his directory that ‘Christian Dior, became... the most famous couturier of the century.’ This success has been attributed to his 1947 ‘New Look’ line, his first couture collection which became an instant and huge success. Media coverage ensured that the name of Dior ‘became a household word almost overnight.’
\textsuperscript{125}ibid., pp. 88-90.
Balmain held much promise for the young student. These were Balmain’s halcyon days; he was riding high on the wave of success and social prestige in the 1950s and the 1960s. His work was constantly in demand and it featured in many prestigious journals. The couturier glamorously dressed nearly all the elite in Paris including the international set. 126 He adhered to strong fashion design principles and held to beliefs which followed the doctrine ‘that dressmaking is the architecture of movement’. 127 It may be safely assumed that Lagerfeld learnt much about the basic principles of fashion design and garment construction during his time there; about structure, fabrics, line, proportion, cut, impeccable fitting and finish. Lagerfeld, in a curious mixture of haughtiness and seriousness, recalls:

Balmain made me an offer ... I didn’t choose him. I didn’t really know very much about all these things at the time. I was there to learn something and not to act the genius. Being at Balmain was not like being at Dior or Balenciaga, which were chapels. I said to myself I was there to learn, and I was sufficiently detached. 128

Lagerfeld left after three-and-a-half years at the Balmain fashion house because, according to Nicholas Coleridge, he felt stifled and the aesthetic and creative atmosphere was not conducive to his new found personal direction. 129 Soon after, at the age of twenty, Lagerfeld accepted an offer to act as chief designer at the conservative House of Patou. 130 This important event propelled Lagerfeld into a world of high fashion, inspirational examples and aesthetic models. Colin McDowell states that Patou and Gabrielle Coco Chanel 131 were known to be jealous arch rivals and neither held much public regard for the other.

In his directory McDowell declares that Cristobal Balenciaga ‘is unquestionably the greatest designer of the century.’ In Paris, After World War II he had spectacular successes throughout the following two decades. His garments had the minimum of detail, he was devoted to the perfection of cut and ‘each collection made a crisp and clear fashion statement with clothes which had grown logically from previous collections.’

126 ibid., p. 90-1. Pierre Balmain had loyal clients and friends such as the unlikely pair Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. At his apogee as a purveyor of glamorous clothing to the rich in the 1950s and 1960s, he dressed queens, statesmen’s wives, stars, and virtually all members of the international set. In addition, he designed flight attendants uniforms for females and created costumes for many plays and films, including his memorable wardrobe for the stage production of The Millionaire’s.
127 ibid., p. 91
129 ibid.,
131 Jean Patou throughout his years as a significant fashion designer produced liberated garments, as early as 1914, for women, in the categories of active sportswear, casual sportswear, formal daywear and evening wear. Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel is attributed as to have been solely responsible for the ‘new simplicity’ of the early Twentieth Century but this is prejudiced, uninformed view propagated by the media.
132 Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel designed clothes that she wanted to wear; comfortable, uncluttered and simple garments. She revolutionised the style of clothing from the overly-formal to the practical and wearable. Her classically chic, instantly recognisable and much copied Chanel suit from the 1950s still looks modern today. During her life and still long after her death (1971) she has inspired and influenced numerous contemporary fashion designers.
Significantly, Lagerfeld’s work at Patou forced him into close proximity with the results of such creative foment and it enabled him, for the first time, to develop his natural predilections and to gain confidence with his design skills. The pressure at Patou was to dress women in understated designs following the fashion house’s established design principles of elegance and simplicity. Early in the turbulent 1960s, Lagerfeld would have considered Patou’s designs dated by the standards of the day. He left, according to fashion experts Caroline Rennolds Milbank and Nicholas Coleridge, after one year because boredom and a sense of aesthetic frustration had set in once again. Lagerfeld’s feeling at the time may be partially gleaned from the following statement.

Patou had begun to bore me...I got to the point where I thought I wasn’t meant for the trade. I wanted to get back and earn my baccalaureate, but I was also nauseated by the prospect of the restraint of school.\(^\text{133}\)

This disenchantment coincided with the development of the post war youth culture with its questioning of pre war aesthetics and cultural values. Through his constant reading, his travel and his keen eye for trends Lagerfeld would have felt the ramifications of the youth culture emanating from the London scene during the 1960s; this time and generation set the scene for some of Lagerfeld’s own more personalised and less politicised revolution. It has been impossible so far to ascertain whether Lagerfeld visited London during this decade.

At the time Lagerfeld would have sensed, or been aware of a generation of modern women who seemed to feel that *haute couture* was well and truly dead. *Haute couture* with its ossified forms and elitist sentiments became a fashion metaphor for the aspirations of privileged bourgeois matrons; concepts that the *youthquake* (to use *Vogue* magazine’s term for these young women) generation abhorred and consequently shed for the popular *Mod* style of dressing. Writer Linda Benn DeLibero’s essay on Twiggy (Lesley Hornby), the famous English fashion model of the sixties, describes aspects of this period from her own recollections as a growing teenager and the effects that this time had on her own life in the following passage:

Fashion (the mass produced variety) as a powerful mode of expression, style as a means to another life, the sense of possibility in a purchase—the connection between clothes and politics of liberation hadn’t been so pronounced since the twenties. ... the rhetoric surrounding the Mod style supported those notions: ... a movement that sought to reverse rigid hierarchies of style, feminine beauty, class, and age. \(^\text{134}\)

Young women yearned to free themselves from the constraints of *haute couture*’s formal clothing and the burden of its enormous price tag. Young women purchased up to the minute

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affordable outfits, footwear and accessories that had become the rage during this period of time. Fashion designer Mary Quant\textsuperscript{135} styled clothes which expressed the mood of the Swinging Sixties and she went on to popularise the mini-skirt in London which was introduced in Paris by the haute couture designer André Courrèges.\textsuperscript{136} Lagerfeld's fashion designs for the Chloé company show a close affinity with the work of Barbara Hulanicki another influential designer working in London during the mid to late 1960s. Lagerfeld's romantic and diaphanous Tea Dresses for the Chloé company were highly successful and became his visual trademark during the early seventies. Hulanicki left her own mark on the London fashion scene at this time. She designed unusually sophisticated clothes in dark tones for her boutique called Biba. Her success was enormous during the mid 1960s and early 1970s because customers realised that they were not only purchasing clothes, but symbolically participating in an alternative life-style as well. Hulanicki's work for Biba often drew inspiration from old 1930s films, and art movements such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco.\textsuperscript{137}

Quant and Biba's fashion styles personified a liberation from the constraints of a society influenced by an older generation. Their clothes generally reflected the anti-conservative attitude and stance of young people of that time and were widely popular. Both Quant and Hulanicki contributed to the cultural revolution which was taking place by producing clothes that were not only aimed at the younger generation but, in many cases, that were only actually able to be worn by the young. These young women in general wanted to look vital and young, they preferred clothes in which they could move and dance freely. They found growing old was a 'hideous' prospect and in general preferred the contemporary to the traditional. \textsuperscript{138} In Changing Styles in Fashion: Who, What, Why, author Maggie Pexton Murray writes the following about this period.

... witness the mini (skirt) of the 1960s. The hair, the attitudes, the clothing, all reflecting the protest of a large part of our society: the cutting edge in this case was the cult of the young and the disenfranchised. Fashion went up from the streets, rather than down from the elite.\textsuperscript{139}

London's fashion designers were not the only icons of a turbulent decade; their prominence was shared, and sometimes challenged, by rock and roll and pop bands like The Beatles, The


McDowell suggests that Mary Quant's 'legendary name . . . personifies the youth revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. She holds a central place in history as a significant fashion designer during a period of great sociological and cultural change which began in London. Quant was an important designer and trend-setter of that period.

\textsuperscript{136} Benstock, Shari and Ferriss, Suzanne, Ed., 1994, On Fashion, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, p. 44.


\textsuperscript{138} Benstock, Shari and Ferriss, Suzanne, Ed., 1994, On Fashion, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, p. 44.

Rolling Stones, The Small Faces and Herman's Hermits to name but a few. Collectively these groups and all that they stood for had a great effect on the social mores of Britain's youth culture, directly influencing their attitudes, clothes and hair-styles. The music scene in London became very important and its products were exported to many parts of the world, as was its fashion. Some of this new vitality may be sensed in Ted Polhemus' description of the period in his essay Swinging London and the Psychedelics:

It is not surprising that the original Mod minimalist restraint should have been swept overboard in the heady, exuberant atmosphere of 'Swinging London'. With the world's eyes fixed on British youth and big money at stake in the pop and film industries, there was a constant temptation to emphasise the ostentatious at the expense of the refined. ... Symptomatic of all of this was what was happening down on Carnaby Street. In the early sixties it (Carnaby Street) was transformed into a haven for the early Mods ... Then, as Swinging London became the centre point of the Western world's popular culture, an endless stream of new 'boutiques' opened on Carnaby Street, selling anything and everything that might catch the eye.\(^{140}\)

Polhemus as well as many other authors\(^{141}\) on the subject of fashion, culture and society all attest to the cultural change occurring in the sixties. The power and wide appeal of the above trends are most clearly encapsulated within the film and print media and the whole Western world seemed to become saturated with images which revolved mainly around London at this time.

London soon became the Mecca of the Western fashion world and took over from Paris, Milan and New York as the pre-eminent international fashion capital. As a result English fashion models such as Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy became household names and leaders in their field. Inspiration for clothing was even gleaned from the Union Jack.\(^{142}\) Op artist Bridget Riley and Pop Art artist Andy Warhol's current paintings became inspiration for juxtaposed textiles designs for clothing. The famous photographer David Bailey captured London's exciting and changing sociological landscape in his highly publicised colour and black-and-white images. These images obtained international recognition and Lagerfeld

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\(^{142}\) Ibid., p. 52. Photograph and advertisement for Union Jack 'Jam' Jackets.
would have been familiar with them. Although Britain's halcyon days lasted only for that
decade they reflected the revolutionary sixties period in a powerful collision of changes
exemplified by the predominant youth culture with its ready-to-wear alternative fashion
styles and its politics. A new, far reaching development had taken place in the Western
world. Colin McDowell expresses his view on this time of social upheaval by focussing
upon the sociological significance and place of the hat:

The power of the hat, like the power of couture, was diminished by the fact that
in the late fifties and early sixties the young took over as fashion leaders. Youth
came swinging in with the new decade, confident and iconoclastic, determined
not to be constrained by the rules that had their mothers in thrall. The sixties
virtually saw everything that had been important in fashion for the past fifty years
cheerfully jettisoned by young women bored by what they had worn last week, let
alone what had been in fashion for a decade or more.\textsuperscript{143}

The hat has always been associated with the sartorial refinement of well dressed men and
women throughout history, and until at least the sixties was still regarded as proper attire
which completed one's outfit. The fact that, at this time, the hat, as well as couture itself
became close to extinct, testifies to the power of the predominant youth culture and their \textit{out with the old in with the new} mentality.

Lagerfeld with his talent and eye for new trends and voracious reading habits would have felt
the signals of this great change in social attitude towards \textit{haute couture}. At times he has been
quoted saying that many \textit{couturiers} were too formal and rigid in their approach to fashion
design. This is a view held by Lagerfeld since his time with Patou where he expressed how
the salon life had \textit{bored} him.\textsuperscript{144} As his discontent with this situation increased, he left Paris
for a year, in 1964, to study art history in Italy. The young and fashionable Lagerfeld seemed
to have become bored with a lack of future direction as tabulated in his oft repeated
protestations about the high drama and great seriousness that some of the Parisian fashion
designers engaged in whilst producing one artistic collection after another. As Lagerfeld
explains:

\begin{quote}
I don't live to build a career ... I just do for the pleasure of doing. Pretentiousness
runs high in this business. One is supposed to suffer. The slightest ease, any
dexterity, are seen as a symptom of superficiality. Well, I love superficiality and
artificial things. This is just dressmaking, after all, not the ceiling of the Sistine
Chapel ...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{145}

In the sixties, one of the designers who sensed the ramifications of the trend towards the
displacement of \textit{couture} by mass clothing, was the young Yves Saint Laurent. He introduced
his first ready-to-wear collections because of the shift to mass market clothing overseas.

\textsuperscript{145}Ibid., pp. 187-188.
Couturiers needed to change, indeed, sometimes they were forced to change in line with the new casual, free spirit and mood of the times if they were not to become bankrupt during the Sixties. Yves Saint Laurent decisively moved from the production of exclusively haute couture design to a new ready-to-wear enterprise. On September 26, 1966 Yves Saint Laurent opened the first ready-to-wear boutique named Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, at 21 rue de Tournon, Paris. This boutique was the first in a long chain of boutiques situated worldwide.\(^{146}\) The fashion media quickly mimicked the concerns of the youthquake generation and collectively embraced the new culture. In one article from Queen magazine of the 1960s, the following comment and view epitomises the acrimony felt by the fashionable masses towards the rigidity and formality of certain clothing styles:

THE END Balenciaga is fallen, fallen, that great designer. The inspiration of the king of couturiers is dead, is dead. ... The great master that used to be three or four years ahead of the others ... has fallen out of touch with today ... The mood (of the House of Balenciaga) was fiftyish. The colours were drab. The evening clothes were dreary. From Givenchy, and from Balenciaga too ... mourning for the power and glory (that the designers once had) ... is gone.\(^ {147}\)

To date full or specific details of Lagerfeld’s sojourn in Italy during 1964 have not been documented in any books, periodicals or magazines. However, what is known is that he returned to Paris in the following year (it could have been later in the same year but sources are unclear to the exact time), to design free-lance fashion collections for several ready-to-wear firms. He designed clothing, and even shoes at times, for both women and men at companies which included Alma, Ballantyne, Cadette, Charles Jourdan, Chloé, Club Roman Fashion, Fendi, Krizia, Mario Valentino and Max Mara; all of this being done in preference to work in the restrictive couture houses.\(^ {148}\)

The new cultural and social trends of the sixties would inevitably have made an impression upon the developing talent of the young Lagerfeld. The London scene, and its filtering into the mainstream culture of Westernised Europe, seemed to prompt Lagerfeld to move in new directions and gave him the creative impetus to design more boldly, to think more laterally and extravagantly and to further develop and experiment with his early work. His contrary stylistical flourishes, his suspicion and dislike of what he has called, the Diktats of fashion, his variety and his anti-establishment leanings, may well stem from the perceived restrictions, the stultification and the false decorum of these formative years. A few years later, in the seventies, Lagerfeld had established himself as a very successful, confident and creative fashion designer. The fashion writer Georgina O’Hara reinforces this view and wrote the


Fig. 1.1 Camellia pink silk crepe de chine blouse, full sleeved, embroidered with pink pearly beads, knee-covering skirt with pockets in the hips. Accessories by Karl Lagerfeld for Chloé, from the range at Piero de Monzi. Handkerchiefs tied tightly around the neck and wrist, decorated with a pin and bracelet, fabrics by Bini. Photograph taken with Karl Lagerfeld in his Paris apartment.

following concerning Lagerfeld's fashion collections for the *Chloé* and the *Fendi* companies during the mid-seventies and early eighties:

Lagerfeld's name is equally associated with *Fendi* and the firm *Chloé*, where he became famous for his top quality ready-to-wear garments. Every collection was expressed in positive, unhesitant terms, whether Lagerfeld showed shepherd dresses with scarves tied as bodices or shawls, or about the waist (1975); mini skirts (1980), or layered skirts over pants (1981).\(^{149}\)

Once Lagerfeld began his freelance designing career he did not return to school. His time at *Chloé* proved to be an enormous success. In 1964 he was one of four fashion designers for the company; so successful were his own styles that *Chloé* renegotiated his contract and made him their sole designer as early as 1970.\(^{150}\) Lagerfeld was given the honour of designing for this label in any way he saw appropriate. This creative association lasted until the completion of his autumn collection in 1983 when he finally accepted the *House of Chanel's* offer to design their *haute couture* and ready-to-wear lines. Lagerfeld remained creatively receptive in these early years. His early successes with *Chloé* and *Fendi* developed in him a new and expanding confidence with designs, material and concepts. The Lagerfeld designed creations of the *Chloé* company's ready-to-wear designs are produced to the highest quality, and their finish is acknowledged as being near to *couture* standards. He seems at the time to seek out and embody a new desire to branch out beyond past restrictions. Despite this, Lagerfeld, was by all accounts, becoming increasingly disenchanted with the static quality of artistic content and lack of direction in the fashion industry together with the attitudes of its more hide-bound and mannered, long suffering practitioners.

The late British fashion and costume historian James Laver felt that Lagerfeld was one of a few designers who exemplified fashion for the seventies period. Laver has noted that during this time not only did fashion designers concentrate on the less structured shape of informal sportswear styled clothing, but also the fabric, the cut and the construction. Lagerfeld's successful collections for *Chloé* soon shared the media limelight with other designers and international fashion companies (fig. 1.1). Laver discusses a few of the main trends of seventies fashion below and sees Lagerfeld as co-existent with, and reflective of, this new casual and informal direction:

Designers such as Jean Muir, Missoni, Bonnie Cashin and Karl Lagerfeld for *Chloé* all reflected early sportswear-shapes in the cut of their clothes and the fabrics used. Their tailored skirts with matching hats and jumpers, layered with waistcoat and jacket, flared trousers with tailored skirt and jacket, swathed evening dresses, were all cut from softer, more sinuous fabrics. Knitwear, too, was popular-for almost everything, even coats. The shape of the body was once again emphasised by the treatment of clothes covering it, as in the Fifties, rather than by the amount of clothing that had been cropped away. When garments were not knitted to cling, they were cut to reveal the shape underneath.\(^{151}\)

\(^{149}\)ibid., p. 154.  
Lagerfeld's first stint of free-lance designing for the Chloé ready-to-wear company lasted for nearly two decades, from 1964 to 1983. After this time, the company was left 'reeling from the blow of his absence'152, since the directors relied on Lagerfeld for many years during which they had given him a creative carte blanche. The fashion designer Guy Paulin was appointed to fill the considerable vacuum; to many he was simply the sacrificial lamb selected to take over the reigns of Chloé from Lagerfeld. Times were difficult for Paulin because of interference from many at the firm and this situation consequently had unfortunate repercussions on his first collection. Paulin was regarded as an excellent sportswear designer but obviously had a daunting task taking over from the talented Lagerfeld.

The ready-to-wear Chloé company was established in 1952, and ever since, its main aim has been to produce clothing which contained elements of luxury. Lagerfeld understood this main overriding aim and created many extravagant and unabashed exquisite garments which fulfilled this aim. Several fashion designers including Paco Rabanne and Martine Sitbon have designed for this label but none was as prolific as Lagerfeld. The house of Chloe sought a truce with Lagerfeld and this was finally effected in 1992 when Lagerfeld rejoined the firm. The Chloé label once again soared up the ladder of success from this profitable association, as the following Planet Fashion news report expressed, regarding a highly regarded Chloé collection in 1994:

Falling profits and failing reputation led the house (of Chloé ) to seek a reconciliation (with Lagerfeld). Reinstating him with great success last year. ... Chloé must still be celebrating their decision to bring back Karl Lagerfeld.153

Lagerfeld had reinvented his own past poetic and romantic style and distinct mark for the Chloé company from 1993 to 1997. In 1997 he left the company for the second time in his career. He was well known in the fashion circles in Paris, as well as internationally, for designing his individually 'layered, floating silk crepe de chine ready-to-wear ensembles for Chloé.154 His re-affiliation with Chloé, from 1993 to 1997, enabled Lagerfeld to return to the successful and more feminine designs for which the company became noted. In 1993 he told an interviewer for Vogue magazine that his designs for his recent Chloé collections expressed his lighter, more flippant side of his character and nature.

In 1963 Lagerfeld began to undertake freelance designs in fur and leatherwear for the Rome based Fendi firm and has continued with this until the present day. After four years of Lagerfeld collaborating with the Fendi company, the fur garments produced were of such an

exceptional design standard that the Fendi sisters felt confident to show their fur collections to international fashion buyers. In 1967 he joined the Fendi company as a consultant designer. Lagerfeld employed several pioneering techniques for the furs he designed and consequently broke new ground in the traditional production processes used until that time. The standard silhouette of existing fur coats, jackets and other fur items dramatically changed. Lagerfeld maintained that fur coats in general were too heavy and limited the potential of the fur pelts for styling in original shapes. At least two original and daring techniques were employed to rectify this and make the fur supple and soft. One technique was to strip away the underside or the fur pelt only keeping the thinnest layer to support the fur pile; and another was to perforate the fur pelts with hundreds of tiny holes creating a lightweight fur.

As a result of these new fur treatments, Lagerfeld created innovative fur garments particularly jacket and coat styles. The House of Fendi is a highly successful company today and eclipses other fur companies vying for the same market. The Fendi sisters have done this with their own unique style and high quality workmanship; notwithstanding this, it should be noted that a considerable proportion of their success may be attributed to the imaginative flair of Lagerfeld's design skill, as well, no doubt, to their inventive techniques of fur cutting and high quality workmanship. The Fendi sisters and Lagerfeld have had a close and intense association and friendship which has lasted more than three decades. The Fendi sisters have always appreciated Lagerfeld's significant contribution to their company and have stated this view often in numerous interviews. The following comment is but one example of their esteem for Lagerfeld:

Karl Lagerfeld designs our entire line. It's a pleasure to work with Karl because there's a lot of feeling between us. It's been years now, we practically grew up together and so we understand immediately his message and it's wonderful because we manage to pass it directly onto our public, our clientele.¹⁵⁵

In 1983 Lagerfeld accepted an offer to act as Design Consultant in Charge of the Collections for the prestigious House of Chanel; his responsibilities covered the design of both the couture and ready-to-wear lines. He left the Chloé company in the same year due to a dispute regarding perfume sale rights and launched his own eponymous signature label: Karl Lagerfeld. After a period of eight years without Lagerfeld, the Chloé company was desperate to have him rejoin the company; it was finally successful in 1992. Lagerfeld has re-established the former look of Chloé by rejuvenating his collections using floating, tender, romantic design elements in his repertoire of styles. While designing for the four companies: Chanel, Chloé, Fendi and his own signature label Lagerfeld manages to maintain an active interest in his other activities, such as photography which he has publicly exhibited and

published in three books: *Karl Lagerfeld: Photographer*,¹⁵⁶ *Off the Record*¹⁵⁷ and *Visionen*.¹⁵⁸ He also has carried out extensive period renovation work on his properties and developed an extensive art collection. He is able to work in this manner because of his enthusiasm and broad scope of knowledge. In February 1997, his well known model Helena Christensen¹⁵⁹ seemed to confirm this in a personal interview when she expressed the view that Lagerfeld’s artistic drive and interest in world trends are motivating sources that go beyond a parochial Paris based view. She elaborated:

He is very decadent, very ambitious and is constantly working or thinking about projects. He sees everything and has an immense understanding of what tendencies are happening around the world.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸Lagerfeld, Karl, September 1996, *Visionen*, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen. Lagerfeld’s photographic exhibition was held at the Galerie Grmurzynska.
¹⁵⁹Helena Christensen is ‘never off the covers of *Vogue, Elle* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, has become ‘the face’ in many of the top advertising campaigns. She superseded Linda Evangelista as the Kenar Girl, Hennes, Patrick Cox and Gianni Versace. When British clothing company Dorothy Perkins decided to re-vamp their image, they chose Helena to endorse their name in a major campaign, which covered billboards across the UK. She was selected as the supermodel to publicise Robert Altman’s film *Prêt-à-Porter ...*’. Morris, Sandra, 1996, *Catwalk Inside the World of the Supermodels*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, p. 20.
Chapter Two: Origins, Sources and Inspirations.

... K L is my German genes. Chanel is the French; but with Chloé I can be more whimsical, put mad things together as English eccentrics do.\textsuperscript{161} Karl Lagerfeld (1993).

Lagerfeld is generally considered to be one of the most talented and prolific fashion designers of the late twentieth century (fig. 2.1). His work schedule is gruelling and his output is prodigious: he has revealed that he has designed as many as six hundred garments for the one fashion season. These fashion garments have been created for a number of labels: his own signature label, the House of Chanel, Chloé and the Fendi companies. What is remarkable about his work for these four fashion houses is that he designs haute couture and ready-to-wear lines concurrently and seems to have no difficulty in bridging any inherent barriers. He says that he is \textit{like a computer} and automatically reverts from designing from one label to another, often in the same day.

Lagerfeld has had seemingly endless ideas for ensembles and accessories. His peers and the fashion cognoscenti such as Suzy Menkes,\textsuperscript{162} constantly remark upon his punishing regimen and express amazement at his consistent production for the four clothing companies he is associated with. When Carla Fendi was asked the question: ‘How do you explain Karl Lagerfeld’s success?’, she replied with a comment which hints at his innate talents:

\begin{quote}
First and foremost his talent, then by his culture and also some people are just born exceptional—a musician for example ... he was definitely born with something more than the common mortal.\textsuperscript{163}
\end{quote}

The ubiquity of such comments points to the fact that Lagerfeld’s success is often seen as being due to his natural talent for fashion design. Furthermore, the pleasures and satisfaction he admits to getting from producing collections and his perceptive use of a multitude of varied sources and inspirations, are crucial elements in the understanding of his creative process and methods.

As has been seen, Lagerfeld’s work has been conditioned by his background, his early development, his mentors and his freelance work for various fashion houses. All of this development took place in the atmosphere of his restless energy and desire to create a personal signature style. This initial ground work and his successful early fashion design, during his mid teens, trained him for the additional pace his life took from about 1983 when

\textsuperscript{162} Suzy Menkes, fashion critic for the \textit{Herald Tribune}, Chicago, USA.
[Copyrighted material omitted]
he accepted the position of Design Director in Charge of Collections at the House of Chanel. Kitty Allesio, President of the House of Chanel took great interest in Lagerfeld’s work before approaching him to become Chanel’s sole designer. In comments made to Nicholas Coleridge she reveals her admiration of Lagerfeld’s talent:

He was one of the few designers, if not the only one, who had never borrowed from *Chanel*. At the time I had been studying him for fourteen years, and though I only knew him through his work, I knew he could do it. He had an inherent love of elegance and had grown up in the presence of wonderful things.\(^{164}\)

One of the clever things about Karl Lagerfeld is the way he designs for many different labels, each rather differently, while maintaining a distinct Karl Lagerfeld stamp. He doesn’t make a dress you can’t sit in, ... He doesn’t make a single pair of pants you can’t board a plane in.\(^{165}\)

As a young man, Lagerfeld admired the creations of fashion leader Jacques Fath.\(^{166}\) Lagerfeld described Fath as a *bright light of Paris fashion*, one quite different from others of the day who worked within the confines of the overly stiff and formal trends of traditional *haute couture* houses. Elizabeth Ewing in her text *History of Twentieth Century Fashion*, wrote that Fath, a gifted fashion designer, attained great eminence before his early death in 1954. ‘He was one of a new group of Paris couturiers, nearly all men, whose influence on world fashion was to be important in the following years after WW2.’\(^{167}\) Many other fashion historians, such as Georgina O’Hara felt that Fath gained high celebrity status for his unique style of fashion design. She describes Fath’s work and style in the following comment:

In 1937 he opened a salon and swiftly gained a reputation as a leader of French fashion ... Fath was famous for his hour-glass shapes, plunging necklines, tiny waists, and full skirts. To some extent an unsung hero of fashion, Fath anticipated in 1939 the style of dress which in 1947 became known as the New Look ... Throughout his career, Fath was a popular designer in the USA, where his light-hearted and witty clothes were welcomed.\(^{168}\)

The fact that this statement could easily be applied to Lagerfeld points to similarities of purpose that may well go beyond coincidence. Fath’s style, artistic flair and lifestyle seems to have had an influence upon Lagerfeld as a paradigm of method and approach. Again and again, Lagerfeld has been quoted when talking about the preciousness of the fashion business and fashion designers who take themselves far too seriously. Lagerfeld has broad similarities to Fath because he, like Fath, enjoyed liberating fashion from the overly serious constraints of *haute couture*. This similarity seemed to be acknowledged by the American fashion


\(^{165}\) ibid., p. 188.

\(^{166}\) Jacques Fath was born in 1912. in Maison-Lafitte, France in 1912 and died in 1954. He was a highly esteemed fashion designer and a precursor of Christian Dior’s ‘New Look’. He died at the young age of forty-two due to leukaemia.


industry in 1980 when Lagerfeld, like Fath in 1949, was awarded the prestigious Neiman-Marcus Award for having rendered ‘distinguished service in the field of fashion’.\textsuperscript{169} This acknowledgment of Lagerfeld’s fashion design is further supported when we realise that fashion historian Colin McDowell’s description of Fath and his style of fashion design could easily have been applied to Lagerfeld himself.

His (Jacques Fath’s) success was considerable, not only because of his designs, but also because his personality was extravagant, ebullient and theatrical. ... He created young and sexy clothes which remained firmly in the haute-couture mould of elegance and sophistication and never slipped into vulgarity.\textsuperscript{170}

A little more than three decades after Fath’s reign, a similar description is given regarding Lagerfeld’s contribution to fashion design. Brenda Polan, the general editor of The Fashion Year, discusses the four designers that were of crucial importance to fashion in 1983; they were Karl Lagerfeld, Azzedine Alaia, Giorgio Armani and Issey Miyake. She wrote the following of Lagerfeld:

The most brilliant exponent of the Parisian look at its most sexy and the man who sets the pace right at the top of the French fashion industry is German-born Karl Lagerfeld.\textsuperscript{171}

The sentiment of McDowell’s comment about Fath is mirrored in Polan’s comment about Lagerfeld; this unity of views is a pointer to Lagerfeld’s historical sense and his view of the true function of fashion.

During the early part of the seventies Lagerfeld began to develop a style which was markedly different and considered to be daring. He became famous for his deluxe ready-to-wear garments for the firm Chloé and fur collections for the Fendi company in Rome. Women were purchasing Lagerfeld’s highly successful styles in the varied forms of lingerie styled, lace Tea Dresses. A partner at Chloé, Gaby Aghion, part owner of Chloe, recalled that ‘Women fought to have those dresses.’\textsuperscript{172} Lagerfeld’s fashion designs for the firm were nearly always based in soft, romantic silhouettes. O’Hara attributes Lagerfeld’s success to his strong collections from the mid-seventies through to the early eighties.

Every collection was expressed in positive, unhesitant terms, whether Lagerfeld showed shepherd dresses with scarves tied as bodices or shawls, or about the waist (1975); mini skirts (1980), or layered skirts over pants (1981).\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{170}ibid., 138.
O’Hara goes on to discuss more fully why Lagerfeld has been so successful in the fashion business:

An exacting, confident stylist, Karl Lagerfeld’s clothes areimaginatively accessorised. His ideas are sophisticated, often impudent but always stylishly executed. ... From the mid-1970s Karl Lagerfeld has been a major force on the fashion scene, a designer who is not only able to move with the times but to move the times.174

In order to deserve such accolades one needs to be in touch with, and experience, elements that broaden and sharpen insight and perception. It is for this reason that Lagerfeld was drawn to Paris from a very young age. Consequently it is not surprising that his fashion, work that gained him international prominence, is designed with a flamboyant Parisian lifestyle in mind.

Other people in other cities might make clothing; Paris made fashion. True the talent which flourished in Paris was rarely Paris-born and much not even French-born. Among other foreigners, Worth was British, Balenciaga Spanish, Schiaparelli Italian, Lagerfeld is German and Kenzo Takada Japanese. But it was only in Paris that they could become stars, only there that their unique national characteristics and individual genius could shine as part of high fashion’s mainstream. That this is still true today is an indication of the French fashion industry’s single-minded determination to keep it so.175

As early as the mid-seventies, Lagerfeld was already considered by perceptive fashion buyers as a dynamic fashion designer in the chic, deluxe field of ready-to-wear garments for the companies he worked for: Fendi in Rome and Chloé in Paris.

Soon the prêt-à-porter had taken over from the couture as the centre of excitement in Paris. ... in the mid-seventies, three designers came to the fore: Karl Lagerfeld for Chloé, Claude Montana and Thierry Mugler. French fashion took another turn. Ready-to-wear had appeared as a response to the mood of the times. ... Both Kenzo’s Jap collection and Yves Saint-Laurent’s Rive Gauche were factory made. But the Chloé, Montana and Mugler collections were of a quality that demanded all the individual skills of couture production. As Gabrielle Aghion, Vice President of Chloé, told me recently: ‘Our production is exactly like couture. The only difference is that our customers do not have fittings. Between them, Lagerfeld, Montana and Mugler took the lead away from the ready-to-wear industry.176

After briefly working with the House of Patou, Lagerfeld distinguished himself as an eminent force in the ready-to-wear fashion business with his floating, layered silk crepe de chine fabric outfits. Fashion historian Elizabeth Ewing wrote that Lagerfeld was renowned for his leadership in the ready-to-wear field for twenty years, especially for his work with the

174 ibid.
Chloé label. He won success after success with his bold use of colour and design style. From his early days with Balmain and Patou, Lagerfeld felt, at his own admission, that the pace of couture was far too slow for his liking and kept away from it until 1983 when he joined the House of Chanel. By the late eighties, Lagerfeld did not view fashion designing work, as work, but rather as a pleasurable pastime. This view is often conspicuous in comments made by his contemporaries or fashion commentators; such as the one Alistair Blair recounts to Coleridge:

There are a lot of famous designers in New York, but most of them aren’t designers at all in the European sense, they’re stylists really. I call Karl Lagerfeld a proper designer because he also has a sense of fun. And sometimes he says very true things. He says, 'We’re not curing cancer. We’re not putting people into space. It’s only clothes. Let’s not take ourselves too seriously.'

Despite the self-effacing quality of these sorts of comments and his self-professed modesty Lagerfeld has been particularly successful with his haute couture and ready-to-wear fashion design creations for the House of Chanel. These creations were instrumental in resurrecting the House of Chanel and bringing the company back into international prominence during the eighties and nineties. Some of this success, no doubt, is due to the fact that Lagerfeld is a fashion designer who seeks perfection in his fashion design work and also has a strong work ethic which he says comes from his late father, a wealthy businessman, whose life is undocumented in currently available sources.

For his continuing work with the House of Chanel, Lagerfeld maintains a large archival collection of Coco Chanel fashion designs which he often uses to develop his own vision for the label. He is very selective and eclectic in his use of Chanel’s classical styles, especially her famous braided suit design. He has redeveloped her simple clothing designs into contemporary versions which he considers are more appropriate for a younger clientele. Lagerfeld’s vision for the Chanel company held that the classic Chanel suit deserved resurrection and reinterpretation, in that it was seen to suffer from a restricting association with an older generation of women. Lagerfeld’s redevelopment of the House of Chanel is deeply embedded within Chanel’s design philosophy and lies not in copying her style but in extending her trail blazing designs. In following this path Lagerfeld’s work has managed to transform Chanel’s work from functional Modernist clothing items, to works that embody aspects of postmodern assemblage. These works, though based on the past, have his individual stamp; they contain, amongst other attributes, a taste for fun, a wry wit, a spirit of surprise and a consistent adherence to the attainment of perfection in his fashion designs. Jane Mulvagh discusses Lagerfeld’s successful aims and objectives for the House of Chanel in the following passage:

He aimed to modernise Chanel’s internationally recognised style rather than revere the clothes of a bygone age. By 1984 Chanel had become the most expensive couture house and even though one of the jackets in the 1984 collection was priced at $75,000, the house could not make them fast enough. Many were critical of what they saw as Lagerfeld’s brash, showy reinterpretation of Chanel, the most obvious examples being his use of prominent shoulder pads and heavy gilt jewellery—a parody of Chanel’s earlier, understated style. Others acknowledged that he restored the commercial strength of the house and a fashion designer must be an opportunist and avoid becoming a prisoner of his own, or anyone else’s image. For this reason he enjoyed working for his own label and Fendi as well as Chanel. 179

Lagerfeld, to use Charles Baudelaire’s words, uses ‘the past to confront the present,’ 180 but he has stated that he is interested in a past that he does not know, not one that he has experienced. The author, academic and semiotician, Umberto Eco in his text Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, 181 maintains that anyone who sensitively understands medieval aesthetic theory and practice can learn something about the present. This is not because medieval aesthetics are born of a civilisation that is better than our own but because aesthetics are the hidden values of a civilisation and express it in ways that surpass doctrines of the past. Eco’s statements and sentiments seem to find sympathetic expression in Lagerfeld’s life and art. When one looks at the range and aesthetic variety of Lagerfeld’s productions, one can sense that he has learnt much about the work of the past and has incorporated this accumulated knowledge into his work of the present. In Lagerfeld’s case this is more than mere historicism and plundering from the past, it is a process of aesthetic re-evaluation and is based upon a sustained attempt to understand the principles of past stylistic endeavours and products in order to strengthen the conceptual base of his own advances.

Lagerfeld has said in a 1990 interview for ARTnews that he looks at ‘all kinds of art-old and modern ... though ... not too much 19th century.’ 182 Lagerfeld has wide-ranging tastes in art and admires works by a variety of artists such as Brancusi, Fragonard, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Manet and Watteau. One can speculate, without much fear of contradiction, that Lagerfeld’s aesthetic development has been nurtured by this passion for the arts and his love of the work of such historical figures; a passion actively maintained in his personal collections. This historical knowledge is supplemented and supported by his vast collection of rare and modern books on fashion and costume. Lagerfeld takes particularly great pride in one of his libraries which is housed in a separate pavilion at his chateau in Brittany. The library holds approximately six tons of books and he told Nicholas Coleridge in an interview

181 Eco, Umberto, 1988, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, trans. from Italian, H. Bredin, Yale University Press, USA.
that he has a copy of ‘everything printed about fashion in the last three hundred years’. His specialised knowledge of costume and fashion was acknowledged and tapped when he was invited to be artistic adviser and part presenter for the three part documentary film: *The Story of Fashion*. The same may also be said about Lagerfeld’s work for another important documentary film on Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel, entitled *Chanel, Chanel*.

Many of Lagerfeld’s *haute couture* designs for the *House of Chanel* during the 1980s show his extensive knowledge and masterly inventiveness in adapting varied historical fashionable modes of dress into innovative styles. This knowledge of history is complemented by his far reaching interest and love of art in the Louvre collection, as well as other smaller art galleries. He admits as much in the following statement:

> What is this discerning designer’s museum of choice? No less the Louvre. ‘I love the Louvre. It may sound banal, but it is just great, and I live next to it, with just the Seine in between. But,’ he adds, ‘there are also small museums I love.’

These comments are particularly relevant in understanding Lagerfeld’s artistic flair and imagination. Lagerfeld’s keen interest in art is not only expressed through his use of it to create clothes, but also in his large personal art collection. For Lagerfeld, the palpable quality of costume documented in historical paintings has been a powerful influence. As a very young child, Lagerfeld was first drawn to *couture* and the style of eighteenth century dress, whilst admiring a reproduction of the painting, *The Round Table at Sans-Souci*, by Adolfo von Menzel. The appeal of clothing from past periods, such as the eighteenth century, lies in the use of rich, sumptuous embroideries, often executed in elaborate designs on gowns intended for day and evening wear. These historically documented costume designs were often made in deluxe fabrics and opulent colours. The painters of the time took great care to accurately render the costumes and their often elegant styles. One can appreciate the appeal of all this to the young Lagerfeld; it is little wonder, therefore, that this interest finds itself continually perpetuated in his mature work and thought.

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187 Many searches have failed to locate the painting by Adolfo von Menzel (1815 - 1905) entitled *The Round Table at Sans-Souci* (c.1850), much admired and cited by Lagerfeld. Presumably the painting was destroyed “during the war.” The War mentioned is not specified and it is quite possible that it was destroyed by fire. This has been documented by Lucas Grisebach in the following publication held by the *Berlin National Gallery*: Ahlers, Christian, 1980, *Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz Nationalgalerie, Berlin*, Verlagsgeschäfte & Co., Stuttgart und Zurich, p.38.
Designer Roland Klein who worked as Karl’s assistant at Patou recalls him then as an immensely amusing companion, a renaissance figure fascinated by painting, music opera, poetry. Today he is still bound by the larger world of general culture, rather than the minutiae of the fashion world.\textsuperscript{188}

Historical sources have offered Lagerfeld great inspiration for many collections especially in the \textit{haute couture} work for the \textit{House of Chanel}. These historical sources offer him ranges of inspiration, themes and projects which can only find expression in the more sumptuous field of \textit{haute couture}. Richard Martin and Harold Koda, in their extensively researched text \textit{The Historical Mode: Fashion and Art in the 1980s} recognised this connection and discuss it at some length.\textsuperscript{189} They present many examples of the work of fashion designers which were inspired by art works, including Lagerfeld’s fashion designs during the 1980s. They write the following regarding Lagerfeld’s perceptive reliance upon historical paintings, prints and photographs:

\begin{quote}
In the 1980s Lagerfeld demonstrated a mastery of varied historical sources. If the Watteau back captures the spirit of the artist’s Standing Woman Seen From Behind, c.1715, and his Gersaint’s Shop Sign, c.1720, Lagerfeld’s silk suit with pants is derived from the artist’s Pierrot (called Gilles), c. 1718-19. In this instance, Lagerfeld chooses a work of art that is distant, yet close ... Lagerfeld plucks Gilles from melancholy to become a modern paragon of decorum and style. He is transformed as he becomes fashion in the 1980s; yet his gravity remains and flourishes across the interval of more than 250 years.\textsuperscript{190}
\end{quote}

In \textit{The Historical Mode}, Martin and Koda have placed Lagerfeld’s fashion designs side by side with paintings, prints or photographs to illustrate his passion for recreating the past within a personal twentieth century setting and aesthetic. Lagerfeld’s interpretations and assimilations of past styles and aesthetic characteristics are strikingly evident and the exacting research carried out by Martin and Koda help to clarify Lagerfeld’s historical links and interdependence. A particular example of these links may be seen in Lagerfeld’s Evening Suit (fig. 2.2), from the Winter Collection, 1988-89 for \textit{Chanel}, a work based upon the aesthetic appeal of the Elizabethan Age (fig. 2.3). The jacket design is inspired by the costume depicted in the anonymous 1585-1590 painting of \textit{Mary Hill (Mrs. Mackwilliam)}. Martin and Koda have astutely isolated its source and the costume’s enriched treatment of textiles replicates the sleeves and centre front of the Elizabethan costume; the softly puffed fabric of the decoration forms ovals over the beaded flowers. Lagerfeld’s approach to many of his designs from the 1980s has been formed by his choices of elements from past centuries and his eclectic combination of these into hybrid forms of contemporary dress. Lagerfeld’s skirt design is short and straight compared with the full patterned skirt as seen in the portrait


\textsuperscript{190}ibid., pp., 9-10.
Fig. 2.2 Elizabethan Age: Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Evening Dress. Autumn/Winter Collection. 1988-89.
Fig. 2.3 Elizabethan Age: Mary Hill (Mrs Mackwilliam). c.1585-90. Oil on panel. Private Collection.
painting. He has narrowed the sleeves for the *Chanel* jacket and added wide cuffs and Peter Pan collar on his design. The model is seen sporting a large soft hat echoing the gathered sections of oval decorations prominent in the painting. The Elizabethan painting depicts a woman whose headdress is severe with a shaved hairline high on the forehead with a stiff headpiece; her demeanour suggests control and adherence to society’s strict rules on deportment. Lagerfeld has changed the rigid look of the style by introducing a poetic, romantic appearance; the model’s face is framed softly with a hat covering her forehead, her hair is long and styled in ringlets with large oval pearl earrings and three oversized necklaces frame her face.

Another example of Lagerfeld’s use of elements from historical costume as represented in paintings for his *House of Chanel haute couture* designs may be seen in his *Evening Knickers Ensemble* (fig. 2.4) from the Autumn/Winter Collection of 1987-88. Martin and Koda have documented that this ensemble was inspired by Jean-Baptiste Lully’s costume design for Louis XIV, as the Sun King in the painting Ballet de Nuit of c. 1653 (fig. 2.5). Lagerfeld’s suit design has distinct associations with costumes from the seventeenth century. The silhouette of Lagerfeld’s outfit is identical with Lully’s design in the painting. The bodice is closely fitted to the body, the peplum is full and covers the hip area, the knickers are slim and have decorated hems, the sleeves are long and have upper-arm decorative detail and the top of the ensemble is ornately adorned. Lagerfeld’s model also wears medium heeled shoes with floral motifs, in a style which is similar to the shoes in Lully’s painting which have sun and ray motifs placed in their centres. Lagerfeld’s ensemble top has a combination of appliqué, embroidery and beading in the form of flowers and geometric patterns and the knickers are finished with classical black Chanel bows at the knees. This trans-historical linkage is strengthened by Lagerfeld’s retention of the knickers in the painting, closely related to the style of Louis XIV, as part of the ensemble instead of modifying his garment with more contemporary trousers or skirt. Lagerfeld’s extensive knowledge of historical costume and the use of artistic precedent is evident in works such as these.

In the history of fashion it is by no means unusual that art and past modes of dress have been sources or models of inspiration. Writers in art journals and fashion and lifestyle magazines have often drawn comparisons between existing works of art, or present trends in art, to styles in fashion design, especially those associated with *haute couture* in Paris. One such article is *The Designers Talk: Passion, Whimsy and Picassos*, where the anonymous author discusses the importance of art and art’s influence upon fashion designers.

\[191\] Ibid., pp. 62-63.

... the word among fashion designers is ‘Art’. Art as an inspiration. Art as a direct influence. Collecting art for the love of the object, of colour, of pattern.
Fig. 2.4 Mid-Seventeenth Century: Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Evening Knickers Ensemble. Autumn/Winter Collection. 1987-88.

Fig. 2.5 Mid-Seventeenth Century: Costume design for Louis XIV as Sun King, in the Ballet de Nuit. c. 1653, by Jean-Baptiste Lully.
Studying art to see the clothing styles of the past ... they (designers) look at art with a voracious eye.\textsuperscript{192}

It must be stressed that Lagerfeld's consistent use of historical precedent, artistic style and aesthetic form is more solidly researched, scholarly and sustained than any other fashion designer. His own personal and eclectic foraging of the past gives his work a peculiar and distinctive sensibility; a sensibility which is both nuanced by the past and enhanced by the present.

Chanel's contemporary, Elsa Schiaparelli, has also had a great influence on the direction and artistic content of Lagerfeld's fashion design work. Schiaparelli's sense of fun and the use of playful or Surrealist inspired elements and accessories have left a strong legacy in Lagerfeld's work. From Lagerfeld's early days with Chloé, Schiaparelli's influence has come through in many of his subsequent designs. For example, in his Dressmaker or Seamstress collection of 1984, his sense of the jocular and his witty nature was evident in various accessories, embroidery and beading. It was his last collection for the fashion house and it paid respect to the seamstresses of the company. Lagerfeld's use of accessories, such as a brooch produced in the shape of a large sewing needle with diamantés as thread, again demonstrates his love of the displacement and juxtaposition of ordinary everyday items which are here transformed into high fashion accessories. Another example of legacy from Schiaparelli belongs to a garment from his ready-to-wear Autumn/Winter of 1990-1991 (fig. 2.6) where he perches the classic quilted Chanel bag, open and upside-down, on top of the model's head in the form of a hat. Lagerfeld's fashion designs of this type pay homage to Schiaparelli's Surrealist and surrealistically inspired fashion pieces, such as her famous Shoe Hat from the Autumn collection of 1937.

The art world and its products form only part of the sources and inspirations of Lagerfeld's fashion design. Lagerfeld is also adept at using the latest style in various subculture groups to transform it into items that create a high fashion look. He sanitises and modifies current street styles into thoroughly chic clothes produced in deluxe fashion materials. Youth subculture groups have had an their impact on many of Lagerfeld's collections, especially in the 1990s. Lagerfeld has used fashion elements from various subculture groups such as the Bikers, Raggas, B-boys, Flygirls and Surfers.\textsuperscript{193} Each of these youth movements display their own brand of street fashion styles, street slang, signs and music. In this way they mark their own aesthetic and cultural territory. Their influence is often felt world-wide through multimedia and especially through film and music video clips. Their unique forms of radical streetwear have had a trickle-up effect upon Lagerfeld's couture and ready-to-wear ranges. Lagerfeld and his design assistants, for example, often listened to popular music such as the

\textsuperscript{193} See Polhemus, Ted, 1994, Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk, London, Thames and Hudson.
Fig. 2.6 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Ready to wear for Autumn/Winter 1990-91. Lagerfeld adds quilted leather sleeves to this bright pink and black wool mini-skirted suit with leather trim. In the manner of the Surrealists, who were fascinated by displacement, the model wears a hat in the form of Chanel’s classic quilted leather bag.

Haye, Amy de la and Tobin, Shelley, 1994, Chanel: The Couturiere at Work, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, p. 120.
Red Hot Chilli Peppers while they designed a collection for the *Chloé* company; this music was used to evoke a mood and inspire a modern look for the younger clientele.

The Autumn/Winter collection of 1992-1993 featured top-selling ready-to-wear garments for *Chanel*, the most prominent of which was a leather biker inspired outfit (fig. 2.7). The ubiquitous black leather jacket remains a popular symbol of rebellion and anti establishment philosophy in many youth subcultures. This began with the 1950s *Bikers* and progressed with further popularity to the *Rockers, Punks* and *Headbangers*. This factor of popularity and its rebellious associations became ingrained in collective memories from the time of Marlon Brando’s characterisation as Johnny in Stanley Kramer’s 1954 film *The Wild One* to the present time. Lagerfeld’s mainstream fashion clientele were able to safely adopt the attitudes and mantle of this rebellious persona and enjoy its vicarious identification. One of Lagerfeld’s most constant stylistic characteristics is his incorporation of wit into fashion design. He seems to enjoy a light-hearted approach to fashion; one which is closest to Schiaparelli’s approach to design and he dislikes the seriousness of several other designers in his peer group (fig. 2.8). This may be seen in the *Biker’s* style jacket where the chunky belt buckle, which is normally worn at the waist with a leather belt, is here unexpectedly placed between the lapels of the jacket. One can immediately sense that it belongs to a *Chanel-like* tradition because of Lagerfeld’s amusing use of Chanel’s quilted leather bag treatment on the yolk of the jacket, together with the combination of the leather pants and the belted bag at the waist.

In Lagerfeld’s Surrealist based designs of the Spring/Summer collection of 1994, he added a cage of feathers made into a hat, produced by the milliner Philip Treacy, which completely covered the model’s head, who is seen wearing a black lace *Ragga* inspired, short evening dress (fig. 2.9). The dress has a bra section covering the breasts, a narrow shawl section wrapping the model’s upper arms and back and a mini skirt. The look is one which is suggestive of sexy lingerie, with a slightly fetishistic touch in the form of long transparent, floral gloves. Lagerfeld has mixed the *Ragga* subculture’s overt sexually provocative style of dress with classical Chanel design elements. For example, another outfit from the same collection further highlights this influence: Lagerfeld’s design of matching yellow, classic tweed fabric bra top, shorts, jacket, shawl and hat, accessorised with chunky fake brooch and plastic chain hip belt with Chanel’s insignia (fig. 2.10). Despite the fact that the outfit is not as outrageous as the *Ragga* subculture group of females’ batty-rider shorts which purposely reveal more than they conceal, Lagerfeld still has a lot of the model’s skin exposed in ways that are outrageous and irreverent. Ted Polhemus, in his text *Street Style*, made the following pertinent observations on the *Ragga* subculture and one can sense its inherent appeal to the eclectic tastes of Lagerfeld:

*Raggamuffins of both sexes, ... are glitzy, ostentatious-’extra’ in the extreme. What began in the ‘dancehall’ subculture of Downtown Kingston spread like*
Fig. 2.7 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Ready-to-wear for Autumn/Winter 1992-93. Top-selling leather Biker inspired outfit.
[Copyrighted material omitted]
Fig. 2.9  Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Haute couture for Spring/Summer 1994. Black lace evening wear inspired by Ragga and worn with caged, black feather hat by Philip Treacy.
Fig. 2.10 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Ready-to-wear for Spring/Summer 1994. Bra top and shorts with matching jacket and hat in Chanel’s classic tweed fabric.
wildfire to Miami, New York and, of course, London, where Ragga musicians like Shabba Ranks and General Levy performed for sell-out crowds of female fans boggling their batty-riders and male fans eyeing the layered patchwork of each other’s ‘click suits’ ... Raggamuffin clothing and adornment style is refreshingly unique. In particular, its layered textures-juxtaposing velvet, lace, fishnet, appliqué, leather, suede, brocade, Lycra, ruffles and many different shades of denim-constitute a revolutionary approach which is already being copied in high fashion.\(^{194}\)

Often with Lagerfeld’s approach one may discern his various sources, yet it must be stressed that his work is not based on a copy but exists more as an identification with the spirit of the subculture. Moved by such a spirit he selects elements from the particular subculture that suit his purpose. In this way surprisingly hybridised stylistic silhouettes spring forth in his collections unannounced, though based on these types of hidden elements and sources. He utilises and displaces design elements in unexpected ways and in unusual contexts; in these ways the fashion designs are not straight Surrealism, not straight streetwear and not straight Chanel.

Rap music artists and groups, such as Run DMC and Public Enemy seem also to have inspired Lagerfeld’s fashion collections in certain ways. In their text, Chanel: The Couturiere at Work, the authors Amy de la Haye and Shelley Tobin have written the following in regard to Lagerfeld’s street style and youth subculture sources:

For the Spring/Summer 1994 collections Black Ragga and B-boy styles have clearly inspired his work. Some of this inspiration is imbibed at first hand; Lagerfeld is friends, for example, with the Afrocentric rap band Arrested Development. Secondary sources must include films, television and magazines. Whatever the case, the references he extracts are purely stylistic and lose their sub-cultural and ideological significance when applied to high fashion. In the 1990s fashion is pluralistic and both Chanel’s haute couture and ready-to-wear catwalks clearly reflect this stylistic diversity.\(^{195}\)

One may see this stylistic diversity in many ways. For example, B-boy bum-bags were featured in his Autumn/Winter 1989 collection for the House of Chanel where models paraded Chanel suits with sporty trainer footwear with the Chanel insignia sewn onto the tongues. In Lagerfeld’s Autumn/Winter collection of 1993-94 ready-to-wear collection for the House of Chanel, he designed a youthful sportswear outfit: training shoes, leggings, skivvy, white unbuttoned shirt and jacket on top. The outfit was completed with the characteristic Chanel gilt and pearl necklaces and chain belt; a look which is traditionally associated with Chanel, yet which in this case is worn in a manner similar to the heavy gold jewellery associated with the B-boys and Flygirls. It was in this way that the original style of

\(^{194}\)Ibid., p. 110.
impoverished African-American youth subcultures in the South Bronx suburb in New York became embodied in high fashion.

A further instance of Lagerfeld's use of popular culture adornment and its trickle-up effect may be discerned in his adoption of elements from the Surfers' subculture. These effects together with leisure and aerobics Lycra sportswear styles are in evidence in Lagerfeld's Spring/Summer collection of 1991. Model Linda Evangelista came out on the catwalk, surfboard under arm, with a Surfer inspired, wet suit styled jacket, its sequined fabric glistening and shimmering like the sun on deep blue water (fig. 2.11). Figure hugging, black Lycra shorts completed the outfit and complemented the black trimming. Another sportswear design consists of a tight fitting Lycra body-suit, only suitable for women who work-out, with overshit. This range of sportswear is invariably produced in pastel colours with an abstract pattern. The accessories include classic Chanel quilted bag made in blue-green pastel sequined material and several large and visually jarring pieces of jewellery adorn the garments, all of which highlight his awareness of sources outside traditional couture medium.

Another significant source for Lagerfeld's fashion work centres upon his relationships with special friends. Perhaps the most special of these is the eccentric and creative Milanese ex-fashion editor Anna Piaggi (fig. 2.12).196 Their friendship is well established and documented and she has been his close friend, confidante and muse for many years. This association is supported by the fact that Piaggi has published a book of approximately 200 sketches of herself drawn by Lagerfeld over a period of fifteen years.197 Coleridge in his text The Fashion Conspiracy makes the following remarks about their long and enigmatic relationship:

Over the last fifteen years Anna Piaggi has been drawn 200 times by Karl Lagerfeld. There are sketches of her stepping out at Paloma Picasso's wedding, hailing a cab outside La Coupole in Paris, scrutinising restaurant menus with Tina Chow and Rosita Missoni, pacing the sidewalks of Rome, Vienna and Monte Carlo in Crinolines and hooped petticoats. They are ingenious but frustrating vignettes: ingenious because they consolidate her position as a first-division fashion eminence grise, frustrating because they tell you almost nothing about the motivation—or even the point—of this astute fenomeno who looks like a cross between the Marchesa Casati and the maîtresse of a Budapest bordello.198

Coleridge's opinion supports the general observation that Piaggi's influence on Lagerfeld's fashion design work had been strong and consistent for many years. Piaggi has acted as his stylistical icon and aesthetic model for many collections. She is also well known for her collection of over one thousand pieces of second hand clothing and costumes, especially those dating from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. It is a collection which she

196 In the early days of Anna Piaggi's career, she had been a writer for various fashion magazines, including Grazia and Annabella. Later on she became fashion editor for Arianna and (Italian) Vogue.
Fig. 2.11 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, *Surf*ers. High fashion tries to *hang ten* without getting its feet wet, Spring/Summer collection, 1991. Photo: Niall McInerney.
[Copyrighted material omitted]
makes use of on special occasions by dressing up, as if playing a role, when she displays her well known sense of the theatrical. The shoe designer Monolo Blahnik describes Piaggi in the following terms, perhaps encapsulating some of her appeal to Lagerfeld:

... an everyday work of art ... Anna is really the one who pushed me into this nonsense of shoes. Nothing about her is prepared, that is what is wonderful about her. She is an artist. It happens that the tools she chooses to work in are clothes.\textsuperscript{199}

Lagerfeld’s friends and colleagues hold him in high regard not only for his high status in the fashion world, but also for his character and distinctive attributes. Fashion model Helena Christensen reveals her thoughts and experiences with regard to Lagerfeld in the following terms:

... when I first met him, I realised what a special, talented and charismatic man he is. He has a very interesting sense of humour, a twist that can be seen in a lot of his designs. ... He is sharp, bordering to sarcasm and I think you have to be on the same sort of level to fully appreciate his wit and quick replies. I enjoy very much working with him, he is very inspirational and makes me crack up laughing ...
\textsuperscript{200}

Throughout Lagerfeld’s years designing for the Chloé firm, then later for the House of Chanel, a very direct and strong Surrealist influence permeates many of his collections. Several of these collections are inspired by the collaborative works of the Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí and the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli during the late 1930s. These garments aimed to add a shocking element and tradition breaking dimension to haute couture garments; elements which shocked and delighted the European public. This category of art clothes which lay beyond conventional expectation tended to rest its position upon the Surrealist art movement’s belief in the beauty of inner association and surprise; that is, of beauty lying in the subconscious expression of an inner reality. In fashion, this was a reality which found its expression through a technique of dislocation. Famous examples of this expression include Schiaparelli’s Shoe Hat, the Mutton Chop Hat, the Lips-embroidered Suit and the Circus Collection. Lagerfeld’s knowledge and obvious appreciation of these witty historical and intellectual examples have had a great impact upon individual items in many of his own collections. A few examples of this category of garments are Lagerfeld’s Pastry Hats (1984-fig. 2.13), Chair Hat and Upholstered Dress (1985-fig. 2.14), Backward Suit (1986-fig. 2.15) and Lobster Dress (circa 1994).

Another very important source of inspiration for Lagerfeld’s Surrealist couture is André Breton’s convulsive beauty theory. Breton was the leader and originator of the Surrealist literary and art movement; a movement that gained its main impetus in 1924 when its activities and theorising centred upon the evolution and identification of a new way of

\textsuperscript{199}ibid, p.240.  
\textsuperscript{200}Christensen, Helena, 22 February, 1997, personal communication.
Fig. 2.13 Above: Karl Lagerfeld, Pretty Hats, 1984. Photograph: Roxanne Lowit.
Fig. 2.14 Below: Karl Lagerfeld, Chin Hat and Upholstered Dress, 1985. Photograph: Daniel
[Copyrighted material omitted]
creating and tabulating a mode of aesthetic experience more in tune with the tenor of the
times and in advance of prevailing artistic and academic traditions. Lagerfeld used his
knowledge of Surrealism to infuse his fashion designs with its powerful philosophical
connotations and aesthetic characteristics. For example, his designs often transcend the
normality of garment making, within the traditional haute couture realm, and converge into
the orbit of the marvellous where a inner psychological reality plays the main defining role
and seems to determine viewers’ sensations. Many commentators have remarked upon this
strange facility and its unexpected qualities and Sally Brampton in her overview of
Lagerfeld’s 1990 collection seems to recognise these sorts of extraordinary elements when
she remarks:

Lagerfeld ... is a genius at designing clothes. He makes the acceptable elegant
and the everyday utterly desirable.

In one of Lagerfeld’s sketchbooks entitled The Couture Journals from 1994, he illustrates
his knowledge of Surrealist aesthetics by incorporating Surrealist works into the formulation
of his own outfits (figs. 2.16-2.19). He seems to be able to incorporate this knowledge by
creating highly original garments based upon the Surrealist theory of convulsive beauty. The
outfits and millinery of this time take part in a drama of psychological discourse; a discourse
between the real and the imagined. In essential Surrealist terms, Lagerfeld’s garments are
metamorphosed from chic ensembles into objects imbued with elements of the marvellous;
this is done in ways that are surprisingly in tune with the sentiment of Breton’s original
pronouncements in the 1920s and 1930s.

Additionally, many of Lagerfeld’s other works owe much to a framework that can only be
described as Postmodernist. Substantial parts of his many and varied fashion designs consist
of Postmodernist assemblage and a hybridised ahistorical bricolage; elements which form
unique links with the theory and practice of architecture, art and the literature of the latter
part of the twentieth century. Many examples of these Postmodernist designs for Lagerfeld’s

201 André Breton was the founder of the Surrealist movement. He was born in 1896, in Tinchebray in
the Orne, France and died in 1966, in Paris. Breton is regarded as one of the Twentieth Century’s
greatest writers, was the primary theorist of the Surrealist movement and wrote Manifesto of
Surrealism, Second Manifesto of Surrealism, Nadja, Mad Love, and Surrealism and Painting. ‘André Breton
showed many artists the way. In France, and throughout Europe, he was the torch that guided their
steps. ‘Salvador Dalf. ‘... Breton launches the Surrealist movement and publishes the Manifesto of
Surrealism. The movement, initially defined by its interest in dreams and automatism, counts some of
the century’s most original minds as its early members: Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard (Breton’s
closest friends), Robert Desnos, Max Ernst, Antonin Artaud, Jacques Prévert, Yves Tanguy, Benjamin
Péret, Raymond Queneau, Michel Leiris, André Masson a, and Man Ray. ’ Breton, André, 1993,
Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism, translated and with an introduction by Mark Polizzotti,
Paragon House, New York, pp. vii-viii.

111.

pp. 366-369.
Fig. 2.16 Photograph of Karl Lagerfeld's notebook of pivotal inspirations behind his early 1994 haute couture collection for Chanel. Talley, Andre Leon, March 1994, 'The Couture Journals: Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel', Vogue (USA), p.366.
Fig. 2.17 Photograph of Karl Lagerfeld’s notebook of pivotal inspirations behind his early 1994 haute couture collection for Chanel.
Fig. 2.18 Photograph of Karl Lagerfeld's notebook of pivotal inspirations behind his early 1994 haute couture collection for Chanel. Talley, André Leon, March 1994, 'The Couture Journals: Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel', Vogue (USA), p.368
[Copyrighted material omitted]

Fig. 2.19 Photograph of Karl Lagerfeld's notebook of pivotal inspirations behind his early 1994 haute couture collection for Chanel.
signature collections may be found illustrated in contemporary fashion magazines, such as, *Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar* and *Nextfashion*.

One of Lagerfeld’s signature collection evening dresses (fig. 2.20), featured in *Vogue* during the early part of 1992, clearly establishes him as foremost in the adoption of Postmodernist elements in fashion design in Paris. The black coloured, figure-hugging gown is a pastiche of several dissimilar stylistic elements. For instance, the closely formed silhouette of the dress is appropriated from the early thirties and the neck clasps which accompany it have been produced in a decorative Art Deco manner. This historically referred material is further stylistically reconstituted by the addition of a black diaphanous men’s shirt and tie topped by a crisp white collar. Lagerfeld’s design places welt pockets on the hipline of the dress which echo the fashion of daywear coats and jackets which further emphasize a leaning towards masculinised appearance. The style of the evening gown has a strong *retro* association; an association which has a discordant quality because of its Postmodernist *double-coding*: it is at once a glamorous evening dress, typical of the look of the thirties, yet at the same time it possesses hard edged masculine components suggested by the duplication of the male business shirt typical of the present day. What we see in such an example are complex plays with association which are ahistorical, ironic and stylistically detached. When one considers that Lagerfeld’s model, Helena Christensen, simulates the sophisticated look and pose of early thirties actors, such as Joan Crawford, and realises that the photograph is reproduced in black and white one can appreciate the subtle and layered elements that go to make up the illusion of surface vintage chic in a deceptively simple fashion item.

In *Harper’s Bazaar* of March 1994 an advertisement (fig. 2.21) for his own label shows Lagerfeld’s model sporting a blonde wig reminiscent of the powdered wigs common in the eighteenth century. This excessively high and narrow accessory is perched on top of the model’s head; the virtual pyramid of hair is approximately two feet high and lavishly rolled and tied in criss-crossed braid like the laces on a ballerina’s shoe. The model’s face is adorned with decorations in a vaguely primitive manner with a long painted vertical black stripe that runs from her forehead to her chin. Above her left eye is a neatly painted black heart which seems to act as a parody of the mid-seventeenth century women’s fashion for black face patches. The actual ensemble is made up of a short, low cut, black dress with a sheer fitted top worn underneath; the bodice of which is similar to fifties style dresses. The stretch top underneath the bodice has an unfinished appearance and lacks discernible hems, much like the unfinished look seen in Lagerfeld’s similar and contemporaneous outfits (figs.

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206 Patches on a woman’s face was a popular form of adornment during the late 1640s in England. Examples of this form of face decoration were a horse and carriage motif on the forehead, two half moon shapes asymmetrically placed under the eyes a star on the right lower cheek a full moon on the chin. A visual example may be seen on page 108 in Robert Brain’s text: *The Decorated Body*, of 1979 (Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., London).
[Copyrighted material omitted]
Fig. 2.21 Karl Lagerfeld for Lagerfeld.
2.22 - 2.23) in the fashion magazine Nextfashion\textsuperscript{207}. As if to play further upon the historical bricolage of this outfit Lagerfeld adds conspicuous white leather shoes with pointed toes; a style reminiscent of that found in popular shoes from the mid 1970s. The linearity of the elongated wig and narrow line painted on the face are mimicked and further intensified by the inclusion of two fine waist length earrings and a similar chain belt, with two side pieces hanging to the hem of the dress. In this sort of example from 1994, the almost disturbing mix of elements from past and present, with their contradictions, once again give a glimpse of the sort of creative \textit{pastiche} that characterises much Postmodern artistic experimentation.

Even in these two isolated examples from 1992 and 1994 Lagerfeld uses the Postmodernist concept of ahistorical fragmentation in a way that gives little regard to one particular period or cultural style over another. The sort of inspirations evident in the two above examples of his Postmodernist \textit{couture} bear witness to his vast and rich knowledge of history and its costume. It is evident that Lagerfeld’s personalised methods of recycling fashions from the past are assembled with a feel for the present. Looked at in a Postmodernist way Lagerfeld, in these types of works, eclectically selects and styles elements from the past; this is done not as an historical copyist, but as a time traveller who explores fashionable modes from many periods and uses them to enliven the output of the present. The subsequent evolution of many of Lagerfeld’s original fashion designs is based upon such strategies, as well as changing technologies, the histories of varied countries, the visual impact of their cultures and the folklore of their peoples.

As a young man, Lagerfeld admired the fashion leader Jacques Fath. Fath’s style, artistic insights and lifestyle had an influence upon Lagerfeld and he acted as a paradigm of method and approach, especially as in showing a way around the overly serious constraints of \textit{haute couture}. Lagerfeld subsequently went on to develop a style which was markedly different from his contemporaries in that it seemed to be more in touch with the tenor of the times; a tenor already perceived in his early work in Paris. Lagerfeld’s early creations were instrumental in resurrecting the \textit{House of Chanel} by redeveloping its simple clothing designs into contemporary versions that were more appropriate for a newly emerged and younger clientele. Lagerfeld’s contemporary fashion design work has managed to transform Chanel’s work from historical Modernist clothing items to ahistorical and Postmodernist clothing items. It is this evolution of form and function that is one of Lagerfeld’s most notable and under recognised achievements.

Through this evolution Lagerfeld’s creations embody aspects of contemporary culture and thought. This is more than mere cultural historicism and plundering from the past, it is a process of aesthetic re-evaluation based upon a sustained attempt to understand the principles

Fig. 2.23 Karl Lagerfeld for his signature collection.
of past stylistic endeavours and products in order to strengthen the conceptual base of his own advances. These contemporary works, though based on the past, have his individual stamp; they contain, amongst other attributes, a taste for fun, a wry wit, a historical knowledge, a spirit of surprise and a consistent adherence to the attainment of perfection in his fashion designs.

These factors are supported by a wide ranging and detailed historical knowledge supplied by his vast collection of rare and modern books on art, fashion and costume. Such historical sources have offered Lagerfeld ranges of inspiration, themes and projects which can only find expression in the more sumptuous field of haute couture; a field which also allows for artistic input and the subcultural aspects of his more adventurous designs. Characteristically, Lagerfeld manages to invest his design work with a non serious yet artistic combination of elements that is in advance of more traditional modes of fashion design and creation.

Some of this advanced standing may be attributed to Lagerfeld’s use of Postmodernist principles. Much of Lagerfeld’s later fashion design consists of Postmodernist assemblage and hybridised ahistorical bricolage, which give his work a peculiar artistic relevance that underlies his prominent status in contemporary fashion design. When one considers the above one may see why Lagerfeld is generally considered to be one of the most important fashion designers of the late twentieth century. This estimation is generally shared by contemporaries, historians, critics, curators and collectors and Lagerfeld’s work for the companies of Chanel, Chloé, Fendi and his own signature label is testimony to his prodigious energy and output.
Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.

Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), *Maldoror* (1864) 208

Lagerfeld’s knowledge and well established appreciation of art, together with its various forms and fundamental theories, is able to be discerned in many of his fashion designs for the Houses of *Chanel* and *Chloé*. Even a cursory examination of these designs reveals images whose origins may be traced to the motivating philosophy and aesthetic insights of the movement of Surrealism. The richly coloured palette of the Surrealist movement encompassed the fields of literature, the fine arts and fashion; selected elements of its program may be discerned in the fashion design of Lagerfeld.

Surrealism was an aesthetic movement and philosophy which placed strong stress upon the prime importance of the individual imagination and its source in the layers of the subconscious mind. The theories of Sigmund Freud, first published in 1900 in Vienna, supplemented the Surrealists’ burgeoning knowledge of the functioning of the mind and aesthetic response. The Surrealists’ rightful legacy may be traced back to the creative talents of the late Nineteenth Century; particularly to the writers and thinkers who grouped around the poet and theorist Guillaume Apollinaire and the talented group that followed the late Symbolist theories espoused by Gustave Moreau, Artur Rimbaud, Joris Karl Huysmans and Charles Baudelaire. The thoughts and ideas of these individuals did much to establish the foundations of the Surrealist movement and its principles; not so much as a school, but as a condition of modern life, a condition of living in Paris and a condition of contemporary modernity.

In broad scope, the Surrealists tried to achieve a freedom of the imagination comparable with that of children and to that found in irrational impulses in art and literature. To do this Surrealists developed techniques and experiments to reveal unconscious thought processes and tap the sources of creative talent. It was this general trend which prompted Salvador Dalí’s unique ability to think in an uninhibited manner and both enabled and inspired him to create his unusual Surrealist imagery. Dalí’s ability or technique eventually came to be called the *paranoiac-critical method* and served to reveal unconscious associations, thoughts and meanings, which were transposed into art forms or into combinations whose essential purpose served to break down habitual thinking and artistic complacency. This technique highlighted Dalí’s ability to modify the objects of external reality to correspond with unconscious memories or irrational and non rational thought associations. Salvador Dalí’s

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paranoid-critical method promoted a scrutiny of an object or image which in turn developed into semi-hallucinatory creations which challenged conventional expectations and interpretations. Dali believed that the advantage of the paranoid-critical method lay in its active as opposed to passive nature; that is, it allowed for the involvement of the artist as participant and ran slightly counter to the less active modest recorder form of inspiration typical in early Surrealism from 1924. In Dali’s schema the artist sought, or forced, inspiration rather than waited for it to appear of its own accord. The importance of this more active method was quickly recognised; in 1934, before their personal disagreements, André Breton pronounced in a lecture:

Dali has endowed Surrealism with an instrument of primary importance, ‘paranoid-critical method’, which has immediately shown itself capable of being applied equally to painting, poetry, the cinema, to the construction of typical Surrealist objects, to fashion, sculpture, to the history of art and even, if necessary to all manner of exegesis.\(^2^9\) (my italicizing).

Elsa Schiaparelli, the fashion designer, and Salvador Dalí, the Surrealist artist, were amongst the first to collaborate upon and create Surrealist fashion or fashion items inspired by Surrealist principles. Schiaparelli worked and collaborated with Dalí in the mid to late thirties in Paris.\(^2^10\) Their work there shows that they moved beyond functional and/or merely fashionable restrictions and explored the potential of cross discipline collaboration. The early period before World War II with its depleted market potential, provided the pair with an opportunity to investigate aesthetic manipulation of fashion and fabric design without the imperatives of popular and commercial pressures. Consequently, these comparatively free times led to freshly designed clothes which became intellectual idioms and expressions of their collaborative creative spirit and imagination. Rarely in history have clothes been imbued with such symbols of dislocation and fabricated juxtapositions of diametrically opposed associations. These dislocations had many contemporary sources; as well as being found in Surrealist art works, exhibitions, theories and sculptures they were to be found in every day advertisements, films, photographs, posters and window displays. One need only recall the numerous advertisements in magazines, most notably Vogue, which incorporated the flower-headed women of Salvador Dalí. The most obvious example of these metamorphosed women was seen at the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in London, where it was reproduced on the cover of the official exhibition catalogue. \(^2^1^1\) Dalí’s use of this flower headed woman image is not restricted to this incident, but it betrays a long-standing psychological concern among the Surrealists, about the hidden and secret nature of the woman as muse. Dalí’s use of this image may also

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\(^2^9\) Wilson, Simon, 1980, Salvador Dalí, Tate Gallery, London, p. 11
be seen in his painting *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 212 of 1936 and later in 1939 on the cover of *Vogue* magazine.213 Instances such as these only serve to demonstrate the ubiquitous appearance of Surrealist devices and stylistic characteristics from the mid 1930s onwards; instances which tended to validate and spread a trend which may be traced back to the original pronouncements and aspirations of the Surrealist group in Paris in the mid 1920s.

By the 1950s there is little doubt that Lagerfeld was aware of Surrealism’s long and active tradition of radically manipulated forms and that his work owed much to this established artistic legacy. So much so, that it is possible to assert that Lagerfeld’s use of provocative images and juxtapositions would have been impossible without the precedence, influence and conceptual underpinning of Surrealism.

Lagerfeld’s conscious or semi-conscious recognition and assimilation of André Breton’s Surrealist aesthetic principles enabled him to gain inspiration to create his own poetic vision; a vision expressed through the language and forms of fashion design. Lagerfeld has designed garments which have deviated from the norm as embodied in traditional *haute couture* design and moved to a multi-faceted style which is governed by innovative and ingenious impulses. Michael Boodro suggests that:

Yet perhaps the most intimate connection between art and fashion occurred during the heyday of Surrealism ... Surrealist fashion was created in a spirit of fun, to amuse, to shock—and like so much else invented by the Surrealists—to question the basis on which judgements about art are made. 214

Lagerfeld’s questioning of the principles of artistic fashion design is continually motivated by his own personalised understanding of Breton’s concept of the *marvellous* in Surrealism.215 Breton’s idea of the *marvellous*, never fully or clearly elucidated, is first introduced in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in Paris in 1924 and finds its most elegant definition in Breton’s novel *Mad Love* of 1937. It is in this novel that the concept’s artistic links are established and demonstrated; in particular, the idea of the *marvellous* is shown to have a three fold structure within the portmanteau term *convulsive beauty*. This structure, according to Breton, has the following components: the *magic-circumstantial*, the *fixed-explosive* and the *veiled-erotic*. These three components, in part or in whole, make up the visual power of the *marvellous* and demonstrate the principle of *convulsive beauty*.

212 ibid. . p. 135. The three women depicted in *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, have flower heads.

213 ibid. . Three years later the floral headed woman from the 1936 *International Surrealist Bulletin*, reappears in Salvador Dalí’s cover design for *Vogue*, New York, June 1, 1939.


215 Breton’s concept of the marvellous refers to that in life which excites wonder, astonishment and/or surprise. It is also concerned with the extravagantly improbable in poetic material.
These types of important motivating impulses may be readily traced, and easily appreciated, when we relate them to the Surrealist concept of convulsive beauty. A concept which seems to underpin Lagerfeld's work and which, when applied in the field of fashion, gave rise to designs which reacted to the static reality of conventional design as well as countering the humdrum reality and everyday sameness which Lagerfeld saw as being prevalent in the majority of his contemporaries' fashion work. The basic tenets of the convulsive beauty concept deserve simple outline. André Breton's three characteristic principles of his theory of convulsive beauty are most fully discussed in his novel Mad Love (L'Amour fou) of 1937. The motivating substrata of this cluster of ideas seems to be propelled by a desire to achieve a new aesthetic and a dynamic response to the new world after the turmoil of World War I. This new world was challenged by the need for new social order, new societal dictums, new sociological profiles and new philosophical imperatives. Breton's original concept of convulsive beauty thus may be seen as an attempt to promote a radical and jolting alternative to an old world order and value system, now seen as outdated and restrictive. This new aesthetic, based as it was upon the physical sensations of shock, amusement and surprise, provided artists, like Lagerfeld, with a range of techniques and responses which were subsequently validated by psychological research and theory. In Mad Love, Breton elaborates upon his enigmatic theory and gives it an almost simplistic definition in the following words:

Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be.216

The theory of convulsive beauty attempts to signify and unveil the marvellous as it occurs in everyday encounters and the hidden depths of seemingly mundane existence. Thus, it is hoped, simple occurrences are invested with a sense of magical significance, the drabness of everyday life is overcome and the human gift of unfettered imagination is given licence. The resultant effect upon the perceiver must be palpable and experiential. When one contemplates the potential applications of André Breton's famous statement, one may sense its seductive appeal and be forgiven for thinking that it may well as easily have been written by Lagerfeld himself. Furthermore, Breton's statement about the physical appeal of art could serve as a description of some of Lagerfeld's subsequent work:

I confess without the slightest embarrassment my profound insensitivity in the presence of natural spectacles and of those works of art which do not straight off arouse a physical sensation in me, like the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across my temples to produce a real shiver. I could never avoid establishing some relation between this sensation and that of erotic pleasure, finding only a difference of degree.217

217ibid., p. 8.
Lagerfeld's formative days with the Chloé company helped to develop and release the potential of his witty, amusing and bold approach to the designing of fashion items. In the Chloé collections of the 1980s one can discern the influence of Elsa Schiaparelli's Surrealist styled clothing; for example, this is more especially evident in the irreverent and surrealistically inspired motifs seen in his evening gown with an embroidered shower head image and its flowing streams of spouting diamantes and sparkling beads cascading down the dress. (1983-fig. 3.1). The glittering shower of beads runs the length of the dress and ends in a pool of water which is embroidered around the perimeter of the frock’s ankle length hem. This typical Surrealist principle of juxtaposition and displacement of images is also evident in other outfits; for example, Lagerfeld's dress which incorporates two dramatic images of embroidered scissors cutting across a dress; the evening gown is extravagantly beaded and the scissors are realistic in their design and the overall sense is one of disturbing wit and visual irony. The fabric of the dress seems to be torn by the images of the scissors and it is obvious that Lagerfeld is playing with the normal expectations associated with fashion design—that of care not to tear and misuse fabric and the association of precious materials; here these things are ironically subverted. Another day wear outfit has a scissor belt and bracelets made into the shape of enormous bobbins or reels of threads. These works were created for the Chloé company in 1984 for his Dressmaker Collection; they embody Lagerfeld’s play with the associations of cutting and pattern making, essential functions in the construction of garments, and they are incorporated in ways that are clashing and unexpected; the overall result is a garment which is visually contradictory as well aesthetically pleasing in a Surrealistic way.

This type of imaginative license and flair may also be discerned in some of the items in his Chloé collection of 1986. For example, Lagerfeld's fireworks inspired creations for this collection, are made up of dark fabric which, like the night sky, highlights embroidered images of showers and showers of sparks which seem to burst and radiate over the garments (1983-fig. 3.2). These garments underscore Lagerfeld's ingenuity and are made up of city night scapes which underline the sensation that what we are witnessing is a fire works spectacle transposed and frozen for our view or paused like a video clip; a pause which enables the viewer to look at the shower or firework scene juxtaposed onto a garment. This form of transposition has strong links to Breton's ideas on the nature and permutations of the idea of the fixed-explosive within his concept of convulsive beauty. Based upon the evidence of works such as these, there is little doubt that Lagerfeld was aware of this aesthetic principle; a factor that Richard Martin seems to note in his influential study Fashion and Surrealism.

What is important about Schiaparelli is that she dared and dreamed, allowing clothing created out of pure, unmitigated, almost divine inspiration to become a
Fig. 3.1 Left: Karl Lagerfeld for Chloé, 1983, Faucet Evening Dress.
Fig. 3.2 Right: Karl Lagerfeld, 1986, Fireworks Evening Gowns.

[Copyrighted material omitted]
choice for twentieth-century dress. Her influence today is widely felt in the witty, imaginative work of Karl Lagerfeld... 218

This statement of comparison seems to highlight Lagerfeld’s similar sense of freedom and shares the ideal of living one’s life unrestrictedly, whenever possible, in an attempt to give life and art back its ability to sustain wunderment and excitement. Despite the fact that Lagerfeld’s fireworks creations are seemingly literal translations of Breton’s idea of the fixed-explosive; it is worth recalling that such literal use of the idea was not uncommon amongst Surrealists’ themselves. Breton’s most sustained elaboration of the concept of convulsive beauty is contained in his prose work Mad Love of 1937. For example, in this book Breton illustrates the idea of the fixed-explosive with a photograph by Man Ray which captures the wild gestures and movement of a cabaret dancer and shows just how literal the Surrealists’ vision often was. Additionally, in Mad Love Breton focuses on the convulsive beauty of an image of a locomotive, once as fast as a speeding bullet, now found in a forsaken and derelict state in an untouched forest. He goes on to discuss the term convulsive in relation to his views on beauty:

The word ‘convulsive,’ which I used to describe the only beauty which should concern us, would lose any meaning in my eyes were it to be conceived in motion and not at the exact expiration of this motion. There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned-convulsive beauty-except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and in its repose.219

Certainly not all their ideas were so literally realised and Breton’s more developed aims call for the development of a sense of wonder and optical curiosity. In this way the dullness of everyday life is thwarted and replaced by an awareness of the magical and arresting qualities to be found in taken for granted events and objects. When we consider these two early examples of the idea of fixed-explosive we realise that Lagerfeld’s fireworks creations have a respectable pedigree that can be traced to the original instances of this aesthetic idea in Surrealism.

Richard Martin discusses the Surrealist philosophy of displacement of objects and illusionistic painting in his book Fashion and Surrealism. For Martin:

The Surrealist object was essentially an exercise in displacement. ... the Surrealist object became art as a function of its dysfunction and displacement. Altered by its removal from its conventional milieu, causing disruptions in role, association, and even scale, it shifted identity through its new designation as Surrealist object.220

Some of this dysfunctional appeal and shift of identity may be discerned in Breton’s example of *convulsive beauty* in regard to his description of the outfit worn by a *pretty* or rather *poetic* waitress in *Mad Love*:

On April 10 in the morning, she was wearing, over her white collar with red polka dots which harmonised so well with her black dress, a very delicate chain containing three clear drops like moonstones above a crescent of the same material, set in the same way. I again admired the way in which this brooch coincided with the eclipse.\(^{221}\)

Such incidental and seemingly insignificant occurrences often account for Breton’s insights; insights which are then analysed for their artistic uses and which become the basis for aesthetic formulation. Another significant example of this *magic-circumstantial* quality as found in many Surrealist works, may also be found in Lagerfeld’s well known *Patisserie* or *Pastry Hat* collection (fig. 2.13) of 1984. The various works of this collection are composed of frivolous and witty associations: those of the shapes and decorations of cakes with those of millinery. The associations that account for these juxtapositions are typical of the fortuitous coincidences that often motivated the Surrealists. It is easy and not altogether improper to speculate that Lagerfeld’s own designs for these creations originated in such coincidental images. It seems highly likely that Lagerfeld was prompted to create these whimsies upon viewing a window display of cakes and noting their superficial similarity to millinery. The confection of one gives rise to the confection of the other; the relationship of the two is strengthened and magnified. If items such as these are any guide to Lagerfeld’s thinking and creative method then Breton’s principle of the *magic-circumstantial* was an important factor in his inspirational technique. These millinery *confections* are a tribute to both Breton’s theory and Lagerfeld’s perception. They also underscore Lagerfeld’s strong visual sense of fun, irony and Postmodern wit.

In the same vein, although not quite as visually entertaining, is Lagerfeld’s celebrated *Chair Hat and Upholstered Dress* of 1985 (fig. 2.14), first published in *Vanity Fair* in September, 1985. In this work we are presented with a model wearing a hat jauntily perched upon her head whilst she sits upon a chair which is an identical version of the hat. The sympathetic visual relationship between the hat and the chair, here emphasised by Lagerfeld, is another fine example of Breton’s *magic-circumstantial* quality. It is easy to imagine Lagerfeld seeing a woman on a chair and being inspired by the possibilities of a visual reversal of the relationship between the woman and the chair; that is of inverting the relationship so that, figuratively speaking, the chair sits upon the woman rather than the woman sitting on the chair. The inversion of the two elements is typical of Surrealistic inspiration and in this example gives Lagerfeld’s work a flamboyant and irreverent sense that would be hard to arrive at through normal means. In this sense, one may also refer to the strange and subtle appropriateness found in Lagerfeld’s shimmering blue *Chanel* style jacket for his

Spring/Summer collection of 1991 as illustrated in Ted Polhemus’ *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*.222 This jacket with its highly reflective blue surface is reminiscent of the colours of the sky mirrored by the surface of the ocean; an association which is clarified and emphasised by Lagerfeld’s inclusion of a surf board and the model’s tight board shorts in the official photograph from the fashion show (fig. 2.11). This example’s pertinence is reflected in other creations to be found in his Spring/Summer 1991 collection as illustrated in *Collezione Donna: N 19*. 223 and in Amy de la Haye and Shelley Tobin’s book entitled *Chanel; The Couturiere at Work*.224 Here, in these examples, the associations are more clear; the works are shaped like wet suit designs and coloured by the clear tones of the ocean. The hues and subtleties of colour are modulated by light effects which mimic those of the ocean at various times of the day. Once again Lagerfeld’s inspiration was probably occasioned a seemingly innocuous viewing of these effects; probably from his home, *La Vigie*, in Monte Carlo. Breton’s idea of *magic-circumstantial* effects, that is, the accidental quality of coincidental perception, and its transforming inspirations are seen to be instrumental in Lagerfeld’s methods.

Another example which may be cited in this light is Lagerfeld’s black evening dress with superimposed embroidered and beaded guitar of 1983 for the *Chloé* company (fig. 3.3). This *Guitar Dress* with its elegant transposition of imagery seems likely to have been inspired by Lagerfeld’s viewing of a female guitarist. The guitar shape here is moved to the centre of the female body; the bottom of the guitar sits on the hips, the narrow curved centre mimics the waist, the top of the guitar accentuates the breasts and the neck ends neatly at the high neck of the collar. Once again Lagerfeld’s cheeky and opportunistic inspiration has a tantalising similarity to Breton’s *magic-circumstantial* method. This is hardly surprising since one can recall the impact in Paris of Man Ray’s celebrated photograph *Le Violon d’Ingres* of 1924. In this photograph of Man Ray’s mistress Kiki of Montparnasse, one sees a clever visual pun; a pun which plays upon the shape of a woman’s body, the shape of the violin and Ingres’ hobby of playing the violin. In Lagerfeld’s *Guitar Dress* of 1983, we see similar juxtapositions of a musical instrument and similar associations with the shape of the instrument and the shape of a woman’s body; here all transposed to new effect and impact.

This category of underlying qualities and motivations may be discerned in the full range of Lagerfeld’s imagery and products. The broad scope of his fashion works and artistic ambition may, perhaps, be aptly summarised in Breton’s words:

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[Copyrighted material omitted]
... liberty acquired here on earth at the cost of a thousand-and most difficult-renunciations, must be enjoyed unrestrictedly, while we have it.225

With this in mind, Lagerfeld’s designs for various companies, therefore, may be viewed as being actively committed to the liberating freedom of art and creative pursuits. This generalised and understated aim seems to be at the base of Lagerfeld’s artistic personality.

For support of this view one need look little further than his work for the Fendi company where fur, that long over conventionalised material, is emancipated in ways not seen before. His long and consistent originality for the Fendi company, gave rise to a form of aesthetic contrariness in the shapes, textures and forms of his creations. He took fur skins, such as mole, rabbit, and squirrel furs which were previously considered unfashionable or unsuitable for coats, dyed them in vibrant colours and successfully launched them as high fashion items. He popularised the use of reversible fur-lined coats and jackets; mixed fur with leather and other fabrics; pleated fur, cut up pelts into shapes such as petals and created woven fur strips for added sculptural effect to garments. This innovation led to exciting differences which range from the natural quality of the fur garments to the unnaturally bright coloured, dyed furs (fig. 3.4). These led to the stripping away of conventional beauty and the parading of subsequent results on the catwalks of Paris as the latest in chic. In this radical schema and new value system humble rabbit skins end up having the same fashion use and value as mink. The democratic impulse behind this new value system is propelled by Lagerfeld’s disregard for convention. Colin McDowell, in his text: McDowell’s Directory of Twentieth Century Fashion, writes the following on Lagerfeld’s fur designs for the Fendi sisters:

In 1962 they had begun to employ Lagerfeld and it was he who designed the famous ‘double F’ initials. ... Always they have been inspired by the genius of Lagerfeld, whose baroque and magnificent designs show a total understanding of the medium and an exceptional imaginative power. 226

This new value system is not based upon a displacement of fashion design elements such as that seen in Schiaparelli’s Shoe Hat or his own Corset Hat (fig. 3.5). Rather it is one of a more philosophical stance-a position that insists upon the right to change design, fabrics and the cut of garments in order to be released from the constraints of the past and the heavy hand of tradition.

This should not be taken as implying that Lagerfeld did not value the past. Lagerfeld undoubtedly uses elements of the past but in ways which the past could not imagine or value. That is, in esoteric and distanced ways that not only use elements of the past but also seem

Fig. 3.5 Karl Lagerfeld: Corset Hat, 1985-86, Photograph - Roxanne Lowit.

[Copyrighted material omitted]
aware of the value of artistic vision and the use of Surrealist principles. Significantly in this regard, Lagerfeld has often commented on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s famous statement regarding the value of the past.\textsuperscript{227} In his 1990 interview with \textit{ARTnews}, he explains his feelings about this often acknowledged saying:

‘Make a better future with the enlarged elements of the past.’ That’s very good for art’s influence on design ... It can help you to direct your feelings, but it should not overwhelm you. \textsuperscript{228}

The sentiment expressed in this quotation has a revealing relevance and importance in that it gives a glimpse into Lagerfeld’s life and view of the world. Lagerfeld often repeats this statement and in the documentary film series \textit{Tycoons} he discusses the idea a little further and relates it to his life. In the documentary film he says that Goethe said a very clever thing:

To make a better future with enlarged elements of the past. I think that is really the main idea of my life, but I don’t live in the past. I find the future interesting and what’s going on in the world is fascinating. I like the idea of the past, but of the past I have not known—I don’t care for the past that I’ve known.\textsuperscript{229}

In this regard Lagerfeld’s use of Goethe’s words and view is similar to what the writer and philosopher Michel Foucault has said of Breton:

... (he) is a little like our Goethe ... What we owe to him alone is the discovery of a space that is not the space of philosophy, nor of literature, nor of art, but rather of ‘experience’.\textsuperscript{230}

Some of the artistic quirkiness of this view of history may also be discerned in the work of Schiaparelli who took the fashionable cognoscenti by surprise and shocked with her Surrealist jewellery and garments. She adorned severe black suits with buttons of various shapes like astrological symbols, bullets, circus themes, cupids, drums and rabbit feet. All added wit, visual interest and drama to her couture collections of the 1930s. Her hats were in

\textsuperscript{227}Goethe was born August 28, 1749, at Frankfurt-on-Main. In 1765 Goethe attended the University of Leipzig to study law, however it was literature rather than law that engaged him. After the enormous success of his publications \textit{Sorrows of Young Werther} (1774) and the \textit{Goétz}, he ‘inaugurated the literary movement known as \textit{Sturm und Stress} (Storm and Stress)’. After 1786, to use Goethe’s words he ‘found himself again as an artist’ in Italy, where he spent twenty-two months. ‘Under the influence of what was regarded as the classical spirit, he resolved, ‘I will occupy myself with lasting conditions, such as we see in the Greek statues.’ Later in his life he produced many books, including \textit{Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, Hermann and Dorothea, Faust, Iphigenie auf Tauris, Torquato Tasso and Egmont}, shortly after the completion of his book \textit{Faust} in 1832, Goethe died. It had taken the writer sixty years of interrupted writing to complete this epic poem. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 1952, \textit{Faust}, trans. George Madison Priest, University of Chicago, Chicago, Bibliographical Note: pp. v-vi.


the shape of a lamb chop, a shoe or inkpots. She often explained that the appeal of the Surrealists and other artists at the time inspired her to make clothing which incorporated the function of a garment with an artistic sensibility:

Working with artists like Christian Bérard, Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Vertès and Kees van Dongen ... one felt supported and understood beyond the crude and boring reality of merely making a dress sell.\textsuperscript{231}

An example of Lagerfeld’s obvious admiration of this sort of creative company may be found in his 1995 book entitled \textit{Off the Record}, where a section is dedicated to the Duchess of Windsor. In its introduction Lagerfeld describes why he admires the Duchess, but is also quite critical of her style and taste at the same time. He writes:

I admire people who are not great beauties but who become icons of elegance by willpower alone. In my memory there is no rival to the Duchess of Windsor. She acquired taste the way others buy antiques. ... Her style and looks were part of another era. ... For these photographs I included the latest silhouette I designed for Chanel (circa 1994), because the Duchess liked to be the first with the new. I liked her best in Schiaparelli and some Mainbocher. ... A Schiaparelli suit gave her a military harshness, the word best describing her style and attitude.\textsuperscript{232}

The photographs in this visually rich book are propelled by a desire to emulate and pictorially recreate the type of historical atmosphere that he found particularly inspiring. In this sense the photographs are unusually revealing in disclosing Lagerfeld’s sources. For example, the second black and white photograph in this series is one of the model for the Duchess wearing an evening dress with a large lobster printed on the front of it. In this way, Lagerfeld pays homage to Schiaparelli and Dalí in his artistic acknowledgment of the famous Surrealist \textit{Lobster Dress}. Lagerfeld has posed his model voraciously eating part of a lobster; she has a lobster shell in her mouth and a claw in her right hand with another lying on a napkin on a chair beside her, as though to play with the notion of lobster for the wealthy; lobster dress only for the rich and lobster eaten greedily by the Duchess. Lagerfeld wittily brings all the aspects of his Surrealist dress together with his knowing juxtaposition of the real lobster next to the printed lobster on the dress. This indicates a considerable knowledge of aesthetic context, historical place, artistic antecedents and Surrealist sources.

This knowledge may also be discerned in Lagerfeld’s actual designs and items. For example, the \textit{veiled-erotic} concept in Breton’s principle of \textit{convulsive beauty} is prevalent in (fig. 3.6) Lagerfeld’s \textit{Glass Slipper} of 1992. This superficially simple item is, upon closer investigation, enlivened by a Cinderella like fantasy which seems embodied in the clear plastic sandal and its associations. The basic sandal both contains and reveals the form of the foot and exposes its skin. The plastic heel and platform of the sandal elevates the base of the

\textsuperscript{232}Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, \textit{Off the Record}, Scalo, Zürich, pages not numbered.
Fig. 3.6 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel Glass Slipper with Chanel’s insignia in pliable plastic. Anon. ‘Clear Footing’, March 1994, Vogue (USA), p. 397.
foot, giving the wearer the look of walking on air and being elevated from street level. Only the sole, the Chanel insignia and the silver buckle resemble the accepted forms of more conventional summer sling back sandals. The constriction of the revealed toes gives a slight fetishesic signal to the wearer or viewer and heightens the sensation of the wearing of a crystal-clear casing which reveals the flesh of the toes and the sides of the feet. This exhibitionistic sensaon is added to by the implied display of the play between an encased foot and toes and the contrasting sensations of the arch and heel being freed from the constraints of the plastic. Valerie Steele in her text entitled Fetish, Sex and Power discusses the fetishising of shoes in a way that is pertinent to this view of Lagerfeld’s sandal design:

Since exposure implies accessibility, ‘naked’ shoes are also regarded as sexy. ... open-toed shoes 'encourage men to think of women as a sexual partner ... An extra one-sixteenth of an inch reveals the crack between the toes, which apparently can remind men of other kinds of cleavage or, perhaps, other 'slits' in the female body. 233

The Surrealists’ theories and their interests in the mystery of woman, the hidden power of the femme fatale and the veil of identity afforded by clothing, also seem to have provided Lagerfeld with an aesthetic schema which was peculiarly suited to the concerns of fashion. One need go no further than Lagerfeld’s own sketchbook, as illustrated in The Couture Journals, Vogue, March 1994, to discern the heritage of this powerful influence and aesthetic tradition. 234 There his headpieces with their caged hats of feathers and milliner’s gauze, seem to mimic the mysterious femme fatale figures and their unusual attributes that populate the puzzling and confronting canvasses of Surrealism. In similar fashion, his models parade the headgear and the mysterious features of exquisitely clad mannequins. Here, in the sketchbooks, as in real life the Surrealist mannequin becomes personified; here perhaps she finds her ultimate apotheosis. What began as an idea, a philosophical concept, an aesthetic outrage now finds itself on the catwalks accepted, admired and envied.

Little wonder then that Lagerfeld pays such consistent homage to the art world. Lagerfeld uses a language of form which is indebted to the aesthetic frontiers advanced by the avant-garde artists of the 1920s and 1940s. Like Breton and the Surrealists, Lagerfeld is a great risiker, to use Mary Ann Caws’ term, 235 not always in the vein of Surrealism, but in ways that are devoted to chance and the search for the extraordinary in the ordinary.

This element of searching for the extraordinary in the ordinary owes something to Lagerfeld’s inspiration from the Belgian Surrealist artist René Magritte. He has added three details from Magritte’s paintings in The Couture Journals to show their relevance and effect,
especially in his fashion collections for the House of Chanel. Magritte’s important painting entitled A Sense of Reality of 1936 depicts a large rock floating over a landscape of moon and clouds (fig. 3.7. A detail of this painting is shown in fig. 2.17). In a design for Chanel (fig. 2.17, below, second from the left), Lagerfeld completes his outfit with a model wearing a black headpiece shaped like a cage for the head made of transparent, gauzy fabric draped much like the shape of Magritte’s floating rock. Breton’s concept of the veiled-erotic makes its presence felt in this example and Lagerfeld’s rock like caged hat, which conceals the head and at the same time reveals the face, neck and head of the figure, illustrates his perceptive grasp and knowledge of Surrealist principles, precedents and aesthetic characteristics. These unexpected design elements, combined with the parody of the classical Chanel suit; blue jacket, with a top under the jacket featuring a black ribbon with gardenia; produce powerful images closely related to the types of forms conjured up by the Surrealist principle of objective chance. The up-dated Chanel design and the black rock are potent examples of the Surrealist ideal of juxtaposition, here combined with Magritte’s psychologically inflected forms, all bound up into a sensual and surrealist device for the Parisian catwalks.

Lagerfeld’s black and white Chanel suit topped off with a startling white hat (fig. 2.17, below, far left) which completely hides the head inside a cage of white feathers, presents us with a remarkable image. The image consists of an arrangement of fashion elements constructed in such a way that it hides the eyes and seems disturbingly at odds with the conventions of accepted fashion design. The actual design of the hat is strongly reminiscent of the central figure in Magritte’s painting of 1928 entitled The Central Story (fig. 3.8, detail also shown in fig. 2.17). This seemingly strange connection is bolstered by Lagerfeld’s own placement of a photograph of this design within the context of Magritte’s work, as his work is reproduced adjacently in the same scrapbook, on the same page that contains the fashion design. Furthermore, Lagerfeld’s model is rendered just as anonymously and generically as those in Magritte’s other figures in his other paintings such as The Man from the Sea (1927), The Lovers (1928), The Pleasure Principle (1937), and Not to be Reproduced (1937).

Lagerfeld has stated in The Couture Journals that his headgear, in particular, contains ‘many elements of surrealism’.236 His hat has the look of a shaggy mane of white hair turned unnaturally from the back to the front of the head. In this, one cannot help but be reminded of Magritte’s celebrated, and well known, painting Not to be Reproduced of 1937 where displacement and visual shock is used to similar effect. In Magritte’s paintings this principle is often used to throw attention upon the philosophical conundrums present or to discredit our normal perceptions of the event being depicted; in Lagerfeld’s work, as seen in this example, the displacement of the feathery hair in the hat highlights his similar use of magic-circumstantial qualities and serves to focus our attention not, as is usual, upon the features of

Fig. 3.7 René Magritte, *A Sense of Reality*, 1963, oil, 175 x 115cm. 
the model, but upon the uniqueness of his design. Lagerfeld’s choice of feathers as his material has imbued the headgear with a shock value which underscores the jarring quality of a *magic-circumstantial* characteristic. The whole design of the hat, simple and seemingly insignificant as it is, represents what Hal Foster, in writing on the concept of the *marvellous*, has called it a ‘rupture in the natural order’,237 a description which seems particularly apt in describing Lagerfeld’s elegant conception. In this way, Lagerfeld’s model, in his 1994 collection, is transformed from an elegantly dressed woman to a surreal dreamlike creature; a creature which seems resurrected from the past to be enlisted in Lagerfeld’s aesthetic program.

The headpiece 1994 (fig. 2.17, below right) worn by fashion model Naomi Campbell has a strong similarity to that found in Max Ernst’s painting of 1939: *The Robing of the Bride*; a painting which shows a bride who is half women and half bird (fig. 3.9). In Ernst’s painting the female’s eyes peer out of a head totally covered with a hood of feathers, a very full, long and bulky cape covers most of the side and back of her body but exposes the front from the breasts down. In Lagerfeld’s creation Campbell wears a large headpiece resembling a feathered mane of long hair which at the same time looks more like an exotic bird’s head of feathers, fluffed out to entrance a mate. A sense of Breton’s concept of the *veiled-erotic* is expressed in the visual tease of the manufactured mane of feathers covering much of the model’s own hair. The strength of Lagerfeld’s design lies in his capturing of the essence of Ernst’s woman/bird mutation; a Kafkaesque metamorphosis from the surreal to the real. The ambiguity of the femme fatale image in Ernst’s painting is striking for two reasons. Firstly, the red colour of the bride’s matrimonial garment is symbolically associated with confidence and power; she is definitely not depicted as the nervous, expectant virgin about to wed. The bride’s portrait is framed above her to the left of the painting, giving one the uneasy feeling that she has done this before. Such potent and frightening images of ravenous women as destroyers are depicted throughout male Surrealist paintings.

An image particularly pertinent to this fundamental principle was that of the praying mantis; for the Surrealists the praying mantis became an epitome of their apprehension about woman and her ability to figuratively castrate the male. In real life the praying mantis decapitates her mate after copulation and this bizarre habit seems psychologically conjured up in Ernst’s painting in the form of the ominous, scarlet clad bride. Secondly, although the hood covers the bride’s face, large bird eyes peer out at the viewer. This is unsettling because it is not what one expects. The dreamlike nature of this vision has a menacing quality which is reinforced by the sinister vulture with a human hand and leg. This creature is holds a spear in its right hand, and seems ready to protect the bride and perhaps awaits to pick the bones of her prey. All of these forms of ambiguities and psychological associations seem reflected in Lagerfeld’s work. Lagerfeld has a strong interest in art and Surrealist philosophy so it is little

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Fig. 3.9 Max Ernst, *The Robing of the Bride*, 1939, Painting on wood, 86 x 130cm. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.
Quinn, Edward, 1984, Max Ernst, Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona, p.211.
wonder that he captures so well the power and ambiguity of woman in various *haute couture* collections for the *House of Chanel*; collections where the unsettling quality found in Ernst’s painting helps to take his work out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary.

In his book *Off the Record*, Lagerfeld has photographed his striking feathered caged hat complementing his evening dress with tulle and feathered cape (fig. 3.10). The headpiece is a fine example of the *veiled-erotic* as espoused by Breton. The hat’s ribbed sections obscure the model’s mouth and nose and the contours of the face are hidden by the diagonals of the feathers. The overall impression is that of a faceless model, showing only a vague hint of its human origins. Once again Lagerfeld’s evening dress with cape is surprisingly similar to the bride’s garment in Ernst’s painting *The Robing of the Bride*. Lagerfeld has also enhanced the surreal style of his dress and cape by photographing the model in a way that enhances its Surrealist reading and legacy.

In keeping with the spirit of this specialised category of Surrealist inspired fashion, Lagerfeld extends his artistically inspired millinery to another headpiece (fig. 3.11). This particular headpiece does not cage the head but frames the woman’s face. The *veiled-erotic* elements of the hat are further reinforced by the model’s long tulle gloves. According to Valerie Steele the fetishistic association of the hand and arm being inserted into a glove is like that of a penis sheathed in a condom. 238 Lagerfeld here seems to play with the associations of this image: the transparent, soft gloves take on a fetishistic association which provides the model with a second skin whilst the feathers provide her with a second head of hair. The element of partial disguise gives the sense that Lagerfeld’s woman is mysterious and not able to be easily recognised. These are qualities which enhance and add to the intrigue and seductive appeal of the model and underline the insistence of Surrealist aesthetics in Lagerfeld’s work and thought.

The variegated blue caged feather hat (fig. 2.17, above left) is made in the style of a historical helmet of war. Its spiked vertical feather sitting on top of the headpiece mimics that of the blindfolded falcon found on the same page of Lagerfeld’s journal. In this example Lagerfeld seems to have drawn inspiration from the image of a falcon; a *bird* of prey is dressed in Surrealist garb which emulates the famous praying mantis of Surrealist tradition. The model seems to self consciously possess the attributes of a siren; the exquisite historical fantasy figure which is ready to control and conquer. The *veiled-erotic* elements in this headpiece are apparent in the headgear; a headpiece which seems to play *hide and seek*, a virtual visual game where features are not revealed directly. The hat hides the woman’s head whilst exposing the woman’s chin, neck and throat and her sensuous and delicate skin. The softness of the black silk fabric of her dress is dramatically juxtaposed with the more obvious associations of the hunter styled helmet. One’s attention is aroused by the beautiful creature

Fig. 3.10 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Evening wear, c. 1993-94.
Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, *Off the Record*, Scalo, Zurich, up.
Fig. 3.11 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Evening wear, c. 1993-94. Lagerfeld, Karl, 1994, Off the Record. Scalo, Zurich, up.
and strangely drawn to her at the same time; a form of ambivalent movement seems at the base of her attraction; an ambivalence that is also found in her helmet and its feathers. Lagerfeld’s model is totally departicularized in the same manner as are Breton’s women in many of his poems. In her book André Breton: Magus of Surrealism, Anna Balakian wrote the following in regard to one of Breton’s poems; a sentiment that could, almost equally, be applied to the women in Lagerfeld’s creations:

The poem does not present a photographic picture of the woman but conveys the power she exercises on the poet; the erotic force of woman in the generic sense, totally departicularized ... 239

Magritte’s body of work consists of many repetitious images of men and women with totally concealed heads, as in his paintings: The Lovers and The Central Story. These images are directly linked to his own past and the psychological trauma he suffered. The shock of his mother’s suicide (she drowned in a nearby river) and the sight of her nightgown covering her head, together with the realisation that he did not know why his mother committed suicide led to the incidence of these enigmatic images of faces totally covered in drapery. The covered heads symbolically represent and give form to Magritte’s anxiety. In similar manner Lagerfeld has taken the general appearance of the images and translated them into fashion designs which prevent the viewer having access to the identity of the models. Speaking as if in response to the images of Magritte’s figures, Lagerfeld made the following remark about his Empire-line inspired evening gown (fig. 2.16, above left):

I want evening dresses like silent nightgowns, clothes with whispers. My own fugue of two moods: floating dresses and construction.240

Once again, in his rock styled headpiece (fig. 2.17, below, second from left), Lagerfeld has combined the elements of the hidden face together with the construction of the floating rock, combining both symbols in a further evolution of the principle of Surrealist displacement. In Magritte’s realistically painted work A Sense of Reality, illusion is accentuated by the realism of the rock and the weightless rock floats in the blue sky in simulation of the moon and clouds. One looks at this page and sees that Lagerfeld has obviously transposed much the same source as that which pervades the mystery of Magritte’s work. Lagerfeld’s rock-like headpiece sits effortlessly on the model’s head, as if a by chance a heavy black cloud descended downwards and totally enveloped the women’s head. Breton’s concept of the marvellous and the veiled-erotic are strong elements in Lagerfeld’s design procedure, as may be found in several of his other designs for The Couture Journal. In these works there exists an interplay of concealment and sensuous display. Concealment of the skin by various

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materials is played out with partial or total see-through elements which reveal the face or body. In these ways, Breton's original concept of the *marvellous* is incorporated in Lagerfeld's work with everyday materials; materials which are transformed into surreal objects.

Furthermore, the designs for Lagerfeld's headgear are not only inspired by Ernst and Magritte but are also in keeping with some of the symbols associated with Dalí's depictions of flower headed women. The Surrealists' fascination with the perilous threat supposedly posed by women often materialised in their depictions of women missing facial features and sometimes even faces or heads. These depictions were all imbued with a fearful atmosphere which hinted at the supposed nature of their subjects. Lagerfeld's wedding dress with bustle (fig. 2.18, above left) is a reinterpreted version of Chanel's nineteenth century fancy dress evening gown (fig. 2.18, above right). The Lagerfeld design displays a large feathered headpiece which frames the model's head. Emanating from the top of the headpiece is a full, gathered veil enveloping the sides and back of her body. The play of the thick feathered headpiece against the veil's train and the way the eye is attracted to the head emphasises the model's eyes in ways that are similar to that found in the hood and cape of Ernst's bride in his *The Robing of the Bride* (fig. 3.9). Lagerfeld's modern creation for Chanel pays tribute to Ernst's bold poetic vision by playing with the associations of symbolic purity, innocence and virginity. The weightlessness and luxurious quality of the silk mousseline fabric of the dress further adds to the delicateness of the garment. The gown's front bodice and sleeves are transparent while the rest of the wedding dress is opaque. The diaphanous silk cloth covers the top of the breasts, arms and part of the model's hands but at the same time the fabric exposes the skin beneath. Thus, Lagerfeld in his design again embodies the principle of the *veiled-erotic*. The sensuous quality of the see-through fabric of the wedding dress is juxtaposed with the contrasting white, virginal quality of the outfit's material, in ways that are aware of symbolic and surreal associations.

The Surrealists' displaced objects in art have often been borrowed by fashion and accessory designers. For Lagerfeld, what makes his use of the material and design Surrealist is not the actual incidence and use of certain materials, objects, themes and motifs, but the extent that these reflect Surrealist principles. In assessing the role of Surrealism in Lagerfeld's output the prime question should be: do the materials and incidence of Surrealist elements concur with the aims of Surrealism, and how do they develop, reflect or extend Surrealist principles? In other words, what is important here is not the appearance of these items, but the use of these items. The fashion historian and author Colin McDowell enthuses about Lagerfeld's skill as an accomplished and original fashion designer and discusses the use of millinery in his collections, as well as the natural attributes which make Lagerfeld one of the most influential and exciting designers of the latter part of this century. He describes Lagerfeld in the following way:
His (Lagerfeld's) exuberant fantasies often flout the rules of good taste, but nothing he designs is ever dull. His millinery has frequently flirted with surrealism and in 1985, working with Kirsten Woodward, he designed a hat in the shape of an armchair to match a dress upholstered like an ottoman. The year before he had produced an amusing series of hats based on traditional French patisserie which echoed Stephen Jones' 'French Fries' hat of the previous year.\footnote{McDowell, Colin, 1992, \textit{Hats: Status, Style and Glamour}, London, Thames and Hudson, p. 197.}

It is ironic, however, that Lagerfeld's interest in the powerful principle of displacement imagery in Surrealist art has been focused on various \textit{Chloé} and \textit{Chanel} collections in the 1980s and 1990s since his predecessor Chanel constantly asserted her dislike of Elsa Schiaparelli's art clothes. Both, Chanel and Schiaparelli's attitude towards each other may be gleaned from the following comment:

Chanel described Schiaparelli as that 'Italian artist who makes clothes.' Schiaparelli, in turn, referred to Chanel as 'that dreary little bourgeoise.'\footnote{Steele, Valerie, 1991, \textit{Women of Fashion: Twentieth-Century Designers}, Rizzoli, New York, p. 66.}

It is to Lagerfeld's credit that he was able to avoid such petty comparisons and combine the artistic ambitions of these two figures in ways that, though they are in some part indebted to the work of both, manage to transcend their collective achievements. Again and again, throughout the years, Lagerfeld has paid consistent homage to the prescient work of Schiaparelli. Some of this developed admiration may be discerned in the aesthetic concepts which underlie the probable source of Lagerfeld's \textit{Candelabrum [sic] Dress} of 1985 (fig. 3.12). In it we find a dark coloured evening dress that is decorated with a full scale candelabra topped with two lighted candles. The visual effect of this displaced candelabrum is strikingly unusual and may be considered as an inspired application of Breton's concept of the \textit{magic-circumstantial}. Breton's concept stressed the importance of seemingly innocuous events and circumstantial coincidences as an entry point into the world of magical and inspirational juxtapositions; as a form of remaining alive to the world of wonder and innocent visual pleasure. In this example, Lagerfeld has obviously been prompted by the coincidental juxtapositioning of a woman and a candelabra and, aware of the aesthetic possibilities, he has created a happy mixture of the visual coincidence in a way that enlivens his repertoire and embodies the \textit{magical circumstantial} quality of earlier Surrealist origins and theory. In this way Lagerfeld seems fully aware of the aesthetic and inspirational potential of his immediate environment and astutely takes in what is happening around him, a characteristic that perhaps prompted his model Helena Christensen to describe him as a fashion designer who \textit{sees everything}. It seems certain that he noticed a woman standing behind a candelabra; an image which had an accidental origin and a magical potential in its coincidence and appearance. The conjunction of the two images, though circumstantial, is imbued with a \textit{magical circumstantial} quality that jolts the senses and clearly embodies an important part of Breton's theory of \textit{convulsive beauty}. 


Lagerfeld's appreciation of Surrealist art and the philosophical tenets based in Breton's theory and principles opened up aesthetic boundaries in his fashion design production. The Surrealist aesthetic as evident in his various garments and accessories is associated with the long, yet neglected, tradition of image making and artistic practise of the Surrealists from the late twenties to thirties. The collaboration of Dalf and Schiaparelli provided Lagerfeld with an abundant source of psychologically exciting and intriguing visual motifs and styles that set them apart from the traditional and formal fundamentals of haute couture design which had pervaded so much of twentieth century fashion in Paris. Like Schiaparelli, Lagerfeld's clothes speak of wider artistic pursuits; pursuits which go beyond the constraining limits of economical considerations. Lagerfeld's clothes, as discussed within this chapter, are created with the Surrealist aesthetic in mind; they would not have been possible without the conceptual strata and primary sources found within Surrealist art and literature. Apart from Lagerfeld's direct homage to Dalf and Schiaparelli in the form of his Lobster Dress, Dressmaker Collection and accessories, other garments and head pieces discussed and analysed are unique examples of Lagerfeld's practical incorporation of Breton's concept of convulsive beauty. It is a concept often found in the work of Max Ernst and René Magritte; both of whom were early inspirations for Lagerfeld's fashion designs, particularly for his Chanel collections of 1994, which were the most significant to be imbued with the quality of the Surrealist marvellous in a poetic visionary sense. The earlier work for the Chloe company was inspired by Schiaparelli's Surrealist symbols and was characterised by the applications of the use of images based upon Breton's aesthetic principles of the veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive and magic-circumstantial. In these ways, Lagerfeld has created an original fashion genre that has its central axis firmly placed within the sphere of Surrealist writing and artistic theory.

Unlike his Surrealist predecessors the concept of chance, in the main, plays no part in the generation of his designs. On the contrary, Lagerfeld seems to produce works that are deliberate and consciously developed. Discounting the element of chance and accident makes us all the more aware of his perceptive knowledge and selective application of the aesthetic philosophies that surrounded the Surrealist movement. Lagerfeld has borrowed from historical precedent, Surrealism most prominent amongst them, in an intelligent, discerning and deliberate manner.

Lagerfeld's fashion designs throughout the last two decades have been characterised by the recurring use of displacement and juxtapositions of motifs. This usage uncovers elements which display a freshness and lack of constraint rarely seen in the work of his contemporary couturiers. Earlier this century Schiaparelli's fashion designs had the power to take the public by surprise and, following her tradition, Lagerfeld's individual and dramatic fashion design concepts for the House of Chanel, in like fashion, now capture his audience by surprise. These reveal a tenacious understanding and use of concepts and elements which
originate from André Breton’s theory of *convulsive beauty*. Throughout the last two decades Lagerfeld has demonstrated his awareness of the aesthetic characteristics embedded in Surrealist philosophy and artistic thought. Lagerfeld, in true Surrealist form, has created several highly individualised fashion designs. His ensembles and accessories have turned the *mundane* into the *marvellous*. He has succeeded in consistently creating garments which are imbued with components that are irreverent, irrational and whimsical and are similar to predecessors such as Dali and Schiaparelli. Lagerfeld’s Surrealist oeuvre consists of garments which are forceful in their shock value; a value that owes much to his tapping of Surrealist principles and aesthetics.

Lagerfeld’s use of a Surrealist dialect of the fashion language is a continuation of Breton’s three tenets of *convulsive beauty*: *veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive* and *magic-circumstantial*. Furthermore, Lagerfeld consciously and deliberately uses symbols of dislocation, juxtaposition and diametrically opposed relationships of incongruous fashion design and Surrealist art elements. Several of Lagerfeld’s designs are more than simply homages to Ernst, Dalí, Magritte and Schiaparelli; they are valid Surrealist objects that continue the Surrealist spirit and may be traced to artistic antecedents. In this way the conventionality of accepted fashion design is challenged and overcome by an awareness of the magical and arresting qualities to be found in taken for granted events and objects. Lagerfeld is perceptive and has fun playing with past ideas of Surrealist concepts, especially those discussed at length by Breton in his text *Mad Love*. Irony, postmodern assemblage and wit are well developed in his fashion designs in the last two decades. He has maintained an integral visual sense and intellectual understanding of the Surrealist art movement; from its jarring visual images to involved philosophical ideals. Lagerfeld’s attainment of some of those ideals comes through in powerful and convincing ways. His masterful use of the concepts of *convulsive beauty* are seen in his fashion designs; designs which are infused with *fixed-explosive* elements, shower and fireworks inspired evening dresses, through to the *veiled-erotic* elements of the caged, rock like headpieces and the *magic-circumstantial* element in the *Candelabrum Dress*. Lagerfeld’s artistic fashion design has been extended and developed by his own personalised understanding of Breton’s concept of the *marvellous* in Surrealism. The cultural barometer of Lagerfeld’s work from the 1980s onwards certainly responded to the aesthetic principles created and heralded by Breton in the 1930s and 1940s.
Chapter Four: From the Modernist Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel to the Postmodernist Karl Lagerfeld: Transformations in Fashion Design at the *House of Chanel*.

There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.

Francis Bacon

After Gabrielle *Coco* Chanel’s death in 1971 her *couture* house remained open for business but did not do well. In 1983 Lagerfeld created his last collection for *Chloé* and when he took on his new position at the *House of Chanel* his work flourished with a burst of creative ferment that revived the languishing fashion house from its long slumber. The *House of Chanel* quickly became an international success once again. Lagerfeld has stated that he spent his first few years designing high fashion with the view that *Chanel*, and many *haute couture* houses of old, were too traditional and conservative for his taste. He told the media that he was ‘trying to take the institutional image out of Chanel’. His one time muse and the *face of Chanel* was the model Inés de la Fressange who, like Lagerfeld, disliked the obvious preciousness of *haute couture* and supported Lagerfeld’s iconoclastic position:

I was critical of haute couture when it was bourgeois and conformist. Now with designers like Karl and Lacroix, couture is full of fantasy again.

Lagerfeld created a whirlwind of change in the *House of Chanel*; a fashion house that had fallen into decline and lost its direction since the death of Chanel. The *haute couture* and ready-to-wear collections have undergone dramatic changes since Lagerfeld’s acceptance of directional responsibilities. Lagerfeld created hybrid versions of the ubiquitous *Chanel* suit and its accessories giving these new creations an increasingly contemporaneous aesthetic. In the last decade this new aesthetic impulse has directed Lagerfeld to an adoption of Postmodernist aesthetics and concepts. His many changes, drawn from Surrealism to

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244 Lagerfeld returned to design for *Chloé* for a period of approximately six years: 1992 to 1997.


246 ibid., p. 203.

247 Postmodernism (often also written as Post modernism, Post Modernism or post modernism) is term that has a long and respectable history of use in the twentieth century (see Rose below). The term refers to a set of concepts and characteristics that aim beyond national, cultural and generic boundaries; it describes art, attitudes and cultural artefacts that share certain non Modernist characteristics; characteristics which are by no means settled or universally agreed upon. This uncertainty and debate has made the term’s uses very pliant and adaptable, to the point where it has developed many additional cross cultural functions. The term’s origins, definitions and uses offer non historical period based insights into recent art practice as well as providing conceptual frameworks for the analysis of contemporary experience. Postmodernism seems based upon what François Lyotard has called an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (1984); that is, a distrust of larger meanings in history or coherent linear development in self or society. This has led to a number of characteristics and attributes whose incidence may be seen as Postmodern. These general
subcultural developments and Postmodernism, slowly strengthened in their visual impact and influenced the shape and character of his subsequent fashion designs. Lagerfeld’s initial and bold stylistical revolution bore fruit and not since the days of its founder did the House of Chanel receive such fame and accolades in the world-wide community of fashion cognoscenti and the media. The author Elizabeth Ewing wrote about Lagerfeld’s talent and ability during this period to revitalise and rejuvenate the traditional House of Chanel:

Chanel’s house remained in business during the 1970’s, but the big shot in the arm came that looked like putting new life and vigour into it did not happen until 1983, when Karl Lagerfeld was appointed chief designer. He had been with Chloé in Paris for 20 years, winning success with his bold designs, assertive and colourful, for the manufacturing trade. In 1983 he did a ‘Farewell and Hail’ act by presenting his last Chloé collection in the spring and his first Chanel on that autumn.248

In the last few decades the Postmodern style or visual aspects of the Postmodern condition, have been embodied in Lagerfeld’s haute couture and ready-to-wear collections. These collections have displayed characteristics which lean toward the encapsulation of internationalism, esotericism, irony, parody and a certain impersonality in clothing. They seemed increasingly to be made for a faceless, classless and raceless beauty who embodies and engenders whatever attributes are seen to be valued at the time. Although this phenomenon tends to reassert that fashion or haute couture garments are essentially ephemeral in nature, Lagerfeld’s creations cannot, in the main, be thought of in this pejorative sense because he has infused his work with, what Martin and Koda have called, a ‘mastery of historical sources.’249 Furthermore, Lagerfeld’s finely tuned and personal sense of aesthetic aptness saved the bold creations of the period from 1983 to 1998 from any easy dismissiveness, thereby enriching and strengthening the French tradition of haute couture. Because of this remarkable and generally acknowledged achievement, Lagerfeld’s work has

characteristics evolve from all or some of the following sets of oppositions: self-reference instead of representation, play instead of method, lack of seriousness instead of seriousness, fragmentation instead of unity, ahistoricism instead of historical/chronological accuracy, subjectivity instead of objectivity, present context instead of past aura and a preference for the popular instead of the profound. The tensions implied in these linked oppositions have produced many new techniques, forms and hybrid activities. The following selected texts contain further information:


been extensively shown in several major international fashion exhibitions. In keeping with this achievement Lagerfeld’s name and couture have been coupled with those of the great fashion designers of this century, including Cristobal Balenciaga, Gabrielle Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Mariano Fortuny, Je Anne Lanvin and of his own contemporaries such as Issey Miyake, Romeo Gigli and Yves Saint Laurent. Other fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and John Galliano have also used historical sources and similar Postmodernist techniques and processes in their recent collections.

The exact nature, extent and sources of this considerable achievement are complex. The actual style and the essential character of Lagerfeld’s individual and original creative abilities are shrouded in mists of uncertainty, as are those of any exceptional individual. Lagerfeld, like many other creatively gifted individuals, is most reticent to discuss his deepest sources and to divulge much about his aims and methods. However, despite this, a starting point in unravelling potential answers to these questions may be made by considering Lagerfeld’s artistic innovations. There is little doubt Lagerfeld has consistently developed a unique style influenced by his close study of past traditions in art and historical modes of dress; these aspects were developed in conjunction with a strong sense of forward thinking ideas. In Lagerfeld’s case these are ideas which prevented his work from falling into the common trap of backward looking inspiration and the easy comforts of recreating the past without learning from its essential and defining spirit; this is why Lagerfeld’s creations are at the opposite end from mere historical costume. Lagerfeld’s knowledge and understanding of fashion, from its early beginnings to its present trends, is apparent in his consultancy work for various documentary films, for example Chanel, Chanel and the three part series The Story of Fashion, where his expertise was keenly obvious. Given this expertise and insight, Lagerfeld’s instigation of a paradigm shift at the House of Chanel occurred almost immediately after he set free the potential of the company in the first few seasonal collections. Coleridge wrote the following of Lagerfeld taking over the reins at the House of Chanel:

During the early seventies the house of Chanel was sometimes compared to Tutankhamun’s tomb, in the sense of a dead, plundered place rather than an undiscovered treasure trove. It fell to Karl Lagerfeld to break the spell of the Chanel dummy and disinter the famous Chanel suit, discredited uniform of the

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250 For example, the Fashion and Surrealism Exhibition at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, (November 1, 1989 to January 27, 1990); Infra Apparel Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (April 1, 1993, to August 8, 1993) and Dressed to Kill, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (December 4, 1993 to February 27, 1994).


grandes bourgeoises. This he had done through repeated shock treatments (marrying leather and denim with gold-trimmed tweed) and corrective surgery (wide shoulders, roomier jackets, a sharper silhouette).

Lagerfeld reinterpreted and personalized many of Chanel’s serious, elegant and functional designs for clothing and accessories and presented them to the world with a humour and freshness not normally associated with fashion. These are attributes that have been the characteristic design signature of his work for the last three decades. This fresh approach has been often commented upon and the following remarks are typical of the widely held view that Lagerfeld does not simply emulate the famous Chanel look, but rather plays with its concepts and changes it dramatically to his own tastes:

By 1983, Lagerfeld began his extraordinary career at the House of Chanel. His reign at Chanel invigorated the business, as he mercilessly plundered Coco Chanel’s historic contributions and served them up to the world with a new spin, displaying his own wit and style.

Lagerfeld’s view of fashion and its purpose is different from Chanel’s; she wished to dress women in a style and fashion that had everything to do with functional elegance. Chanel abhorred sartorial puns, especially those that could be found in Elsa Schiaparelli’s fashion design work; these sorts of superficial details were seen as superfluous and not in line with the unadorned simplicity dictated by Modernist thought. By contrast, Lagerfeld has made highly intellectualised witty motifs and accessories his trademark; almost in the same way as Schiaparelli. For example, he used typical Chanel suit elements but changed their colour and silhouette dramatically. By comparison with their origins, Lagerfeld’s suits and other ensembles remind one of other styles and other decades; they are made up of visual mixes which are complemented by elements from ethnic and exotic cultures. Jane Mulvagh clearly recognises this in her text: Costume Jewelry in Vogue, when she discusses Lagerfeld’s early 1980s use of a pastiche of Chanel’s classic suit and its accessories:

The ubiquitous Chanel suit, a fashion classic, was recoloured by Karl Lagerfeld ... and sanctioned the use of gilt, mock pearls and glass bakery. Haughty models came down the Parisian catwalks wearing baroque pastiches of Chanel’s original look on an essentially classic suit line. Chanel bijoux became the quintessential fashion theme of the early eighties, but Lagerfeld was actually parodying rather than recreating the gilt chain look of the fifties. ... Quilted leather mini-skirts were hung with chains in imitation of the classic Chanel bag ... These formed the ingredients of a huge promotion, which became further and further removed from Chanel’s own notions of style.

With the benefits of hindsight one can see how Lagerfeld’s personal and professional history has formed an interesting and enlightening backdrop to the developmental evolution of his

mature work. Lagerfeld's early Modernist approach, seen in many of his 1970s designs for Chloé, Krizia and Fendi, has slowly and systematically developed into what now may be characterised as a Postmodernist and collagist method of fashion design. It is as though Lagerfeld has kept in pace with the aesthetic issues of the times or has shared the same sense of urgent need for innovation that characterises much Postmodern ambition. This new method of acquiring fresh inspiration has had wide repercussions for Lagerfeld and it was responsible for producing his most creative work as found in the various collections for the House of Chanel. Lagerfeld's designs there were inspired not only by the fashion look and theme of Chanel's house styles, but also found inspiration in sources which encompassed such diverse areas as the arts, historical dress, popular film, music stars as well as various subculture groups.

Lagerfeld's development away from the early Chanel look and its traditions may be more readily represented by a comparative overview of Chanel's legacy. By 1936,\textsuperscript{250} Chanel had perfected her quintessential classical suit.\textsuperscript{257} As early as the First World War Chanel dressed herself in her new creation; a straight pleated skirt and sailor's pea jacket, a style with functional chic which has endured through the perpetual seasonal changes in modes of fashion.\textsuperscript{258} The principal characteristic that have made the suit a classic for three decades was her use of a combination of perfected and successful design elements (figs. 4.1 - 4.2). Chanel often used tweed fabrics, once synonymous with masculine English fashion during the early part of the century. Chanel produced light weight mohair suits lined with silk and ordered especially woven tweed fabrics from Scotland. From the outset she managed to translate English male garments into feminine outfits. The simple unification of the visual elements of her clothing was usually restricted to an understated match between blouse and jacket lining. The outfit was invariably trimmed with braid and assorted functional brass buttons. To add to this utilitarian approach, which contained an element of hidden luxury, weighting was added to the jacket's soft hem in the form of gilt chains with flattened links, sewn into the lower inside edge of each garment to keep its elegant shape. The jackets' turn-back cuffs were important design features that were functional and unbuttoned. The skirt would consist of variations on the theme of a slim skirt with pleats at the sides for easy walking, later modified to a shorter A-line or straight skirt. The main colours of the outfits ranged from variations of beige, grey, fawn, navy and blacks.

\textsuperscript{256}Charles-Roux, Edmonde, 1989, Chanel, Harvill, London, noted in text next to illustration No. : 100.
\textsuperscript{257}The term classical is generally applied to art and thought that has established long lasting stylistic or formal qualities; it may also be seen as pertaining to the use of rules and models of art or literature from Greek and Roman antiquity. In the case of fashion, the term classical is often loosely categorised as being an enduring model of clothing which is just as stylistically appropriate and acceptable for everyday wear today as it was when first produced. Because fashion is intrinsically ephemeral in nature, the fact that a fashion style has lasted for many years gives the garment or style the status of a constant style synonymous with the enduring nature of Greek and Roman antiquity. The Chanel suit today is just as wearable today as it was earlier this century. Furthermore, when the suit was described in Chanel's day as classical the fashion editors of the time referred to the suit in this way because it was viewed as a culmination of her earlier styles.
\textsuperscript{258}Kennett, Francis, 1984, Secrets of the Couturiers, Orbis, London, p. 56.
[Copyrighted material omitted]
Fig. 4.2 Gabrielle Coco Chanel, oatmeal coloured tweed suit, 1959. This photograph taken outside the Chanel boutique in the rue Cambon, was reproduced in 'This Year's Suit', Everywoman magazine in April, 1959.

Chanel completed the look of the suit by using individual combinations of accessories: a hair piece produced from a gros-grain bow and gardenia, costume jewellery and two-tone sling pumps or shoes. These ephemera were the only extravagant items Chanel incorporated into her strict code of dress. Throughout Chanel’s life she tried to perfect a timeless elegance in her clothing; her intrinsic talent lay in achieving a controlled understated, uncluttered style which was functional as well as aesthetically pleasing in a typically Modernist fashion. Chanel prided herself on her creations: the chic and refined clothes which reflected her ‘essential elements of self-presentation.’ She commented on the nature and appeal of her haute couture designs in an interview for television and added the following revealing comment about much of the clothing of the sixties:

My style is all that remains of an age when being elegant meant something. These days you don’t need to be elegant, the main thing is to turn people’s heads. My work surprises nobody; everyone knows they must look elsewhere for eccentricity. I believe the more feminine women are, the more they come into their own. That idea is outmoded; what women wear now is to entertain other people.

After taking charge of design at the House of Chanel Lagerfeld quickly became an expert on Chanel and her work. Some of his views on Chanel’s mature work in general, and the famous suit in particular, may be gleaned from Lagerfeld’s comment below; a comment given spontaneously in a filmed documentary on Chanel’s life and work:

Suddenly, she (Chanel) had found the magic touch again (in her seventies) and became a big hit. The funny thing is that she in the period of the stiff dressmaking designer fashion of the late Fifties, mixed up a whole look out of seeing everybody, Chanel and the others did in the twenties and thirties and out of it came the Chanel suit. ... It’s an idea of her own past, adapted to a changed life and another reality twenty-five years later. I think what’s very clever, very strong, in fact genius at that, is not just having ideas. The genius is to do the right thing at the right moment. ... She used a lot of things of other people but she put it back when they’re not around any more to do it themselves. ... In a period when nobody was interested in retro fashion, looking at fashion with eyes of the past, of the big knowledge. So it (her fashion designs) suddenly appeared like a new look and had a relation to what they (her clients, the public in general) thought looked elegant in pre-war days and what they heard her repeating always (about elegance) [sic].

Lagerfeld’s distance from the time and stylistic restrictions may be sensed in this comment; a comment which underlines his perceptive grasp of fashion’s essential need to generate forms in response to its times. In the 1980s this is exactly what the House of Chanel seemed to

259 Charles-Roux, Edmonde, 1989, Chanel, Harvill, London, see illustration No. : 100, an article in Redbrook describes ‘what made the (Chanel) suit a classic, and uniquely hers.’
262 Ibid.
need to propel it into a new era. The enormous challenge that this posed did not slacken Lagerfeld's pace and he soon launched Chanel to spectacular new heights. Coleridge's comments are a fine synopsis of this revolutionary change in the *House of Chanel."

This he had done through repeated shock treatments (marrying leather and denim with gold-trimmed tweed) and corrective surgery (wide shoulders, roomier jackets, a sharper silhouette). Epitomised during this period by Chanel's house model Inés de la Fressange, Lagerfeld's Chanel again looks modern, and smart women have adopted it as a basic classic. For an extraordinary number of smart women from Madison Avenue to the Peak in Hong Kong, a Chanel suit is the single most desirable fashion item of the mid-eighties.²⁶³

The recipe of this success lies in Lagerfeld's understanding of the design needs of a new social strata. Lagerfeld's visual aim seems directed at an amorphous new international group whose tastes are made up of a mixing of rock culture, street fashion, traditional chic and new multi-national savvy. Lagerfeld's *haute couture* cocktails are blended and mixed in just the correct proportions and delight even the most jaded of the fashion *cognoscenti*'s taste buds. Lagerfeld wishes to reinvent fashion each time he completes a collection; he seems to becomes inspired by the principle that both the past and the present are combined and enable him to create a better future.

Many thought that Lagerfeld's *shock treatments, reinventions* and diametrically opposed style changes at the *House of Chanel* were bold actions because, as Coleridge puts it, 'Lagerfeld's style was flamboyant, dramatic and in many ways contrasted violently with Chanel's traditional understatement and 'poor look'.²⁶⁴ Kitty D'Alessio, the president of *Chanel* who invited Lagerfeld to design for the company, stressed that she had faith in Lagerfeld's abilities and talent.²⁶⁵ It is fascinating to note that D'Alessio followed Lagerfeld's collections for many years and wanted him for the position of designer for *Chanel* because of his talent as a fashion designer and particularly because he did not copy Chanel's garments.

Many of Lagerfeld's individual collections for the *House of Chanel* form daring aesthetic extensions of Chanel's classic suit designs. The originality of Lagerfeld's imaginative and amusingly clever garments have an originating basis in his unusual use of Chanel's fashion design elements. In his work for the *House of Chanel* he combines the type of fashion made famous by her in a manner which is eclectic and profane; it is a personal style which almost parodies her original ideas, yet gives them new forms and directional impulse. This seems to be achieved by Lagerfeld's ability to systematically cross the boundaries of Modernist ideals, once so powerful and authoritative, and move toward his more Postmodernist iconoclastic

²⁶⁴ibid.
²⁶⁵ibid, p. 190.
and deconstructionist preferences. Viewed in total Lagerfeld’s work for the House of Chanel has consistently demonstrated a liberating abandonment of the traditional Modernist style; a style which placed emphasis upon simplicity and unification of form and compositional elements. He told Nicholas Coleridge in an interview:

They take themselves very seriously at Chanel. Ca m’assomme—that’s too boring. Of course, it amused me to put Chanel back on the map. I enjoyed it. I felt like an actor performing a new role. But I’m not going to go on for ever with four pockets, two gold buttons, and a gold chain. ... Change, perpetual change, that’s what keeps me going.

The impact of these new designs generated much discussion amongst contemporary commentators and many secondary source reports stressed the radical and shocking nature of this departure from Chanel’s Modernist norm. It seemed to be a departure which was generally lamented and was often portrayed as heralding the end of the age of the conventional Chanel look. Much criticism of Lagerfeld’s early stages centred upon the confronting nature of this departure. Despite this, Lagerfeld’s designs managed to maintain a critical and fundamental design integrity that finally convinced his critics and converted his detractors. Consequently Lagerfeld and the late Chanel were seen as the meeting of two great talents. Lagerfeld’s first collection for the company was an outstanding success. One of the top executives for the House of Chanel spoke about this collection:

While keeping the overall classic lines of Chanel, Karl updated the traditional Chanel suits. He showed a certain lack of respect for the grand dame when he exposed the one thing she hated the most—the knee! And it was a smash!

Lagerfeld’s Postmodernist fashion designs have their origins in Chanel’s style and classic suit elements. Her design principles were of another era and at the opposite end of Lagerfeld’s employment of the extraneous and extravagant. Chanel’s personal vision and code owe much to the character of Modernism and its aesthetic concepts; her fashion style sprang forth, like Modernism itself, from a nineteenth century world changed by dramatic urbanisation and growing technological advances. These advances had their impact upon the role, status, aspirations and self defining attributes of the modern woman. Chanel capitalized upon these new trends: her individual hallmark was the elegantly simple suit which avoided anything extraneous. She also minimized sartorial decoration because it was generally associated with overt feminine sexuality; belonging more to the Belle Epoque period rather than Modernism. Her philosophy of style reflected the spirit of the age and was closely

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related to a strand in the Modernist aesthetic that emphasized minimal decoration and the emphasis of form, while abandoning non essential ornamentation as feminine and unnecessarily distracting, even disturbing.

During his first few years at the House of Chanel Lagerfeld added masses of fake pearls, gilt chains and cut glass stone combinations to his parodies of the famous iconic Chanel suit. He impersonated Chanel’s fifties style costume jewellery by stylistically exaggerating its proportions and added the interlocked Chanel trademark. Lagerfeld took this irreverent attitude a step further; he had fabrics and other items printed with decorative images of Chanel’s archetypal fashion pieces: jewellery, belts, quilted handbags, buttons, black hair bows and gardenias, along with the Chanel insignia were all now used in ways that Chanel herself could never have imagined. These fabrics were then constructed into items of clothing and accessories; anything from blouses to beach towels.269 This extension of what Chanel stood for came about not only because of Lagerfeld’s love of Baroque extravagance, but also as an intentional ploy to put Chanel back in the public eye and to place it at the top of the Paris fashion stage. The ever present Chanel insignia had the effect of making every outfit instantly recognisable. Lagerfeld’s success was immediate and quite remarkable: he targeted a younger clientele which eagerly bought the new products. Conspicuous consumerism was all the rage and Lagerfeld intuitively recognised the new designer brand conscious market of the eighties and the nineties. His models and clientele became ambulatory advertisements for Lagerfeld and the House of Chanel prospered once again. These Postmodernist like transformations are greatly removed from Chanel’s original poverty deluxe style and her adopted Modernist principle of less is more.270 Despite the shocks caused by such changes to an established Parisian icon, many commentators now view Lagerfeld as the man of the times, the man with his pulse attuned to a contemporary beat in a search for design ideas which continue traditional links yet invest them with new meaning.271

This stress upon essential new meaning is emphasized when one compares Lagerfeld’s aim with that of Chanel’s. With fashion designers such as Chanel the aim was to conform to ways of dressing in a predetermined Modernist sense; a sense that had a received meaning and context. Whereas with Lagerfeld the aim is to break free of such defining and received restrictions in a spirit that is Postmodernist in its perspective. Lagerfeld’s constantly changing fashion and never static designs represent an essential and restless freedom which has an attitude which is anti-establishment in tone. Lagerfeld is not a designer of fashion which is conservative and sensible and he enjoys designing fashion with a deliberate

269See a photograph of these beach outfits in Cerf de Dudzeele, Carlyne, March 1994, ‘Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel’, Vogue, USA, p. 323.
270Paul Poiret, the fashion designer of the early twentieth century did not like Chanel’s new style, he called it poverty deluxe. Chanel retorted by saying that ‘simplicity does not mean poverty.’ Guerra, Roberto and Ella Hershon, 1989, Chanel, Chanel. Writer and Editor: Richard Howorth. RM ARTS Munich and Channel 4.
tendency toward irreverence. Typically Lagerfeld is against dress for business as such; for instance, the *dress for success* clichéd clothing formulas are, for him, deadly to the creative spirit and represent a failure of fashion's higher responsibilities.

Under Lagerfeld's guidance the fashion designs for the *House of Chanel* have progressed to a point where their qualities and new harmonies are more relevant to an age of Postmodern aesthetics. His work, like that of some of his contemporaries, contains a *strangeness in the proportion* which typifies some of the visual characteristics of Postmodernist formal manipulation. Georgina O'Hara seems to agree on this point in her writing on Lagerfeld; an agreement hinted at in the following statement:

> From the mid-1970s Lagerfeld has been a major force on the fashion scene, a designer who is not only able to move with the times but to move the times.

The content and manipulated elements of Lagerfeld's fashion designs not only encompass deconstructed elements from Chanel's original style, but also focus upon styles and motifs drawn from a highly varied and rarefied assortment of historical clothing. This assortment is arranged in an ahistorical manner and a seeming disregard for chronological order and functional origin. For example, in collection after collection, Lagerfeld does not borrow wholly or solely from one historical period, but rather selects parts of historical components of modes of dress and combines them in deceptively simple and seemingly effortless refabrications. Characteristically, he manages to imbue his design work with a *tongue-in-cheek* flirtation that plays with and combines elements of past and present fashion styles. This has led to a large body of individualistically styled clothing items which are based upon newly developed elements of his fashion design and which often give the appearance of being ahead of his fashion design contemporaries.

Lagerfeld's oft expressed admiration for Goethe's words: 'to make a better future with enlarged elements of the past,' seem clearly defined in practical terms in Lagerfeld's various fashion collections for the *House of Chanel* particularly in the eighties and the early part of the nineties. In this sense Lagerfeld's admiration of aspects of the historical past is paraphrased in the words of Michael Boodro in his article *Art and Fashion: a Fine Romance*, when he suggests that designers and artists are closely linked and attracted to the same aesthetic philosophies.

Of course, in an industry noted for that sincerest form of flattery, the practise of knockoffs, as it's known in the business, it's not surprising that designers should turn to art for ideas. *But the art and fashion connection is more complex than mere thievery and inspiration because of the transitory nature of clothing styles*

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272 Such as the irreverent fashion designers John Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood.
and the speed with which fashion absorbs whatever is new... fashion often predicts a common mood or desire, a yearning for change, a nostalgia for a more glorious past, a need for a new and improved future.274 (my italicizing)

Lagerfeld designed many collections with several Postmodernist fundamental principles in mind: free floating signs, double-coding, eclecticism, ahistorical bricolage, simulation, fragmentation, pastiche, deconstruction and stylistic exaggeration all run through his creations. His designs and ideas may be characterised by an air of anti-seriousness and are broadly marked by a purposeful love of ironic and eclectic fragmentation: a fragmented and indicative note that is analogous of late Postmodernist aesthetics. His fashion designs are a reinstatement of aspects of past modes of dress either from history itself or the type of history glorified and re-presented in the discourse of our times. In this sense, in Lagerfeld’s mind, all past fashion styles and present design elements are given democratic and equal consideration in his design work. Jennifer Craik’s thoughts, in her text The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion, are relevant to this understanding of Lagerfeld’s use of Postmodernist concepts to transform the House of Chanel.

Fashion is described as ‘an early warning system of major cultural transformations’ and a parody of hyper modern culture (Kroker and Kroker 1987: 16). Fashion is a visual commentary on the excess of postmodern culture providing ‘aesthetic holograms’ that ‘introduce the appearance of radical novelty, while maintaining the reality of no substantial change’ ... fashion is seen to epitomise the ephemeral character of contemporary western societies - if not the modern malaise. Fashion has been especially attractive to postmodernists (eg. Kroker and Kroker, 1987; Faurschou, 1987; Wark, 1991) because its slipperiness-the ambivalence, polyvalence, semiotic smorgasbord and excess-fits into the world view of consumerism, pluralism and masquerade gone mad-the unfettered circulation of free-floating signs. The elements of fashion that leak out of dominant theories accord perfectly with a postmodern vision. (my italicizing) 275

Postmodernism is a concept that has a long and respectable pedigree in the twentieth century. The term itself refers to a set of concepts and characteristics that aim to go beyond national, cultural and generic boundaries; it describes art, attitudes and cultural artefacts that share certain non Modernist characteristics; characteristics which are by no means yet settled or universally agreed upon. Postmodernism, in essential terms, seems substantially based upon what the French philosopher François Lyotard has called an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’;276 that is, a distrust of larger meanings in history or coherent linear development in self or society. This has led to a number of characteristics and attributes whose incidence in the self or society may be seen as Postmodern. These general characteristics evolve from all or some of the following sets of oppositions: self-reference

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instead of representation, play instead of method, lack of seriousness instead of seriousness, fragmentation instead of unity, ahistoricism instead of historical/chronological accuracy, subjectivity instead of objectivity, present context instead of past aura and a preference for the popular instead of the profound. The aesthetic tensions implied in these linked oppositions have produced many new techniques, forms and hybrid activities. Lagerfeld’s best known designs and fashion ideas are often characterised by such elements, by an air of anti-seriousness and are marked by a purposeful and ironic love of eclectic fragmentation which takes his work into the realm of contemporary Postmodernist aesthetics.

Some of these radical aesthetic aspects of Postmodernism are best seen in specific examples. One example of Lagerfeld’s use of free-floating signs, an irreverent appropriation of associations and images, may be seen in one of his suits from the December 1992 collection. The bright red woollen jacket with its ostentatious eighties style gilt Chanel insignia buttons, is softly tailored like a classic Chanel jacket, but its colour is vibrant quite unlike the typical subtle use of colour in its antecedent (fig. 4.3). Lagerfeld has finished the neckline of this jacket by appropriating the style of a fifties’ tied collar and the pastiche of ahistorical style is further emphasised by the fitted black Bikers inspired leather pants and leather knee-high red leather lace-up boots, reminiscent of styles in use in the early seventies. Lagerfeld seems fond of these contradictory signifiers, as may be discerned from the feminine softness of the jacket here diametrically opposed with the associations of the masculine severity of the leather pants. The pseudo toughness associated with the emulation of the Bikers subculture seems totally out of place with the elitist Parisian couture jacket. Colour, is the unifying factor of this outfit; the red and black mix and the gilt buttons and boots’ eyelets seem to harmonise what is essentially a very discordant outfit. It is as though the outfit is opened out with associations that radiate out from the strange and unconventional combinations found in this outfit. By contrast Chanel’s original suit seems closed in, associationally confined and contained within its own strict Modernist code.

Lagerfeld’s soft knit suits (fig. 4.4) of 1994 also demonstrate the use of his pastiche design elements. Both the pink and black and black and white outfits display the famous contrast trim edges of Chanel’s classic suits. Many brass decorated buttons are used which display the trademark interlocked Cs. Unlike Chanel’s original suits however they do not appear to button a real pocket nor do they seem to be required to button up the tiny cardigans. The cardigans are here designed to remain unbuttoned and the buttons are placed not to button up but to announce an irreverent decorative purpose that would be anathema to Chanel. The skirt lengths in these two examples are micro-mini in size and hark back to the Swinging Sixties. The accompanying all-in-one thigh high Lycra boots with high heels are made in the style of a happy hooker which at the same time reflects the body conscious track suit gear of the gymnasium. This association with sportswear is further reinforced by the white double-

[Copyrighted material omitted]
[Copyrighted material omitted]
line design detail running through the side of the black boot in the example to the right. The low waisted quilted belts with their gilt chains and medallions link back to Chanel’s original use of these details and seem to parody Chanel’s classic hand bag (fig. 4.5) and its familiar 1950s chain belt. The suit on the right has a see-through chiffon section exposing the midriff; the round neck top of which ends a few centimetres below the bustline. This chiffon piece has the look of lingerie-underwear worn as outer wear as though to hint at the reversals that Lagerfeld is playing with in these outfits. The softness of the knitted fabrics is strangely juxtaposed with the hard-edge *femme fatale* associations of the style of the garments. Large black fur Cossack-like hats accessorise the outfits in ways that mimic the bold irreverence of the associations in the outfits themselves. The *free floating signs* which crowd these outfits are typical of Postmodernist assemblage and disregard for tradition; a tradition that is here stylistically associated with Chanel herself.

Another outfit which acts as a parody of the traditional *Chanel* suit with its tweedy fabrics is Lagerfeld’s 1992 outfit with jockey underpants (fig. 4.6). The outfit is absurd because Lagerfeld’s clientele would probably never wear the garments as presented in his show, but the idea is nonsensical and amusing. The model is sporting a send-up of the classical tweed of *Chanel*’s traditional look—this style is not elegant in its entirety but deliberately cheeky, rebellious and perhaps a little shocking too. Lagerfeld’s inspiration here may be directly linked to Elsa Schiaparelli’s clever and humorous puns. The wide contemporary acceptance of such sartorial jokes comes as a result of a new ‘visually sophisticated generation’ of women.278 The men’s white jockey underpants have a pom pom attached on the pubic hair section made of tweed yarns that match the jacket, bag and hat. The model’s underpants have the *Chanel* label sewn on the elastic waistband and underneath it is attached the *Chanel* insignia above a low, large gilt and black leather plaited chain belt with medallion. Once again, Lagerfeld has wittily simulated Schiaparelli’s sense of the jarring and amusing by using a replacement of pubic hair by a frayed tweed pom pom; a pom pom which is consciously and visually reflected in the frayed edges of the model’s tweed sun hat. The seemingly incongruous use of Chanel’s favourite tweed fabric, which its noted for its associations of winter warmth, for the model’s sun hat, is also indicative of the playfulness that is in operation in this outfit; as is the use of the same fabric for the shoulder bag. The tweed shoulder bag thus carries associations of a beach bag; associations heightened by the model’s sunglasses and sun hat which are perplexing and almost incompatible links with the normal associations of the jacket. If we return to the Lagerfeld’s use of the underpants in this outfit we notice that they are reminiscent of the way Jean Paul Gaultier made his international impact in 1990 with his famous girdle, bra and suspenders which were worn as outerwear over a suit by the pop star Madonna.

Lagerfeld’s designs for the *House of Chanel* also owe much to a *double-coding* effect in his use of elements from Chanel’s Modern style in combination with elements from other styles.

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or codes. The concept of double-coding originates from Charles Jencks’ analyses of architectural innovations during the seventies and eighties. The following points constitute some of the main attributes of this concept and its relationship to Postmodernism.

... Postmodernism ... demands a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honoured if we are to attend to history, apprehend change.

An example of this double-coding may be found in Lagerfeld’s 1991 outfit which combines Chanel’s Modernist 1920s code of simplicity in the shape of the little black dress, with the Surrealist 1930s code of object based displacement. The outfit Wool Tea Dress with Cup and Saucer Hat (fig. 4.7) is complemented by a hat which acts as an obvious borrowed parody of Meret Oppenheim’s famous Surrealist sculpture Fur Teacup. The effect produced by this same yet different juxtaposition is striking and attention grabbing and its effect is enhanced by Lagerfeld’s creative use of historical and aesthetic rupture. In an anonymous article, entitled The Designers Talk: Passion, Whimsy and Picassos, Lagerfeld perceptively reveals his same yet different approach:

Karl Lagerfeld feels that art should be taken only in moderation—at least as far as influences on designer’s fashions are concerned. ‘One should control that,’ he says, because ‘today we are much into paying homage, which is a polite form of copying called ‘inspiration’.’ He feels that ‘you have to keep a distance; get the feeling more than the detail. Art can influence fashion, as Cubism did Pop Art later. Older art is often more and inspiration of detail-as-ornament than of spirit. You can use the feeling of an artist, but you should not make your trademark out of it.

Another outfit which embodies the use of Jencks’ sense of double-coding is Lagerfeld’s suit from the Spring/Summer ready-to-wear collection of 1994. The suit is made up of a matching bra top, shorts, jacket, hat and shawl all made in classic Chanel tweed fabric in shades of yellow (fig. 2.10). Irony and illogicality are used in this outfit in ways that originate from the Ragga subculture’s mode of dress. The implied meaning of the outfit; a sexy number for the extroverted young female, is quite different from the traditional meaning and association of the original Chanel suit. Once again, the use of tweed fabric is implicated in a way that has double-coding associations; that of breaking away from the restraint of traditional tweed fabric to that of having time in the sun and taking a break away from normal restrictions. The hat too carries on these associations and its casual appearance and frayed edges echo the tailored hipster shorts which are frayed, denim like, at the hems.

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280 ibid., p. 48.
Fig. 4.7 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, *Wool Tea Dress with Cup and Saucer Hat*. Chanel Promotion, September 1991, *Vogue,* (English), Vol. 155, p. 230.
off-beat casual style push-up bra top, also with frayed hem, is glamorised with a large ornate broach reminiscent of Chanel’s 1950s gilt and faux gemstone jewellery which in a double-coding way signals its deluxe status and seems decidedly misplaced in what ostensibly is a casual outfit. This double-coding element of the outfit is continued in the large yellow plastic chain belt and plaited leather, with its dangling interlocked Cs telling us that the outfit is from the House of Chanel, but most definitely designed by Lagerfeld. Even the fact that the outfit of tweed, a traditional suiting fabric for the winter season, is used here in this skimpy outfit, in a cross purpose way that subverts its normal function, indicates Lagerfeld’s Postmodernist pleasure in the stylish breaking of fashion codes.

A further use of Postmodernist attributes may be found in Lagerfeld’s use of radical eclecticism and his witty combinations of ahiistorical elements.284 Lagerfeld often further develops and embellishes these attributes by changing the accepted proportions of these garments and has them produced in incongruous fabrics, not in line with previously accepted tastes. These incongruous combinations of fabrics may be seen in many ensembles. For example, his Leather and Lace Evening Dress of 1987 presents us with a one shouldered short black leather dress and a large frilled lace sleeve (fig. 4.8).285 The huge frilled lace sleeve emulates the shape of a matching long lace, almost Victorian, bustle. The completed outfit’s appeal is made up of a mix of radical eclecticism of ahiistorical elements. The almost fetishistic allure of the short leather dress and the fifties inspired high stiletto, pointed shoes are not quite Punk or Pervs in style, but contain hybridised elements at once belonging to those subculture groups.286 This pseudo punk element is also hinted at in the large leather cuff bracelet with the word Inés on it; an obvious reference to Inés de la Fressange, who was his muse and model during these years. The sleeve of the outfit is flamboyant and has the Hollywood star glamour look of the eighties; it is extravagant in size and deliberately conspicuous. The bustle, variant of the Victorian era of the 1870s, is reproduced in lace-like fabric that would never be used Victorian times. The outfit is completed with earrings made from large, dangling jewelled number 5s, an obvious reference to Chanel’s famous perfume dated from 1921. The strange combinations that make up outfits such as these are occasioned by Lagerfeld’s distanced position; an attitude that gave him a considerable edge upon his contemporaries. The fragmentation, eclecticism and mixture of ahiistorical elements evident in these works speaks of an ironic detachment hinted at in the following observation:

He was an outrageous classicist, with a wicked affinity for the absurd. A man who preferred the edge to the centre, he hung out with the avant-garde, while his contemporaries were already burdened with the weight of haute couture.287

Looked at in this way, Lagerfeld’s various haute couture collections for the House of Chanel are representations of a visual deconstruction of the canons of Chanel’s Modernism.

284Ibid., Rose gives an overview of the term and concept of ‘radical eclecticism’.
Fig. 4.8 Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, Leather and Lace Evening Dress, 1987.

[Copyrighted material omitted]
Certainly they form examples of fashion repeating itself, but in Lagerfeld’s case these are not mere repetitions but reinterpretations that incorporate the philosophy and feel of the times. Thus, Lagerfeld’s fashion is a constantly changing, renewing and metamorphosing artistic object which constantly changes into alternative states by responding to its environment. To call this aspect of Lagerfeld’s work a pastiche in the normal sense, is to do it a great disservice since Lagerfeld’s work is never deserving of the pejorative implications of that term. Lagerfeld’s fashion based use of historical pastiche is, it must be stressed, a Postmodernist use of the technique. His use of pastiche overcomes its pejorative implications by using ironic and whimsical detachment in ways that enable a newer and fresher viewing of the elements that go to make up the particular design. Normal pastiche is usually associated with poverty of imagination, yet in Lagerfeld’s case his Postmodernist use of pastiche, as seen in the above examples, singles out and highlights his imagination. It is as though his imagination radiates beyond the present, cannot be contained in material around him and relishes the frisson supplied by historical detail and Postmodernist manipulation. Martin and Koda make interesting observations that are pertinent in this regard when they discuss the place of art in recent fashion design and the role of what they call inspirational borrowings as opposed to plagiarism.

But the inspirational borrowings across art’s distant and recent generations is not plagiarism. An object or concept is transformed by its time travel. A work of contemporary art or design answers the charge of plagiarism with alterations in material and context. It asserts difference despite likeness. In clothing the garment is not replicated in the manner of copying but in assimilation. Elements are borrowed, but differentiation is supreme.288

Therefore, what we find in many of Lagerfeld’s fashion designs are variants of the original elements of Chanel’s Modernist style transformed into an eclectic mix of disparate fashion modes. Lagerfeld brought Chanel out of the middle aged bourgeoisie scene and opened it up to a younger clientele by using Postmodernist concepts of fashion design to ‘cross the gap between high and popular culture.’289 One distinct example of this development is his denim and tweed based collection of 1992 (fig. 4.9). In these examples, the models wear versions of Chanel’s pared down functional and Modernist jacket and cardigan. Teamed with these brightly coloured tweed and knit jackets are denim jackets with Chanel logo studs, trimmed with braid reminiscent of Chanel’s earlier styles. Here, once again, Postmodernist double-coding presents itself in the clash between the Modernist forms of the classic tweed jacket and cardigan and the ubiquitous blue denim jackets and skirts. Jeans and other denim products always signified classless and democratic sentiments, particularly in America. A view supported by the writer Charles A. Reich who made the following observations regarding blue denim jeans and associated apparel:

The new clothes (jeans) express profoundly democratic values. Their are no distinctions of wealth or status, no elitism; people confront one another shorn of these distinctions. 290

Denim, a sturdy fabric initially created for manual labour was later adopted by the masses as a uniform of universal classlessness. Lagerfeld changed the democratic code of denim and elevated it to the realm of deluxe fabrics by lining his denim jackets with expensive fabric and ornate gilt studs. The skirts are short with perfectly frayed three centimetre hems and traditional *Chanel* braid is sewn on the edges of the pockets and side seams. A further Postmodernist illusion of democratisation of the garment is added by the white *T*-shirt worn by the model on the right. Mid-calf biker styled boots and many pieces of chunky chain jewellery complete the outfit. The jewellery worn by the models were inspired by subculture groups like the *Punks, Bikers* and *B-boys* as seen in the combination large gilt chains and/or leather necklaces and belt. 291 The black boots echo everyday street wear as found in several subculture groups. The *retro* short skirts and bright red tights are reminiscent of the sixties. The overall look is fresh and young but overtly extravagant. Lagerfeld’s fashion designs created in this Postmodernist style intricately weave fragmented codes of dress in these denim and tweed ready-to-wear outfits. In Lagerfeld’s *Chanel* denim collection of 1992, his ready-to-wear suits are styled for a younger or young-at-heart clientele, but a wealthy clientele at that. In typical Postmodernist fashion the original significance of denim products as democratic and non elitist, loses its significance. The same can be said for what Lagerfeld did for the *Fendi* company when he elevated the status of inexpensive, common furs to new heights in Paris fashion chic. Lagerfeld has also used terry-towelling cloth, usually associated with sweat suits or dressing gowns, and given it the same status as more luxurious and traditional fabrics. This Postmodernist democratisation of the material has become a hallmark of his style in the last two decades. Lagerfeld has an engagingly honest approach in eclectically choosing fragments of past or present clothing and mixing them up in assemblages where no particular design element or material is more important than another. He seems in tune with the spirit of the words of Marcel Vertès, the fashion illustrator, from earlier this century:

We want clothes that speak of the future or tell us of the past, clothes that give us the chance to wear something we might have missed and clothes that reflect many mirrored messages. Fashion is the embodiment of all these things. 292

Lagerfeld has admitted to spending his first few years designing high fashion with the view that *Chanel*, and other fashion houses were past their prime. This acerbic view was no doubt brought on by a perceptive awareness of a new spirit that pervaded the world of fashion in the eighties and nineties. Lagerfeld found Postmodernism enticing. Its flamboyant character,

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disregard for convention and new techniques seemed to suit his disposition and he used it to propel his work well beyond his contemporaries. It provided a context for his artistic leanings and made use of his love of history in ways that resonate throughout his creations. The role of Postmodernism in the world of fashion is contentious, but its role in Lagerfeld’s world seems well established. A visual analysis of Lagerfeld’s creations shows his bold and timely adoption of Postmodernist techniques and attributes are remarkable and effective. There is little doubt that Lagerfeld’s Postmodernist fashion designs use Chanel’s style and classic suit elements as springboards (fig. 4.10). Yet, Chanel’s personal vision and code is quite different and owes much to the essential character of Modernism. Chanel’s fashion style sprang forth, like Modernism itself, from a nineteenth century world changed by dramatic urbanisation and growing technological advances. Lagerfeld’s fashion style sprang forth, like Postmodernism itself, from a twentieth century world changed by dramatic globalisation and growing electronic advances. The distinctions between their respective works, aims and artistic attitudes becomes clearer when we view it this way. It represents a move from restriction to freedom, from closed form to open form, from received meaning to contextual meaning and, of course, from Modernism to Postmodernism. In Lagerfeld’s case this is an applied Postmodernism, one unencumbered by academic theory but limited by technical considerations. This makes its applications in Lagerfeld all the more remarkable. His Postmodernist designs and ideas are characterised by an air of anti-seriousness and ironic detachment; one might say that Lagerfeld paid tribute to Chanel’s design aesthetics and later played tribute to them.
[Copyrighted material omitted]
Chapter Five: Conclusion.

This thesis has attempted to give a detailed and sustained insight into the creative output, aims, sources and artistic motivations of the German expatriate Paris based fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld (1938-). In fulfilling this broad aim, the investigation has tended to cross more traditional boundaries of thought and ideas in order to give an adequate coverage of an enigmatic and prolific personality. This more broad approach was considered necessary to give fuller credence to the scope of the various phenomena of the Lagerfeld empire. The research concerned itself not so much with the many products bearing the Lagerfeld label, but with the seminal and quintessential aspects that go to make up what may loosely be called the Lagerfeld style or look. Lagerfeld is generally considered to be one of the most talented and prolific fashion designers of the late twentieth century. Furthermore, the pleasures and satisfaction Lagerfeld admits to getting from producing collections and his perceptive use of a multitude of varied sources and inspirations, are crucial elements in the understanding of his creative process, methods and sources.

There is no doubt that Lagerfeld has made a remarkable contribution to the couture houses of Chanel, Chloé and Fendi as well as his own signature label. Lagerfeld’s work is drawn from a well spring of inspirations and sources comprised of elements from his life-long interest in art, art history and historical styles of fashion. Lagerfeld, in keeping with the spirit of Baudelaire’s injunction to use the past to confront the present, often incorporates elements from previous styles; however, this has always gone beyond historicism and formed a process of aesthetic re-evaluation which he has used to strengthen his conceptual advances. Lagerfeld’s development as an international fashion designer is continually linked by various fields of interest and influence and the creative impact of his designs is indebted to his personalised weaving of these disparate threads into a unique pattern distinctively his own.

Lagerfeld’s fashion design work has been influenced and inspired by several inter-connected sources; all of which have moderated the production of his original designs and shaped the direction of his artistic output. My research has attempted to give a fuller and more reasoned examination of Lagerfeld’s creative methods, sources and significance; not only because his work fully warrants investigation but also because the art of fashion is often in danger of being misunderstood because of its commercial aspects.

The more creative aspects and conceptual origins of Lagerfeld’s work do not form the basis of any currently available investigation and my research has attempted to place Lagerfeld’s artistic work within an analytical context that highlights his creative importance and uniqueness; in this sense the present research is an advance on current scholarship and published works. Most current books on aspects of the fashion industry, excepting those of
Roland Barthes, Harold Koda, Richard Martin, Colin McDowell and Valerie Steele, give little credence to the creative ambitions of their respective subjects and tend to emphasize historical progression, society, success, glamour and wealth; aspects that Lagerfeld has always seemed little concerned with. Important and interesting as these factors are, the lack of detailed artistic and scholarly evaluation has severely restricted the wider appreciation of Lagerfeld’s ambition, stylistic evolution and unique vision. It has also, in general, prevented the fuller appreciation of Lagerfeld’s fashion based artistic program and its links with theories of contemporary artistic practice.

The disappointing lack of access to substantial primary sources and the considerable difficulty of getting any detailed information from the Lagerfeld corporation have also been considerable hurdles in developing the form and content of the present research. Nevertheless, my investigations have shown that there is little doubt that Lagerfeld’s artistic and historical interests were instrumental in forming and propelling the particular ambit of his later mature work and international reputation. This, combined with the formative time of his early training and later work experience with fashion houses in Paris, had profound effects and provided a solid base for the creative work on his own signature label and for the House of Chanel, Chloé and the Fendi firm.

Lagerfeld’s products and designs for the four varied labels, Karl Lagerfeld, the House of Chanel, Chloé and the Fendi firm, have reflected the complexities and adaptable nature of his character. It is worth restressing that his early creations were instrumental in resurrecting the ailing House of Chanel by redeveloping its signature clothing designs into contemporary versions that were more appropriate for a newly emerged and younger clientele; his subsequent success was immediate and remarkable. Conspicuous consumerism became popular and Lagerfeld intuitively took notice of the designer brand conscious market of the eighties and the nineties together with its visually literate and culturally astute new audience. Models and clientele alike soon became ambulatory advertisements for Lagerfeld and the House of Chanel. This form of conspicuous consumption and Lagerfeld’s Postmodernist transformations are greatly removed from Chanel’s deluxe poverty style and the generally adopted Modernist principle of less is more. This stylistic progression seems to have been fuelled by Lagerfeld’s developed ability to systematically cross the boundaries of Modernist ideals, once so powerful and authoritative, and express his Postmodernist, iconoclastic and deconstructionist preferences.

Essentially Lagerfeld is the foremost exponent of a particular style and content of French haute couture fashion design; broadly, it is a style characterised by its cross disciplinary and artistic connections. Certainly in the history of fashion it not uncommon for art and past modes of dress to act as sources or models of inspiration. Vivienne Westwood and a younger generation of designers, such as John Galliano for the House of Dior, Alexander McQueen
for the House of Givenchy and Jean Paul Gaultier for his signature company are currently exploiting the same approach in Paris. Writers in art journals and fashion and lifestyle magazines have often drawn comparisons between existing works of art, or present trends in art, and styles in fashion design, especially those associated with haute couture in Paris. Notwithstanding this, it must be stressed that Lagerfeld’s consistent use of historical precedent, artistic style and aesthetic form is more solidly researched, scholarly and sustained than any other fashion designer in Paris today. Lagerfeld’s personal and eclectic foraging of the past gives his work a peculiar and distinctive sensibility; a sensibility which is both nuanced by the past and enhanced by the present.

Another significant and influential source for Lagerfeld’s fashion work centres upon his relationships with special friends such as the Milanese ex-fashion editor Anna Piaggi. Piaggi has acted as Lagerfeld’s muse-like stylistical icon and aesthetic model for many collections. Her personal collection of historical clothing was an aesthetic touchstone for Lagerfeld; a factor that underlines his own awareness of past modes and traditions. This historicising method of acquiring fresh inspiration was instrumental in producing his most creative work in the various collections for the House of Chanel. The acuity of historical vision that is characterised in these varied collections is complemented by an unprejudiced awareness of contemporary sources of visual inspiration such as those found in popular films, music stars and subculture groups.

Lagerfeld’s contributions and original fashion designs, generated as they are by several interrelated factors, form a compendium of fashion based insights into Post War French aesthetic development; a development that moves from traditional fashion forms to forms more associated with the tenor of contemporary times. In other words, when analysed stylistically, historically and artistically Lagerfeld’s mature works describe a broad trajectory from Surrealism to Postmodernism. This is done in ways that reveal Lagerfeld’s perceptive use of historical antecedents, his adoption of new techniques, his artistic background and his love of art and design together with the influence of artists and selected fashion designers from Magritte to Dalf and Schiaparelli to Fath.

The garments produced during this period owe something to the pioneering work and artistic precedence of Schiaparelli, who aimed to add a tradition breaking dimension and shocking elements to haute couture garments; elements which both shocked and delighted the European public. The constant collaborations of artists, especially those of Dalf and Schiaparelli, provided Lagerfeld with sources of psychologically exciting and intriguing visual motifs and styles set apart from the traditional and formal fundamentals of haute couture design which pervaded much of twentieth century fashion in Paris. Like Schiaparelli, Lagerfeld’s clothes speak of wider artistic pursuits; pursuits which go beyond the constraining limits of economic considerations. This category of art clothes, which lay
beyond conventional expectations, tended to rest its position upon the Surrealist art movement’s belief in the beauty of inner association and surprise; that is, of external beauty lying in the subconscious expression of an inner reality; it is this that is the fundamental source of the visual impact of Lagerfeld’s creations.

Another important source of inspiration for Lagerfeld’s Surrealist couture is to be found in André Breton’s theory of convulsive beauty and its three component parts: veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive and magic-circumstantial. Lagerfeld used his knowledge of Surrealism to infuse his fashion designs with its powerful philosophical connotations and aesthetic characteristics. His designs often transcend the normality of garment making and converge into the realm of the marvellous, where an inner psychological reality plays the main defining role and determines viewers’ sensations. Lagerfeld’s fashion designs for the Houses of Chanel and Chloé reveal a perceptive understanding and use of concepts and elements which originate from André Breton’s theory of convulsive beauty. Throughout the last two decades Lagerfeld has demonstrated his awareness of the aesthetic characteristics embedded in Surrealist philosophy and artistic thought. In true Surrealist form, he has created several highly individualised fashion designs and his ensembles and accessories have often turned the mundane into the marvellous. Lagerfeld has succeeded in consistently creating garments which are imbued with components that are irreverent, irrational and whimsical. Lagerfeld’s Surrealist oeuvre consists of garments which are forceful in their shock value; a value that owes much to his tapping of Surrealist principles and aesthetics. Lagerfeld’s creations of the time take part in a drama of psychological discourse; a discourse between the real and the imagined. When Lagerfeld’s output is considered in this way, there is little doubt that by the 1950s, Lagerfeld was aware of Surrealism’s long and active tradition of aesthetic manipulation and that his work owed much to this established artistic legacy. So much so, that it is possible to conclude that Lagerfeld’s use of provocative images and juxtapositions would have been impossible without the precedence, influence and conceptual underpinning of Surrealism.

Lagerfeld’s conscious or semi-conscious recognition and assimilation of Breton’s Surrealist aesthetic principles enabled him to gain inspiration to create his own poetic vision; a vision expressed through the language and forms of fashion design. In essential Surrealist terms, Lagerfeld’s garments are metamorphosed from chic ensembles into objects imbued with elements of the marvellous; a concept which seems to underpin Lagerfeld’s work and which, when applied in the field of fashion, gave rise to designs which reacted to the static reality of conventional design as well as countering the humdrum reality and everyday sameness that Lagerfeld saw as endemic in the fashion industry. Lagerfeld’s designs for various companies, therefore, may be viewed as being actively committed to the liberating freedom of art and creative pursuits. This generalised and understated aim seems to be at the base of
Lagerfeld’s artistic personality. This is always achieved in ways that are surprisingly in tune with the sentiment of Breton’s original pronouncements in the 1920s and 1930s.

Additionally, many of Lagerfeld’s later works owe much to a framework that can only be described as Postmodernist in tone. Substantial parts of his many and varied fashion designs consist of assemblage, hybridisation, ahistorical bricolage, fragmentation, deconstruction and eclecticism; all of which are elements that form unique links with the Postmodernist theory and practice of architecture, art and literature during the latter part of the twentieth century. Lagerfeld’s creations, like those of some of his contemporaries, may also be seen to contain a strangeness in the proportion and often carry associations which have disturbing qualities because of their Postmodernist double-coding. What we see in works which embody this form of double-coding are complex plays with association which are ahistorical, ironic and stylistically detached with clashing sensations which give a glimpse of the sort of creative pastiche that characterises much Postmodern artistic experimentation. Much of Lagerfeld’s later fashion design consists of this Postmodernist assemblage and a hybridised ahistorical bricolage, which give his work a peculiar artistic relevance that underlies his prominent status in contemporary fashion design.

In Lagerfeld’s work the content and manipulated elements of these designs focus upon styles and motifs which are drawn from a highly varied and rarefied assortment of historical clothing; this assortment is arranged in an ahistorical manner and with a seeming disregard for chronological order and functional origin. Characteristically, Lagerfeld manages to imbue his design work with a tongue-in-cheek flirtation that plays with and combines elements of past and present fashion styles. This has led to a large body of individualistically styled clothing items which are based upon newly developed elements of his fashion design and often give the appearance of being ahead of his fashion design contemporaries. Looked at in a Postmodernist way, the subsequent evolution and international appeal of many of Lagerfeld’s original fashion designs are substantially based upon the sensitive use of such strategies. When one considers the foregoing one may see why Lagerfeld is generally considered to be one of the most important fashion designers of the late twentieth century.

This high estimation is generally shared by contemporaries, critics, curators and collectors and Lagerfeld’s work for the companies of Chanel, Chloé, Fendi and his own signature label is testimony to his prodigious energy and output. This output has often been supported by interests outside the immediate fashion design area, such as his work in fashion photography, photographic exhibitions and publications. He has been an art director of several documentary films and been involved in extensive renovation and decoration of his own properties and a large hotel in Germany. He also collects art, art objects and furniture, especially of the eighteenth century; all of which enhances his fashion work and reputation as a connoisseur of the fine arts.
All of the above points; personal energy, pleasure in production, early training and experience, knowledge of historical antecedents, intuitive marketing, progress beyond Modernism, adoption of Postmodernism, contemporary relevance, insightful friends, understanding of art history, artistic pursuits and his understanding of Surrealist principles, form much of the structural framework of Lagerfeld’s uniquely individual and original style.

Viewed in total Lagerfeld’s successful resuscitation of the House of Chanel has consistently demonstrated a liberating abandonment of the traditional Modernist style; a style which once placed emphasis upon visual simplicity and unification of form and compositional elements. The development of Lagerfeld’s contemporary fashion design work has managed to transform Gabrielle Coco Chanel’s work from historical Modernist clothing items to ahistorical Postmodernist clothing items. It is this stylistic evolution of form and function in fashion that is one of Lagerfeld’s most notable and under recognised achievements.
1938.
Karl Otto Lagerfeld was born in Hamburg, Germany.

1954.
Lagerfeld, at age 15, wins first prize for the best coat section in the International Wool Secretariat’s (Concours du Secrétariat International de la Laine) fashion design competition. He began his career working as an assistant to Pierre Balmain as a result of winning this section of the competition. Balmain put Lagerfeld’s winning coat into commercial production.

1959.
Lagerfeld leaves the House of Balmain and accepts the position of Artistic Director at the House of Patou; he continues to work there until 1963.

1963.
Lagerfeld begins to work as a freelance designer for various companies including the House of Fendi in Rome. Lagerfeld also begins to design ready-to-wear collections and accessories for the Chloé company.

1970.
The Chloé company renegotiates Lagerfeld’s existing contract and makes him its sole designer.

1971.
Gabrielle Coco Chanel dies on the 10th of January, aged eighty-seven.

1974.
From 1974 onwards Parfums Lagerfeld introduce, in succession, the following perfume scents: Chloé, Lagerfeld, KL Femme, KL Homme and Photo.

1977.
Lagerfeld writes and directs the film Views and Interviews.

1980.
Lagerfeld is honoured by being presented with the prestigious Neiman-Marcus Award for having rendered distinguished service in the field of fashion.

1983.
Lagerfeld resigns from the Chloé company after eighteen years and becomes Design Director in Charge of Collections (Direction Artistique de la Haute-Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter et des Accessoires) at the House of Chanel. Lagerfeld designs six collections per year for Chanel. The Chanel company relaunches the perfumes which were originally introduced in the following years: No. 22 (1922), Gardenia (1925) and Bois des Iles (1926); initially these three perfumes were only available from 31, rue Cambon. A second Chanel boutique is opened at 42, avenue Montaigne in Paris.

1984.
Lagerfeld opens his first ready-to-wear fashion house carrying his own name: Karl Lagerfeld. He showed his garments with Paris ready-to-wear collections and sold in London exclusively through Lady Rendlesham in Bond street. The perfume Coco is launched by the House of Chanel.

1986.
Chanel received the Dé d’Or award for Lagerfeld’s 1986 Autumn/Winter Haute couture Collection. World wide launch of the fragrance No. 5 eau de parfum, Carole Bouquet promoted the fragrance in all the advertisements.
1987.
The House of Chanel began their publicity campaign Le Temps Chanel which launched the watch Première; their first watch boutique opens in avenue Montaigne, Paris. Lagerfeld is Artistic Adviser on the three part series The Story of Fashion.

Lagerfeld and the House of Chanel received the Special Award for International Fashion given by the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

1989.
Large scale Chanel exhibition is held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Marseilles for their opening of their Fashion and Costume area.

1990.
The House of Chanel launches the eau de toilette Egoïste for men, the watch Mademoiselle and opens a jewellery and watch boutique in place Vendôme in Paris. Lagerfeld publishes his book Karl Lagerfeld: Photographer.

Lagerfeld illustrates the children’s book The Emperor’s New Clothes by Hans Christian Andersen.

1993.
After an absence of ten years Lagerfeld accepted the offer to once again design for the Chloé company. The House of Chanel launches the eau de toilette Egoïste Platinum for men, and Chanel jewellery. Lagerfeld is the third winner of the Lucky Strike Designer Award for his mastery of design management.

1994.
The House of Chanel launches the Matellassée watch and The Corps Actif range. Lagerfeld has another book of his photographs published: Off the Record by the Scalo publishing house in Zürich.

1995.
The House of Chanel launches the new make-up line: Les Editions Ephémères.

1996.
The House of Chanel launches the perfume Allure and honours the memory of Gabrielle Coco Chanel by showing its haute couture Spring/Summer Collection at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. Lagerfeld has a photographic exhibition at the Galerie Gmurzynska in September, 1996. A catalogue entitled Visionen is published by Steidl Verlag, Göttingen.

1997.
Lagerfeld resigns from the Chloé company for the second time.
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