

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Lagerfeld's ultimate accolade: epitome of culture, creativity and refinement

February 20, 2019



Karl Lagerfeld. Image credit: LVMH

By SARAH JONES

Prolific designer Karl Lagerfeld leaves behind a legacy that helped shape fashion houses Chanel, Chloé and Fendi, as well as the luxury business at large. Whimsy, creativity, pizzazz: those were his hallmarks in everything he did.

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Mr. Lagerfeld held the simultaneous roles of creator and fashion personality, becoming a household name to those beyond the industry thanks to his signature look and sometimes outspoken nature. From reviving Chanel to blockbuster brand status to modernizing fur at Fendi, Mr. Lagerfeld was a rare talent in his ability to steer multiple houses in different directions at the same time.

"Not only was he able to steward and curate and energize the Chanel brand, but at the same time he was able to build his own brand separate and distinct from Chanel, which is a very tricky, balancing act to do," said Allen Adamson, cofounder of marketing firm [Metaforce](#) and adjunct professor at NYU Stern School of Business, New York

"Because of the fact that he was so iconic and different, how he looked, how he carried himself, he was able to both imbue the Chanel brand with the edgy designs that he created but also maintain a distinctive, unique brand of his own," he said.

Fashion royalty

Mr. Lagerfeld passed away Feb. 19 in Paris at the age of 85. He died of pancreatic cancer.

The designer had missed the two Chanel haute couture shows last month, something he rarely did. But speculation did not extend to the seriousness or nature of his illness, attributing his absence to being a bit tired from a lifetime of movement in the worlds of luxury and fashion ([see story](#)).

Born in 1933 in Hamburg, Germany, Mr. Lagerfeld caught the fashion bug and moved to Paris to begin his career in 1952. He started as an assistant to Pierre Balmain, and would later become the art director for Jean Patou.

Early on, he also worked at Chloé, a house he would return to as creative director in the 1970s and 1990s.

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Karl brought a vision of femininity to Chloé that remains ever-present in our hearts today. We are forever grateful for his 25 years with the Maison. From his softly feminine, slightly irreverent designs, to his strong visual instinct, he has inspired every designer at Chloé. He will be remembered with enduring affection.

A post shared by Chloé (@chloe) on Feb 19, 2019 at 7:11am...

Instagram post from Chloé

“Karl was a man of immense culture, creativity and refinement, marked by a vast and eclectic array of interests,” said Johann Rupert, chairman of Chloé’s parent company, Richemont, in a statement. “He was incredibly successful in reinterpreting a maison DNA, year after year. As such, he was and will remain an inspiration to many.”

In 1965, Mr. Lagerfeld joined Fendi, starting a relationship that would last for more than a half-century. He was responsible for Fendi’s iconic double F logo, which he sketched to represent “fun fur,” which has been used on everything from the Baguette handbag to apparel.



Fendi's FF Capsule collection put its iconic logo center stage. Image credit: Fendi

"With the passing of Karl Lagerfeld we have lost a creative genius who helped to make Paris the fashion capital of the world and Fendi one of the most innovative Italian houses," said Bernard Arnault, chairman/CEO of Fendi

parent LVMH, in a statement. "We owe him a great deal: his taste and talent were the most exceptional I have ever known."

In 1983, Mr. Lagerfeld joined Chanel and helped to catapult the label into a powerhouse brand. He was the first to take over the fashion collections following house founder Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel's death in 1971, when many were convinced the label was dying out.

"His impact and his legacy was the tremendous revival and success of Chanel as a luxury brand," said Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of the [Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology](#), New York.

"When Chanel had died in 1971, the brand had already become kind of démodé," she said. "Chanel was an old woman, she wasn't really in touch with the fashions of the modern post-war era.

"And so when Lagerfeld took over in '83, he performed radical surgery on this sort of moribund fashion house and brought it back to life completely and made it really hip. So instead of having a sort of conservative, older clientele, he made it appealing to a number of highly young and fashionable women as well."

As of 2017, the brand is worth almost \$10 billion ([see story](#)).

"Thanks to his creative genius, generosity and exceptional intuition, Karl Lagerfeld was ahead of his time, which widely contributed to the house of Chanel's success throughout the world," said Alain Wertheimer, CEO of Chanel, in a statement. "Today, not only have I lost a friend, but we have all lost an extraordinary creative mind to whom I gave carte blanche in the early 1980s to reinvent the brand."

While keeping house codes such as the little black dress and tweed in mind, Mr. Lagerfeld took Chanel in a more modern direction, allowing the label to appeal to a new consumer base.

"My job is not to do what [Coco Chanel] did, but what she would have done," Mr. Lagerfeld said about working at Chanel. "The good thing about Chanel is it is an idea you can adapt to many things."

Beyond fashion design, Mr. Lagerfeld had a hand in building the image of both Chanel and Fendi. This included staging elaborate runway shows, which over the years have included sets such as a rocket launchpad, a branded supermarket and a clear runway overtop the Trevi Fountain.

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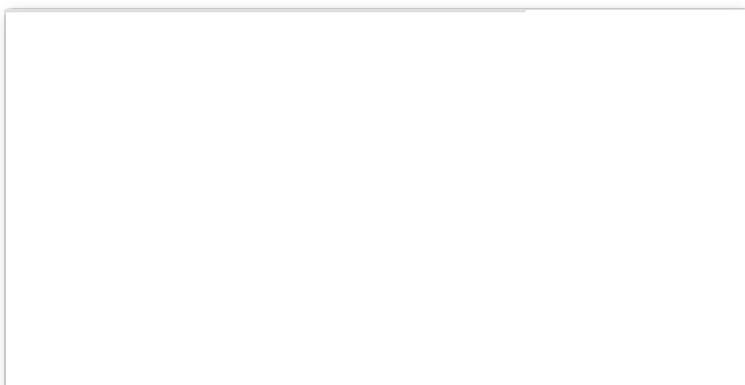
Chanel's runway shows under Karl Lagerfeld featured transportive sets

A photographer, Mr. Lagerfeld took the creation of advertising campaigns into his own hands as well, working behind the camera to produce stills and films. The designer was also instrumental in picking campaign faces, choosing in recent years to collaborate with new generations of talent such as Kristen Stewart, Kaia Gerber and Pharrell Williams.

The designer branched into short films for Chanel, directing mini features delving into the brand's history. The short films ran into the millions of dollars to produce, weaving masterful narratives that kept the viewer engaged and enthralled.

In addition to his work for Fendi and Chanel, Mr. Lagerfeld launched an eponymous fashion label in 1984.

Along with designs that straddled classy and edgy inspirations, the Karl Lagerfeld brand often leaned on its founder's iconic visage as well as the celebrity of his almost equally famous cat, Choupette, who has 151,000 Instagram followers. This included merchandise emblazoned with the cartoon likeness of the ponytailed designer and his furry friend.



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It's finally here... The men's collection is now available on KARL.com! Discover all of the pieces by clicking the link in the bio. #KARLLAGERFELD

A post shared by KARL LAGERFELD (@karllagerfeld) on Feb 23...

Instagram post from Karl Lagerfeld

The Karl Lagerfeld brand enabled the designer a way to reach fans at a more accessible price point. It also took a more playful spin on personal branding, with marketing efforts that leaned on themed emojis bearing the creative director's likeness or his trademark leather gloves.

Mr. Lagerfeld's iconic look and celebrity designer status has also led to other product launches, such as Fendi's Karlito fur bag charm ([see story](#)) and a stuffed animal version of Choupette ([see story](#)).

"To me, he understood the basics of how to build a brand," Metaforce's Mr. Adamson said. "Who you are is a brand, how you dress, how you behave.

"He created a signature look and delivered on it, day in and day out," he said.

Legacy lives on

Chanel swiftly announced yesterday that Mr. Lagerfeld's longtime collaborator, Virginie Viard, will take up the creative reins of the house. Ms. Viard, who worked with Mr. Lagerfeld for 30 years, has been appointed creative director to oversee Chanel's collections.

"Luxury houses are traditionally family owned and, in many cases, are founded by creative talents who become the soul of a brand, infusing it with their own persona and style, which are enduring and hard to replace," said Qing Wang, professor of marketing and innovation at Warwick Business School, in a statement. "This is a particular problem for Chanel due to Karl Lagerfeld's work ethic and longevity as the creative designer for decades.

"His passing comes in a critical time for Chanel as luxury brands are at a crossroad, facing challenges ranging from engaging the millennial generation to fending off newcomers from industries outside the sector such as sportswear brands like Nike and technology brands like Apple," she said. "It is hard to know what route Chanel will take in [the] post-Lagerfeld era, and whether the DNA of Chanel will stay intact, but one thing is certain, the continuity and consistency provided by him is now over."

Mr. Lagerfeld had an even longer tenure at Fendi, having joined the house in 1965. As of press time, no successor has yet been named.

As for Mr. Lagerfeld's own line, time will tell whether it can outlive its founder.

"It's a little bit difficult to see whether anybody would want to put the money into trying to keep the Lagerfeld brand going, because it was so associated with him personally, his personal iconic look," FIT's Ms. Steele said.

"But you never know," she said. "He proved that there was a lot of capital latent in famous brand names, so it's possible that the same could be said for his own brand name."

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