

Amanda for all seasons

Amanda Harlech has been bewitching people all her life. She was a siren at Oxford, the bride of an aristocrat, and muse to Galliano before meeting her match in Karl Lagerfeld. For 12 years she's been adding British flair to his vision, never more pertinently than with Chanel's Paris-Londres line. She casts her spell on **Tim Blanks**

You've never seen me like this,' Amanda Harlech announces as I zero in on her at Tea Palace in Notting Hill. Certainly I'm not used to seeing her in jeans, boots and a bobble hat, sipping on nettle tea (good for a sluggish liver, apparently). We're usually backstage in Paris or Milan and she's perfectly poised in something wonderful as the very incarnation of whatever collection Karl Lagerfeld, the designer who had the foresight to hire her as his right arm 12 years ago, has attached himself to. She's at his side when he shows his collections for Fendi and the ones that carry his own name, but the Lagerfeld enterprise she is most associated with is Chanel.

Amanda is actually Lady Harlech, the title a holdover from her 12-year marriage to Francis Ormsby Gore, the 6th Baron Harlech, which ended in the late Nineties, after producing two children, Jasset, 21, and Tallulah, 20. She found her married name a more pleasing proposition than the surname she was born with 47 years ago, Grieve. 'Like the verb, not the footballer,' she says. Harlech's role in Lagerfeld's life and work is nebulous but clearly vital. Muse? No, too obvious. In some ways she is more of a magician's apprentice and, today at least, spokesmodel. We're in Tea Palace to talk about this year's edition of the Métiers d'Arts, the satellite collection that is presented annually to

celebrate the craft of the artisanal studios that Chanel acquired in 2001. The venue for the presentation changes each year. In 2006 the Métiers d'Arts was shown in Monaco. Last December it was London's turn, with Chanel mounting Paris-Londres, a full-scale fashion spectacular at auction house Phillips de Pury's new space in Victoria.

Chanel's action saved a handful of fashion's most endangered species. They're worth listing, if only because they represent the apex of craftsmanship: Desrues (costume jewellery); Lemarie (feathers); Lesage (embroidery); Massaro (boots); Michel (hats); Goossens (silversmith) and Guillet (silk flowers).

According to Harlech, this collection is one of Lagerfeld's favourites out of the many he designs each year. 'A lot of the initiative for the acquisition of the ateliers came from Karl and he is so proud of that,' she says. 'It's totally an act of philanthropy, but rather than an act that ends, it's self-regenerating. You notice more and more young people are working at Lesage or with the jewelers or even at Massaro. It's no longer a dusty garret with some old guy in bifocals. There are kids

there, too.' Amanda warms to her subject. 'For so long, we've heard about tired, rickety little ateliers reaching the end of the road, unable to stand up to the laser-cutting techniques of the future, but I think they are standing up, because you can't beat that heritage, and that's why Paris still retains the crown of being the fashion centre of the world. You go to Paris for the skill, the depth of discipline, the excellence and the... more than craftsmanship, there's something exquisite about it, it almost goes beyond craft. Then you have London for that infinite variety of self-presentation and the challenging energy.'

Which makes Chanel's Paris-Londres Col-

lection the consummate fashion marriage, with Karl as the minister and Amanda as maid of honour. 'But who's the bride and groom?' she wonders. Could it be Amy Winehouse, whose already iconic look inspired the towering hair and heavy make-up for last December's extravaganza (and would that - shudder - make Pete Doherty the other half?). At least we know the reception is at Dover Street Market, where, in a departure for Chanel, the collection is on sale in an exclusive →

