or some reason, I always end up seeing Jean-Paul Goude at the same restaurant in Paris. La Méditerranée, on Place de l’Odeon, opened in 1942 and is a glimpse into a fast-receding world of wit, sophistication, and charm. Jean Cocteau designed the plates; Christian Bérard, the painter and fashion illustrator, created the whimsical murals; if you blur your eyes, you can almost see Orson Welles or Ava Gardner across the room. It’s about timeless chic. Kind of like Jean-Paul. I don’t have to blur my eyes to see him as the same guy I met in the ’70s, when he was an art director at Esquire.

He still dresses in the same mode: the white bucks (with lift), the gray T-shirt (probably with subtle shoulder padding), the bespoke cropped pants (undoubtedly designed to achieve some optical illusion, like the curved lines Iktinos and Kallikrates designed into the Parthenon). Gone is the baseball cap he wore in the late ’90s. Jean-Paul’s hair now looks the same as when we met: same style and volume, pretty much the same color. (Don’t ask.) The only variable one expects from him is the smart tailored jacket. Tonight it’s a heather-green tweed that’s an exact match with his eyes.

An haute couture fantasy. Linda Evangelista plays Karl Lagerfeld’s blushing bride while Bazaar’s creative director, Stephen Gan, tosses confetti and the photographer himself, Jean-Paul Goude, sweeps up the mess, December 2003.
I was in my 20s when I met him. Jean-Paul wasn't much older, but he was an eminence. I had been editor of Interview, but he was the greatest magazine artist in the world. Hand plucked from Paris in 1968 by Harold Hayes, the legendary editor of Esquire, Jean-Paul (along with George Lois) provided the visual wit that accompanied the new journalism's elite—Wolfe, Talese, Mailer, Vidal. Jean-Paul started off as an absolutely ace illustrator, a stylists, impeccable draftsman. Then he developed a new way of combining his skills as a painter and collageist with the realism of photography. By cutting up photographs and painting them, he essentially invented what Photoshop does about 20 years before Photoshop was introduced (1990). He produced painted photos illustrations like What if Nixon were black? What if Helen Curley Brown were a man?, and Mao swimming in the Yangtze with a rubber ducky. And he created hilarious stories like "The French Correction," which gave away his secrets for trompe l’oeil self-improvement, using visual tricks to enhance one’s image.

I sort of idolized Jean-Paul, but he was too cool to notice. As a "Warhol acolyte," I didn’t buy into the supremacy of the fine-art world. To me, Jean-Paul was one of the greatest artists because he had the guts to do what he wanted and wear what he wanted. He lived in a penthouse in Union Square in Paris, where his beloved mother lived, and he became the world’s greatest TV-commercial artist. His commercials, for Chanel, Kodak, Perrier, and others, with their inimitable, stylized wit, were in a league of their own. For Chanel’s men’s fragrance Égoïste, Goude brought a famous Ormond Gigli photo to life, with 32 evening-gowned models slamming balcony doors on a five-story Riviera palazzo, angrily shouting in unison, “Égoïste!”

His ultimate client turned out to be his country itself. When it was time for France to celebrate its bicentennial, the nation (via François Mitterrand) turned to him to create the parade to end all parades, on Bastille Day, July 14, 1989. More than 8,000 performers, musicians, drummers, and dancers, along with a million and a half in attendance, made for an incredible marching revue representing the cultural diversity of France, its former colonies, and its allies. There never has been, nor will there ever be again, such an event. Jean-Paul chuckles that that dream of French cultural diversity has also vanished like a dream.

Anyway, here we are, two veteran bougeois and I find that’s psychoanalyzing the idea of the French correction, giving it a kind of Freudian psychosexual motivation.

JEAN-PAUL GOUDE: The show is called “Goudemalion.” In ’87, I had a show in Manseille, and I wanted some things written for it, and Azzedine Alaïa suggested a friend of his who is a philosopher, Edgar Morin. He said okay, we met, we talked, and he wrote this thing that sort of went, “Jean-Paul Goude, typical New York-type artist, is interesting, though it is mistaken about himself. He thinks he is a Pygmalion. Pygmalion the story is about an artist who falls in love with a statue, and he loves the statue so much, it becomes a real woman. Goudemalion is a man who falls in love with real women, and he wants to transform them into statues, so he’s got a problem.”

I never considered myself Pygmalion. Journalists, people see me like that, and maybe I am that in essence, but I’ve never really thought about it.

GLENN O’BRIEN: I think that’s psychoanalyzing the idea of the French correction, giving it a kind of Freudian psychosexual motivation.

GO: Exactly. The French people see me as a cute little jumping leprechaun. Or that’s how they saw me at the height of my glory. It’s not me, but I welcome it. It’s a sort of parallel character built around me. This show is his show, and that permits me to speak of myself in the third person and not come off like some Barthólic maniaxia. This is Goudemalion and talking about his upcoming retrospective, which opens in November at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the Louvre. Knowing how discreet, elusive, modest, and even humble he is, I was surprised he would consent to something entailing such publicity. He says that at first he didn’t want to do it, didn’t want a show all about him, but then he found the huge locomotive that he had built for the bicentennial parade, the one that rolled up the Champs-Elysées without tracks, and knew that he had something big that he could base a show around.

But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Self-adulation, the way celebrities talk about themselves in the third person, is anathema to Jean-Paul’s style, so he had to come up with a justifying theology. And it came from a philosopher.

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Goude’s story charming. He was born under the shadow of this great big fake rock that represented to him all the wild countries he dreamed about, that he read about in comic books. That artificial territory nurtured his sensibility, and his character developed through meeting different women—first his mother, then his girlfriend, the daughter of the con- cierge—and it’s amusing how he takes care of his muses. Unlike a homosexual designer, he designs them for himself. It’s more like fetishism. He remakes the girls for sexual reasons. The images are really more like fetishism. He remakes the girls for his personal consumption.

I invented the idea of Photoshop more than 20 years before Photoshop came to be.

I didn’t invent anything. I just wanted to make fake documents. I wanted to do incredibly realistic pictures that weren’t real. It was fun to mislead the public. It was magic.

The public had a more innocent eye then. Seeing isn’t believing anymore.

Yeah, but photomontage has always been there. It was more painstaking to do, but it always existed. Changing a little gesture in a photograph or changing the order of how people are standing, [Richard] Avedon did that. He did a lot of doctoring of photographs, but he never told anybody. He didn’t have to. I tell everybody because I want to be noticed. I’m like a magician showing how I do the tricks.

I was friends with Azzedine for a while, but I think it really bonded us when I started taking lots of pictures of him with my girlfriend Farida. He was a friend, and I found him to be the best, most amusing visual march to Farida. They made a good-looking romantic couple, like Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald in *The Merry Widow*. When you think of Farida’s personality, it’s difficult to find somebody to show her off. Azzedine was perfect because of the height difference and he’s unusual. It broke the duché of the couple. I think maybe it was unconscious on my part because I’m little and I’ve always liked big women. I like the idea of a big woman and a little man. It’s silly, but it’s graphic, really, a graphic solution. I think it bonded our friendship, not that we were poking fun at the business, but he was actually saying I do what I want to do, with whom I want, when I want. I don’t have to conform just because I’m in this business. So because I had all these pictures of Azzedine, I thought it would be fun to observe the fashion scene by doing pictures of designers. It happened quite naturally, I knew them all.

Tell me about Karl Lagerfeld.

I’ve known Karl Lagerfeld for years, just from being around Paris. Finally got to really know him at Chanel. Karl is grand. He is a character of the sort they don’t make anymore, a real eccentric in the tradition of Ludwig II of Bavaria. He’s the real thing, and he’s funny.

And an amazing worker.

I understand working that way. I’m working more and more now because I don’t want to think. I have a wife I adore, I have a family, but I don’t want to have time to be bluey or sad because my friends are disappearing. So you work harder. Work really brings a lot of pleasure. He’s right to do that. Jealous people talk about how all he does is work. What do they know? They get drunk, they eat rich food in fancy restaurants, they go sailing on the weekend, which is dangerous and bad for the skin, they come back exhausted, and meanwhile Karl has done three ad campaigns. I prefer his work. Karl is an emperor. I’ve always wanted to poke fun at designers, but in a fun way.

Did you know Marc Jacobs when you shot him for *Bazaar*?

Not at all. Stephen Gan organized it. He was very nice, very American, very bouncy. “Hi! How are you?” He looked really good. He was tanned, muscles everywhere. He looked like a trained ballet dancer. I had a girl’s tuna in the studio, and he wore it and thought it was cute, and I had a picture.

I know you say that your art comes from fetishism. We aren’t religious, but there is a sort of primal magic involved in it. You made statues of Toukie Smith with her so she can become as beautiful as Grace is there, and it’s my way of seeing things. It’s really at the basis of my personality. There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s my strength also.

She’s my wife. She wants me to be successful. We’re a team. We’re touching on very profound subjects. I don’t have the vocabulary or the intelligence to develop all these themes, but they are trottling around my mind.

So does she coach you back?

No. She’s smart. She understands my way of seeing things. It’s really at the basis of my personality. There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s my strength also.

That’s fine. We’ll take everyone to the threshold of the profound and just leave them there.

Yeah, enter at your own risk! Paul gripes about aging and complains when he can’t remember Tim Walker’s last name right off (the one photogra- pher who doesn’t retouch is his favorite now), but he’s fighting age tooth and nail. He has that same twinkle in those eyes, the color of his jacket. I know where it comes from—the muse!