

**British fashion designer Zandra Rhodes** is one of the most recognisable names in the industry over the last fifty years. Her work includes the design of haute couture dresses and garments for a host of eminent clients such as Elizabeth Taylor, Freddie Mercury and Diana, Princess of Wales, to name just a few.

Born in Chatham, Kent, in 1940 Zandra was introduced to the world of fashion by her mother, a filter for the Paris fashion House of Worth. She studied at the Medway College of Design (now part of the University for the Creative Arts, UCA) and later at the Royal College of Art in London, then had a brief turn at teaching and collaborated with Sylvia Aytton on the Fulham Road Clothes Shop before making her own way in fashion.

First and foremost a textile designer, Zandra Rhodes brought a fresh approach to garment construction by using vibrant screen prints to dictate the cut and shape of garments. Her experimental techniques can also be seen in her use of exposed seams, slashed garments influenced by Elizabethan silks and her punk-inspired couture decorated with tears, jewelled safety pins and silvery chains that earned her the title 'Princess of Punk'.

In her private studio in London, Zandra Rhodes and her team continue to design and produce her latest fashion collections. Around them lie vast silver trunks stacked from floor to ceiling. The trunks contain an expanding personal archive of samples, numbering several thousand, which she had the foresight to retain from the start of her career to the present day.

Once opened, and beneath layers of tissue paper within the trunks, delicate silk chiffon dresses are found, with intricate hand beading, and the bold, colourful prints for which Zandra Rhodes is so well-known. Few visitors to the Fashion and Textile Museum next door,

which Zandra founded and opened in 2003, are aware that this comprehensive archive lies just moments away. The treasure trove is largely unseen apart from select pieces chosen for temporary exhibitions, catwalk shows such as her retrospective at Paris Fashion Week in 2012, or to be worn by Zandra herself.

But behind the hot pink and orange exterior of Zandra Rhodes Studio an exciting project is underway. Five hundred key pieces across Zandra's career have been digitally photographed and made available online for teaching and research. Education is important to Zandra. In 2010 she became Chancellor of the University for the Creative Arts, where she spent her formative years studying. This collaborative venture, led by the UCA, directed by Professor Kerstin Mey and managed by Amy Robinson, with funding from JISC, completes the circle – creating a resource for the next generation of fashion and textile designers, fashion historians and fans of Zandra Rhodes work.

With funding to digitise just a portion of this colossal resource, one of the first tasks for the project team was to choose between the garments. This selection was guided by the expertise of the studio's Production Manager, Frances Diplock, who has worked with the fashion designer since 1976, with input from Zandra Rhodes whenever she was in London (she divides her time between her penthouse apartment above the Fashion and Textiles Museum in London and her beachside home with her partner in Del Mar, California).

The selection focuses predominantly on the collections of the 1970s and 1980s at the height of the designer's career, sprinkled with a few early pieces from the Fulham Road Clothes Shop days, her Knitted Circle collection in 1969, and recent designs. The process of

uncovering these gems was an exciting one as boxes bore obscure labels such as, 'mixture of historical and modern' 'Punk/Mexican' or 'Freddie Mercury top.'

Zandra Rhodes is distinct from many other fashion houses in her commitment to conducting as many parts of the design and production process as possible by-hand and in-house with her skilled studio team. It starts from the development of ideas in sketchbooks and continues with the hand-drawing and painting of the design, screen printing on fabric, pattern cutting, sewing and hand finishing of the garment. And this project has revealed her astonishing work ethic firsthand.

In between press appointments, engagements, parties and plane trips back and forth to California, every spare moment is dedicated to her design work, which she pursues equipped with her workman's tool belt and bright pink overalls. Zandra Rhodes is always the first in the studio and stays up long into the early hours. Her frenetic creativity is evidenced the following morning by the huge sheets of paper scattered on every surface and stuck to walls, showing her vivid designs.

The launch of the Zandra Digital Study Collection coincides with the exhibition *Zandra Rhodes Unseen* at the Fashion and Textile Museum which will highlight the full scope of Zandra's artistic vision and archive. As Curator Dennis Nothdruff says "Arguably, Zandra is the best representative of a generation of creatives who work across disciplines and who use themselves as a canvas for their ideas and designs." This exhibition reveals why she is an inspiration to young designers as well as to her contemporaries. ♦♦♦ Amy Robinson

**Zandra Rhodes Unseen, 12 July–31 August 2013, Fashion and Textile Museum, T: +44 (0)20 7407 8664, ftmlondon.org, zandrarrhodes.ucreative.ac.uk**