

## **“I’d go through Victoria station with my 3 eyebrows and wonder why people looked!”: 50 Years of Zandra Rhodes**

*With several lifetimes of glamour, design and luminous hair colours under her belt, British fashion and textile designer, Zandra Rhodes, shares her significant imprint on the industry to the Old Town Hall in Richmond.*

“I didn’t know I was going to get such a big audience here!” exclaims renowned Fashion designer Dame Zandra Rhodes, the vibrant shades of her kaftan cascading over the stage. Her perplexion to the large crowd before her is somewhat in itself, perplexing, considering Rhodes has been an important catalyst for fashion throughout her active years. Unique design prints; works with celebrities and royalty, endless collections with large brands: her successes are nothing short of mesmerising, a large audience is to be expected.

“She was very exotic, she used to spray her hair with a wonderful silver curl at the front”, Zandra’s mother, that is, whom she took great inspiration from and instigated her love for textile design from a young age. “I always used to say don’t look different from all the other mothers at school, because she always did”, showcasing a picture of her mother and her sewing machine, it became very apparent where Rhodes got her feisty sense of style from, my fixation drifting to her bright fuchsia bob then back to her mothers’ tremendous gown. Rhodes initially followed in her impetus’ footsteps, as she attended the Medway College of Art in Kent where her mother taught, although continued her education at the Royal College studying Printed Textiles, where her love for fabric making blossomed. “I was always drawing in a sketchbook, right from being at school”, her artwork beaming from a screen.

“They laughed at what I had to show them... they said they couldn’t sell any of that and showed me this terrible texture that they were going to sell millions of!”.

Rhodes’ first rejection by a textile company in Manchester was a pivotal one, as it later led to her first ‘Yes!’; turning into what she calls a “convertor” for 2 years for fashion designers *Foale and Tuffin*, who immediately fell in love with her designs, understandably. “I was getting into all sorts of strange things like drawing lipsticks on fabrics... and at that time they weren’t selling”, the irony soon hit as said design was bought by *Valentino* 30 years later, Rhodes’ sigh-turned-laugh filling the room.

Following her year-long running of Fulham Road Clothes Shop with partner Sylvia Ayton, Rhodes' brief stint in America occurred spontaneously. An idea pushed by "a wonderful mad American, and two also equally mad American-Ukrainian models", who told her she *must* bring her work to America in order to "make her fortune". Her first collection was then produced with the hope of said 'fortune', and indeed did attract interest from American and British Vogue. Rhodes describes American Vogue's editor at the time, Diana Vreeland's rave about the collection as a "quirk of fate; "she had [the clothes] photographed on Natalie Wood!".

Having visited America, Rhodes expanded her travel checklist over her former years, which she took vast inspiration from. "In the 1970's I had a trip to Mexico, believe it or not, in a camper van", the mere thought of someone of Rhodes' extravagant creative calibre travelling in a caravan made me chuckle alongside her. "I think it was 1976 actually... the print is based on the embroidery on a Mexican sombrero", she says, proudly showcasing two burnt orange dresses with said print, both being very Zandra-esque, created with similar patterns that are even recognisable in her most recent work.

"I was invited in 1981 to go to India, to help them with their first festival there... India became a huge influence on me", Rhodes' travels continued to places designers hadn't even considered to be influential at the time. Her sari collection stunned the local crowd at that moment, a period where "revolutionary" fashion, a term that was used to describe Rhodes' collection, didn't yet exist. Rhodes drew influence from the punk era and the creativity that came with it to concoct her saris, "It shocked all the ladies", she says, displaying a colourful vintage ensemble, the holy sari, as she named. Her beaded saris left a mark on the fashion landscape in India, almost a cultural reset fashion wise for the eastern country that had not yet been infiltrated by western trends.

Subsequent to her significant jets around the globe, the Dame had a momentary lapse in publicity, to which her friend and sculptor Andrew Logan informed Rhodes of an available warehouse in the 1990's, "he said to me, Zandra, you've always wanted to do a museum, why don't you get the building?". To which she replied, in typical feisty Zandra fashion, "what do you think I am, made of money?", smiling and pointing towards the irony that was her very own museum, The Fashion and Textile Museum, filling the board with vibrancy. She sold her Notting Gate property at the time, and persuaded top architect Ricardo Legoretta to fly from Mexico to design her museum, "I persuaded him and flew him to London on my mileage tickets, first class!", she adds, waving her finger at the crowd hilariously. The

museum opened in 2003, the bright orange and fuchsia building captivated the Punk Queen's aura effortlessly.

"I always tried on looks on myself, when I look back later I think that was a bit of a mistake", she says, showcasing her makeup looks over the last 50 years. "I always feel as a designer, you're representing yourself", this ideology instantly clicked as Rhodes began listing the well-known stars she has dressed and met over the years, encountering the likes of Karl Lagerfeld, John Watters, Iris Apfel, Natalie Wood, Princess Diana and Princess Margaret. "I actually made the outfits for Freddie Mercury in 1973", chuckling at the reality of being 10 years older than the rest of his concert crowd, her unique flair that which she incorporates in her own outfits beams from the pleated outfit.

Her achievements seem endless, also dressing the likes of Princess Anne for her engagement dress as well as American singer Donna Summer, and just before COVID times her exposure soared. Managing brand deals with Marks&Spencer, M.A.C, alongside her most recent deals with IKEA, Fuli Carpets and Wallis. "It went on during COVID", she says, explaining her IKEA designing process, "that was when I had just learnt to use Zoom". Rhodes' issue with modern day designing lies with recent technology, "I'm almost becoming an outdated specimen of something", she states, unamused by the idea of associating with the changes that are coming with this new process, concerned it will affect the way she does things.

The concern of a new digital fashion world accompanies her age concerns, which is jaw dropping impressive, "You get various problems as you get older, I have to disguise sneakers because I can't wear heels", heels or no heels, Zandra is as incredible now as she was 50 years ago and ends with "I didn't know there was going to be this many people!", her perplexity resuming, now more than before, a hilarious statement.