

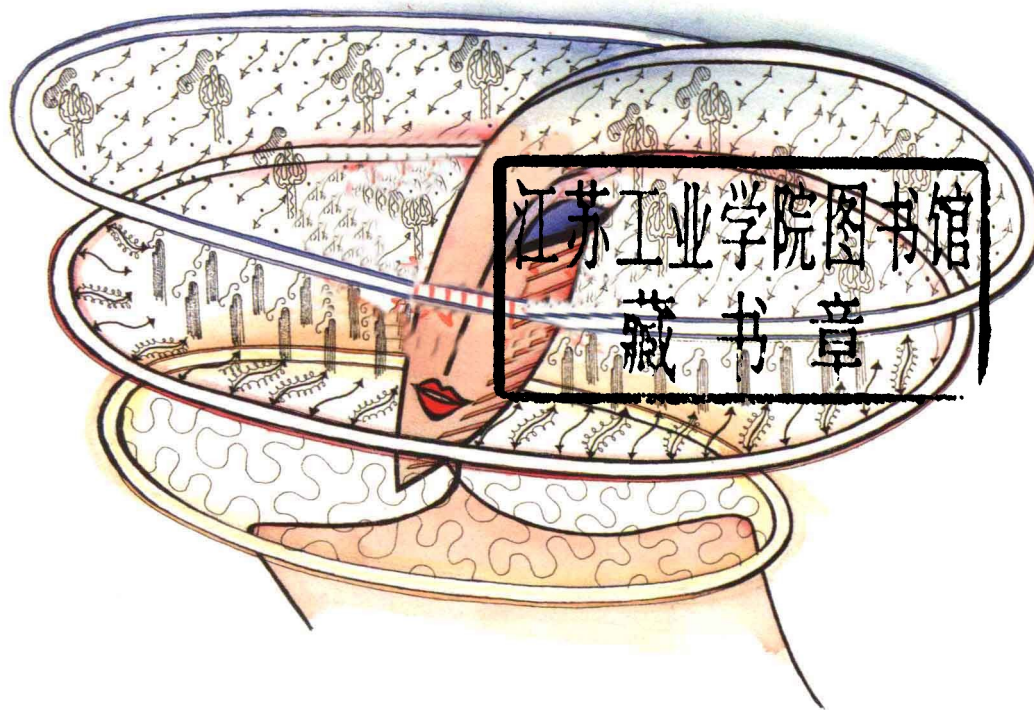
The Art of Samuel R. Hurdes



THE ART OF *Zandra Rhodes*

Written by Zandra Rhodes and Anne Knight

Researched by Marit Lieberson



ZR

ZANDRA RHODES PUBLICATIONS LIMITED



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My special thanks are due to Robyn Beeche
for her extensive photographic work
and especially for the Butterflies and Textiles.

This book is dedicated to my fabulous
mother, Beatrice Ellen Rhodes, and my
grandmother, Beatrice Rosina Twigg,
and to all those who proudly wear my
clothes

[illegible]

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I also owe thanks to Nate Kacew, who shut me in a New York hotel room and told me to finish all the writing so that this book was finally completed; and, last but not least, to Anne Knight and Ronnie Stirling, for being silent pillars of strength.



PHOTOGRAPH: ROBYN BECCE HAIR AND MAKE-UP: YVONNE GOLD

Photograph of Zandra for 'Indian' poster, 1982



Introduction

I had for a long time wanted to do a book about my work because I wanted to chart the story behind my designs. They are not produced lightly and flippantly, but evolve through an interpretation of my surroundings, seen in my own special way. I feel that one of the major contributions to the world of fashion I have been able to make is my originality of textile print design and the way I have allowed the textiles to influence the garment shapes. This is what I want to demonstrate.

In my original concept I was inspired by a fabulous book of water-colour drawings by Max Tilke, called *Costume Patterns and Designs*. In this all the garments are laid out clearly, just as butterflies are displayed in showcases, and this has influenced the presentation of my own dresses. I had initially thought of calling this book *Zandra's Butterflies*, conceiving it as a book without words where the garments would speak for themselves. For several years, together with Robyn Beeche, a close friend and photographer, I had been perfecting a method of cataloguing dresses flat so that they transcended period and showed how the prints had been used.

Then those around me said, no, we want you to show your formative vision, the source, the sketches, the textiles, and finally, the butterflies. My publisher wanted a verbal explanation, a story, as it were.

I was thrilled with the idea of doing this book. I was in love with the idea and thought it would be easy. After all, I had carefully recorded everything I had ever done from the day I started. I possessed the drawings, the press cuttings, and the dresses. The original of every garment I had ever made was in my personal archives, nearly two thousand of them stored away. I know of no other fashion designer who owns every one of their originals, and it is a strict rule of the Zandra Rhodes House that nothing from my sample collection may be sold.

In the event it wasn't easy—what is? I should have known. However, it made me think about my work in a way I might never otherwise have done. So I looked back over sixteen years of textile prints and fashion design. This began to show me how I interpreted what I saw in front of me with my own intensely personal vision. Because of my background as a textile and not a fashion designer, I believe I see things more as an artist, interpreting what I see from a deeply personal point of view. For me this creative process does not lose any of its pain with repeated application. Sometimes it is an agony. I cannot say simply and precisely how I arrive at anything I do, because it is always an interrelationship of knowledge and experience. It is certainly not purely academic, although I have always turned to traditional sources like museums to research subjects chosen; but equally I draw on my own past, and everything that is going on about me now.

I love to work with people all around me, asking their opinion—‘Do you like the colour?’—‘What about this shape?’—‘Do you think it would be better turned round?’ All those sorts of questions. I am not often very influenced by what is said but I find that communication of the idea, live, and not just within myself, helps to sort out the problems. My friends' interest generates my enthusiasm and helps me to keep going on an idea especially when it doesn't work the first time, which is often the case. Friends are paramount to my existence. I am introspective. I thrive on admiration and need that close contact to get me out of myself. I like to talk about the things in my head and often unknowingly friends I like become the catalyst, giving a new twist to an idea by taking me to an exhibition or suggesting a place to visit for a vacation. Finally, my really intimate friends support, succour and inspire me, laugh with me, listen to my woes, understand my dilemmas, hear me out, encourage my

endeavours and, perhaps because most of them are also artists, they relate to my devastating insecurity, turning it from destruction into creation.

Through tracing my own methods I have found that my different themes relate to journeys of some kind in a very quixotic way, where the final images are almost unexplainable (even to me) until all the links are put together. So I resolved to chart these journeys and take a close look at the interpretations and results which emerged from them, and to try to pin down this creative process visually for others to share. About sixteen journeys proved to be involved. Each one has been an adventure for me, starting seventeen years ago with the local and tangible impressions of the supermarket, T.V. shows and the Blackpool Illuminations. Later, the broadening circles of experience that came to me as the pattern of my life became more international, meant that the influences on my designs were expanded in just the same way, and this helps to explain what has now become recognised as my particular style.

I was born in Chatham, Kent, England, in 1940 and grew up there. At that time the area was semi-rural. Our house was only a short bicycle ride from woods full of bluebells and celandines. At the bottom of the garden, looking over the North Downs, was a chalkpit. The view from there was one of the first things I drew in my sketchbook at school.

I came from a working-class family, and you could say that in every sense of the word. My father was a lorry driver. My mother had been a fitter at Worth in Paris. I had a younger sister, Beverley. I was completely obsessed by my school work and homework. As a family, we almost never sat around doing nothing. Even when we went on holidays we always took things like jigsaw puzzles and worked on them together. I have often thought it was an advantage that television did not exist in those days so there was no distraction. I feel lucky that my parents made work so imperative. I never resented being compelled to work, and I have never changed. I still work seven days a week, fourteen hours a day, and there is no vacation for me unless it is actively associated with my work.

All the things I remember doing in my childhood have stayed with me and still appear in my prints. The fret-saw shapes of the jigsaw puzzles must have been the first wiggles to become imprinted in my mind's eye. Even now these wiggles nearly always appear somewhere, even if only as fillers in the background of my new designs (a signature all of their own). I love the way words look, graphically, so writing has always been a



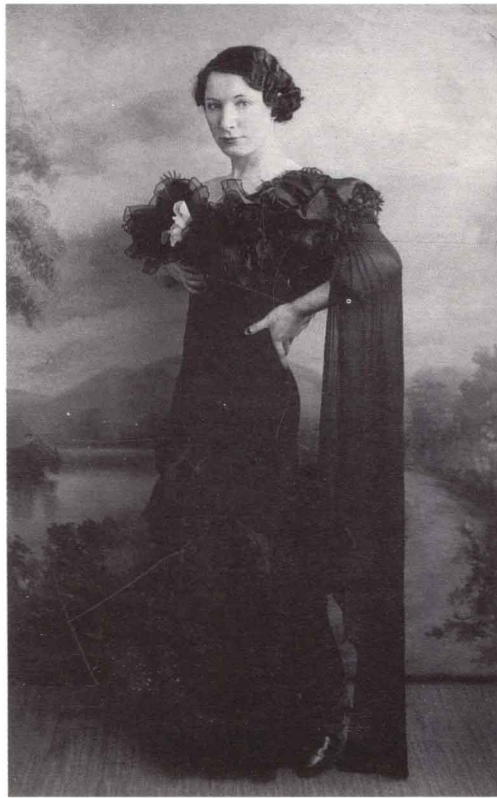
Zandra sketching at an early age



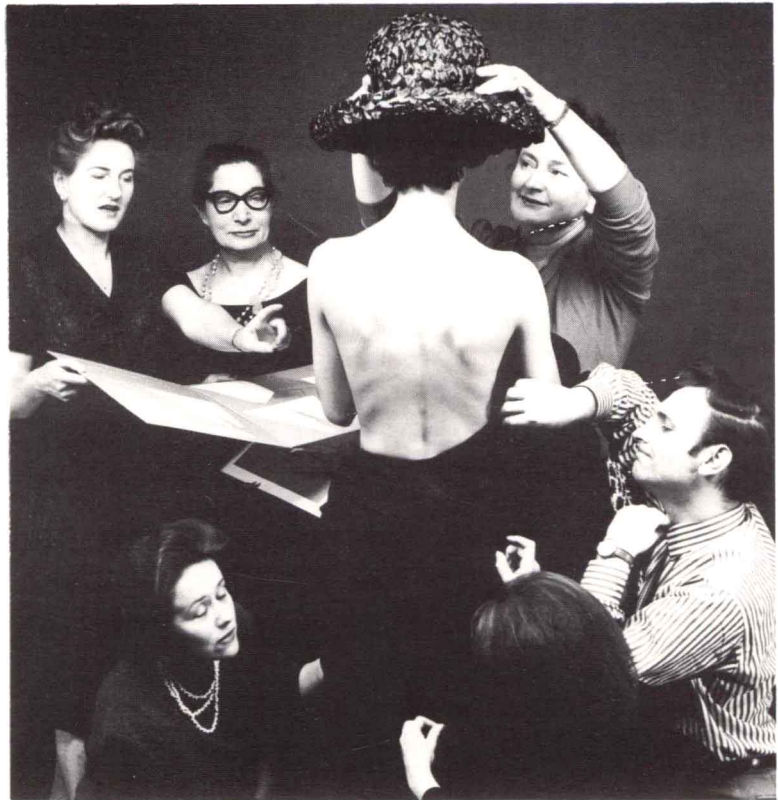
Zandra's sketch of the North Downs

pleasure for me. I wrote boringly and neatly in my school books. I never minded writing lines at school and, although I was naturally left-handed, I taught myself to write with my right hand so that I could do italic script. We had to do writing exercises, practising pages of words to improve our skills. Calligraphy became a passion and so I have often incorporated my thoughts and sometimes little poems into my prints. The words made designs of their own and, linked with the jigsaw shapes, became very important to my prints.

Another thing, which has stayed with me, was that I had to explain and justify my name throughout my childhood. It was Zandra with a Z—not Sandra with an S. I used to practise writing it over and over again—explaining it and writing it, no wonder it became an integral part of me, so that I write the name Zandra into my patterns, my publicity handouts, my labels, my shop bags, and almost everything I do—just like the wiggles.



Zandra's mother, Beatrice



Zandra's mother teaching (second from left, standing)

The strongest influence in my childhood was undoubtedly my mother. She was an exotic woman, dramatically dressed, stylish and chic, always immaculately and heavily made-up, very opinionated, dominating our house, dazzling my childhood, embarrassing me in my awkward years; but ultimately being my strength and my direction. From 1959 to 1968, when she died, she was a senior lecturer in the Fashion Department at Medway College of Art. She is still spoken about today by those people who worked with her and students she trained. I often receive letters from people who want me to know how much they admired and respected her. She had an amazing effect on others. She was so interested in them that they accepted her advice. She taught belief in oneself and almost invariably, I believe, to the advantage of all those who came into contact with her. I can feel her presence around me when I am working in my studio, although I must admit I come from a very psychic family. I went

to Medway not at all wanting to do fashion. In fact, I didn't want anyone to know that it was my mother who taught there, since I was determined to make my own way in my own right, and I took elaborate pains to avoid her.

I admired the flamboyant character of the printed textile tutor, Barbara Brown. It was because of her I decided to specialise in textiles, and through her, I applied for and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, at that time the world's art mecca. I loved designing textiles. I enjoyed the discipline of the prints, that they had to be cut and used economically, that I had to consider measurements and repeats, that it was both technical and artistic at the same time, and directed towards an end product outside the pattern itself. I was proud to be a textile designer and I did not feel I was inferior to a painter or sculptor; it was my *métier*. I loved it and enjoyed the mental challenge of taking an art form into another stage; that is still an impulsive

motivating force in my work. My ideas are never static. I don't just design a print or a dress, produce it, and then drop it. The theme keeps worrying me to be developed and the original idea becomes linked to something new and is regenerated. I suppose that is why the so-called 'Rhodes Style' is so strong and emphatic.

When I left the Royal College in the early 1960s, it was fashionable to design furnishing fabrics; and, in fact, my degree print was bought by Heal's as a furnishing fabric. But it was during my second year at the Royal College that I became interested in the different discipline of dress fabrics. I was the first in the College's Textile School, for a long time, to turn away from furnishing textiles to doing dress fabrics. Maybe I took to dress fabrics because of my mother? Furnishing fabrics tend to be large-scale, and in the early 1960s frustrated, would-be artists designed furnishing fabrics, painting such things as abstract landscapes. I did not want people to go around like a walking painting for the benefit of the artist, and I did not think they should have to hold up their arms for the benefit of the print they were wearing. I was excited by the idea of things divorced from themselves, prints designed flat but never used in that manner, lines written instead of drawn, words spelled out instead of just illustrated. In learning to design for dress fabrics, I was involved in a special adventure, that of patterns which would not hang flat but would be cut and put together again in many different ways. Therefore, I treated myself similarly, like a canvas, pinning paper on to myself and walking around, moving, creasing, and studying the effects.

I loved printing and was a very flamboyantly messy student, always with dye on my nails. I enjoyed working closely with the colours and, from those early days right up until today, I still work with dyes and printing and make up all my own colourways, which are now catalogued so they can be mixed at the mere quote of a number.

I found out from my first experiments into the world of textile design that I was like no one else and fitted into nobody else's shoes. This meant that all along I was the best promoter and advertisement for my clothes because I represented the whole, not just a facet. Soon after that I came to the conclusion that if I was not going to wear and represent my clothes, who else was? Then as my business gradually grew, I had to show a new look every six months and change my own appearance every six months; I realised my small business had become an empire and I

had created a dragon. However, in spite of its size, I still make sure I am involved with the essential looks being created and I plan show scenes on the most accurate of charts.

As an extension of this type of designing I used myself as a canvas with no compromises, experimenting with my image, using cosmetics and my hair to create an impact. As a final note about myself, I have always been very extreme in my appearance, from sticking feathers with eyelash glue on the ends of my dyed green hair in the 1960s, and embroidering and patching jeans quite outrageously, right up to my photograph for the Indian-inspired poster of 1982 when I used blue make-up influenced by a blue Indian god.

From the beginning of my involvement in textile and fashion design, I have rejected the conventional and opposed formal attitudes. I have recklessly injected colour and beauty into my designs and have fought for originality and freedom of choice. This has been incomprehensible to many, but I have persisted in my beliefs and in the end I know I will win—this is still only the beginning.

Journey into Lights

Pop Art and the Beatles were on the crest of the wave when I was at the Royal College of Art. The current influences around me were Roy Lichtenstein, with his comic-book style, Andy Warhol's 'Soup Can', leading me to the glories of the super-market, and Jasper John's use of words and letters. Emilio Pucci, the elegant Florentine aristocrat, was a current couturier

designing and printing his own fabrics in complete panels for his garments. I was already experimenting with panels of my own, and I would try on the painted paper designs in front of the mirror, cutting out holes for my head, and turning them around on my body. This was the tail end of Swinging London. Mary Quant had invented the mini. Marion Foale and Sally Tuffin were installed in Carnaby Street; they were the unstated influence on the then young Yves St Laurent, with their use of Liberty prints.

I graduated from the Royal College in 1964. My last major project and the theme behind my diploma show was medals. This was originally sparked off by a painting by David Hockney, 'Generals'. From the way the picture was painted it was the medals that first caught my eye and must have subconsciously also been linking in my mind with the current Pop Art/Union Jack craze. David Hockney had graduated two years before me from the Painting School of the Royal College. I adored his work. I then studied at the War Museum and the Wellington Museum, drawing medals, and produced designs with medals translated into a Pop Art style. Heals bought one of the medal print designs and *Queen* used one for a cover in a dress by Foale and Tuffin. The Royal College of Art arranged a meeting for me with Pucci, who was showing his collection at Woollands.* Alas, he didn't offer me a job in Florence but told me to concentrate on designing in black and white. Who knows what would have happened to my career if he had taken me back to Florence to design for him!

*A shop in Knightsbridge, London, now, sadly, gone.

Portrait of Zandra with Alex MacIntyre, before she started making her own clothes. The sequined helmet she is wearing is by James Wedge, and the suit in yellow plastic is by Ozzie Clark.



NORMAN TUDGAY

The Art of Zandra Rhodes

Right, Lemuel Francis Abbott's painting of Viscount Horatio Nelson (1758–1805) wearing medals

Far right, Zandra in front of her 'Medals' fabric at the Royal College of Art diploma show, 1964

Below, 'A Grand Procession of Dignitaries painted in Semi-Egyptian style' by David Hockney. Oil on canvas, 84 × 144 inches (214 × 367 cm.), © David Hockney 1961.



Above, Zandra's crayon study of medals

Right, 'Moiré Medal Panel' design for cotton velvet. Design repeat 55" (139.7 cm.), width of fabric 36" (91.4 cm.).



IAN YEOMANS



Right, section of eight-colour 'Medals' print on cotton sateen (produced by Heal's as a furnishing fabric). Design repeat 30" (76.2 cm.), width of fabric 48" (121.9 cm.).

Below, panel print design for full length garment





Zandra at home with Alex. On the left, Janet Street-Porter modelling transparent trousers and a bikini top by Sylvia Ayton and Zandra Rhodes.

After graduating with no job, I set up house in St Stephen's Gardens, London, with Alex MacIntyre, who had been in the same class with me at the Royal College. We were existing hand to mouth, rushing down to the Portobello Road late on Saturday to buy cheap fruit and vegetables from the stalls just closing up. Food was not that important. We were determined to live in our world—a world of today—and that meant making it all ourselves, creating our own Pop environment, a perfect world of plastic, true to itself, honestly artificial. We covered everything in plastic by the yard, including the walls and even the television set; we had plastic grass carpets, collected plastic flowers and trees, used synthetic marble and 'Fablon' tiles. We made the furniture by drawing shapes on the floor and building laminate and foam seating and tables on these spots. We built standard lamps from pillars of plastic, circling them with neon bulbs. 'A wonderful world from Woolworths'. I had seen an abstract landscape with a house and a river and a woman looking out of the window, painted by Duggie Fields. I fell in love with it and, although I had no money I just had to have the painting. I hung it across the window to make a false view and I put curtains on either side. I then cut out hardboard shapes to echo the forms in the painting and used them to conceal the lighting below it. Then

I placed plastic flowers around it, which brought the picture right into the room. Duggie came to visit me one evening and fell in love with what I had done with his painting. From the first moment there was a terrific affinity between us—it did not stop him, though, getting his lawyer to chase me for the money. I know him so well now and he told me he was ashamed to do it, but he needed the money so much he had no alternative. I did pay him eventually, in instalments, so we never got as far as the Courts. We love each other dearly.

Alex and I were building up the print works at our Studio in Porchester Road, where we took on other people's printing to help pay for our own. I was also teaching part-time, at Ravensbourne College of Art with Leslie Poole and Sylvia Ayton, and at High Wycombe and Birmingham. I hated it but the money supported our frugal standard of living and enabled me to design in between. Since we were always short of money our lifestyle was very simple, centred around work, television, the supermarket and any trips within our means. It was from this limited environment that I took the images which influenced me. Jonathan Miller presented a vivid television documentary on Las Vegas, showing the neon signs and electric sculptures in the sky. I clearly remember the picture of the Neon Man, advertising the programme, appearing on the cover of the *Radio Times*. We used to buy Omo soap powder, which had drawings of the Rainbow Men on the packets to publicise their competition. (These men called from door to door giving out prizes for the correct answers to a series of questions.) From these two impressions emerged my 'Mr Man' print. (Years later when I went to Las Vegas I was photographed under the same Neon Man outside the Golden Nugget.)

Alex and I went to visit his parents, and from where they lived it was a short distance to Blackpool to see the famous Blackpool Illuminations—enormous fantasies in electric light, millions of coloured bulbs shaped into spectacular magical fountains and fairytales. The Blackpool Tower seemed like the Eiffel Tower illuminated against the northern sky. I started to draw what we had seen but I found I was concentrating on the source—I drew lightbulbs again and again. Lightbulbs blinking and sparkling, with live filaments and neon elements.

Another on-hand inspiration was comics—crudely printed in black and red half-tone dots. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I loved Lichtenstein's blow-up interpretations of American popular comics and, with the selections of comics available