

TEXTILE DESIGN

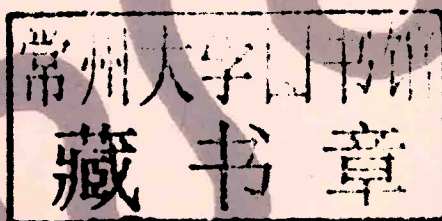
Samantha Erin Safer

TEXTILE REVOLUTION: MEDALS, WIGGLES AND POP 1961-1971

ZANDRA RHODES



Samantha Erin Safer
Antique Collectors' Club



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This project has been particularly close to my heart. In 2003, I came to London from the States to study and work as an intern at the Fashion and Textile Museum, which Zandra founded, marking the beginning of a close working relationship that has lasted many years. Before I came to London, I had never even heard of Zandra Rhodes, but now this icon of British design has left an indelible mark on my life and career. I remember the first time I stepped into her design studio and was confronted with huge rolls of printed chiffon in every colour imaginable and delicate fantasy-like dresses hanging from dress rails. However, no amount of color and eccentricity could have prepared me for my first sight of Zandra Rhodes in the flesh. She was like nothing I could have imagined. Her hot pink hair was tied up into a topknot, which bore no relationship to the wild hair accessories sticking out from it. She was wearing a full face of make-up on which every color of the rainbow was represented. Staccato lines for eyebrows drawn on with electric blue pencil completed the look. I was at once frightened and in awe of this woman. Her design studio had staff with their heads buried in paper designs, sewing, hand

rolling, cutting, and beading her chiffons. Once I'd caught my breath, I felt like I was in heaven. To be asked to write this book on Rhodes's textiles that have continued to inspire me over the years has been an honour. This book would not have been possible without the photography beautifully executed by Patrick Anderson. Thanks extend to Gene Nocon, David Bailey and the other photographers within the book for granting us permission to reproduce their wonderful images bringing Zandra Rhodes's work to life.

Zandra's studio team, particularly all the hard work of her PAs Deborah Ababio in the UK and Cristina Jimenez in the USA, as well as Frances Diplock, Ben Scholten and Kitty Joseph are much appreciated.

Whilst researching this book I have enjoyed many brilliant conversations with Rhodes's closest colleagues and friends allowing me time from their busy schedules to interview them. Particular thanks go to Barbara Brown, Jackie McLennan, Julius Schofeld, Marion Foale, Sally Dennis, Joan Juliet Buck and David Sassoon. Many thanks to Neil Parkinson from the Royal College of Art archive for bringing to light Zandra's early textiles from the college and granting permission to reproduce them here. I also acknowledge the efforts of David Sekers, John Kaldor and Alison Kraus of Angelo Donghia in assisting me to piece together Zandra's early textiles commissions.

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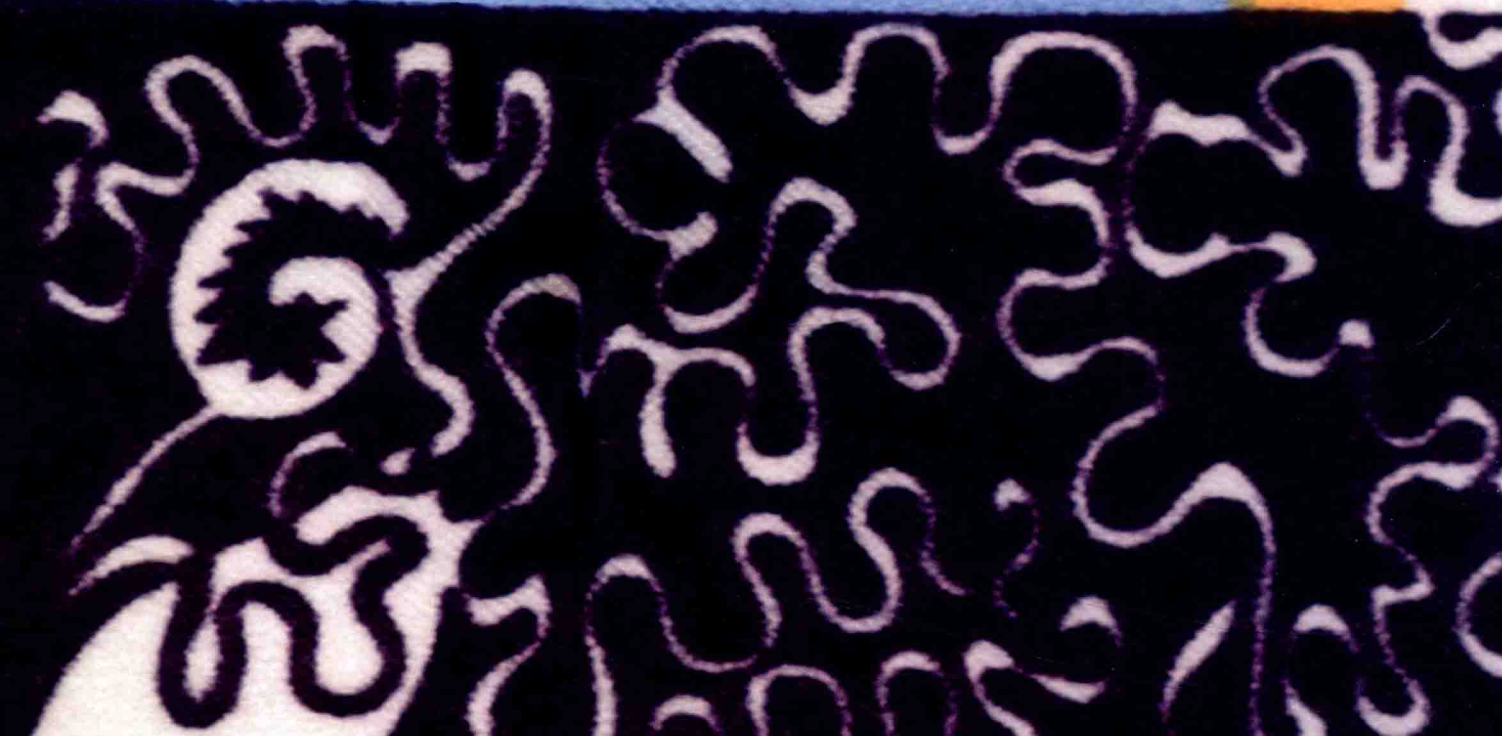
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me to work this book into something of which I am fiercely proud. I also extend my thanks to Mark Eastment, V&A Publishing and V&A Enterprises colleagues for their support and encouragement.

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Throughout the years, my dear friends and family have championed my work, cheering me on and lifting me up: Corina Maccarin, Laura Heller, Alexandra Kears, Dara Heller, Allegra Hirschman, Gity Monsef, Timothy Hunter, Henrietta Fry, Lindsay Harrison, Jessica Kelly, Ellie Herring, Ed Town, the Guttenbergs, Safers, Shaperos, and Zoddas. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, Robin Safer and grandmother, Rita Shapero for their unwavering support in all that I do.

Zandra herself would like to dedicate this book to her partner Salah Hassanein for enabling her to follow her beliefs, Ben Scholten and Chetna Bhatt for their unwavering support and her sister Beverley Haydon.

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The education of a young artist, wrote John Ruskin, 'should always be a matter of the head, and heart and hand going together.' Art and design, he said, 'must be produced by the subtlest of all machines which is the human hand. No machine yet contrived, or hereafter contrivable, will ever equal the fine machinery of the human fingers. Thoroughly perfect design is that which proceeds from the heart, that which involves all the emotions; associates these with the head, yet as inferior to the heart; and the hand, yet as inferior to heart and head; and thus brings out the whole person.'¹

Zandra Rhodes

Ruskin could be speaking directly about Zandra Rhodes, British textile and fashion designer, who is world renowned for her fantastically innovative and bright hand-printed designs as well as her own colourful appearance. Exploring Rhodes's treasured personal archive of designs and drawings dating back to the 1950s, her talent, imagination and vibrant creative spirit can be traced throughout. What is apparent is her gift for drawing (the head) and her love for putting ink or paint to paper and fabric (the hand); from lush botanicals and still lifes to outlandish Pop art designs and abstract shapes, they are all rendered with skill and thought (the heart). Known as a prolific draughtsman, Rhodes to this day never travels without her sketch books and is inspired by all that is around her both home and abroad.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s Rhodes won acclaim from the fashion world on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1972, she was named Designer of the Year by the English Fashion Trade with a similar honour, Royal Designer for Industry, bestowed on her in 1974. She was awarded a CBE in 1997. Her intricate and bright textiles, transformed into show-stopping dresses, were splashed across the pages and covers of *Vogue*, *Harpers Bazaar*, *Queen*, and *Women's Wear Daily*. Rhodes's impact, of just one collection from her eponymous line (launched in 1969) was so revolutionary, that her legacy within textile design, as well as fashion, is still felt today. Stars of the fashion world, including John Galiano, Christian Lacroix, Dolce and Gabbana, Mario Testino, Issey Miyake and Manolo Blahnik, all openly cite Rhodes as an inspiration. Lacroix muses,

'Zandra Rhodes contributed to the fashion world like all those who have a radically personal vision...those who innovate and bring the kind of oxygen we need.'²

As a young and ambitious textile student in the early 1960s, Rhodes studied at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, fertile ground for rising stars in the art, design and fashion world. There Rhodes was exposed to the bold new aesthetic of Pop art. This book investigates Rhodes's early textile designs (1961-1971), many never seen before: from her years at the RCA,

¹ John Ruskin: *The Two Paths*, being lectures on art, delivered in 1858-1859, Maynard Merrill, New York, 1893, Lecture 2, 'The Unity of Art' pp. 54-57.

² Christian Lacroix quoted in Gity Monsef, *Zandra Rhodes a Life Long Love Affair with Textiles*, Antique Collectors' Club, 2005, back cover.

³ Suzy Menkes, *Jewish Chronicle Colour Magazine*, 28 April 1972.

to her first foray into the fashion world with the innovative Swinging London duo Foale and Tuffin, to the launch of her eponymous collection in 1969, as well as her special commissions for Jacqmar, &Vice Versa , Mafia, and Sekers Australia.

Rhodes's early work demonstrates an original approach towards designing textiles, stepping away from the easy, all-over prints popular in the 1930s, '40s and '50s to textiles that are directional, leading fashions within textile design. She plays with colourways as children play with paint, splashing contrasting colours around, adding and taking them away to create a print that, although is the same form, strikes a different note in every colour incarnation. For instance, Rhodes printed *Medals, Bows and Stars* (1964) in twelve colourways using primary colours for bold effects where the bows, stars and brush mark shapes are robust. When printed in softer hues such as light pink, turquoise, white and black, a mellower effect is apparent with the main motifs seeming to collapse into each other. Each collection grows out of her previous ones as she recycles ideas, shapes, and motifs, combining them with new decorative elements. For example, Rhodes is passionate about stitch work and components of stitching appear in all her early textile designs most notably, *Knitted Circle, Chevron Shawl, Wiggle and Check, Sparkle, Buttonflower* and later designs from the 1970s and '80s such as *Zig Zag Shell, Spinifix Landscape, and Torn Square*. Flowers are another idea that Rhodes has built on since 1965. First seen in the form of stylized flowers drawn out of neon-like tubes, her flowers develop sprouting leaves and blossoms in the *Chevron Shawl* print from 1970 and combine with chain-like stitches to form knitted flower shapes in textiles Rhodes designed for Sekers Australia in 1971. A true progression and maturity is gleaned throughout her early work, particularly from her art school years to her first collection in 1969.

Within the realm of fashion design, Rhodes comes out of a tradition of twentieth-century couturiers whose primary concern was with fabric, the construction of the garment being secondary. Designers in this tradition, from Mariano Fortuny and Madame Grés, to Madeleine Vionnet have not necessarily looked to mainstream fashion trends dictated by their respective eras and consequently, have never been in nor out of fashion. Their ultimate goal was to produce individual garments in which the drawing of a textile or the drape of a fabric in relation and to the body remained the first spark of the creative process. This approach

was honed at art schools where Rhodes was in constant contact with fashion designers, painters, sculptors, and product designers. As Rhodes's prints are not easy repeats, the intricate flat patterns led her in how she could use them on the body, the silhouettes always being arrived at by experimentation. 'Chiffon – light as air and flying free. Scissored into handkerchief points or folded into intricate pleats. Awash with swirling prints. Glowing with vibrant colour' was how Suzy Menkes described Rhodes's early work in 1972.³ Zandra Rhodes is a designer who is driven foremost by her individual creativity, which stems, as Ruskin said, from the marriage of hand, heart, and head.

Formative Years

Zandra Lindsey Rhodes was born in Chatham, Kent, England in 1940 where she spent her childhood. She came from a traditional working class family: her father Albert was a lorry driver and her mother Beatrice was a Senior Lecturer on the fashion course at Medway College of Art (now the University for the Creative Arts, Rochester). Prior to her marriage, Beatrice Rhodes had been a fitter at the Worth couture house in Paris and upon her marriage ran a dress making business



designing for private clientele under the old-fashioned moniker Beatrice Modes. Chatham was semi-rural and the family home was a short distance from the picturesque North Downs and woods swathed with bluebells and celandines. One of Rhodes's first drawings for school was the view from the bottom of the garden, looking over the North Downs, scenery she would sketch repeatedly. Rhodes's family life was filled with small town pursuits, going for walks, reading, learning to sew, drawing, and playing

with friends. On family holidays they would assemble jigsaw puzzles, the pieces of which would later be reinterpreted into her textile designs as signature wiggles. Rhodes and her sister Beverly were encouraged to do well in school and pursue outside interests. Rhodes openly stated later, that she was

*'very boring and snobby. I worked very hard so I was always top. It did not cross my mind whether you liked school or not. I was brought up to believe that if you worked hard, the best person got the job and I was boring enough to not query it.'*⁴

With her passion and talent for art and drawing, Rhodes sketched everything from her mother sewing, local people in the market, children, allotments, cabbages, flowers, cathedral doorways to traditional landscapes using a range of materials such as gouache, pencil, pen and india ink. The options for creative young women during the 1940s and 1950s were limited, though this would quickly change in the 1960s. The decorative arts and design provided one of the few areas in which women could become leading, well-regarded professionals. Coupled with the influence of her fashion-designer mother, the natural progression was to pursue a creative yet practical field; however, Rhodes wanted to carve her own path aspiring to become a book illustrator.

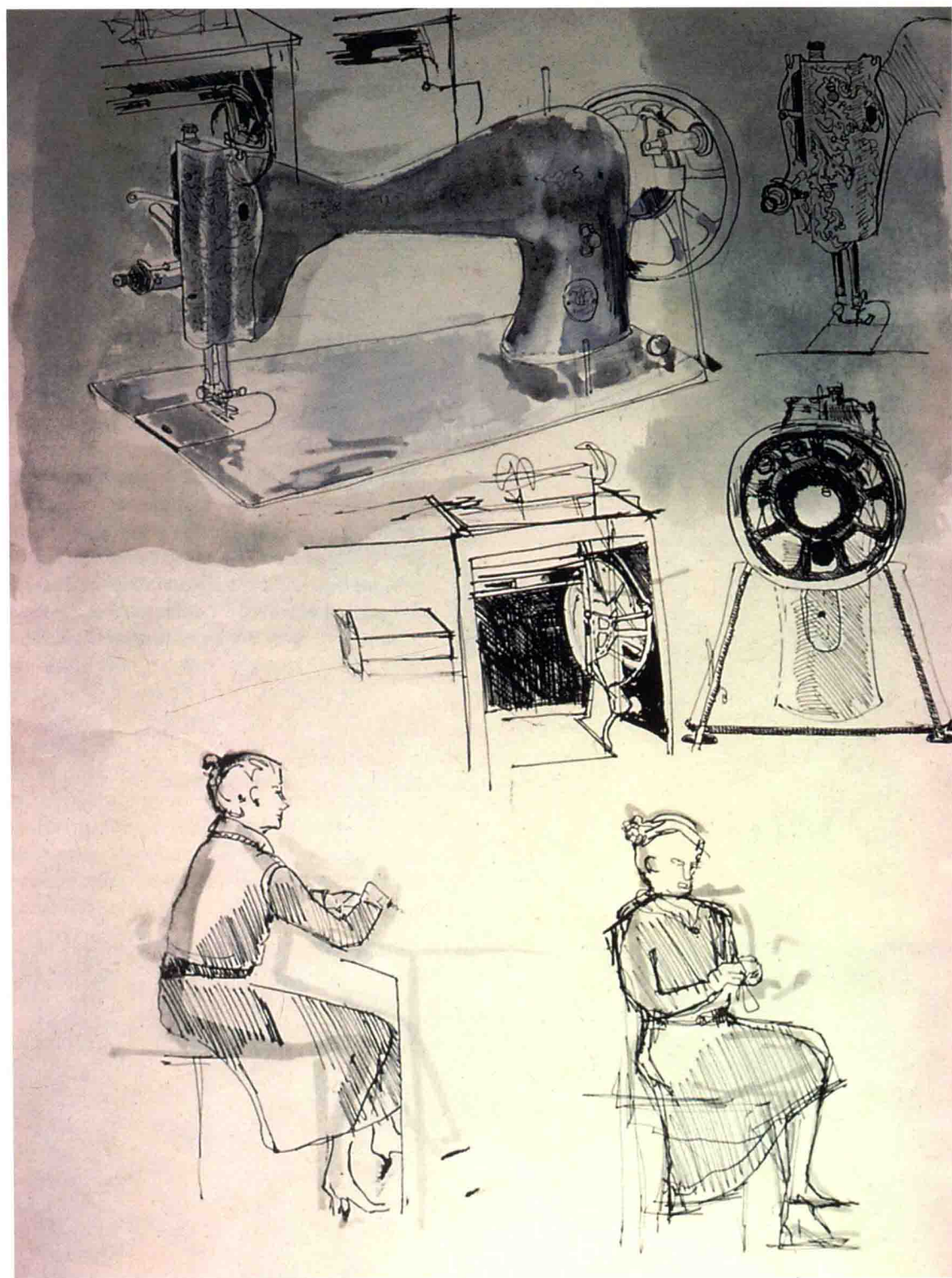
After completing O levels at Chatham Technical School for Girls, she achieved A-levels

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

Opposite Sketch of Beatrice Rhodes sewing from Zandra Rhodes's school sketchbook

⁴ *Illustrated London News*, October 1978, Zandra Rhodes Archive.

⁵ Zandra Rhodes, interview with author, 14 November 2009.



in History and honours in Art. In 1957, the seventeen-year-old Rhodes entered Medway College of Art as a student in the art department where her mother was lecturing on the fashion course.

"My mother taught dressmaking and I did not want her to teach me at that stage and I did not have a special leaning towards clothing."⁵

Rhodes went to great lengths to keep secret from her peers her mother's tenure at the

college, avoiding her as much as possible. At Medway she learnt how to design furnishing fabrics (amongst other media on the foundation course), at the time the main path for textile designers. Rhodes's artistic skill was such that she entered into the second year of the intermediate foundation course, bypassing the first year altogether. After her foundation course, Rhodes studied for a further two years for the National Diploma of Design. Originally,