

ABSOLUTELY

As a retrospective of the work of **Zandra Rhodes** opens in London, **AIR** chats to curator Dennis Nothdruff about the trailblazing designer's 50 years in fashion

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# fashion

AIR







When Valentino's creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli began working on his first, highly-anticipated collection after his long-time design partner left for Dior in 2016, he turned to flamboyant British designer Dame Zandra Rhodes for inspiration.

Piccioli's spring 2017 ready-to-wear collection featured Rhodes' signature bold prints, drawn from Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, in every shade of pink imaginable. "She's my icon," Piccioli explained backstage, flanked by mood boards pinned with images of the magenta-haired designer.

As Rhodes chalks up five decades in the notoriously fickle fashion industry, the acclaimed Valentino collaboration underscores just how relevant she continues to be. Her influence can be seen in the work of contemporary fashion and textile designers such as Mary Katrantzou, Alice Temperley and Matthew Williamson, while she has been tapped to work with brands as diverse as Royal Doulton, Mac and Ikea.

Celebrity fans include Helen Mirren, Barbara Streisand and Sarah Jessica Parker, while collectors of vintage Zandra Rhodes pieces include designers Tom Ford and Anna Sui and supermodels Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell.

"She's been going for 50 years, but I don't think Zandra is in or out of fashion; if people love her, they really love her," says Dennis Nothdruff, curator of a new exhibition of her work at London's Fashion and Textile Museum. "She has always approached it almost like an extended kind of performance art, and I think that is her key: she just does what she does."

Rhodes' personal style, meanwhile, has always reflected the flamboyant quality of her designs: that pink bob, theatrical make-up and layers of jewellery. "She has always used herself as a canvas, she personifies what she does, and I think she is quite radical in that sense," says Nothdruff.

On show until January, *Zandra Rhodes: 50 Years of Fabulous* presents the avant-garde prints and era-defining garments, worn by the likes of Freddie Mercury, Diana Ross and Princess Diana, that have sealed her place in fashion history.

"I was really clear that it needed to be

a full retrospective," says Nothdruff, who has worked alongside Rhodes for more than 25 years, first as a design assistance and later as head of exhibitions at the museum she founded in 2003 next to her London atelier.

"A lot of people focus on her early career in the Sixties and Seventies, and she really reflects fashion history through those decades. But the idea was to show the scope of what Zandra has done over her 50-year career, from when she founded the company in 1969 up to contemporary times," he says.

Delving into Rhodes' extensive and immaculately catalogued archive, Nothdruff was struck by how fresh some of the designs felt. "She was creating these quite extraordinary dresses and the scale of her prints is amazing. We're reminded how innovative, how beautiful, and how distinctively her own, they were," he says.

The exhibition features 50 looks in the main gallery – one from each year of Rhodes' career – ranging from a 1969 ankle-length kaftan, screen-printed in silk chiffon to a fan-pleated jumpsuit in a shimmery satin from 2018.

"You can see the evolution from very experimental things to becoming more and more fine – they're always beautifully made, but they start to become more what we would consider beautiful dresses," says Nothdruff. "But always the idea is about the print or the printed textile. There's very few that don't have a print on them."

In the mezzanine gallery, visitors wander through a forest of iconic chiffon prints, which hang in rows from floor to ceiling. Next up, Rhodes' groundbreaking costumes for the English National Opera's 2007 production of *Aida*; previous productions of Verdi's Egyptian extravaganza often featured white nightdresses so, in typical style, the designer opted for a palette of gold, turquoise and ultramarine inspired by her *Secrets of the Nile* collection from the Eighties.

"The thing with fashion is, at the end of the day, you have to sell a garment. But for opera, she really could just be creative and absorb the essence of the opera, and then come up with something quite extraordinary," says Nothdruff. "She wasn't making fashion, she was making an artistic



product, and it was just this amazing Zandra-Rhodes-world come to life."

Meanwhile, a collection of Rhodes' original sketches of daily life and her distinctive fashion drawings offer insight into her design process. They are displayed alongside specially commissioned masks by milliner Piers Atkinson. "Zandra has a very distinctive vision. It always starts from her observational drawings, then it becomes a printed textile, and she hasn't really changed that pattern for 50 years," says Nothdruff.

Born in Kent in southeast England in 1940, Rhodes was first exposed to fashion by her mother, who was a garment fitter for a fashion house in Paris and later taught dressmaking. After studying at the Royal College of Art in London in the early 1960s, Rhodes began her career as a textile designer and sold her early Pop Art-influenced prints to the design-led furniture store, Heal's.

Despite this early success, she soon realised her textiles were too





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**Opening pages:**

Zandra Rhodes 'Cactus Highway' print, 1976; Dame Zandra Rhodes, by Simon Emmett

**Previous pages:**

*Z with Pink Hair Pink Nails*, archived by *Zandra With A Zee*; *Zandra Rhodes and models at Port Eliot Festival, Cornwall*, July 29, 2017, by Louise Roberts.

**These pages, left to right:**

Zandra Rhodes SS19 Lookbook, by Bridie O'Sullivan; Zandra Rhodes photo for the poster for the S/S 1986 'Spanish Impressions' collection, by Robyn Beeche



outrageous for many traditional British manufacturers. Undeterred, Rhodes began making floaty dresses from her fabrics and, in 1967, opened a boutique in Chelsea with fellow designer Sylvia Ayton, using a down payment from actress Vanessa Redgrave.

She got her big break two years later when Diana Vreeland featured her first collection in US *Vogue*, worn by actress Natalie Wood and photographed by Richard Avedon. "I was a fabric designer who couldn't find a job, and I happened upon the world of fashion by chance," Rhodes once reflected.

She approached fashion design differently to her contemporaries, designing the print first, then cutting and forming the garment in response to the fabric on the body. "She hadn't trained as a pattern cutter or fashion designer, so she was using the shape of the printed pattern as a way of shaping and developing construction in garments," says Nothdruff.

While exotic hand-printed dresses became her signature, Rhodes was also at the forefront of the glam rock, punk and disco aesthetics. Highly-influentially collections included 1978's Conceptual Chic, with its rips,

chains and adorned safety pins, and the Renaissance/Gold collection from 1981, with voluminous gold lamé skirts and puffed sleeves inspired by the Elizabethan era.

An avid traveller, Rhodes' globetrotting has given rise to some of her most memorable prints and shapes; today, each garment is still silk-screened, sewn and beaded by hand in her London atelier. "I've always wanted people to think they were buying into a piece of wearable art," she has said.

After being made a dame in 2014, Rhodes made a triumphant return to London Fashion Week the following year after a nine-year break, with a collection inspired by the traditional fabrics of Malaysia. She has since presented a handful of collections to considerable critical acclaim.

The designer has also teamed up with high-end online retailer, Matches Fashion, to produce a number of archive-inspired collections. In 2016, she revisited ten of her most famous dresses, including Princess Diana's iconic cherry blossom dress, and has recently collaborated with resort brand Three Graces on a series of bespoke prints inspired

by her celebrated Mexican banana-leaf print from the Seventies.

"She influences other designers, but I think what's been interesting is young designers, not necessarily there the first time she was doing all these amazing things, want to collaborate with her or commission her. They appreciate what she knows and she is seen as quite radical," says Nothdruff.

Alongside the London retrospective, Nothdruff has co-authored a book with the designer, *Zandra Rhodes: 50 Fabulous Years in Fashion*, which includes essays by the likes of Anna Sui and Suzy Menkes. "It's interesting because I have my design historian's view and my ideas is about Zandra's work. But Zandra's very articulate about how she works and why she does what she does, which a lot of people aren't really able to do," he says.

Five decades on, the doyenne of British fashion shows no signs of slowing down. "She just has this amazing energy. It's quite easy to bend with the times, but Zandra has taught me that if you believe in what you do, somebody eventually will believe in it too," Nothdruff says.

*Zandra Rhodes: 50 Years of Fabulous, on show until January 26, [ftmlondon.org](http://ftmlondon.org)*





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