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 Diana, Princess of Wales, to name just a few. Born in Chipping, Kent, in 1940 Zandra was introduced to the world of fashion by her mother, a former employee at the Paris fashion house of Worth. She studied at the Watford College of Design (now part of the University for the Creative Arts, UCA) and later at the Royal College of Art in London. She then had a brief stint at teaching and collaborating with Sylvia Ayrton at the Fulham Road Couture 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 garment influenced by Elizabethan silks and her puckered or shaped couture depicted with lace, jewelled plaits and sullie collars 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 the room are silver, black and white fabrics stacked from floor to ceiling. The trunk contains an expanding personal archive of samples numbering several thousands, which she has had to forego to earn from the start of her career to the present day.

Once opened, and beneath layers of tissue paper within the trunk, delicate six inch chiffon dresses are found with macabre themed beading and the bold, colourful prints for which, Zandra Rhodes is so well known. Few visitors to the Fashion and Textile Museum in London, which Zandra founded and opened in 2003, are aware that this comprehensive archive lies just moments away. This treasure trove is largely unseen apart from several chosen for temporary exhibitions, catalysing shows such as her retrospective at Paris Fashion Week in 2012, or to be worn by Zandra herself.

Beyond 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 when she spent her formative years studying. This collaborative venture, led by the UCA, thrilled by Professor Kenna, Mary 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 take just a portion of the colossal resource, one of the first tasks for the project team was to choose between the garments. The selection was guided by the expertise of the studio’s Production Manager, Frances Duxor, who has worked with the fashion designer since 1974, with input from Zandra Rhodes whenever she was in London (she divides her time between her parachute apartment above the Fashion and Textile 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, and includes a few early pieces from the Fulham Road Couture Shop days, her Knitted Circle collection in 1969, and recent designs. The process of discovering these gems was an exciting one with boxes of obscure materials such as: ‘mohair of historical and recent’ ‘Point/Masson’ or ‘Trellick Mercury lap’

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

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 partners equally with her wonderful staff and bright pink overall. Zandra Rhodes is always the first in the studio and stays up long into the early hours. Her tireless creativity is witnessed the following morning by the huge sheets of paper scattered over the studio and stuck to walls, showing her vivid designs.

The launch of the Zandra Rhodes 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 influence. As Caroline Nutting, curator says, ‘Zandra is the best representation of a generation of creative women 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.’

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Amy Robinson
Zandra Rhodes Unseen, 12 July—31 August 2013, Fashion and Textile Museum, T: 020 7450 8554, ftm@fdm.org, zandarhodes.ucreative.ac.uk