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**Zandra Rhodes' 'Works of Art' (1979 - 1988): From Feminine Frills to Goddess
Saris**

By MARIE-THERESE GRAMSTADT

By 1979 the British fashion designer Zandra Rhodes (b. 1940) was well established and internationally renowned for her colourful hand screen-printed silk chiffon crinoline dresses. The femininity of her chiffon dresses ensured their continuation as best-sellers beyond 1979, however little has been written about her other dress designs during the 1980s. During this period Rhodes introduced new styles including her heavily beaded 'exotic tunics' and designer saris worn over hip panniers. Zandra Rhodes' designs were perceived as feminine when worn by the designer herself, her models and her clientele; and represented as feminine in their portrayal in magazines and newspapers at the time. Using original records held in the Zandra Rhodes Archives, London, as well as material gathered during The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection project (Jisc, 2011- 2013), this article examines the period 1979 - 1988 within a framework of feminine representation and also considers Rhodes' proposition that her designs are 'works of art'.

KEYWORDS: Zandra Rhodes, fashion, textiles, 1980s, femininity, gender, British, twentieth century, sari

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INTRODUCTION

The British fashion and textile designer Dame Zandra Rhodes (b. 1940) has designed collections every year since launching her first solo collection in 1969. She is known especially for silk chiffon dresses cut to reflect the shape of her hand screen-printed textile designs, for making a feature of outside seams, and for her 1977 *Conceptual Chic Collection* which remade punk as glamorous high fashion.

Rhodes describes her couture garments as 'works of art'; the artistic process that leads to their creation includes sketchbooks filled with inspiration, designs for the textile print, the actual garment, and the mapping of the hand-made textile to the wearer's body. Her couture dresses are also considered works of art by others including the American artist Barbara Nessim (b. 1939) and Australian photographer Robyn Beeche (1945-2015) who photographed her dresses for the book *The Art of Zandra Rhodes* (1984).¹ Rhodes' decision to archive her 'works of art' reached its culmination with the founding of the Fashion and Textile Museum, London, officially opened in May 2003.

This article discusses the different forms of femininity that were represented in Rhodes' 'works of art' during the period 1979 to 1988 by considering four garments which characterized her work during this time.² They are: a classic crinoline dress (79/106), a gold pleated evening jacket from the 1981 'Modern Renaissance Look' collection, a heavily beaded 'exotic tunic' (85/196) and the designer sari (December 1987 and July 1988).³

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According to fashion theorist Jennifer Craik in her book *The Face of Fashion*, femininity is related to both the body - 'being female', and to the construction of gender - 'being feminine'; it is 'characterised by techniques of display and projection of the female body'.⁴ A frill could be considered feminine because its curves reflect the curves of the female body in contrast to the angularity of the male body.⁵ The frill is a recurring motif in Rhodes' 'works of art', whether the pleated frills of screen-printed satin and gold lamé jackets, or the frilled 'lettuce' edging of jersey tops and dresses, and textile prints with names like 'Frilly' and 'Frilly Flower'.⁶

During the 1980s notions of femininity were changing; there was an increasing sense of female power and confidence, but also a romantic sensibility that influenced both men and women. The style of the 'New Romantics' emerged in the early 1980s: 'elaborate combinations of real and imagined past styles, painting their faces to enhance fantasy and artifice, their escape from the natural.'⁷ Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton in their book *Women & Fashion: A New Look*, describe how the artifice of fashion 'transforms the "raw" of woman into the "cooked" of femininity'.⁸ Rhodes' own body is the 'raw' of woman as she places the paper version of her textile design on her body to begin the construction of a fashion garment.⁹ Rhodes and her famous clientele: including Diana, Princess of Wales (1961 - 1997) and actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor (1932 - 2011), further emphasise the femininity of her designs. They displayed the natural

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femininity of Rhodes' designs by lending their internationally recognised glamour to carefully constructed fashionable styles.

The period 1979 – 1988 in Rhodes' career has received relatively little attention in contrast to her earlier work. Ten years after Rhodes' first solo collection, she was a well-established designer in the United Kingdom, and her business with the United States was booming. In 1979 Rhodes was one of twenty-five fashion designers invited to contribute a complete fashion look, with accessories, to the Victoria and Albert Museum's (V&A) *British Fashion Designers* exhibition, which was their 'first exhibition devoted exclusively to contemporary British fashion'.¹⁰ 1988 marked another turning point for Rhodes with the UK premiere of her *Indian Saree Designer Collection* and the completion of her involvement with *The Festival of India* in Japan. The following year represented the start of a new chapter as Rhodes' Mayfair shop (14a Grafton Street, London, W1), which had been open since 1975, closed.¹¹

RESEARCH METHODS

This research owes much to Rhodes' meticulous preservation of her design material; she has kept a sample of every design produced since 1969. Records of designs are kept in the Style Bibles and given unique codes called Style Numbers which consist of the last two digits of the year of design with a running number sequence.¹² The Style Numbers are cross-referenced with the pattern in the Textile Design Name Bibles to make a garment. Over time the Style Bibles have become an important historical record showing

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how the collections were formed. Through *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection* project (Jisc, 2011-13), digitized copies of both the Style Bibles and Textile Design Name Bibles were made available online alongside the digital images and records for 500 dresses.¹³

For this article additional research was conducted into Rhodes' press books (UK and international magazine and newspaper clippings), postcards, posters and fashion show invitations held in the Zandra Rhodes Archives in London.¹⁴ This article also discusses the author's own experience of handling the garments during the project, directed by Rhodes, and informed by Frances Diplock, Production Manager, who has worked for Rhodes since 1976. These sources have been underpinned with a thorough search of the University for the Creative Arts' library catalogue, journals, newspapers, American *Vogue*, image databases and other online content covering the period 1979 to 1988.

ZANDRA RHODES' 'WORKS OF ART'

The term 'works of art' is used by Rhodes throughout her Style Bibles to denote her couture fashion collections. It is not used for ready-to-wear or for collections where she has licensed her name. Rhodes' clear distinction between couture and ready-to-wear may be inspired by her mother, Beatrice, who was a senior lecturer in the Fashion Department at Medway College of Art, Kent, UK, and had been a fitter at Parisian haute couture house Worth.¹⁵

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Rebecca Arnold in the book *Fashion: A Very Short Introduction* states that: 'fashion has its own particular concerns that prevent it from ever being purely art, craft, or industrial design... [although] it incorporates elements of all these approaches.'¹⁶ This positioning of fashion as art is open to debate but the reasoning behind the use of the term 'works of art' can be explained in terms of Rhodes' background and the specific context. After Rhodes studied textile design at Medway College of Art (1959-61), she won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, London, graduating in 1964. In *The Art of Zandra Rhodes* she writes: '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*.'¹⁷ After teaching and designing prints independently, in 1966 Rhodes went into business with Royal College of Art fashion design graduate Sylvia Ayton (b. 1937).¹⁸ This lasted until 1969, the same year that Rhodes launched her first solo fashion collection.

Rhodes' concept of art needs to be understood within the mid to late 1960s 'alliance between fashion, art, music, and popular culture' and its later developments.¹⁹ As described by Peter York in his 1976 essay 'Them' for *Harpers & Queen*, this is: 'an *art-directed* lifestyle, in which art might take the form of assuming a persona, or creating an environment (domestic or retail/commercial) that might both resemble and assume the function of a film set'.²⁰ York's 'Them' were described in the Fashion and Textile Museum's press release for the *POP! DESIGN • CULTURE • FASHION* exhibition in 2012 as: 'an influential group of Baroque Pop designers who coalesced around Zandra Rhodes in the 1970s'.²¹ Rhodes, interviewed in 1989, explained that: 'I've always thought

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of myself as a further expression of my work'.²² Her Grafton Street shop was not only filled with her dresses, but was decorated with her fabrics and the artworks of students from London Art colleges.²³

In the mid-1970s, the American artist Barbara Nessim encouraged Rhodes to think about her work as: 'a lasting art form - not only an expression of textile and fashion design... [but as] an artist creating three dimensional works of art'.²⁴ Rhodes has held several exhibitions of her watercolours and sketches, and signs her textile prints on the selvedge, like a work of art. In response to *The Guardian* newspaper's question 'Is fashion a true art form?' Rhodes commented: 'I think fashion is an art form - you might call it decorative or applied art as opposed to fine art, but what's the distinction? Because the same amount of artistic expression goes into clothes, a piece of pottery or a painting. I've founded a museum on the basis that I think it's an artistic form that should be remembered.'²⁵

Even in the early years of her career Rhodes' dresses were considered collectors' items being acquired and displayed by museum collections around the world.²⁶ Rhodes' couture dresses are sold with a silk square printed with the words: 'This is one of my special dresses. I think of it as an artwork that you will treasure forever. Everything made by me is an heirloom for tomorrow.'²⁷ Rhodes has kept a sample of every design created; and a résumé of earlier pieces has been a feature of her fashion shows since the 1970s. In 1984 the book *The Art of Zandra Rhodes* was published in the United Kingdom and came out in the United States the following year. The book was a partnership between Rhodes and Anne Knight,²⁸ with photographer Robyn Beeche. It was Beeche who encouraged Rhodes

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to photograph the garments 'flat out like pinned butterflies, to illustrate the nature of [her] art'.²⁹ This was also how they were appreciated by American actor Larry Hagman (1931 - 2012) and his wife, Swedish actress Maj Hagman (b. 1928): 'Her clothes are works of art and well made. Larry likes to see them hanging on the wall like you would hang a painting or display a sculpture'.³⁰

Therefore this article uses the term 'works of art' due to the consistent and clear use of this by Rhodes throughout her career; she designs both the textile and the dress; and others have considered her work not merely as a dress to be worn on the human form but also as a work of art to be displayed away from the body.

HISTORICAL FANTASY: 'THE DRESS'

'Zandra Rhodes' designs ... capture the imagination of our time in such a way as to ensure that future generations of costume students will not overlook them.'

Christina Walkley writing for *Costume* in 1976³¹

In 1976 *Costume* reported that, on request, Rhodes had donated a dress to the Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester: originating in The Shell Collection of 1973, Style Number 73/44 also became known simply as 'the Dress'. In the book *Zandra Rhodes: A Lifelong Love Affair With Textiles* an entire chapter is dedicated to 'the Dress', described as 'her best-selling garment'.³² This design was also chosen to feature in the Design Museum's book of *Fifty Dresses That Changed the World* for 'its sensitive yet dramatic approach to fabric' and 'a dreamy femininity'.³³ The style known as 'the Dress'

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emphasized the female form with a deep v-neckline, highlighted the waist with a coordinating satin sash, and presented a soft, floating femininity with butterfly sleeves and a full-length voluminous crinoline skirt. Evans and Thornton note the 'implicit association of the huge skirt with maternal fecundity';³⁴ the voluminous crinoline shape of 'the Dress' emphasized the traditional path of motherhood following marriage. The crinoline style continued to be an important shape for bridal wear and formal evening wear during the early 1980s.³⁵

As documented in the Zandra Rhodes' Style Bibles, variations of 'the Dress', in silk chiffon, silk organza and tulle, were shown in many subsequent fashion collections. In Rhodes' sketch of dress design no. 79/106 (**Figure 1**) there is a hint of the *Star Wars* textile print, and the skirt obviously stands out in the classic crinoline shape. Each tier of tulle is printed, pleated, and edged with a narrow lace trim. This dress was photographed for *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection*, and when unpacking the dress after years in storage, the need for starch becomes apparent as the tulle hangs straight. At Lady Diana Spencer's pre-nuptial ball Rhodes was responsible for around thirty of the ballgowns, giving rise to a newspaper headline of 'Future Queen Puts Starch into British Fashion', a reference to the amount of starch required to support the layers of silk tulle petticoats.³⁶

Rhodes' frothy tulle versions of 'the Dress' were worn by upper class English women such as Patricia, Lady Rothermere (1929 - 1992),³⁷ and shot by high class

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photographers such as Norman Parkinson (1913 - 1990) for the aspirational magazine *Town & Country*.³⁸ Rhodes' crinoline dresses also featured in advertisements of the period representing a particular type of femininity. For example *Johnnie Walker* compared their *Black Label* whisky to a woman in a white Zandra Rhodes' dress at a white piano and declared 'Other pleasures pale beside it' (1983) and *Fabergé* chose a similar dress and model for their *A Touch of Class* perfume advertisement with the tag line: 'A young, fun fragrance for sophisticated ladies...' (1984).³⁹ 'The Dress' associated the wearer with high society, class and sophistication.

Craik discusses how social and economic changes to European society during the eighteenth century led to the 'convergence of class with gender, and the association of femininity with "leisures and ornament"'; this was disseminated through women's magazines into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ The media portrayal of Rhodes' 'the Dress' perfectly captured this sense of woman as 'ornament' - as in the *Johnnie Walker* advertisement; and associated with 'leisure' - the *Johnnie Walker* model playing the white piano, or resting in a beautiful garden in the *A Touch of Class* advertisement. However the fact that 'the Dress' became Rhodes' 'best-selling garment' says more about the dreams and aspirations of her clientele, than about the designer herself. For Spring/Summer 1981, Rhodes continued to showcase new designs but ensured that she still pleased her regular clients by deliberately presenting 'floating, chiffon dresses in delicate prints' before unleashing the theatrical and 'primaeval [sic]' *African Collection*.⁴¹ In 1985 when *Style and Simplicity Patterns* commissioned a coterie of top

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British fashion designers to create dress patterns, Rhodes' contribution was a wedding dress with matching bridesmaid's dress, both in flounced and layered tulle. In contrast Rhodes' 1984 and 1985 couture collections focused on beaded cocktail dresses and inspiration from Indian dress including beaded tunics (*kameez*) worn over tight trousers (*churidar*).⁴² This would suggest that although Rhodes continued to design innovative collections, as a businesswoman she also knew the nostalgic appeal of 'the Dress's' traditional romanticism held for many of her non-couture customers.

GLORIANA: A GILDED DREAM

The Renaissance/Gold Collection's 'Modern Renaissance Look' (Autumn/Winter 1981) was inspired by the royal wedding of the Prince of Wales (b. 1948) to Lady Diana Spencer in 1981.⁴³ The full ensemble consisted of six pieces that could be worn in different combinations: the gold pleated jacket; a screen-printed corset; a detachable gold pleated pannier; a white cotton under-pannier; and two skirts – screen-printed tulle worn over gold lamé.⁴⁴ (Figure 2) In 1981, the year that the superstar singer Diana Ross (b. 1944) wore Rhodes' 'Elizabethan gold silk taffeta' evening ensemble, dubbed by *American Vogue* as 'this year's "star" fantasy', there was global recession, war and conflict.⁴⁵ Rhodes' gold ensemble was not only a welcome distraction from reality in 1981, but continued to be worn by a wide range of women during the 1980s. Rhodes herself wore a variation of the 'Modern Renaissance Look' when she attended the official opening of the new Barbican Centre, London, by Queen Elizabeth II (b. 1926) on 3 March 1982. In 1986 broadcaster and *Woman's Hour* presenter Sue MacGregor (b. 1941)

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was 'all dressed up' in a Zandra Rhodes gold lamé jacket described as a 'modern masterpiece' over a black evening dress on the cover of the English *Radio Times* to celebrate forty years of *Woman's Hour*.⁴⁶ The editorial reported that the jacket was already in the collection of the V&A.

From *The African Collection* (Spring/Summer 1981) to the *Secrets of the Nile* collection (Spring/Summer 1987) the shape of Rhodes' classic pleated jacket was transformed with the addition of large swirls of pleated fabric to the shoulders, known as 'cabbages' to Rhodes' studio staff.⁴⁷ (Figure 3) Rhodes' jackets featured in aspirational style magazines such as *Mode Avantgarde* and *The Mail On Sunday's YOU Magazine*. The pleated jackets suggested a powerful femininity through their exaggerated shoulders; the volume of physical presence and the structure of the pleated fabric underlining the power of the wearer. *YOU* was launched in 1982 setting the pace in 'aspirant [sic] ... lifestyle voyeurism';⁴⁸ Joan Collins (b. 1933) was photographed by David Bailey (b. 1938) for *YOU* wearing a Zandra Rhodes pleated satin jacket in pastel hues surrounded by *Rootstein* mannequins modelled on her features.⁴⁹ According to Collins, who played the character Alexis Carrington in the television soap opera *Dynasty*, the series 'showed viewers that women could be vital, sexual, and powerful past the age of thirty-five', and in 1984, the year she turned fifty-one, she was voted 'the most beautiful woman on television'.⁵⁰ The 1980s fashion trend for 'Power Dressing' was popularized by television shows like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and often incorporated an exaggerated shoulder-line. During a time when there was a significant increase in the number of women in the

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workplace, 'Power Dressing' was about the 'desire to be noticed, and to appear commanding and confident'.⁵¹ In a feature article for *Mode Avantgarde*, Rhodes shared details about her personal life and the sacrifices she made to be a top fashion designer: 'as a woman I had to work twice as hard as any man, even if I was twice as good'.⁵² Alongside a strong work ethic, Rhodes presented a confident and powerful persona, for example at the climax of the fashion show for *The Mount Olympus Collection* (Spring/Summer 1983), the forty-two year old Rhodes was hoisted into the air by 'two body-builder men in regulation wrestling leotards ... [amidst] fragments of plaster Doric columns'.⁵³

Rhodes could be described as an 'artist in fantasy' both in the way she presented herself and in the dreams she provided for her clientele.⁵⁴ This fitted with wider trends in society during the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example in *Vogue* magazine where, over the 1970s, it became possible to 'identify a range of options in relation to women's fashion that allowed for an engagement with a more complex range of identities'.⁵⁵ For example, Sarah Grant, an Australian fashion model, commented on British fashion shows in 1978: '[...] clothes have changed so much, there is no one particular style [...] so one minute you might look incredibly butch in your leather gear...and the next minute you'll have the most wonderful floaty feminine thing on.' This comment is juxtaposed with shots of both floaty chiffon (similar to the Zandra Rhodes ensemble that Sarah Grant is wearing for the interview) and masculine leather outfits.⁵⁶

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Christopher Breward has written about the early 1980s that the 'possibilities of disguise and dressing-up [were] central to the concerns of contemporary youth culture'.⁵⁷ This was explored by regulars of the Tuesday club night at The Blitz, London, who were closely connected to Rhodes.⁵⁸ Iain R Webb (b. 1958), 'Blitz Kid' and fashion editor of *BLITZ* magazine, worked for a few seasons in the Zandra Rhodes Studio, London. Robyn Beeche photographed 'Blitz Kids' model Scarlett Cannon (b. 1963) and music journalist and Disc Jockey, Julia Fodor (Princess Julia) (b. 1960) wearing Zandra Rhodes' gold lamé jackets. The photograph contrasts the more traditional feminine beauty of Princess Julia with the distinctive and androgynous style of Scarlett; in this image she is shown with a shaved head and eyebrows, with a single lock of hair spiking across her forehead.⁵⁹ Scarlett was a popular model for new street style magazines such as *BLITZ*, *The Face* and *i-D*, all of which started in 1980. The new magazines provided representations of street and club culture, they were about 'the idea that identity (*i-D*) is forged by appearance'.⁶⁰

Evans and Thornton have commented that in the 1980s London club scene both men and women 'raided the image bank for signifiers of femininity, so that femininity itself came to be seen as an infinite number of appearances, divorced from biological sex'.⁶¹ This referred to wider changes in society and visual culture from the 1970s; for example according to Philip Auslander in his book *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* the musician David Bowie (1947 - 2016) 'treated gender identity in the same way he treated sexual identity: as performative.'⁶² In 1972, the

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Alternative Miss World competition was 'inaugurated in ... the run-up to London's first Gay Pride rally'.⁶³ Founded by artist and sculptor Andrew Logan (b. 1945), the focus was on 'transformation' rather than traditional 'beauty' and 'when it comes to costume absolutely anything goes'.⁶⁴ Rhodes has designed all of Logan's she-male costumes worn in his role as pageant compere; Logan in turn has produced many sculptures and pieces of jewellery for Rhodes.⁶⁵

A key theme running through Rhodes' 'works of art' is performance which is communicated through her theatrical fashion shows and highlighted in the way her designs work with the movement of the human body. For example, when British film director Derek Jarman (1942-1994) choreographed the fashion show for *The Mediaeval Collection* (Autumn/Winter 1983); the models held their palms together as if in prayer and wore elaborate headdresses created by British milliner Stephen Jones (b.1957).⁶⁶ Rhodes is also known as a designer of costume for stage performance from glam rock to opera.⁶⁷ In the 1970s, Rhodes dressed singer-songwriter Marc Bolan (1947 - 1977),⁶⁸ and made stage costumes for the rock band *Queen*. Although the clothes were custom-made, they began life as women's clothing - *Queen* lead vocalist Freddie Mercury (1946 - 1991) famously tried on Style Number 72/45, a pleated white satin cape normally worn with a long matching pleated skirt, 'to see how it would move on the stage'.⁶⁹

Rhodes' pleated gold jacket was versatile enough to represent two different types of femininity; the powerful, confident woman, represented by the designer herself (and

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by clientele such as Joan Collins), and the flamboyant, gender-bending world of the London club scene.

MANHATTAN: DESIGNS ON AMERICA

Rhodes' connections with the US played a crucial role in the evolution of another design which exuded an aura of confident and wealthy femininity, as typified in popular American soap operas of the 1980s. In January 1979 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, America's National Cultural Center, organized the first of its trips to China, following the opening of diplomatic relations between China and the US. Rhodes was invited to take part in this cultural tour, and her experience of China led to the two Chinese collections of 1980.⁷⁰ Also in 1979, Neiman Marcus, 'America's first store', invited Rhodes and three other British designers to show as part of their foreign fortnight - sales from this event were reported to exceed the store's Christmas takings.⁷¹ *The Chinese Collection* (Spring/Summer 1980) was shown at Neiman Marcus, Dallas, Texas (15 October 1979). Despite the significance of this promotion, it should be noted that this was not Rhodes' first foray into the US.⁷² British *Vogue* reported that in 1977 Rhodes did \$1,500,000 worth of business in the US and expected to achieve \$3,000,000 in 1978.⁷³ By 1990 Rhodes estimated that up to '80 per cent of her Works of Art Collection [was] bought either in the States or by Americans visiting her London store'.⁷⁴

Rhodes' American couture clientele included heiress Gloria Vanderbilt (b. 1924), Jacqueline Onassis (1929 - 1994), Jacqueline's sister Lee Radziwill (b. 1933), actresses

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Lauren Bacall (1924 - 2014), Elizabeth Taylor and Marisa Berenson (b. 1947), singer Eydie Gormé (1928 - 2013), and actor, drag queen and *Alternative Miss World* contestant Divine (1945 - 1988). Rhodes also designed for American television soap stars such as actors from *Dallas*' including Larry Hagman, who played J R Ewing, Hagman's wife Maj and Victoria Principal (b. 1950) who played the character Pamela Barnes.

In 1984 Rhodes introduced the *Manhattan* print based upon the Manhattan Skyline featuring the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. A beaded version of the *Manhattan* print (Figure 4) was produced for the *India Re-visited* collection (Autumn/Winter 1985), which coincided with *The Festival of India* in the US in 1985. This beaded dress was worn by Rhodes herself on numerous occasions. In the *Style Bible* the drawing for this dress features dashes all around the outside, as if the dress is sparkling; this is Rhodes' method for denoting that a dress design is beaded (Figure 5). Rhodes' travels in India in the early 1980s influenced the style and production methods of several collections. The beadwork for collections from 1984 to 1987 was carried out by skilled craftsmen in India recreating textile print designs by Zandra Rhodes. For example, in 1985 Rhodes designed the wedding dress for Victoria Principal which was described as: 'white pure silk chiffon encrusted with tiny pearls and sequins, a high-necked front, cowl back and pointed hem hung with pearls'. The beadwork represented 'three week's work for three men' in Rhodes' factory in India.⁷⁵

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Whilst cataloguing *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection* it was possible to handle many of the dresses, and to see them close-up. In particular the physical contrast between the earlier voluminous silk chiffon crinolines and the later beaded *kameez* style dresses, which appeared in collections from 1984 to 1987, was very apparent. The *kameez* style dresses, based upon the shape of a Punjabi tunic and described by Rhodes as 'exotic tunics',⁷⁶ could be worn as a suit with Punjabi style trousers (*shalwar* or *churidar*); however they were normally purchased and worn by clients as dresses in their own right.⁷⁷ Several of the Zandra Rhodes' *kameez* designs made a feature of the back with a very low back cowl highlighted with coordinating beaded edging and a decorative tie at the neck. For example, the back view of Style Number 84/177 from *The Magic Carpet Collection* (Autumn/Winter 1984) shows the curve of the mannequin's waist. (Figure 6) This back feature combined the traditionally modest Punjabi suit with elements more associated with Western fashionable notions of femininity, by highlighting and exposing the female body. The incredibly detailed work increased the production cost of the dresses as well as their weight. When you handle the silk georgette dresses covered in beads they feel noticeably heavy, like a glamorous suit of mail. These heavily beaded dresses were both feminine 'armour' and status symbol. Examples in the press cuttings show that the beaded dresses cost in the region of £2,500 to £4,000; this compared with £515 for a hand screen-printed silk chiffon cocktail dress in 1980.⁷⁸ Such high press visibility of the beaded dresses and their evident cost would have added to the sense of the wealth and status felt by the wearer.

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During the 1980s beaded dresses designed by Rhodes were worn by a host of celebrity women and also donated for significant charity auctions. Rhodes was one of the fashion designers involved with *Fashion Aid* (5 November 1985), which was inspired by *Live Aid's* fundraising concerts for the Ethiopian famine (13 July 1985). Singer Dame Shirley Bassey (b. 1937) wore a vibrant yellow beaded dress by Rhodes on this occasion.⁷⁹ At 'the most important charity auction Christie's has held', the London event to benefit *The Aids Crisis Trust* (1 June 1987); actress Anita Dobson (b. 1949), from the soap opera *EastEnders*, wore a beaded Rhodes' dress and another dress auctioned was described as a: 'red-beaded and embroidered dress with a surrealist flower-pot design [...] estimated at £3,000-£4,000'.⁸⁰ The Zandra Rhodes poster for 1987 depicts Rhodes wearing one of her heavily beaded dresses with the shape enhanced by shoulder pads, the shorter angular appearance of her hair and her authoritative gaze exude power.⁸¹ This image was also used in a piece about her as a council member of the 'Think British' Campaign (1987) promoting British products. In the article Rhodes comments that: 'In America having a Zandra Rhodes dress is status dressing'.⁸² It was a concept which was also applied to the hand-embroidered and hand-beaded saris in her 1987 *Indian Designer Saree Collection*.

ADITI: CREATIVE POWER AND THE DESIGNER SARI

During the 1980s *The Festival of India*, the largest cultural event of its kind, travelled to the UK (1982), the US (1985), France (1985-86), Sweden (1987), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (1987) and Japan (1988) promoting Indian textiles, culture

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and craft.⁸³ In 1981 Rhodes was personally invited to visit India by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917 - 1984) in conjunction with preparations for *The Festival of India*. This experience inspired the design and production of several collections, and found its apogee in the premiere of Rhodes' *Indian Saree Designer Collection* in Mumbai, India's most populous city, on 14 December 1987 (Figure 7) and its capital city, New Delhi on 18 December 1987.

Rhodes' first fashion collection inspired by India was *The Indian Miniature Painting Collection*, also known as *An Indian Collection* (Autumn/Winter 1982). It was shown in May 1982 at Pillar Hall, Olympia, London; the fashion show was described in *The Times* article titled 'blue models for a pink lady'; 'the show featured swirling clouds of incense, sitar music, and silken tents from which models emerged wearing jewels around their eyes, silk fabric twined in their pigtails, and huge stiff ruffs standing up from their heads. The models were painted blue, Rhodes explains, 'because ancient Indian gods were blue in colour.'⁸⁴

At the end of the show the stage was showered in rose petals and Rhodes appeared wearing a sari. A supporting show of clothes and interiors designed by Rhodes, which had been embroidered in India by Indian craftsmen, was exhibited alongside the *Aditi* exhibition at the Barbican Centre, London, 6 July - 22 August 1982.⁸⁵ Robyn Beeche photographed the poster for the special event; (Figure 8) the words 'Aditi' and 'creative power' are written across Rhodes' forehead as she represents Aditi, the Indian

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goddess of creation. Rhodes also channels Aditi through the blue make-up of ancient Indian gods, highlighting her cheekbones and jawline, and extending into her eyebrows and hair. She has become the 'diva' in the sense of the divine Hindu goddess of creativity, the ultimate expression of her work. Although the word 'diva' originates from the Italian for female deity, it is also commonly used to describe 'a celebrated female opera singer' and is particularly associated with successful powerful women.⁸⁶ This could apply to a number of Rhodes' famous clientele, as well as her costume designs for the opera.⁸⁷

In December 1987, Zandra Rhodes became the first Western designer to premiere a fashion collection in India - the *Indian Saree Designer Collection*.⁸⁸ The sari can be described as: 'a long unstitched piece of cloth, usually six or nine yards long that is draped in a set pattern. It accentuates the curves of a woman and the midriff is usually exposed.'⁸⁹ The sari is the principal national dress of the Indian woman; the gift of a sari marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood and it is part of the Hindu wedding ceremony. Hindu goddesses are depicted wearing saris, and saris are also offered by married women as gifts to goddesses through the *Oti bharane* ritual.⁹⁰ Depending upon how the sari is worn, it can both expose and hide the female form. For example historically it was worn as a single piece of cloth on its own: 'With the coming of the Muslims, the *ghagra* or the petticoat was discovered and clothes were stitched. Before that, Hindus believed piercing clothes with needles was impure. The blouse [*choli*] came into existence with the Muslims and also the British.'⁹¹

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Rhodes' *Indian Saree Designer Collection* may have been described by *The Indian Post* as 'the fashion equivalent of shipping coals to Newcastle'⁹² but in fact nearly sixty percent of the saris were to be exported to Western countries.⁹³ Rhodes commented that clientele attending her fashion shows now included sari-wearing 'International, jet-set Indians'.⁹⁴ Rhodes thought that: 'Indian ladies look[ed] so exquisite in their wrapped beauty, those feminine columns, identical yet different'.⁹⁵ She also commented that: 'Indian women are towers of strength and I want[ed] to emphasise this through my designs.'⁹⁶

In April 1988, *The Festival of India* arrived in Japan, Rhodes exhibited saris and textiles produced in India at the Seibu Seed Hall, Tokyo.⁹⁷ The *Indian Saree Designer Collection* was shown again, this time in London, to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of India's independence from Britain (6 July 1988). The UK premiere of the *Collection* featured the two main forms of Indian dress: the sari and the *shalwar* or *churidar kameez*. Rhodes gave the traditional shapes a twist, with decorative beadwork on the draped end of the sari's *pallu*; rounded shoulder pads in the *choli* ('bolero bodice' or blouse), 'puffed satin headdresses based on the turban', and: 'those crinoline panniers, a wicked, if witty, Western distortion of the graceful saree, giving it a shocking sexuality by thrusting the female hips into focus.'⁹⁸

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Both the Indian sari and the Punjabi suit present power and status through the costly hand-embroidered and hand-beaded silk fabrics, however they represent femininity in different ways. Whilst the *shalwar* or *churidar kameez*, as designed by Rhodes, only exposed the female shape of the back, the sari potentially highlighted the waist, shoulder, back, cleavage, and - as designed by Zandra Rhodes with the crinoline panniers- the hips as well.

CONCLUSION

Zandra Rhodes' representation of femininity evolved during the period 1979 to 1988 as she fulfilled an increasingly public role as a powerful and confident businesswoman. This is evident in the iconography and symbolism in posters for her fashion collections: from her portrayal as the Hindu goddess Aditi, the mother of creativity, to the posters for the *Zandra Rhodes II* and *Indian Saree Designer* Collection shows in the late 1980s. Rhodes' designs exposed and highlighted the natural shape of the female body, but also provided the wearer with fantasy and a sense of theatricality.

Performance is a central theme in Rhodes' 'works of art' and includes the mapping of the textile design onto the human body, theatrical fashion shows and the portrayal of femininity by the designer and her diverse clientele.

The voluminous crinoline shape of 'the Dress' communicated messages of 'maternal fecundity', whilst its representation in the media associated its representation of

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femininity as unambiguously upper class. 'The Dress' was worn by high society women and performed in the context of formal evening wear and bridal wear.

Elizabethan symbolism in the gold pleated jackets of *The Renaissance/Gold Collection* was combined with the swirled pleats exaggerating the silhouette of the wearer's shoulders. Worn by successful, powerful women such as Joan Collins and Diana Ross, the jackets communicated feminine beauty as power. The jackets, as photographed by Robyn Beeche, also demonstrated new and fluid concepts of femininity and gender identity in London's club scene in the early 1980s.

The intense labour needed to produce the heavily beaded *kameez* style dresses or exotic tunics made them visibly costly garments. Their value enhanced their representation as status symbols in contemporaneous newspaper and magazine articles. The weight of the garments and bold silhouette with its exaggerated shoulder pads offered a message of powerful femininity.

Finally Rhodes' reworking of the traditional Indian garment, the sari, drew on its intimate connection with and performance of Indian and Hindu rituals but also with the engagement between the female form and cloth in its simplest unstitched manner.

Zandra Rhodes' 'works of art' still have much to offer current and 'future generations of costume students'.⁹⁹ *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection* provides an online

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access point to the Zandra Rhodes' Style Bibles, Textile Design Name Bibles, digital images for 500 dresses, and learning and teaching materials including video tutorials.¹⁰⁰

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² *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection* makes available samples from all collections during this period, with the exception of the *Ode to Woman Collection* (Autumn/Winter 1986) which can be viewed towards the end of Style Bible No. 7.

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⁵ Winifred Holtby, a feminist writing about fashion after the First World War, commented unfavourably on the use of 'frills and flounces to emphasise the difference between men and women.' Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane, 1934), p. 119.

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⁷ Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety*, (London: IB Tauris, 2001), p. 116.

⁸ Caroline Evans, and Minna Thornton, *Women & Fashion: A New Look* (London: Quartet Books Ltd, 1989), p. 13.

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<<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>> [accessed 8 February 2015]. Please note that this information seems to have now been removed from Companies House.

¹² Some designs have specially designated numbers such as a one-shouldered dress which first appeared as 74/5C and then appeared in similar forms with the '5C' repeated, such as 78/5C.

¹³ *The Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection*

<<http://www.zandrarahodes.ucreative.ac.uk>> [accessed 21 January 2016].

¹⁴ Some of the research data underpinning this paper, including a timeline and a list of couture collections, is also available as a fileset online:

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²⁵ Alice Rawsthorn (Director of the Design Museum, London) and Zandra Rhodes, 'Is fashion a true art form?', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2003. Available from:

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⁴⁰ *The Face of Fashion*, p. 46.

⁴¹ *The Art of Zandra Rhodes*, p. 234.

⁴² In the 1960s the *shalwar kameez* - 'formerly a flappy, loose, regional outfit, became smart daywear'; influenced by Western fashion the tunic and trousers became more fitted, the *shalwar* trousers eventually metamorphosed into the tight *churidhar* trousers. See: Laila Tyabji, 'Fashion in Post-Independence India', in *The Berg Fashion Library*, September 2010 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/BEWDF/EDch4034>> [accessed 21 January 2016].

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Captions

Figure 1. Zandra Rhodes, 'Net Crinolines', including a sketch of crinoline dress design no. 79/106, page 97 from *Style Bible No. 3*, 1979. Pencil on paper. London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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[Available at: <http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=200427&sos=0&pic3=97>]

Figure 2. Zandra Rhodes, 'Modern Renaissance Look', page 170 from *Style Bible No. 5*, 1981. Pencil on paper. London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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Figure 3. Zandra Rhodes, detail of pleated gold jacket sleeve design no. 81/171. Gold tissue jacket worn with a black acetate satin belt (just seen). London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=200687&sos=15&pic3=81_171_81_186P_81_138_D]

Figure 4. Zandra Rhodes, detail of the beadwork on dress design no. 85/196. Sequins, bugle and seed beads on silk georgette. London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=200588&sos=0&pic3=85_196_D]

Figure 5. Zandra Rhodes, 'The Exotic Beaded Tunic Look', including a sketch of dress design no. 85/196, page 330 from *Style Bible No. 7*, 1985. Pencil on paper. London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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[Available from: <http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=200588&sos=0&pic3=330>]

Figure 6. Zandra Rhodes, back view of design no.s 84/177 (tunic) and 87/173 (trousers). Sequins, bugle and seed beads on silk georgette. London: Zandra Rhodes Archives.

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[Available from: http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=200690&sos=4&pic3=84_173B]

Figure 7. Premiere of the *Indian Saree Designer Collection*, models wearing saris hand-beaded and embroidered in India, with mirrored jewellery by Andrew Logan, 14 December 1987.

Photo by Swapan Mukherjee at the Oberoi - Trident Hotel, Mumbai.

Figure 8. Poster for Zandra Rhodes' exhibition at the Barbican Centre, London, 6 July to 22 August 1982. Photography by Robyn Beeche and make-up by Yvonne Gold.

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