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Norman Parkinson's Vintage Photography Inspires Fashion Designer Alice Temperley

The tranquility of rural England and the hustle of New York Fashion Week may seem worlds apart, but a rare photographic archive held in Somerset was the surprising inspiration for a leading British fashion designer's latest collection. The collection, created by Alice Temperley, was inspired by the vintage prints of Norman Parkinson, a pioneering fashion photographer at the height of his career in the 1950s and early 60s, whose work was regularly featured in Vogue and Queen Magazine.

Past and present were ingeniously brought together by the archive's creator, Angela Williams, who worked as Parkinson's assistant from 1962, just as her own career as a photographer was beginning to take flight. When Parkinson left London for Tobago as a tax exile in 1963, he gave Angela his original prints, featuring everything from fashion shoots with leading models of the day, to advertising campaigns and portraits of celebrities such as The Beatles and Audrey Hepburn.

Decades later, Angela's archive of hundreds of vintage silver prints documenting Parkinson's photography from 1950 to 1964 is one of the most important collections of the work of a leading British photographer and a fascinating record of rapid social change in a dynamic era of modern British history.

Alice Temperley explains how the archive provided a surprising source of inspiration for her Autumn/Winter 2010/11 collection. "Angela was a friend of my family, but although I had heard of Norman Parkinson as an early fashion photographer, I had no idea Angela used to work for him until she contacted me about using his photos," she says. "I was very surprised by the chapel studio, and how beautiful the prints are, and could see how his work had inspired other photographers."

Captivated by the potential of the Parkinson archive, Alice then set about choosing a selection of images that would best reflect the Temperley style, and which would inspire the creation of a new fashion collection. "I was particularly drawn to the Jean Shrimpton pictures," she explains. "I chose clean, beautiful, elegant photographs that would look good together as a collection. But the women had to look good too; I wanted models that would look timeless, pictures that could have been shot today. I rejected some because the models looked too much of their era and didn't translate to a modern look."

Alice has been described as being 'proud of her Britishness', and the Parkinson-inspired collection was hailed as 'a salute to British style'. "I designed the clothes themselves around the concept of being typically British," explains Alice. "For example I used royal jewellery as inspiration for the embroidery and schoolboy stripes and lace in other pieces."

Instead of the traditional catwalk show, Temperley London decided to stage a fashion/photography installation in New York Fashion Week, featuring the chosen selection of Norman Parkinson prints, with Temperley clothes and a new series of commissioned portraits of iconic British women of the 21st century wearing the clothes, shot in a style reminiscent of the Parkinson era. These celebrities included Annie

Lennox, Sophie Dahl, Erin O’Conner, Cecilia Chancellor, Rosamund Pike, and Lily Cole, and Adam Whitehead, former assistant to Mario Testino, shot the portraits.

“Parkinson’s work is so English and he was a bit eccentric, which inspired my idea to photograph proper British celebrities – women with true English blood in their veins – wearing pieces from the collection, with my own take on his originals,” says Alice. “I then sent the canvases off to a Temperley factory in India where details were re-embroidered directly onto the canvases using the same techniques that are used in the original creation of the clothes.”

Temperley was also keen to use the installation as an opportunity to support a good cause and on 18 May, the embellished celebrity canvases will be sold at a silent auction at the Phillips du Pury Gallery, with the proceeds going to The Circle, an Oxfam project supported by celebrities such as Annie Lennox, that aims to educate women out of poverty in West Africa.

“The Temperley collaboration has been very exciting, and we have been very busy since our successful show at Six Chapel Row Gallery in Bath last year,” says Angela. “From 19 May until 12 June the Chris Beetles Gallery in London will be showing over 50 Parkinson prints. This will be one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of his photographs since his retrospective exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 1981.

“We’ve also contributed Parkinson prints to a number of photography books, and also to the recent ‘Beatles to Bowie’ photographic exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, so the Archive is certainly gaining national interest.”

“There’s a huge surge of interest in vintage style and photography, so it’s wonderful to see Parkinson’s work taking centre stage again. It’s a great privilege and responsibility to be a caretaker of his legacy and to ensure his contribution to British photography continues to get the attention it deserves.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

- For further information, interview opportunities or images, please contact Angela Williams on tel: 01373 812290 or email: angelawilliamsbathuk@btinternet.com
- Find out more about the Angela Williams Archive of Norman Parkinson prints at www.angelawilliamsarchive.co.uk
- From 1945 to 1960 Norman Parkinson was employed as a portrait and fashion photographer for Vogue. From 1960 to 1964 he was an Associate Contributing Editor of Queen magazine. In 1963 he moved to Tobago, although frequently returned to London, and from 1964 until his death in 1990 he worked as a freelance photographer.
- Angela Williams is a successful photographer in her own right, and a number of her celebrity portraits are held in the National Portrait Gallery’s collection.