

L THE WORLD OF ANNA SUI

Quotes from *The World of Anna Sui* (credit panel)

Interpretive wall panels

Introduction (panel 1)

‘Even if people haven’t heard them for a while, I feel I’m telling stories that never go out of style.’

Anna Sui is one of New York City’s fashion legends. Since establishing her eponymous label in 1981, and from her first catwalk show in 1991 to her rock-star status in the Far East, Sui has maintained an independent vision and an independent company. Reflected in the fashion that she produces are her own passions. Unlike many American designers, Sui has forged a distinctively narrative-based design identity. Her storytelling weaves detailed research stemming from her inspirations with obsessions that have stayed with her from childhood onwards to create a look that could only be Anna Sui.

Together with Marc Jacobs, Isaac Mizrahi, Cynthia Rowley and Christian Francis Roth, Sui helped to define the American look in the 1990s. A youthful spirit infused the fashion of the era: it was a rejection of the head-to-toe, high-end designer styles that had dominated the 1980s. This fresh wave of design would come to represent a new, dynamic approach to fashion in the United States.

A rock and roll sensibility fused with gothic-tinged bohemianism has become the leitmotif of Sui’s collections. Her long-standing fascination with music, art history, the decorative arts and popular culture has provided the designer with a lexicon of elements that she is able to shape and combine in seemingly endless permutations. This is a key to Sui’s style. It is never a copy, but rather a distillation of references and research, culture and creativity.

Anna’s Inspirations (panel 2)

‘Everything I did my whole childhood was so I could be a designer.’

Born in suburban Dearborn in Detroit, Michigan, Sui knew from a young age that she would be a fashion designer. Her parents were first generation Chinese-Americans, and Sui grew up in a white, Catholic area of the city. A fascination with pop stars, Jackie Kennedy, clothing and fashion magazines would spark a lifelong passion. These early interests helped Sui to

create her own world, a talent for which she is known today in her ability to construct a complete environment.

Sui was taken by her brother to rock concerts in downtown Detroit, where she became fascinated by not only the music, but also the visual language of that world: its graphics, posters, clothing and environments. This thread, omnipresent in the designer's collections, combined with her other interests and began to form the Anna Sui universe. Even from an early age, Sui would research and document her inspirations; she has retained both the original inspirations and the methodology as part of her design process.

As a designer, Sui has built on these passions for popular culture. A constant feeling of the exotic 'other', perhaps reflecting her own experience of growing up in the only Chinese family in the neighbourhood, also runs through Sui's work. What emerges in her design language is the sense of careful observation, of studying and then interpreting anything and everything that interests her.

New York Style (panel 3)

'All I could be sure of was that this gorgeous subculture existed. I wanted in and Parsons was the ticket.'

After graduating from high school, Sui moved to New York City to attend Parsons School of Design: an ambition she had held since reading an article about two young designers who had attended the famous art school and then were able to open a boutique in Paris. It was only later Sui realised that one of the two was the daughter of Irving Penn, arguably the most famous American photographer of the twentieth century. It was during Sui's time at Parsons that she met the photographer Steven Meisel, who was to become a lifelong friend and collaborator.

Sui was a regular on the New York City club circuit; her dedication to her own outfits was a prelude to the detail that she would bring later to her fashion collections. The inspirations of those early years in New York – the punk scene and clubs like the Mudd Club – would become another element in the Anna Sui universe.

It was while Sui was a student at Parsons that she was hired as a design assistant for the label Charlie's Girls, under the direction of designer Erika Elias. From that point on, Sui was based

in New York's garment district, on Seventh Avenue. It was the fashion industry in that small area of the city that would provide the designer with the real-life training, the resources and the facilities to hone her talents. Through working for fashion companies in the garment district, and from the beginnings of her own wholesale company to her first catwalk shows, Sui became part of a movement of young, cool designers that would come to remake American fashion in the 1990s.

With the buzz generated by the collections of Marc Jacobs at Perry Ellis, Isaac Mizrahi, Cynthia Rowley, Byron Lars, Stephen Sprouse and Christian Francis Roth among others, the definition of American style would shift from the aspirational high fashion then seen as the pinnacle of American design to an alternative vision of modern dressing.

The World of Anna Sui (panel 4)

‘Externalizing my aesthetic clarified it. Everything became more *iconic*.’

A major element in Anna Sui's career has been her ability to create and sustain a unique world view, predicated on the environments that she has developed for herself. From her teenage bedroom – with its second-hand Victoriana furniture lacquered in black and the psychedelic posters she collected in high school – to her first apartment in New York City, Sui's living spaces came to define her label's aesthetic and ethos.

Influenced by the work of Aubrey Beardsley, Sui began to collect wicker and Victorian furniture, which she painted herself in a glossy black. Her bedroom walls were a pale grey and were lined with Beardsley prints and psychedelic rock posters. The lacquered furniture travelled to New York with her, and it was this coupled with the decor of her New York apartments that informed the way Sui's universe began to crystallise. In her very first home in the city Sui painted the entire living room – including the windows – a glossy red, while her bedroom was painted black.

Just after her first fashion shows, designer Zack Carr advised Sui to open a boutique as this would allow customers to ‘get’ her aesthetic. Taking his advice, Sui opened her first boutique in 1992. Purple walls, red floors and black-lacquered furniture provided the backdrop for

Sui's clothing and accessories, alongside rock posters, dolls' heads and Tiffany-style lamps. While the original boutique in Soho, New York, was very much a DIY affair, the decor provided the blueprint for Anna Sui retail environments around the world. Into this fully realised, distinctive milieu came Sui's designs for fashion, where they existed as both part of and an extension of the designer's world.

'I always loved a complete environment.'

Anna's Archetypes (panel 5)

'But I'm always looking for the unfamiliar perspective on familiar things. That takes research. Which, as I said, is my favourite thing.'

Throughout Sui's career a strong group of themes has been present. These themes, represented here as characters or eras, provide a crucial thread linking Sui's personal obsessions with her meticulous research. These archetypes are touchstones for the world that she has created in her interiors, collections and products. The ultimate storyteller in American fashion, Sui's narratives are rich in imagination and anchored in research.

What gives Sui's designs their distinctive edge is her ability to create links between disparate elements and ideas; when she puts them all together what emerges is something both original and familiar. There is a twist inherent in Sui's work: the characters that move through her designs offer a dichotomy – light and dark, innocent and knowing, sweet and sour.

Note: Archetype text will be in the exhibition brochure that is given to each visitor.

Collaborations (panel 6)

Sui has had long-standing collaborations that have been vital to the look and atmosphere of the collections. From the knitwear, millinery and jewellery through to the hair and make-up artists, these relationships are pivotal to Sui's oeuvre. Friendships and the feeling of being part of a family are evident. Sui's main collaborators have worked with the designer for many years and are an important part of the process for the designer.

Originally, François Nars created the make-up for the Sui's fashion shows; more recently, Pat McGrath has taken on this role. Garren of New York has styled the hair from the first presentation in 1991, and Frédéric Sanchez produces the soundtracks: always a vital element in the world of Anna Sui.

The now-legendary millinery is created for Sui by James Coviello, along with knitwear infused with wit and charm. Designers Erickson Beamon work closely with Sui on jewellery and accessories that are much more than just that: they are crucial to the complete looks that Sui sends down the catwalk.

James Coviello (small panel)

James Coviello is an American fashion designer and milliner who, after graduating from Parsons School of Design, established his own label in 1987. He and Sui met the evening before her first catwalk show. She needed accessories to complete the outfits and asked Coviello if he could make hats for the occasion. Since then, Coviello has designed all the hats featured in her collections, as well as all her knitwear and some of the accessories. Sometimes he even creates props, like the iridescent palm trees decorating the catwalk of the Spring 2016 show. In 1998, Coviello launched a ready-to-wear line that he still produces today.

Erickson Beamon (small panel)

Originally from Detroit, Karen and Eric Erickson are jewellery designers based in New York and co-founders of Erickson Beamon, a label renowned for its elegant handcrafted aesthetic. Karen and Eric Erickson had already been friends with Sui for a few years when she asked them to design jewellery for her first fashion show. Their collaboration has lasted ever since. While preparing a collection, Sui sends fabric samples and sketches to Karen who designs her jewellery accordingly, providing a witty and provocative touch that completes the outfits.

Pat McGrath (small panel)

Pat McGrath is a British make-up artist who received international recognition in the early 1990s for her unique style, defined by a mix of innovative techniques and experimental uses of material. Although she never received a formal training in make-up artistry, she gained significant visibility through her early collaboration with Edward Enninful – then editor of *i-D* magazine and current Editor-in-Chief of *British Vogue* – and with Steven Meisel in 1994. Working on more than 60 ready-to-wear and couture shows each season, McGrath is today one

of the most influential make-up artists of the fashion industry. Among her many achievements, she also launched her own brand, Pat McGrath Labs, in 2015. She was recently named a Dame of the British Empire for Services to the Fashion and Beauty Industry and Diversity.

Steven Meisel (small panel)

Trained at Parsons School of Design, Steven Meisel is an internationally acclaimed fashion photographer best known for having shot every single cover and editorial story of *Vogue Italia* since 1988. He first started working as a fashion illustrator for the Halston label and for *Women's Wear Daily*, before his rise to prominence as a photographer in the 1980s. His clients include Prada, Versace, Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein and Marc Jacobs – to name just a few – for whom he has photographed some of the most iconic campaigns and controversial fashion stories. Meisel and Sui met while studying at Parsons in the late 1970s. Both shared the same interests in fashion, music and subcultures and quickly became close friends as well as collaborators.

François Nars

François Nars is a French make-up artist, photographer and founder of the cosmetic line, NARS. After graduating from the Carita Institute in Paris, Nars was employed by several French fashion magazines in Paris. In 1984 he was asked by Polly Mellen – then fashion editor of American Vogue – to work on one of her shoots. She convinced him to move to New York where he was immediately commissioned by Harper's Bazaar, Vogue US and Vogue Italia, collaborating with many renowned designers and photographers. Since 1996, Nars has also worked as a photographer for a number of fashion magazines.

Garren (small panel)

Garren is a legendary hairstylist and a fixture in the world of fashion. Dubbed "The Godfather of hair" by Vogue Magazine, he continues to be known for setting trends and pushing boundaries. For the past four decades, he has been called upon by leading photographers, designers, models, celebrities and magazines to create iconic styles and transformations. With over 1,000 magazine covers to his credit, Garren's name is synonymous with the highest level of style, sensibility and sophistication. His work is regularly featured in leading fashion publications. Garren is also the co-founder of the hair care brand, R+Co.

The Design process (panel 7)

‘My favourite thing was always research. I met all the trim people, the button people, the pleating and embroidery people...’

‘I kept coming back to music, too. Music made the fashion more amazing, more accessible.’

Sui’s design process reflects her eclectic, encompassing aesthetic and her fascination with popular culture. She is an avid exhibition-goer with an interest in fashion, art, design and music. Each collection begins with a spark, an idea that starts the designer off on her research, the outcomes of which will form the basis for the design of the collection.

Key to Sui’s research is the desire to understand why things happened or what inspired the design, song or artwork. This then leads her on to other topics and ideas that themselves become part of the design process. The creation of Sui’s collections represents this bricolage of ideas and images that the designer builds into a personal narrative that runs through each catwalk presentation. Many of those in the audience may never know the depth of the ideas in each look the designer presents but will be fully aware of the consistency of Sui’s vision across the collection.

The development of the groups within each collection takes place on large mood boards that the designer creates on the walls of her studio. Inspirational images from her research, sketches, and swathes of textiles and samples of print are arranged within signature Sui borders. These boards track not just the development of each season’s collection but also the designer’s creative processes.

Sui is known for the use of textiles in her collection, many of which she herself creates. She has developed particular approaches to textiles, including the overprinting of jacquard woven fabric; this adds yet another dimension to her creations. Other textiles, such as Liberty of London prints, are re-coloured and reworked for Sui’s collection in collaboration. Alongside the textile and print design is Sui’s appreciation and fascination for the details that make up a garment. She often develops specific trims, buttons, beading and embroidery that relate to

another element or concept within the looks for that season. Anna Sui's holistic vision as a designer is about making connections, and everything around the designer is part of the connectivity, and the story.