

Matthew Williamson

Fashion Designer (1971-



Matthew Williamson portrait,
Photographer Patrick Igonet



Matthew Williamson exhibition at
the Design Museum, 2007
photograph Luke Hayes



Matthew Williamson, Spring
Summer 1998 debut collection
Electric Angels, copyright
Catwalking



Matthew Williamson is a unique success story within the British fashion industry. From setting out as a fashion graduate in 1994, he has opened his own store in London's Mayfair and his collections are worn by international celebrity clients. It is fifteen years since he established his business and he now has a multi-million pound international fashion brand.

Born 1971 Manchester England

Studied at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, graduating in 1994.

In the summer of 1997 a cold call to Plum Sykes, then fashion assistant at British Vogue, led to a meeting where she placed an order for some silk scarves he had designed.

His eponymous fashion house was founded in February 1997. Joseph Velosa is the business partner and the CEO of Matthew Williamson.

That same year, Williamson debuted his collection 'Electric Angels' at London Fashion Week

Electric Angels, the debut show featured models Kate Moss, Jade Jagger and Helena Christensen wearing bias cut dresses in tangerine, fuchsia and magenta.

In 2005, he launched his own perfume range; the following year he was appointed Creative Director at Emilio Pucci.

In 2007, a runway show of his designs was incorporated into the video for Prince's song "Chelsea Rodgers" from his *Planet Earth* album.

In 2007, the Design Museum, London, hosted a retrospective of his work entitled "Matthew Williamson – 10 years in Fashion"

In 2008, Williamson was awarded the "Red Carpet Designer" accolade at the British Fashion Awards where he has also received three nominations for Designer of the Year

Matthew Williamson, Spring Summer 1998, debut collection Electric Angels, copyright Catwalking



Maththew Williamson working on his De Gournay dress for Vogue



Matthew Williamson, De Gournay dress, Look 31 in the Autumn/Winter 2006 Collection



Matthew Williamson - Autumn/Winter 07 - Copyright Matthew Williamson

In October 2010 it was announced that Matthew Williamson signed a new licensing deal with MBFG. The deal began a new line – Muse by Matthew Williamson. The new line is expected to be in stores for Fall 2011.

Williamson is known for his love of colour, patten, print and increasingly the intricacy of the artwork.

Candy Girls Collection in Spring/Summer 2000, Williamson started to experiment creatively with print - prior to this garments were painted by hand.

He frequently prints onto silk georgette, the flat graphic nature of the print counteracts the fluid, unstructured natural quality of the fabric. Both combine to give the illusion of movement.

One of his best known prints is based on peacock feathers. The theme has exotic references and reflects his signature print style consisting of an outline - either black or white - which is then filled with a flat or graded synthetic colour.

SIGNATURES: "My collections are known for their print, embellishment, attention to detail and kaleidoscopic colour. The designs encapsulate a bohemian spirit and a laid back sense of glamour."

TRADEMARK: "I would say an evening dress in my signature style – combining colour, print and embellishment!"

Born in Chorlton, Manchester in 1971, aged seventeen, he won a place on the Fashion and Textiles course at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London. Following his graduation in 1994, he concentrated on devising his own collection, whilst working part-time for fashion companies including Monsoon and Marni. From the beginning, Williamson's ideas have derived from a wide range of sources, both academic and intuitive. His early sketchbooks, photographs and artwork provide an insight into his working process from initial inspiration and the application of pattern, texture and colour to the finished product on the catwalk.

In the summer of 1997 a cold call to Plum Sykes, then fashion assistant at British Vogue, led to a meeting where she placed an order for some silk scarves he had designed. Encouraged by her reaction, Williamson concentrated on producing his first women's wear collection which was shown at London Fashion Week in 1997. Entitled Electric Angels, the debut show featured models Kate Moss, Jade Jagger and Helena Christensen wearing bias cut dresses in tangerine, fuchsia and magenta. The show lasted just seven minutes and featured eleven outfits, but it received widespread acclaim from all those who saw it. This was the starting point for the business, which under Williamson and his business partner Joseph Velosa, has continued to develop and expand.

Q. In 2007 you celebrated ten years in fashion with an exhibition at the Design Museum?

A. I have always held the Design Museum in high regard and was thrilled to be invited to stage an exhibition of my work. The exhibition offered me the opportunity to review ten year's of work and to reflect on my working process and the development of the Matthew Williamson aesthetic over that period.

Q. How have you managed to keep a business operating for ten years within such a fiercely competitive arena?

A. A combination of ambition, vision and always being confident that I had something to say. I was fortunate to meet early on in my career Joseph Velosa who is now my business partner and the CEO of Matthew Williamson. We are both very business minded and decided early on that we would create clothes that women wanted to buy. I understood that I needed to sell clothes in order for the business to survive. We are now a multi-million pound fashion brand. Many fashion businesses make an early profit and then fail due to lack of support or they start up, run for a few seasons and are then bought out by larger conglomerates. Whilst celebrity endorsement is important to the brand, it could not survive on celebrity endorsement alone - people are choosing to wear Matthew Williamson designs above others.

Q. When did your interest in fashion design first emerge?

A. As a young boy, I was constantly sketching. Aged eleven, I drew a picture of a shop coloured bright pink. I now have my own store in Bruton Street which carries a bright pink sign above the door. I excelled in art and design at school but had little interest in other subjects. I took O' and A' levels and then decided to pursue a career in art and design.

Q. Tell me about your early years growing up in Manchester?

A. I had an extremely happy childhood growing up in Manchester with my parents and sister. I played violin as a child but eventually decided to give up private lessons in order to focus on art and design. My parents encouraged my interest and bought me a sewing machine for my birthday. I used to sew and knit during the weekends. I admired my mother's style. I have early memories of watching my mother get ready for work. I was fascinated in the way she laid everything out on the

bed the night before, how everything was colour-coordinated from her clothes and shoes through to jewellery and nail colour. My parents took the difficult decision to sell their house in Manchester and move to London to help me set up my business. My mother actually worked in the Bruton Street store where she was a very popular Saturday girl.

Q. How important were your studies at Central St Martins, London?

A. I decided early on that I wanted to be a designer and applied to Manchester Polytechnic to do a Foundation Course in art. At interview, the tutor told me that as I had a very clear idea about where I wanted to go, it wasn't necessary for me to undertake a Foundation course and should be able to get onto any fashion course but with the exception of St Martins. This comment, combined with reading in Vogue that John Galliano had studied at St Martins, prompted me to make an application. I was seventeen years old when I had my interview and was offered a place on the Fashion course.

Q. How important was your first meeting with Plum Sykes at British Vogue?

A. I saw Plum's name in the staff list of a copy of Vogue and sent a silk scarf to her. She invited me to meet with her at Vogue House together with Alexander Shulman, Lisa Armstrong and Lucinda Chambers. They gave me my first order and told me that if I fulfilled the order, they would write about me. I remember spending two weeks in Delhi making up the order for Vogue.

Q. From where did the inspiration derive for your first collection, Electric Angels?

A. I saw a picture of a girl wearing a fantastic beaded skirt on the front cover of Tatler. I later learned that this was Jade Jagger and asked to meet her. She was full of ideas and encouraged me to build my first collection - Electric Angels in 1997. She called her friend, the model Kate Moss to ask her to get involved. Kate came to my flat in Holborn and selected the dress she wanted to wear in the show. We were then joined by Helena Christenson and Diane Kruger. The inspiration for Electric Angels derived from an awareness at the time that fashion was grey, masculine and dowdy. Jade and I were living with bright colour and ordering saris from India. The first show was very modest in scale – it was only four minutes in length, featured eleven outfits and cost just £15,000 to stage, made possible by a bursary

from the Fashion Council.

Q. How would you describe your working process?
How do you design?

A. Ideas for a new collection usually start with my last show. As I send out my models, backstage I am viewing a monitor and passing a critical eye over the individual looks. Mood boards are an important part of my design process. A six week period of research follows a show where I and my design team travel to bring back examples of whatever is inspiring them – it could be a swatch of fabric or a photograph. This collection of images derived from a number of different sources is collated to create a mood board. Behind the scenes at Matthew Williamson is a small team of motivated professionals who work with me to develop my vision. It is their task to interpret my personal preferences and to work closely with me to develop the collection and the brand aesthetic. A collection of some 400 garments results with around 58 key garments selected to best express the essence of the collection. These garments then typically form a show that consists of between 35 and 40 looks or 'exits'. The constant demand to show every six months is both challenging and demanding but I recognise that this is the key vehicle by which the fashion industry moves forward from season to season.

Q. How do you organise your catwalk, what is involved in this process?

A. A catwalk show is the platform that most designers use to show their work. A show usually lasts no longer than ten minutes but is the culmination of six months work and preparation. Often a theatrical event, it is the buyers and press who attend along with celebrity clients. During a typical fashion week in London or New York there will be between six to eight shows each day so it is essential that the designer makes those all-important ten minutes count.

It is this process of evolution from one show to the next that best expresses a designer's continuing body of work. My shows have concentrated on developing the essential elements that go together to form my core signature. Successfully developing this signature from season to season is key to keeping both press and buyers interested in my collections. Each season presents a delicate juggling act for a designer - move the signature too far and you risk alienating the buyers, keep the signature too similar and the fashion press have nothing new to report.

Q. You are known for your love of colour, pattern and

print – is this a vital element of your work?

A. Print is an essential aspect of my work. The development of a new print for the season can kick-start an entire collection. It was not until the Candy Girls Collection in Spring/Summer 2000, that I started to experiment creatively with print - prior to this garments were painted by hand. Working closely with my design director, I have consciously striven to extend the complexity of my print aesthetic, increasing the intricacy of the artwork. I frequently print onto silk georgette, the flat graphic nature of the print counteracts the fluid, unstructured natural quality of the fabric. Both combine to give the illusion of movement. I like to contrast and counterbalance colour and print in unusual combinations combining the natural with the man-made - the contrast between design, fabric and decoration is the strongest inspiration of all. One of my best known prints is based on peacock feathers. The theme has exotic references and reflects my signature print style consisting of an outline - either black or white - which is then filled with a flat or graded synthetic colour. I think it was this energetic synthesis of print with colour which led to my appointment as Creative Director of Pucci in 2005.

Q. What inspired the De Gournay dress?

A. As far back as 1999 and the Disco Zen Collection, I had been interested in hand painting Chinoiserie patterns, most notably on unusual and delicate fabrics, such as paper and silk. Chinoiserie combines a contrast between synthetic elements and stylised natural design, fusing exotic motifs from Asia and the Far East. My fascination for Chinoiserie motifs re-emerged when I decided to use De Gournay silk wallpaper to decorate my flagship store on Bruton Street. I embellished it with painted fluorescent highlights and antique jewels sourced from market stalls. The individuality of the decoration caught the eye of the World of Interiors Magazine who took the highly unusual step of featuring the interior of my retail store on their front cover. Shortly after opening the Bruton Street store, I was approached by Vogue who asked me to contribute a dress for their celebratory ninety year edition. I was keen to re-work the De Gournay print into a one-off couture garment which was later photographed by Mario Testino. I was so pleased with the outcome that I asked his design team to rework the dress so it could be retailed as a ready to wear style. The new look De Gournay dress became Look 31 in the Autumn/Winter 2006 Collection. Following the show, the garment was sold in the very Bruton Street store that had originally

inspired the print.

Q. From where do you derive your inspiration?

A. At the very beginning of my career, my many trips to India aroused an early interest in colour and pattern. For a young designer from Manchester, India's exoticism had an enormous impact on my work and was to influence many later collections. I was enthralled by the exquisite craftsmanship, vivid colour palettes and extraordinary beadwork and jewellery. Returning to London, I sought to imbue his work with his newly discovered palette of colour. Drawing on my early experience as a placement student working with Zandra Rhodes, I developed fabric swatches of my own designs, featuring intricate beading, print and embroidery. My subsequent debut collection, Electric Angels, featured bright, fresh colour combinations and juxtapositions that were to become my trademark. I continue to travel extensively and collect inspiration from every possible source in order to continue to develop my aesthetic. Print and beading from Africa, geometric graphic shapes from Mexico and ice-cream colours from Miami have all been central to my more recent collections.

Q. How many collections do you design each year and how many pieces in each collection – describe a typical year in the MW calendar?

A. I design four collections a year, two main collections in February and September for London and two for Pucci in Italy. In addition there are pre-collections slotted inbetween. Following the shows there is a four week selling period to buyers pre-fall and pre-spring.

Q. If you had advice for an aspiring fashion graduate just starting out, what would this be?

A. Ensure that you have a pure, strong vision and have confidence in that vision. Be prepared to take advice and criticism but your opinion and conviction must remain strong and solid. Find someone to support you, who can compensate for your weaknesses and help you to overcome obstacles. But overall you must have an unwavering sense of belief in your artistic work to survive in the fashion industry.

© Design Museum

FURTHER READING

iamson
MATTHEW WILLIAMSON

Catwalk show

15 September 2013
19:00

Company Details

www.matthewwilliamson.com
46 Hertford Street
London
W1J 7DP

Biography

Matthew Williamson Biography

Lookbook

Matthew Williamson Lookbook

Social Media

FacebookTwitter



DESIGNER NAME: Matthew Williamson

BACKGROUND: Matthew Williamson was born in Manchester in 1971. He grew up and studied there until the age of 17, when he was offered a place on the fashion degree course at Central Saint Martins College, London. Matthew graduated from Central Saint Martins with a BA in Fashion Design and Printed Textiles in 1994.

Matthew Williamson Ltd was founded in February 1997 by Matthew and CEO, Joseph Velosa. Matthew showed his acclaimed debut collection, 'Electric Angels', at London Fashion Week in September 1997. Matthew's debut show of only fourteen vibrantly coloured looks worn by models including Kate Moss, Helena Christensen and Jade Jagger made a huge impact on the fashion world, showcasing a taster of what was to come in the years to follow.

SIGNATURES: "My collections are known for their print, embellishment, attention to detail and kaleidoscopic colour. The designs encapsulate a bohemian spirit and a laid back sense of glamour."

TRADEMARK: "I would say an evening dress in my signature style – combining colour, print and embellishment!"

IDEAL CLIENT: "Anyone who loves my clothes! I don't design with a particular look or age in mind as it's obvious from working in my stores that my clothes are worn by all different types of people. The Matthew Williamson woman is feminine and sexy, fun and free-spirited, with a laid-back approach to glamour."

THE COLLECTION: "The English country garden and the artist Keith Haring."

FAVOURITE COLLECTION TO DATE: "Asking a designer to pick their favourite collection is like asking a mother to pick her favourite child. I know how hard I've worked for each one and so each remains special to me in some way. I must admit though that I probably always favour the newest collection."

WHO EMBODIES THE SPIRIT OF YOUR BRAND? "My collections have always been more about an attitude and an idea. I am drawn to a certain insouciant but down-to-earth spirit and that often comes through in my designs. There isn't a quintessential Matthew Williamson woman and the

customers I meet in my Mayfair store are a real testament to this; they come from all walks of life and there is a real range in terms of age, ethnicity and lifestyles. Ultimately, I like to think they are drawn to my pieces because it makes them feel beautiful and they can have fun in them."