



Details of a contemporary wedding skirt from southwest India on display at the Nomad Museum.

All dressed up

Former fashion designer Sandra 'Zandi' Richardson opens private museum featuring her global textile and art collection

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SCOTT GERDES

YOU'LL
NEVER
BE AN
ARTIST
BECAUSE
YOU CAN'T
DRAW.

Sometimes those “you’ll never be good enough” words from a college art instructor still cross her mind, but Sandra “Zandi” Richardson created new dreams anyway. If only her instructor could see her now.

A lifetime of globe-trotting has afforded the former teacher, gallery owner, filmmaker and fashion designer quite the garment, textile and art collection, all of which is featured in her Nomad Museum.

She set up the Nomad Foundation that is presently in a trust. Upon her death, Richardson’s historic Taos home built and lived in by Joseph Fleck (a contemporary of the Taos Society of Artists), all of its contents and the small museum on the property will live on as the “Nomad Collection.”

“The idea is for artists and people who don’t travel anywhere to be able to walk through, and see art and textiles and sculpture and works on paper — pretty much every medium — from around the world to get ideas that will inform their work, like Gauguin did when he went to the South Pacific and it changed his whole art,” Richardson passionately explained as if she were offering you a taste of her favorite food.

The museum is open now and can be toured by appointment only for groups up to 12 people.

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A 50-year-old ‘Singing Shawl’ from Thailand. This garment is so-named due to the sound the hand-woven cotton makes with the wearer’s movements, caused by the rattle of the green beetle wings affixed to it.



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P R I M A R I L Y , its purpose is for groups interested in textiles or for organizations like the Wurlitzer Foundation if they want to bring their students on a tour. It's housed in a simple building with a hand-painted sign by Taos artist David Vedoe. Inside, her museum-quality garments and other textiles are displayed. Her art-filled home cannot be toured at this time as it's a "very private" type of "museum" where she plans to host invitation-only soirées and lectures on specific topics until her demise after which it, too, will be open to appointment-only tours.

The museum collection

African hand-spun cloth dyed with mud from the Niger River. Early 20th-century silks lined with Russian trade cloth. Ottoman Empire outfits from Turkey. A wool brocade cape worn by an Atlas Mountain Berber man featuring designs depicting Talismanic

tattoos with protective powers and a sword used to defeat Portuguese invaders. And so much more history, glittering thread, lace, shells, bells and hand-dyed colors make up her treasure.

"I started my personal collection in the '80s when I was buying for my Gallery Nomad in Sydney (Australia)," Richardson said with an infectious smile. "So a lot of these pieces are quite old, as they were antiques when I bought them. I shop — that's what I do — and I've been shopping for 50 years."

Richardson likes to go to the country where the items were made and buy from the native people. That's quite different from what most collectors do; they go to a gallery and buy a piece of art.

"In Pakistan I bought all this furniture from a dealer in the Swat Valley where we can't go anymore because it's too dangerous now," she said with sadness. "A couple years ago we (she and late husband Runno)

went on a trip through all the 'Stans' along the Silk Road (primarily refers to ancient trade routes from China to Russia). We went to Uzbekistan for the first time, but I had coveted their textiles from dealers in England, France and Morocco. I went there thinking, 'Oh goody goody, I can buy from the source.' And I did, but it was slim pickings. In Turkmenistan I was very disappointed. There's nothing left in some countries of origin because they're not making things anymore. Everybody's got blue jeans and cell phones, and it's like the old crafts have died in a lot of places."

For Richardson, the procuring of ethnic textiles and garments isn't just about the hunt, it's about preservation and education.

How she got here

At 18, while living with her mother, who was a U.S. Army special weapons expert stationed in Germany,

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1 > Sandra 'Zandi' Richardson's Nomad Foundation collection includes a Uzbek silk ikat coat and hat with Russian tradecloth lining. The number of hat braids indicate a person's relationship status: four braids means single and six braids means married. Ikat is a difficult technique that involves dyeing the warp and weft thread before weaving, making the achievement of a clear design very challenging.

2 > Richardson haggles over furniture prices with men from the Swat Valley in remote Pakistan circa mid-1980s. Courtesy photo

3 > Details of a man's silk jacket from the 19th-century Ottoman Empire in Marmara, Turkey. Along with 'shalwar' (pants), Richardson collected this garment in Istanbul in the 1980s.

4 > The Dogon priest had just gotten a new hat the day this photo was taken in Mali, West Africa in 2000. With some charade-like gesturing and help from her guide, Richardson talked the priest into selling his old hat to her. Courtesy photo

ALL DRESSED UP

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Above: Hats are also part of the extensive Nomad Foundation collection. Shown is a child's embroidered 'Tiger Hat' from early 19th-century China procured in England. In Chinese culture the tiger is a mascot. Parents and other family members embroider the animal's likeness on shoes and hats for their children to wear. It is their hope the children look dignified and strong. And they believe the image of the tiger is a protection against evil, which can protect children from different disasters.

Left to right: A few handmade Zandi Design garments remain from Richardson's design days, which incorporated antique textiles from around the world. Shown is one of her first creations.

A heavy Egyptian net shawl interwoven with silver strips.

Collected in New Dehli, India, is this museum-quality silk 'Airplane Skirt.' Among the traditional animales and men on horseback, it shows a unique phase after WWI in which bi-planes were weaved into the brocade's motif.

Richardson was bitten by the travel bug. After the short-sighted instructor at Southern Colorado State College in her hometown of Pueblo, Colorado, told her he didn't see her as an artist, she decided to go into teaching. She earned a degree in communications and education at the University of Colorado in Boulder. A kinship with Australia soon followed.

"I was protesting like anyone with a brain in the '60s and early '70s, and they killed the students at Kent State," expressed the self-described hippie with the same disdain she felt so many years ago. "And I thought, 'I'm outta here. I don't want to live in a country where they kill college kids for saying what they think.' So I left."

The year was 1972 when the 22-year-old immigrated to Australia after meeting an Aussie girl in a Cincinnati "chicken shop." They got along from the start and the girl asked Richardson if she wanted to go back to Australia with her. It was Richardson's ticket out.

Via a "cheap" British touring company, the journey began in Venice on a bus with 27 other adventurers. They rumbled over mountains into Greece, then on to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and then up to Nepal where they got stuck because of the Bangladesh Liberation War and couldn't fly out. Eventually, they flew to Thailand, took a train to Malaysia and then hopped a plane to Australia.

"Through all those travels you start noticing things." The first piece of ethnic art she ever bought was on that trip from a market in Iran. Little did she know, the lifetime of "shopping" had begun.

In Sydney, she got work as a teacher and incorporated her film studies by starting a film and a magazine class. She made a couple movies on film grants. Subsequently, she was offered a chance to train as a film producer and filmmaker. Richardson left teaching and started her own film company with her first husband, David. They made a feature documentary called "Drop of Rough Ted," about a "real" Outback character. During the production, the couple traveled throughout the territory.

"That's when I really, really got into aboriginal culture."

She gave up her next career as a freelance film director for Film Australia after meeting Runno — thinking the best way to start off a marriage was not to accept a six-month directing gig in Indonesia. The couple took ownership of a friend's shop called Gallery Nomad, where she had worked in between films, after her friend decided to get out of the business.

"It was a Pier 1-type store" in Paddington, Australia — the Soho of Sydney. "I loved it." It took off and "we became really quite famous."

"We had international clients — I sold a rare Indonesian textile to the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). That was a big day. I nearly fainted," she humbly recalled.

Richardson earned a reputation for being an international dealer. She sold gold to people in Switzerland and Naga items from tribal India to collectors in Germany.

Fashion design

During her time at Gallery Nomad she bought pieces of dress fronts featuring "amazing" embroidery made by the Punjab in northern India.

"They were just fragments for dress fronts because they were going to burn them to get the gold off the thread. I was distressed. I said, 'No, you can't do that,' so I bought them."

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The Nomad Foundation collection includes this rare Jain textile from India. The scene depicts the Hindu Jain master teacher instructing his disciples under The Tree of Life.



Traditional Mali mud cloth made into a Zandi coat, circa 2012. This fabric is called mud cloth because the handspun cotton is dyed black, brown or yellow with mud from the Niger River by the Dogon tribe.



Far right: Sandra 'Zandi' Richardson's Nomad Museum garment and art collection spans decades and represents cultures from around the world.



A Dogon priest's old hat that Richardson bought from him in Mali, West Africa in 2000. 'You would never see these hats unless you visit a Dogon priest and they are never for sale. What is very unique about this top is that it features depictions of Dogon dancers with sky ladder and Dogon cross masks on their heads, and butterfly designs.' Richardson described.





A Turkoman (Turmenistan) women's top – a traditional black-dyed and multi-pleated skirt embellished with buttons, fine embroidery, and brass, silver and metal ornamentation.

THEN THE IDEA STRUCK HER TO SEW

the pieces into fashions. She carted them around for 10 years, came to Taos in 1994 and opened the second Gallery Nomad. Richardson found herself single after divorce, had no boss, no one telling her what or what not to do and if she was going to create wearable fashions that incorporated Punjab embroidery, that was the time. In 1999, Richardson made about a dozen garments.

“And then I thought, well, I suppose I should show them to somebody. So I had a little solo fashion show out at the Taos Country Club and somebody bought some. I went, ‘Holy cow, I guess that means I’m a designer.’”

She later sold clothing out of her

Ranchos de Taos boutique, gaining notable clients such as Goldie Hawn (her first clothing sale from the shop) and Shirley MacLaine. “I was over the moon.”

Richardson and Runno reconnected some years later and remarried. They set off on a jet-setting life that brought more ethnic garments and textiles into her care.

On to Taos

Richardson visited Santa Fe when she was 18. It impressed her and was on the radar after deciding to come back to the U.S. upon hearing the news that her mother was ill. But the Santa Fe she remembered as a teenager had changed.

“It totally lost its heart and character as far as I’m concerned.”

A friend in Albuquerque posed, “If you liked Santa Fe in the old days why

don’t you keep driving to Taos?”

But she remembered Taos as being a “biker town where hippies got shot.” She didn’t think she was going to like that.

“I drove up over that ridge seeing the mountain range and the Gorge and I had to pull over. I burst into tears and this is somebody who has traveled around the whole world, it’s not like I haven’t seen pretty places,” she said. “I was astonished. I had no idea that Taos was so beautiful. I thought, ‘This is it. You got weird White people, Hispanic people, Indian people ... I like this. This is not like America.’”

And neither is her collection.

“I feel like if you have a dream, just do it. Either it works or it doesn’t. At least try instead of sitting around being frustrated. Don’t die thinking, ‘If only I had ...’” she advised. “Heed the old Estonian saying, ‘If the dog doesn’t wag its tail, who will?’” ☺



To schedule a tour, call (575) 751-1882 or (575) 741-1000 or email: nomad@taosnet.com
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