

A WOMAN

THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, ZAMPATTI ALWAYS TOOK TIME TO GIVE YOUNGER DESIGNERS A LEG-UP, WRITES SUSAN HORSBURGH, SHARING BUSINESS ADVICE AND SHOWING THEM HOW TO ENDURE IN AN OFTEN BRUTAL INDUSTRY.

OF INFLUENCE



The whimsical designs of Romance Was Born are held in costume and textile collections around the country – many with intricate beading and hand-worked embroidery, others showstopping statement pieces of sequins, fringing and ostrich feathers. Anna Plunkett, one half of the duo behind the label, describes the aesthetic as “maximalist”, so it was notable that Carla Zampatti – Australia’s queen of elegant understatement – asked Plunkett and her design partner, Luke Sales, to style her for a 2015 *Harper’s BAZAAR Australia* shoot celebrating her label’s half-century. The following year, Zampatti harnessed their styling smarts again for the launch of her 2016 Spring-Summer range at her home in Sydney’s Wool-lahra. Calling them Australia’s only haute couture designers, she explained that she ‘wanted a bit of their romance’ and was thrilled with the show, which starred a one-off, hand-beaded leopard-print cape with ‘Carla’ emblazoned across the back.

Even in her 70s, Zampatti remained curious, championing the young and the new. After one Romance Was Born show, Zampatti called Plunkett and Sales to lavish them with praise. Still, she couldn’t resist a sneaky business suggestion. ‘She loved the show but was like, “When will you guys ever consider a clean black pant?”’ recalls Plunkett. ‘That’s so her. We just couldn’t stop laughing because it was so opposite to how we think, but she was just trying to help us be more commercial.’

Zampatti prized prodigious creative talent – and, equally, commercial drive. She freely dished out business advice, taking young designers under her wing, introducing them to useful contacts and urging them to aim high. She didn’t necessarily influence their style or designs, but she was universally admired for her public persona and business savvy. ‘She herself said that fashion is not an art form, it’s a business, and you have to work creatively within that,’ says Powerhouse senior curator Roger Leong. ‘She was this icon of Australian fashion that all young designers looked up to – for her ability to be true to her own style, but also to maintain a business practice that allowed her to be true to her own style. She left a template for how one could succeed in the Australian climate.’

Perhaps the designer most influenced by Zampatti, her daughter Bianca Spender grew up working in her mother’s

Kent Street headquarters every school holiday, filing, making swatch books and attaching swing tags to garments. After school, despite her flair for fashion, she studied commerce, reluctant to enter an industry where comparison with her mother was inevitable. Eventually though, she gave in. When Spender joined the family business in 2003, she and her mum struck a deal: ‘I got a budget, I did a collection; if it sold, I stayed, and if it didn’t, I left,’ says Spender. ‘There was no question she was the boss – I had to sell my ideas to her like any other designer.’ In the end, half of Spender’s collection sold well and half of it didn’t. And Zampatti’s verdict? ‘[She said] I was allowed to do tailoring and wasn’t allowed to do jersey,’ says Spender. ‘It was like, “You can’t take it to this young, more casual end. [We have to] stay true to the existing clientele base.”’

Eventually, Zampatti suggested Spender go out on her own. ‘She was probably happiest when I separated my business from her and she saw me grow and learn independently,’ says Spender, who established her own eponymous label in 2009. ‘I had to call the shots and I also had all the consequences. Mum would always say, “You’ve got to have skin in the game.”’ Spender left armed with four decades of lessons: ‘Mum ran a business like a post-war immigrant, and that meant every resource was precious. The vision of longevity, the connection to how things feel, the investment in quality, in Australian -made, relationships with your makers ... all of those things are deeply ingrained.’

Zampatti’s wisdom was hard-won but she never tried to hoard it. As early as 1980, she was offering her industry knowledge to budding teen fashion designers in an educational television series for HSC students. She hosted a non-stop procession of work experience kids and fielded countless job applications from design graduates, always making time for an encouraging chat or a critique of their portfolios. She’d invariably point at their drawings and ask, ‘Well, would you wear it?’, says Spender. ‘That was always her ultimate truth, because if you didn’t wear it, you weren’t backing it. It was all about how it felt on the body and what that evoked in you.’

UTS Fashion and Textiles graduate Sarah Lim encountered Zampatti’s philosophy first-hand when Zampatti was on the judging panel for the inaugural Carla Zampatti Foundation Design Award in 2018, which gives the winner \$25,000 for post-graduate tuition fees at a top-ranked international fashion school. The three finalists were taken aback, New York-based Lim recalls, when Zampatti asked them each to try on a piece from their ‘kind of wacky’ collections. ‘We were mortified because we’re not sample size and some of the garments were tricky to put on,’ says 28-year-old Lim, the award winner. ‘But looking back on it, I definitely see her point.’ Lim used the \$25,000 prize to fund her master’s at Parsons School of



OPPOSITE LEFT A model walks the Romance Was Born runway at Melbourne Fashion Festival 2020.

OPPOSITE RIGHT A model poses on the Romance Was Born runway during Afterpay Australian Fashion Week 2021 at Carriageworks in Sydney.



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— Anna Plunkett



ABOVE. Models walk the runway for KITX during Afterpay Australian Fashion Week 2021 at Carriageworks in Sydney.

Design in New York and now works as a technical designer at ‘artsy’ New York grunge label Puppets and Puppets. ‘In school, they teach you fashion should be experimental or push the boundaries, but [Zampatti] made me realise fashion is for wearing, and it’s a really useful medium for making people feel confident or beautiful or glamorous,’ she says. ‘That’s an important side of fashion that maybe gets overlooked.’

When Domenic Roylance won the same award in 2020, his out-there, ‘pretty unwearable’ collection was inspired by Greek grandmothers and featured an absurdly massive silver quilted coat. ‘She was just like, “You need to follow your vision”,’ says Roylance, ‘but it was almost like she was figuring out a way to make it more appealing to the wearer, because she said, “Maybe add some snaps and some buttons in here, and that will make it better.” She knew instantly.’ Since winning the award, the 28-year-old has graduated from London’s Central Saint Martins art school and interned for six months at Oscar de la Renta in New York.

By funding international postgraduate study, Zampatti said she wanted to help a young designer with ‘both creative talent and a passion for commercial longevity’ to gain a global perspective and ultimately bring their expertise back to the Australian fashion industry. While living in Paris in the late 1990s with her former husband John Spender, then the Australian ambassador to France, Zampatti delighted in celebrating Australian designers such as Akira Isogawa and Collette Dinnigan.

In 1996, Zampatti threw a cocktail party for Dinnigan and the young designer almost missed it: stuck in a meeting with US fashion buyers and unable to nab a taxi, she hitched rides across Paris with a pizza delivery man and a police officer, before finally arriving via Metro for the last 15 minutes of her own party. ‘Carla had a huge influence in pushing fashion forward,’ says Dinnigan, ‘and that opened up the doors for a lot of younger designers.’

Zampatti had predicted Dinnigan’s success a few years earlier when the two met for the first time at a *Vogue Australia* shoot at Zampatti’s Woollahra home. Dinnigan remembers feeling intimidated as she arrived in her beaten-up Volkswagen Beetle with a box of samples – silk pyjama pants and T-shirts – and marvelling at Zampatti’s imposing house. ‘She said, “You’ll have a home like this one day, Collette, I can guarantee it ... I can see it in what you’re doing now.”’

Generous with her compliments, Zampatti had a way of encouraging and emboldening fledgling designers – all the more because she was such a formidable figure in fashion. Melbourne designer Toni Matceviski met her about 20 years ago when she came up to him at a function. ‘I would never have had the guts to approach her,’ he says. ‘She was so sweet and supportive, and would always say things like, “You’re my favourite”. She made every encounter feel personal and private, even in a room full of people. I can’t say that happens in fashion with anyone else.’

According to *Vogue Australia* editor-in-chief Edwina McCann, Zampatti had a special empathy for young designers trying to

navigate the world of business, which is why McCann asked the fashion veteran to join the inaugural board of the not-for-profit Australian Fashion Chamber (which would become the Australian Fashion Council). ‘She was there in a heartbeat,’ says McCann. ‘It kind of broke her heart that so many talented young designers were failing in business ... She always said to me that if she’d started today, she wouldn’t have been able to build [her] business model as it was.’

When Kit Willow was unceremoniously ousted from her namesake brand in 2013 by its owners, The Apparel Group, Zampatti promptly called to bolster the designer. ‘She was like, “Keep going – talent always rises”,’ recalls Willow, who launched her current label, KITX, two years later. ‘It meant a lot to me. We had a strong connection.’ Much of what Willow has learned about business filtered through from Zampatti via Elena Notte, who is Carla Zampatti’s long-time financial controller and also works with Willow and KITX.

A hands-on designer, Zampatti would engineer each garment to maximise fabric usage and keep costs down, says Willow, adding a seam, for example, if it didn’t impact the aesthetic. ‘She ran a very tight ship,’ she says, ‘never wasting a dime.’ Taking her cues from Zampatti, Willow has learned to keep an eye on the bottom line, try every garment on her own body, and identify customer favourites each season. ‘Carla would just constantly rework the winners.’

Even in her absence, Zampatti’s influence continues to be felt. Last year at the Australian Fashion Laureate awards, the inaugural Carla Zampatti Award for Excellence in Leadership went to Cairns artist and designer, 34-year-old Grace Lillian Lee, the founder of First Nations Fashion and Design, a not-for-profit corporation that supports the growth of Indigenous fashion. For Lee, after a decade promoting Indigenous fashion, the award felt like validation – ‘the industry finally seeing us and creating space for us’. It has boosted her confidence and changed her career trajectory. ‘My mum was a huge fan of Carla Zampatti and had some pieces in her wardrobe,’ says Lee, ‘so it was unthinkable that a little Cairns girl could have some kind of connection to someone so iconic.’ Lee never met Zampatti, but collaborated with Spender for Australian Fashion Week 2022. Seemingly continuing the mentoring that her mother started, Spender even massaged Lee’s shoulders to calm her pre-show nerves like she used to for Zampatti. ‘I was so emotional – it was pretty special,’ says Lee. ‘I didn’t even know Carla, but it felt like she was there.’

Whether it was recognising inspiring industry leadership or inviting her patternmaker to move into one of her rental properties, nurturing talent was part of Zampatti’s modus operandi. ‘She wanted to help realise everyone’s potential,’ says Spender. ‘She wouldn’t see it as mentorship as much as encouraging and supporting and growing. She was called “the matriarch” for a reason.’