

SUZIE ZUZEK, LILLY PULITZER, AND THE SUZIE ZUZEK PROJECT

DISCOVERING THE ARTIST BEHIND AN ICONIC AMERICAN LOOK



The Reef, © June 12, 1979
 Suzie Zuzek (Agnes Helen Zuzek de Poo, American, 1920-2011)
 Brush and watercolor, pen and black ink, graphite on paper. 38.1 x 34.3 cm (15 x 13 1/2 in.)
 Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Gift of The Original I. P. LLC, 5891.1.2018
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Imagine a chance encounter launching you into the art world after discovering a 6,000-object archive of work by a brilliant, yet largely unknown artist. This is the course that Becky Smith's life took in 2007 when she first encountered Suzie Zuzek (Agnes Helen Zuzek de Poo) and her iconic textile designs used by Lilly Pulitzer, famous purveyor of high-society resort wear in the 1960s and 1970s.

"TMS and Gallery Systems have been two of our most important team members in achieving our goals and in helping us catalogue and understand our archive, but most importantly to then share it with the world."

- BECKY SMITH / MEG SHINKLE, CO-FOUNDERS,
 THE SUZIE ZUZEK PROJECT



OVERVIEW

- Over 6,000 objects
- Watercolor and gouache design drawings, acetates, microfiche, textile samples, index books, and ephemera



RETURN ON INVESTMENT

- Archive catalogued to museum standards
- Efficient cataloguing processes and exhibitions management
- Positioned to share the archive with the world



PRODUCTS

- The Museum System (TMS)

 DISCOVERY


Suzie Zuzek (Agnes Helen Zuzek de Poo, 1920-2011). Photo circa 1969, Courtesy The Original I. P. LLC

That first encounter with Zuzek was the catalyst that inspired Becky, and ultimately her co-founder Meg Shinkle, to form The Suzie Zuzek Project with the goal of saving, conserving, cataloguing, and championing Zuzek's iconic watercolor and pen-and-ink drawings—the Zuzek Prints. Their efforts have culminated in an upcoming monograph [exhibition](#) at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, opening May 15, 2020. The incredible journey from first encounter to exhibition has been a multi-year passion project, with Gallery Systems' team and collections management system, [The Museum System \(TMS\)](#), playing a crucial role.

In the 1960's and 70's Lilly Pulitzer was practically a household name, a socialite fashion designer who turned out garments with whimsical printed textiles. During the fashion house's heyday, "the Lilly Look" was sported by such celebrated women as Audrey Hepburn, Caroline Kennedy, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, a school friend of Pulitzer's. The vivacious florals, expressive animals, and bold color palette were unmistakable, but the artist behind the fabrics was largely anonymous.

Between 1962 and 1985, Suzie Zuzek created over 2,000 astonishing designs for Key West Hand Print Fabrics, the supplier of fabrics to Lilly Pulitzer, Inc.

Pulitzer herself said of Zuzek, "The fabulous success of the 'Lilly Look' would not have been possible without Suzie's whimsical and magical creations. She constantly amused me, not only by the genius of her art, but also the sheer number of designs she created. I simply couldn't have done it without her."

When Pulitzer filed for bankruptcy and sold her archive of prints in 1985, Zuzek's original artwork disappeared and the artist herself believed it lost, even at the time of her passing in 2011.

Yet five years after Zuzek's death, Becky Smith and Meg Shinkle, after much sleuthing and some luck, managed to track down Zuzek's archive in Key West, Florida, hidden in a warehouse, crammed into dusty cardboard boxes, unprotected from Florida's heat and humidity. In spite of that, most of her original drawings and their acetates were preserved.

Meg credits the preservation to Zuzek's background as a textile design graduate of the Pratt Institute. "Because Suzie was classically trained, she understood the value of using excellent materials. She used really good paper and really good watercolor ink, and that is a huge part of why her drawings and paintings have stayed intact," she says. "There was nothing done to preserve them."

Collectively, the two women made the decision to purchase the entire Zuzek archive in 2016 with the goal to first save it and then share it.

CHALLENGE

When cataloguing the archive began, the task seemed Herculean. The archive had never before been catalogued. During her prolific career for Lilly Pulitzer, Zuzek had produced over 1,500 designs, along with another 500 unregistered works. These items, along with their acetates, totaled over 6,000 objects, all needed to be documented.

“The enormity of it! No wonder nobody did this before us,” Becky laughs when recalling the fledgling days of saving the archive.

While the sheer size of the archive was intimidating, another problem surfaced: many of the copyrighted textiles were titled incorrectly. When Zuzek finished a design, her original artwork was given a title; however, this working title was often different from the copyrighted title, or the copyrighted title was simply misspelled. To compound the confusion, many of the designs had duplicate titles.

Still, the two women were determined to succeed. “We wanted to save and preserve the archive because it is an iconic American look that was used in fashion,” Becky says. “Also, to inspire and educate others, and for the sheer enjoyment of viewing the art.” Seeing the brilliance in Zuzek’s creations, they were committed to earning her the recognition she deserved, a recognition that is often lost to women artists.

Though devoted to their quest and determined to succeed, they were new to the world of collections management and had much to learn, including the best practices for cataloguing a 6,000-object textile archive.

They tried several solutions, but none of the software programs could keep pace with their objectives. As Meg explains, “It couldn’t be a database that would only work once it was set up. It had to be a database that was developing with us.”



The Zuzek Project. Cataloguing and conserving over 2,500 sets of acetates for archive designs, 1962-1985. View: Fine Art Storage Facility. Photo: courtesy The Original I. P. LLC

 SOLUTION

Feeling frustrated by the endeavor, the pair reached out to contacts in the museum world, who suggested The Museum System (TMS), as a possible solution.

Once they began using TMS in August 2016, things quickly began to come together. Being able to catalogue Zuzek's archive in a streamlined, efficient way sped up the process, and TMS also remedied the problems encountered with earlier software, including how to catalogue pieces with multiple names as well as capturing many different data points relevant to the works, including attaching media to each unique object.

"It was very difficult to use other programs," Becky explains. "With TMS, we could have several different title names for the same design."

Becky and Meg praised TMS for its universally user-friendly interface, along with the training and continued support that the Gallery Systems team provided.

"TMS has been instrumental in getting us where we are today. We consider Gallery Systems to be part of the team that is helping rescue Suzie and her artwork from obscurity, especially Danielle Uchitelle [Chief Operating Officer] and Allison Galland [Training Specialist]. Allison met us at our skill level and gave us invaluable help. Danielle has been instrumental, helping us with data imports and creating relational links between objects. Working with Gallery Systems has been a lifeline for us to move the project forward."

They also believe the software gave their mission credence within the art world: "When people ask, 'How are you organizing the archive?' and we say, 'We're using The Museum System,' I feel like it's the best thing we could say. People then respect it as an archive, they respect it as art, and they respect the decisions that we're making for the long-term relevance of the archive."



Rhino, © January 21, 1977
 Suzie Zuzek (Agnes Helen Zuzek de Poo, American, 1920-2011)
 Brush and green watercolor, white gouache, pen and black ink, graphite on paper
 38.1 x 28.4 cm (15 x 11 3/16 in.)
 Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum
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OUTCOME

Being able to catalogue the archive with TMS helped achieve another goal: showcasing Suzie Zuzek's vibrant, innovative watercolor drawings to a broader audience. This dream came to life when Cooper Hewitt decided to stage "[Suzie Zuzek for Lilly Pulitzer: The Prints That Made the Fashion Brand](#)," the first extensive exhibition of the artist's work.

When Becky and Meg first approached Cooper Hewitt about the archive of Suzie Zuzek, they found their shared use of TMS very beneficial. "It made it so much easier for us," says Becky. Using the same collections management system allowed them to speak the same language.

Opening on July 24, 2020, the exhibition will display over 35 of Zuzek's watercolor and gouache textile designs, the resulting screen-printed fabrics, and their transformation into Lilly Pulitzer's beloved fashions. Its debut will also coincide with the May launch of [Suzie Zuzek for Lilly Pulitzer: The Artist Behind an Iconic American Fashion Brand, 1962-1985](#), a monograph of the Zuzek Prints published by Rizzoli Electa with essays written by Susan Brown, Associate Curator of Textiles at Cooper Hewitt, and Caroline Rennolds Milbank, a New York-based fashion historian, author, curator, and appraiser.

Meg and Becky conclude, "TMS and Gallery Systems have been two of our most important team members in achieving our goals and in helping us catalogue and understand our archive, but most importantly to then share it with the world."



Wildness, © September 11, 1972
 Suzie Zuzek (Agnes Helen Zuzek de Poo, American, 1920-2011)
 Brush and watercolor, pen and black ink, graphite on paper
 38.1 x 56.2 cm (15 x 22 1/8 in.)
 Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum
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