

Sarah Burton - A Contemporary Designer

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Introduction

Sarah Burton is a contemporary designer and was a creative director for a luxury brand, Alexander McQueen. Burton joined the brand as an intern in 1996 and later reached a higher position as McQueen's right hand woman. After Lee's death in 2010, Burton was appointed to be the creative director for Alexander McQueen. Burton was recognized for her artistry, creative designs, and imagery that tribute McQueen's legacy while implementing her own style and uniqueness. Burton was passionate and followed Lee's footsteps by also advocating for sustainability in the fashion industry. This research paper allows readers to understand stages of how Sarah Burton became to where is today. From creating her own clothes at young age, college student who transfer from fine art to print fashion, intern for Alexander McQueen, right-hand woman, creative director for the luxury brand, visionary, praised and rewarded, and a great role model for young generations who wants to change the fashion industry is what makes Burton a well respected fashion designer that also make others appreciate artistry that others do not see in deep of what happens behind closed doors in the fashion industry.

Early Life and Education

Her full name, Sarah Jane Heard, Burton was born in 1974 in Macclesfield, Cheshire, in the United Kingdom (Eric, n.d.). She was the second oldest daughter with other four siblings growing up in the northwestern part of England and got education in a strict girl's school located in Manchester (Horyn, 2023). Burton's father, Anthony, worked as an accountant while her mother, Diana, was a music teacher. Burton has a talent and loved creating her own wardrobe, however, she did not consider enrolling into fashion school until her art teacher introduced her to Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (Horyn, 2023). Burton decided to move to London and studied print fashion. Burton changed her career path from fine art to pursue fashion. Burton was introduced to Alexander McQueen during her junior year in college by her tutor, Simon Ungless (Eric, n.d.). While studying in print fashion, Burton successfully accomplished a placement year at Alexander McQueen. After Burton's graduation ceremony and after two years had passed, she became the head of womenswear design. In Burton's early life, she was artistic and innovative growing up. With guidance from her tutors and teacher she followed the path she has the talent and passion for.

Role at Alexander McQueen

Burton is dedicated to reaching her passion even when she had little to no money and interned where it was unpaid, but she was paid with knowledge and experience. To earn some money to support herself, Burton would work part-time jobs such as selling children's toys and worked as a barmaid since her parents could not support her and interning at McQueen was unpaid (Horyn, 2023). Burton started interning for Alexander McQueen in 1996 and later became McQueen's assistant the next year in 1997 and gradually climbed up to the position and became the head of the womenswear collection the following year 2000 (Kelly, 2023). Burton was quite shy but McQueen warmed up the atmosphere to make her feel comfortable by asking her if she believed if UFOs existed and she did (Horyn, 2023). McQueen and Burton worked together for several years and within those years they both created collections that made headlines that were exaggerated and dramatic. McQueen created "bumster" pants that elongate the torso and reveal one's lower back (Mower, 2023). Burton also worked on a few other famous collections McQueen had created which includes the "The Highland Rape" and "The Widows of Culloden" collection (Mower, 2023). After a tragic announcement of McQueen's death from suicide in 2010, Burton became the creative director for the brand. Burton pursued to produce more collections that were inspired by McQueen heritage while implementing her own touch into the brand.



Figure 1. Low leather trousers at McQueen SS19

Design Philosophy and Aesthetic

Burton's design preferences are quite unclear but she stays loyal to the Alexander McQueen brand aesthetic and imagery. However, Burton did make the garments wearable and feminine where she softened the looks from Michelle Obama to Kate Moss (D'Souza, 2014). Burton style is modest, subtle, and muted by highly demanded. Burton believed that McQueen garments change one's psychological being when they wear one. Alexander McQueen supports sustainability in the fashion industry and during the interview with Vogue, Burton revealed that she concluded that she will be reusing and recycling the fabrics that they already have in stock and print, recreate, and make the original fresh (Duzansky & Parungao, 2020). There are a lot of fabrics and garments that are being mass produced where there are more garments than bodies of human beings. Mass produced fabrics and garments go to landfill and to the oceans that harms marine life. High to low end brands need to practice sustainability in the fashion industry and with Alexander advocate for sustainable fashion, Burton made a great decision by following the sustainability route to reuse and recycle the materials that are already on hand.

Notable Collections and Runway Shows

After the death of Alexander McQueen and Sarah was appointed as creative director for Alexander McQueen to continue his legacy, Burton significantly made an impact on the fashion industry with the variety of collections she had created. The Pre-Autumn/Winter 2022 line collection was a project named, “Process”, where Burton gathered twelve artists to recreate her work in their own unique way (Newbold, 2022). Artists had to use their physical strengths for the collection and it was definite and real that it unveiled what Burton believed that the innovations come from numerous perspectives. The Bee-Themed Spring/Summer 2013 collection showcased designs from inspirations of bees, where dresses are paired with honeycomb structure with a full skirt and encrusted choker (Cartner-Morley, 2023). The bee can symbolize women empowerment, passion, and loyalty in a group of people and that is what bees do when they are a colony of bees protecting the queen bee. They are loyal, work together, and passionate to protect the one queen bee. Another significant collection Burton had done was Drawing on Britain’s History and Craft Heritage (Bowles, 2017). The collection contained ancestral British sentiments that also brings back McQueen’s vision of a progression of how women became to what they are and have in the present. With these collections, there are contributions to Alexander McQueen's vision with her own uniqueness. Burton also got recognized for creating Cathrine Middleton’s wedding dress (Sarah Burton: Bof 500: The people shaping the global fashion industry, 2022). Burton may be well respected in the fashion industry but received critiques and obstacles over the course of the years in her career. Burton was known for belittling her work and undervaluing herself (Mower, 2023). However, Burton’s work speaks for itself and this shows she is a humble person.



Figure 2. Model walking down the runway for Spring Summer 2013 collection

Innovations and Contributions

Burton included technology into her designs in various ways. Burton was innovative by using materials and different techniques especially in the Bee-Themed Spring/Summer 2013 collection, the dress had latticework honeycomb structure that had a full skirt and paired with encrusted choker (Braithwaite, 2023). Burton was detail oriented, for instance, when she was creating Cathrine Middleton wedding dress, it involved hands on cutting English and French Chantilly lace and was created at the Royal School of Needlework at Hampton Court Palace (Braithwaite, 2023). Not only was Burton meticulous, she was able to adapt fairly quickly by creating moons and stars embroidery with the use of beads embellishments for the runway collection 2016 Manus X Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology gala for Nicole Kidman. This shows Burton is innovative and tries different techniques that push boundaries that are not normal to the fashion industry. Working under Alexander McQueen and later becoming the creative director for the brand, she showcased creativity, innovation, and connection in her collections that also implemented Lee's legacy and there were many supporters but also critics. Burton transformed the brand to fit modern society with a luxury powerhouse that was recognized for its unique craftsmanship and romantic garments that suit the female silhouettes. Burton was able to combine avant-garde with wearable pieces (Yellowbrick, 2023). Committing into sustainability and ethical fashion and influences other potential designers to follow her lead to become sustainable but with their own unique too.



Figure 3. Catherine Middleton walking with her husband Prince William while wearing her wedding dress created by Sarah Burton

Collaborations and Partnerships

Burton was always loyal and known to work for Alexander McQueen in the fashion industry. There was not much information of Burton collaboration with other designers and brands. However, Burton got recognized globally for being the designer and the creator for the Duchess of Cambridge, Catherine Middleton wedding dress and this ceremony was showcased to millions of audiences that impacted pop culture (Parna, 2023). Burton dressed many celebrities which included Zendaya, Lady Gaga, Beyonce, Nicole Kidman, Timothee Chalamet, and many more (Velasco, 2023). Burton creations had drama but also theatrical that was not overwhelming to the person who wears the garment. Burton was versatile with her designs that she created for the celebrities that made the garments memorable. Burton exposed the Alexander McQueen brand to the U.S. which opened outposts in Hawaii and Las Vegas (Childers, 2020). Burton plans to expand on accessories and men businesses which means the name is set in the U.S. The brand sales had grown overtime, for instance, in the year 2021 the sales was 758 million euros and compared to 2022 the sales rose to 830 million euros (Guilbault, 2023). Burton made a huge impact for the brand by expanding to the U.S., with her continuation and creation at Alexander McQueen, and exposing the brand to influence other cultures.



Figure 4. Lady Gaga wearing Sarah Burton's Alexander McQueen garment to the 2018 premiere of *A Star is Born* that took place in London

Awards and Recognition

Throughout Burton's career in the fashion industry, she earned countless awards and accolades. Burton deserved those rewards because of her talent, innovation, and discretion. Burton was awarded for assisting the British fashion industry and the award was an Order of the British Empire. Burton was also awarded for excessively decorating and won The Warpole Award for the British Luxury Design Talent, Harper's Bazaar Woman of the Year Award, the Designer of the Year Award, and the CFDA International Award in June 2019 (Sarah Burton: Bof 500: The people shaping the global fashion industry, 2022). Burton deserved many peer recognition for her work and those were Cathrine Middleton, Anna Wintour the editor chief of Vogue who described Burton a genius, François-Henri Pinault who sees Burton as a visionary for Alexander McQueen, and many more that includes fans for her feminine and intimate aesthetic (Braithwaite, 2023). In Burton collections, she implemented narration, empowerment, focus on communities, technology, and British heritage which makes people respect her and her work speaks for itself. Future generations can get inspiration from Lee Alexander McQueen and Sarah Burton.



Figure 5. Sarah Burton was awarded for designer of the year in 2011 at the British Fashion

Award

Legacy and Future Prospects

Burton continued Lee Alexander McQueen legacy which the brand was recognized for pushing boundaries, creative, and its rebelling designs but with a little twist of her own uniqueness to the collections. Burton created garments for well known people such as a wedding dress for Cathrine Middleton who married prince William. Burton collections displayed embroidery, elegant fabrics, and gorgeous garments (Frankel, 2021). Burton delivered her craftsmanship and creativity through the collections she had created throughout her career in the fashion industry along with diverse and talented members in her team. Burton is a great role model for future generations who want to work in the fashion industry just like her because she is known for innovation, beauty, empowerment, and passion. After 26 years of working at Alexander McQueen, unfortunately, Burton decided to leave her position as the creative director but had not made an announcement on what she will be doing in the future. However, there are speculations of possible endeavors and contributions. Some believe that she will be making her own label that she can have the freedom to create her own aesthetics without limitations. Burton may collaborate with other fashion designers to share knowledge and gain new audiences. Others believe Burton wants to focus on her personal life such as her family. Whatever Burton decides what she wants to do, she left a great impact on the fashion industry and for Alexander McQueen.

Conclusion

Sarah Burton is a significant role model and a leader who changed and influenced the fashion industry with her creative designs and imaginative approach. Burton was appointed as creative director for Alexander McQueen and continued the legacy for 26 years while also implementing her own talent, style, and individuality. Burton received many awards, honors, and praise throughout her career in the fashion industry. Burton work and collections influence others who are aspiring designers globally. Burton is a great role model for women in leading in the fashion industry that mostly are led by men but also in any profession. Burton proved that she was passionate, hard working, and innovative, her collections showcased that.

Index

Figure 1. [Are we all about to wear low slung trousers again? | Dazed \(dazeddigital.com\)](#)

Figure 2. [The worker bee world was brought to life in Sarah Burton's opulent fantasy for Alexander McQueen Spring Summer 13 | ELLE UK](#)

Figure 3. [Kate Middleton Two Wedding Dresses Sarah Burton \(refinery29.com\)](#)

Figure 4. [Sarah Burton to Leave Alexander McQueen After 26 Years \(people.com\)](#)

Figure 5. [Sarah Burton, Victoria Beckham and Stella McCartney take home top honours at British Fashion Awards | Daily Mail Online](#)

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