

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Fashion Conspiracy

Nicholas Coleridge

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About the Author

Nicholas Coleridge was born in London in 1957. He was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. His previous books include *Around the World in 78 Days*, a travel adventure, and *Shooting Stars*, a novel. In 1984 he was named Young Journalist of the Year. In 1986 he was appointed Editor of *Harpers & Queen*.

ALSO BY NICHOLAS COLERIDGE

Around the World in 78 Days
Shooting Stars

The Fashion Conspiracy

A Remarkable Journey through the
Empires of Fashion

Nicholas Coleridge



*It's big and it's bland
full of tension and fear*

David Bowie, 'Fashion'

There is an inscrutable world, of which one occasionally catches a tantalising glimpse or reflection, behind the industry of making women's clothes, which seems to promise, to anyone happy enough to penetrate into that close society, a rich and almost virgin literary soil. The high diplomacy of the couturiers; the espionage of the copistes; the wicked senators' wives who smuggle their maids into the mannequin shows; the secrets and intrigues and betrayals in the ateliers; the simple private lives of mannequins and vendeuses; the genius who lives in an attic and conceives robes he will never see for beautiful women he will never meet; the great designer who steals his ideas; the life of the frock as its character is shaped and modified and enriched by the impact of each personality through whose mind it passes; its eventual emergence into reality – what a world to sack!

Evelyn Waugh, Labels

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Introduction: the Emperor's New Clothes

I BECAME SERIOUSLY intrigued by fashion entirely by accident. In January 1985 I flew to Madras to interview Tamil terrorists for a television programme. Between interviews I killed time in a steam bath at the Holiday Inn hotel. Every evening the only other customer was a corpulent Indian who sweated cardamon through his enormous pores. On the third day he said suddenly, 'Are you acquainted with Her Majesty the Queen's dressmaker By Appointment, Mr Hardy Amies?'

I replied that I had not met Mr Amies, but that I passed his premises in Savile Row every morning on my way into work.

'At one time,' replied the Indian, whose name was Mr Kumar, 'I had the honour to be manufacturing in my factory accessories for the Hardy Amies boutique. But lately,' he said, 'we are hitting the big time and working for Liz Claiborne in New York. You know Liz Claiborne?'

'Only by reputation.' I had recently read an article about her American sportswear empire in *Fortune* magazine, which estimated her annual turnover at \$1.8 billion.

'Each day we are manufacturing one thousand garments for Liz Claiborne,' said Mr Kumar. 'You would like to visit my factory? It is not far.'

We took a motor rickshaw along the beach road and then headed inland for a few miles to a suburb of Madras called Shenoy Nagar. The buildings in this part of the city are mostly bamboo shacks, punctuated by gimcrack garages and light-industrial factories. Eventually we arrived at an arcade of shops and Mr Kumar led me to a flight of concrete steps at the back. Upstairs was a large warehouse room, occupying most of the upper storey of the arcade, in which about eighty young girls were working. They sat in their

saris at long wooden trestles, twenty girls to each table, operating prehistoric industrial sewing machines. Through their nostrils were fine gold *mookuthi* (Tamil nose jewellery) and many had white vertical stripes painted on their foreheads.

Mr Kumar gazed contentedly around his factory, while loosening the buttons on his shirt that strained over his obese stomach.

‘It is the busy time now,’ he said. ‘January to March are most busy because these garments must be available in the stores by September for winter collection.’ We watched as a girl fed a length of pink and blue check material through her machine. She smiled bashfully when she saw us standing over her, and pulled her sari across her face. I asked Mr Kumar how old she was, and he translated my question into Tamil.

‘Thirteen,’ he replied. ‘Or that is what she says. Maybe she is younger, but they are paid more at 13.’

Eight or nine months later, when I had all but forgotten my excursion to the Madras sweatshop, I happened to be in Manhattan one Sunday morning and was reading the *New York Times* when an advertisement for Macy’s department store caught my eye. A teenage American girl with long blonde hair was smiling out of the page, wearing a familiar pink and blue check jumpsuit. The caption read, ‘Herald the season with gifts and gladness from Macy’s . . . something for little girls to celebrate in the terrific holiday collection from Liz Claiborne. In dusty pink and blueberry cotton. \$43. Fifth Floor.’

The dusty pink and blueberry cotton outfit seemed to be the very garment I had seen in production in the Shenoyanagar suburb of Madras.

The journey from 40-rupee outfit in a backstreet sweatshop to a full-page advertisement for a major department store is only one leg of the fashion conspiracy. What inspired this book on the fashion industry was the

realisation that you can follow a piece of clothing – exactly like you might follow the course of a river – from the place where the cotton is grown to the moment that the customer finally disposes of it. On its way, however, the skirt or coat is subjected to the most extraordinary hype by designers, fashion editors, store buyers, publicists, shop assistants and the rest of the fashion circus. This book is a travel journal through the interior of fashion.

In Nongkhai in northern Thailand, close to the Cambodian border, there is a community of Irish nuns called the Good Shepherd Sisters. They came to Nongkhai in 1981 to set up self-sufficient communities in an area of Thailand prone to malnutrition. One project the Good Shepherd Sisters set up was a weaving co-operative, producing a local variety of fabric called *ky khit*.

Two years after the looms were established, the nuns were approached by Yohji Yamamoto, the introspective Japanese designer, who bought several thousand yards of dark, rough cotton for his summer collection. It was shipped from Thailand to Yamamoto's headquarters in Tokyo, where he designed a selection of jackets and trousers and sent them to his factories in the Japanese countryside for manufacture.

Yohji Yamamoto does not show his collections in Tokyo; he shows in Paris which is more convenient for foreign store buyers, so the sample clothes are flown from Japan to France for fashion week. After the catwalk show, watched by the world's press and buyers, the samples remain in Paris for two weeks for the stores to place orders, while the press file their excited first reactions to the new shapes to their newspapers.

In due course the samples are flown on to Yamamoto's press office in Manhattan. American magazines, having checked with the store buyers which pieces they are ordering, need to photograph them for their collections issues. A New York fashion editor has the brainwave of styling the pictures in the Seychelles, so the Japanese

clothes are again packed into trunks and flown back across the Atlantic, to be photographed on a Swiss model by a German photographer.

Three months later, when the pictures are published, a jet-lagged Kuwaiti woman flicks through a copy of the new *Vogue* in her hotel bedroom. Her eye is caught by a pair of black copra trousers being modelled underneath a palm tree.

'Those I like,' she thinks, and directs her limousine driver to the designer store.

Back in Kuwait she wears the trousers to an all-girls tea party. Later they are delivered to the Meshal dry-cleaner on Sharq Jaber Mubarak Street. And there, since she never troubles to collect them, they remain, a modest addition to the hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of unclaimed Arab designer cleaning.

This fashion network – from Thailand to Tokyo to Paris to New York to the Seychelles, then back to New York and ending up in the Gulf – is no longer especially unusual. There are, of course, variations. A garment might begin its life in a sweatshop in South Korea or Sri Lanka, and end up in a shopping mall in Houston, Texas or Bal Harbor, Florida. It might start at one of the giant Italian mills near Lake Como and end up on the bargain rail of a boutique in Singapore.

But the fashion conspiracy is not simply a conspiracy of expensive clothes being marked up around the world, it is a conspiracy of taste and compromise: the prerogative of the international fashion editors in determining how the world dresses, and how their objectivity can be undermined, the despotic vanity of the designers and the ruthlessness of the store buyers in distributing their immense 'open to buy' budget. Often the conspiracy is a conspiracy of silence. A magazine goes to great lengths to make bad clothes look good, because the designer is advertising heavily in its pages. Major designers exert extraordinary pressure on

department stores for more prominent square-footage while simultaneously pirating ideas from smaller rivals. Department stores, in turn, condone espionage to add a particular label to their designer room.

But this was not a conspiracy that I could grasp all at once. Fashion is an infinitely larger and more complex world than it appears from outside. The decade from 1978 has been decisive for fashion, as important as the 1950s were for the motor industry and the 1970s for computers. Designers like Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani have created from nothing fashion empires on a scale and with a speed that seemed impossible in the mid-1970s. In less than ten years they have achieved annual turnovers of \$1.3, \$1.1 and \$1 billion respectively, and furthermore have largely held on to the equity themselves. This has produced a compelling new factor in the world economy: designer money.

‘What’s happened,’ says Fred Hughes, president of the Andy Warhol Trust, ‘is that the entire western world – the entire world – is clothes conscious. People are living longer and staying fashion conscious; it’s just going to go on and on, getting bigger and bigger and richer and richer.’

Designer money, like the first wave of Arab money to leave the Gulf, has been directed at a few enormous, rather similar status symbols: *palazzos* around Milan and Lake Como, cattle ranches in Colorado, châteaux in Normandy, apartments overlooking Central Park, yachts, jets and eighteenth-century paintings. Unlike the Arabs’, however, these status symbols have not been accumulated in secrecy. Designers can rarely resist being photographed at their *palazzo*, ranch or château or assuming the helm of their new yacht.

More significantly, designer money has transformed the social status of designers. Few fashion designers before the mid-seventies were regarded as even half-respectable. At the most basic level, fashion designers were not asked to

dinner by their customers. If they were invited to a customer's wedding they were seated inconspicuously at the back. This is no longer so. The relentless growth of the designer empires, and their diversification into billion-dollar licensing arrangements, has upscaled them to the status of chief executive officers of multi-national corporations.

'We have become world businessmen,' the New York designer Oscar de la Renta told me. 'In the old days fashion designers – seamstresses really – made and sold only dresses; today we sell a lifestyle to the whole world. We have moved into more and more areas of influence, and this has made a huge difference to how we are perceived. It has made the career more socially acceptable. And I think that in the end all social structures come to depend on power and influence. And, of course, on the influence and power that money brings.'

As the fashion industry has become international, however, it also gives the impression of being smaller. The five fashion capitals – New York, Paris, Milan, London and Tokyo – each have the same designer shops. Chanel, Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, Giorgio Armani, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein . . . whichever city you happen to be in, there is the same collection for sale in identically designed boutiques with identical carrier bags. It is fashion colonialism. Important designers must have a presence in every fashion capital. The boutiques are their embassies, their press offices are intelligence-gathering agencies telexing bulletins of rumour and counter-rumour to headquarters. The speed with which this takes place is sometimes incredible. While I was researching this book I flew from London to Tokyo to interview designers. A couple of hours before my flight I was told a beguiling item of gossip about an American designer.

'I am only telling you,' said my informant, 'because you are leaving the country. This is totally confidential. It's just been telexed from New York, and nobody even knows the story there.'

I arrived in Tokyo exhausted, slept for four hours, then met a Japanese friend in the fashion business for breakfast.

‘How discreet can you be?’ she asked as soon as we sat down. ‘We have received a cable from New York . . .’

It is normal in the fashion industry to have exactly the same conversation in Milan as in London, and in Tokyo as in New York. Because the fashion circus is constantly on the move – not just the designers, but the photographers, store buyers, fashion editors and models – it creates its own homogeneous society, at once international and profoundly xenophobic. A buyer for a New York store will fly 200,000 miles a year from fashion capital to fashion capital, inspecting collections, but she will eat at the same few fashion restaurants and discuss the same tiny cast of characters. At the Bagutta in Milan she talks about the Tokyo designer Issey Miyake; at the *ippiselli* in Tokyo she broods darkly about Ralph Lauren’s Madison Avenue store; at the Quai Voltaire in Paris she philosophises about the Italian ready-to-wear of Giorgio Armani, or the seriousness of Jasper Conran’s winter coats in London. In London, sitting at her window table at Le Caprice, the buyer is terribly, terribly concerned about the long-term future of Givenchy.

The private language of fashion embraces the five capitals. In his essay on ‘Linguistics and Anthropology’ in *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss defines the relationship between language and culture. ‘Among us [western developed man],’ he writes, ‘language is used in a rather reckless way – we talk all the time, we ask questions about many things. This is not at all a universal situation. There are cultures – and I am inclined to say most of the cultures of the world – which are rather thrifty in relation to language. They don’t believe that language should be used indiscriminately, but only in specific frames of reference and somewhat sparingly.’

The fashion industry is the antithesis of Lévi-Strauss’s thrifty culture. It uses language so indiscriminately that it

has actually created a parallel vocabulary, in which everyday words take on specific fashion connotations, entirely misleading to the outsider. Basic (as in 'your basic wardrobe', 'your best basic') and essential ('the essential black leather skirt') are straightforward antitheses when hijacked by fashion writers. A black leather skirt is clearly not an 'essential' garment, any more than a fuchsia wool-and-cashmere Gianfranco Ferre shawl, costing \$1,595, can reasonably be described as 'basic'. But the language of fashion is not restricted to magazine copy-writing. Because people in the fashion industry tend to be more visually than verbally literate, their conversation takes on an exaggerated cartoon quality. Places are described as 'fabulous' or 'a nightmare'; collections are 'brilliant' or 'hideous'; particular restaurants are 'to die for' or to be avoided.

The larger the fashion industry grows, the fewer the players that really count. In the developed world, fashion employs eleven million people. And yet, when you pare the cast of leading characters to the minimum, it reduces to sixty. Thirty of these are designers: eight in New York, nine in Paris, three in Tokyo, five or six in Milan and three, perhaps four, in London. The next twenty are the fifth columnists: five or six crucial fashion editors, a dozen buyers for stores and boutiques, a handful of backers and entrepreneurs who underwrote the boom. The final five are fashion legends like Paloma Picasso, Tina Chow and Loulou de la Falaise Klossowski, the late French-Tunisian columnist Hebe Dorsay, and John Fairchild, chairman and editorial director of *Women's Wear Daily*.

It is scarcely surprising, with such a tiny nucleus of opinion-makers hurtling around the world, that the level of paranoia is so high. No industry induces insecurity on the scale of fashion. Of the 400 people I interviewed for this book, only about fifty seemed altogether sane. The structure of the fashion year provokes paranoia. Designers become paranoid under the pressure of producing two, sometimes

more, collections a year; store buyers become paranoid at buying millions of dollars' worth of clothes that might not sell; fashion editors over the age of 40 become paranoid and begin to fear for their jobs.

Rivalry in fashion is more intense than in apparently comparable industries, like the record or film businesses, for this reason: everything happens in direct competition. Twice a year *all* the new collections are shown within a few days of each other, and directly compared. 'Ungaro was fabulous this season,' trills the fashion editor, 'but Dior was a nightmare.' 'Christian Lacroix was to die for,' says the buyer, 'but Balmain was *hideous*.'

A film may be previewed with other films at a festival, but their *premières* and release dates are carefully spaced. Fashion collections are simultaneously shown to the store buyers, who are selecting what to purchase from a finite budget. Within two weeks of a collection, the designer has an accurate idea of the level of orders, and whether these will occupy the seamstresses and outworkers for the next three months.

The invention of licensing (the means by which designers rent their names to the manufacturers of ties and sardine cans) has heightened paranoia since it emphasises the chasm between the successful and the less successful. Pierre Cardin has 840 licences, ranging from scuba-diving suits to designer igloos, which produce an estimated annual personal income of \$10 million. Yves Saint Laurent, already licensed up to his sun-glasses, is pledged to a massive escalation over the next three years, and is vying with Gianni Versace to be the first designer to gain a full listing on a stock market. The average fashion designer has one or two licences or perhaps none at all.

All the time, however, the prospect of attracting the first licensee becomes more remote. The designer billionaires in their Italian *palazzos* and French *châteaux* retain staff to administer their licensing deals and to solicit new ones, and

with every new licence their celebrity is more firmly established. It is a conspiracy to perpetuate income from endorsement, which looks set to continue for the next fifty years.

‘Even when men like Saint Laurent or Lagerfeld are gone, their labels will continue,’ says a French fashion writer. ‘The same in America too, with Bill Blass and Geoffrey Beene. Somebody else in their studio will continue the label. For the licensee it is imperative. Just like Dior and Chanel were kept going after Christian and Coco.’

But there are aspects of the fashion industry that reminded me not of the madhouse but of a Middle Eastern emirate. The sheikhs of fashion are remote, protected by their bodyguards inside walled palaces, while the populace speculate and whisper. In no other profession have I encountered so much conjecture and innuendo. This designer is about to go bankrupt; that designer has AIDS; this one is so jealous of that one that his name must never be mentioned in his presence. And yet nothing of this is ever written down. The biographies of fashion houses – hagiographies really – read like propaganda from Gulf tourist offices. The lives of designers are reduced to inventories of statistics: he won this many Coty Awards, that many Neiman-Marcus awards, he produced so many ready-to-wear garments in 1987. I cannot fully explain fashion journalists’ reticence, unless they are genuinely afraid of causing offence and being banned from the next collection. Or unless it is the half-antagonistic, half-protective view of fashion that gradually overtakes you if you spend too much time in the circus.

When I began researching this book, I assumed that the fashion industry would be like ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ – founded largely on hype. This is not true. The industry can be more dangerous and sinister than I had appreciated. While I was in South Korea investigating the sweated labour of Seoul, a letter from a sweatshop boss was posted

underneath my hotel door warning me out of the city. Whenever I think of the typed rice-paper sheet with its cryptic advice to 'go from Seoul city' it presents a chilling perspective on the 'basic' fuchsia wool-and-cashmere \$1,595 shawl from Gianfranco Ferre.

After I visited the Madras factory, long before I had the idea of writing about fashion, I had a drink with Mr Kumar back in the Holiday Inn hotel. Mr Kumar drank imported gin and ate greedy handfuls of peanuts.

'Does it worry you,' I asked him, 'employing young girls for so little money, and to work such long hours?'

Mr Kumar shifted his weight on the plastic stool, so that his stomach could rest comfortably on the bar.

'Let me tell you a story,' he said, 'from Indian mythology. It will help you to understand. The young prince Gautama, the Buddha, was riding his white steed across a ploughed field when he saw that the ground was covered with insects killed by the plough. This filled him with deep sorrow, so he alighted from his horse and pondered on the subjects of birth and destruction. And then, desiring to be alone, he went apart to sit underneath a rose-apple tree where he attained the first stage of contemplation.' Mr Kumar was so absorbed in his story that he did not notice that his enormous stomach was now resting in a pool of Kingfisher lager. 'Whereupon,' said Mr Kumar, 'the young prince saw standing before him an old holy man. "Who are you?" asked Prince Gautama. "I am a beggar," replied the old man, "wandering without family and without hope, accepting any fare, I live now for nothing but the highest good." Whereupon,' said Mr Kumar, 'he rose into the sky and disappeared, for he had been a god.'

Mr Kumar scooped up another large fistful of peanuts. 'You are getting the point of my story?' he asked.

'Not really, I'm afraid.'

'It is obvious,' said Mr Kumar. 'It is a story about India. The landlord or the employer - that is me - is the prince. The

poor people are like the holy man, wandering without hope and accepting whatever is available. At the moment what is available is manufacturing sportswear for American stores. Before, it was something different. Next it will be something different again. But today, it is fashion that people are wanting, so we are making it for them.'

1

New York: Manhattan Patterns – the Oscar de la Renta Mob and the Blass Menagerie

i

IT IS SOMEHOW fitting that 550 Fashion Avenue, the twenty-five-storey headquarters of most of the richest fashion labels in America, stands on the sleaziest, least-designed sidewalk in Manhattan. It is an area of donut bars, cheap gold laboratories and discount furniture stores selling teak office chairs and electric desk fans. There is a McDonald's, with a permanent promotion of chicken McNuggets, and their red carry-out cartons scud lamely in the wind between the traffic. Right across the street from 550 Fashion Avenue, alongside a perspex igloo selling cut flowers, is a bronze by Judith Weller entitled the *Garment Worker*. The Garment Worker wears a Jewish cupel on his head and contrives to look repressed and heroic at the same time. A plaque on the statue tells us that it was donated to the City of New York by, among others, the Affiliated Dress Mfg Assn, the Blouse Industry Trust Fund, Marty Gutmacher, Isaac Hazan, Nat Kaplan, Bill Blass and Ralph Lauren.

From the plinth of the statue you get the best view of the 550 building, soaring above the filth of the sidewalk like a great Gothic space rocket. From six o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night the brass doors of the building never stop revolving, as a thousand assistants, house models, pattern cutters and press attachés come and go, while rails of sample clothes (concealed in plastic sample

bags as a precaution against copying) are trundled out of the brass lifts and on round the block to the sidestreets between Eighth and Ninth Avenues to Puerto Rican workshops. On each floor, or part of a floor, of 550 is the showroom of a different designer or line: Geoffrey Beene, Bill Blass, Blassport, Bob Mackie, Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, Oscar de la Renta, Miss O by Oscar de la Renta, Carolynne Roehm, Nina Ricci, Pierre Cardin, Hanae Mori and Karl Lagerfeld. Around lunchtime there is a flurry of activity as a fleet of stretch limousines pulls up outside the building, waiting to take Blass or de la Renta or Bob Mackie uptown to lunch. But often there is nothing remotely fashionable about Fashion Avenue, and the place is given over to the rails of clothes and the bums and hoboes who congregate in the long shadow of the unknown Garment Worker.

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Crossing the foyer of the Bill Blass floor in the 550 building is like crossing the desert. The distances involved are so great, and the expanse of grey carpet so enormous, that the horizon melds into the grey of the sofas and the venetian blinds. Every thirty yards or so, like oases in the Empty Quarter, are positioned little black Andrée Puttman tables upon which sit giant grey ashtrays. It would be perfectly possible to smoke an entire cigarette as you journeyed from oasis to oasis, on the route towards Blass's own office in the furthest corner.

He sat behind his desk with his back to the window, a bull of a man, aged 61, in a grey chalk-stripe suit. Afterwards I was left with the impression that he'd been smoking a fat Havana cigar, though he was doing no such thing.

'You're wearing a suit,' he said as I came in. 'Is that for my benefit?'

'Not really. I generally wear a suit for interviews.'

‘It’s a good suit,’ he said. ‘Who’s your tailor? Huntsman of Savile Row?’

I said that no, my tailor is a smaller, less famous place in Savile Row.

‘An Englishman spends much more comparatively on his clothes than an American,’ proclaimed Bill Blass. He leant back in his chair exposing the purple silk lining of his suit. For the purposes of this exchange it was clear he considered himself an honorary Englishman.

‘An Englishman may not replenish his wardrobe very often,’ he went on, ‘but he loves to go to Huntsman – or your smaller place – to buy his suit. In America it’s different. The men whose wives spend \$5,000 on a dress don’t want to spend \$750 on a suit. Mostly they pay \$350. It’s part of the American phenomenon.’

There was something disconcerting about Bill Blass’s showroom. All the time we were talking I could half hear Vivaldi playing nearby, but so softly it was impossible to follow the harmony for more than a few seconds. One moment you could hear it and then it faded and then it came back again. I asked, ‘Is this Vivaldi?’ But Bill Blass denied he could hear any music at all.

That same evening I met a conspiracy theorist at a party and happened to mention the phantom orchestra.

‘That’s never phantom,’ said the theorist, ‘that’s subliminal selling. They all do it now in fashion. It creates an ambiance. The music, the Vivaldi, the Ravel, whatever, creates an ambiance of luxury. It’s like the fragrance scent strips in the pages of *Town & Country*.’

‘Much more likely,’ I said, ‘it was buzzing in my ear-drums from the aeroplane.’

‘Maybe,’ replied the theorist unconvinced. ‘Maybe not.’

William Ralph Blass was born and raised in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the son of a hardware store owner. ‘And he’s remained a vulnerable, corn-fed Fort Wayne boy too,’ insists his friend and customer Katherine Liberman, though I am

doubtful that corn plays a pivotal role in Blass's many lunches and dinners. Along with Oscar de la Renta, he is the most party-minded designer on Seventh Avenue, locked into an apparently ceaseless round of charity dances and gala dinners.

It was disorientating to see him out of a dinner jacket, so closely do I associate Blass's broad, bronzed face with a black bow-tie. In social photographs he manages always to look exactly the same, whatever the party and whoever he's talking to: wide-eyed, amused, wry, vaguely flirtatious. He tends, intentionally or otherwise, to be photographed in profile, often kissing a customer lightly on the cheek. The register of women Bill Blass likes to kiss, or to whisper some mote of light gossip to, reads like the residents' association of the Forty-Two, Manhattan's smartest condominiums from Park Avenue to Gracie Square. His client list, which is couriered around the world as part of his press kit, in order of protocol, includes Mrs Ronald Reagan, Mrs George Bush, Mrs Henry Kissinger, Mrs Emil Mosbacher, Mrs Walter Annenberg, Mrs Estee Lauder and Mrs Felix Rohatyn.

'Do your customers mind appearing in a press release?' I asked.

Bill Blass gave a skewback smile, which developed into a massive beam. 'Do they mind?' he said. 'No, I don't believe my gals mind too much. Have you talked with many of my gals yet?'

I said that I had talked to rather a lot of them.

'Then I guess you know already they don't mind,' he laughed.

The Shiny Set is exceptionally loyal to Blass. They are loyal to him personally and loyal to his clothes. When they describe him it is in similar terms to those reserved by nineteenth-century hostesses for society sculptors and watercolourists.

'Bill is the epitome of style and grace,' Judy Peabody told W. 'He is a Cole Porter song, urbane, charming,

sophisticated, the type of man who never makes a false step.'

'I've known a lot of men in my time,' says Missy Bancroft, 'and Bill is one of the most attractive. He is handsome, clean, polished. He has the most wonderful skin. And he smells so good. It's not a perfumed scent, but something natural and very pleasing. He is a pleasing man. I've never known Bill to buy a piece of furniture that wasn't pleasing or cook a meal that wasn't delicious or hang a painting that wasn't impeccable. His house in Connecticut is perfect, a testament to what makes life beautiful and pleasant.'

Beautiful and pleasing are touchstone words in the lexicon of Bill Blass. His brightly coloured dresses in reds, pinks and green satin, often with a ruffled collar or a sable trim, are clothes that express the equilibrium of rich and happy American society. They are clothes for the country club, for the Nantucket antiques fair, for the Lester Lanin benefit at Saratoga Springs and the Blue River Park polo benefit at Kansas City, Missouri.

'Despite the fact that *Vogue* has an infinitely bigger circulation, my customers are much more inclined to read *Town & Country*,' said Blass. 'I realised early on that most American designers never went anywhere except Europe, or perhaps Palm Beach. But I decided that it would be interesting to go to Detroit. I wanted to see who my customer was in Milwaukee. When I started out I was really peddling clothes, but I was also, more importantly, getting to know the people who wore them. Ultimately they became friends. I could anticipate what they needed because I knew how they lived in a particular town. Certain cities don't have restaurants, so all entertainment takes place either in a club or a person's house. Restaurant clothes aren't necessary in that case.'

'Whenever I look at Bill's clothes on the racks their colours remind me of Enough Money,' said a buyer from Kaufmann's store in Pittsburgh. 'The blues he uses remind me of big,

expensive beach clubs in the Bahamas, his reds remind me of big, expensive fillet steaks.'

Blass arrived in New York by train from the Midwest aged 19, and took a job as an assistant in a Seventh Avenue design studio. 'At that time,' says Blass, 'we designers were kept very much in the back room, almost as if we were something to be ashamed of. And the minute a collection had been shown, the designer was encouraged to take a long vacation, so the clothes could be modified or adapted - watered down, really - by the manufacturer and there'd be nobody around to complain. It's only since 1960 that designers have been acceptable and accepted.'

After the war, which he spent in the army, Blass joined a firm called Anna Miller, where he worked first as a sketcher, then as a designer. When Mrs Miller retired in 1959 the firm merged with that of her brother, Maurice Rentner, a successful Seventh Avenue house known for dressing fat women. Blass transformed Rentner's fat image into his own, more youthful one. In 1960 he was made a vice-president of the company and by 1970 had bought it and renamed it Bill Blass. In no time at all, as he tells it, he was earning \$250,000 a year and living in a pair of back-to-back penthouses on East 57th Street, entertaining on a terrace planted with \$15,000 worth of vegetation.

He persuaded the women he'd met at Park Avenue dinner parties and on Long Island weekends to come to his fashion shows, where he seated them in the front row. They were delighted to accept, and kept on accepting. He was one of the first American designers to license his reputation to bathing suits, scent and luggage, and later bed linen and little wrapped-up chocolates and Lincoln Continental motor cars.

It is an empire founded on the strength of his own personality and high profile. His annual lists of what he likes and doesn't like so much about women, conceived to

promote his Bill Blass scent, have become cult advertisements in the fashion magazines.

Two characteristics he professes to dislike are women who can't go to the movies by themselves and women who wear exercise clothes when they aren't exercising. Two that he does like are women who sing, loud, even though they're tone deaf, and women who send a man flowers, just because it's raining. It is a bizarre composite: a tone-deaf woman, singing loudly in the rain, mailing boxes of roses to Bill Blass.

'Do you like opera fellas?' he asked suddenly.

'Opera fellas?' Were they something Blass did like or didn't like? I had no idea.

'Fellas who work in the opera. I wondered if you knew any. I was having a discussion with some opera fellas last night and they were saying how the soprano hates the tenor and the tenor hates the baritone. I was telling them it's the same in fashion. Designers aren't kind about other designers, especially when they're successful. These opera fellas said it's nastier in opera, but I say it's nastier in fashion. And I'll say it again,' he repeated with a broad Indiana grin. 'It's nastier in fashion.'

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I went to visit Calvin Klein in his headquarters at 205 West 39th Street, round the block and fifty paces from 550 Fashion Avenue. The offices are a maze of narrow corridors occupying the tenth, eleventh and twelfth floors of an unremarkable thirties building that could as easily house the Internal Revenue Service as the studios and workrooms of a billion-dollar fashion empire. Klein's own office overlooks the internal well of the block, another passage of a room with a white formica table under the window he uses for sketching, and a black divan with black cushions. On the wall are Calvin Klein advertisements framed in black perspex,