

What I Like About Bill Blass

His Candor: "Honey, don't ever let 'em tell you money isn't attractive."

It isn't enough to be king of the taffeta strapless evening gown, consummate escort to the Pat Buckleys of the world and unashamed originator of the "What I Like and Don't Like About Women" ad campaign.

"Oh, *that* old thing. A lotta people didn't like that ad when it first came out. They said it was anti-feminist, which is *too* ridiculous." In a rare trip out into the heartland, Bill Blass spent a couple of hours of hard labor in Philadelphia one recent afternoon, presenting his new fall line at Nan Duskin. He was there to meet and greet while the local Ladies Who Shop had their fittings for the Blass creations they had ordered six months earlier. The creator sat behind a desk and served up one jovial bon mot after another as the bustling parade of models, customers and attendant Duskinites whirled around him.

"Of course, I knew Nan Duskin when I was first starting out—that was years ago. This store has always had a tradition of catering to women. It understands the Philadelphia woman's needs and caters to those needs—dresses her. The New York woman is much more into shopping. Whereas the Philadelphia woman has no problem making a decision about what she wants."

One such decisive creature came charging out of the back dressing rooms—a blond going gray, in her 40s, about a size eight, with saleswoman in tow. "Mr. Blass, I *must* have this suit," she said in a slight Southern accent. But horrors! The suit was the last of its kind and it had someone else's name on it. She began to plead with the saleswoman. "Oh, has the other customer seen it yet? Really,



Blass from the past: Servicing the Duskin set.

I *must* have it," she said, giving herself another appreciative glance in the mirror. "It's perfect for those stupid little country meetings I have to go to. And I'm really into gray now."

"Oh, you're really into *gray* are you?" the saleswoman replied, teasing. "Is that what your Color-Me-Beautiful lady said to you? Are you absolutely sure you want it?" she almost taunted. The woman nodded eagerly, her severely

cropped hair bobbing against her plain, unpainted face at chin level. So the saleswoman led her back into the fitting rooms to see what she could do. It looked as though someone who was not there to look after her interests was about to get royally screwed. Blass roared.

"Women have no scruples whatsoever," he said with the gleeful satisfaction of one whose fondest suspicion has been borne out yet again, and

he sipped his Diet Coke. After 40 years of four packs a day, Blass quit smoking and subsequently acquired a new habit: diet soft drinks.

The surrounding madness of shoppers and models as well as the tentative questions of reporters held little interest for Blass, who showed far greater attention to Bill, the young, lanky, freckle-faced boy who came along to shoot pictures. Blass asked him his age several times and marveled at his youthful looks. (The lad is 23, but Blass insisted that he really looked about 14.) He also quizzed him on his career plans and who his favorite photographers are. "Do you like Penn? Have you heard of him? How 'bout Avedon? Is he your favorite? I just saw him the other day—he looked well. I hadn't seen him since he did my portrait. You like those pictures Bruce Weber does for the Calvin Klein Obsession ads? They're a little steamy—well, *dirty* pictures is what they are. Do you do pornography?"

Young Bill, who was taking pictures throughout this sinuous inquiry, looked out from behind his camera long enough to shrug and say gamely, "Sometimes. Do you want to take your clothes off?"

"Maybe for you, Bill," Blass quipped, shocking himself a little.

Soon after that exchange Blass abruptly ended the interview by politely leading us outside to the street. He left us standing there in front of a window display of a headless mannequin wearing green feathers and draped velvet. We got one last shot of Blass's back as he retreated into Nan Duskin—where the girls are. —Constance Adler