

BILL BLASS

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Born in 1922 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Bill Blass was inspired by the glamorous fashions that oozed out of Hollywood movies and magazines in the 1930s. He left the Midwest for New York City in 1940, where he studied for a short time at the Parsons School of Design and worked as a sketch artist for clothing manufacturer David Crystal. Blass's budding career in fashion was put on hold during World War II—he enlisted in 1943 and served in an army counterintelligence unit. In the postwar years, Blass returned to New York and assisted Anne Klein before joining clothing manufacturer Anna Miller. This opportunity would lead to the creation of his eponymous fashion empire. In 1959, Miller's business merged with her brother Maurice Rentner's reputable design house. Amid the restructuring, Blass gained recognition and started designing under the label Bill Blass for Maurice Rentner. In 1970, Blass bought the company and it became Bill Blass Ltd.

Although his label included updated versions of classic menswear styles, Bill Blass was most admired for his glamorized sportswear for women. His conservative and clean silhouettes were composed of versatile separates featuring menswear details as well as sequins and bold geometric patterns. Blass's elegant designs were adopted by wealthy American society women including Brooke Astor, Gloria Vanderbilt, and Happy Rockefeller, as well as First Ladies Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan.

Though his couture clothes were worn by a select clientele, he also produced a more affordable line called Blassport, and his name was widely consumed on everything from fragrances and executive gifts to linens and home furnishings, and much more. Blass was a leader in the business licensing boom of the late twentieth century and had nearly 100 licensing agreements by the mid-1990s, which generated an annual income of \$700 million.

Blass was honored with a Coty American Fashion Critics' Award three times and earned the first Coty Award for menswear in 1968. The Council of Fashion Designers of America recognized Blass with a 1987 Lifetime Achievement Award and the first Humanitarian Leadership Award in 1996. Following a stroke, Blass sold his business in 1999 for \$50 million and died of cancer in June 2002. The designer was remembered as being debonair, charismatic, and American through and through—like his creations.

The Bill Blass brand experienced a tumultuous decade following the loss of its longtime leader. It was bought and sold several times and saw the coming and going of multiple creative directors: Steven Slowick, Lars Nilsson, Michaele Vollbracht, Peter Som, Michael Bastian, and Jeffrey Monteiro—all of whom were unable to revive the brand. In fall 2014, Chris Benz was appointed to take over creative direction. Rather than attempting to breathe life into the former design house, as his predecessors had done, Benz started from the ground up. Taking advantage of the widely positive recognition of Bill Blass's name, Benz guided the label to a contemporary launch with an eclectic mix of clothing and accessories sold exclusively online at various price points.



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Bill Blass, spring/summer 1992. Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

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