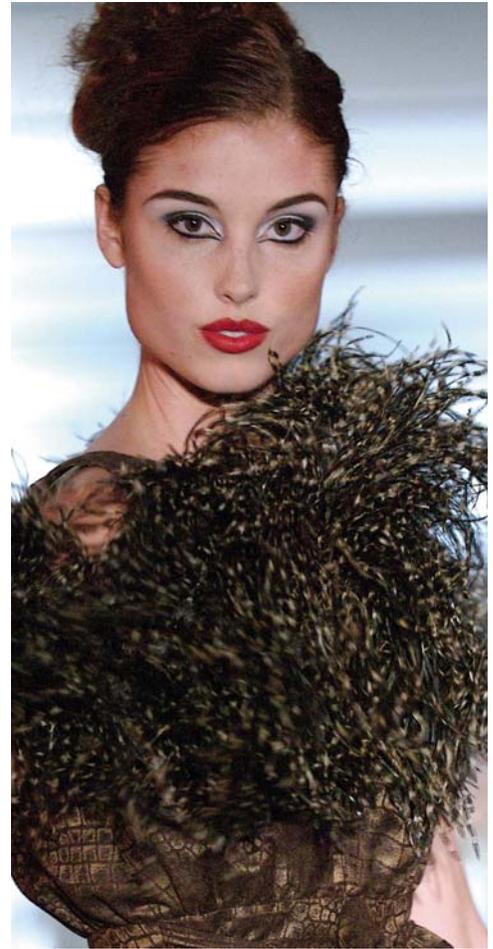




Michael  
Vollbracht  
with model



“Indiana, Indiana... don’t tell me he is from Indiana. They are all from Indiana...”

With these words, fashion icon and editor Diana Vreeland heralded Michael Vollbracht’s arrival into the New York fashion world. She was referring to Vollbracht’s Midwest kinsmen, legendary designers Norman Norell, Halston and Bill Blass, all of whom grew up in the heartland before making their names on Seventh Avenue.

Vollbracht followed suit. He studied at the Parsons School of Design, graduating in 1969. In his early career, he worked at the New York major fashion houses of Geoffrey Beene and Donald Brooks, but turned his talents over to fashion illustration, working for Henri Bendel and Bloomingdale’s department stores. While on staff at Bloomingdale’s, Vollbracht designed the store’s iconic “Big Brown Bag,” created in the 1970s, and still seen by thousands of people everyday.

The designer returned to the cloth trade, launching his own line in 1979, which won him

# BI<sup>the</sup>BLASS

## Blast

By Lana Bortolot

Michael Vollbracht Left Seventh Avenue for a 15-Year Sabbatical, Reinventing Himself as a Florida Artist. Back on Seventh Avenue, He's Updating the Bill Blass Brand for a New Generation.



accolades from *Women's Wear Daily* as “Seventh Avenue’s newest, brightest star.” Celebrity trendsetters Farrah Fawcett and Paloma Picasso wore his designs. In his second season, he won the Coty American Fashion Critics Award for Designer of the Year.

The young designer quickly found a high-profile following, many of whom would become friends and backers. People like Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Crawford and Joanne and Johnny Carson. But when the Carsons’ marriage fell apart, so did Vollbracht’s underwritten support—and his fashion house. At the apex of his career, he simply up and left New York, the fashion world and his celebrity connections.

The designer settled in the aptly-named town of Safety Harbor, FL, where for the next 15 years, he kept a low profile. He helped a friend renovate an aging spa in return for room and board. He did volunteer work. He painted. He bought and retrofitted a beach cottage with thrift-store treasures. And he stayed connected with his friend and mentor, Bill Blass.

When Blass asked Vollbracht to curate his work for a retrospective at Indiana University in his hometown of Fort Wayne, he became the de facto expert on the designer. And when Blass died in 2002 shortly after completing the project, Vollbracht was the tailor-made candidate to lead the struggling brand back to glory.

**While the collection respects its American roots—a casual sophistication—it’s been updated for the “next” Blass woman.**

Since then, Vollbracht hasn’t tried to change the Blass aesthetic as much as update it, which he does with revealing fabrics, classic details and flirty—not fluffy—flounces. Though the Blass legacy lies in the “great daytime suit,” Vollbracht updated the look with smart belted jackets, miniskirts and feminine blouses.

While the collection respects its American

roots—a casual sophistication—it’s been updated for the “next” Blass woman. For her, Vollbracht created mod short tunic dresses with belts and swingy overcoats—sort of a Canaby Street meets Madison Avenue.

Vollbracht says his new collection was influenced by his fellow Hoosiers: “Norell because I fell in love with his sequined mermaids years ago... Halston because his simple philosophy looks so good in this era of over-designing. And, of course, Blass because it is my job to knock him off.”

But with as much fun as he’s having in these collections, Vollbracht has never veered from his trademark American glamour. Vollbracht’s gowns are unfussy and sweeping in neutral palettes, with occasional shots of colors, graphics and hand-sewn sequins. The designs are showing up in pop culture magazines such as *Radar*. But the biggest newsmaker this year (so far) was a January *Vogue* cover on which Angelina Jolie posed against the African desert in a raspberry rayon evening dress from Bill

*fashion & style*



Blass. Other fans include Oprah Winfrey, Sigourney Weaver, Iman and Janet Jackson.

At the recent Destination Fashion Show at the Bal Harbour shops, Miami got its own taste of Seventh Avenue at the show presented by Saks Fifth Avenue Bal Harbour, to benefit the Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis. Hot off the Bryant Park runway in New York were the designs that made the covers during Fashion Week: From

midnight blue (the season's new black) body-draping gowns to a saffron paisley batik—a strong pattern that's emerging on the design

**Hot off the Bryant Park runway in New York were the designs that made the covers during Fashion Week.**

scene everywhere from home décor to stationery. The show's most dramatic statements reflected the collection's range: A

cream gown with flowing skirts and a plunging neckline, and, in the finale, a parade of 30 models wearing the quintessential little black dress.

"Bill Blass was our choice for this event because the collection offered everything the Miami customer is looking for," says Deborah Slack, vice president and general manager at the Bal Harbour store. "She is sophisticated, well traveled—trend



conscious but not a fashion victim—and she always loves color.”

Slack adds, “We are very happy to host and donate the VIP portion of this fabulous event. The Miami Project To Cure Paralysis is a very important charity and we were thrilled to partner with them.”

Vollbracht has a history of supporting worthy causes—even when he could have been considered one himself after his exit from New York. Of that time he’s been quoted as saying, “I grew up poor and I don’t need much.” But

even then, Vollbracht volunteered his time and also his work for charity fashion shows and auctions.

Today, he lends his support to a number of charities. He recently participated in the YWCA Old Bags Luncheon in Greenwich, CT, to raise awareness about domestic violence. He supports the American Cancer Society and charities that brings awareness to AIDS and cruelty towards animals. This spring, he accompanied First Lady Laura Bush, who wore a crimson Blass suit at The Heart Truth Red

Dress Show (for the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute) at New York Fashion Week.

What’s next for the reborn brand? Vollbracht just launched The Fragrance From Bill Blass, which the company describes as “upscale and aspirational” in keeping with the quintessential Blass woman. But soon, the label may add some multiculturalism to its American sensibility; with NexCan Brands Inc.’s recent acquisition of the label, look for the Blass brand to expand into Asia and European markets. SA