

# Designers counter tightened budgets

By CHRISTINE WALDEN

"Women today have only two reasons to buy clothes, either it's something they need or something so devastating and flattering and attractive they have to have it." — Bill Blass.

"You have to be on your toes more than ever. The only way we can fight

it is to do better design wise." — Bill

Haire.

"You have to start looking at lines that have as much quality and durability as possible, as much as the nickle and dime you pay can get you." — spokesman for Stephen Burrows, Inc.

But it's not nickle-and-dime stuff that Haire, Blass and others speak of when talking design and fashion. It's big dollars, creativity and, right now, keeping the fashion industry afloat as clothing sinks to the bottom of the buying priority list.

Because the fashion industry is one of the first places hit by tightened budgets, it is forced to respond. Already, some Detroit area sales are down and the questions arise: how will designers counter the economy and what will happen if budgets are cut even more?

Part of the answer, if there is one, is knowing who's during well and why.

"WE'RE PRETTY happy to be where we are at the moment," said Haire of Bill and Hazel Haire for Frederick Sport. "Because of our product and the quality at a better price, we aren't having as many problems as those with lower prices."

Halston, despite of the economy (and the skimp), is also doing well, evidenced by a five point increase in

company stock and the opening and

scheduled openings of new divisions.

He attributes success to a design philosophy of quality but "we don't make a product so high fashion that it is a reasonable thing," he said.

However, and perhaps more importantly, the continued good sales of higher priced designs is based on the contention that women who bought Halston, Blass, Trigere, etc. still have money and will continue to spend it. They are the established rich and are not feeling the effects of lay-offs or paycuts.

WHEREAS, THE purchasers of the less expensive lines who were just coming into money when the economy began to shake are now caught in the middle of the pinch and have realigned their spending habits.

While that contention seems to work, companies such as Concept VII, based on quality designs at a good price, are still reporting good sales.

Said Concept VII designer Ronald Kolodzie, "Four or five months ago, when this whole thing started, we noticed that we were starting to do better than everyone else. Now people are shopping much more sharply and we look especially good. We have a designer look but it's not costing \$500 a shot."

Kolodzie said Concept VII designs may be attracting those who bought cheaper clothes but are now looking for quality rather than quantity.

Of course, most spring lines have already been marketed and so it is to summer and fall that designers look. And if Detroit is an indicator, the fashion industry may be in for a bad time.

WHILE MOST designers don't compare one city to another, some indicated that Detroit clothing budgets have been reduced before the rest of the country.

Bill Blass said a recent Troy showing of his collection indicated "that there is a diminishing audience in Detroit. But, he added, "I have not found this true in the rest of the nation."

Similarly, the manufacturer's representative for Christian Dior commented that Detroit sales were down 14 items from Chicago.

And yet the Adele Simpson collection sold better in Birmingham this January that it did last year.

While such contradictions make a trend difficult to establish, the far reaching effects of a depressed auto industry, along with others, are undeniable. And as women start tightening their belts, designers will have to, in some way, accommodate.

Of course, most designers contend that - creativity cannot be hampered by economics. One must not think in

terms of designing cheap, just designing.

The philosophy holds and is reflected in spring and summer lines which contain more fabric than ever.

Said Kolodzie, who created one spring gown with 30 yards of fabric, "We can't take back a certain style just because it's bad in terms of money."

ONE WAY of maintaining sales is to reduce prices, which is what Concept VII did and with great success.

"We made a fantastic effort at getting prices down, probably to just about half of what we would have had to charge, hoping we would get the volume to offset it," said Kolodzie.

He added that reductions were made without "skimping on fabrics and hopefully none on workmanship."

But low prices alone don't induce people to part with their money. As Blass said, there are only two reasons to buy, needing and wanting.

"At a time like this you want to make clothes as pretty as possible," said Blass. "Women want quality and clothes that are by nature lasting."

And if a woman bought quality last year, she's not likely to need, she has to want.

Consequently, designers cannot sit on their laurels and let the money role in. They must be fresh and new every season. And though some designers have loyal followings, Halston commented, "Women don't pick out designers. They pick out clothes they like. People aren't so interested in designer labels, but what the designer might produce."

HAIRE ADDED, "Everyone's hurting to a degree and because of that, you have to try harder. Designers must be more original. But you have to try harder at every level of the business."

The fabric manufacturers, whose prices determine the price of garments, are doing just that.

Haire said, "Prices haven't gone up in fact, cashmere and yarns have

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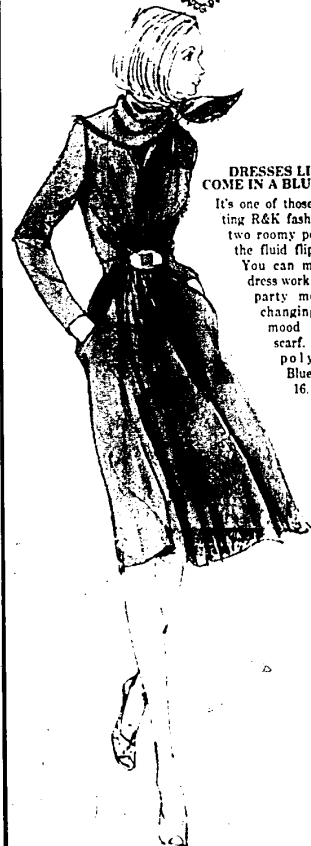


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