



art and sou

HOLIDAY 200
The actress Natalie Portma



Clockwise from left: Gloria Vanderbilt in 1979; Diana Vreeland, Babe Paley and C. Z. Guest imagined by Kenneth Paul Block in the same Balenciaga coat; a sketch of Pat Buckley; Block and Vanderbilt at her New York apartment; a 1972 sketch of Yves Saint Laurent couture.



A Fine Line

CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS SITS FOR THE MAN WITH THE BRUSH, KENNETH PAUL BLOCK.

If all you knew of Kenneth Paul Block were his society portraits and fashion drawings, you'd think he'd spent his life clinking martinis with Gloria Vanderbilt and wheedling previews out of Yves Saint Laurent. If all you knew were the ascot he knots inside the turned-up collar of a black cotton shirt and the retired cigarette holder and opera cape, you'd think he was too fastidious for words (which he is). But that picture of Block — the last in the line of great fashion illustrators; Eric, René Bouët-Willaumez and René Bouché are the others — would not be complete.

Block, 83, cultivates an exasperated indifference to pop culture, taking cover in a fortress of clotheshorse idols (Gloria Guinness, Babe Paley, the Duchess of Windsor, all of whom sat for him) and design invincibles (Balenciaga, Grès, Galanos). But occasionally, propelled by friends, he has agreed to be swept along on the tide of an alien enthusiasm — one of his most charming qualities.

I met Block 30 years ago at a diva puppet show in a Greenwich Village apartment featuring marionettes of Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer. One of the acclaimed porn boys of the era appeared at intermission to deliver to the puppeteer Bob McKinley a birthday gift, a raccoon coat

under which the boy wore exactly nothing. It was the perfect '70s moment: the intersection of fashion, camp, disco and what would turn out to be the beginnings of superstar porn.

As an upcoming book, "Drawing Fashion: The Art of Kenneth Paul Block" (Pointed Leaf Press), by Susan Mulcahy, makes clear, the '70s belonged to Block. When every magazine had left fashion illustration for dead, W offered him a showcase for drawings that used clothes as a pretext for suggesting worlds and lives of impossible leisure, luxury and vanity — a universe direct from the boudoirs of Block's imagination. In his pure fashion work, he might place a figure alone on the page without a stroke of context, but you knew from her slouch or the way she held her gloves the kind of furniture she collected and how she treated her maid.

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taffeta, the silent thud of velvet. He never evaded his responsibilities as a journalist. His contract wasn't with the designer, and heaven knows it wasn't with the publisher John Fairchild, notwithstanding assignments he was obliged to fulfill that negatively engaged him. Block could have lived without giving Madonna a beauty makeover. Of a Streisand sitting: "She didn't want to be there, and neither did I." By the time he attended the puppet show, at least he knew who she was.

As disenchanted as one could wish, Block doesn't have to find a dress attractive for him to do a good drawing of it. "The process is hard to explain." Long pause. "It helps if I'm amused."

Block graduated from Parsons in 1945 and joined Women's Wear Daily (which would spawn W) in the mid-1950s. In 1957 he traveled to France for the first time, packing his paints, just as he would on dozens of subsequent trips, to record landscapes, gardens, houses. It was the dawn of a scary strain of Francophilia, of people like Block and Julia Child who believed in the unanswerable superiority of France. He and his partner, the textile designer Morton Ribyat, took French lessons from the architect Pierre Chareau's impoverished widow in her Manhattan walk-up. With an introduction from Madame, the men were invited to tea at Maison de Verre in Paris, then drifted down to the Luberon.

That sounds like nothing today, but interior Provence was not an obvious holiday destination then. There was Dora Maar in Ménerbes and the ghost of Chagall in Gordes, but the sniffy colonizing of the region by Rory Cameron, the Sainsburys and Fairchild himself was years off. Nearly four decades after that first trip to the Midi, Block and Ribyat stayed with me in a *mas* I had restored in the area, and we retraced their steps. Around 11 every morning I'd pour them a vodka, and Block would disappear into the lavender to paint. I was never allowed to see his watercolors, though much later he did give me a lovely one of my house, the only work of this sort in the book.

Experience had taught me not to expect it. Block once arrived in Paris, where I was on the desk of W and WWD in the '80s, with a watercolor of another place I'd had, in Normandy. It was a present, but when he returned to New York it was still in his suitcase.

"I looked at it again in the hotel," he said. "It's just not — I can't."

"Drawing Fashion" has lots of tasty French bits to chew on. Balenciaga banned the paper when it wrote of a "tunnel of love" connecting his house with Givenchy's. Block was installed as a spy in an apartment looking into Balenciaga's workrooms, but the outcome



Left: Block at the Women's Wear Daily offices. Above: a watercolor of Perry Ellis's 1978 collection.

had the predictability of a cartoon: "Curtains foiled my mission," he said. Such subterfuge would have been ridiculous if it wasn't so determined.

Ohrbach's Sydney Gittler attended collections from which WWD was barred and reported back to Block, talking him through Balenciaga's new silhouette. It was good training. Block later drew the Princess of Wales's wedding dress from a description that, according to the paper, was official and had been slipped mysteriously under the door. It may just as well have fallen from the sky.

Not the least of the book's pleasures are its nonfashion and not-strictly-fashion ones. Block allows how his sketch of Chanel is cruel but not inaccurate: "She really looked that way at the end of her life, like a little brown nut of a wrinkled monkey." Saint Laurent is a leonine, swivel-hipped stud fitting Zizi Jeanmaire. Romantic paintings of rooms inhabited by Bill Blass and Pierre Bergé tell why they are high-water marks of 20th-century decoration.

Steven Meisel, who left WWD to become

a photographer long before the paper's illustration department was eliminated in 1992, poses for Block in a tasseled wrap. Since the company didn't employ models, male staffers often filled the void, stripping to their jeans before being zipped into evening gowns. Tender studies of Jackie O. defending herself against Ron Galella are from Block's brief stint as a courtroom artist. Portraits of Nan Kempner and Pat Buckley conjure a lost world of BP and FVs (for those under 40, Beautiful People and Fashion Victims). In a tour de force, Block fantasizes Paley, Diana Vreeland and C.Z. Guest in conversation, as if there was nothing more normal than for them all to be wearing the same Balenciaga coat.

Block's days of depicting underfed ladies with oversubscribed social lives are likely over. Amy Fine Collins, the keeper of the Best Dressed List, courted him, but he had a bad feeling about the way the proposed commission came about.

"She told me that since everyone tells her she looks like my drawings, I should draw her," Block says. "The kind of woman I find thrilling is not necessarily everyone's favorite. For example, I really thought Mrs. Gilbert Miller was very chic, very elegant, extremely stylish. But she was not pretty. Really not good looking at all. And she was old. But she had these other qualities. The kind of woman I find exciting, it's a very limited group." ■