



Peacocks Roosting: Mildred Custin’s introduction of menswear to Bonwit Teller of the 1960s
Michael Mamp, Central Michigan University, USA; Sara Marcketti, Iowa State University, USA

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The 1960s were a period of rapid cultural change which fueled social paradigm shifts related to concepts of gender, sexuality, race and age.¹ Fashion of the era reflected these changing ideals. Menswear in particular underwent a period of evolution. According to author Aquilina-Ross, John Stephen’s shop, which began on Carnaby Street London in 1956, flung open the door for the male fashion revolution of the 1960s, “until his arrival, even if men had wanted colorful clothes, there was little available that was ready made.”² Kutulas stated that prior to the 1960s “fashion was a female realm and shopping-consuming-a female activity...only gay men and other masculine outliers followed fashion.”³ However, by 1965 fashionable men known as *peacocks* emerged from urban London roots to flourish in a frenzy of individualized fashion exploration. The ready-to-wear market had finally embraced the male gender and subsequently exploded with choice for men of all socio economic statuses, sexual orientations and ages.⁴

¹ Judy Kutulas, “Dedicated followers of fashion: peacock fashion and the roots of the new American man, 1960-70,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2012): 167-184.

² Geoffrey Aquilina-Ross, *The Day of the Peacock Style for men 1963-1973* (London: V&A Publishing), 15.

³ Kutulas, “Dedicated followers,” 167.

⁴ Aquilina-Ross, *The Day of the Peacock*.

The purpose of this research was to introduce readers to the innovations Mildred Custin brought to American menswear. The historical method was utilized for this research. The most significant primary source was a transcript of an interview conducted with Custin in 1989 as part of the Oral History Project at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Custin's strategies were verified with period articles from the *New York Times* and *Vogue*.

Custin served as President of New York based Bonwit Teller from 1965-70. Prior to this, Bonwit's, in existence since 1895, had only sold women's clothing. Although the Peacock Revolution had been in full swing in Europe since the early part of the decade, the more conservative American market resisted new styles for men. Custin initially added menswear to Bonwit's assortment with an in



Figure 1 Examples of Bill Blass menswear for Bonwit Teller. Images © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

store Pierre Cardin boutique.⁵ Cardin's designs emphasized trim silhouettes, collarless jackets, and bold coloring. The department was successful and became a beacon of style and roosting spot for peacocks of the late 1960s. The Men's Department at Bonwit Teller also carried Bill Blass' new menswear collection (Figure 1). Custin's decision to introduce exclusive menswear to Bonwit's assortment supported new ideas of what it meant to be a man of the era and proved financially successful for her organization. This research also introduces a somewhat unfamiliar female leader of retail.

⁵ An Interview on Mildred Custin by Mildred Finger, 1989, Fashion Institute of Technology SUNY, FIT Library Dept. of Special Collections and FIT Archives, New York, NY, USA.