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CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Rachel
L. Mellon
Collection

Balenciaga, 100 years



Cristóbal Balenciaga in a photograph taken in 1937. © Sarria / Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

Balenciaga opened his first atelier in 1917, in San Sebastian, when he was only 22 years old. This was the beginning of an intense activity which would see him set up business in Paris, the city he moved to twenty years later, where he would become the “Master” of international Haute Couture.

The year 2017 therefore marks 100 years since the start of the young Balenciaga’s creative and business adventure and 80 since he opened his famous Parisian *Maison* at number 10 Avenue George V.

As part of the centenary, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum has organised the exhibition *Rachel L. Mellon Collection* running from 27 May 2017 until 25 January 2018, and paying tribute to a great lady with her own specific weight as a client of the *Maison* Balenciaga, as a social figure of her time, as a self-taught landscape artist and as a benefactor of many cultural entities in different countries, among them, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum.



The Legacy of Mrs. Mellon

Rachel Lowe Lambert Mellon (1910-2014), known as Bunny, was one of the great ladies of the North American high society in the 20th century.

Philanthropist, art collector, garden designer, personal friend of the Kennedy family, and wife of the financial magnate and great patron Paul Mellon, Mrs. Mellon constitutes the archetype of the wealthy, sensitive and exclusive client of the Balenciaga *Maison*. As such, and also given her relationship of affinity and friendship with the couturier, Mrs. Mellon enjoyed the privilege of having one of the most important Balenciaga wardrobes of her time. It included all kinds of garments and accessories for her social and private life, chronologically concentrated into 12 years, from 1956 until Balenciaga closed his doors in 1968.

“Private collections have their own physiognomy which, obviously, reflect the tastes and attitudes of those who put them together”. John Rewald makes this reflection on art collecting in the catalogue for the exhibition of one of the Mellon’s art collections and which could be extended to the way she selected, purchased, conserved and even documented her entire wardrobe, a fraction of which is now a collection with its own name forming part of the heritage of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum.

The Collection

The collection put together over the years was given a strong boost in 2014 thanks to the important legacy left to it on Mrs. Mellon’s death and which was subsequently enhanced with the reception of documents referring to the collection and donated by the Gerard Lambert Foundation.

The collection therefore includes all sorts of clothes and accessories for all times of the day, purchased by Mrs. Mellon during more than 10 years. It specifically comprises 120 day outfits, 50 coats, 40 cocktail dresses, 25 evening gowns, 20 déshabillés, 10 gardening outfits, 30 lingerie items, 215 scarves, 32 toques and hats, and a miscellaneous category amounting to a total of 660 pieces. The Rachel L. Mellon collection also comes with a document archive including 138 original sketches with fabric samples and 250 references of commercial and personal correspondence.

It is, undoubtedly, the biggest Balenciaga collection by a single client conserved today in the collection of any

Rachel L. Mellon in a blouse by Cristóbal Balenciaga as she tends her garden.
© Henri Cartier-Bresson/ Magnum Photos/ Contacto.



Rachel L. Mellon became one of the most outstanding international clients. Invoice for the year 1956. © Collection Rachel L. Mellon/Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

museum; however, although the volume of articles is in itself important, the greatest wealth of the collection lies in its variety and in the information emerging from relations between the pieces and the documentation which Mrs. Mellon’s habit of keeping things now offers us the opportunity of observing.

This interrelation between documentary evidence and the collection of attire perfectly reflects the purchasing process of an international client at the Balenciaga house, starting with the sketches sent for her to choose models and ending with the invoice. In turn, a number of documents also highlight the exclusivity and preferential treatment dispensed to Mrs. Mellon.

The Exhibition

The *Rachel L. Mellon Collection* is the first organised by the Museum on the subject of her legacy. Of the more than 600 textile and document references making up the collection, 150 representative pieces have been selected, most of which have never been exhibited before. Specifically, there are 97 pieces of clothing together with original documents and personal objects: sketches, correspondence, invoices, photographs, etc. The exhibition enables us to approach Balenciaga through the fascinating filter of Mrs. Mellon as a client, friend and expert collector, and as the exponent of a way of life to which very few had access.

This reading represents a complex challenge tackled under the direction of Mr. Hubert de Givenchy, Founder-President of the Museum, key figure of the genesis of the collection and a personal friend of both.

Produced by the Museum, the exhibition has the associate curatorship of Eloy Martínez de la Pera, Patron of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation, and Igor Uria, the Museum Collections Director.

The Rachel L. Mellon collection received a strong boost in 2014 with the incorporation of more than 400 pieces. © Collection Rachel L. Mellon/Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.



Mrs. Mellon and her World

One of the central themes of the exhibition is the biography of Mrs. Mellon, set in the context of its historical moment, and thanks to which we can understand the social relevance of her public persona and the special intimacy of her private sphere.



Born in 1910 as Rachel Lowe Lambert, she inherited an enormous fortune forged in the chemical industry by her grandfather, inventor of *Listerine*, and her father, president of *Gillette*. She married twice. The first time, in 1932 to Stacy Barcroft Lloyd, with whom she had two children. Her second marriage, in 1946, was to Paul Mellon, a widower with two children and one of the world's richest men, a great patron and collector of art.

Mrs. Mellon was a person who valued her privacy above all else and preferred to stay out of the public eye. She often received and entertained a small and select circle of friends, among whom were President Kennedy and his wife Jackie. Similarly worthy of note is that her splendid Oak Spring estate in Virginia also welcomed two generations of the British royal family; Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh in 1957, and years later Prince Charles and Lady Diana, their only visits to private homes in their American tour.

Paul and Rachel Mellon at an opening in the National Gallery of Art in 1965.
© National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gallery Archive.



Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, with Mrs. Mellon, leaving the home of Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. after presenting their respects to the assassinated civil rights leader, 1968. © Bettmann Collection/ Getty Images.

Mrs. Mellon unquestionably belonged to an elite not only of enormous economic weight, but political and intellectual too. As a patron and philanthropist of the arts, together with her husband Paul, she bequeathed more than 1,000 works to the National Gallery of Art – Cézanne, Van Gogh or Degas among others. In her rare public photographs we can see her talking to outstanding figures in the world of culture including Truman Capote, the architect I.M. Pei, or the artist Adam Peiperl.

Mrs. Mellon only gave two interviews in her life, the first to *The New York Times* in 1969 and the second, in 2010, to *Vanity Fair*. The former gave rise to her famous phrase and personal motto, “nothing should be noticed”. This aspect of discreet presence and veiled influence in the upper echelons of American social and cultural life was complemented with even rarer images – like those of Henri Cartier-Bresson for *Vogue* – which document a more private Mrs. Mellon, working at her great passion, gardening, and dressed for the job in the tunics, blouses and skirts purpose-designed by Balenciaga.

Studying and going about gardening, horticulture and landscaping is one of the most remarkable and personal traits of Mrs. Mellon for being an area in which she achieved recognition for her own merits. She developed the love from childhood and it stayed with her throughout her entire lifetime; not only was she self-taught, she also put together a magnificent library on the subject and became amateur designer in both her residences and for her circle of friends. In 1962, however, her activity received public recognition when she was commissioned by J.F. Kennedy to design what would become the iconic White House Rose Garden, which borders the Oval Office and the famous West Wing. She completed this work with the redesign, years later, of the Kennedy Garden, commissioned by Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson, earning the *Conservation Service Award* in 1966 for her work.

She later made an important contribution to restoration of the *Potager du Roi* in Versailles, designed by her greatly admired Jean de la Quintinie in the 17th century, a project she was urged to take on by her friend Hubert de Givenchy and which earned her the *Croix D' Officier des Arts et des Lettres*.



Mrs. Mellon, an enormous enthusiast of gardening, horticulture and landscaping. © Fred R. Conrad/NYTS/Contacto.

The exhibition reflects this biographical context linked to Mrs. Mellon through a carefully made selection of gardening, day, cocktail and evening attire which, related to the photographs published in the press, or appearing in the archives of different institutions, the arrangement of original objects and the recreation of atmospheres, permits us to build this bridge in history and access that specific time and world represented by Mrs. Mellon.

**Navy blue wool serge coat
with a panel of four pleats
at the back. BALenciAGA.
PARIS. August 1937.
CBM 2004-57**

Mrs. Mellon had a close relationship with Jackie Kennedy as her mentor, confidant and friend. She accompanied Jackie to official events, and they would spend their leisure time and holidays together. Wearing this day coat, Mrs. Mellon accompanied the First Lady to pay her respects to the widow of Martin Luther King, after his assassination in 1968.



Evening outfit composed of a fitted bodice decorated with black silk organza vine leaves and a skirt in black faille. BALenciAGA. PARIS. February 1968. CBM 2014. 245ac.

This outfit belongs to Cristóbal Balenciaga's last collection. Mrs. Mellon ordered it in February 1968 to attend the opening of the spring exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, of which the Mellons were great benefactors. The outfit appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in March that same year.



Loose garden tunic with diamond-shaped patch pockets in pistachio green cotton taffeta. BALenciAGA. PARIS. CBM 2014.96.

Cristóbal Balenciaga adapted to Mrs. Mellon's needs, making alterations to the models she selected or designed according to her everyday requirements. The couturier took care of her gardening clothes, designing tunics, blouses and skirts. Unquestionably an exception at the *Maison*. As Bunny Mellon said "the daywear designs were perfectly suited to the lives of his clients. This meant that for gardening I had loose linen blouses and plain skirts..."



Client and Friend

His evening gowns and coats were fascinating. The daywear designs were perfectly suited to the lives of his clients. This meant that for gardening I had loose linen cotton blouses and plain skirts...

Rachel L.Mellon

Mrs. Mellon discovered Cristóbal Balenciaga through a mutual friend, the prestigious jewellery designer Jean Schlumberger, hugely famous for his work for the company Tiffany&Co.

She herself tells the story of how her relationship as a client began, and her first purchases: “Johnny Schlumberger was a close friend of mine. He never hesitated to criticize the American designs. At one point I was in London when he sent me Balenciaga’s tailor to take my measurements and make me a made-to-measure mannequin. That autumn he sent me two dresses and a three-quarter length coat made in a marvellous black fabric. I must say I was delighted. That’s when I started going to Balenciaga”.

Soon the relationship flourished into a lasting friendship and an allegiance which was to continue for more than ten years. Her friendship with Balenciaga and her importance as a client mark some of the peculiarities of the way Mrs. Mellon would acquire the garments and by extension of the collection now stored at the Museum and which this exhibition aims to highlight.

Purchasing process

Gathering or collecting are two terms which could be drawn from the detailed study of the commercial correspondence between Mrs. Mellon and the Balenciaga house. Evidence can also be seen in the 128 invoices she kept over the years, from the first, dating from 1956, to the invoice corresponding to Cristóbal Balenciaga’s last collection in 1968.

Mrs. Mellon earned the consideration of special client for her loyalty and her purchasing power. While her friendship unquestionably favoured the preferential treatment she enjoyed at the *Maison*, we mustn’t forget the sum of 614,510 dollars spent by the North American at the Balenciaga house in a little over a decade.

One of the most important factors that set Mrs. Mellon apart as a client is the way certain models were adapted to her tastes and needs.

We must remember that this manner of purchasing was

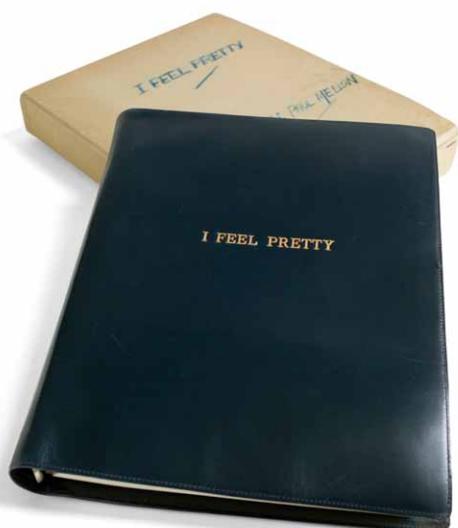


Sketch sent by Mlle Renée Tamisier, on 16th September 1958. CBM 2014.527.
© Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga.

rather exceptional in the context of Haute Couture, and much more so in the case of the Balenciaga House where its lack of flexibility when it came to making changes or accepting requests that significantly detracted from or altered the models was legendary and characteristic.

Evidence of this special treatment can be found in “I Feel Pretty”, an album created by Mrs. Mellon herself with sketches dating from 1959 to 1962 showing the models systematically sent by the *Maison* for her selection. The variety of models expressed coincides exactly with the invoices, underlining how, from the moment of selecting the models, she would have the option of having them made in different fabrics.

The sketches also give specific explanations of how to wear the garments. This documentation shows how the director of the Paris salon, Renée Tamisier, would exceptionally and personally attend to Mrs. Mellon. The North American was also excused from the exhaustive fitting process due to the fact that the workshop had a mannequin exactly made-to-measure for her, a luxury reserved for only the most exclusive clients.



I Feel Pretty album. CBM 2014.526ab.
© Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga.
Photo: Ibañez.



Sketch of Model 149 from February 1962 and day dress in printed pique.
CBM 2014.526.87 / CBM 2014.89. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Paredes.



Sketch of a déshabillé in yellow faille embroidered with thistles in purple Lesage chenille. Model 210. August 1960. CBM 2014.526.98. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga.

Adaptation and repetition of models

One factor that captures the attention is how certain models are repeated in different fabrics, or in the same one, even going as far as to make a repeat purchase of models from previous collections or to create a number of exclusive pieces for Mrs. Mellon, from accessories to nightdresses.

A good example of this peculiar aspect of repeated purchases is the invoice of 19 December 1957 listing the purchase of 4 coats, all corresponding to model 75, with important differences in price according to the fabric or lining used, which could vary between 440.47 and 9,523.89 dollars.

Mrs. Mellon was one of the great international clients who imported Haute Couture from Paris and who contributed to generating the halo of social aspiration that would open the American market to Europe's luxury markets. On many invoices the total amount shows a mark-up of 25% on the value of the goods due to customs duties, packaging and payment to American Airlines.

When the *Maison* closed, Mrs. Mellon recalled: "One of the joys of my life was to have known Cristóbal Balenciaga. He was a good and dear friend. He designed my wardrobe for more than 10 years. He understood luxury and simplicity with deep sensitivity. His charm, his smile and his dedication to design were always there in his calm presence."



Cocktail dress with puffed skirt in printed satin, changed at the back for Mrs. Mellon. BALENCIAGA. PARIS. CBM 2000.05ab. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



Photograph of model 126, August 1957. © Archives Balenciaga, Paris.

The Collector

Since her death in 2014, her legacies and the sale of her properties for charitable purposes have revealed a great deal of personal information about the figure of Mrs. Mellon



Rachel L. Mellon has shown that she was a woman of her own, educated taste, firm aesthetic criteria and a faithful friend whose subtle influence extended far beyond her private realm.

The Mellons had a passion for buying and surrounding themselves with things they loved. Together they created one of the best private art collections in the world. Paul preferred the art of the impressionists and the ancient Masters, while Rachel cultivated an eclectic taste enabling her to enjoy both a 19th century costumbrista landscape and a contemporary masterpiece. Among her personal collection she accumulated works by Giacometti, Rothko, Diebenkorn and Braque. She also surrounded herself with all kinds of treasures: furniture, porcelain, basketwork, gems and clothes, all exquisitely arranged in her houses with an exacting and distinctive sense of proportion and beauty while refusing to lend “important” works a superior decorative status.

Her means enabled her to appreciate objects based on personal criteria rather than on their cost. In the words of her friend, the gallery owner Giraud in an interview in 2014

Mrs. Mellon con un de sus libros sobre botánica, fotografiada en 1982. ©Fred. R. Conrad. *The New York Times*/Contacto.



Painting by Mark Rothko owned by Mrs. Mellon. ©Sotheby's.

for the *Financial Times* “you can always judge a collector by what’s hanging on their walls. She had a Van Gogh in the bathroom and in her salon in Antigua a poster for a Rothko exhibition.”

Of all her collections, undoubtedly the most important for Mrs. Mellon was the one stored in the Oak Springs Library, a large compilation on research into the sustainability and preservation of botanical species. Like in her radical art collection, Mrs. Mellon was ahead of her time as regards her concern for nature and the environment.

Although it is perhaps somewhat excessive to consider her as a *tastemaker*, given her limited public exposure, Mrs. Mellon collected with the guidance of an impeccable expert eye and instinct. Admired and imitated in her circle, she thought nothing of using her influence to promote artists.

Balenciaga’s Mrs. Mellon collection is no exception to the rule of the collector’s eagle eye; based on her aesthetic criteria and preferences she selected over her 12 years of faithful patronage some of the most important pieces in Cristóbal Balenciaga’s entire career as a creator, meaning that they can be considered iconic pieces of the collection and are therefore highlighted in this exhibition.



Mrs. Rachel Mellon at the opening of the exhibition Paintings from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Buffalo, New York at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, on 17 May 1968. © National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gallery Archives.

Constructions studied to the millimetre which achieved refined volumes, without constricting the body and with attention to the essential: beauty and proportions. Factors obvious in this example of comfort nevertheless leaving space for the majesty of a splendid evening gown in pink silk ikat with a floral pattern in violet shades.

BALENCIAGA. PARIS.

Model 10. February 1961.

CBM 2000.33. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga.

Photo: Outumuro.



Made in Paris for the 1957 winter collection, with lace by the prestigious firm Marescot. Conceptually, the model anticipated the baby doll line presented by Balenciaga the following year. BALENCIAGA. PARIS. Model 49. August 1957 CBM 2000.38. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



The naked elegance of the dress in black gazar highlights the severe sobriety characterising many creations and dogmatizes the importance of the back. **BALENCIAGA. PARIS.** Model 148. August 1964. CBM 2000.17. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



The simplified silhouette generated by the gabardine coat highlighting the curves of the cocoon demonstrates Balenciaga's modern outlook in the reversible nature of the garment, something which was highly appreciated by Mrs. Rachel Mellon, who went as far as to purchase it three times. The studied folds placed at different points of the back of the coat accentuate the importance of the air circulating inside it while underlining the natural consistency of the fabrics. BALenciAGA. PARIS. Model 108. August 1957. CBM 2000.24. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



Perfection and knowledge of the trade are categorically obvious in the sartorial suit in navy blue quadrillé, one of Mrs. Mellon's favourite colours. A basic in her wardrobe where the aplombs, the encircling yokes and the perfectly matched quadrillé are some of the resources used to successfully turn a simple suit into a recognised masterpiece. BALENCIAGA. PARIS. Model 4. February 1966. CBM 2000.41ab. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



The mastery and command of the materials underlined in the complex simplicity of this dress in orange wool crepe emphasize the Balenciaga touch. This is, undoubtedly, one of the most iconic pieces in the collection. BALENCIAGA. PARIS. Model 80. February 1967. CBM 2000.58. © Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga. Photo: Outumuro.



The Tale of a Centenary.

The Early Years

Balenciaga was born in 1895 in Getaria, a small fishing village in Gipuzkoa, the Basque Country. A place to which he always felt close and to which he would return repeatedly throughout his life.



He learned how to sew with his mother, Martina Eizaguirre, seamstress to the Marquises of Casa Torres, when they would follow the Spanish Court during the season, coming to Getaria to rest. The Marchioness, a woman of enormous elegance and social relevance, was one of the people who lent Balenciaga early support in his career; however, the maternal figure was unquestionably the most important reference for Balenciaga throughout his life.

The origins of this adventure lie in the flourishing context of the turn of the century in San Sebastian, barely 30 km from his native Getaria, an especially intense moment for the city's tertiary economic activity triggered by the seasonal presence of the court and the boom in tourism on the Basque Coast, on both sides of the border, with its focal points in San Sebastian and Biarritz.

At the age of 22, Cristóbal Balenciaga opened his first business. Little is known of his prior experience and training, although having lived in the city since 1907 – according to the Municipal Register – it seems logical to suppose that he would have trained at one of the large stores with connections to the fashions of Paris which functioned in San Sebastian at the time. What we do have is documentary evidence that in the same year he placed several announcements in the press for staff and entered his name on the employee's registration book listed as a Couturier, with a tax code corresponding to the highest

Corner of the Avenida de Libertad and Calle Bergara in San Sebastian. Cristóbal Balenciaga opened his first *atelier* at number 2 of this street. © Guregipuzkoa.eus / Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.



The San Sebastian ateliers in the 50s.
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

category, under the name “Cristóbal Balenciaga”, and with its address at the Calle Vergara no. 2. Before the year was out he changed the entry, adding new partners, the Lizaso sisters, in a limited company to last for six years, creating “C. Balenciaga y Cía” and maintaining the same business address.

Some time later, in 1924, the association was dissolved and, in its place he once again registered the company “Cristóbal Balenciaga”, transferring its operations to Avenida no. 2, while in March 1927 he created “Martina Robes et manteaux” on the 1st floor of Calle Oquendo 10, (Martina was his mother’s name). This was the second brand in a diversification strategy, renamed in October as “EISA Costura” (yet again related to his mother, this time for her surname, Eizaguirre).

This second house and brand, which lived alongside the former, would be used to optimise shared resources and to increase client numbers among the local middle classes.

The first company remained open until 1937, the date when Cristóbal moved to Paris and opened “Balenciaga”. The second diversified geographically to Madrid (1933) and Barcelona (1935) with the name “EISA B.E.”, while the headquarters remained in San Sebastian, at the Avenida de la Libertad no. 2.

Undoubtedly those early years of work in Spain were essential for perfecting his technique, for establishing his artistic and aesthetic influences and for consolidating his business acumen. All are important aspects in understanding his subsequent trajectory, development and eclosion, which could only have taken place in the undisputable context of a World Capital of Fashion like Paris. Added to this was his ability to attract important top-line international clientele, among whom were Mrs. Mellon, his client and friend.



Cristóbal Balenciaga set up business at 10 Avenue George V in Paris in 1937.
© Juan Gyenes. Biblioteca Nacional de España / Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum



Exterior view of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria.
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, opened on 7 June 2011, is located in the town where the couturier was born, in commemoration of those early years of his professional training and maturing in order to understand his contributions to the world of fashion.

With the aim of explaining Balenciaga's life and work, his relevance in the history of fashion and design, and the contemporaneity of his legacy, the Museum houses a unique collection. Its large size – almost 3,000 pieces which continue to rise in number thanks to loans and donations – and its wide-ranging formal and chronical extension – including, for example, the earliest existing models by the couturier – make this one of the most complete, consistent and interesting of its kind.

Another of the collection's exceptional values lies in the origin of the pieces. It goes without saying that Balenciaga's major international clients were outstanding social figures in the central decades of the 20th century: Mona Von Bismarck, Bunny Mellon, Patricia López Wilshaw, Barbara Hutton, Princess de Réthy, Grace Kelly and Madame Bricard all wore some of the models now featuring in the Archives.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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MUSEUM OPENING HOURS

JUNE, SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER

Tuesday - Sunday, 10:00 - 19:00h

JULY AND AUGUST

Monday - Sunday, 10:00 - 19:00h

NOVEMBER - JANUARY

Tuesday - Sunday, 10:00 - 15:00h

GUIDED TOURS

The Museum runs free guided tours lasting for one hour on weekends and public holidays. During the months of July and August guided tours will be programmed daily.

Mornings, 11:00h and 12:30h.

Afternoons, 17:00h (March-October)

Private tours are available all year round.

EXHIBITION GUIDE

56 pages

Spanish / Basque / French / English

Available from the Museum shop. RRP 5€

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EL DIARIO VASCO

BONAVERI

Bonaveri, founded in Cento in 1950, are makers of high quality mannequins and busts. Over the years, Bonaveri has achieved new heights of quality in the mannequin industry and in the role they play as the interpreters of fashion brand identity. They have their headquarters at Renazzo di Cento (Ferrara, Italy), where they make approximately 20,000 mannequins every year. Bonaveri offers two lines of products: Bonaveri Artistic Mannequins and Schläppi. Since 2017, Bonaveri has a new brand, “B by Bonaveri”, focussed on the important premium market and which includes collections exploring youth culture in the fashion world.
[www.bonaveri.com]

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