

Sketches from the
House of Balenciaga
1943-1964

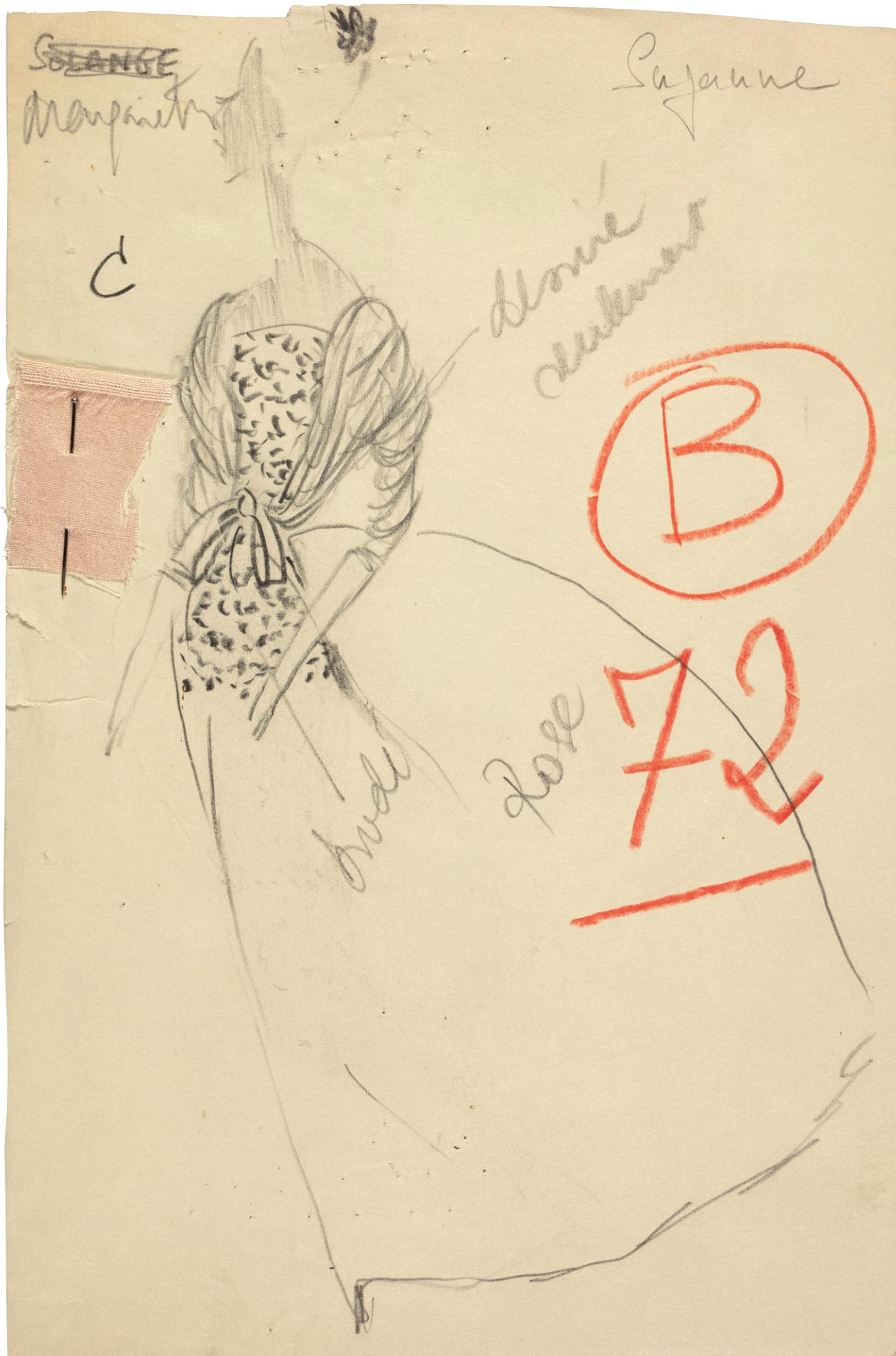
Riva Collection.
Historical Archive of
the Basque Country

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The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum is launching a new exhibition of original House of Balenciaga sketches from the Riva Collection housed at the Historical Archive of the Basque Country. The exhibition features a representative sample of the 8,000-piece collection acquired by the Department of Culture of the Basque Government from Italian designer Lorenzo Riva in 2022.

Organized as a preliminary step to the collection being deposited at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum for further study and research, the exhibition aims to highlight the historical significance of the collection, raise awareness about its provenance, and showcase its beauty.

Exhibition
30.03.2023—21.05.2023



Sketches from the House of Balenciaga 1943-1964 Riva Collection. Historical Archive of the Basque Country

Through 120 drawings and documents, the exhibition showcases the work process at the House of Balenciaga during the mid-20th century, from the conceptualization to the presentation of the collections, with a particular focus on the construction of the designs.

In addition to sketches drawn by different designers using a variety of techniques, the exhibition features private documents and handwritten notes by Cristóbal Balenciaga, revealing his constant engagement in all aspects of the design process.

From conceptualization to execution

The exhibition opens with a series of preliminary sketches, essentially unannotated drawings of exploratory ideas, some of which may never have made it into the final collections. One particularly noteworthy sketch is the study of the "semi-fitted" model which was presented in the 1951 summer collection and marked a pivotal moment in fashion history.

The main body of the collection features workshop sketches made between 1956 and 1962. These drawings provide detailed information about the fashion designs presented by the house each season. Each one comes with a registration number, the name of the *première d'atelier* in charge of executing the design, and the name of the girl chosen to model it. Many of the sketches include swatches and notes on materials and suppliers.

Other revealing information regarding the production process at the fashion house are included in Cristóbal Balenciaga's handwritten notes where he details modifications he wants made to how a garment is assembled or clarifies exactly how he wants something done. Before presenting the final collection, changes were sometimes made to the tailoring, or to the styling or pairing of garments.

Commercialization and sale

The collection includes some less common commercial sketches from the 1950s, used for presenting the collections at fashion shows held in various cities across Europe and America. Included in this category are the sketches clients received when they ordered a garment and other more detailed sketches that were used for advertising and promotional purposes.

The importance of the total look of an outfit is seen through a smaller series of sketches on accessories. The notes in Cristóbal Balenciaga's handwriting specifying materials and colours, as well as indicating the correct positioning of hats and headresses, evidence the designer's involvement in every step of the creative process of developing a silhouette.

Theatre Sketches

The collection includes a substantial number of sketches made for theatre costumes in the 1940s. These sketches reflect an extensive and detailed knowledge of historical costume and feature some of the designs created for the actress Alice Cocéa for her role in *Echec à Don Juan* (1941).

Theatre costume sketch, 1942
Riva Collection. Historical Archive of the Basque Country



In December 2022, the Department of Culture of the Basque Government acquired a collection of 8,362 documents pertaining to the House of Balenciaga in Paris. The documents were previously held by Lorenzo Rivas, the brand's former creative director during the early 1980s.

Public Archive

This archive is a unique collection of unparalleled magnitude and importance. No other museum in the world houses a document collection on Balenciaga quite like it. Only the Balenciaga brand is in possession of a larger collection, but it is kept private and is not open to the public.

As the Minister of Culture and Linguistic Policy of the Basque Government, Bingen Zupiria, has pointed out, "This is the first Balenciaga collection of this type to fall into public hands, making it a very valuable addition to Basque cultural heritage."

For director of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, Miren Vives, this collection of sketches represents a significant boost to the Museum's documentary holdings. "This acquisition consolidates and strengthens the international importance of the Museum's documentary archives."

The collection will open up new avenues of research and provide fresh insights into the creative process of Cristóbal Balenciaga.

Provenance of the collection

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation learnt of the existence of an archive of documents from the fashion designer's workshop which could potentially be digitalised, organised, and disseminated and set about locating it. In December 2021, the first contact was made with Lorenzo Riva, owner of the collection, and with artconsulting.net, the company in charge of managing it.

Riva was the artistic director of Balenciaga from 1980 to 1982. On his departure from the company—which was about to be sold off at the time—he agreed to a financial settlement and further in-kind compensation, which turned out to be the archive which is currently on display. The sketches had been stored away until 2021. "I did not want to be influenced. They were beautiful drawings, and I was glad to have saved them. That was enough for me. In those years of confusion and continuous corporate changes at *Maison* Balenciaga, they would have disappeared", explained the Italian designer.

Following the initial meeting with Lorenzo Riva and subsequent briefing with the Board of Trustees of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation—of which the Basque Government is a founding member—a detailed study of the documentary archive began in earnest. This involved several return visits to Italy to examine the archive *in situ* and verify its authenticity.

The collection, which is now kept in the Historical Archive of the Basque Country, has been inventoried and has undergone preventive conservation. All the material is being digitalised to ensure it can be studied in the future without being handled directly, and preserved and protected appropriately. After the exhibition, the collection will be accessioned, and work will begin on studying and cataloguing it.

“I am very pleased that the drawings are now being preserved in the Museum Cristóbal Balenciaga. It is the right place for them. I am sure they will be studied and valued as they should. Fashion is not only a business; it is history, a reflection of society at a given moment”, explained the 84-year-old Riva, who travelled from his home in Monza, Italy, to attend the opening of the exhibition, and contribute several of his own designs.

Artistic drawing. 1950s
Riva Collection. Historical Archive of the Basque Country



été 1952



The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, inaugurated on 7 June 2011, is located in Getaria, the designer's hometown and the stage for Cristóbal Balenciaga's first years of training and professional maturing. This is essential to understand his contributions to fashion.

In order to share Balenciaga's life and works, his relevance in the history of fashion and design and the contemporary nature of his legacy, the museum holds a unique collection. Its vast nature (over 3,500 pieces in a collection that only continues to grow, thanks to loans and donations) and its formal, chronological extension (including, for example, the designer's earliest models conserved) make it one of the most complete, coherent and interesting collections in existence today.

Another of the collections' exceptional values is the origin of the pieces. Balenciaga's great international clients were prominent social figures from the mid-20th century, such as Mona Von Bismarck, Bunny Mellon, Patricia López Wilshaw, Barbara Hutton, Princess Rethy, Grace Kelly and Madame Bricard, who wore some of the models held in the Archive.



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