

The Givenchiaga Family

Press Kit

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The Givenchiaga Family

CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Exhibition
28.03.2026—22.02.2027

Hubert de Givenchy adjusting a fitting at the salons at 3, Avenue Georges-V, 1961



The Givenchiaga Family

They are still more alike than unlike, more like each other than like anyone else. One is older, the other younger: they are still unmistakably the Givenchiaga family.

—Katharine Whitehorn. *The Observer*, 1960

British journalist Katharine Whitehorn used this expression to describe the stylistic connections she observed between the collections presented by Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895–1972) and Hubert de Givenchy (1927–2018). In the same article, she wrote that she had seen in them ‘the most beautiful dresses in the world’.

This creative affinity began to take shape after the two designers met in New York in 1953, an introduction arranged by the Chilean socialite and leading haute couture client Patricia López-Whillshaw. From that moment, the two men developed a singular relationship founded on mutual respect, shared business interests, and a deep personal friendship.

Creatively, their collections showed a common approach to form particularly from 1956 onwards. They were marked by the same innovative spirit and an understanding of fashion in which beauty, harmony and elegance were paramount.

Balenciaga and Givenchy set the trends. Meet the mystery men of Paris haute couture. Balenciaga and Givenchy create the chic and shocking styles that are adapted or copied by top designers the world over. The timeless simplicity of line of both designers is a clue to their power.

—Gwen Cowley. *Star Weekly*, 1960

They also shared business strategies: from 1956 onwards, they presented their shows a month after the other fashion house; supplied the press with their own photographs and sketches; co-presented their summer collections at New York’s Ambassador Hotel; and, from 1959, established their businesses on the same street, with GIVENCHY located directly opposite BALENCIAGA at 3 Avenue George V.

Hubert de Givenchy's admiration for Cristóbal Balenciaga, combined with the keen attention he paid to the advice of his reserved yet generous mentor, made him Balenciaga's closest protégé despite never having worked in his atelier. Thus, when he retired in 1968, Balenciaga facilitated the transfer of some of his most trusted staff and several of his best clients to the Maison Givenchy.

The exhibition *The Givenchiaga Family* brings the creations of both couturiers into dialogue, revealing the origins of their creative affinity. It also highlights the lessons in style and technique that Balenciaga passed on and that Givenchy absorbed and reinterpreted in his own way, rooted in a shared philosophy of refinement, perfectionism and gradual evolution.

Fashion is continuity. You do one thing, and the next season you try to improve it, to refine it... I don't say 'This year I'll be young or next year my collection will look more mature'. I do exactly what I feel like doing.
—Hubert De Givenchy. *Women's Wear Daily*, 1969

The exhibition is also a tribute to Hubert de Givenchy and to his outstanding role within the Givenchiaga family, not only as an exceptional designer but also as the custodian of the legacy of his friend and mentor, Cristóbal Balenciaga.



© Tony Vaccaro / Tony Vaccaro archives

Hubert de Givenchy in his studio, 1961

The exhibition

This exhibition is a tribute ahead of the centenary of Hubert de Givenchy's birth. In 2027, many international institutions will be honouring him, so in this context the museum in Getaria is among the first to celebrate his life and contribution to creativity and design.

—Igor Uria, curator of the exhibition

The exhibition is part of the museum's 'Encounters' series, developed in recent years within the programme of temporary exhibitions held in a dedicated gallery. It complements the experience of visiting this single-author museum by placing Balenciaga's life and work in dialogue with other designers, creators, disciplines and collections.

On this occasion, Igor Uria, the museum's curator and Director of Collections, has chosen to present Balenciaga's work alongside that of Hubert de Givenchy. The exhibition is a tribute to the celebrated couturier, a friend of Cristóbal Balenciaga and a leading supporter of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation and the museum.

Thirty-five works by both designers are presented in a chronological display spanning 1956 to 1972—with a larger selection of designs by Givenchy as the 'guest' couturier. As Uria explains, "the curatorial intention is not to stage a Givenchy retrospective, nor to make an exhaustive comparison between the two, but to highlight their links and affinities".

Accordingly, the eleven Balenciaga pieces—drawn from the museum's collection and from two private collections in Spain and Italy—have been selected to showcase the principal points of stylistic convergence between the two from the perspective of the couturier from Getaria.

The twenty-four Givenchy works come largely from the brand's archives in Paris, complemented by a number of significant pieces from the Museo del Traje, Madrid. Their selection traces how these common stylistic threads evolved in Givenchy over time, and points to other personal and professional connections with the designer from Getaria.

The exhibition will remain on view until 22 February 2027, coinciding with the centenary of Hubert de Givenchy's birth.

Givenchy's early career in fashion

If I hadn't met Balenciaga, I would, perhaps, never have discovered the essence of fashion.

—Hubert de Givenchy, 2011

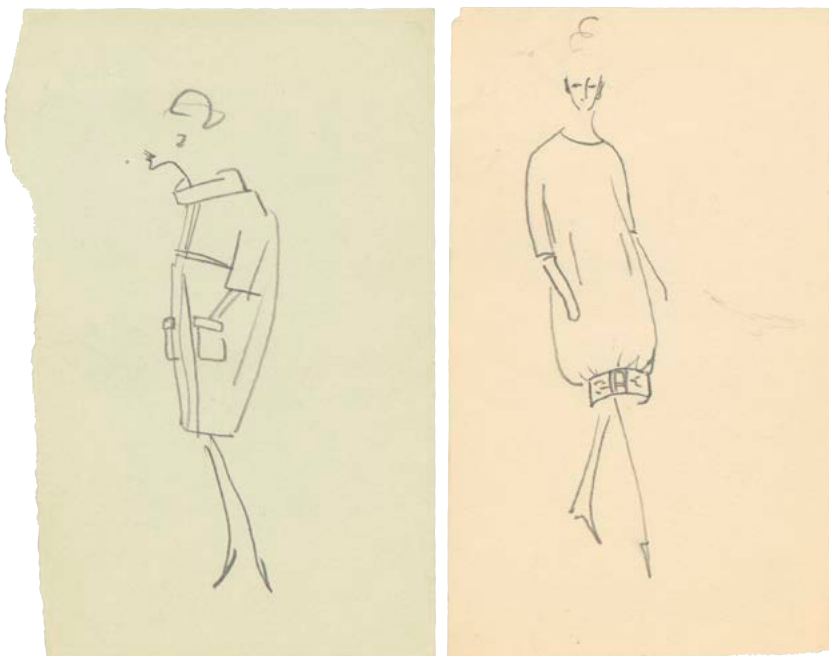
Hubert de Givenchy moved to Paris in 1944 to study at the École des Beaux-Arts and train in the craft of fashion. He worked in the ateliers of the renowned couturiers Jacques Fath, Robert Piguet and Lucien Lelong, and at Elsa Schiaparelli's boutique, before opening Maison Givenchy at 8 rue Alfred de Vigny in 1952.

He presented his first collection, *Separates*, outside the official fashion calendar. Widely acclaimed by critics, it featured the iconic 'Bettina' blouse, which Givenchy himself regarded as his first best-seller.

A year later, in 1953, he met Cristóbal Balenciaga. The encounter proved a turning point in Givenchy's career: Balenciaga became one of his greatest sources of inspiration, influencing not only his creative decisions but also his approach to business.

The exhibition reflects how fashion magazines responded to the work of the emerging couturier, through a selection of editorials, illustrations and images from landmark publications dating from 1952.

It also includes a group of sketches from 1952 and 1954 by the leading fashion illustrator Bernard Blossac (1917-2002), which capture the innovative and somewhat transgressive spirit of Givenchy's early years which earned him a reputation as fashion's *enfant terrible*.



© Givenchy, Paris

Sack and tunic line sketches, 1957

Converging styles

Paris awaits New Shape at Givenchy, Balenciaga. It's the million-dollar fashion question this weekend: Will Givenchy showing today and Balenciaga Tuesday give the new silhouettes the fashion world hasn't found in Paris collections?

—John Fairchild, *Women's Wear Daily*, 1960

Cristóbal Balenciaga departed from the dominant mid-1950s silhouette immortalised by Dior's New Look, championing volume, freedom of movement and an architectural approach to dressmaking.

The austere elegance of the tunic, the intentional curve of the softly bloused backs, the trapezoidal geometry of the baby-doll dress, the impeccable tailoring of the suits and coats, the richness of the embroidery, the simplicity of the wraparound designs, and the architecture of the pared-back lines of the evening dresses—so deceptively simple in appearance—are among the invaluable lessons passed on by Balenciaga and treasured by Givenchy.

They all stem from one essential maxim: to understand and love fabric. At the heart is a desire for freedom and independence, and the conviction that an idea must be pursued until perfection is achieved.

Givenchy adapted these principles and developed them in his own style—perhaps for a different, younger woman, but of the same social standing and with the same appreciation for beauty and harmony as Balenciaga's clientele.



© Givenchy, Paris

Givenchy Haute Couture
February 1958, designs 2240 and 2235

Revolutionary lines: The Tunic, Sack and Baby-doll Dress

The exhibition opens with Givenchy's interpretations of the revolutionary designs that defined Balenciaga's work: the tunic, the sack, and the baby-doll dress.

First launched by Cristóbal Balenciaga in February 1955, the tunic was hailed as revolutionary by the fashion press of the day. Consisting of two pieces of fabric, it created a slender silhouette that was both comfortable and suited to the modern woman, while remaining elegant and sophisticated.

Its influence on the work of other designers can be seen in collections that followed. Hubert de Givenchy also incorporated features of the tunic in his designs, such as highlighting the vertical axis of the silhouette and shaping the underskirt to encircle the knees without restricting movement.

In later Balenciaga collections, the impact of the sack dress introduced in 1957 was undeniable, attracting criticism, longing and admiration in equal measure. Its enveloping silhouette abstracted the female form while maintaining a refined, sophisticated sense of femininity.

Givenchy's interpretation of the design spoke more directly to a new generation: a daytime model in knit fabric that accentuated the neckline while still offering a balance of comfort and elegance.

From 1957 onwards, both couturiers presented designs with markedly asymmetry hems. In Balenciaga's case, the hem extends and lengthens the rear of the garment; in Givenchy's, the effect is even more pronounced. These 'peacock trains'—as the press dubbed them—can also be seen in the exhibition.

This gradual evolution of the silhouette led to a series of designs that were both controversial and admired, including the baby-doll dress introduced in 1958. An key feature of the baby-doll for both designers was the aired space that separated the outer silhouette from the body within.

CBM 2001.08

Evening gown in yellow Gros de Naples silk, embroidered in different coloured chenille; a gift from Balenciaga to Givenchy. Balenciaga, August 1960

© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa / Outumuro



Evening ensemble consisting of a draped cape and gown in flamingo pink silk gazar and fitted bodice embroidered with silver, sequins and pearls
Givenchy, August 1967



The importance of technique

The evolution of the silhouette required exceptional technical mastery. Balenciaga was a master of technique, and the tailoring section where the coats, suits and jackets were made became his laboratory for experimentation.

The shoulder lines, sleeves, backs and necklines of his creations carry a distinctive signature; they are unmistakably Balenciaga. The press of the day noted that Hubert de Givenchy designed and constructed his garments in the master's tradition, keeping his focus on the key points that build a recognisable silhouette.

During the 1960s, the abstraction of the female silhouette grew increasingly prominent in the collections of both couturiers. Balenciaga sought to create a sober, almost sculptural, minimalist aesthetic. Givenchy, too, developed abstract designs, always ensuring the freedom of movement favoured by a new generation of haute couture clients.

Wraparound designs and bias cuts are essential to the elegant silhouettes of their evening dresses. Beneath the luxurious fabrics lies a masterful understanding of technique and cut.

For both designers, the materials they worked with mattered deeply: "to understand and love the fabric" was indispensable. The "Fashion mavericks: Givenchy and Balenciaga"—as journalist Janie Samet described them—strategically embellished and illuminated their evening dresses with exuberant embroidery. Crafted by *métiers d'art* in a range of motifs and materials, these unique decorative features were a vital element of haute couture.

Rachel "Bunny" Mellon, client and close friend

Balenciaga and Givenchy forged a close personal and professional bond that led them to share clients such as Rachel "Bunny" Mellon, Patricia López Whillshaw, Audrey Hepburn, Teresa Berganza, Matilde Ucelay and Sonsoles Diez de Rivera, with whom they also maintained close friendships. These relationships went beyond the usual bond between designer and client; they were genuine connections rooted in common interests.

Rachel L. Mellon, known as Bunny, was one of the grand dames of 20th century American high society. Philanthropist, art collector and garden designer—she designed the White House Rose Garden—personal friend of the Kennedy family, and wife of the renowned patron of the arts Paul Mellon, Rachel Mellon was the archetype of Balenciaga's clientele, wealthy, sensitive and exclusive.

Bunny was one of Balenciaga's most loyal clients and later became one of Givenchy's. When Balenciaga decided to close his couture house, in a characteristically generous gesture, he personally introduced Givenchy to Mellon, starting what would become a decades-long relationship. More than a client, Mellon became a close friend to Givenchy. They shared a deep passion for contemporary art, architecture and landscape design. Through her, the French designer was introduced to leading collectors, gallerists and avant-garde artists.

Givenchy himself, in statements to *Women's Wear Daily*, described Rachel L. Mellon's personality: "As soon as Cristóbal introduced her, we connected immediately, at once I admired her learning, her imagination and the creativity that infuses her every gesture. Bunny is worlds away from those wealthy, idle women I have always avoided. Her conversation and her profound knowledge of modern painting are enormously stimulating. We share so many affinities. And with Bunny, everything becomes a game; our relationship is delightfully playful."

Rachel L. Mellon's collection of over 600 textile and documentary items, bequeathed to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in 2014, formed the basis of an exhibition curated by Hubert de Givenchy and produced by the museum in Getaria in 2017.

Among the works by Balenciaga and Givenchy on display in the current exhibition are several that belonged to Mrs Mellon including one ensemble which was co-created by both designers: a coat and skirt in navy wool twill with a white quadrillé check. This design is Look 10 from Balenciaga's 1968 collection, however, it was made for Mrs Mellon in the atelier of Mme Felisa at the House of Givenchy in 1969. It bears witness to the transfer of the client, *première d'atelier*, and even the pattern from one fashion house to the other.

CBM 2000.13

Navy blue wool twill coat. Balenciaga, February 1968



The Givenchiaga Family

Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961



Audrey Hepburn, Givenchy's muse

The relationship between Hubert de Givenchy and Audrey Hepburn is one of the most iconic collaborations between fashion and film in the twentieth century.

They met in 1953, when the young actress visited Givenchy's Paris atelier in search of costumes for her new film *Sabrina*, directed by Billy Wilder.

The success of *Sabrina* helped establish Hepburn's public image as a symbol of modern elegance and marked the beginning of a creative partnership that would last for decades.

Throughout her career, Hepburn wore Givenchy's designs both on screen and off, and some of them became enduring icons of film and fashion.

The exhibition includes two of the actress's most celebrated dresses: the gown worn by Audrey Hepburn in Billy Wilder's 1956 film *Love in the Afternoon*, and the little black dress seen in the opening scene of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*—an enduring style icon—on loan from the Museo del Traje, Madrid.

Beyond their professional relationship, the two shared a deep friendship grounded in mutual admiration and a shared aesthetic sensibility. Hepburn became the designer's muse and the most visible ambassador of his style, while for Givenchy she epitomised the perfect woman for his creations.

Fashion editors as tastemakers of a shared style

Influential fashion editors such as Carmel Snow, Madame Bousquet, Diana Vreeland and Bettina Ballard became both allies to designers and important conduits for their work. First captivated by Cristóbal Balenciaga's creations, they later recognised Hubert de Givenchy as a worthy successor.

These women played a decisive role in mediating between haute couture and the wider public. They interpreted designers' new proposals and helped to shape the taste of an era.

Across the pages of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Femme Chic*, among other publications, their coverage not only documented the changing female silhouette but also built the public image of the two couturiers and helped cement the idea of a 'Givenchiaga family'.

Hubert de Givenchy unveiling his collection to the fashion editors Carmel Snow and Marie-Louise Bousquet in November 1955



Francois Pages/ Paris Match © Getty Images

Hubert de Givenchy, guardian of Balenciaga's legacy

Balenciaga was my religion. There was Balenciaga, and then there was God.
—Hubert de Givenchy, *Women's Wear Daily*, 2007

After Balenciaga's death, Hubert de Givenchy presented his summer 1972 collection as a tribute to his friend and mentor; several of its designs are featured in this exhibition. Throughout his life, in interviews and public statements alike, Givenchy spoke of Balenciaga with utmost respect and admiration. Until the end of his life, he worked to keep the legacy of the master couturier alive, becoming one of the principal advocates for the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation and the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum.

Hubert de Givenchy assembled an important personal collection of Balenciaga's creations. More than an act of collecting, it served a clear purpose: to safeguard material evidence of the couturier's work and to prevent it from being dispersed or lost over time. For Givenchy, these garments were true documents of fashion history, and irreplaceable examples of the technical rigour and formal innovation that defined Balenciaga's oeuvre.

This commitment culminated in his decision to help set up the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation, which opened in 2011 and whose aim is to study, preserve and disseminate the designer's work. He donated his collection of Balenciaga garments to the museum, along with his collection of historic fashion magazines: 450 items in total, now held in the museum's archives. Among the garments is a yellow *gros de Naples* evening dress with floral chenille embroidery from 1960, given to Hubert de Givenchy by Cristóbal Balenciaga as a birthday gift.

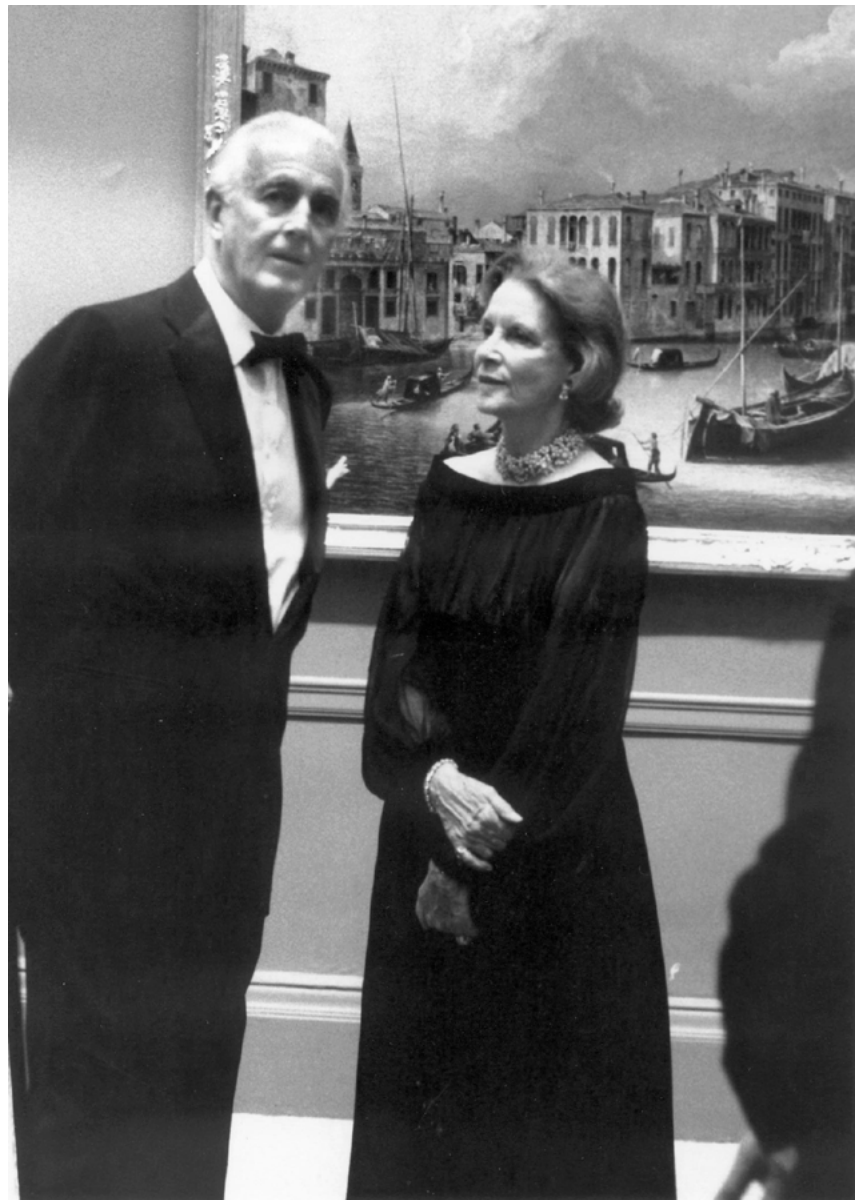
Givenchy continued to support the museum's work until his death in 2018, taking an active part in exhibitions devoted to his friend and mentor, further underscoring a loyalty that endured across time and remains an essential chapter in fashion history.

Biography

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- 1927-1952 Hubert James Taffin de Givenchy was born on 20 February in Beauvais, France. After moving to Paris in 1944, he spent a year as an apprentice in the ateliers of couturier Jacques Fath.
- In 1946, on Christian Bérard's recommendation, he was hired by Robert Piguet and collaborated with Lucien Lelong for six months. He later became creative director of designer Elsa Schiaparelli's boutique, a position he held for four years before founding his own fashion house in 1952 at 8 rue Alfred de Vigny.
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- 1953-1971 In 1953, he met Cristóbal Balenciaga. The encounter marked a turning point in his career.
- In 1954, Audrey Hepburn visited his atelier to ask him to design the wardrobe for her new film, *Sabrina*, directed by Billy Wilder. This was the beginning of a close relationship in which Audrey became his muse and ambassador.
- In 1968, Balenciaga introduced him to his friend and client Rachel "Bunny" Mellon, with whom Givenchy would maintain a friendship and collaborative relationship for decades.
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- 1972-2018 After Balenciaga's death in March 1972, Givenchy's August collection was presented as *Hommage à Cristóbal Balenciaga*.
- From 1982 onwards, he received major recognition for his career, beginning with a dedicated exhibition at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology.
- In 1988, he sold the brand to luxury conglomerate LVMH, though remaining as creative director until 1995 when he retired from fashion.
- In the years that followed, he intensified his work as curator of the Balenciaga legacy and actively participated in museum projects and international exhibitions.
- He passed away on March 10, 2018, in Neuilly-sur-Seine.

The Givenchiaga Family

Hubert de Givenchy, with Mrs. Rachel L. Mellon, at the National Gallery, 1983



Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, inaugurated on 7 June 2011, is located in Getaria, the designer's hometown and the scene of his formative years and professional maturity, essential for understanding his contribution to the world of 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 5,100 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.



Information

Zuriñe Abasolo Izarra
Head of Communication

zurine.abasolo@fbalenciaga.com

T +34 943 004 777

M +34 647 410 775

Aldamar Parkea 6
20808 Getaria
T +34 943 008 840
info@crislobalbalenciagamuseoa.com
www.crislobalbalenciagamuseoa.com

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