

Exhibition

Vivre sa vie  
Georges Dambier and Fashion

Press Kit

CRISTÓBAL BALenciAGA MUSEOA

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Exhibition  
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## Vivre sa vie Georges Dambier and Fashion

At the end of the 1940s, imbued with a sense of hope after the end of the war, Paris regained its status as the world's fashion capital and haute couture became one of France's leading industries.

Haute couture then experienced a true golden age, known for the unparalleled creativity of the fashion houses that would set the standards for modern femininity: Dior, Chanel, Givenchy, Fath and Balenciaga...

These figures together did not only hold sway over the Parisian scene, but they also set the course of fashion worldwide. Their designs were reproduced, reinterpreted and featured in magazines, department stores and by international clients; the influence of haute couture as an economic and cultural driving force was thus consolidated.

*ELLE*, the magazine founded by Hélène Gordon-Lazareff in 1945, conveyed the image of an emancipated woman who was constantly evolving, in clear contrast with the fashion press of the time.

The entrance of the photographer Georges Dambier (1925-2011) in the exclusive world of haute couture was marked by two female figures: Françoise Foucault, a young model who would become his wife, and Lazareff herself, who was the driving force behind his career in fashion photography, which reached its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s.

A trail-blazer in his approach, Dambier flouted photography conventions as he moved out of the studio to shoot outdoors; that freed the models from stiff poses and stereotyped attitudes, but without relinquishing an exquisite and rigorous technical delivery. Paris became his studio; Place Vendôme, Montmartre, the Champs-Élysées, the Rue de la Paix, the River Seine became the settings for a trend that Dambier called *Couture in motion*.



The lively and curious mind of Georges Dambier, the avant-garde vision of Hélène Gordon-Lazareff and the democratisation of travel in the 1950s were the perfect alliance to shape the concept of the *tourist photographer*. Dambier produced fashion editorials for *ELLE* in far-off destinations, such as Morocco, the former Yugoslavia, Brazil, the French Antilles, Tahiti or Ceylon and featuring an independent female traveller.

Women are the undisputed focal point in his oeuvre. Influenced by the films and the aesthetics of the French New Wave, Dambier captured a vibrant, radiant and timeless beauty that empowers women and goes beyond the ephemeral.

The title of the exhibition is taken from Jean-Luc Godard's existentialist film *Vivre sa Vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962). In the same way as Nana, the leading character played by Anna Karina, all the beautiful women photographed by Dambier lived their lives with freedom and without inhibitions, flouting conventions in a still predominately male-dominated world.

## The Exhibition

Fashion and photography have always been powerful vehicles to explore time and memory. The *Vivre Sa Vie. Georges Dambier and Fashion* exhibition is an invitation to delve into Parisian haute couture of the 1950s from the unique perspective of the French photographer.

The rooms of the Aldamar Palace are the venue for the exhibition. The visitor journey links the *Technique, Material and Form* exhibition of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum's collection, with *The Givenchiaga Family* temporary exhibition showcasing the connections between Balenciaga and Givenchy.

The route culminates with a discourse featuring the golden years of haute couture, as it includes the final touch provided by the fashion press: a vision constructed by editors, interpreted by photographers, as Dambier, and epitomised by models, and which renders and projects the fashion of the time to society.

The exhibition is curated by Anabela Becho, a fashion historian and exhibition curator, working closely with Guillaume Dambier, the custodian of the Georges Dambier Photos collection.

The 77 selected photographs are organised into 7 typical themes of his work and of the society of that time, with sections dedicated to Balenciaga and Givenchy: *Scénario: Fashion Photography Reveled, Real and Surreal, Balenciaga Seen by Dambier* (including Hubert de Givenchy's first fashion show), *Couture Spirit, A Woman in the City, Invitation to Voyage*; and *Mister Sun, Stay Awhile*.

*Georges Dambier's photography captures a renewed haute couture, seen through the prism of thoroughly modern fashion. In the work of this French photographer, time and memory are intertwined with Parisian couture and its tradition, enriching a vital account of one of the golden ages of fashion history.*

—Anabela Becho, curator of the exhibition



© Georges Dambier Photos

Suzy Parker. Place du Tertre, Paris  
Balenciaga / *ELLE*, 1953

## Couture Spirit

The portraits of Capucine and Bettina embody the symbolic image of haute couture, that highly regulated and hierarchical world. The faces of these two models—perhaps the most iconic of the 1950s—represent the golden age of Parisian fashion, where the spotlight was also on the accessories, such as the hats and gloves.

The sophistication and quality of the materials highlight the importance of the textile industry and the decorative arts in the creative process of haute couture. After the restrictions of World War II, particularly in terms of materials and fabrics, the *New Look* of 1947 gave new momentum to the art of millinery. The hats were initially very large and striking, but gradually found a perfect balance between proportion and volume with respect to the total look. Whether inspired by history or by the Orient, or by a whimsical fantasy, hats become the finishing touch, the epitome of elegance and stylised silhouettes of the time.



© Georges Dambier Photos

Bettina / Legroux / 1953

## Balenciaga Seen by Dambier

Cristóbal Balenciaga launched the semi-fitted line in 1947; it was noted for a characteristic draped volume that was loose at the back, in contrast with the fitted front that softly hugged the waist. Even though it was not immediately widely welcomed, the simplicity of this silhouette and the complexity of its cut meant that this line caught the attention of the specialist press. It quickly became a milestone in the history of the fashion house.

In the 1952 and 1953 summer collections, Balenciaga explored this style in dresses and two-piece suits. 'Without a nipped-in waist, but with a belt: curved along the lower part of the back, this belt turned the hips into the new focus of the female body. Balenciaga insisted on the drop waist in the style of the 1920s for all his dresses. This garment is not an extreme case. But it is typical: loose around the bust and with a drop waist' (*ELLE*, 2 March 1953).

The different perspectives that Georges Dambier's photographs offer of Balenciaga's designs provide a nearly all-round view of his pieces; that reveals the technical excellence of the cut and the wealth of details in the designs of the Basque couturier, while also creating cinematic narrative sequences.



© Georges Dambier Photos

Nina, Paris / Balenciaga / 1955

## Givenchy's First Fashion Show

Paris, 2 February 1952. The schedules for unveiling the summer collections of the haute couture houses were 'shaken to the roots, in a way reminiscent of an electric shock or the effect of a reinvigorating injection enriched with super vitamins' (*ELLE*, 3 March 1952).

The magazine, champion of the avant-garde and the free spirit of its founder, Hélène Lazareff, enthusiastically wrote about the first fashion show of Hubert de Givenchy, who was 24 at the time. Georges Dambier's photographs were used alongside the text; it was his first job for the magazine edited by Lazareff, who immediately grasped the potential of the young photographer.

The show lasted an hour and a half and had 75 items. Givenchy's uninhibited haute couture perfectly met the requirements of the life and women of his time, and was edging towards prêt-à-porter. Hubert de Givenchy's main innovations included the showcasing of plain-woven cotton and separate garments, which could be combined together.

Givenchy thus made a bold and decisive entrance into the exclusive (and very conservative) world of Parisian haute couture. The creativity and passion of the young couturier were evident. However, his lack of technical prowess was clear, even to his mentor, Cristóbal Balenciaga, the master of the flawless execution, who 'criticised, corrected and encouraged Givenchy' (Bettina Ballard, *In My Fashion*).

Under Lazareff, *ELLE* understood that era and encouraged creativity and freedom. Georges Dambier played an active role in overhauling the tradition of Parisian fashion. His uninhibited photoshoots revealed a youthful and vibrant haute couture, that was thoroughly modern, in balance between tradition and the contemporary style.



## A Woman in the City

Dambier, who had a background in photojournalism, was one of the first French photographers to take the models out of the controlled (and artificial) environment of the studio, rejecting the stereotypical gestures and poses of fashion photography. However, his photography—known for a desire for freedom and being outdoors, of living the moment to the full and completely naturally—was never to the detriment of his delicate and demanding technique. Georges Dambier demystified the all-powerful world of haute couture and put it in motion (Couture in motion), thus shifting it towards modern life and women's longing for emancipation.

Paris became his chosen studio; a dramatic, magnificent and real space. Dambier went outdoors with the most beautiful women, wearing sophisticated designs of the Parisian couturiers. Place Vendôme, Montmartre, the Champs-Élysées, Rue de la Paix, the Seine... Paris is also a charming woman that the photographer immortalised through his eye, with passion, sense of humour and his spirit of *flâneur* (saunterer).



© Georges Dambier Photos

Ivy Nicholson, Paris / Christian Dior / 1954

## Scénario: Fashion Photography Exposed

Fashion photography has a powerful ability to seduce and awaken the imagination. In the same way as illustration, its predecessor, photography has a complex and central place in the world of fashion. The two-dimensional representation of clothes is generally the first (and often the only) access point for potential buyers to the latest trends.

This visual contact can awaken desire and longing for a specific style. Even though its means of dissemination is usually fleeting and fragile (magazines or newspapers), photography—the preferred tool to reflect on time and memory—immortalises moment of fashion history and the evolution of the sector.

In the three photographs displayed in this section, Nina (wearing Balenciaga), Gunilla (wearing Givenchy) and Bettina (with a Dior ensemble) are holding a blackboard on which the name of the designers of the garments they are wearing is provided as information for the magazine in question; there is also the date on which the photos were taken, which, of course, differs from the publication date, thus revealing the intricacies of the photo session.



© Georges Dambier Photos

Bettina, Quai Alma-Marceau, Paris  
Christian Dior / 1955

## Real and Surreal

Apart from the commercial aspects, fashion photography acquired a certain narrative freedom during the 20th century, as it created stories that went far beyond their main theme, fashion. There were constant references to other visual disciplines, such as painting, graphic arts, theatre and films.

From very early on, Georges Dambier found cinematic imagination to be a source of inspiration and several points of contact. His vision of fashion depicted an emancipated women who lived with freedom and independently, and which heralded the spirit of the *Nouvelle Vague* [French New Wave].

The dialogue between his fashion photography and the dramatic arts often goes much further than mere allusion. In some photo essays, the setting, the staging, the reference and even the models themselves are openly inspired by the worlds of film and theatre.



© Georges Dambier Photos

Fiona Campbell-Walter, Paris  
Marc Bohan / 1953

## Invitation to a Voyage

The lively and curious mind of Georges Dambier, the avant-garde vision of Hélène Lazareff and the democratisation of travel in the 1950s were the perfect alliance to shape the concept of the tourist photographer.

After France and Italy, there were other trips: Morocco, Corsica, the former Yugoslavia, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, England, the French Antilles, Taïti and Ceylon. His reporting style added a touch of lightness to his fashion photographs; he captured the moment with spontaneity and light.

*Georges turned each photo in an expressive and vibrant scene. Thanks to him, fashion shoots were no longer static or rigid. His photoshoot told a story.*

—Anne Rivemale, fashion editor at *ELLE*



© Georges Dambier Photos

Taïna, Morocco  
Givenchy / 1953

### Mister Sun, stay awhile

Georges Dambier's personality and approach was echoed in a society in the throes of far-reaching changes. The enthusiasm for life and the yearning for light and lightness became the distinctive traits of this young photographer who was searching for an antidote for the darkness of the world conflict that had affected him profoundly.

After the liberation of Paris, he worked with the photographer Willy Rizzo as his assistant; he discovered a new form of art in photography and quickly mastered its finer points, in particular the use of light.

At *ELLE* and *Nouveau Femina*, Hélène Lazareff allowed him considerably freedom in his work, particularly during his famous fashion shoots on holiday. This creative freedom allowed him to convey an image of women noted for their joie de vivre and a certain naturalness, in harmony with their surroundings. The result is photographs bathed by the sun that reflect the personality of Georges Dambier and reveal his love of living by the sea, particularly in the south of France and on the Basque coast.



© Georges Dambier Photos



© Georges Dambier Photos

Marie-Hélène Arnaud, Eden Roc Hotel, Cap d'Antibes / 1957

## Georges Dambier Biography

1925

Georges Dambier was born on 5 April in Issy-les-Moulineaux, a Parisian suburb, into a lower-middle class family. His childhood was happy and carefree. He spent summers in Chaufourg, at his grandparents' property in the Périgord region. Immersed in nature, he enjoyed a time of freedom and pleasure that he would always remember with affection.

1939

When World War II broke out, his parents decided to send him to Biarritz, to his paternal grandparents' home, where he attended a temporary high school run in a stately holiday home. Meeting Roland Barthes, who would teach him during that unusual academic year, would prove to be a turning point in the intellectual development of the young Georges, who had been a rather inattentive student up until then.

1942-1945

Once back in Paris, Georges studied drawing, painting and advertising design at the studio of Paul Colin, famous for his graphic work and for his posters for Josephine Baker's *Revue Nègre*. Colin was highly influential in bringing out the innate visual talent and aesthetic taste of Georges Dambier.

1946

Dambier began his career in journalism as a designer for *Point de Vue*, the weekly magazine specialised in news on the royal family; he met the Italian photographer Willy Rizzo there. He later joined *But Club*, the sports magazine, initially as a press photographer's assistant.



1947

In February, he managed to take a series of photographs of Rita Hayworth by a stroke of luck. He published the first photographs of the Hollywood star in the press and his career took off. He was contracted by the *France-Soir* group, where he worked with Pierre Lazareff. As a photojournalist on *France Dimanche*, a magazine specialising in news and celebrities, he immortalised moments and photographed the most important personalities of the world of art, culture and society. Georges loves his work: he hung out in the bohemian nightlife, travelled and rubbed shoulders with Parisian high society.

1951

He left *France Dimanche* to focus on fashion photography, in which he would become increasingly more involved in the 1950s and 1960s. Hélène Lazareff invited him to work with *ELLE*, a magazine that she had founded in 1945. The trail-blazing Lazareff sought to mainstream the beautiful designs of the Parisian couturiers and make them accessible to women. George's uninhibited and keen eye perfectly embodied the emancipated vision of the modern woman that *ELLE* wanted to convey.

1952

In February, Dambier photographed Hubert de Givenchy's first fashion show for *ELLE*; that would be his first work published in the magazine. In June, *ELLE* published an unprecedented fashion shoot which was also on its front cover: Georges and Françoise's trip, for which Françoise wrote the travel log that went with the photos; this was the first major fashion shoot by Georges Dambier, published in *ELLE*. In tandem with his work for *ELLE*, he continued his career as a freelance photographer and artistic director.

1954

His friend Robert Capa invited him to set up a fashion photography department within the Magnum agency. Unfortunately, the project never came to fruition due to Capa's unexpected death in Vietnam.

1955

He founded Laboratoires C.D.R.T. (48, rue de la Bienfaisance) together with his partners, Yves Colleau (photographer specialising in still life) and Jean-Pierre Rossignol (photojournalists). He would later buy out his partners. C.D.R.T. - *Conception, Diffusion, Réalisation et Tirage* (Design, Distribution, Production and Printing) - consisted of a studio, laboratory and a graphic design and advertising office; that meant he had total control over the whole process, from taking the photographs to printing them. Apart from his work with *ELLE*, he contributed with publications of the ilk of *Nouveau Femina*, *Marie-France*, *Jardin des Modes*, *Jours de France*, *L'Express* and *Vogue*. He also had long-lasting partnerships with leading brands and advertising agencies.

1964

Dambier and some friends founded *Twenty*, a magazine with a youthful and ground-breaking approach, inspired by *L'Express* and *Jeunesse Cinéma*.

1976

Together with Maurice Siegel, he embarked on the design project for the *VSD* (*Vendredi, Samedi, Dimanche*) magazine, where he began to work as editor-in-chief and artistic director. He was appointed as head of the photography department the following year.

1990

He decided to leave Paris and settle in Chaufourg, in the Dordogne, at the family property which he so loved and which he turned into a small boutique hotel. Sociable by nature, he loved to welcome artists and celebrities that he had known during his busy life in Paris.

2004

His son Guillaume also decided to leave Paris to be closer to his father at the family home in the Dordogne. Guillaume Dambier embarked on the huge legacy and memories of his father with patience and resolve, guided by a noble ambition: to rebuild his archives. It is thanks to his oldest son that Dambier's photography has undergone a worthy renaissance, showcasing its uniqueness and originality.

2007

Different exhibitions: Collections *Années 50*, Ribérac Cultural Centre, France; *Georges Dambier: À la mode*, Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York, U.S.A.; *Georges Dambier: À la mode*, Michael Hoppen Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

2008

Publication of the book *Paris Fifties, Regards de mode*, by Georges Dambier, Paris, Éditions Ramsay.

2011

*Who's That Girl? Georges Dambier Fashioning the Fifties*; exhibition at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York, U.S.A. Several months later, Georges Dambier died on 30 May at his home in Dordogne in France.

Georges Dambier's work is currently in different museums, galleries and private collection, including the *Palais Galliera*, the Paris fashion museum, which houses twenty-six standout copies.



# 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.



© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa / Idoia Unzueta

## Information

Zuriñe Abasolo Izarra  
Head of Communication

[zurine.abasolo@fbalenciaga.com](mailto: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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