

# Cristóbal Balenciaga Technique, Material and Shape

Low Vision

CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

B



# Gallery 1



## Cristóbal Balenciaga, 1895-1972

Cristóbal Balenciaga is a pivotal figure in the world of 20th century haute couture. His design concepts, techniques and silhouettes have left an indelible mark on the history of fashion.

Viewed at the time as “invisible”, “enigmatic” and “the man behind the curtain”, Balenciaga’s personal life has always remained discreetly in the background.

By bringing together the scarce portraits that document his extensive biography, the references to his early years, the personal and work-related objects, and his creative milestones as they were perceived at the time, we aim to bring to light Cristóbal—the person—and Balenciaga—the myth.

1895

Cristóbal Balenciaga Eizaguirre is born on the 21st January in Getaria, at 10 calle Zacayo, now known as calle Aldamar. Son of José and Martina, he is the youngest of three.

1917

He establishes his first house, "C. Balenciaga", on 2 Calle Vergara in San Sebastian, and he then associates for six years with the Lizaso sisters under the name "Balenciaga y Cía".

1906

He creates the first dress for the Marquise of Casa Torres, who used to summer in the villa Bista Ona in Getaria and for whom his mother worked as a seamstress. The Marquise was to become Cristóbal's mentor and client.

1924

Following various company changes, he moves his operations to 2 Avenida de la Libertad in San Sebastian, under the name "Cristóbal Balenciaga". The Queen María Cristina and the Infanta Isabel Alfonsa become his clients. Other royals and ladies of the Court will follow suit.

1907

He moves to San Sebastian and begins his training as a tailor at some of the most important maisons of the time, possibly Casa Gómez, New England and Grandes Almacenes Au Louvre-Paris.

1927

He founds a second house, "Martina Robes et Manteaux", located on 10 Calle Oquendo in San Sebastian which in October that same year is renamed "EISA Costura". Both denominations are a tribute to his mother.

1933

"EISA Costura" gives way to "EISA B. E. Costura", on the first floor of 2 Avenida de la Libertad. The firm "Cristóbal Balenciaga" moves to the second floor of the same building. Simultaneously, he opens a branch in Madrid, on 42 Calle Caballero de Gracia, and two years later he establishes a third branch of "EISA B.E." at 10 calle Santa Teresa in Barcelona.

1937

He temporarily ceases production in his houses in Madrid and Barcelona. In July he joins the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture and, together with his partners d'Attainville and Bizcarrondo, he opens "BALENCIAGA" on 10 Avenue George V in Paris.

1939

Balenciaga presents a collection with deep historical influences and reminiscences of fashion trends from the 17th century and the Second French Empire. The success of his "infanta" dresses is overwhelming. Due to growing demand, he acquires dressmaker Mainbocher's adjacent rooms.

1941

The house in Madrid moves to 9 Gran Vía. Alongside his brother Juan Martín, one year later, he creates the company "EISA S.A.", which will group together the three houses in San Sebastian, Madrid and Barcelona.

1946

Balenciaga's first perfume is launched under the name "Le Dix", which will be followed by "La Fuite des Heures" (1948) and "Quadrille" (1955).

1947

In February, Balenciaga presents the "barrel" line, far removed from the dominant corseted silhouettes of the time and opting for fluidity in the design. Christian Dior simultaneously presents his "bar" model.

1948

The first street-level boutique is inaugurated, designed by Christos Bellos in a somber yet elegant style with Spanish motifs. Wladzio d'Attainville passes away in Madrid in December.

1951

Balenciaga presents the "semi-fitted" and the "marinière" suits in February and the "midi" in August. These models hark back to the silhouettes of the 20s that disguise the waist and mark the shoulders and the hemline of the dress as the points of reference.

1952

The shop window design falls under the competence of Janine Janet, who will create sculptures in which the products are completely integrated, becoming almost invisible.

1955

Balenciaga presents the "tunic", a two-piece dress made up of straight and refined lines that wrap around the body without constricting it, in an evolution of the "midi" line. One year later, Balenciaga decides alongside Givenchy to present his collections to the media outside the official calendar.

1957

He introduces the "sack" dress, a step further towards the formal evolution that he began with the "barrel" line. The dress stands out due to its pronounced curved back; it is one of his most discussed and controversial silhouettes. In this same collection, he presents his "baby doll" dress, characterised by the simple trapezoidal silhouette that eliminates the waist. It is a new example of the progressive conceptual distance between body and dress in Balenciaga's designs.

1958

He presents the "peacock-tailed" dresses, with an asymmetrical hemline. At the same time, the close collaboration with the fabric provider Abraham gives life to gazar, a fabric that allows him to sculpt his increasingly conceptual creations. The French government awards him the title of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur whereas the international press consecrates him "the Master" and the "King of Haute Couture".

1960

He designs a wedding dress for Fabiola de Mora y Aragón, granddaughter of the Marquise of Casa Torres and future Queen of Belgium. After presenting his collections Balenciaga often takes breaks at his house in Igeldo, halfway between Getaria and San Sebastian.

1967

Balenciaga introduces ever more pure and abstract silhouettes, taking his previous concepts to the limit. He creates sculptural silhouettes that are totally dissociated to the body, in an acclaimed collection by the press and public alike.

1968

In February he presents his last collection, announces his retirement and gives the first interview of his life to the magazine Paris Match. That same year, his designs for Air France uniforms are also presented.

1970

From his house in San Sebastian he participates in other fashion related business projects. He collaborates with the first retrospective exhibition at the Museum Bellerive of Zurich (Switzerland).

1972

Cristóbal Balenciaga passes away in Valencia on the 24th March at 77 years of age and is buried in a small cemetery in his native Getaria.

1973

The Metropolitan Museum of New York creates a posthumous homage to the master of haute couture. A long list of homages will follow, promoted by different international institutions up until the present.

1999

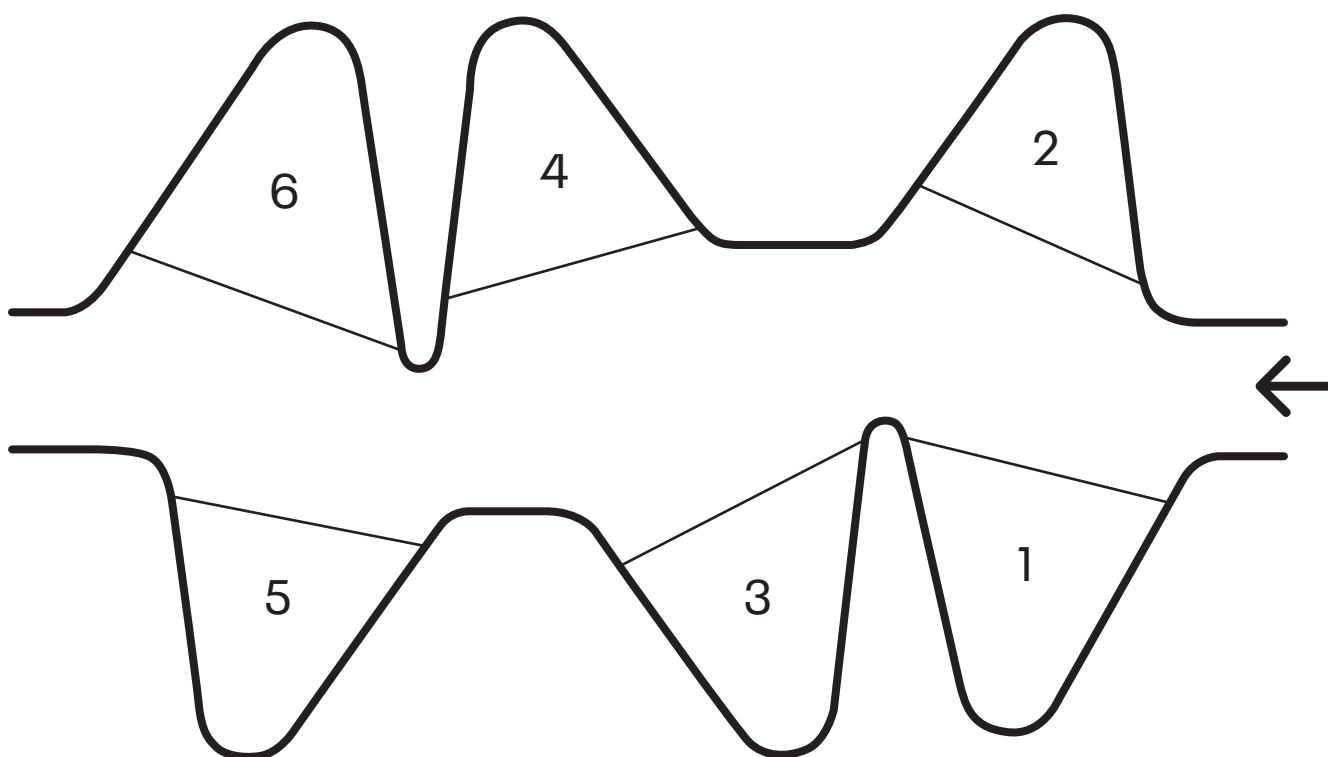
The Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation is created, with a first board of trustees chaired by Hubert Givenchy and composed of relevant figures in fashion and culture with the aim of conserving and sharing the work of the couturier.

2011

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum opens, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, the Basque Government, the Regional Council of Gipuzkoa and the Town Council of Getaria.



# Gallery 2





## The House

In haute couture salons, every season a ritual takes place that marks the transition from the house's creative cycle to its production and marketing cycles: the presentation of the collection.

Access to the event is by invitation only. Private clients—cosmopolitan and influential—and professional buyers—the true financial backbone of the fashion houses—attend to choose from the new range of designs, while the specialist press brings it to the wider public.

At the House of Balenciaga, everything—from the refined, neutral décor of the salon to the graceful and elegant, rather than strikingly beautiful, models—is designed to focus all attention on the quality of the collection. Following the official presentation, a daily schedule of private viewings continues for two months. Saleswomen—suitably cultured and well-mannered—oversee the entire sales process, personally assisting their assigned portfolios of customers with orders and fittings.

Haute couture symbolises exclusivity, status, and a certain way of life, but above all, it is a business. In the case of Balenciaga, the name that is being sold is synonymous with elegance, excellence, and the avant-garde. And, as such, it is highly prized, coveted, and commands a price.

“Balenciaga is the most expensive, and the clientele are the wealthiest”. Florette Chelot, saleswoman at the House of Balenciaga, Paris

## Showcase 1

217 / August 1960

Evening dress in mauve satin  
with embroidered tulle overlay  
featuring floral motifs

CBM 2004.08

63 / February 1962

Evening ensemble in ivory  
shantung silk with floral silk  
spun embroidery

CBM 2000.130ab

169 / February 1960

Evening dress in pale pink silk  
with embroidered black leaves

CBM 2011.34

1958

Evening dress in pale pink Gros  
de Tours with tulle overlay  
featuring sequined floral  
embroidery and lace ribbon

CBM 19.2023

114 / February 1960

Evening dress in yellow satin

CBM 2006.09

## Showcase 2

62 / February 1958

Evening gown in fuchsia satin  
with ivory-coloured floral  
embroidery

CBM 2000.125

9 / February 1958

Evening gown in black silk  
satin adorned with black lace  
and ruffled fuchsia underskirt

CBM 2012.39

141 / August 1959

Déshabillé in pink velours au  
sabre with white floral pattern

CBM 2000.20

106 / August 1959

Evening dress in white Gros de  
Naples with gold brocade work  
and red paisley ikat print

CBM 2000.34

104 / August 1962

Cocktail ensemble in black  
satin and pink taffeta with  
chenille-embroidered  
tulle overlay

CBM 2000.25ab

126 / February 1961

Evening dress in coral silk twill

CBM 2011.18

## Showcase 3

191 / August 1959

Cocktail ensemble in printed  
rayon gauze in shades of  
brown and grey  
CBM 2000.78ab

42 / August 1962

Cocktail dress in white  
organza with floral broderie  
anglaise motifs  
CBM 2000.54ab

77 / August 1958

Cocktail dress in grey lace  
embroidered with tone-on-  
tone organza ribbons  
CBM 2000.73

147 / February 1962

Cocktail dress in black lace  
with a ruffled neckline and  
pink satin ribbon drawstring  
CBM 2012.35

136 / August 1962

Evening ensemble in pink and  
black satin, with shantung  
silk bodice embroidered with  
sequins, crystals and beads  
CBM 2000.72ac

## Showcase 4

197 / February 1959

Cocktail dress in blue silk  
twill with black polka dots.Round padded headpiece in  
black satin

CBM 2019.14

CBM 14.2016

1959

Cocktail ensemble in  
blue organza

CBM 29.2012

117 / February 1960

Cocktail dress in a blue / grey  
gauze print

CBM 02.2013ab

1960

Loose-fitting evening coat in  
blue velvet

CBM 2000.01

185 / August 1958

Cocktail dress in royal  
blue damask

CBM 2000.88

130 / August 1960

Cocktail dress in embroidered  
black gauze with lace  
ribbons, silk cord, sequins  
and jet beads

CBM 2000.65

## Showcase 5

121 / August 1962

Coat in emerald green boiled  
wool twill

CBM 2003.22

134 / February 1958

Loose-fitting cocktail coat in  
blue organza

CBM 2014.67

108 / August 1962

Tunic cocktail dress in  
turquoise plissé rayon twill  
with black satin bow. Hat  
in black melusine with  
leather bow

CBM 2000.203

CBM 2007.08

1961

Dress in turquoise green  
silk crepe

CBM 1998.65

124 / August 1959

Day ensemble in black bouclé  
mohair wool twill. Mink hat

CBM 2005.20

CBM 2012.66

132 / February 1959

Cocktail dress and capelet in  
gathered white silk taffeta with  
blue and yellow floral print

CBM 2000.83ac

## Showcase 6

61 / August 1959

Cocktail dress in black wool crepe with U-shaped back and panel pleat

CBM 2014.60

11 / August 1958

Cocktail coat in royal blue Gros de Naples

CBM 2000.50bc

CBM 2007.08

73 / August 1959

Cocktail dress in blue ottoman with black floral ikat print. Black velvet bourette with bow

CBM 2014.63

CBM1999.08

121 / August 1960

Cocktail dress in black and navy ribbed chenille

CBM 2014.163

42 / August 1958

Cocktail dress in royal blue Gros de Naples, with square back and tulip skirt

CBM 2000.50a

140 / August 1962

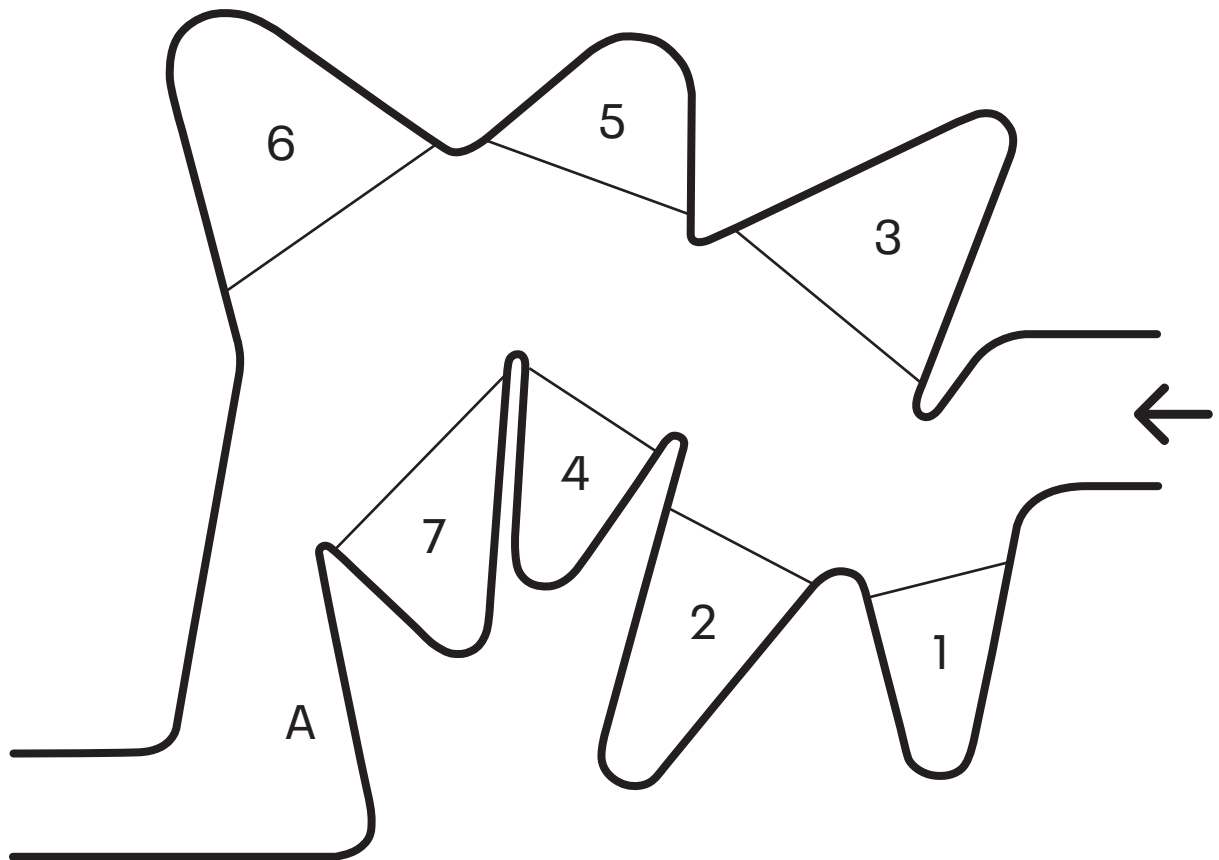
Suit in wool serge with jet buttons. Black felt bonnet

CBM 2018.1141ab

CBM 208.1132



# Gallery 3





## Technique

Balenciaga was a master of his craft. He was capable of designing, cutting, assembling and sewing everything with his own hands. It was all part of his creative process, which generally began by shaping or moulding the fabric onto the body—a process known as moulage—or by drawing a sketch for a toile or cotton pattern.

Thanks to the technical expertise he acquired over a lifetime of study and experimentation, he was able to create enveloping shapes—cut on the bias—that wrapped around the figure, single seam patterns embodying the epitome of minimalism in structure and form, volumes that were supported by geometries of mathematical precision, or sleeves that display a deep understanding of anatomy and movement.

## Ateliers

The sewing and assembly of the garments took place in the ateliers. A cotton toile of the original design by Balenciaga was made to measure for a specific customer and was only made in the final fabric after the fitting and adjusting of the toile.

The ateliers had different specialities. The tailoring atelier created garments for daywear in durable fabrics, the fantasy / dressmaking workshop specialised in cocktail, evening, and ceremonial wear in fine or embellished fabrics, and the milliners were experts at handcrafting hats and headpieces.

Each workshop was managed by a Chef d'Atelier, who was in charge of cutting the fabric and distributing the work among teams who were overseen, in turn, by head seamstresses. They, together with other seamstresses and assistants, assembled, sewed, and pressed the garments, using the exacting techniques and finishes that are the true hallmarks of haute couture.

These employees were mostly women and were usually trained in-house in their skills of choice. To the public, their workspace and craft were as invisible as their stitching. Their names and faces went unnoticed. Collectively, they were known as 'les petites mains', the hands that sew, Balenciaga's indispensable collaborators.

## Showcase 1

This installation traces the process involved in creating this iconic evening gown, with its asymmetric hem and neck tie, from the toile—which belongs to the museum’s collection—to the finished piece, as photographed in 1967 by Cecil Beaton for the magazine *Harper’s Bazaar*.

## Scenography

Ikerne Giménez

## Showcase 2

1953

Semi-fitted ensemble in moss green wool jersey  
CBM 2001.09AB

1953

Semi-fitted suit with rounded back yoke, in yellow linen  
CBM 2011.43ab

## Showcase 3

1961

Full coat with one seam, in black wool serge  
CBM 17.2023

1966

Dress featuring one seam, in black silk crepe  
CBM 2012.49

1963

Two-piece wrap ensemble in pale blue wool crepe  
CBM 1998.42ab

## Showcase 4

1962

Hip flip suit in black wool crepe with black interwoven lurex buttons  
CBM 1998.25ab

## Showcase 5

1953

Trapeze-shaped coat with neck bow in black moiré  
CBM 2023.226

1950

Evening ensemble in ivory satin with black lace overlay  
CBM 2023.225

## Showcase 6

1967

Fourreau evening dress in orange silk crepe with softly pleated neckline  
CBM 2014.78

1963

Wrap evening dress in white silk with red floral print  
CBM 2003.21a

## Showcase 7

1959

Bias-cut wrap evening dress in black silk velvet with stole from the shoulder

CBM 2009.02

1962

Bias-cut wrap cocktail dress in black silk crepe with tube-shaped stole

CBM 2019.19

1960

Evening gown with draping, in ivory chiffon with brown ribbon print

CBM 2016.105

## Installation A

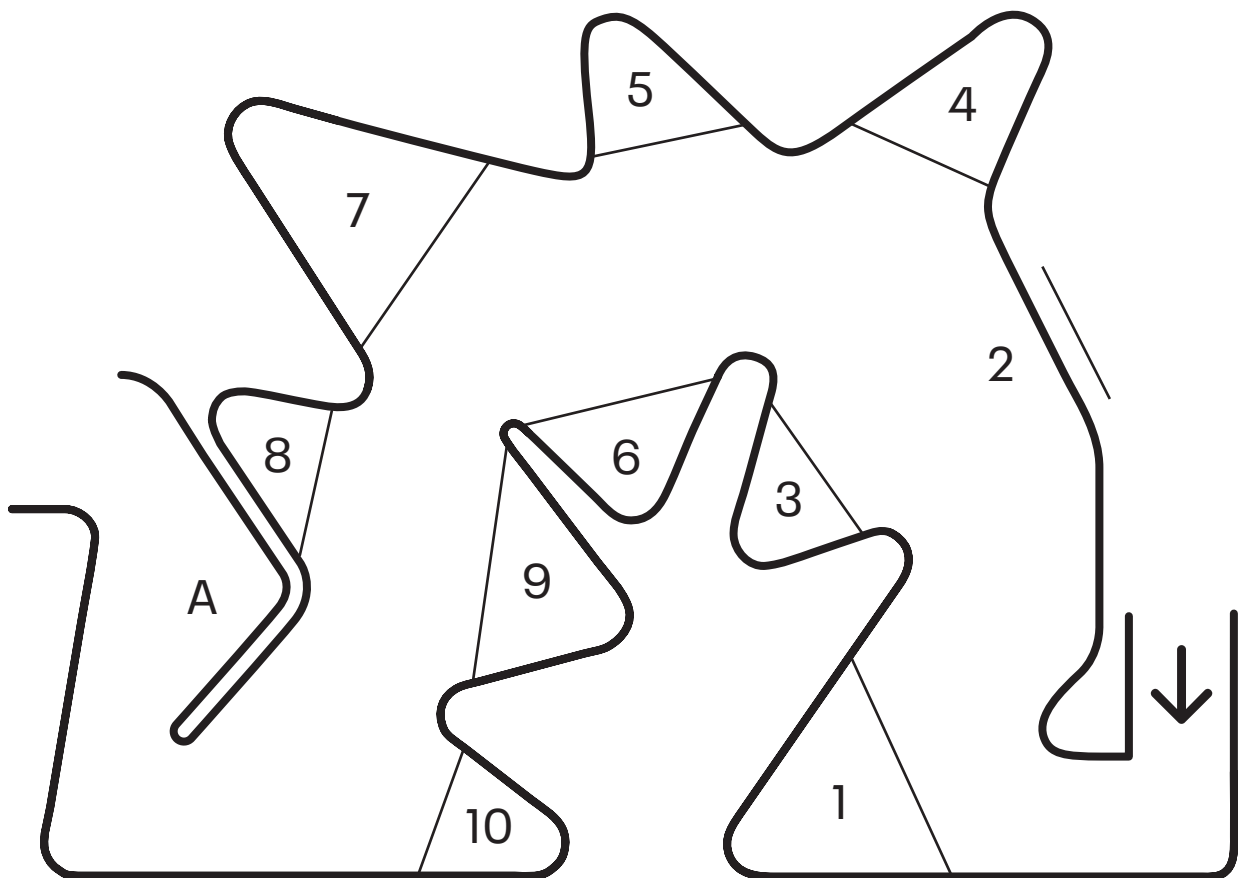
This installation pays homage to the people who worked passionately and tirelessly for Balenciaga “behind the scenes”, spotlighting their contributions through a series of photographs and portraits depicting the day-to-day life of the atelier.

Artist

Susana Blasco



# Gallery 4





## Material

“With fabrics, we do what we can.  
Balenciaga does what he wants.” Christian Dior

The close collaboration that existed between the textile suppliers and the fashion designers was undoubtedly instrumental in producing the vast range of sublime textures, colours, prints and embroidered fabrics the Parisian fashion houses used to captivate their clientele season after season.

Within the value chain of the textile industry, there were different levels of suppliers. There were sales representatives and agents working on commission who carried carefully curated portfolios of different textiles by a range of manufacturers. Others specialised in prints or embroidered fabrics, but sourced their base fabrics from third parties. And some leading manufacturers ran the entire creative and technical operation on an industrial scale.

Balenciaga had a deep understanding and knowledge of fabrics, possibly because of his training background and experience in tailoring which was the cornerstone of his creative process. He worked with fabric suppliers from France, Switzerland, Italy and England, developing long-standing business relationships, some of which turned into friendships, such as the one he shared with Gustav Zumsteg from the Swiss textile manufacturer, Abraham.

## Showcase 1

This installation presents the deconstruction of the layers of the lamé-banded textile used in this evening jacket—from the initial weaving process to the final printed design. Featuring 'Voluptueuse', as the fabric by Coudurier, Fructus et Descher was known, this garment was part of Balenciaga's first collection in Paris in August 1937.

CBM 2023.124

Scenography

Ikerne Giménez

## Showcase 2

These carboards contain essential information about all the models in a collection, including their assigned numbers, a fabric sample with the name of the supplier, the name of the Chef d'Atelier who ran the workshop in charge of its confection, and the name of the model who was going to present it. While these boards were originally used to organise the atelier's workflow, today they serve as a visual testament to the scale and complexity involved in producing a fashion collection.

August 1957 Collection

February 1966 Collection

February 1968 Collection

Archives Balenciaga, Paris

## Showcase 3

Circa 1964

Ensemble in emerald green  
linen by Simmonot-Godard  
Eisa

CBM 1998.33ab

## Showcase 4

1948

Dress with leather belt and  
pleated skirt, in violet blue  
wool crepe by Anfrie

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 09.2023ab

1946

Cocktail dress and foulard in  
satin and wool, embroidered  
with jet beads and braid  
by Bataille

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 2021.01ab

## Showcase 5

1959

Suit in white cotton piqué  
print with abstract design in  
black by Staron

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 2011.10ab

1967

Coat in white cotton ottoman  
with black polka dot print  
by Lajoinie

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 2005.19

## Showcase 6

1975

Cocktail dress in silk ikat  
taffeta with pink floral  
print by Staron

Eisa

CBM 2003.04

1968

Cocktail dress in white gazar  
with floral print in fuchsia  
by Abraham

Eisa

CBM 26.2007

## Showcase 7

1962

Dress with neck tie in beige  
wool jersey by Dumas Maury  
Balenciaga. Paris  
CBM 06.2023

1967

Double-breasted suit in brown  
jersey herringbone by Fournier  
Balenciaga. Paris  
CBM 49.2012ab

Circa 1939

Dress in brown jersey,  
with round neck and two  
small lapels  
Eisa  
CBM 2019.216

1967

Wrap cocktail dress in brown  
jersey by Burg  
Eisa  
CBM 1998.04

## Showcase 8

1963

Coat in shot silk with  
lace overlay and chenille  
embroidery by Marescot  
Balenciaga. Paris  
CBM 2016.106

## Showcase 9

1965

Evening ensemble in black and white silk broderie anglaise gazar by Abraham, with pink silk bow

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 2003.24ac

1967

Dress and cape ensemble in pink and black lurex laminate

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 08.2019ac

1963

Evening gown in pink faille embroidered with sequins and metallic thread by Rébé

Eisa

CBM 2019.08ab

## Showcase 10

1957

Cocktail dress with harem hemline in satin ikat by Costa with a candelieri print by

Brossin de Méré

Balenciaga. Paris

CBM 2000.05ab

Installation A

Atelier sketches with fabric sample

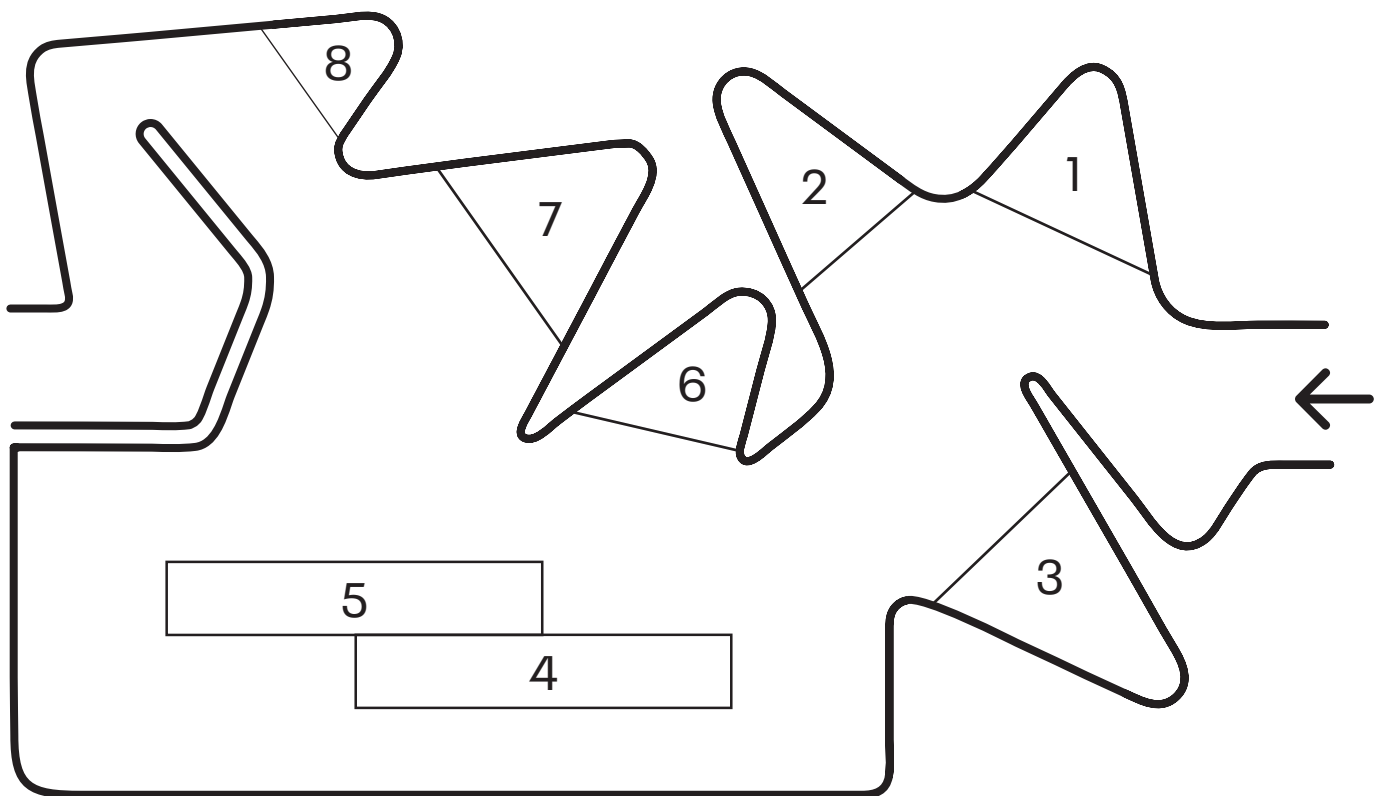
1951-1966

Lorenzo Riva Collection

Euskadiko Artxibo Historikoa



# Gallery 5





## Shape

“Balenciaga was revolutionary without making the revolution”.  
Hubert de Givenchy

Cristóbal Balenciaga left an enduring mark on the history of fashion by introducing new silhouettes that redefined aesthetic ideals for women.

From his early collections—where the influences of designers such as Lanvin and Vionnet could be traced—to the structured, more architectural forms of later years, Balenciaga’s trajectory was slow and deliberate. It was an evolution driven by thoughtful analysis and the desire to present new shapes and outlines which were constantly refined through a process of ongoing experimentation and adaptation.

At the heart of this approach lay a commitment to comfort, fluidity of movement, and the interplay between body and garment as a masterful formula for achieving elegance—the supreme value—and attaining the timeless quality that characterises all his work. Balenciaga’s journey is one of unwavering coherence and evolutionary innovation.

## Evolution

Once established in Paris in the 1940s, Balenciaga looked to historical dress for inspiration, reinterpreting and modernising its silhouettes for his eveningwear while introducing new innovative designs for daytime attire. As the French press reported in 1945: "Two years ago, Balenciaga transformed the female silhouette by using pads to bulk out the hips of his dresses and tailored skirts, which created an incredibly slender waist..."

However, in 1947, Balenciaga took a radical departure from the prevailing 'hourglass' silhouette, veering instead towards softer, more fluid shapes and rounded backs—a style the press called the 'tonneau' or barrel line.

Continuing this evolutionary journey, in 1951, he brought out a series of designs that blurred rather than accentuated the curves of the female body, particularly the waist. Silhouettes such as the 'midi', 'mariner' and 'semi-fitted' styles redefined the shoulder and hemlines, shifting the focus away from the waist.

These innovations paved the way for some of his most groundbreaking designs, including the minimalist 'tunic' line from 1955 and the highly controversial 'sack' dress of 1957. These designs broke from the traditional relationship between body and dress and gradually came to incorporate a third key element: air.

True to his vision, Balenciaga continued to refine, develop and even hybridise these concepts in his later collections.

## Abstraction

In 1957, further abstracting the dress from the body's natural contours, Balenciaga introduced the 'baby-doll' line—an avant-garde, trapezoidal silhouette whose influence still resonates in contemporary fashion.

Throughout the 1960s, Balenciaga continued this progression. His conceptual and technical minimalism was now expressed through enveloping forms crafted from structured fabrics such as gazar, zagar, and ziberline, resulting in more refined, sculptural silhouettes.

These designs became known as the 'Marvels of Form', as some of the models from his February 1967 collection were described in Vogue magazine.

## Showcase 1

Circa 1925

Evening dress in black  
lace with beige and black  
floral design at hip

CBM 2011.61

## Showcase 2

1936

Dress in blue silk jersey

CBM 08.2006

Circa 1938

Dress in beige silk taffeta

CBM 1998.66

## Showcase 3

1946

Purple satin cocktail dress with  
applications of lace and jet

CBM 04.2002

1947

Flecked gray wool with black  
silk velvet trim tailored suit

CBM 03.2002

## Showcase 4

1948

Dress in black silk crepe with  
asymmetric overskirt

CBM 2018.1201

1960

Three-tier tunic suit in light-  
weight black wool

CBM 2016.88ac

1955

Tunic dress with short panel in  
black wool jersey

CBM 2019.214

1957

Tunic cocktail dress with  
blouson back in taffeta with  
floral ikat print

CBM 2019.78bc

1952

Midi ensemble in flecked grey  
herringbone jersey

CBM 2006.26ab

1966

Tunic dress with buttoned  
flaps in flecked jersey

CBM 2012.46ab

## Showcase 5

1955

Day ensemble with sack back  
in flecked grey wool tafetta  
CBM 2006.92

1951

Marinière jacket in  
black silk shantung  
CBM 2023.76

1957

Sack dress in black wool crepe  
CBM 2016.02a

1964

Wrap ensemble with blouson  
back, in printed silk twill  
CBM 31.2012ab

1961

Semi-fitted ensemble  
with sack back, in  
black silk shantung  
CBM 2019.219ab

1960

Semi-fitted déshabillé dress in  
embroidered silk shantung  
CBM 2014.75

## Showcase 6

1958

Baby-doll dress in silk ikat  
taffeta with floral print

CBM 06.1999

## Showcase 7

1967

Evening dress in ivory ziberline

CBM 2011.17

1961

Loose-fitting evening coat in  
blue / black shot silk

CBM 2014.65

## Showcase 8

1967

Evening gown in white  
organza with pink ostrich-  
feather appliqués

CBM 32.2012

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

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