

II
INTERNATIONAL
CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA CONFERENCE
CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Getaria, October 2025
Conference Proceedings

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Foreword

In 2020, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum promoted, organised, and hosted the First International Research Conference devoted to the figure and legacy of this creator, on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of his birth.

The Conference was conceived with the aim of stimulating interest within academic and museum circles and of fostering collaboration in the production of new, rigorous, objective, and verifiable knowledge on Cristóbal Balenciaga: his work, his biographical, historical, and creative context, and his contribution and interpretation from a broad perspective linked to the arts, culture, and contemporary society.

The response to this initiative was outstanding. Despite the complex circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Conference was successfully held with the presentation of thirteen papers, followed online by more than 2,500 attendees, far exceeding all expectations.

This first meeting represented a key opportunity to strengthen ties with an emerging community interested in deepening knowledge of Cristóbal Balenciaga and his legacy. It was therefore both natural and fair that the effort invested in this initial edition should find continuity in a second conference.

Nevertheless, the five-year interval between the two events has brought about several significant changes. The most evident—and undoubtedly the most valued—has been the possibility of meeting again in person, of sharing experiences, and of opening the Museum to this international community. We are fully aware that travelling to the small coastal town of Getaria is no easy undertaking, and we therefore deeply appreciate the effort made by the more than 200 participants who journeyed from around the world—quite literally—to join us and exchange knowledge.

The support of our renewed Scientific Committee, together with the intensive preparatory work involved in disseminating the call for papers and in evaluating and selecting the research proposals, was clearly reflected in both their active presence throughout the Conference and in the keynote lectures—opening (Lesley Miller) and closing (Karen de Perthuis)—as well as in the moderation of the paper sessions (Alexandra Palmer, Simona Segre-Reinach, Emily Brayshaw, Valerie Steele, and Carlos Naya). This generous and selfless commitment is fundamental to an initiative of this nature and therefore they deserve our most sincere gratitude.

By broadening the fields of research beyond fashion history—our natural area of expertise—to include proposals related to education, journalism, audiovisual production, philosophy, or architecture, the Conference greatly enriched interpretative approaches and introduced new perspectives that reinforce the contemporary relevance of Balenciaga's work and figure. Over the past five years, the Museum itself has likewise expanded its curatorial approach, presenting exhibitions that connect Balenciaga with contemporary creation and strengthening research lines related to the intangible heritage of Haute Couture, aspects that were also reflected in several of the Conference papers. For all these reasons, we wish to extend our warmest congratulations to the thirty authors of the papers presented, whose profiles range from specialists and doctoral candidates to communicators and curators.

The significant increase in the number of selected proposals compared with the first edition, combined with an inevitably limited time frame, posed a genuine challenge for the scientific and technical organisation of the programme. The final schedule brought together twenty-one papers over two intensive days, made possible thanks to the dedication, commitment, and passion of our team and collaborators, whose contribution deserves special recognition.

Finally, while we have highlighted certain changes, other aspects have fortunately remained constant. These proceedings of the Second Conference include all the full papers developed from the presentations delivered, with the exception—once again, as in the first edition—of those selected for publication in a special issue of *Fashion Theory* and duly referenced in these proceedings. Special recognition is due to Valerie Steele, Editor of *Fashion Theory*, to the issue editor Ana Balda, and to all reviewers and contributing authors.

Miren Vives Almandoz
Director of Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

Opening Keynote Address

Lesley E. Miller

Cristóbal Balenciaga 1985-2025:
From Journalism to History via Exhibitions

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Cristóbal Balenciaga 1985-2025: From Journalism to History via Exhibitions

1. Introduction

My opening lecture at the Second International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference reflected on the profile of Cristóbal Balenciaga in History over the last 40 years, charting advances in scholarship through the different phases of my own acquaintance with the 'Master' (*Maestro*). It was an especial pleasure to do so, as the Balenciaga Foundation had invited me to become an honorary member (Research) of their Advisory Committee, joining Judith Clark (Museology), Gaspard de Massé (Collection) and Elisa Palomino (Education), and thus underlined the importance of historical research to their overarching mission of promoting greater understanding of the couturier and his context. The large audience at the conference—both in person and on-line—was surely testament to the efforts of the small and dedicated team at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa in Getaria (hereafter CBM) to inspire the next generation of 'Balenciaguistas', if I might coin a new term, and to do so, as far as possible, through judicious, impartial and probing evaluation of Balenciaga's life, his body of work and his legacy. Some such research had, of course, already recently informed the imaginative and dramatic interpretation in the 2024 Disney+ series 'Cristóbal Balenciaga' (Phillips, 2024; Latif, 2024; Añes-De la Cruz, 2026), which has likely reached far wider audiences than most history books or exhibitions do. In the interests of a fluent and seamless narrative, the script-writers of that series dare to fill in personal details that historians and curators might well avoid because they have no secure evidence of behaviour 'behind the curtains' of the fashion house: Balenciaga was a man who chose discretion over public performance.¹

Nonetheless, over the last 40 years, the 'Elusive Balenciaga' of whom Alexandra Palmer spoke so eloquently in 2020 at the beginning of the First International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference (Palmer, 2020), has emerged a little from behind the curtain. The basic facts have not changed: Cristóbal Balenciaga was born in 1895 in Getaria, he set up his couture house in Paris at the age of 42 in 1937, retired at the age of 73 in 1968, and subsequently he suffered a heart attack in Jávea (Xàbia) in 1972, which led to his death. During his life, in 1971, an exhibition celebrated his achievement at the Musée Bellerive in Zurich (Monti, 2021), and immediately after his death, three others, the first at the Salón de Elegancia in San Sebastián in 1972, the most widely known at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereafter MET) in New York in 1973, and the last at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Madrid a year later (Uria, 2020: 29; Monti, 2021: 529-532; Gennaioli and Mozzati, 2025).² The short publication accompanying the MET exhibition offered testimony from friends and admirers: three former clients

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¹ Of course, at the beginning, Disney does include a disclaimer to the effect that the series is 'inspired by the life of Cristóbal Balenciaga', despite the definitive nature of the title.

² The relationship between these exhibitions was tight (Monti, 2021). My list of exhibitions is slightly longer than that of Uria, 2020, because I include smaller displays of about 25 objects and also exhibitions in which Balenciaga was one of the main protagonists, not the only protagonist; five between 1971 and 1980; five between 1981 and 1990; 10 between 1991 and 2000; 10 between 2001 and 2010; 25 between 2011 and 2020 (of which 8 were iterations of the same exhibition); 11 since 2021 (again some duplication). The impact of the opening of the CBM in 2011 is clear.

deeply enmeshed in the fashion world (the exhibition curator Diana Vreeland (1903-1989), Pauline de Rothschild (1908-1976) and Gloria Guinness (1912-1980), and Balenciaga's parish priest in Paris, Father Robert Pièplu (1914-2006)—so there was always a tribute to the man as well as a presentation of the clothes he made (*The World*, 1973; Miller, 2017: 140-148).

Fast forward to 1985, the starting date for my own entanglement with the mysteries of the 'Master', from which I subsequently developed three books between 1989 and 2017 [Figure 1a-c]. Each edition grew as a result of further research (my own and that of others), adding new data and correcting errors. Each increased in length, number of words and images, changed in the selection of illustrations, and improved in quality of production, yet remained tailored to suit a similar readership. The first major exhibition of Balenciaga's work in France had been my 'light bulb' experience. It took place in the world-renowned Musée Historique des Tissus (now Musée des Tissus) in Lyon (1985-1986), curated by its director Pierre Arizzoli-Clémentel, who worked with the archivist at the House of Balenciaga, Marie-Andrée Jouve (hereafter MAJ, 1924-2023). It had been scheduled to coincide with the 16th Worldwide Conference of the International Silk Association which was meeting in Lyon for the first time since 1948 (*Hommage*, 1985: 9). Lyon has, of course, been a major centre of silk weaving since the late 17th century and has served and inspired Parisian high fashion ever since. In the 1980s, its significant museum holdings, built up since 1864, continued to inform manufacturers and designers, and the International Silk Association had its official headquarters not far away. 'Hommage à Balenciaga' was only the museum's second exhibition on the work of a fashion designer, the first having celebrated the Spanish-born Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949) five years previously.³

At that time, during my doctoral studies, the early modern silk industry was my main preoccupation, with many months spent in dusty Lyonnais archives, leavened by forays into the museum library to look at thoroughly baroque or neoclassical textiles and designs.⁴ Kind curator Evelyne Gaudry (now Gaudry-Poitevin) transformed my bookworm life by giving me an invitation to the glamorous exhibition opening. The impression was long-lasting, as it has been for others (Clark, 2024: 18). Striking displays installed in an exceptional historical environment delivered an 'immersive' experience, gentle in comparison with that of its MET predecessor. Visitors entered this fine 18th-century town house on black and white tiled floors walking past elegant mannequins in day dress, progressed into the magnificent, soaring carpet gallery to admire clusters of dramatically posed evening wear, and exited through a carefully staged evocation of Balenciaga's workshops [Figure 2a-c]. Only in hindsight did the appropriateness of the setting dawn on me: it was an architectural environment very much to the taste of Balenciaga and many of his wealthy clients, who collected 17th and 18th-century French decorative arts and furnished their homes in a historicist spirit, mitigated by modern comforts.⁵ The exhibition contained some 508 objects, including impressive sculptural garments on mannequins, hats and other accessories, fashion photographs, sketches, swatches of fabric and some of Balenciaga's personal possessions. The clothes came from the

³ Subsequently, Paquin (1989-1990), Vionnet (1994-1995) and Lapidus (1996-1997) provided a similar focus on fashion and its use of textiles. I am grateful to Marion Falaise at the Musée des Tissus for providing a list of the museum's exhibitions.

⁴ This research resulted in Miller (1988), dealing with 600 textile designers rather than a single fashion designer, and is why I believe that further research of a similar nature needs to be undertaken on other Spanish fashion designers makers in order to make comparisons reliable. Competition and context are crucial.

⁵ For example, Mona Bismarck who lived first in the Hôtel Lambert on the Ile de St Louis and then at no. 34 avenue de New York where the interiors were transformed with the help of Maison Jansen (founded 1880, closed 1989) in the spirit of the 18th century (Mona Bismarck Foundation, 1994, p. 10); or Mrs Charles Wrightsman who donated so much to the MET for the named Wrightsman Galleries of French Decorative Arts.



Figure 1a-c

Front covers of the three editions of the monograph by Lesley Miller: (a) with drawing of ballgown, *British Vogue*, 23 August 1939 (B.T. Batsford, 1993); (b) with Seeberger photograph of evening dress of white organdie embroidered with black spots, model no. 169, February 1952, fabric by Forster Willy of Saint Gall, Switzerland (V&A Publishing, 2007); and (c) with Hiro photograph of Alberta Tiburzi in wide winged cocktail dress, *Harpers' Bazaar*, June 1967 (V&A Publishing, 2017).



Figure 2a-c
Exposition *Hommage à Balenciaga*, Lyon, Musée historique des Tissus, 1985. Hôtel de Villeroy, 34 rue de la Charité, Lyon. © Lyon, Musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs.
(a) The entrance on tiled floor with 18th-century murals; (b) the carpet gallery with evening gowns and wedding dresses; (c) the marble-floored gallery with the mocked-up workshop (atelier).

House archives (Archives Balenciaga) and from private wardrobes and collections, including that of Hubert de Givenchy (1927-2018), who subsequently so generously supported the museum in Getaria over many years. There were also loans from museums in France, Great Britain, Spain, and the USA (*Hommage*, 1985: 61-121).

The catalogue [Figure 3] comprised three essays and many tributes, some of the latter fresh and new, others culled from publications of deceased members of Balenciaga's circle. There was an overview of fashion during Balenciaga's reign in Paris (Yvonne Deslandres), an introduction to the cut of Balenciaga's garments (Marylène Delphis-Delbourg, *Jardin des Modes*, September 1980), and an insight into the textiles Balenciaga used (Pierre Arizzoli-Clémentel). Short tributes from the design fraternity came from Balenciaga's friend Givenchy, his former apprentices in Paris André Courrèges (1923-2016) and Emanuel Ungaro (1933-2019) and his Spanish contemporary Pedro Rodríguez (1895-1990); from employees in the Paris house, tailor Salvador Camón (dates unknown), draughtsman Fernando Martínez Herreros (b. 1932), and saleswoman (*vendeuse*) Florette Chelot (1911-2006); from clients Pauline de Rothschild and the Marquesa de Llançol (1914-1996), textile manufacturer and art collector Gustav Zumsteg (1915-2005), journalists Carmel Snow (1887-1961) and Diana Vreeland, and photographer, interior and costume designer and diarist Cecil Beaton (1904-1980).⁶ Dramatic images complemented these texts, shot contemporaneously by well-known fashion photographers Henry Clarke (1918-1996), Horst P. Horst (1906-1999), and Irving Penn (1917-2009) for glossy fashion magazines, as well as the then less well known Tom Kublin (1924-1966) and Juan Gyenes (1912-1995), the latter active in Madrid (see Balda and Kublin, 2024; Olmeda, 2011: 151-153). They showed to best advantage key styles, which look very different on breathing human bodies in motion than they do mounted on rigid static mannequins.

In essence, beyond the obvious tribute to Balenciaga's perfectionism in design, cut and construction, 'Hommage' showed how 'fashion textiles' inspired and even shaped some 20th-century garments, as their seasonally innovative ancestors had done since the late 17th century. Its publication was the basis of the large, lavish book, authored by MAJ and journalist Jacqueline Demornex, published in French three years later (Jouve and Demornex, 1988). It was to become the foundation for all subsequent work on Balenciaga. The English translation (1989) was in print when British publishing house B.T. Batsford invited me to write a monograph on Balenciaga as the fourth title in their new 'Twentieth-century Fashion Designer' series—just after I completed my doctorate and as I was starting my university teaching career (Snelson, 1989).⁷

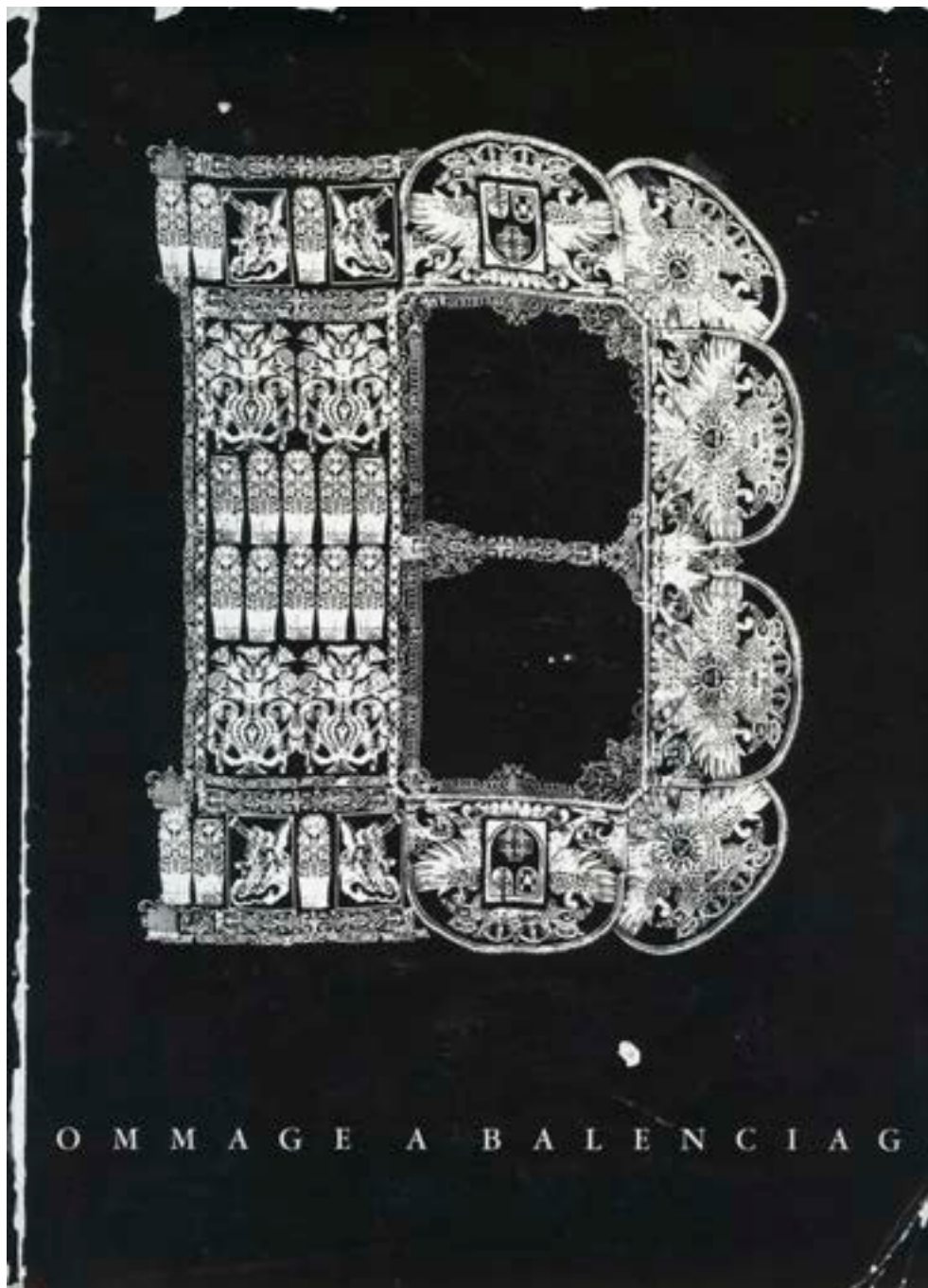
2. 'My Balenciaga': Great Expectations, 1985-1993

In the 1980s, Batsford was one of the few publishing houses in the UK that was commissioning books on dress history which were not for coffee tables but were instead educational in mission and priced to suit a student market.⁸ With my heart in the early modern

⁶ The tributes were either newly commissioned or extracts taken from previous publications, and in the case of Pauline de Rothschild, her essay from the MET catalogue was used, as it has been in subsequent catalogues (see below). Note, too, that well known antiques dealer and interior decorator Marcel Bissey (1901-) contributed as did Alexis Weissenberg, presumably the Bulgarian concert pianist (1929-2012) who was in Paris between 1956 and 1966.

⁷ The other titles published were *Christian Dior* by Diana de Marly (1990), *Paul Poire* by Alice Mackrell (1990), and *Coco Chanel* by Alice Mackrell (1992).

Figure 3
Well-worn cover of author's copy of the
catalogue for *Hommage à Balenciaga*,
motif taken from a silk scarf by Sache
for Balenciaga.



period, writing on a 20th-century fashion designer was certainly not my ambition but a warm lingering memory of that exhibition in Lyon and a certain amount of pragmatism persuaded me to consider this proposition seriously. At that time, teaching fashion history was a challenge because of the paucity of reliable secondary sources, with many publications adopting a hagiographical and hyperbolic approach to 20th-century designers. This situation undoubtedly fuelled my desire to put together something that would help students who needed to know what and who were behind the 'designer genius'—how a design house actually worked, as well as what it produced and how traditional or innovative its different activities were. Balenciaga appealed because of my own background: he was Spanish and conveniently also worked in France, so I could return to my scholastic roots in Hispanic Studies (MA, Glasgow, 1979), practise both my nearly fluent French and rather rusty Spanish—and return to Spain where I had taught English during and after my undergraduate degree. Balenciaga valued sobriety, discretion, privacy and hard work—as do many Scots brought up, like myself, in the Presbyterian tradition for whom Dior's extrovert bonhomie is less attractive. Balenciaga's clothes were infused with historical references, drew on traditional craft skills, and exemplified high production values—qualities all too familiar from the exacting standards absorbed from my mother who had trained in dressmaking at the Glasgow and West of Scotland College of Domestic Science in the post-war years when Balenciaga was active in Paris. She had also inculcated in her daughters an understanding of the quality and properties of textiles by dragging them round the then abundant fabric shops in Glasgow in the 1960s, just as Balenciaga was experimenting with ground-breaking synthetics, innovative woollens and sculptural silks in Paris.

Naturally, I entered this project with a critical eye, questioning the views in preceding works and identifying sources that would confirm, nuance or challenge their story. As an 18th-century design historian who had just spent several years writing a doctorate on the design, production, dissemination and consumption of silks, I had great expectations about what was possible. Ideally, of course, the research would have to analyse archival, material, printed and oral sources which would need to be accessed primarily in France and Spain, but beyond that, too, because of the international markets Balenciaga served. This was a scale of venture suited to a full-time researcher with several years, a deep pocket and multiple skills, whereas I had 18 months for both research and writing and a very modest budget (see Appendix). This activity had to be managed alongside a full-time teaching post in Stoke-on-Trent—not the centre of the fashion world, not even geographically close to it. Just over a year later, Winchester School of Art's initiatives in Barcelona enticed me to move to teach in a different part of the country—at least, Winchester is nearer Paris than Stoke.⁹ It is worth underlining that in the 1980s, many research tools familiar today were not available: there were no laptop computers, portable phones or digital cameras, no internet, no Eurostar joining London to Paris and flights were expensive, so where one lived impacted significantly on what one could do: a gruelling schedule of letter-writing lay ahead on the most basic Amstrad word processor, and the cultivation of patience as I awaited responses.

- ⁸ Their most recent series had been 'Dress and Civilisation' for which I had been commissioned to write a title on 'Golden Age' Spain, because of my Masters dissertation on Spanish men's dress of that period. Alas, the first two titles did not sell well, so the publisher cancelled the second two. Within two weeks of cancellation, they came up with the proposal that I write the volume on Balenciaga. Other Batsford series are still valuable today: 'The Visual History of Fashion', 'Fashion in Photographs' (with the National Portrait Gallery in London), and 'Accessories'. Dr Aileen Ribeiro at the Courtauld Institute of Art was the publisher's external advisor.
- ⁹ Winchester School of Art opened a Fine Art studio in the Barri Gòtic in September 1991 with dedicated staff teaching a Masters programme in Painting and Printmaking. In addition, the School was validating degree courses in fashion school EATM and design school Elisava. On the home campus in Winchester, we were setting up a Masters in Textile and Dress History (first graduates 1993).

Histories of Paris fashion and haute couture—an essential context for Balenciaga who spent 30 years there—were few and there was no equivalent for Spanish fashion. Taken together, existing texts introduced key couturiers, their activities and markets, covered the basic style changes chronologically, considered the artistic and cultural environment of Paris, and had begun raising questions about gendered differences in designers' approaches to female bodies (Lynam, 1972; De Marly, 1980; Steele, 1988; Leventon and De Pietri, 1989; Evans and Thornton, 1989).

Balenciaga was the subject of only the aforementioned exhibition catalogues and monograph. This last was invaluable, an archive in its own right because of its 600 magnificent and varied illustrations and straightforward text. However, this book is not intended for students: it is not referenced and has no bibliography, so there is no shortcut to the documentation on which it is based. Indeed, it is more akin to journalism than history, divided into bite size thematic sections. It does, however, have a chronology,¹⁰ a list of theatre and film collaborations, another of manufacturers supplying material, embroidery, jewellery and accessories, and a third of exhibitions on Balenciaga, as well as copious acknowledgements—all stepping stones on the path to a research plan. Moreover, the photograph captions dropped many names, so were the perfect vehicle for identifying clients. Few mounted garments graced the pages and there was no evidence of how they were constructed, though there were some details of especially splendid fabrics, and a few toiles on basketwork dress stands (Jouve and Demornex, 1988: 60-65).

Reviews of Jouve and Demornex's book were not entirely complimentary, with journalist Colin McDowell noting that 'its price makes it unattainable by any but the richest, and most self-indulgent readers' (McDowell, 1990; McDowell, 1989), while fashion publicist Percy Savage (1926-2008) wrote that the images alone were 'of immense value to present day students of fashion' though he lamented that the text did not suit those who had known the Master:

Though these photographs and the work of leading fashion artists are richly rewarding, the text may disappoint some readers, especially those who knew Balenciaga and his friends. Many things are left unsaid, but then that is what a circle of close friends is for... it is like a club to which it is very difficult to belong (Savage, 1989).

His description underlines how the book differed from the exhibition catalogues and also what I could not achieve, because I was an 'outsider' studying a world to which I did not belong—but, of course, that has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. My aim was certainly not an intimate biography.

Jouve and Demornex's book was, however, a significant achievement, given that MAJ was not a professionally trained archivist or curator and had only just started her self-appointed mission of 'sorting out' and enhancing the House archive in Avenue George V in the early 1980s. She both facilitated research on the Master and ferociously guarded the archival treasures (Spindler,

¹⁰ The Chronology does not deal with Spain; and the updated version in the paperback (2023) lists very few of the exhibitions. The emphasis is on France.

2002; Frost, Miller and Uria, 2023) and she could do so because she had worked at the House before its closure (though she never met the Master), and had subsequently volunteered at the Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris (Palais Galliera) when its collections were being moved to a new building in the 1970s (Uria, 2023). Having been a stylist before her marriage, she knew fashion inside out and, in particular, the Paris world of high fashion and its main players. She was clearly the woman best placed to facilitate further research—but any novice would have to do suitable homework in advance to prove trustworthiness.

Whatever its shortcomings, this volume helped identify certain gaps that might usefully be filled for my target audience who, like me, did not necessarily come from a fashion background, but who, unlike me, had aspirations to work in fashion. Such students were living some 20 years after the “youth quake” of the 1960s, so needed a solid context in which to place Balenciaga, his achievements and continued reputation, in order to compare him with his peers and with later practitioners. They required an insight into the technicalities of his designing and making methods and execution, evidence derived from the inside and outside of actual garments, and I believed they would also benefit from knowledge of how the business operated. Jouve and Demornex offers very little on finance, pricing, or management, or on the experience and interaction of employees, though some significant voices had clearly informed their text (Jouve and Demornex, 1988: 59-69). The role of Spain is evoked through facts about Balenciaga’s origins and the location of his three businesses (EISA), as well as the drawing of analogies between his garments and paintings (largely Spanish though Manet sneaked in), and Spanish traditional dress (Jouve and Demornex, 1988: 13-20, 70-75, 231-284). His place of birth and continued association with his native land differentiated Balenciaga from his fellow couturiers in Paris.

Some questions arose from personal curiosity as much as from perceived gaps in the previous narrative. How did Balenciaga prepare for his career; what did a tailor or seamstress learn in Spain and where? Why did Balenciaga go to Paris at 42 in 1937 when he was already comfortably settled and successful in San Sebastián, running branches in Madrid and Barcelona? Were the reasons entirely professional or was there also a political dimension? How was the House set up financially and spatially; who were the employees, what were their conditions of service; and how did the Spanish houses operate relative to the Parisian one? What made the garments so special, their style or methods of making, or both? Would forensic examination of the inside structures and finish perhaps identify differences between the methods or quality of French versus Spanish production?

With these questions, my location and deadline in mind, a research programme crystallized. Most accessible was the fascinating embarrassment of journalists’ and couturiers’ autobiographies and other writings from the 1950s and 1960s (for example, Dior, 1956; Latour, 1958; Spanier, 1959; Ballard, 1960; Balmain, 1964; Adburgham, 1966) and the English and French language fashion and trade press, *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar* but also *L’Officiel* and

Drapers' Record: the former suggested the common structure of couture houses, their staffing, and relationship to suppliers and clients, while the latter defined the innovative styles, the relationship of designers with the press and announced the identity of some of the private and commercial clients buying Balenciaga. Excellent libraries in Manchester and London housed much of this textual material and their museums offered the chance to see, if not always handle, Balenciaga garments. The former was just an hour by train from my base in Stoke-on-Trent. Capital of the British cotton industry, it has been home to a renowned museum of costume since 1947, as well as acclaimed fashion and textile design courses—precisely because of its history in textile manufacturing. London, some three hours away by train, was home to the British Newspaper Library and the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum (hereafter V&A) whose Textile and Dress collection boasted many items; Bath Museum of Costume—a cross-country ride away—had 14 outfits, while all other British collections had one or two at most.¹¹ My letter-writing campaign to international museums with fashion collections threw into relief the professionalism and generosity of American curators who photocopied their index cards and dispatched heavy envelopes across the Atlantic. Despite variable levels of cataloguing and few photographs, their records often provided excellent information about how the garments were made, what label they carried and who the owners/wearers were. Paris, not surprisingly, demanded a visit, the details received from their listings being more laconic than those from the USA.

British museum collections did not just introduce me to British wearers but also to some of Balenciaga's international clients, and some intriguing finds took me in the direction of wholesale couture (high-end ready-to-wear) and department stores (making to order and also selling ready-to-wear)—for example, Manchester Art Gallery's three pieces were a hat of unknown provenance (1988.103), a hat bought at the auction of some of the possessions of Mary Vaudoyer, née Kennedy Mundle (1918-2018), a British fashion writer and later collector who married a Frenchman after the war (1989.56), and a suit from a British client who had 'loved' (her word) it so much it had been relined (1972.227, Figure 4). At least latterly, the matching blouse she had worn was ready-made in exactly the same shade of silk, but labelled Harry B. Popper (1972.228), which, I discovered, was a wholesale couture company which bought models from Paris to copy. None of these items had been photographed.¹² At the V&A, I spent three days (that is about 15 hours) viewing about 90 garments so I gained an overview rather than undertaking slow deep analysis as a curator could do over time. The main discovery was the recently delivered, still uncatalogued Ava Gardner (1922-1990) donation, every garment bearing the EISA label. They included the sculptural, avant-garde *La tulipe* (model no. 76, autumn/winter 1965) and an evening coat (T.294-1990) in a fabric that MAJ had never seen, which suggested it was possibly Spanish, a variation on the French model. The actress had lived in Spain from 1955 before moving to London in 1966 (Miller, 2017, pp. 149-152). In contrast, Bath's collection included seven more modest outfits worn by British character actress Martita Hunt (1900-1969) and a gown that had belonged

¹¹ In reduced form, nine out of 26 collections that responded were eventually published in an appendix. I had visited all the British ones. Miller, 1993: 89-93. It should be noted that the collections have grown considerably since this date.

¹² Those with a Balenciaga label are now available on the museum website alongside a number of more recent purchases; the blouse has not been photographed. The donor wished to retain anonymity.

Figure 4
Emerald green woollen suit, lined in silk,
1964. Manchester Art Gallery 1972.227.
Courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery.



to Agota Balkanyi (1917-2001), wife of Hungarian-born, British-based, textile manufacturer Miki Sekers, who shrewdly courted the couturiers (Sekers, 2019-2026; Miller, 2007a). Outside museums, British dealer Francesca Galloway offered generous access to her collection, while Spink and Sons, Sothebys and Christie's allowed perusal of items for sale on the recent and expanding market for second-hand couture. The authors of catalogues, such as Pat Frost and Francesca Galloway, were able to comment on differences in quality between couturiers' work because they were constantly examining an array of pieces in a way I could not. Balenciaga rated highly for consistency in quality of crafting.¹³

In Paris, appointments at the Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris (Palais Galliera) and investigation of the Archives Nationales de France (hereafter ANF) and Archives de la Ville de Paris (City Archives, hereafter AVP) preceded my meeting with MAJ at the growing House archive. Despite the interruption of power cuts that plunged the Galliera basement into darkness periodically while I was examining garments, I gained insights into many glamorous objects, worn mainly by French owners, including the boldly spotted 'Ladybird' (*La coccinelle*) of 1962 (Miller, 1993, colour plate 5). To my delight, the AVP delivered the official registration of the business in 1937, an entry with annotations that showed that it had subsequently grown in the late 1940s and 1950s (documents transcribed in Golbin, 2006: 26-27). At the ANF the completed couture questionnaires for 1952 to 1955 revealed Balenciaga's productivity: the number of models he created each season, the number of garments made each year for private customers, wages paid to key employees, and the number of mannequins employed (Miller, 1993, pp. 66-71; 2007, Appendix 4: 125). These findings were particularly rewarding as the context for Balenciaga's business could be divined from comparison with the returns for his contemporaries in *couture-cr  ation*. Deeper delving into commercial matters was less straightforward, because the House had not retained its accounting records, had to maintain confidentiality relative to living clients, and could only access the prices of garments via the surviving *vendeuses* who retained their client notebooks (Jouve and Demornex, 1988: 69). With MAJ acting as intermediary, eventually, two months before my book went to press, a letter arrived with the basic information about the cost of two key contrasting items, a day suit and an evening dress (Jouve, 1993).

Opportunistic or unplanned research took place in Barcelona: I admired from the street the neat one-storey building occupied by Balenciaga's business in a wealthy central residential and shopping area. Then, I peered into vitrines at the few garments on display at the Museu T  xtil i d'Indument  ria (now within the Disseny Hub Barcelona), the dedicated dress and textile museum where a Balenciaga retrospective, based on the Lyonnais one, had been held in 1987 (Uri  , 2023: 29). That visit was just before my deadline. An unexpected week in New York permitted a visit to and conversation at Balenciaga Inc. (established in 1987 under the ownership of perfume group Jacques Bogart), as well as a whole day in New York Public Library looking at American newspapers on microfilm (Miller, 1993: 78-82). One major regret was not to reach San Sebasti  n

¹³ At a later date, auctioneer Kerry Taylor confirmed this impression (2006).

or Madrid, but I travelled vicariously through contemporary travel guides and post cards, many provided by knitting historian Montse Stanley (1942-1999), a Cambridge-based Catalan friend whose husband was a dealer in maritime memorabilia (including post cards). Atmospheric early 20th-century images of the great elite holiday resort [Figure 5] and the Spanish capital generated new ideas about how to deal with other aspects of Balenciaga's heritage on a budget, notably Spanish traditional dress [Figure 6]. As a result, the popular, commercial imagery surrounding him, such as post cards, sherry bottle labels, or bullfighting posters, took its place alongside examples of the high art already identified as informing his work (Miller, 1993: 10-12).¹⁴

Apart from the slowness of communication, my main frustrations lay in areas that were often not familiar from my 18th-century research practice because Balenciaga had worked within living memory. Certain questions were too sensitive, especially any related to clients, money or politics. Yet, clearly the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Second World War (1939-1945), and the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975) were the context for much of Balenciaga's career. Beyond that, more prosaically, the limited availability and high cost of photographs were distressing: I had to beg images on the basis the book was educational in nature, and then negotiate the copyright fees accordingly. In other words, aspiring to Richard Avedon's fashion shoot for *Harper's Bazaar* in November 1948 (V&A, PH 13A-1985; Miller, 2017: 61) was commendable, but a museum photograph of the same suit mounted on a mannequin at Cincinnati Art Museum (1986.765a-b) proved realistic and was gratefully received. Sadly, thereafter it was very poorly reproduced (Miller, 1993, Figure 13). In similar vein, a sketch from *Woman's Journal* substituted for a photograph from *Vogue* (Miller, 1993, col. pl. 1). In the case of garments, most museum objects had not been photographed, so the generosity of auction houses and dealers was appreciated (Miller, 1993, col. pl. 3 & 4). An EISA-labelled black and white lace cocktail dress was an investment, on which I 'blew' one third of my photograph budget of £1,500 in order to examine it and have photographs taken (Miller, 1993: 32 and 34; CBM 2025.119ab). Its former owner kindly explained its story. She was a one-off client from London who had seen it worn by a mannequin in the San Sebastián house parade in the early 1950s, bought it for herself, and donned it in London for several seasons: 'I had no intention of buying anything, but maybe it was due to the beauty of the dress and it being small fitting or because I was suffering from concussion still after our car accident but I found myself flying back to England with it in my luggage!' (CBM 2025.119c)

There were definitely highs and lows in this early research journey. The resulting book was a slim overview that documented all sources carefully, contained new data particularly on Britain, drew attention through its chapter titles to different elements of Balenciaga's progress from Getaria to Paris, attempting to build an argument about the marriage of Spain and France in his approach to both design and business practices: in 'A Spaniard in Paris', my knowledge of 17th-century tailoring enabled me to signal that his debt to ecclesiastical garments ran deeper than visual reference to

¹⁴ The Montse Stanley Knitting Collection is now housed at the University of Southampton in the Special Collections. <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/intheloop/collections/montse-stanley.page> [last accessed 9 February 2026].



Figure 5
Postcard of San Sebastian, no. 135 San Sebastian. Paseo y Playa de la Concha, photographer Gregorio G. Galarza for Union Postal Universal, early 20th century, acquired from Tom Stanley, dealer in maritime memorabilia, to illustrate the first edition of the author's book. Private collection.

Figure 6
Postcard of regional dress, Canaries, 10 Folia (popular dance of the islands), applied fabric and machine embroidery on printed card, Elsi [Gumier] for Postales Alcala, Madrid, early 1960s, sent to the author as a child by her great aunt. It is typical of the series that covered all regions and spoke to the Spanish government's drive to promote tourism through this type of imagery. Private collection.

clergy depicted in Spanish paintings;¹⁵ in 'Clothes and Clients', the role of commercial buyers, including the final lucrative commission from Air France, balanced out commentary on high profile private clients; in 'An Unusual Business', concrete and contextualised numerical data complemented general observations on Balenciaga's approach to marketing, raising questions about whether his Spanish operations permitted him to avoid embracing *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear); and finally in 'Balenciaga Now: the Legacy', the new initiatives of the house in ready-to-wear provided data to complement what was already known about designers who followed in Balenciaga's footsteps.

Batsford was generally happy with the manuscript, though it was submitted late, while their specialist dress history consultant was wary about certain elements, '... I feel there's perhaps too much emphasis on the business side & on the later franchising etc. It's all good stuff, but I'm not sure about the extent of its appeal to a wider audience' (Ribeiro, 1992). This first edition was probably not particularly successful, as it is little known and Balenciaga was the last title commissioned for the series. In retrospect, that is not surprising: the quality of the images would absolutely not inspire fashion students. One reviewer was kind enough, however, to note: 'informative captions make clear what we cannot see' (Adburgham, 1994). However, the text held up for quite a long time: it respected the designer, attempting to put his 'genius' into context, and the rather unglamorous images balanced out what had appeared previously, revealing Balenciaga's whereabouts outside the pages of high-end fashion reporting.¹⁶

I returned to the 18th century, though Balenciaga continued to feature in lectures to special interest groups and students—and I took opportunities of adding to my repertoire of Balenciaga 'bits and pieces' when in France or Spain ostensibly doing something else. As a result, my teaching materials drew on newly found or available evidence, thus permitting me to encourage others to take this research further, for the subject was still ripe for sustained investigation.

3. The V&A's Balenciaga: A Golden Age, 2005-2020

In the meantime, fashion history was becoming more sophisticated, a milestone being the launch of the peer-reviewed journal *Fashion Theory: A Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* in 1997, an initiative of Valerie Steele with publisher Berg. A special issue on 'Methodology' followed in 1998 (2:4), another on Exhibiting Fashion in 2008 (12:1), and the acclaimed *Encyclopaedia of World Dress and Fashion* two years later (Eicher, 2010).¹⁷ Bloomsbury had taken over Berg in 2008, and has since expanded its 20th-century fashion output, publishing handbooks, readers on methodology (e.g. Black et al., 2014), and case studies from thorough doctoral research. Exhibitions on Balenciaga flourished. At least 10 took place worldwide between 1993 and 2006, and 13 between 2007 and 2016, each focussing on different aspects of the designer's work, clientele or legacy, according to their location and the collections at their disposal.¹⁸

¹⁵ My Masters dissertation had focussed on tailoring books published in Spain in the late 16th and early 17th century, sumptuary legislation and Holy Week processional sculpture. 'Aspects of Men's Dress in Spain, 1600-1630: Courtly Developments and Popular Problems,' unpublished MA in Art History (Dress), Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1982.

¹⁶ It certainly paved the way for good relations with both MAJ and later Rosa Martín i Ros, the curator in Barcelona, and Mary Blume indicated that its rigorous scholarship had inspired Miren Arzalluz to become a costume historian, her first writing on Balenciaga being her Masters dissertation in 2004, before my second edition came out. Blume to the author, email, 12 January 2011.

¹⁷ One of Valerie Steele's many contributions to raising the academic profile of fashion history and theory. She was General Editor from this date until 2025.

Importantly, oral history with Balenciaga's family and employees informed some of these many exhibitions (Golbin, 2006; Walker, 2006: 13-42; Bowles, 2011).¹⁹ Lack of Spanish language skills was, however, often a barrier to learning more about the nature of the houses in San Sebastián, Barcelona and Madrid. The Museo del Traje (Fashion Museum) opened in Madrid (2004), modelling its displays on the temporary exhibition 'Moda en Sombras' (Fashion in the Shadows) in featuring both traditional and fashionable dress (*Moda en Sombras*, 1991; see special issue of *Indumenta*, 2007).²⁰ A spectacular temporary exhibition in 2009, 'Genio y Figura', on the influence of Spanish culture on fashion, admirably complemented the permanent displays which devoted significant space in the 20th-century section to Balenciaga (Cabrera and Miller, 2015).²¹ From 2014 the new Museu del Disseny in Barcelona subsumed Balenciaga into its thematic approach to body-shaping in its Fashion Gallery (Bastardes and Ventosa, 2015).

Of course, curators and collectors worldwide continued to consult MAJ, as did successive archivists at the House after 2004, first Gaël Mamine and later Gaspard de Massé, as my infrequent tea-time chats with MAJ between 2005 and 2018 revealed (Miller, 2023). Given all this activity, it was surprising that no exhibition had taken place in London, but that was not because senior 20th-century fashion curators at the V&A had not tried. Indeed, Valerie Mendes had been in dialogue with Lyon and MAJ in 1991, a provisional budget already broached (Jouve, 1991), while her successor Claire Wilcox's ambition to stage a show in 2007 on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the couture salon in Paris was pre-empted by Pamela Golbin's exhibition in Paris (2006-2007). So, it was only in 2017 that the V&A achieved its aspiration in time for the 80th anniversary, which was also the centenary of the opening of Balenciaga's first business in San Sebastián.

From the V&A's perspective, Balenciaga's golden age has undoubtedly been the period from 2005 until 2020, with him placed shoulder to shoulder with his post war rival Christian Dior (1905-1957) in the narrative of 'The Golden Age of Couture, 1947-1957' (2007-2008), then celebrated through his own work and legacy in 'Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion' (2017-2018) and its subsequent iterations until 2020.²² Curator Cassie Davies-Strodder, ably aided and abetted by Exhibition Research Assistant Stephanie Wood, led the initiative, with Lesley Miller, then Acting Keeper of the Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department and Sonnet Stanfill, Senior Curator of Modern Fashion serving as consultants for the two different parts, 'Balenciaga' and his 'Legacy' respectively.²³ My authoring of the accompanying book made turning the exhibition around in 18 months possible as it released the curators to engage in other exhibition-related endeavours (Miller, 2017). Indeed the V&A Exhibitions Steering Group had accepted the initial proposal on this basis:

...a very strong, classic option for the Public Programme, on the condition that design and interactive elements animate the presentation and the interpretation differentiates it from past V&A fashion shows... the existence of a publication, though requiring updating, frees up curator time to research

¹⁸ The locations were: Barcelona (1995); Bilbao (2010); Calais (2015); Château de Haroué, Paris (2010); Dallas, Texas (2006); Getaria (2004, 2006, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016); Paris (1994, 2006, 2012, 2016); Mexico City (2016); New York (2010); Phoenix, Arizona (2002); San Francisco (2011); San Sebastián (2001); Valladolid (2000); Valencia (2001).

¹⁹ In the case of Golbin, the interviews surfaced creatively in *Couture Confessions*, 2016 and a fuller version in 'Monsieur' in Martínez de la Pera, 2019: 45-52. Interviewees included *vendeuse* Florette Chelot, Jacqueline Michel who was working in Accounts in 1968, Simone Roptin in draping, Nicole Parent, house mannequin, and Ungaro.

²⁰ The same galleries were used, but at that time the museum was called the Museo del Pueblo Español. See museum website for wider history and 30th anniversary celebration of the exhibition and its impact: <https://www.cultura.gob.es/mtraje/actividades/celebraciones/30-aniversario-modaensombras.html> [last accessed 5 March 2026].

²¹ Recently an article in *El País* lamented the much reduced space devoted to Balenciaga in current displays, revealing just how in-built the notion of his importance is to the Spanish fashion community, perhaps because other designers have not yet received their due. de las Heras Bretín, 2016.

²² In Montreal (Canada, 2018), Borås (Sweden, 2018-2019), Bendigo (Australia, 2019) and finally in Hangzhou (China, 2020).

²³ My original proposal was presented under the title 'Balenciaga: Outside In' and focussed on making; that proposal was adjusted and rebranded by the curators and marketing team. My role as Acting Keeper of Department precluded me from actually curating the exhibition. Each section occupied a floor of the temporary exhibition space in the Fashion Gallery at the Museum.

the construction of the garments and present the findings in a dramatic and engaging manner (V&A, ESG, 2015).

V&A Publishing considered the book a 'refresh' of the museum's previous trade title published ten years earlier to accompany *The Golden Age* catalogue, alongside that by Alexandra Palmer on Dior (Miller, 2007; Wilcox, 2007; Palmer, 2007). 'Refresh' is possibly an understatement, given the need to address the burgeoning fashion historiography, the spike in publications on Balenciaga (far more than between 1993 and 2007),²⁴ new research on the V&A's own collections and new photography.²⁵ Indeed, the specification for each V&A title in the Appendix reveals schematically the adjustments required and also the conditions under which each was achieved by an employee who had ever-changing responsibilities. The tone remains similar to the 1993 edition, considered appropriate for the museum—scholarship worn lightly, expressed accessibly, and fully referenced—and thus, it has continued to cater for students and researchers as well as a more general audience enthusiastic about fashion. The quality of production is infinitely superior, the V&A priding itself on creating beautiful books and encouraging constructive dialogue between in-house editor, designer and author. The 2017 book sits happily on a coffee table as well as on university library shelves, thanks to the talents of Charlie Smith Design.²⁶

On some levels, inside the museum with the largest collection of Balenciaga in the UK, the conditions were ideal for research and publishing. The reputation of the institution opens doors to dialogue with external organisations, thanks to international networks established over more than a century and a half. In-house, curators and conservators can analyse the surviving objects culture carefully, rather than cursorily, learning both from traditional connoisseurial examination and also from conservation and mannequin-mounting procedures. They may thoroughly evaluate provenance through museum accession and documentation records whose content may be complemented by the rich contextual resources in Prints and Drawings, Photography and the National Art Library. Photographs from and for other in-house publications are readily available and new photography is commissioned for exhibition catalogues, though rarely for trade books.²⁷ The budget for each type of book is relatively generous though not limitless. Moreover, in-house editors manage all copyright permissions with external parties, rather than abandoning authors to hours of frustration. The location is also excellent, conveniently close to mainland Europe, with London linked to Paris by the Eurostar from 1994, as well as by four busy international airports serving destinations worldwide. Moreover, by the early 2000s, the internet existed, speeding up long-distance research, whether via email or on-line searches. The Exhibition Department's travel budget allows for both the negotiation of loans and for some off-site study. San Sebastián and Getaria were on my itinerary at last in 2006—and the impact of experiencing the city and village, their layout, architecture, promenades and beaches cannot be underestimated, nor the value of speaking to the people then closest to interpreting the Master for the Fundación Balenciaga, established in 1997.²⁸

²⁴ Uria (2020) lists 18 exhibitions that preceded 'Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion' between 2000 and 2017. All of them had some kind of publication, but other non-exhibition books were also published, such as Blume (2013) and Irvine (2013).

²⁵ Academic reviewers were split. Rebecca Arnold (2017), whilst complimentary, considered it a 'refresh', while Caroline Ness (2019) appreciated the substantial developments since earlier editions. Colin McDowell (2017) gave it a glowing review, which was a real coup because of his encouragement back in 1990 and his generally critical stance towards much fashion history. He considered it 'essential summer fashion reading... the most comprehensive, readable and factual book' in a crowded field.

²⁶ My evidence is anecdotal in the case of the former, but I have been asked to sign copies for the former purpose. Reviews on Amazon confuse the two editions, so are not a reliable guide.

²⁷ The difference between a trade publication and an exhibition book lies in the budget available for photographs and how the exhibition theme meshes with the other title. Privilege will always go to the exhibition book in terms of new photography, and in the case of fashion exhibitions, mannequins are often not mounted until too late in the book production schedule to allow them to be included. In 2007, the photographic resources for the Balenciaga holdings were a suit (T.127-1982) and an incorrectly mounted ballgown (T.427-1967) from the 1984 redisplay of the Fashion Gallery and six dresses from *Black in Fashion* (Mendes, 1999) - more photographs than in 1990. It was possible to add just one new acquisition, but only a detail of the embroidery and the inside, photographed flat as it had not yet been mounted for the *Golden Age of Couture* (Miller, 2007: 40; T.17-2006). Ten years later, not only was it possible to use these but also the mounted garments from the 2007 exhibition (Miller, 2017: 15, 122-123), as well as actually determining how certain images were set up to illustrate certain themes, such as the range of hats, the sari dress and the fastenings on it and other garments. There are 30 V&A garments (usually with details) and nine hats (Miller, 2017: 85 & 143, 80-81, 86).

In these privileged circumstances, turning to the secondary literature was still essential. A few key titles deserve mention, as they have made the workings and ethos of couture more accessible, affording a much-needed broader context for individual designer case studies: the various editions of Didier Grumbach's *Histoires de la mode* (1993, 1999, 2008, 2017), Alexandra Palmer's pioneering thesis *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (2001), and Dominique Veillon's *La Mode sous l'Occupation* (1990, translated into English in 2002 as *Fashion under the Occupation*). Between them they demonstrate the value of archival, object-based and oral history research, in capturing the variety of ways in which French haute couture struggled and flourished culturally and economically during and after the Second World War, its dependence on non-French clients, and its ambivalent relationship with *prêt-à-porter* and the press—that is, in the years that Balenciaga was in the ascendant in Paris. These books take into account the institutional and state promotion of French luxury industries as well as the commercial interactions between different players and their products.²⁹ While French fashion was increasingly well served by 2017, there was still no thorough social or cultural history of 20th-century Spanish fashion across its regions, though highly regarded journalists had begun to publish on women and fashion, their data apparently largely drawn from accepted narratives, their sources often unspecified (e.g. Figueras, 2003). As a result, there was still no way of rigorously evaluating Balenciaga's apparent singularity.

In some respects, the literature focussing on Balenciaga echoed these developments. Pamela Golbin's major catalogue *Balenciaga Paris* (French and English versions published), reproduces documentation of the couturier's businesses (Golbin, 2006: 26-27) as well as a year by year introduction to his collections via extracts from magazine articles and photographs from the fashion press and the House. She was first to provide ground plans of the spaces at Avenue George V (Golbin, 2006: 22-25), partly constructed through interviews with employees. Unfortunately, the publication contains none of the garments that dazzled in the enormous exhibition.³⁰ In Spain Miren Arzalluz broke new ground in *Cristóbal Balenciaga. la forja del Maestro* (2010, translated as *The Making of the Master*) by examining in detail newly mined archival evidence on Balenciaga's origins and environment in the Basque country and the early patronage of the Marquesa de Casa Torres, as well as key early influences on his work—historicism, art and Japonisme (Arzalluz, 2010).³¹ This publication preceded by only a year the opening of the CBM in Getaria, whose lavish, yet scholarly, collections catalogue takes a chrono-thematic approach in its four essays and divided its object entries typologically: Arzalluz discusses the couturier's early years, Jouve his time in Paris, Arizzoli-Clémentel his use of textiles, and art historian Lourdes Cerillo Rubio his artistic temperament, while the catalogue divides into 'Early Years', 'Day', 'Cocktail', 'Evening', 'Brides', 'Essential', which is a 'close readings' of a selection of some 'iconic' day, cocktail and evening ensembles, and 'Accessories' (Descalzo, 2011; Nicklas, 2012: 437).³²

Balenciaga's debt to Spain continued to be a recurring theme, tackled both as headline subject and as sub-section within other

²⁸ In 2006 Miren Arzalluz greeted me with warmth, as did Igor Uria, who in March 2016 offered a veritable Masterclass to the curators of the forthcoming V&A exhibition. The lace exhibition then on display fed directly into the V&A making of a garment for visitors to try on.

²⁹ Journalists, of course, continued to publish on Balenciaga. For example, Susan Irvine (2013), though unreferenced, has a bibliography and the author acknowledges at the end her debt to three key texts and an unpublished lecture. Similarly, small exhibitions tended to have 'arty' publications, with relatively little text that included the basics and a few colourful quotes about Balenciaga or from him. For example, De Nicolay-Mazery (2010).

³⁰ Ghesquière became creative director of Balenciaga in 1997 and left for Louis Vuitton in 2012. He and the House supported this exhibition in 2006, which included a section at the end from Ghesquière's collections since 1998.

³¹ Translated into English as *The Making of the Master* and published by the V&A in 2011, prologue by Miller.

³² The Fundación Balenciaga had been established in 1997, with several small exhibitions held while today's museum was being constructed. The catalogue entries were authored by Amalia Descalzo (Universidad de Navarra) and Lucina Llorente (Museo del Traje, Madrid), with input from the then conservator Igor Uria, now Director of Collections.

topics: in New York Hamish Bowles assumed the mantle of the late Diana Vreeland in focussing on Balenciaga and Spain, a show re-curated and expanded for San Francisco (2010-11). His book offers a lively overview on all aspects of the designer and his career before focussing on the impact of Spanish art, the royal court, religious life, dance, bullfighting and regional dress. Some of Balenciaga's clients, colleagues and friends shared memories with him (Bowles, 2011).³³ In contrast in Getaria the more modestly sized 'Coal and velvet. Views of Popular Dress' (2016), curated by Ana Balda, examined closely the photographs of José Ortiz Echagüe (1886-1980). Balenciaga garments placed beside or before imposingly large reproductions of selected black and white photographs relayed its message to great dramatic effect. The authors of the catalogue provide illuminating commentary on the early 20th-century Spanish fascination with and desire to preserve popular traditional dress (*Coal*, 2016; see too Balda, 2019). Inevitably, the exhibition on Balenciaga and lace, curated by Catherine Join-Dietérle, first mounted in Calais and then in Getaria (2015-2016), drew attention to 'national' heritage (Descalzo, 2015), as did the poetic displays curated by Olivier Saillard for the Palais Galliera in Paris, the first on Balenciaga's collection of regional and historical dress which he juxtaposed with some relevant models from the couturier's oeuvre (*Les Docks-Cité de la Mode*, 2012; Saillard, 2012) and the second on 'Balenciaga and Black', which skilfully presented a dialogue between black-clad mannequins and the white statuary at the Musée Bourdelle (2017; Belloir, 2017).³⁴

Viewing Balenciaga through the lens of his clients, their attachment to their clothes and to the couturier, was another emerging trend—no doubt, a sign of the times because many of Balenciaga's most faithful clients were either aged or had died. As a result, their clothes were arriving in museums through generous donations or bequests or purchase at auction or from dealers; some came with stories from their wearers. A few exhibitions focussed on particularly prominent women. Countess Mona von Bismarck (1897-1983) was the third protagonist of an installation in her former townhouse in Paris in 1994, in the company of Balenciaga and Cecil Beaton. Portraits (paintings and photographs) bore witness to friendships and domestic surroundings, bestowing both character and context on the magnificent gowns displayed jewel-like in low lighting, but most thrilling for me were the previously unseen bills in the table cases. These last are not reproduced in the accompanying catalogue, though MAJ discloses that on average Bismarck bought 50 to 80 outfits per year at the House, including her gardening shorts (Mona Bismarck, 1994: 57). The Marquesa de Llanzol (1914-1996), one of Balenciaga's muses, featured in an exhibition on her wardrobe, complemented by key pieces from that of her daughter Sonsoles Díez de Rivera (faithful patron of the CBM), including her wedding dress (CBM 11.1999ab). They were accompanied by family and society photographs showing the garments in use (*Cristóbal Balenciaga & La Marquesa*, 2004), many now available online via Museotik. Texan oil heiress Claudia Heard de Osborne (1910-1988) featured in 'Balenciaga and his Legacy' in Dallas (2006), having donated her clothes with photographs and notes revealing her intense emotional connection with these special possessions (Walker, 2006: 44-85).

³³ Conceived by Oscar de la Renta, the exhibition bore the title 'Balenciaga: Spanish Master' at the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute in New York (2010-2011), and 'Balenciaga and Spain' at the Museum of Fine Art in San Francisco (2011). Bowles's career in journalism makes him a natural heir to Vreeland, as he has been steeped in fashion culture from a young age and is an avid collector, on which he reflects in his essay 'Balenciaga and Spain' in Martínez de la Pera, 2019: 53-63. The opening pages of his impeccably referenced catalogue reproduces the typed appreciation of Balenciaga by Pauline de Rothschild which had been published in the MET catalogue (1973: pp. 18-24) and later in the Musée des Tissus catalogue (1985: 25-29). It is still a touching and engaging personal account of the couturier's life, all the more so for being a reproduction of the original document. Bowles's acknowledgements reveal those to whom he spoke (Bowles 2019: 250).

³⁴ At this juncture, the Palais Galliera itself was closed for renovations so the exhibitions took place off-site. 'Balenciaga and Black' subsequently toured to the Kunstmuseum in The Hague, Netherlands (2022-2023).

All three women were surely typical of wealthy clients who devoted much time and money to buying a full wardrobe each season *chez* Balenciaga, in some cases striking up a friendship with the couturier. Many other museum acquisitions belonged to less wealthy women with a high public profile who did not necessarily socialise with the couturier—aristocrats, film stars, philanthropists, diplomats' and politicians' wives—and fashion journalists who knew him well. Some loyally patronised the House, known only in their own locality or circle, but largely absent from the press, such as Meye Maier Allende Bilduma, whose less flamboyant, yet exquisitely dignified wardrobe was exhibited in Getaria two years after that of the Marquesa (*Balenciaga. El lujo*, 2006).³⁵ Ironically, therefore, waning or deceased clients enlivened the story of Balenciaga, their memories offering potential for analysis within the thriving interdisciplinary histories of the emotions and sartorial biographies (Barclay, 2020, 2021; Shukla, 2015), but also suggesting why the business was solvent. Their memories also speak to the skills of the *vendeuses*, who protected their designated customers from social *faux pas*, such as Florette, who worked for Balenciaga from 1937 till closure and was now prepared to share her experiences with curator Pamela Golbin and journalist Mary Blume (Golbin, 2006; Blume, 2013).

The availability of an increasing range of photographs internationally and the digitisation of House photographs of each season's collection were beginning to facilitate comparisons of taste across frontiers, as well as the identification of specific models.³⁶ For example, there was now evidence that at least two young women of 18, one the daughter of a French socialite friend of Balenciaga and the other the daughter of his aristocratic muse in Spain, independently chose the same evening gown in white lace by Brivet as a coming-of-age gown (model no. 69, autumn/winter 1960) [Figure 7]. They presumably did not move in exactly the same circles, but importantly their purchases point to the age- and occasion-appropriateness and appeal of certain models. The House photograph shows the gown in the same fabric but modelled in deep pink, so some discussion between *vendeuse* and client had been necessary, as befitted the special duties of the saleswoman. The young women's selection also permits speculation on what Balenciaga's 'best sellers' were, as does information about department store orders which likely spread certain styles widely (Miller, 2007: 82-83; 2017: 120-121).³⁷ For example, in 1965 Harrods in London chose a suit in Yorkshire wool worsted with pure silk collar and cuffs to reproduce for individual clients, at a cost that was one third of the amount charged for the couture model in Paris (*Harrods Autumn Fashion News*, 1965; Miller, 1993: 58 [Figure 8]). The Marquesa de Llanzol wore the same model, presumably made to measure either in Paris or in Spain, the price in line with that charged in the place of making—more expensive in the former than the latter (Miller, 2007: 100-101 [Figure 9]). It is likely that Florette and her team dealt with Harrods as her roster was dedicated to English-speaking clients (Blume, 2013).

In short, the 2007 edition of my book could reflect on newly available photographic evidence and sterling curatorial object-based research by affording both the making of clothes and the

³⁵ My list of clients, compiled ready for incorporation into an open access database, amounts to some 200 individuals and businesses so far, amassed through perusal of auctions, museum catalogues and appearances in the press of the period.

³⁶ Digitisation began under the archive stewardship of Gäel Mamine between 2004 and 2013. As this is a private commercial archive, its database is not available on-line, but Gaspard de Massé, Director of Heritage and Sofie Parikka, Heritage Project Coordinator are extremely helpful in answering research enquiries.

³⁷ Carole Weisweiler, daughter of Francine Weisweiler, née Worms (1914-2003) and the Marquesa de Llanzol's older daughter Carmen Diez de Rivera (1942-1960).



Figure 8

Balenciaga promotion at Harrods department store, *Harrods Autumn Fashion News*, London, 1965. On the extreme left is the suit selected by Harrods for reproduction for clients in its dressmaking workshop, the same model as chosen by the Marquesa de Llançol from the couture salon. Courtesy of Harrods Company Archive.

Figure 9

The Marquesa de Llançol, with her mother, daughter Sonsoles and granddaughter Sonsoles on the occasion of the first communion of her granddaughter. Courtesy of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.



Figure 7
Juan Gyenes, The Marquesa de Llanzol with her daughters Sonsoles and Carmen, on the occasion of the coming-of-age party of the latter, who wears model no. 69, winter 1960 in lace by Brivet. Courtesy of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

choosing of clothes their own chapters, without losing sight of the original overarching themes of the 1993 edition. Every attempt was made to include images that had not appeared in other more lavish books, including those for wool and nylon knitted stockings sold at Franck et fils and the use of Balenciaga's name in advertising for fine stockings made by Gui and used by many fellow couturiers in their mannequin parades (Miller, 2007: 44-45). Thrillingly, this edition was translated into Spanish by Gustavo Gil, first printed in hardback and subsequently in paperback. The same structure was largely retained in 2017, though some images had to yield their place to newly mounted V&A objects despite the overall increase in image quota. 'In-focus' sections at the end of each chapter, with a generous allocation of images, underline new avenues of and for research: 'A Spaniard in Paris' benefits from a diversion into the embroidered and lace items that Balenciaga knew from regional dress (*chaquetillas*, *mantones* and *mantillas*); 'From Cloth to Collections' enjoys a post-script on the materials, techniques and tools of couture, homing in on equipment and details of textiles and fastenings, the first group thanks to the generosity of the late Maite Gil and Mariu Emilas, widow and daughter of Juan Emilas, cutter at EISA in San Sebastián (Miller, 2017: 87); 'Commercial Culture' ends with a tribute to Balenciaga's hidden human assets who 'sold' his clothes—the *vendeuses* in the house, the fashion editors who wrote about him and the mannequins who acted as clothes horses; 'Clients and Clothes' alludes to the emotional attachment, even dependence, of some clients, offering insights into three of his more famous cosmopolitan customers; finally, 'Legacies' expands its chronological reach, paying particular attention to Balenciaga's friend Givenchy, his apprentice Ungaro and his successor in the late 1990s, Nicolas Ghesquière.

Pleasingly, the appendices also set up the route into deeper research for those so inclined. Victoria de Lorenzo, a student on the Masters programme in Design History and Material Culture at the Royal College of Art/V&A compiled thumbnail sketches of far more textile suppliers than appear in previous publications, research she went on to cultivate in a scholarly framework for two contrasting case studies of woollen manufacturers at the First International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference and subsequently in her essay for the first special issue of *Fashion Theory* devoted to Balenciaga, guest-edited by Ana Balda (De Lorenzo, 2021).

The other crucial component of the 2017 edition is the foregrounding of Cecil Beaton's role in establishing the V&A collection of Balenciaga items at the time of his ground-breaking exhibition 'Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton' in 1971. The back cover—a photograph by Beaton for that catalogue—and the quotations from the fashion photographer preceding each chapter, intimate that the V&A collection is the reference point, the Introduction states so, and where possible V&A objects are used to develop the argument. Beaton was, of course, a friend and admirer of Balenciaga. He wrote about him in *The Glass of Fashion* (1954), then again in *The Sunday Telegraph* (Beaton, 1965). Balenciaga was, in turn aware of Beaton's exhibition in 1971, his friend Ramón Esparza (1923-1997) having visited. Esparza

was also to deliver an evening dress for Beaton's subsequent exhibition in Salisbury in 1972, which still bears its French customs tag showing it was an original model legally exported (St Johns College, 1962-71; Miller, 2017: 17), a detail understood because of Alexandra Palmer's work on the Royal Ontario Museum couture collections in Toronto (2001). The Beaton connection also owes a debt to another strand of academic endeavour in this period: the history of fashion exhibitions, consolidated in the UK in the establishment of a Masters in Fashion Curation at the London College of Fashion in 2007, and underlined in the publication by the course's professors Judith Clark and Amy De La Haye on the exhibiting of fashion before and after 1971, Beaton's exhibition being this pivotal date (Clark et al., 2014).

While 'Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion' drew from and contributed to the eponymous book,³⁸ it also asserted its independence in devoting half of the exhibition space to Balenciaga's legacy. Eighty percent of the 100 garments and 20 hats on display were from the V&A's collection, with loans sought only for iconic pieces or archival material not represented in the collection, such as the envelope dress modelled on the cover by Alberti Tiburzi (formerly in Musée Bellerive, and now in the Landesmuseum, Zurich) and photographs from the House archive. The curators undertook investigation of the crafting of Balenciaga's garments in several ways: first, traditional object examination and documentation; second, X-rays of a few of the garments by artist Nick Veasey that reveal their inner structure; third, patterns and toiles made by London College of Fashion (LCF) Masters students from objects in the collection; fourth, the findings from scientific investigation of materials to be conserved; and finally toiles and supports made by textile conservators who were devising the best methods of mounting particularly challenging pieces, and also providing guidance for the animator who was to show pattern pieces assembling themselves into three-dimensional form on a monitor beside select show cases. This lively method of underlining the complexity of the making process was an echo of the innovative interpretation installed at the CBM in 2011.

The findings from the first type of investigation are clearly visible in the photographs in the publication, the other outcomes are invisible. Such is the case of the evening dress *La tulipe*, made in Spain for Ava Gardner in 1965, which was subjected to most of these methods, but for which only the fully mounted garment and a detail of the actress's own ready-made 'Lady Marlene' corset appear in the book (Miller, 2017: 250-151).³⁹ The more creative interventions were, however, fundamental to the interpretation in the display cases, such as that for the cerise ballgown (T.427-1967) [Figure 10]. This research corrected past mounting and brought the gown to life [Figure 11 a-e], and is now accessible on the V&A website, while two of the LCF toiles are currently on display at V&A East Storehouse, the museum's stores which are open to the public at Hackney Wick in London [Figure 12] and not far from the new LCF building. It served the making theme of the exhibition, differentiating it from the section devoted to clients and their wardrobe choices.⁴⁰

³⁸ The title was chosen by the curators of the exhibition, with 'shaping' expressing both Balenciaga's craftsmanship and his legacy.

³⁹ An unexpected outcome of this approach to *La tulipe* was the way it inspired the architects O'Donnell + Tuomey of the new V&A East building due to open at Stratford Waterfront in London in May 2026.

⁴⁰ These cases were devoted to the making process, rather than to clients, who had their own dedicated section. The curator of the exhibition subsequently went on to study wardrobes collected by museums and a move towards telling personal stories that make 'meaningful links between our experiences of fashion and dressing ourselves now and in the past' for her PhD, through a case study of an earlier wardrobe acquired by the V&A (Davies-Strodder, 2023).



Figure 10
Display case in 'Balenciaga. Shaping Fashion',
V&A, 2017. The mounted gown (V&A T.427-
1967) was on a plinth that rotated slowly so
that visitors could see it in the round. The
toile and X-ray provided interpretation along
with the sketch, fabric sample and House
photograph. Outside the case, a screen
showed the animation of the putting together
of pattern pieces.



Figures 11
Evening dress of cerise silk taffeta,
Balenciaga, Paris, Autumn/Winter 1954. V&A
T.427-1967. Courtesy of the V&A Museum,
London. (a) Incorrectly mounted in 1984 for
the semi-permanent display in the Fashion
Gallery at the V&A. (b) Incorrectly mounted
in 2007 for 'The Golden Age of Couture', but
shown from the back because of uncertainty.
Courtesy of V&A London. (c) House
photograph of model no. 176, Autumn/winter
1954. ©Archives Balenciaga Paris. (d) X-ray
by Nick Veasey, revealing internal structure,
2017. ©Nick Veasey. (e) Internal structure
which draws the skirt upwards at the front and
allows taffeta to billow in movement, finally
understood in 2017. Courtesy of V&A London.

Figure 12

Toiles made by students from London College of Fashion in 2017 on display in the new open storage at V&A Storehouse, London, 2026. They were taken from a tweed suit, model no. 24, Autumn/Winter 1950 worn by Mrs Opal Holt (T.128-1970) and the ziberline evening cape, autumn/winter, 1967 (T.39-1974). Courtesy of V&A, London.



Delighted with the success of exhibition and book, a true team effort,⁴¹ I went back to the 18th century and to silk, continuing to revisit Balenciaga quietly once a year in my teaching on the Masters in Dress and Textile History at the University of Glasgow. Given the richness of published empirical research, I now asked students to apply different theoretical frameworks to Balenciaga's work or environment (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Barthes, 1966; Bourdieu, 1979). Within ten years, however, Balenciaga ambushed me again, when the CBM was fulfilling its mission to encourage in-depth, interdisciplinary research through hosting two International Cristóbal Balenciaga conferences—not once but twice, in 2020 and more forcefully in 2025. The invitation to deliver the opening lecture for the second was daunting, as the guidelines suggest prospective speakers might submit abstracts for peer review on topics that range across a number of disciplines and practices, not necessarily historical (Prospectus, II International, 2025). It was, however, the opportunity to ponder what had changed in the years since the V&A exhibition, how any general historical overview might have to be updated, and where new ways of thinking might take Balenciaga Studies in the future. After all, it is now more than 50 years since Balenciaga's death and the first exhibitions which celebrated him. Oral history is therefore receding as a research tool, because even Balenciaga's younger associates and clients have died. The repetition of certain jaunty leitmotifs has become so prevalent that it will soon be hard to know whether they come from actual experience or from more recent reading or viewing of exhibitions, unless the date and context are firmly documented.⁴²

4. Balenciaga: A Universal Basque, 2017-2025

Unsurprisingly, fashion history has continued to diversify in line with prevailing geo-political concerns, some already familiar from previous decades, others heightened by more recent events. Some have already impacted on the literature about Balenciaga, while others might well provide avenues for future research and contextualisation. Notable, though not entirely new, have been the application of sociological and cultural readings to fashion (Rocamora et al., 1st ed. 2015, 2nd ed. 2025); the investigation of global and local narratives (Palmer, 2017; Breward et al., 2024), the business of couture and ready-to-wear (Hill, 2017; Blaszczyk and Pouillard, 2018; Pouillard, 2021; Tregenza, 2022; Romano, 2022), identity politics and everyday dressing practices (Geczy and Karaminas, 1st ed., 2013; 2nd ed., 2024; Shukla, 2015). Ethical, environmental and sustainability issues (Ehrman, 2019; Burman, 2023) are increasingly recognised as is the impact of war, and living under restrictive regimes (Jansen and Slade, 2020; Taylor and McLoughlin, 2022; Paulicelli, 2025).⁴³ Academic work on 19th and 20th-century Spanish fashion has increased in quantity, laying the ground for debate within the field (Rosés Castellsaguer, 2022; Fernández de Alba and Garcés, 2022; Velasco Molpaceres, 2021, 2024). These researchers reveal the distance travelled since the Franco régime which ended just three years after Balenciaga's death, as they directly address how the moral strictures of the state affected what Spanish couturiers and designers were creating and their clients wearing. They also underline that there was a common

⁴¹ Reprinted three times since the initial exhibition print run, the number of copies circulating in English is now 19,500, and it has also been translated into Chinese. These figures are high because linked to an exhibition that travelled. Windross, 2025.

⁴² On oral history as method, see Abrams, 2016.

⁴³ These titles are randomly chosen, as there is much other literature on the subject. For the range of titles and subjects, perusal of the current Bloomsbury catalogue is informative.

vocabulary adopted that makes it difficult always to distinguish the clothes of one designer from another, which begs the question of why Balenciaga is credited with particular styles or with dressing a film star when only a costume designer is mentioned in a film's credits.

Much Spanish research seems to emanate from the study of visual culture—magazines and film—with little attention paid to the integration of surviving material culture or archival documentation, often a necessary corrective or balance to media representations.⁴⁴ The interpretation or inclusion of objects in history seems to remain the purview of exhibitions such as those at the Museo del Traje, which accorded dress/fashion historical scholarship value by relaunching its journal *Indumenta* as a peer-reviewed on-line publication in 2020, just three years after the first colloquium for textile and fashion researchers in Spain took place at the Centre de Documentació i Museu Tèxtil in Tarasa (Catalonia) in collaboration with the Fundació Història del Disseny.⁴⁵ The Proceedings of the latter were promptly published (*l Coloquio*, 2017): of 41 papers given, the majority dealt with pre-20th-century textiles, the two couture workshops receiving attention being Fortuny and Nigrin (Bañares, 2018; Roca Cabrera, 2018) and Balenciaga (Balda and Uria, 2018; Emilas, 2018)—still favoured over other lesser known individuals.

The third of these biennial conferences in 2021 underlined that fashion history is still not fully recognised in its own right, though it forms part of degree courses in schools of art, design and architecture, or communications (Esedín Rojo, 2021), and in the career route into museums (*oposiciones*). To undertake doctoral level research in history is, therefore, challenging because material literacy is required in order to interpret objects and integrate them into historical narratives and many historians do not have this particular skill.⁴⁶ This may be partly because in Spain the career paths into universities and museums are independent of each other. In contrast, in the UK, interaction between museums and universities has become increasingly common since the 1980s, boosted in 2005 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's decision to award Academic Analogue status to certain research active museums (Beward, 2008; Gerritsen and Riello, 2021). This interaction has also gained traction in France, for example, in the launch in 2015 of the Groupement d'intérêt scientifique: Apparences, corps & sociétés' - 'Appearances, Bodies, and Societies Research Interest Group (RIG-Acorso), which has a strong focus on collaborative projects, whether scholarly articles or exhibitions.⁴⁷

Practice-based methods are also increasingly utilised in Anglophone circles, as evidenced by the 'embodied' turn which theorises how making reproductions or replicas of historical dress informs understandings of the experience of past makers and wearers (Davidson, 2019), an approach embraced for earlier periods, but equally important for the 20th century. An element of the methodology came through in the aforementioned V&A/LCF project and in Berta Pavlov's pattern-taking research on the Royal Ontario Museum's collection presented at the last

⁴⁴ This is not the case for earlier periods, the 16th-18th centuries in particular revealing many very thorough archive-based case studies. See Colomer and Descalzo, 2014 and Descalzo et al., 2026.

⁴⁵ Particularly pertinent in this 20th-century context at the Museo del Traje were '¡EXTRA, MODA!', 2019-2020; 'Raíces', 2025 (Jiménez Izquierdo, 2025). The Catalan conference chose to use Spanish (International sort) to encourage as wide participation as possible, with contributions from British, Japanese and Mexican nationals as well as residents of the peninsula.

⁴⁶ This term has been gaining traction in Anglophone circles. Edward S. Cooke, Jr. (2022).

⁴⁷ The best overview of the development of Dress History in the UK is Taylor (2002 and 2004), The 1980s seem pivotal in the UK as the point at which the Masters in Design History and Material Culture was established as a collaboration between the Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum, with teaching taking place in both establishments, in classrooms as well as in museum stores, taught by a team of design and social historians and curators. The Arts and Humanities Research Council awarded Academic Analogue status to certain national museums with significant research capacity in 2005 to allow them to apply for research funding. It encouraged joint supervision of PhD research projects through competitively awarded Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships and Awards, which encouraged understanding of the different professional environments for object-related research among successful students.

Balenciaga conference (Pavlov, 2020).⁴⁸ Conservation is surely the other window on to materials and techniques, their uses and reuses, which are of immense significance to historical discourse (O'Connor and Brooks, 2007; Porcel Ziarsolo, 2012; Brooks and Eastop, 2016; Haldane, 2017).

In this general context, Balenciaga Studies has had much to offer, with excellent research conducted transnationally, much originating in the Basque country. Since 2017, several exhibitions in Spain have addressed many of the aforementioned themes in slightly different ways or in greater depth: in Madrid, in 'Balenciaga and Spanish Painting' (Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, 2019), couture garments stood before historical paintings. This exhibition generated the thoughtful essay by Juan Gutierrez on Balenciaga's ethnicity which ends with a plea for the interpretation of Balenciaga's 'silences, renunciations and frustrations' in order to understand his work fully (Gutierrez, 2019: 23-33, esp. 33), a call that invokes the collection of essays on Balenciaga, fashion, politics and society during the Civil War by Javier González de Durana (2020), Director General of the Fundación Cristóbal Balenciaga between 2011 and 2014. This rivetting scholarly insight into different facets of war-time and regime change early in Balenciaga's career is surely long overdue translation so that it reaches a wider readership. In contrast, 'The Century of Balenciaga', first shown in Zaragoza, then Bayona (2019), and revived three years later in Jávea (Museu Arqueologic i Etnografic Soler Blasco, Casa Lambert and Casa del Cable, 2022) to mark the 50th anniversary of the couturier's last visit to the local parador, presented a tripartite overview: the early years, the golden years, and the legacy. The short catalogue explain the local connection (*El Siglo*, 2022).

The CBM has added gradually to the overall story, often in collaboration with external parties, generating short publications in four languages and thus opening up previously inaccessible stories to multiple audiences: it has deepened knowledge of people who had a relationship with Balenciaga, such as client Rachel (Bunny) Mellon (*Rachel L. Mellon*, 2018) and photographer Tom Kublin (Balda and Kublin, 2024); and foregrounded the hat as an object type in its own right, a project initiated in the Museu de Disseny in Barcelona (2021). In the series 'Cristóbal Balenciaga, Fashion and Heritage', in collaboration with Judith Clark, there were glimpses of the relationship of historiography and museology, the creative design process in garment-making production, and the man as remembered through his own clothes and through memories of his associates ('Conversations', 2018, 'Contexts', 2019, and 'Cristóbal', 2020)—different aspects of tangible and intangible heritage. The accompanying catalogues not only reflect on the process and conceptualisation of exhibition-making from subjective and objective viewpoints, but also reproduce original documents, such as the famed magazine interviews from *Paris Match* in 1968 and *The Times* in 1971 (2020: 33-40) and extracts from conversations with representatives of different generations of Balenciaga's Spanish circle—the journalist Natalia Figueroa (b. 1939), Balenciaga's great niece Rosa Medina, his illustrator Fernando Martínez Herrero (b. 1932) and his chauffeur in the last three months of his life Miguel Cardona (2020: 24-31). These derive

⁴⁸ See in particular the activities and publications of The School of Historical Dress. https://theschoolofhistoricaldress.org.uk/?page_id=43 [last accessed 12 March 2026].

from an interview campaign undertaken from 2014 onwards, 'Hands that Sew', recently made available online with English subtitles (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 2025). They complement the personal memoir of Mariu Emilas, whose father worked as a tailor for Balenciaga in San Sebastián, a book underpinned by her childhood memories and later conversations with her parents and their contemporaries (Emilas, 2017).

Interviews were also a feature of Ana Balda's research for her doctorate (University of Navarre, 2013), and she has since then expanded into sustained archival research that has taken her not only to local Basque but also to French archives, and the USA.⁴⁹ Imaginative and tenacious in her pursuit of relevant documentation, she has addressed a variety of previously underexplored issues and published in internationally respected journals: the contradictions of Balenciaga's relationship with the press (2013; 2015; 2022); Balenciaga's ventures after he retired (Balda, 2020); his work as licensee of French couture in San Sebastián before his departure for Paris (2023); and most recently a compelling profile of the mysterious Wladzio d'Attainville (1899-1948) that examines his likely contribution to the marketing of the House (Balda, 2026). Genealogical and biographical research demanded the tracking down of registrations of births, marriages and deaths and records of military service, as well as the necessary exploration of the broader historical context that gives meaning to this newly discovered data—in this case an assessment of the role of aristocratic émigrés and their families in the promotion of French couture. Multilingualism and willingness to travel are definitely assets for anyone working on the Master.

Balda's stewardship of the CBM's international conferences has also pushed forward academic recognition of 20th-century Spanish fashion, with the Proceedings of the 2020 conference already online and those of the 2025 iteration pending. A well-rounded issue of *Fashion Theory* looks outward from Balenciaga, underlining the broader significance of his work internationally: how it was copied in the UK by wholesale couture manufacturers (Tregenza, 2021); how two woollen manufacturers, one in Italy, the other in England, conceptualised his role relative to their products (de Lorenzo, 2021); how the 1971 exhibition, proposed by Swiss silk manufacturer Gustav Zumsteg, evolved as a vehicle for teaching (Monti, 2021); and how textile conservation has thrown light on post-war shortages and the couturier's resulting compromises through a garment in a Dutch collection (Rodríguez Salinas et al., 2021). The textile content of these articles, brings me back to the starting point for this reflection—'Hommage à Balenciaga' at the Musée des Tissus in Lyon—because just one week before the Second International Conference in Getaria, Igor Uria gave a carefully crafted reassessment of the adoption of silk gazar at the congress of the Lyon-based Centre International des Tissus Anciens (Museo del Traje, Madrid, 25-28 September 2025) where textile historians, including curators and conservators, were pondering 'New Directions in the Study of Historical Textiles'. Balenciaga thus took to the stage before an organisation often focussed on much earlier periods, and also stimulated consideration of how new textiles are developed and sold.

⁴⁹ There is a full list of her publications in the bibliography.

At a time when western European textile production is much reduced, many textiles being sourced from Asia, renewal and experimentation after the Second World War seemed a particularly pertinent topic. Rigorous analysis of French records suggests that state support for couture between 1952 and 1960 was largely mobilised to promote exports of French textiles rather than exports of couture per se. Surprisingly, Balenciaga seems to have been one of the six main beneficiaries of subsidies in 1952 (Dubé-Sénécal, 2020: 312) although it is known he refused to use the stipulated quota of French textiles. What does the timing of this new reference suggest about the state of his business in the early 1950s, his connections with non-French suppliers, and in general the post-war quality of French textile production? Fashion (Balenciaga) historians might profitably engage with their textile and economic history counterparts in tracking down and scrutinising the archives of textile manufacturers in public institutions or private companies for signs of the couturier. Silk has been well served, but other fibres less so, as de Lorenzo has identified (de Lorenzo, 2021). Some exhibition or collections catalogues have already broached the subject of the symbiotic relationship between couturiers and textile manufacturers from different standpoints establishing the foundations for future exploration (Miller, 2007a; Palmer, 2014; *Esprit Staron*, 2007; Vernus, 2006; *Pirate Silk*, 2012; Morini and Rosina, 2017; *The Mad Silkman*, 2019; Schoeser & Harley, 2022).

Encouragingly, in 2024, the Spanish Fashion Academy recognised the significant role of textiles when it conferred its Cristóbal Balenciaga award on Jeanologia, a company that has been working towards fashion that combines beauty with sustainability since 1994. Enrique Silla, CEO and founder, accepted the statuette in the form of Balenciaga's iconic late 1960s headdress, linking his company's mission to that of Balenciaga: 'The way a product is made is part of its DNA and cannot be beautiful if it is made in a contaminating manner. Jeanologia develops technologies that enable designers to create beauty while taking care of the planet. This will shape the future of fashion' (Jeanologia, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This personal and highly selective reflection has drawn attention to the fact that histories of Balenciaga (like many histories of 20th-century fashion) have their roots in fashion journalism, have evolved through many exhibitions conceived by freelance curators and museum professionals, and also through an academic mission to serve student fashion designers.⁵⁰ More recently mainstream history has embraced fashion, providing new analytical tools for thinking about the economics of this type of production and consumption and absorbing material culture into their own armoury of sources (Styles, 1998; Gerritsen and Riello, 2021).⁵¹ Over the last 40 years, documentation of sources and of the personal knowhow/ experience, or positionality, of the historian has become more consistent, inspiring confidence in the reliability of certain 'facts' or narratives. The types of evidence readily available for Balenciaga have, of course, changed, as the couturier and his circle recede from living memory. As a corollary, the amount of material culture

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that, at the FIT in New York, not only was there a monographic exhibition in 1986, but also others that included his work under the rubric of Paris Fashion, and the most recent 'Dior and Balenciaga: Kings of Couture and their Legacies', 1 June – 6 November 2022.

⁵¹ Interestingly, where in the past, journalists' dependence on certain sources remained implicit rather than explicit, more recent endeavours have acknowledged what they base their narrative on (Irvine, 2013; Fernández-Miranda, 2023). An example of slightly random research, as revealed by its bibliography, is Dirix, 2022.

available has increased, enabling materially literate scholars to build up comparisons. They will benefit from the scientific methods of analysis that textile conservators contribute to understanding materials, techniques, use and the concomitant implications for the environment. Moreover, official archives are gradually releasing their secrets while digitisation aids long-distance investigation particularly of 2-D representations in words and images.⁵²

Nonetheless, present-day and future scholars need to understand the foundations on which their work is based—and may even be surprised to find overlooked nuggets of wisdom or information in previous generations of research, as I have done in returning to Jouve and Demornex, and even to my own early files. As a result, I now share the testimony of Penelope Woolfitt (b. 1932), who generously wrote to me as I was beginning my journey and whose words now make more sense when compared with other oral testimony. She had worked as a supervisor in the lingerie department of a middle market department store in London that did not buy Paris couture to copy but did sell ready-to-wear derivatives. Her anecdote reveals her fashion literacy, tying up with so many other tales about the longevity of Balenciaga's styles in other countries:

In the early '60s I worked in Dickins & Jones. One day a stunningly dressed lady came in—mustard coat—black hat. In those days fashion was fashion - & anything didn't go—unlike today. I asked her about her clothes—she said she always dressed at Balenciaga because she got so much wear out of the clothes. The first year everyone said "My God!"—the second year everyone said "How fantastically stunning" & the third year everyone said "How elegant". I have always treasured this—& hope it may amuse you (Woolfitt, 1990).

The above overview and the recent conference in Getaria underline the need to think beyond what has become the traditional geography of European couture and consider the relationship of different couture spaces—private and public, domestic and commercial. The southern hemisphere is poorly represented in current works, though one of the first exhibitions on Balenciaga was held in 1992 in Melbourne (Healy, 1992), and, encouragingly, Alexandra Barter has presented the beginnings of fascinating doctoral research on the transmission of couture skills to and in Sydney (Barter, 2025). Complementary studies for the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia might fruitfully be pursued. Japanese fascination with Balenciaga was evidenced as early as 1980 when 30 objects were borrowed from the Archives Balenciaga for an exhibition celebrating France at the department store Mitsukoshi in Tokyo (Jouve, 2023: 295) with a second monographic show put on by the Fashion Foundation Japan only seven years later with the aid of the Palais Galliera. This appetite for Balenciaga is suggestive not only of shared aesthetics but also of a customer base on those islands during Balenciaga's lifetime.⁵³ It is no accident that in the 1960s not all Balenciaga mannequins were of European heritage because they were the clothes horses that sold his collections.⁵⁴ Research might focus on different themes, from the transmission of styles and skills, through the

⁵² In Spain personal files are available 25 years after the death of the person in question if childless, or 50 years from the date of the file, if the person is still living; in France, similarly from date of death and for Civil Register Records, 75 years after the registration of a birth or marriage.

⁵³ It should be noted that Jouve and Demornex (1988) was also translated into Japanese as well as English.

⁵⁴ In Latin America, the first exhibition of the designer's work was held in Central America at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City (2016), curated by Javier Durana and drawing on the collections of the CBM which were juxtaposed next to the museum's paintings (Modern Art rather than historical).

identification of further private and commercial customers, to the adoption and adaptation of non-European garments and textiles, as epitomised by the kimono (Arzalluz, 2010: 236-274) or the sari. Indeed, Jason Cyrus is already studying Balenciaga's sari-dress in the framework of de-colonial and post-colonial theories as part of his doctorate at the University of Warwick (Cyrus, 2025). Textiles and embellishment are crucial elements of such analysis, as is their sourcing. Such research surely complements the current emphasis on France and Spain.

Even within Europe, casting the net wider than France and Spain would be beneficial, as papers on Italy proved at the last conference. An increasing number of visual and textual references to Balenciaga's circle of friends or professional connections suggests that Switzerland played a significant role in Balenciaga's business, leisure and health. Perhaps it is time to investigate when he became attached to Zurich and how much time he spent there, with whom he socialised at the Kronenhalle and the Dolder Grand, and even which sanatorium provided his crucial health care. Did he actually ski and, if so, with whom—perhaps with textile manufacturers such as Czech-born, London-based Zika Ascher (*The Mad Silkman*, 2019)? We already know that he entertained Swiss friends at his country houses in Orleans. Did they ever visit Igueldo, his home on the outskirts of San Sebastián?

In addition, Balenciaga's apparently well-known local environments merit further scrutiny, his country and city properties, both domestic and commercial. How and when were they purchased, decorated and used? Who were his neighbours and guests? The answer to such questions would firmly pinpoint Balenciaga's ascent into the wealthy bourgeoisie, his sharing of taste and tradesmen with his clients and friends, for which sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's findings from research undertaken between 1963 and 1968 may provide a useful theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1979). D'Attainville had bought La Reynerie in 1943 for 1 million francs, and after his death, Balenciaga paid his former partner's heirs triple that amount (Archives Départementales du Loiret, 1943, 1949). Subsequently, at some point, Balenciaga employed interior decorator Serge Royaux (1924-2016), renowned for his 'strict and sober' Louis XVI styling (Owens, 2019). Photographs of the house's interiors in both *Paris Match* (1968) and *Architectural Digest* (White, 1994, Owens, 2013), analysed alongside those taken by Cecil Beaton in Paris and Juan Goyen in Madrid, provide further evidence of his collecting, taste and even household management—and importantly, allow them to be positioned in a much broader context.

This reflection ends in the certainty that, 'behind the curtain', the next phase of historical research is already underway—in museum stores among ghostly tyvek-shrouded gowns and in archives surrounded by acid-free cardboard boxes and old leather-bound registers, in pristine conservation laboratories equipped with microscopes and x-ray machines and in minimalist modern offices behind sophisticated computers. These professional spaces will, no doubt, all be rather less dusty than the 18th-century archives from which I emerged to meet Balenciaga some 40 years ago, but their

contents should prove just as inspiring for those with the tenacity to wade through much that seems irrelevant in order to discover the next hidden gem that prompts new insights into or questions about Balenciaga and his legacy. When researchers reach that point, I shall hope that they have the opportunity to present their findings at the CBM, enjoying the uplifting view of Balenciaga's home town and the Bay of Biscay beyond—as well as plenty of bracing fresh air to stimulate the 'little grey cells'.

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- 'Balenciaga', Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, 23 September – 6 December 1986. Curated by Harold Koda.
- 'Balenciaga and Black' (Balenciaga, l'œuvre au noir), Musée Bourdelle, Paris, 8 March – 16 July 2017. Curated by Olivier Saillard for the Palais Galliera.
- 'Balenciaga and Black', Kunstmuseum, The Hague, Netherlands, 24 September 2022 – 5 March 2023, adapted from Paris exhibition of 2017. Curated by Olivier Saillard.
- 'Balenciaga and his Legacy', Meadows Museum, Texas, 4 February – 17 June, 2007. Curated by Myra Walker.
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- 'Balenciaga: el lujo de la sobriedad. Colección Meye Maier Allende Bilduma', Fundación Balenciaga, Getaria, April – September 2006. Curated by Miren Arzalluz and Igor Uria.
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- 'Balenciaga Paris', Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris, 6 July 2006 – 28 January 2007. Curated by Pamela Golbin.
- 'Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion', V&A London, 27 May 2017 – 18 February 2018. Curated by Cassie Davies-Strodder, with Stephanie Wood.
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- 'Cristóbal Balenciaga, Fashion and Heritage, Cristóbal', Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 29 February 2020 – 21 June 2020. Curated in collaboration with Judith Clark.
- 'El mundo de Balenciaga', Palacio de Bellas Artes de Madrid, Madrid, 20 February – 5 April 1974. Adapted from the MET exhibition with the aid of the Comité de Damas.
- '¡EXTRA, MODA!', Museo Del Traje, Madrid, 22 noviembre 2019 - 1 marzo 2020. Curated by María Prego and Ana Cabrera.
- 'Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton', Victoria and Albert Museum, London. October 1971-January 1972.
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- 'Mariano Fortuny', Musée historique des Tissus, 19 April – 19 July 1980. Curated by Guillermo de Osma, under the museum directorship of Jean-Michel Tuscherer.
- 'Moda en Sombras', Museo del Pueblo Español, Madrid, 5 November 1991-20 May 1992. (Now Museo del Traje).
- 'Mona Bismarck, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Cecil Beaton', Mona Bismarck Foundation, Paris January – February 1994. Curated by Monica Dunham, Mona Bismarck Foundation and Marie-Andrée Jouve, Archives Balenciaga.
- 'Rachel L. Mellon Collection', Cristóbal Balenciaga Museao, Getaria, 27 May 2017 – 25 January 2018. Curated by Igor Uria.
- 'Raíces', Museo del Traje, Madrid, 21 May – 19 October 2025. Curated by Laura Jiménez Izquierdo.
- 'The Century of Balenciaga', Museu Arqueologic i Etnografic Soler Blasco, Casa Lambert and Casa del Cable, Jávea, 21 July – 30 December 2022. Curated by Pedro Usabiaga (earlier iterations in Zaragoza and Bayona in 2019).
- 'The Golden Age of Couture 1947-1957', V&A London, 22 September 2007-6 January 2008. Curated by Claire Wilcox, with Eleri Lynn.
- 'The World of Balenciaga', Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 23 March – 28 June 1973. Curated by Diana Vreeland.

Specification for 1993 edition and conditions for writing (B.T. Batsford)

Purpose	Title in the series: 'Twentieth-century Fashion Designers'	
Target audience	Fashion students	
Contract issued	22 December 1989	
Delivery date	31 March 1991: intended	Spring 1992: actual
Publication date	Spring 1992: intended	Spring 1993: actual
Specification	25,000 words (excluding endmatter) 50-60 black and white photographs, 8 colour plates 96 pages Binding style: paperback (25 x 19 cm)	
Financial data	£1,500 fee, paid in three instalments £1,000 photo budget inclusive of copyright permissions, all negotiated by author Retail price: £9.99	Travel, purchase of cocktail dress and photographs absorbed all earnings and photo budget
Place of work and role	North Staffordshire Polytechnic, Stoke-on-Trent (1990-91), Senior Lecturer in Design History (full-time) Winchester School of Art, Winchester (1991-), Senior Lecturer in Dress and Textile History (0.75)	

Specification for 2007 edition (V&A Publishing)

Purpose	Trade title to accompany exhibition catalogue, one of two	
Target audience	General interest and students	
Contract issued	12 November 2005	
Delivery date	1 October 2006	
Publication date	October 2007	
Specification	30-35,000 (excluding captions, endmatter: chronology, further reading, references) 80 colour plates, 20 black and white 128 pages Binding style: paperback (25 x 21 cm)	New photography dependent on exhibition schedule
Financial data	No fee and no royalties, because member of staff Small travel budget (Paris x 1, San Sebastián and Madrid x 1) Image permissions negotiated by publishing team Retail price: £19.99	
Place of work and role	V&A, London, Senior Curator of Textiles pre-1800, Department of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion	

Here the V&A Publications Department was branching out, by commissioning not only a catalogue, but also two trade books. Fashion historian Christopher Breward, then Head of Research at the Museum, and Claire Wilcox recommended my book to the Head of Publishing Mary Butler who considered the tone right for the museum. The Rights had reverted to me from Batsford, though I had to write to Chrysalis to confirm so. On some levels for me, this new encounter with Balenciaga was not entirely logical, as I had been appointed in July 2005 as Senior Curator of pre 19th-century textiles (not fashion).

Specification for 2017 edition (V&A Publishing)

Purpose	Exhibition book	
Target audience	General public and students	
Contract issued	6 April 2016	Under discussion by December 2015
Delivery date	1 June 2016	
Publication date	May 2017	
Specification	50,000 (excluding captions, endmatter, etc.) 150 colour plates 192 pages Binding style: hardback (28 x 22 cm)	New photography dependent on exhibition schedule
Financial data	No fee and no royalties, because member of staff travel budget but little time (San Sebastián x 2 and Paris x 2) image permissions negotiated by publishing team retail price: £30.00	
Place of work and role	V&A, Acting Keeper of Department of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion (0.8, 2015-?); Senior Curator of Textiles pre-1800 (0.8); University of Glasgow, Professor of Dress and Textile History (0.2) (2015-2017)	

Museology

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CBC

A Gift of Affect: Rachel L. Mellon's Donation to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

Abstract

"I Feel Pretty" are the words inscribed not only in the leather album where Rachel L. Mellon carefully treasured the sketches combined with the fabric swatches of her Cristóbal Balenciaga garments but also handwritten in the cardboard case of the album. It might seem like a simple detail, but these words can be interpreted as a sign of the affect that those garments convey to her owner.

In this communication proposal, I aim to delve into the consideration of Rachel L. Mellon as a donor of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa and explore the donation process of her collection. My comprehension and use of the term donor seek to unwrap the implication of the emotional attachment between the donor and her collection by engaging with the concept of gift. "A gift makes a connection", in the words of Lewis Hyde. The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, as the recipient of this gift, adds to its collection the relationships and stories that the donor and collection have developed.

This investigation stems from my PhD research following oral history methodology and storytelling approaches that enable a personal approach to the sometimes-unknown process of donation and acquisition of pieces by museums. These narrative approaches support the comprehension of the non-tangible, the emotions and relationships, and the invisible attachments that affect the collection and the donor. The entanglement goes beyond collection and donor, including the museum and its personnel, as well as the crucial figure of Hubert de Givenchy in the donation process.

Lastly, the stories and the anecdotes that surround the donor and the collection, I argue, add an alternative layer of value to the collection and the pieces, inferring that by sharing these donor/ collection narratives, the affect of this relationship embedded in the collection and pieces would foster the audience in an empathetic manner channelling the care and appreciation of the pieces.

Affect / Donation / Gift / Legacy

Alba Sanz

University of Edinburgh

Alba Sanz Álvarez is a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh. Her PhD working title is "Donors' Traces: From Garment to Museum". This project revolves around the presence and absence of stories from the donors of three fashion collections once the objects are in their new institutional homes under the interdisciplinary guidance of her supervisory team with Juliette Macdonald, Frances Fowle and Christopher Breward. Alba holds two master's degrees from Stockholm University in Fashion Studies and Fashion Communication and Marketing, as well as professional experience working in the Swedish high-end fashion brand Acne Studios. Since 2021, she has volunteered as the Conference and Events manager for the Association of Dress Historians supporting all their activities and is a member of their Executive Committee.

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A Gift of Affect: Rachel L. Mellon's Donation to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

1. Introduction

Have you ever wondered how the garment in front of you in a fashion/dress display in a museum happened to be there? A similar question was the starting point of my doctoral investigation. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that dedicated fashion departments and museums started to develop, and they have subsequently been subject to numerous discussions and investigations, from critiquing the presence of these objects in museums, to dissecting histories of fashion and dress collecting, display and curatorial matters (Palmer, 1988; Taylor, 2004; Steele, 2008; Clark et al., 2014; Melchior and Svensson, 2014; Vänskä and Clark, 2017; Bass-Krueger, 2018; Petrov, 2019). However, there are few accounts concerning the “behind-the-scenes” aspects of accessioning dress/fashion collections to museum collections involving exhaustive knowledge of the previous owners of the garments.

When examining previous owners of fashion collections, two distinct categories are typically used to characterise them: collectors and wearers. My concern and focus on comprehending the transfer of a collection, a group of garments belonging to an individual, made apparent that there was a connection between both of the categories mentioned above, collectors and wearers, suggesting more nuance than previously thought in the understanding of who donates and their motivations. The common point between these individuals is the donation. In this process, I am preoccupied with the personal relationships that the fashion and dress collections engage with, particularly given my understanding of donation within the gift theory framework, emphasising the words of Lewis Hyde, “a gift makes a connection” (1999:53).

Rachel L. “Bunny” Lambert Lloyd Mellon (1910-2014) was born in New York into an affluent family. She is not regarded as a fashion collector, but she was a collector of both art and gardening and botanical books. Her grandfather and father were both collectors, possibly leaving a lasting impact on her behaviour and taste (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa [CBM], 2017:9; Tongiorgi Tomasi and Willis, 2020:99-100). From her grandfather, Mellon was gifted the first book, *Flower Guide: Wild Flowers East of the Rockies* (1920), of her later collection and dedicated gardening and botanical library in her Virginia residence, Oak Spring estate (now known and functioning as Oak Spring Garden Foundation) (Lambert Mellon, 1997:xxv). Her passion for botanical knowledge, gardening, and landscape design transcended the books, as she was a self-taught gardener, designing the gardens at Oak Spring and developing relevant commissions, such as the Rose Garden

at the White House. There are some ties between her gardener's facet and her wardrobe. For instance, Mellon designed the garden of fashion entrepreneur Hattie Carnegie in 1933, in exchange for a dress and a coat, as her first commission (Tongiorgi Tomasi and Willis, 2020:101). And when her wardrobe was entirely from Balenciaga, her gardening attire was also made by the Balenciaga ateliers (Skrebneski and Jacobs, 1995:20; CBM, 2017:12).

In her role of art collector, she was joined by her second husband, Paul Mellon (1907-1999), who was the son of Andrew W. Mellon (1855-1937), financier and former Secretary to the US Treasury, who amassed one of the greatest fortunes in the USA. Rachel Mellon's interests were in French and Contemporary art, especially pieces of abstraction, such as those by Rothko, whose canvas dressed one wall of her beloved Oak Spring Library (CBM, 2017:12; Tongiorgi Tomasi and Willis, 2020:101).

Unfortunately, in the case of Rachel L. Mellon, there is no possibility of a first-hand conversation to discover more primary evidence, since she died in 2014 and her available written statements are scarce. The apparent lack of information is, however, countered by the abundance of material beyond the garments that she preserved and donated to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa (CBM). In addition to the receipts, letters, and postcards, there is a leather binder with a cardboard box jacket, a jacket which I believe is significant to a fuller understanding of Rachel Mellon as a donor.

The uniqueness of this object and the written words of Mellon will serve as the foundation for this article. Thus, the purpose of this article, following the Rachel L. Mellon Collection at Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, is to explore and argue that the meaning of donor can be deepened through exploring the donation process of her collection.

Comprehending Rachel L. Mellon as a donor and the emotional aspect of her collection expands our knowledge of fashion collecting from both individual and institutional perspectives, while providing personal insights that can be explored in further curatorial interpretations of her collection. A dedicated exhibition took place from 2017 to 2018, and its catalogue has been a key resource for my research, complemented by the online version of the exhibition and one focused on the album (CBM, 2017; Google Arts & Culture, 2017a,b)

2. Preserving a Balenciaga Wardrobe

In my research on dress/fashion collections, personal and emotional aspects are key to examining the relationship between the owner of the collection and the collection itself, as well as to exploring the relationships and connections that may arise throughout the collection and its donation. In this sense, scholar Sara Ahmed's (2014) work, especially the concept of "affect", provides a word and an understanding to illustrate the active role of emotions and how the collections (garments) and individuals affect each other and are affected. The stickiness of the affect,

or emotional attachments unveiled, is intended to comprehend and argue for their relevance in the preservation and gifting of the collections (Ahmed, 2010:29). As argued by Kate Hill, professor of history and historian of museums, collections and heritage, "Analysing this interaction between people and objects can help produce a much deeper understanding of the construction of the museum objects" (2016:69). Thus, this article follows Hill's assertion.

The definitions of wardrobe range from the physical space for storage of garments, to the "totality of clothing a person owns" (Woodward, 2007:10). Questions around why women keep clothing/garments that they no longer wear have been considered engaging with individuals' identities and biographies (Guy et al., 2001; Bye and McKinney, 2007; Woodward, 2007). According to sociologist Saulo B. Cwener, "Wardrobes enclose not only clothes, but the personal biographies associated with them" (2001:87). Rachel Mellon's collection of Balenciaga garments was part of her wardrobe; she wore those garments and kept them.

Investigating the role of the kept garments, Maura Banim and Ali Guy recognised three categories concerning the perceptions of the self: "Continuing Identities", "Discontinued Identities" and "Transitional Identities" (2001:203-220). Within Banim and Guy's exploration of the "continuing identity," the assumption that clothes have or evoke memories is further complicated, encompassing ideas of how the stories of the garments kept and the connectedness to others through these kept clothing connect women with certain aspects of themselves that they wish to maintain (2001:206-210). Beyond their identities and selfhood, the emotions that concern the stories and involve connections to others between the owner and the garments also seem relevant and influential in the preservation of these garments, which are no longer worn.

Furthermore, according to design researchers Elizabeth Bye and Ellen McKinney, "emotional reasons" and "personal connections to the clothing" are also relevant and influential in the preservation of garments which are no longer worn (2007:484-485). Merging the emotional and personal with the narrative account that garments could convey leads to Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell's understanding of "dress stories" – autobiographical narratives in which an item of clothing becomes a key organising feature for a detailed account of life events (2004:4, 256).

Given that there is no testimony from Rachel Mellon to unequivocally provide an answer to the question of why she kept her Balenciaga garments, there is a statement handwritten in a cardboard box and engraved in a blue leather album that is revealing. The words read in both mediums, "I Feel Pretty", and the contents of the leather album are sketches of Balenciaga garments owned by Mellon, with the corresponding fabric samples in the colourways that she owned. Significantly, the cardboard box includes "MRS. MELLON" as a signature, claiming ownership. From Mellon's statement, the present tense in which the statement is written asserts that the emotion evoked by the contents of the album, the sketches of her garments, and hence the garments. Following dress and material culture researcher Alison Slater's elaboration of Banim and Guy's

findings (Slater, 2014:132-133), Mellon's feeling is in the present; it has not disappeared, even if it were part of her past and could be considered a memory. Mellon's feelings expressed in the cover of the album are a testament to her connection to the Balenciaga garments she owned. Another significant detail is that the album's contents are sketches, not photographs, of her wearing the garments. Photographs would suggest the memory of a specific event. Conversely, the feeling and her words extend/refer to the drawings, hence to the garments themselves and not to a precise moment, where they were worn or recorded to be worn, which enhances the affect and feeling towards the garments themselves. (Figure 1)

The uniqueness of this personal object evidences and illuminates the affects between Mellon and her Balenciaga wardrobe. In this section, I emphasise the relevance of this statement and its implications for understanding Mellon's motivations in retaining her Balenciaga wardrobe. In the following, I will also refer to the contents of the album, as they serve a distinct purpose that can foster an understanding of her personal relationship with the couturier, beyond her client status.

However, before moving on to the relationships and their involvement in both preservation and donation, it is essential to further contextualise Rachel Mellon, with a special interest in her collecting behaviour and inclinations, as well as some of the complexities of gifting.

3. Rachel L. Mellon. Why Is She Not Considered a Fashion Collector, or Why Wasn't She a Fashion Collector?

In depicting the collector, Jean Baudrillard states that the activity of collecting is more active at an early age, between 7 and 12 (1994:9). This characteristic seems to align with the influence that her grandfather's gift could have on Mellon's emerging collecting impulse towards botanical books. Baudrillard is further preoccupied by the systematic and serial approach of collectors in their practices of collecting. This view/ reflection about the collector resonates with other collecting scholars, such as Elsner and Cardinal, expressing "classification precedes collection" (1994:1), and Russell W. Belk, who supports that "the key skill shown in a collector's expertise is that of discrimination" (1995:88) and defines collecting as "the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (1995:67).

When acquiring her garments, Mellon was purposely selecting them. At first, the garments were not detached from their function, from being worn, which, as Belk remarks, is characteristic of the pieces of a collection. Although Amy de la Haye, in her consideration of private fashion collectors, asserts that not all academics and collectors consider that "it is only possible to collect fashionable dress when it is no longer worn" (2018:384), it does not seem to be the case encountered when attending to Rachel Mellon's formation of her Balenciaga

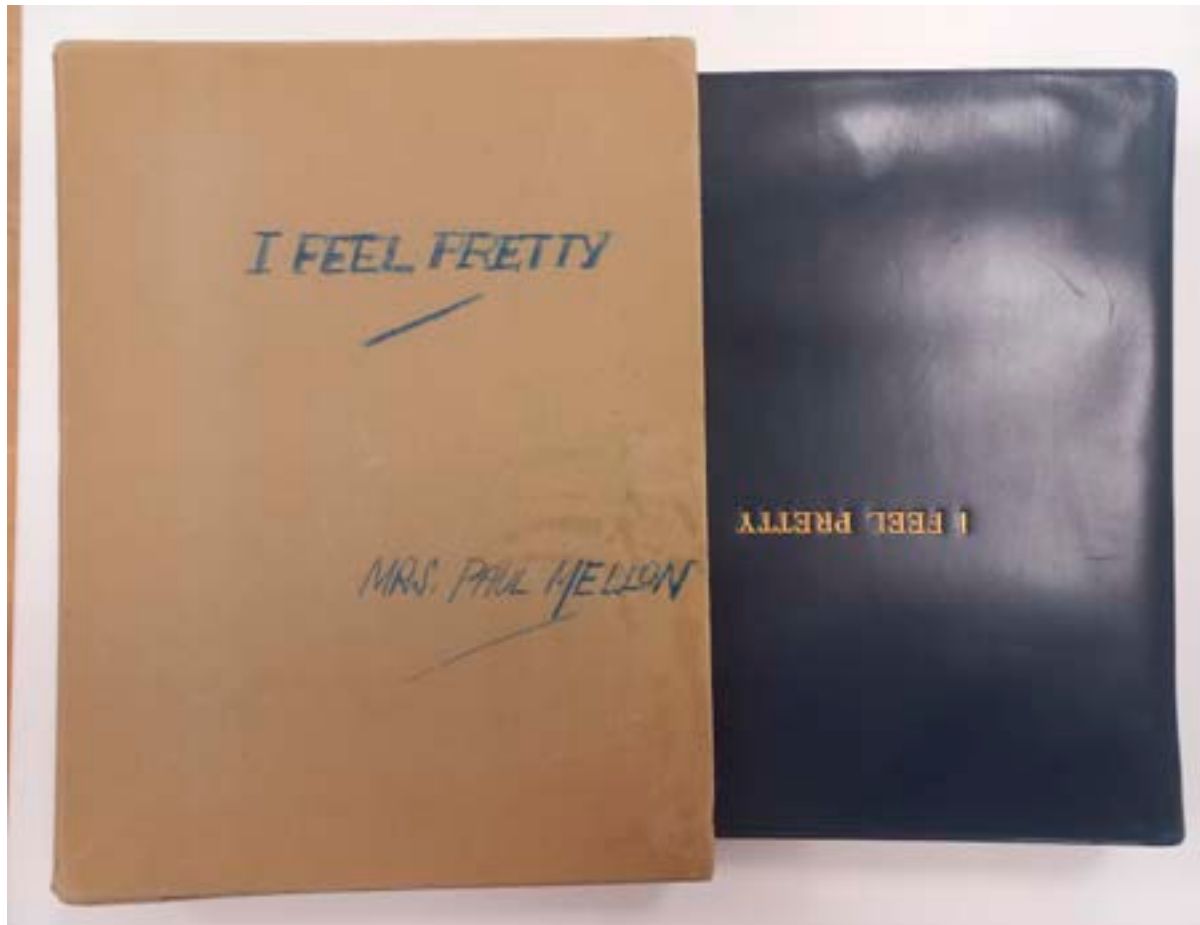


Figure 1
"I Feel Pretty" album (CBM 2014.526ab).
Copyright: Cristóbal Balenciaga
Museoa. Author's own photograph

wardrobe. However, Mellon's status as a non-fashion-collector does not prevent her from having gathered a collection.

I have already introduced some explanations of why women kept garments that they no longer wear. In those, the notion of continuing identity appears, and as it was exposed, Rachel Mellon was a collector; this feature is part of her and her behaviour. While Susan Pearce reflects on the possibility of a passive collector, she brings, coincidentally, an example of a woman finding in the back of her wardrobe "an important group of Mary Quant dresses" and wonders "if a predisposition to collect is an essential feature of the collector" (1995:174-175). This "passive collecting" appears insightful in comprehending the preservation of Mellon's Balenciaga wardrobe. The impact of behaviour, context or background concerning passive collecting or inclination to gathering is explored by Benjamin Whyman in one of his research subjects, art historian Roy Strong and his wardrobe. Whyman explicitly considers Strong as a "non-collector" and develops an understanding of Strong as a connoisseur from "a historical and art historical perspective" (2017:53). Likewise, Whyman recognises Strong's awareness of the role that his wardrobe had in constructing his public and private identity, as well as his professional background. Strong was director of the National Portrait Gallery (1967-1973) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) (1974-1987). These roles also impacted the future of his wardrobe and donations to renowned museums, the V&A and the Fashion Museum in Bath, which now house several pieces from Strong's wardrobe. He was, as quoted by Whyman, "aware that in the long run such a collection might be very interesting" (personal communication quoted in Whyman, 2017:57).

In the case of Rachel Mellon, there are few accounts on her Balenciaga wardrobe, beyond her written statement expressing her feeling pretty towards her Balenciaga garments and a written recollection that recognises how the couturier understood her needs for a wardrobe, both 'suitable for the garden or for any other country chores and extraordinary dresses, coats and hats for dances and soirées' (essay included in Skrebneski and Jacobs, 1995:20). In both, there is an appreciation of the garments. The retrospective regard at these accounts is an interpretation of her words and her preservation of the wardrobe. Balenciaga and Mellon shared personal values are emphasised and summarised by Igor Uria, Director of Collections at CBM, in 'simplicity, comfort and elegance' (CBM, 2017:43) and sustained by Hubert de Givenchy's remarks on how Cristóbal Balenciaga and Mrs. Mellon 'shared things she loved, the same vision' (CBM, 2017:15). Furthermore, when Givenchy expressed how Mellon "wasn't a follower of taste or fashion but held each of her interests for a reason" (CBM, 2017:27), the significance of devoting her wardrobe for over 10 years to the Basque couturier and its later safeguarding acquires further understanding. These garments were an integral part of her life; she would have valued the quality and skill, as well as the comfort and aesthetic appeal of the garments, and the mutual understanding with their creator, and thus, they were treasured.

Rachel Mellon not only kept the garments and the mentioned album with sketches, but she also saved receipts of her purchases,

correspondence with the Balenciaga atelier, including telegrams and letters. Furthermore, she also preserved personal letters and postcards from exchanges with Cristóbal Balenciaga and Ramón Esparza (CBM, 2017:16,22). This documentation blended the personal and transactional or more commercial aspects of her relationship with Balenciaga, which seemed to have evolved from a client-couturier interaction to a more personal connection and a commissioned wardrobe. I will examine this personal relationship further while discussing the donation process in the following section. However, before moving on to that, I want to explore the understanding of the preservation of both the document archive and the wardrobe collection in more depth.

In this sense, the parallelism with Whyman's understanding of Strong's wardrobe preservation, as he escapes from the denomination of collector, explicitly not considering himself as such, is relevant to my examination of Mellon's behaviour. In the deliberate retention of garments from his wardrobe, Strong labelled and wrote notes, leaving them within the garments, in the pockets, which augmented the information about the garments in his possession. That information could include the date of purchase or remarks concerning when and how it was worn, for instance. Additionally, the contents of the pockets of some garments were also kept expanding the embedded biography of the garment and wearer with receipts or other objects. Whyman attributes this behaviour to Strong's comprehension and awareness of the museological value and functions of fashion and clothing, and how they encompass multilayered stories: cultural, sociological, and personal or biographical. Additionally, Whyman contemplates the influence that Strong's museological knowledge and familiarity could also play a role in what he calls "archival behaviour". Defining this attitude as 'someone who does not consider themselves a collector, but their behaviour patterns belie intent of gathering a selection of objects (like clothing), and an awareness that the relevance of the garment shifts (such as something worn on a daily basis and a thing which takes on other socio-cultural meanings)' (Whyman, 2019:8, 317).

In the case of Rachel Mellon, her decision to keep and retain her Balenciaga garments, the sketches, the letters, and the receipts appears to be deliberately intentional. However, the reasons behind her choice, in contrast to Strong's reasons, are unknown, not definite and open to interpretation. Nonetheless, her collecting practices seem influential, as they evidence an approach to systematic recording and a predisposition for preservation. These behavioural patterns suggest an intent to gather a selection of objects aligning more closely with Whyman's definition of archival behaviour than with the traditional collecting understanding. Bearing this in mind, I understand her wardrobe, or collection of attire, and the documentary records together as her personal Balenciaga archive. With this, I intend to enhance the unique and intentional aspect of the gathering, including the retention and recording of these contents. The "I Feel Pretty" album, for instance, beyond the words that introduce us to it, the sketches, along with the corresponding samples of fabric, are a purposeful act. It has been noted by Uria that the importance of her collection of engravings and watercolours could have on the preservation

of the documents (CBM: 2017, 23). Significantly so, in the case of the creation and preservation of the garment sketches. The sketches with the fabric swatches that she compiled in the "I Feel Pretty" album, in some examples, show how, when purchasing new colourways of a particular garment in a different season, the new colour swatch was included, reflecting the care and curation dedicated to this album (CBM, 2017:27). (Figure 2, Figure 3)

In the preservation of wardrobe and other documents and materials, it is also significant to bear in mind the shift in meaning and awareness specified by Whyman in the definition of archival behaviour. This transformation of everyday objects into an archive is recognised by Michel de Certeau's words 'something which had its own definitive status and role into *something else* which functions differently" (1988:74, emphasis in the original).

A similar shift can be recognised when a wardrobe is considered a collection. Mark C. O'Flaherty, design journalist and photographer, signals, 'sometimes, without it being intended, a wardrobe becomes a collection, and the patina it develops — even if barely perceptible — tells stories" (2023:2). In O'Flaherty's statement, the narrative aspect of the wardrobe as a collection is emphasised. In a similar vein, fashion and dress professors Amy de la Haye and Lou Taylor and curator Eleanor Thompson acknowledged in their catalogue of the Messel family wardrobe collection that "a collection of one person's clothes can reflect, in fabric and stitches, the factual and emotional story of their life..." (2005:14).

While I agree with the above statements, establishing the Balenciaga-Mellon archive designation instead of using the term "collection" involves considering a previous step before the donation. This contemplation encompasses the relevance of scrutinising every step of the process, from acquisition and the decision of preserving to donation. The aim of examining this process is to comprehend the "affectiveness" between the contents of the archive, particularly the garments, and Mellon, seeking to unfold her rationale through her relationship and comprehension of her Balenciaga possessions.

The heart of this investigation lies in the process by which Rachel Mellon's Balenciaga-related possessions became part of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. Thus, when the wardrobe, receipts, letters and so forth began their shift from function to 'something else', it is essential. Subsequently, first, I wanted to highlight this intermediate or pre-step of these belongings before entering the museum. Primarily, because in the process of donation, the change of context and place has a crucial role, as well as the separation of the donated collection from its previous owner. In the following, I will focus on the donation process and the transition to personal archive to become a donated collection, as the CBM refers to it: the "Rachel L. Mellon Collection."



Figure 2
"I Feel Pretty" album and sketch (record from museum) (CBM 2014.526ab, CBM 2014.526.65). Copyright: Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. Author's own photograph

Figure 3
Sketch from the "I Feel Pretty" album showcasing various colourways swatches (CBM 2014.526.68). Copyright: Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. Author's own photograph

4. The Gift of Affect. Donation of Rachel Mellon's Personal Balenciaga Archive

In the investigation of Rachel Mellon's donation to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, as occurred with the exploration of the reasons behind the preservation of her personal Balenciaga archive, her first-hand testimony remains unknown.

To begin this exploration, one wonders about what might trigger a donation and what circumstances in one's life could lead to parting with those treasured objects. Rachel Mellon donation was a succession of contributions, gifts, in the form of garments to the CBM that culminated after her death following her wish and intention that her Balenciaga possessions must, as his close collaborator in the Oak Spring Garden Library, Tony Willis stated, "return to Europe and become part of the permanent collection of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation in Getaria, Spain" (CBM, 2017:9).

Beyond one's death as the turning point to the donation to occur, the death of loved ones and processes of bereavement and grief are also found as prompting circumstances in which objects might shift value and significance (Stallybrass, 1999; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Gibson, 2008; Simpson, 2014). Ben Whyman signals grief-related donation reasons in the case of Roy Strong, since, after the death of his wife, Trevelyan Oman, he proceeded with donations of additional pieces from his wardrobe (2017:57). Furthermore, in my own doctoral research, I encountered that one of my case studies, the fashion illustrator and collector Tonie Lewenhaupt, found the death of her late husband, Claes Lewenhaupt, to be a decisive moment for considering the future of her fashion collection and seeking potential options for its donation (Lewenhaupt and Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft [RM], 2019:11). By recognising the museum as the new home for their collections, Strong and Lewenhaupt obtain, in words of curator Myna Trustram, the continuity pledged by the assumption that museums "will exist forever and defy destruction" (2014:79). Since, as Trustram also asserts, "the museum is one of the forms we have for slowly *showing what we value* and for *preserving what is left*" (2017:266, emphasis in original).

This grief-related donation may not seem relevant at first glance to the Rachel Mellon case. The Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation, from which the creation of the CBM materialised, was not established until 1999, and the museum was inaugurated by 2011. The death that could have influenced the donation of garments and might have impacted the preservation and building of Mellon's Balenciaga Archive would be that of Cristóbal Balenciaga. Balenciaga died unexpectedly in 1972 at 77 years old, only a few years after the closure of the maison in 1968 (Miller, 2017:17).

A year after Cristóbal's death, Diana Vreeland (1903-1989), former editor in chief of *Vogue* (1963-1971) and *Harper's Bazaar* (1936 to 1962), as Special Consultant to the Costume Institute within the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) since the spring of that same year, debuted and organised the exhibition *The World of Balenciaga* (23 March-30 June 1973) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art [MET], 1973). This exhibition is regarded as the

introduction of the "fashion retrospective exhibition" and the establishment of the legacy of Vreeland's exhibitions, which are "among the most influential examples of an emergent genre" (Steele, 2008:10; Stevenson, 2008:221-223).

This exhibition featured a group of garments belonging to Rachel Mellon, which are detailed in the catalogue, a total of 17 entries (MET, 1973:71-72). In the exhibition documents, these pieces are described as "Lent by Mrs. Paul Mellon" (Thomas J. Watson Library Digital Collections, 1973). Currently, within the digital collection of the MET Costume Institute, these Balenciaga garments and some additions (a total of 29 entries, including accessories and some shoes that complemented the outfits) are listed as "Gift of Rachel L. Mellon, 1987", indicating a transformation in their accession status with the institution (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no date). This gift represents a significant selection of Balenciaga garments, including evening gowns, loungewear and garden attire, highlighting the diverse aspects of Mellon's custom-made wardrobe created by Balenciaga.

The World of Balenciaga commemorated the legacy of the couturier. The presence of Mellon's garments and those of other relevant patrons paid a homage to Cristóbal Balenciaga. Given the timing of the exhibition, shortly after the couturier's passing, and the possible impact of the bereavement process, Rachel Mellon might have needed some time to consider her decision to donate the pieces to the museum.

A couple of years before, in 1971, the photographer, illustrator, writer and costume designer Cecil Beaton (1904-1980) curated the exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology by Cecil Beaton* at the V&A (October 1971-January 1972), considered seminal for the exhibition of fashion and fashion curatorship (Clark et al., 2014:6). Beaton was focused on contemporary fashion and "as inspired by the stylish women who wore the clothes as by the design of the garments they chose" (quoted in Clark et al., 2014:71); contrasting with the mentioned retrospective venture of Vreeland. In Beaton's exhibition, garments from Rachel Mellon were showcased, a total of 12, the majority of which were from Givenchy and only three ensembles from Balenciaga (Ginsburg, M. et al., 1971:19,30-31; Clark et al., 2014:90-91,102-103). The Balenciaga garments, dated from 1966 to 1968, illustrated late designs of the couturier, aligning with the curator's purpose of representing the wearer's contemporary style, too. In the words of Beaton's proposal letter for the exhibition, he aimed to showcase: "I would hope to flatter the donors by only asking for specific garments that I had seen and admired" (quoted in Clark et al., 2014:69). Mellon's garments appeared as gifts to the museum collection, the year of accession is not visible in the objects details, but according to Igor Uria, those were donated in 1974 (CBM, 2017:21). The detailed process of the MET and V&A donations escapes the scope and focus of this paper. However, these examples are of great relevance as they showcase earlier instances of Mellon donating pieces from her preserved wardrobe, part of her personal Balenciaga Archive, becoming available within a museum context.

The museum environment was not strange to Rachel Mellon; she and her husband, Paul Mellon, were not only art collectors but also dedicated patrons of museums. A key example is the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where they contributed to the endeavours of Paul's father, Andrew Mellon. The couple enriched the gallery's collection with their donations, while Paul held various roles in the Board of Trustees of the Gallery for many years, from 1938 to 1985. Additionally, they were benefactors of their local museum, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, where galleries are named in their honour. Throughout their lives, they continuously enriched the collections of these institutions through their gifts and bequeathed further donations after their deaths (Barriault and Davidson, 1997: xvi; Vogel, 2014; Tomasi and Willis, 2020:89-107).

Consequently, as her art and book-collecting practices might influence the preservation of her Balenciaga belongings, her patronage and contribution to museum collections could be interpreted as a continuation of this inclination, an understanding of the future of the archive and cherished possessions leading to a public audience to share.

In those first donations mentioned to the MET and the V&A, previous to the donation to the CBM, the pieces arrived at the museums with the purpose of featuring the exhibitions and deepening their collections. It is noteworthy to point out that those were also personal requests from Diana Vreeland and Cecil Beaton. Not an unusual circumstance, for instance, Whyman reveals that Strong "was being asked to donate by fashion curators at the V&A" when he was director of the institution (Whyman, 2017:57).

Thus, it is noted that the first garments from Rachel Mellon to enter the collection of the CBM came through Hubert de Givenchy (CBM, 2017:6,21). Before delving into the details about Mellon's donation to the CBM, two brief observations about Givenchy and the Foundation will provide necessary context.

First, Hubert de Givenchy (1927-2018) was a French couturier who founded his maison in 1952, working uninterruptedly until his retirement in 1995 (Beyfus, 2015:146). His admiration for Balenciaga was ceaselessly perceived. Although he attempted to become Balenciaga's apprentice, his efforts were unsuccessful (Musée de la Mode et du Costume [MMC], 1991:24). Nonetheless, he regarded Balenciaga as his mentor, declaring, "He gave me encouragement [...] He helped me. He gave me direction. His work was so strict, so pure" (quoted in Miller, 2017:164). Over time, the two shared a friendship, and, in 1959, Givenchy's atelier moved across Balenciaga's on the Avenue George V in Paris (Miller, 2017:164). Givenchy's respect and esteem for Balenciaga evolved into his active commitment to preserving and honouring the legacy of Balenciaga. This dedication led him to become the founding chairman of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation.

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Foundation was established in 1999 by a group of people who, like Givenchy, sought to maintain Balenciaga's legacy. The Foundation's mission is "to promote, develop and publicise the enormous importance of the figure

and work of the couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga Eizagirre in the world of fashion and particularly haute couture" (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, no date-a; CBM, 2017:6). As a result of the Foundation's expanding collection and committed efforts, a museum was opened to the public on June 11, 2011.

After the first garments from Mellon that came through Givenchy, the years of Mellon's contributions to the CBM are recorded in the museum's list of "Benefactors and Advisers" (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, no date-b). In this list, Mellon appears on five occasions, from 2004 to 2014, the year of her death. The serial nature of the donations to CBM is reminiscent of the gradual pattern of contributions made by Mellon and her husband concerning their art collection to the museums they supported. A detail worth mentioning about the donation of their art collection is that, after Paul's passing in 1999, certain pieces became promised gifts and arrived, sometimes unexpectedly, from Rachel, and finally, after she died in 2014 (Vogel, 2014). This decision allowed Rachel to continue enjoying the artworks during the time that separated their deaths. In this sense, the impact of mourning on donations, as previously mentioned, may have played an influential role. A similar practice of retaining significant pieces while making a donation was observed in the case of Tonie Lewenhaupt and her contributions to the Röhsska Museet (Lewenhaupt and RM, 2019:11). Comparably, the gifts of Roy Strong to the V&A and Fashion Museum of Bath were also progressive accessions of his wardrobe to the institutions (Whyman, 2017:45). Hence, on some occasions, the retaining of certain possessions before their donation can be attributed to an emotional and affective significance of those.

The possessions that were donated were, first, safeguarded attending to diverse reasons that I tried to unfold in the previous pages, emphasising their affective aspect. In comprehending the donation, I intend to highlight this affective perspective as well. I first referred to mourning and found that Mellon's contribution to the Balenciaga retrospective exhibition that resulted in gifts to the MET could be an illustration of this, as well as, closely to this, she had already contributed to other fashion exhibitions and was aware of the space that garments and contemporary fashion were starting to inhabit within museums. Highlighting her experience and behaviour as an art collector and donor of art further situates her persona and understanding of her treasured belongings and would help in comprehending her behaviour toward the donation of her personal Balenciaga archive.

Furthermore, in my understanding of Rachel Mellon's donation, drawing on gift theory, my affective perspective and the significant influence of the personal relationships and friendships that intertwined with the collection are supported beyond a transactional donation understanding or a re-contextualisation of the objects alone. From authors who discuss gifting, the gift is understood as part of the self or an extended self (Mauss, 2001:16; Hyde, 1999:92; Belk, 1988:150). Therefore, the donations are not only from the donors but also part of them, which echoes the understanding of Mellon's Balenciaga archive and its preservation as keeping and taking care of part of her life. Furthermore, Lewis Hyde emphasises

the “feeling bond” created by gifting (1999:56). In this sense, there is an existing bond between Rachel Mellon and the museum through Givenchy and towards the aim of the museum, as the pursuit is preserving and taking care of the legacy of Balenciaga, from which she treasured a personal archive and shared a friendship.

5. Interwoven Connections. The Influence of Friendship in the Donated Collection

In the last section of this article, I aim to enhance the affective perspective from a relational angle by explaining how the friendships and personal relationships between Rachel Mellon, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Jean Schlumberger and Hubert de Givenchy are intertwined within the donated collection and affected the donation.

I have already referred to the intercession of Givenchy concerning Mellon's contributions to the CBM. Thus, acknowledging their connection, which was in fact a long-lasting friendship. I have also noted the friendship of Givenchy and Balenciaga, as well as recognising the one between Mellon and Balenciaga. Then, how do the three of them connect? How did Givenchy and Mellon know each other and become friends? This encounter was thanks to Balenciaga. I have refrained from explaining this detail until now to emphasise their personal involvement with each other towards the donation of the collection.

The story of their encounter unfolds upon the closure of Balenciaga in 1968. Personnel from the Balenciaga atelier, including Madame Ginette, Mme Jacqueline, and vendeuses Florette Chelot and Odette (MMC, 1991:104; Golbin, 2006:24; Blume, 2014:188-189), were moving across the street to the location of Givenchy's maison. This notable and evocative crossing from Balenciaga to Givenchy's atelier is the route that Rachel Mellon took, accompanied by Cristóbal Balenciaga and, according to the author, Jean Schlumberger as well. Interestingly, it was Schlumberger who originally introduced Mellon to Balenciaga.

Rachel Mellon, who had been dressed for all occasions by Cristóbal Balenciaga, found in Hubert de Givenchy her new wardrobe-creator and, more importantly, a friend for life (MMC, 1991:91; Gordon, 2019:253, 276, 445). The relationship between Mellon and Givenchy was close and intimate, sharing holidays and creative endeavours, such as the design of Givenchy's residence garden at Le Jonchet, and the renovation of *Le Potager du Roi* at Versailles, which earned Rachel Mellon the *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Government (CBM, 2017:11; Holden, 2018:303).

Thus, the friendship between Mellon and Givenchy, along with their mutual admiration and personal esteem for Balenciaga, provides compelling insights into understanding Mellon's contributions to the CBM. By considering how the donations evolved, from the initial intervention of Givenchy to the final donation after her death, Hyde's words expressing how the gift makes a connection resonate here (1999:56). The gifts from Mellon enclose a personal and affective aspect. As gifts, they are part of herself, retaining

not only her life but her emotions and affects. Therefore, the graduality of her gifting illustrates a growing relationship of trust. Through the gifting, her personal Balenciaga Archive pieces transcended her ownership; it is not she who is taking care of her possessions because they ceased to be hers. Nonetheless, she is still present as they become the Rachel L. Mellon Collection.

In the series of Mellon gifts, there is an anecdote shared by Igor Uria regarding Givenchy's arrival at the inauguration of the museum. Uria recalls Givenchy bringing garments from Mellon, causing Uria to rush them inside during this highly ceremonious event (Uria, 2023). This story, underlining a gift from Mellon at such a significant occasion for the Foundation, emphasises the evolving relationship, as the gesture can be interpreted as a recognition and celebration of the milestone achieved that will further the accomplishment of the Foundation's mission. In addition, stories and anecdotes like the above enhance the donation process narratives and knowledge and, according to theatre collecting researcher Eve Smith, are worth considering as evidence in the narratives of a collection (Smith, 2016).

When Rachel Mellon died in 2014, the remains of her personal Balenciaga Archive reached their final destination at the CBM, joining Mellon's previous donations and becoming the Rachel L. Mellon Collection. Similarly, Mellon's collection of jewellery and objects of art by Jean Schlumberger was bequeathed to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts after her passing. Jean Schlumberger, as noted earlier, was the one who introduced Mellon to Cristóbal Balenciaga. Jean Schlumberger (1907-1987), a renowned jewellery designer, began his career in Paris, collaborating with Schiaparelli in the late 1930s, and later moved to New York, where he joined Tiffany & Co. in 1956. Mellon first met Schlumberger in 1954, and since that time, she became a patron of his creations, eventually developing a close friendship with him. In his bespoke designs for her, nature was a recurrent inspiration. Beyond jewellery, Schlumberger created "one-of-a-kind-decorative objects" for Mellon's residences (Couser, 2018:1-7). Notably, she entrusted him with the design of the floral bouquet pinnacle of the greenhouse at Oak Spring State (Tomasí and Willis, 2020:51). The gardening passion of Mellon underscores the significance of the greenhouse, as one of her favourite spaces, and the importance of this commission.

Mellon's trust in Schlumberger led her to Balenciaga. In one of the few conserved accounts from Mellon, she writes, "Many dresses and suits were the work of both men ... not because I was a fashion plate, but they understood my need" (essay included in Skrebneski and Jacobs, 1995:20). These words reveal the admiration and devotion Mellon had for the creative friends she surrounded herself with and patronised.

Safeguarding the majority of her belongings from these two friends throughout her life, until her passing, knowing the interpersonal connections that they created in her life seems a relevant detail to appreciate and recognise.

Her Balenciaga belongings encompass her own wardrobe during a period of time, her own relationship with Balenciaga and other friendships that directed her to him and stemmed from him, and also her own feelings. This reflection leads me to the "I Feel Pretty" album that was discussed at the beginning of this article. This piece of the collection came as a surprise and is one of a kind, seeming to be Mellon's testament to Balenciaga, honouring his work and their relationship. The contents of the Rachel Mellon Collection at the CBM are "120 day outfits, 50 coats, 40 cocktail dresses, 25 evening gowns, 20 *déshabillés*, 10 garden outfits, 30 lingerie articles, 215 scarves, 32 toques and hats, and miscellaneous category (...) 250 documets, including invoices, telegrams, postcards and personal letters as well as 138 original sketches with fabric swatches" (CBM, 2017:22). However, there is more that cannot be quantified.

In this paper, I have focused on the often overlooked affective aspects present in this collection and the relationships it encompasses. By emphasising the significance of the gift and the emotional bond that this act fosters, I have conveyed a personal perspective on the behind-the-scenes processes of museum accession. While these processes might provide a transactional first impression, they can unfold a multitude of emotions and narratives that remind us how fashion and garments are more than mere pieces of cloth.

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Wearing Balenciaga: Two Connecticut Clients

Abstract

This article contextualizes the ownership of several garments, now in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, designed by Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972) and worn by two American women. Dresses, suits, coats, and hats dating to the 1950s and 1960s from both the designer's Spanish and French houses are discussed and compared to other, known couture clothing and higher-end ready-to-wear examples worn by Emily Hall Tremain (1908-1987) and Bluma Bassevitch (1909-1990). The resulting analysis provides insight into the wardrobes of two artistically minded clients with ties to the state of Connecticut, while also suggesting a larger framework for ownership of Balenciaga and EISA clothing in the American northeast. This research also aims to deepen scholarship on the designer's American clientele. The designer's creations figured prominently in a "uniform" for both social and business obligations for these women, whose wardrobes included other couture, as well as American, clothing.

Balenciaga / Bassevitch / Connecticut /
EISA / Tremain

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Wearing Balenciaga: Two Connecticut Clients

1. Introduction

Emily Hall Tremaine (1908-1987) and Bluma Rose Bassevitch (1909-1990) were two women with ties to Hartford, Connecticut, who wore Balenciaga clothing. Nineteen pieces, consisting of dresses, suits, coats, and hats, collectively worn by the two women, plus one facture or invoice, all date to the 1950s and 1960s. All are in the collection of Hartford's The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, and represent both the designer's French and Spanish houses. The research presented on these two wardrobes suggests a framework for ownership of Balenciaga and EISA clothing in the American northeast. The designer's creations figured prominently in a "uniform" for both social and business obligations for these women, both of whom were connected to the Arts.¹

For this client-centered, place-based approach to the study of Balenciaga, this research begins by exploring the presence of Balenciaga in greater Hartford, the state's capital city. I then draw upon heretofore little-studied material culture and archival papers at the museum, primary and secondary research on the two wearers, and important, published secondary sources written by scholars in the past twenty years on haute couture in general and Balenciaga in particular (Golbin, 2006; Miller, 2007; Palmer, 2021; Pouillard, 2021; Walker, 2006). This paper's unique perspective centers on the context for adoption of Balenciaga garments into the wardrobes of two American women during a time of great social and sartorial change, thereby offering a more nuanced view of the designer's US customer base at the same time as his own design aesthetic was evolving.

2. Balenciaga in Connecticut

Cristóbal Balenciaga first appears in the newspapers of Connecticut's capital city, Hartford, in 1938, one year after opening his Paris couture house. Appearing in the fall of that year were two separate pictorial features in the same newspaper issue depicting his striped, full-length shirtwaist dress ("For Chic Dressing": F13). This same dress was also featured in one of the first ads the designer placed in French *Vogue* (Miller, 107). Into the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, citations of the designer centered on his Paris couture house showings. Several by Hartford newspaper fashion and women's editor Edyth Radom appear in the 1940s and 1950s, while mentions in the 1960s tend to be from syndicated New York fashion reports and advertorials by Eugenia Shepherd and Tobé (Radom, 1946: 12; Radom, 1950: 8; Sheppard, 14; "Tobé Says," 1960: 13). Two of the city's leading department stores, Sage-Allen and G.

¹ Emily had run a society gossip magazine in California during the 1930s; later she was described as a "former graphic artist." See "Friends Get Novel Card From Couple," in *The Hartford Courant*, December 23, 1973: 4A.

Fox, promoted adaptations and copies of Balenciaga designs. These stores also sold the couturier's two fragrances, *Le Dix* and *Quadrille* ("Display Ad," 1963: 11; "Display Ad," 1963: 5A). Based on these sources, the public's preference (which was undoubtedly also shaped by retailers and buyers' selections) favored Balenciaga coats, suits, hats and dresses, in that order. During the late 1940s and 1950s, copies and adaptations of Balenciaga designs in greater Hartford ranged from \$80-\$120 for coats ("Display Ad," 1949: D6; "Display Ad," 1957: 5A; "Display Ad," 1957: 3E). Day dresses and suits hovered around \$50 ("Display Ad," 1951: 6). Hats copied from Balenciaga originals retailed for between \$20 and \$40 ("Display Ad," September 1951: 9; "Display Ad," February 1956: 7A). All of these advertisements were frequently couched to highlight an allure of Spanish fashion and the color black, often-cited characteristics of his work. And the Spanish influence in fashion was certainly discussed in local papers during the 1950s, including a local woman whose outfits were "designed by an apprentice of Balenciaga" (King, 1955: G4).

During the 1960s, at least two Connecticut brides wore Balenciaga, and the wives of influential state men wore his designs to official, formal events ("Miss Hughes Bridal Held at 'Penbryn,'" A8); "Miss Tiffany is Bride of Mr. Thompson," A6; Barrett, 10). Original designs (or their adaptations) also made their presence known in the state through fashion shows such as the *Ebony Magazine Fashion Flair Show* and the *Israel International Fashion Show*, the latter held on October 25, 1964. (Tonnelly, 20 September 1964: 6E; Tonnelly, 25 October 1964: 6E).

Related to these general references to the designer in the state are the wardrobes of two women with ties to Connecticut, but who likely didn't know each other personally. Their surviving clothes from Balenciaga have been little studied. During the 21st century's rich and continued re-examination of the designer, these clothes and their wearers are placed to enrich the known *oeuvre* of Balenciaga.

3. Emily Hall Tremain

Emily Hall was born in Butte, Montana, in 1908. She was the daughter of William Hubbard Hall (1856-1931) and Elizabeth Purdon Hall (née Smith, 1872-1941). The family summered in Montecito, a suburb of Santa Barbara, California, and it was here Emily met her first husband, Max von Romberg (Baron Maximilian Edmund Hugo Wilhelm von Romberg, 1911-1938) at her 1927 coming-out ball (Housley, 24). Sadly, Max died tragically just ten years after their marriage, in 1938, and a second marriage for Emily against the backdrop of World War II ended in divorce and scandal (Housley, 51).

By the time of her marriage to her third (and final) husband, industrialist Burton G. Tremain, Jr. (1901-1991) in the mid-1940s, the couple resided in New York City and Madison, Connecticut ("Green Bay Tree Club Meets Today in Tremain Home," 18). Emily's interest in modern art began before she met Burton. She had a

lifelong interest in art and design, having edited and art-directed her own society gossip magazine, *Aperitif*, in California during the 1930s (Housley, 33). However, both Emily and Burton became synonymous with their world-class collection (Baro, 135). The couple's collecting was possible through Emily's inherited wealth, as well as that of her new husband who was president of a lighting firm called The Miller Company in Meriden, Connecticut. ("Miller Co. Will Expand, To Remain in Meriden," 5).

Emily Tremaine had long been a customer of haute couture, and her wardrobe mirrored the international life she led. Her first wedding gown from 1928 is attributed to couturier Lucien Lelong (1889-1958). However, it may in fact be a copy made in New York City, possibly by either Sak's Fifth Avenue or an as-yet unattributed dressmaker-importer, when Emily was in New York shopping for her trousseau with her mother (Tremaine papers, Box 1, folder 19). Into the 1930s she wore designs by Madeleine Vionnet, and Mario Fortuny with Henriette Nigrin. None of her clothing from the 1940s survives in The Wadsworth's collection, however couture garments from the 1950s include a ball gown from Hubert de Givenchy's first collection in 1952, as well as day suits, dresses, and accessories from Jacques Fath and Jean Dessès. Items from the 1960s and 1970s include designers like Andre Courrèges, Madame Grès (attributed), Pierre Cardin, Hannae Mori, and Halston, plus another Givenchy dress. There is also one late 1960s paper dress sold at Elizabeth Arden, probably purchased for The Wadsworth's 1966 Paper Ball. The dress was never worn, as the purchase tag is still attached.

Based on the surviving garments in The Wadsworth's collection, Tremaine began buying designs from Balenciaga in the 1950s. She continued to favor the designer's creations well into the 1960s. Collectively, these twelve pieces are the most numerous surviving garments by one designer from Tremaine at the museum.

Emily's first donation of her clothing to The Wadsworth Atheneum occurred in 1964, which was, in fact, a Balenciaga evening dress. More followed, including a black evening or cocktail dress from 1963, donated in 1965 [Figure 1]. Black featured prominently in her Balenciaga pieces; the color is included approximately half of them. Tremaine favored cocktail or evening ensembles from the house, as well as daytime suits. Those in the former category defined the body, including an ensemble from Spring/Summer 1955, made from a sheer silk that was printed with an all-over, abstracted pansy floral motif [Figure 2]. Most of the suits in the collection, worn for day and dating to the 1960s, feature semi-fitted coats and straight skirts ending just below the knee. One bold, cocoon-shaped coat hints at Emily's more playful side [Figure 3].

Collectively, these donations may have been the result of her connection to earlier, pioneering Wadsworth director Chick Austin (1900-1957), who was a cousin (Gaddis, 287). The clothing was happily accepted by then-curator J. Herbert Callister (1916-1980), who was focused on building the museum's collection of *haute couture*. While examples of clothing worn by Tremaine survive in other American museum collections, only one other piece of



Figure 1
Evening dress, 1963. Black silk crepe. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremain, 1965.306.

Figure 2
Cocktail or evening ensemble, 1955. Green and white printed silk. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremain, 1969.141.

Figure 3
Coat, c. 1960. Yellow-orange and off-white mohair. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremain, 1967.181.

Balenciaga clothing appears to be held in a museum outside of the Wadsworth; a boxy red coat from about 1958 held by the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City (MFIT: 70.64.1). The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City has several examples of Tremain's clothing worn for sport (mostly skiing), but no known clothing by Balenciaga connected to Tremain.

Despite her many purchases from the house, Emily's only known, surviving facture from Balenciaga is from the designer's Paris couture salon. Dated 25 April 1955, and addressed to "Madame Tremain," it records the sale of a silk moiré dress sold to her by her vendeuse, possibly Florette or S. Porette, for about 105.000 francs, or about \$3,000 (€2,500) today (Miller, 2025). The garment described in the invoice does not appear to be one of the surviving garments in The Wadsworth's collection.

4. Bluma Rose Bassevitch

Bluma Rose Bassevitch (née Jacobs) was born in Norfolk, Virginia. While attending college at Cornell University in the late 1920s, she (class of 1930) met her future husband, Marcus Bassevitch (1905-1993, class of 1927) of Hartford, Connecticut (Cornell Alumni Magazine, 1972: 41). The pair married around 1934, and relocated to Hartford. Here, Bluma worked for a time as an advertising copywriter, while Marcus worked as an attorney, and also possibly as a trustee for a local steel industry ("Bassevitch Dies, Founder of Fur Firm," 1951: 3).

Like the Tremaines, one of the Bassevitchs' common interests was a commitment to modern art. Bluma herself was a local artist whose work included sculpture ("Society Art Show," 1949: D1; "Art School Exhibition is Stimulating," 1949: 5). The couple built their dream home between 1953 and 1954 in the affluent suburb of West Hartford. That house, in the international style, was designed by architect Robert Carroll May (b. about 1913), who had been a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. The house's interiors were designed by Marcus's sister, Florence Bassevitch Barron (1902-1999), and included modern, cutting-edge furnishing textiles designed by Dorothy Liebes (1897-1972) ("Robert Carroll May").

Clothing donations by Bassevitch to The Wadsworth occurred between 1972 and 1990, the year of her death. In total there are seven Cristóbal Balenciaga designs, all dating to the late 1950s or early 1960s, roughly the same period as Tremain's more extensive holdings. Of these seven items, five are EISA garments (two sack dresses, two suits, and one hat) and two are Balenciaga pieces. It is possible that the EISA brimless, toque-style hat was worn with one or both of the sack dresses. Those two items in Bassevitch's wardrobe to be donated to the museum from Balenciaga's Paris atelier include a 1956 suit [Figure 4] and a pillbox-style hat [Figure 5]. Bassevitch was also a customer of other Parisian couture houses, such as Jacques Griffe. She supplemented her couture wardrobe with clothing from higher-end American ready-to-wear designs from Pauline Trigère, Bonnie Cashin, and Adele Simpson.



Figure 4
Suit, 1956. Dark blue, plain-weave bouclé wool. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Marcus Bassevitch, 1972.70.

Figure 5
Hat, 1956. Lavender-pink felted wool. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Marcus Bassevitch, 1975.110.



Figure 6
Sack dress, 1958. Dark blue, plain-weave
linen. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of
Art, Gift of Mrs. Marcus Bassevitch, 1975.105.

Figure 7
Sack dress, 1958. Tan, plain-weave wool
with light brown, suede belt. The Wadsworth
Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Marcus
Bassevitch, 1975.107.

It is unclear how Bassevitch acquired her Balenciaga clothing. Considerably less scholarship on American consumption of garments designed and made at one of the EISA ateliers in Spain further complicates an easy narrative. That design house doesn't appear in American newspapers, either in advertisements or discussions about fashion, the way the designer's eponymous Paris work does. It can be assumed that Bassevitch traveled to Spain and visited one of the EISA ateliers there. Spain, and Spanish fashion, were promoted in greater Hartford during this time (get citations).

As an artist and lover of modern art, the modernity of Balenciaga's late 1950s designs appealed to Bassevitch. She owned not one, but two examples of the designer's sack dress from the EISA ateliers [Figures 6 and 7]. Although the designer had been exploring more abstract shapes of garments for years, the press latched onto some of the more extreme iterations that manifested most succinctly in his 1957 and 1958 collections (Lazaro, 2024: 233). Comfort could be another reason. By 1957-1958 Bluma would have been in her late 40s, and the forgiving structure of the sacks might also have helped with an ageing body. But Bassevitch remained more traditional in other ways, with her

5. Conclusion

The Balenciaga and EISA items in wardrobes of Emily Tremaine and Bluma Bassevitch provide excellent and heretofore understudied examples of fairly conservative daytime and evening clothes from both Paris and Spain. As two women of means, it makes sense that both Emily and Bluma would wear suits, the practical, daytime uniform for women attending meetings, luncheons, and other daytime, urban pursuits. Balenciaga's evolving interest in the suit reflected his thoughts about modernity. The easy fit, to-the-knee skirt hem, and bracelet-length sleeves of these surviving garments all helped with living in suburban Connecticut, and traveling by car to and from New York City. The dressier cocktail and evening ensembles reflect more conservative tastes, particularly of Tremaine as she aged. However Bassevitch's adoption of not one but two sack dresses suggests the latter's more playful side and possibly closer connection to making art than Tremaine, who was primarily a collector by the 1950s. Coats and hats, however, reflect a more whimsical element common to both women. While it cannot be assumed that what survives in the Wadsworth's collection is indicative of the entire taste of either woman, these clothes help to provide more information about Balenciaga's work and legacy vis-à-vis American clients.

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El mundo de Balenciaga: Reconstructing the Spanish Contribution to the 1974 Exhibition

Abstract

In 1972, the Metropolitan Museum appointed Diana Vreeland as special consultant to the Costume Institute. Just a few months later, the former *Vogue* editor-in-chief organized *El mundo de Balenciaga*, which opened on March 23, 1973, showcasing the work of the couturier in a spectacular exhibition. In 1974, that exhibition was restaged in Madrid at the Palacio de Bibliotecas y Museos, one of the Dirección General de Bellas Artes most hallowed venues. The success of the New York show had prompted the Spanish authorities to restage it in compliance with the policies of the Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia: significantly, Carmen Polo de Franco was president of the Ladies' Committee, overseeing all social events in support of the exhibition. A selection of paintings was also displayed alongside Balenciaga's dresses, the aim being to offer a multifaceted idea of *hispanidad*, reflecting a trend that, in the course of the desarrollo years, sought to use the nation's splendid art heritage as a prop to bolster Spain's new-found modernity. Analyzing *El mundo de Balenciaga* and its impact through unpublished materials from several international institutions, the essay will explore how an event devised for an American audience was revisited for the Spanish public with a view to transforming the couturier in a national "monument."

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Fashion Curating /
Fashion Museology / Hispanidad / Spanish Fashion

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↗ Fashion Theory

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Communication

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CBC

The Archive as Narrative: Percy Savage and Alison Settle's Role in the Mythmaking of Cristóbal Balenciaga

Abstract

Writing in 1954, British journalist Alison Settle acknowledged that it was rare to find authoritative books on the creation of fashion, although histories of costume and theories on dress were common. This article focuses on material from the archives of two key fashion motivators, the British journalist Alison Settle and fashion PR Percy Savage. Together with the life writing and fashion books of contemporaries of Cristóbal Balenciaga, this research aims to understand how the mythology which has grown up around the couturier was constructed to fill an almost complete absence of his own voice.

Key themes emerging from this study include the professional value of social intimacy, the use of personal testimony as a mechanism for myth making, and the dynamics of fashion authorship through archival practices. Close analysis of Alison Settle's and Percy Savage's archival materials illustrates how the act of collecting, curating, and writing about fashion is, in itself a historiographical intervention. Figures such as fashion editors Bettina Ballard, and Marie-Louise Bousquet also reveal how editorial authority was not only a matter of institutional power, but also of personal access, taste, and narrative control.

Balenciaga / Balenciaga / Memory / Myth /
Life Narratives / Fashion Autobiography

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↗ Fashion Theory

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Obituaries and Mythmaking: The Media Construction of Cristóbal Balenciaga's Legacy

Abstract

Cristóbal Balenciaga passed away on March 23, 1972, in Jávea (Alicante). At that time, he was already established as one of the most prominent couturiers in the field of haute couture on an international scale. If the objective of an obituary is to capture the essence of a life, rather than focusing on the circumstances of death, this article examines the media coverage of his death in 1972 and explores how obituaries went beyond mere reporting to actively create and establish his legacy as a cultural and artistic icon. Drawing on press sources from Spain and around the world, the study reveals how fashion media mythologized Balenciaga through symbolic narratives, selective omissions, and visual rhetoric. Through an analysis of the interplay between journalistic conventions and cultural memory, the article reveals how obituaries shape public perception by emphasizing Balenciaga's creative genius and discretion while obscuring complex issues such as his sexuality and the political context of his era. Ultimately, the article emphasizes the obituary's role as a ritualized narrative that transforms individual loss into a collective cultural myth. This contributes to the canonization of one of the most influential couturiers of the twentieth century.

Balenciaga / Obituary / Myth /
Fashion Media / Cultural Memory

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Design

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CB

Dress as Cultural Language. Translational Aspects in Cristóbal Balenciaga's (1895-1972) Creative Process

Abstract

This research investigates the work of Basque couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga through a critical study of his creative process, aiming to understand how this process leads to a unique visual and formal language in fashion. The methodology combines critical literature review with an archaeological approach inspired by Salles' (1998) notion of 'traces,' reading Balenciaga's creative procedures as acts of cultural translation where design emerges as negotiation between material, cultural, and temporal forces (Silveira, 2010). We hypothesize that some creative procedures inscribe themselves into longer temporal layers, producing codes that remain available for translation beyond their original context. Balenciaga's work reflects this through his paradoxical dialogue between ephemeral and permanent, re-signifying Western women's dress across five decades (Arzalluz, 2011; Vives, 2018) in ways that echo Braudel's (1992) concept of *longue durée*. By offering a theoretical foundation and analytical protocol grounded in Brazilian process criticism, this study contributes tools for examining culturally constituted creative processes in fashion.

Archaeology of Process / Cultural Translation /
Cristóbal Balenciaga / Fashion Language / *Longue Durée*

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Dress as Cultural Language. Translational Aspects in Cristóbal Balenciaga's (1895-1972) Creative Process

1. Introduction

Dress functions as cultural language as it expresses values, circulates social codes, negotiates tradition and innovation (Oliveira, 2004; Castilho, 2004). This makes clothing an object of interdisciplinary inquiry, situated across art, history, social sciences and design.

Researching fashion's creative process, then, means recognizing its translational dimension where memories, cultural references, construction techniques and craft practices are transformed into aesthetic forms that combine functionality and meaning.

From this perspective, we examine how Basque couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972) constructed a visual language across five decades, negotiating the transitory nature of collections with the constancy of an authorial voice (Arzalluz, 2011; Vives, 2018). His creative process is analyzed here as an act of cultural translation, where design emerges in dialogue with historical and symbolic forces.

Through Salles (1998, 2006), who mobilizes genetic criticism and semiotics to interpret traces left by creative thought, we understand creation as a network of connections where choices, experiments, and refusals shape the work. In dialogue with Salles, Silveira (2010) frames the creator as an agent operating within this network, translating signs across coexisting cultural temporalities.

We ask: how can Balenciaga's creative process be read through cultural translation? Our hypothesis is that tracing the connections within his creative process helps explain how his language sustained innovation and cultural relevance across decades, and beyond. We also propose that this durability can be read through Braudel's (1992) concept of *longue durée*: Balenciaga's creative procedures operated not only within the seasonal event, but inscribed themselves into longer temporal layers, remaining available for translation by later generations.

Methodologically, we adopt an archaeology of process, through Salles' (1998) notion of 'traces' in what the author calls 'process documents.' We treat photographs, technical descriptions of archival pieces, published sketches, exhibition catalogues, and interviews as sources through which we trace Balenciaga's creative thought in operation. We bring these sources into dialogue with critical literature on the couturier's life and work, such as Arizzoli-Clémentel (1985), Jouve and Demornex (1989), Miller (1993), Arzalluz (2011, 2016), Bowles (2011) and Gil (2023).

We organize our method of analysis into three operations identified in Balenciaga's work: (i) tradition and reinvention, examining how historical references become structural solutions rather than mere quotation; (ii) structural innovation, analyzing how material and cut redistribute volume and displace the anchor points of silhouette; (iii) ephemeral and permanent, concerning how recurrences of his formal language create effects of continuity outside the collection cycle, and beyond fashion.

In each operation, we read form as cultural translation: decisions, experiments, and negotiations operating within a network of connections, taking material shape. Through these operations, we attempt to render visible how Balenciaga constructed a grammar that sustained coherence throughout his career and beyond.

Through this framing, we expand on largely Brazilian scholarship that has yet to be fully developed abroad, providing tools to examine culturally constituted creative processes in fashion. Here, Balenciaga is read not as an isolated genius, but as cultural translator working within the collective ecology of the atelier and across coexisting cultural times and spaces.

2. Intersemiotic Creation and Its Translational Aspects

To understand Balenciaga's creative process as cultural translation, we move away from the trope of the isolated 'genius.' A linear view of creation from imaginative moment to finished object does not account for the dialogue, error, uncertainty, and negotiation that constitute work in the atelier.

We adopt instead a perspective concerned with the becoming of his work. Cecilia Salles develops this on what she calls 'process criticism.' In *Redes da Criação* [Networks of Creation] (2006), she frames creation as a network of connections: a dynamic, non-linear system where material and symbolic factors interact without pre-given hierarchy. The traces left by creators, such as sketches, notes, diaries, along with immaterial influences like memory and culture, form a field in motion, constantly remade as creative thought develops. This field is reflexive and dialogical, as the creator dialogues with himself and his references through choices, refusals, and revisions, questioning the object's status as 'closed, static and isolated' (Salles, 2006:19) ¹.

Additionally, it should be noted, as the author emphasizes, how the creative subject tends to relate to their environment through "borrowings" (Salles, 2006). Balenciaga's perception was evoked by conversations with fellow partners (Gil, 2023); childhood memories, the volumetric force of a figure in a Spanish Baroque painting, or the impact of a civil war (Arzalluz, 2011); or even experiences of mourning (Jouve and Demornex, 1989). These disparate factors eventually find some order when creation materializes onto the body of the mannequin (Miller, 1993).

His atelier acts as a hub where heterogeneous influences converge into a working syntax, continually refined and rearranged along his

¹ All quoted citations from original works in a foreign language were translated by us.

career. For Salles, the work is always unfinished, “there is always a difference between what has been done and the project that has not yet been completed by the artist” (Salles, 2006:13). This incompleteness is what drives the process forward. Balenciaga’s career reflects this, as repeated experiments and working strategies solidify and make new connections that are constantly reconfigured over time, allowing both coherence and novelty.

3. Balenciaga as a Cultural Translator: From the Ephemeral to the Longue Durée

In her earlier publication called *Gesto Inacabado* [Unfinished Gesture], Salles (1998) also argues that the act of creation is hybrid by nature, a process of “conversions from one language to another” in a “continuous translational movement” (Salles 1998:114-115). Taking from semiotic studies, the act of creation does not confine itself to one system of signs, for example, only verbal in the case of the writer, or only pictorial for the painter. Rather, it takes place within the friction and passage between systems. Creation is therefore an act of not merely interlinking references but of translating them as they take material form.

This intersemiotic premise allows us to understand more concrete workings of the operative dialogues in Balenciaga’s ateliers. As McGilp (2023) reminds us, fashion design is an exercise of translation par excellence. The process of transforming an article of clothing, the concrete object, into a “fashion sign”, meaning an object with cultural value (Kawamura, 2005), happens in a chain of translations: the observation of shapes and references in the world may be articulated in the bidimensional language of the sketch form; the sketch may be articulated in the geometric and sensorial language of the pattern; the pattern may be articulated in the material language of fabric such as the weight, the drape and the texture, until it is articulated in the kinetic language of the moving body, where the object takes on its spatial and temporal dimension. In Balenciaga’s case, this chain of translations was often non-linear. As Miller (1993) suggests, the process began often with the drape of a specific shape, working directly onto the mannequin, only to be defined later as a solution, ready to be sketched and produced.

Framed in this way, Balenciaga’s work may be interpreted as that of a translator, someone moving between codes and retaining the operative essence of a form through successive translations: from plane to volume, from sketch to material construction. But translation does not end in the atelier. As Kawamura (2005) argues, once worn and socially seen, the garment becomes fashion, it enters circuits of meaning. And once there, it becomes available for further translation, reread by other creators, in other times, in other fields. This is where Silveira’s (2010) development of Lotman’s concept of culture-as-text within process criticism ground our argument. Creative agents operate within a system where productions coexist across temporalities, continuously available for rearticulation.

Balenciaga emerges as an agent reading cultural signs available to him and rearticulating them into new forms, new contexts, new

meanings, a way of reorganizing a society's visual vocabulary. His work offers a way to understand how fashion's constitutive tension between transiency and permanence (Lipovetsky, 2008) operates in creative practice.

Reading signs from sometimes opposing cultural strata, such as religious austerity, royal ornamentation, the needs of modern women, he translated them into the haute couture system. His seasonal collections responded to immediate aesthetic and commercial imperatives, while his formal language (the purity of line, the economy of cut) transcended seasonal logic. In doing so, he wove past into present, producing formal operators that outlasted his own practice.

Following Fernand Braudel's (1992) historical framework, we can read fashion's relation to time through three temporal layers, the event, the conjuncture, and the *longue durée*, which we adapt here as seasonal collection, career-long patterns, and enduring formal codes. Translational procedures that initially exist in the event of the collection, return with difference, inscribing themselves into fashion's *longue durée*: not the permanence of a 'classic garment,' but of operational codes that continue producing translations beyond their original context.

4. Archaeology of a Process: Reading Traces as a Method

Process criticism, as proposed by Salles², promotes the notion of understanding creation as an inter-semiotic and relational undertaking. Instead of seeing the work in its finalized product, it moves the gaze onto what remains of the making, such as sketches, notes, records of conversations, correspondence, journals and models, or patterns in the case of fashion design, which are seen as partial materializations of cognitive and intuitive operations that guide choices, refusals and reformulations in the time of creation. Acting as both working memory and testing ground, those traces enable us to access the dynamics of creation thought that would otherwise remain opaque (Salles, 1998). However, in conjunction with Silveira (2010), we see the importance of both material and symbolic traces in co-determining the act of creation.

Therefore, we are called upon to work with those aspects that leave a material trace (the documents, objects, records of pictorial images) and immaterial dimensions (memory, perception, culture, historical situations) accessed through what remains available to the critic, such as interviews, publications, historical accounts.

The metaphor of archaeology proposed here indicates reconstructing layers and associations that originate from heterogeneous remnants. Practically speaking, this involves a willingness to tolerate discontinuities, mutate references, and chase the shifts in meaning: how the procedures reappear, how a technical solution is rearticulated based on new materials. Salles' (1998) argues that the job of the critic is not to evoke the exacting 'thread of the skein,' but rather movement, the recombination and the interruption that informs the progress of the work.

² Process criticism gained momentum in the Brazilian academic field in the mid-1990s, following an expansion of literary genetic studies that had originated in France in the late 1960s. See Salles (2008).

We also need to bear in mind the methodological dilemma caused when there is limited access to primary sources, either because the creator is deceased, in which case, it is impossible to follow his daily studio practice; or because the very essence of creative thought as something partial and fleeting, making it difficult to have material record of many decisions taken along the process³. For that reason, in this article, we focus on photographs and technical descriptions digitally accessible in archives, as well as interviews, previously published research, and publicly available catalogues, as indices of operations of thought and decision.

In the case of Balenciaga, the archaeological reading has more substance when we consider the collective aspect of *haute couture* practice. *Haute couture* functions like an ecology of work, where *premières*, pattern makers, seamstresses, and the creator himself deliberate, prototype, and revise (Gil, 2023; McGilp, 2023). Salles (2006) emphasizes that interactions are an important part of multiplying possible pathways through this collectivity, which expands the developmental network of the work. These collaborative moments leave its traces in the form of annotations for patterns, instructions in margins of sketches, or as variations to *toiles* that record decisions made in succession, and not always by the same person.

Contemporary accounts suggest that Balenciaga became the kind of designer who draped, or constructed directly on the body, and only turned to sketch when needed (Miller, 1993). However, when he did sketch, the lines seem to express something akin to cognitive shorthand, a record, quickly rendered to fix rhythm, volume and fall. Some of these records remain extant in sketches that are also marked with technical indications, refusals, sequences of variations.

The couturier's trail also demonstrates the widening of this network of connections. From a Basque childhood, where he engaged in the practice of sewing and observed the dress of high society, to his professional experiences in San Sebastián, Madrid, Barcelona and Paris, his repertoires of techniques and business models were widened (Jouve and Demornex, 1989; Miller, 1993; Arzalluz, 2011). At the same time, the interactive space where creative decisions were made became increasingly complex.

These changes were also driven by the sharing of information with new environments, in particular Paris, the birthplace of *haute couture*. His frequent trips to Paris, which began when he managed the women's department at Au Louvre in San Sebastián, exposed him to new techniques and ideas. On these trips, Balenciaga attended shows of other couturiers and recorded solutions in sketches and technical notes, later rearticulating them in his own ateliers. Some of these sketches, preserved on hotel letterhead from France and Spain (1932-1933), seem to be drawings of models presented at Maison Vionnet (Jouve and Demornex, 1989; Arzalluz, 2011). [Figure 1]

Such sketches depict the oscillation between seeing, testing, and deciding, and help confirm creation as a network of

³ The preservation of these material indices of process within fashion archives also presents limits, since historically the field has emphasized conserving the finished garment over the documents that record its becoming. Key archived documents, such as sketches and patterns, usually go through several adjustment versions, yet these are often lost in the everyday flow of the craft, and typically, only the final version used for the garment's production is preserved (McGilp, 2023).

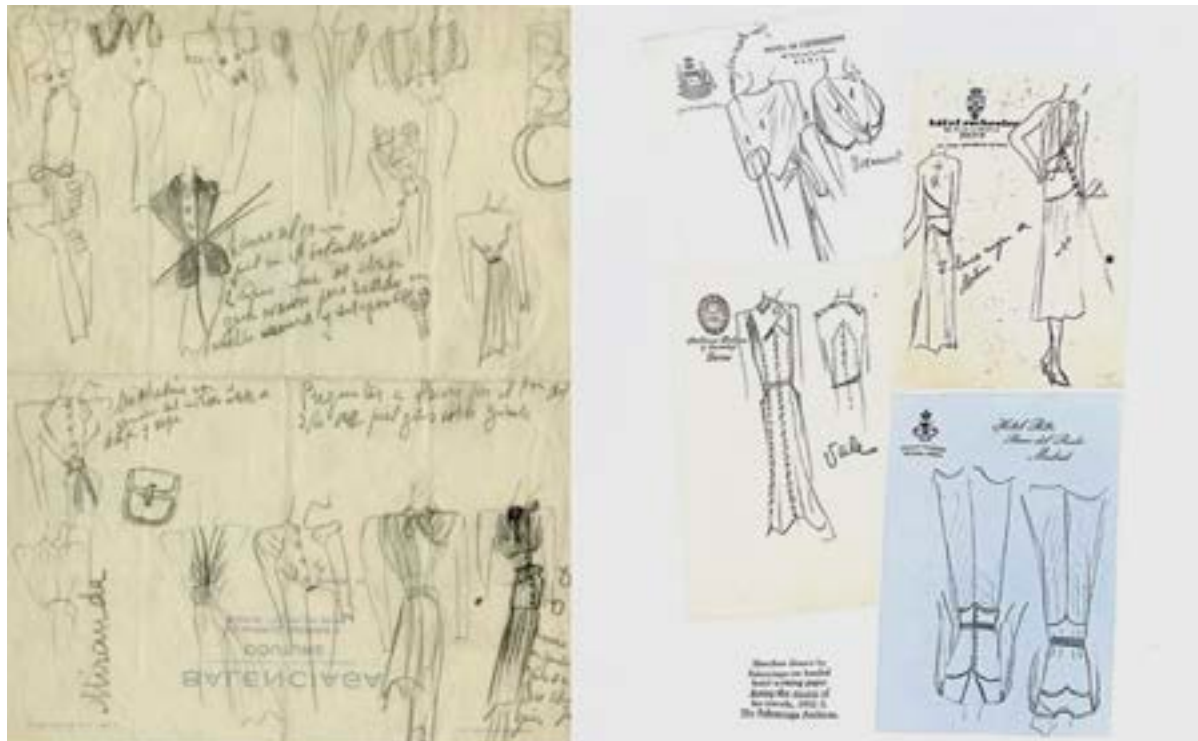


Figure 1
Cristóbal Balenciaga, process sketches (graphite and ink on paper). Left: atelier sheet with technical notes for the 1939 collection. Right: sketches on hotel stationery from various trips, c. 1932–33. Sources: Balenciaga Lovers (available at <https://balenciagalovers.wordpress.com/page/2/>. Accessed in 2024) and Jouve and Demornex (1989). Composite created by the authors for scholarly purposes only.

micro-operations linking perceptive attention to gesture, and aesthetic judgement. In this sense, we take up Silveira's (2010) argument that new communicative relations support new unfoldings of form, material, and method, without totally abolishing earlier habits, which return with variation, being variation itself a defining feature of translation.

This weaving of personal experiences, craft memory, historical repertoires, and the demands of the present helps to account for the attention and knowledge that Balenciaga delivered to every stage of the atelier work (Miller, 1993). Records such as these allow a grasp of a creative dynamic that unites cognition and intuition, error and chance, individual decision and collectively negotiated choice, under the concrete condition of materials and bodies. Through these traces we see refusals and simplifications paving the way to structural solutions; how choices of pattern, cut, and assembly articulate with cultural protocols and expectations of use, gradually stabilizing the creator's lexicon.

Rather than reconstructing a singular narrative of genesis, the analysis proposed in this investigation maps operations: what kinds of volumetric support recur? What varieties of fabric drape/weight address the same problem but in a different solution? What comparable repeat choices allow cohesion across collections? This archaeological method frames an approach that compares, contrasts, and connects evidence, thus opening the way for the critical readings.

5. Translational Acts in Balenciaga's Work: A Critical Reading

Rather than cataloguing styles, we focus on the meaning-making operations that constitute Balenciaga's language most evidently, observed through his productive trajectory: tradition/reinvention; structural innovation; ephemeral/permanent. Thus, along with the bibliography, the documented and immaterial traces lend us the chance to spot the process of cultural translation in action. By recognizing the process as an open project (Salles, 1998; 2006), and the image as dependent to its environment (Silveira, 2010) as well as its capacity to occupy several layers in time (Braudel, 1992), we treat the set of clues as shifting evidence of thought becoming form in the processes to be analyzed.

5.1. Tradition and Reinvention

In Balenciaga, tradition acts less as quotation and more as operational grammar retranslated into new formal enunciations. This creative network also depends on memory: childhood in the Basque Country, his mother's atelier and the first encounters with the codes of high society encoded by the Marquise of Casa Torres (Arzalluz, 2011). In one of his few interviews, the *couturier* referred to these memories (Merlin, 1968 as cited in Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 2020:34):

My father was a fisherman, and my mother a village seamstress. I was fortunate that in that town of Getaria, near San Sebastián, there was the summer residence of a great lady, the Marquise of Casa Torres. I had eyes only for her when she arrived at Sunday mass, stepping down from her Tilbury, with her long dresses and lace parasols. One day, gathering all my courage, I asked if I might visit her wardrobes. Amused, she agreed. And so I lived through marvelous months: every day after school, I worked with the Marquise's pressers on the top floor of her summer palace, caressing the laces, examining every fold, every stitch of those masterpieces. I was twelve when the Marquise authorized me to make her a first model. And you can imagine my joy when, the following Sunday, I saw the noble lady arrive at church wearing my dress! That is how I made my entry into haute couture and high society, at the same time.

These memories acquire translational force when connected to method. During his production phase in Spain, the purchase of licensed patterns and sketches from Parisian houses functioned as a technical laboratory. Added to this was the time he spent visiting Paris libraries examining fashion plates of garments from past centuries and sourcing his own collection of some illustrations and historical garments as a study archive (Jouve and Demornex, 1989; Arzalluz, 2011; Bowles, 2011). His process then evolved by contrast, attempt, and rejection. His confession, to his friend and tailoring atelier premier Juan Emilas, that he wished to work with light fabrics as fellow *couturier* Jacques Doucet managed, exposes the constitutive incompleteness of his project, and constitutes an impetus for him to experiment technically and formally throughout his career (Gil, 2023).

Here, the peplum serves as a paradigmatic thread of cultural translation (Silveira, 2010). This device had its origins in seventeenth-century cuts, and Balenciaga started using it in his work, showing up first in his Infanta line from 1939 and reappearing throughout his career, as seen in the evening ensemble of 1945, worn by Gloria Guinness, before Christian Dior made it famous with his *New Look* in 1947. It is not a literal translation: the peplum ceases to serve as historicist ornamentation and acts as a structural lever to redistribute mass in the silhouette, define the rhythm of the line, and discipline the ensemble through ornamental economy. In this passage of codes, the historical reference is reprogrammed and no longer speaks to courtly manners but to contemporary body architecture.

If read processually, the reprogramming occurs in the back-and-forth from the atelier and the world, through the various gestures of looking at images and archival garments, experimentation with the anatomy of female bodies and variations of cut and fabric and sketching and fittings that would work to stabilize the solution on the mannequin (Miller, 1993). By inserting historical repertoires, dress habits of potential clientele and historic periods, the tradition is reorganized and becomes a series of meaning operators, with the peplum as volumetric hinge and a pared down palette as clarity of form, rather than simply a repertoire of quotation. [Figure 2]

This reading begins to explain why certain elements, for example, the controlled declaration of volume, the moderation of ornamentation, and the waist positioned as a strategic point of support, return with variation in future decades. In temporal terms, we can identify a lexicon of operation that sits across collections without aspiring or exhausting itself in the seasonal event. Tradition, in this instance, is the terrain where Balenciaga reopens questions and finds solutions, through reiteration and edit, that circle in to form a language.

By shifting the peplum from the field of ornament to that of silhouette engineering, Balenciaga transmutes a historical sign into a constructive mechanism. It is here, within this articulation where tradition becomes a structural solution, that we turn to the following axe of analysis.

5.II. Structural Innovation

The practice of collecting historical garments, with emphasis on eighteenth-century attire and monastic and sacerdotal vestments, as well as antique fashion-plates allowed Balenciaga to gain a vocabulary which was not translated literally, but served as a grammar of operations involving support and volume distribution (Jouve and Demornex, 1989; Arzalluz, 2011; 2016; Bowles, 2011). According to Silveira's (2010) argument, this was a form of cultural translation, reorganizing historical signs that became the foundation for exploring cutting techniques in contemporary construction mechanisms.

In his process, the material was critical. Balenciaga worked with suppliers like the Swiss Abraham and the English Garigue to obtain fabrics appropriate to the silhouettes he envisioned, more often those that had specific shape memory qualities and provided a self-supporting volume, with minimal external armature (Arzalluz, 2011; de Lorenzo, 2021). The translational movement began with the material, manipulating weight, fall, and rigidity on the mannequin directly, followed by a sequence of pattern adjustments during fittings on models, and only then the act of stabilizing the cut (Arizzoli-Clémentel, 1985; Miller, 1993; Bowles, 2011). Within both types of ateliers of the Balenciaga Houses (dressmaking and tailoring) the relevance given to cloth can be viewed as two registers of the same structural intelligence, via the testimony of Balenciaga's former archivist, Marie-Andrée Jouve (2008:7):

For evening [...] a Balenciaga gown would stand out by virtue of its boldness and originality and the lustre of its colour and material, making the woman who wore it as aloof and inaccessible as a work of art; however, for day, a Balenciaga of classic simplicity could pass unnoticed in a crowd. Only an initiate would see the subtle cut and quality of fabric that characterized the Balenciaga style.

The silhouettes that define his language constitute a research program. Balenciaga leveraged the specificity of material and cut to displace the anchor of form, be it the waist, the back or hips;

Figure 2
 Historical reference and translation. Illustration of a 17th-century French dress and sketch of the "Infanta" dress (1939) by Cristóbal Balenciaga. Below, Balenciaga's evening ensemble (1945) and Dior's New Look (1947). Sources: Bibliothèque Nationale de France (available at <https://bit.ly/3Y9H7PH>. Accessed in 2024); Arzalluz (2016, p. 36); Bowles (2011, p. 28); Harper's Bazaar Brasil (available at <https://bit.ly/3Y9H7PH>. Accessed in 2024). Composite created by the authors for scholarly publication.



to redistribute mass and smooth the visual line. The 'barrel' coats (1947) articulated the refusal of the post-war mandated waistline, inverting expectations and rehearsing a posterior support of silhouette (Arzalluz, 2016). Two decades later, the economy of cut hit its limit form with the one-seam coat (1966) in which the sleeve and back were cut from a single panel.

Read processually (Salles, 1998; 2006), innovation appears in the traces. The stage between sketches and finished pieces, shows elongations, suppression of cuts, repositionings of support. Annotations or new variant sketches scribbled into the margins of the sheet attest to minor refusals guiding work toward stable solutions. [Figure 3]

Structural innovation constitutes an important aspect of Balenciaga's syntax, translating a new legibility of the female body in culture. Such invention signified a moment in which the body itself was contested, for instance in the arts, with the emergence of body art and performance practices in which artists used the body as material (Warr and Jones, 2012). Its representations in culture were reread by Balenciaga and formally transformed through both manipulation and perceptions of material.

This technical-translational operation elucidates the singularity of his work. Volumes defined by fabric, reduction of lines, and moderated use of color, are signs which recur and sustain effects of continuity through collections. By transferring tradition to the plane of structure and reducing form to its generators, Balenciaga created a language that provoked the cycle of ephemerality and anticipated the discussion of permanence that follows.

5.III. Tension Between Timelessness and Avant-Garde

More than timely collections, Balenciaga's body of work establishes new codes that cut across times, bodies, and disciplines with translational possibilities. The indissoluble relation of form and matter described above helps to understand why some solutions remain active after the seasonal cycle finishes, generating continuities that are compatible with a reading of lengthy duration.

Influenced by Braudel (1992), we treat Balenciaga's procedures as formal operators that permeate temporal layers of duration: short, medium and long. That is, they respond to the event of the season, consolidate ensembles of silhouettes in cycles over his career, and embark upon a structural lexicon that re-enacts itself through decades. From this standpoint, we propose to read the tension between ephemeral and permanent in his work.

This durability appears first in the history of fashion design itself. The late twentieth century generations from Japan and Belgium, such as Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, Martin Margiela, and Dries Van Noten, returned to the problem of volume and the abstraction of the silhouette as a site for research and new translations. In the text of the catalogue of the exhibition *Fashion Game Changers: reinventing the 20th-century silhouette*

Figure 3
Drawing-to-garment translation, 1952. Left: sketch for a Summer 1952 look. Center: final garment photographed for Harper's Bazaar (1952). Right: atelier sheet with fabric indication and variant sketches. Blue overlay lines added by the authors highlight proportional continuities from sketch to garment. Sources: de Lorenzo (2021, p. 492), Flickr and Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa (both available at <https://tinyurl.com/mryxsntb> and <https://tinyurl.com/mryxsntb>. Accessed in 2024). Composite and blue overlay lines created by the authors for scholarly purposes only.



at the MoMu – Fashion Museum Antwerp (Arzalluz et al., 2016), the “family” of innovations linking the 1920s to the 1980s finds a central knot in Balenciaga, and his study of form’s paring down became a core instrument for new experimentations (Arzalluz, 2016). Maison Balenciaga itself reactivated this lexicon at different intervals, with new creative directions. With Nicolas Ghesquière as creative director between 1997 and 2012, critics identified direct dialogues with abstraction, translated into forms at times organic, at times architectural (Mendiola, 2021). In 2021, the return to *haute couture* under Demna’s direction depended on an immersion into the archives: garments, prototypes, notebooks and annotations regarded by the designer as vestiges of the House’s primary operations, products of its creative potential that he then rearticulated in contemporary language (Bowles, 2021). On the collection itself, Demna processually translated inherited operators into new modes of use and visibility, as in the case of millinery hats, tailoring in kimono inflections, and the architecture of black.

The permanence of his language becomes even more evident when it spills into other fields of culture. In dialogue with the arts, the proximity to sculptor Eduardo Chillida proposes strong readings. The exhibition at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, *Chillida/Balenciaga. Plying Form*, framed the encounter between the two Basque creators as a study of form. [Figure 4]

Aside from shared roots and a friendship, both couturier and sculptor worked their respective languages through subtraction and economy, allowing for void and space to be part of the construction (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 2024). The work *Homenaje a Balenciaga* (1990) resolves this by drawing, in iron, a silhouette suggested by intervals: a sort of “molding” of air that recalls Balenciaga’s ways of articulating volume and environment.

Architecture provides yet another site of inquiry. In the new V&A East building project by O’Donnell & Tuomey (2020), the architects describe a path that starts with an observation about the way Vermeer represented a dress sleeve, passes through Yamamoto’s designs, and finds, in a Balenciaga exhibition held in the original V&A building, x-rays of garments that reveal the logic of its supports and the topology of cuts. [Figure 5]

The notion of a precast concrete envelope that “drapes” the building’s internal layers reenacts, in constructed space, Balenciaga’s structural logics: the exterior drapes, the structure responds, and what lies in the interval is the “body”, what collects experience. Again, here we have the *couturier’s* language translated into another medium, without losing its operative core, which allows his work to be revisited and re-articulated in the plural times of culture.

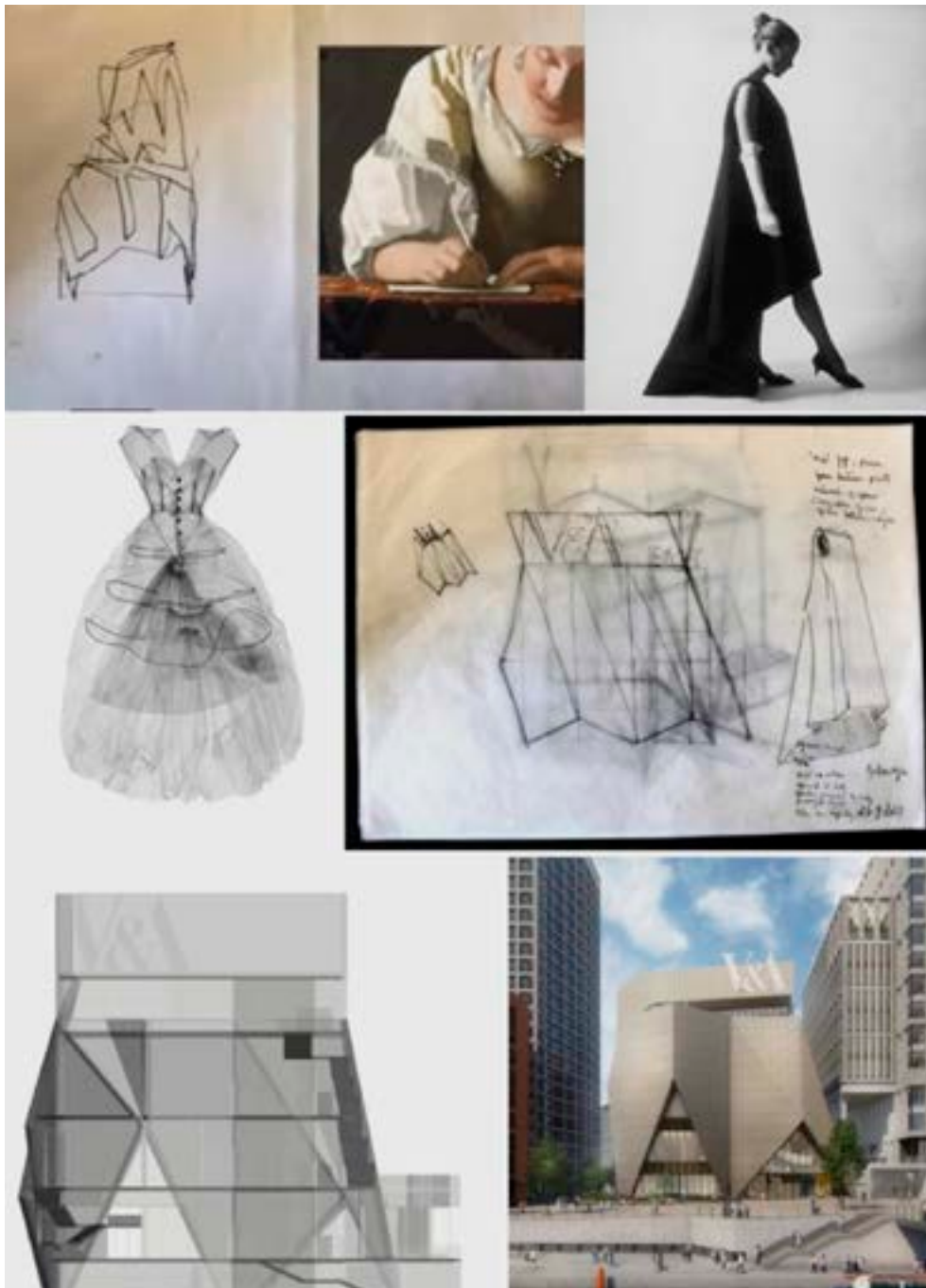
These cases, taken in series, sustain a reading of Balenciaga’s *oeuvre* as a language which creates a lexicon that lasts and migrates between authors, fields, and eras. From a processual standpoint we can observe repetition with a difference: problems re-opened and newly re-resolved, by other agents, with new materials. From a translational point of view, these are passages



Figure 4
Eduardo Chillida, *Homenaje a Balenciaga*:
from study to sculpture. Left: print
from the study series for *Homenaje a
Balenciaga*, 1987-88. Right: Eduardo
Chillida with the *Homenaje a Balenciaga*
sculpture (1990). Sources: Museo Chillida
Leku and Galeria Cortina (both available at
<https://tinyurl.com/2sjtr7xd> and <https://tinyurl.com/4emwfcnu>. Accessed in Dec
2024). Composite created by the authors for
scholarly purposes only.

Figure 5

From dress to building: process sequence for the V&A East project (2017-2018) by O'Donnell + Tuomey. Studies move from visual references (Vermeer sleeve; Balenciaga dress and X-ray) to tracing-paper structural sketches, façade/section diagrams, and the final exterior rendering. Sources: V&A available at <https://tinyurl.com/yxcm36yz>. Accessed 2024), O'Donnell and Tuomey (2020), and Irenebrination blog (available at <https://tinyurl.com/4zxhdf26>. Accessed 19 Dec 2024). Composite created by the authors for scholarly purposes only.



between systems that constantly feed each other, from *haute couture* to *prêt-à-porter*, from fashion to the arts and architecture, while maintaining the roles of support, distribution and reduction; even as the signs change. It is in this tension between ephemeral and permanent that a cultural language's strength lies, not in fixed forms, but in codes that persist precisely because they remain available for translation.

6. Conclusions

We return to our initial hypothesis: the creative process of Cristóbal Balenciaga reveals itself as cultural translation, transforming memories, references, and techniques into a singular authorial language. Using a processual-translational framework and a temporal reading inspired by Braudel, we illustrated that this language is not reducible to the event of the collection. Rather, it is comprised of a syntax of operators, or procedures that are inscribed across distinct layers of duration, in relation to both ephemeral and durable elements. In this sense, the permanence of the Balenciaga gesture comes across as a grammar of procedures that recur and are updated, like the rearrangement of mass in the silhouette, the economy of cuts, and the dialogue with material as co-author. We argued that these operators resurface beyond their original time and field, continuing to influence authors and supporting dialogues with later decades, art and architecture. This is what enables the strength of his vocabulary to persist beyond the seasonal cycle. This is, in processual terms, the repetition with a difference, and in translational terms, the passage across systems that have preserved functions even though their signs change.

From the perspective of fashion studies, the contribution of this paper lies in shifting analysis away from a catalogue of "styles" and towards an examination of the meaning-making operations that produce language. The mobilization of a theoretical framework largely developed within the study of process criticism, which still has little international reach in the field, supports the thesis that form can be read as a continuous negotiation between cognition and intuition, individual and collective decisions, error and chance, material and context. Methodologically, the archaeology of process, which includes the investigation of material traces and immaterial conditions of creation, proved to be a productive way to follow the networked movements of creation rather than simply seek genesis linearity or a single archive.

That said, there are limitations and new potentials. The lack of wide access to primary sources precludes the granularity of some readings and underscores the opacity of practice. As a way forward, the research points the need to: (i) undertake primary material analysis of archival collections; (ii) explore related archives to expand the network, such as textile suppliers and partner ateliers; (iii) pursue comparative studies with other designer-translators - the antecedent or influence on Balenciaga's creation e.g. Vionnet, and those who were in turn somehow influenced by Balenciaga, such as Miyake and Kawakubo; (iv) explore how digital methods might translate the principles of

genetic criticism into fashion analysis. With tools such as pattern versioning, for example, the evolution of the creative gesture can be mapped with unparalleled accuracy to reveal the micro-decisions that constitute a designer's syntax over time.

Finally, this research resonates with current sustainable practices, which re-conceptualize the tension between ephemeral and permanent in a new way. If the speed of novelty is unraveling ecological and social limits, "permanence" transcends the status of "classic" garments and comes to designate creative procedures that render forms legible, reusable, and re-contextualizable. In this context, the processual reading of Balenciaga offers both a method for historical understanding and criteria for the present. To privilege operators of clear cultural meaning, economy of means, and material intelligence becomes a way of bringing creation, consumption, and responsibility into alignment.

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The Riva Fund in Barthesian Perspective

Abstract

In this investigation, I will analyze unsigned drawings from the Riva Fund archive at the Historical Archive of the Basque Country. My goal is to classify and discuss them as material that formed part of Cristóbal Balenciaga's design process. My analytical starting point is Roland Barthes' essay 'Language and Clothing' (2013 [1959]), in which he sets out the theoretical arguments that have made it difficult to approach clothing, particularly everyday dress, as an object of research. At the same time, Barthes identifies a type of drawing that, in his view, can provide the basis for such an analytical study.

The Riva Fund contains unsigned drawings depicting models and garments created by Balenciaga. This study examines whether, and to what extent, these drawings correspond to the typology identified by Barthes in 1959. The central question is therefore the following: if some of these drawings do conform to this typology, and if they can be chronologically classified, is it possible to extend the analysis of Balenciaga's garments and designs? More specifically, could a closer study be undertaken, for example, of when certain elements emerge and disappear, or of how specific features are reused across designs from different seasons?

For this research, I will consider, among others, secondary sources by Andy Stafford (2013) and Nicole Pellegrin (2005). Both authors defend the validity and usefulness of Roland Barthes' interdisciplinary research on clothing and fashion. They also agree that Barthes' writing on clothing and fashion comprises a range of texts aimed at different audiences, produced both before and after his seminal work *The Fashion System* (1985a [1967]). In addition, I will pay attention to Emmanuelle Dirix's article *The Role of Drawing in Fashion* (2013) which contains a useful analysis of the functions that drawings have in fashion to this day.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Design Process /
Drawings / Riva Fund

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The Riva Fund in Barthesian Perspective

This study introduces the Riva Fund of the Historical Archive of the Basque Country¹, as new source for the study of Cristóbal Balenciaga's (1895-1972) work and its historical context. Specifically, this material provide new insights into Balenciaga's technique, work and legacy, since the hand-drawn sketches provide insight into the work process developed in his Parisian haute couture house. In other words, working with this documentary fund can reveal previously unknown elements and characteristics of the design process that Balenciaga developed, primarily during the 1950s, as well as the work process that occurred in his atelier during the same decade². Furthermore, this material will allow us to understand, in its complexity and in detail, the design process of Balenciaga, integrating existing research, and opening new lines of investigation.

For this purpose, I will bring together material of two different forms created in 1950s Paris: extracts of the essay by Roland Barthes (1915-1980), 'Language and Clothing' (2013 [1959])³, and different documents from the Riva Fund, as well as part of their history. Specifically, these documents consist of unsigned sketches, hand-drawn depictions of designs by Balenciaga.

By combining these materials, I bring into dialogue works by two contemporary authors with no documented evidence of direct influence, although they worked and lived in the same city. My analysis also involves applying to the study of Balenciaga's haute couture design processes methodological concepts that Barthes considered appropriate, in a purely hypothetical way, for developing a new analytical framework of human 'everyday' clothing. I will undertake this transposition because I believe that the passage of time allows me to combine the works of two key authors in the history of fashion and its study.

Furthermore, by resorting to this coupling I shall demonstrate the utility, analytical value, and contemporary relevance of Barthes' writing on fashion and clothing. Barthes offers a kind of analysis which, after attempting to define it, he then refuses to address in 1959, due to obstacles that would probably not be so relevant today. The approach also involves trying to elaborate a concrete application of a hypothetical methodological element proposed by Barthes at the beginning of his foundational and pioneering interdisciplinary study on fashion and clothing between 1957 and 1969 (Stafford, 2013; Pellegrin, 2005). I mention this because the essay in question was written two years after he began his study on women's clothing, as described in fashion magazines, in 1957 (Barthes, 2010: ix)⁴. A study which, according to him, focused on dress as an 'everyday' object⁵, as well as an object

¹ It was acquired by the Department of Culture and Language Policy of the Basque Government from the Italian designer Lorenzo Riva (1938-2023) in December 2022. <https://www.irekia.euskadi.eus/en/news/83047-gobierno-vasco-amplia-patrimonio-documental-euskadi-con-adquisicion-mas-000-dibujos-documentos-cristobal-balenciaga-equipo> (Accessed 30.11.2025)

² I am referring to Balenciaga's distinctive ability to mobilize the tools, techniques, and technologies of haute couture in order to connect and reconcile references from diverse sources, while practicing his craft as a creator of couture models and garments.

³ Reedited, in Marty, E. (ed.), *Barthes. Roland. Œuvres complètes*, vol. I., 1942-1962, Paris: Seuil.

⁴ Barthes writes, for the first time, Fashion with a capital F in the sense of 'fashion' to maintain the distinction with 'fad', in *Système de la Mode* (1967). In fact, this distinction is preserved in the Spanish translation of the book (1978, 2003), and we considered it appropriate to retain it.

⁵ Objects are used by people on a daily basis.

of communication created by human beings. Barthes sought to identify a way to examine it in order to theoretically -and not metaphorically- substantiate the existence of the 'language of dress' (Barthes, 1985b:43).⁶

In this context, the study also engages with contemporary concerns within the framework of investigations into Balenciaga's technique⁷. This means that developing the type of analysis that Barthes outlined in 1959 can be useful today for understanding the performative character of Balenciaga's creative process. That is, for understanding the design process through which Balenciaga created the silhouettes and garments commercialized by the House. In fact, Wissinger argues that discussions of fashion performativity draw on Barthes (2016: 285-300).

In other words, this research also aims to show that Barthes' writing allows us to understand in detail the unique way in which Balenciaga created designs that, as such, facilitated and influenced the lives of their users. This is so because, among other things, they conditioned their users' movements and attitudes, as well as the way they were perceived in social spaces; they may be read as material objects through which Balenciaga articulated and circulated his distinctive vision of clothing and fashion.

In fact, this article extends the research undertaken for the doctoral thesis entitled, "The Performativity of fashion dress: The Barthesian fashion dress of Maison Martin Margiela (1967, 1997)".⁸ First, because the article 'Language and Clothing', due to its conciseness and length, is one of the simplest materials used in that thesis, which had a different purpose: to understand and explain the performative character of another fashion dress. Specifically, the dress created by the designer and artist Martin Margiela (Genk, 1957), within the framework of Maison Martin Margiela, during a specific period (1988-1997). Second, because in this research, the same text is used in a similar way for the aforementioned purpose. In short, that thesis used the same text to interpret Margiela's work through drawings of garments and outfits that he produced by hand during the early years of his fashion house. Here, a few elements from the same text allow us to present unsigned drawings of Balenciaga garments and models as documents that allow us to know and study his creative process.

To connect these two materials, section 1 will introduce the previously mentioned article, also presenting the methodological element I have already referred to. Then, in section 2, I will combine elements from both materials to present the Riva Fund as a new archival corpus that allows us to understand the technique, and Balenciaga's dress. Finally, the conclusions of this research will be presented.

1. 'Language and Clothing' (1959) by Roland Barthes

During the 1950s in Paris, several key events occurred that shaped the history of fashion. Among them, the following stand out: Cristóbal Balenciaga's "semi-fitted" model was first marketed

⁶ Read interview conducted by Raymond Bellour (1985), 'On the Fashion System and the Structural Analysis of Narratives', in *The Grain of the Voice. Interviews 1962-1980*, 43-55.

⁷ By technique, I mean Balenciaga's distinctive ability to deploy the tools and working methods of haute couture to bring together references from diverse origins in a highly personal way.

(1951), and original variations of this design (or copies of original variations) could be observed in different social spaces⁹. For example, worn by its users, as well as photographed or illustrated in fashion magazines aimed at fashion-loving and fashion-conscious women. A few years later, in 1957, Balenciaga presented his much criticized but admired “sack dress”, and Barthes began to develop a pioneering and fundamental interdisciplinary study of fashion and clothing (Stafford, 2013; Pellegrin, 2005). In fact, Patrizia Calefato (2017:367) reminds us that it is in this period that the birth of fashion theory and studies as autonomous fields is situated, based on their recognition as cultural studies. As I have already said that same year Barthes began his writing about fashion and clothing, and two years later, in 1959, the article ‘Language and Clothing’ was published.

In that article, Barthes outlined a brief history of the study of dress. Drawing on works from different periods and perspectives, he points out that the history of dress only begins with Romanticism.¹⁰ He further argues that the methodological difficulty that hinders addressing clothing as an object of research lies in how clothing is defined in these texts. As noted above, Barthes identified methodological elements that, hypothetically, would facilitate his analysis, but refrained from pursuing it for reasons discussed later, along with the methodological elements in question.

Before this, however, it may be helpful to introduce and contextualize this text and briefly present some of the interpretations the essay has generated.

Andy Stafford (2013) proposed a new way of reading Barthes’s writing on fashion and clothing. This new reading (also applied by him) consisted of reading Barthes’ seminal book *The Fashion System*, and the articles he wrote from 1957 to 1969, as a single “body of writing” (120). He proposed dividing this corpus into three chronological thematic parts: (1) History of Fashion (1957-1960); (2) Systems and Structures (1960-1967); (3) Debates and Interpretations of Fashion (1967-1969). Within this framework, Stafford considered the article ‘Language and Clothing’ a key text within the first period. That is, from the phase in which Barthes, according to Stafford, focused his research on the history of fashion, until he realized that the study of forms of dress was too broad and perhaps useless (7-13). It also belongs to the phase in which Barthes (based on his interest in semiological study) laid out the groundwork for the transition to the topic mentioned in the second part.¹¹ In short, for Stafford, Barthes’s writings on fashion and clothing are clearly interdisciplinary and, in fact, they were published in a wide variety of French journals.¹²

Before Stafford, Olivier Burgelin (1996, 81-100), in view of the importance and complexity of *The Fashion System*, did not propose an overall reading of Barthes’ fashion writings, but offered a detailed reading of them (81). He also elaborated on a specific reading of this essay. In fact, when Burgelin sought to better understand Barthes’s interest in clothing, he analyzed a corpus consisting of ‘Language and Clothing’, as well as other articles and interviews. As Burgelin sees it, Barthes examined the

⁸ By *fashion dress*, I refer to the Maison Martin Margiela collections designed by Martin Margiela during a specific period of his tenure at the House. Title translated by the present researcher; PhD thesis defended at the Faculty of Fine Arts, UPV/EHU, February 2025.

⁹ I am referring to the model, as well as to the variations of that model designed by Balenciaga and disseminated and marketed through his House.

¹⁰ Barthes, despite mentioning some other works, presented this article as a reading of the following five works: *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) (1884-1955), by John Carl Flügel; *Kleidung, Kleidung, Mode und Mensch. Versuch einer psychologischen Deutung* (1956), by Franz Kiener; *Histoire du Costume* (1956), by Henny Harald Hansen; and *Historic Costuming* (1936), by Nevil Truman. But he also highlighted the *Psychologies*, which he defined as a light and interesting literature on dress; *Principes de phonologie* (1940), by Nikolai Trubetskoy (1890-1938) and, *Three Centuries of Women’s Fashion, a Quantitative Analysis* (1940), by Jane Richardson Hanks (1908-2014) and Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876-1960).

¹¹ According to Stafford, Barthes did so by specifying how two early twentieth-century investigations could serve as the basis for a new study of “clothing”: that proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), grounded in a branch of linguistics, and the phonological analysis developed by Nikolai Trubetskoy (1890-1938).

¹² For example, some were published in journals as diverse as *Annales*, *Critique*, or *Communications*, while others appeared in popular magazines such as *Marie Claire* or even in a magazine for nurses.

different ways in which clothing had been described and analyzed in different fashion books from different periods. He also offers a brief critique of the historiography of dress. In doing so, he identifies the factors that, in his view, had prevented the emergence of a formal and systematic examination of clothing, as well as those that might facilitate it. He further articulates — more implicitly than explicitly — his main concerns regarding the ways in which clothing had been described and analysed. This critique reveals his early interest in studying the material garment itself; that is, approaching dress as it was worn and experienced in the society of his time. Nicole Pellegrin (2005), for her part, expanded Stafford's proposed approach.¹³ She did so by arguing that the three moments identified by Stafford are not sequential, but rather interconnected, indicating three directions, three interests. She suggest that Barthes had implemented a political and aesthetic program in all his works (and in his life), and not only in his writings on fashion and clothes (127).

Also, according to Pellegrin, the criticism Barthes received, as well as certain aspects of the complexity, novelty, originality, and "high-risk interdisciplinary work", were prompted because his study involved the use, adaptation, combination, and development of notions and hypotheses that were unknown and new in France. Furthermore, he did so to establish pioneering and "contemporary, not nostalgic, analysis of consumerist ideologies". In fact, Pellegrin argues that in 'Language and Clothing', Barthes explored and disseminated the works of authors unknown to French specialists in the field. In this regard, Wissinger (2016) indicates that many of these works have since become essential for the study of fashion and clothing.

Finally, Stafford and Pellegrin agree that the disparity and number of citations (direct and indirect) of Barthes's research demonstrate its interdisciplinary nature, as well as its continued relevance. Both authors argue that Barthes's research remains a complex and useful field of study that still requires further exploration.

On the other hand, according to Calefato (2017), Barthes laid the foundations of fashion theory when he defined fashion as a "social discourse" or "a system of signs," when he wrote about "written" and "described" fashion that has become a language in his book, *The Fashion System*, and also when he wrote about "real" fashion considered as a social practice in almost all of his essays (367). Calefato also found in Barthes's writings a useful basis for clarifying what it means to conceive of fashion theory as a multiple field of study. In fact, for her, the way women appear in the analysis of Barthes's seminal book mentioned above shows us that fashion theory must be a broad, complex, and multifaceted field of study that delves into the power of the human body as a producer of unexpected meanings and as the site of social constraints and stereotypes experienced by the human body (373).

In light of the above, the following points stand out from the essay in question:

- I. Barthes identified the kind of illustrations that, methodologically, could be most accurate for investigating clothing, in what he

¹³ According to Pellegrin, she formulated this expansion by following Stafford as well as Jean-Baptiste Farges.

considered the beginning of the history of dress. According to him, this was a relatively recent history since he maintains that it didn't really begin until the Romantic period (between the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries).

He introduced this methodological point by referring to an event he situates in this period: when theater actors asked painters and designers to create period dress based on real social uses, and painters began openly reconstructing roles and myths—kings, queens, and nobles (22). This fact had two methodological consequences that prevented the development of a formal analysis of clothing:

Clothing was analysed as an anthology of selected garments, chosen in accordance with the needs of Romantic drama, giving the impression that ordinary people had never been dressed. The designer's attention was directed towards the picturesque rather than towards design principles or the system as a whole.

Furthermore, Barthes added that the the apparent ease of drawing probably seriously compromised the history of clothing. Specifically, because for him, "graphic, spontaneous representation removed all speculative work; an imperfectly established generality was being actualized on the spot" (23). In this sense, Barthes (without reproducing any examples) presented the type of drawing that, for him, would facilitate the study he so desired, as follows:

"This is why the most methodologically sound illustrations are, in my view, those drawings which are overtly schematic, those which aim to arrive at a state of principle, or abstraction, with regard to the vestimentary system of a particular epoch, such as those by Nevil Truman in *Historic Costuming*." (23)

- II. Barthes in a purely hypothetical way argues that we must look for clothing's unit of meaning in true functions, oppositions, distinctions and congruences, isolating the units that really do hold meaning (29).¹⁴

In fact, for him, this type of analysis would bring to light the truly meaningful units of the "vestimentary continuum". These are, for him, the simple (and remotely significant) variations, such as leather buttons / other buttons, but above all, they are "true functions of functions," the "combinatorial variations" (for example, tweed / leather buttons / front pocket), as well as the absence of elements (for example, not wearing a tie) (29).

As discussed earlier, Barthes refrained from undertaking the type of study that he detailed in the essay in question. He refrained from demonstrating the validity of such a methodological element for several reasons, two of which deserve highlighting: first, he considered it premature to undertake this type of analysis due to its scope. This is because carrying it out required resorting to an extensive informational corpus (i.e., collecting, classifying, and working with a large amount of very diverse information), something that only a group of researchers could manage. Second, at the end of the article, Barthes identified a new object of analysis

¹⁴ For him, this is because dress is a kind of endless text, and it is therefore necessary to learn how to delimit its signifying units, which is a very difficult undertaking (28).

whose study would facilitate the achievement of his research objective (recall, demonstrating the existence of the language of dress). Namely: "fashion clothing that is presented in both graphic or descriptive form in newspapers and magazines", according to Barthes (29). I refer here also to a new study object that years after, Barthes, in the book *The Fashion System*, would call 'Fashion clothing'. He presents it as the clothing composed of the garments he encounters each time he opens a fashion magazine; as the dress that is composed of the 'image-clothing', as well as the 'written clothing' (or described clothing); and, as the clothing that presents - through photography or drawing, as well as through writing - the same reality: that is, the 'real clothing' whose structure, as Barthes teaches us, can only be technological because its units can only be the distinctive traces of the processes of its manufacture, of its materialization (2010, 3-5).

Despite the limitations pointed out by Barthes, his work allows us to begin engaging with documents from the Riva Fund with a clear objective: to understand, in all its complexity, the design process behind Balenciaga's models and their variations.

2. Riva Fund and 'Language and Clothing'

Various private and public initiatives undertaken between from 1982 to 2022 facilitated the establishment of the Riva Fund of the Historical Archive of the Basque Country in December 2022.¹⁵ They also made possible the opening of the exhibition *Sketches from the House of Balenciaga 1943-1964 Riva Collection. Historical Archive of the Basque Country* at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria (CBM) in March 2023.

In this regard, we are deeply grateful to the Italian tailor and fashion designer Lorenzo Riva (1938-2023)¹⁶, as well as to his partner and lifelong companion, Luigi Valietti. Firstly, because for almost 40 years (from 1982 to 2021), they preserved the archive of nearly 10.000 original documents belonging to the House of Balenciaga, from which the Riva Fund originates.¹⁷ Then, because at the beginning of 2021 they entrusted Art Consulting with the preservation and dissemination of the documents. Finally, because as Riva explained, the only reason he accepted and kept the documents was to save 'precious' and 'valuable' material by which, moreover, he did not want to be influenced¹⁸ and which might otherwise have been lost during a period of turmoil within the House (Riva, 2021:19:40 / 55:45).

In that exhibition, 120 drawings (classified as sketches) and documents from the Riva Fund were displayed. During my visit to that exhibition, many specific documents caught my attention. However, what impressed me most was the way in which seeing different types of documents on display produced a particular understanding of Balenciaga's work. In fact, this may have been precisely what led Lorenzo Riva to preserve the different drawings, since he described them as follows:

¹⁵ See <https://www.irekia.euskadi.eus/es/news/83047-gobierno-vasco-amplia-patrimonio-documental-euskadi-con-adquisicion-mas-000-dibujos-documentos-cristobal-balenciaga-equipo> (Accessed 12 July 2025)

¹⁶ Riva was the artistic director of the House of Balenciaga between 1980 and 1982. See "Biography" on Lorenzo Riva's official website, <https://www.lorenzoriva.com> (Accessed 28 July 2025)

¹⁷ According to the CBM (2023), Riva received these documents as payment in kind as part of the compensation he was granted upon leaving the House in 1982. Riva (2021) explains that he kept the material exactly as it had been delivered to him — inside red boxes — until Valietti secured it by filing it in folders (22:29 / 55:45).

¹⁸ See the Press Release for the exhibition.

Each drawing is a project containing the seed of an idea destined to become the dream of an entire generation of women. The drawings lead us behind the scenes at a legendary atelier, where the clothes that made fashion history in the 1950s were created. (Riva, cited by Art Consulting, 2021).¹⁹

The next section presents, classified into four groups, the different types of drawings from the fund that most caught my attention and explain why. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the work I carried out with the drawings of the first type, after having reviewed other digitized documents held at the Basque Country Historical Archive.

The documents discussed here include:

Unsigned and undated documents, consisting of drawings (again, a garment sketch created by Balenciaga), which have similarities to and differences from the type of fashion drawing discussed by Barthes (1959) [Figure 1 and Figure 2]. These documents, taken together, seem to show variations in Balenciaga's semi-fitted model. Specifically, the variations concern the garments covering the upper body. In fact, when viewed as a group, it can be inferred that the shapes of the garments covering the lower body remain consistent, while the garments that are subject to variations are those covering the upper body.

Documents composed of unconventional, bold, and raw drawings, due to the unusual rendering of faces, which make it difficult to determine gender. Their strangeness, boldness, and rawness are also due to the agile and strong lines, as well as the clarity and apparent fidelity with which the garments are represented: that is, the volume and shape they create when worn. In addition, many of these drawings, bearing a London dateline, consist of two graphic representations of the same garment, which appear to have been executed by different hands [Figure 3].

Unsigned and undated documents that, through various elements (notes, drawings, fabric scraps), provide information about the process of the development of a design. For example [Figure 4]: a drawing in which a garment is clumsily (even humorously, and one might say fearlessly) represented; notes that provide technical information about the model shown (registration number, name of the mannequin, etc.), as well as precise information regarding the process of its crafting; and in some cases, they also include fabric samples and information about their supplier. Documents of this type were the most prevalent in this exhibition.

These three types of documents reflect the absolute prominence of the garments and designs created by Balenciaga in the fund. The different strokes—that is, the various ways in which the drawings were formed—as well as the calligraphy present in many of them, allow us to assume that they were made by different people. Therefore, these drawings exemplify what Valeriano Bozal (1987) tells us about the act of representation through plastic or graphic procedures. According to Bozal, these acts always involve the “subject” who creates them, as well as the

¹⁹ See ‘Sketches from the House of Balenciaga 1943-1964. Riva Collection’, in Art Consulting, <https://artconsulting.net/projects/balenciaga-museum-riva-collection/> (Accessed 07.12.2025)



Figure 1
(Ref. 467_ALBUN_23_0032)
Riva Fund, © Historical Archive of
the Basque Country

Figure 2
(Ref. 0467_0471_0001)
Riva Fund, © Historical Archive of
the Basque Country



Figure 3
(Ref. 0467_ALBUN9_0025)
Riva Fund, © Historical Archive of
the Basque Country

Figure 4
(Ref. 0467_0502_0001)
Riva Fund, © Historical Archive of
the Basque Country

"rhythm" that depends solely on him. That is, on the subject's perception of the real object represented, the attention they pay to one or another element (or characteristic) of the represented object, and the way in which he or she isolates, through the act of representation and with the chosen tool, a spatial and temporal perception, transforming what is seen into a "figure" (19-20). On the other hand, the fact that most of the documents are undated complicates the analysis. It is for this reason that working with them would greatly facilitate a more thorough understanding of the history and characteristics of the models represented.

Examining many of the digitized documents in this institutional archive enabled me, first, to identify a significant number of drawings of the first type mentioned and, secondly, to observe that only a few are dated. I then compare these drawings and the type of drawing Barthes proposes as suitable for the formal analysis of dress. Before elaborating on that topic, it is worth noting that it was while looking at these drawings that I began to see the potential of working with different types of documents depicting the same model could offer; in this way the material could truly be used to its full potential. I will elaborate on this point at the end of this section.

The drawings of the first type are similar to those discussed by Barthes for several reasons. For example, they may be considered individual drawings in which, through a few clean strokes, the aim is to represent, in an abstracted and simplified way, the outlines of the garments in frontal view of similar, but not identical, garments. In fact, most of the garments depicted in these drawings appear to be variations of Balenciaga's "semi-fitted model". Therefore, these drawings, when viewed as a group and arranged chronologically, would allow us to determine when a specific element appears or disappears from a particular model, giving rise to a variation that produces the transformation of that model into another. And they could also allow us to identify what Barthes terms "the units that truly have meaning": the simple oppositions that may potentially carry meaning, but above all, the "combinatorial variants", as well as the absence of elements²⁰. In short, this is a type of drawing that allows us to identify the units that, I repeat, according to Barthes, are revealed through the formal analysis of clothing.

But at the same time, these drawings can also be read as a kind of spontaneous sketch in which a generalized version of a specific model has been loosely sketched, according to Barthes (23). However, in the case at hand, the opposite is the case, since these drawings represent a well-established general version of the semi-fitted model. They depict one of the characteristics of Balenciaga's model that has attracted considerable scholarly attention and design inspiration. The space that his semi-fitted model created space around the upper body of women who first wore it (from 1951 onwards), the space he carved out around a larger part of the body of the women who wore the "sack dress" later (from 1957 onwards), as well as the open space with which Balenciaga, in his later stage, surrounded the body of the women who wore his more abstract designs of the 1960s. Therefore, this suggests that the observation of these chronologically grouped

²⁰ For Barthes, conversely, learning to decipher the accumulations of signifiers produced in most garments through a redundancy of messages could provide the means to elaborate a structural definition of taste (29).

and ordered drawings allows one to hypothesize that they are developments of the semi-fitted model: first, the sack dress, then, the more abstract garments presented during the last years of Balenciaga's professional activity.

Based on the above, and considering that numerous drawings of this first type exist in the Riva Fund, I can surmise, though not definitively state, the following regarding the authorship and function of these drawings during the design and /or production processes at the House: it is highly probable that they were created to facilitate and expedite the design process, as well as the production of variations of Balenciaga's semi-fitted model. It therefore seems unlikely that these drawings were created entirely by Balenciaga. This hypothesis has emerged because hand-drawn tracings of these drawings have been found in the Historical Archive of the Basque Country. Also, because in the drawings analyzed, the shape of the garment's outline remains consistent while the changes (more precisely, the variations) occur in the garment's construction details (for example, in the position and direction of seams), as well as by adding new elements. Overall, because despite the presence of tracings, examining these drawings together allows us to identify versions of Balenciaga's semi-fitted model, since many of them depict garments with very similar, albeit not identical, elements and characteristics.

However, it is crucial to identify the author (or authors) of these drawings. Accordingly, it is possible that they were created by Balenciaga himself or by someone familiar with his work, as well as his needs, aspirations, and desires.

Moreover, this makes it necessary to emphasize that the type of drawing we have just described does not fit, for various reasons, into the established classifications of drawings produced within the fashion industry. For example, they cannot be classified as fashion illustrations created to promote products through various channels to increase sales. Nor can they be classified as garment sketches through which the author aims to depict something new. Rather, these drawings belong to a category that shares features with the types mentioned above, without fully conforming to any of them. They constitute a unique type of drawing, given that its elements and characteristics seem to meet specific needs arising during the design process within a specific context: the House of Balenciaga. This should be understood within a context shaped by the rhythms set by the fashion system, as well as by the way in which Balenciaga resisted following them.

On the other hand, the type of drawing we are discussing cannot be classified as a new type of drawing within the field of fashion. In fact, both its characteristics and its very existence are best understood in light of one of the central aspects of the drawing training offered at the renowned Fashion Department of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. Since the late 1960s, the Academy's curriculum has been distinguished by the central role it assigns to drawing as a core component of students' training. According to Emmanuelle Dirix (2013), this pedagogical approach is defined by two key features: from the first year onward, students

are encouraged to use drawing to develop a personal visual vocabulary and their own design style; moreover, they are taught to conceive their drawings as unfinished sketches to which they can return repeatedly, adapting them for different purposes (130).

Given the above, the question arises of how to continue working, in a structured way, with the drawings of the first type, both individually and in relation to drawings of the other two types mentioned, as well as with the remaining documents (many of them handwritten) that comprise the Riva Fund. To begin with, this new lot of material can be described as overwhelming due to its sheer volume (it consists of 8.362 documents) and the diversity of the documents it contains. It also comprises material that must be understood through the study of its history. To make effective use of this material, it is necessary pursuing two parallel approaches: on the one hand, analyzing and examining the different types of elements (documents, drawings) that comprise it; on the other hand, establishing connections between (that is, documents from the archive) with a purpose: for example, to expand knowledge about the design process of variations of the semi-fitted model, as well as its development.

In this regard, expanding current research requires forming an interdisciplinary working team, establishing a shared workspace, and establishing procedures for knowledge sharing. Such a team would include specialists in different aspects of Balenciaga's work, his designs, and their historical context, as well as researchers experienced in interpreting knowledge generated through the analysis of visual representations and design objects. Experts in garment construction and in Balenciaga's models and their variations — i.e., in what Barthes terms his "real-technological clothing" — would be essential, as they would enable the classification and chronological sequencing of different types of drawings depicting a specific model. This would also require a shared workspace designed to support both the grouping and observation of printed reproductions of the digitized drawings as well as their comparison with reproductions of the other types of documents that make up the Riva Fund.

3. Conclusions

A central element of Barthes's research on clothing and fashion allows us to frame the Riva Fund from the Historical Archive of the Basque Country as new material for interdisciplinary research on technique, dress, and Balenciaga's legacy. In other words, it focuses on the formal work Balenciaga developed through the design processes he carried out during the final decades of his professional career.

In this respect, Barthes's writing allows us to work with this archival collection (new material) more effectively for several reasons. It allows us to unravel its complexity, and will support future research comparing the similarities and differences between the design processes of two key figures in the history of contemporary fashion: Cristóbal Balenciaga and Martin Margiela.

Furthermore, pursuing this expanded Balenciaga–Barthes line of research with the same aim requires a collaborative approach. This, in turn, entails integrating into a single research project previous investigations — conducted across different fields and periods — focused on Balenciaga’s dress and technique, while also identifying new lines of inquiry. Finally, we argue that a thematic classification of the documents — i.e., sorting them according to the specific model depicted — will support the continuation of the work already underway.

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Balenciaga and Grès: Exploring the Form

Abstract

Despite the unique identities of each designer, this article aims to demonstrate that Cristóbal Balenciaga and Madame Grès shared many moments of rapprochement. These moments appeared both in the chronology of events and in the strongly authorial practice that characterised them. 1937 was a milestone for both. The already mature Cristóbal Balenciaga opened his Parisian couture house and presented his first collection in the French capital. That year, the Parisian fashion scene witnessed significant events, culminating in the success of the Pavillon de l'Élégance at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*. For Grès, still Alix, 1937 was also a decisive year, marking her destiny both professionally and personally. The French designer presented two dresses, showcasing impeccable technique. She had the ability to make women dream and fly, as seen in the butterflies applied to the skirt of one dress. The butterflies on Alix's 1937 dress were like an announced metamorphosis, in which the couturier was reborn as Grès in 1942. Balenciaga was also reborn in Paris, where he experimented with architectural form. These would become more daring as the decades passed. Madame Grès had a sculptural approach to fabric, using a more intuitive process than Cristóbal Balenciaga, who relied on and emphasised the geometry of the cut. With a pioneering spirit, Grès anticipated some of Cristóbal Balenciaga's experimentation, such as the semi-fitted design introduced in 1947. For example, her "suit with a fitted jacket at the front and loose at the back from Grès" (*Silhouettes*, October 1943, nº 178) had a coat with a front closely following the body and a loose, draped back. After Balenciaga's closure in 1968, Maison Grès expanded to five ateliers. Professionals from two ateliers (one *tailleur* and one *flou*) came from the Spanish designer's couture house.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Architectural Fashion /
Exploring the Form / Sculptural Fashion / Madame Grès

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Balenciaga and Grès: Exploring the Form

Introduction

"We can say that there is a Balenciaga silence, but I think there is a real Grès mystery."¹

When I was researching Madame Grès, French journalist Laurence Benaïm², one of my interviewees, immediately and spontaneously drew a connection between these two names in Parisian haute couture. She referred to the silence of one and the mystery of the other. Besides sharing decades of experience, they also shared some personality traits. Both were very reserved and focused on their work.

Even without Cristóbal, the name Balenciaga resonates from Paris to the world, having international and media repercussions. However, we can strongly question whether the designer would approve of this new phase of the house he founded, which, against his will, persists after his death. In contrast, Madame Grès is a ghostly presence in Parisian fashion. Unlike Balenciaga, her name does not show in trendy commodities; she is like a sphinx, a myth that persists suspended in an ideal designed for eternity. Cristóbal Balenciaga decided to retire in 1968, and Grès, against her will, had to end her career abruptly in 1988, twenty years after the Basque master's retirement. Despite these differences — Balenciaga's enduring brand and Grès's mythic yet less commercial legacy — both designers had a strong authorial identity³ that marked their careers and their lives.

This article argues that while Madame Grès and Balenciaga each developed distinctive approaches to form — Grès with her sculptural technique and Balenciaga with his architectural method — their work exhibits notable points of convergence over time. This argument is grounded in direct observation of their pieces in museums and archives, as well as thorough bibliographical and documentary research. My specialisation in Grès's oeuvre provides a foundation for this comparative exploration, which traces the chronological sequence of events, highlighting these convergences in their creative approaches.

1. Shaping (Their) Lives

The French capital undeniably shaped both couturiers. Madame Grès was born in Paris, while Cristóbal Balenciaga admired the city from a young age. In a notable moment of artistic recognition, both were photographed by Boris Lipnitski, who came to Paris from Russia in 1921 and joined the city's vibrant cultural circles

¹ Our Translation of the French "On peut dire qu'il y a un silence Balenciaga, mais je pense qu'il y a un vrai mystère Grès." Becho, A. and Benaïm L. (2018), in person interview, Paris, 28 September.

² It was L. Benaïm (1994) who discovered Madame Grès' secret death, 'La mort confisquée de Madame Grès', *Le Monde*, 14 December, p. 21.

³ However, as Ana Balda explained in her research, from a business perspective in the interwar period, Balenciaga reproduced models under license from Vionnet, a couturier who influenced and was part of the Basque designer's training. Balda, A. (2022), 'Balenciaga, licensee of Maison Vionnet', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 36 N° 2, pp. 125-140.

through Paul Poiret. Being photographed by Lipnitzki was a significant fashion statement; esteemed couturiers like Poiret, Jeanne Lanvin, and Gabrielle Chanel all posed for him. Balenciaga was photographed in 1927, ten years before he made Paris his permanent home, presenting a refined appearance and a confident gaze. Early in her career, while working under the Alix Barton label, Grès was photographed by Lipnitzki in 1933 as she designed a dress directly on a model for Macy's. This moment seemed to foreshadow a promising future for both designers.

When we look back at Madame Grès's life, we inevitably come across the aura of mystery she cultivated. She hardly ever gave interviews. Information about her life is often contradictory, and there is very little biographical material. Grès reinvented herself and took on different personae throughout her life. Meticulous, obsessive, austere, and monastic, she lived a private life, far from the spotlights of the world of fashion under which her creations shone brightly. She was born into a petit bourgeois family in Paris on 30 November 1903. She was baptised Germaine Emilie Krebs, a name she claimed to have hated, perhaps because she felt it was not distinguished or special enough. Little is known about her childhood, except that she had an innately artistic view of the world, with a particular affinity for sculpture and dance. It may be fair to say that the body was her main frame of reference: the perfect, sculptured marble body, and the body in the modern dance moves of Isadora Duncan, who came to fame when Germaine was young. She worked for sixty years. Initially going by the name Alix, she created and recreated gowns as if they were sculptures, designs that she invented, crafted, perfected, and purified. Her creations were three-dimensional, in an affinity with classical sculpture. Although the couturier never mentioned it in any interview, around 1924, she began to work at Maison Premet as an assistant pattern designer, continuing then as a second pattern designer and finally as a first pattern designer (Rometti; Carrasson, 1992:1). This Parisian couture house was extremely popular at the time of the *Garçonne* trend, run by Madame Charlotte until 1929, and in the 1930s by Georgette Renard (Samson, 2012:171).

Villiers le Moy once wrote that the mystery "surrounding this last survivor of the golden age of French haute couture – the time between the two world wars – has never diminished." She asked Grès, "You are said to be a mysterious, discreet, enigmatic woman. What do you think about this legend?" Grès replied, "I am extremely, excessively wild and unsociable. It is very unusual for me to speak. I don't even know the world of haute couture. I don't like socializing; I have no time for it." In the same interview, Moy asked, "Doesn't your solitude sometimes weigh heavily on you?" Grès answered frankly: "Well, I have had the chance to do what I want, but I have to work hard. Where there is a will...and I have a lot of will. The answer to your question is difficult...Solitude, for me, is essential, but terribly oppressive" (Villiers le Moy, 1982:99). Her work consumed her life; friendship and love were secondary, a choice she accepted consciously. She was also a loner at work. When asked who she discussed her work with, she replied, no one (Grès quoted by Ardisson and Maître, 1981: 68). Grès faced herself, followed her working path with total focus, and filled her life with

it. She once stated, "I have nothing to say and everything to show. I only work, work, work. When I'm not asleep, I cut. That's my life" (Grès quoted by Benaïm, 2004:4).

A focus on work also guided Cristóbal Balenciaga's life. Born in Getaria, a small village on the Basque Coast, on 21 January 1895, his fascination with fashion, specifically Parisian creations, began at a very early age. The son of a seamstress, he did his childhood training closely associated with the Marchioness de Casa Torres, a client of Parisian haute couture houses who allowed the young Cristóbal to explore her wardrobe during her summer stay at the family villa in Getaria. This was his first exposure to the excellence of Parisian fashion. After intensive technical training, Balenciaga began working as a tailor at the San Sebastian branch of the Parisian department store Au Louvre in 1911, where his technical excellence was immediately apparent. His new job allowed him to visit Paris. After a brief stint in Bordeaux, he opened a boutique in San Sebastian under his name in 1917 (2 Calle Vergara), offering haute couture designs he had selected during his frequent trips to Paris, including those of Vionnet and Lanvin (2004:4).

Miren Arzalluz has noted that the mention of Balenciaga in *La Esfera* magazine in March 1917 may very well be the first press reference to his work (Arzalluz, 2016:57):

The latest design is very accentuated. I have seen Balenciaga present a chic interpretation of it in San Sebastián: over a skirt with small, lightly emphasized box pleats goes a shorter skirt, in front, so that the underlying pleatwork may be seen. From the torso to the hem there runs a stole with chenille embroidery at the end, vividly-coloured yet discreetly tied in with the rest, fully deserving of its maker's signature. The extremely simple back falls straight down over the hips and is cut in a special way so as to peak at mid-back. It's nothing, but all the parts add up to an elegant outfit.

In the 1920s, while Madame Grès was beginning her fashion training at Maison Premet, Balenciaga was already an established couturier, having in his clientele Spanish royalty and high society. A creation by Lanvin, made in Balenciaga's ateliers in 1929, was added to the collection now held at the Museo Balenciaga in Getaria. Meanwhile, in 1924, the Basque couturier housed his company at 2 Avenida de la Libertad, which also served as his residence. Building on this foundation, by 1933, he began showcasing his collections under the name EISA, after his mother, Eizaguirre. In that same year, he opened a boutique in Madrid at 42 Calle Caballero de Gracia, followed by another in Barcelona at 10 Calle Santa Teresa in 1935.

Alix made her public debut in *L'Officiel* in August 1933. A full-page article, illustrated with a portrait by Madame d'Ora, praises her creative talent. Mademoiselle Alix poses with her hand on her waist, gazing seductively at the camera. Her wide sleeves and large neck bow, both hallmarks of her style, distinguish her outfit. Her elaborate hairstyle recalls the volutes decorating Ionic column

capitals. The article emphasises her intelligent fashion and artistic sensibility (*L'Officiel*, 1933:31):

*Mademoiselle Alix, the brainy artist, whose creative skills has forthwith placed Maison Alix Barton in the first flight. Her talent has confirmed itself during the Parisian Grand Saison; at every fashionable gathering, Alix Barton creations, worn by the women best known for their good taste, have created a stir. We are awaiting with special interest for the appearance of her new creations which will be paraded on July 31st.*⁴

2. Nineteen Thirty-Seven

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) led Cristóbal Balenciaga to move to Paris. During the 1930s, Parisian haute couture was predominantly influenced by women, whose contributions redefined fashion by aligning the liberation of the female body with internal empowerment and technical mastery. In contrast, designers such as Paul Poiret and Jean Patou sometimes adopted a more objectified interpretation of women's liberation. The female gaze during this period was revolutionary and grounded in expertise, as highlighted by Yoxall, quoted by Steele: "There were male designers, too, in the years between the wars, but 'the real excitement' lay among the regiment of women" (Steele, 1998:249). These women uniquely recognised and shaped both the aesthetic and social evolutions that fashion could express at a pivotal historical moment. Strong-willed female couturiers engaged deeply in artistic collaboration, and their classical construction techniques honoured the fabric's width, requiring minimal cutting. Madeleine Vionnet innovated by combining traditional and non-Western methods, such as adapting kimono sleeves for Western garments to enhance movement. Balenciaga and Grès would later reinterpret these innovations, particularly the kimono sleeve. Vionnet, credited with creating the bias cut by draping fabric diagonally around the body, revolutionised how garments embraced the feminine form. The bias cut offers increased elasticity in the fabric, providing enhanced freedom of movement for the wearer. However, it does require more material than the traditional straight cut. These pioneering women not only revolutionized the structure and tailoring of women's clothing but also elevated the working conditions for their female employees by providing healthcare, childcare, and paid vacation periods. Jeanne Lanvin and Madeleine Vionnet are prime examples of this innovative approach. In the context of female empowerment, the ambitious young Alix embarked on her journey into the prestigious realm of the French capital, partnering with renowned figures in the fashion design industry (Steele, 1988:250):

In addition to Chanel, the female leaders of Paris fashion included Alix [...], Augustabernard, the Callot sisters, Mme Chéruit, Nicole Groult (Poiret's younger sister), Madame Jenny, Jeanne Lanvin, Louiseboulanger, Lucile Paray, Madeleine de Rauch, Jane Régny, Nina Ricci, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Madeleine Vionnet.

⁴ The French version was also published in the magazine: "Mademoiselle Alix, l'intelligente artiste, dont le talent créateur a placé d'emblée la Maison Alix Barton au premier plan. Ce talent s'est affirmé pendant la Grande Saison Parisienne ; a toutes les manifestations d'élégance, les créations Alix Barton, portées par les femmes les plus connues pour leur bon goût, on fait sensation. C'est avec un intérêt tout particulier que nous attendons ses nouvelles créations qui seront présentées le 31 Juillet".

In the 1930s, the profound feminine influence within the couture world significantly shaped both the creation and the wearing of garments. Dressing evolved into a ritual that embodied a sophisticated and elite lifestyle: "A high overtone of frivolity and a strong aura of fashion pervaded Paris in the years before the war. Women of fashion were at their most powerful – dictators, in a sense, of a luxurious and capricious way of life" (Ballard, 2017:88). These cultured women, the clients, played a crucial role in promoting the work of female couturiers. Countess Munõz and Millicent Rogers played a key role in promoting Alix's designs. "These were the women who inspired the couturiers and modistes, the women for whom fashion was really created" (Ballard, 2017:88).

In the context of women's design leadership, Cristóbal Balenciaga presented his first collection in Paris in August 1937. The Balenciaga Archive in Paris houses many documents that reveal how the Basque designer synthesised influences after relocating to Paris in 1936. His preserved schematic drawings and annotated ideas for new models reflect not only his own creative vision but also inspirations from designers such as Worth, Maggy Rouff, Chanel, Vionnet, and Lanvin. Balenciaga openly admired several contemporaries, stating after retirement, "[...] his deep admiration for Chanel and Vionnet, whom he named, together with Louise Boulanger, the greatest fashion designers of all time" (Arzalluz, 2015:55). This admiration began early in his career as a couturier in San Sebastian, when he regularly visited Paris from the 1920s to study and acquire designs by both established and pioneering designers. Vionnet's bias-cut technique, in particular, had a profound influence on his approach, leading him to integrate it with his signature classical tailoring. He meticulously deconstructed styles by designers such as Chanel and Schiaparelli, reimagining them through his own innovative techniques. This relentless drive to learn and reinterpret underpinned his entire work ethic. Cecil Beaton noted the prominence of Schiaparelli and Chanel in that era: "Sandwiched between two world wars, between Poiret's harem and Dior's New Look, two women dominated the field of haute couture – Schiaparelli and Chanel" (Beaton, 2014:198). Chanel's focus on luxurious comfort and simple lines, contrasted with Schiaparelli's surreal and witty approach, intersect in their shared attention to the female body's silhouette. Despite their differing philosophies, both designers' models contributed to the era's aesthetic, where nonchalance and effortless style signaled modernity: "To appear to pay too much attention to clothes was *démodé*, while to wear one's clothes *avec désinvolture*, in a free and easy manner, was the look of modernity" (Steele, 1998:248).

The Paris World Fair of 1937, officially called the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*, became a defining moment where fashion and art converged to shape modern couture. Highly anticipated in Paris, the exhibition generated great excitement, particularly in the fashion press. The press promised new perspectives on clothing and upcoming trends. Spring heightened the sense of novelty and desire. Architecturally, the event revealed a vision of unity and classicism. This was echoed in the Grand Palais de Tokyo and Palais de Chaillot. Both reflected an interwar quest for order. This atmosphere was set at

the Pavillon de L'Élégance, where Alix's gowns embodied haute couture innovation by combining classical style with technical artistry. Displayed on statues by Robert Couturier, one gown evoked classical draping. Another featured a romantic silhouette with nature-inspired motifs. Together, these designs exemplified the exhibition's dual focus on art and technique. This blend propelled Alix to prominence. Reflecting on her award-winning experience, Alix later emphasised the appeal of simplicity, harmony, and peace in her creations, including her iconic butterfly-adorned blue organza dress. The butterflies on this dress, Lepidoptera, symbolise transformation, renewal, and change. They also highlight the fragile beauty of ephemerality. In this way, the butterflies featured on Alix's 1937 dress represent a forthcoming metamorphosis. They mark the couturier's rebirth as Grès in 1942. Within the realm of haute couture, Alix quickly gained recognition, much like Balenciaga. However, in contrast to most couturiers, Balenciaga did not work as an assistant in any Parisian couture house when he moved to the city. Instead, he arrived with professional acclaim, extensive experience, and technical expertise.

In the 1930s, Balenciaga's historicism was evident in designs that drew inspiration from the 19th century and his Spanish heritage. Meanwhile, Alix's historicism drew on much earlier eras, reaching back to antiquity and reinterpreting them for modern audiences. This contrast appears in *Excelsior Modes* Winter 1937-38, where a double-page feature, 'Deux robes à danser,' presents a dress by Alix and another by Balenciaga [Figure 1]. Photographs by Arik Népo show the Madagascan dancer Muni performing in Alix's finely pleated sleeveless gown. The dress, an ode to movement, is described: "The graceful, light dress that billows in the breeze of the dance slowly sets off, suddenly rising and swelling. The muslin skirt spreads gracefully, while the bodice is held in place by narrow gold circlets"⁵. In comparison, Balenciaga's dress is described through its material details and overall mood: "To the sound of a piano-forte with its shrill notes, one could easily imagine a mazurka figure danced by a charming woman wearing this dress of beautiful white satin. The bodice, featuring cherry ribbons, is made of openwork black velvet, and the same motifs are inlaid on the satin of the skirt"⁶ (*Excelsior Modes*, 1937-38:56). The dress, elegantly adorned with cherry ribbons and a bodice of finely detailed openwork black velvet, mirrors Alix's ode to movement with its grace. The skirt is embellished with the same motifs inlaid onto the satin, allowing the fabric to catch the light and accentuate every movement. This flowing ensemble parallels the artistry and movement celebrated in Alix's pleated gown, reflecting the harmonious relationship between form and performance. The performative nature of these flowing dresses represents the artistic dialogue between the Basque and the French couturiers. In Alix's dress, we perceive a more modern attitude related to the liberation of female body movement; this is further emphasised by the absence of decorative elements. In contrast, Cristóbal Balenciaga's dress reveals a more traditionalist, historicist approach. The creative dialogue between the two designers is evident in the *Excelsior Modes* for Summer 1938, where the article 'Présages pour l'Automne' by Madelyne des Fontenelles presents models by both couturiers side by side: "Alix trims a black wool coat with mink sleeves / Balenciaga reserves

5 OT of the French "La robe gracieuse et légère qui s'envole au vent de la danse part lentement, se soulève et se gonfle soudain. La jupe de mousseline s'étale gracieusement, tandis que le corsage est retenu par d'étroites cerclettes d'or".

6 OT of the French "Au son d'un piano-forte aux notes grêles, on verrait fort bien une figure de mazurka dansée par une charmante femme portant cette robe de beau satin blanc. Le corsage aux rubans cerise est fait de velours noir ajouré, les mêmes motifs sont incrustés sur le satin de la jupe."



Figure 1
Balenciaga, Summer 1938
© Archives Balenciaga, Paris

Figure 2
Grès, Winter 1943
Anabela Becho Collection, Lisboa

the blend of wool with black satin in a suit trimmed with black fox”⁷ (*Excelsior Modes*, 1938:42). In the same article, on the right-hand page, the spotlight is on a long, draped model by Alix, in a full-page photograph by George Saad: “Artfully draping Rodier’s djersyl, Alix has created different models in two slate tones. In addition, by mixing dark brown with discreet green and black with burgundy, we can see here one of the most successful creations”⁸ (*Excelsior Modes*, 1938:43). This feature marks the moment of Alix’s meteoric rise, which coincided with Cristóbal Balenciaga’s arrival in Paris. From then on, their work appeared side by side, praised in the specialised press and adored by elegant women.

3. Couture as Resistance

During the German occupation of Paris in World War II, in January 1944, the Germans demanded that the Ministry of Industrial Production close two of the most representative houses of Parisian couture, Balenciaga and Grès, despite several interventions by Lucien Lelong, then president of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*.⁹ Maison Grès was closed “on the pretext that it does not respect the measures in force”¹⁰ (Veillon, 2014:188). The couturier allegedly refused to allow inspection and did not disclose the fabrics or their origin, thereby failing to comply with the imposed restrictions. Fully committed to her art, Madame Grès never renounced the draping technique that had given her fame and glory, despite the immense amount of fabric needed. In the same month as the closure of her Maison¹¹, *Silhouettes* magazine highlighted a Grès’s draped dress as synonymous with Paris (*Silhouettes*, 1944:10) [Figure 2]. Dominique Veillon refers to the event in her book *La mode sous l’Occupation*: “Furthermore, the designer, defying the prohibitions that impose strict yardage rules, is not concerned about restrictions. In the name of freedom of inspiration, she intends to remain faithful to the skilful draping that made her famous”¹² (Veillon, 2014:188). In light of this, would Grès have refused to pay homage to officers’ wives eager to buy couture models? Given her independent and upfront personality and commitment to the cause of Parisian haute couture, this situation is plausible. For instance, Edmonde Charles-Roux stated that “she would not receive them”; the journalist was referring to the German officers and their wives (Charles-Roux, 1964:97). Similarly, according to Dominique Veillon, Balenciaga also came under close surveillance and had to give up his art (Veillon, 2014:188). It would have been for the same reasons as Grès, for not respecting the measures imposed on materials (excessive use of fabric and sometimes its origin), that the Basque couturier’s house was closed by the Germans. Maison Balenciaga only reopened following the intervention of the Spanish Embassy (Lelong, 1947:19). During the closure of Maison Grès, the well-connected Christian Bérard and Jean Cocteau intervened on her behalf. The couturier herself visited the German embassy to voice her protests, and they reportedly expressed their support by speaking to a government minister. As always, she mentioned to Edmonde Charles-Roux that “she never remembered names” (Charles-Roux, 1964:97). In March 1944, two months after the closure, thanks to a petition signed by Cocteau, André Derain, Sacha Guitry, and Henri Sauguet, which ended up

7 OT of the French “Alix garnit de manches de vison um manteau de lainage noir. Modèles PAIS Reproduction interdite /Balenciaga réserve le mélange du lainage au satin noir e dans um tailleur bordé de renard noir”.

8 OT of the French “Drapant avec art le djersyl de Rodier, Alix a créé different modèles de deux tons ardoisés ; ou bien encore mêlant le marron sombre au vert discret et le noir au bordeaux, on peut voir ici l’une des plus heureuses réalisations. Modèle PAIS. Reproduction interdite”.

9 The couturier is referred as ‘Maison GRÈS (ex ALIX) 1, rue de la Paix’. Report Lucien Lelong, ‘La couture française de juillet 1940 à août 1944’, 1947. Archives Nationales, Paris. F / 12/ 10503.

10 OT of the French “sous prétexte qu’elle ne respecte pas les mesures en vigueur”. Dossier G. Krebs, 218115, Archives de la préfecture de police. Dominique Veillon (2014), *La mode sous l’Occupation*, p.188.

11 The *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* spontaneously took responsibility for paying the specialized labour of the Maison Grès, for the entire duration of its closure. Report Lucien Lelong, ‘La couture française de juillet 1940 à août 1944’, 1947. Archives Nationales, Paris. F / 12/ 10503.

12 OT of the French “Par ailleurs, la créatrice, bravant les interdits qui imposent des règles strictes de métrage, ne se soucie guère des restrictions. Au nom de la liberté d’inspiration, elle entend rester fidèle aux drapés savants qui firent sa renommée” Dominique Veillon (2014), *La mode sous l’Occupation*, p.188.

lifting the ban, Maison Grès could reopen (Veillon, 2014:293). Nevertheless, the conditions were clear: “she must give up the technique that gives value to her creations, which will limit her room for manoeuvre”¹³ (Veillon, 2014:188). In 1982, the couturier recalled the event with a ten-month error in chronology: “Lucien Lelong, then president of the Chambre Syndicale, asked me and Madame Lanvin to go to the Germans and plead for haute couture, which was paralyzed because of a lack of material. A few months later, my house was closed. Thanks to the intervention of my many friends in the world of art and literature, it was reopened one year later” (Villiers le Moy, 1982:97). However, according to available documents, Maison Grès was actually closed for two months, not twelve.¹⁴ When Maison Grès reopened, the couturier presented her last collection before the Liberation of Paris. According to Charles-Roux, Madame Grès did not receive the Germans. She used some materials of uncertain origin, implying that they would have arrived from Lyon via the black market, and decided to show the dresses in niches: “If anyone asked any indiscreet questions, she could say that-well, these dresses were not really dresses, they were statues” (Charles-Roux, 1964:97). The Germans did not show up. “Too bad...I had organized a real parade for them. All the dresses that were not in the niches, all those that were shown on real mannequins of flesh and bone – all, without exception were in materials of blue, white, red”, Madame Grès confided laughing to Charles-Roux (Charles-Roux, 1964:97). Several articles in the press prove that both couturiers continued to develop their collections during the closure of the houses and that fashion magazines supported their work, never ceasing to highlight their creations. It is curious to observe that, in this period, models by Grès and Balenciaga often appeared side by side in the press, perhaps to reinforce support for the two houses.

On 23 March 1945, an exhibition was inaugurated at the Pavillon de Marsan, part of the Musée du Louvre. Organised by the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, this exhibition was titled *Le Théâtre de la Mode* by Christian Bérard. It responded to the challenge of the ‘Entr’aide Française’ to rehabilitate haute couture after the difficult period of the Occupation. Notably, the exhibition included one hundred and eighty small-scale wire dolls (80 cm high) designed by Éliane Bonabel. These dolls featured clothing and accessories from thirty-eight couturiers, among them Grès and Balenciaga (Veillon, 2014:320). In addition to fashions by couturiers, work from milliners and hairdressers was also included, while French painters and decorators created elaborate sets to complete the presentation. The exhibition was a great public success, welcoming seventy-five thousand visitors. Following the Paris event, the exhibition toured internationally: first to London (August), then to New York (November). Today, the Balenciaga Archives in Paris preserve some of these dolls. Among them are two with striking models by Cristóbal Balenciaga and Madame Grès side by side, symbolically uniting two geniuses of Parisian couture.

13 OT of the French “elle doit renoncer à la technique qui fait la valeur de ses créations, ce qui limite sa marge de manoeuvre”.

14 The couturier recalled the event with some inaccuracies: according to the documents consulted, Maison Grès was closed for two months and not twelve months, clarifying the actual timeline.

4. Exploring the Form

Both designers' early years coincided with the Modernism period, a time of experimentation and a break from the past. However, both Cristóbal Balenciaga and Madame Grès never stopped looking to the past. They drew on historicism and classicism to undertake a genuine stylistic revolution. Over the years, they proposed modern silhouettes with high points in exploring the form. Like Madame Grès, Balenciaga preferred to continue his ideas with consistency, countering fashion's thirst for novelty, introducing some radical lines at times, such as the tunic, which already existed at the beginning of his career, the cocoon silhouette, or barrel line (initiated in the 1940s and persistent throughout his career). Most of his experimentations are related to Japonism, which influenced fashion at the beginning of the 20th century, evoking the work of Paul Poiret or Callot Soeurs, especially Vionnet (with her kimono sleeves and bias cut). These include the characteristic arch along the back, achieved by a loose draping; the asymmetrical hem, which is shorter at the front and longer at the back; and the collar with a slight drape at the back that reveals the nape of the neck. His *déshabillés* also show influence from the 18th-century robe à la Française. Balenciaga admired the simplification of women's clothing achieved by Gabrielle Chanel. He was very familiar with her work and appreciated the simplicity of the line, as did Grès. Balenciaga revisited this style in the 1955 summer tunics. Fundamental in Balenciaga's architectural forms is the generous space between the body and the garment, known as 'ma' in Japanese. As great couturiers, Cristóbal Balenciaga and Madame Grès had access to the finest fabrics and materials, becoming associated respectively with gazar (Abraham) and jersey (Rodier). One allows architectural constructions that abstract the body; the other, malleable to sculpting the dress and the body. Although Grès's work is more closely associated with long, sculptural, draped, and pleated dresses, the French couturier experimented with form, often through pronounced volumes, particularly in the sleeves, a technique similar to that of Balenciaga. Always enthusiastic about textile innovation, Alix Grès explored the potential and characteristics of various fabrics. As her career blossomed, she embraced avant-garde materials, such as cellophane, which she used in an evening ensemble that *Vogue* magazine praised for its "shimmering effect in a beautiful beetle tone"¹⁵ (*Vogue*, 1934 :42). Just like the iridescent glow of these insects, which display deep and changing colours, Alix's career would evolve while maintaining a coherent continuity. During that time, advertisements and mentions of fabrics and manufacturers were prominent in magazines, highlighting the significance of the textile industry within the realm of haute couture. In October 1934, Alix returned to the spotlight with a magnificent model that was highly praised. With sculptural volume sleeves, this *manteau du soir* captured the attention of the specialised press not only for its stylised silhouette but also for its innovative fabric. *Vogue* described it as follows (*Vogue*, 1934 :32):

This large evening coat appears to be made of embossed leather, as was the one that brought glory to Cordoba. In reality, it is a black and gold waxed satin, embossed and

¹⁵ OT of the French "Un effet miroitant d'un beau ton de scarabée".

¹⁶ OT of the French "Ce grand manteau du soir paraît être fait en cuir repoussé, comme celui qui fit la gloire de Cordoue. En réalité, c'est un satin ciré noir et or bosselé et écrasé, dont Alix a l'exclusivité. Les manches immenses, très amples du bas, contrastent avec l'encolure très serrée autour du cou et sans col", , pp. 32-33. Accompanying the description is a magnificent photograph of the model by Hoyningen-Huene. The Decor was by Raval and Davin.

*crushed, of which Alix has the exclusive right. The immense sleeves, very ample at the bottom, contrast with the very tight neckline around the neck, without a collar.*¹⁶

About the same coat, in *Femina* one can read (*Femina*, 1934):

*Mrs. Alvaro Munoz chose this marvellous coat from Alix, although it is unclear whether it is made of fabric or fine Cordoba leather. It is black and gold satin, and the raised embroidery reproduces the exact patterns of Cordoba leather. Its line is of incomparable elegance, and the puffed sleeves, wider at the bottom, add to its feminine grace.*¹⁷

Even though the long draped dress became her archetype, the designer was also a master of voluminous sleeves: "At Alix, they are huge, embossed or gathered"¹⁸ (*Vogue*, 1934:45). The puffed sleeves are also a characteristic of Madame Grès's work (she hated fitted sleeves). In December 1934, *L'Officiel* presented a stunning Alix creation photographed by d'Ora, featuring an "Afternoon dress in black silk crepe; belt in cut leather" (*L'Officiel*, 1934 :47). In this model, the passion for the volume of the sleeves was masterfully paired with sculptural draping. Years later, in 1948, *Femina* named Grès as the reinventor of the kimono sleeves: "Two very loose-fitting coats, one of the big new items of the season. Grès, to whom we owe the revival of kimono sleeves, wonderfully creates this wide, comfortable garment in Lesur's chunky 'houndstooth' fabric"¹⁹ (*Femina*, 1948). The following year, Grès continued to remain "faithful to kimono sleeves [...]"²⁰ (*Femina*, 1949).

A 1935 black silk taffeta coat with sculptural sleeves from Balenciaga's atelier matches Alix's design featured in *Vogue* in 1934. Now conserved at the Museo Balenciaga, it is one of the few surviving pieces bearing the 'EISA B.E.' label. Notably, according to Ana Balda, the model "follows a pattern similar to dress 6705 by Vionnet that Balenciaga developed into an evening version, adding a small tuxedo collar with a V-shape at the back" (Balda, 2022:136). This model further showcases Cristóbal Balenciaga's mastery of technique in cut, construction and finish: "two large panels seamed diagonally make up the fullness, while a padded lining from neck to bust gives its volume" (Miller, 2017:51). While the silhouette of Alix's model follows the contours of the body, Balenciaga's model, in contrast, has a looser line.

According to Miren Arzalluz, Balenciaga has three main themes: "The characteristic volume at the back, the obliteration of the waist, and the progressive softening of the body's outline" (Arzalluz, 2016:67). These themes determined his experimentation with form. After consolidating the semi-fitted in 1947, he was progressively taken over by the avant-garde and iconoclastic spirit throughout the 1950s. This period culminated in 1960 with his most abstract and radical forms. In the early years of the semi-fitted, the tailored garments consisted of a straight skirt and a waistline jacket. They featured a distinctive, draped volume that fell in the back, contrasting with the fitted front that gently cinched the waist. Although the consensual reception was not immediate, the simplicity of this silhouette and the complexity of its cut meant

17 OT of the French "Mrs. Alvaro Munoz chose this marvellous coat from Alix, although it is unclear whether it is made of fabric or fine Cordoba leather. It is black and gold satin, and the raised embroidery reproduces the exact patterns of Cordoba leather. Its line is of incomparable elegance, and the puffed sleeves, wider at the bottom, add to its feminine grace", *Femina*, October 1934. Photograph by Lipnitzki.

18 OT of the French "Chez Alix, elles sont immenses, gaufrées ou froncées",

19 Our Translation of the French "Deux manteaux très amples, une des grandes nouveautés de la saison. Grès, à qui nous devons le renouveau des manches kimono, réalise à merveille ce vêtement large, confortable en gros tissu 'pied de poule' de Lesur. [...]"

20 Our Translation of the French "fidèle aux manches kimono".

that this line featured widely in the press. It became a milestone in the house's history. In the 1952 summer collection, this style was explored in daywear, dresses, and two-piece suits. According to Arzalluz, it evoked the silhouettes of the 1910s and 1920s. Afterwards, it followed two distinct but similar lines: a hip-length band creating a loose, draped fit, and a more elongated line (Arzalluz, 2016:67). [Figure 3, Figure 4]

Although Madame Grès is known for her draped dresses, her entire body of work reflects a more architectural style, particularly in the cuts and volumes of her daywear and coats. Grès's pioneering approach foreshadowed some of Balenciaga's innovations, such as the semi-fitted silhouette in 1947. In her "suit with fitted jacket in front and loose in back"²¹ the coat's front closely follows the body while the back remains loosely draped (*Silhouettes*, 1943:11). In 1949, *Femina* advertised a similar model: "The Grès suit, with an extremely clever cut that shows the loose back of the jacket and the very fitted front"²² (*Femina*, 1949).

Many times, even given the complexity of the cut and contemporaneity of the construction, Balenciaga's and Grès's creations approach the avant-garde work of Japanese designers like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto. This similarity is evident in their geometric cuts, which are reminiscent of those found in the kimonos. Both respected the space between the body and the garment, creating a place of intimacy and discreet sensuality. In contrast, pleated dresses — those that gave fame to Madame Grès — featured bodices that moulded the bust. Despite such variations in technique, like Balenciaga, the main themes of Madame Grès's work did not follow fleeting fashions but persisted over the years.

According to Didier Grumbach, it was from the 1950s onwards that the Basque couturier reached his creative peak (Grumbach, 2008:119):

*Balenciaga would wait until the end of the war to fully demonstrate his exceptional talent, as if these years of drama had nourished his style marked by Iberian austerity. With the war over, he began abolishing all artifice. In the 1950s, he moved towards a rigorous geometry, an architecture composed of abstract volumes, which he achieved through a game of elimination.*²³

In August 1957, twenty years after settling in Paris, Balenciaga presented his most radical silhouette to date: the sack dress. This garment extended the arch of the back throughout the entire form, eliminating any reference to the waist or hips and narrowing at the knee, departing dramatically from the decade's hourglass silhouette. In this design, Balenciaga made the woman's body more abstract, allowing movement and freedom within the garment. At the core of his approach was a relentless pursuit of sartorial perfection, architectural quality, and material innovation, all in service of redefining the female silhouette. Balenciaga's exploration reached new heights with the baby doll dress of the late 1950s — a trapeze shape taken to its extreme in 1958 — and continued into the

²¹ OT of the French "tailleur à veste ajustée devant et ample derrière de Grès".

²² OT of the French "Le tailleur de Grès, d'une coupe extrêmement savante qui montre le dos de la jaquette vague et le devant très cintré".

²³ OT of the French "Balenciaga attendra la fin de la guerre pour donner toute la mesure de son exceptionnel talent, comme si ces années de drame avaient nourri son style empreint d'austérité ibérique. Abolissant tout artifice, il se dirige dans les années 50 vers une géométrie rigoureuse, une architecture composée de volumes abstraits, à laquelle il parvient par un jeu de d'éliminations".



Figure 3
Balenciaga, Winter 1958, n°203
© Archives Balenciaga Paris

Figure 4
Balenciaga, Winter 1961, n°141
© Archives Balenciaga Paris

Figure 5
Balenciaga, Winter 1964, n°148
© Archives Balenciaga, Paris

1960s with further abstraction of both garment and body. These experiments were grounded in meticulous material exploration, most notably through close collaboration with manufacturers like Abraham and Ascher, and the sculptural qualities of silk gazar, which inspired some of his most spectacular creations. [Figure 5] While both Balenciaga and Madame Grès began with work on the bust, their visions diverged: Grès approached fabric with sculptural intuition, whereas Balenciaga emphasised geometric cuts. Sometimes, both focused on form by working in black, which distilled the visual impact of their technical mastery. Arzalluz argues that some of Balenciaga's final works, from 1967 to 1968, achieved a synthesis of architecture and independence from the body, thereby becoming twentieth-century fashion icons (Arzalluz, 2016:33). In contrast, Grès's work, though also invested in form, continually merged the dress and the body without ever losing their connection.

5. Conclusion

The relentless pursuit and introspection of both Balenciaga and Grès were crucial to the evolution of their creative work. This drive enabled both designers to achieve greater artistic freedom and experimentation, especially in the later stages of their careers. Such freedom is visible in their final designs, serving as the apex of careers devoted to technical mastery and innovation in form. While deeply loyal to haute couture and resistant to ready-to-wear, both experimented with these boundaries. After Balenciaga closed in 1968, Maison Grès expanded to five ateliers by incorporating two of Balenciaga's ateliers and staff.²⁴ Although neither designer planned for succession within their houses, Balenciaga did mentor the next generation — most notably Hubert de Givenchy, who later played a significant role in supporting Madame Grès during the latter part of her career. In gratitude for this support, Grès gifted Givenchy her last gown. This piece, featuring a straight skirt and a bodice with loose draping and volume, expresses a contemporary, experimental edge.²⁵ It marks a shift from her earlier 'goddess' styles, utilising new materials and drawing on Eastern design principles — particularly the 'ma' or the space between body and fabric — to express liberation. The loose draping evokes a flower in bloom, forming a powerful closing statement that encapsulates Madame Grès's avant-garde spirit and transformation.

The creations of both designers are preserved in museums around the world, and each has been the focus of monographic exhibitions. Today, Cristóbal Balenciaga is commemorated with a foundation and a museum bearing his name, as well as the Balenciaga Archives in Paris, which owes much to the dedicated efforts of its first custodian, Marie-Andrée Jouve. These institutions strive to honour his legacy and heritage. In stark contrast, little remains of Madame Grès except for a few elegant testimonies to her life and career; her remarkable body of work alone bears witness to her significant contribution to fashion history.

²⁴ The information obtained in the interview with Martine Lenoir in November 2020 coincides with the information in the catalogue of the exhibition *Madame Grès, Entre Ombre et Lumière*. Célia Bertin's information on this subject in the book *Haute Couture, Terre Inconnue* (p.219), is slightly different mentioning, at the date of writing of her book (1956) that, "elle possède en tout sept ateliers, dont trois de modèles flous, un de modèles tailleurs, deux autres ateliers et un de répétition flou".

²⁵ Grès, ca. 1989, corsage and skirt for evening wear, taffeta floral pattern. Collection Galliera GAL. 2001.222.2, donation Hubert de Givenchy.

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Chester Weinberg, Balenciaga's American Disciple

Abstract

Though virtually forgotten today, Chester Weinberg was a leading American designer of the 1960s and 70s alongside Seventh Avenue's 'Three Bs': Beene, Brooks, and Blass. Yet the most influential 'B' in his career was Balenciaga, who became friend, mentor, and inspiration.

Weinberg encountered Balenciaga's work in 1952, while traveling to Paris to sketch couture shows. Years later, Gustav Zumsteg of Abraham Ltd., Balenciaga's longtime collaborator, introduced them. Zumsteg encouraged Weinberg's admiration and tutored him in art collecting. In the postwar fashion industry, gay men like Zumsteg, Weinberg, and Balenciaga formed discreet networks; Weinberg looked to the older men for guidance when homosexuality remained closeted.

Launching his label in 1966, Weinberg used Abraham fabrics and Balenciaga-like tailored suits, trapeze dresses, and oversized 'poster' prints, translating the master's bourgeois chic for a youthful American clientele. He said Paris, except for Balenciaga, was "vacant" for him: only Balenciaga had the authority to make him think, and he felt a similarity in their thinking.

Like Balenciaga, Weinberg was a designer's designer, sharing his belief that a couturier must be architect, sculptor, painter, musician, and philosopher. They shared art collecting and travel. In 1971, Weinberg joined Balenciaga in Greece as Zumsteg's guests aboard his yacht, recalling Balenciaga's response to antiquity.

Givenchy doubted the trip occurred, while *Women's Wear Daily* publisher James Brady remarked that Weinberg "must have something" to be accepted by Balenciaga. That "something" was talent, later overshadowed by questionable business and personal decisions after Balenciaga's death in 1972. This paper introduces Weinberg's Balenciaga-influenced work and traces their surprising friendship.

Gustav Zumsteg / Abraham / Kronenhalle /
Douglas Cooper / Seventh Avenue

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Chester Weinberg, Balenciaga's American Disciple

Though virtually forgotten today, Chester Weinberg was one of the leading American designers of the 1960s and 70s alongside the so-called 'Three Bs' of Seventh Avenue: Geoffrey Beene, Donald Brooks, and Bill Blass. But the most influential 'B' in Weinberg's long career was Balenciaga, who became a friend and mentor as well as a fashion inspiration.

Weinberg first encountered Balenciaga's work in the summer of 1952, when he began traveling to Paris as a young design assistant to the Seventh Avenue firm of Leonard Arkin & Son, which specialized in affordable knockoffs of French couture. Weinberg, pictured on the left, was just 21 and fresh out of Parsons School of Design; Balenciaga, on the right, was 57. Decades later, Weinberg described these formative years to a journalist: 'I went to Europe. I saw Balenciaga. I was invited to Jacques Fath's parties. I danced with Ginger Rogers at Schiaparelli'. (Walz and Morris, 1978:219) But it's likely that all of those milestones actually took place on that first memorable visit in 1952.

That was the year Ginger Rogers attended Elsa Schiaparelli's insect-themed couture show and afterparty, both held at the designer's home just off the Champs Élysées. A Brazilian orchestra played samba music in the cellar; champagne flowed all night, and pastry and caviar were served for breakfast. ('Schiaparelli Holds Fashion Show', 1952:11) A jaded fashion journalist called it 'one of the most fabulous parties I have ever attended in Paris — or points North, South, West or East'. (Green, 1952, 5)

But that party was instantly eclipsed the following night by Jacques Fath's 'Carnival of Rio' gala at his moated seventeenth-century manor outside Paris, where Fath threw an annual celebration after his fall show. The same Brazilian orchestra played as the costumed guests arrived; American milliner Lilly Daché wore a fruit-bedecked hat, while Schiaparelli wore a yellow parrot costume with a plumed headdress, beak, and tail feathers. Fath, at left, reportedly changed clothes eight times, and he himself led the samba dancing for 2,000 guests — including Weinberg, Rogers, Orson Welles, Claudette Colbert, Jean Dessès, and the First Lady of Brazil. (Brooker, 1952:22)

The following summer, Weinberg returned to Paris armed with his *carte d'acheteur*, the pass issued by the Chambre Syndicale that allowed him to sketch (and, effectively, copy) the couture collections for the American market. Weinberg would visit Paris every six months on and off until the 1970s as he worked his way up Seventh Avenue as an in-house designer, progressing to more prestigious firms like Jo Copeland, Herbert Sondheim, Harvey Berin, and Teal Traina before he finally launched his own eponymous label in 1966.

He was driven not just by precocious talent and ambition, but his insatiable appetite for fine fabrics. Weinberg was an unapologetic textile snob — something he had in common with Balenciaga. 'Fabrics set the whole mood of my collection', he once said. 'I cannot design a dress until I know what the fabric will be'. While he often felt frustrated by the way his Seventh Avenue employers stifled his creativity or took credit for his work, what he found really unforgivable was being forced to work with subpar textiles, and specifically American textiles.

At the time, most American textile mills prided themselves on the impressive volume of their output, rather than its quality or originality, much like the large New York garment manufacturers they supplied. By contrast, European mills had longstanding relationships with top couture houses and they were accustomed to small, exclusive orders. Only the most elite Seventh Avenue firms sourced their textiles from Europe; however, these orders could take months to arrive in the US, and once they were gone, could not be restocked. (Daria, 1990:53) Weinberg obtained all of the fabrics you see here from a single European supplier, the Zurich-based Abraham.

Given his thirst for innovative textiles, it was perhaps inevitable that Weinberg would befriend Abraham's chief designer, Gustav Zumsteg — a name much more familiar to Balenciaga scholars than Chester Weinberg, for Zumsteg and Balenciaga famously collaborated to develop gazar in the late 1950s. Zumsteg also worked with Dior, Saint-Laurent, Chanel, Balmain, Cardin, Givenchy, Schiaparelli, and many more. At a time when it was not unusual for textile manufacturers to be credited alongside fashion designers in the pages of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, Abraham was the most prestigious name in silk production. Zumsteg kept an apartment in Paris, and it was undoubtedly he who introduced Weinberg to Balenciaga.

Zumsteg was 15 years older than Weinberg and, over the course of their lifelong friendship, he served as the younger man's mentor in many respects. Though he was a giant in the textile industry, he was equally well known as an art collector and restaurateur, and he cultivated Weinberg's appreciation of fine art, wine, and food. Zumsteg's mother, Hulda, owned the storied Kronenhalle restaurant in Zurich, which had, over the years, been frequented by Picasso, Chagall, Kandinsky, James Joyce, and Albert Einstein, as well as prominent Swiss bankers, actors, and politicians. In lieu of payment, Hulda accepted paintings: Braques, Bonnards, and Matisse decorated the restaurant's walls. Zumsteg acquired more artworks through his friendship with the gallerists Aimé and Marguerite Maeght, and kept an 'impressive' selection in his Paris apartment. (Sheraton, 1977:C8) In Zurich, he lived above the Kronenhalle and frequently took his fashion designer friends there; Yves Saint Laurent, Federico Forquet and, at bottom right, Balenciaga, dining with Zumsteg, Ramón Esparza, and Coco Chanel.

Hulda wore only Balenciaga; the couturier had designed 'four basic outfits for her' and 'each season she [had] them made in different fabrics'. (Anderson, 1980:62) Here she is wearing variations on her Balenciaga designs with Kenzo and Saint Laurent.

Zumsteg encouraged Weinberg to invest in modern art, and helped him build a collection that, if did not rival the Kronenhalle's, resembled it in many respects. Over the years, Weinberg would acquire lithographs by Georges Braque and the Basque artist Eduardo Chillida, paintings by Chagall and the Catalan artist Joan Miró, a Calder drawing, a Giacometti etching, oil paintings by Max von Moos and François Fielder, and a Rodin bronze, some of which you can see in these photos of the apartment he commissioned Joe D'Urso to design in 1973 — and if you look very closely you'll also spot his Siamese kitten, Kamelia, in both photos.

In a 1968 interview, Weinberg humblebragged that he was so busy: 'I hardly have time to appreciate the paintings by Miró, Giacometti, Chagall, and Braque that I've painstakingly gathered' — name-dropping several artists on intimate terms with Balenciaga, who kept a photo of Chagall in his study at La Reinerie, his country house near Orléans. ('Chester Weinberg', 1968:19) Indeed, I strongly suspect that Weinberg spent time at La Reinerie, for the New York apartment he lived in for the entirety of the 1960s shared its Old World elegance and some of its furnishings; note the rugs and nailhead ottomans. There, Weinberg hosted an Italian-themed dinner party for Balenciaga's protégé Federico Forquet and many of their shared clients when Forquet visited New York in 1966.

Zumsteg probably encouraged Weinberg's admiration for Balenciaga's work just as he cultivated his love of modern art. As the British art critic and collector Douglas Cooper joked: 'I wish Gustav would stop crossing himself every time he mentions the name of that lugubrious Spanish dressmaker'. (Richardson, 2019:66) Cooper, shown here, was a friend — but also a cautionary tale. In 1961, he picked up a young Algerian soldier in a known cruising area near his chateau in the South of France, where Picasso was a frequent — and frequently shirtless — houseguest. The two men parked on a lonely country road; the Algerian demanded money and, when Cooper refused, stabbed him in the stomach and fled with his wallet. Bleeding profusely, Cooper dragged himself to the nearest village, barely surviving the assault, which made headlines around the world, though the newspapers sanitized the incident, portraying the 'bachelor' art collector as the victim of a random attack. When police tracked down the culprit, he claimed that he'd acted in self defense when Cooper tried to rape him. (Richardson, 2019:284) It was a grim reminder of the physical and reputational dangers gay men faced at a time when homosexuality was widely viewed as a crime and a disease as well as a mortal sin.

And this was perhaps the most important area in which Zumsteg served as Weinberg's mentor. Within the postwar fashion industry, gay men like Zumsteg, Weinberg, and Balenciaga — not to mention the Three B's of Seventh Avenue and many other designers — formed discreet personal and professional networks. Zumsteg taught Weinberg how to navigate life as a gay man at a time when even the fashion world kept homosexuality firmly in the closet. He encouraged him to travel — both for enrichment and entertainment. In Greece, Morocco, Cuba, and other distant locales, gay men could explore their sexuality without fear of reprisals. Weinberg made his first trip to Greece in 1956. Zumsteg chartered a yacht there for three weeks

every summer, and both Weinberg and Balenciaga joined him aboard. 'The way he responded to antiquity was amazing', Weinberg said of Balenciaga after one of these trips in 1971. 'He was like a present-day extension of what we were looking at'. ('The King is Dead', 1972:1) On another visit, Weinberg got off the plane to find Zumsteg waiting for him 'with [an] entire Greek soccer team'. (Carracci interview, 2021) Today, we might be tempted to call this sex tourism, but it was, essentially, a form of safe sexual expression at a time when it was not remotely safe to be openly gay in many parts of America or Europe. Weinberg would go on to play a similar guiding role in the lives of many of the young, gay American designers he taught and mentored, including Calvin Klein, Perry Ellis, Willi Smith, Richard Tam, and Marc Jacobs.

Zumsteg recognized that his two friends were kindred spirits, despite their age gap. Like Balenciaga, Weinberg was often described as 'a designer's designer', a phrase denoting a level of mastery that is evident to his peers, if not always to the public. (Ashton-Wash, 1977:F10) Balenciaga frequently told Zumsteg that he believed that a 'good couturier' had to be an architect, a sculptor, a painter, a musician, and a philosopher all at once — an ethos Weinberg embraced. (Deslandres, 1985:38) In both his personal and professional life, Weinberg had the same exacting and sometimes punishing standards as Balenciaga, who, in the words of Fernando Martinez Herreros, 'chose with the same care a fabric for his costumes, a piece of antique furniture, a carpet, an object, a dish, as simple as it may be'. (Deslandres, 1985:42)

When Weinberg launched his namesake label in 1966 and no longer had to conform to a conservative house style, his debt to Balenciaga and Zumsteg's tutelage became evident. 'Paris, except for Balenciaga, is vacant for me', Weinberg confessed at the time. 'I've gone to Paris for many years, but none there has the authority to start me thinking. Except Balenciaga — I feel a similarity in his thinking'. (Spaak, 1966:2)

Weinberg's late collections for Teal Traina and his early solo collections paid homage to Balenciaga — and, occasionally, vice versa. In many cases, they seem to have been using the same fabrics, undoubtedly provided by Zumsteg. Weinberg's tailored suits and slim tunics translated Balenciaga's ladylike chic for a youthful and individualist American clientele. He internalized Balenciaga's dictate that 'elegance is elimination', letting his bold textiles speak for themselves. Of course, everyone copied Balenciaga; Dior likened him to the conductor of a symphony, and the *New York Times* called him 'the prophet of nearly every major silhouette that changed the shape of women'. (Emerson, 1972: 34) But Weinberg's fresh take on crisp linens, capes, tweeds, schoolgirl tartans, kimono sleeves, lace, flamenco ruffles, and sculptural eveningwear proved irresistible to fashion editors, as well as young American socialites who thought of Balenciaga as what their mothers wore.

When Balenciaga retired in 1968, *New York* magazine heralded it as a changing of the guard — an opportunity for American fashion to finally break free of Parisian dictatorship. (Milinaire, 1968:20) Weinberg had long felt discouraged, he said, 'because American designers,

including me, were copying Europe'. (Walz and Morris, 1978:220) Now, he pivoted from bold prints and sculptural silhouettes to the 'quiet' colors and so-called 'soft dressing' that would characterize his work in the 1970s and galvanize the American sportswear market. 'Clothes have been overly structured with thick welt seams and hard lines', he explained, conveniently omitting his own complicity in this history. (Christy, 1969:27) His radical reinterpretation of fashion minimalism referenced both Balenciaga and the burgeoning social forces of feminism and fitness; these soft, stretchy, monochrome fabrics took their shape directly from the body, without interfacings, girdles, or even bras. Weinberg would soon swap his colorful, antiques-filled apartment for his stripped-down beige studio, and trade his own wardrobe of Savile Row suits for jeans and turtlenecks.

When Balenciaga died in 1972, Weinberg eulogized his friend as 'a most gentle, simple, honest, creative man', adding: 'He also made the best martinis'. ('The King is Dead', 1972:1) It was this last telling detail that convinced *Women's Wear Daily* publisher James Brady that Weinberg had, in fact, been close to the reclusive designer. Brady would later write of Weinberg: 'He must have something, since he was taken up by Cristóbal Balenciaga in the master's later years and Balenciaga had little time for young men whose only qualifications were their bright blue eyes and smooth complexions'. (Brady, 1974:114) Weinberg did not have blue eyes, in fact, but he did have 'something' Balenciaga recognized: talent.

On March 22, 1973, Weinberg attended the opening of Diana Vreeland's Costume Institute exhibition *The World of Balenciaga*; here he is with Vreeland and Balenciaga-clad socialite Deeda Blair. 'A lot of what is here tonight created an industry', Weinberg told *Women's Wear Daily*. 'It can still be said in a contemporary way and remain the essence of his art'. ('Eye View', 1973: 8)

Weinberg's own label folded the following year amid tax problems; he would spend the rest of his career freelancing as a designer-for-hire, before dying of AIDS in 1985 — a crushing stigma that ensured his overnight obscurity. By that time, however, he had won Balenciaga many more American disciples. While working on Seventh Avenue, Weinberg also taught for decades at Parsons School of Design and the School of Art Institute of Chicago, and he mentored countless young designers. Though his name may be forgotten today, his former students and protégés are pillars of the American fashion industry, most notably Donna Karan, Marc Jacobs, Isaac Mizrahi, and Calvin Klein. Klein and Karan, in particular, built their reputations on minimalist luxury combined with the ease and versatility of American sportswear — a perfect distillation of Balenciaga's legacy as channeled through Chester Weinberg that is still celebrated today.

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A (In)Visible Basque-Balkan Thread: Balenciaga's Legacy and the 20th Century Women Fashion Artists in Serbia

Abstract

Noting the absence of Balkan perspectives in Balenciaga scholarship and moving beyond the conventional positioning of Christian Dior as the dominant reference of Western fashion in Eastern Europe, the proposed research aims to expand general assumptions about the presence of haute couture in Serbia's twentieth-century fashion system by emphasizing the influence of Cristóbal Balenciaga on several women designers and artists between the 1940s and the 1960s. While Balenciaga's house was formally introduced to the Serbian public at the 1959 Fashion in the World fair in Belgrade and through the appearances of the Yugoslav First Lady Jovanka Broz, the fair ultimately came to be dominated by Pierre Cardin's promotion of domestic textile traditions, and the First Lady's wardrobe was largely defined by Dior and his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Joksimović. As such, Balenciaga's influence will be examined through (in)visible women fashion artists who were seminal in establishing the Spanish couturier's aesthetic legacy within the framework of Serbian fashion: Milena Pavlović Barilli, Ljubica Cuca Sokić, and Anđelka Slijepčević. Following Hamish Bowles's classification of Balenciaga's Spanish themes of art, dance, bullfighting, and regional dress (Balenciaga and Spain, 2011), the research will outline how these particular themes were translated—and transgressed—through the works of Barilli (fashion illustration, fashion photography, costume design), Sokić (fashion illustration, collage), and Slijepčević (fashion design, fashion drawing), resulting in a localized reconfiguration of Balenciaga's aesthetics. Although all three artists lived and worked in Paris after he opened his couture house in 1937, Barilli's life and travels in Spain, as well as her rendition of the 1939 Infanta dress for the cover of US *Vogue* in 1940, will be considered the catalyst for the introduction of the designer's iconographic vocabulary into Serbian fashion and visual culture prior to the presentation of his designs in Belgrade in 1959. Ultimately, the juxtaposition and comparison of Balenciaga's couture with the work of the three Serbian artists aims to demonstrate the dynamics of fashion exchange between Spain/West and Serbia/East and to diversify the growing body of scholarship on the Spanish designer by placing the Balkans on the map of his artistic legacy.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Fashion History /
Fine Arts / Serbia / Women Artists

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A (In)Visible Basque-Balkan Thread: Balenciaga's Legacy and the 20th Century Women Fashion Artists in Serbia

1. Sociopolitical Context of Balenciaga's (Mis)Reception in Yugoslavia and Serbia

In the ever-growing body of scholarship on the Basque couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga, no study to date has examined the designer's influence and reception within Balkan dress and fashion culture, specifically in Yugoslavia and, more precisely, Serbia. While Balenciaga is undoubtedly an artist of Western provenance, the constant repositioning of his work within the orbit of Western fashion, both in academia and museum practice, has led to a narrowing of his creative landscape, often dominated by established fashion centres such as Paris, London, and New York. The geopolitically privileged production of knowledge thus reinforces well-established interpretative commonplaces while simultaneously creating blind spots for less visible—or, as Luz Neira Garcia terms them, "peripheral"—fashion cultures (Neira Garcia, 2018), including Serbia.

However, the overall Eurocentrism of fashion academia is not the sole reason for the lack of studies on Balenciaga in Serbia and what was then Yugoslavia. Fashion in the 1950s and 1960s in Yugoslavia has typically been framed within the broader context of socialism and interpreted primarily as a reflection of Yugoslav politics and ideology, and only secondarily of consumer culture (Žarić, 2022:7), despite these two decades being the most prolific in Balenciaga's oeuvre. Indeed, this period was so productive that Maison Balenciaga was formally presented in Yugoslavia's capital, Belgrade, at the 1959 International Clothing Fair *Fashions in the World*. Yet, as Yugoslavia traditionally maintained closer political ties with France than with Spain—the Yugoslav embassy in Spain was established only in 1977, compared to 1918 in France—Balenciaga was sidelined in favour of his French and, subsequently, Yugoslav counterparts, Christian Dior and Aleksandar Joksimović, dubbed the "Yugoslav Dior."

Although significant, Yugoslav socialism offers only a limited set of established fashion-historical narratives: the sociopolitical fashioning of postwar Yugoslavia's "new" woman; fashion as an extension of the regime; the designer-regime correlation; and First Lady Jovanka Broz as the epitome of the regime's fashion (Žarić, 2022:7). As Balenciaga did not align with any of these narratives—unlike Dior, whose influence operated through Joksimović's role as the First Lady's official designer—Yugoslav and Serbian fashion landscapes, both within and beyond Belgrade, became saturated with all things Dior. Bojana Popović, art historian and curator at the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade (MAA), observed this dynamic upon the museum's acquisition of a Dior-style gown that had

belonged to Ljubinka Valjarević Mates, wife of Leo Mates, Yugoslav ambassador to the United States between 1954 and 1958:

The gown was made for the occasion of the ball, then a favorite representative social event, which was dominated by the toilettes that, by their appearance, followed the fashion dictates of Christian Dior. When Dior launched New Look in 1947, he had already designed an off-the-shoulder waisted model, with a tight top and a luxuriously wide bottom. Based on the romantic fashion lines of the 19th century, it immediately gained the status of a symbol of glamorous femininity, extremely emphasized during the 1950s. Luxurious hand embroidery, as well as the simultaneous use of several types of luxurious, imaginatively draped fabrics of different patterns and textures, complemented these Dior creations, as well as the creations of other European and American designers, creating from them original fashion masterpieces of extremely high prices. The presented gown belongs to the type of dresses that haute couture introduced into all fashion practices. Although less exclusive, it is sewn to measure and with great tailoring skills in a Washington fashion salon. It is made of sand-colored silk with machine-embroidered, black floral motifs, beige lining and black synthetic tulle, which gives a special volume to the asymmetrically draped bottom left part of the gown. In addition to fashion, this dress also has cultural significance. It testifies to the great refinement of the ambassadorial couple who, with measure and taste, at the same time respect the dress code of the event they attend and, by choosing available clothing items, express the views of the country they represent on haute couture as a creation of ideologically unacceptable class society (Popović, 2020:90).

Despite Dior's dominance, Balenciaga was—although his presence was not as widely noted as Dior's—still largely present in the emblematic fashion iconography of the 1950s and 1960s in Yugoslavia and Serbia. Tailored skirt suits, coats, blouse-and-skirt ensembles, full skirts in lightweight cotton, straight-cut cardigan suits, and cocktail dresses were, after all, introduced almost simultaneously by Chanel, Dior, and Balenciaga (Žarić, 2022:9; Milford-Cottam, 2017:13). There was, however, one domain of the Yugoslav and Serbian fashion systems over which Balenciaga reigned supreme: fashion's visual culture, unlike Dior's dominance over the material culture of fashion. According to Roland Barthes's seminal work on fashion semiotics, *The Fashion System* (*Système de la mode*, 1967), a fashion system consists of three structures, that is, three types of clothing: real clothing (an actual, physical garment), image clothing (fashion photography and fashion illustration), and written clothing (verbal and textual description) (Barthes, 2010). Balenciaga's influence was unmatched within the domain of image clothing in Serbia, given the couturier's refined and meticulous affinity for art history and cultural heritage, most apparent in his reconfigurations of Spanish painting and folk costume.

It was his artistic and aesthetic legacy—his pure fashion iconography—rather than his artisanal couture skills that served

as a gateway into Serbian fashion. It is important to note that Aleksandar Joksimović also incorporated Serbian and broader Yugoslav cultural heritage into his work, often creating entire collections based on Serbian medieval art and related sources. While no less aesthetic, his renditions were always ideological and never, so to speak, fashion for fashion's sake. For that reason, Balenciaga's introduction into the Serbian fashion system was only possible through less visible and less (if at all) ideologically charged designers and artists who approached fashion as a form of visual art, consistently engaging in dialogue with art history and fashion history. Working both within and outside Serbia—grounded in a rigorous, somewhat conservative art education acquired in the country, yet enriched by the cosmopolitanism gained in the West—Milena Pavlović Barilli, Ljubica Cuca Sokić, and Anđelka Slijepčević were seminal in establishing the Spanish couturier's aesthetic legacy within the framework of Serbian fashion. Oriented toward fashion as an art form, these women artists were, as this paper aims to demonstrate, Balenciaga's (in) visible compass in a landscape dominated by Dior's reputation.

2. From Velazquez to Vogue: Barilli, Balenciaga and the Fashioning of 'Spanishness'

Serbian fashion illustrator, costume designer, poet, and painter Milena Pavlović Barilli (1909–1945) was one of the key figures in conceptualizing Serbian artistic fashion from the early 1920s until the mid-1940s as a national response to the emergence of haute couture in the West. Barilli also introduced—at least in terms of visual representation—numerous haute couture trends that were not grounded in Serbian art history or fashion history (Žarić, 2022:6). This includes representations of Balenciaga's designs in her fashion illustrations, photographs, and paintings, thereby supporting the thesis that the designer's work functioned as image clothing within the Serbian fashion system. She is the only Serbian artist who incorporated fashion throughout her entire oeuvre (including painting and poetry)—not clothing as an essential aspect of human appearance, nor merely the latest trends that inevitably shape the depiction of the dressed figure, but fashion as a self-sufficient aesthetic phenomenon (Žarić, 2017:67).

More importantly, unlike Slijepčević and Sokić, Barilli lived in Spain, frequently visited the Prado, and travelled extensively throughout the country (Granada, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Córdoba, Madrid) between 1928 and 1931. She was thus able to experience firsthand the same "Spanish themes" that nurtured Balenciaga's creativity: the art of Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya, flamenco, bullfighting, religious life, and regional dress (Bowles, 2011), which she incorporated into her artistic vocabulary. After moving to Paris in 1931 and then to New York in 1939, where she resided until her death in 1945, Barilli refined her fashion illustration practice through the elegance of Coco Chanel, the surrealism of Elsa Schiaparelli, the draping techniques of Madame Grès, and Cristóbal Balenciaga's romanticization of historical costume (Žarić, 2021:81). Many of her early works prior to her 1932 shift toward surrealist and later metaphysical and neo-Romantic

aesthetics present realistic yet subjective impressions of Spanish art and dress, as seen in her 1929 painting *First Smile* [Figure 1]. In addition to works such as *Toreador*, *Sevilla*, and *Serenade* (Tomić, 2024), Barilli went even further by repeatedly self-fashioning in Spanish dress in a series of intimate photographs, thus bringing to life the image clothing of Velázquez, Goya, and Balenciaga through the performative dimension of her own appearance [Figure 2].

Velázquez and Goya—and, more specifically, their representations of dress—constituted a connective thread between Balenciaga and Barilli, as for both artists the conservatively imposed hierarchy between high fashion and high art did not exist. The Spanish painters' ability to render the transparency of lace and the stark contrast between dark and luminous tones, thereby producing an intense dramatic effect, proved equally influential for both Balenciaga and Barilli, who continued to employ the motif of the black lace veil in her drawings, paintings, and photographs throughout her life. The inspiration Barilli drew from Velázquez and Goya was less structural and less volumetric than in Balenciaga's case, given that she largely operated within the two-dimensional realm of fashion illustration. Yet living and travelling in Spain, dressing in Spanish attire, and writing poetry in Spanish enabled the Serbian artist to fashion a more horizontal, embodied, and three-dimensional "Spanishness," which lay at the core of Balenciaga's couture idiom.

Far removed from the frameworks of twenty-first-century neoliberal identity politics that might frame her Spanishness as cultural appropriation, Milena Pavlović Barilli celebrated Spanish dress to such an extent that both Velázquez and Balenciaga may be credited with inspiring what remains one of the most significant works in Serbian fashion visual culture: Barilli's April 1940 *US Vogue* cover. Her relocation from Paris to New York in 1939, in the wake of the Second World War, led to her almost immediate engagement as a fashion illustrator for *Vogue*. Her distinctly European visual language—shaped by the Italian Renaissance, the Metaphysical school, the Spanish Masters, and French Surrealism—aligned with the aesthetic values of *Vogue*'s art editor Frank Crowninshield, who appreciated these fine-art qualities in both art and fashion; the two subsequently became friends, with Crowninshield even writing the foreword to the catalogue of her 1943 New York exhibition. This relationship between an American art critic and a Serbian fashion illustrator, grounded in their shared affinity for the fine-art dimensions of fashion, was symbolically crowned by the king of Spanish fashion himself, Cristóbal Balenciaga, through the cover illustration Barilli was commissioned to create for the 1 April 1940 issue of *Vogue* [Figure 3]. Barilli's artwork was not only a response to Balenciaga's *Harper's Bazaar* cover but also an acknowledgment of the master couturier, as can be discerned from the article and photographs accompanying the illustration:

The introductory photo of the article, taken by Toni Frissell, suggests that Barilli created her illustration, known as the Model of a Blue Wedding Dress, after this photograph. The model from the photograph is positioned on a grandiose marble staircase next to a massive candelabrum with burning



Figure 1
Milena Pavlović Barilli, *First Smile*, 1929
© The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli

Figure 2
Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Milena in a Spanish Dress*, 1932
© The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli

Figure 3
Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Blue Wedding Dress Model*, US *Vogue*, 1 april 1940
© The Gallery Milena Pavlović Barilli

candles. She is wearing a delicate lace veil and a narrow-waist, princess style wedding dress made of white taffeta with see-through sleeves, designed by a less-known American wedding and evening gowns designer, Mabel McIlvein Downs. The text below the photograph states that "the bride was a picture by Velazquez". Figures from Barilli's New York fashion illustrations, including the one from the cover, are just like Velazquez's Infanta: pale, blonde, individually positioned within a landscape or an interior in their elegant gowns. The resemblance is not surprising considering the artist expressed an affinity for Baroque culture well before creating the cover page for Vogue. Furthermore, Barilli's mentor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, Franz von Stuck, executed a few portraits of his daughter dressed as Velazquez's Infanta between 1908 and 1909. Fashion-wise, Crowninshield certainly had in mind photographs published a year before in a rival publication, Harper's Bazaar, which featured a model dressed in Balenciaga's Infanta dress photographed by George Hoyningen-Huene, when he assigned Barilli to illustrate the cover. Cristobal Balenciaga started appearing more often in Vogue as of the early 1940s, since his designs, quoting Velasquez, Zurbaran, Miro, and Picasso, were appealing to Crowninshield's sensibility, and which he deemed 'essentially modern', just like he did Barilli's illustrations. Knowing that, it is not surprising that Crowninshield even wrote the foreword for the catalog of Barilli's exhibition, in which he named her works a 'wholly exceptional phenomena in the world of American art', as she authentically unified centuries of European art and fashion with the contemporary pulse of New York City (Žarić 2017:65–67).

Given the foregoing, Barilli's Vogue cover illustration may be defined not merely as a potential point of reference, but as the foundational moment in the reception and representation of Cristóbal Balenciaga's couture in Serbia—across its art, culture, and fashion—further echoed in the works of Ljubica Cuca Sokić and Anđelka Slijepčević.

3. Between Folklore and Minimalism: Balenciaga in Belgrade

Forming her artistic expression between Belgrade and Paris and socializing with the fashionista and art historian Olga Kešeljević Barbezat—often photographed wearing Dior and Chanel creations—painter and illustrator Ljubica Cuca Sokić (1914–2009) subtly translated Balenciaga's image clothing into Serbian fashion in the second half of the twentieth century. In a sense, despite displaying the least overt interest in fashion among the three Serbian women artists, Sokić paradoxically acted as a bridge between Barilli and Slijepčević's more explicit and prominent reconfigurations and adaptations of Balenciaga's aesthetics. Sokić's close friendship with Kešeljević and, subsequently, with her spouse, the French editor and pharmacist Marc Barbezat, led to her designing packaging and accompanying fashion illustrations for Barbezat's beauty and cosmetics company,

Gifrer-Barbezat. Art historian Dijana Metlić, who discovered Sokić's fashion and beauty illustrations in 2020, states that:

These artworks were representations of her artistic treatment of contemporary fashion trends from the mid-20th century and their translation into illustrations. Resonating with the dominance of haute couture, predominantly Christian Dior, Cristobal Balenciaga, and Yves Saint Laurent's designs on one, and the reception and reconfiguration of its iconography in Yugoslav fashion print on the other side, Cuca Sokić's illustrations can be observed not only as the extension of her life in Paris but as well as one artist's creative response to fashion as a formidable cultural phenomenon and artistic practice in the 20th century (Metlić & Žarić, 2025:252).

Where Barilli embraced the maximalism of Balenciaga's historicism and romanticism, Sokić gravitated toward his geometric, Cubist, and avant-garde minimalism, which he inherited from Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. Initially described as intimist, her paintings evolved toward more simplified forms, geometry, and moderate abstraction around the same time that Balenciaga himself moved toward a minimalist aesthetic, focusing on architectural, streamlined silhouettes. This shift was also evident in her fashion and costume illustrations, which emphasized the introduction of new cuts into the fashion vocabulary of the period (Stevanović, 2024:85). In this respect, Dior and Chanel's designs appeared too restrictive and overtly feminine for Sokić, who herself cultivated a minimalist, androgynous look that resonated with Balenciaga's refined austerity.

Additionally, the couturier's tailoring skills—particularly his sensitivity to cut, form, and structure—resonated strongly with the Serbian painter and her fashion-related works. At times, she employed collage, symbolically creating her paper dresses not with a brush or pencil, but with scissors, resulting in subtle, geometric interpretations of Balenciaga and, to a lesser extent, Dior. An illustration titled *Women's Dress Sketch*, in which she presents three studies of a waisted dress with loose shoulders—adaptable into long or short sleeves, or even a jumpsuit—attests to this [Figure 4]. With this illustration, Sokić emerged not only as a fashion illustrator but also, in a sense, as a fashion designer, evoking the sewing patterns popular in the domestic fashion press.

Given that Barilli's engagement with costume design occurred at the very end of her life, and that Sokić—apart from her paper cut-out collage dresses—did not substantially design or produce garments, it was Anđelka Slijepčević (1931–2010), a fashion and costume designer and professor at the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade, who effectively translated Balenciaga from image clothing into the realm of the Serbian runway. The fashion drawings of both Sokić and Slijepčević—and, in the latter's case, her realized designs—demonstrate the extent to which Balenciaga was localized within Yugoslav and Serbian visual and fashion cultures, revealing the dynamics of haute couture circulation in Serbia and its adaptation to domestic material and aesthetic conditions (Metlić & Žarić, 2025:249).



Figure 4
Ljubica Cuca Sokić, *Women's Dress Sketch*,
NLS Inv. No. CSGr 5/34
© Visual Art Collection, National
Library of Serbia

Figure 5
Anđelka Slijepčević, *Evening Gown Drawing*,
1960–1961, MAA Inv. No. SP-11045 (25260)
© Museum of Applied Art Belgrade

Like Barilli and Sokić, Slijepčević also lived and worked in Paris and had her own “couture contact,” which enabled her exposure to Balenciaga’s artistry: for Barilli, it was Crowninshield and *Vogue*; for Sokić, Olga Kešeljević; and for Slijepčević, her engagement with Maison Lanvin. Working for a couture house of such renown undoubtedly required not only respect for but also acute awareness of the creative strategies of rival maisons, including those of Christian Dior and Cristóbal Balenciaga:

Contrary to media mythologization of Joksimović as being ‘Yugoslavia’s Dior’, it was in fact Slijepčević who pioneered the westernizing national style in postwar fashion with some aspects of Dior and Balenciaga’s designs. In 1961, (two years after returning to Belgrade from Paris) she organized a fashion show titled Folklore and Fashion (Folklor i moda) which marked a turning point in Serbian fashion, as it was the first time that both collection and catwalk were based on national folk costumes on one side, drawing from Balenciaga’s affinity toward Spanish regional dress, and Dior’s A-line silhouette on the other (Žarić: 2022:9).

Slijepčević was, as Popović emphasizes, one of the most astute interpreters of contemporary trends, informing Joksimović’s early understanding of fashion rather than the other way around (Popović, 2022:83). In this regard, Joksimović’s use of Serbian folklore and art history in the creation of what was termed “national haute couture” can be traced back to Balenciaga through Slijepčević, rather than to Dior. *Folklore and Fashion* was—excluding the presentation of Balenciaga’s designs at the Fair two years earlier—the first instance of what Barthes would call the translation of Balenciaga as image clothing into real clothing on the Serbian runway.

Both the runway presentation and the collection drew not only on other representations of image clothing—such as Carl Erickson’s 1939 *Infanta* sketches for *Vogue* or Frances McLaughlin-Gill’s photographs of the model Anne Gunning Parker in Balenciaga’s gowns and capes—but also on the Spanish master’s well-documented affinity for Spanish and Basque folk dress. In addition to his friendship with Ignacio Zuloaga, who depicted Spanish folkloric dress in painting, and his ownership of several such garments in his personal costume collection, Balenciaga consistently employed black—the colour of Basque mourning dress—and the red of the Spanish flag as defining chromatic markers of folkloric modality in his practice (Bowles, 2011:187-188). These elements are embedded in Slijepčević’s drawings of models from the collection and in the realized garments themselves, executed in deep red and black, with references to Spanish court dress as portrayed by Velázquez and to Spanish folk costume transformed into bodices that evoke the traditional Serbian women’s vest, the *jelek* [Figure 5].

4. Conclusion: On Balenciaga and Balkanness

Within such a dynamic, the Spanishness of Balenciaga's work opened Serbian fashion to its own "Serbianness" and "Balkanness," as Folklore and Fashion represented not only a true union of Balenciaga as image clothing and real clothing within the Serbian fashion system, but also a synthesis of his dualities—or rather, his totalities. It combined both his and Barilli's sensibility for the past, chromatic contrasts, and drama with his and Sokić's minimalist elegance, resulting in a hybrid yet distinctive aesthetic within the broader history of Serbian fashion.

The irony lies in the fact that Cristóbal Balenciaga entered the fashion landscapes of Yugoslavia and Serbia through the fine arts—the very domain that, even in present-day Serbia, continues to gatekeep the definition of art, still resisting the recognition of fashion as such. More importantly, his mediators in Serbia were women who, according to certain enduring notions of "Balkanness," were not expected to produce high art but rather to engage in the supposed trivialities of ephemeral and peripheral "low fashion." This hierarchy has resulted in only recent evaluations and validations of Barilli and Sokić's fashion work, as well as in the recontextualization and renewed appreciation of Slijepčević's. Yet if anyone understood how arbitrary dichotomies such as "art-fashion" or "East-West" truly are, it was Balenciaga—and Milena Pavlović Barilli, Ljubica Cuca Sokić, and Anđelka Slijepčević understood this as well. The more the Balkans and Serbia perceive fashion as something exclusively inherent to the West, the more the West will, in turn, alienate the Balkans and Serbia from the global discourse of fashion knowledge. This form of "mutual othering" benefits no one; the invisible Basque-Balkan thread connecting Balenciaga and these women fashion artists to Serbia instead attests to the value of cultural interconnectedness.

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Education

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CBC

Cristóbal Balenciaga × Central Saint Martins

Abstract

Over the last eight years Central Saint Martins (CSM) has participated in collaborative projects with the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa in Getaria, Spain. Through museum field trips, curatorial talks, archive presentations and digital resources, students have been exposed to the inspiration, methodology, development and process of Cristóbal Balenciaga's garment design and creation. Supported by the museum's educational and curatorial team, students have been invited to respond to what they have learned in the context of their own experimental design practice. This research investigates how engagement with Balenciaga's legacy has contributed to the development of students as contemporary womenswear designers.

The research draws on a wider body of work from the Balenciaga Transmissions projects taught at CSM and focuses on ten individual student case studies. It investigates whether engagement with Balenciaga's design practice can be evidenced in students' subsequent approaches to garment design, particularly in silhouette, volume, pattern cutting, construction techniques and detail.

The methodology combines interviews with students and graduates, analysis of sketchbook development, documentation, observation of project garment outcomes and analysis of subsequent design practice. Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences of the projects and discuss their perceptions of its influence on their development.

This qualitative, practice-based analysis seeks to identify visual and methodological evidence of how an intimate engagement with Balenciaga's work may have informed individual design processes. The research considers the relationship between experiential learning, engagement with an historical design legacy and the development of contemporary design practice. Its outcome is a short-form digital film bringing together research findings, images and garments, presenting the research in a format suitable for TikTok.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Central Saint Martins /
Fashion Design Education / Pattern Cutting Innovation /
Experiential Learning / Transmissions Project

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Heather Sproat

Central Saint Martins UAL

As Pathway leader for the Womenswear Fashion Design course I am responsible for the management of the course and tutoring both second and final year students. I have creatively directed graduate design research projects for Penhaligons, Bvlgari, Sephora, Paul Frank, and Diadora. I have worked on Student projects with Louis Vuitton, Dior, Celine, Mulberry, Canada Goose, Nike, Victoria & Albert Museum, Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa. I was an Associate lecturer at CSM for 7 years before being awarded the role of pathway leader and have taught there for 24 years. I have worked as a designer at Louis Vuitton in Paris and before that studied Haute couture tailoring at Christian Dior in Paris. I have been external examiner for the fashion courses at both Falmouth and Limerick universities. I researched and curated a chapter of the book *Pattern* published by Phaidon in March 2013, and a chapter in *Teaching Sustainability* at higher education Level published by Springer 2016.

Cristóbal Balenciaga × Central Saint Martins

How has exposure to Cristóbal Balenciaga's design legacy, aesthetics, pattern cutting and construction techniques impacted the learning of BA fashion design womenswear students at central saint martins?

1. Introduction

The Fashion programme at Central Saint Martins has earned an international reputation for producing original, creative, successful fashion design graduates who have made an impact in the international fashion industry with alumni such as Phoebe Philo, Kim Jones, Peter Copping, Craig Green, Kiko Kostadinov, Grace Wales Bonner, Charles Jeffrey, Susan Fang, Conner Ives, Tolu Coker, Sohee Park and Harris Reed. As a faculty it has been running for more than 90 years (Blackman and Davies, 2019).

BA(Hons) Fashion Design is a practice and workshop centred course, where conceptual narrative, exploration, experimentation, and innovation are valued as essential to developing an expression of fashion design with fine art values. We grow resilient, flexible thinkers who can expand beyond the perceived limitations of expected product development.

Students learn their practice through practice, they are encouraged to stretch their imaginations with elastic thinking, responding to experiential research with 3d experimentation. They learn to experience, evidence, document, collect, collate and curate to support their design process, this is followed with material experimentation, fabric development, physical making of toiles and final garments where they learn the skills of pattern cutting, construction and finishing.

I have been teaching on the BA Fashion course for the last 25 years and running the womenswear pathway with Anna-Nicole Ziesche for the last 10 years.

2. Transmissions Project

In 2016 the BA Fashion womenswear pathway joined the print pathway in the Transmissions project which was instigated by the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa in Getaria with the aim of expanding the students' knowledge and understanding of the designer's legacy, in order to explore his continuing relevance and impact on contemporary designers.

This ongoing educational initiative is aimed at immersing international fashion students in the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga. The womenswear pathway has completed this international project seven times.

The project asked students to learn about his work, make a replica toile of one of his pieces and then use this exercise to develop their own contemporary narrative, experimenting, developing, designing and making a physical response.

The students were invited to Spain to gain exclusive access to the exhibitions with the curator, also archive visits where the archivist explained in depth and detail, the cutting, making and design process that Balenciaga used to create his pieces.

This experiential, object-based learning allowed the students to interact with objects in sensory ways, encouraging a deeper understanding of the craftsmanship, context, and design, (Chatterjee and Hannan, 2015)

As a teaching methodology taking the students out of the classroom and allowing them to experience, research, record, and sketch the actual garments created within the Cristóbal Balenciaga ateliers was very exciting for them. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, where learning by experience, followed by reflection and conceptualisation, moves beyond passive to active understanding, that supports both technical development and conceptual growth.

I mean just even in the exhibition space, first of all, to see the garments in person, but then to be taken up... with the archivist, to touch them, to look at them and stuff, even I think what was so incredible about that, it was such a comprehensive lesson. (Conner Ives)

For those students who were not able to travel we made visual presentations, local archive visits, and interactive workshops to transmit everything that the staff and students had experienced.

Over the course of the Transmission's collaborations, we invited all of the participating tutors to experience the museum visit, to develop a deeper more embodied understanding of Balenciaga's work. This approach reflects the principles of situated learning theory, emphasizing the importance of learning through authentic, contextual experiences (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and that of the reflective practitioner, where educators actively engage in their own professional learning to enhance their teaching practice (Schön, 1983).

3. Research Method

This article uses a practice-based qualitative methodology, through semi-structured interviews, combining elements of student voice inquiry and reflective practice research to evaluate the impact of the Transmissions project. Drawing on Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner, the analysis integrates personal teaching reflections and professional judgement to provide a broader understanding of the project's pedagogical impact. This dual perspective allows for a richer interpretation of student learning and its application in contemporary fashion design practice.

I chose a selection of ten graduates and students who had completed the project and been selected to exhibit their work, to interview. The data was then gathered in clusters to review and analyse.

4. The Inspiration

The garments toiled were the Semi fitted jacket 1951, Balloon dress 1952, Sac dress 1957, Abstraction evening coat 1962, Feather evening dress 1966, Zibeline 1967, Orange summer dress 1967 (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, n.d.)

5. Internal Constructions

Zhujing, Kenan and Yutetsu studied the semi fitted jacket and the orange summer dress for their toile making, expressing affection for the learning process that revealed how Balenciaga's internal structures create a space between the garment and the body. Conscious of design sustainability, Kenan upcycled his beaded lace panels, Yutetsu used a waste free string construction and Zhujing used food waste to create a richly textured couture garment. Their excitement at uncovering the secrets of Balenciaga's process was palpable.

[...] Internal structure. It's very important to shape the garment. even if its calico, they make it perfect. (Zhujing Dai)

Zhujing's finished garment illustrates how the volume and body of the corn husk dress were achieved through bold pleating and structure at the back of the shoulders. [Figure 1]

[...] little hidden tricks that he uses throughout his work, like in the shoulder pad, and obviously the back part of, the waistband and how that keeps out the volume, just little things like that that I don't think I would have ever figured out if I didn't look into this piece. (Kenan Slevira)

Kenan created volume and form in the side pleats of his garment using an inner structure reinforced with crin bands, the gathered pleats in the satin skirt drape effortlessly to create a loose cocoon shape collapsing inward past the knees. [Figure 2]

What I wanted to do is combine the process of fabric making and the pattern making to get rid of the excess (waste).

It felt very soothing to me... Where the strings went was genuinely just how I felt, and that direct like connection between me and the piece, is what made it nice. (Yutetsu Matsunaga)

Yutetsu wove his fabric net pieces using coated strings which he reinforced with heat to bond them in place, using an asymmetric loom to create something authentic that reflected the layering



Figure 1
Zhujiing Dai
Corn Husk Dress
© Heather Sproat

Figure 2
Kenan Slevira
Beaded black lace overlay top with
white satin deep pleated skirt
© Heather Sproat

construction of garment pieces inspired by the orange summer dress. [Figure 3]

6. Geometry of Pattern Cutting

Both students were affected by the strength and purity of the Zibeline dress construction, the contradictions of its pattern cutting simplicity and complexity, and the bold volume created by such a master hand.

[...] it's got like 2 seams, but it has a shape that you wouldn't think, how seams will create a cylinder."

I love immersing yourself, putting yourself in someone else's shoes. It really clicks and then it's easier to take that and put it into your own world. (Julie Pereira Martins) [Figure 4]

Julie described a moment where her learning clicked and fell into place, working with her hands to create new knowledge to fuel her own project.

Then how can I make the garment lighter and lighter... that is quite connected to me, I really like to like straight (lines) but I have never used these shapes because I only learnt how to make commercial garments. (Doyeon Jeong) [Figure 5]

Doyeon had never explored geometry in the ways this project encouraged, Balenciaga taught her to explore fundamentally radical ways of expanding her practice.

7. Inner Space

I learned a lot, a lot about making clothes. I choose the Semi-fitted jacket... It still kind of influences my work. I tried to really put his philosophy into my work but also add a little bit of my aesthetics. I learned about construction, which influenced my work. Even right now it influences the way I am thinking. (Nodira)

Nodira worked on creating one large pattern piece with cut outs, three seams and a zip for her Balenciaga garment, she used structural gathers and boning to help bring form and volume to the diaphanous bloom. [Figure 6]

[...]I really wanted to explore that conceptually and begin viewing the world in its simplest configuration, which I thought was through geometric shapes. (Danielle Derrick)

Danielle's inspiration was geometry, flat pattern cutting of the green gazar evening coat and a desire to explore what can be gained through a disciplined and reductive regime, she successfully used her experimentations to inspire her geometric woollen dress with flocked print. [Figure 7]



Figure 3
Yutetsu Matsunaga
Geometric woven string multilayered jacket
© Heather Sproat

Figure 4
Julie Pereira Martins
Geometric deep fold wool suit
© Heather Sproat

Figure 5
Doyeon Jeong
Black organza folded origami heart Dress
© Doyeon Jeong



Figure 6
Nodira Dadajonova
Voluminous boned crin dress
© Nodira Dadajonova

Figure 7
Danielle Derrick
Circle drape flock printed dress
© Heather Sproat

Figure 8
Yafei Li
Open void geometric grey coat
© Yafei Li



Figure 9
Curtis Sho Noguchi
Plaid dress with floral patches
© Heather Sproat

Figure 10
Conner Ives
Pink parachute dress with feather embroidery
© Elisa Palomino

"I learned a lot of important technical skills I think tailoring is more like creating the tension around the body and creating an interior capsule between the body and within the garment." (Yafei Li)

Yafei concentrated on exploring balance and the void between the body, her multiple geometric garments layered over each other creating hollow volumes and a dramatic silhouette. [Figure 8]

8. Weightless Volume

Curtis and Conner were researching the volume that Balenciaga achieved through lightness,

"Structure and volume and yet it's light, like it's very light... The wind naturally goes in and the use of crin behind lace to create volume, but it's light." (Curtis Sho Noguchi)

Curtis's investigation of the balloon dress with its double layered air pocket and internal crin bands, inspired his decorative crin creating a new textile with his wool check allowing volume to be held in the draped forms he required. [Figure 9]

For Conner examining the 1966 evening dress covered in individual feather plumes was pivotal.

"[...] creating volume, kind of Like whimsy, I guess, without the weight of it. I really love the desire for like a weightlessness in something as complex...I strived to do that, being a parachute material, being reinforced with like a crinoline tape on the outside." (Conner Ives)

Conner's recycled parachute silk used bands of crin to add body to his base fabric which remained airy, agile and delicate with feather decoration.

Conner and Curtis explored different expressions of volume, facilitated by the techniques that they uncovered through in-depth investigation. [Figure 10]

9. Conclusion

The transmissions project invited the students into an intimate conversation with fashion history of Cristóbal Balenciaga, through a practice of practice they unlocked a tactile relationship with his work. Though the active process of recreating and responding to archival garments, the students engaged physically, emotionally and philosophically.

As a tutor who has shared this journey with them, I have witnessed how deeply these embodied learning experiences can shape our evolving practice as designers, makers and teachers. Aligning with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, we made knowledge through doing, reflected on the experience and applied it to new contexts. The

project nurtured not only technical excellence but also critical, aesthetic, and conceptual development.

Each student grew their individual narrative through the creative process which was transformational. In several cases, the skills and conceptual directions initiated during the Transmissions project became central to their final graduate collections.

Conner Ives continued exploring lightness and movement in silhouette—although vastly different in style, his graduation work carries this conceptual thread and bold volume.

Nodira Dadajonova acknowledged that while her later work drew from different inspirations, the confidence and skills she built through in her textile construction empowered her.

Doyeon Jeong, our most recent graduate, spoke of how this project radically altered her relationship with pattern cutting, inspiring a new geometric and intuitive approach balancing lightness and form.

This type of object-based, contextually embedded project allows fashion education to move beyond garment aesthetics. It fosters a sense of continuity with design heritage, while also encouraging disruption.

By inviting students to step into the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga not to copy, but to walk with him in the atelier, we give them tools not just to design garments but to invent and explore. We prepare not only skilled makers, but thoughtful, critical, and resilient designers equipped to form the future of fashion.

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Transmissions and Iceland University of the Arts

Abstract

This paper examines Cristóbal Balenciaga's influence through the educational initiative *Transmissions*, within the context of the philosophy and values of quality craftsmanship and sustainability underpinning the fashion program at the Iceland University of the Arts (IUA). First launched in 2018 by the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum to disseminate his legacy, *Transmissions* has made parts of the museum's archives accessible to students and tutors from around the world, offering them a unique opportunity to engage with and learn from the master's groundbreaking work.

The paper inquires how participating in *Transmissions* has affected both IUA students and staff with a focus on the three last years, from 2023–2025. Does Balenciaga's legacy continue to resonate with this new generation of IUA students? Has applying some of his principles and techniques improved their tacit knowledge? What lessons were most valuable, and have they affected their practice in a meaningful way? How do they experience the stark contrast of values and craftsmanship inherent in Cristóbal Balenciaga's work to the principles of fast fashion of today and feel relevant in their contemporary discourse about fashion?

Lastly, I reflect on my own practice-based experience as an educator in the program, analysing how the lessons learned from working with my students on *Transmissions* and witnessing their inspiration to excel in their craft have shaped my own teaching practice, in the spirit of Balenciaga's dedication to excellence.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / *Transmissions* /
Higher Education / Craftsmanship / Innovation

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Katrín María Káradóttir is formally educated in tailoring and dressmaking and she also studied fashion design in Paris where she gathered professional experience with houses such as John Galliano and Lutz Huelle. Katrín is a slow fashion pioneer in Iceland and won the Indriði Award in 2013 for her work at ELLA, awarded

by the Icelandic association of fashion designers for quality and excellence. She has 20 years' experience in teaching, holds a MA degree in Arts Education and in her research focuses on crafts, sustainability and higher education. Katrín is currently a Professor at the Iceland University of the Arts in Reykjavík where she teaches fashion design and history of fashion.

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Transmissions and Iceland University of the Arts

1. Introduction

In 2018, the Iceland University of the Arts first participated in the educational programme *Transmissions: Heritage and New Creations* (hereafter *Transmissions*), developed by the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria, Spain. This collaboration, offered to selected fashion schools worldwide, has since become an integral component of our BA Fashion curriculum. In this paper, I examine the factors that have contributed to its sustained success within our programme.

Since our initial participation, *Transmissions* has been progressively refined and expanded — not only by the museum but also through the evolution of our pedagogical approach at IUA. The most significant structural change has concerned the duration of each edition: rather than involving a single year group prior to the final exhibition, the programme now spans three academic years. This extension has strengthened the selection process for student work and provided the museum with greater curatorial flexibility in planning the exhibition.

As the third edition of *Transmissions* draws to a close, I take this opportunity to reflect critically on how we have engaged with this unique initiative. With particular focus on the past three years, I analyse how the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga — mediated through the *Transmissions* educational framework — has influenced the students and educators who have participated in the programme.

2. Context

Cristóbal Balenciaga is widely regarded as one of the most influential fashion designers of the twentieth century (Arzalluz, 2011). His work commanded such respect that even his fiercest competitors openly admired him (Blume, 2013). Yet, when referring to Balenciaga, the terms *dressmaker*, *taylor*, and *couturier* are often used interchangeably (Miller, 2007: 16), reflecting the breadth and versatility of his technical expertise.

Balenciaga was considered a reserved and enigmatic figure, but even more mysterious was the craftsmanship embedded in his garment-making practice. At the age of twelve, he was apprenticed to a tailor in San Sebastián and continued refining his skills throughout his career (Blume, 2013), ultimately achieving a level of mastery described as absolute (Arzalluz, 2011). He developed his knowledge through close study of other designers' work — most notably Madeleine Vionnet — as well as through relentless experimentation within his own atelier (Blume, 2013). His

exceptional ability to exploit the structural and expressive potential of fabric became one of his defining qualities (Shaeffer, 2001: 11). Some scholars suggest that this sensitivity to material was intensified during the austere war years, when scarcity of high-quality fabrics and trimmings demanded ingenuity and precision (Blume, 2013: 61).

Over time, his techniques evolved into a form of excellence that proved virtually inimitable; careful study of a Balenciaga garment consistently reveals complexities that exceed first impressions (Blume, 2013: 7).

Within the Paris couture house, the emphasis was not on selling dresses but on dressing clients — on shaping garments to enhance each individual's presence and dignity (Blume, 2013: 33). This philosophy informed Balenciaga's scepticism toward the growing shift from haute couture to ready-to-wear, which he feared would prioritise speed and profit over quality and craftsmanship (Blume, 2013).

Although the structure of the fashion industry has radically transformed since his time, the underlying concerns remain strikingly similar — now amplified by the scale of contemporary overconsumption (Cline, 2012). Calls to slow down production cycles and to revalue human skill and material knowledge (Edelkoort, n.d.) resonate strongly with Balenciaga's principles. In this sense, the enduring relevance of his work makes him an essential reference point for future generations of designers (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, n.d.).

3. Work Within Transmissions

When invited to participate in *Transmissions*, the Iceland University of the Arts (IUA) readily accepted, recognising the uniqueness of the initiative. We immediately identified a strong alignment between the programme's objectives and the core aims and values of our Fashion Department, as well as an opportunity to situate our students more centrally within international fashion education. Accordingly, we adapted our curriculum to integrate the project and began structured planning.

The *Transmissions* programme unfolds in several phases, some of which involve travel. It begins with specialised training for tutors, who play a crucial role in mediating and transmitting the knowledge acquired at the museum to students in their home institutions (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, 2021). Travelling from Reykjavík to Getaria is both time-consuming and costly; therefore, in order to reduce expenses, we coordinated the visit with our annual second-year study trip to Paris. With additional support from the Erasmus+ programme, we were able to make participation financially accessible to our students.

The study visit to the museum includes a guided tour of the exhibitions, a screening of a documentary on Balenciaga, and a technical study session with a specialist. During this session, the construction of selected garments from the museum's archives is

analysed through toile replicas. By examining patterns and fabric samples used in Balenciaga's ateliers, students gain rare and privileged insight into couture-level garment construction.

In the first year of our participation, we allocated only one day to the museum visit due to time constraints. In retrospect, this proved insufficient, and we subsequently extended the stay by an additional day. We also incorporated a specialised workshop focused on tailoring a collar, which allowed students to engage more deeply with specific construction techniques.

Upon returning to Iceland, the core practical work began. The first assignment required students to construct a toile replica of a Balenciaga garment. This task would challenge even experienced professionals; nevertheless, with guidance from tutors and the support of a digital platform provided by the museum — featuring instructional videos, detailed photographs, and 3D simulations — the project became achievable.

The second assignment invited students to develop a personal project: an original outfit inspired by the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga, conceived and executed independently. Both phases were completed within an eight-week studio period. This dual structure — replication followed by reinterpretation — enables students to internalise craftsmanship in garment construction, dressmaking, and tailoring through embodied practice, in a manner comparable to the apprenticeship model described by Sennett (2009). [Figure 1 and 2]

4. Methodology of Stud

Although the overall feeling of success of *Transmissions* among our students has been overwhelming, and feedback sessions at the end of each project have been positive, I wanted to investigate the matter further. I chose a focus group as my methodological approach, an established tool in qualitative research methodology, as discussions can generate a wide range of data more promptly compared to in-depth individual interviews (Hennink, 2014).

I mostly followed the guidelines of Professor Richard A. Krueger (October 2002) and asked six students who had participated in this edition of *Transmissions* at the IUA to take part. There were two students from each year group represented in the study group (24 students participated in total in the programme), six students in total. Of the six, three had been selected to present their work at the exhibition and three had not, as I thought this might affect their views.

The focus group was carried out in August this year, and five out of the six invited students attended. My questions were open-ended and are visible in the text below. The discussion lasted about an hour and was recorded with permission. A member of the IUA research support team took notes in addition to my own transcription of the recording, in order to provide another perspective and to facilitate the thematic analysis of the data.



Figures 1 and 2
Learning craftsmanship in garment
construction in a way you typically learn art
© Arnar Freyr Hjartarson

Limitations of the study include the fact that there was only one study group, but as it represented a quarter of the students involved, the number seemed adequate. It was also difficult to recruit more participants, as many of them had already graduated and moved on to other things.

5. Focus Group Results – A Summary

The first question addressed the students' expectations of *Transmissions* at the time we began planning the trip to Getaria. All were familiar with the name Cristóbal Balenciaga, and some had a general awareness of his work; however, they knew little about the programme itself beyond a brief introduction given in the autumn semester. A few even mentioned that there had been a certain sense of secrecy surrounding the project. None of the students anticipated how much work the course would ultimately require, nor how much they would learn. In retrospect, several commented that this may have been beneficial, as full awareness of the scope of the project might have caused additional stress.

Upon arriving at the museum, they were all pleasantly surprised. They noted that they would have been satisfied simply watching the documentary about the master and visiting the exhibitions. However, when they were escorted upstairs to meet a specialist who introduced them to toile replicas of garments from the archives, along with original patterns and fabric samples, the experience exceeded their expectations. They described feeling privileged, amazed, and deeply engaged during the extended study session.

When reflecting on the additional workshop day dedicated to constructing a tailored collar, many explained that they had never previously examined the interior structure of a tailored garment or practised pad stitching. All expressed enjoyment of the exercise and emphasised the importance of preserving such craftsmanship and technical skills. Throughout the discussion, students used strongly positive language when describing their time at the museum, often accompanied by expressive physical gestures that underscored their enthusiasm.

In terms of lessons learned, a deeper understanding of garment construction ranked highest, particularly in relation to draping techniques and what they described as "clever couture tricks". The museum's digital platform — containing instructional videos, photographs, and technical simulations — was considered crucial in supporting the reconstruction of Balenciaga's complex designs in toile form. All participants reported an increased ability to control silhouette through the techniques acquired. The value of hand sewing was mentioned repeatedly; several students reflected that prolonged physical engagement with materials added another layer of meaning to their work.

Although only some students continued to pursue tailoring after the course, all stated that they continue to apply much of what they learned in their current creative practice. They described this as



Figures 3 and 4
Vilte Savickaite: Transmissions + IUA
©Vilte Savickaite
Photos: Silja Magg

building tacit knowledge that has led to more skilful work, a greater sense of freedom, and a more intuitive development of ideas — particularly valuable in relation to storytelling through dress.

With regard to textiles, high-quality fabrics made from natural fibres were generally preferred, depending on the project context. Students expressed concern about the declining quality of both garments and materials in the contemporary market, as well as about overproduction. When asked whether they felt hopeful about change, none believed that fast fashion would disappear; however, they observed a growing demand within their own circles for longer-lasting, higher-quality garments, particularly in menswear. In this sense, they felt that there remains some room for optimism.

The discussion also generated particularly thoughtful reflections on the pleasure of taking time in garment-making and the privilege of encountering knowledge — such as draping, interfacings, hand stitching, weights, haircloth, handmade passepoilé buttonholes, and bias cutting — that fewer practitioners possess today. Additional valuable insights emerged during the conversation; however, one conclusion was unmistakable: the focus group unanimously agreed that *Transmissions* was the most demanding course within the IUA BA Fashion programme, but also, by far, the one from which they learned the most. [Figure 3 and 4.]

6. A Tutors Journey

With formal training in tailoring and dressmaking, I have always been deeply engaged, as a fashion designer, in draping and pattern making. During my years in Paris — most notably at Galliano — I became closely acquainted with the high-end fabrics, trimmings, and materials used in couture. It was there that my interest in creative garment construction truly flourished.

For this reason, an educational program dedicated to preserving the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga and transmitting his knowledge to fashion students around the world immediately captured my attention when I first heard about it.

Now, several years later, the IUA has participated in three editions of *Transmissions: Heritage and New Creations*, and each time the experience has exceeded my expectations. Through this study, I can also confirm that our students have felt the same. The care and ambition demonstrated by the museum staff in designing, implementing, and continuously refining the program are truly exceptional.

By offering us meaningful insight into Cristóbal Balenciaga's work and revealing aspects of his garment construction techniques, the program has profoundly supported the education of future fashion designers, inspiring them to further develop their craft and more effectively articulate their creative narratives. It has not diminished the mystery of the master's magic; rather, it has enabled us to better understand the depth of his knowledge and the refinement of his skills.

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Balenciaga & Italy

Echoes of Balenciaga in Postwar Italian Fashion

Abstract

In the 1950s, Italy was gradually recovering from the devastation of World War II and, in the rebuilding of its economy, the reconstruction of the fashion system became an important component of national renewal. The fashion shows promoted in Florence by Giovanni Battista Giorgini played a crucial role in introducing the new generation of Italian designers to both domestic and international markets. From 1952 onwards, thanks to the Sala Bianca events, names such as Jole Veneziani, Simonetta, Fabiani, Sorelle Fontana, Carosa, Emilio Pucci, and others, rapidly gained international recognition.

Italian fashion magazines documented these new creations while simultaneously showcasing the latest designs of French couturiers such as Pierre Balmain, Christian Dior, Gabrielle Chanel, and Cristóbal Balenciaga. The aim of this research is to examine the extent to which Balenciaga's innovative silhouettes and designs of the 1950s and early 1960s, widely represented in the Italian fashion press of the period, shaped the work of emerging Italian designers: traces of his influence can be, for example, observed in the essential purity of Fabiani's lines and in the sculptural, body-detached volumes developed by Simonetta.

The primary sources for this study are Italian fashion magazines from the period, notably *Arianna*, *La Donna*, and *Novità*. Far from being mere vehicles of documentation, these publications actively shaped the discourse of fashion, mediating between French haute couture and the emerging Italian system.

By examining their representations of Balenciaga and of a selection of contemporary Italian designers, this research highlights the mechanisms of influence, adaptation, and reinterpretation that forged a distinctly Italian fashion identity while situating it within the dynamics of international fashion.

Balenciaga and Italy / Italian Fashion /
Italian Fashion Magazines / *Arianna* / *Novità*

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Balenciaga & Italy

Echoes of Balenciaga in Postwar Italian Fashion

1. Introduction

"1952: Italy Explodes". Irene Brin, pseudonym of Maria Vittoria Rossi, one of the most brilliant and versatile figures of postwar Italy (fashion journalist, translator, art gallerist), chose this title for her book¹ describing "the year that saw Italy, still bearing fresh scars and as poor as ever, burst beyond its borders in an atmosphere of intelligent yet ragged festivity" (Brin, 2015: 34), a year in which the country entered in a phase of authentic economic and creative "boom" that reshaped the nation and projected it once again onto the international stage. Following two decades of isolationism, Italy sought to reconnect with the world through cinema, art, and design, while the economic recovery fuelled a growing demand for objects that signalled modernity and prosperity (Cerutti, 2023: 28). In the words of one of the emerging fashion designers of the time, Simonetta:

The Italians set to work, and their efforts, taste, and imagination gave rise to what later came to be called "the Italian miracle." New creative talents emerged in many fields ... Cars, paintings, sculptures, craftsmanship, textiles, and fashion produced in Italy caused a sensation in the 1950s. (Colonna di Cesarò, 2008: 46)

This veritable explosion of activity and creativity found in fashion a privileged outlet, positioning it simultaneously as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, enhancing Italy's soft power and international image, and as a strategic economic driver in the reestablishment of the country's global commercial relations, with particular regard to the United States, where the Marshall Plan, combined with a favourable dollar exchange rate, offered significant opportunities. (White, 2000: 10-16). The challenge, however, was considerable: how could Italian fashion compete with the well-established French industry and its centuries-old tradition of haute couture? (Sgubin, 2023: 232)

2. The "First Italian High Fashion Show for Foreign Firms"

One day I was visited by Giovanni Battista Giorgini, a Florentine businessman who served as a buyer for many important foreign stores. He spoke to me about a project he had in mind, ambitious and forward-looking: to launch Italian fashion on the world stage. At that time, haute couture was the undisputed monopoly of Paris; all European fashion houses, including most of the Italian ones, travelled to Paris twice a year to purchase and copy designs. (Colonna di Cesarò 2008: 48)

¹ *L'Italia esplode: Diario dell'anno 1952* was rejected by the publisher and was finally printed in 2015.

The birth of the Italian fashion system of post-war Italy was the result of a series of cleverly orchestrated initiatives that strategically linked centuries-old artisanal traditions with the demands of international markets (White, 2000: 40-45). Among these initiatives, the fashion shows organized by Giovan Battista Giorgini in Florence are widely regarded as foundational, providing a platform for up-and-coming couturiers to gain international recognition and establishing Italy as a credible counterpart to Paris. In the early 1950s Giorgini, "a Florentine businessman of impeccable origins and manners", who headed a well-established office that specialized in the export of high-quality Tuscan artisanal products toward the United States "began to consider whether, alongside straw, blown glass, embossed leather, and porcelain, Italian clothing might also be promoted as a valuable cultural and commercial asset". (Brin, 2015: 53) In February 1951 he brought together, in a single runway show in Florence, creators of haute couture, of boutique fashion, and accessories to present their collections. The event, called the "First Italian High Fashion Show for Foreign Firms," was held in the *piano nobile* of his own Villa Torrigiani, in Florence and enjoyed a tremendous success abroad:

The first gathering at Villa Giorgini literally made the gleaming windows of Fifth Avenue in New York shake, and immediately afterward the dirty windows of Seventh Avenue. In other words, first the luxury shops trembled, then the wholesale factories. Was it really true that in Italy one could buy magnificent things for next to nothing? Let's see. In July 1951, half of America crowded into Florence; the fashion shows were held in the Grand Hôtel's ballroom, and people were practically fighting to get in. It was a triumph. (Brin, 2015: 54)

A decisive factor in this triumph was Giorgini's brilliant storytelling strategy, which transformed Italy's rich cultural heritage and artisanal traditions into a competitive advantage for Italian fashion and in a key element of differentiation from French fashion (Fadigati, 2023: 228). The new generation of postwar Italian designers established a distinctive stylistic identity that combined historical awareness with modern innovation by reclaiming and reinterpreting the country's heritage.

The fashion houses invited to the 1951 event, many of them born after the war, represented the forefront of contemporary Italian design. The selection included, among others, the Milan-based maison of Jole Veneziani (founded 1938), admired for the refined elegance, luxurious fabrics, and sophisticated embellishments of her designs; the Roman atelier of the Sorelle Fontana (founded 1943), already renowned for their couture creations and "Hollywood on the Tiber" celebrity clientele; and Alberto Fabiani who, at the time, directed the atelier founded by his parents in the 1940s, and was known for his clean, minimal lines, meticulous tailoring, and his ability to balance innovation with wearability. An aristocratic touch, that proved especially captivating to American buyers, was provided by the creations of Duchess Simonetta Colonna di Cesarò, who began her career in fashion in 1946 and was known for her essential silhouettes and volumetric experiments; by the Marquis Emilio Pucci, who since 1947 pioneered a youthful, dynamic style

characterized by geometric, colourful prints and innovative textiles; and by Princess Giovanna Caracciolo Ginetti and Countess Barbara Rota Angelini Desalles, founders in 1947 of the Carosa maison, probably the Italian atelier that most closely mimicked the elegance of French couture. (Gnoli, 2005: 106-115)

The Florentine fashion shows were highly successful in introducing Italian fashion to professional audiences, both Italian and international, but the medium through which the creations of Italian designers reached the broader public within the country was instead the fashion press. Journalists such as Irene Brin (Caratozzolo, 2006: 65-73) and Luciana Boccardi (Boccardi, 2021: 212-231) and illustrators like Brunetta (Biribanti, 2018: 62-65), produced dedicated reports for magazines and newspapers showcasing the season's novelties, thus playing a crucial role in shaping public perception of fashion, and acting not merely as recorders of trends, but as active mediators and promoters of Italy's emerging sartorial identity. At the same time, these magazines extensively featured the creations of French designers, allowing for clear comparisons and revealing points of dialogue between Italian and French fashion.

3. The Italian Fashion Press: A Mirror and A Filter

Among the rather varied panorama of the contemporary Italian fashion press of the time the most relevant periodicals chosen for the research are *La Donna*, *Novità*, *Arianna*, (later *Vogue & Novità*, and eventually *Vogue Italia* in 1964), between the 1950s and the 1960s, a selection guided by three main criteria. First, their relevance to the research focus, privileging publications dedicated primarily to women's fashion and lifestyle, where both haute couture and prêt-à-porter were consistently documented. Second, the readership demographics, as these periodicals targeted the upper and middle classes and thus operated as aspirational vehicles for the diffusion of new models of femininity and consumer culture. Finally, accessibility and availability were crucial factors, since the possibility of consulting complete runs of issues within the chosen timeframe made possible a diachronic analysis of how Balenciaga's influence was mediated and received in Italy, revealing the mechanisms of cultural reinterpretation through which Italian fashion interacted with international haute couture.

La Donna, founded in 1905, represented one of the earliest examples of an Italian women's magazine. Initially published as a biweekly and later as a monthly, a frequency typical of fashion periodicals, it targeted a middle-to-upper-class readership interested in fashion, personal care, and beauty.

After the war, the articles signed by Antonia Monti Tedeschi, reporting from Paris, Florence, and Rome, helped to redraw the cartography of fashion and marked the emergence of a style that could increasingly be defined as specifically Italian. (Frisa, 2011: 375-377) It was against this backdrop, that *Novità* (founded in 1950 by Emilia Kuster Rosselli, editor until 1958, and later renamed *Vogue & Novità* and finally *Vogue Italia*) rapidly established itself

as a reference point for an upper-middle-class female readership. Despite modest financial resources and a small editorial staff, it managed to enjoyably combine fashion coverage with a broader cultural program, including interior design, art, antiques, literature, and social issues, responding to the aspirations of postwar women seeking new roles and identities. (Redazione MAM-e, 2021) A distinctly more modern spirit characterized *Arianna*, an Italian monthly published from 1957 to 1973. Targeting a younger and more emancipated readership, especially working women, it was among the first magazines to address controversial topics such as sexuality and divorce, alongside the more conventional subjects of fashion, beauty, and domestic life. Its editorial focus fell particularly on prêt-à-porter, privileging accessibility and wearability, without neglecting references to haute couture. With contributions from figures such as Brunetta and a young Anna Piaggi, *Arianna* positioned itself as a magazine attuned to the social transformations and new consumer desires of Italy's economic boom years. (Redazione MAM-e, 2021) Together, these publications did not simply mirror postwar fashion tastes, but actively participated in their construction, framing the reception of international styles within a specifically Italian cultural perspective. In this process, Cristóbal Balenciaga emerged as a key point of reference: his radical silhouettes and sculptural approach were not passively absorbed, but rather refracted through the lenses of the fashion press and creatively reinterpreted by Italian couturiers, thus transforming a foreign model into a catalyst for local innovation.

4. Echoes of Balenciaga: Comparing Shapes in Italian Fashion in the 1950s

Leafing through Italian fashion magazines of the 1950s and early 1960s, the tension between French dominance and the emergence of Italian fashion becomes immediately apparent. French couturiers such as Pierre Balmain, Gabrielle Chanel, Pierre Cardin, Jacques Heim, Lanvin-Castillo, Jean Patou, and, above all, Christian Dior commanded the pages with extensive photo spreads and detailed reports on their collections: as a representative example, the September 1959 issue of *Novità* devotes considerably more space to French fashion, fifteen pages versus ten for Italian designers, with Italian creations generally presented second, emphasising their subordinate position in a market long dominated by Parisian trends. The magazine's covers, however, reveal a different dynamic, alternating Italian and international designers, and reflecting a conscious effort to assert the emerging identity and creative legitimacy of Italian fashion alongside its French counterparts, among which Balenciaga occupied a category of his own. His work was, in fact, typically featured in dedicated articles, rather than grouped with contemporaries, like even Dior usually was, an editorial strategy that drew attention to the originality and conceptual depth of his vision: by presenting him in this way, the Italian fashion press functioned as active intermediary, positioning Balenciaga less as a rival to domestic designers and more as a model of creativity to be studied, and reinterpreted.

Emerging Italian couturiers engaged with Balenciaga's ideas in ways that aligned with their own developing aesthetic, drawing inspiration from his unconventional redefinition of elegance, his rethinking of the female silhouette, and his pursuit of essentiality and clarity of form.

Traces of Balenciaga's influence, his semi-fitted look, the sack silhouette, his geometric shapes, reframed foreign innovation into a language that informed the evolution of a distinctly Italian haute couture identity which can be clearly discerned in the work of several designers, such as Jole Veneziani, Roberto Capucci, Antonelli and others. Two names, however, stand out in particular for their ability to appropriate and creatively reinterpret his stylistic suggestions: Alberto Fabiani, with his essential, architectural lines, and Simonetta, with her sculptural experiments that separated clothing from the body.

Married to Fabiani since 1953, Simonetta recalls in her autobiography how her husband, like all fashionable Roman couturiers, had initially followed Parisian trends, as he dressed much of Rome's upper society, "ladies who wanted only French models and whom he understandably did not wish to disappoint" (Colonna di Cesarò, 2008: 60). This position changed after the very first Florence fashion show, when Fabiani began to pursue a vision of his own, quickly becoming a leading star of the new Italian haute couture. Flocks of international society women crowded into his magnificent frescoed atelier in via Condotti to purchase his impeccable suits, and "little black dresses, true masterpieces", deceptively simple designs informed by sophisticated tailoring (Gnoli, 2005: 137).

Fabiani, noted Simonetta, had much in common with Balenciaga: he had learned the craft within his family and, like the Spanish couturier, "he was one of the few fashion creators capable of constructing his models directly in toile. Above all, he was a rigorous and refined artisan," as well as a perfectionist never fully satisfied with his results (Colonna di Cesarò, 2008: 60). Simonetta was herself a sincere admirer of Balenciaga who, in her opinion,

did not make Dior's mistake of changing line every six months... Take a magazine from six, seven, or ten years ago and look at Dior's models: today they seem odd, even ridiculous. But if you look at an old Balenciaga today, it still appears beautiful, utterly modern (cited in Gnoli, 2020: 179).

Since 1951, Balenciaga, in fact, had consistently been working on silhouettes that broke away from the dominant New Look exploring instead a semi-fitted line that created space between the garment and the body (Jouve, 1997: 35) In his spring 1957 collection, the journalist Jean Pierre Guérin noted that his designs were still "governed by softness and fluidity. The jackets are always very supple and remain detached from the body" (*Novità*, May 1957: 4). The theme was appropriated by Italian designers, who reinterpreted it in tailleurs like those by Jole Veneziani presented by *La donna* in March 1957, or by Simonetta in *Novità* in May and October of the same year; the October model, in particular,

combined the semi fitted look with another beloved Balenciaga theme, the sack dress, thanks to the elegantly gathered soft folds in the rear, a motif that is visible also in the selection of three "dresses to go out" by Villa presented by *Arianna* in April 1958, characterized by the "linea controvento", a bodice with a blouson effect at the back.

The sack dress, with its rejection of the cinched waist and embrace of sculptural purity, represented a further development of Balenciaga's explorations of volumes detached from the body and embodied his vision of simple garments that could be slipped over the head and fastened with only a few buttons or hooks. Its design was also highly practical: by disregarding the waistline, it could adapt to a wide variety of female figures (Miller, 1993: 27). The sack is a Balenciaga's silhouette that will encounter great success in Italy, being proposed as a couture design, as a boutique piece and even as a do-it-yourself outfit, but rather than mere imitation, it represents an independent, yet parallel, elaboration of similar aesthetic concerns, showing how Italian couture was able to converse with the most innovative ideas of the time. Simonetta so describes how Fabiani developed his own interpretation, and how she, in turn, embraced this groundbreaking approach:

He called me in the middle of the afternoon and asked me to rush to his atelier, just a few blocks away. Once I was comfortably seated, a model appeared wearing an extremely simple dress, straight, without a waistline, falling to mid-calf. It was so different from what we had done until then, so different from what women were accustomed to wearing at the time! The perspective was so unexpected that it took me a few minutes to appreciate it. That seemingly shapeless look was in reality perfectly cut. Its line was so pure, so ingenious, that all the other styles of the moment suddenly looked outdated. I followed Alberto in that direction and adopted the new style. When we presented our collections at the crowded Palazzo Pitti in Florence a few weeks later, those dresses were dubbed sack dresses. Our models walked the runway in total silence, in an atmosphere charged with tension, followed by excited discussions and even protests from buyers and the press. Yet after the initial shock, their reaction mirrored mine. All the other collections presented after ours, with their tight waists and short full skirts, appeared completely outdated. The sack look was a triumph. Our intuition had been correct, and we had hit the winning number. (Colonna di Cesarò, 2008, p. 85)

In 1958, the sack dress, known in Italy as the *abito-sacco*, or simply *sacco*, and *abito-camicia*, became an almost ubiquitous feature in Italian magazines: in March 1958, *Novità* published an illustrated article titled "Il vestito di punta" with variations of the fluid lines of the "sacco": Simonetta's interpretation is described as "wide and full on the back and the hips", a volume that "allowed the figure to be hinted in the front" (*Novità*, March 1958: 50), while one of the Fabiani's creations is described as a white "chasuble" worn over a black linen dress and another, made instead with a mohair wool and nylon fabric, is characterized by a soft line created by "a scarf knotted to the upside down collar", [Figure 1] (*Novità*, March

Figure 1
Sack gown by Alberto Fabiani in
Novità, March 1958
Collection and copyright of the author



1958), a motive similar to the one used by a Veneziani's design and illustrated on the same page. The fall of the *sacco* was enhanced by the fabrics used: "the great change in fashion is determined by the quality of the textiles, now all soft [...] These are the true agents of the fluid, draping style. They are the ones that inspired Balenciaga's tunics" (*Novità*, April 1957: 3). Fabiani's creations were likewise enhanced by the softness of the fabrics employed, as visible in his sack dress featured in *Arianna* in the same month, with soft fold at the waist and a horizontal flap fastened by large buttons and in the "sacco" presented by *Novità*, September 1958, specially designed to advertise "Rhodiatocce" synthetic textiles: the rather voluminous gown was made with a very fluid black "rhodia" cadì, the suppleness of which perfectly matched the shape of the design.

Interestingly, in January 1959, *Arianna* proposes an almost identical model as a "Cucinecchi", that is a pattern pre-cut from the fabric, in this case a red wool flannel "with the skirt draped in the shape of a barrel". These do-it-yourself models were sold as a kit that included all the essentials for the realization of the model: needle, thread, buttons, zippers etc, and their price was even more affordable than ready-to-wear designs, since all the assembling was made by the client. The price of this model was 6.000 *lire*, approximately €30–35 in today's term (calculations made by the author). The success of the "sacco" continued for several seasons, being perfectly suited to the demands of women with active lives (*Arianna*, and *Novità*, February 1959).

Balenciaga's research on volumes is also evident in his outerwear, characterized by exaggerated proportions and by an approach disengaged from the body, an aesthetic strategy subsequently employed by Simonetta in the coats and capes that solidified her reputation. These designs, ranging from coats with wide, rounded lines in almost raw fabrics, like the "rough wool with a pronounced black-and-white check weave" featured in *La donna* (March 1960), to those in more refined wool cloth, such as the coat in "deep red, verging on fuchsia" described as "the colour of the year" in 1960 (*La donna*, September 1960), demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of how materiality interacts with form that is further confirmed by the repeated interpretation of similar silhouettes and shades later that year: a good example is the design created to promote the soft "Primula" velvet produced by Cotonificio Cantoni, Varese (*Novità*, November 1960) where texture appears as an enhancer for volumetric expression. Other Italian designers, including Luciani (*La donna*, March 1960), similarly embraced this structural style, signalling a broader acceptance of Balenciaga-inspired spatial experimentation within the Italian sartorial milieu, an approach that was not confined to haute couture alone.

Ready-to-wear labels such as Edmond (*Arianna*, October 1960) translated in fact these silhouettes, making them accessible to a broader audience, as did the recently founded Max Mara (1951), a company that frequently drew inspiration from contemporary haute couture proposals (Rasche, 2006: 29). A clear example is the reference to Balenciaga's Spring / Summer 1957 collection in which the designer explored not volume, but geometry, with trapezoidal silhouettes articulated through formal rigor and precise modulation of lines and proportions, interpreted in the work of Marucelli

(*Novità*, March 1957) [Figure 2], Simonetta (*Novità*, February 1958) [Figure 3], and Fabiani (*Novità*, September 1957), but, later, also in a long-haired mohair Scottish check coat from Max Mara's Autumn / Winter 1959–60 collection (*Bellezza*, August 1959). Here, geometric tailoring and the careful selection of materials achieved a harmonious balance between shape, texture, and wearability, underscoring how couture concepts could be successfully adapted for serial production.

Such examples highlight the Italian designers' capacity in reinterpreting Balenciaga's formal innovations, and in highlighting the ongoing dialogue between international influence and the construction of a distinct domestic fashion identity, across both couture and ready-to-wear. A crucial role in this process was played by historical references, a theme dear to Balenciaga that he, however, habitually revisited by streamlining them and stripping them of historicist affectations, a point on which Simonetta also concurred, making in her collections a conscious effort in avoiding "every precious, sly, or ironic reference to the past" (Caratozzolo, 2008: 35).

By selectively integrating elements from historical silhouettes, such as the Empire waist or draped forms, while adapting them to contemporary materials, proportions, and production methods, Italian designers as well created garments that acknowledged sartorial heritage while embracing a modern aesthetic. Balenciaga's reflections on the Empire silhouette, for example, described as the line that "dominates the entire next season" (*Costume*, December 1958), resonate in the outerwear of the following season, as seen in the orange-red model featured on the cover of the February 1959 issue of *La donna* [Figure 4] and in De Luca's design presented in the magazine's inner pages, crafted in a very hairy and looped light-yellow Shetland bouclé with a high waist defined by the cut and hips accentuated by pockets. A closely related example is Antonelli's coat in wool and rhodia (*Novità*, March 1959), which similarly features an Empire-style waist and soft pleats, another examples of how Italian designers reconfigured Balenciaga's selective approach to historical motifs with an emphasis on structural clarity, precise waist definition, and the modulation of volume, these designers engaged in a critical dialogue with historical silhouettes, demonstrating a sophisticated negotiation between reverence for the past and the creation of a modern, distinctly Italian fashion idiom.

5. Conclusions

New trends and ideas drift through the air. Wherever they are, creatives often arrive at the same visions, aligned to a shared wavelength. (Colonna di Cesarò 2008: 85)

This research aimed to investigate how the innovative silhouettes introduced by Cristóbal Balenciaga after the Second World War were merged with Italian cultural heritage and reinterpreted by emerging Italian designers. At the same time, it examined how Balenciaga's creations and their Italian reinterpretations were



Figure 2
Coat (left) by Germana Marucelli in *Novità*, March 1957
Collection and copyright of the author

Figure 3
Coat by Simonetta in *Novità*, February 1958
Collection and copyright of the author

Figure 4
Cover, *La donna*, February 1959
Collection and copyright of the author

framed and presented by the Italian fashion press, a crucial arena where influence, originality, and cultural positioning were negotiated.

Balenciaga exerted a profound influence on the development of Italian fashion at this formative moment, serving both as inspiration and as a point of departure. Italian designers absorbed and reinterpreted key elements such as volume, meticulous attention to materials, and structural experimentation. Fabrics were central to Balenciaga's practice, involving close collaboration with textile manufacturers to select the most suitable materials. Italian designers engaged in similar collaborations, sometimes creating pieces commissioned to promote both traditional fabrics wool, silk, linen and innovative ones, as exemplified by numerous models by Fabiani, Simonetta, Veneziani, and others, presented in fashion magazines using the same approach as designers' collections.

Italian fashion magazines proved instrumental in this process, functioning not merely as channels for the dissemination of fashion imagery, but as active cultural mediators: they framed reinterpretations of Balenciaga's work, establishing narratives of originality, influence, and cultural positioning, and situating Italian design within a broader dialogue with Parisian haute couture. Ultimately, this study underscores how the relationship between international inspiration and local reinterpretation, mediated through material choices and periodical representation, was central to the formation of a distinctly Italian fashion identity in the early postwar years. Balenciaga's influence emerges not as mere imitation, but as a catalysing force that Italian designers transformed into their own creative language, marking the beginning of Italy's ascent in the global fashion arena.

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Cristóbal Balenciaga in Florence. The Forgotten Legacy of Couture Copies

Abstract

As the history of Italian fashion has long favored designers and brands that achieved international fame, little is known about Italian copyist sartorie. Since their specialty was the copy and adaptation of French couture, their histories did not contribute to the promotion of Made in Italy fashion, and their presence, along with the material traces left by their businesses, was largely overlooked by historiography. The forgotten biography of a late-1950s polka dot cocktail dress, donated to the Museum of Costume and Fashion at Palazzo Pitti in Florence as "a Balenciaga", serves as a focal point for this article. Its owner, Liana Bertolli, and the three Florentine copyist sartorie she and her family patronized offer the possibility to trace how Balenciaga's original designs were accessed, copied, and adapted for Italian clients by Florence-based dressmakers. The article draws on garments and archival, oral, and documentary sources to reposition the work of sartorie Magnani, Calabri, and Sorelle Chiostrì within the broader, transnational history of twentieth century couture, revealing the circulation of Balenciaga's legacy beyond Paris and into the wardrobes of Italian well-to-do women.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Sartorie / Couture copies /
Italian fashion system / Florence

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↗ Fashion Theory

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Balenciaga's Heritage in Italian Fashion. The Federico Forquet and Roberto Capucci Cases Between Aesthetics and Marketing

Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the enduring heritage of Spanish couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga and its profound impact on post-World War II Italian fashion, both in terms of aesthetics and marketing. This study examines how Balenciaga's architectural approach to fashion, characterized by sculptural proportions and clarity of form, deeply influenced prominent Italian couturiers, from Mila Schön and Simonetta to Roberto Capucci.

Drawing on archival resources from the Federico Forquet Archive and the Roberto Capucci Foundation, the research highlights Balenciaga's direct mentorship of Federico Forquet, who worked as his assistant for three seasons. Forquet's designs reflect Balenciaga's aristocratic and architectural aesthetic, as well as his commitment to couture. Like Balenciaga, Forquet chose to preserve the integrity of his artistic vision rather than embrace prêt-à-porter, maintaining a focus on handcrafted, exclusive pieces and preserving their vision of elegance over commercial expansion.

From a marketing perspective, the research delves into how Balenciaga's heritage reshaped the concept of exclusivity in fashion by emphasizing artisanal craftsmanship and intimate, private presentations. This strategy contrasted with the more public runway shows of the time and influenced some Italian designers to adopt a similar approach, positioning their brands as symbols of luxury and personal attention to detail. This concept of exclusivity and personalization has strongly resonated with Italian fashion marketing, where many brands still focus on the idea of artisanal luxury and a storytelling centered on attention to detail and uncompromising quality.

This study, apart from documentary sources, relies on the relevant literature on fashion history and fashion marketing. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how Balenciaga's legacy shaped the development of Italian couture and luxury branding in the postwar period.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Federico Forquet /
Roberto Capucci / Italian Fashion / Exclusivity

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Balenciaga's Heritage in Italian Fashion. The Federico Forquet and Roberto Capucci Cases Between Aesthetics and Marketing

1. Introduction¹

As Diana Vreeland famously noted, "(Balenciaga) was the prophet of nearly every major change in silhouette" (cit. Irvine: 119). Christian Dior defined him as "The master of us all". Even Coco Chanel admitted, "Balenciaga is the only true couturier; others are just draftsmen". This article highlights the significant influence he wielded on Italian fashion from both aesthetic and marketing perspectives, with a focus on the figures of Roberto Capucci and Federico Forquet.

When considering the profound influence that Balenciaga had on the work of Capucci and Forquet, it should be noted that this influence was primarily stylistic rather than methodological. While Cristóbal Balenciaga was a true couturier, Capucci and Forquet were primarily fashion designers.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, apart from a few isolated cases such as Salvatore Ferragamo, there was still no fully established Italian fashion system. Although the fascist regime had made many efforts to make Italian fashion independent from French fashion, such as the creation of the Ente per la Mostra Permanente Nazionale della Moda (National Permanent Fashion Exhibition) in 1932, the major Italian fashion houses continued to "draw inspiration", explicitly, from fashion from across the Alps. So, even after 1945, the big names in Italian fashion - from Ventura to Montorsi, from Zecca to the Botti sisters - continued to send their representatives to Paris Fashion Week to buy designs by Jacques Fath, Pierre Balmain, Christian Dior, and Balenciaga.

2. Giorgini and the First Italian High Fashion Show

It was in this context that the pioneering figure of Giovanni Battista Giorgini emerged. He did far more than promote local talent: he acted as market maker, platform orchestrator, and place-branding strategist. Beginning with collective presentations in Florence in 1951 and professionalizing them in the Sala Bianca from July 1952, he built a multi-sided platform uniting products, venues, media, and ordering logistics. The format reduced cross-border frictions — search, coordination, and quality uncertainty — by matching qualified Italian supply with American department-store demand in a time-limited, camera-ready exchange, helping shift power from Paris to a multi-centred Europe and positioning Italy on craftsmanship, modernity, and value (Pinchera and Rinallo, 2022; Devine, 2022; Belfanti, 2015; White, 2000). Three design choices mattered: timing against Paris; an assortment spanning couture,

¹ Although the article represents the result of joint research and reflection by the co-authors, the final draft can be attributed as follows: To Sofia Gnoli, paragraphs: Balenciaga: The Italian School; Roberto Capucci: le petit Balenciaga; The Federico Forquet Case. To Annamaria Esposito, paragraphs: Balenciaga's "anti-marketing" strategy; Balenciaga's Legacy across Capucci and Forquet marketing. To both co-authors: Abstract; Introduction; Giorgini and the First Italian High Fashion Show.

boutique, sportswear, and accessories that mapped to U.S. price ladders; and the Sala Bianca's servicescape that encoded "Italian style." He engineered signalling and cross-side network effects, and standardized shows, on-site ordering, and follow-up, collapsing AIDA and rewiring the market interface with reliability.

Despite his excellent prospects, Giorgini faced many difficulties. Many Italian fashion houses, especially those of the old guard, accustomed for decades to buying French designs, feared that participating in a collective fashion show under the banner of Italian style would mean closing their doors to Paris forever. For this reason, they declined Giorgini's invitation when, in 1951, he organised the First Italian High Fashion Show, a collective Italian fashion show at his home, Villa Torrigiani in Via de' Serragli. The idea was to present the collections at the end of Paris Fashion Week, to convince American buyers to extend their European trip from Paris to Florence. There were many factors in favour of the project, ranging from craftsmanship and high creativity to sophisticated fabric production and unbeatable prices that only Italy was able to offer (White 2000, p.44)². The Florentine gentleman's invitation was accepted mainly by young couturier who had recently opened their doors, including Simonetta Visconti and Fabiani, Sorelle Fontana and Emilio Schuberth, Carosa and Marucelli.

This first event was a resounding success: the critics were enthusiastic, and the Italian creations, which were 50% cheaper than their French counterparts, immediately sold out. Buyers commented "Paris didn't impress us that much" or "it was worth the trip" (Vergani, 1992: 50).

Buoyed by this success, Giorgini organised a second, larger fashion show in July of the same year, taking the halls of the Grand Hotel in Borgo Ognissanti. Then, in 1952, he triumphantly arrived in the majestic Sala Bianca of Palazzo Pitti, which until the 1970s would be the best springboard for any newcomer. Although the national and international press hailed the great victory of Italian fashion, on closer inspection, many creations born under the aegis of Italian style continued to be influenced by France.

After centuries of French subjugation, Italian fashion was emerging, but on closer inspection, the influence of Parisian ateliers continued to reign supreme in many of the creations of the pioneers of Italian style.

3. Balenciaga: The Italian School

The titans of fashion to whom many Italian couturiers looked for inspiration were Christian Dior and Cristóbal Balenciaga, who, according to Cecil Beaton, were the two leading figures in post-war fashion. While comparing the former to Antoine Watteau (rich in nuances, elegant and delicate - an essential exponent of Rococo painting), Beaton defined Balenciaga as the Picasso of fashion. Like Picasso, behind all his experiments in the name of modernity, Balenciaga concealed an immense respect for traditional forms and the purity of line.

² In the United States, as reported by *Women's Wear Daily* in 1952, an Italian fashion dress could cost from \$130 to \$250 (day dress), from \$120 to \$500 (evening dress), and from \$90 to \$130 (boutique); cf. White, 2000, p. 44.

While the creations of fashion designers such as Sorelle Fontana and Emilio Schuberth reflect the work of Dior and Balmain, those of Simonetta, Fabiani, Marucelli and Carosa often show the influence of Cristóbal Balenciaga (Quinto, 2025).

In the case of many noblewomen of Italian fashion, such as Carosa³ (Princess Giovanna Caracciolo Ginnetti di Avellino) and Simonetta (Duchess of Colonna di Cesarò), the French influence, and that of Balenciaga, is particularly evident. This was perhaps also due to the training of the two dressmakers, given that French fashion was probably more traditionally accepted among their mothers than in other social classes.

The reference to Balenciaga is not only a constant feature of Simonetta⁴ but also of her husband, Alberto Fabiani, a well-known Roman tailor, famous above all for the masterful cut of his suits.

Although Balenciaga's work has recently been reflected in certain creations by many other representatives of Italian fashion, from Mila Schön to Gianfranco Ferrè, his true Italian heirs are Roberto Capucci and Federico Forquet. Although both were more fashion designers than couturiers in the manner of Balenciaga, who was a master of couture techniques, these two were close to Balenciaga not only in style but also in their conception of fashion, which for them was a kind of silent ritual linked to haute couture.

For this reason, it could be argued that Balenciaga's influence on Capucci and Forquet was not only aesthetic but marketing structural. His model of controlled aura offered a repertoire of strategies that the Italians reinterpreted to fit their systems and selves. Together, they illuminate how couture in the 1960s was not just a matter of dresses but of designing ways of being seen — and of not being seen.

4. Roberto Capucci: le petit Balenciaga

The famously haughty French press christened him "Le petit Balenciaga" (Blum, 2011:45). Dilyl Blum, who dedicated an exhibition to him at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2011 (*Roberto Capucci. Art Into Fashion*, from 16 March to 5 June 2011), said of him, "Capucci represents everything that every designer aspires to be - an artist true to himself - and so he links himself to the tradition of great couturiers such as Cristóbal Balenciaga and Charles James." (Gnoli, S., 2011:18.)

Like the Spanish maestro, the Roman couturier-artist Roberto Capucci (1930) belongs to the artistic category of great couturier-architects, and he can undoubtedly be considered one of their leading representatives. As Cecil Beaton wrote about Balenciaga, Capucci

is not part of any clique, he plays no one's game but his own; he vigorously refuses to market himself and his talent, pays little attention to seasonal changes in fashion, and pursues a solitary creation of values that have earned him the respect,

³ The Carosa atelier was founded in Via Sistina in Rome in 1947 by Princess Giovanna Caracciolo Ginnetti di Avellino (1910-1983), who soon became the sole owner. The fashion house was also supported by Countess Barbara Rota Angelini Desalles and Mrs. Sakellarios, a Greek lady whose apartment in Via Sistina served as its first headquarters.

⁴ Simonetta Colonna di Cesarò (1922-2011) founded an atelier in Via Gregoriana in Rome in 1946. In 1951, she successfully participated in the collective Italian fashion shows organised by Giorgini in Florence. In the meantime, she met the couturier Alberto Fabiani, who would become her husband. Their activities remained separate until 1963, when they moved to Paris together and opened the Simonetta e Fabiani fashion house.

admiration and protection of those who are able to appreciate his uncommon genius. (Gnoli, 2007: 47-48.)

Unlike Alberto Fabiani and the noblewomen of Italian fashion mentioned above, who in most cases reproduced Balenciaga's models with few variations, Roberto Capucci reinterprets the Spanish maestro's taste through the lens of his own personality. Although his style is very individual, on closer inspection, the influence of the Spanish couturier is evident. It is no coincidence that, as Enrico Minio Capucci, the couturier's nephew and now general manager of the Roberto Capucci Foundation, recounts: "From when I was a small child, when I went with my mother to the atelier to see my uncle, I would always hear people talking about Balenciaga." (Capucci, 2025, 2 July.)

Roberto Capucci's passion for Balenciaga is deeply reflected in his love of pure lines and sculptural volumes, but also in his choice of "full-bodied" fabrics such as taffeta, faille and gazar.

To give an example, Balenciaga's influence is particularly evident in the 6 Gonne dress (1957). This was a taffeta gown inspired by the concentric circles produced by a stone thrown into water; it quickly became such a classic that it was chosen for a Cadillac advertisement and was later immortalized in a famous cartoon in The Dallas Morning News. Another great example of originality is the Linea a scatola (Box Line). [Figure 1]

Launched in 1958, it was based on sculptural and abstract volumes and earned the Italian couturier the Fashion Oscar established by Filene's department store in Boston. That collection, which reflected Balenciaga's yearning for clean lines, was a huge success. Denise Minelli, one of the great socialites of the period, married Vincent wearing a wedding dress from that collection. "A little bereavement box. Only she could wear it at her wedding, don't you think?" Capucci told Oriana Fallaci. (Fallaci, O, 1961:203.) It was a sort of antithesis to Dior's new look, which exalted a slender, retro hourglass silhouette, while Capucci's box dress, reminiscent of Balenciaga's silky sculptures, was almost "a textile habitat, an elaborate, hollow form to inhabit" in its geometry (Vergani 2001:13). The following year saw the arrival of "Lampione" skirts and overlapping collars, also associated with the aesthetic tradition of Cristóbal Balenciaga's work. "Two or three overlapping collars?" asked Gianna Manzini in 1959, and answered her own question: "No, nine. Incredible but true; nine collars one on top of the other, made of very light fabrics, preferably satin organza." (Manzini, 2003:110). [Figure 2]

Later, while often going beyond the world of fashion, he kept his love for Balenciaga's typical sculptural lines intact. This is particularly evident in a 1982 red taffeta dress with an asymmetrical length embellished with ruffles, created for Duchess Lydia Sforza Cesarini for the 18th birthday ball of Donna Leontina Pallavicini. That design is very similar in appearance to a fuchsia gros de Naples dress with a moiré effect made in 1963 by Balenciaga for Sonsoles Díaz de Rivera y de Icaza, now preserved at the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria⁵.

⁵ This dress was exhibited in Milan (Palazzo Morando, 21 February–2 March 2025) during the exhibition *Balenciaga / Shoes from Spain Tribute*.



Figure 1
Roberto Capucci
Sketch *Box Line* fall-winter 1958-59
Courtesy Fondazione Roberto Capucci

Figure 2
Roberto Capucci
Sketch *Lampione Line*, 1959
Courtesy Fondazione Roberto Capucci

5. The Federico Forquet Case

The Italian couturier most closely linked to Balenciaga is undoubtedly Federico Forquet (1931); he was born in Naples, from an ancient family of French origin. He had admired Balenciaga since childhood, when he would leaf through his mother's fashion magazines. "My big break," he confessed, "came in 1954 when Marie-Louise Bousquet⁶, one of the most famous socialites in Paris, called Enrico d'Assia (editor's note: a close friend of Federico's since childhood) and asked him to entertain Cristóbal Balenciaga, who in a few days, was due to arrive in Ischia for a spa break with his friend Ramon Esparza, who made the hats for his collections. But Enrico had an unavoidable commitment. His first exhibition of paintings was about to open at the Obelisco, the Roman gallery owned by Gaspero del Corso and his wife, Irene Brin. Forquet recalls:

Knowing my admiration for Balenciaga, he immediately let me know and asked me to go in his place. I contacted Balenciaga from Naples. Assuming that I was already in Ischia, he made an appointment to have dinner with me that same evening, so I rushed to catch the first ferry and hurried to the island.

Forquet and Balenciaga also spent time together the following day and for the rest of the Master's stay. Forquet once again recalls:

Balenciaga was such a "legend" to me that, in the few days we spent together, I didn't have the courage to show him my designs. Then Enrico returned; we all went out together, and he asked Balenciaga, 'So, what do you think of our young friend's designs?' The great couturier looked at him, puzzled. At that point, not having had time to warn Enrico that I hadn't mentioned my passion, I admitted it with great shame. Balenciaga asked me to show him the designs, but I had left them in Naples. (Forquet, 2013)

Several months later, despite his family's disapproval, he took the train to Paris. There, Balenciaga had arranged for him to stay with his friend Bianca Gilchrist. He continues:

I introduced myself to him with a bundle of 500 designs. Balenciaga leafed through them quickly, like a cashier counting banknotes; he judged 480 of them useless, the rest good, and invited me to prepare a collection based on those he had liked. (Comitto, 1962)

In the meantime, although he had to leave Paris for a few days, he invited Federico to stay at his house.

He lived on the fifth floor of an anonymous building, I think on Avenue Morceau, near the Spanish Embassy and opposite the Église. His apartment was very conventional. The predominant colours in the house were dark green and eggshell as a base colour. He also had a country house near Paris: La Reinerie. This too was normal, sober. Balenciaga did not like to show off; he was not grandiose. He never believed himself to be a star.

⁶ In the 1950s, Marie-Louise Bousquet was the French correspondent for Harper's Bazaar. Cecil Beaton, describing her in *The Glass of Fashion* (1955), claimed that Madame Bousquet resembled the magical ingredient that the Chinese have used for centuries to flavour soups and sauces. Without her, the fashion world would be deprived of an essential part of its mind and heart, Milano, Garzanti 1955, p.313.

He had dedicated his life to fashion, but he did not feel like a superhuman god (Forquet, 2024).

On his return, after seeing the designs he had made during his absence, he said to him, "I have thought a lot about you and what you have to do in life. And I think that you could be a very good designer." (cit. Bowles, 2020:25.) He allowed him to stay in his studio while he prepared the collection. It was December 1954, and the Spanish couturier was working on the spring / summer 1955 collection that he would present in February. Shortly afterwards, Gerard Chueca, Balenciaga's secretary, contacted Forquet, and from that moment on, he received a small pay cheque at the end of each week. "It was an elegant way," Forquet recalls today, "to give me the possibility of staying in Paris." (cit. Bowles, 2020: 25.) Forquet, who had no support from his parents - they wanted him to manage the family estate - rented a modest room in a small boarding house. Balenciaga wanted him to make sketches based on what he observed during the collection rehearsals to better understand his abilities. Shortly after that, the Master declared himself very satisfied with what he had learned. Forquet remained in Paris until the presentation of the collection on 2 February 1955, without even returning home for Christmas. "My family," he recalls, "was stunned by that decision." (Forquet, 2024.) He returned to Naples after the show and left for Paris again after about a month, when Balenciaga invited him to assist him in preparing the next season's collection. On that occasion, Forquet also met the Master's fabric suppliers, including Gustav Zumsteg of Abraham from Switzerland. [Figures 3 and 4]

It was the period when young talents such as André Courrèges and Emanuel Ungaro were working at the Balenciaga fashion house.

In the early 1980s, at a reception at the French embassy, I met Ungaro, who confessed that he and Courrèges were very jealous of me. He told me, 'We didn't know each other, but I hated you because when we were working for Balenciaga, we weren't allowed into Monsieur Balenciaga's studio.' I was the only one allowed into the Master's studio. They cut and sewed, but they weren't where he created. I watched him create. Some ran around with fabric, others passed him pins or scissors. I stood there in silence, watching. Then I went home and drew. Sometimes I would create designs thinking about what he would have liked. (Forquet, 2024).

Meanwhile, during the gap between collections, Balenciaga urged Forquet to sell his sketches to various house of fashion. It was then that, to support himself, he designed briefly for Princess Giovanna Caracciolo Ginnetti of Avellino, owner of Carosa, and Alberto Fabiani. He worked with the latter, famous for his impeccably cut suits, for a couple of years. When Balenciaga started his new collection, Forquet returned to Paris to assist him. However, "Nobody else was designing the clothes at Balenciaga other than the Master himself, although in Forquet's sketches from the period one can discern the genesis of a number of significant silhouettes of the period." (cit. Bowles, 2020: 26.)

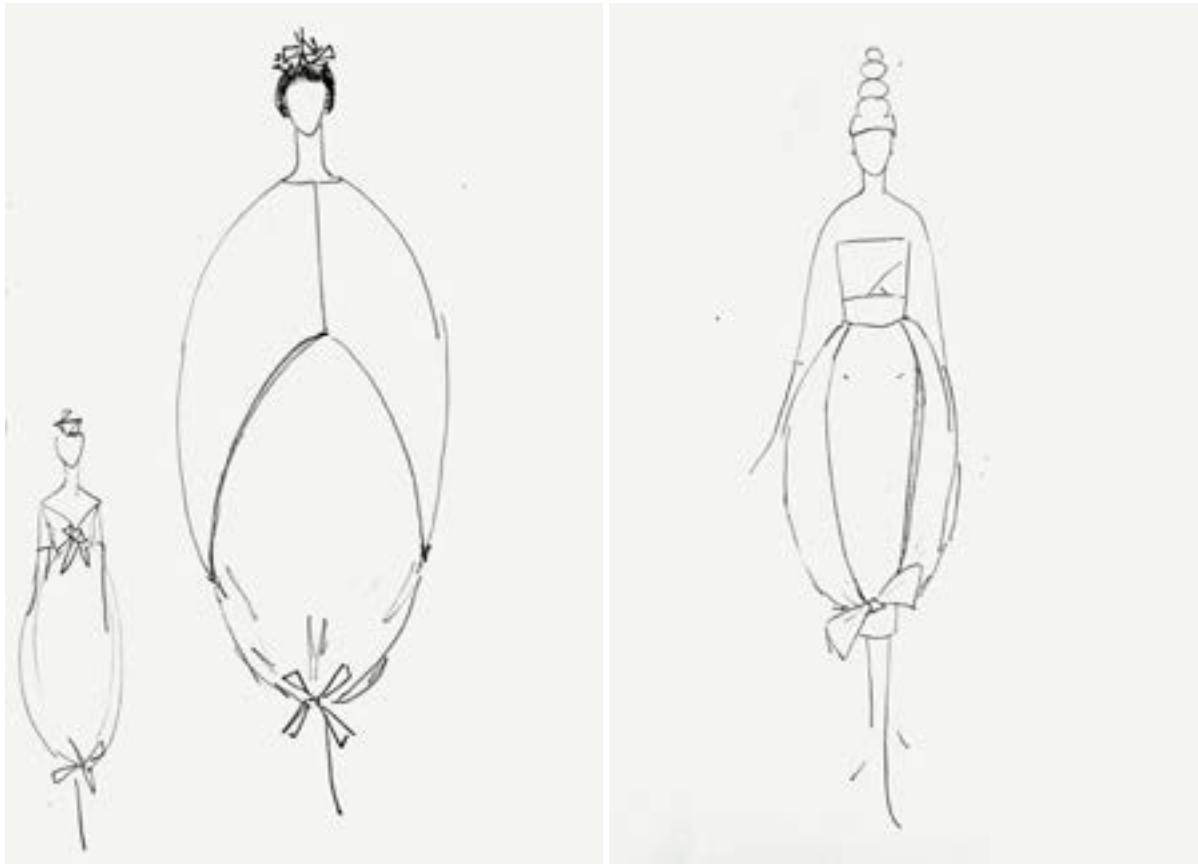


Figure 3
Federico Forquet
Sketch ca. 1955-1958 Courtesy
Federico Forquet

Figure 4
Federico Forquet
Sketch ca. 1955-1958 Courtesy
Federico Forquet

In 1958, Balenciaga told me that I now had enough experience and that I could start flying with my own wings. He protected me a lot, he had a paternal affection for me and was concerned about my future. He insisted that I should find a job as a designer. He told me, 'You have to start making collections for someone who can't hold a pencil. You draw the designs and explain to your employer and the cutters what you want.' I was afraid. He said to me, 'Wait... Let's see if we can do something.' He also spoke to Mademoiselle Renée, the strict director of the atelier. After about ten days, Mademoiselle Renée mentioned Galitzine (Forquet, 2024).

Forquet began working for her during the preparation of the spring / summer 1959 collection. The atmosphere at Galitzine was very different from that of Balenciaga in Paris. "The Spanish master," recalled Forquet, "always thought about his customers, but Galitzine's approach was completely subjective: 'The woman was her.'" (cit. Bowles 2020: 29.) The Galitzine / Forquet partnership gave rise to an eternal paradigm of elegance: the 'Palazzo Pyjamas'. At that point, Forquet felt the time had come to set up his own business, so in partnership with Bebe Pozzi⁷, former director of Fabiani, he opened a fashion house at number 9 Via Condotti in Rome in 1961. The timing could not have been better, as Capucci, Simonetta, and Fabiani - three big names in Roman fashion - had just left the Italian capital to move to Paris. "Italian fashion has therefore found its 'golden boy' on the day it lost him," commented Renato Barneschi in Gente, referring to Roberto Capucci's move to Paris (Barneschi, 1961). The day after his first collection, presented on the Florentine catwalk of the Sala Bianca (XXIII Fashion Show) on 14 January 1962, Pia Soli Roncoroni, correspondent for Il Tempo, wrote an article retracing the friendship between the young couturier and the great Spanish master with the evocative title "Top marks from Balenciaga". On 10 March 1962, Mimmina Quirico wrote an article in Telesera entitled: "Balenciaga's Italian pupil is the fashionable designer for well-to-do ladies". That collection consisted of 73 designs of great cleanness, all based on asymmetry, a distinctive feature of his creations. Balenciaga was no stranger to this type of exercise, as evidenced by the Peacock line (1957) and the Sari line (1963). In fact, as seen in his collections, designed for fun in his youth, in addition to the 'Fungo' and 'Cartoccio' line, there was also the 'Urto' line, completely unbalanced on one side. The press and buyers were ecstatic. In the pages of the Corriere d'informazione, Irene Brin commented: "For Forquet today, there was nothing short of a miracle, a succession of impeccable elements, increasing enthusiasm, until in the end the eyes of some of the female spectators were literally overflowing with tears." (Brin, 1962.) Balenciaga passed on to his protégé his conception of fashion, which he believed should be evolution rather than revolution. Unlike Dior, who completely changed his lines with each collection, the Spanish couturier limited himself to adding a little "firework" from time to time while always remaining true to his signature style. Forquet would always treasure this lesson. So much so that every time he created a new collection, he would spread all the designs from the previous season on the floor to find a common thread. The toga line, which would become a constant feature of his style, is emblematic in this sense. It is difficult to find a collection

⁷ Bebe is the nickname of Immacolata Pozzi.

in which he did not present this design in the form of a dress or a tunic to be worn over soft trousers. Another interesting example is the Crescendo 1 and 2 collections, which he launched in 1959 in two successive seasons. The second was a development of the first. Serena Sinclair commented on the collection in *The Daily Telegraph* on 23 July 1969:

He presents five versions of the same dress or coat on the platform at one time, each with subtle graduated differences. This way, a woman can see what length, how dark a shade of beige or coral she should choose. It's an amazingly beautiful version of a catalogue (Sinclair, 1969).

According to Balenciaga, one had to remain faithful to one's roots. Balenciaga always remained close to Spain and encouraged Forquet to 'feel' his homeland, Naples. A few years later, this teaching would give rise to a collection of volcano collars dedicated to Vesuvius (fall / winter 1963-1964). "His suits stay in the Balenciaga category," commented Eugenia Sheppard in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 16 June 1963, "but he adds some stylish touches. (...). Both dresses and coats have high turtle-necked collars, some of them so high that they look like a cast for a broken neck."

The similarities between Forquet and Balenciaga are particularly evident in the yellow gazar petal dress from 1967 that belonged to Laura Tanzini and is now part of the collection of Enrico Quinto and Paolo Tinarelli, which has many points in common with *La Tulipe* (fall / winter 1965) designed by Balenciaga for Eisa⁸. This is yet another example of the Spanish master's supremacy.

6. Balenciaga's "anti-marketing" strategy

Cristóbal Balenciaga was a celebrated couturier renowned for his purity and modernity, yet he was almost invisible as a public figure. Where contemporaries became household names through media and personal visibility, Balenciaga operated in near silence (Walker, 2006). This was not a deliberate approach, but rather a reflection of his naturally reserved personality, which anticipated many contemporary luxury marketing strategies.

The marketing strategy employed by Balenciaga was predicated on the couture contradiction: the more a particular silhouette was observed, the more rapidly it was replicated, thereby diminishing its perceived value (English and Munroe, 2022). The Maison solved this problem by turning scarcity into a marketing tool. This involved the implementation of an invitation-only salon system, the rationing of press access, and the strict regulation of product diffusion. Furthermore, the Maison managed the sequence and lead time in a manner designed to deter imitation (Thorpe, 2017; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018). Cristóbal Balenciaga is widely regarded as having perfected the model (Kapferer, 2017; Miller, 2007), reinforcing what have been termed 'luxury anti-laws': resisting the adoption of scale, appearing sparingly, and privileging the connoisseur over the crowd (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012).

⁸ A light pink version of the dress was purchased by Ava Gardner, who later donated it to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The first pillar of Balenciaga's marketing strategy was silence that created an aura of exclusivity: unlike many of his contemporaries, he was notably discreet and humble (Walker, 2006), and he avoided media engagement—granting only a few interviews in his fifty-year career (Victoria and Albert Museum; Balda, 2022b)—thereby sidestepping the self-promotion typical of Parisian houses. This was not due to a lack of marketing, but rather an effective implementation of Integrated Marketing Communication, which engendered depth and costly signalling via access / time. Reticence (Palmer, 2021) created interpretive scarcity that was then filled by admirers (e.g. Dior, Chanel) as earned media. The house's press image unified esteem rather than inviting debate (Balda, 2022a; Keller, 2001, 2013; Kapferer, 2012).

The second key pillar was his manipulation of time (Balda, 2022a). In the postwar era, piracy posed a severe threat to couture. Buyers, journalists, and sketch artists transmitted Paris silhouettes to department stores and ready-to-wear manufacturers, who produced copies within weeks (Pouillard, 2016; Tregenza, 2021). For houses like Dior, widespread copying eroded exclusivity even as it amplified influence (Raustiala and Sprigman, 2006). In order to protect the exclusivity of his designs, Balenciaga, in 1956, introduced a system of re-sequencing the calendar so that private clients and trusted buyers were able to view collections first, with journalists being granted access weeks later.

A third element of Balenciaga's marketing strategy was selective diffusion. Despite his aversion to publicity (Victoria and Albert Museum), he recognised the importance of mass touchpoints. It is evident that fragrances such as *Le Dix* (1947), launched in 1947, coinciding with the unveiling of the *New Look* by Dior (Miller, 2017), *La Fuite des Heures* (1949), *Quadrille* (1955)—were conceived as a means of providing an entry point for consumers who did not have the financial means to procure couture, yet still sought to experience the associated aura of the brand. Accessories such as scarves (Bowles, 2011) and handbags played a similar role (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, Balenciaga accessories 1940–1968).

The distinguishing characteristic that set Balenciaga apart from his contemporaries was his ability to exercise restraint. He resisted the temptation to license his name extensively or to launch prêt-à-porter lines, even as other Parisian fashion houses did so in the 1950s and 1960s (Romano, 2022; Thurman, 2006).

In line with this rationale, the company rejected the idea of providing paper patterns and was reluctant to embrace prêt-à-porter and extensive licensing (Thurman, 2006).

The fourth pillar was his belief in the value of communication with his customers. His client list included some of the most prominent women of the 20th century, such as Grace Kelly; the Duchess of Windsor; Mona von Bismarck; Elizabeth Park Firestone, heiress to the Firestone tyre fortune; Ava Gardner; María Sonsoles de Icaza y de León (Marquesa de Llanzol); Marella Caracciolo di Castagneto.

These women's wardrobes and public profiles amplified the fashion house's aura, effectively serving as unpaid influencers and bringing Balenciaga into the society pages. *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Women's Wear Daily* were among the publications that covered the fashion house (Arndt, 1967; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Cova and Cova, 2002; Holt, 2004; Ismail, 2015).

Rather than embodying the absence of marketing, Balenciaga represents a distinct marketing paradigm in which press coverage is not the primary means of creating value.

7. Balenciaga's Legacy across Capucci and Forquet marketing

Further examination of how Balenciaga's marketing strategy influenced Capucci and Forquet in the 1960s reveals that it cannot be reduced to imitation alone. The aura created by Balenciaga could not simply be transferred to Italy, where the high fashion economy in cities such as Florence and Rome depended on visibility and media coverage abroad (White, 2020; Pinchera and Rinallo, 2022). Giorgini's Sala Bianca shows were designed to attract American buyers and magazines, so visibility was essential. In such a system, Balenciaga's strategies could not simply be copied. They had to be adapted.

The lesson for Italian designers Capucci and Forquet was clear: visibility could be achieved without chasing publicity. Silence, if disciplined and authentic, could serve as a form of brand differentiation.

They absorbed Balenciaga's teachings and interpreted his philosophy differently, developing two distinct strategies that nevertheless shared his core principles: controlling visibility and distribution, and elevating the couture experience through its temporality, space, and service. Capucci incorporated Balenciaga's teachings into an artistic, Italian-first strategy, while Forquet adopted a more selective approach. Capucci would later adopt this ethos of retirement, while the more sociable Forquet retained an aristocratic reserve that echoed his master's discretion.

8. From Balenciaga's silence to Capucci's artistic creations: a marketing continuum

Roberto Capucci's trajectory during the 1960s demonstrates a clear absorption of Balenciaga's legacy, albeit refracted through the conditions of postwar Italian couture. Like Balenciaga, Capucci cultivated an aura of reticence. Although his Paris debut in 1962 (*Linea pura*) was celebrated by the French and American press, he consistently resisted the trappings of personal celebrity (Blum, 2011). His reputation was consolidated less through continuous media engagement than through episodic acclaim, particularly in the United States, where department stores such as Macy's and Ohrbach's promoted line-for-line adaptations of his designs. In this sense, Capucci mirrored Balenciaga's logic of selective diffusion: allowing peripheral products (hosiery, perfumes) to circulate symbolically while preserving the integrity of couture.

Capucci's disavowal of seasonal market pressures reframed him not as a couturier of fashion but as a sculptor in fabric, aligning his work with art rather than commerce. Where Balenciaga mobilized royal patrons and actresses as unwitting ambassadors, Capucci relied on cultural intermediaries. His collaboration with Pier Paolo Pasolini on the film *Teorema* (1968) exemplifies a strategy of client-led communication transposed into cinema, extending his aura into new cultural fields without recourse to advertising.

Viewed through a marketing lens, both Balenciaga and Capucci resisted mass visibility and prioritized exclusivity, thereby transforming silence and absence into signals of prestige.

9. The Balenciaga shadow on Forquet marketing approach

Conversely, Forquet, who worked for Cristóbal Balenciaga in Paris between 1955 and 1956 (Gnoli, 2020: 47) engineered a small yet coherent client interface, incorporating selective distribution, relationship marketing and brand-identity coherence. He adapted the model into media couture characterized by selectivity. This, combined with a regular presence in prestigious publications and celebrity endorsement, has been instrumental in establishing his reputation.

Forquet built desirability through curated access: invitation-only trunk shows tightly edited capsules, and high-prestige editorial placements (*Vogue* / *Bazaar* / *WWD*). Imagery focuses on online and material intelligence; society muses act as living media. The tone is sociable yet aristocratically reserved visibility without overexposure. International aristocrats and tastemakers wore his garments at high-society events, generating visibility through their appearances. This was similar to Balenciaga's approach but with an Italian twist: Forquet's clients also came from the glamorous worlds of cinema thanks to Matteo Spinola, press agent and his partner for 40 years, and international diplomacy in 1960s Rome.

All of this network functioned as proto-influencer marketing: Forquet's proximity to socialites and aristocrats didn't just dress the elite; it signalled elite belonging.

Unlike typical mid-century licenses (perfume and accessories) for a very short period, Forquet designed salon-exclusive fashion lines for Elizabeth Arden's luxury salons in Rome and Milan (Gnoli, 2020).

Together, selective distribution, experiential retail, meaning transfer via high society, and iconic product codes prefigured later luxury theory while remaining unmistakably his own.

These two different approaches effectively channel Balenciaga's logic of scarcity and sequence into distinct market systems (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013)

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Cristóbal Balenciaga and Australia. Importing, Reproducing and Adapting Balenciaga Couture in Sydney, 1938-1968

Abstract

Cristóbal Balenciaga is considered one of the most innovative designers of the twentieth century, with an influence extending well beyond Europe and North America. Within one year of showing his first haute couture collection in Paris, the Australian press reported on Balenciaga and details of his collections were promptly relayed back to receptive audiences in both metropolitan and regional centers. Australian women did not have to wait long before they could see and buy Balenciaga garments for themselves, as original models were imported, reproduced and adapted in Australia by 1939. This article traces the transfer of Balenciaga's clothing to Australia during the inter-war period and after the Second World War, with a focus on Sydney couture salon Germaine Rocher. In 1934, Vera Fels emigrated from Paris to Sydney, and established couture salon Germaine Rocher, producing authorized reproductions of Paris models. Existing Australian fashion histories have largely overlooked pre-Second World War haute couture in Australia, with more emphasis on the postwar period. Encompassing rich stories of migration and the transfer of haute couture technical knowledge to Australia in the early to mid-twentieth century, this study provides new understandings of the wearing of couture in Australia as well as transcultural relations and Australia's fashion history.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Germaine Rocher /
Copying Haute Couture / Australia / Skills Transmission

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↗ Fashion Theory

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Stitching Space

An Architectural Study of Cristóbal Balenciaga's Workshops in San Sebastián

Abstract

The name Balenciaga evokes his creations and the innovations he brought to the world of fashion, yet the spaces that enabled the couturier to develop his creativity and stage the most prestigious fashion shows of the era are often overlooked. This essay examines the architecture of the ateliers from which Cristóbal Balenciaga operated throughout his life, focusing specifically on the city of San Sebastián. The study of architectural plans, photographs, and archival images has made it possible to identify these sites and to understand the relationship between spatial organization and function. It should be noted that this research does not focus on the furniture, decoration, or atmosphere of Balenciaga's ateliers; these aspects are mentioned only occasionally. Instead, the study concentrates primarily on the analysis of floor plans and the purpose allocated to each room, in order to reconstruct the architectural and organizational logic of these workspaces. Although the materials gathered (iconographic documents and written descriptions) do not follow a chronological order, the evolution of the ateliers is presented chronologically to facilitate understanding and ensure narrative coherence.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / San Sebastián /
Sewing Workshop / Architecture / Fashion Design

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Stitching Space

An Architectural Study of Cristóbal Balenciaga's Workshops in San Sebastián

1. Introduction

Cristóbal Balenciaga — described by Hubert de Givenchy as “the architect of haute couture,” and hailed by his peers as the “master of masters” — is an emblematic figure in high fashion. A true authority in elegance and innovation, his name has become synonymous with technical perfection and bold creativity. He was able to rise above fleeting trends to create timeless garments that continue to shape contemporary fashion. His work, defined by clean lines and sculptural silhouettes, reveals a profound understanding of form and structure. Each piece he designed constitutes a work of art in its own right, reflecting a singular vision and an unrivalled command of the craft of sewing. Balenciaga was not merely a dressmaker, but a genuine architect of fashion, capable of transforming fabric into a sublime expression of elegance and refinement.

Beyond his exceptional skill as a couturier, Balenciaga was also a visionary who understood the significance of architecture within fashion. The presentation of fashion shows with live models — introduced in 1858 by Charles Frederick Worth to bring garments to life — also established the principle of temporality as an essential element of fashion. Cristóbal Balenciaga was fully aware that the setting in which a creation is presented can strongly shape its reception. For this reason, he devoted particular attention to the architecture of his sewing workshops, creating spaces that echoed his aesthetic sensibility while enhancing the impact of his designs.

Fashion and architecture, though seemingly distinct at first glance, are in fact deeply interconnected. Architecture offers fashion a physical framework through which it can be expressed; workshop spaces are conceived to meet different needs, both for the workers who produce the garments and for the distinguished clients who visit the premises. To date, no specific study has been undertaken on the plans of Balenciaga's sewing workshops in San Sebastián, nor in other cities in which he established his activity. This essay therefore seeks to recover the plans of the buildings occupied by Cristóbal Balenciaga in order to understand how these workshops functioned and how their spaces were distributed.

Situated on the Basque coast, San Sebastián experienced a profound urban transformation between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evolving from a military stronghold and fishing port into a consolidated seaside resort and major tourist destination. This development was marked by the creation of new infrastructures, such as the ensanche (urban expansion) and the casino, in response to the arrival of an aristocratic and bourgeois

clientele. The establishment of royal summer residence played a decisive role: following the death of Alfonso XII, Queen Regent María Cristina moved the court to San Sebastián in 1887, residing at Miramar Palace. This progressively attracted the aristocracy and reinforced the city's image as a capital of refinement. The presence of high society profoundly shaped everyday life in San Sebastián. During the summer season, La Concha beach became the epicentre of social activity. In order to meet the sartorial expectations of this prestigious clientele, luxury boutiques and fashion houses began to establish themselves in the city.

Major fashion houses were structured around a strict hierarchy that shaped both the creative process and the organization of labour. At the top stood the head couturier — simultaneously artist and entrepreneur — who supervised every stage of creation. Saleswomen played a crucial role as intermediaries between the house and its clientele. Under their direction, the workshops became the productive core of the maison: the workshop heads (*premières*) and those responsible for manufacturing ensured the flawless execution of each model, supported by the so-called *petites mains*, highly skilled workers who were often subjected to demanding working conditions.

This hierarchical organization was reflected in the very architecture of haute couture houses. Presentation salons — decorated with moldings, chandeliers, and precious textiles — were conceived to impress and seduce clients; by contrast, the couturier's office, though discreet, maintained a sober elegance that reinforced their authority. Meanwhile, the workshops, frequently located in less visible areas, concentrated the productive activity and collective labour of the house. Existing fashion historiography has largely emphasized the artistic dimension of designers, yet relatively few studies examine how this social and gender hierarchy is translated directly into the spatial organization of the ateliers. In this respect, the case of Cristóbal Balenciaga is particularly revealing. The analysis of the plans and layout of his workshops offers a renewed perspective, connecting the practice of haute couture with its architectural and organizational dimensions.

2. Methodology

This work is grounded in a historical and architectural research methodology aimed at reconstructing the spaces of Cristóbal Balenciaga's workshops in San Sebastián. The approach combined a bibliographic review, archival research, and the comparison of architectural plans with iconographic sources. First, an exhaustive review of the existing literature on the couturier's life and professional career was conducted, with particular attention to the work of Miren Arzalluz (*The Forge of the Master*). In a second stage, architectural documentation was located and compiled from the Municipal Archive of Donostia / San Sebastián. The original plans of the buildings in which the workshops were installed constituted the primary basis for analysis. The research was further complemented by iconographic analysis: the identification of archival photographs — both interior and exterior — made it

possible to establish morphological correspondences between the architectural elements visible in the images and those represented in the consulted plans. Finally, the material was organized according to a chronological criterion in order to provide a coherent overview of the evolution of the workshops within the city.

3. Calle Vergara, 2

According to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, Balenciaga began his training in San Sebastián in 1907, working as an apprentice in various establishments connected to Parisian fashion. In 1917, he opened his first workshop under the name "C. Balenciaga" at 2 Calle Vergara, where he worked independently for a year before forming a partnership with the Lizaso sisters under the firm "Balenciaga y Cía." Strategically located just a few metres from La Concha beach, this first establishment enabled the young couturier to consolidate his position within the city's urban and social fabric.

The plans consulted, held in the Municipal Archive of Donostia / San Sebastián, suggest that alterations were introduced to the building's internal layout between the original plans dated 1867 and Balenciaga's occupancy beginning in 1917. It is therefore hypothesised that the fitting-room salon was located in the rooms facing Avenida de la Libertad, where large, naturally lit spaces offered privileged views. Adjacent to these rooms, Cristóbal Balenciaga's office was likely situated, integrated into the reception and administrative area. Areas dedicated to production — including cutting, corsetry, and tailoring — were probably distributed towards Calle Vergara. [Figure 1]

4. Avenida de la Libertad, 2

In 1924, Cristóbal Balenciaga became independent and moved to the first floor of 2 Avenida de la Libertad. In 1933, he founded a new establishment, *E/SA B. E. Costura*, on the first floor, relocating the Cristóbal Balenciaga firm to the second floor of the same building. Archival photographs dated 1946 depict a richly decorated and meticulously arranged interior, suggesting the attention to detail Balenciaga devoted to the reception of his most prestigious clients. [Figures 2a, 2b, 3]

Large mirrors visually enlarged the space, while chandeliers and fine materials such as wood contributed to an atmosphere of elegance. The contrast between these environments reflects the duality between exclusivity and artisanal production. Clients attending fittings or fashion presentations could scarcely perceive the intense manual labour required for the creation of each garment. [Figure 4] The coexistence of luxurious presentation rooms and functional workspaces underscores the very essence of haute couture: meticulous craftsmanship sustaining an appearance of refined sophistication. [Figure 5]

Figure 1

Plan, section, and elevation of the house at Calle Vergara No. 2, redrawn and combined by the author from original documents to reflect the state of the spaces occupied by Balenciaga between 1917 and 192

© Joakin Aramendy, based on plans from the Archivo Municipal de Donostia / San Sebastián, Construction Projects Collection, File H-00314-01





Figure 2a
Isabel Garcés posing in the salon of the
Balenciaga EISA B.E. workshop, with a
balcony overlooking Avenida de la Libertad
© Kutxa Fundazioa Fototeka / Photo Carte
Collection / Author: Vicente Martín /
August 27, 1946. ID: 56717419.

Figure 2b
Isabel Garcés in the Balenciaga EISA B.E.
workshop, Avenida de la Libertad
© Kutxa Fundazioa Fototeka / Photo Carte
Collection / Author: Vicente Martín /
August 27, 1946. ID: 67918522.



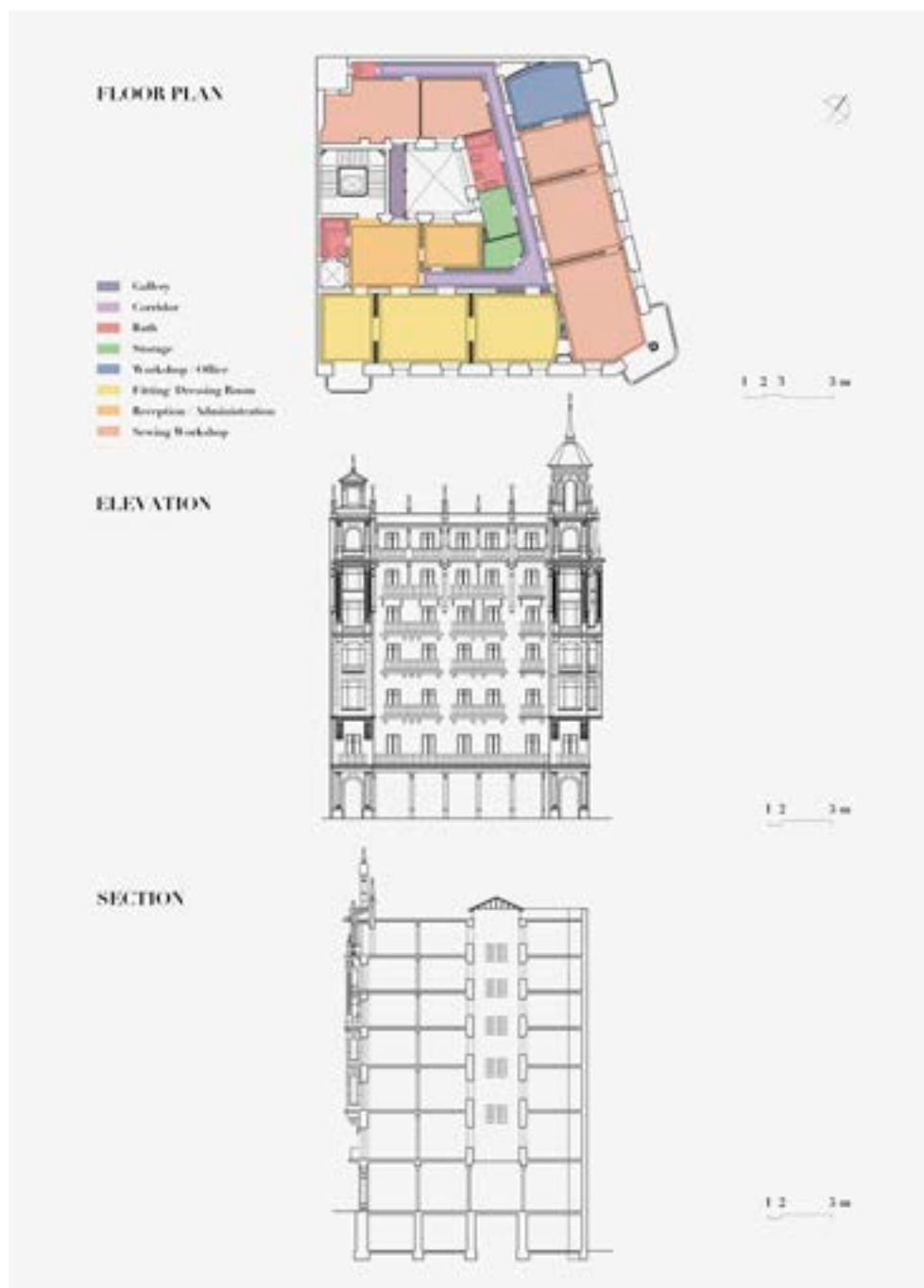
Figure 3
Building at the corner of Calle Santa Catalina and Avenida de la Libertad, with the Balenciaga sewing workshop on the upper floor
© Kutxa Fundazioa Fototeka / Foto Marín Collection / Author: Paco Marí / 1968. ID: 61534360.

Figure 4
Interior view of the Balenciaga workshop with seamstresses at work
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa / Documentary Collections / Inventory No. 12345.

Figure 5

Plan, section, and elevation of the house at Avenida de la Libertad No. 2, redrawn and combined by the author from original documents to reflect the state of the spaces occupied by Balenciaga between 1924 and 1968

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5. Calle Oquendo, 10

In 1927, Balenciaga opened a new establishment at 10 Calle Oquendo under the name *Eisa Costura*, in honour of his mother. It is believed that this new location catered to middle-class clients spending the summer in San Sebastián, as well as to the daughters of the local petty bourgeoisie who could not afford the exclusive models created for high society. A plan from 1928 suggests that the patio was enclosed, which would have made it possible to gain a considerable amount of additional space for manufacturing activities such as cutting and tailoring. [Figure 6]

6. Calle Santa Catalina, 3

The proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931 and the subsequent exile of the aristocracy had a significant impact on luxury businesses in San Sebastián. In 1932, Balenciaga opened a new establishment at 3 Calle Santa Catalina under the name *B.E. Costura*. Given the economic circumstances, he temporarily suspended his haute couture activity under the firm "C. Balenciaga" in order to focus on *Eisa Costura* and *B.E. Costura*, both aimed at a middle- to upper-middle-class clientele. However, in 1933 he decided to close the Santa Catalina shop and concentrate his activity once again at Avenida de la Libertad. [Figure 7]

7. Conclusions

The architecture of Cristóbal Balenciaga's workshops constitutes a fundamental aspect of his work and legacy. These establishments were strategically located along the city's main thoroughfares, serving as markers of luxury and refinement. While the interior spaces designed for clients were richly decorated and filled with light, the *petites mains* worked in functional areas devoted to the demanding daily processes of production. This architectural legacy deserves full recognition for its contribution to urban development and to the cultural heritage of the period.

Figure 6

Plan, section, and elevation of the house at Calle Oquendo No. 10, redrawn and combined by the author from original documents to reflect the state of the spaces occupied by Balenciaga between 1927 and 1938

© Joakin Aramendy, based on plans from the Archivo Municipal de Donostia/ San Sebastián, Construction Projects Collection, File H-00297-08.

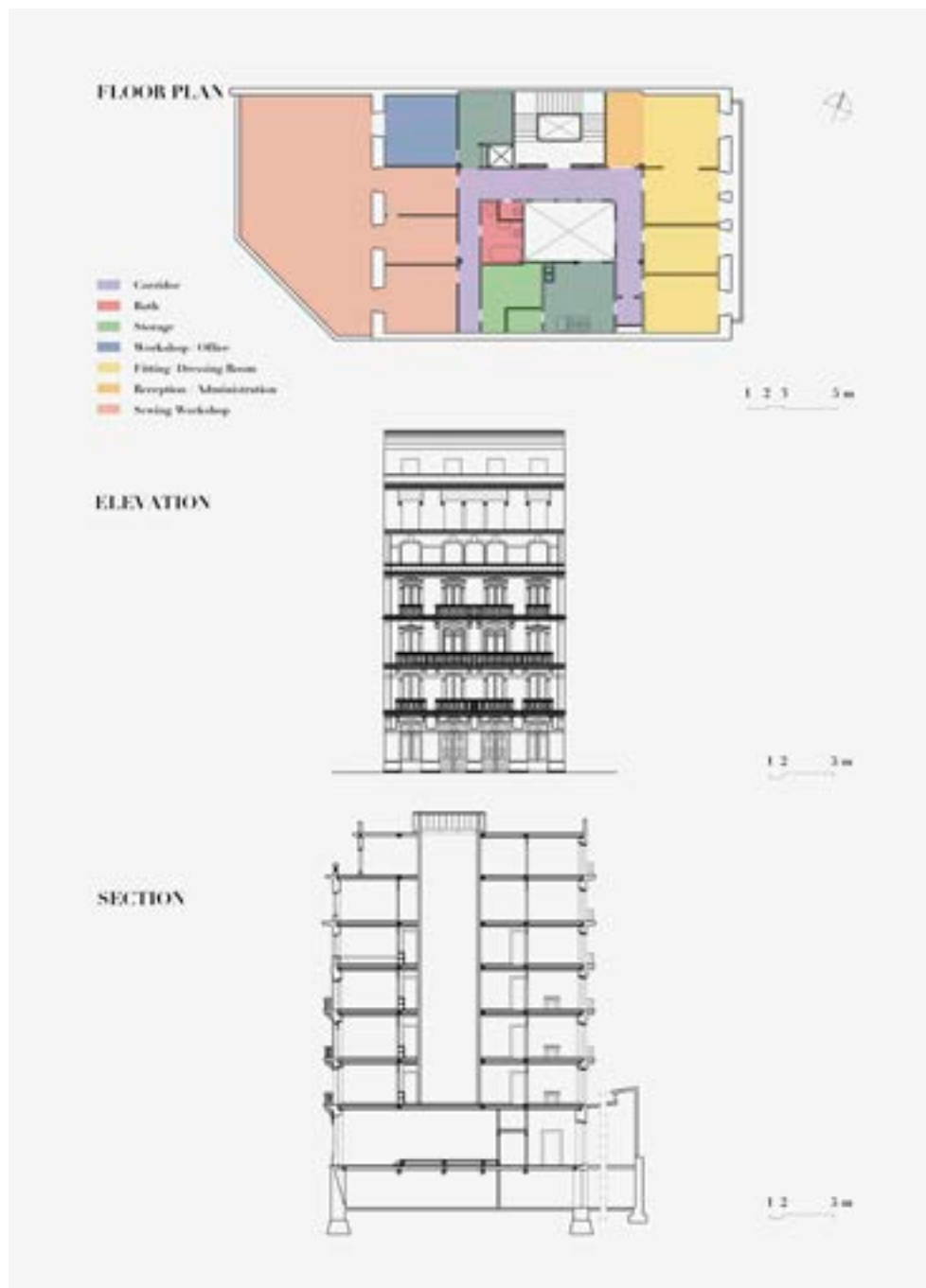


Figure 7

Plan, section, and elevation of the house at Calle Santa Catalina No. 3, redrawn and combined by the author from original documents to reflect the state of the spaces occupied by Balenciaga in 1932

© Joaquín Aramendy, based on plans from the Archivo Municipal de Donostia/ San Sebastián, Construction Projects Collection, File H-00313-20.



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Models of the 1950s and 1960s at the Maison de Couture Balenciaga in Paris: Lives and Testimonies

Abstract

Haute couture mannequins and models were sometimes visible in magazines—though not all of them appeared in the press—yet there is remarkably little documentation regarding their personal trajectories: where they came from, why they chose to become mannequins de cabine, and how they experienced this highly demanding profession. As a result, they have largely remained anonymous. In many ways, they became “invisible”, since attention was meant to rest exclusively on the garments they wore.

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the backgrounds and working conditions of the mannequins de cabine, and more specifically on their role in shaping the renown of the Maison de Couture Balenciaga. Drawing on the testimonies of five mannequins de cabine—Michèle Coche, Michèle Schwab, Jacqueline Nave, Monique Backmann and Anna Eberhardt—this study brings to light key aspects of their professional lives at the Maison de Couture Balenciaga: how they remembered this formative period; the specific skills required to obtain and perform the role; their interactions with one another, as well as with Cristóbal Balenciaga and his staff; and the demanding preparation involved in the défilés. It also highlights what distinguished the experience of being a mannequin de cabine at Balenciaga from working in other couture houses, and the crucial role these women played in sustaining the Maison’s standards of excellence and its international renown.

Cristóbal Balenciaga / Mannequin Cabine /
French Haute Couture / Women at Work /
Working Conditions

Alexandra Handjian

Independent researcher, Paris

Alexandra Handjian is the daughter of Michèle and Armand Handjian, both of whom worked in the fashion industry in the 1960s. She grew up surrounded by fabrics and fashion collections. Her father founded a luxury ready-to-wear house in Paris in 1956. Her mother worked as a model for major haute couture houses from 1956 to 1966, beginning with Bruyère and continuing with Ungaro and Courrèges, with a particularly significant collaboration with Balenciaga from 1959 to June 1963. She obtained a Master’s degree in Business Management from the Sorbonne in 1992 and a Certificate in Sustainable Business Management from the University of Cambridge Institute in 2024. She then pursued a 25-year career as a private banker. Her research and writing aim to shed light on the work and lives of the models who brought Balenciaga’s creations and ideas to life. While Balenciaga’s garments are widely recognized, the women who modeled them have largely remained invisible. Through her work, Alexandra seeks to restore their visibility by tracing their stories back to the 1960s and highlighting the friendships and shared experiences within the cabine.

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Models of the 1950s and 1960s at the Maison de Couture Balenciaga in Paris: Lives and Testimonies

1. Entering the Profession

Modeling attracted women from a wide range of socio-professional backgrounds and life trajectories. For some, it constituted a supplementary activity, while for others it represented a primary source of income. Their previous experience also varied significantly, ranging from former seamstresses to young women who had only recently completed schooling and entered the profession without prior work experience. How and why did the five models discussed below become models? [Figure 1]

Michèle Coche (1930-) became a mannequin at the age of nineteen in 1949, first working at the Maison Christian Dior and later at Jean Dessès. Initially, modeling was simply a way to earn a little pocket money; she wanted to ride horses, which she did. She also studied art and later went on to manage an art gallery in Paris, near Beaubourg, for more than twenty years with great success.

She worked at Balenciaga from December 1949 to December 1954, with a six-month break spent in Spain. She sometimes wonders whether this interruption was the reason Balenciaga did not keep her on for longer after she returned to Paris. She married for the first time in 1954 and went back to Christian Dior for an additional year, although she never felt the same admiration for him. She also worked as a mannequin volant for Hubert de Givenchy and later spent two years in Rome working for a fashion designer. Back in Paris, she briefly worked for the House of Virginie before joining Courrèges, then located on Avenue Kléber.

When she married a second time in 1963, Michèle returned to the cabine to greet her friends. Mlle Renée lent her a Balenciaga outfit for the wedding. Michèle was very fond of Mlle Renée, with whom she shared the same birthday. Mlle Renée was deeply dedicated to her work and to the House. She was also a close friend of Colette Berni, the mannequin vedette. Colette Berni was born around 1920 and was the first mannequin hired by M. Balenciaga in 1937. When Michèle later met her in the cabine, Colette was already a widow, and the two women became close friends. Colette lived with her mother in an apartment on Avenue Franklin-Roosevelt, in Paris's 8th arrondissement. Her mother sometimes invited Michèle to lunch, and after her own marriage in 1963, Michèle invited Colette for dinner at her home. Despite their friendship, Colette never spoke about her husband or any personal matters. She remained in the cabine for many years and was admired for her perfect figure until the late 1950s. Colette spoke often to Michèle about M. d'Attainville, who was cheerful, imaginative, and full of charm. He was both an associate of the House and a modéliste. After his death

Figure 1
In front of the boutique at 10 Avenue
George V, from left to right: the doorman;
Jacqueline Nave as Sabine; Brigitte Sauer
(wife of Jean-Claude Sauer, photojournalist
at *Paris Match*); Michèle Schwab;
Jenny; and Marie-Louise, 1959–1960.
Marie-Claire / Paris Match
© Jean-Claude Sauer



in 1948, the atmosphere in the House changed completely: silence reigned. M. Balenciaga became solely dedicated to his work, and that was all that mattered.

Jacqueline Nave (1934-2015) was called Sabine at the House because there was already another Jacqueline. She wanted to become a ballet dancer, and once in Paris, she trained at Madame Lonsavini's school. She entered the cabine in 1959 and that November, she had her Saint Catherine Day party. She left the House after getting married in 1961 but later returned to modeling for Madeleine de Rauch. Jacqueline had met Michèle Schwab once in Balenciaga's cabine and they happened to live in the same building on the rue de Rochecouart in Paris's 9th arrondissement. True and lasting friendships often blossomed within the cabine. Jacqueline had a younger brother, Jean, who was born in 1941. Since he wanted to become a fashion designer, Jacqueline asked Mlle Renée to invite her brother to the défilés. Mannequins could invite a friend with the authorization of Mlle Renée. Fond of drawing, he produced several sketches of the hats, which were published in the *Oran Gazette*, where their family lived. Needless to say, Mlle Renée was furious with Jacqueline. Another of Jacqueline's memories: She complained to her brother about the punch clock and the very tight corset she had to wear. The corsets disappeared at the beginning of the 1960s as they were included in the bustier. Jean also met several mannequins Taïga, Valérie and Dany, and became a very good friend of Michèle Schwab.

Monique Backmann (1936-2020) joined the cabine in 1961 and stayed until 1964, leaving when she married that year. Her image endures thanks to Tom Kublin's famous photograph of her wearing the black evening coat in shantung satin from the Winter 1962-1963 collection. She had worked as a mannequin for Jacques Fath and Christian Dior.

Michèle Schwab (1936-2024) worked as a mannequin from 1957 to 1967. She first earned a diploma in couture and spent three years at Balmain as a seamstress, where she left as a *première main qualifiée*. While working in couture, several people suggested that she should become a model, though she paid little attention to the idea until her sister encouraged her to try. After taking a few classes in *mannequinat*, she began her career at Bruyère and Jacques Heim. Schwab later recalled that she learned how to walk properly at Bruyère, though by then the house was nearing the end of its era and no longer held much interest. At Jacques Heim, things were different: she knew she would have to fend for herself. At the same time, she also walked in défilés for Haute Coiffure. She was then hired by Cristóbal Balenciaga and worked at the House from July 1959 to May 1963. She completed her haute couture mannequin career at Courrèges (June 1963 to June 1965), later worked with Emmanuel Ungaro when he opened his own house (December 1965 to June 1967), and spent a short period working for Hubert de Givenchy. She then modelled prêt-à-porter for several years, and married in July 1966. Much later, in the late 1990s, she began working with Marie-André Jouve — the first archivist of Balenciaga — on Rue Jean Goujon (8th arrondissement). She went on to work there for nearly two decades, undertaking

meticulous archival tasks, including matching garments with the fabrics originally used to make them. Schwab also took part in the 1998 documentary *Concerto pour Balenciaga*, alongside former mannequins such as Dany, Florette, Claudia and Solange.¹

Anna Eberhardt (1943-2025) trained in mannequinat at Lucky's² school when she was 19 years old. After a few classes, in 1962, Lucky sent her to a selection at Balenciaga. At the time, Anna already had a two-year-old daughter Alice. She left Balenciaga in 1963 after three seasons, primarily due to the low salary, and she went on to join Nina Ricci under the modéliste Gérard Pipart, and later, Madame Grès. She also did numerous photo shoots, which paid very well. Anna continued modeling until the 1970s. As noted in *Balenciaga Kublin*, Katinka Bleeker, the wife of Tom Kublin, made 60\$ an hour of photo shooting in 1963 in New York (Balda, 2024: 23).

2. Remembering Balenciaga: Retrospective Accounts and Present-Day Perspectives

Michèle Coche describes it as "an extraordinary experience". For her, life at Balenciaga was like being at a boarding school with her friends. She felt profound admiration for M. Balenciaga, describing him as both a sculptor and an architect — one who did not work with clay, but with fabric. Once, in the middle of a fitting, she saw him become intensely angry and rip the fabric off, before sitting down at the sewing machine to stitch it himself. None of the other couturiers for whom Michèle worked ever did this. Christian Dior, for instance, would simply use a stick to point and give instructions. M. Balenciaga, by contrast, worked in physical proximity to the models, pinning the fabric himself. As Hubert de Givenchy explains in the documentary *Concerto pour Balenciaga*, he used countless pins to sculpt the garment directly on the model. M. Dior, by contrast, rarely pinned himself.

When André Courrèges arrived in 1951, Mlle Renée briefly introduced him to the mannequins, who were somewhat aloof. Left standing awkwardly among them, he felt alone — until Michèle Coche took it upon herself to introduce him to each one. He never forgot her kindness, and she believes this may be one reason why he later hired her as his assistant in 1963.

Although their perceptions of working at Balenciaga differed, the mannequins all agreed on the atmosphere of deep concentration and silence that reigned there. For Michèle Schwab, "M. Balenciaga was a demanding magician in an always electric atmosphere." For Anna Eberhardt, the House was instead "a sea of peace, silence and creativity, where each and every one had their place."

Another testimony comes from Danielle Slavik (1944-2025), one of the last mannequins at the House, who worked there from 1964 to 1968. She told Léa Blin for *Vogue Czech* in September 2023,

My memories are that at the end of each collection, a few days before the press show, M. Balenciaga always created a design

¹ Christiane Bourlon, known as Solange, worked at the House from 1939 to 1962 (Liaut, 1994: 135). In the 1960s, she was responsible for presenting the models to older clients, a role in which she was reportedly particularly effective.

² Lucie Daouphar, known as Lucky (1922-1963), began her career as a seamstress before entering the Christian Dior *cabine* as a *mannequin vedette*, where she worked from 1949 to 1958. She was thirty-six when she opened her own *mannequinat* school. Lucky later became involved in improving mannequins' working conditions.

himself in the studio. He would begin a piece, often a suit, and sew it himself. Sometimes he would start working on it at eight o'clock in the evening, and continue until midnight. Several times he made a suit for me at the last minute, the day before the collection itself, and I would say to myself, "Oh, my God, this will never be done tomorrow," and it was incredible. He was there with his needle, his fabric, and the next day it was done. The next day we came very early, around 8 o'clock in the morning, for the fittings, and he would still be making his final adjustments to the suit. I remember a black suit, a skirt with large pleats. For each collection, he created one last piece, as if, suddenly, he had one last inspiration.

The models came from varied backgrounds, they were all in their 20s. Most of them worked for at least three to five Houses over the course of a decade, yet throughout their lives, they only spoke of the Maison Balenciaga, not the other houses. By their hard work, they made the cabine the most prestigious in Paris.

3. Professional Skills and Working Conditions at Balenciaga Paris

Only clients could enter the boutique, where they were received by a doorman. Employees used the *entrée de service* — also used by suppliers — and climbed the stairs to the first floor, where they clocked in. The mannequins then turned left into the wide corridor leading to their cabines. As they walked along it, they passed Mme Véra and the vendeuses, whose desks were also located there. The two cabines were situated between the main salon and the atelier. The mannequins mainly interacted with those who entered the cabine; they had little to no contact with the workshops or the seamstresses.

The term mannequin cabine dates back to the Worth period at the end of the nineteenth century and refers to the fact that models worked in a cabine: the room where the House's mannequins and their team gathered just before, during and after presentations. Their history begins with Charles Frederick Worth, who in 1858 employed women to present his couture designs to clients in his salons — a practice widely regarded as foundational to the modern fashion system. Worth (1825–1895) adopted the principle of the live mannequin very early on: first his wife modelled his designs, and later he employed professional mannequins to parade in his salons (Boucher: 369). This decisive innovation would serve as a template for haute couture in the decades that followed. The mannequins helped prepare the garments and adjust them on the body, took part in fittings, and paraded in front of a small audience or during formal presentations. They worked on a full-time basis. The cabine system established by Worth lasted until the end of the 1960s, when prêt-à-porter began to emerge. Worth's institution would profoundly shape the organisation of fashion houses throughout the twentieth century, with each major house maintaining its own dedicated cabine of mannequins. Balenciaga was no exception. As Michèle Coche put it, Balenciaga's models were reputed to be highly professional — though not necessarily "pretty"!

Michèle Schwab [Figure 2] recalled that Taïga became the leading model because she was the most extravagant, distinguished by her exotic beauty. Taïga was M. Balenciaga's favourite model after Colette. She joined the cabine in 1954 and was still there in 1964. Although the House did not officially designate a star model, two mannequins were remembered as central figures: Colette, from 1937 through the 1950s, followed by Taïga, from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s.

Recruitment often occurred by word of mouth, through informal networks linking models across the various haute couture houses. Michèle Coche described notable differences between Dior and Balenciaga in this regard: Cristóbal Balenciaga made hiring decisions on his own. His criteria for beauty were clear — "a clean neck, square shoulders, and a long bust". There were no official star models at Balenciaga, although some mannequins may have worn more outfits than others during presentations.

The House recruited models before each collection. As mentioned by Mary Blume (2014: 34):

Balenciaga always chose his house models himself bony and long-waisted, she (Colette) would crash into the showroom like an invading army. Her jutting pelvic bones inspired Balenciaga's early use of padded hips, while her long neck and curved spine were the origin of his famous set-back neckline and bloused back....Balenciaga wanted his models to be remote rather than appealing, gazing over the heads of clients and casually carrying a card on which the number of the outfit -unlike other designers, he never gave his clothes names- was displayed. He invented a signature loping walk for them, long strides, torso tilted back, pelvis thrust forward. They walk with a pleasant swagger -the likable swagger of the aristocrat...

The selection criteria largely consisted of a walk in the salon in front of M. Balenciaga. Anna remembered very well when she was selected:

Mme Jacques, the chef de cabine, quickly pinned my hair up before ushering me into the studio. I was very intimidated. M. Balenciaga gestured for me to walk to the door and back. Unfortunately, Mlle Renée was very upset that M. Balenciaga had chosen me because of my nationality. I was a foreigner because I am Belgian. I was deeply impressed, and even more so when it was time for me to enter the salon for the show. Behind the curtain, M. Balenciaga had to push me into the salon: I was frozen to the spot!

A monastic atmosphere reigned at Balenciaga. According to Michèle Schwab, "It was very quiet; no one spoke. It was always peaceful. M. Balenciaga would not have tolerated any noise. No one spoke in the studio." She loved that atmosphere.

Anna recalled "an atmosphere of quiet creativity, a buzz of excitement, each person working in their own sphere; it was like a ballet. Each dancer knew their exact place — like bees in a

Figure 2
The cabine in the 1960s, from left to
right: Michèle Schwab, Annick, Solange,
Dany, X, and Taïga
© Archives Balenciaga Paris



hive." Schwab also remembered that two or three models would be in the room alongside the premières, waiting for corrections. In addition, they had to remain available for clients whenever called by a vendeuse.

M. Balenciaga worked closely with M. Ramón Esparza. The models saw Balenciaga every day during the preparation of the collections, yet he rarely spoke to them. They held him in the greatest respect — an immense artist, exceptionally demanding of himself, and expecting the same of others. Schwab described him as a profoundly humane figure. The same was true of M. Esparza, who was constantly at Balenciaga's side and was equally respected by the models. Anna admired him deeply and likewise considered him a profoundly humane man. There were no overseas trips with M. Balenciaga. He had his models in Spain, where the working style was different. Gérard, who worked alongside Balenciaga, served as his secretary and acted as the link between the atelier and Mlle Renée.

Regarding life in the cabine, Anna recalled:

Everything was perfection. A year in haute couture was divided into two seasons: Spring-Summer and Fall-Winter. The summer collection was presented in February, and the winter collection in August. Shortly before each season began, Monsieur Balenciaga would meet with the models to select those best suited to his upcoming collection. Mademoiselle Renée then handled the hiring paperwork — and foreigners, beware: she had to draw up a contract lasting more than three months and less than six. The new models joined the cabine, where the pillars of the House were already in place: Taïga, the ravishing Eurasian woman and mannequin vedette; Dany and Annick, highly professional and always impeccable; Michèle, who arrived a little later; Ariane, a painter's muse; Monique — and then me, Anna. Affinities quickly developed among the mannequins. Michèle and Monique read the same books and were especially drawn to art in general. I remember that they even knitted a coat, and the première d'atelier, Félicia, helped them make the coat linings so the garments would keep their shape. Looking back, I'm amazed to have witnessed such magical moments. What's more, despite my lack of discipline, they never held it against me — and I loved them very much.

The friendships of that time remained intact until the end of their lives.

Generally, the models had little interaction with M. Balenciaga. They posed and walked; silence reigned in the studio. During the preparation of one collection, Cristóbal Balenciaga asked Michèle Coche to come and pose on a Sunday. She found herself alone with him and Ramón Esparza. His chef brought her lunch.

Michèle also recalled visiting the Musée d'Art Moderne after eating a sandwich — an outing that would later fuel conversations with Balenciaga, who also loved art. She noted that he spent time with painters such as Miró and Max Ernst. Balenciaga drew inspiration

from contemporary artists, not only from the old Spanish masters such as Goya, Velázquez and, especially, Zurbarán; he had a deep love of colour, she added.

Anna Eberhardt also noted that Balenciaga's use of colour and visual world were strongly embedded in the designer's creative process:

I remember the creation of the white faille and black lace dress in which Cecil Beaton photographed me in the summer of 1962. To create the illusion that the bust was bare beneath the lace, M. Balenciaga used a subtle subterfuge, superimposing layers of very fine chiffon in shades of pink, orange, ivory and cream to match my skin tone. The effect was perfect — without ever being provocative. A true masterpiece. What magic, what a dress, how I loved it!

Balenciaga's mannequins embodied a form of highly skilled labour that extended far beyond physical appearance. Their work demanded discipline, precision, and strict adherence to the House's codes — silence, restraint, and control of posture and movement — within a hierarchical couture organisation. Yet this expertise should not obscure a fundamental point: modeling at Balenciaga was paid work, and wages formed a central — if often overlooked — dimension of these women's professional experience.

In 1960, Balenciaga's mannequins earned 600 francs per month (approximately €1,030 today), a figure all of them recalled with remarkable precision and generally regarded as low (Blume: 109). Their pay was lower than in other Houses, although occasional bonuses could be granted for posing or Sunday work. By comparison, in 1954 the average wage of a première d'atelier was 975 francs, while a mannequin hired by Nina Ricci in 1962 earned 700 francs per month, plus garments and additional in-house benefits (Liaut: 193). Beyond these comparative figures, the testimonies also reveal the concrete impact of low wages on everyday life. As Anna recalled:

I was paid so poorly that I had to choose between a metro ticket and a baguette while taking care of Alice. Luckily, at lunchtime, we went to Doucet, a lovely restaurant owner who gave us amazing prices! He was very kind and didn't understand how we managed to stay thin while eating so much.

M. Balenciaga asked Anna why she left the House in 1963, and she told him it was because of her salary. It seems that Balenciaga was under increasing pressure from payroll costs: he employed around 500 people by the end of his career, compared with 262 in 1954 (Miller: 125). On average, around ten models were employed each year.

The mannequins could buy clothes or accessories only at full price, which — given their wages — made such purchases virtually impossible. In 1963, a day suit cost around 4,900 francs (equivalent to approximately €5,900 today) (Balenciaga Paris: 21).

On the other hand, they were allowed to purchase perfume by the litre at a very modest price, albeit without the bottles, which were reserved for clients.

Taken together, these accounts highlight, on the one hand, the professional function of the mannequins, linked both to the creative process and to haute couture presentations; and, on the other, their role as paid employees, whose wages — and, where applicable, bonuses — varied according to the demands of the collection presentation calendar.

4. The Collection Season: A Distinct Working Rhythm

The collection season marked a distinct and particularly intense phase in the annual rhythm of the House, structured around the development, fitting, and presentation of a new couture line. It required heightened discipline and constant availability from the mannequins, whose work intensified as the collection took shape. Anna described this period in detail:

The room adjoining the cabine is the studio, a very large room where the designs for the upcoming collection are kept. Fernando is in charge, with sketches already matched with fabric swatches. M. Gérard runs from the Studio to Mlle Renée's office to place orders. During the first month of the season, called Pose, the work is devoted to creating garments, choosing fabrics, buttons, and accessories, and deciding which mannequin will be assigned to each design. We are entirely at their disposal during this month, as the 'canvases' are prepared in the workshop and then fitted directly on us. In general, it is a half-canvas (écru) with the seams marked out in black bolduc (a black fabric, slightly stiff yet still supple) and the buttons indicated by circles of black fabric. [Figure 3]

The canvases were tried on several times with M. Balenciaga before moving on to the final fabric. So committed was he to perfection that he would sometimes undo everything and start again.

After the *toile* stage, the garments were made, followed by rehearsals in the *grand salon*, which could take place in the evening or extend over several days. Then came the *première* for the press, with or without applause. Emmanuel Ungaro (a *premier d'atelier* from 1956 to 1964) described the studio as monastic: during the pose there was no conversation, and everyone spoke in whispers. Preparing a collection took a month and involved some 200 models. The collection was then presented daily for a further month. Cristóbal Balenciaga would return to Spain after a few days. "Buyers paid a fortune to obtain two garments without the label, as an entrance fee!" Michèle Coche explained.

Anna's favourite moment was when the *pose* ended. In the 1950s, the girls usually wore very tight made-to-measure corsets from Lefaucher, foundation garments made exclusively for Balenciaga (Miller, 2007: 41). Michèle Coche recalled that she sometimes went to dinner wearing one and had to undo the clips in order to enjoy the



Figure 3
Photograph taken by Michèle Coche in the atelier in the 1950s. The mannequin Colette Berni is posing, with Ramon Esperza kneeling. Monsieur Balenciaga is partially hidden behind Colette. A rare and valuable document, as no photographers were allowed in the studio at that time
© Michèle Coche

evening. Over the corset they wore a black satin underdress, with a large zip at the back, onto which the *canvas* was pinned.

Michèle Coche also remembered that if she failed to stand upright while posing, Madame Claude would immediately reprimand her: "Michèle, stand up straight!"

Regarding the fashion shows — the *défilés* — they took place over several weeks. The first few days were crucial, since the press had the first look at the collection for magazines: first the foreign press, with Carmel Snow, then the French press. Next came the foreign buyers, followed by European buyers, and finally the clients.

When the House first opened, the white leather armchairs were soon replaced by tightly arranged rows of Napoléon III-style chairs, a consequence of the designer's growing success. M. Balenciaga had taught the mannequins never to smile: all attention had to remain focused on the clothes. Each presentation lasted between one and two hours.

And then out lope the mannequins, cool and indifferent in the finest clothes in Paris, languidly waving the outfit's number printed on a card or sometimes pocketing them, as if to suggest that actual selling is not the point. They are said to be the ugliest models in Paris. I wonder about this, having spoken to Balenciaga models from the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1960s, all of them very good-looking, even now...but the reputation for odd looks was probably due to the overpowering influence of Colette... (Blume: 108)

As Lucien François put it, Michèle Coche recalled that he would speak of the mannequins in striking terms: "If you dream of a Balenciaga model, it turns into a nightmare." Lucien François was a fashion columnist for many women's magazines between 1940 and 1960. He always had an excellent seat in the salon, and the House dreaded his remarks.

At the Worth exhibition at the Petit Palais, held in the summer of 2025, a short film showing a 1928 fashion show from the House of Worth was screened. Watching it, Michèle noted that the models walked in much the same way as she had in the 1950s, and that the atmosphere felt remarkably similar. Dany, a mannequin in the 1960s, stated in the documentary *Concerto pour Balenciaga*: "I wasn't supposed to wiggle my hips. I had to enter like a woman who greets her guests, without swaying."

Unlike in other fashion houses, mannequins' numbers were not called out. Instead, the models carried small numbered cards. Spectators would sometimes sketch the outfits or handle the fabrics. The mannequins would discreetly signal them — as Anna did — while Cristóbal Balenciaga watched from behind his curtain.

Members of Balenciaga's family, as well as staff from his Spanish houses, travelled from Spain to Paris twice a year to attend the shows. Balenciaga replicated the French collection in Spain,

adapting it to local standards and using cheaper fabrics. The French mannequins never presented collections in Spain.

Next to the *Grand Salon*, where the mannequins dressed, were two adjoining *cabines*. Each dressing room was divided lengthwise, with six dressing tables facing one another. Large mirrors created a visual separation. Beyond this space lay the *atelier*, and finally M. Balenciaga's office. The mannequins did their own makeup, as the House did not provide it. "The same concern for purity and restraint was evident in both the makeup and the hairstyling. Solange recalls that M. Balenciaga had an aversion to extravagance in both these domains" (Liout: 136).

In the 1960s, a makeup artist was present in the *cabine* to assist in preparing the girls. In other houses, such as Maison Christian Dior — which had its own cosmetics line — lipstick was supplied by the House itself. The hairdresser Alexandre and his team came on site to create sophisticated *chignons*. In the 1950s, however, Michèle Coche recalled doing her own *chignon à la banane*, held in place with nothing but hairpins. Balenciaga also offered the models UV tanning sessions in preparation for the summer show in February, at a time when such practices were only beginning to emerge.

A single *habilleuse* attended to three or four models. Dresses and hats were placed on the upper shelves, while shoes were kept below, in racks and shelves behind the dressing tables. At Maison Christian Dior there was one *habilleuse* for every two mannequins; Balenciaga's *cabines*, however, were larger and brighter. Michèle Coche remembered that, before the show began, Madame Jacques distributed both the short and long gloves — and collected them again in the evening.

Madame Jacques played a key role as the "chef de cabine". Anna wrote that:

She supervised the dresses and assisted the models in getting dressed, helping them with their jewelry and preparing all the accessories between each appearance in the showroom (adjusting a lock of hair, or checking whether any accessories had been forgotten). She prepared the outfits and laid them out on the counters between presentations. She had to respond to the slightest problem, whether it meant sewing on a button herself, or returning to the ateliers any garment that had a broken zipper accident or a similar fault. I loved Madame Jacques.

Each model was provided with matching shoes, gloves, jewellery and hats, assembled under Ramón Esparza's supervision. The shoes were particularly remarkable: custom-made by the master shoemaker Mancini, and occasionally by Vivier.

The mannequins entered the salon when they were ready, exchanging quick glances as they passed one another. Madame Jacques oversaw the sequence of entrances. Behind each dressing table hung a cardboard chart indicating the running order. Typically, Colette opened the collection, followed by Taïga. The garments

were presented in the following order: sportswear, suits, day dresses, dinner dresses, cocktail dresses, evening dresses, and finally the wedding dress.

From behind the curtain, M. Balenciaga observed closely, occasionally withdrawing a garment from the collection if it failed to meet his approval. At times, Michèle Coche would voice her opinion when she did not understand his decision, but he never took it into account. This, she noted, was not the case with M. Dior, with whom discussion was possible.

After the *défilé*, M. Balenciaga would briefly stop by to thank the mannequins. In the 1950s, champagne was served, though he never stayed to drink. Unlike other houses, the mannequins did not present him with a bouquet of flowers. He never entered the salon, and generally left shortly after the *défilé*.

Some clients would request to see particular outfits again. The mannequins then took the garments back to the fitting room for a second viewing. After the show came a brief release of tension. The girls would sometimes gather in the lavatory to smoke their favourite cigarettes.

The House also observed certain internal traditions, such as the *Catherinettes* — a French custom honouring unmarried women turning twenty-five. On that day, the atmosphere in fashion houses was celebratory: the *catherinettes* were honoured by colleagues and management, who presented them with headdresses and gifts. The workshop was transformed into a festive space, complete with a grand meal. At the heart of the tradition was the hat — often a true work of art. On one occasion, the milliner Edwige Basset presented Michèle Schwab with a beautiful green-and-yellow hat made of satin, velvet and tulle. Its flowers were crafted in wax, and the pins in metal. Michèle kept it carefully in its original box for many years before donating it to the Hat Museum in Lyon. [Figure 4].

There were also large parties — almost like those held at a girls' boarding school. The mannequins dressed up and enjoyed themselves. "We celebrated the end of the *pose* with champagne in the 1950s — lots of champagne," Michèle Coche recalled. There were also gatherings with buyers after the collections, where the *vendeuses* served champagne. Michèle Coche also remembered that Crazy Horse Paris invited the girls to its opening on 19 May 1951. Naturally, they did not attend: the girls were respectable.

Specific skills were required — not least the look and *chic* of the Parisian woman. Yet it was possible to come from any social background, and even to move from the *atelier* to the *cabine*. The collection season therefore established a specific working rhythm for the mannequins, defined by intensified labour and strict discipline. In this period, couture was not only produced but also rehearsed and performed, placing the mannequins at the centre of the House's activity.

Figure 4

From left to right: Taïga, Mme Jacques, Michèle Schwab, Mme Maria, Mlle Renée, Lili, and Florette Chelot, having lunch in the office during the special Saint Catherine's Day celebration for Michèle Schwab, 25 November 1961

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5. Two Other Couture Houses

At Maison Christian Dior, the recruitment of mannequins was decided in consultation with his *état-major*. M. Dior was always surrounded by a large team. Like Cristóbal Balenciaga, he paid close attention to the size and shape of the shoulders; yet he also valued the face and a model's star quality. One mannequin who moved from Balenciaga to Dior, for instance, was asked to undergo a nose operation — which she did. A few years later, she met M. Balenciaga again, who told her she should not have listened.

M. Dior was also more attentive to the theatrical side of fashion. He had ten to twelve models in his *cabine*, and he sent them around the world — from New York to Moscow — as ambassadors of the brand. In his 1956 book, Christian Dior devoted an entire chapter to his mannequins (Dior, 1956: 143). He referred to them as his "*jeunes filles*", whose sole concern was to look pretty. They typically spent three to eight years at the House. Dior nonetheless acknowledged the exhausting nature of their lives, divided between shows and photo shoots. After the *pose*, the most demanding phase of the collection lasted two weeks. Each morning was devoted to photographers — either for in-house images or for magazines — while afternoons were reserved for shows. Dior concluded with these words: "My models are the life of my dresses, and I want my dresses to be happy."

Lucky was interviewed in 1956 in front of the punch clock, *vanity case* in hand, as she explained her work. The mannequins clocked in at 9 a.m., had lunch in the canteen, and never knew what time they would return home — during collection periods, it could be as late as midnight. She even advised practising gymnastics to keep up the pace, as collection months were particularly difficult and exhausting. Michèle Coche shared the small *cabine* with the charming Lucky and Renée, whose complexion she described as porcelain. They became close friends. Michèle also recalled that M. Dior presented each *mannequin vedette* with an outfit of her choice after the collection — something M. Balenciaga never did. Beginning in 1955, Dior also allowed the models to collect Dior make-up once a week.

Mannequins' schedules differed significantly at Dior and Balenciaga. At Balenciaga there were more *défilés* and fewer photographs. M. Balenciaga also did not use mannequin *doublures*. He did not seek "pretty girls", but rather women who resembled his actual clientele.

By the late 1960s, the number of mannequins in a *cabine* began to decrease. At Courrèges, for instance, the *cabine* employed only four mannequins. Sabine Cusson recalled that they presented *défilés* both in-house and externally, with travel sometimes involved. The *vendeuse* Florette, who had previously spent several years at Hubert de Givenchy, later joined Courrèges and developed a close relationship with the mannequins (Blume, 2013: 189). She sometimes even stood up to Courrèges himself — something unimaginable at Balenciaga — as her older *clientèle* required long dresses and not only short ones. On several occasions, she even

lent dresses to clients for important events. Coqueline Courrèges also spent a great deal of time with the girls. She played a major role in the creation of designs, selecting fabrics and working as tirelessly as her husband André, who always listened to her before making decisions.

At the opening of the Courrèges house on Avenue Kléber, photographers rushed to be the first to capture the collection. Michèle Coche recalled that during the show period she and Ariane spent long nights allocating outfits to the major fashion magazines — from *Harper's Bazaar* to *Women's Wear Daily*.

These comparisons show that mannequins were not only shaped by internal working routines, but also by each House's approach to media visibility and fashion photography. This dimension becomes especially significant in the case of Balenciaga, whose refusal of publicity coexisted with the strategic role played by his cabine models in shaping the brand's international image.

6. Cristóbal Balenciaga and the Press: Cabine Models and the Making of the Brand

The relationship between haute couture houses and the press was far from uniform in the postwar period. While Christian Dior actively cultivated media visibility, Cristóbal Balenciaga maintained a markedly reserved stance towards journalists, reinforcing his reputation for discretion and inaccessibility. Yet the diffusion of Balenciaga's work beyond Paris still depended on the fashion press and on the circulation of images — an arena in which models played a key mediating role in the making of the brand.

Michèle Coche recalled an evening at the *Bar du Théâtre*, opposite the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, when she was having dinner with the model Claude and two men approached them. They chatted casually — until it became clear that the men were journalists, simply trying to find out through which door the couturier would leave the building. For the press, M. Balenciaga was notoriously inaccessible and had gained a reputation for being difficult. Dior, on the other hand, received extensive press coverage. After his Moscow *défilé* in 1959, *Vogue* published a six-page feature, illustrated with twelve mannequins led by Madame Luling (*Vogue Paris*, August 1959: 46–51). In *Vogue* (*Vogue US*, 15 September 1967: 86–93), the forty-page feature “The Prettiest Fashion from Paris in Years” included an eight-page spread on Balenciaga, illustrated with photographs by Irving Penn — including the iconic image of the “polyhedral woman” in a gazar cocktail dress. The models in this editorial were American.

Balenciaga also received publicity indirectly through an advertisement for “Les Bas Guî” (*Femina*, December 1949: 9), which listed the names of all the major haute couture houses. By the late 1950s, Balenciaga had begun branding hosiery under his own name (Miller, 2007: 43).

In the *Album du Figaro* (Fall 1948: 97, 176), the Balenciaga name appeared twice: once next to a drawing of a cape and again beside

a photograph of a model posing in the boutique with the perfume *Le Dix*. Compared with other fashion brands of the period — Nina Ricci, Christian Dior, Hermès, Madeleine de Rauch — advertisements for Balenciaga were rare. By 1961, however, *Jardin des Modes* carried a full third-page advertisement for the perfumes *Le Dix* (1947) and *Quadrille* (1955) (November 1961: 51). Like most couturiers, M. Balenciaga had developed his own line of perfumes. As noted in *Cristóbal Balenciaga* (Irvine, 2014 :51):

M. Balenciaga was very attached to his models; he was the only Parisian couturier to insist that magazines use them for photoshoots. This somewhat frustrated the editors, who found ways around it by photographing the dresses from the back or by the models' heads out of the layouts..."

Not all the mannequins were photographed. Celebrated photographers such as Tom Kublin and Cecil Beaton — both close friends of M. Balenciaga — frequently photographed his models wearing extraordinary creations. Michèle Schwab appeared in several magazines, including *Vogue* (France and the United States) and *Jardin des Modes*.

On occasion, M. Balenciaga agreed to take part in public fashion events — *manifestations d'élégance* — in which a single mannequin would present a single garment. Michèle Coche took part in one such event.

Unlike Christian Dior, who embraced publicity, Cristóbal Balenciaga deliberately avoided flooding the press with images of his models, fearing copies above all else. During model loans, copyists were prepared to go to any lengths: some even positioned themselves opposite 10 Avenue George V to spy through the windows. Copying was the House's greatest fear. Couturiers, designers and even journalists attempted to reproduce the designs, while mannequins themselves were sometimes questioned — and even bribed — for information.

Between 1956 and 1962, the press was only allowed to view the collection one month after the *défilés*, in order to limit the risk of copying. From 1962 onwards, journalists were excluded altogether for the same reason (Liaut: 60), a restriction that remained in place until 1967 (Blume: 180). As the article "Balenciaga et Givenchy" (*Jardin des Modes*, November 1961, no 479:51-56) observed:

It has now become a tradition for these two collections to be unveiled a month later than the others, renewing the spectacle of seasonal fashion with their own distinctive accents. This season, Balenciaga asserts more clearly his preference for rounder shoulders, longer tunics, and a return to a more defined silhouette at the bust and waist. Black still dominates, along with greys, browns, beiges, sunflower yellows, and warm greens. Givenchy...

The model was selected during the fittings and, once assigned to an outfit, she was expected to present it in the *défilé* and to pose wearing it for any photo shoot, as was customary in Balenciaga and

Givenchy houses (Liaut, 1994: 60). M. Balenciaga preferred to rely on his in-house mannequins rather than outside models, although magazines often pushed for well-known faces. From 1956 onwards, American magazines almost invariably featured American models; however, they wore only authorised copies of Balenciaga designs, never the original creations.

From the 1960s onwards, Tom Kublin filmed the *défilés*, with and without an audience. He also photographed each model after the collection in order to protect the House's design rights. Photo shoots often took place at night in his studio, as the garments were needed for presentations the following day.

For the mannequins, photo shoots were welcome opportunities, as they provided additional income. In 1960, for instance, Michèle Schwab earned 177 francs from *Les Éditions Condé Nast*. The models also enjoyed being photographed by M. Balenciaga's trusted friends, Tom Kublin and Cecil Beaton. [Figure 5]

The sources discussed above suggest that, in the French press, Balenciaga's creations were represented almost exclusively through his own mannequins. This selective visibility might reflect not a lack of interest in the media, but a deliberate strategy of control over how — and through whom — the House's designs entered the photographic and editorial sphere.

7. Conclusion

Although they came from different social backgrounds, all the mannequins expressed how proud they were to serve as *cabine* models for Cristóbal Balenciaga. Each of the five retained an enduringly positive memory of their youth on Avenue George V.

They all recalled the atmosphere of strict discipline that prevailed at the House of Balenciaga, where every action taken by the master was directed towards excellence and elegance. They also remembered how respectful Cristóbal Balenciaga and his team were towards them. Even though they were poorly paid, they nevertheless maintained a profound admiration for him and for his art. According to those who had also modelled for other houses, such a level of perfection could not be found anywhere else in haute couture.

For more than a century, the *mannequin de cabine* was a profession in its own right — one that came to an end with the closure of the Balenciaga house in the late 1960s, as prêt-à-porter rose to prominence.



Figure 5
Jardin des Modes, November 1961,
 pp. 52-55, "Balenciaga et Givenchy"

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Closing Keynote Address

Karena de Perthuis

Threads of Influence. The Clothes-Philosophers
of Cristóbal Balenciaga

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Threads of Influence The Clothes-Philosophers of Cristóbal Balenciaga

Introduction

In *Sartor Resartus* ([1833] 1975), Thomas Carlyle's 'clothes-philosopher', Professor Teufelsdröckh, asserts that the first purpose of clothes is ornament. Moreover, as an 'architectural idea', clothes give form to the human body and meaning to the self. Despite being considered a 'fashion classic' (Carter 2003), *Sartor Resartus* is not about fashion—in fact, Carlyle advises against discarding old clothes ahead of time. Nor is it really about clothes. Rather, *Sartor Resartus* is a novel that uses an elaborate sartorial metaphor and rich allegorical prose to explore the human condition, linking the world of clothing to the world of the spirit to reveal the deeper significance of dress in our lives.

Why begin this closing address with a novel written by a controversial Victorian-era Scottish intellectual who died a generation before Balenciaga was born? My reasoning is twofold. First, as it happens, my volume of *Sartor Resartus* also includes Carlyle's lectures, 'On Heroes and Hero Worship'—the source of his famous claim that 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men', commonly known as the 'Great Man' theory of history. Sitting in the audience at the II International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference as a member of the Scientific Committee tasked with providing the closing remarks, I was struck by a recurring refrain throughout the papers and discussion: the rich research possibilities contained within this one subject, this one man—Cristóbal Balenciaga. It seemed inevitable, then, to consider the Great Man of history theory in the context of fashion, which is to say that there is a history (one history) of fashion that has largely been built around the biographies of 'great men'. We need not go far to find evidence to support the theory of Balenciaga as a great man of fashion. In the literature and across numerous papers presented at the conference, Balenciaga is repeatedly described with 'great man' epithets: he is a 'genius', a 'master', one of the 'greatest and most acclaimed fashion designers of the twentieth century', a man who performs 'miracles' of architectural technique (Arzalluz 2011; Skillen 2025).

There is much to critique in great-man-of-history theories, not least, to take the current context, the idea of a museum, a conference, centred entirely around one individual—a single 'great man'. That such an approach has merit is undeniable; nonetheless, important questions remain: What can we understand by focusing on one person or their work? What, ultimately, is gained by examining a single 'great man'?

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This brings me to my second reason. *Sartor Resartus* translates to 'the tailor unpatched', and in the pages of the novel, the reader follows Carlyle's clothes-philosopher as he pulls at loose ends, unravelling what seems complete or whole, following the threads to see where they lead. What became apparent at the conference is that such events (and institutions such as the museum) encourage us all to be clothes-philosophers, to pull at the threads of Balenciaga's life and work, to follow those threads and see where they lead. However, anyone who has visited the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa or had the opportunity to study a Balenciaga garment up close is aware that there is nothing unravelled or unstitched, patched or unpatched about a Cristóbal Balenciaga garment. On the contrary, what one is struck by is the absolute completeness, the utter finishedness of a Balenciaga garment, where even the buttonholes are edged with fabric to ensure that no stitch may go astray. Perhaps, this *passepoile* technique (as it is called) would make for a more appropriate metaphor, directing us, as researchers, along the opposite path to unravelling, inviting us to close in on the detail, pay attention, to explore what is left out. In such an approach, we would begin with what appears finished only to find that the story is not complete—there is always something more.

What then was the 'something more' that we discovered? Or, to stay with the original metaphor, what threads were unravelled? Over the course of two days, twenty-eight scholars presented twenty-two papers, reflecting the broad interest in Balenciaga's work across multiple disciplines. The presentations were organised into five themes: Museology, Communication, Design, Education and Brand Imaging and Marketing. Within the scaffolding of this structure, my closing address identified five additional threads: Geography and Cultural Translation; Mythmaking and Cultural Narratives; Wearing and Collecting Balenciaga; Working Women; and The Legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga for Contemporary Design Students. What follows is a weaving together of the threads running through the papers presented at the conference.

1. Thread I: Geography and Cultural Translation

Cristóbal Balenciaga Eizaguirre was born in 1895 in Getaria, a fishing village in Basque Country, Spain. At a remarkably young age he established himself as a celebrated couturier in San Sebastian, Madrid and Barcelona before moving to Paris in 1937 to set up premises at number 10 Avenue Georges V where he showed his haute couture collections until his retirement in 1968 (Arzalluz 2011). One of the recurring themes at the conference was Balenciaga's deep connection to his Basque homeland and traditions, which he maintained throughout his working life. This connection is further reflected in the location of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa and its foundation, housed in the summer residence of the young Balenciaga's patron, the Marquesa de Casa Torres, a short walk from his birthplace in the village of Getaria.

Several papers continued to explore Balenciaga's Basque connections and base. Gabriela Muñagorri Mendiola (2025)

presented a Barthesian analysis of unsigned drawings of Balenciaga garments in the Lorenzo Riva collection held in the Historical Archive of the Basque Country. Stefan Zarić (2025) followed the '(in)visible' threads that trace Balenciaga's Basque origins to the Balkans via twentieth century women artists in Serbia while, closer to home, José Ángel Medina Murua and Joakin Aramendy (2025) provided an architectural study of Balenciaga workshops in San Sebastián. Turning to Paris, Anabela Becho (2025) explored the formal design synergies between Balenciaga and Madame Alix Grès. From Italy, scholars presented on the couturier's legacy in Florence with attention to couture copies (Faggella 2025), his influence on postwar Italian fashion (Campagnol 2025), and his heritage in Italian fashion aesthetics and marketing (Gnoli and Esposito 2025). We heard about entrepreneurial disciples of Balenciaga in the United States (Chrisman-Campbell 2025) and Australia (Barter 2025), where the history of fashion intertwined with stories of war, escape, exile and migration. In all, the papers presented the kind of detail and complexity to the Balenciaga story that is omitted by the Disney+ series, *Cristóbal Balenciaga* (2024) whose target audience, as we learned, was largely unaware of his Spanish origins (Muñoz, Díaz Soloaga and Barrera 2025).

Yet, if the threads of Balenciaga's influence criss-crossed the globe, this exchange was not always a one-way street. The Cristóbal Balenciaga archive reveals the couturier's debt to the dress practices and fashions of India, the Middle East and Asia. The presenters and audience at the II International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference came from places as geographically distant as Iceland and Australia, Serbia and Brazil; however, the Global South, as well as countries in the Middle East and Asia, remain largely underrepresented. These regions therefore represent rich and underexamined avenues for future scholarship, with considerable potential to deepen our understanding of Balenciaga's work, legacy and life.

2. Thread II: Mythmaking and Cultural Narratives

When Cristóbal Balenciaga died in 1972, newspapers around the world announced his death with headlines proclaiming, 'The King is Dead' (*Women's Wear Daily*) and 'La Moda Esta De Luto' (*Blanco y Negro*), with obituaries canonizing him as, variously, 'one of the greatest figures in the history of fashion' and 'one of the most influential haute couture designers of the twentieth century' (Pérez-Álvarez 2025). More than a fashion designer or couturier, Balenciaga was acclaimed as a sculptor, an 'immense artist', an architect and a 'cultural translator' with the international media, especially, celebrating 'his artistic innovation and influence' (Pérez-Álvarez 2025).

In his analysis of Balenciaga obituaries in Spanish, French, British and North American newspapers, Álvaro Pérez-Álvarez found that the media functioned as 'an instrument of cultural memory' that constructed a legacy of Balenciaga as a unique, irreplaceable 'artist-author', a visionary whose lifework was synonymous with an 'aesthetic revolution' (Pérez-Álvarez 2025). The media construction

of Balenciaga's legacy continued to build over time. In 1973, a retrospective of the couturier, *The World of Balenciaga*, opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the first of Diana Vreeland's renowned exhibitions for the institution; the following year, it was restaged in Madrid as *El Mundo de Balenciaga* (Gennaioli and Mozzati 2025). In 1985, thirteen years after Balenciaga's death, the Australian-born, London-based PR agent, Percy Savage, published a long article in *The Observer* under the headline: 'Balenciaga the Great', in which he recounted his visit to the exhibition, *Homage à Balenciaga*, at the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyon (Skillen 2025). As Pérez-Álvarez (2025) observed: 'Death does not interrupt [Balenciaga's] trajectory, but rather stabilizes it and inscribes it into the narrative of what endures'.

During his lifetime, Balenciaga was systematically ignored by the propaganda machine of the Franco regime and its official state newsreel service, No-Do (Noticiarios y Documentales). As Isabel Durante Asensio y Danny Cruz Pérez (2025) explained in their paper, 'Cristóbal Balenciaga Bajo la Lente de No-Do: De la Elusión a la Propaganda', despite his international reputation and ties to the elite of the regime, the couturier's homosexuality challenged the state model of heteronormativity and hyper masculinity. After Balenciaga's death, however, the narrative shifted and he was represented as a 'universal Spaniard' who rose from humble origins to become a 'genius creator' (Duran Asensio and Cruz Pérez 2025). In their comparative analysis of media coverage in the Spanish and French press, Julio González-Liendo and Bárbara Castillo-Abdul (2025) found that the right-wing Spanish daily newspaper *ABC* reported Balenciaga's death in an 'emotional and nationalist tone'. By contrast, the liberal French newspaper, *Le Monde*, adopted a more sober tone and situated the couturier within the structure of haute couture to explicitly link 'the designer's memory with museographic legitimisation and the cultural tradition of French luxury' (González-Liendo and Castillo-Abdul 2025).

In her paper, 'Memories of the Master: Balenciaga through the Eyes of His Contemporaries', Sarah Skillen (2025) situated the narratives surrounding Balenciaga within the context of the broader 'myth-creating world of Parisian couture'. Drawing on archival sources and fashion autobiographies, Skillen investigated 'the mechanics of how the couturier's myth was constructed' with a specific focus on the contribution of media texts and the writings of influential figures 'to the construction of the Balenciaga myth in the collective imagination' (2025). Both during his lifetime and after his death, a contributing factor to the mythologising around Balenciaga, argued Skillen, was the designer's reluctance to engage with the press and public.¹ In an echo of the designer's famed 'architectural technique' and sculptural use of negative space, Balenciaga's public silence left a lacuna that was readily filled by others. In Skillen's words: 'We imagine what has been left out' (2025). This imaginative work was largely performed by influential figures in the world of elite mid-century Paris fashion, such as Alison Settle (*British Vogue*), John Fairchild (*Women's Wear Daily*), Percy Savage (Lanvin press attaché) and fashion editors, Bettina Ballard and Carmel Snow.

¹ See also Alexandra Palmer (2021) on 'The Elusive Balenciaga'.

Far more than simple reportage, these figures leveraged their position in a two-way street that constructed and perpetuated the myth of Balenciaga as a symbolic figure 'across publications, seasons and decades', writing and rewriting Balenciaga's legacy in a 'palimpsest ... of memory, myth and editorial performance' (Skillen 2025).

3. Thread III: Wearing and Collecting Balenciaga

A more intimate, personal picture of Balenciaga's legacy emerged in papers that focused on the women who wore—and collected—garments from the Balenciaga stable. It is to these women that we owe the existence of many of the garments in the collection in the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, as well as in museums around the world. Moreover, the scholarship of these papers served to reinforce the museum as a place of valuing, of preservation and legacy, and also as a site of exploration into the experience of owning and wearing Balenciaga. In the context of traditional museology, the women profiled in these papers were often described as 'a non-fashion-collector' or a 'passive collector' (Sanz Álvarez 2025), which is to say, they were women for whom collecting was a by-product of wearing Balenciaga and whose preservation of a 'Balenciaga wardrobe' made them collectors by chance. Thus, we heard stories of the collector who is not a collector in the conventional sense, and of an archive that is not strictly an archive but rather an emotional one, revealing the affective relationship between Balenciaga's couture garments and the women who wore them.

For example, in 'A Gift of Affect', Alba Sanz Alvarez explored the 'emotional aspect' of the collection bequeathed to the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa by the New York socialite Rachel L. Mellon (1910-2014). Born into an affluent family of collectors and married to great wealth, Mellon was considered more a collector of art, gardening and botanical books than fashion. Nonetheless, for years she devoted her wardrobe to the Basque couturier, ultimately, wearing exclusively Balenciaga with even her gardening attire made by the Balenciaga ateliers (Sanz Álvarez 2025). Even so, the extent of the Rachel Mellon Collection held by the museum is extraordinary. As listed by Sanz Alvarez (2025), it comprises: 120 day outfits, 50 coats, 40 cocktail dresses, 25 evening gowns, 20 *déshabillés*, 10 garden outfits, 30 lingerie articles, 215 scarves, 32 toques and hats' and 250 miscellaneous documents, 'including invoices, telegrams, postcards and personal letters, as well as 138 original sketches with fabric swatches'. Building on the observation of sociologist, Saulo B. Cwener, that 'wardrobes enclose not only clothes, but the personal biographies associated with them', Sanz Alvarez traced a research path that was less about the garment as simply a material object than the life of the garment itself before its donation—the story of how the garment lived, why it was kept and, especially, how particular garments made the wearer, the owner (and her body) feel when wearing them.

The story that emerged from these acts of wearing/preserving/collecting is one of an affective relationship with clothing that

resonated with many in the audience, even if we don't expect to experience what wearing Balenciaga feels like ourselves. In this paper (as in others), the presentation was illustrated with photographs of women wearing Balenciaga and of the garments as they are preserved or exhibited in the museum. As a member of the audience, I found myself reflecting on the difference between memories associated with the garment itself and memories associated with a photograph of an individual wearing that same garment. The photograph may evoke a memory, as may the garment; yet the garment is imbued with memory. It holds sensation—smell, tactility, haptic feel; it takes up space in a wardrobe; and although I suspect closet space was not a concern for Mrs Mellon, I could understand the sentiment behind her form of collecting—the longer she held onto a garment, the harder it became to give it away.

A smaller Balenciaga collection, held at the Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, was the subject of David Lazaro's paper, 'Wearing Balenciaga: Two Connecticut Clients' (Lazaro 2025). The collection, consisting of nineteen Balenciaga and EISA dresses, suits, coats and hats from the 1950s and 1960s, was collectively worn by the wealthy East Coast socialites Emily Hall Tremaine (1908-1987) and Bluma Rose Bassevitch (1909-1990). Both women were deeply interested in modern art (Bassevitch was also an artist) and, like Mellon, had the means to dress in Paris couture. However, as Lazaro (2025) explained, the collection is particularly interesting because these two women lived outside of the metropolitan centre, making the garments an excellent source of previously 'understudied examples of fairly conservative daytime and evening clothes'. One advantage of the unofficial, 'passive collector', Lazaro implied, is that we see couture in the context of the everyday life—that is, worn much as the rest of us might wear jeans and a t-shirt. According to Lazaro (2025), for Tremaine and Bassevitch, the Balenciaga suit—with its 'easy fit, to-the-knee skirt hem, and bracelet-length sleeves'—served as a 'practical, daytime uniform', well suited to women who travelled regularly to and from New York City.² Their evening ensembles were relatively conservative; coats and hats, by contrast, allowed greater scope for experimentation and could be more whimsical; Tremaine's ownership of at least two of Balenciaga's sack dresses, Lazaro suggested, may likewise reflect her more artistic and playful side.

Nonetheless, being a socialite was not all fun and games; it could also be hard work. In one of Percy Savage's notebooks, he underlines a quote from Diana Vreeland: 'A woman dressed by Balenciaga in the 50s walked into a room and had a dignity, an authority' (Skillen 2025). As Skillen (2025) observes, the 'implication is that haute couture is meant for public display; it lent the wearer the armour of cultural authority within the confines of post-war Parisian high society'. For all of us, clothing demarcates a permeable, ambiguous border between the body, the self and the outside world (Cavallaro and Warwick 2010). Perhaps for the wearer of couture, it does more. If couture was a uniform, it was also armour: marking a clearer boundary and serving as a social shield—less permeable, more protective.

² Practicality is a recurring consideration across wearers of Balenciaga. For example, Alexandra Barter (2025) quotes Vie Hawkins who says of her Balenciaga coat: 'The orange coat was something that I wore and wore and wore. It did me very, very well'.

4. Thread IV: Working Women

While the figure of a celebrated *grand homme* of couture often dominates fashion discourse, as argued by Paula Nunes Rodrigues da Silva and Isabel Orestes Silveira (2025): 'To investigate the genesis of Cristóbal Balenciaga's visual language, we must reject the trope of the creator as the isolated "genius"'. What became clear over the two days of the conference is that the story of Cristóbal Balenciaga is, moreover, one of a feminised workforce and the women who underpinned his success. The list is long: employees, businesswomen, reporters and industry professionals; it includes mannequins, seamstresses, craftswomen, *vendeuses*, *premières*, *chefs de cabine*, pattern makers, entrepreneurs, designers, artisans, journalists, PR agents and many more. Some of these women, such as Bettina Ballard and Carmel Snow, were themselves public figures—icons even—or, like Alison Settle, achieved a degree of recognition in their own time (Skillen 2025). Others, such as Germaine Rocher, the Australian licensee for Balenciaga credited with developing a nascent couture industry on the other side of the world, were celebrated in the media for their entrepreneurial talent and technical skill (Barter 2025). Most, however—whether as highly visible but silent mannequins,³ or as part of the largely invisible workforce tasked with stitching the Balenciaga legacy—remain anonymous, their work and contributions unknown to history were it not for the work of researchers like those present at the II International Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference.⁴

Paolo Volonté (2022) has argued that, compared to the standardised cut and sizing of ready-to-wear, couture is more accommodating to the realities of the human body and different types of the female form. In the hands of the skilled craftswomen of the atelier, 'mistakes' of nature are corrected as the dressed body of the client is redrawn as close as possible to the image of the fashionable ideal. In Alexandra Barter's paper (2025), 'Cristóbal Balenciaga and Australia Importing, Reproducing and Adapting Balenciaga Couture in Sydney, 1938–1968', we were given a glimpse into how anomalies of the body—'such as *runder rücker*, (a round back), *langhals* (a long-neck), or *speck-neck* (a fat neck)'—were reconfigured into the desired silhouette via the techniques of the atelier.

By contrast, the Balenciaga mannequin, personally selected by the couturier for each collection, was chosen for her ability to conform to the Balenciaga beauty ideal and came 'ready-made'. As Alexandra Handijan (2025) explained in her paper, 'Models of the 1950s and 1960s at the Maison de Couture Balenciaga in Paris: Lives and Testimonies', 'the beauty criteria according to M. Balenciaga [was] a clean neck, square shoulders and a long bust'.

Drawing on the work of (among others) Miller (2007), Blume (2014) and testimonies from Balenciaga mannequins, Handijan provided details of the mannequins' presentation and working conditions. In appearance, the ideal Balenciaga mannequin possessed a bony, long-waisted figure with jutting pelvic bones. She walked with a signature loping 'aristocratic swagger' with 'long strides, torso tilted

³ Handijan (2025) explained that 'the house did not officially designate a star model, [although] two models were remembered as central figures: Colette from 1937 through the 1950s, followed by Taiga from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s'. She continues: 'Although, mannequins were visible in magazines (and not all of them were in magazines) there is little documentation about their historical background, where they came from, why they chose to become a mannequin for Balenciaga. For these reasons, they are unknown and anonymous faces.'

⁴ See also Lesley E. Miller (2017), *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*, London: V&A Publishing; and Alexandra Palmer (2001), *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

back, pelvis thrust forward' and was taught 'never to smile' so as to keep all attention on the clothes, which goes some way to explaining 'the reputation of Balenciaga's models [as] very professional but not pretty!' (Handijan 2025).⁵ Underneath the couture garments, mannequins wore the Balenciaga corset (made-to-measure by the atelier Lechauffer), which was very tight and layered with 'a black satin underdress with a large zipper on the back to which the canvas was pinned' (Handijan 2025).

Compared to today's freelance modelling industry, the *mannequins de cabine* at Balenciaga worked under structured, atelier-based conditions as salaried employees of the house, punching a time clock and adhering to regular working hours like other members of the couture staff. Their professional lives were also comparatively long, with older mannequins retained to present collections to mature clientele, a practice that reflected couture's emphasis on continuity, discretion and close alignment between model and client.

In the opening essay of *Balenciaga*, Marin Arzalluz's describes the post-show activity at Balenciaga:

Once all of the clients had handed in their cards with the details of the numbers of those models that had attracted their attention, the arduous process of fittings and making the clothes began. The salespeople and fitters, as well as the workshop staff, returned to the frenetic activity that had preceded the first show (2011: 27).

A closer look at the spaces of this frenetic activity was provided by Medina Murua and Aramendy in their architectural study of Balenciaga workshops (2025). These were spaces where the (mostly) female employees of the house brought the couturier's designs to life. Focusing primarily on workshops occupied by Balenciaga in the city of San Sebastián, the authors contrasted the architectural space and organisational logic of the public and private areas of the ateliers. The details of the work carried out in the ateliers were not directly addressed in this paper; however, it was heavily illustrated with images of behind-the-scenes workspaces where women in white dustcoats and severe black dress worked among the stacked dressmaker dummies. It was impossible not to notice the disparity between the *plein air* aesthetic of the seaside city and the confined conditions of the Balenciaga workshop at Avenida de la Libertad.

5. Thread V: The Legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga for Contemporary Design Students

The innovative work of the famous named designers at the brand of Balenciaga in recent years—Nicolas Ghesquière, Alexander Wang, Demna Gvasalia and Pierpaolo Piccioli—is just one component of Cristóbal Balenciaga's legacy. All were once students or learnt their trade through interaction with 'masters'. One of the most exciting aspects of the conference, and of the work of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, was learning how Balenciaga's legacy

⁵ The mannequin walk and performative style are, of course, not unique to Balenciaga. On the mannequin walk, see Caroline Evans (2013), *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929*, New Haven: Yale University Press. On the mannequin's underperformative style on the catwalk, see Karena de Perthuis (2018), 'Tilda Swinton: Performing Fashion'. *About Performance*, no. 16, pp. 5–25.

continues to influence future generations of designers and design students. Two papers, Heather Sproat's 'Christóbal Balenciaga x Central Saint Martins' and Katrín María Káradótti's 'Transmissions and Iceland University of the Arts', provided the audience a window into the important work of the museum's educational initiative, Transmissions, to ensure that the knowledge, values, techniques and skills of the house continue to teach and inspire future generations.

Launched in 2018, Transmissions is an educational program that provides international fashion schools and their students 'a firsthand immersive experience into Balenciaga's universe through research, reflection and creation' (Transmissions). Sproat presented ten case-studies of student work from Central Saint Martins (CSM) with a focus on experimental design practice, guided by the research question: What is the impact of Balenciaga's legacy of design, aesthetics, pattern cutting and construction techniques on emerging design talent? In her findings, she identified the importance of object-based research in fashion education. Not only does it allow students to move beyond garment aesthetics, it fosters 'continuity with design heritage', while also encouraging invention, exploration and disruption (Sproat 2025). As she concluded:

By inviting students to step into the legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga not to copy, but to walk with him in the atelier, we ... prepare not only skilled makers, but thoughtful, critical, and resilient designers equipped to form the future of fashion (Sproat 2025).

The students who travelled with Káradótti from Iceland University of the Arts (IUA), over three editions of the Transmissions program, are taught in a context that contrasts starkly with those of CSM. Whereas the latter are at the very centre of one of the four traditional fashion capitals, Iceland has a small local industry, imports most of its clothing and its museum archives are primarily concerned with textiles and traditional or craft-based garments (Káradótti 2025). The opportunity to participate in international fashion and draw on the knowledge and experience of a couture archive was invaluable for both the students and educators, with innovative patternmaking, tailoring and controlling the silhouette informing their ongoing practice and pedagogical work back home. In her survey of participating students, Káradótti found that 'they used much of that they learned in their creative work today, building tacit knowledge leading to more skillful work, allowing more intuitive development of ideas' (2025). On a deeper level, the participants found an affinity between the craftsmanship, heritage and focus on natural/quality fabrics, inherent to the couturier's work, and their own value-driven, principled approach to design, which is embedded in the IUA fashion program. The study of couture craftsmanship, then, is an antidote to fast fashion. As Káradótti (2025) stated:

Amidst the global environmental crises driven by overproduction, Balenciaga's philosophy of craftsmanship and quality of materials leads to sustainability that stands in stark contrast to the principles of fast fashion, making it especially relevant in contemporary discourse.

6. Conclusion

The world of Cristóbal Balenciaga in which scholars, researchers and an interested public were immersed over two days at the II Cristóbal Balenciaga Conference is a different world to ours. For me, and no doubt others, the experience of the conference was a welcome respite from our obsessive relationship to technology, the internet and social media—our short attention span. What we heard again and again was a story about time. The time it takes to create a garment; the time lag between its creation as a material object and its release into the world as a symbolic form via the press; the time of wearing the garments; time as duration; of keeping and valuing a garment, a scrap of paper, a note, a facture—preserving and collecting. Then there is the time spent in research, time in archives, tracking down leads and hints from captions and ephemera to discover what we don't know, what we didn't know was worth discovering, and to go back to that research, as Lesley Miller reminded us, to deepen and enrich existing knowledge. To this end, the words of the curator, Myna Trustram, provide a fitting end to these closing remarks: 'The museum is one of the forms we have for slowly *showing what we value* and for *preserving what is left*' (in Sanz Alvarez 2025; emphasis in original). Muchas gracias. Thank you.

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