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CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Cristóbal  
Balenciaga,  
Fashion and  
Heritage

*Contexts*



Black silk crêpe dress with overskirt simulating jacket. 1947.

CBM 2018.1201

© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa



# Cristóbal Balenciaga, Fashion and Heritage

EXHIBITION. 1/03 / 2019 – 12/01/2020

**Fashion and Heritage maintains an almost impossible dialogue between the ephemeral and the permanent, the validity of which derives from the moment, as opposed to that which receives its value from the past. A boundless conversation when the subject is Cristóbal Balenciaga.**

This is the starting point of the curatorial series *Cristóbal Balenciaga. Fashion and Heritage*, when Balenciaga's creations no longer circulate the streets and salons but begin to inhabit archives, galleries and museums. They stop serving as embellishments for bodies but are admired for their beauty. They take their leave from fashion magazine covers to appear instead on the covers of art magazines, and lose their exclusivity to become accessible to audiences from all social circles.

In 2018, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum launched this curatorial series to explore the work of Cristóbal Balenciaga through a chronological and evolutionary discourse and to highlight the process through which apparently simple items of clothing became a museum collection.

*Conversations*, the subtitle of the first exhibition, referred to the links between the object on display and the relevant visual and research models, those layers of interpretation which are properties of the object itself and confer on it the status of heritage.

This new exhibition, *Contexts*, takes us in search of the common ground that history and fashion share, the spaces behind the curtain –where everything actually takes place– and the formal parallels between the haute couture of those days and the museum work of today.

The exhibition discourse and the selection of pieces that accompany it, as well as the spatial conceptualisation and its design, are the result of collaboration between the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum team and the renowned fashion curator Judith Clark, and are a continuation of the work undertaken in 2018 for the beginning of this series.

Evening dress in ginger silk shantung embroidered with silver thread and sequins and with asymmetric hem. 1937.

CBM 2018.1201

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# The exhibition

*Cristóbal Balenciaga, Fashion and Heritage, Contexts*, takes us on a chronological journey that covers the entire working life of Cristóbal Balenciaga and builds up a picture of his new approach in a cumulative way, assimilating and combining previous and current research.



The exhibition traces the history of the emblematic firm and the creative evolution of the dressmaker and reveals a new relationship between the Fashion of Balenciaga and the Heritage of the museum, seeking the parallelism between their contexts. These contexts offer us the opportunity to understand where and how the creation of Cristóbal Balenciaga occurred.

Some of these contexts are hidden and are part of the trade and know-how of haute couture, such as the workspaces of the ateliers – fabrics, tools and hands – or the luxurious but intimate glamour of the salon for the exclusive customers. At the same time, the monastic atmosphere of the museum's archives and restoration laboratory are also hidden and inaccessible contexts which in turn form part of the history of the objects.

Other contexts are entirely public and have to do with socio-cultural environments and historical events which mark moments of creation and processes of dissemination and adoption of the innovations within culture, art, design and fashion in the twentieth century. In these contexts, the media plays a fundamental role, reflecting them for us, and, in the specific case of fashion, even creating them, and for this reason the media provides one of the voices of the exhibition discourse.



Wedding dress in ivory crêpe with tight-fitting body and sash that ends in a bow at the front. 1939.  
CBM 2012.06  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

## Some figures

The exhibition occupies six galleries, 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> of the museum, and involves a renewal of all the items of clothing on display (a total of 80), most of which have not been exhibited before. These are new additions to the museum's collection, contributions and loans from the Balenciaga Archives and the Courrèges Archives in Paris, the Museum of Fine Arts in Manchester, the CIPE Costume Museum in Madrid and the Barcelona Design Museum, as well as from private collections such as the Parodi Costume Collection of Miami, and that of Bibiñe Belausteguigoitia de Solano (Palacio de Zubieta, Ispaster/Lekeitio).

The selected pieces tell us about Balenciaga's creative process: the formal exploration based on the mastery of technique and fabric, the innovation of introducing new silhouettes in clothing, and with them new ideals of the feminine, and the evolutionary refinement in a cycle of constant improvement throughout his career that characterises the work of the master.

Together with these, other resources –documentation, testimonies, images, objects, patterns, wearable replicas, sketches, fabrics– connect us with their vital and professional context.

Technology also plays an important role in this exhibition, facilitating interactivity through digitalisations that allow us to observe the detail (megapixel) of a piece, its 360° visualisation, infographics about its technical construction, and the app that allows to explore the contents in greater depth .

Cristóbal Balenciaga: Fashion and Heritage.  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa





Judith Clark makes reference to the salon at the House of Balenciaga.  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa

## In collaboration with Judith Clark

The museum has once again collaborated with Judith Clark, creator of exhibitions and Professor of Museology at the London College of Fashion, for the design of this new exhibition.

The conversations, designed by Judith Clark and expressed through museographic proposals and installations which combine the presentation of contemporary art, the craftsmanship of haute couture and the aesthetics of the museum archive, are still present in the new exhibition, *Contexts*, having been edited, reviewed and expanded, since the series has been conceived as a cumulative work which, maintaining the same common thread and chronological sequence, allows us to assimilate and add new contents.

The aesthetics of the exhibition evoke the white and clean atmosphere of the archives and the restoration laboratories, with the constant presence of conservation materials and working methods of this interior, private museum space – a space which is normally invisible to the visitor and, therefore, becomes something mysterious and romantic. In addition, spaces as important as the atelier and the salon are rescued and reproduced in order for us to understand Balenciaga's creative process.

## About Judith Clark

Clark is an exhibition-maker and curator. She is Professor of Fashion and Museology at the London College of Fashion (LCF), Co-Director of the Centre for Fashion Curation and reached on the MA Fashion Curation course. Originally from Australia, Judith spent her childhood in Rome. She moved to London to study architecture at the Bartlett. In 1997, she opened her own gallery in West London, the first non-profit experimental space dedicated to the exhibition of clothing. Since then, Clark has curated over 40 exhibitions, including *Chloé. Attitudes*, *Anna Piaggi: Fashion-ology* and *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, and more recently *The Vulgar: Fashion Redefined* and the fashion section of *Homo Faber*. She lectures internationally on issues of dress display. Her latest publication *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971*, written with her friend and colleague, Professor Amy de la Haye, gives a timely perspective of the rise in exhibition of fashion.

«What this series of exhibitions does is re-think the boundaries between the two words, and their uses. If heritage is so often seen as static and finite, these exhibitions disrupt that perspective». JUDITH CLARK



Cocktail dress in blue silk taffeta with lace transparency in blue silk. 1957.  
CBM 2000.51  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa



# The creative legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga

The exhibition discourse reveals the continuing evolution of Cristóbal Balenciaga's work following a chronological thread that runs through his entire professional career. *Contexts* extends the timeline inherited from *Conversations*, in order to encompass the entire biography of Cristóbal Balenciaga, giving an account of his "active" retirement and the impact of his disappearance in 1972, taking us through six physical rooms and five chronological stages.

## Beginnings and influences (1912-1936)

Cristóbal Balenciaga begins his entrepreneurial and creative adventure in San Sebastián, at a time when the city is enjoying a heyday prompted by the seasonal visits of the court and the tourist popularity of the Basque Coast.

In those early days he purchases, analyses and recreates the French haute couture creations, particularly by Vionnet, Lanvin or Chanel. Women who dress women. He is attracted, following the trend of the time, by other conceptions and sensitivities such as those coming from the East. He focusses his attention on trials with different kinds of sleeves, on exploring the meaning of fabric, on minimising seams, on simplicity of shape and on ornamentation of the fabric itself.

Balenciaga continued with the development and expansion of his brands in Spain: Madrid in 1933 and Barcelona in 1935.

## Formal exploration (1937-1951)

Balenciaga immediately impresses critics with his first collection in Paris, thanks to his technical command and proposals of Spanish flavour which set him apart from others. However, World War II breaks out immediately afterwards and for a number of years the scarcity of

Tailored suit in black wool bengaline. 1912.  
CBM 1998.01  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa





Two examples of the creative legacy of Cristóbal Balenciaga: “midi” and “tunic”.

materials, the new roles of women or the patriotic spirit mark a military-inspired fashion for a society committed to the war effort.

The end of the conflict tests the capacity of French Haute Couture to start rebuilding the sector with new ideas in keeping with the better times. Balenciaga lives and participates in these contexts. In 1947 he simultaneously presents models mirroring the tendency of the moment: slender waists and voluminous skirts, as well as new proposals such as the “barrel” and “balloon” lines which move away from the overriding aesthetics.

## Innovation (1952-1959)

The prior investigation undertaken in the development of a new silhouette resulted in the milestones achieved by the dressmaker in this decade. Some of these models are reminiscent of silhouettes from the twenties where the waistline was less accentuated, with Balenciaga drawing the eyes to the shoulder and hemline of his dresses.

These factors lay the foundations for his benchmark creations in the 50s with the “tunic”, “sack” and “baby-doll” lines; models in which he quietly proceeds to bring about a revolutionary divorce between the body and the dress, lending progressively more importance to a third element: air.

Balenciaga, “The couturier who sets the pace for the fashion future”, as noted by the different fashion writers of his time, leads his clients by means of a gradual, discreet and incessant evolution to an innovative change in the female ideal.

## Refinement and abstraction (1960-1967)

In the sixties Balenciaga’s silhouettes take on greater degrees of abstraction. The ample volumes, found both in tailor making and dressmaking, draw on his groundbreaking creations of the 50s, revising the patterns of the “sack”, the “tunic” and the “semi-fitted” garments. Some of the new silhouettes present during that decade come from the combination of these cutting-edge creations to configure new aesthetic references.

Conceptual and technical minimalism, inherent to his career, are obvious in the wraps made in fabrics of a certain rigidity, such as gazar, zagor and sable, creating abstract silhouettes and geometric volumes based on the circle and the square.

One step at a time. An evolution of the previous version. That’s how Balenciaga’s collections change year after year, with no improvised jumps, with consistency, gradually pushing earlier ideas to the extreme until obtaining absolute dissolution of the female body and the dress.

## Last years (1968-1972)

In 1968 Cristóbal Balenciaga announces his decision to retire. After 52 years of continuous work, presenting an average of 200 new creations every season, age and fatigue are enough in themselves to justify this step. “A dog’s life” – he would confess in the only interview he gave in his life. (*Paris Match*, 1968).

But also, the important social, political and cultural changes of the time: May 1968 in France, the Prague Spring, the missile crisis, the race riots or protests against the Vietnam war... make it almost inevitable. In that new society of ‘68, faster moving and more immediate, more revolutionary and spirited, *prêt-à-porter*, had democratised fashion.

Balenciaga accepts the commission to design and produce the uniforms for “Air France”, his only foray into this new tailoring mode of pre-established sizes. After the experience, and faithful to himself, he decides to abandon the world of which he no longer feels himself to be a part. By then, the dimension, presence, influence, recognition and prestige enjoyed by Balenciaga have become such that many see his last collection as the end of an era.

Balenciaga enjoyed an “active” retirement, advising and collaborating in a number of *prêt-à-porter* projects of friends and acquaintances, and more specifically for Subijana y Cía of Villabona (Gipuzkoa) and Textil Tarazona of Tarazona (Zaragoza).

In 1971, the Bellerive Museum in Zurich dedicated a first retrospective exhibition to Balenciaga, followed by many others that continue to this day.

Uniforms for Air France hostesses, 1968.



Sack-back cocktail dress in black silk crêpe. 1966.

CBM 2012.38

© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa



# Biographical Milestones

## BEGINNINGS AND INFLUENCES (1912–1936)

- 1895 Cristóbal Balenciaga was born in Getaria, a small fishing village located in the north of Spain. The son of a sailor and a seamstress, in his hometown he had access to the thriving context of the summer regal vacation that was common at the beginning of the century on the Basque Coast.
- 1906 Cristóbal Balenciaga made his first dress for the Marchioness of Casa Torres, his mentor who employed his mother as a seamstress during the long summer seasons that the family spent in Getaria.
- 1907 Balenciaga moved to San Sebastián – according to the municipal census register, he resided in the capital of Gipuzkoa from this year on – and it seems logical to assume that he probably trained in some of the important fashion houses in existence at the time: surely Gómez House, New England, and Au Louvre, all of which had ties to the fashion of Paris and operated in the city of San Sebastián.
- 1917 Cristóbal Balenciaga started his business and creative adventure. The designer established his first fashion house known as “C. Balenciaga” at Vergara Street, Number 2, of San Sebastián. Seven years later, in 1924, after different company modifications, he moved his operations to Avenue Number 2 of the same city under the name “Cristóbal Balenciaga”.
- 1918 He founded “Balenciaga y Cía” alongside the Lizaso sisters, creating a limited-term company.
- 1924 The aforementioned company was dissolved and he moved his operations to Avenue Number 2, first floor, of the same city, under the name “Cristóbal Balenciaga”.
- 1927 He founded “Martina Robes et Manteaux” as a second brand (Martina was the name of his mother). In October of that same year, he changed the brand to “EISA COSTURA”, once again related to his mother (whose surname was Eizaguirre), located at Number 10 on Oquendo Street in San Sebastián.
- 1933 Balenciaga opened a fashion house in Madrid, at Caballero de Gracia Street, Number 42, under the name “EISA B.E.”.
- 1935 He set up a second location for “EISA B.E.” at Number 10, Santa Teresa Street, Barcelona.
- 1936 With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he abandoned Spain and settled in Paris. He temporarily stopped normal business activities at his fashion houses of Madrid and Barcelona.
- 1937 He moved “EISA COSTURA” To Avenue Number 2, second floor, under the name “EISA B.E.”.

## EXPLORATION WITH NEW LINES (1937–1951)

- 1937 In July, he registered with the Chambre, Syndicale de la Haute Couture and opened, alongside his partners Wladzio d’Attainville and Nicolás Bizcarrondo, “BALENCIAGA” Ltd. , a *haute couture* fashion house which would leave its mark on the history of fashion.

1939 Cristóbal Balenciaga presented a collection with a profound historicist influence which was clearly reminiscent of the fashion of the seventeenth century and the Second French Empire. The success of his “infanta” dresses was overwhelming.

1947 In February, Balenciaga presented the “tonneau” or “barrel” line, which departed from the dominating aesthetics of confined figures and emphasized fluidity in its design. This was the same year in which Dior introduced its “bar suit”.

1949 The first street-level boutique was opened, designed by Christos Bellos. Its decoration was marked by an austere nature, without giving up on elegance or luxury, making use of furniture and decorative elements that alluded to Spanish origin.

INNOVATION (1952–1959)

1951 Cristóbal Balenciaga introduced the “semi-fitted” suit (February), the “sailor” (February), and the “midi” (August). These models were reminiscent of the silhouettes of the twenties in which the waist was blurred, with Balenciaga using the shoulder line as a focal point and placing emphasis on the lower part of the dress.

1952 From this year on, the shop windows were designed by Janine Janet, with sculptures being created in which the products were integrated or directly invisible to the passer-by thanks to the materials used and their markedly artistic nature.

1955 The “tunic” was introduced, a two-piece dress with straight, clean lines that covered the body without constricting it – an evolution of the “midi” line.

1956 Balenciaga decided to showcase his collections one month after the official start of the high-fashion shows alongside Hubert de Givenchy.

1957 The designer introduced the “sack” dress into his collections, a further step in terms of his formal experimentation – a type of evolution of the “sailor” style. Along with the fabric creator Gustav Zumsteg (Abraham), gazar was developed – a fabric with sculptural properties suitable for creations that were increasingly conceptual in nature

1958 Cristóbal Balenciaga introduced the “baby doll” dress, characterized by the simplicity of its trapezoidal silhouette that got rid of the waistline, as well as “peacock tail” dresses – longer in back than in the front. The French Government awarded him the title of *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* for his service to the fashion industry. He became known by the international press as the “Master of High Fashion”.

PURIFICATION AND ABSTRACTION (1960–1967)

1960 Cristóbal Balenciaga designed the wedding gown of Fabiola de Mora y Aragón, the granddaughter of the Marchioness of Casa Torres and future Queen of Belgium.

1962 Balenciaga began to introduce forms that were increasingly more pure and abstract. The conceptual and technical minimalism that was inherent to his career became evident in the garments he made of fabrics with a certain degree of rigidity, such as gazar silk, zagar silk, and ciberlina (a soft, wool fabric), creating abstract silhouettes and geometrical volumes based on the circle and the square.

LAST YEARS (1968–1972)

1968 Cristóbal Balenciaga accepted the task of designing and producing the uniforms for Air France, his only experience with *prêt-à-porter* garments. He granted the only interview of his life to the magazine *Paris Match*.

1969 Closure of his last fashion house in San Sebastián.

1971 The Bellerive Museum in Zurich (Switzerland) dedicated a first retrospective exhibition to Balenciaga, followed by many others that continue to this day.

1972 Balenciaga passed away in Xàbia (Alicante) on March 24, at the age of 77, and he was buried in the small cemetery of his hometown, Getaria.

Evening dress in white sable by Staron. 1967.

CBM 2011.77

© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa





# The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum



Exterior view of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in Getaria.  
© Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa.

**The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, opened on 7 June 2011, is located in the town where the couturier was born, in commemoration of those early years of his professional training and maturing in order to understand his contributions to the world of fashion.**

With the aim of explaining Balenciaga's life and work, his relevance in the history of fashion and design, and the contemporaneity of his legacy, the Museum houses a unique collection. Its large size – almost 3,000 pieces which continue to rise in number thanks to loans and donations – and its wide-ranging formal and chronical extension – including, for example, the earliest existing models by the couturier – make this one of the most complete, consistent and interesting of its kind.

Another of the collection's exceptional values lies in the origin of the pieces. It goes without saying that Balenciaga's major international clients were outstanding social figures in the central decades of the 20th century: Mona Von Bismarck, Bunny Mellon, Patricia López Wilshaw, Barbara Hutton, Princess de Réthy, Grace Kelly and Madame Bricard all wore some of the models now featuring in the Archives.

# Practical Information

More information:

Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum Communication

Zuriñe Abasolo Izarra

zurine.abasolo@fbalenciaga.com

T 943 004 777

M 647 410 775

## MUSEUM OPENING HOURS

JUNE, SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER

Tuesday - Sunday, 10:00 - 19:00h

JULY AND AUGUST

Monday - Sunday, 10:00 - 19:00h

NOVEMBER - JANUARY

Tuesday - Sunday, 10:00 - 15:00h

## GUIDED TOURS

The Museum runs free guided tours lasting for one hour on weekends and public holidays. During the months of July and August guided tours will be programmed daily.

Mornings, 11:00h and 12:30h.

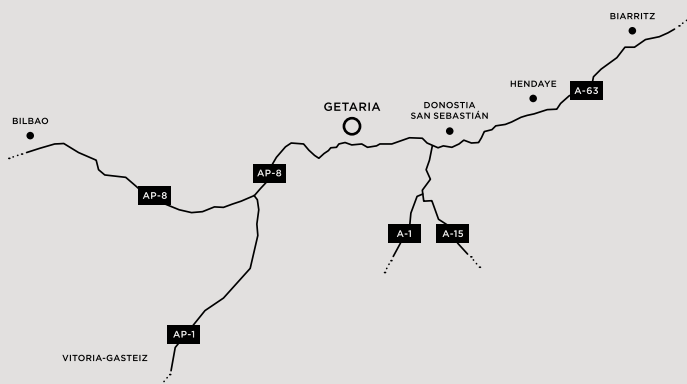
Afternoons, 17:00h (March-October)

Private tours are available all year round.

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## CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Aldamar Parkea 6  
20808 Getaria - Gipuzkoa - España  
T 943 008 840  
info@crislobalbalenciagamuseoa.com  
www.crislobalbalenciagamuseoa.com



Biarritz — 71km  
Bilbao — 81km  
Donostia/San Sebastián — 25km  
Iruña-Pamplona — 97km  
Vitoria-Gasteiz — 83km

GPS  
43° 18' 6.92" N  
2° 12' 18.77" W

