

Highlights Release

Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion

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Gallery 40, V&A

27 May 2017 – 18 February 2018

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'For twenty years, Balenciaga was the prophet of nearly every major change in silhouette.'

Diana Vreeland

Renowned couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga designed clothes characterised by their sculptural quality, deft manipulation of textiles and dramatic use of colour and texture. Drawing on a wide range of influences from 19th century dress to the Japanese kimono, in the 1950s and 60s he revolutionised the female silhouette, originating distinctive shapes that continue to resonate. It was during this period that he introduced the tunic, sack and shift dress shapes, all of which remain style staples today.

The balloon hem

Evening dress, silk taffeta, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1954, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



From 1951, Balenciaga began experimenting with the balloon hem. It became one of his signatures. In 1954, he used his superior fabric draping skills and a paper-thin silk taffeta to create this exquisite evening dress. Inspired by 19th century costume – a keen interest of Balenciaga's – great swathes of fabric supported by hoops were drawn from the centre front seam to form the bustle-like back. The skirts are shaped through 'bagging out', which creates spacious voids that fill with air as the wearer walks, ballooning to dramatic effect. This is enhanced further by quirky hidden ties which knot just above the knee.

The 'semi-fit' dress

Day dress, wool, Cristóbal Balenciaga (Eisa label), Spain, 1957, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Like many of Balenciaga's pioneering designs, the 'semi-fit' look – fitted at the front but loose at the back – was initially met with hostility. Following its debut in 1951, Carmel Snow, former editor of Harper's Bazaar US, remarked that the audience 'sat there hating it'. She questioned 'why should a woman look like a house?' Yet, despite the initial resistance, the shape became one of Balenciaga's most popular and most imitated looks, seen in everything from tailored suits to evening dresses. Irish-born designer Rory Parnell-Mooney took inspiration from Balenciaga's 'semi-fit' shape for his Autumn/Winter 2016 menswear collection.

Evening dress and cape, silk, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1967, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



This ensemble is a virtuoso example of pattern-cutting. The main body of the evening dress is cut from a single piece of fabric joined at the centre back. There are no side seams. Two dress weights at the front, visible in x-rays, ensures the dress falls correctly. The neck of the cape is painstakingly pieced to ensure a soft line which stands away from the body. This ensemble typifies the increasing simplicity and abstraction of Balenciaga's later work. It relies on a deep knowledge of the fabric which determines the sculptural shape. Although strikingly modern, the design echoes mantles and soutanes worn by Catholic clergy in Spain and elsewhere.

The 'baby doll' dress

Cocktail dress, crêpe de chine, with lace by Marescot and satin, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1958, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Balenciaga debuted the 'baby doll' dress in 1957. When made with opaque fabric, it completely concealed the shape of a woman's figure. In this particular example, Balenciaga was both revealing and concealing the body. The translucent Chantilly lace hangs loosely over a fitted inner sheath with zips on both sides to ensure a tight fit. Today, London-based fashion designer Molly Goddard cites 1950s Balenciaga as an influence on her own designs. Her signature tulle party dresses reimagine the 'baby doll' for the 21st century.

Spiral hat, silk, Cristóbal Balenciaga (Eisa label), Spain, 1962, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Balenciaga's hats were some of the most elaborate in Paris. During the 1950s and 60s they became increasingly surreal, playing with scale, shape and unusual materials. Unlike many other couturiers who outsourced their hat-making, Balenciaga's premises in Paris housed two ateliers dedicated to millinery. While Balenciaga did not design the hats himself, he worked closely with his hat designers, the Franco-Russian milliner, Wladzio d'Attainville, and later, the Spaniard, Ramón Esparza to develop these avant-garde creations.

The envelope dress

Cocktail dress, silk gazar, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1967, on loan from the Applied Art Collection/Museum of Design Zurich/Zurich University of the Arts



Towards the end of Balenciaga's 50-year career, his experimentation with form and fabric led to a complete abstraction of the body. Made the year before he retired, this dress reasserted his relevance to 1960s fashion. Although the dress was popular with the fashion press, few sold because of its impracticality. One wearer found it impossible to go to the bathroom in it, and returned it to the fashion house. The legacy of this abstraction of the body is seen throughout the 20th century and today in the work of designers such as Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, Hussein Chalayan and the sculptural works of Iris van Herpen.

Alberta Tiburzi in 'envelope' dress by Cristóbal Balenciaga, Harper's Bazaar, June 1967 © Hiro 1967

Evening jacket, silk velvet with glass-paste beading, Cristóbal Balenciaga (Eisa label), Spain, 1947, on loan from Museo Cristóbal Balenciaga, Getaria



Although best-known for his Parisian couture, Cristóbal Balenciaga was a Spaniard, and often drew on his Spanish heritage in his designs. The earliest piece in the exhibition, this evening jacket is based on the short *chaquetillas* worn as part of the bullfighter's traditional dress referred to as 'the suit of lights'. Here, Balenciaga took a traditionally masculine garment and redesigned it for women to be worn over a full-length evening gown.

The 'T shaped' jacket

Evening Coat, wool, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1950, on loan from Chicago History Museum



Some of Balenciaga's most innovative designs were also the simplest. In this design, a T-shaped kimono cut is manipulated into dramatic folds by an invisible internal ribbon that runs the length of the inside sleeves to hold the gathers in place. Vogue described it as having the 'sculptured, direct beauty of a Roman toga'. This photograph shows Swedish model Lisa Fonsagrives-Penn wearing the design in a 1950 editorial spread for Vogue Paris. It was photographed by her husband Irving Penn.

Lisa Fonsagrives-Penn wearing coat by Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1950. Photograph by Irving Penn © Condé Nast, Irving Penn Foundation

Evening mini-dress, metal wire and plastic paillettes, Paco Rabanne, Paris, 1967, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Paco Rabanne was the son of Balenciaga's head seamstress in San Sebastian. He studied architecture, combining university studies with designing accessories for couture houses. Cristóbal Balenciaga was an early supporter of his work. Balenciaga and Paco Rabanne shared an experimentation with materials and form. In this piece, the sewing needle is replaced by plyers, and dressmaking by jewellery-making techniques. Rabanne was a leader in 1960s experimental fashion, employing unconventional materials such as plastics, metals and

leather.

Women's cape/dress, hat and boots, silk cloqué, Nicolas Ghesquière for Balenciaga, Paris, Autumn/Winter 2006, on loan from Balenciaga House Archives, Paris



Nicolas Ghesquière revived the Balenciaga brand when he took over as creative director in 1997. His reinterpretation of classic Balenciaga shapes using new materials proved to be a commercial success and established Ghesquière as an important tastemaker. In 2006, Ghesquière co-curated a museum retrospective on Balenciaga in Paris. Of his seminal Autumn/Winter 2006 collection for the fashion house, he said: 'I wanted every outfit to be a citation, to have a direct link with Cristóbal Balenciaga'. For this, Ghesquière visited the house archives and

reimagined many of Balenciaga's iconic shapes. The collection included this cape/dress, referencing Balenciaga's radical design of 1963, also on display in the exhibition.

Snake dress worn by Björk, acrylic coils mounted on silk tulle, Iris van Herpen, Amsterdam, Autumn/Winter 2011, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Dutch designer Iris van Herpen's creations tread the line between fine art and fashion, often using entirely new materials, much like Balenciaga. She was an early experimenter with 3D printing. There was no preconceived idea for this dress. The material led the design, which she made by arranging the acrylic coils on a stand. As with some of Balenciaga's designs of the late 1960s, its sculptural form distorts and conceals the natural shape of the body.

Dress, embroidered silk organza over tulle, Oscar de la Renta, New York, Spring/Summer 2015, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



In the late 1950s, Oscar de la Renta worked briefly as a sketch artist at Balenciaga's Madrid salon, Elsa. He credited this, along with his apprenticeships in Paris, for the high standards he later applied to garments for his own New York label. As in Balenciaga's creations, floral patterns, like the decoration on this dress, are recurring motifs. This dress is from de la Renta's final collection before he passed away. It has been acquired for the V&A's permanent collection especially for the exhibition.

Women's jacket, top, trousers and shoes, cotton, lurex, plastic and glass, Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga, Paris, Autumn/Winter 2016, on loan from Balenciaga House Archives, Paris



The off-the-shoulder appearance and stand-away collar of this jacket by Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga is achieved entirely through pattern-cutting. Gvasalia took inspiration from Balenciaga's coats with open, pushed-back necklines. Gvasalia never makes sketches, but works in three dimensions, often experimenting with cutting up and reassembling garments. Like Balenciaga, he plays with proportions in his designs.

Women's ensemble, polyurethane leather, Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, Tokyo, Autumn/Winter 2016, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



space around the body as the body itself.

Balenciaga changed the shape of woman's fashion, creating unusual volumes that stood away from the body, framing the figure, rather than restricting it. It was a gutsy move that challenged the then dominant hour-glass silhouette of Dior's 'New Look'. Balenciaga's silhouettes continue to inspire designers today. Like Balenciaga, Rei Kawakubo at Comme des Garçons has explored this idea of the void or volume around the body – a concept known as *ma* in Japan. Her recent collections have featured increasingly architectural shapes, as seen in this ensemble, newly acquired by the V&A. It is as much about the

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Notes to Editors

- The exhibition *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* runs from 27 May 2017 - 18 February 2018. Admission £12 (concessions available). V&A Members go free. Advance booking is advised – this can be done in person at the V&A; online at vam.ac.uk/balenciaga; or by calling 0800 912 6961 (booking fee applies).
- *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* is curated by the V&A's Cassie Davies-Strodder and is accompanied by a new V&A publication.
- The exhibition is the latest in the V&A's series of revelatory fashion exhibitions and follows *Undressed: A Brief History of Underwear* (2016 – 2017), *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* (2015 – 2016) and *Club to Catwalk: London Fashion in the 1980s* (2013 – 2014).
- The V&A's fashion collection is designated as the UK's National Collection and is one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of dress in the world.

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For further PRESS information about *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion* please contact Laura Mitchell in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2503 or email l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk (not for publication).

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