



BALENCIAGA AND SPAIN

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HAMISH BOWLES

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Skira *RIZZOLI*
NEW YORK

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Balenciaga and Spain was organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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Evening bolero jacket of blood-red silk velvet with jet and passementerie embroidery by Bataille, winter 1946
Collection of Hamish Bowles
Photo by Kenny Komer

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DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

John E. Buchanan, Jr.

It is with great pride and excitement that the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco present *Balenciaga and Spain*, a captivating look at the influence of Cristóbal Balenciaga's native land—from its rich artistic tradition to its distinctive regional cultures—on his extraordinary designs.

It is a project that is several years in the making. The seed of its idea was planted in the fall of 2008, when *Vogue's* European editor at large, Hamish Bowles, participated in a symposium hosted by the de Young in conjunction with *Yves Saint Laurent*. Hamish captivated us with his deep and passionate knowledge of couture, and we began to imagine collaborating together on the next big costume exhibition for Bay Area audiences.

We were enormously pleased when Hamish suggested that the de Young become a venue for *Balenciaga: Spanish Master*, an exhibition that the renowned designer Oscar de la Renta had invited him to organize for the Queen Sofia Spanish Institute in New York. Although the San Francisco exhibition has ultimately grown into a much larger presentation with an expanded focus, we are grateful to Mr. de la Renta, Inmaculada de Habsburgo, and their colleagues at the Queen Sofia for stimulating this important project.

Every great master deserves major museum exhibitions to achieve a full assessment of his or her oeuvre, and Balenciaga is no exception. It has often been noted that his designs bear the indelible impression of Spanish culture, but never before have his Iberian influences been traced in such a thorough and compelling way. Hamish Bowles is surely one of the brightest minds working in fashion today, and I can imagine no better guide to lead us through the story of Balenciaga's inspirations: the paintings by Velázquez, Goya, and Picasso; the elaborately worked gowns and armor of the royal court; the garb of cardinals, monks, and Madonnas; the flourish and ruffles of flamenco dance; the ritual theatricality of the bullring; and the colorful costumes found in villages throughout Spain's many regions. Hamish has done an astounding job in sourcing the looks for the exhibition, and his contacts in the fashion world are certainly unmatched. With unflagging energy and enthusiasm, he has identified the finest Balenciaga examples the world over. On behalf of everyone at the Fine Arts Museums, I thank him for his partnership on this exhibition and congratulate him on his achievement.

All of our most successful special exhibitions have roots in the Museums' permanent collections. This one naturally draws on the strengths of the Fine Arts Museums' costume holdings, containing several exquisite Balenciaga designs once worn by San Francisco's most well-heeled women, including Mrs. C. H.

Russell, Eleanor Christensen de Guigne, and Elise S. Haas. But the exhibition would have been unthinkable without the cooperation and generosity of the house of Balenciaga, most notably François Pinault, founder of PPR; François-Henri Pinault, CEO of PPR; and Nicolas Ghesquière, creative director of Balenciaga Paris. Balenciaga's Lionel Vermeil and Gaël Mamine facilitated unprecedented access to the archives, the loan of a tremendous number of landmark designs, and many of the fascinating documentary images that grace the pages of this volume. Thomas Campbell, Harold Koda, and Andrew Bolton at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, are also deserving of special thanks. The exhibition includes remarkable ensembles on loan from museum and private collections throughout the United States and Europe, and we are grateful to all of our lenders for their assistance and participation.

A project of this scope and complexity can only be possible with the generous support of the Museums' patrons. We are enormously grateful to those who have made early leadership gifts to underwrite this exhibition: Christine Suppes, the San Francisco Auxiliary of the Fine Arts Museums, and Neiman Marcus.

I know Hamish joins me in thanking the hard-working and capable staff of the Fine Arts Museums for their many contributions to the project. Jill D'Alessandro, curator of costume and textiles, was essential to the exhibition from its inception, serving as Hamish's crucial liaison to San Francisco, facilitating access to the Museums' collections and resources, and lending her expertise in mounting exhibitions. Karen Levine, director of publications, has overseen the catalogue with flexibility and aplomb. Krista Brugnara, director of exhibitions, handled logistics with an array of international lenders, adeptly aided by Therese Chen, Leni Velasquez, and Suzy Peterson. The project has also been shaped by the vital input of textile conservators Sarah Gates and Beth Szuhay, who cared for and participated in the dressing of these delicate costumes; Susan Grinols and Joseph McDonald, whose work resulted in stunning new photography of the Museums' Balenciaga pieces; and Sheila Pressley and Renée Baldocchi, who spearheaded the symposium and other educational offerings. Warmest gratitude is owed to Bill White, Steve Brindmore, and the technical production staff as well as the marketing and design team. Recognition is also due to Hamish's research assistants, Jennifer Park and Molly Sorkin, for their tireless efforts on behalf of the project.

Acknowledgments concluded, we turn to a poignant appreciation of Balenciaga written the year after his death by one of his greatest patrons, Baroness Philippe de Rothschild. And, thus our journey begins in Guetaria, the maestro's birthplace on the Basque coast.



1

Richard Avedon

Dorian Leigh wearing evening ensemble of black silk organza
and white cotton piqué, summer 1951

Variant originally published in *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1951



2

Horst P. Horst

Pauline de Rothschild wearing coat of black lace and brown organza, winter 1953
Originally published in *Vogue*, July 1, 1963

BALENCIAGA, appreciation by Baroness Philippe de Rothschild

In the center of a street, made dark by the shadows of its thick stone houses, a woman was walking, her back turned to the light from the sea. She wore a pale, ankle-length, silk shantung suit. The severe houses enclosed her, shuttered.

A boy was watching her.

She would come almost abreast of him, and he would run up a side-street of the fishing village, so closely carved into the mountain that its streets are as steep and narrow as Genoa's, some entirely made of steps. Down another he would run and be ahead of her again.

Then he would stare.

One day he stopped her, and asked her if he could make a suit for her. The boy was about thirteen, with dark hair and darker eyes and the smile he would keep all his life.

- Why do you want to do this? she asked.

- Because I think I can, he answered.

The boy was Cristobal Balenciaga.

The woman was the Marquesa de Casa Torres. We know nothing of the outcome of the first attempt. The Marquesa had him begin the long years of apprenticeship to his trade. In Spain, then, some say, in Bordeaux. When he was eighteen she took him to Paris to see Mr. Doucet. Mr. Doucet was a great collector, and a very grand dressmaker. The boy saw how Caroline ReGoux's hats were brought over for each fitting, how one fussed about proportions. Years later the Marquesa, still infinitely fashionable, insisted that the young man open his own house in Madrid. The Spanish civil war (the siege of Madrid lasted eighteen months), brought him to Paris. The rest is not only the history of his clothes, but that of mysteries particularly his own.

I had the privilege of dressing at Balenciaga's for twenty-three years. I knew and loved other dressmakers, and understood them. But the mysteries were Balenciaga's.

He exerted a close to total dominance over his field. He did his own thing, as the saying goes, and where sayings cannot go, he went. His own way. Intransigent in his creativeness, in his dealings with people, with a sway over the very bones and minds of those who wore his clothes. Perhaps even over their flesh. The women wearing a dress of his, or a coat, or a raincoat, seemed to have acquired a birth-certificate to some commitment of their own secret choosing. And of his. One night, he never went to galas or to a party, was never seen in restaurants or the theatre, he refused to let a dress be delivered to one of his most beautiful and favorite clients, a dress ordered to be worn that very evening at one of three receptions in Paris for the Queen of England. The dress had been changed, he said. He did not like what had been done to it. It would be put in the sales, but not until it had been brought back to its original conception. (The crime consisted of sewing the seams of a dress down to the floor, instead of letting it be two panels opening over a tunic). The saleswoman responsible would pay for the alterations out of her own money. "I didn't mind the money", later moaned the saleswoman, "but imagine not being able to deliver the dress'."

Where had he developed this sureness?

His name became synonymous with perfection and elegance. Why these two words, in themselves unexplainable? How does the Oxford dictionary explain perfection? It gives, as an illustration, "The hawk that is most suited for the flight." Perhaps. And elegance? "Neatness, grace, refinement." No. There must be some cuckoo's eggs in the nest.

Where did he train his eyes to choose and limit his colors so that each became a rarity? As subtle and firm as that of the most sparing of Chinese painters. This man who only travelled between France and Spain.

And the ever-renewed science of cutting? The superb cut that engendered a serenity in movement, a look of ceremonial. Where did he learn this? Not in any apprenticeship.

There was the magnificence too, the adventures for the evening, for the night.

From Goya, of course, came the prettiness of black lace and satin ribbons, but what of the spumes of frosted embroideries, the showers of mother-of-pearl, the pale slightly-stiffened silks layered in silver and gold so that you did not know which moved first, the dress or the light? There was once a bolero embroidered in natural straw the color of Inca gold.

So, one day in February, we went on a pilgrimage of affection and admiration to Guetaria, on the Northern coast of Spain, where Balenciaga was born and where he asked to have his body buried. It was an Atlantic winter day, sudden bursts of sun, then rapid clouds. The houses on the main street, their heavy stone still wet from the rain, glistened as if covered with a gold metallic armor. The proprietors of these seventeenth century houses are well-to-do. Their boats sail out in the spring to the Arctic seas, to Iceland, for cod-fishing. A map in a recent edition of Moby Dick shows that whales had a visiting place very near and directly facing Guetaria. In the church, we were to see the pews, to be identified by the carvings of two very small whales, harpooned, each surmounted by a cross. Whalers and believers. Visibly, a people of pride and nimbleness.

The cemetery lies on the side of a hill like a sheet spread out to dry. Vineyards run down to it. Balenciaga's tomb is the highest of two Balenciaga family plots, looking out toward the vineyards and the sea and one lone beautiful pine tree. Balenciaga's tomb is particularly ugly. Slab upon slab of grey granite, and a standing head-board of granite topped

by ill-shaped cross. It promises total blindness and deafness. Solid, expensive, it needs no upkeep, no gestures of fondness, it doesn't allow for weeds. What is he doing there, the austere voluptuary who so often gave us Cinderella's three dresses, one the color of the weather, the other the color of the moon, the third the color of the morning sun? He would be happier with the poor, further down, lucky to ~~lie~~ under the green grass and who only require black cast-iron crosses of delicate patterns with the green of the grass showing through.

But look carefully at the vineyards which he must have seen so often. The tutors of the vines show that they have a difficult time ~~with~~ as they are so heavily sprayed with copper sulfate. And as you look you see the swatches of a Balenciaga collection: rain washed blues, greys with a greenish tinge, the weather has in places washed the dark brown wood to pale coffee, to white, and sometimes left a harsh metallic blue. No Mediterranean colors these, no red earth, no sapphire sea. The eye that chooses so much for us knew the beauty of black hulls in Atlantic mists, black against egg-shell, against brown. The boats and their sails.

A sail is hung from a very precise point so that it will resist or give to the pressure of the wind. The shape of the sail determines the amount of yielding. It is mathematically constructed to respond ;to respond to certain conditions. I had had in my hands a few days ago a magazine on sailing and had marvelled at photographs of sail-boats almost becalmed with sails of all shapes and colors, rounding out, fitted to hold the slightest breeze. In a seemingless windless hour, the sails were kept shaped and alive.

A woman walking would displace the air so that her skirt would billow out just so much, front and back and sides would round out each in turn, imperceptably, like a sea-swell.

That was the answer to these miracles of cut, the black tulips he would send out across the floor. Nothing held them out, neither whalebone cages or petticoats gave them any support. Legs moved easily, the front of the long skirt running a little faster ahead than one's walk, like the tides, you were given the elements, you could use them at will. This created never cared much where the breasts were placed. "Monsieur Balenciaga likes a little stomach" the fitter would say. One afternoon, the waist disappeared altogether.

As for the general look achieved (for a long time, before the sack and the tunic) he preferred, as does Japanese art, the horizontal to the vertical. His clothes took on great width. They sometimes looked to me like a group of great insects with outspread wings when in reality they were closer to Japanese stage clothes.

Wit was on the head, where it should be, and several seasons saw small impertinent black velvet hats with a straight tab up their back, such as those of long gone Japanese gentlemen, shōguns imperturbable under their highly lacquered head gear. On August sixth in Guetaria they hold the feast of Juan Sebastian Elcano, "the first navigator to circle around the world", in five years 1519 to 1523. There in his birthplace, they play out his life and his return. Which brings us back to procession and Balenciaga's four sided dresses like Spanish madonnas'. This brings back splendor. Perhaps the church would bring an answer.

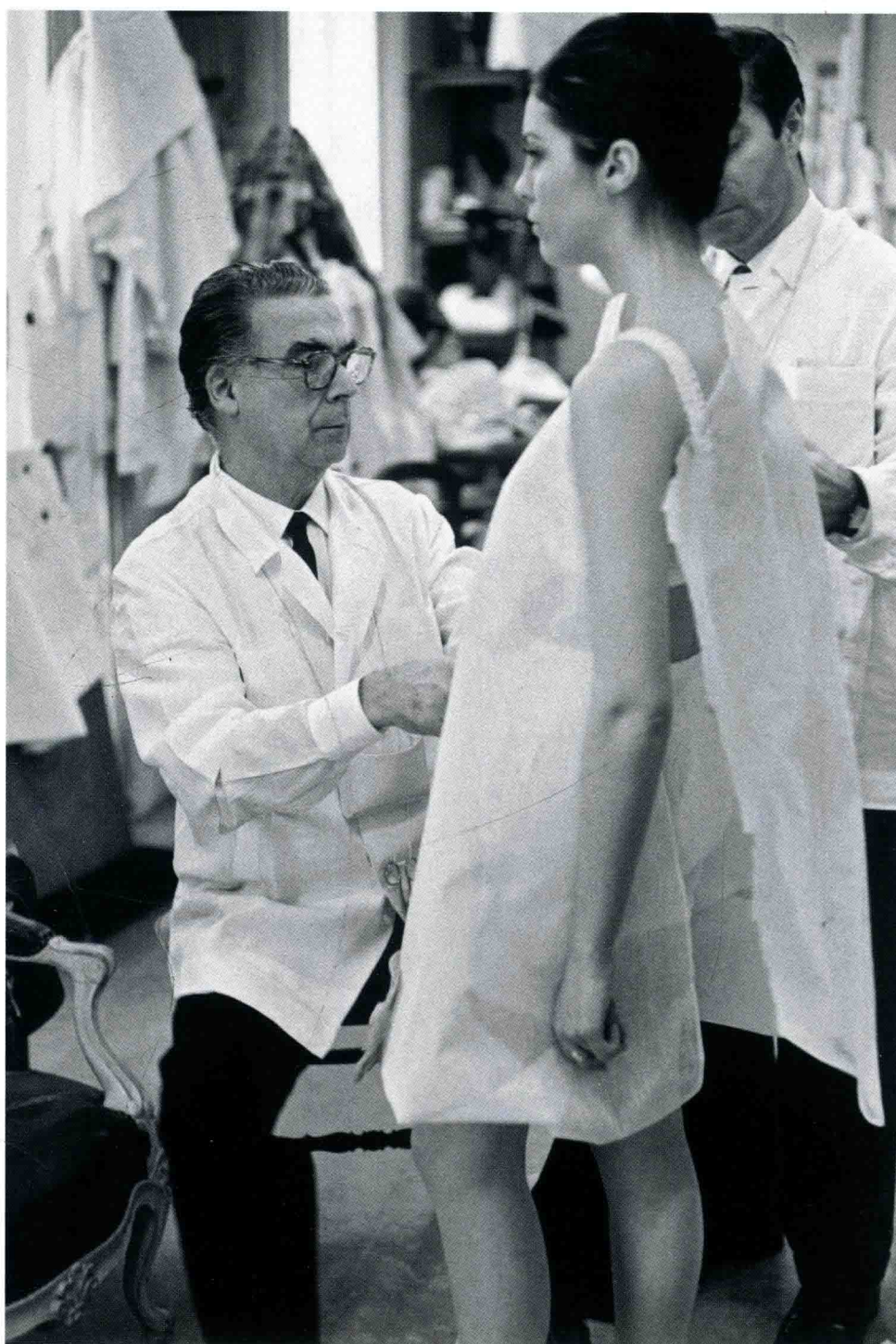
Too big for the town, it stands across the end of the main street, a tawny animal high on its legs, arching its back and stomach over a paved road where eight horses could have stood abreast. The road runs down to the warf below, straight through the walled-up crypt. In summer all manner of craft sail into the triangular port, and people walk up through the cobb arch into the shadows of the street. They eat sardines grilled on iron grills the size of ship births. Inside the church, the madonna in a long hooded black cloak was there, the silver handles of the seven swords of our deadly sins stuck through her heart.

A smaller madonna is carried in processions. The vehemence of her usual ornamentation had disappeared, perhaps with the civil war, and she was soberly clad, just a few sequins on a discolored dress, but the shape was there. Not much splendor. Other cathedrals not too far away must have furnished this, Burgos for instance or the exquisite Miraflores with its double octagon that encloses king and queen, as the poet tells us. Because Balenciaga used splendor as if he could make it materialize our the shining things that man has invented to distract and possess, gold, diamonds, mirrors and their like. He, Balenciaga, worked as if he wished to annul the dark, the perishable, the disillusionment. It was unintellectual, and very straightforward, made to last forever. There was voluptuousness, and wit, and severity.

We are in front of a monumental work, in itself a pilgrimage. Pilgrimages give unexpected rewards. Gaetaria holds many of Cristobal Balenciaga's reasons. Though it is dangerous to try, if not impossible to invade the privacy of a man's genius. Errors set in. Yet one knows that imprints in the eye come up to its surface. At the end, some said the collections were not as bold, no longer prophetic. Then he made one, the one before-last. It was the collection of a very young man together with all the knowledge.

In Spanish, the verb to wish, to want, to love is one and the same. Tu quieres? Perhaps at the beginning of life, at thirteen, one should ask only that question of others and of oneself.

Pauline de Rothschild
February 1973



3

Henri Cartier-Bresson
Cristóbal Balenciaga fitting the mannequin Nina, Paris, 1968