BALENCIAGA EXHIBIT
PARIS, 2006

A Study of Cristóbal Balenciaga
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I went to the Exhibition Balenciaga Paris at Les Arts décoratifs Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris, with the Senior Studio instructors of the Fashion Design Department of Otis College of Art and Design, to study the works of Cristóbal Balenciaga. We arrived at the Museum on July 21, 2006. Pamela Golbin, the curator of the Balenciaga exhibit, gave us a private tour of the works of Balenciaga. The exhibition is of a grand scale with 150 pieces of Balenciaga's beautiful clothing. The exhibit displayed clothes made from 1937 to 1967.
Balenciaga started as a dress buyer. Soon after, he started designing on his own. His clothes were custom and hand made; his customers were of the highest society in Europe. He was very careful about direction of fabric, and how to place it. As he created his work, he would hand fit the design to the model, himself. His clothes were very light, never using lining. He was careful so that the clothes moved gracefully with the wearer. Even when fabric was scarce, he made voluminous clothes. The colors he used favored muddy yellow, scarlet, and fuchsia. His unique embroidery techniques were only his. Though his eccentric nature caused him to tear the clothes off the fitting models in front of his staff, he would work furiously to correct the designs until he was satisfied with the style.
Balenciaga’s clothes are powerful. The fabric flows beautifully so that the design creates an illusion of a grander creation and a greater sense of space and presence than they are. Every part of the dress balances to each other and makes it as an orchestrated whole. Each of the designs are so powerful that each stands out among the other dresses when individually viewed. The color, proportion, and texture of fabric are harmoniously combined within the design, and all parts of the dress create a balanced effect. As I looked at each piece, I felt comfort and luxury.
Balenciaga’s early designs of the 1930’s are mostly dresses, and they are more like the custom dressmaker styles in opposition to formal tailoring. They are soft, gentle, delicate, and very creative. One of my “favorite themes” of the dresses on 1938-39 has gray stripes on a white soft silk fabric. He joined opposite striped pieces side-by-side creating intricate details like modern graphics on a plain basic dress style. Thus, he elevates the simpler style to the high fashion of courtier design.
Towards the end of the 1930s through the 1940s, he designed tailored suits, soft two-piece suits, daytime dresses, and evening dresses. His clothes are very attractive and feminine. During this period, he uses black fabric with black satin ribbons as a sash or inserted satin ribbons between black panels as a part of the design. The dresses are fitted close to the body and tight at the waist. The skirts are gathered at the waist and hang down gently to the hem. Tailored constructed suits are accentuated at the waist and flare out at the hip. The skirts are straight to below the knee. There are soft dresses and two piece outfits consisting of a jacket and dress for evening wear or a jacket and skirt for day wear. The mood and attitude of those clothes are creative and sophisticated. Evening dresses are fitted at the waist with the skirt gathering and gently falling to the floor with the back hem subtly longer than the front. In innovative works, he used cocoon styling, Spanish ruffling, and Basque. During this period of work, many of the evening dresses have subtle embellishments of opposing color through the use of embroidery showing the Spanish influence.
1940’s

1949

woolen sheath dress
Taffeta draped over the shoulder
A.T. Beall 06
Balenciaga’s 1950s evening dresses were very exciting. Many taffeta or fail dresses were created by using a balloon effect by gathering fabric into one point and letting the rest of the fabric to spread out into an airy balloon effect. He created this effect by placing cloth around the hip over another bulbous skirt or by added to the hem of the skirt. Another notable style is an entire skirt made of this balloon style.

There was a beautiful black strapless long evening dress, of which the top of the dress is fitted tight and having decorative tulle around the top edge. The skirt is two layers and hangs like a man’s morning coat tail. The under skirt is entirely made of tulle which is much longer than the top skirt making a strong, transparent, and gracious train in the back. The front part of the tulle is arranged so that the edge creates a cascaded effect. It is very pretty.
We viewed two short dresses. One of the dresses was of a rounded shape. The other was in a classic style and looking very powerful. On the round dress, the sleeve is cut in bias as part of the bodice fabric. Gussets are inserted under the arms. It has no collar and sleeve length is about three quarters long and wide. The shoulder appears wide due to no seam. Small lace flowers are scattered here and there on the dress and it makes the dress feel a little softer than the classic style alone.
1950’s

The second dress is a two-piece dress which has the same construction as the first dress but it is made of much softer fabric, and it has an asymmetrical cut. On the skirt, soft bias cut fabric hangs from the one side of the waist to create a cascading effect and a feeling of airiness.
Another dress had simple lines embroidered and was a shift dress without collar and sleeves. The front flowed straight to below the knee, while the back loosening below the shoulder and continued to flare out to a long train like a peacock-tail. It is of a simple style and is beautiful.
Balenciaga’s 1960s clothes have voluminous rounded shapes with simple lines on suits, coats, and dresses. The look is entirely different from the other couturier designers. His representative style of this time is voluminous clothes with flat fronts and round convex backs that curve down to the hem. Dresses are cut elegantly with a jewelry neck. They are mostly cap sleeved or sleeveless. The top of the dresses are fitted to the shoulder area, with slightly shaped fabric under the bust line. Rounded shaped fabric flows making a triangular outlined skirt to the hem. Evening dress silhouettes are cut with lines as simple as possible, and have a disciplined classic style which flows to a train in the back. They are very delicate but voluminous, simple, and beautiful.
Of the early part of the 1960s, his style was energetic, with very creative designs using gazer or taffeta for long dress with ruffles around the hem. The wildest dress is a dress and cape set with taffeta fabric. He squashing the taffeta and gathered it to one side of the front making it three dimensional. Gathered circled ruffle was used on the squash line and brought it all the way down from the top to the hem, continuing around the hem, and finally up to the top of the dress. Over the dress, he created a taffeta cape to cover the shoulder and back of the dress. This cape has a high collar, almost like a hood, and has a gathered wide ruffle all the way round the edge which wraps loosely over the dress. The cape is held by the wearer and partially surrounds the wearers face and drapes over the dress while accentuating the ruffles of the dress. The enormous amount of squashed taffeta and ruffles made the effect of the outfit very powerful.
Of the late 1960’s, on display was a triangular sleeveless wedding dress of ivory gazer. This dress is of simple form with a long tail in the back. It has a hat which covers the head, shoulder, and arms. The back rim of the hat is cape-like with a very long draping to the middle of the back. I felt that the effect of this design is very spiritual. As finality on his work, and in contrast to his custom work of the 1930’s through the early 1960’s, they displayed a mini-culotte with a small jacket. It was short and airy and represented the latest style of the late 1960’s. This showed that he was able to design with the current trends.
Balenciaga’s style is distinctly radiant. The delicate usage of fabric combined with his skillful cutting technique makes a powerful style that characterizes Balenciaga. His clothes were worn by the wealthy and social elite. He created powerful styles that were based on classic form and added creative elements while arriving to the designs that are timeless and uniquely his.

Even after 33 years of his death he is often used in reference by designers who critique our students. Our critiques often ask them to “design like Balenciaga”. Balenciaga is widely thought as the lone courtier of the world and is the most famous Spanish couturier of the 1900’s.