



Balenciaga, Cristóbal (1895-1972)

by Shaun Cole

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The best known Spanish fashion designer, Cristóbal Balenciaga is regarded as the master of fashion. His classic designs inspired the fashion industry throughout most of the twentieth century and continue to exert influence.

Born on January 21, 1895 in Guetaria, near San Sebastian, Spain, Cristóbal Balenciaga Eisaguirre was the son of a fisherman. He studied needlework and dressmaking with his mother until 1910. In 1915, he established his own tailoring business under the sponsorship of Marquesa de Casa Torres. By the early 1930s he had established a reputation as Spain's leading couturier.

Following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Balenciaga closed his three couture houses and left Spain. After a brief stay in London, Balenciaga settled in Paris and in 1937 opened The House of Balenciaga on Avenue George V.

Balenciaga never married. This fact, coupled with his career in fashion, has led to speculation and rumors about his sexuality. A deeply private man, he never discussed his personal life publicly.

One particular incident reported by writer Jacqueline Demornex may, however, throw a little light on his sexuality. After an argument between the couturier Coco Chanel and Balenciaga, Chanel allegedly made the following observation to a mutual friend: "It is obvious that he dislikes them (women); look at the way he conceals blouses under suits, just to expose the wrinkles in their necks."

Inasmuch as such charges are frequently made against gay male designers, Demornex ponders why Chanel attacked Balenciaga in such a way: was it his age, his way of dressing women, or his private life?

In actuality, rather than exposing the defects of the women who wore them, Balenciaga's designs concealed them. Balenciaga was a master of illusion. Through his designs he altered the silhouette of a woman's body, often defying established conventions to flatter his clients' less than perfect bodies. Balenciaga himself said, "A woman has no need to be perfect or even beautiful to wear my dresses, the dress will do that for her."

In the 1950s Balenciaga developed the set-back (or standaway) collar, which bestowed on a woman the appearance of a long swan-like neck. The collar was initially designed for the editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*, who, as she put it, "had no neck." Again, Balenciaga disguised a less than perfect body. His shortened seven-eighths sleeves also gave an appearance of height that the wealthy, middle-aged women who were wearers of his clothes often did not possess.

So flattering were Balenciaga's creations that women often ordered more than one of each design so that they could wear one while the other was being cleaned or so they could keep one at each of their houses.

Balenciaga was a perfectionist and insisted that his garments be perfect before they were released to his

customers. He also understood scale and proportion and the importance of balance in an outfit. Exaggeratedly large or minutely small hats (such as the pill-box, which he invented in 1946) were used to finish his distinctive silhouettes.

Balenciaga, more than any other couturier, altered the silhouette of fashion. In the 1930s he made suits with nipped in waists and rounded hips and ball-gowns with extremely wide skirts, both of which designs anticipated Dior's New Look of the 1940s. In the 1950s he moved away from the close fit of the New Look, which by then was very popular, and created softly unshaped suit jackets.

In 1956, Balenciaga presented a loose dress unflatteringly called the sack (which anticipated the 1960s sheath dress) and created his distinctive asymmetric look by raising the hemlines at the front and dropping them low at the back of dresses and coats. During the 1960s, he created loose full jackets with dolman sleeves and put his models into bodystockings.

Remembered as a master of black, Balenciaga often favored a muted palette of colors, especially a combination of black and brown, inspired by the traditional dress of his native Spain. Spain was also the source and inspiration for his use of lace, his heavy embroidery with jet-encrusted trimmings, as well as the brilliant whites and the drama and dignity of stiff formal fabrics reminiscent of those painted by Goya and Velázquez.

In 1968 Balenciaga closed his business rather than see it compromised in a fashion era he did not respect. He retired to Spain and died on March 23, 1972.

The Balenciaga ready-to-wear collection was re-launched in 1987 and the shops reopened in 1989. Today the House of Balenciaga is owned by Jacques Bogart S.A. Nicolas Ghesquière has recently taken over as chief designer, re-packaging the classic Balenciaga look for today's woman.

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Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).