



## CRISTOBAL BALENCIAGA



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- 1895** Born on January 21 in Guetaria, Spain
- 1915** Opens a couture salon in San Sebastian
- 1920** Opens a salon in Madrid
- 1937** Moves to France; opens an haute couture house in Paris
- 1947** Makes women's suits in a new "Barrel" style
- 1954** Develops a narrow, straight "I-shaped" line, which influences other designers; Balenciaga models are sold only to an exclusive private clientele
- 1957** Invents Trapeze line for dresses
- 1958** Introduces the Empire line; designs the "Pillbox" hat
- 1963** Shows his legendary cape-jackets for the first time
- 1968** Closes his salon and retires in Spain; manufacture of Balenciaga scarves, purses, and perfumes continues
- 1972** Dies on March 24 in Valencia, Spain
- 1978** Balenciaga retrospective, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 1987** Michel Goma designs a new ready-to-wear line under the name Balenciaga
- 1991–97** Melchior Thimister designs the Balenciaga collections
- 1996** Balenciaga-Hommage-Collection with trademark styles
- SINCE 1997** Nicolas Ghesquière designs the Balenciaga collections
- PERFUMES** Le Dix (1947), Quadrille (1955), Ho Hang (1971), Cialenga, Eau de Balenciaga, Lavande (1973), Prélude (1982), Rumba (1988), Balenciaga pour Homme (1990)

Creator of some of the most powerful styles of the twentieth century, Cristobal Balenciaga has frequently been described as a prophet. How he pictured the female form and how he used that shape as a jumping-off point resulted in some of the most dramatic shifts in silhouette to follow Christian Dior's postwar New Look. When Balenciaga showed his breathtakingly waistless chemise or "Sack" dress—shocking for those accustomed to the corseted look of the 1950s—he did so out of a sense of conviction about proportion. Seemingly simple, yet wildly controversial at the time, the dress, or rather its silhouette, would flavor the coming decade.

His most memorable dress and cloak designs, especially for evening wear, are defined by such striking forms as a tiered wedding cake, a lampshade, or a balloon (bifurcated or not) and backs billowing like spinnakers. Balenciaga was not only a genius of shape but also a master colorist—tempering matte black with nutmeg brown, enlivening robin's egg blue with the cheeriest cerise, choosing yolk yellow, grass green, or bubblegum pink for the grandest of ball gowns. For fabric he repeatedly chose to work with the lightest, paper taffeta and textured and upholstery-weight wools, like faille and mohair. A signature for him, as well as for his protégé Hubert de Givenchy, was gazar, a feather-light yet substantial silk that made even his most sculptural dresses seem ephemeral.

While his most renowned designs are ball gowns, his truly influential styles were those for daywear. Many designers, Coco Chanel foremost among them, have worked to give women a uniform in which they could live, i.e. a suit, but Balenciaga constantly played with the idea of what constitutes a suit. While nothing he designed ever had an air of "casual Friday" about it, there was an insouciance to a suit made with a straight coolie jacket, a tunic, a capelet, a shawl, or, perhaps most well known, a fisherman's smock. With coats and dresses he often had a soft touch, cutting the former with liquid folds and making easy little one- and two-piece dresses gently sashed with a band of glove leather, rope of thick piping, or heavy satin ribbon tied in a bow. His tailored clothes often reveal unusual erogenous zones: the bones of the wrist poking out from bracelet length sleeves, the base of the neck framed by a shallow, curved, stand-away collar.

Balenciaga's clientele was comprised of some of the most distinguished people of his day, from social arbiters Pauline de Rothschild, Bunny Mellon, Mrs. Arturo Lopez-Willshaw, and the Duchess of Windsor, to people in the arts like Clare Booth Luce, Rosamund Bernier, Diana Vreeland, Anita Loos, Inge Morath, and even Yul Brynner (photographed by *Vogue* in 1969 wearing pants made for him by Balenciaga). The fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, a friend of Balenciaga's, wrote in his diary (published as *Self-Portrait with Friends*, 1979) that Balenciaga's clothes were so particularly good because "they are the result of depth of thought, intense concentration, even physical suffering."

Caroline Rennolds Milbank

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“ALMOST EVERY WOMAN, DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY, HAS WORN A BALENCIAGA.”  
(HARPER’S BAZAAR, 1940)

