



A FITTING TRIBUTE TO A MAESTRO

The fashion world's enduring reverence for couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga is evident in a V&A show

by Caroline Phillips – a journalist and public relations consultant



COCO CHANEL, WHO never had a good word for anyone, called Cristóbal Balenciaga 'the only couturier in the truest sense of the word. The others are simply fashion designers.' Christian Dior compared the whole of couture to an orchestra composed and conducted by Balenciaga. Now an exhibition at the V&A will feature more than 100 of his garments from the Fifties and Sixties — the focal decades in his 50-year career when, says the show's curator Cassie Davies-Strodder, 'he was distilling all his ideas and coming into his unique vision'.

It was a vision that transformed fashion and is still crucial in wardrobes today. The exhibition looks also at his legacy on 20th- and

Above, from left: Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn shot by Irving Penn in a Balenciaga coat (1950); Balenciaga's baby doll cocktail dress (1958); Alberta Tiburzi in an envelope dress (1967)

21st-century fashion. Abolishing the obsession with the waist, Balenciaga developed the sack and baby doll dresses, the high-waisted chemise, the barrel jacket. Hubert de Givenchy called him 'the greatest influence of my career'. Courrèges and Ungaro, key figures in Sixties minimalism, started as his apprentices.

The Balenciaga couture customer had to be rich, of course. When Jackie Kennedy wore him, her husband the president was disturbed at what the electorate might think of such extravagance. His clients included Rothschilds and Agnellis. The ineffably wealthy Mona von Bismarck even had her gardening clothes made by him, in cinnamon to match her

hair and the walls of her house in Capri. Fastidious women, then, though not so fastidious as the maestro, who never gave interviews and didn't even afford these wealthy customers an easy ride. Courrèges said that in Balenciaga's atelier, which was pure white, 'people walked on tiptoe and even the clients talked in hushed voices'.

The great American *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland said that at the sight of his clothes 'one fainted'. Visitors to the V&A will certainly be awed by consummate couture, brought to life in film footage of his shows and captured by the greatest photographers. Richard Avedon's work will be there, and that of Irving Penn and Henri Cartier-Bresson. 'David Bailey's picture of Balenciaga's single-seamed trapezoidal wedding dress and conical headpiece is the photographer's own favourite image,' says Davies-Strodder.

Thanks to x-ray technology, you'll be able to see every hidden detail — boning, dress weights in hems, and balloon hems that fill with air as you walk — and digitised patterns will show how the elements come together to make the whole garment. 'Often the garment has been masterfully created from one piece of fabric,' says Davies-Strodder. Balenciaga was a maestro of craftsmanship. He could draw, cut, assemble and sew with either hand, and at amazing speed.

If this exhibition has another hero, it is Cecil Beaton. 'Seventy per cent of the dresses in the show come from the V&A's own collection,' Davies-Strodder tells me. 'They were mostly assembled in the Seventies by Beaton going through his little black book and asking ladies to donate their couture.'

Vreeland, rejoicing in her own Balenciaga, with its gold top and skirt with layers of grey tulle, once said: 'As it moved the colour changed like rolling clouds of smoke. Simply, one walked into a room and no other woman was there.' ●

The exhibition 'Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion' runs from 27 May 2017 to 18 February 2018 (vam.ac.uk/balenciaga)