

KING of FASHION

This May, a major retrospective at the V&A shows how Spanish designer Cristóbal Balenciaga became fashion's leading man, writes *SCARLETT RUSSELL*

There are some who would call Cristóbal Balenciaga the most important couture designer of the 20th century. Christian Dior described him as “the master of us all” and Coco Chanel said he was “a couturier in the truest sense of the word... The others are simply fashion designers”. He personally mentored Hubert de Givenchy and Oscar de la Renta. Even today, 80 years after he opened his debut Parisian salon on 10 Avenue George V in Paris, his eponymous fashion house is worn by every style maven, from Kate Moss and Sienna Miller to Nicole Kidman and Lady Gaga.

It's no surprise, therefore, that a retrospective of Balenciaga's work has been in the works at the V&A – which has previously presented major fashion exhibitions including *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*. Thanks to Sir Cecil Beaton's *Fashion: An Anthology* exhibition at the museum in 1972, the year Balenciaga died, the V&A houses the largest collection of the designer in the UK and this year marks not only the 80th anniversary of his first Paris store, but it's also the centenary of the opening of Balenciaga's first ever fashion house, in San Sebastián, Spain.

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“The way he shaped fashion is iconic; it was Balenciaga who shaped the body rather than restricting it and moved away from this hourglass silhouette that was dominant with Dior, into a more avant-garde, modernist look,” explains Cassie Davies-Strodder, the curator of the upcoming retrospective, entitled *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*.

“We've been wanting to do this exhibition for so long,” he continues. “As well as the two anniversaries, the brand really feels like it's having a moment. The name is back on everyone's lips so it seems a good time to be looking back at where it all began.”

The exhibition will run from May 2017 until February 2018 and will focus on the latter part of Balenciaga's 50-year career: the 1950s and 1960s.

“This was the point where he really departed from other designers and distilled what his ideas were about the body, fashion and design,” says Davies-Strodder. “His early work is also fabulous, but our collection at the museum focused on that period anyway and, when we

looked more closely at it, we could see that the kinds of shapes, materials and cutting he was using are what is so strongly seen in his legacy today.” ▶



Alberta Tiburzi in 'envelope' dress by Cristóbal Balenciaga, *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1967, photography: ©Hiro 1967

This page: Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn wearing a coat by Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paris, 1950. *photography:* Irving Penn. *courtesy of:* ©Condé Nast and Irving Penn Foundation; Elise Daniels with street performers, suit by Balenciaga, Le Marais, Paris, 1948; Dovima with Sacha, cloche and suit by Balenciaga, Café des Deux Magots, Paris, 1955, both *photography:* Richard Avedon. *image courtesy of:* ©The Richard Avedon Foundation

► Just some of the revolutionary shapes pioneered by Balenciaga include the tunic, the sack, the 'baby doll' and the shift dress – all of which are still popular today. It seems fitting, therefore, that the second half of the exhibition features work from over 30 designers of the past 50 years who either worked closely with and trained under Balenciaga, or cite him as a huge influence today.

"Contemporary designers frequently ask to look in our archives for inspiration, and one of the most requested is Balenciaga," says Davies-Strodder. "Clearly, he is still hugely relevant. I also think he's a 'designer's designer', like McQueen, who is revered by people in the industry because they see the integrity of his vision and how bold he was."

As such, you can expect to see pieces from André Courrèges, Emanuel Ungaro, J.W. Anderson, Phoebe Philo for Céline, Molly Goddard, Simone Rocha, Erdem and Balenciaga's own former and current creative directors, Nicolas Ghesquière and Demna Gvasalia, plus many more.

"Balenciaga's work was so true to modernity and femininity, innovative and inviting," Simone Rocha tells me. "His work is always inspiring."

As well as a room dedicated to Balenciaga's legacy, there are two main sections of the exhibition: Front of House recreates the store, what it would have felt like to be a client, attend fashion shows and have fittings; meanwhile, Workrooms focuses on the different





says Davies-Strodder. “We were really keen to tap collections that hadn’t been seen before.”

Several pieces belonging to actress Ava Gardner – who lived around the corner from the V&A in her later life and was a regular visitor of the Balenciaga store in Paris and at the house’s sister label, Eisa, in Spain – are on display. “She bought fairly austere Balenciaga pieces and added a touch of Hollywood glamour. We’ve got a lace coat which she added ostrich feathers to and a cape and dress to which she had added a floral trim. She looked

“She would ask for her wardrobe to be open every morning to ‘let her babies breathe’.”

elements of actually making the garments.

“We’re keen to show the craftsmanship and skill of Balenciaga. One of the reasons he was so revered among his contemporaries is that he was known for being skilled at every stage of the making process. He could cut a pattern, assemble it and finish it,” explains the curator.

“The dresses can actually be quite understated so to understand how exceptional they are, you need an explanation of how they’re made,” she continues. “We’ve got a film of a couture fitting where you can see the amount of work that goes into making something for a specific body. There are even X-rays of garments which show intrinsic elements that the naked eye cannot see.”

During the 1950s and 1960s Balenciaga dressed the rich, the famous and the fashion elite. Greta Garbo, Ava Gardner, Gloria Guinness and Mona von Bismarck were regular clients, and Davies-Strodder and her team painstakingly researched archives and collections around the world to put the exhibition together. “We sourced pieces from France, Spain, Switzerland, everywhere,”

at her couture clothes as her ‘babies’ and she would ask for her wardrobe to be opened every morning to ‘let her babies breathe’.”

Another spectacular loan originates (of all places) from the Henry Ford Museum of automobiles in Detroit. Ford’s grandson’s mother-in-law was Elizabeth Parke Firestone, who adored haute couture – Dior and Balenciaga, in particular. Many of her clothes are displayed in the museum and seven pieces were lent to this exhibition. “Post-World War II Europe was broke and these American clients who were buying lots of clothes were keeping the couture industry afloat,” explains Davies-Strodder.

Dior may have revolutionised the fashion industry, Chanel designed the most famous outfit in the world, and McQueen certainly broke boundaries, but, as this exhibition proves, they would be nothing without Cristóbal Balenciaga. ■

Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion is at the V&A from 27 May 2017 – 18 February 2018, vam.ac.uk



Top right: Model wearing Balenciaga orange coat as I. Magnin buyers inspect a dinner outfit in the background. Paris, France, 1954, *photography:* ©Mark Shaw, *courtesy of:* mptrimages.com