

LES ARTS DECORATIFS, 107 RUE DE RIVOLI 75001 PARIS  
EXPOSITION DU 6 JUILLET AU 28 JANVIER 2007

# BALENCIAGA PARIS

**LES ARTS  
DECORATIFS**

MUSÉE DE LA  
MODE ET DU TEXTILE

# The Imprint of Cristobal Balenciaga

by Karolyn Kiisel

The emergence of the Pret a Porter clothing industry was as important to fashion as was the Industrial Revolution to manufacturing. An entirely different quality of product evolved. As this new era was ushered in during the 50's and 60's, the couturiere's were the bricks and mortar upon which this industry was built. Often cited as the most influential designer, Cristobal Balenciaga's, artistically unique style of silhouette and shape provided a blueprint for many future designers to follow, including Nicolas Ghesquiere, current designer of the House of his name

A perfect embodiment of the designers' goal of "form follows function", Balenciaga focused on a very specific clientele, the wealthy elite, giving his women exactly what they needed and wanted. Their changing lifestyles led him to continual design innovation.

He eschewed the spotlight and as a result, was not credited for many of the groundbreaking looks he pioneered. Ironically, he decided to close his couture business in 1968, partially because of his dismay in the direction clothing manufacture was heading.

His work ethic and devotion to his craft set new standards for Haute Couture. His diligence, discipline and focus resulted in a prolific collection of work now being widely studied at three different venues.



\*Sketch: 1939 Robe du Soir''

The exhibition of Balenciaga's work at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs leads the viewer along his life path chronologically. Pamela Golbin, the exhibit curator, pointed out interestingly, that many of the themes he developed throughout his career, such as use of floral motifs, bold contrasts, and the exploration of volume and shape, were apparent in his earliest pieces.

One of the first pieces on display was an ankle length dress made entirely of black embroidered leaves stitched together by hand. At first glance, it appears to be a textured fabric, but on closer inspection, one is amazed at the virtuosity of workmanship. The individual leaves create a lifelike effect as the spaces in between allow an airiness and lightness which became one of his trademarks. The little pointed leaves are delicate, yet the all over statement is one of grandiose strength. Within the exhibit, the flower motif appears again and again yet never soft and whispery, the flowers always graphic and bold.

A circa 1939 dress, the "Robe du Soir/ Faille Noir et Surah Blanc", is a striking study in contrast. Strong and graphic black curves over a white skirt create an almost chiaroscuro effect. The bodice and sleeves, semi sheer over a strapless camisole lining give the piece a delicacy and femininity. The contrast is in the color story as well as the mood, bold, but with a light touch.



In another group, a cream dress with heavy black embroidery is strong and stylized, yet the curves in the embroidered lace are feminine and lyrical. Balenciaga loved working with stripes and in many pieces, we see how he played with their graphic quality; matching them, forming chevrons, using them as under skirts peeking out, as if to imply their bold strength an undercurrent to the soft, crisp volume of the over dresses.

\*Sketch: Cream/ black bodice/ Stripe dress bodice

This powerful but gentle touch is also apparent in M. Balenciaga's use of interesting and unexpected features. Many of the garments were strong, simple and elegant, yet had an element of softness about them which tended to draw the viewer or the wearer into the mood of the piece.

An example of this is in the 1950, "Robe du Jour", in black with cream dots. It is almost austere in the front with the exception of the playful dots which foreshadow the back. When the woman turns, a beautiful lifted drape of taffeta cascades down from waist to hem.



Many of the suits of the later 1940's and 1950's combined this concept of being somewhat straightforward, but with an element of softness and/ or surprise such as a peplum, an interestingly curved lapel, or whimsical pocket.

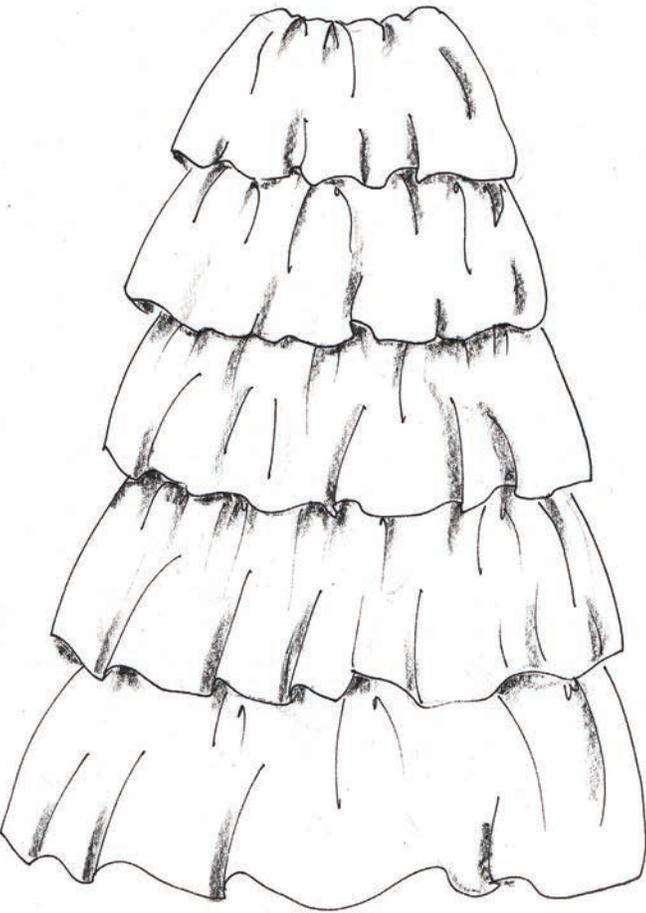
Throughout our tour, Mme. Golbin brought our attention to Balenciaga's progression of the exploration of volume and shape. He was known for his ability to create interesting shapes and silhouettes. This was the result of the combination fabrics and draping techniques. Because his draping skills were so strong; he was able to achieve very new angles and lines. The fabrics were rich and often heavy looking, but were actually very light and held shape without the use of support fabrics such as crinolines or heavy linings or paddings.

\*Sketch: 1950 Robe du Jour"

In his early years, he achieved his looks often in taffeta, a soft, crisp silk. Later, in an important collaboration with Abraham, a Parisian fabric designer/ manufacturer, he developed different weights of silk gazar. Some of the earlier gazar's had an almost mesh like, open weave quality that resulted in a very light, airy effect, yet had unusual body..

One of the exhibits' opening pieces, "Robe du Soir", 1939, is a precursor to his later shapes, exploring simplicity in silhouette with volume, yet with a very light feeling.

It was also in this exploration of volume that he exemplified his focus on form following function. In the late 1930's as war approached, and during the 1940's war years, high prices and shortages of fabric forced designers to be practical, economical and use the least amount of fabric possible. M. Balenciaga's ingenious draping resulted in gorgeous suits and dresses that were simple and spare, but with a twist of fabric or a pulled up drape in the back, provided an elegant silhouette or interesting shape.



\*Sketch black ruffle cape

During the tour we were able to go into the archives to see some of the clothing at close range. As we put on our white gloves and had a closer look, we were all amazed at the lightness and simplicity of the clothing. Many had no linings and though the fabrics looked rich and dense, were extremely fine and delicate. The importance of this is that again, his effects were achieved by skillful draping techniques, not by use of complicated support mechanisms.

We learned that M. Balenciaga often used over 200 different kinds of fabric within a seasonal collection. Today that would be unheard of as most fabric mills and garment manufacturers work closely to produce only what is needed. Many have very high minimums which allow only large volume companies to purchase.

One of my favorite examples of his “form follows function” philosophy is the Circa 1945 “les Deshabilles”, translated, “undergarments, or bathrobes”. In postwar Paris, heating costs were very high. Two beautiful house coats, slender in line and very comfortable looking, were made lined with fur. How incredibly sensual, warm, and luxurious these must have felt! One was mustard colored wool and the other rose colored velvet and both were absolutely stunning in their balance and understated elegance.



\*Sketch: 1945 “les Deshabilles”

Continuing through the exhibit, one sees how through the decades, the seeds of every major trend were being cultivated by M. Balenciaga years before his contemporaries.

As the 1940's came to a close, Balenciaga was free to use more fabric and began making dresses with fuller skirts, many with the silk gazars that he developed with Abraham. His exploration of volume went hand in hand with Abraham's continued evolution of the silk gazar, seen in many of the garments in varying weights. Their association is credited with the popularity of this widely used, very fine fabric.

The dresses made during these years were of the silhouette Dior is credited with called the "New Look". This is what is commonly known as the full skirted, softer shouldered silhouette which remained popular throughout the 1950's.

A natural evolution from that was the "Tunic" silhouette. Women grew tired of feeling restricted and wanted to feel more comfortable. Rectangular silhouettes and origami type folds characterize many of clothes of this era. Notable are the mini dresses that seem to foreshadow the 1960's Flower Child era. Courreges was a protégé of Balenciaga's and certainly his design sensibility owed much to his mentor.

M. Balenciaga appeared to have no interest whatsoever in courting the press and no concern that he was not recognized for his groundbreaking looks. It was not clear whether this was out of complete humility or whether he was simply so absorbed in his work that he did not have time to pay attention to it. In either case, it is certainly an attitude to be emulated. In our current media obsessed atmosphere, it sometimes seems that the Advertising and Public Relations aspects of the design firms are more important than the actual product.

Balenciaga's focus on his creativity, craft and on his customer brought him his balance and power. From the beginning of his career as he designed for the wealthy women of Spain, to the end when he designed for the socialites of Paris, he gave his clientele exactly what was appropriate at that moment. Constantly in touch with the needs of his women, which often included needing to be at the height of fashion, his work was successful because it combined what was specifically needed at the time with the highest level of inspired design.

Nicolas Ghesquiere, Balenciaga's successor, has taken this concept into the present moment, expressing nonverbally the sensibilities of our civilization and echoing the same themes that Balenciaga himself used. In the exhibit, it was very interesting to see the modern clothing at the end of the show as a coda to the design progression.

It is important to find the links between the wisdom and traditions of our past and our present experience. When one can understand the context of Balenciaga's creativity, it becomes easier to understand the impact of his design work, appreciate his formidable artistry and see how it continues to inform us today.

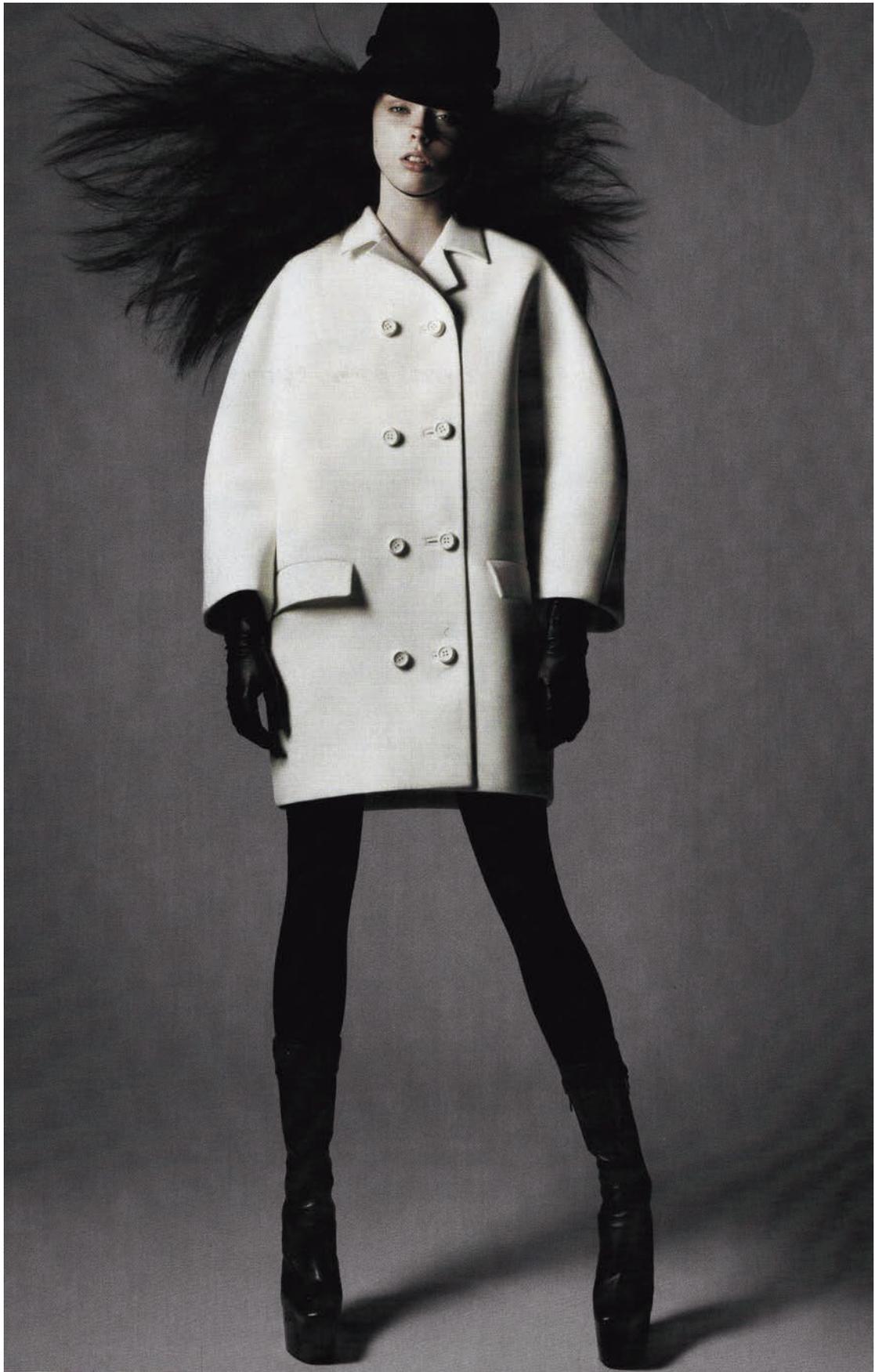
With Nicolas Ghesquiere leading the House of Balenciaga into the present and continuing to explore the themes of his predecessor, the appreciation of Balenciaga finally comes to fruition as the public is able to relate the new collections with their roots.

\*Following are photographs from the current Balenciaga collection, by Nicolas Ghesquiere and photographs from the exhibition at Le Musée des Artes Decoratifs'.

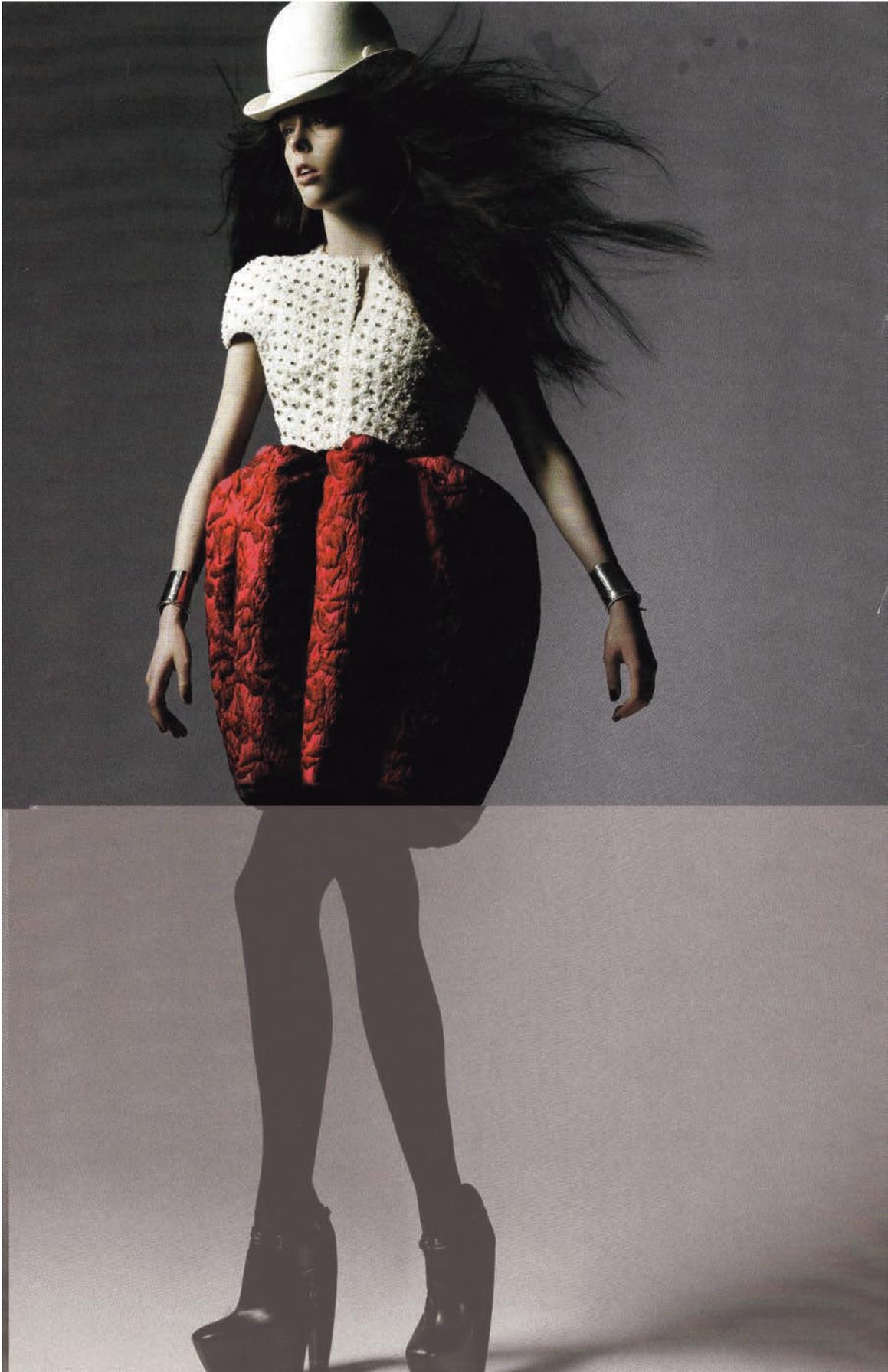


**RING MY BELL**

Many of the most striking new volumes hark back to the glory years of 1950s Parisian couture. Balenciaga by Nicolas Ghesquière gray silk cape, black riding hat, and platform shoes; coat and shoes at Balenciaga, NYC. Details, see In This Issue.



KAROLYN KISEL BALENCIAGA REPORT



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Musée de la Mode - Exposition "BALENCIAGA"- 6 juillet 2006 au 28 janvier 2007 - Photographie : Luc Boegly.



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Musée de la Mode - Exposition "BALENCIAGA" - 6 juillet 2006 au 28 janvier 2007 - Photographie : Luc Boegly



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