

SALUTING SEÑOR STYLE

A futuristic museum in the quiet Basque port of Getaria is a shrine to the great Spanish designer Cristóbal Balenciaga and his spectacular creations. **Caroline Baum** makes the pilgrimage.

Cocktail dress in
blue satin decorated
with gold candelieri
print, c.1957





Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum and Palacio Aldamar, Getaria (above); “baby doll” dress in ivory silk taffeta with floral print, 1958 (right); from the presentation of the first Balenciaga collection in Paris, 1937 (far right)



THE SMALL TOWN OF GETARIA, a 20-minute drive west of San Sebastián on the Basque coast, is best known as one of the anchovy capitals of the world. While this hardly makes it a destination, except for foodies with a taste for premium-grade salty fish, there is now another reason to visit the picturesque port and former whaling station.

Perched high up on the hill overlooking the town, a new landmark flaunts a strikingly minimalist silhouette. The building’s sleek black lines give barely a clue as to its purpose beyond suggesting that within lies a world of elegance and exclusivity. In fact, it is a shrine dedicated to the life and work of Spain’s only haute couture designer, Cristóbal Balenciaga, arguably the most well-known Basque native and a man whom Christian Dior considered a master.

While San Sebastián has been a staging post for pilgrims en route to Compostela for many centuries, the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum is attracting the faithful of a different kind. Opened by Queen Sofia of Spain in 2011, this is a modern cathedral to a secular deity, where opulent robes and a reverent atmosphere welcome the worshippers of fashion.

In contrast to the austere exterior, reminiscent of some of the designer’s own pared-back lines, the museum’s interior celebrates Balenciaga’s flair in the very fabric of its structure: an interior facade comes alive with hidden LED lighting revealing a laser-cut surface in the floral pattern of one of Balenciaga’s dresses. The building, designed by Cuban architect Julián Argilagos and Barcelona architects AV62, is the ideal illustration of the Balenciaga paradox: restrained sobriety one minute, flamboyant decoration the next.

Inside is a collection of more than 1200 handmade, beaded and embroidered clothes and jewelled accessories, donated by former clients including European royalty (Queen Fabiola of Belgium, Princess Grace of Monaco), American heiresses (Rachel “Bunny” Lambert Mellon), fashion icons and fellow designers. While only a portion is on display at any one time, due to strict conservation rules, what is on show is sumptuous enough to satisfy even the most jaded fashionista.

State-of-the-art technology enhances the experience: dresses revolve in lighted cases as if worn by models on the catwalk, while 3D computer imagery shows Balenciaga’s



Daywear in one of the Balenciaga Museum's six exhibition halls

trademark tailoring secrets and the almost architectural approach he brought to the construction of each garment.

The collection is divided into themed areas, laid out in the same order as a traditional haute couture show. It opens with early years then daywear, graduates to cocktail dresses and evening wear, and culminates in a selection of bridal gowns. One notable bridal ensemble is decorated with intricate embroidery in gold metallic thread and has a bell-shaped skirt that dips to become a peacock-tail train at the back.

The museum, one of very few in the world devoted solely to a fashion designer, is the result of significant commitment from a variety of Basque institutions. It is headed by the Balenciaga Foundation's honorary president, couturier Hubert de Givenchy, once mentored by Balenciaga, who has donated 109 dresses to the collection. The museum's price tag, not including its collection of couture garments (and after several financial controversies) was more than €30m (\$38m).

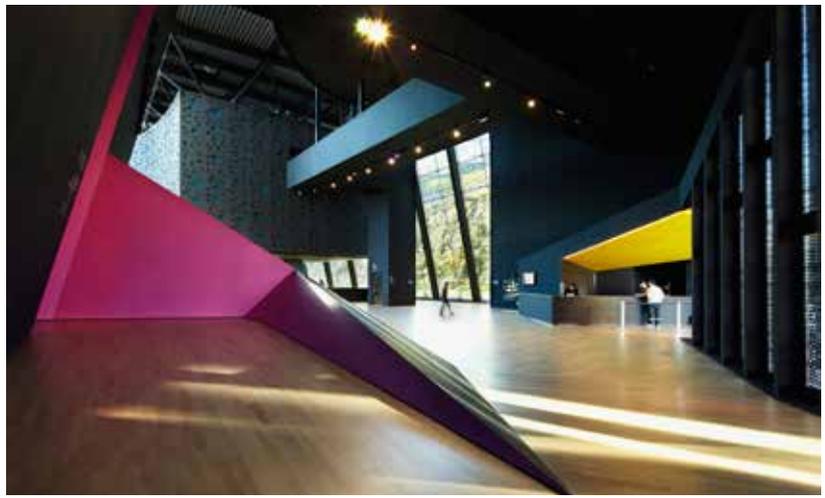
While Balenciaga may not have become a household name like Dior or Coco Chanel, both revered him for his mastery as a tailor, which was unparalleled and radical. Born in 1895, Balenciaga spent his childhood watching his seamstress mother work at the Aldamar Palace (the villa that adjoins the museum), where she fitted corsetted clothes for the elegant Marquesa de Casa Torres. In 1917, at the age of 22, he opened his first boutique in San Sebastián, following several years

spent studying tailoring in the city, which at the time rivalled Biarritz and Monte Carlo as a seaside gambling resort, attracting a glittering *beau monde*. By 1936, the designer had also opened salons in Madrid and Barcelona, catering to an aristocratic clientele.

When the Spanish Civil War erupted, Balenciaga fled to Paris where, in 1937, he showed his first collection to instant acclaim. Although he never returned to Spain to live, he remained a devout Catholic and later unapologetically designed clothes for General Franco's granddaughter.

Over the next four decades he redefined the female silhouette. At first, his collections were influenced by historical references to paintings by Velázquez and Goya, in dresses that were shaped, beaded and decorated to turn their wearers into modern jewelled *infantas*. Later, inspired by Japanese *kimono* designs, he adopted their cut for a loose, open sleeve made from a single piece of fabric, and also invented the baby-doll silhouette, manipulating volume and movement with the eye of a sculptor.

Balenciaga daringly left the back exposed in a series of low-cut dresses with full skirts designed to flatter the waist. He revived the empire line from the late-18th century by moving the waistline up to the bust, revisited the 19th-century bustle, and pioneered both the balloon dress and the sack dress. Other Balenciaga innovations included a ▶



Clockwise from above: museum reception area; short-sleeved floral evening gown and wrap, c.1953; at Balenciaga fashion house in Paris, 1957; cocktail dress in white silk taffeta, printed with petals in two deep-red tones, 1961

“HE WORKED WITH THE MOST INNOVATIVE, COSTLY AND SUMPTUOUS MATERIALS OF THE DAY”

Jacqueline Kennedy (whose many Balenciaga purchases annoyed JFK, who worried

Americans would think her too lavish). In 1968, the couturier became one of the first designers to take on a corporate assignment, creating uniforms for Air France’s female flight attendants. By then he had become a mentor to the next generation – onetime pupil Oscar de la Renta was already making waves with his own glamorous evening wear.

Balenciaga’s final public appearance was in 1971 at the funeral of his friend Coco Chanel. He died the following year and was buried in his hometown. The fashion house fell into a period of dormancy before being revived in 1986, its fortunes turned around by Nicolas Ghesquière, who became chief designer in 1997. Following Ghesquière’s departure from the house last year, American Alexander Wang was announced as his replacement.

This injection of youthful talent has reinvigorated Balenciaga, once again making it a label of creative innovation and conceptual daring. Indeed, its newfound global clientele may not be aware that the house’s origins lie in a simple fishing port on the Bay of Biscay, far from the frenzied catwalks of Paris, Milan and New York.

multipurpose overskirt that could be worn as a cape and, borrowing from the costumes of *toreadors*, cropped *bolero*-style jackets embroidered by the renowned Maison Lesage.

When it came to fabric, Balenciaga was also a pioneer, working with the most innovative, costly and sumptuous materials of the day including *gazar* (a silk specially created for the designer in 1958) and *cloqué* (which has an irregular, blistered look). A lifelong fascination with lace prompted him to layer the material over other fabrics to create illusions of transparency. Similarly, his bold sense of colour saw him embrace a palette of fuchsia and orange, utilise unconventional colours such as purple for evening wear, and contrast black with blue to dramatic effect.

Not all of his clients were film stars and socialites such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Elizabeth Taylor and

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MUSEUM/COCKTAIL DRESS PHOTOGRAPHY: BALENCIAGA MUSEUM; FASHION HOUSE: BALENCIAGA ARCHIVES; EVENING GOWN: CORBIS