

Balenciaga  
The Elegance of the Hat

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CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA - 10 YEARS



Balenciaga. The Elegance of the Hat  
Exhibition. 29.10.2021-08.05.2022

**B** CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEOA

Museu del Disseny  
de Barcelona





# Balenciaga

## The Elegance of the Hat

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Covering or uncovering one's head has meant different things depending on the time or place, marked by culture, religion, social class or gender role. In Cristóbal Balenciaga's time, the hat was considered to be an essential part of the silhouette. Most haute couture maisons therefore had a department exclusively dedicated to its design, creation and sale. Of all of them, the hats and headdresses by Balenciaga were the most sought-after.

Cristóbal Balenciaga and his collaborators, in the majority women, made the most of this circumstance to devise silhouettes and combinations which, from morning to evening, and from head to toe, would suggest elegance, distinction and, sometimes, daring.

Depending on the width of the brim, of its position on the head, we find picture hats, turbans, bonnets, berets or diadems made in straw, felt, leather or fur, decorated with flowers, feathers or tulle... All had something in common: meeting the social protocol of covering the head while enhancing the silhouette.

"Balenciaga. The elegance of the hat" is the first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to the hats and headdresses of Cristóbal Balenciaga made in the millinery departments of the haute couture Maisons in Paris and Madrid, from the late 30s until the maisons closed their doors in 1968.

The exhibition is born from years of joint research into the hat collections of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum and the Barcelona Design Museum, the institutions co-producing the show. Curated by Igor Uria, Collections Director of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum and by Silvia Ventosa, conservator of fabrics and fashion at the Barcelona Design Museum.

The exhibition now comes to Getaria, following its run in Barcelona, with 87 hats, 78 of which are presented individually, and 9 with a complete outfit. Forty-three of them belong to the Design Museum collection and another 44 pieces to that of the Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum.



# Exhibition

Cristóbal Balenciaga established a highly characteristic style and shape in his hat designs, with their refined, stylised volumes, created using very simple, almost abstract shapes, authentic sculptures in themselves.

The show takes a deeper look at the uniqueness of the designer's work, highlighting the innovative and imaginative forms, the choice of exquisite materials, the search for techniques, the artisan character of his hat production. The sum of all these factors makes them unique, unrepeatable and magnetic.

“In his day it was considered necessary to define a type of hat known as the ‘Balenciaga Shape’; these were large bulbous shaped hats which generated an aura of mystery—thanks to the delicate shadow they cast over the face—and of distinction by means of the organdie, tulle or lace veils employed”, stresses Igor Uria.

A good connoisseur of historical and traditional headdress, Cristóbal Balenciaga updated them and made them fashionable, always experimenting to create new models. He also studied hats from myriad cultures and reinterpreted them with a modern touch while playing with the harmony and contrast of the colours, seeking to create a profound visual impact.

In the words of Silvia Ventosa: “In his private collection Cristóbal Balenciaga conserved numerous historical hats: straw hats from Mediterranean peasant cultures, fishermen's berets and caps typical of popular Basque culture, etc. The designer recreated these hat types and gave them a contemporary appearance.”

The exhibition focusses the spotlight on a fundamental aspect, the trade and the *modistes* —as the milliners were known— thereby highlighting the world of the women who lent shape to Balenciaga's design and creations: the Paris and Madrid departments were managed by women, and the hat-makers and sales assistants were women too.

The headdress designers at Balenciaga were Wladzio d'Attainville, from 1941 until his death in 1948, followed by Janine Seignon, Hélène Morny and Mme. Ginette. In Madrid, the head milliner working for EISA was María Ozcariz. All of them, together with the sales assistants, key figures in conveying Cristóbal Balenciaga's propositions to his clients.

From a contemporary point of view, the show addresses the importance of this accessory in order to stand out in the social and cultural context of the time.

Haute couture has been, since the outset, the highest expression of an experience of luxury, exclusivity, uniqueness and exquisiteness, specifically focused on the world of women from the circles of the affluent elite. The haute couture clients live in a world of refined luxury, and any

social event is an excuse to add to their wardrobe. The importance of knowing the codes of etiquette is essential if one is to join this elite club.

“Chechias, beats, bowlers and pillboxes are some of the styles that completed the ladies’ silhouettes, intended both to draw the attention of those around them and to enhance their distinguished eyes. Amongst all of them, the most distinguished were the headdresses by Balenciaga” says Uria.

The exhibition catalogue has articles by the curators and a special collaboration from the famous hat designer Philip Treacy. With editions in Catalan, Spanish, Basque and English.

As Treacy himself declares: “A good hat is a positive symbol. A good hat is the ultimate glamorous accessory. It thrills observers and creates a high status of desirability, and although in images they can seem out of this world, the consumer who loves sumptuous articles relates strongly to the hat. The message is simple and absolute: a great hat exists outside its own time.”

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# Areas

The show is divided into six sections highlighting the use, types, creative process and meaning of the hats and headdresses made in Balenciaga's millinery departments over more than three decades (1937-1968).

## I. Introduction

A headdress is an essential item of clothing that balances volumes and complements the wearer's silhouette and look. It is also a sign of identity and an indicator of rank and social status. Ever since Antiquity, it has been a protective element as well as a symbol of authority, expressed in the extravagance of its ornamentation or its size. The word *chapeau*, from the Latin *caput*, meaning 'head,' came into use in the 17th century as a term for a headdress. In the late 19th century, with the appearance of new purchasing and consumer habits, hats for women were to be found in every level of society.

In the late 18th century, modistes set up ateliers for making hats, which were luxury artisan items. Modistes play a central role in the fashion world, since they have the technical skills required by their craft, are creative in the use of varied and exquisite materials—velvet, felt, straw, silk, horsehair, feathers, flowers and embroider—and endowed with a touch of magic, all of which enables them to create unique objects. Modistes design and label their hats, mount fashion shows and sell their own designs. Some fashion designers also create hats to match their clothing.

In the mid-20th century in the world of haute couture, headdresses added glamour with a touch of daring. Hats were items worn on a daily basis until the 1960s, when they fell into disuse with the rise of social movements demanding social and gender equality, as headdresses were associated symbolically with the upper classes and a society organised as a patriarchal hierarchy. Nowadays, hats appear from time to time in fashion shows and at celebrations or social events.

Cristóbal Balenciaga designed hats essential to the elegance, exquisiteness and creativity of the total look. He experimented freely, using a style and shape that were highly individual, so much so that one type of hat became known as the 'Balenciaga Shape.' We have no information regarding the existence of specific millinery departments in the three EISA salons in San Sebastián (1927), Madrid (1933) and Barcelona (1935) prior to the opening of the House of Balenciaga in Paris in 1937.

This exhibition features headdresses made in the House of Balenciaga millinery departments in Paris and Madrid, taking into account the importance of this accessory in the social and cultural context of the time.



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## II. Prestige

From the outset, haute couture has been the highest expression of luxury, exclusivity, uniqueness and exquisiteness, centred especially on the milieu of an affluent female elite. Women clients for haute couture live in a world of refined opulence and every social event provides an excuse for them to expand their wardrobe. Knowing the codes of etiquette is absolutely crucial to join this select club. Gaining access to some haute couture salons was extremely difficult due to the prestige of the fashion house, which in many cases was decreed by the specialist media such as fashion magazines. In the salons, decorated in a clean, neutral style so as not to detract from the impression caused by the designs, the collection was presented to a small number of buyers, who were received by a saleswoman. New clients were accepted following a recommendation by an existing client and would be assigned a saleswoman, who would advise them on their decisions.

### MODES, THE HOUSE OF BALENCIAGA MILLINERY DEPARTMENT IN THE ATELIERS IN PARIS AND MADRID

At Balenciaga, the head designers were Wladzio d'Attainville—who was also responsible for the house's press and public relations—from 1941 to his death in 1948 and Cristóbal Balenciaga himself.

The key figure was the modiste, the milliner. From the 1940s onwards, there were two ateliers in Paris run by Janine Seignon, Hélène Morny and Mme Ginette. The saleswoman, Mme Bellita Dauvilliers, was an essential figure as she ensured that the designer's intentions were conveyed in full to the buyer, showing the correct position for the hat and other seemingly imperceptible details that were nevertheless critical to standing out as a Balenciaga client. In Madrid, María Ozcariz was in charge of hat making and worked for EISA. Her elegance, as well as her previous work as a mannequin for the fashion house, were key factors in her performance in this role.

### BALENCIAGAS

International clients admired the House of Balenciaga in San Sebastián and the designer's mastery from 1924 onwards. This appreciation increased with the opening of the EISA salons in Madrid (1933) and Barcelona (1935). Following the opening of the House of Balenciaga in Paris in August 1937, being a Balenciaga client was a source of considerable prestige.

The 'Balenciagas,' as some sectors of the press dubbed the maestro's clients, identified with the house's doctrine. Its timeless style, with slow

and calculated advances that placed it constantly ahead of the fashions of the time by a few years, accentuated the imperceptible differences that enhanced the clients' style and distinction, adding to their sense of self esteem, confidence and elegance. Clients who valued his refined creations, with their clean lines and exquisite manufacture, sought to envelope themselves in this aura of mystery that surrounded Balenciaga in order to stand out in society. Many of the fashion house's elitist clientele would purchase the total look by requesting a headdress to complement the clothing design. But there were few ladies who could regard themselves as 'dressed by Balenciaga.

### III. Tradition

Balenciaga was consistent and faithful to his own standards, so nothing in his work can be described as superfluous and no detail is of secondary importance. A memory is always a key to his creative universe.

Cristóbal Balenciaga drew inspiration from various sources in creating his headdresses: the large straw hats of rural Mediterranean cultures, the traditions of Basque popular culture, such as berets—a Basque and French symbol—and fishermen's caps. He was also very familiar with religious clothing and reinterpreted nuns' wimples and the broad-brimmed flat hats worn by priests. From the world of bullfighting and majos (the name given to members of the lower classes in the 18th century who wore elaborate clothing), he took tassels in the shape of berries, nets and headdresses, tricornes and matadors' hats, with a shape at the back reminiscent of a bullfighter's pigtail.

Materials such as jet and techniques like macrame and lacemaking, typical of popular Spanish clothing, were recreated by the designer, giving them a new life.



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## IV. Exuberance

Balenciaga's hats are notable for their innovative and bold use of materials, colours and ornaments, as well as the painstaking craftsmanship that went into them, which can clearly be perceived in the finish of the works. Added to this was his comprehensive knowledge of the anatomy of each of his clients and of the headdresses best suited to framing a certain face or even an expression.

Simple, everyday materials such as wool and straw—which includes all kinds of plant fibres, even banana leaves and strips of raffia—were used in the hat-making ateliers. The most luxurious and exotic material was the fur of wild animals, among them mink and monkeys, or domestic animals, such as rabbits and goats. Rich fabrics such as velvet, satin and silk organza were combined with linen or cotton, taut or draped, to make caps, headscarves and turbans.

The colours of the hats either harmonised with the outfits or completely different or clashing. In general, the hats were monochrome but exceptionally might be in more than two colours. Balenciaga said that a fashion designer had to be 'practically a scientist in the selection of colours.'

Every season, the latest fashion was determined by the ornaments used to enhance hats. As a result, exquisite and delicate crafts came into being, among them those of the plumassier and the fleuriste, part of a whole industry that supplied couture and fashion houses. Many of these craftsmen and women became established thanks to haute couture and the high demand, in particular, for artificial flowers in the 1930s and the varied range of feathers applied to headdresses in the 1950s and 60s. The *petites mains* (little hands), involved in both haute couture and in hat making, highlighted the importance of the delicate tasks of stitching and decoration, done with extreme skill, sensitivity, accuracy and care.

The most exclusive ornaments were gemstones and feathers, from the most common cockerel feathers to ostrich plumes and swan down. Silk flowers—roses, carnations and camelias, made by Judith Barbier—generally adorned summer hats, while some winter hats were totally covered in feathers, which could be curled, knotted, individual or in balls consisting of marabou or swan feathers.

## V. Elegance

According to the various canons of beauty that have existed throughout history, a straight back and upright posture are signs of distinction. People with good posture and graceful movements project an image of elegance, self-assuredness, confidence and dignity.

The models represented what was regarded as the epitome of elegance for an haute couture client. They walked swiftly around the room, holding in their hand the number of the design they were wearing, all the while maintaining an upright posture and looking off into the distance. Their posture was emphasised by their headdress, precisely positioned using haircombs and pins. Part of the success lay in the fact that clients were able to appreciate the volumes and elegance of the design and imagine themselves wearing the headdress at one of the many events in their social lives.

Every type of hat, depending on the times, demands a particular position on the head: to one side, straight, at the back of the head, resting on the forehead, etc. The various shapes of the headdress must

complement the face. Headdresses, boaters and cartwheel hats are placed on top of the head. Bonnets, cloches, caps and turbans are close-fitting and cover the hair completely or in part. Bun cover hats gather in the hair and hold it in place, whereas crowns and diadems surround and adorn it. Draped headdresses include headcloths, veils, mantillas and headscarves. Hats, broad and narrow-brimmed alike, are positioned and fit tightly on the head.

## VI. Less Is More

When creating and choosing a hat, it is important to bear in mind the harmony between the shape of the hat, the outfit and the face, as well as its colours and sheen in relation to the face, hair and complexion. The balance between the brim and the crown and between them and the outfit is another aspect that heightens elegance, as does symmetry in the position of the hat in relation to the line of the eyes and of the shoulders.

Balenciaga is known for the sophistication and formal simplicity of his designs. The clean, stylised volumes created by means of simple, almost abstract forms, can be considered sculptures, in some cases emphasised thanks to the characteristics of the materials. Headdresses complete the silhouette in a harmonious manner and, in many cases, lack ornamentation, thereby enhancing the elegance of their simplicity.



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# Collections



MUSEU DEL DISSENY DE BARCELONA

The Design Museum of Barcelona has an emblematic collection of Balenciaga hats and dresses. The hat collection consists of 173 pieces, from both Balenciaga Paris and Eisa, the brand used for the houses in San Sebastián, Madrid and Barcelona. A total of 23 come from the donation made in 1976 to what was then the Clothing Museum-Rocamora Collection by Ramon Vilà de la Riva, who was the driving force behind 'The World of Balenciaga', an exhibition held in 1973 in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and in 1974 in Madrid. Almost half were donated by Anna Maria Torra de Gili, while the rest were individual donations.

Out of the Design Museum's 170 Balenciaga pieces, there are many dresses and hats from the 1950s. This is uncommon in Balenciaga collections and significant, because this was the decade in which the designer introduced most of his innovations and created various types of dress.



CRISTÓBAL BALENCIAGA MUSEO A

The Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum, which opened on 7 June 2011, is located in Getaria, the designer's home town and the place he spent his formative years and experienced his professional coming of age, which are essential to understanding his contribution to the fashion world.

The Museum is home to a unique collection that aims to educate visitors about Balenciaga's life and work, his relevance in the history of fashion and design, and the contemporaneity of his legacy. Its vast size (with more than 4,500 pieces of clothing, accessories and documents in a collection that continues to grow from donations) and formal and chronological variety (it includes the designer's earliest preserved work and his last creations during the period of active retirement after his fashion houses were closed and before his death in 1972) make this one of the most comprehensive, coherent, interesting collections on the international scene.

The collection of 375 hats particularly stands out for its quality and variety. It is made up of hats and headdresses made between 1940 and 1968 in Balenciaga's Spanish and French houses. For the first time, the components of the collection have been studied as creative objects in their own right within the exhibition's specific discourse.

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43° 18' 6.92" N

2° 12' 18.77" W

