

Balenciaga and Regional Beauty

Annalisa Giannotti
Art History
University of North Texas
1155 Union Circle
Denton, Texas 76203 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Denise Baxter

Abstract

In 1955, the Spanish haute couture designer Cristóbal Balenciaga created two versions of the same dress design: a bell-shaped ball gown made of pink silk and lace with an off the shoulder neck line, reaching just below the knee. One was produced in his workshop in Madrid, and the other produced in Paris. The similarities between the dresses are well documented, but their differences have yet to be discussed. This paper argues that the variations between the dresses are a result of the different ideas regarding gender and national identity within the two countries in which the dresses were produced. Although there is a wealth of scholarship surrounding Balenciaga, the predominant focus has been broad explorations of his career. This research is entering the field as the first exploration of the differences between his two workshops, and one of the first thesis driven arguments regarding his design choices. The key difference in the dresses can be seen in the choice of lace and size of skirt. The Spanish dress utilizes a Spanish cotton lace and a larger skirt, which is a result of the rigid expectations for women during Francisco Franco's fascist regime at the time regarding adherence to traditional gender roles. Additionally, the expectation of extreme patriotism manifested in the notion that all clothing be essentially Spanish prompting the use of the Spanish lace. In contrast, the French dress utilizes French Chantilly lace - a product of the strong connection between the haute couture industry and the French identity. It also has a smaller easier to maneuver skirt which comes from the more open roles for women in France and internationally, allowing mobility in social settings. All of this indicates a complex negotiation of national identity within the two dresses and possibly throughout Balenciaga's career.

Keywords: Balenciaga, French Fashion, Spanish Fashion

1. Body of Paper

The Spanish designer Cristóbal Balenciaga has been the subject of substantial extant scholarship, the majority of which involves general studies of his career as a whole, exploring his personality and stylistic innovations. However, this research will focus on two specific ball gowns; one produced in France in 1955 [Fig. 1], and another version of the same design that was produced at his house in Madrid around the same time [Fig. 2]. This research looks at the material qualities and circumstances surrounding the two versions of this design, and compare them in order to show how the differences between the two dresses were influenced by ideas of gender and the national identity of the two

countries in which they were produced. By doing so, one will be able to better understand how style is shaped by those factors as well as how Balenciaga negotiated his place between Spain and France.



Figure 1. Cristobal Balenciaga, evening dress, Spring 1955. Gift of Claudia Heard de Osborne, TFC 1981.022.014. Image courtesy of the Texas Fashion Collection, University of North Texas College of Visual Arts and Design.

Figure 2. Could not be shown please reference the link below

Cristobal Balenciaga, Robe, 1955. | Cristobal Balenciaga, physical object, 1955; (https://www.europeana.eu/portal/it/record/2048218/UF_74_33_2.html?q=balenciaga : accessed November 19, 2017), Tous droits réservés.

Very few designers have received the level of academic investigation Balenciaga has. He has received steady attention through publications and exhibitions since the early 1990's. Perhaps the most recognized scholar on Balenciaga is Lesley Ellis Miller, whose research exploring his life and work has been published three separate times. Miller began with the book *Cristóbal Balenciaga* in 1993, then published an extended a version of that research in 2007, with *Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972): The Couturiers' Couturier*, where she focused more heavily on his stylistic innovations and influence as a designer.¹ This research was later extended and published a third time in 2017, as *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*, to create the catalog for and exhibition at Victoria & Albert museum by the same name.² This version of her research offered a more accessible approach by explaining names and places in far more detail, and focused more on his formal development and followers. My research is therefore deeply indebted to Miller's work. Each of these texts have provided a wealth of contextual information surrounding both of the dresses that I focus on, as well Balenciaga's complex relationship with Spain and France. This essay will add to this existing research by discussing a specific case study of two individual objects and exploring how Balenciaga negotiated national identity differently in two different workshops at the same time.

There are several other texts on Balenciaga worth noting as key within the scholarship and in this research. Two publications central to our understanding of Balenciaga include Myra Walker's book *Balenciaga and His Legacy: Haute Couture from the Texas Fashion Collection*, and Susan Irvine's *Vogue On Cristóbal Balenciaga*.³ Walker's book focuses - for the most part - on Balenciaga's influence within the context of garments housed by the Texas Fashion Collection, but it does extrapolate a broader thesis arguing for Balenciaga's influence on the next generation

of designers.⁴ Irvine explores this idea as well. In her book, Irvine focuses on Balenciaga as an artist, arguing for his artistic genius and creative influence. All of these texts provide a vast wealth of contextual information surrounding Balenciaga's life and work. Walker's text is particularly useful because it discusses Claudia Heard de Osborne, whom the French version of the dress was made for. All of these texts are useful for discussing the artistic qualities and business strategies surrounding Balenciaga's workshops. To these sources this research seeks to offer a more specific look at his practices, specifically how he altered his work based on his different workshops and offer further relative contextual information to the scholarship.

The first dress under discussion was made in Balenciaga's workshop in Paris for Claudia Heard de Osborne in 1955 [Fig. 1]. This is the only dress that was viewed in person at the Texas Fashion Collection at the University of North Texas during the course of this research. This dress was to be worn to an opera at La Scala in Milan, and then to a ball later that evening.⁵ It is made of mostly bright pink silk Taffeta with cream Chantilly lace. The neck line is off-shoulder, with the pink silk stopping at the breast and exposed cream lace reaching further up toward the neck, revealing most of the chest and collarbone. The sleeves fall off the shoulder and tie in silk bows on the upper arms. The shape of the bodice creates a tight structured hourglass shape resembling a corset. The attached skirt starts at the hip, and is constructed with three hoops, it then drapes down and bows out creating a bell shape which further emphasizes the hourglass figure of the entire dress. The pink silk falls down in horizontal billowing ruffled layers, stopping roughly at the knee. Then, several layers of cream lace peak out from the bottom of the silk line and stop half way down the calf.

The Spanish dress [Fig. 2] is very similar to its French counterpart. It has the same basic design but contains several crucial differences. It was made in Balenciaga's house in Madrid for Sonsoles Díez de Ribera, a Spanish client.⁶ The Spanish dress is the same basic shape and construction. The majority of the dress is made of the same silk taffeta. It lays off the shoulder and it is constructed with three hoops hitting just below the knee. The key differences are in the skirt and secondary lace material - this dress was constructed with a much larger skirt and a cotton Spanish lace. The difference in the skirt sizes are particularly visible when the dress is being worn which is referenced in Figure 4. The Spanish dress has more volume beginning at the waist and bows outward further into space, creating a larger, true bell shape. The French version transitions from bodice to skirt more smoothly against the body, and the skirt bows out in a smaller more triangular shape than a true bell shape. Based on images of the Spanish dress, this doesn't seem to be a result of the wearers body, but a stylistic choice.



Figure 3. Cristobal Balenciaga, evening dress, Worn by Claudia Heard de Osborne, TFC 1981.022.014. Image courtesy of the Texas Fashion Collection, University of North Texas College of Visual Arts and Design.



Figure 4. The same image of the dress worn by Claudia Heard de Osborne with a basic illustration of the height of the Spanish version's waist and the difference in the size and shape of the skirt

Balenciaga had a complicated career path as result of the political situation in Spain during his lifetime. He was born and raised there, and opened his first dress making business in San Sebastian in 1917.⁷ After the Spanish Civil War in 1931 resulted in the fall of the monarchy and a right-wing dictatorship, his business suffered quite a bit.⁸ In 1936 San Sebastian came under control by the dictatorship and flooded with supporters for the new regime.⁹ As a result he fled to England then moved quickly to Paris in 1937.¹⁰ The regime, led by Francisco Franco, was particularly repressive until the 1950's and did not end until Franco's death in the 1970's.¹¹ By 1955, - when the two dresses were produced - Balenciaga was working in his house in Paris and had two additional houses in San Sebastian and Madrid.¹²

National identity is at the core of most of Balenciaga's work in some form or another, and the complex position that he was in likely affected his understanding of national identity. Although he left Spain, his style always maintained Spanish influence.¹³ The haute couture industry has always been considered fundamentally French, but he frequently quoted Spanish history, art, and culture in his designs to keep his work Spanish.¹⁴ Both of these dresses are therefore full of Spanish influence. This can be seen in their color and shape, as reminiscent of old Spanish dancing dresses illustrated in this image.¹⁵ Balenciaga also kept two design houses in Spain even though they were far less lucrative than his Paris location.¹⁶ That being said, by the time these two dresses were made Balenciaga was gaining fame as a haute couture designer in the French context and he likely had a very deep investment in the national identity of both France and Spain. This is one of the reasons that the two dresses have distinct national differences.

Spain had a far more rigorous understanding of gender than France did as a result of the political climate at the time. Reinforcing traditional gender roles was a major component in Franco's dictatorship in Spain.¹⁷ This was implemented through governmental regulation as well as social expectation.¹⁸ In order for the country to be successful, women needed to return to their "natural" roles.¹⁹ Additionally, gender boundaries were being challenged during the Civil War, when women were expected go out and work during the fighting.²⁰ As a result, there was a concerted effort to reinstate these gender boundaries during the years following the Civil War by the Franco regime.²¹ Gender roles also began to be tied up in patriotism, particularly for woman in the upper classes.²² This manifested strongly though dress. The expectation that women have an unwavering allegiance to the nation resulted in a stagnant fashion market. Style rarely shifted or changed because the boundaries for what women should wear were already rigidly set.²³

This is the reason that the Spanish version of the dress has a much larger skirt. This dress physically imposes gender stereotypes through limiting mobility. The sheer size of the skirt would be exceedingly difficult to maneuver. During this time in Spain, clothes that offered women too much range in motion were often considered "provocative," and care had to be taken not to upset those norms.²⁴ Additionally, the basic build of the exaggerated hour glass figure and length fit perfectly with the trends regarding women's dress in wartime.²⁵ The massive skirt on this dress limits a woman's mobility, emphasizes her feminine form, and asserts her traditional place in times of turbulence.

Spain's isolation during this time also led to an emphasis on Spanish made clothing. Right after the Spanish Civil War, the second World War began. Spain did not participate, and most nations other than Italy and Germany barred any Spanish imports.²⁶ Additionally, many fashionable products - such as make up - that were considered too Americanized, were banned in Spain.²⁷ As a result, Spain was essentially isolated until the early 1950's.²⁸ This increased the importance of Spanish made products, specifically clothing, during the dictatorship.²⁹ Even those upper-class women who sought high end or haute couture clothing purchased their clothing from one of several couturiers in Madrid or Barcelona.³⁰ This was not the standard for the rest of the world, generally most of the upper class women throughout Europe and America purchased their clothes exclusively from haute couture houses in Paris.³¹

This focus on patriotism particularly with regard to Spanish-made clothing is one of the reasons for the difference in the lace between the two dresses. This version of the dress features a Spanish cotton lace as opposed to the Chantilly lace featured in the French version.³² This seems like a small change but in reality, this was likely a very important distinction. Not only was this lace made in Spain, but it was produced with a Spanish technique. Additionally, lace making techniques can be seen as a point of pride within Spanish culture. Considering that at the time these dresses were produced, expressing national pride through clothing was so important, this was likely a very specific choice. This simple difference adds an entirely new layer of national heritage to the dress, creating a patriotic look befitting a Spanish woman during this time.

The French version of this dress relates to a far more open understanding of gender than that of Spain. In Balenciaga's workshop in Paris he was not limited in the same way that he was in Spain, where he saw mostly Spanish clients. In France, he worked with all manner of socialites and celebrities who likely didn't conform to traditional gender roles quite so readily. Balenciaga liked strong willed women: he is quoted as saying "A distinguished lady always has a disagreeable air." Although I could not find any further information about the Spanish client, Sonsoles Díez de Ribera, the ideal Spanish woman would be agreeable and supportive at all times.³³ This is certainly not to say that there was only one type of woman in Spain at the time, but they generally were not looking to commission anything particularly stylistically innovative due to the political climate.³⁴ In the French version of the dress, Balenciaga was working with Claudia Heard de Osborne (shown in Figure 3 wearing the dress) whom he knew quite well.³⁵ De Osborne was a socialite and an extremely strong willed woman.³⁶ While wearing this dress she was likely moving around, dancing, and socializing. She would be unable to achieve that with a skirt as large as the Spanish dress. De Osborne needed to be active and available in a public setting rather than policed and on display.

The concept of national identity in the French dress is also quite complex. The haute couture industry is a vital part of French identity and history.³⁷ It is uniquely French and internationally recognized as the highest level of fashion.³⁸ This means that the French haute couture industry served all types of clients, not just French or Spanish - de Osborne herself was an American.³⁹ In this version of the dress, he was not required to stick to the same rigorous standard of patriotism that the other dress was subjected to. However, he did choose to incorporate the French Chantilly lace technique for the secondary material, taking its name from the French city of Chantilly.⁴⁰ Through incorporating this element from the French tradition, Balenciaga addresses the long-standing tradition of haute couture France culture as a part of his work. Moreover, the combination of the decidedly Spanish construction and color with a distinctively French lace technique keeps with the idea of haute couture being simultaneously French, and internationally pursued and recognized.

Both of these dresses have complex relationships with gender roles and national identity. Balenciaga had the benefit of absorbing himself in the cultures of both France and Spain. His work within these two countries was influenced by completely different cultural and political factors. This illustrates not only a complex understanding of how fashion can be manipulated to be successful in different social and political climates, but also that it can be done in very subtle ways. Balenciaga faced two radically different cultures and addressed them differently. This is important for our understanding of Balenciaga as a designer, but it is also a perfect case study for how clothing can be politically motivated, no matter how subtle. This opens up further opportunities for research such as the role that Sonsoles Díez de Ribera played in the design of the Spanish version of the dress, and the broader overarching distinctions between his work in France and Spain during this time. It also allows for further explorations for politically driven design in Balenciaga's work, which is completely missing within the scholarship.

2. Endnotes

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Lesley Ellis Miller, *Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972): The Couturiers' Couturier*, rev ed. (London: V&A Pub., 2007), 28.

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- 2 Lesley Ellis Miller, *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*. rev ed. (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2017).
 - 3 Myra Walker, *Balenciaga and His Legacy: Haute Couture from the Texas Fashion Collection*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).
 - Susan Irvine, *Vogue On Cristóbal Balenciaga*, (London: Quadrille Publishing, 2013).
 - 4 Myra Walker, *Balenciaga and His Legacy*.
 - 5 Myra Walker, *Balenciaga and His Legacy*, 48.
 - 6 Lesley Ellis Miller, *Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972): The Couturiers' Couturier*, rev ed., (London: V&A Pub., 2007), 86.
 - 7 Lesley Ellis Miller, *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*, 10.
 - 8 Ibid., 22-23.
 - 9 Ibid., 22.
 - 10 Ibid., 23.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 Ibid., 24.
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 - 15 Hamish Bowles, and M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, *Balenciaga and Spain*, 24.
 - 16 Lesley Ellis Miller, *Balenciaga: Shaping Fashion*, 137.
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 - 30 Ibid., 137.
 - 31 Alexandra Palmer, "Haute Couture."
 - 32 Lesley Ellis Miller, *Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972) :The Couturiers' Couturier*, 28.
 - 33 Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion*.
 - 34 Mary Vincent, "Camisas Nuevas."
 - 35 Myra Walker, *Balenciaga and His Legacy*, 44.
 - 36 Ibid., 43.
 - 37 Alexandra Palmer, "Haute Couture."
 - 38 Ibid.
 - 39 Myra Walker, *Balenciaga and His Legacy*, 43.
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