

BALENCIAGA, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; March 23-July 1

It is not always correct to call a dress designer either an artist or a craftsman. Many designers do not cut, fit, and sew; nor are their imaginative productions exactly like designs either for monumental sculptures or for chairs and tables. We are happy to sit at eighteenth-century tables but not to wear eighteenth-century dresses; and so we must conclude that fashionable dress is not one of the minor arts. We are also willing to adore El Greco or Shakespeare, but we would never wear a starched ruff; and so we must conclude that costume is not a

major art either. It is clearly much closer to being one of the performing arts—both ephemeral and somehow immortal, but unable to withstand the test of ordinary time.

Balenciaga, the famous Spanish designer who died in 1972, was one of the few couturiers who could properly command fame as a craftsman, quite apart from the artistic status of his fashion genius. His colleague Coco Chanel called him the only one who could design, cut, sew, and finish a garment entirely alone. He was a master tailor and dressmaker—separate crafts requiring talent and discipline quite independent of design. The extreme subtlety characteristic of all his works, both in conception and realization, bears witness to his extraordinary, complex gift.

About 150 of his designs—magnificent evening dresses, sportswear, suits, and four grand wedding dresses—are included in this exhibition. The designs are all dramatic and deceptively simple, but never completely easy to understand even from the aspect of basic cut. They all have a high perfection of finish and a lack of compromise with the modern concept of easy negligence.

Balenciaga's qualifications as an artist begin with his firm position as a classicist. With all his vivid, radical imagination, his designs for clothing never depart from the bilateral symmetry dictated by the structure of the human body. There is no abstract drama here, based on one bare shoulder or one draped hip. The brilliance and the excitement are rather generated more by the dialectic of front and back, which, as a look at the history of art will show, is a main source of the erotic drama of the feminine body. Balenciaga's dresses, with bloused, loose backs and fitted fronts, or short hems in front dipping low behind, continue the long tradition which includes the Victorian bustle and the bare breasts of the Minoan court lady. All celebrate the sharp difference between a woman's advance and her retreat—and the fact that you cannot accurately determine the exact nature of either one by looking at the other.

Balenciaga was a great innovator, whose revolutionary designs were often con-

firmed by popular taste in their debased versions, like the unbelted dress and the semifitted suit, or patterned stockings and boots. His famous Spanish spirit is most apparent not so much in his spangled matador jackets as in his intense, creative use of black, which, since the sixteenth century, has been associated with a particularly Spanish elegance. The much-imitated short black dresses in particular, whether of crisp lace or fluid silk, are often incredibly compact expressions of stately grandeur. The truly stately evening and wedding dresses, on the other hand, are as magnificent in their modern idiom as any in Velasquez's portraits. Not so Spanish, but equally dramatic and self-assured, are the coats and suits; and the distinction of these wearable, functional garments, so different from the grand formal creations, is a measure of Balenciaga's imaginative scope.

The Costume Institute's new galleries make a fine, spacious arena for this collection of masterpieces. —ANNE HOLLANDER

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FASHION PLATE, Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; October 22-January 17

"Fashion Plate" was a group of elegant ladies's dresses from the past 200 years, each costume intended to be viewed as a complete typical composition in its mode—a representation of the ideal of its moment. The moments were presented in a random bouquet, devoid of chronology or setting. Each lady appeared as a three-dimensional version of a fashion plate, usually accompanied by a blown-up reproduction of an actual one.

This method of display forced the viewer to observe a fashionably clad woman as an absolute unit, like a Chinese vase, subject to abstract criteria of taste without reference to culture or society. Comparisons were invited, not between adjacent periods (for tracing developments) but rather between widely separated ones (for observing differences in emphasis and in whole conceptions of elegance). One corollary effect was to expose the most bizarre elements in each fashion rather crudely, since the stages

by which they evolved were missing.

Clothes since the First World War seem to need movement to show them off—the mannequins appear stiffer and the clothes deader than in the more abstract static fashions which depended upon the shaping of corsets and different forms of the long skirt. A noticeable reduction in simple bulk occurs during the same time. The female figure after 1920 ceases to be extravagantly augmented by large accessories for head and hands—only the full skirt of the 'Fifties provides any echo of the vast constructions of the past. Instead, one was invited to observe the extreme subtlety and delicacy of fabric and seaming which first appears in the 'Twenties, a muted perfection much different from the excessive, multiple dazzle of earlier days. Missing from this exhibit was an example of the French Empire classical fashion, when flimsy delicacy and a slim silhouette were also briefly desirable.

To supplement the exhibits, 200 years of fashion plates were projected in two hypnotizing but confusing series of slides flashed on the wall, one devoted only to male dress. Nothing appeared for more than a couple of seconds, and nothing was identified—the effect was captivating but senseless.

There is something awkward about a group of elegant women thrust like this into one another's company by an aesthetic impulse remote from that which created any single one of them. Their beauty is diminished and somehow ridiculed by this perverse mode of juxtaposition, despite the undeniable elegance each personifies in isolation. —ANNE HOLLANDER

UNTAILORED GARMENTS, Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; January 26-July 2

Above all an excellent example of costume display, "Untailored Garments" consists of over fifty articles of clothing basically rectangular in shape, which are intended to be worn folded or draped on the body with no shaping of any other kind. They come from Asia, Africa, South America, and the Near East, and there are some North American Indian blankets.

The variety of textures, ranging from the heavy woolen mantles of Peru to the most delicate silk saris, makes the exact method of folding and draping these clothes a fascinating study. It is interesting to note that one rectangle is hardly ever used, as it was in ancient Greece, to form a complete costume. Most of these garments are meant to be worn in combination with others, even the sari, which otherwise is the nearest approach to it. Stiff fabrics are tightly wrapped into skirts or hung over the shoulders to form large, heavy folds, while delicate soft cloth is bunched, twisted, or pleated into many broken, flowing lines.

Slides appear in one gallery to show representations of ancient Greek and Chinese drapery and to illustrate the draping of the sari and the izar. —ANNE HOLLANDER