



**Balenciaga**

*Infanta dress 1939*

**Balenciaga, Paris** (couture house)  
est. 1937

**Cristobal Balenciaga** (designer)  
Spain 1895-1972

**Infanta dress** 1939

silk, cotton, metal

160.0 cm (centre back); 35.0cm (waist, flat)

Gift of Sarah Bostock, 1993 (CT1-1993)

Throughout the history of costume, Spain has played a major role in the development of the latest styles and technologies. The vast wealth of the Spanish Empire was the result of colonisation and trade. Many fashion innovations originated in Spain such as knitted silk stockings, the ruff, the corset and the doublet. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish tailors were recognised for clothes of precise line and cut, with sparse and restrained decoration. The monumentality of aristocratic and royal fashion, represented in lavish portraits, is expressed in the work of Cristobal Balenciaga.

Balenciaga was initially trained by his dressmaker mother; he then undertook formal studies as a tailor in Madrid and opened his first boutique in 1914. He established a couture house in Paris in 1937 where he forged a reputation for austere abstraction formed by radical tailoring.

The luxurious *Infanta dress*, made of silk satin and cotton velvet, echoes the shape and formality of lavish and luxurious seventeenth-century court costume, as depicted in the paintings of Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599–1660), the official court artist of King Philip IV of Spain. Balenciaga's *Infanta dress* references Velázquez's intimate portraits of members of the royal family at court. In particular, it evokes the wardrobe of the king's eldest daughter, the Infanta Maria Teresa, often depicted in various ivory coloured gowns with tight-fitting bodices over spectacular broad skirts supported by a wide hooped petticoat known as a pannier.

Balenciaga created the *Infanta dress* in 1939, the year that the Spanish Civil War ended, the Fascist dictator General Franco came to power and the Second World War commenced. Although Franco's wife was one of his clients, Balenciaga was not politically biased as he also dressed many members of Spain's royal family and the aristocracy. He fled the Civil War in 1937 and moved to Paris, but often returned to his homeland.

Balenciaga created the *Infanta dress* with an exaggerated profile, broad shoulders supported by padding and a wide neckline created by intensive gathering. The heavy silk of the dress contributes to the formal and structured silhouette. In the NGV version, the pure lines of ivory are decorated with green cotton velvet scrolls that frame the sleeves and the bodice. In other versions, the scrollwork is black and the neckline is varied. Unlike its historical predecessors, the wearer may easily be dressed, as the gown simply fastens at the centre front using the recently invented dress zipper.

*Anna Hirsh*

**Balenciaga, Paris** (casa de costura)  
est.1937

**Cristóbal Balenciaga** (diseñador)  
España 1895–1972

**Vestido Infanta**, 1939

seda, algodón, metal

160 cms (centro espalda); 35cms (cintura, en plano)

Donación de Sarah Bostock, 1993 (CT1-1993)

España ha jugado un papel muy importante en el desarrollo de nuevas tecnologías y estilos a lo largo de la historia del traje. Quizás a causa de la extrema riqueza del Imperio español, procedente de la conquista, la colonización y el comercio, muchas innovaciones de la moda como las medias de seda, la gola, el corsé y el jubón surgieron en España. Durante los siglos XVI y XVII los sastres españoles fueron famosos por la precisión en el corte y la línea de sus trajes, de escasos y austeros adornos. La moda de la realeza y de la aristocracia, reflejada en lujosos retratos, influye en la obra de Balenciaga.

Balenciaga nació en 1895, y su madre le enseñó de forma rigurosa el arte de la costura. Fue educado formalmente como sastre en Madrid y abrió su primera boutique en 1914. En 1937 estableció una casa de costura en París en donde se hizo famoso por la abstracción austera de su sastrería radical.

El lujoso *vestido Infanta*, hecho con raso de seda y terciopelo de algodón, se inspira en los ricos y elaborados trajes de la corte española del XVII, reflejados en las pinturas de Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1500-1600), pintor oficial de la corte del rey Felipe IV de España. El *vestido Infanta* imita los vestidos que aparecen en los íntimos retratos de la familia real, especialmente los vestidos de la hija primogénita del rey, la infanta María Teresa, que, a menudo, llevaba trajes de color marfil con corpiños apretados y espectaculares faldas ahuecadas mediante enaguas de aros llamadas miriñaques.

La monarquía española cayó en 1931. Balenciaga creó el *vestido Infanta* en 1939, año en el que finaliza la Guerra Civil -tras tres años- y el General Franco sube al poder. 1939 es también el año en que empieza la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Aunque la esposa de Franco fue una de sus clientes, Balenciaga no se compromete políticamente y viste también a miembros de la familia real y de la aristocracia española. Había huido de la guerra en 1937 para establecerse en París, pero con frecuencia regresaba a su patria.

Balenciaga creó el *vestido Infanta* con formas exageradas, hombros amplios con hombreras enguatadas y anchas caderas formadas a base de grandes fruncidos. La pesada seda contribuye al aspecto formal y estructurado de la silueta. En el modelo que posee la Galería Nacional de Victoria las líneas puras de marfil están decoradas con espirales verdes de terciopelo que rematan las mangas y el corpiño. En otras versiones, las espirales son negras y cambia la línea del escote. El vestido, a diferencia de los modelos originales en los que se inspira, es fácil de poner y quitar mediante el uso de la recién inventada cremallera.

## Thinking and discussing before the visit

- How would you define the concept of 'fashion'?
- Discuss the quotes at right — in what ways do you agree or disagree with them?
- Discuss whether fashion can be considered an art form.
- Discuss reasons why people may want to follow fashion.
- Discuss to what extent advertising and marketing campaigns influence the fashion we buy?
- What factors influence the fashion we buy?
- Discuss whether fashion is equally important to men and women.
- What clues do a person's clothing give about their personality, social status and attitude to life?
- Discuss how and why the methods of producing fashion in Europe changed dramatically from the late nineteenth century onwards.
- Discuss examples of where new technologies, fabrics and materials have benefited contemporary fashion designers.
- What can fashion at different times in history reveal about changing attitudes to human beauty? Discuss with reference to a particular women's fashion such as the corseted waist of eighteenth-century Europe and the mini skirt of the 1960s, which dominated Western fashion.
- Research the fashion terms *prêt-à-porter* and *haute couture*. Discuss their different meanings.
- What careers are associated with the fashion industry? What aspects of them would you enjoy and why?
- Discuss the special qualities of your favourite garment and when and where you wear it.

## Gallery visit activities

- What are your first thoughts when you look at this dress?
- As a class or small group, imagine you are describing the dress to someone who has never seen it before. Find evocative words and phrases that will describe different aspects of the dress such as the colour, fabric, silhouette, decorative features, shape of the shoulders, waistline and hipline.
- What sounds would the dress make as its wearer moved?
- Discuss what sort of jewellery the owner of the dress might have worn with it.
- Imagine what sort of hairstyle would have complemented the dress.
- How does this dress reference fashion from another age (pre twentieth century)?
- What garments might need to be worn under the dress?
- Imagine you are the woman who is having the dress fitted at Balenciaga's fashion house. Role-play a conversation between yourself and the designer.
- What aspects of the dress do you like? Where might you wear it?

'Art produces ugly things which frequently become beautiful with time. Fashion, on the other hand, produces beautiful things which always become ugly with time.'

– Jean Cocteau  
(1889–1963), French  
writer, actor, painter,  
film director

'Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.'

– Coco Chanel  
(1883–1971), French  
fashion designer

'Fashions fade, style is eternal.'

– Yves Saint Laurent  
(1936–2008), French  
fashion designer

'Fashion is what you adopt when you don't know who you are.'

– Quentin Crisp  
(1908–1999), English  
actor and writer

How is the dress fastened?  
What fastenings would  
have been employed before  
the zip was invented in the  
early twentieth century?

Describe the sort of woman  
who might have worn this  
dress and on what occasion.

## Gallery visit activities, continued

- What can you tell about the female body shape that was considered beautiful at the time when the dress was made?
- How does the ideal female body shape today compare with this?

## Post-visit activities

- Locate an image of Velázquez's *Infanta María Teresa*, c.1652–3, on the internet.
- Balenciaga's dress was inspired by this painting. How are they similar and different? Discuss which dress you would rather wear and why.
- What does the painting tell you about the world of aristocratic children in seventeenth-century Europe?
- Imagine that you were a fashion journalist seeing the dress for the first time on a catwalk at a fashion show in 1939. Write a brief review of the dress for your magazine or newspaper.
- Prepare an illustrated talk or PowerPoint presentation on who, in your opinion, are the ten best-dressed celebrities in the world today. Include both men and women and give your reasons for selecting them.
- Research contemporary Spanish and South American fashion designers on the internet.
- Write an illustrated article for an Australian fashion magazine on Spanish fashion. Include details of Spain's top designers and fashion chain stores such as Mango and Zara.

What defines human beauty? To what extent may it depend on fashion, clothes and make-up?

Imagine you are the *infanta* in the painting, attending a celebration at the royal palace. Write a journal entry describing the guests, their clothes, the food and the entertainment provided. Consider the formality of language at this time in history. Now write a brief modern-day version of this event as an email or SMS to a friend.

Study a range of fashion-drawing styles in fashion books, magazines and on the internet. Imagine you are a celebrated fashion designer. Let your imagination run freely and design a garment you would like to wear which has been inspired by a Spanish contemporary or traditional painting.