

***Balenciaga: Master of Couture*, McCord Museum, Montréal, June 15 to October 14, 2018, Organized by the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) of London. Curator: Cynthia Cooper, Head, Collections and Research, and Curator, Dress, Fashion and Textiles, McCord Museum**

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Berry's volume convincingly establishes the significance of the *Société des Trois* for these three artists. She sketches the relevant contexts for her analyses and offers insightful readings of individual works in terms of the group's dynamics and tenets. She could have situated and defined her scholarly intervention more thoroughly and clearly, however. A number of key points are buried in chapters, and there is little contextualization of her work within extant scholarship. She might have made more use of Alsdorf's work, which situates the idea of the group in nineteenth-century French social thought in life and thought. The book, as a whole, could also have used considerably more proofreading. One of the authors of the most important scholarly precedent for this book, cited numerous times, is repeatedly listed as "James" rather than Jane Munro, and there are garbled and ungrammatical sentences in various places. While these errors are certainly the author's responsibility, they raise the question of whether a copy editor is employed for the Routledge Research in Art History series, the only unifying element of which seems to be the \$150 US price tag per volume. But these are quibbles, and do not diminish the volume's merits as a useful study offering insights into a formative stage of the artists' identities and careers. ¶

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Dovima with Sacha, cloche and suit by Balenciaga, Café Les Deux Magots, Paris, 1955.
Photo: Richard Avedon
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Balenciaga: Master of Couture

McCord Museum, Montréal

June 15 to October 14, 2018

Organized by the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) of London. Curator: Cynthia Cooper, Head, Collections and Research, and Curator, Dress, Fashion and Textiles, McCord Museum.

Stephanie Weber

Narratives championing mid-century design giants as innovative geniuses vary little across the boundaries of genre. The mainstays in apparel design are described in much the same way as are architects, artists, and furniture designers: as individuals who single-handedly ushered in a new era of visual culture through their contribution in their field. Of course, prestigious fashion design houses benefit from the mythologization of their founders, who, often posthumously, are elevated to the status of cultural icons and household names. They are remembered as iconoclastic innovators of the intellectual and physical aspects of craft and skill. The two most recent fashion house retrospectives in Montreal, namely, that of Yves Saint Laurent in 2008 and of Jean Paul Gaultier in 2011, both presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, exalted the innovation and influence of the two successful designers with little reference to the labourers associated with the houses, thus saying little about the working conditions for or

contributions made by the "petites-mains" who are responsible for much of these designers' material legacies. In this tradition, The McCord Museum's *Balenciaga: Master of Couture* reveres the originality and craftsmanship of Cristóbal Balenciaga, especially as his clothing designs proliferated throughout Montreal and the globe in the mid-twentieth century. The exhibit constructs a narrative of his revolutionization of the female silhouette and a celebration of his bold independence, ideas that are explored through an emphasis on his extensive knowledge of fabric and technique and his exacting craft skills.

Organized by the Victoria & Albert Museum of London and including four of the fifteen Balenciaga designs from the McCord's permanent collection, the designs exhibited are mainly from the later years of the Paris couture house and its ancillary ateliers. The viewer is led through a selection of some of Balenciaga's most iconic gowns, suits, and sets from the 1950s and 1960s, and the exhibition highlights those designs that have earned archetypal status in fashion discourse. Hats are exhibited in one of the main spaces, and this display is flanked by interactive elements: on one side, a garment is available to be tried on, and on the other, the visitor is encouraged to fold a paper pattern into the design of the "one seam" dress for themselves. As part of the exhibition, the visitor is offered a tactile experience: one can construct and take home a "craft" of one's own, inspired by a "great" of design.

The exhibition forges connections with its locale, including photographs and documentation of some of Balenciaga's more well-known Montreal clients. The viewer is informed that these elegant Montreal women kept abreast of trends and paid for personal tailoring, cementing a particular notion of the in-vogue cosmopolitanism of the city. The McCord's slogan, "Our People Our Stories," suggests a commitment to the inclusion of local histories, though it is a relatively minor

aside, as the exhibition seeks mainly to highlight Cristóbal Balenciaga's craftsmanship. As the introductory text at the entrance to the exhibit reads, Balenciaga's "training set him apart" from other masters of the day, which is why he was referred to by his contemporaries as "the Master." He was personally skilled in designing, cutting, tailoring, and dressmaking. Signs throughout the exhibition suggest that Balenciaga was a perfectionist, one who was "obsessed" by sleeves and would destroy a garment if its sleeves were not right. He was known to be meticulous in taking the measurements of a client and his tailoring work was exacting in the extreme, which meant it could take up to three months to complete a commission for a Balenciaga suit. A film shows footage of him at work during one of these personalized fittings, thus drawing a clear connection between luxury and craftsmanship. Nearby is a display of a small selection of garments from the "Eisa" label, one of the ancillary ateliers producing Balenciaga designs at a less expensive price point. At Eisa, as stated in the accompanying booklet, the stitching, although "very good," was not of the same quality as at the Balenciaga house, thus one can be sure that the atelier was not associated with Balenciaga himself except for its use of his designs.

Alongside iconic gown and suit shapes, the exhibition includes original sketches and fabric swatches, solidifying the connection to craft for the viewer. At several instances, videos produced by the museum further reinforce this connection. In a 2016 video in which designer Ying Wang demonstrates the technique of "draping," one shot pans closely across his hands folding and pinning the fabric of a gown on a mannequin. Looking at the elegantly draped dresses in the glass case next to the screen, viewers may easily conjure up an image of the hands that folded each dramatic crease into place.

Similarly, next to the miniature "one seam" activity in the main space are examples of the iconic design that inspired it: an architectural woolen jacket and its matching shift dress. Beside this design, a television screen shows an animated pencil being dragged across the screen, forming the shape of the coat's pattern. The shape then fades to an actual pattern as fabric is laid atop it, pinned down, and cut. The camera again lingers upon the hands performing this action. Then, the film fades back into the animation, and the raw pattern folds over on itself and closes its own seam, showing how the finished garment would drape over a body. Again, one feels distinctly the connection between craft and wear, between the hand of the maker and the finished product. Ominously, however, one wonders how this video might interpret the current labour practices of Balenciaga's parent Kering, which in 2016 was exposed for engaging in forced labour practices and currently obscures much of the information necessary to comment on the effectiveness of its recent wage and labour safety measures.¹

Arguably, haute couture designs already benefit from an elevation to the level of art in the public eye. The structure and exclusivity of runway shows during fashion weeks have ensured that new designs remain in the hands of those with money and influence, and the salon shows of the mid-century fashion world resemble events at today's exclusive auction houses. In this exhibition, numbered cards in front of the mannequins refer to a numbered list in an accompanying booklet containing information about each item's year of creation, ownership, and influence, and the resulting uncluttered look gives the sense of being in an art gallery. Balenciaga himself refrained from naming his pieces and from bowing at the end of his salon shows, expressing his wish to let his clothes speak for themselves, a wish that is echoed here.

The exhibition's investigation of Balenciaga's adaptation of Japanese kimonos and Indian designs is somewhat problematic. In the bid to solidify Balenciaga's status as "the Master," it fails to provide insight into the politics of global interest in Asian dress. Rather than attributing genius to Balenciaga's willingness to draw from a variety of sources for inspiration, the curators could have effectively integrated an examination of Orientalism to understand that globalization occurred alongside the reworking of Asian designs themselves, resulting in the celebration and sharing of designs across borders. As Carla Jones and Ann Marie Leshkovich have shown, Asian designs appearing in Western clothing are the result of a process of evaluating and appropriating with the purpose of "deciding where Asian dress fits into the global pantheon" of dress.²

As a result, otherness is confirmed even while styles are integrated, and the genius narrative that this exhibition integrates so generously only serves to solidify the authority maintained by fashion leaders to name, borrow from, and evaluate the "other." Especially considering the racialized nature of textile design and production in the current day, this connection is an important one to make.

The overview of Balenciaga's career ends with a note about the design house's initial closing and subsequent revival in 1986, and then the exhibition opens up into its most expansive and brightly-lit room, which seems to signal the future. This final room, a veritable white cube, explores designs from a variety of ready-to-wear lines including J. W. Anderson, Phoebe Philo for Celine, and Rick Owens. Mounted on one wall is a film entitled "Balenciaga's Influence," in which three designers talk about the ways their practice is informed by the tradition of Balenciaga. All three speak to Balenciaga's way of working with the body, elevating simplicity and luxury, and incorporating architectural or sculptural

forms; in particular, they emphasize his “innovative” pattern cutting. Josep Font of Lesage laments that “embroidery has been devalued” and suggests that it is good to “revitalize” these kinds of crafts for the future, as Balenciaga has done. Here again, craft is central to the narrative.

The exhibition clearly attempts to represent Cristóbal Balenciaga as a highly skilled craftsman in order to imbue both mid-century and current Balenciaga design with the luxury connoted by the term “hand made.” Through craft, Master of Couture links the Balenciaga label to skill and slowness, forging connotations of qualitative superiority opposed to the cheap expediency of fast fashion. These narratives are projected despite Cristóbal Balenciaga’s relative distance from the output of many of his associated ateliers, not to mention the current obfuscation of the labour practices of Kering’s suppliers. As a result, the romantic message of the exhibit feels disingenuous, accomplishing, alongside any educational value, the capitalist mythmaking on which the luxury brand industry relies for its market success. ¶

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1. “Kering Standards,” the company’s code of ethics, is now published publicly, but the information it provides does not provide definitive information concerning the sourcing of its material and labour. Significantly, Kering does not provide a list of its direct suppliers, nor does it communicate membership at MSIs such as ETA or FLA. It has implemented measures within the year to improve its labour practices but has not provided enough information to comprehensively specify the results of those measures, making it impossible to suggest their success. Similarly, information about establishing living wage pay rates at its direct suppliers is as of now unreleased. Rankabrand, “How Sustainable is Balenciaga?” <https://rankabrand.org/sustainable-luxury-brands/Balenciaga/>; see also “REPORT: Gucci, Balenciaga, Prada have More Forced Labour in their Supply Chains than H&M,” *The Fashion Law*, December 9, 2016.

2. Carla Jones and Anne Marie Leshkovich, “The Globalization of Asian Dress: Re-Orienting Fashion or Re-Orienting Asia?” in *Re-Orienting Fashion*, ed. Sandra Niessen, Anne Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones (New York: Berg, 2003), 5.

Diana Newall, ed.

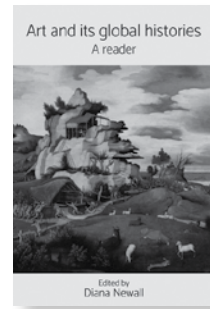
Art and Its Global Histories: A Reader
Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Open University, 2017

344 pp. 17 b/w illus., 4 graphs
£17.99 (paper) ISBN 9781526119926

Erin L. Webster

With the publication of *Art and Its Global Histories: A Reader*, the editors and authors have chosen to offer a global, theoretical exploration of visual culture supported by the use of primary source texts, and dispensing with illustrations, save for a few black-and-white reproductions. This volume is a reader for the Open University level-three distance-learning module of the same name, which uses the lens of colonialism to construct an overview of the globalisation of art from the early modern to the contemporary eras, with a particular focus on British colonialism. The volume is meant to serve as an introduction to a series of books that expand the material offered here. Each of its four sections is presented by a different editor and consists of a brief introduction, a selection of carefully chosen primary source texts, and excerpts from “critical sources” that explain the connections between these primary texts and the approaches of present-day scholars.

The first section, entitled “Confronting Art History: overviews, perspectives and reflections,” provides a set of excerpts from major scholars who have shaped postcolonial theory, including Edward Said, Linda Nochlin, and Homi K. Bhaba, in order to establish a foundation for the material that follows. In her introduction to these excerpts, editor Diana Newall shows how the study of colonialism, postcolonialism, and globalisation enables the discipline of art history to address the challenges and limitations of Eurocentrism, given that the



very methodologies and vocabularies of this discipline are constructed by and for a Eurocentric audience. However, *Art and Its Global Histories* offers some mixed messages about the process of learning and about the subjectivity of scholarship.

The first of the four sections, “European art and the wider world, 1350-1550,” is edited by Kathleen Christian. Primary sources concerning European encounters with Indigenous cultures in Central and South America are followed by excerpts from the well-known writings of sixteenth-century artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Leonardo da Vinci, and Condivi (on Michelangelo), as well as texts from historical sources such as inventories and travel writing. Essays by scholars including Claire Farago, Luca Mola and Marta Ajmar-Wollheim ponder globalisation and historiography in the so-called Renaissance era—the complications of traditional boundaries, cultures, and methodologies that circumscribe study of this period. Unlike earlier collections of primary sources from this era, such as Elizabeth Gilmore Holt’s *A Documentary History of Art* (1957), *Art and Its Global Histories* includes this recent scholarship to provide models of how to interrogate these texts and the historiography of interpretation.

The next section, edited by Emma Barker, offers an overview of the connections and interdependencies of art, commerce, and colonialism in the period from 1600 to 1800 as the major European powers extended