Review:

The Master of Us All: Balenciaga, His Workrooms, His World
By Mary Blume
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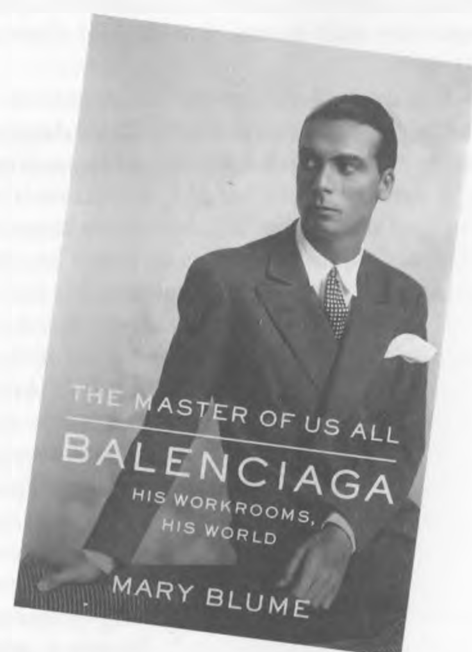

Balenciaga head designer Nicolas Ghesquière just ended his fifteen-year stint to be replaced by Alexander Wang, who could, says *The Guardian*, take the brand into a more "mass market" and less "elitist" direction. One wonders if Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895–1972)—the master craftsman who didn't even know from "brands," and wanted his name to die with him (his family decided otherwise)—would appreciate the irony of his make-under for the "street style" set. Between the house of Balenciaga that thrived from 1937 to 1968 as the cathedral of couture, and today's branding orgy where "the name, depersonalized, is world-famous [while] the designer is expendable," modern buying power has clearly sashayed from class to mass.

Mary Blume, a veteran Paris-based reporter for the *International Herald Tribune*, offers a peek at the atelier of the haute couture of yore. Elegantly weaving interviews with Balenciaga's last living chums (including "keeper of the flame" Givenchy, whose house, along with Courrèges's, Balenciaga first backed) with cultural history, Blume's account follows Balenciaga's top vendeuse (a saleswoman; like today's personal shopper), Florette Chelot, who provides a keen *Upstairs, Downstairs* perspective on midcentury Luxe. The Spanish-born artisan of togs remains elusive, but his milieu and its denizens make for a fascinating look at a lost world. Rigid hierarchies meant that in-house craftsmen, hired as teen apprentices, moved up through the ranks, but never saw finished versions of their work. And instead of the celebrity designer on Page Six, "there was a social custom that one did not entertain one's tradespeople," as Chanel once told a journalist.

Florette (who died in 2006 at age ninety-five) was Balenciaga's first hire in Paris, working from 1937, when he opened the house on Avenue George V, until 1968, when he abruptly closed it. With her enviable sales book bursting with big spenders, she placed his creations with ladies—much like a stylist would do today—chilled other vendeuses (they worked on commission), and protected Monsieur's privacy so he could create in peace: "I wasn't going to irritate him with clients" (not even a Rothschild).

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Proust knew: Talking to the "help" proves illuminating. Blume met Florette in the 1960s, when the author was a fledgling scribe snagging her first Balenciaga suit from cast-off samples, and the fact that she had personally lurked on the scene adds a nice note to her research. Blume's portrait of Florette offers a sometimes poignant story of a life spent cultivating intimacy—but not equality—with the rich. The psychology of the vendeuse "required a certain complicity with the client," Blume writes, "which some carried to a form of mimesis or even—odd in view of the clients' wealth and frequent bad manners—pity." Turbo-shopper Barbara Hutton, who drank "from a glass of water, which was gin," ordered one ball gown at $15,000; Yves Saint Laurent's annual salary that year as chief designer at Dior was $14,000. Hutton told Florette, "We are so much alike." "She meant well," Blume writes, "but was unaware of the effrontery of saying that to an overworked woman with aching feet, and Florette, as she told me the story, seemed unaware of it as well." This "unawareness," it turns out, raked in the francs.

At one point, Florette's sales accounted for half the house's earnings. "In those days, the job of vendeuse was the only one in which women with no skills or diplomas could win excellent wages," Blume tells us. "By the time Balenciaga closed, Florette was earning more than a full professor at Harvard." Blume notes that over the course of their conversations, Florette changed her perspective on the gig: "I don't think that earlier she would have said that vendeuses were a form of personal servant and I am sure she would not have announced one day, 'Quite honestly I did that job because I was put into the métier, but had I the

chance, it isn't what I would have done. I think you have to make yourself care about it because it really isn't a very pleasant world.'"

Intensely "private," rarely photographed, mythologized by the press as a formidable fashion monk as he dazzled his well-off and conservative clients—including Mona Bismarck, who once ordered eighty-eight "numbers" at once, various Rothschilds, *marquesas*, and Truman Capote's "swans"—with impeccable daywear and spectacularly sculptural evening duds, Cristóbal Balenciaga was considered "the *only* couturier" by Chanel. Like Chanel and Vionnet, he was not a sketcher—he was a draper and pinner. ("The others are just designers," scoffed Chanel.) Dior deemed him "the master of us all." At one collection (models walked every day at 3 PM in a classy salon designed to scare off looky-loos) Diana Vreeland raved: "One fainted. It was possible to blow up and die." His unclassifiable creations were described as "Spanish," *faute de mieux*. But who was he? The man never granted interviews, except for one late in life, in which he came off as "charming," but which included few quotes. He never took a bow at the end of his shows, but peeped through a hole in the curtain (on the lookout for copyists and talkers marring the solemn vibe). Blume hints that he felt shy about his Spanish accent and "rough edges," which his well-connected partners smoothed over for him early on.

"One fainted. It was possible to blow up and die"

Blume traces his path from the Basque village where his mother was a dressmaker, through whom he was first exposed to fancy clients. By the time he arrived in Paris at forty-one, he was already a successful designer who had set up—and dissolved—several houses in Spain, where he would always keep his base. The Spanish Civil War—bad for shopping—triggered his move: "Like most craftsmen in luxury trades, Balenciaga was as conservative as his patrons and—as he showed later during the occupation of Paris—totally indifferent to politics." Blume says that the war years made Balenciaga "into the great couturier he became." He "mastered his craft" in his studio while *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* competed to promote him. As a Spanish citizen, he could import fabric from neutral Spain, spared the rationing that challenged Parisian glamour.

In 1943, when World War II was at its worst, Florette's sales were higher than in 1938. Blume deftly sketches the Vichy period, when "the word patriotism was stretched by all sides to the point where it made no sense." She tartly describes how "the French became both victims and accomplices" while accommodating the Germans, whose toilette and deference to French culture impressed them as so "correct." Florette's coping mode was chillingly typical, Blume writes: "The rule of the times, she says, was to say nothing and think nothing. . . . 'It was a question of work,' [Florette] finally said one day when I had asked one question too many. 'It may seem strange to you, but it was easier to work with the occupier than against.'"

Florette's wartime clientele included mistresses of Germans, wives of Vichy officials, wartime profiteers, and black marketers known as BOF (*beurre, oeufs, fromage*). Checking out the crowd at Lelong's, Dior said to Balmain: "Just think! All these women are going to be shot wearing Lelong dresses!" One client, the duchess from French *Vogue* whose husband was kidnapped by the Gestapo, spent months in solitary confinement wearing the beige Balenciaga she was arrested in. Bettina Ballard observed that "the Balenciaga dress she wore and slept in for months had, she reported, been cleaned and looked very good again." Though the duchess herself, unfortunately, resembled a ghost.

"Danièle, it's not your job to slim, it's my job to dress you so it can't be seen!"

Balenciaga's stuff was never merely "wearable" or "pretty" (the sculptural forms were difficult to pull off—or even to put on; the Duchess of Windsor kvetched that "he makes one pull everything over the head. It is ruinous to the hair"), but nevertheless a must-have for chic Parisians. He enjoyed the aesthetic challenge of the aging, stooped figure of a wealthy dowager. His standaway collars were kind to those with "no neck." The bloused back finessed the dowager hump, and "the unemphatic waistline permitted them 'to believe in a figure that perhaps they did not have.'" A dieting model who became faint at a fitting was told: "Danièle, it's not your job to slim, it's my job to dress you so it can't be seen!" The Master ordered her a *steak frites* and insisted she eat it.

While in 2006 one-third of the house's profits were made by the "It" bag, Balenciaga himself made accessories not as a profit leader but to complete a look. The echt "grown-up"-ness and luxury lifestyle of the Balenciaga client—people who schlepped with servants instead of carry-ons—were at odds with the '60s zeitgeist. Youth and democracy were in, and the dowager-friendly Balenciaga, a daily churchgoer (who designed a cassock for his parish priest), was gay but neither a hippie nor a swinger like YSL, who posed nude to sell his perfume. Balenciaga had done ready-to-wear early on in Spain, but he was ready to retire, and so he did in 1968, firing everyone, including Florette, by registered mail with no warning. *Voilà*.

To Givenchy, whom he teased as comme il faut, Balenciaga lived exquisitely but kept the simplicity of a chap born poor in a little village. "In no way part of the Paris scene and [with] no wish to be," Balenciaga, in Blume's telling, endlessly fusses over clothes, especially sleeves, which he would constantly redo, sometimes thrilling friends by asking to redo theirs on the spot. He was said to know nothing about art, but he did know antiques, loved flea markets, and made an excellent martini. Through telling bits of vintage gossip, we get the skinny on the master's fellow legends, from Vionnet to Dior to YSL, as well as the shoppers and pros who created the heyday of couture. Like a Balenciaga suit designed to skim the body rather than hug it, Blume's artful blend of history, reporting, and chat conjures the designer's world, if not the man himself. For that, one must consult his stuff. Givenchy fondly describes a breakfast tray that sums up "the truth of the man": "He never chose anything chi-chi. Everything had a huge force, a personality that was reflected in everything, because even the linen had a rough side. It wasn't Porthault, it was Balenciaga." Fabulous.

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