Balenciaga returns to couture after half-century hiatus

By Godfrey Deeny - 7 July 2021

The silence was intense at Balenciaga, for a show held without any soundtrack to mark the return of the great house to haute couture after over half a century. The applause, however, was resounding after the last of 63 sculpted and voluminous looks by Demna Gvasalia exited the show.

Staged inside the house’s recently restored historic home at 10 avenue George V, before an audience of barely 100, this was the hottest ticket of the season - and justly so.

Lewis Hamilton showed up in a surgical mask; Kanye West too, his head entirely covered in a silk face mask with a saber tiger print. Bella Hadid arrived out of breath just as the show was about to begin. That necessitated a little musical chairs to squeeze her into the front-row sat beside Hamilton. Lewis seemed very pleased.

The only noise in the entire show was the whoosh of a jet black dress made of shards of sequins, as the cast marched slowly on the carpeted floor of the showroom, where Cristobal Balenciaga would once have greeted favored clients.

In a co-ed show, the founder’s uber talented Georgian-born successor Gvasalia opened with a quartet of men’s suits and tuxedos in fresh wool, one worn on a woman, and all cut with enormous square shoulders and billowing pants, setting the scene and underlining the silhouette.
Before pairing several suits with giant padded silk satin cloaks, oddly described as stoles in the program notes, worthy of an opera diva or a medieval potentate.

Dashing houndstooth chesterfield coats that brushed the ankles; pagoda-shoulder, enveloping blazers; and three-sizes-too-big sack suits all looked so contemporary. Finished with vicuna turtle necks; trompe l’oeil tuxedo shirts and micro-logo ties the guys all appeared as very artistic gentlemen.

For women, molded and embroidered tweed bouclé cocktails cut like curvy chess pieces wowed, while a Jaffa-orange suit or a deconstructed trench-coat each came with men’s collars that sat three inches away from the neck. Perfectly judged proportions.

Due the pandemic, Gvasalia had over one year to work on this collection, which he called “pure luxury.”
Massive funnel necks; wildly dropped shoulders or elephantine volumes from Demna. So he certainly pushed the envelope when it came to exaggerated proportions, but it never tipped over into farce. His sense of hyperbole never got out of hand. His curvaceous forms and metallic finishes echoing the DNA of Balenciaga, though never too literally.

“Balenciaga is architecture. It is not design. It is not decoration. It is about architecture and the garment being the first layer on the body. So, I really didn’t have a choice especially in this house. But also this is my way of making clothes. Less embellishment, and more constructing around the human form, and giving it posture and attitude in a couture way that is sophisticated and elegant. Trying to put Cristobal's legacy and mine into one aesthetic,” Gvasalia told FashionNetwork.com.

Added Francois-Henri Pinault, CEO of Kering, Balenciaga’s owner: “Couture is the whole basis of Balenciaga. Its raison d’etre. So it makes so much sense to bring back couture, not to look back but to lead the way forward.”

Nor did he lose his sense of humor, since his newest leather bag - designed to look like a black and white boutique shopping bag - had great wit. Demna even called in the skills of Irish hatter Philip Treacy for several giant domed hats in black flocked velvet.
"My minute of silence was for the heritage of Cristobal Balenciaga, and also to honor the past and the legacy this house has. Also, a moment of silence just to shut up for fashion in general. To look itself in the mirror and say, 'what’s next?,'" added Demna, who in another first wore a tailored suit. Sourced from Savile Row’s Huntsman.

"For me it’s a new moment, a time to enter into something different in my life. Most people probably put me in a box as someone who designs hoodies and sneakers. And that’s really not who I am. So for me, it was really important to use this opportunity to show who I really am as a designer. This the manifestation of that. I hope!" he laughed.

Sometimes raw design talent conquers. It did today at Balenciaga, and the Paris’ season’s most compelling collection to date.