

## Exhibition Reviews

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***Balenciaga: Spanish Master*, Queen Sofía Spanish Institute, 684 Park Avenue, New York, NY. Exhibition Dates: 19 November 2010 - 19 February 2011<sup>1</sup>**

'Balenciaga: Spanish Master', curated by Vogue's European editor-at-large, Hamish Bowles, brings together a stunning display of the late fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga's couture from the 1930s to the 1960s. The exhibit not only highlights Balenciaga's creative and exacting genius by drawing on his various artistic inspirations, it marks the first in-depth study of the influence of his native Spain on his work, providing an intriguing insight into the relationship between the designer and his homeland, the country that provided so many cultural muses for the designer during his career at his Paris fashion house.

The exhibition immerses the viewer within the world of Balenciaga, with the striking use of objects, images, sound and film. It is the couturier as artist who is centre stage here, a point that is reinforced through the scale of the displays and the biographical elements of the exhibition's narrative. Upon entering the Institute, the spectator is immediately confronted with a large photograph of Balenciaga. Travelling through the exhibition, viewers will encounter the designer's artistic process and the final products of his imagination and artistic process, the numerous gowns, boleros, capes and cocktail dresses for which he is vividly remembered. However the exhibition brings more than a study of the material side of fashion, it brings into view those who wore Balenciaga's garments, locating the couturier amongst his clientele and the various societal spheres in which he was involved. In this way, the exhibition marvelously captures the rarefied, exclusive, and often eccentric, world of haute couture.

Each of the three exhibition spaces is artfully designed and the architecture of the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute lends to the grandeur of the exhibit. The space on the top floor features footage from Balenciaga's fashion shows in the 1960s, which gives life to the otherwise motionless garments on display. Seeing fashion 'performed' on film brings a vital dimension to couture exhibitions: the same effect was achieved in showing footage of the catwalk in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent Alexander McQueen exhibit and the new Cristóbal Balenciaga Museum in northern Spain also makes use of extensive catwalk footage.

A sense of the couturier's international success and reputation conveyed in this same gallery allows visitors to reflect upon Spain as a crossroads between the United States and the rest of Europe. Prominent images, books and magazines serve to contextualize his work and clearly assert the reasons behind the designer's success abroad. Large photographs present studio sketches from the Balenciaga archives in Paris and, when counterposed with the garments on display, contribute to an appreciation for the designer's artistic process from beginning to end: from the sketches to the finished product. Placing this process on display allows spectators to understand the amount of work that goes into making a couture garment.

The two other exhibition spaces display many of Balenciaga's fashions in large vitrines, and both spaces include lighting and music that create a visceral experience and contribute to the general mood of the exhibit narrative. In the main floor exhibition space, the lights are dimmed, while the fashions that hang on elegantly posed mannequins are well lit, becoming the focus of the spectator. In these spaces, the parallels established between artworks and the designer's fashions proves that fashion is a high art that requires tremendous skill, knowledge and inspiration, which is not always emphasized enough in haute couture exhibits.

Time periods are fused by design on various occasions, showing how the couturier subverted historical garments in the pursuit of something new. A metallic beaded 1966 cocktail dress turns out to be inspired by the armour of King Philip II (1527-1598). The 1939 'Infanta' dress achieves a similar fusion by creating a garment fit for a woman rather than the young Infanta Margarita featured in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). The fluid conversation that is created between time periods, fashions, and works of art demonstrates that the arts are involved in a constant dialogue that both transcends and complicates notions of linear time, thus generating new fields of inquiry for scholars in many areas of study.

Most striking is the juxtaposition between the glamorous, material world of haute couture and the austere, contemplative environment created by haunting Gregorian chants and the placement of a large photograph of a cathedral on the back wall. The photograph serves as a backdrop to the evening dresses that suggest nun's habits, a red evening coat that evokes a cardinal's chasuble and a wedding dress reminiscent of the sumptuous gowns created for the virgins who float atop the *pasos* during Holy Week in Spain. The label text explains that Balenciaga was inspired by the vestments of the Catholic church from an early age as an altar boy, and all of these garments and visual texts provide spectators with a sense that Catholicism is woven into many spheres of Spanish culture, even into the unexpected folds of Balenciaga's apparel.

While the main floor exhibition space reflects the more sacred aspects of Balenciaga's couture, the lower level displays a playful collection of polka-dot flamenco dresses and embroidered shawls, cocktail hats, intricate bullfighter costumes, elaborate gypsy outfits and the berets and sheepskin vests typical of the Basque Country. It is interesting that the latter are displayed along with the garments of southern Spain, since the various regions in the country are so distinctive, and the Basque Country is far removed from the accoutrements of Southern Spain. Large-scale photographs are again used as backdrops to create the ambiance, and both Spanish guitar music and passionate flamenco music pipes through the speakers, allowing one to imagine that the mannequins on the platform that mimics a *tabla* might begin to dance flamenco at any moment. The exhibit references all things Spain, from center to periphery, by featuring the unadorned white shirts worn by the Basque of Balenciaga's youth to billowy outfits that allude to the near eight century of the Moorish reign of Al-Andalus. Unfortunately, these peripheral cultures are somewhat lost in the trappings of more stereotypical albeit archetypal renderings of Spanish culture: flamenco, gypsy culture, Catholicism and bullfighting, which are more prominent due to the organization of the exhibit.

Another small criticism would be the way in which the exhibition draws attention to how the work of Spanish masters such as El Greco, Goya, Velázquez, Zurbarán and Murillo were influential in providing Balenciaga with inspiration. These artworks appear as small renderings on the otherwise tremendously informative label texts and may have been more compelling if the images of the artwork had been reproduced much larger. Otherwise, it creates a fascinating visual dialogue between the garments and the works of art, and this aspect of the exhibit is unique, since couture exhibits often mention designers' artistic inspirations in passing rather than placing them directly alongside the fashions on display.

Overall, Balenciaga's exquisite fashions thrive at the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute. His designs bring together a vast collection of the cultural shades of Spanish history and culture, enriching our understanding of both the art and the fashions on display. Most strikingly, the diverse character of Spain's past and present becomes particularly evident in this exhibit, which is something that cannot be underlined enough by everyone from Spaniards to scholars of Spain abroad. Such exhibitions might well be created more often, as linkages between periods and different types of artistic media give us a richer awareness of how the past informs present, and vice versa. The labour of communicating both the specificity of cultures while also avoiding generalities about them is one of the challenges of museums and educators. 'Balenciaga: Spanish Master' provides an example of how it is indeed possible to undertake this demanding task.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Another version of the exhibit, *Balenciaga and Spain* was on view at the deYoung Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco from 26 March 2011 - 4 July 2011.

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***Drawn to the Water: Artists of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Capture our Region's Waterways, 1830-Present, Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 15 April – 31 December 2011***

Situated at the confluence of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, Philadelphia boasts a rich maritime history. The city's Independence Seaport Museum (ISM) displays and interprets that history, maintaining one of the largest maritime collections in North America. The ISM comprises permanent and special exhibition galleries, a working wooden boat shop, a library and concert hall, as well as two National Historic Landmark ships docked nearby—the Spanish-American War Cruiser *Olympia*, and the World War II Submarine *Becuna*. In recent years, the ISM, like many maritime museums, has rethought its role in the cultural landscape. In addition to presenting artifacts related to traditional subjects like trade and shipbuilding, the museum goes further, particularly in its special exhibitions, to look at waterways as social and cultural spaces. The ISM's revised mission, according to President and CEO John Gazzola, of 'connecting Delaware River region residents to their maritime heritage, past, present, and future,' is the impetus for an exhibition of maritime-themed paintings that have not been studied for some time.

*Drawn to the Water* is the project of chief curator Craig Bruns, whose fine arts background piqued his interest in creating a show in partnership with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), the United States' first fine art academy and museum which loaned many of the works. For Bruns, the exhibition is a starting point for an unexplored area of art. The paintings represent a tradition of PAFA artists who have drawn inspiration from the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, as well as the southern coastline of neighboring New Jersey. *Drawn to the Water* brings into focus waterways that are seen and experienced on a regular basis by museum visitors and reveals how artists across time have developed a visual relationship with them.

As a whole, the artworks reveal how artists have captured and chronicled the timeless and changing waterways of the Philadelphia region. The show is organized in three sections by geographical location (Delaware River, Schuylkill River, and the Jersey Shore). Wall text and labels on softly coloured backgrounds become part of each picture. A large label accompanies each painting and includes information about the work, the artist, and his/her connection to PAFA. The label also provides a map to geographically locate each painting. The context is taken further by the inclusion of a contemporary work in each section painted during a *plein air* session organized by the museum. During the exhibition's run, three artists created works on location (two in Philadelphia, the other near a lighthouse in New Jersey). In this way, the ISM extended the museum in order to reach more people and engage them in the artistic process, making them witnesses to an important tradition. Back in the gallery, the final artwork is mounted with its accompanying text, plus a screen running digital images from the event. In keeping with the idea of reaching a broad audience, the exhibition's catalogue is a colouring sketchbook of various maritime sights in the region. The publication allows for wider dispersal and provides increased points on entry into the subject, encouraging visitors to further explore their maritime heritage.

Progress versus nature is a theme running throughout the exhibition, with industrialization and urbanization evident in many of the works. Some depict remnants of things past, as in Giovanni Martino's *Canal Bridge* (1946) where an automobile bridge has eclipsed a canal once vital to the economy of Manayunk, an industrial Philadelphia neighborhood. A wide, multi-lane thoroughfare fills Chris Nissen's *Delaware Avenue* (1980), where one hardly takes notice of the water.

The seaside of New Jersey is explored through a dramatic shipwreck painted by William Trost Richards in 1872 (the New Jersey coast was treacherously shallow at points and many shipwrecks occurred there). With a simplicity recalling Constable's cloudscapes, Giovanni Casadei depicts multiple views of piers at Ocean City (2007-2010) where holidaymakers (first brought long ago by train, and later, automobile) still enjoy the sea. From the outdoors the visitor is brought to the interior of Mitzi Melnicoff's 1971 canvas *Beach House*, a stylistic nod to Matisse and other modernists painters, in which two figures turn away from the harbour beyond their home's large glass windows, one absorbed in a newspaper, the other staring pensively. Here the water is a passive back-drop to vacationers enjoying modern comforts of being inside on a hot day, reminding visitors that they too at times may express a passive indifference to the waterways surrounding them.

In keeping with a mix of old and new, the Schuylkill River section contains both majestic and humble representations of this key waterway. Thomas J. Fenimore's *Schuylkill River* (1868) glows with a beauty of a landscape unmarred by technology, while Francis Speight's *Obstructed View* (1946) is just that—a railway line bisecting an industrial neighbourhood, blocking the view of a river whose canal system was eclipsed by the use of trains.

The Delaware River area brings visitors up close with one of American art's (and PAFA's) masters, Thomas Eakins. *Sailing* (circa 1875), is as educational as it is aesthetically pleasing. The soft brown ripples and the scattered sunlight are lovely, but we learn that the boat is a 'Delaware Ducker,' a type of skiff used for duck hunting along the river. The section also includes a long wall of paintings charting the Delaware's flow from Easton, Pennsylvania through to Philadelphia.

In a thoughtful and accessible manner adhering to their mission, the ISM has reexamined its regional maritime history not just through objects and their meanings, but in how artists continue to revisit and redefine our relationships with waterways. The museum effectively brings these works to our attention, places them in context, wedding art and maritime history. The interpretation and presentation strategies make visitors into active participants in how these waterways are perceived and imagined. One only has to be greeted by the Delaware when leaving the museum to understand this.