

An Evening Dress for Equal Rights

The '60s were a time of progressivity in both culture and fashion. Style vastly ranged from elegance to ruggedness, with clothing inspired by fashion icons like First Lady Jackie Kennedy, model Twiggy, and actress Edie Sedgwick. From Woodstock to the March on Washington, womenswear trends of the time centered around three main themes: elegance, youth, and hippie culture. Each of these influences can be found within Cristóbal Balenciaga's "Evening Dress" from the start of the decade, which features a rusty copper silk, boxy frame, and abstract print. These features not only encapsulate the stylistic tendencies of the '60s, like the production of garments in mustard yellow and various hues of orange, but also the socio-political-cultural movements occurring simultaneously. Balenciaga's design opened the doors of the fashion industry to the second wave of feminism.

Founding the House of Balenciaga in 1937, Balenciaga's innovative designs, as seen in the creation of the 1960 "Evening Dress," propelled a distinctive shift in women's fashion. From the assassinations of political leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and John Fitzgerald Kennedy to the start of social movements surrounding civil and gay rights, war opposition, feminism, and environmentalism, the 1960s witnessed an array of transformations. The '60s also birthed major fashion revolutions that coincided with these changes, and Cristóbal Balenciaga was at the forefront with his design.

This two-piece, consisting of an underskirt and pullover dress component, reflects an absolute metamorphosis of gender roles. Prior to the 1960s, specifically from the turn of the 1500s onward, women's fashion was laboriously restrictive. Starting in the French Courts of the 16th Century, styles centered around slim waists and wide hips, or hour-glass figures, which were only attainable with corsets and girdles. These garments were made from sharp,

uncomfortable, and downright dangerous materials such as whalebone, which could prick or impale its wearers, and buckram, a coarse linen stiffened by gum or paste. By the 1950s, corsets were made from less hazardous materials, like hardwearing cotton, though still constraining. The '60s, however, brought forth a rejection of unattainable cinched waists and stereotypically “feminine” silhouettes that preceded the time.

The boxy clothing that dominated the fashion scene of the '60s represented rebellion by breaking away from the conservative social norms of the '50s, which exhibited women as stay-at-home wives and mothers whose only skills applied in the kitchen. Balenciaga's showcase of the 1960 “Evening Dress” inspired other designers, like Hubert de Givenchy and Mary Quant, to move away from form-fitting compositions.

A surge of women entering the workforce, along with the numerous protests and rallies of the time, also challenged the gender roles set in place in the West. Though women were still confined to typically “female” careers: nursing, teaching, and assisting, they required clothing that fit these modern professional positions. Balenciaga's “Evening Dress” showcased a modest yet liberated manner that separated the '50s highly tailored and form-fitting clothing from the '60s loose and unconfined apparel.

The boxy shape of the top garment of the “Evening Dress” duo allows for movement, and the free-flowing pattern suggests independence with its abstract geometric forms. In terms of material, silk was not as easy to care for as more practical textiles, such as polyester and acrylic, but the fabric indicates elegance, one of the three major pillars of womenswear in the 1960s.

The adoption of boxy-styled clothing in the 1960s by major fashion houses like Balenciaga furthered the sociocultural movements of the time, most specifically the feminist movement. Balenciaga's distinctive design of the 1960 “Evening Dress” stemmed from various

sociocultural, political, and artistic influences of both the '50s and '60s. High-fashion models and significant political figures, like Jackie Kennedy, even went on to wear his contemporary creations in later years, which skyrocketed his influence over the fashion industry and, thus, over the world. His work was about much more than selling clothes and curating fashion shows. His modern designs reflected the rejection of traditional, conservative gender roles and other societal norms forced upon women. The shape, texture, and design of Balenciaga's "Evening Dress" expressed the social change required to obtain liberation and the freedom of expression that women in America have today.