Title: Copying a Master: London Wholesale Couture and Cristóbal Balenciaga in the 1950s

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Abstract

Cristóbal Balenciaga is widely recognised as one of the leading twentieth century couturiers. His dynamic designs redefined fashionable silhouettes internationally. This paper will consider the impact of his designs in Britain, focusing upon how London wholesale couturiers copied, adapted and took inspiration from his garments. The majority of London wholesale couturiers' garments were copied or adapted from Parisian haute couture. They modified these designs to meet ready-to-wear manufacturing techniques, producing high-quality garments targeted at a middle-class consumer. By focusing on two silhouettes introduced in the late 1950s; the sack and baby doll, this paper discusses how these firms translated Balenciaga's designs. The sack, in particular, was rapidly adapted by London wholesale couturiers who managed to successfully modify it for the ready-to-wear market. By drawing on a range of source material, including original garments, newspaper and magazine editorials, this paper will evaluate how Balenciaga's design aesthetic was translated by wholesale couturiers for consumption by a middle-class public in the 1950s.

Keywords

Wholesale Couture; Cristobal Balenciaga; Frederick Starke; Copying; Haute Couture

Introduction

Cristóbal Balenciaga is widely recognised as one of the leading twentieth century couturiers. His dynamic designs redefined fashionable silhouettes internationally. This paper will consider the impact of his designs in Britain, focusing upon how London wholesale couturiers copied, adapted and took inspiration from his garments. Whilst many fashion manufacturers in Britain could be defined as wholesale couturiers, the focus here is on a select few firms who were known to have copied Balenciaga and were members of either the London Model House Group or Fashion House Group; Frederick Starke, Koupy, Polly Peck and Frank Usher. These firms were chosen because they all created 'line-for-line' copies of Parisian couture and were highly regarded for their copying and adaptation skills, with garments by each regularly featuring in British fashion editorials. This paper draws on a range of source material to assess how closely such firms copied Balenciaga's designs and how these were presented to British consumers. The British editions of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* were particularly key to this research- all issues published between 1950 and 1960 were searched for wholesale couture copies of Balenciaga's design in order to assess the presentation of such garments, the fabrics used and their cost to the general public.

Copying was an essential part of the Parisian haute couture system and unquestionably couturiers expected to be copied. As an article in the *Aberdeen Evening Telegraph* suggested "to the French […] not to be bought or copied is a sign of dire failure" (January 24, 1961). This quotation indicates that aside from the artistry of Parisian haute couture it was first and foremost, certainly in the 1950s and 1960s, a business venture. This was a time when ready-to-wear, as produced by these couture houses, was still in its infancy. Indeed, the general public often 'consumed' the designs of haute couturiers through copies produced by ready-to-wear companies. It must be recognised that wholesale couturiers were an important part of the wider haute couture system, their purchase of models or toiles to be copied provided vital income for haute couture houses in a period of significantly reduced private clients.

Systems of legally copying Parisian designs existed in other countries (notably in America) and have been discussed by Palmer (2001 and 2009), Okawa (2008) and Pouillard (2018), yet there has been little scholarly attention on the British contribution. Indeed, wholesale couture, which blended Parisian design with British craftmanship, was a uniquely British phenomenon, carrying a cultural cachet internationally thanks to this British craftmanship.

Starke highlighted this international desire for British garments, suggesting that in North America there was "an increasing demand for the snob value of an imported label and the urge to buy something which is not to be found in every shop in the high street" (*Women's Wear Daily*, July 21, 1965). Wholesale couture pieces were produced in fairly large numbers and many garments exceeded runs of 500 pieces, as such, garments by these firms do survive and provide a glimpse into how Parisian couture was consumed by the general public.

Wholesale Couture

Wholesale couturiers operated at the very pinnacle of the British ready-to-wear trade. The majority of their garments were copied or adapted from Parisian couture. However, these designs were modified to meet ready-to-wear manufacturing techniques in Britain. They focused on high quality production, using the best fabrics possible and incorporated hand finished details. The designs were carefully monitored for profits. Sybil Zelker of Polly Peck, a firm which straddled wholesale couture and medium range production, suggested that it took a run of around 300 dresses to justify the expense of buying a Paris original to copy (*Picture Post*, April 23, 1955). On average, Wholesale couturiers' garments were produced in runs of between, 100-500 pieces and manufactured in standardised sizes (typically a 10-18). Surprisingly, they occasionally produce bespoke pieces for special clients including dancers, film stars and magazine editors. For example, in 1952 Starke made a bespoke suit for Rosemary Cooper, editor of *Vogue Book of British Exports (*BBC Written Archive: T17/122).

Wholesale couturiers were largely based in the heart of London's Mayfair with opulently decorated showrooms. Their garments were stocked in the 'model' rooms of department stores across the country and in smaller exclusive boutiques and "madam shops." Janey Ironside suggested that madam shops were small "good" shops "found in greater London as well as provincial high streets." The clientele for such stores were "well-to-do local women" who relied upon the taste of the Madam store owner to make their fashion choices (Ironside, 1963, 47). These shops sold "the best" Paris garments alongside British wholesale couture (Scott James, 1952, 60). It is important to note that wholesale couturiers did not retail their own garments.

Garments by wholesale couturiers sold internationally. Leading department stores including David Jones (Australia), T. Eaton (Canada) and Bonwit Teller (United States) stocked their products and ran advertising campaigns that marketed and featured these firms' recognisable names. Indeed, the garments of London wholesale couturiers were particularly popular in North America and Australia. Alexandra Palmer has suggested that in Canada, London couture was considered a "safe buy, as the less extreme designs and lower price tag suited English Canadians' taste as well as their pro-British colonialist sentiments" (2001, 23). Arguably the same can be said for London wholesale couture, particularly in terms of the suits, coats or what might be considered 'day' collections produced by the firms. Whilst the designs were largely copied or adapted from Parisian couture, international consumers still valued these garments for their, supposed, "Britishness" with a focus on high quality fabric. American buyers, as the *British Vogue Export Book* (no.5 1949,80) reported, "welcomed designs on classic lines yet embodying Paris inspired details; fabrics of super British quality yet geared to American living."

Garments by wholesale couturiers were retailed at a variety of price points. In 1958 for example the fashion journalist, Jean Soward, reported that garments by Frederick Starke (who was amongst the most expensive wholesale couturiers at the time) retailed at between 5 ½ gns and £80 (*News Chronicle*, June 23, 1958). The majority of wholesale couture firms offered a standard wholesale couture line, featuring garments closely copied from Parisian couture, alongside a cheaper, youth targeted line.

In Britain, wholesale couturiers' main line garments were targeted primarily at a middle-class consumer. This can be seen through advertisements and editorials that appeared in fashion magazines such as *Vogue, Tatler, Harper's Bazaar* and *Country Life*. Editorials indicate that these garments were affordable pieces within the reach of many women. Yet, advertisements positioned these garments as luxuries. Unlike most medium and mass producers, wholesale couturiers' advertising did not typically include the price of garments, adding a sense of exclusivity to them. This mirrored the way Parisian couture was advertised in French magazines such as *L'Officiel*, where the price of the garment was not stated. Advertising copy emphasised wholesale couturiers' position within the market. For example, a Starke advertisement in *Tatler* (May 9, 1951) suggested that his garments were "to be found wherever fine clothes are sought and bought."

Editorial copy highlighted that wholesale couture suits in particular were targeted at the modern, middle-class professional, educated working woman. An article discussing successful advertising appearing in the trade journal *Fashion and Fabrics Overseas* (January-February 1949) suggested that;

> The professional woman can see herself in most of these advertisements […] These women are doctors, business people, barristers, solicitors and welfare workers. Their main interests are in their work. But they are discerning about good clothes. The professional woman pays well for what she buys and at her best is the ideal customer. She will buy a complete ensemble, is trained to appreciate expert opinion and looks for sound advice on her clothes.

Overall, these were garments that were suited to the lives of busy working women, who did not have time for fittings but wanted high-quality clothing that put across the right professional image. These were women with their own income, who could afford these higher priced copies. It can be seen, through the comments of some wholesale couturiers, that such firms were also trying to capture an upper-class market and as the 1950s progressed many wholesale couturiers' main lines were seen as viable alternatives to London couture. Starke proposed in 1958 that 'the day of the private couturier and astronomical prices is over […] The future and reputation of Britain's fashions in world markets will stand or fall by her ready-to-wear manufacturers" (*News Chronicle*, June 23, 1958).

By the 1950s wholesale couturiers had also recognized the importance of the youth market and many produced cheaper, youth targeted lines, for example, Fredrica (Fredrick Starke), Atrima (Rima) and Marcusa (W&O Marcus). Garments from these lines were not so precisely copied but still had the essence of Paris. This would be seen in style details such as applied decoration or sleeve shape. They were made up in cheaper fabrics and were not finished to such an exacting standard, often lacking recognizable "quality" elements, such as linings.

Designing Wholesale Couture

Copying Parisian couture must be regarded as a complex process and required both excellent design skills and, ideally, a photographic memory. Typically, representatives of London

wholesale couture firms (generally this meant the company director/ head designer accompanied by an assistant designer) would travel to Paris between two and four times a year, in order to view the haute couture collections. Wholesalers would only view a small number of collections because, for professional manufacturers the price to view them was prohibitive (Ironside, 1963, 30). In the early 1950s most Parisian couturiers charged around £200 for London wholesalers to view their shows (See: *Daily Mail*, September 25, 1951 and *Daily Mail,* September 7, 1956). Balenciaga's general fee to wholesalers was higher than any other Parisian couturier at the time. In 1958 fashion journalist Maureen Williamson suggested that wholesalers had to pay an entrance fee of £1000 to view a Balenciaga show. She argued that Balenciaga could charge this amount because "[he] is the arbiter of world fashion. He can afford to play hard to get, for as he is always in the avant garde […] it is imperative for any high-fashion house […] to know what he is up to" (*Tatler*, September 24, 1958). The prohibitive cost of Balenciaga's shows meant that not all London wholesalers could afford to see them. In many ways Balenciaga operated differently to other couturiers, he would not court the press in the same way other couturiers would and from 1956 Balenciaga did not follow the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne's programme of shows, presenting his collection one month later in the season than the majority of other Parisian couturiers. This meant London wholesale firms had to make a return visit to Paris in order to view his collections. Lesley Ellis Miller (2017,22) has suggested that "his refusal to show his collections at the same time as the other couturiers after 1956, resulted in more not less press coverage." This combination of factors set Balenciaga apart, and arguably copying his designs therefore offered a form of prestige for wholesalers. It demonstrated that those firms who copied him were both financially successful and able to keep up with the latest modes.

In the early 1950s London wholesale couturiers favoured Parisian couturiers included Fath, Dior, Balmain, Givenchy and Balenciaga. However, as the 1950s progressed London wholesale couturiers were increasingly viewing a more diverse range of Parisian shows. In 1958 for example Starke suggested that he was also viewing the collections of both Lanvin-Castillo and Pierre Cardin (*Tatler*, September 24, 1958). This was part of an increasing shift towards younger designers as well as less expensive admission fees. However, it should be noted that Balenciaga's designs retained popularity with London wholesale couturiers into the 1960s because he continued to design avant garde silhouettes which could be copied and adapted by London wholesale couturiers in multiple ways.

The entrance fee wholesalers paid operated as a deposit against the purchase of models or toiles and Parisian couturiers typically offered four ways to purchase models. The wholesaler could purchase an example of the garment (the 'model'), a calico toile, a third or quarter scale model, or a paper pattern. Models and toiles were sold with detailed information regarding component parts, materials and trimmings which would have assisted wholesale couturiers with making copies as close to the original as possible. (*The Times*, March 1, 1965). Miller has suggested that Balenciaga did not sell models in the form of paper patterns, because "he felt they did not adequately demonstrate how the garment was constructed nor the quality of the components" (2007, 73). Toiles were an intermediate option, and still an expensive outlay. In 1955 Cynthia Judah stated that a toile cost wholesale couturiers' on average "£100 or so" (*Picture Post*, April 23, 1955). Balenciaga's toiles were more expensive, and in 1958 the £1000 entrance fee gave buyers the "privilege of buying two toiles" (*Tatler*, September 24, 1958).

Wholesale couturiers could also buy the original model to copy. This was the most expensive option, however it provided them with the most comprehensive information regarding the garment itself. For those copying Balenciaga it was certainly advantageous to buy the original model as the construction of his garments was typically so complex. As fashion journalist Felicity Green, suggested "trying to copy a Balenciaga garment without an actual pattern is like trying to knit a fair isle sweater in the dark" (*Daily Mirror*, March 14, 1964).

It should be noted that the wholesaler paid more for the original model from the couture house than both the private buyer (who bought the garment to wear) and the department store buyer (who also purchased with the intention of copying- but generally in smaller runs, with the copied garments often made-to-measure). In 1954 a private client would pay 130,000 francs (£130) for a woollen suit from Balenciaga, whilst a department store paid 265,000 francs (£270). Wholesalers paid as much as £1000-£1500 for the same item (Miller, 2007, 73). In addition to the purchase price, wholesalers had to pay purchase tax and customs duty in order to import the garment into Britain. This often added half again onto the price of a garment, meaning a dress seeming to cost £1000 would eventually cost more like £1500 (Settle, 1963, 37). For these reasons it was only possible for wholesale couturiers to buy a small number of models to copy.

Whilst copying was largely a legal endeavour, Parisian couturiers were keen to deter wholesalers copying from memory. This meant that during the shows wholesalers were not permitted to sketch and were able to make only scant notes. If designers were caught sketching they were liable to have their notebooks confiscated and be banned from viewing future shows. Garments were however certainly copied and reproduced from memory, and as Cynthia Judah suggested “some of the most faithful and successful copies and adaptations are those whose cut has been analysed and carried home in someone’s head” (*Picture Post,* April 23, 1955). It was absolutely vital to wholesale couturiers that they could copy some of the models shown from memory, in order to get their monies worth when viewing the shows. As Starke suggested, “nobody in his right senses would pay £700 for just one model but what we see and remember of a show make it worthwhile” (*The Times*, March 1, 1965). Indeed, wholesalers typically bought no more than four garments from each couturier, yet as there were generally more than 75 models shown there was far more design inspiration to be taken home from these shows.

There were also other more precarious ways of both copying and purchasing models. Judah suggested that in order to try and reduce costs some firms would send a representative disguised as a private customer**.** “They may allay suspicion by actually buying something to wear personally. But their position is as perilous as a tightrope walkers” (*Picture Post,* April 23, 1955). This would enable the representative both to purchase an actual couture model at a lower price, and also memorise some of the designs shown. This was however illegal, and could result in the firm being stopped from making future purchases and viewing the shows of that couturier (See: Palmer, 2001, 62-75).

Wholesale couturiers produced multiple versions of the models they had seen and purchased in Paris. From precise copies, to garments that bore little resemblance to the Paris originals other than in small details such as pocket flaps, button placement and strap style. Typically, London wholesale couturiers produced at least one “line-for-line” copy- a garment almost indistinguishable from the original (*Sunday Times,* May 17, 1959). Iris Ashley suggested of such copies that:

> In many cases you would have to see the original French model alongside the British version before you could be sure of the difference. Even then it is often only a matter of the fullness in the underskirts, the material of the dress being identical (*Daily Mail*, September 22, 1950).

In a later article Ashley provided a clear example of how such purchasing and copying worked:

> Mr Kuperstein of Koupy who pay around £2,000 each season to buy from Balenciaga, brings home each year three or four original suits, coats and dresses[…] This season he brought back a black short evening dress in Seker wool-chiffon. The identical dress in the same fabric will sell for less than a tenth of the original (*Daily Mail*, September 15, 1958).

In both of these articles Ashley describes the dresses as ‘identical’ although there would have unquestionably been some differences between the garments. Whilst the exterior appeared to be remarkably similar, the difference was likely in the interior construction and the fact that wholesale couture pieces were made to standardised sizes. Certainly, many firms were able to use the same fabrics as the Parisian couture garments (when originally shown in Paris). It seems likely they were able to do this because they were buying fabric in bulk, which ensured good prices. It is interesting to note that London wholesale couturiers often used either French or Swiss fabric for their eveningwear during the 1950s- like the Parisian couturiers, yet daywear and suits were generally made up in British fabric. This relates in part to the strong reputation of British woollen and tweed manufacturers. Using British fabrics ensured garments could be offered at lower prices, at there was not tax and import duties to pay on fabric coming from Europe. This, aside from more complex deisgns, is one of the reasons why daywear garments were generally retailed at lower prices than those for evening.

Prices for copies of Parisian couture made in London varied dramatically, depending on the manufacturers, fabric used and the number of garments produced. Understandably more expensive wholesale couture models bore closer resemblance (in terms of their construction particularly) to the Paris originals, as Judah suggested; “the more a maker-up can charge for a garment, the more and better the material, labour and finish he puts into it can be” (*Picture Post*, April 23, 1955).

It is challenging to do a like for like comparison of the price charged for a wholesale couture copy versus a Balenciaga original. Although on average it appears that wholesale couture garments cost around one-tenth of the price Balenciaga charged for the original garment. Ashley suggested in 1950 that the price from a "top" Parisian couturier was "anything up to £150 for a day dress and up to £500 for a lavish evening affair" (*Daily Mail*, September 22, 1950) (See also: Miller, 2017, 120). In Britain daywear copies by London wholesale couturiers typically retailed at under twenty guineas and eveningwear copies were often priced between 30 and 60 guineas. Many of those garments priced over 30 guineas were made up using the original fabric seen in Paris. For example, in December 1958 two evening dresses appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*, clearly influenced by Balenciaga. One by wholesaler Koupy cost 32gns and the other by Frederick Starke was priced at 38gns (a Balenciaga dress with an almost identical silhouette had appeared on the front cover of the November 1958 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*). The fabric manufacturer of the Koupy dress was not mentioned, however the Starke dress was made in bronze satin by Abraham of Zurich, one of the fabric manufacturers whom Balenciaga used the most.

'Line-for-line' copies were a key feature of wholesale couturiers' production, however each design purchased was expected to be adapted into more than one garment. An article appearing in *The Times* on October 19, 1959 suggested that Dorville had purchased just one Balenciaga suit and this had been used as the inspiration for a coat, a dress and two suits. Christopher Carr-Jones of Susan Small indicated that his company would expect to get about eight to ten derivatives from each Balenciaga model they purchased and reproduce each of these derivatives 400-500 times (Miler, 2007, 89). It can be seen therefore, that whilst Balenciaga's designs were expensive for wholesale couturiers to purchase, they were undeniably cost-effective as they could be copied and adapted in so many different ways.

The process of turning a Paris original into one for the London ready-to-wear market was a challenging one. It required an understanding of Parisian couture alongside international expectations of British ready-to-wear. Those who adapted Parisian couture needed a good eye for what garments were possible to make in large numbers, where precision fit was not totally essential. As Judah suggested, "whatever the price, a good Paris copy has to be carefully converted for the home market. It has to be wearable, which a direct re-make of a model-

dependent on expert individual cutting and fitting- could scarcely ever be. And it has to keep a new, provocative and even alien look to it" (*Picture Post,* April 23, 1955).

Copies of Parisian couture reached British shops within varying time frames. Some firms were able to get copies out to stores within six weeks of the Paris shows. However, other manufacturers copies appeared up to nine months after they were first shown (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, August 19, 1954). If copying from memory, Wholesale couturiers could return to London and begin work on adaptations of the garments they had seen straight. Most, however, would have to wait for their original Paris models, toiles or patterns to arrive before they could begin work- on average these would arrive in Britain three to four weeks after the show (Wray, 1953, 29). Copies could take a long time to reproduce if the process of adapting for mass manufacture was complex, and if a number of toiles needed to be made before putting the garment into production. Once produced, the garment had to be shown to the press and buyers, appropriate promotion planned, and finally delivered to stores.

Some firms were able to get copies out very quickly. Fashion journalist Katherine Whitehorn suggested that the company, Wallis:

> [Could] get Paris copies into their windows in a matter of weeks- and I don't just mean, as more 'reputable' manufacturers imply, some tatty gimmick-ridden rag in poor materials; but excellent coats and […] dresses worked from the original toile or cotton working model. They do this, they say, by having their own factory (*Spectator,* November 6, 1959).

In the mid to late 1950s, Wallis were certainly unusual. Whilst the company was established in 1923, it was from 1957 onwards, under the leadership of Jeffery Wallis that the company began to produce such fast adaptations of Paris originals. Wallis had their own stores and relied on factory production, both of which arguably enabled them to get products out much quicker. Slow production was a problem that hampered the British wholesale couture sector. Whilst some firms did have their own factories in the late 1950s many were still relying on outworkers for much of their production. Whilst this reduced overheads it did tend to slow production down. Increasingly however the speed at which wholesale couture copies were produced accelerated, particularly during the 1960s. This was in part owing to the desire for American business. In order to compete in the American market, quick production was essential, this was because American ready-to-wear manufacturers produced their copies very

quickly, able to get them out in shops within a few weeks. British manufacturers had to offer similarly fast production if they wanted to sell their garments to American stores (*Women's Wear Daily,* April 11, 1961).

Copying Balenciaga

Balenciaga was widely admired by London wholesale couturiers, and particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s was amongst the most copied Parisian couturiers (*Birmingham Daily Post*, September 17, 1962). The London wholesale couturiers Ann Gibbs (Jaeger), Jean Allen and Frederick Starke all regarded him as their 'favourite' couturier (*Daily Express*, January 14, 1958, *Woman and Beauty*, June 1961 and *The Gazette*, January 21, 1959). However, this predilection for Balenciaga must be considered in the context of his prohibitively expensive shows and the complexity of his designs. Certainly, it was challenging to correctly copy a Balenciaga garment so that the original silhouette was not diluted. As an article in the *Birmingham Daily Post* (March 1, 1958) put it his designs were "deceptively simple on the eye but extremely hard to copy."

There were many reasons why wholesalers copied and adapted Balenciaga's designs. Gibbs suggested, "buy a coat from him and you've got a fashionable line for years. I'm still running one that I bought from him five years ago. I can't drop it- people keep asking for it" (*Daily Express*, January 14, 1958). Starke agreed suggesting that he was drawn to Balenciaga's designs because he "doesn't make a violent change every six months. It's an evolution" (*The Gazette*, January 21, 1959). As Miller has suggested (2017, 128) similar elements appeared in Balenciaga's designs for two or three seasons, this meant that patterns could be used by wholesale couturiers more than once. Furthermore, wholesalers unquestionably copied Balenciaga because his designs were considered ahead of the fashionable silhouette, a number of articles indicating that he was up to three seasons (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, November 12, 1959)- or even three years ahead of it. His garments not only inspired wholesale couturiers, but other Parisian couturiers too. An article in the *Hampshire Telegraph* (July 25, 1958) suggested that:

> All the latest fashion trends can be traced to Balenciaga […] Three years ago he showed knee-high skirts, loose fitting sacks, puff-ball dresses, chemises and the 'baby doll' look- at a time when all the other couturiers were going in

> for clearly defined waists and lots of belts. And then this spring, the ‘popular’ designers took up Balenciaga’s three-year-old ideas- and now they’re current fashion.

Balenciaga’s designs were also praised by the British fashion press and the fashion journalist Patricia Latham, whose articles appeared in the *Birmingham Daily Post,* wrote often of her admiration for his designs. She suggested that he was the “greatest designer of them all […] who has been unrivalled for many a long year.” She went on to write that “his clothes are coveted, his cut is without parallel, and his beautiful sense of timing only confirms that he alone is in tune with present day needs” (Mach 15, 1963). This popularity of Balenciaga with the fashion press consequently meant that copies of his garments were more likely to receive coverage.

One of Balenciaga’s most copied designs was the ‘sack’, a garment he began to develop from 1956 onwards. The sack was however a controversial design, receiving mixed press internationally. As Angela Regis suggested (*Bognor Regis Observer*, November 29, 1957) “Never has a fashion been so widely copied, discussed, admired and criticised as the ‘sack.’” London wholesale couturiers eagerly adapted the sack, producing versions in all manner of fabrics and suited to both day and evening. The press referred to these garments in different ways describing them as; shifts, straight chemises, tunic effect dresses, and of course, sacks. However, Balenciaga’s sack silhouette was not universally popular in Britain. In particular, the design did not win total favour with department store buyers who were wholesale couturiers’ main customers. It was challenging to get these buyers to purchase copies of Balenciaga’s garments which hung loosely from the body, creating shapes of their own, rather than tightly hugging the body of the wearer. In the late 1950s it was still, particularly outside of London, the Dior New Look silhouette that was preferred with fitted waist and full, or pencil slim skirt. Whitehorn suggested (*Spectator*, November 6 ,1959) that it was “waist not, want not in the provinces.”

Another reason why some buyers were reluctant to purchase sacks for their stores related to quality and the standard of the copies. An article in the *Bognor Regis Observer* (November 29, 1957) suggested that;

> Within a few weeks of its first appearance in Paris, […] manufacturers all over the world were turning out their own interpretations […] so quickly and so cheaply that by now most people think of it as two shapeless pieces of fabric joined together at the side-seams, hideously unflattering to any figure.

Starke, a wholesale couturier who created many line-for-line copies, agreed. He blamed "shoddy manufacture for the slating that the new fashions often receive." Williamson went on to suggest in the same article that:

> It is understandably galling for manufacturers who spend thousands of pounds a year to attend the Paris collections, and buy original models so that they can reproduce them with the correct cut, to see the cheap pirated misshapen imitations that are mass-produced (*Tatler*, September 24, 1958).

Indeed, this was a problem with the adaptation of Balenciaga's designs because the apparent simplicity of garments like the sack meant that garment manufacturers at all levels were keen to re-create them. However, without the original pattern it was challenging for manufacturers to re-create Balenciaga's silhouette.

One of the most faithful copies of the classic Balenciaga woollen sleeveless sack was produced by Starke. An article in *Queen* (January 7, 1958) described it as "Balenciaga-inspired, the shift dress for day in pure wool. The fullness is concentrated at the back, falling from the shoulders, the front fastening from neck to hem with outsize flat wooden buttons." Apart from the colour this design appears to be identical to a Balenciaga sack from 1957 held by the Museo Cristobal Balenciaga. One of the most accurate details of the dress is the curved yoke that runs around the back of the dress. This ensures the dress stands away from the body, as the Balenciaga original does. The *Queen* article also featured another "Balenciaga-inspired" dress by Starke- a "loose black lace shift over a fitted black taffeta sheath, caught just below the knee with a ribbon." This garment was also clearly copied from a garment featured in Balenciaga's Autumn/Winter 1957 collection. A photograph of the original Balenciaga dress appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* (U.S. edition, November 1957). This article describes the dress as a "straight chemise of deep black Marescot lace over a fitted undersheath, caught low with a ribbon." From the photographs of the dresses it is difficult to tell how precise the copy was. It appears that the Balenciaga version was made from a much

denser lace, however the silhouette is very similar. The Starke version has a slight flounce to the hem, and the Balenciaga dress does not. However, this difference may be because the Balenciaga lace used was heavier and did not sit in the same way. The Starke version was priced at 19 ½ guineas, at the time this was a fairly low price for a Starke eveningwear copy of a Parisian couture piece. It can be conjectured that the price was low because Starke had not used the same fabric.

During the 1950s Balenciaga experimented with a number of other silhouettes that stood away from the body, creating shapes of their own. These include the balloon, bubble, cocoon and baby doll. The baby doll silhouette first appeared in 1957. One example, produced for Autumn/Winter 1958, had a black crepe de chine fitted sheath underdress. On top was a short sleeved very fine semi-transparent black lace baby doll overdress. This dress was wide and flared, creating a trapeze shape. It had a low waist with a gathered skirt made up of at least two tiers of lace. The dress was accented with a large satin bow on both the dropped waistline and at the neckline. This dress is a clear example of Balenciaga's experimentation with shape and body proportions and there is a playfulness to the combination of a skin-tight underdress and a very loose and voluminous overdress. Indeed, there is something quite childlike about the proportions of the design, yet equally the tightly fitted underdress shows off the woman's figure beneath.

This line was adapted by London wholesale couturiers in both their Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter collection in 1958. In April 1958 Frank Usher's adaptation of this Balenciaga dress was featured in *Harper's Bazaar*. This dress, like Balenciaga's, featured a tightly fitted black sheath underdress. However, in the Frank Usher example the overdress is strapless, described as a "curtain of dotted net." This dress again has a dropped waistline and features an accent bow detail. However, the bow appears to be on the sheath in the Frank Usher example, rather than on the overdress. Whilst still an effective design, this is not so dramatic as the Balenciaga original.

Balenciaga produced a number of versions of the baby doll, using different fabrics to create slightly different silhouettes. One example, produced in 1958, was made from ivory silk taffeta with a floral print in deep pink. The dress had short sleeves and formed a trapeze line. The bodice finished at approximately hip level with a full skirt beneath. The dress was accented with a large bow on the skirt made from the same fabric. Starke made at least two

garments which were based on this design for his Autumn/Winter 1958 collection. These both had the essence of Balenciaga's baby doll but displayed some differences. One version, designed for evening, was sleeveless with a lower waist than the Balenciaga version. It was made from oyster satin scattered with embroidered gold leaves. The fabric used was designed by Montex of Paris, a company that produced some of the finest embroidered textiles in Paris at the time. Starke also created a coat which was based on the baby doll design. The silhouette was similar, with its dropped waist almost at thigh length. The coat was made from a ribbed silk, featuring a floral pattern in sapphire, grey and black. This fabric was made by Abraham's of Zurich. Miller (2007, 93) has suggested that Abraham was one of Balenciaga's "closest collaborators." Starke's coat was priced at £52 and his evening dress at 54 guineas. Both garments significantly higher in price than the lace dress previously discussed. This demonstrates the uplift in prices of wholesale couture garments when fabrics similar or perhaps identical to the couturiers were used. Neither article suggests that these pieces are copied or adapted from Balenciaga, however the influence of his baby doll dress is clear. Overall these two examples clearly follow Balenciaga's aesthetic but are subtly different. Notably neither feature bows, which most of Balenciaga's late 1950s baby doll dresses included. This was likely a matter of Starke's own personal preferences. He stated in a number of interviews his preference for 'extreme simplicity […] plus good proportion" (*Daily Mail*, May 5, 1960).

Whilst these examples are very close adaptations of Balenciaga's designs sometimes the details adapted from Balenciaga were more subtle- Spanish influences in flamenco hems, pop-poms and black lace, or in the choice of colours- following Balenciaga's preference for brown, black and bright highlights of pink, for example. Overall, it is much easier to trace how wholesale couturiers adapted Balenciaga's eveningwear silhouettes. However, as magazine articles are testament to (See: *Country Life*, October 1, 1958 and October 9, 1958) London wholesale couturiers certainly adapted Balenciaga's silhouettes for day too. One Starke suit for example, featured in the *Daily Mail* (alongside a number of other copies of couture) was described as follows;

> These are not identical copies from the Paris collections, but each one is unmistakably influenced by the very latest news from the French capital. We have reported to you from Paris a suit of which the jacket is moulded to body in front and hangs straight at

> the back (Balenciaga) Here you see London's versions on these themes. On the left a stone tweed suit has brown and white overchecks (*Daily Mail,* September 25, 1951).

Often these daywear garments are harder to identify as being Balenciaga inspired because the silhouettes are not so dramatic, but certainly the influence of Balenciaga can be seen in wholesale couturiers' collections of day dresses, suits and coats throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

Marketing and Consuming Wholesale Couture

Between the 1940s and 1960s the British fashion press repeatedly highlighted the significance of London wholesale couturiers to the British public, demonstrating that it was through them that the Parisian couture aesthetic was consumed. For example, Joy Matthews (*Daily Express*, January 14, 1958) stated that;

> I've been talking to the people who matter as much to you as the Paris designers, the people who between them produce millions of coats, dresses, suits and skirts every year in Great Britain- the clothes that are sold in the shops all over the country. The clothes that YOU wear […] Whatever the Paris geniuses have in store for us this Spring, it is what these men and women buy, what catches their eye, what they like or dislike that shapes your fashion future.

This quote must be understood in the context of the dominance of Parisian fashion in the 1950s, whereby lines were dictated from Paris each season. For this reason, a good adaptation of a Paris original carried a cultural capital of its own, demonstrating that the wearer was knowledgeable about the latest silhouettes from Paris.

This celebration of Paris modes must be seen in contrast with how some of the British fashion press viewed London couturiers, particularly the members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers. Articles praised their choice of colours, fabric and excellent workmanship but suggested that their designs were "monumentally dull." Claire Hardie, writing for the *Liverpool Echo* (August 6, 1957) suggested that "Unlike Paris, London's big designers don't design with you and me in mind. They have a mental picture of the regular client, a tiara's lady or at least one on a grouse-moor." Indeed, as the article went

on to suggest by the late 1950s many of what were considered the “best dressed” women in Britain (the article notes the Duchess of Kent and Duchess of Argyll) bought ready-to-wear copies of Paris models which were “superbly made” by British wholesale houses. This seemed to be an opinion generally held by fashion columnists for local and daily newspapers. Ready-to-wear couture copies, I argue, better fitted into the lives of fashionable working women, like newspaper columnists.

During the 1950s and 1960s fashion magazines and newspapers enthusiastically included the copies and adaptations of London wholesale couturiers within their pages. Sometimes articles made clear that such garments were copies of Paris originals with article headlines such as “From Paris to Your Local Shop” (*Times*, October 19, 1959) and “Hints for Ensuring Haute Couture at Your Price” (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, August 19, 1954). Whilst other editorial pieces did not mention the Paris origins of the design in either the headline or copy. Those articles that do make clear that garments were copied and adapted from Parisian originals use interesting language to do so. Garments were described as “inspired by”, “adaptations”, “copies” or even as “from the Balenciaga collection” (*Country Life*, October 1, 1959). Some press articles also described wholesale couture copies as being ‘after’ a certain designer. This unquestionably borrows from the lexicon normally used to describe art. It illustrates the fact that the garment is a copy, whilst also indicating the artistry of Parisian couture and that to some it was seen as an art form.

Articles in the British press demonstrate however that many of these magazines featured copies of Parisian couture that were not destined to make it into many of the British shops. Often, the outlandish designs did not sell well to store buyers, particularly outside of London, because store buyers were reluctant to risk stocking high fashion pieces. An article by Ashley, appearing in the *Daily Mail* (September 25, 1951) suggested that she had created “something of a rumpus by saying that in many cases store buyers stand between the wholesale dressmaker and the customer” and that they were “slow to venture on anything really new.” However, this certainly seems to be the case and this risk adverseness from buyers was also illustrated by Whitehorn (*Spectator*, November 6, 1959). In 1959 she was invited to view the Frederick Starke’s “Fredrica” buyer’s show, rather than the press show. Press and buyers typically saw the shows at different times because of “the well-known disgust with which buyers and press regard each other.” She suggested that this “disgust” was because buyers believed the press should feature ‘Good wearable clothes […] you can sell all

the time" rather than the more avant garde creations, closely based on Parisian couture, which were often featured. Whitehorn described what typically happened:

> The press, seeing some gay little number in pink swansdown with orange spots, gleefully photographs it, only to find that outside Soho there is not a single shop in which their readers can buy it. The buyers, having bought their usual quota of a hundred beige classics, a hundred maroon classics, and 500 black outsizes- with perhaps one fashionable dress to put in the window are furious when a magazine illustration sends dozens of customers into the shop clamouring for the fashionable one. They then order the dress in quantity, but by the time it arrives, the magazines are onto something else.

This understandably annoyed wholesale couturiers, who believed that the general public wanted to buy such designs. Whitehorn quoted Starke who stated:

> The buyers underestimate the taste of the public over and over again […] They keep saying, "Of course, we're six months behind in the provinces", but who keeps them behind? They'll always play safe and just order what went well last year.

The question must be asked therefore, why were buyers not willing to take risks? Of course, there was the financial issue of buying something different that they were not sure their customers would want to purchase- buyers understood their local markets well, and what they would and would not typically purchase. However, there was also an issue of sizing, and particularly questioning how the high fashion garments would scale up for their local clientele. By the late 1950s this was beginning to change, and manufacturers aside from Starke were suggesting that they were able to sell exact copies of Parisian couture outside London. In 1958 Anne Bruh, head designer for Frank Usher, suggested that the "approach to fashion has undergone a violent change in England in the last few years. You can sell the most extreme lines from Paris in Leeds, Manchester and Bradford without any trouble" (*Tatler,* September 24, 1958).

Surviving garments are a testament to the limited risks taken by many buyers. Only small numbers of line-for-line wholesale couture copies survive. Yet, there are an abundance of semi fitted wool dresses for example. Garments that clearly have a slight flavour say, of the Balenciaga sack, but do not so precisely follow the line. Certainly, there is a disparity

between what kind of garments survive created by wholesale couturiers in the late 1950s and what is known they designed and appeared in the press.

Conclusion

Despite their success in the mid twentieth century the names of most wholesale couturiers and their associated designers have faded into obscurity. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps most importantly, it is because the wholesale couture sector had ceased to exist by the 1970s. The hegemony of Paris was no longer as strong as it has been in the 1950s and the system of legalised copying and purchasing models in Paris was consequently no more. Many wholesale couturiers had struggled to survive in the 1960s as the price of clothing decreased and companies outside of their sector moved production overseas, making competing on prices impossible. It is also likely that the names of wholesale couturiers and their designers have largely been forgotten because these firms were copying, and designers did not have autonomy. In Britain by the mid 1960s ready-to-wear garments as 'copies' did not have the same cultural value as those by companies such as Mary Quant for example, with London increasingly renowned as a centre for innovative youth fashion. Some of the wholesale couturiers' market was also captured by Parisian couturiers, and the increasing importance of designer ready-to-wear produced in Paris under labels such as Yves Saint Laurent's Rive Gauche (established in 1967).

Regardless of the fact that wholesale couturiers were largely copying and adapting Parisian couture, in the 1950s and early 1960s they unquestionably helped to secure London's position as a fashion capital for ready-to-wear, offering high-quality, high-style garments to women internationally. As Whitehorn put it in 1959 "You won't be wearing a Balenciaga dress next spring, and nor will I; but we might rise to a Polly Peck or a Dorville, a Frederick Starke or a Susan Small" (*Spectator*, November 6, 1959). Despite the fact these pieces were copies, as the *Spectator* article quoted above indicates, there was still undeniably a prestige associated with such copies, seen as couture modified to fit into the lives of middle-class women internationally.

The designs of London wholesale couturiers must be recognised as an essential part of the dissemination of Balenciaga's design aesthetic in the 1950s and 1960s and for many consumers this was the only way they could afford a "Balenciaga" design. Wholesale couture

garments however, thanks to their fairly high price tags, were still luxuries for most. For those who could afford to purchase such garments there was undeniably a cachet associated with them, whilst not original they still had a couture pedigree. Despite wholesale copies neither being made nor designed in Paris, they were inextricably connected to the Paris original. Discussing Canadian and American copies of French couture Palmer (2001,174) suggests that "For many […], the copy, or hyperreal, couture became as good if not better than the original because it had been re-engineered for their taste and was cheaper and more appropriate for their lifestyle." The same, I argue, is true of the London wholesale couture copies. The celebratory way in which copies were discusses within the press further demonstrates their significance. For those knowledgeable consumers who purchased the British copies arguably there was a double cachet. The well-known ready-to-wear label itself was covetable, but the connection to a couture garment enhanced this further. Balenciaga was amongst the most copied Parisian couturiers, but his designs were exceedingly hard to copy accurately. Therefore, I argue that it is through the adaptations of Balenciaga's designs that the copying and adaptation skills of London wholesale couturiers are best measured.

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