



Demna bows out at Balenciaga with star-studded final show in Paris



At times controversial fashion designer used show as study for 'La Bourgeoise' before move to Gucci in Milan

Kim Kardashian modelling an off-shoulder fake mink coat inspired by Elizabeth Taylor. Nicole Kidman and Kyle MacLachlan nattering on the front row. And an appearance from Mrs Bezos herself.

The stars were always going to align in Paris for Demna's final show at Balenciaga. And on Wednesday lunchtime, the most controversial and copied designer in modern fashion bowed out after a decade with a show that conformed to the idea of couture as much as it challenged it.

Backstage, Demna spoke with relief about "leaving this city that I love and hate for good" when he moves to his new job at Gucci in Milan next week. But before then, he wanted to "make couture relevant".

Democratising couture isn't easy. This stuff is handmade to exacting rules and wildly expensive. But the plan was to use the show as a stage and the clothes as costumes for social commentary. Previous hot topics have included climate change, swag-wars and AI. On Wednesday it was a study of the relevant dress codes of "La Bourgeoise" – and the moneyed few sat here who fork out for it.

The stage itself was Cristóbal Balenciaga's former apartment, restored to its plush 1960s cream glory when the Georgian designer introduced couture in 2021.

At the glamorous end were a sugar pink debutante dress made from the world's lightest organza, and a sequinned skirt suit based on – what else – Demna's grandma's kitchen tablecloth. No doubt Mrs Bezos had her eye on the elegant corset dresses which came without boning, "so you can actually breathe", he said.

Famous for flipping traditional notions of beauty by casting models of all ages and sizes, out came nine Neapolitan suits without shoulder pads and modelled by bodybuilders because "it isn't the garment that defines the body, but the body that defines the garment".





Demna (second from left) in June at the Paris menswear spring/summer 2026 show with (from left) Guram Gvasalia, Tori Brixx and Rich the Kid. Photograph: Pierre Suu/Getty Images

There followed references from Demna's greatest hits, including a seam-free puffer coat and couture trainers, while references from Cristobal's came in the shapes and long sleeves; the show ended with a cream, bell-shaped Guipure lace gown which referenced the scale of Balenciaga's from the 1950s.

Few designers have had the cultural reach of Demna, who was made creative director at Balenciaga in 2016 after stints at Maison Margiela, Louis Vuitton and his own label, Vetements.

During his career here, he has orchestrated frenzies around ordinary items such as Crocs and Ikea Frakta bags, upending the meaning of good taste while infuriating critics by whacking four-figure price tags on to distressed trainers.

Intended as a joke and a commentary on the hierarchy of value, it proved a particularly lucrative gag for Balenciaga's parent company, Kering, becoming a billion-dollar megabrand.

For some, Demna never recovered from allegations that he had condoned child exploitation in a series of ads involving BDSM imagery and children in 2022. At the time, he took responsibility, although the scandal dented both hype and sales for some time.

Ultimately, it predicated a move away from his more viral designs, which had begun to distract, and he became more focused on his skills as a designer.

skip past newsletter promotion
Sign up to Fashion Statement
Free weekly newsletter

Style, with substance: what's really trending this week, a roundup of the best fashion journalism and your wardrobe dilemmas solved

Privacy Notice: Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our Privacy Policy. We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service

apply.

after newsletter promotion

He is succeeded by the relatively safer designer, Valentino's Pierpaolo Piccioli. Demna's back catalogue will continue to polarise, but his legacy is indisputable. As Demna said: "I'm so hard on myself – but I could not do better than this at Balenciaga."

Was this Giorgio Armani's last ever collection? Last month, for the first time in the designer's history, the designer missed his Milan shows due to ill health.

The plan had been a precautionary one, a rest before this show. So a no-show from the designer at his show at the company headquarters this week, coupled with visibly emotional models ambling like Erté sketches down the catwalk, certainly sent tongues wagging.

In an attempt to stop the rumour mill, the 90-year-old designer explained his absence to a handful of reporters in an email: "Even though I wasn't in Paris, I oversaw every aspect of the show remotely via video link, from the fittings to the sequence and the makeup". His absence, he said, was at the behest of his doctors: "Although I felt ready to travel, they recommended extending my rest."

Regardless of whether you could afford an Armani suit, one of his legacies has been encouraging women to wear trouser suits. And at the show, among the sculptural peplums and slithery gowns with oversized bows, came tuxedos in funereal black. Ostensibly glamorous versions of the menswear he began in the 1980s, there was also a finality to them.

Keen to control the narrative of his £10bn Armani empire, of which he is a sole shareholder, he was quick to remind us that "everything [we saw] ... has been done under my direction and carries my approval".

