



The Reviews

Balenciaga

Scorched-earth policies are so last season: Most designers making their debuts at European heritage houses for spring 2026 are paying homage to the creatives that came before them.

Perhaps none more gallantly than Pierpaolo Piccioli, whose strong debut at Balenciaga on Saturday night drew many straight lines – and some dotted ones – to Cristóbal Balenciaga, and to the two 21st-century talents who propelled the brand into the big leagues: Nicolas Ghesquière and Demna, now leading Louis Vuitton and Gucci respectively.

“I don’t want to deny what has been here before,” he told a huddle of editors and well-wishers after the show, whose celebrity guests included Isabelle Huppert, Kristen Scott Thomas, Anne Hathaway, FKA Twigs and – to the puzzlement of many – Meghan Markle.

There were moments when you wondered if you might be chez Valentino, where Piccioli spent the lion’s share of his career. Among the VIPs arriving at the steamy, cross-shaped venue were Giancarlo Giammetti, Valentino Garavani’s longtime business partner, who arrived with Georgina Brandolini, a longtime muse and collaborator of the Roman couturier.

But once the show got underway – the first model wearing a sleeveless black sack dress accessorized with fierce, bug-eyed sunglasses – Piccioli’s methodology was clear.

Nods to the founder were many, including T-shirt, white shirt and black leather cape versions of the founder’s famous Darth Vader-esque 1967 wedding ensemble; and numerous balloon dresses and skirts, the most striking in black leather.

Cristóbal’s famous tulip dress was cross-pollinated with Demna’s streetwear sensibility in baggy Bermuda shorts, sometimes in khaki, sometimes in denim with rips and tears. Jeans also came in wide-legged versions, dragging under the feet as Demna would have them, minus the mud.

The tall riding hats and egg-shaped coats with big buttons were an echo of Ghesquière’s fall 2006 Balenciaga collection, while supersized and pint-sized versions of Le City Bag took you back to his first “It” accessory, introduced in 2001. ►

Yet the inimitable handwriting of Piccioli – his graceful, sculptural silhouettes, his opulent use of color, his romanticism – shone through, thrusting Balenciaga in an exciting new direction.

The Italian designer, who had a one-year hiatus after exiting Valentino, also proved he’s in tune with fashion’s current obsession with bringing sexy back, his cropped shirts and leather tops revealing large slices of toned midriffs.

That said, Piccioli made no apologies for opening the show with the sack dress, introduced in 1957 and a radical departure from the stiff, hourglass shapes of the era.

“That dress is so relevant and so meaningful, because it freed women from their restrictions,” he said backstage.

To wit: Piccioli built his first Balenciaga collection on new versions of the gazar fabrics the founder used to achieve volume with lightness, his most important legacy.

Underlying these innovations is a kindness and goodwill that Piccioli has demonstrated his entire career, and maybe that’s the newest thing in fashion. Welcome back Pierpaolo! – *Miles Socha*





