



Balenciaga

Royal welcome for debut built around female empowerment

Jess Cartner-Morley

Paris

New names at Dior and Chanel have generated the most noise at this Paris fashion week, but it was Balenciaga's debut that brought the media storm with a front row coup: the Duchess of Sussex, making her first European appearance in three years. On Saturday night in Paris, Dior, Chanel - and Lauren Sánchez, who also attended the show - were all outdone for razzle-dazzle.

Until that point, the mood music around Pierpaolo Piccioli's debut had felt relatively serene. Balenciaga is a venerated house, and Piccioli a world-leading designer. Meghan's choice of Balenciaga - a French house founded by a Spaniard with an Italian designer - was notable for the absence of any links to Britain.

Intriguingly, the theme of Piccioli's "manifesto", as he described the collection backstage, was female emancipation. His starting point was Cristóbal Balenciaga's 1957 sack dress, a silhouette that sits proud of

the body to neither amplify nor constrict a woman's curves. The look was a radical expression of a zeitgeist that was beginning to shift from 1950s conservatism towards the 1960s, said Piccioli. "It was about progress for women. It freed women from the weight of clothes that sit on their body and talk about their body. The sack dress allowed women to be free in space."

Piccioli, who exudes an air of hippy-ish serenity, is not interested in seeing fashion as an ego battle. It is "cooler", he says, for designers to appreciate each other's talents. First on to the catwalk was a reworking of the sack dress, elongated to an ankle-skimming hem, worn with opera gloves - but also with wraparound bug-eye sunglasses that were a direct hat-tip to the apocalypse-chic of Balenciaga's erstwhile designer Demna. Piccioli said he was hoping for a "reconciliation" between the couture roots of the house, and its streetwear era. Balenciaga's most famous silhouettes were included in the show: a "cocoon" coat, this time in poison green, and a trapeze dress in violent purple.

Michael Rider worked closely

with Phoebe Philo during her tenure at Celine, and then spent six years building Polo Ralph Lauren into a flagship for accessible taste. Now back at Celine, he is bringing the inclusive spirit of Polo to Parisian style. So there were trenchcoats, straw baskets, and silk scarves tied around bags - all the motifs of French-girl-chic, a modern moneyspinner.

"Celine isn't a mean brand, or a brand that wants to exclude people," Rider said after the show. "When you wear this brand you may not have the strangest thing, but you have the best coat, and you



▲ The Duchess of Sussex was a front row coup for Balenciaga's Paris show



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