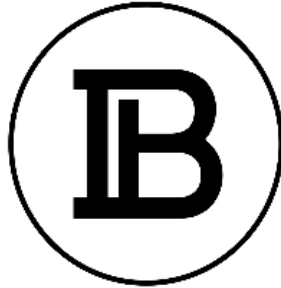


Balmain: Back from the Brink



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## Introduction

The Balmain Fashion house was founded in 1945 with the intent to bring back the french haute couture industry of pre-war France. Pierre Balmain was a french born designer opened their first store in Paris, France at 44 Rue Francois 1er. The company was known for voluminous busts and cinched waists and large embroidered bell skirts and traditional silhouettes. Following Pierre Balmain's death in 1982, several head designers have stayed true to Balmain's aesthetic.

However one designer deviated from the pattern of his predecessors: Christophe Decarnin. He ushered in an age of "Balmainia" bringing the company back from the brink of bankruptcy (Vogue).

## Background

Pierre Balmain was born Pierre Alexandre Claudius Balmain on May 18th, 1914 in Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, France. His father owned a drapery business and his mother ran a boutique with her sisters. His father died when he was seven years old and also worked in his mother's boutique measuring and arranging fabrics. In 1933 he went to



study architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts to appease his mother according to the Balmain official website. While he studied there Balmain sold sketches to swiss couturier Robert Piguet. At the age of twenty he stopped studying architecture and petitioned Edward Molyneux for a job as a dress designer. Afterwards he served in the French Air Force during World War II from

1936-1939 and during the Nazi occupation of France he designed for Lucien Lelong. Between 1939 and 1942, Balmain began to feel unfulfilled with his time designing for Lelong, but he filled for the Gestapo's permission to go to the Barcelona International Exhibition as a emissary for Lucien Lelong. Following this and the rising designers of the time, such as Cristobal Balenciaga and Christian Dior, Balmain established his own fashion house in 1945 with only 600,000 francs to his name (Snodgrass). He released his first collection in October 1945 and would continue to run the company until his death from liver cancer in Paris, France on June 29th 1989 (Britannica). After his death many designers took the helm at Balmain all leading it through the decline of couture and the rise of ready to wear. The most influential head designers were Oscar de la Renta who lead the house from 1993-2002 and Christophe Decarnin (2005-2011) who completely switched the direction of the company and radicalized the traditional design aesthetic of the company and he was replaced by Olivier Rousteing in 2011.(Vogue)

### **Market Segment**

The original aesthetic of the brand has always been associated with Hollywood and Parisian royalty and aristocracy (Snodgrass). So their target would be very rich people who are looking for a custom quality gown, a classic piece that would be reserved for very formal events. However when Decarnin took over as the head designer the aesthetic radically changed and so did their target market, the bold, sexy designs of his era attracted the attention of young rich parisian women in the early 2000's. In the company's current era Rousteing modernized the

original aesthetic of the brand and is also targeted at rich young people with the youthfulness of their most recent designs.

## **Design**

The designs of the brand while it was still headed by Balmain were very classic silhouettes, full busts, cinched waists and voluminous bell skirts. Balmain also embroidered the full skirts of his designs. As stated earlier the designers after him deigned to keep the original aesthetic of the brand, including De la Renta and the only to stray away from them was Christophe Decarnin. His designs were very flashy, expensive and sexy which made him a hit among the young rich Parisian women. After Decarnin left in 2011, Olivier Rousteing took over the position of head designer and he brought a new life into the brand and his designs have been said to have an asian influence, which makes sense since that is a big part of their market.

## **Promotion**

After Balmain's death in 1982 the couture industry was on the decline and so the designers had to move into the ready to wear market. However that did not prove easy because in 2004 the house filed for bankruptcy and hired Decarnin to revive the brand (Sherman). However it was Rousteing who helped bring the brand into the mainstream, when in 2015 Balmain collaborated with H&M opening them up to a whole new market of consumers.

## **Relevance**

Balmain is relevant because he was the one who brought back the couture industry in post war France and breathed new life into Paris' dying fashion industry at the time. Their current designs are also bold and modern and also are a nod to their past with the embroidered designs and elegant cuts but also bringing something modern to it with the geometric shapes and bold patterns. Erik Mortensen, the first head designer to head the company after Balmain's death won two Golden Thimble awards for his collections for Autumn/ Winter '83/'84 and Autumn/Winter '87/'88.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion Pierre Balmain and the Balmain fashion house have had an important impact on fashion and are an important part of fashion history after picking up the pieces of the parisian fashion industry of post-war France and bringing back the luxury couture it was known for. Rousteing is doing the same thing today bringing back the luxury aesthetic of the brand and what it stands for.

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