In 2006 I received a faculty development grant, which enabled me to travel to Paris for the Otis fashion design department. I was one of five instructors selected to go at the invitation of Pamela Golbin, curator of the Musee Des Arts Decoratifs, for fashion Designer Cristobal Balenciaga's retrospective.

In senior studio we teach our students to construct their designs that have been created through the mentorship of some of the industry's leading designers. In the past these mentors have included Bob Mackie, Vera Wang, Lloyd Klein, David Cardona, Cirque du Soleil, Calvin Klein, and countless others equally as impressive. Most of them have one thing in common: they cite Cristobal Balenciaga as an inspiration to the students to he researched. Balenciaga' s structure, fabrication, silhouette, and out of the box philosophy are nearly mythical in fashion history. One other thing nearly mythical about Balenciaga is seeing one of his garments up close. Original works, especially the famous ones, are extremely rare to come by. If you are a young design student struggling to understand your mentor's direction and you research Balenciaga for the first time, a highly stylized magazine photo is beautiful but not very explicit when trying to understand construction, cut, draping, or fabrication. Now, because of the Otis Faculty Development Grant, our students do not have to settle for just archived photos and descriptive passages. They can go to their own professors and ask questions. Now my students can show me a famous Balenciaga and ask, "how did they do this?" and I can say, "I've seen this dress; I can show you how they did that."

For those of you not familiar with Balenciaga or why it would be so important to see his work up close to fully understand it, I would like to share with you my experience in Paris. Balenciaga was an innovator of many of the most accepted shapes of the rhetoric of fashion today; the kimono sleeve coat, the sack dress, the balloon hem, the baby doll, and collars cut for the sole purpose of elongating the neck. Collars like these were displayed on custom made mannequins with exaggerated neck length to show how they were intended to shape the perception of the wearer. However his clothes always came with a disclaimer: "No woman can make herself chic if she is not chic herself." This credo exemplifies the shapely
simplicity that made Balenciaga a great couturier. His genius was in the cuts of his clothing, which achieved an inevitable sense of rightness. Harper’s Bazaar said, "Balenciaga abides by the law that elimination is the secret of chic." Unlike most French couturiers, Balenciaga (his house was in business from 1937-1968) was from Spain and brought with him an aesthetic of great strictness and severity that contrasted with the current lightness and ethereal qualities of his counterpoints. It is the combination of severity and elimination that make Balenciaga unequalled, even today. Basically what our students are trying to understand is that there is a very specific difference between a sack dress and a sack.

What we saw at the Musee Des Arts Decoratifs, a branch of Paris' famous Louvre, was a complete retrospective of all things Balenciaga. It was a chronicle of Cristobal Balenciaga's work both from the House of Balenciaga and from his career roots in Spain before his fame. The exhibition also had as a closing several displays of the modern House of Balenciaga, ruled by Nicolas Ghesquiere, and dominating all the top fashion magazines. The two-story retrospective was so powerful and influential to experience it inspired the modern house of Balenciaga to reproduce Cristobal's designs from the 50's and 60's as they were, for today's recent collection. It is a historical first to be sure, and a great credit to the exhibits creator, Pamela Golbin. The clothes looked as modern and chic today as they did back then.

On the day of our tour Pamela Golbin met with us herself and took us through the exhibit from beginning to end, and then some. It really was the experience of a fashionistas’ lifetime. We started at the beginning of Cristobal Balenciaga's career, when he was still in his homeland of Spain. The exhibit was organized not only chronologically but by genre as well. The exhibit windows were done according to category. For example, they had a window of beaded bolero jackets showcasing his Spanish influence. They had a window of faux fur outfits during the sixties to showcase that he was the first Parisian House to use faux fur. They had a window of his famous one seam coats (not nearly as easy as they sound) and a window of plaids and stripes showing how he matched every stripe to the smallest detail. The window of "baby doll" silhouettes was especially impressive. One of the key elements of the
entire exhibit, as Ms. Golbin explained, was the use of fabrics. He used over 500 fabrics per collection on occasion. His particular preference was for fabrics with very stiff and sculptural qualities. His favorite was silk gazar (namely "gazar de Abraham" after the mill that produced it). After experiencing the entire exhibit the real tour started. Ms. Golbin took us underground in the Louvre through historic rock-lined passages and narrow DaVinci Code-like corridors. We met with her staff who built the custom long necked mannequins for the displays and Ms. Golbin showed us some remarkable Balenciaga pieces that did not make it into the showcase. Wearing white cotton gloves, Ms. Golbin took us through seams and stitches and linings of some of Balenciaga's custom client work close up. The experience was detailed and technical and completely passionate all at once.

After a tour like that I will never be the same teacher again. I will always be a better instructor than before. I have seen some of the most complicated, cerebral construction fashion history has to offer. I now approach my students’ designs with much more avant-garde construction and stress the importance of a light hand more than ever to achieve the illusion of simplicity. The tour I was given at the Louvre affects every aspect of my teaching from the basics of construction to ways to match a print and especially how to choose the right fabric.