

[Transcript] Founders / #315 Balenciaga

If you've been listening to Founders for a while and you have not joined the Private AMA Feed, I really think you're missing out.

This is something that I've made that is exclusively for enthusiasts of Founders.

These people that completely understand the benefit of this intense studying of great people and the great work that came before us and how valuable it is to know what happened that came before you

so you can apply it to what you're working on.

If that is you, I recommend that you sign up for the Private Founders AMA Feed.

I've been making these short episodes every week based on questions that I get from members.

If you become a member, you'll be able to ask me questions directly.

There's a private email address that you get access to in the confirmation email.

I read every single one of these emails myself.

I do not have an assistant that looks over them.

I read every single one myself.

The questions I get from these emails, I then turn into these short AMA episodes.

So that allows other members to learn from questions of other members.

You can also add your name and a link to your website with your question

so that other members can check out what you're working on.

That feature alone is worth the investment.

I've actually already heard from people that have gotten new customers

as a result of other AMA members hearing about their business from these episodes.

So far, I've made 33 episodes.

If you become a member, you can listen to those immediately.

And I plan on making several episodes every week.

Just got this feedback from a new subscriber.

Your AMA is fantastic.

I'm going through it and I love the focused nature of the questions and the answers.

If you consider yourself an enthusiast of Founder's Podcast,

I highly recommend that you become a member

and you can join by using the link that's in the show notes in your podcast player

or by going to FoundersPodcast.com.

And so one more thing before we jump into the incredible story of Balenciaga.

This actually surprised me.

I was so hyped up after studying and then listening to this episode

that I think we're going to be or try to be the Balenciaga of entrepreneurial podcasts.

I do want to tell you about one of the best podcasts I've heard this year.

It is episode 336 of Invest Like the Best with my friend Jeremy Giffin.

It is called Special Situations in Private Markets.

This episode has gone viral and disturbingly.

So I actually saw somebody say that they've listened to 750 episodes of podcasts in the last year and they think it's the best episode they've heard.

I will leave a link down below,

but you could probably just search whatever you're listening to this on.

If you search for Invest Like the Best, make sure you follow that show

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and then make sure you listen to episode 336.

Of all the creative people I've come across, Balenciaga was easily the most dedicated to the business of making beautiful things.

His work absorbed him totally and there was no room in his life for anything or anyone else.

When the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s made it impossible, as he saw it, to produce work of the highest quality, he retired and quickly died of a broken heart.

Among the masters of Parisian fashion, Balenciaga was the greatest.

Indeed, many would rate him the most original and creative couturier in history and he was a true couturier, not just a designer.

That is, he could design, cut, sew, fit, and finish.

And some of his finest dresses were entirely his own work.

Let me just pause there when he says,

Indeed, many would rate him the most original and creative couturier in history.

I'm always fascinated by these people where they're peers.

The people are doing very similar things of them.

It's like, no, no, no.

This is the person you should pay attention to.

Christian Dior called Balenciaga the master of us all.

And Coco Chanel said that Balenciaga was the only couturier in the truest sense of the word and that everybody else was simply a fashion designer.

I've come across this level of adulation for peers in the same industry before.

I was reading a bunch of books on John D. Rockefeller and Cornelius Vanderbilt and I was shocked because I didn't know who Jay Gold was at the time.

And Rockefeller, he was asked questions like,

Who's the best businessman you've ever known?

And he said, without hesitation, Jay Gold and then Cornelius Vanderbilt when he was in his seventies and by far the richest American alive.

He said that Jay Gold, who was in his thirties at the time, was the smartest man in America.

And so we see something similar happening here with Coco Chanel and Christian Dior.

Super successful in their own right in the same industry.

And they're like, no, no, no, Balenciaga is the greatest.

And part of that is tied to that he could do every single aspect of his work.

We just saw this with the episode I did on James Cameron.

He could do any job that a movie needs to be made.

James Cameron can do it.

And so back to Balenciaga, it says that he could design, cut, sew, fit and finish.

And some of his finest dresses were entirely of his own work.

And there's a bunch of hints in his early life to how he became the greatest.

So he's born in 1895 in Spain in a little fishing village.

His father was a sailor, but he died young, leaving his wife and his children very badly off.

And so his mother is left with not a lot of money and has to raise her kids on her own.

She is the key to all of this, which I didn't understand the first time I read this.

But as I, once you finish this and you go back through, you're like, oh, she, she was the key the whole time.

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So her name is Issa.

She set up as a dressmaker and taught the entire village, a little village, all the women in the village on how to sew Balenciaga at age three and a half.

He joins her class and he winds up showing immediately astonishing skill with a needle.

So we saw this with Tiger Woods.

We saw this with Mozart.

You're going to see it over and over again.

You have some kind of level of innate talent for what you're doing.

And then you start unbelievably young.

He starts at three and a half.

He works in this industry till the day he dies, or I guess right before he dies because he retired and then died of a broken heart.

And so it says, for the next 74 years, he could and did so superbly and kept his hand in by doing a piece of sewing every day of his life.

That is insane.

Sewing every day for 74 years.

I've never even heard of anything like that.

Remind me of what Paul Graham said in his essay on episode 314.

One of my favorite lines in the essay, he said that being prolific is underrated.

In fact, I said this in the Picasso episode.

So if you haven't listened to the Walt Disney and Picasso episode, that is episode 310.

That is based on the same book that I'm reading from and going over with you now.

This is about Balenciaga and Dior.

It's this book by Paul Johnson called Creators.

It profiles, I would say, maybe 20 of the greatest creators in history.

I highly recommend buying the book.

Do not read it in chronological order.

Just pick the people that you're most interested in.

Shakespeare, Twain, whoever it is, Dior, Disney and Picasso and just go straight to those chapters.

And so in that Picasso episode, I'm pretty sure I said this, but here's another example of somebody that was unbelievably prolific, just like Balenciaga.

Picasso lived a total of 33,403 days with 26,075 published works.

That means Picasso averaged one new piece of artwork every day of his life from age 20 until his death at 91.

He created something new every day for 71 years.

I've also seen this before a long time ago.

I think it was on episode 154.

I read the autobiography of Charles Schultz.

Charles Schultz is the animator, the guy that created Peanuts and like Charlie Brown.

Check out this crazy stat from his autobiography.

Beginning with the first strip published on October 2nd, 1950 until the last published on February 13th, 2000.

So it's almost a 50 year run.

Schultz wrote, penciled, inked and lettered by hand every single one of the daily and

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Sunday strips to leave his studio, 17,897 in all in an almost 50 year run.
What did we just say on the previous page, right?
Just said Schultz wrote, penciled, inked and lettered by hand every single one.
We just said that Balenciaga was able to design, cut, sew, fit and finish.
It's the exact same idea, just a different industry and a different product that they're making.
Back to Balenciaga's early life.
Big things start small, something you and I have talked about over and over again.
Balenciaga's first product was for a cat.
His first original work was a collar set with pearls for his cat.
The collar was noticed by a grand lady of the neighborhood.
So like increasing your surface area for luck is really smart, something really smart to do.
Because the person that's noticing this, right?
Just happens to be the great grandmother of the Queen of Spain.
So she becomes his first patron.
At 12, he becomes an apprentice at a tailor to learn cutting, an art that few dress designers actually possess.
So that's another...
You can't just skip over that.
You've got to pause.
Like, wait a minute.
So he's got...
He can do everything himself.
And then he's also adding other skills that other people in his industry lack.
How can you obtain skills few others in your industry possess?
This reminds me of Kobe Bryant taking tap, tap dancing lessons to strengthen his ankles and Arnold Schwarzenegger taking posing instruction from ballet dancers.
There's very few NBA players that were in the tap dance class and maybe none.
Very few or none in the ballet dancing, like getting tutored one-on-one from a ballet dancer.
That is a really smart idea.
How can you obtain skills few others in your industry possess?
By age 18, he was learning the women's wear trade in a store in San Sebastian in a luxury shop.
And so Balenciaga is his great illustration of this maxim.
The public praises people for what they practice in private.
He starts sewing at three and a half.
He's apprenticing at 12.
He's in it.
He's in a luxury shop at 18.
You see this pop popping up later on in his career, experts as well as customers marveled at the speed he went about his work, especially the difficult business of fitting models with scores of garments just before a collection.
He could do 180 in a day.
The explanation is that from the age of three to his mid twenties, he learned thoroughly every aspect of his trade.

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In other words, he's practicing in private.
This is way before he was regarded as the best designer in Europe.
He put in decades of practice building on his immense natural gifts.
He had for instance, strong, powerful, but also delicate hands.
And this is wild.
And he's also ambidextrous.
He could cut and sew with either hand.
That would be like me being able to read two books at once, one with each eye.
Like that's crazy.
In 1919, so that means Balenciaga is about 24 this time.
He opened his first shop.
He's still in Spain.
He has not gone to Paris yet.
So he opened his first shop in San Sebastian on a coast more frequently by high society.
Go to where your customers are.
He only, from the very beginning, he only wanted to dress the very best.
Remember this for more and later when he's compared to Christian Dior.
Okay.
This is very, very important.
He only wanted to go to the very, very top.
Go to where your customers are.
He's like, all right, go to where the rich people are because that's the people I want
as customers.
And this works because he gets the attention of the Spanish royal family.
He was soon in demand at court in the Spanish royal family.
In the last phase of the Spanish monarchy, before suspension in 1931, he was working
for the queen.
And guess what happens if other people know that you designed for the queen, they're going
to want your stuff too.
He has rapid expansion of his business from an early age.
So he's got the first of his shops in San Sebastian.
Then he's going to expand.
He opened a second house in Madrid and then a third in Barcelona.
All three were called Issa after his mom.
What'd I say?
She's the key to everything.
He's got like a shrine tour.
So they're named after his mother.
His Spanish business.
This was a family run business.
His Spanish business was run with the help of his sister, his brother and other relatives
and was from the first to the very last time, very much a family firm, though it was a very
substantial scale.
They had 250 people in the Madrid house alone and another 100 working in Barcelona.

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And so then the Spanish Civil War breaks out and he's going to have to shut down. So he would be around early forties at this point. And so he's got to figure out where to go. If you're interested in fashion, you know where you're going. He's going to Paris. He eventually is going to reopen in Spain. I think he's just closed for two years, but most of the industry attention and energy is in Paris. And important to note, this is not the first time that he's going to have to shut down temporarily because war obviously going to Paris when the Nazis invade. He's going to have to shut down temporarily as well. So he's 42 years old. He's in Paris and he presents his first collection. The next year for his second collection, he actually gets the Duchess of Windsor as a client and then for his third collection, the next year, Saks Fifth Avenue places a giant order. So from here on in, it says he was launched and thereafter until his retirement at the end of the 1960s, he was one of the major Parisian houses and himself was regarded as the very top dressmaker. And I do want to pause here because I did something this morning before I recorded because this is another example of like, you and I've talked about this, like if you have, if your industry has some kind of like city center where all the talent is, it's probably a good idea to go there. You've been like shown over again in history. The example I use, there's a bunch of examples, but I think the best one is actually if you are a young, mechanically declined man interested in building a car and you were alive in 1900, you better get your ass to Detroit. That's where all the talent was. They wind up knowing each other. It just makes for a very fascinating life story. And so you see the same thing that's happening in the 1930s and 1940s in Paris. And so there's a bunch of examples in the book. It's like Dior, Coco Chanel, Balenciaga, Balmain, I think is how you pronounce it, Ise Saint Laurent, they're all in this book. And I went and walked through the design district, which is like where all these people are housed in the city that I live in. And one, I thought it was interesting that a lot of these brands are still alive, you know, 80 years later or whatever the case is. But when I think of Balenciaga now, I think of like, you know, it's kind of like loud, trendy, my opinion, very ugly. It wasn't like that. It was the opposite of like that when Balenciaga was running it himself. I think in my opinion, if he was alive, the founder be rolling over in his grave. I'm going to get to this later, but he designed one of his basic principles of the products

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that he made was the importance of permanence.

I have never heard of this.

It blew my mind and I'll get there in a minute.

His dresses were bequeathed.

There is dresses still like the dresses that he made with his hands are still women are have passed them long to now, I guess it'd be their great, either granddaughter or great-granddaughter.

I had never even heard of such a thing.

And so I won.

I just thought it was interesting was looking out when I went on the walk this morning.

I was looking through the store window.

Everything was closed.

It was early in the morning.

I was like, wow, this stuff is really ugly and very trendy.

And I just can't imagine somebody wearing this, you know, 40 years from now where you literally have examples of people wearing a dress that he made 75 years ago.

And so that came to mind when I read that line where it's like, no, no, this guy was the top dressmaker in the very center of his industry at the time when it was, you know, expanding and there's all this energy and way to get to how important the fashion industry was to the Paris economy.

Before we get there, I want to pull out one paragraph that I thought was very interesting because he's very, he's deadly serious about his work, deadly serious about the quality.

It's not a game to him at all.

He gets invited to like design.

There's like a collection of dolls that they're giving to some princesses.

I think they might be in England or something.

And so all the top Parisian fashion designers were invited to make pieces for the wardrobe of the dolls.

But Balenciaga was not having it.

It says the fact that Balenciaga was invited to contribute underlined his membership in the Parisian elite, but he declined, not wishing to take part in mere publicity stunts, a characteristic assertion of his high seriousness.

And then we see again just a few years after happening to shut down his fashion houses in Spain.

He has to do the same thing in Paris.

Balenciaga soon had to contend with a new war.

This is Hitler's war, the World War II, in September 1939 and shut down his Paris house for a time in France.

Now this is what I mentioned earlier.

This surprised me.

In France, the fashion industry was regarded as a vital exporter.

I don't even know, Paul Johnson is a great writer and a historian.

I read this.

I'm like, there's no way this could be true.

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But if it's in the book, I trust that Paul researched it in 1938 and 1939.

One exported courtier dress would pay for 10 tons of imported coal and a leader of exported perfume would pay for two tons of imported gasoline.

Seeing words on paper, that doesn't even seem real.

That's incredible.

So he's closed down for a year or two.

The fact that he was one of the few that were allowed to reopen because his ally, Balenciaga's ally, was King Franco of Spain.

Remember, Balenciaga was from Spain and Franco was an ally of Hitler.

So he was able to reopen his fashion house in September 1940 and he was just one of 60 firms that the Germans allowed to function.

And so once the war ends, France is devastated.

It's bitterly divided.

It's impoverished.

What's interesting is these are conditions ripe for launching something new.

And then this is where we have this.

He's rather, he's an older person in the sense that like Christian Dior wasn't a successful fashion designer at this point.

He only had like a 10 year run or something like that because he went up dying young.

But he comes in and he realizes like, oh, the conditions are ripe for launching something exciting, giving the people something to be excited about after going through, you know, what is six years of war or whatever it was.

Now, this is really important that I mentioned earlier, industry specific talent tends to cluster in the same physical location.

And this is important because both Dior and Balenciaga would insist on the very best like subcontractors that people actually producing like the materials that they're using to make their creation.

So I'll get there in a minute.

But big thing that you're going to learn about Christian Dior is that you don't get to the top by fitting in.

You need to stand out.

This is the James Dyson approach, right?

Difference for the sake of it.

All this was in preparation for his first proper post war collection.

This is Christian Dior now when a sensation was caused by an unknown designer.

That's Dior.

Dior was using prodigious quantities of precious materials and thumbing his nose up at wartime austerity.

And what's fascinating about Dior is he kind of comes out of nowhere, right?

He just went from series of kind of one failure after another.

So let me give you background to, to understand like how unique this was.

First of all, this was fascinating.

So Dior's father was a successful businessman who ran a fertilizer factory.

His dad specialized in producing liquid manure.

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Another way to think about this is the foundation of the Dior empire was literally shit in the literal sense.

And what's crazy is 50 years from now, right?

From where we are in the story, Dior would be the beginning of Bernard Arnault's LVMH empire.

If you haven't learned about that connection, go back and listen to the first of many episodes that I'll make on Bernard Arnault.

This episode 296 is very fascinating and he's going to come up a few times in Dior story as well.

But back to his dad, this idea where the fact, the only reason that Christian Dior could afford like how he got to Paris was that his dad's liquid manure business was so profitable that he had a bunch of houses and one of those houses was in Paris.

And even before he was a fashion designer, we see that with like a lot of people that you and I talk about, true interest is usually revealed early.

He loved drawing, he loved dressing up, he would design like fancy clothes for his sisters when he was like a young kid.

But what was fascinating and surprising about that is he didn't first go into the fashion business.

In fact, he also loved art.

So actually the prehistory of Dior's fashion business is the fact that he becomes a partner in an art business in Paris.

His father put up the money so he could get into the business.

And then when I read this next paragraph, let me tell you what I thought.

Let me read the paragraph to you first.

It says, then troubles came, Dior said, I never really got over them.

His brother was locked up in an insane asylum.

His mother died and during the depression, his father went bankrupt.

And at the same time, Dior's art gallery failed.

And so I wrote, would there be a Dior fashion brand if this never happened?

Opportunity is a strange beast.

It frequently appears after a loss.

My previous note when I just read to you was written before I read this sentence and it's exactly what had just come to mind.

Without this financial disaster, Dior would probably have spent his life as a middle ranking art dealer and died unknown.

And so he takes this opportunity and he just takes a bunch of random jobs.

The way you would describe what Christian Dior is doing before he's going to get this crazy opportunity, you won't even believe what's about to happen, was that he was essentially hovering on the fringes of the fashion industry.

He was broke, taking Hubble jobs in the industry that he wanted to work in.

And then let me read this to you.

It's fascinating.

Then came a unique stroke of fortune that transformed his life.

And this is what Paul writes, in this book, I do not perhaps pay enough attention to the

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role of luck in the creative process, especially to the way it sometimes allows a frustrated would be creator to fulfill his destiny.

Dior certainly believed in luck.

I want to pause there before I get into Dior's like superstitious behavior.

Last week in the Paul Graham episode on 314, he said this because he's read a bunch of biographies just like I have.

When you read biographies of people who've done great work, it's remarkable how much luck is involved.

They discover what to work on as a result of a chance meeting or by reading a book they happen to pick up.

So you need to make yourself a big target for luck.

And the way you do that is to be curious.

This is exactly what's about to happen to Christian Dior.

So let's go back to this idea that Dior certainly believed in luck.

He would go and like he just believed in fortune tellers.

And so one of his fortune tellers told him that women will be very lucky for you.

You will earn much money from them and you will travel widely.

And so he believed that even though he had no reason to believe that at that point, what does that mean by that?

As of July 1946, Dior was a nobody who was in his 40s with nothing in his design career to suggest a genius.

Yet it is at this precise time, right?

This is the stroke of fortune that changed Dior's life.

Opportunity is a strange beast.

It frequently appears after a loss.

So he gets this meeting in this month.

He meets Marcel Boussac.

Now, the crazy thing is this is the business.

Boussac's business is the business that a young Bernard Arnault buys.

I think he's like 35 years old at the time.

So Bernard is going to buy this business 40 years from where we are in the story.

I love how all this stuff connects together.

It's always fascinating to me.

So Dior meets Boussac, right?

Boussac at the time is a textile magnet who was called the King of Cotton.

Boussac wanted to own a big Paris fashion house to give prestige to his booming, but kind of boring business.

And so someone had told Boussac that Dior might be able to help produce his ideas.

That's the reason for the meeting.

Now, this is wild.

Think about how courageous Dior had to be at this point, right?

And this is what Dior responds to.

I'm not interested in managing a clothing factory.

What you need and what I would like to run is a craftsman workshop in which we

recruit the very best people in the trade to reestablish in Paris a salon for the greatest luxury and the highest standards of workmanship.

It will cost a great deal of money and entail much risk.

Now, this is fascinating because if you stop and think what's happening, you need to know who you're talking to.

For some people, a slight minority of humans, they're not trying to go through the easiest route for life.

They want to go for great.

And so this idea where it's just like, Oh, what you really want is we're going to hire the best craftsman in the world.

We're going to reestablish Paris as a salon for the greatest luxury and the highest standards of workmanship.

And by the way, Boussac, it's going to cost you a great deal of money and entail much risk.

Most people would run away from that.

Boussac runs towards it into an astonishing degree, which I'll get to in a minute, but I couldn't help but think I've seen this before where it's like, okay, a few weeks ago, I did the episode on Mark Twain.

One of the things that Mark Twain wanted to see when he was a young man, he was going west across the United States, or I guess it wasn't even United States that back then, or at least a lot, large parts of where he was covering wasn't yet part of the United States.

I guess the way I put it.

And so he was fascinated by this new thing called the Pony Express.

Pony Express, right?

When they wanted to, they delivered mail rapidly way faster than anyone else could.

And so when they want to attract the right kind of risk taking people, you see that in, in how you present this to them, just like Dior presented this to Boussac, this is what the founder of the entrepreneur Pony Express said.

This is the ad for that.

Wanted, young, skinny, wiry fellows, not over 18, must be expert writers, horse riders, willing to risk death daily.

Orphans preferred.

What was the result?

Hundreds of adventure seeking young men actually responded to that ad.

Go back even further in the founders archives.

I did an episode on Ernest Shackleton, the famous polar explorer, right?

He has a world famous, uh, they, they call one of his, uh, his ad, one of the greatest job ads of all time.

He said, men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return, doubtful, honor and recognition in case of success.

There's an element in that into what Dior is pitching Boussac.

And this is a response.

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Boussac liked the idea and offered to set Dior up immediately with an investment of 10 million francs.

And this was later increased to a hundred million francs.

And we see that Dior came out of the gates swinging.

Remember what James Lacey said, difference for the sake of it.

Uh, so it says Dior doubled the risk of opening a new house with his revolutionary quote unquote new look, a deliberate and defiant return to the most extravagant use of material.

He spat in the face of post war egalitarianism and said, I want to make the rich feel rich again.

His first collection turned out to be the most successful in fashion history.

With no expense spared and endless trouble taken, Dior recruited and continued to employ the best people to be found in France, France, men and women who would die rather than turn out an article, which was in the tiniest degree below the best in the world.

That is how you win the success of the house was immediate and prolonged.

And the volume of business continued to grow steadily in the 10 years up to Dior's death in 1957, by which time the house employed 1000 of the finest experts ever gathered together under one roof.

They are the Pixar of fashion houses during this decade.

Dior sold over 100,000 dresses made from 16,000 design sketches and using 1000 miles of fabric.

Again, another example that being prolific is underrated.

And another thing that being prolific does, it increases your surface area of luck.

It is, it's present and I think a lot of industries, but it's explicit in the fashion industry.

It has to be understood that designers or courtiers never present just one line, they produce a variety of styles in each collection.

And though for publicity purposes, they stress a particular favorite, they know that in the end, the magazine writers, the big buyers and above all, the individual customers will decide which is dominant, the sheer volume that they produce being prolific increases your surface area of luck.

Maybe think of a Picasso where, you know, Picasso is one of the most famous artists in history.

He produced 26,000 or whatever it was.

We only remember a few and somebody responded to me.

They're like, yeah, but most of his stuff was crap.

And I go, that's the point.

One of the most important ideas that we fundamentally do not understand that is counterintuitive to how our brain naturally works.

People don't remember the crap.

Another way to think about this is what Paul Graham said in that essay from last week's episode, you can't have a lot of good ideas without also having a lot of bad ones.

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If you have great ideas, no one will remember the bad ones.

Now we go back to Balenciaga.

Balenciaga never commented on other designers.

Another way to say is Balenciaga focused on his own house or GME I mean would have said Balenciaga had blinders on.

And yet as successful as Dior was, everybody knew that Balenciaga was a one of one.

It says in every other way, now comparing directly, comparing Balenciaga and Dior in every other way, Balenciaga was immeasurably superior.

And why?

Because Dior could not actually make a dress.

He was a designer as Coco Chanel said, not a courtier.

And then Paul Johnson, the author says, this was true of virtually all of the others then and since.

And in fact, he encouraged what Dior was doing.

Why?

Cause he's also a very smart businessman.

He realizes that more new customers in the Parisian fashion industry is good for everyone in the industry.

Balenciaga did not regret the success of the new look.

He was a businessman and a very astute one.

And he recognized that it had done wonders for the Parisian fashion industry.

And everyone involved in it himself, perhaps most of all had benefited from the publicity.

He certainly did not see Dior as a rival and he had no fear that his own claims to excellence would ever be overlooked.

Dior dressed the rich Balenciaga, the very rich.

And this was known at the time.

It says during the 1950s, a woman graduated from Dior to Balenciaga.

So what is Dior doing for Balenciaga?

He's filling the top with a funnel.

He's just going to bring him more customers.

It just may take a few years.

And then to Dior's part, he recognizes like, I'm not Balenciaga.

Dior was never jealous of Balenciaga's superior skills.

He recognized them and revered the man who possessed them.

Dior always called Balenciaga master.

And again, they know each other.

That's why it's so important for it to getting to wherever your industry is like located when Balenciaga's partner, this was his lover died.

Balenciaga was so upset that he seriously considered retiring.

And then Dior went to see him and begged him to stay.

We need your example and all that is best in our trade.

And so what kind of person gets the absolute very top of their profession?

[Transcript] Founders / #315 Balenciaga

We've seen this before.

Balenciaga had a religious level devotion to his craft.

He regarded making dresses as a vocation, like the priesthood and an act of worship.

He felt that he served God by suitably adorning the female form, which God had made beautiful.

His approach was reverential and indeed sacred.

His premises reflected his own vocational tone.

So this part was fascinating.

So what they mean is not only does the best companies take on the personality of their founders, but their actual headquarters will look like the founder's approach to his business.

Balenciaga's house in Paris looked like a church and they compare it to some of the other designers at the time and some look like a London townhouse or something that's like warm and inviting.

And so it says his house was like a church and indeed a monastery.

When people visited, they said it was like entering a covenant.

They would describe the atmosphere as monastic in both an architectural and in a spiritual sense.

And even the environment within, like the working environment, it's very much like you would feel like almost like monk like nobody spoke.

If it was absolutely necessary to speak, the voice had to be hushed or reduced to a whisper.

Security was intense.

It was difficult not just to get in at all, but to move from one room to another for all entrances were guarded.

Customers, which were called patrons, were only allowed in by appointment.

And then the room where Balenciaga actually worked, it was totally inaccessible except to his most senior staff.

This was hilarious.

At one time, it was widely believed that he did not actually exist and that Balenciaga was a pseudonym.

So they talked about the fact that he would never court publicity, he wouldn't go out to dinner.

He was in it for the work itself, to the activity of making beautiful, beautiful dresses that will be bequeathed,

which we'll get to in a minute.

He definitely preferred to move in silence.

He never did anything to court popularity.

He never gave interviews except once to the London Times when he decided to retire.

He never went out in society and there are virtually no photographs of him and none of him at work.

His remoteness was not a pose, but part of his dedication to his art.

He worked fanatically hard.

Each collection that he made had between 200 and 250 designs, all of which he completed himself since he had few trusted assistants and often turned down promising juniors.

In fact, a 17 year old Gavinci tried to work for him and he said, no.

More on how he worked, he never raised his voice.

Indeed, silence was his norm.

There was something noble about him.

In just one day, he could get through fitting sessions for 180 outfits by dint of intense concentration.

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Where have we seen that again?

Edmund Land said, intense concentration for hour after hour can bring out in people resources they didn't know they had.

It's one of the key traits that Balenciaga used to get through these crazy days.

So in one day, he could get through a fitting session for 180 outfits by dint of intense concentration and by working with a team who knew exactly what his gesture signified.

For a few words were spoken, his fundamental principle as a dressmaker.

So there's three principles we're going to go over.

This is the first one.

His fundamental principle as a dressmaker was to make women happy.

And this description of what he made shows that he was a true master at work.

His clothes were above all comfortable to wear.

That's incredible because when you look when I see these designs, I would like like that has to be uncomfortable.

So his clothes were above all comfortable to wear an amazing fact.

And it was a fact considering their grandeur, their complexity and the magnificence of their materials.

And he had a reason for doing this.

This is what he said.

Balenciaga argued that if a woman was comfortable in her clothes, she was confident.

And if she was confident, she was at her best and wore her clothes with style.

He said that some designers put a strain on the client so that she was glad to get out of the dress at the end of the evening.

He wanted his clients to be reluctant to part with their clothes, which had become an integral part of their body, a second skin.

Listen to how he talks.

This reminded me of Enzo Ferraris, the first person that put this idea in my mind.

You can tell when people really have soul in the game is because they'll describe their products the way you would describe your lover.

He wants you to not want to take off your dress.

He wants it to become an integral part of your body.

He wants it to be a second skin.

This is not normal language that people usually associate with products, right?

Inanimate products.

It's incredible.

His second principle was permanence.

While Dior may change his twice a year, Balenciaga was always fundamentally the same, especially in his splendid evening dresses, which were his specialty.

And this is what I meant about blowing my mind, right?

A woman could buy one of them as an investment because properly looked after it would last forever.

In 2003, I saw a young woman of 18 wearing a superb dress.

Is that not a Balenciaga?

I asked.

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Yes, she said it belonged to my grandmother.

Balenciaga wanted his dresses to be bequeathed.

How many people have ever made a dress that could be bequeathed?

A dress worn a quarter of a century after its creator had died.

Permanence.

He's aiming for permanence.

He was impressed by the way dresses, hats, and even accessories in certain old masters remained elegant after hundreds of years, and he constantly got ideas from them.

So again, my favorite line in this book is that all creative individuals build on the works of their predecessors.

No one creates in a vacuum.

Balenciaga took a ton of ideas from past dressmakers, past painters, past artists, and then transformed them and added his own touch to create something new.

Balenciaga also would create his own words for his work, right?

You don't wear a Balenciaga dress.

You present it.

That's how he would talk to his patrons, his customers, right?

You're not wearing this.

This is how you present.

This is the proper way to wear it, right?

Well, we would use wear, but he would say this is the proper way to present it.

Third principle, right?

World-class products are going to contain world-class ingredients.

This applies to your company, too.

Great companies are full of great people, right?

Balenciaga's third principle was the central importance of material and his designs.

Textile and lace manufacturers and boarders and specialists lined up for appointments to see him and often collaborated with

him to produce completely new, complex materials.

And because he could do everything himself, that's allowed him to recognize a true genius.

Somebody who's way better at that activity than he is.

He could die himself and often did.

His skill at embroidery enabled him to pick out the occasional genius.

To him, a first-class textile creator was an equal.

He patronized the best embroiderers in the world.

That's something Steve Jobs would do.

There are no shortcuts around quality and quality starts with people.

One of my favorite Steve Jobs quotes, again, how do you know that somebody has sold the game?

This is how you could tell, and this is how you could tell somebody is doing their life's work.

He's making it and not even telling people that he did it.

He often sewed to keep his hand in.

And for every collection he designed, cut, sewed, and finished entirely himself a little black dress, usually of silk,

sold like the others, but never identified as his.

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He had that compulsion to create.

And this is one of my favorite paragraphs about Balenciaga.

The essence of his, you really think about, let me back up, you really think this is handmade craftsmanship, right?

The essence of his creation was the work of human hands, bringing into existence the images projected on paper from his powerful and inventive brain.

The archives of his company survive intact, and they reveal the extent to which everything was done by hand.

The exact sums paid by his celebrated clients, dates for fittings and deliveries, all entered in fine pen and ink,

material supplied in detail, and the prices paid, and countless pieces of paper showing the process whereby each garment was created in ink and pencil and crayon,

with pieces of the material used pinned on by the master sketcher, a lost world of agile, tireless fingers before the computer or even the typewriter took over.

I want to draw the parallel to Enzo Ferrari yet again.

When he first launched his cars in America, this is what was said about them.

Nothing like a Ferrari had ever graced American roads.

They were cars built by Italian artisans.

Every detail down to the steering wheel, handcrafted, using some of the same methods used to make Roman suits of armor and the royal carriages of ancient kingdoms.

And the result of the 70 year career, he's wealthy, he's rich, he's got houses in Paris, in Madrid, in Barcelona, in Basque.

But the way he designed his main residence, something, there's a line in there that stuck out to me that I realized his mom was key to all of this.

Remember, she teaches him how to sew at three and a half years old.

The centerpiece of that house was a vast antique wall table with his mother's old singer sewing machine in a solitary state beneath a vast and fearsomely realistic crucifix.

And then the 1960s come, everybody goes to like trendy new designs.

He found the word trendy abhorrent.

He's, remember, he's going for permanence.

So it says Balenciaga continued designing for time and it is significant that his dresses of the late 1960s, against the trend, cut against the bias as he put it.

That is a great maxim.

That's what he does, a direct quote from him, cut against the bias, cut against the bias is a great maxim.

So it says Balenciaga continued designing for time and it is significant that his dresses of the late 1960s, against the trend, cut against the bias as he put it, are now the ones most admired, collected and copied.

Balenciaga has been genuinely regarded as the greatest dressmaker in the world.

Abruptly, he retired, shut down his Paris house completely because there was no possible successor and returned to Spain.

He died in 1972.

It is most improbable that the kind of dresses Balenciaga created in the 1950s and 1960s will ever be made again.

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They are indeed museum pieces to inspire women or among the fortunate descendants of his clients, heirlooms to be treasured and on grand occasions, flaunted.

What an ending.

For the full story, highly recommend buying the book.

If you buy the book using the link below, you'll be supporting the podcast at the same time.

I would not recommend reading it in chronological order.

Like I said before, go through the table contents, find the people you're most interested in and read that chapter.

It's the perfect book to jump around in.

That is 315 books down 1000 ago and I'll talk to you again soon.