

## Famous French People

**Pierre Balmain**©

*by Robert Shepherd*



Hello, you're listening to EnglishWaves and this is Robert Shepherd with Famous French.

This week we're going to dive into the fashion world and learn about a couturier who founded a fashion house that made his name a byword for elegance.

His long list of esteemed clients included the Duchess of Windsor, the Queen of Belgium and numerous leading movie stars of the 1950s. He is Pierre Balmain.

He was born Pierre Alexandre Claudius Balmain in Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1914. His father owned a wholesale drapery business, but he sadly died when Pierre was just seven-years-old. Balmain's mother ran a fashion boutique with her sisters.

Balmain's interest in couture fashion was inspired by the society women he met in his youth. In 1933, he began studying architecture at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts while taking on freelance work, drawing for the designer Robert Piguet.

After visiting the studio of English designer Edward Molyneux in 1934, Balmain was offered a job. He gave up his studies and began working for Molyneux for the next five years. His next job was working for Lucien Lelong during the Second World War and it was there he met Christian Dior.

The Balmain fashion house was opened in 1945 – and initially it displayed long bell-shaped skirts with small waists. This post-war style was popularised in 1947 as Dior's New Look.

Balmain's first collection appeared in *Vogue* magazine's November issue and the reviewer wrote that Balmain delivered "beautiful clothes that you really want to wear". Another favourable write-up in *Vogue* by Balmain's dear friend and experimental writer Gertrude Stein catapulted him towards stardom.

Not content with building up a client base in his native France, Balmain embarked on numerous PR trips. He toured Australia in 1947 and designed a range to be made Down Under. Four years later, Balmain expanded to the United States, selling off-the-peg

items that earned him the 1955 Neiman Marcus Fashion Award. By this stage, Balmain's clothes could be seen on the likes of Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn.

In fact, Balmain's reputation was so good he was commissioned to design the entire wardrobe of Queen Sirikit of Thailand for her 1960 tour of the United States. His slate of commissions grew and grew. In 1968, Balmain designed outfits for the Winter Olympics in Grenoble. He also designed uniforms for the cabin crew of both TWA and Malaysia-Singapore Airlines in the 60s and 70s. Air France's first-ever female pilot also wore a Balmain design in 1975.

However, Balmain never took all of the credit for his output. Erik Mortensen, who started out as Balmain's assistant in 1948, was promoted to collaborator and they worked together until Balmain's death. It was also Balmain who spotted the talent of Karl Lagerfeld. He hired him after judging a fashion competition that the young German won.

Balmain also opened a branch in Caracas and diversified into perfume and other fashion accessories. He published his memoir, My Years and Seasons, in 1964, and in 1978 was made an officer of the Légion d'Honneur.

The great Pierre Balmain, who once said "dressmaking is the architecture of movement", died of liver cancer at the American Hospital of Paris on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1982. He was 68-years-old and had just completed the sketches for his autumn collection. However, his legacy lives on and his vintage couture gowns remain popular with the Hollywood elite.

Stay tuned to EnglishWaves.