



Beaton, Sir Cecil (1904-1980)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Sir Cecil Walter Hardy Beaton, the celebrated photographer of cultural icons and royalty, was born in Hampstead, London, on January 14, 1904, the eldest son of a prosperous timber merchant. He was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, where he excelled in art and first became involved with photography as a hobby.

Beaton left Cambridge, where his interests had been more social than academic, without a degree in 1921, and set about making a career in photography while working as a clerk in London.

His photography came to the attention of Edith Sitwell, one of his first sitters, and through her patronage and that of her brothers Sacheverell and Osbert, he found an entry into the world of the Modernist *illuminati*, the social and artistic figures he so greatly admired.

Beaton gained public notice with his innovative portrait photos of glamorous individuals placed in unusual poses with theatrical props or costumes, as well as for his use of double and triple exposures for unique effects.

Some early critics found his work fragile, precious, and *chi-chi*, but, at the same time, provocative and witty. In retrospect, his often facile portraits might be considered manifestations of camp.

In 1928, in hopes of making a fast fortune, he traveled to New York, where he was befriended by lesbian socialite Elsie de Wolfe and soon had many American film and stage stars among his clientele.

During this period, much of his time and energy was devoted to travel and an extravagant social life, yet he found time for drawings, photographs, and articles for publication in such glossy magazines as *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *Life*, and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Moreover, he began a simultaneous career as a theatrical stage designer when his longtime fascination with ballet was realized in commissions for the Cochran Revue, an English company, and the noted Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo.

Collections of Beaton's photographs, which would eventually become numerous, began to appear in the 1930s, most notably *The Book of Beauty* (1930), *Cecil Beaton's Scrapbook* (1937), and *Cecil Beaton's New York* (1938).

The 1930s culminated for Beaton with a commission for a series of photographs of Queen Elizabeth, the late Queen Mother. He would subsequently become the Royal Family's official portraitist.

Through the years of World War II, however, Beaton's work took a more serious turn. He became the official photographer for various British government and military agencies, and his work created a permanent historical record of the overwhelming devastation inflicted on London by German bombings during the

Battle of Britain.

After the war, Beaton returned to his stage interests, designing lush and extravagant stage sets and costumes for Broadway and London theater as well as opera and film. He won a Tony Award (1957) for his costumes for the Broadway production of *My Fair Lady*, and an Academy Award (1958) for sets and costumes for the film *Gigi*.

These honors, along with his widely circulated images of the Royal Family, brought him the financial security and social status he had long craved, and, in 1972, a knighthood.

Beaton was noted for his effeminate demeanor--he wore lipstick and painted his nails as a schoolboy and was drawn to drag attire for much of his life--and he realized quite early in his life that he was, as he recorded in his diary, "a terrible, terrible homosexualist." His relationships with men were usually emotionally painful, as his love went unrequited.

He nonetheless persisted, at certain junctures in his life, in what his biographer Hugo Vickers terms "excursions into heterosexuality," conceivably out of fear of persecution and a sense of internalized homophobia.

The most noted of these "excursions" was his relationship with Greta Garbo, who was herself most likely a lesbian or bisexual, but inclined at times to similar "excursions." Beaton became obsessed with Garbo in 1932, while on a visit to Hollywood, and persisted in importuning her for decades. According to Beaton's accounts, the relationship was consummated in the late 1940s, and rumors of their impending marriage were rampant.

Garbo, however, was emotionally distant and detached, and ultimately she rejected him, ironically, in a manner following the pattern of most of his gay relationships. She was, moreover, offended by his revelations about their relationship in *The Happy Years: Diaries 1944-48* (1972), the third volume of his published diaries. While these revelations were based, at least subconsciously, on a desire for retribution, Beaton retained his Garbo fixation until his death.

In 1974, Beaton suffered a severe cerebral hemorrhage that left him partially paralyzed, although he managed to learn to draw, write, and take photographs with his left hand. His health remained fragile, however, and he died at Reddish House, his home in Broadchalke, Salisbury, on January 18, 1980.

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