

An Insatiable Appetite for Style

The world of photographer-costume designer Cecil Beaton

By KRISTINE MCKENNA

SAN DIEGO—British photographer Cecil Beaton once made the comment, "I would like to live in scenery." After viewing the exhaustive retrospective of his work on view at the San Diego Museum of Art through March 26, one can only conclude that he pretty much got his wish.

Enchanted with theatricality and artifice from the time he was a child, Beaton devoted his life to a celebration of glamour and social ritual, and his photographs of the privileged and their environs resurrect a world of fancy dress balls, ornate boudoirs and impeccably manicured gardens. It's all a bit fussy and fey, by the time you stagger out of the last of the seven galleries given over to Beaton's work, you may feel yourself drowning in crinoline and cardboard stage props.

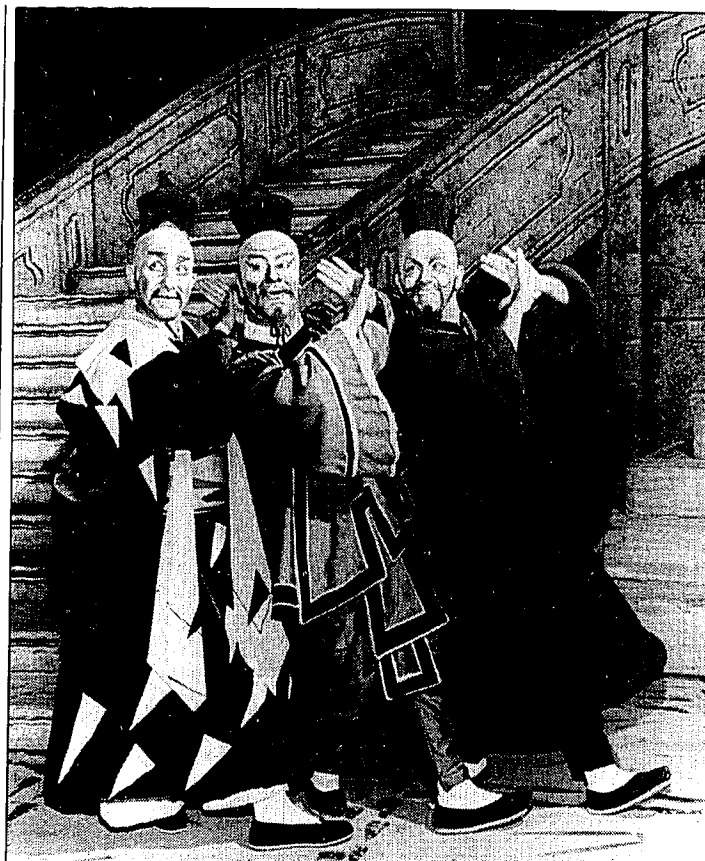
Organized in London by the Barbican Art Gallery, this massive body of work—spanning the artist's life from 1904 to 1980—sounds a melancholy last hurrah for the style of British gentility that began to fade with World War I. A child of the Edwardian era, Beaton harks back to a time when flirting was considered a high art worthy of diligent study, and one's listing in DeBrett's Peerage was of paramount importance.

An all-purpose *bon vivant* who painted, kept diaries, designed costumes and wrote books, Beaton had a compulsive need to be at the very center of where it's at, and over the course of his life he crossed paths with just about everyone of note. Essentially a society photographer, he moved freely through a closed society that was the exclusive domain of the exceptionally rich, attractive or brilliant, and his subjects included artists, actors, statesmen, rock stars, writers, directors and professional beauties.

The official photographer of the Royal Family, Beaton was knighted in 1972, and he won Oscars for his costume designs and shared one for art direction for 1964's "My Fair Lady" (based upon his earlier designs for the original Broadway production). He was a regular contributor to Vogue magazine, was considered the definitive fashion photographer for three decades and is cited by Irving Penn as a major influence.

He captured swinging London of the '60s on film, was on the set of Nicholas Roeg's classic cult film, "Performance," and hung out with the Rolling Stones in Marrakech. He was with Andy Warhol at the Factory, travelled with Truman Capote and had the brass-plated nerve to propose to Greta Garbo, with whom it is said he had an affair. (That fact alone would assure him a minor place in history.) Beaton had an insatiable appetite for style at its most mannered and self-conscious, and the untouchably mythical Garbo is the ultimate embodiment of his sensibility.

The son of a timber merchant, Beaton was enamored with the upper class in a way that only those not born into it can be. A precocious child, he began his interest in



Cecil Beaton's costumes for 1961 production of the opera "Turandot."

photography when he was 3, and at 22 he supervised the elaborate restoration of the family home. Admittedly a determined social climber, he flunked out of Cambridge and subsequently established a photographic career in 1927 with the aid of an endorsement from one of the tastemakers of the day, Osbert Sitwell. All doors were open from then on, and the staggeringly prolific Beaton wasted not a second, amassing a formidable list of friends and acquaintances, all of whom passed before his camera.

Beaton's subjects are so distractingly notable that his style as an artist often goes unmentioned on. Partial to costumes associated with archetypes, Beaton brought a child's sense of play to his work, and his love of decorative excess allowed him to leave no lily unguilted. Shot for the most part in black-and-white, his aesthetic is a slightly garish melange of Surrealism, Neo-Romanticism and Baroque, and his images tend to be lavishly composed, occasionally to the point that his sitters come off as interchangeable mannequins.

Perfumed with a vague current of homo-

eroticism, his work makes frequent references to mythology and often verges on camp. The artist managed to insinuate himself even further into the illusory world he longed to be a part of by including mirrored images of himself in many pictures; this motif recurred throughout his career.

The exhibition, broken into seven more or less distinct bodies of work, includes drawings, books, photographs, paintings and costumes, commencing with artifacts from Beaton's childhood and his images of the Bright Young Things of the '20s and '30s. Shouldering the dreadful weight of their own promising futures, Beaton's debutantes and dandies are straight out of "Brideshead Revisited," and there's something inexorably sad about these exotic creatures whose world was eroding around them while they posed in linen, lace and cashmere. Reflecting the style of the day, Beaton's female models favor Mary Pickford's virginal look of clasped hands and imploring eyes gazing heavenward, while the men are all neurasthenic beauties.

From the stately halls of Britain, Beaton



A Beaton fashion shot from 1945.

went to Hollywood. His film portraiture includes everyone from the Marx Brothers to Jean Cocteau. There's an entire wall of Monroe, numerous stunning shots of Garbo and what may be the definitive portrait of Marlene Dietrich.

Important events also caught Beaton's eye, and his documentary photographs of World War II are frequently cited as his best work. In many respects Beaton's life was one long party—a very expensive, private party—and his gritty war images stand in direct opposition to the fragile civility he so lovingly, almost frantically, preserves in his studies of exclusive gatherings and *femmes fatales*.

A gallery is given over to Beaton's photographs of the Royal Family that are, for the most part, stilted and dull. (This may not be Beaton's fault, given that it's unlikely the royals granted him much artistic license.) A section titled "Gardens and Interiors" is similarly lifeless and amounts to little more than a ramble through an old issue of House Beautiful.

Beaton's fashion photography, on the other hand, is highly imaginative and it's here that he really struts his stuff. Beaton was in full bloom as an artist when fashion photography was just beginning to gather steam, and he pioneered many techniques that have come to be cornerstones of the form. Beaton punctuated his grounding in classical motifs with an irreverent use of androgyny and kitsch, an elevation of street style into high chic and the juxtaposition of the beautiful with the coarse. Beaton's career in fashion was stained in 1938 when Vogue temporarily banned him from the magazine because of anti-Semitic doodlings that appeared on one of his images, and he often complained that his lucrative relationship with Vogue caused him to stagnate creatively. Nonetheless, his fashion photography is alive with innovation and wit, and this is the art for which he'll be remembered. □