



*Cecil Beaton's glamorous 1937 photo of Marlene Dietrich.*

## ART REVIEW

# Beaton's Photos, Other Works Present a Slick View of Past

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**S**AN DIEGO—In the age of People magazine and Entertainment Tonight, when the highest value is placed on celebrity, it's no surprise that the San Diego Museum of Art has imported a mammoth exhibit on Cecil Beaton, photographer to the rich and famous.

After all, the museum has studiously kept abreast of popular culture, organizing, among others over the past decade, exhibits on the "Art of the Muppets," "The Cowboy" and "Dr. Seuss from Then to Now."

Beaton, who died at age 76 in 1980, was undeniably successful as a high fashion and portrait photographer. His clients included Life, Vogue, Vanity Fair and, from 1939 to 1970, Britain's royal Windsor family. He also managed perfectly to blend his professional work as portraitist and theatrical designer with his personal life as a well-spoken dandy, a self-acknowledged snob and social climber.

In his carefully choreographed portraits, Beaton often could not resist calling attention to himself. He frequently put himself in the picture, reflected in a mirror. This technique adds a note of whimsy at times, catching the photographer bent over the camera. But it can also be maddeningly distracting as in a 1933 portrait of Picasso that shows Beaton peering over the artist's shoulder at the camera.

Organized by London's Barbican Art Gallery, the show, which includes his drawings and costumes from opera, theater, stage and film musicals, is gigantic. Beaton was a skilled scenic and costume designer. His designs for the film musical "Gigi" and the Broadway and film versions of "My Fair Lady" won him a Tony Award and three Oscars.

Although 200 photographs have been cut, the exhibit still boasts about 400 images. What they reveal most often is artifice rather than artistry.

Next to ambition, Beaton's greatest strengths were an exceptional appreciation of beauty—

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# BEATON: A Slick View of Past

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male and female—and an unerring sense of style in framing it. He was innately attuned to the times, photographing pop icons Mick Jagger and Andy Warhol years after he caught the allure of Gary Cooper and Greta Garbo.

Beaton portrayed Cooper's stunning 1931 profile in a deceptively simple black and white portrait. Posing Cooper in slacks and sweater against a nondescript wall, Beaton had the actor turn his face away from the camera. Even in profile Coop's magnetic good looks dominate the picture, revealing the real source of the star's early popularity with women, and surely some men.

But it was Beaton's portrayal of female beauty that launched his career in the 1920s. He had a flair for the dramatic, whether picturing musical comedy stars such as Lily Elsie, his mother, Etty, or sisters, Nancy and Baba.

He disturbs the still-water narcissism of the teen-age Baba's lovely reflected face, bobbed hair and bare arms on a grand piano's shiny surface with the unexpected directness in her mirrored gaze.

The carefully staged portraits of Nancy and Baba, both young beauties, helped make them and Beaton popular figures of the 1920s. He knew how to carefully stage-manage his portraits, usually placing his subjects in settings and gowns of lace, tulle and chiffons. "As far as possible I avoid allowing modern clothes to appear in a photograph. . . . I try to get my sitters to wear some kind of costume that has withstood the criticism of time," he once said.

The result were romantic and fantasy-like, an idealized vision of beauty very much in the Edwardian tradition. Although Beaton made clear photographs rather than the misty, Impressionist-style then in vogue, he was basically a reactionary photographer who looked backward to the 18th and 19th centuries for inspiration.

Dressing Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth (now the Queen Mother) in a gossamer gown, he portrayed her in a fairy-tale setting as the Faerie Queen in 1939. Beaton used his trademark fabrics with telling effect in a 1937 portrait of Marlene Dietrich, gilding her classic beauty to the limit. The Dietrich portrait is so glamorous, it may be satire.

Running alongside Beaton's appreciation for beauty was a lively sense of the grotesque as well as a vein of misogyny. He hit it off with

the outlandish Sitwell family, known as high bohemians, posing Edith Sitwell "Lying in State," as if dead on a linoleum floor.

A mean streak surfaces in images of "female wrecks" such as Mrs. Mossecockle, a withered dowager, sitting in a kennel with her dogs.

While these images easily fascinate the viewer, the attraction is most often due to their inherent glamour and a curiosity raised about those pictured. Although he was assigned by the government to depict the British role in World War II, these pictures are remarkably unmemorable.

Outside of his theatrical designs for stage and film, Beaton's lingering contribution is as a chronicler and promoter of popular culture through photographs and more than 2 dozen books.

Starting his career at Cambridge in 1924, he came along at a time when the technology of photography and printing was ready to serve a mass medium.



BARBARA MARTIN / Los Angeles Times

*San Diego State University student Michele Wynne looks at one of Cecil Beaton's costume designs in an exhibit of his work at the San Diego Museum of Art. At right, a photo of Beaton taken in 1937 by Paul Tanqueray.*

