

Fashionable World: Cecil Beaton [B2]

I suoi iconici scatti, esposti alla National Portrait Gallery di Londra, hanno catturato la bellezza e il potere delle celebrità nel periodo a cavallo tra le due guerre e nei primi anni del dopoguerra.

Twentieth-century fashion-photography icon, Cecil Beaton (born in 1904 who died in 1980) was enigmatic, [flamboyant](#) and controversial; both a [misfit](#) and a [social climber](#) with a talent for self-promotion. Openly bisexual, through his decades-long career he captured the essence of various eras on camera: from the 1920s Jazz Age to the high fashion of the 50s to the 1960s glamour of the movie My Fair Lady — for which he designed the set and created the [costumes](#). As a royal photographer, Beaton [played a pivotal role](#) in adapting the British monarchy to the modern age. He also photographed, and to a degree [curated](#), the [hardships](#) of World War Two.

VOGUE CONTROVERSY

Beaton was born in London in 1904, the son of a [timber merchant](#) and an actress. [Mesmerised](#) by his mother's dress sense and with no interest in academia, he was introduced to photography by his [nanny](#), who had a Kodak camera. After studying history, art and architecture at Cambridge he used his contacts to get a stage photo published. This [got his foot in the door](#) and he became a staff photographer on both sides of the Atlantic for fashion magazines Vogue and Vanity Fair. In 1938, Beaton was [fired](#) from American Vogue for — bizarrely — inserting anti-Semitic words in tiny letters into the magazine.

CROWN AND CAMERA

Back in Britain, the House of Windsor's decision to employ Beaton [raised eyebrows](#). Interestingly, this wasn't so much [due to](#) his racist interventions in the US, but his connections to Wallis Simpson, the US [socialite](#) [blamed](#) for the abdication of King Edward VIII (who had married

the divorcée.) Beaton had a fascination with monarchy as well as celebrity. His portraits of Queen Elizabeth, Queen Consort (known as The Queen Mother) and her daughter Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth II) shaped the iconography of the royal family. He loved this job, sometimes [pocketing](#) personal items as [keepsakes](#), among them, the Queen Consort's [scented handkerchief](#).

ROCOCO GLAMOUR

Beaton's style of photography was [attuned](#) to the desired reputation of his subjects and [intertwined](#) with the times: he photographed Wallis Simpson in her austere fashion aesthetic then produced carefully-constructed portraits of the Elizabeths in an elaborate rococo style, with references to court paintings of past centuries. The royals appeared on [landscapes backdrops](#) mainly produced by a firm in west London. Among them were scenes inspired, for example, by the 18th-century artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard's [risqué](#) French painting The Swing (1767), Roman antiquity, or architect Francesco Borromini's Rome-based arcade, an ingenious illusion of perspective.

WARTIME DESTRUCTION

As war approached in 1939, the royal portraits appeared in newspapers that encouraged readers to [cut them out and pin them up](#), by printing ornate picture [frames](#) around them, for example. This extreme self-importance was criticised by the same press, who pointed out that the grandeur of the settings and their subjects' splendid clothing seemed inappropriate as millions of families faced war. Beaton's own wartime experiences [boosted](#) his reputation: he went from chronicling the frivolous worlds of high society and royalty to becoming a serious reporter of human experiences. Commissioned to accompany the air force and the army in North Africa and Asia, he took photos of politicians and military leaders. Most iconic, however, were his [sombre](#) photos capturing the destruction of the London [Blitz](#).

IN THE FACTORY

In peacetime, Beaton's grand but approachable photos of the young Queen's coronation in Westminster Abbey in 1953 heralded those of the 1960s, when the royal family wanted to project a more accessible and modern image. Beaton went for simpler backgrounds, inspired by Irving Penn, a leading US portraitist who worked with Beaton at Vogue. Penn's bold stripped-back aesthetic and use of studio lighting was emulated by Beaton. Yet with the rise of other photographers, notably Richard Avedon and David Bailey, Beaton decided he was done. When his contract at Vogue expired in 1955, he left fashion behind, and only returned to do occasional portraits. Through the 1960s and till the end of his life, Beaton continued to mingle with the most selective of celebrities, and he was photographed with the likes of Andy Warhol and Mick Jagger. Until 11 January 2026 www.npg.org.uk

SOCIAL CHEMISTRY

Cecil Beaton could be charming, flamboyant and witty. He could also make remarks so cutting that French playwright Jean Cocteau had named him "Malice in Wonderland". Beaton's diaries, published in six volumes between 1961 and 1978, provide insight into his personal life and the uncomfortable feelings he carried about his sexuality, including the desire for acceptance and the feeling of guilt. Bisexuality became part of Beaton's identity, and he explored both male and female beauty in his work. He had many relationships with men and women. He was infatuated with actress Greta Garbo, and had a high-profile relationship with US Olympic fencer Kinmont Hoitsma. He craved fame but was sometimes crippled by self-doubt; his diaries reveal a tendency towards jealousy and outbursts, particularly over the successes of some of his friends, including authors Evelyn Waugh and Truman Capote.

Glossary

- **curated** = curare
- **Mesmerised** = ipnotizzare, affascinare
- **blamed** = incolpare
- **intertwined** = intrecciarsi
- **boosted** = promuovere, impulsare
- **heralded** = annunciare
- **witty** = arguto
- **misfit** = emarginato
- **outbursts** = scoppi, scatti d'ira
- **guilt** = colpa
- **fired** = licenziare
- **socialite** = personaggio dell'alta società
- **cut them out and pin them up** = ritagliarli e appenderli
- **played a pivotal role** = svolgere un ruolo fondamentale
- **craved** = desiderare
- **got his foot in the door** = farsi strada
- **due to** = a causa di
- **frames** = cornici
- **bold** = audace
- **mingle** = mescolarsi, socializzare
- **insight** = visione, comprensione
- **timber merchant** = commerciante di legname
- **keepsakes** = ricordi, souvenir
- **landscapes backdrops** = sfondi paesaggistici
- **the likes of** = del calibro di
- **fencer** = schermidore
- **pocketing** = intascare, rubare
- **social climber** = arrampicatore sociale
- **scented handkerchief** = fazzoletto profumato
- **sombre** = cupe
- **Blitz** = bombardamento tedesco durante la Seconda guerra mondiale
- **cutting** = pungente, sarcastico
- **Malice in Wonderland** = Malizia nel Paese delle Meraviglie

- **flamboyant** = stravagante, eccentrico
- **raised eyebrows** = suscitare sospetti
- **attuned** = in sintonia
- **risqué** = osé, audace
- **stripped-back** = minimalista, essenziale
- **charming** = affascinante
- **crippled** = paralizzare
- **hardships** = difficoltà
- **nanny** = tata
- **costumes** = vestiti