

Cecil Beaton.  
Opposite: his  
photograph of  
Audrey Hepburn  
from the April  
1964 issue of  
*Harper's Bazaar*



## IN FINE FEATHER

*As a new book and film shine a light on Cecil Beaton, Catriona Gray looks back on the life and loves of a man whose talent for creating beautiful surfaces belied his hidden depths*



If you visit the Old Library of St John's College, Cambridge, a cathedral-like hall heavy with the smell of the leather-bound volumes that line the Gothic bookcases, you can find the personal diaries and correspondence of Cecil Beaton. It seems a little ironic that this is the final resting place for his ebullient outpourings, given that he spent far more time in the theatre than he ever did at a desk. However, his stint at St John's was still an important one, providing the fledgling aesthete with the social connections that would make him not merely a society photographer, but a celebrity in his own right.

Beaton was remarkably prolific – a Renaissance man who photographed both fashion and the war, a writer, artist, set and costume designer, and all-round arbiter of style. Born in 1904 and active up until the late 1970s, he left an indelible mark upon the 20th century, seeking out and recording beauty in all its guises. 'Beaton entered the creative realm with ease, and it is difficult to know where his life in art stopped and his real life began,' says Lisa Immordino Vreeland (Diana Vreeland's granddaughter-in-law), who spent weeks at Beaton's former college leafing through his papers for her new book and documentary film. 'This is what attracted me to him the most – his drive to reinvent the world around him.'

Less than a week after arriving at Cambridge in 1922, Beaton wrote in his diary: 'I don't want people to know me as I really am but as I'm trying and pretending to be.' Extraordinarily socially aware even as a child, he used photography as a means of elevating both himself and those around him into the smart set, submitting carefully staged snaps of his mother and sisters to fashionable magazines. His early friendships proved vital to his later success – Stephen Tennant, the son of a Scottish peer, introduced him to the Bright Young Things, including Rex Whistler, Lady Diana Manners and the Mitfords, while Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell helped the emerging photographer to find interesting people to sit for him. Beaton's biographer Hugo Vickers describes him as 'an ace re-toucher of his work, drawing waists in, slenderising necks, removing unwanted lines, and presenting his subject as a vision of glamour'; such was his appeal that before long, the cream of society were seeking him out.

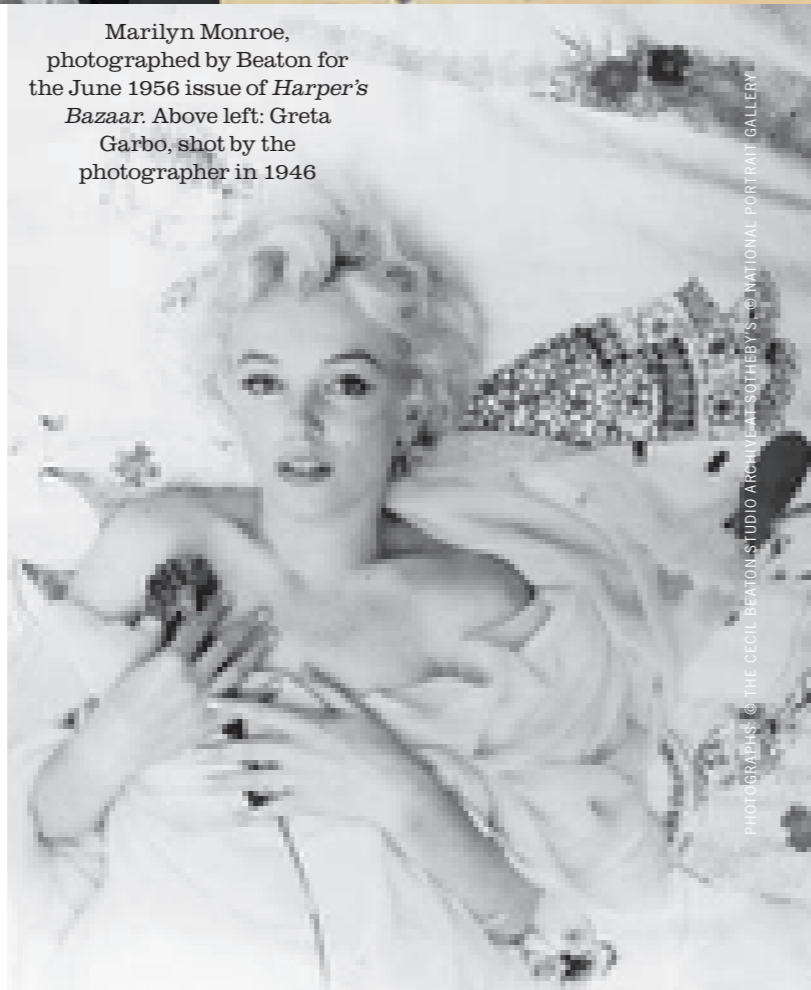
Eager to broaden his horizons, Beaton travelled to New York in 1928 with little more than his camera equipment, and to Hollywood the following year, this time in the company of the screenwriter Anita Loos. 'Nowhere else in the world are there gathered together so many conventionally beautiful people,' he wrote, shortly after his arrival. 'This is a town inhabited almost entirely by gods and goddesses of beauty. The girl shutting the windows is Venus, disguised as an exquisite Madonna. The newspaper boy is a young Apollo. Every cashier-girl, with golden sausage curls, is even prettier than Mary Pickford.'



Left: a scrapbook belonging to Beaton. Far left: Alexandra Danilova in *Swan Lake* in 1951



Marilyn Monroe, photographed by Beaton for the June 1956 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*. Above left: Greta Garbo, shot by the photographer in 1946



Above: Beaton's costume sketches for the musical comedy *Tenderloin*, which featured in *Bazaar* in July 1960. Below: Audrey Hepburn, shot in Rome in 1960



Over the years, Beaton was to photograph countless actors and actresses, capturing them with his pen as well as with his camera. Audrey Hepburn was 'an urchin with impeccable distinction', Mick Jagger 'a rare phenomenon' and Marilyn Monroe 'walks like an undulating basilisk, scorching everything in her path but the rosemary bushes'. Others were exposed to his unfettered vitriol: Elizabeth Taylor was 'everything I dislike' and he called Katharine Hepburn 'a rotten ingrained viper' and 'a dried-up boot'. His pronounced and often arbitrary opinions led Truman Capote to observe that 'he gathers enemies the way other people gather roses'.

Some celebrities made a deeper impression, most notably Greta Garbo, with whom Beaton had a brief affair, despite being homosexual. 'I am obsessed by Greta,' he wrote. 'The moment I wake in the morning I start to think about her, and so it goes on all day and then in my dreams at night.'

Beaton's forays into the film world won him three Oscars, for the costume and set design of *Gigi* and *My Fair Lady*, both enlivened by his visual flair. Although cinema, ballet and especially theatre were lifelong passions, the one thing he was unable to succeed at was playwriting. 'He tried for 30 years to write his script for *The Gainsborough Girls*,' recalls Vickers. 'But it just didn't work. I remember saying that to Audrey Hepburn once, and she just laughed and said, "Well, he couldn't do everything."'

Although darting between London and the US was crucial for his career, Beaton felt happiest in Wiltshire. In 1930 he rented Ashcombe House, then a derelict Georgian manor surrounded by rolling countryside, and restored it to his own taste, adding theatrical touches such as a red-and-white-striped gilt bed shaped like a circus tent, and entertaining frequently. When the lease expired in

1945, he bought Reddish House, in the village of Broade Chalke, and for the rest of his life divided his days between there and his home in South Kensington. In a 1971 documentary by the photographer David Bailey, Beaton is shown in his garden at Reddish, surrounded by banks of daffodils and white hyacinths. 'When I first came down here, I thought, "This is where I belong,"' Beaton says in highly enunciated Edwardian tones, as he prunes a climbing rose. 'I love the freedom that the country gives you, and that's become more and more important to me.'

This Arcadian setting must have seemed idyllic following the outbreak of World War II, during which he acted as an official war photographer. Although he wasn't on the front line, he still endured considerable physical hardship and survived a plane crash. His images, particularly those of London during the Blitz, were instrumental in raising America's awareness of what was going on in Britain at the time, such as his emotive picture of an injured child clutching her teddy bear, which made the cover of *Life* magazine. 'I saw all sorts of people I would never have known unless my camera lens had been my passport,' he later recalled. 'The war took me outside my restricted orbit.'

It certainly had an impact on his fashion photography; in Lisa Immordino Vreeland's book, she deliberately places two editorial shoots side by side, one from 1937, the other from 1941, while Beaton was in-between wartime assignments. The former is wildly romantic – the languid models are surrounded by masses of flowers, posing against the backdrop of a painted landscape. In the latter, the clothes are shot straight-on, the models' faces and hands blurred into obscurity, the background plain paper. For the first time, Beaton's work reflected, briefly, a sense of austerity.

His 1954 book *The Glass of Fashion* is still in print today, although the early-20th-century tastemakers that he chronicles are largely forgotten. Even at the time of writing, Beaton was acutely aware that he was evoking a vanishing age, celebrating the faded stars of the Edwardian era 'with all the nostalgia of a popular song or a summer's day picnic'. Reading these pen-portraits makes you comprehend the lasting appeal that photography held for him. It was his way of capturing the ephemeral, or as he himself put it, 'to preserve the fleeting moment like a fly in amber'. Yet Beaton was not nostalgic – his creative output evolved with each passing decade, and he always evinced a lively interest in other people. The sheer volume of his archives – the many photographs, drawings, designs, scrapbooks and diaries – are a testament to a life lived to the fullest, recorded in loving detail. Beaton seemed to exist on a higher plane; he not only captured the transience of ordinary existence but imbued it with beauty, for all to share.

In one of the final recorded interviews he gave, the interviewer observed that there could be few distinguished men and women of his era he wasn't acquainted with. Far from resting on his laurels, Beaton replied with characteristic modesty. 'Oh I don't know – there are so many that I haven't met that I long to meet. I want to start all over again.' □ 'Love, Cecil: A Journey with Cecil Beaton' by Lisa Immordino Vreeland (£40, Abrams) and the documentary 'Love, Cecil' are out now.