

CECIL BEATON'S BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

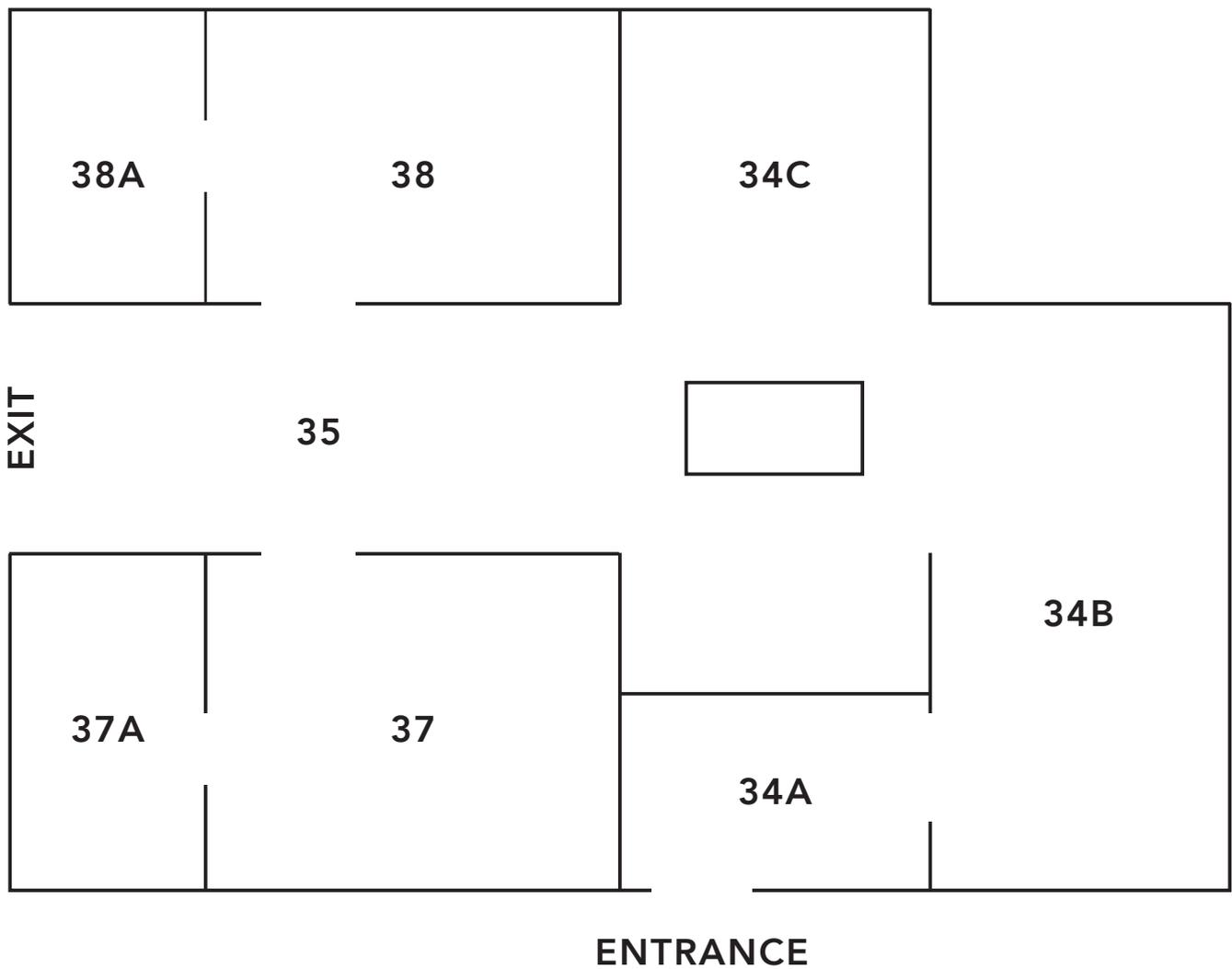


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Exhibition Layout



Introduction

Cecil Beaton (1904–80) was one of the great creative figures of the British twentieth century. Chiefly known as a photographer of portraits and fashion, through his work for *Vogue* magazine from 1924 to 1979, he was also recognised as a significant war photographer. An illustrator and caricaturist, a writer and commentator on taste and manners, Beaton was a theatre designer and art director of world renown and an influential stylist of his own homes.

This exhibition focuses on Beaton's early years. Born in Hampstead to a then prosperous timber merchant, Ernest Beaton and his wife Esther ('Etty'), Cecil was first given a camera in 1914, aged ten. His first subjects were his mother and his willing sisters, Nancy and Barbara ('Baba').

His transformation from middle-class suburban schoolboy to dazzling society figure against the backdrop of the Roaring Twenties and the Age of Jazz revealed a social mobility barely thinkable before the First World War.

Here, then, are the Bright Young Things who brought an extraordinary era vividly to life and in so doing, nurtured and refined a remarkable photographic talent. The strength of his singular vision is such that, when we think of the Bright Young Things, we think of them in Beaton's costumes, through Beaton's lens and as Beaton's friends.

Overture and Beginner

Cecil Beaton's immediate family were his first models and their home was his first photographic studio. In his spirited experimentation, Cecil discovered that masquerade and performance were key to his grander aspirations, both for himself and his two sisters, Nancy and Baba. His promotion of them as sparkling society ornaments in the leading magazines and weekly publications of the day was tireless until, in a short space of time, they became celebrities. Cecil envisaged that their social advancement would lead to good marriages that might reflect well upon a family lacking in illustrious heritage no matter how much he might invent one. They did not disappoint him. Although Cecil grasped the chance from early days to create his own visual world through his camera, he realised he would often need to collaborate throughout his life or allow others to reflect his vision back through their own creative work.

Left

Cecil Beaton reading in bed

By an unknown photographer, c.1910

Looking at weekly magazines in his mother's bed in the Beaton family home in north London was, Cecil recalled, his introduction to the seductive allure of photography. But it was the mass-produced photographic postcard that reinforced his ideal of feminine beauty, specifically an example depicting the musical comedy actress Lily Elsie, toast of the Edwardian stage, in Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. It was, he said later, 'unbearably beautiful'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Above, far left

Cecil Beaton as King Cnut

By an unknown photographer, c.1915

This may be an early masquerade. In a paper crown, Cecil presents himself as the eleventh-century ruler of the North Sea Empire, who, according to legend, attempted to repel the incoming tide by sheer force of majesty alone.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Below, far left

Cecil Beaton at Harrow c.1918

By an unknown photographer, c.1918

As a schoolboy aged twelve, Cecil received from his parents a folding Kodak A3 camera, which produced postcard-size negatives, his first camera had been an inexpensive box Brownie. Cecil recalled: ‘Encouraged by the results of the first exterior shots, I placed my placid sitters indoors, stood them by the long windows of the dining-room and set the camera stop to “Time Exposure”’

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Center

Esther Beaton in medieval costume

By Cecil Beaton, c.1925

Like his sisters, Cecil's mother was near to hand and so Esther 'Ettie' Beaton (1872–1962) often sat for her son. 'My mother strongly objected in the middle of a busy morning, to being made to put on a full evening dress... I marvel at my persistence and at the patience of my family'. The background effect was achieved by his sisters moving a rug during the five-second exposure.

Gelatin silver mounted on card
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Above, far right

Cecil Beaton with two dogs

By an unknown photographer, early 1920s

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Below, far right

Christmas card

By an unknown photographer, early 1920s

‘I want only to be Cecil Beaton’ declared Cecil as a schoolboy but his experiments with gender, costume and identity, would allow him, time and again, to choose just who that Cecil Beaton might be. This might be a self-portrait, but almost certainly Cecil has styled himself in a borrowed Edwardian era picture hat.

Gelatin silver mounted on card

National Portrait Gallery London

Right

Cecil Beaton at Sandwich, Kent

By an unknown photographer, early 1920s

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Baba Beaton as the Duchess of Malfi

By Cecil Beaton, 1926

Cecil designed Baba's white and gold costume and faux-pearl studded headdress. She wore it first at the 'Sandwich Pageant', and then again at the annual 'Children's Carnival and Fancy Dress' party at Claridge's, where celebrated actress Gladys Cooper awarded it first prize. Cecil's study appeared in the prestigious compilation *Photograms of the Year* (1926).

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Baba Beaton

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Eve magazine, which published this portrait of Barbara, known as Baba (1912–73), noted that at fourteen, she had entered the literary field having completed a collection of short stories titled *Yellow Plasticine*, although it remained unpublished.

Toned gelatin silver print mounted on card
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Nancy Beaton holding a daisy

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Vogue noted that Nancy (1909–99) the elder of Cecil's two decorative sisters deserved credit for 'a great deal of his skill as a photographer', for 'no-one could have been a more charming model'.

Gelatin silver print

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.286)

Nancy and Baba Beaton reflected in a piano lid

By Cecil Beaton, 1926

Cecil's sisters are here reflected in the lid of the family piano. This trick was borrowed from the photographer Helen Macgregor, whom Cecil visited in April 1926. In partnership with Maurice Beck, Macgregor was one of Vogue's chief photographers. 'Her flow of bright ideas made me glow', he recalled and he returned home, his head 'buzzing with ideas'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Nancy Beaton

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Cecil conceived the idea that he could launch his sisters as society beauties and worked feverishly to make it happen. Soon they were the darlings of the press. This is from weekly publication the Bystander: ‘I saw the Beaton sisters. They always seem happy and animated. I recommend them to depressed stockbrokers as a tonic.’

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Curtain Raisers

At Cambridge University, Cecil was a failure academically having, by his own admission, paid little attention to his studies. However, it was in developing Beaton's talents as an actor and designer for various theatrical societies that the period was certainly fruitful, affording myriad outlets for his talents. His use of black and white costumes for part of Pirandello's *Henry IV* anticipated his celebrated monochromatic designs for the Ascot scene of *My Fair Lady* (1964).

The skills he developed at university were put to use soon after as chief designer for the charity matinées and tableaux vivants staged by fashionable London society and which helped to make his reputation. Cambridge also provided the backdrop for the first of Cecil's photographs to feature in *Vogue*.

Steven Runciman holding a tulip, Cambridge

By Cecil Beaton, 1922

The historian Steven Runciman (1903–2000) first noticed Cecil when he threw a cigarette out of his window, setting on fire a passer-by's straw hat. Cecil first noticed Runciman at a lecture: 'he really is rather marvellous. I should adore to model him. He is so huge and ugly and strong with the most fruity voice'. In 1922 they acted together (as mother and daughter) in a production of Thackeray's *The Rose and The Ring*. With this portrait, Runciman became Cecil's first formal sitter outside members of his family.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

George Rylands as the Duchess of Malfi

By Cecil Beaton, 1924

Cecil believed the title role of the Marlowe Society's production was rightly his, but failed the audition. The Classics scholar George Rylands (1902–99), known widely as 'Dadie', secured it. Cecil was not asked to undertake the design, which also peeved him. However, this snapshot taken in poor light outside the gentlemen's lavatory of the A.D.C. theatre was the first of Cecil's pictures to appear in *Vogue*. His fee was 30 shillings. Within three years he was under contract.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Boy Le bas as Mrs Vulpy in 'The Watched Pot'

By Cecil Beaton, 1924

Edward Le Bas (1904–66), known as 'Boy', was a school friend of Cecil's and a neighbour in Hampstead. The two went up to Cambridge together and immersed themselves in undergraduate theatrical life. They began to drift apart as Boy took seriously his painting and disapproved of Cecil's fecklessness. Cecil was never shy of asking him for funds, but after one entreaty too many, Boy dropped him completely. Cecil's portrait of his friend was reproduced in *Photograms of the Year* (1925).

Toned gelatin silver print mounted on card
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Cecil Beaton outside the Hotel Excelsior, Venice

By an unknown photographer, 1926

Cecil travelled to Venice with Mrs Alison Settle of Eve magazine along with the Daily Express's Mrs Violet Whish and her daughter to photograph the d'Erlanger costume ball held at the Fenice opera house. The trip was not the success he anticipated but he met Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes and was able to show him a portfolio of drawings. Later that year, Mrs Settle became editor of Vogue and in time put Cecil under contract.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Patrons

Returning from Cambridge to London in 1925, Cecil sought ways to express himself and to make his name beyond the family timber business.

On a trip to Venice he chanced upon the impresario Sergei Diaghilev to whom he was able to show his portfolio of stage designs. Although it came to nothing, Cecil was struck by his own audacity. He began to ingratiate himself shrewdly and charmingly with aristocratic patrons of the arts and leading lights of the literary classes, whom he flattered with his daring photography; thus elevating both them and himself in the public eye. Through hard work, luck and personal charisma, in a short space of time, he became part of a young and fashionable, often titled set who delighted in his imaginative photographs.

The 'Shingled Vicereine': Viscountess Wimbourne

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

The Viscountess (1880–1948), a celebrated beauty and hostess, was one of Cecil's earliest and grandest subjects. The former Hon. Alice Grosvenor was wife to the career politician and peer, Ivor Guest who proved to be a controversial Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the Easter Uprising, 1916. The Wimbornes mostly led separate lives and Alice would develop a deep attachment to Cecil's friend, the composer William Walton and to whom she would become a muse until her death. Here she wears a dress in green and gold designed by Poiret.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Lavery, a multi-exposure

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

A quadruple exposure of Chicago-born Lady Lavery (1880–1935) married to the painter Sir John Lavery and an early champion of Cecil's work. Her circle was wide, her confidantes ranging from Irish revolutionary Michael Collins to Winston Churchill. Beaton was generous towards her. 'I have lost a true and sympathetic friend,' he wrote on her death in 1935. 'Hazel's life was the apex of all worldly delights. Painters forever painted her; photographers squeezed their bulbs...She moved in an aura of romance, she was in the swing'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Alexander in costume for the 'Jewels of the Empire' ball

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

An early patron of Cecil's, Lady Alexander (c.1857–1946) was the widow of the actor-manager Sir George Alexander, who had produced Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). 'Even in broad daylight she appeared to be in full fancy rig,' Cecil recalled. 'Yet we dared not laugh at her, for she was a good, kind soul with a golden heart. She always reminded me of some circus dog dressed up: a white poodle covered in frills and diamanté'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Countess of Oxford and Asquith

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The celebrated political hostess and saloniste Margot Asquith was an early champion of Cecil's, though she did not enjoy the process of sitting for him. This pose is likely derived from Henry van der Weyde's famous portrait of Lily Langtry seen from behind. Vogue published a more conventional frontal variant in 1927, though still considering it 'an interesting and unusual study'.

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Huxley-Parlour, London

Lady Diana Cooper in 'Persian Mood'

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

This is as she appeared in *Vogue* at Christmastime against a spangled background. Her look was always original and Lady Diana (1892–1986) was considered the beauty of her generation, not least by her lifelong friend Cecil, whom she outlived and whose hymns of praise were many. Cecil recalled: 'Lady Diana Cooper appeared, wearing an enormous apricot-coloured garden hat. Surely, she must be the most beautiful Englishwoman alive today. I stared in awe. Her face was a perfect oval, her skin white marble. Her lips were japonica red, her hair flaxen, her eyes blue love-in-the-mist'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Osbert, Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

(Clockwise from below) Osbert (1892–1969), Edith (1887–1964) and Sacheverell Sitwell (1897–1988).

‘What on earth can I become in life?’ Cecil had asked as a *cri de cœur* to his friend Kyrle Leng, who replied, ‘I wouldn’t bother too much about being anything in particular, just become a friend of the Sitwells, and wait and see what happens.’ The words were prescient and the three siblings were significant literary and artistic patrons of the early twentieth century. On making their acquaintance, he put this image into his first photographic show in 1927.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Osbert Sitwell

By Nina Hamnett, c.1918

The elder Sitwell brother was an early champion of Cecil's work, contributing an appreciation to the catalogue for his first exhibition at the Cooling Galleries, Mayfair in 1927: 'Here we have faces', he wrote, 'that in the next few years will assuredly launch a thousand ships.' The uninhibited painter Nina Hamnett, who became the personification of Bohemia in London and Paris, was close to, among other figures, Ezra Pound, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Pablo Picasso, Amadeo Modigliani and Roger Fry. She collaborated with Osbert on a survey of London statues published in 1928.

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, London

Edith Sitwell

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The poet and iconoclast was Cecil's earliest significant sitter. She came to lunch and a sitting at Sussex gardens where Cecil found her pliable and enthusiastic. His portrayal of Edith as a figure from history, here a carved medieval effigy, delighted her. It chimed with her own view of her gothic elegance and regal descent – 'I am a Plantagenet' – and her ambitions for the three Sitwells to be memorialised as a literary dynasty. However, the *British Journal of Photography* considered it 'repellent.' Cecil had misremembered the date of the sitting on this print.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Above

Cecil Beaton in costume for 'Troilus and Cressida'

By an unknown photographer, 1922

Cecil as a spear-carrier in the famous Marlowe Society production which it was claimed restored Shakespeare's 'difficult' play to currency on the stage. Cecil's friend and rival George Rylands was a flamboyant in the character of Diomedes, while the future writer and memoirist J. R. Ackerley shone as Achilles.

Gelatin silver print

V&A Theatre and Performance

Given by Eileen Hose

Below

Cecil Beaton in costume for 'All the Vogue'

By Dorothy Wilding, 1925

In his last term at Cambridge University, Cecil designed the sets and costumes for the Footlights sketch and comedy society's annual revue, *All the Vogue* – a prescient title in light of his future association with the magazine. He also took on six roles, male and female. The *Cambridge Review* noted that 'he wears a series of dresses, diamanté, enormous pearls, a bustle and a whatnot which must be seen to be disbelieved...'

Gelatin silver print
V&A Theatre and Performance
Given by Eileen Hose

Centre

Costume design for Pirandello's 'Henry IV'

By Cecil Beaton, 1924

Cecil and Boy Le Bas worked together on the Marlowe Society's production of Luigi Pirandello's play, its debut in England. Cecil designed the costumes and scenery, Boy painting portraits and props. This design is for the costume of the mother of the Marchioness Matilda Spina.

Translucent and opaque watercolour
over graphite underdrawing on paper
Collection of Lloyd Anthony Ibert

Above

Cecil Beaton in costume for 'All the Vogue'

By 'Carlo Crivelli' c.1924

'Carlo Crivelli' was a pseudonym Beaton gave himself, after the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance painter in order to submit photographs to various publications. Cecil worried that it would be too shameless to send to the press pictures of himself, so he adopted the name for this purpose.

Gelatin silver print
V&A Theatre and Performance
Given by Eileen Hose

Below

Cecil Beaton as Countess Matilda Spina in 'Henry IV'

By an unknown photographer, 1924

Cecil not only designed the sets and costumes for première of Pirandello's *Henry IV* he took the leading female role. The play was a great success. 'The theatrical thrills, the publicity,' Cecil wrote in his diary. 'It was marvellous to see one's name up all over town.'

Gelatin silver print

V&A Theatre and Performance

Given by Eileen Hose

‘Vogue’

1924

When a grainy shot of George Rylands in costume as the Duchess of Malfi was published in *Vogue* in April 1924, it marked the first time the photographer’s credit line ‘Cecil Beaton’ had appeared there. His association with the magazine lasted the next fifty years, his last work for *Vogue* published in 1979.

Vogue / Condé Nast Britain

Limelight

Two figures above all others gave meaning and warmth to Cecil's social life in the 1920s and 1930s. Dual gatekeepers to the rarefied worlds of high art and even higher society, Rex Whistler and Stephen Tennant, reflected and encouraged Cecil's passions with enthusiasm. They helped him to shape his personality and develop new and innovative approaches in his work. Tennant, beautiful, excitable and impeccably aristocratic was the epitome of the 'Bright Young Thing'. Cecil seemed to make real his friend's romanticized vision of himself while benefitting from his unrestrained imagination and taste. Through Tennant, Cecil met the painter and fledgling set designer Rex Whistler, who by contrast was reserved and pensive, but with an unforced charm. Like Cecil, he was of more modest beginnings and observed the social whirl with wryness.

‘Rivière Wanderers’ Cecil Beaton and Stephen Tennant

By Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor, 1928

The Graphic, which published this double portrait in 1930, reported that the two friends wore these ‘silken football jerseys’ (blue and white and red and white respectively) on the Riviera. Stephen reportedly disliked the ‘poisonous wave’ in his hair.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax
by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Stephen Tennant

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

In Stephen's silver bedroom at Mulberry House, Smith Square, the Tennant family's London home, Cecil would have been in heaven as much as its young occupant, who found being there 'swooning, happy, helpless'. The walls, silver-foiled, sparkled as the kindest of light bounced off its reflective sheen. Cecil saw the dramatic possibilities of silver and foil as a backdrop and it quickly entered his visual lexicography.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Stephen Tennant

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Cecil's diary for December 1926 found him mesmerised by 'this remarkably poetic-looking apparition' who blew kisses at him as he revolved past on a roundabout horse at the circus at Olympia, Cecil found Stephen Tennant (1906–87) 'an unforgettable sight'. His new friend was impossibly beautiful, impeccably aristocratic and extremely rich. Cecil photographed him in a favourite coat for his twenty-first birthday. When he saw the results, Stephen declared himself 'crazy about their beauty'.

Gelatin silver print

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gilman Collection,
Museum Purchase, 2005 (2005.100.879)

Stephen Tennant

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Tennant was dogged by ill health and treated delicately by friends as a result. Writer and critic Lytton Strachey was enchanted, describing him as ‘extremely beautiful – but frail beyond imagination’. He entered into a doomed relationship with the soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon (this print once belonged to him).

When Tennant’s mother, Viscountess Grey of Fallodon, died in 1928 he inherited Wilsford Manor, her Wiltshire home and he remained there, increasingly secluded from the world until his death almost half a century later.

Gelatin silver print

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gilman Collection,
Museum Purchase, 2005 (2005.100.880)

‘The Lancret affair’ at Wilsford Manor

By Willie the Wilsford Footman
(under guidance by Cecil Beaton), 1927

As arranged by Cecil, this is perhaps the best-known portrayal of the ‘Bright Young Things’ who came together at Wilsford Manor in costumes echoing the style of the French Rococo artist Nicolas Lancret, whose depictions of pastoral figures in elegant landscape settings were heavily influenced by Watteau. Left to right: Rex Whistler, Cecil Beaton, Georgia Sitwell, William Walton, Stephen Tennant, Baby Jungman and Zita Jungman.

Gelatin silver print
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Siegfried Sassoon

By Cecil Beaton, c.1928–9

Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), celebrated war poet and writer, found himself in an often tense and obsessive relationship with Stephen Tennant, twenty years his junior and he was a frequent visitor to Wilsford Manor. A man of simple and conventional tastes, he was never entirely comfortable with the frivolities of Tennant and his friends. He also disliked being photographed. Cecil recalled that ‘he groaned; tears welled up in his eyes and flowed down his rugged cheeks; and when it was all over he sighed with relief and shook himself like a dog after a bath.’

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Rex Whistler 'In a Watteau Glade', Wilsford Manor

By an unknown photographer, 1927

Though Whistler (1905 –1944) was not always comfortable as a Bright Young Thing 'his movements were always graceful,' recalled Cecil, 'and when he struck a stance one might have placed a crook in his hand and created an eighteenth-century shepherd'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Bright Young Things at Wilsford Manor

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

On the rug beneath a patterned shawl, (left to right):
Steven Runciman, Teresa Jungman, Zita Jungman,
Stephen Tennant, Dorothy Wilde and Borden
Harriman.

Social obligation demanded the guests participate in whatever was suggested, no matter how exasperating. Whether they joined in Cecil and Stephen's high-kicking chorus girl routine or their re-enactment of scenes from *The Last of Mrs Cheyney* is unrecorded. Steven Runciman concluded, 'Everyone was very happy and felt popular, and Cecil took photographs of us all', while Cecil considered his first weekend house party at Wilsford 'faultless'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘A fallen angel’ Rex Whistler

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

In 1922 Rex Whistler attended the Slade School of Art with Stephen Tennant (and Oliver Messel), and it was through Stephen that Cecil first met him. This occurred in February 1927 at the Villa Primavera, Saint Jean-Cap-Ferrat, where the two were guests of Stephen and his mother, Lady Grey. He photographed both friends en plein air wearing his leopard print dressing gown, Rex laid out against the rocks like a drowned sailor washed ashore.

It was the start of a friendship that lasted only seventeen years. Rex’s death, on his first day in action in Normandy in 1944, affected Cecil deeply, as it did his wide circle of friends.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Bright Young Things at Wilsford Manor

by Willie the Wilsford Footman
(under the direction of Cecil Beaton), 1927

In October 1927, Cecil organised and directed a series of late summer tableaux en fête champêtre, emulating the stylised, pastoral paintings of Nicolas Lancret, Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The group of rococo neo-Arcadians comprised their host Stephen Tennant, William Walton, Georgia Sitwell, Zita Jungman, Rex Whistler and Cecil himself. When they moved to the wooden bridge spanning the Avon (see adjacent wall), Walton for one was a conspicuously masculine presence, self-conscious among the painted faces of the mock shepherds and shepherdesses.

© The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Heavenly Creatures

Cecil sought out striking models to match his ideal of beauty among the debutantes and titled women of the era. His dazzling and adventurous images aimed to recapture his childhood awe of celebrity and the glamour of theatre and fashion. In 1930 he published with Duckworth, to a fanfare of publicity, his first book, *The Book of Beauty*, a personal gallery of the famous and the beautiful into which, in portrait photographs and drawings, he raised around fifty of his most exquisite sitters. This project established Cecil's reputation as an authority on taste and style as well as one of the most original of the younger generation of photographers. In his writings as much as his photographs, Cecil often displayed a detachment that made him a perceptive chronicler of his times. heavenly creatures.

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The Maharani of Cooch Behar

By Cecil Beaton, 1930s

Consort to the Maharajah of a rich princely state of north-eastern India, the Maharani (1892–1968) was conspicuous by her extravagance and theatrical tastes. Her shoe collection, made for her by Ferragamo, was legendary: diamonds ran up and down the heels of one pair; phosphorus infused the material of another, so that they glowed in the dark. When from 1927 she began to spend more time in England, the press eagerly reported on her social life, invariably full of spectacle. Her fox hunting skills in Leicestershire earned her many admirers, among them the Prince of Wales.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Angela Dudley Ward

By Cecil Beaton, 1934

Angela (1916–99) was the younger of the two striking daughters of Freda Dudley Ward, *maîtresse-en-titre* to the Prince of Wales. *Vogue* noted her ‘charm and sophistication exceptional even among modern *débutantes*.’ She was engaged to Captain Robert Laycock, a much-admired cavalry officer – not least by Evelyn Waugh who served under him. Perhaps Cecil had reservations. In 1927, at the coming of age party for Sidney, Lord Herbert, Laycock had been one of a group of ‘hearties’ who ducked Cecil in the river Nadder.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Caroline Paget

By Cecil Beaton, 1936

The eldest of the six children of the 6th Marquess of Anglesey, dark-haired Lady Caroline (1913–73) was, said Loelia, Duchess of Westminster, ‘the most attractive girl of her generation’. Her cousin David Herbert recalled, ‘everybody loved Caroline, and perhaps this has been her trouble in life, for she has had to take it for granted that many people of all shapes and sizes and sexes would willingly kill themselves for her.’ One who pursued her fervently and ultimately in vain was Rex Whistler. She was likely the love of his life. Here Lady Caroline models for Vogue a cartwheel Ascot hat by Aage Thaarup.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Penelope Dudley-Ward as a débutante

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

‘Pempie’ (1914–62) became a successful film actress. Cecil would later design her costumes for *Major Barbara* (1941) and for the play *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1946). Rex Whistler fell deeply for her – his first serious love affair – and confided in Cecil. As the news then raced around their circle, Rex immediately regretted it: ‘Cecil is a curiously insensitive friend in many ways, don’t you agree?’ he wrote to Edith Olivier.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘Saint Toughy’ (Angela Dudley Ward)

By Rex Whistler, c.1934

Whistler made a striking portrait of Angela Dudley Ward, casting her in mediaeval armour, a heavy wooden staff in her hand and a halo around her head. If, by now rebutted by her sister Pempie (Penelope), he was exhibiting a fondness towards her sister, Angela’s stern gaze surely crushed his ardour.

Oil on canvas, on board
Private Collection

Baronne Baba d'Erlanger and Miss Paula Gellibrand

By Augustus John, 1919–21

This joint portrait of two inseparable friends, who were known to some as 'The Twins' despite their contrasting looks, was commissioned by Captain Frederick Guest, a Liberal politician and Winston Churchill's cousin. He was also a friend to the d'Erlanger family, as was the artist, newly fashionable, and he sold the portrait on to Baba's husband. The painting took time to finish as Baba was uncooperative, but eventually shown in 1923 at John's exhibition at the Alpine Club, London.

Oil on canvas

Private collection, UK, courtesy of the Richard Green Gallery, London

Baba, Princesse Jean-Louis de Faucigny-Lucinge

By Cecil Beaton, 1920s

The princesse (1902–45) was formerly Baba d’Erlanger. She married in 1923 Prince Jean-Louis de Faucigny-Lucinge. Hostesses had to fight shy of the ‘Displeasure List’ of socialites and style leaders drawn up by Baba and her childhood friend Paula Gellibrand, which was vast and ever changing. Here she wears a double-winged black felt toque by Talbot.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax
by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Paula Gellibrand, Marquesa de Casa Maury

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

The marquesa (1898–1986) was a lifelong friend of Cecil and much photographed by him, on this occasion against a pair of glittering sequin curtains in her Grosvenor Street house. ‘Paula Gellibrand was the most beautiful and exotic of all these golden sitters,’ Cecil recalled, ‘On its long delicate stalk, her head was like a Brancusi egg, the drooped lids of her vast eyes were shining tulip petals; each pose made her a living Modigliani’.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Loughborough

By Cecil Beaton, late 1920s

Formerly Sheila Chisholm from New South Wales, Lady Loughborough (1895–1969) was a legendary siren and married three times. To Vogue she was one of the ‘the smartest and most decorative figures in London society’ and her suitors included Rudolph Valentino and Bertie, younger brother of the Prince of Wales. His father the king promised him the dukedom of York if he stayed away from Lady Loughborough, which he duly did and duly received.

Watercolour on paper
Nina Campbell

Lady Loughborough

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The bell jar, borrowed from Cecil's friend Boy Le Bas, was then a favourite prop. This was the final portrait of his first exhibition at the Cooling Galleries (1927) and the most remarked upon.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Home Movie

1928

Excerpts from a home movie made at Weirbridge Cottage near Savay Farm, Denham, in Buckinghamshire, the home of Lady Cynthia Mosley, the former Lady Cynthia Curzon, known as 'Cimmie' who appears in some of the frames. Here, among other friends, such as Teresa 'Baby' Jungman, Georgia Sitwell and Richard Wyndham, Cecil and Stephen Tennant play out tragi-comic roles. Cecil's costume and appearance borrows much from Society hostesses Margot Asquith and Lady Ottoline Morell.

Duration 3 minutes and 13 seconds

Courtesy of the Mosley Family

‘Beaton to a Dazzle’

By Anthony Wysard, 1930

The *Sketch*'s caricaturist satirized the latest trends in photography and, in the eyes of readers, the man responsible for them. ‘The pictures in the background are lifelike portraits of Mayfair personalities looking like death. The ensemble is a delicious example of the latest “Dazzle” photography. The only implements employed... are a double-jointed lens, eight ordinary air balloons and five or six symbolic blooms’.

Pencil, ink and wash on board
National Portrait Gallery, London

Cecil Beaton's Kodak a3 folding camera

Cecil was given this camera in 1916 on his twelfth birthday. Inexpensive and practical, though not always easy to focus or use indoors, it was regarded as the consummate equipment for the amateur and Cecil quickly mastered it. Producing postcard-sized negatives, six to a roll of film, he would use it almost exclusively up to and including his first years at Vogue. Most of the photographs in this exhibition were made on this still relatively primitive camera.

Lacock Abbey, Fox Talbot Museum and Village (National Trust)

‘The Book Of Beauty’

1930

The Book of Beauty (Duckworth, 1930) was Cecil’s first book. Containing photographs, marginal drawings and generous written profiles of those he considered worthy of entering his gallery of beauty, it mostly garnered favourable publicity. Tilly Losch in her silver costume for the Bluebird in *Wake up and Dream!* (1929) was the cover star. The boards are distinctive for their pink and gold polka dot pattern. One copy, opened to its colour frontispiece, reveals Cecil’s inscribed dedication to Rex Whistler.

Hugo Vickers; Private Collection, West Sussex;
Clare Trimming, Beaux Books

‘Vogue’

1927 and 1929

Cecil was put under contract to *Vogue* in 1926. Photography apart, in his early years with the magazine, he was indispensable as a social commentator and tireless as a caricaturist (mostly benign). These issues date from November 2 1927 and December 11 1929.

Vogue / Condé Nast Britain (1927 issue)

Private Collection, West Sussex (1929 issue)

Georgia Sitwell's Photograph Albums

1927 and 1933

Cecil's presence at so many of the house parties of the era and his habit, it must be assumed, of distributing small prints thereafter present a unique snapshot of the time. Here one set of albums from Weston Hall, home of Sacheverell and Georgia Sitwell, covers a weekend spent at Stephen Tennant's family home, Wilsford, Wiltshire, in the summer of 1927; the other a holiday spent on the Lido, Venice, in 1933.

Private Collection

Epilogue

In 1939 an invitation from Buckingham Palace to photograph Queen Elizabeth took his career into another direction as a photographer of the royal family. When world war, which had shaped the young lives of Cecil and his contemporaries in 1914–18, arose again, it offered him a chance of redemption, which he grasped. As a photographer attached to the Ministry of Information, he travelled the world for the war effort. His photographs, now pared of frippery, were vital to morale, and formed a significant body of work.

Until then he had tirelessly recorded a rarefied world, now vanished. His career would continue to go from strength to strength; he won three Oscars and was given a retrospective exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 1968, Britain's first national museum show of a living photographer. He was knighted in 1972. He died in 1980.

‘Memento mori’ Cecil Beaton

By Cecil Beaton, c.1932

An unusual and unexpectedly dark self-portrait taken as a double exposure in the studio. As ever, the ghoulish aspect was not to be taken too seriously.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Cecil Beaton

by Paul Tanqueray, 1937

A chance encounter with society photographer, Paul Tanqueray, at a garden party in 1925 reaped rewards for Beaton. Tanqueray was able to teach him several new photographic techniques and explained some of the mystique around printing and re-touching. Cecil asked him 'a thousand questions', without, he hoped, 'being too inquisitive.' That same year, Tanqueray photographed Cecil's sisters, Nancy and Baba, and to Cecil's delight these were published in the *Bystander*.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London

Cecil Beaton in costume as Elinor Glyn

By Cecil Beaton, 1934

A studio set up taken while Cecil was working on the stage designs for C.B. Cochran's revue, *Streamline*, showing his inclination at that time towards the baroque style.

Gelatin Silver Print

National Portrait Gallery, London

Cecil Beaton

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

This multiple exposure was the frontispiece to the catalogue to Cecil's photographic show at the Cooling Galleries, London at which he also showed drawings and stage designs. He was now a fixture at *Vogue* and an unrivalled social commentator. His brilliantine-d hairstyle and unhurried demeanour shows the influence of his new friend the aristocratic aesthete, Stephen Tennant.

Gelatin Silver Print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Sir Cecil Beaton, 1980

Cecil Beaton in Costume as Elinor Glyn

by George Hoyningen-Huene, 1930

For a party in Paris, Cecil disguised himself, quite convincingly, as the writer Elinor Glyn, whose novels and screenplays were considered daring for their time. ‘Reputedly,’ said Cecil, ‘She brought good taste as well as sex to Hollywood’.

Gelatin silver print

Collection Andrew Cowan

Self-Portrait

By Cecil Beaton, late 1920s

Throughout his life and career, Cecil transformed the appearance of others and became equally interested in recording and transforming himself. As his reputation evolved and grew, he recorded the different facets of his public persona, writing: 'I don't want people to know me as I really am, but as I am trying and pretending to be.'

Black ink and wash on paper

Collection of James Morgan Watters

Cecil Beaton

By Curtis Moffat and Olivia Wyndham, c.1928

By 1928, Cecil's reputation had reached an early highpoint. He was, in Stephen Tennant's words, 'the King of *Vogue*' and his first one-man show at Mayfair's Cooling Galleries had opened to great acclaim. Apart from shaping his own sense of style, he was engaged this year in designing costumes for 'The Dream of Fair Women Ball' at Claridge's, 'The Ball of the Midnight Sun' at the Park Lane Hotel and the charity matinée at Daly's Theatre, 'The Pageant of Hyde Park'.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London

Cecil Beaton

By Curtis Moffat and Olivia Wyndham, 1928

Cecil acknowledged the influence on his work of both Man Ray and his friend and disciple, Curtis Moffat, who, in his Bloomsbury studio, ‘inspired me to take the heads of my sitters in their underclothes.’ The older photographer’s use of coloured papers and textured boards for finished prints was emulated by Cecil but ‘my imitations never possessed the inimitable Curtis Moffat touch’.

Gelatin silver print mounted on green paper on board;
Gelatin silver print mounted on red paper on board
National Portrait Gallery, London

Cecil Beaton

By F.J. Gutman, 1933

Francis Gutmann was born in London but brought up in Munich. He anglicised his surname to 'Goodman' in 1938. His photographs of the Bright Young Things as their heyday ended, appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Sketch* but his negatives were destroyed during World War II, including this one of Cecil. The background is a decoration, possibly a photogram, by the surrealist painter and photographer John Banting.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Cecil Beaton in the Middle East

By an unknown photographer, 1942

When the Second World War broke out, Cecil offered his services to the Ministry of Information. As a war photographer, this significant body of work ranks among his greatest photographic achievements.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

True Originals

With important patronage secured and influential friends gained, Cecil's social circles expanded rapidly, to encompass some of the more eccentric fringes of the British upper classes. Among endless rounds of parties and fancy dress pageants, Cecil was introduced to some of the era's most creative and successful artists. Composers, musicians, writers, poets, actors and dancers all appeared readily before his lens. A friend, Allamah Harper, with whom he had first met Edith Sitwell, made further introductions and through her a world that had seemed inaccessible suddenly became within reach. His first trip to New York in 1928 earned him further acclaim as queues of society figures sought his approval and, with a fresh and significant supporter in *American Vogue*, the international reputation of 'Society's Shadow Snatcher' began to soar.

His first exhibition of paintings and photographs at Mayfair's Cooling Galleries, held in 1927, had been a triumph. The glow under which he now basked led to his becoming a personality in his own right, in demand for his informed and witty observations on the new standards of beauty or contemporary modes and manners as much as for lucrative portrait sittings.

Lord Berners

By Rex Whistler, 1929

Urbane and scholarly, Gerald Tyrwhitt-Wilson, the 14th Baron Berners (1883-1950), was an accomplished composer, painter and writer but is best known for his eccentricities. He was the model for Lord Merlin in Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). Written under the pen name 'Adela Quebec', his privately-printed roman à clef the picaresque *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* satirised his circle of friends.

The indiscretions it contained incensed Cecil particularly. Rex Whistler painted this portrait at Berners' house in Rome.

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, London

Above

Inez Holden

By Cecil Beaton, 1920s

The writer Beatrice Inez Holden (1903–74) was born into an upper class Derbyshire family but reacted sharply against it, her politics far to the left. She became close to political opposites George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh and was sketched by Augustus John. H.G. Wells lent her an apartment in Regent's Park, while Constant Lambert was in thrall to her 'consumptive charm'. Holden's novel *Born Old, Died Young* (1932) was autobiographical. 'There was one period of my life,' she told her fellow novelist Anthony Powell, 'when I knew only millionaires.'

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Below left

Brian Howard

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

Brian Howard (1905–58) was marked out for success early on. At Eton he precociously despatched his poems to Edith Sitwell, who was warmly receptive. In 1922 he produced with Harold Acton, the shocking – and shocking-pink-covered – *Eton Candle*. Thereafter his trajectory faltered. Instead he was fated to provide the memoirs of contemporaries with a rich seam of anecdote. Evelyn Waugh, at Oxford with Brian, found him a particularly fertile source of tragi-comedy. He was, infamously, the part model for Anthony Blanche in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945); for Johnnie Hoop in his *Vile Bodies* (1930) and for the Wandering Jew in *Helena* (1950)

Modern copy print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Above right

Georgia Sitwell

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

Posed in front of a rococo screen, *Vogue* found this tableau featuring Georgia Sitwell (1905-80) and her borzoi, Feo, a 'grouping of Baroque elegance'. Before her marriage to the younger Sitwell brother, Sacheverell, she was Georgia Doble, the Canadian-born daughter of a financier. She enjoyed the fast-paced London season and often found marrying into the Sitwell family demanding.

Gelatin silver print
Renishaw Hall

Above

Sir Francis Rose

By Cecil Beaton, 1939

The painter and baronet Sir Francis Rose (1909–79) never achieved the fame predicted for him, not least by Gertrude Stein who collected enthusiastically his studied surrealist paintings. He was a lifelong – if occasionally difficult – friend of Cecil’s and close to Allannah Harper, the Sturt family and several daughters of the Guinness family. He is *en travesti* for Cecil’s spoof illustrated memoirs, *My Royal Past* (1939). His moustache was retouched out in the finished print.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Self-Portrait

By Rex Whistler, 1934

Rex Whistler's unforced charm and natural elegance, glimpsed in this relaxed self-portrait, made him attractive to his contemporaries but also won him many admirers from a previous generation: Duff and Diana Cooper, Lord Berners, Edith and Osbert Sitwell and not least the 51-year-old spinster Edith Olivier with whom he enjoyed the closest relationship of his shortened life.

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, London

Left

Evelyn Waugh

By Henry Lamb, 1930

Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) was completed as his brief first marriage ended. The humiliation he felt altered its tone. Promising to be a buoyant satire on the 'Bright Young People' *Vile Bodies* turned out instead a merciless dissection, but it made his name. He dedicated it to Diana and Bryan Guinness to whom he had fled as his marriage failed. They in turn commissioned this portrait of their friend, now the spokesman of the young generation with ahead of him a glittering future. In his left hand, Waugh appreciatively holds a glass of Guinness.

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Centre

Cecil Beaton

By Henry Lamb, 1935

The Australian-born portrait painter was a Wiltshire neighbour of Cecil's. He often played host at Coombe Bisset, the house he shared with his wife Pansy and three children, to Cecil's weekend guests and this painting was made there in Lamb's studio. Although he disliked the finished work, Cecil greatly enjoyed the sittings, writing, 'I am delighted to spend a great deal of time here for Henry exudes all the fire, inspiration and intensity that the pictures lack. The room becomes alive and beautiful with his enthusiasms and I have been extremely happy sitting to him during the past week, for I too have thrived on his glorious sparkle'.

Oil on canvas

Eric A. and Rosayn D. Anderson

Right

Constant Lambert

By Christopher Wood, 1926

This portrait of Constant Lambert (1905–51) is likely to have been painted in Paris where the composer was working on *Romeo and Juliet* for the Ballets Russes and Wood had just been fired as its designer. Joan Miró and Max Ernst were hired instead. The ballet opened in Paris to a protest by their fellow surrealists who considered Miró and Ernst to have been seduced by money.

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, London.

Tallulah Bankhead with balloons and witch's ball

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The American actress had found success in the West End in the comedy *The Gold Diggers* (1926) helped by a *soigné* wardrobe of pyjamas. Cecil included this portrait in *The Book of Beauty* (1930) with a vivid pen portrait: 'Miss Bankhead's cheeks are like huge acid-pink peonies, her eyelashes are built out with hot liquid paint to look like burnt matches, and her sullen, discontented, rather evil, rosebud of a mouth is painted the brightest scarlet and is as shiny as Tiptree's strawberry jam'.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Edward James in front of Ekoi headdress

By Cecil Beaton, c.1934

Edward James (1907–84), collector and patron of writers and surrealist artists inherited a fortune at twenty-five. Falling in love with the impulsive Viennese dancer Tilly Losch, James spent much to keep their marriage alive, including funding for her a ballet company, *Les Ballets 1933*. Their divorce was scandalous but he was unbowed. ‘Edward knows his own failings more intimately than anyone else’, thought Cecil, ‘The intricate complications of his perverse mind and his startling eccentricities give him enormous enjoyment; he laughs with a high cackle at them’.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
West Dean College of Arts and Conservation

Tilly Losch 'A contemporary beauty'

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

Vanity Fair originally published this sketch of Mrs Edward James in remarking upon the subject's 'slanting-eyed, mysterious beauty and elusive grace, which gives a quality of enchantment to her dancing and miming'

Watercolour on paper

West Dean College of Arts and Conservation

Tilly Losch as the Bluebird in 'Wake Up and Dream'

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

The bewitching Viennese dancer Tilly Losch (1903–75) was much photographed by Cecil. Despite a propensity to wild abandonment on the stage, and party to a notorious divorce, Beaton considered her as 'doll-like, exquisitely prim and coy like a shy child...in a party dress tied with bows in a Victorian scrapbook'. Cecil clearly considered this image a vital one, using it for the dust jacket to his first book, *The Book of Beauty* (1930).

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Daphne du Maurier

By Cecil Beaton, c.1926

Considered the prettiest debutante of the year along with Cecil's sister Baba, it was reported that Daphne Du Maurier (1907–89) did not care for 'jazz parties and loves to be alone. She never makes plans and friends never know where to find her.'

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Dorothy Wilde

By Cecil Beaton, c.1927

As the niece of Oscar Wilde, ‘Dolly’ Wilde (1895–1941) enjoyed a certain notoriety but was, by many accounts, startling in her own right. Not least Cecil’s. Accompanying her to a house party at Wilsford Manor, Wiltshire, the family home of Stephen Tennant, he noted Dolly’s ‘raven hair shingled and oyster face plastered with powder; [she] wore vitriolic purple and reclined like a decadent Roman empress’.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Anna May Wong

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

The Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905–61), born in Los Angeles, was a silent-era idol, one of the first and, for a time, only women of Chinese descent to work in Hollywood in an era when non-Asian actors customarily took Asian roles. *Vogue* published a variant of this portrait at Christmas 1929 to mark Anna May's debut on the London stage (*The Chalk Circle* in which she starred with a young Laurence Olivier). In his homespun studio in Sussex Gardens, for his own *fantaisie orientale*, Cecil draped Anna May in exotic flowers, his 'grotto of gypsophilia' held up by billiard cues, and added it to *The Book of Beauty* (1930).

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Gertrude Lawrence in silver wig

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

The actress and comedienne Gertrude Lawrence (1898–1952) had met Noël Coward as a teenager at an elocution class and they would become the most popular double act on the English stage. Cecil was ambivalent about Coward but of Lawrence he was always admiring. In *The Book of Beauty* (1930) he remarked upon her ‘torso-less, loose limbed figure looks to possess the élan and spontaneity of movement that ordinary human beings are conscious of acquiring only directly after a long hot bath’. Here she wears a silver wig.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Tallulah Bankhead

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

Cecil would find Tallulah Bankhead (1902–68) entertaining and exasperating in equal measure, ‘Sometimes it is all cocktails and storms of laughter. Other days it is all nervous wails or bad-tempered screams, adding, ‘most photographers think they are photographing a mad woman...’ This illustration appeared in *Vanity Fair* the sister magazine to *American Vogue* for whom Cecil drew and photographed many of Hollywood’s leading lights.

Watercolour and pencil on paper

Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Miss Hope Williams, 1973

Oliver Messel

By Cecil Beaton, c.1928

Cecil Beaton and Oliver Messel (1904–78) were born within a day of each other, became great friends and their lives followed a parallel course. Cecil recognised Oliver's great personal charm and perhaps envied the attention that it gave him and his gift for mimicry, which collapsed crowded rooms to helpless mirth. In the early years, as they struggled to make their names, Messel and Rex Whistler (with whom he studied at the Slade School of Art) would be considered the foremost stage and costume designers of their day. Cecil imagined himself third choice, which was not necessarily the case. After Rex's unexpected death in 1944, Cecil judged Messel to be his greatest rival.

Gelatin silver print

University of Bristol Theatre Collection, OHM/3/2/11/ ArenaPAL

Nora Holt

By Cecil Beaton, c.1929

In the summer of 1929 in London, Cecil held a cocktail party in honour of the pianist and cabaret star, Kansas-born Nora Holt (1885–1974), one of the most conspicuous figures of the flourishing ‘Harlem Renaissance’. Fresh from his earliest visits to New York and Hollywood, it was typical of Cecil Beaton, considered the Daily Sketch, to be ‘patron to all the interesting Americans.’ The Sunday Times reported that her voice ‘jumps in an amazing manner from the merest whisper to a roar that echoes through the room...’ This is the only known Beaton image of the entertainer, showing her at her most wide-eyed and vital. Cecil included it in his second exhibition at the Cooling Galleries in 1930.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Left

Sylvia Townsend-Warner

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

‘Imagination is Miss Warner’s strong suit’, *Eve* magazine declared, while admiring her ‘Whimsical speculations in the realms of fantasy’. Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978) had just published *Mr Fortune’s Maggot* when she sat for Cecil. He admired the older Sylvia not so much for her literary output, but for her sparkling conversation, her intelligence and her connections. She in turn found much to like in the young photographer. In 1954, writing in her diary, she reflected, ‘I looked wistfully back to that amiable, suggestible and complying young man, Cecil Beaton...’

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Above

Allanah Harper

By Cecil Beaton, 1926

Allanah Harper (1904–92) provided an early and vital impetus to Cecil's career, by introducing him to her lifelong friend, Edith Sitwell. She had taken him to a performance of Edith's 'entertainment', *Façade*, which he found 'monotonous', but a lunch and a portrait sitting followed. The results were dazzling and set him on his way. Allanah also introduced him to others of a world he had long admired but at a distance: Zita and Baby Jungman, Brenda Dean Paul, Lady Eleanor Smith, Inez Holden, William Walton and Oliver Messel

Toned gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Below

Sacheverell Sitwell

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The younger Sitwell brother, to whom fame came early, was a poet and art historian with a particular enthusiasm for baroque art and architecture. Cecil learnt much, he said, about the art of living well while staying with Sitwell and his wife Georgia at Weston Hall, Northamptonshire. ‘Here Sachie held forth, in the deepest coke-crackle voice, on such diverse subjects as the castrati, Offenbach, Norman wreaths, Ingres or Ronald Firbank’ while smoking Turkish cigarettes in ‘boyish, unformed hands’.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Far right

William Walton

By Cecil Beaton, 1926

William Walton (1902–83) was an Oxford undergraduate when discovered by the Sitwells. If not for them, he mused, he might have ended up ‘a clerk in some Midland bank with an interest in music’. He collaborated on *Façade*, setting Edith Sitwell’s avant-garde verse to music. It caused a sensation and secured for Walton a reputation as an *enfant terrible*. Cecil saw a recital in April 1926 but did not much enjoy it. However, he photographed its composer, setting Walton’s distinctive profile against a modernist backdrop of his own design.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘The Girls Of Radcliff Hall’

By ‘Adela Quebec’ (c.1934)

‘Adela Quebec’ was the pseudonym of Lord Berners. His spoof *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* (c.1934) was privately published. It took its title from the author Radclyffe Hall, whose story of lesbian love, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), had caused a sensation. Berners’s novella expanded on similar themes. Berners was Mrs Carfax, the headmistress of Radcliff Hall; her pupils thinly veiled versions of Berners’s male friends: Lizzie (Peter Watson), Olive Mason (Oliver Messel) Daisy Montgomery (David Herbert). Cecil was Cecily Seymour. The stories within it were invariably true and couched in such knowing ambiguity as to leave no room for doubt. Cecil believed himself the chief figure of fun. Only a few copies survive. The copy to the right belonged to Cyril Connolly. The other copy with its decorative jacket belonged to the writer Carl Van Vechten, who was given it by the American writer Gertrude Stein, a friend of Berners.

Private Collection, West Sussex
Diana Parkin

The 'Eton Candle', 1922

Edited by Harold Acton and Brian Howard

Brian Howard and Harold Acton, destined to become the most flamboyant of the Bright Young Things at Oxford, produced the shocking-pink-covered *Eton Candle* while still at school. Promoting modernist poetry and filled with self-penned conceits, it also marked the first published work – a drawing – by novelist Anthony Powell and an essay by Aldous Huxley, the editors' English and French master. The 'Eton Scandal' became something of a *cause célèbre*. It never went beyond its inaugural issue.

Private Collection, West Sussex

Evelyn Waugh

by Cecil Beaton, c.1932

Cecil's and Evelyn Waugh's mutual dislike dated from prep school in Hampstead, where the pugnacious Waugh (1903–66) severely bullied the weaker Cecil. Their enmity was lifelong. That Waugh should be pictured here at Ashcombe, Cecil's Wiltshire home, is therefore surprising. It is likely he was part of a nearby houseparty invited, perhaps, to lunch. Out of courtesy the invitation would have been extended to all Cecil's neighbour's guests.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax
by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

‘Decline And Fall’ (1928) and ‘Vile Bodies’ (1930)

By Evelyn Waugh

In *Decline and Fall*, Waugh’s first published novel, Cecil had a small but pungent role as David Lennox, an insufferable, feather-brained society photographer, who emerges from an electric brougham ‘with little shrieks’ and makes for ‘the nearest looking-glass’ while making inopportune suggestions. Stephen Tennant, however, was delighted to be associated with the flamboyant Miles Malpractice.

Satirical and revealing, Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* is the most significant piece of contemporary writing to focus on the phenomenon of the ‘Bright Young People’. Waugh intended the title of his book to be *Bright Young Things* but believed that by 1930 the term, then in common parlance, was too obvious and clichéd.

Though playful at the outset by the latter chapters it is a portrayal of bleak despair – a mirror not just of Waugh's own personal circumstances but reflecting the broader trajectory of the bright young people, whose stardust was beginning to tarnish.

Waugh's own illustrations decorate the covers of both novels.

Private Collection

Idyll

Flitting between London townhouses and country seats, the upper-class members of the Bright Young Things utilised both urban and rural locations as their personal playgrounds. For Cecil, whose journey into their world had commenced with a trip to Stephen Tennant's Wiltshire home, Wilsford Manor, his acceptance was complete when he found a slice of this rural idyll he could call his own, Ashcombe. In 1937 it was the backdrop to an extraordinary summer party, which in many ways rang down the curtain on an extraordinary era.

Rex Whistler and Cecil Beaton

By Lady Sybil Colefax, 1935

En plein air painting and sketching were activities taken seriously at Ashcombe. Rex Whistler and Cecil would enter the 'Ashcombe Sketching Competition', the results judged by Edith Olivier under her customary parasol. Rex is painting the picture of Ashcombe (in this room), which became one of Cecil's most treasured possessions.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Picnic at Ashcombe

By an unknown photographer, 1935

The horseshoe-shaped valley in which Ashcombe sat was unrivalled and a romantic setting for al fresco activities. Cecil's weekend parties featured in the smarter magazines and a visit to Ashcombe might be on the itinerary for the grander house parties nearby. Both American and British Vogue used images from this set of en plein air photographs, evocative of an English summer's day. The guests, left to right are Hon. David Herbert (1908–95), Lady Bridget Parsons (1907–72), Lady Caroline Paget, Teresa Jungman, Diana Cavendish, Tilly Losch, Hon. Anthony Herbert (1911–71), Cecil Beaton, Betty Shelvin and Cecil Beaton's maid, Dorothy Betteridge.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Cecil Beaton and Peter Watson

By George Hoyningen-Huene, 1932

Cecil pursued Peter fruitlessly and for at least four years, but despite the heartache, melodrama and the sheer exhaustion of it all, neither could quite let the other go. In time, as he found purpose in patronage of artists and the collecting of art, Peter disappeared from Cecil's hectic world. He was a significant collector of Cubist art and in 1940 he provided the financial backing for Cyril Connolly to produce *Horizon*, an influential magazine devoted to the arts. He also helped found the fledgling Institute of Contemporary Arts and lent to its earliest shows.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Jörg von Reppert-Bismarck, Oliver Messel, Lord Berners, Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

The artistic contributors to the decorative flourishes to the circus bedroom at Ashcombe included Lord Berners and Jörg von Reppert-Bismarck, an illustrator and his wife Elsa, a painter in the naïve style. Elsa painted the equestrienne and Jörg a big top strongman. Rex Whistler could not help but add his own noticeable improvements to the latter, which subsequently offended its creator.

Gelatin silver print
National Portrait Gallery, London

‘The Circus Room at Ashcombe’

By Sir Francis Rose, 1939

Cecil had ambitious plans for his circus-themed bedroom. Rex Whistler designed the centrepiece, a fantastical, baroque four-poster bed made by specialists in fairground rides. Several areas required murals of trompe l’oeil figures. They would turn out to include, Harlequin, Columbine with performing dogs, a dancing African boy with an ostrich plume headdress and a performing equestrienne. One weekend, his guests undertook the decoration. They included perhaps the two finest set designers and scenery painters in Britain: Rex Whistler and Oliver Messel. Francis Rose’s illustration remains the only existing colour representation of this extraordinary room.

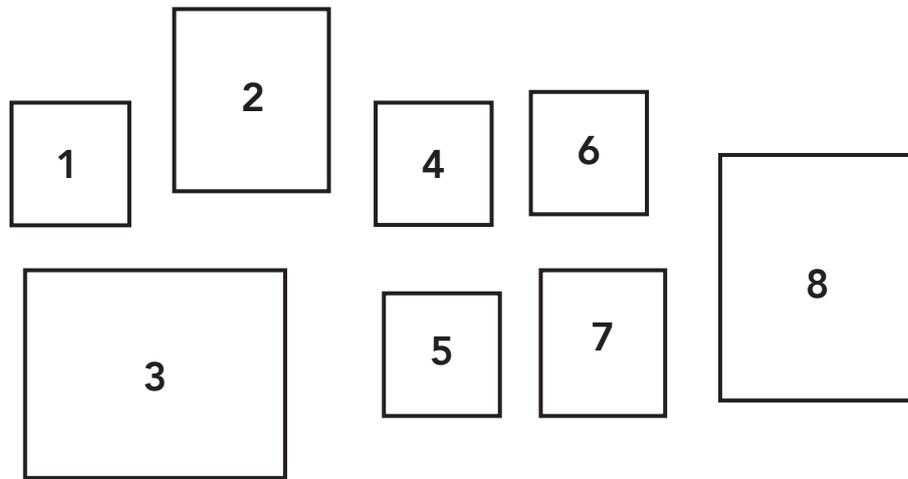
Watercolour on paper

Courtesy of Mr Guy Ritchie

The Aschombe fête

In 1937 Cecil and his close friend Sir Michael Duff began the preparations for a magnificent summer party at Ashcombe for 300 guests, which they would jointly hold. It would take place outdoors on 10 July and take the form of a fête-champêtre, the style of Arcadian revelry devised by the eighteenth-century French court. The two hosts spent six weeks on the build up to their extravaganza and the transformation of Cecil's rural retreat into a heart-stopping idyll. It was for Cecil a theatrical performance into which he cast himself as director, participant and designer. He wore several costumes throughout the evening.

The wallpaper design is taken from a bathroom 'mural' at Ashcombe. The images in this display are modern copy prints unless stated otherwise.



1. Lady Alexandra Haig as Ceres

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

2. Sir Michael Duff dressed as Queen Mary
at Ashcombe

by Cecil Beaton, 1933

Sir Michael Duff was one of Beaton's closest friends and a frequent visitor to Ashcombe. Duff's regular party piece was an impersonation of Queen Mary opening a maternity ward. He is seen here on an occasion other than the fête-champêtre.

Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

3. Rex Whistler and Lady Caroline Paget
in Victorian costume

Photo by John Phillips © ullstein bild / Getty Images

4. Rex Cecil Beaton in his fête Champêtre
rabbit costume

By Gordon Anthony

Cecil wore several costumes throughout the evening, including this representing a rabbit laying waste to a vegetable patch.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

5. Hon. Anthony Herbert as a Victorian bicyclist

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

6. Waiter in a mask sourced by Salvador Dalí
in Vienna

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

7. Sir Michael Duff, co-host, with Pauline Leser

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

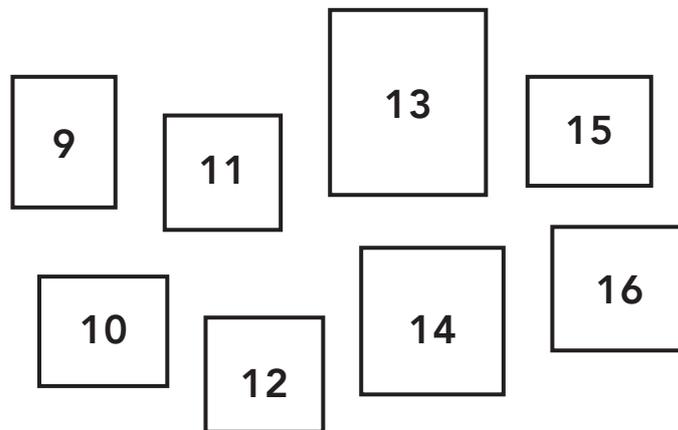
8. Charles James as a field mouse

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

The Aschombe fête-champêtre

The attention to detail was meticulous. As well as watercolours of the elaborate decorative schemes envisaged for house and studio, inside and out, he made drawings of certain costumes he required friends and neighbours to wear. Parties who came from nearby houses had to adhere to strict themes: Wilton as deities from classical mythology; Crichel as oriental peasant folk; Mottisfont as characters from *The Beggar's Opera*; Rockbourne a late-Victorian picnic party. The occasion was a triumph. It lasted until well after dawn and long in the memory of the revellers. The photographer John Phillips recorded it for *Life* magazine.

The wallpaper design is taken from a bathroom 'mural' at Ashcombe. The images in this display are modern copy prints unless stated otherwise



9. Cecil acting in a restoration comedy

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

10. A decorated way-post

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

11. Lady Juliet Duff as a shepherdess with
Tom Driberg, Elizabeth von Hofmannstahl
and Juliet and Rachel Cecil

Photo by John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

12. Lady Stavordale dressed as a faun

By John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

13. Edith Olivier as Elizabeth

By Cecil Beaton, 1935
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

14. Tilly Losch as a meissen Shepherdess Ashcombe

By Cecil Beaton, 1934
The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

15. Viscount Sudley and Lady Mary Dunn

By John Phillips. The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

16. Lord Berners in his pig mask

By Cecil Beaton

Berners often sported a pig's head mask to warn off encroachers onto his Oxfordshire estate and when motoring. He wore it or something similar as part of his *fête-champêtre* costume.

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Fête-Champêtre, Ashcombe, 1937

Cecil's open air, country house party held in the summer of 1937 and co-hosted with Sir Michael Duff, was remembered by many as one of the most memorable parties of the decade, bringing down the curtain perhaps on the Bright Young Thing era. For that year's Christmas issue of *Vogue*, Cecil wrote an article about fancy dress and replicated in a colour drawing several of the creations vividly on display at his party, not least his own 'rabbit' costume.

Vogue / Condé Nast Britain

Cecil Beaton's Visitors' Book Ashcombe, 1930

Of his first encounter with Ashcombe, his country house near the village of Tollard Royal, Wiltshire, Cecil wrote, 'I was almost numbed...it was as if I had been touched on the head by some magic wand.' The opening page of the visitors' book to this enchanted milieu was designed for him by Rex Whistler, who in November 1930 was one of Cecil's first guests, his name appearing immediately beneath his friend and host.

Private Collection

A Sheet from Rex Whistler's Diary for 1937

It would seem that Rex Whistler misremembers the date of his friend Cecil's open-air extravaganza at Ashcombe. It took place on July 10 not July 11 that year. Whistler's Renoir-inspired costume for Lady Caroline Paget was much remarked upon and made her the star of the evening, Cecil's several changes of costume notwithstanding.

The Salisbury Museum

Ashcombe

By Rex Whistler, 1935

Cecil was extremely attached to this portrait of his Wiltshire home, using it as the dustjacket illustration for his elegiac book *Ashcombe: The Story of a Fifteen Year Lease* (1949).

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Peter Watson

By Cecil Beaton, 1930–2

Cecil first met Peter Watson (1908–56), younger son of Sir George Watson, a self-made industrialist, in Vienna in 1930. They did not immediately hit it off, but in a very short space of time Peter came to dominate Cecil's life. He admitted 'watching every gesture of his heavy hands, the casual, languid way he walked.' He became the love of Cecil's life.

Pencil on paper

Private Collection

Society at Play

In their bold use of pattern, line and pose, Cecil's studio compositions of the inter-war period reflected the extravagant and high-spirited characters of the Bright Young Things. His homespun approach developed into a more knowingly sophisticated aesthetic, that was just as sensational as the attention-seeking antics, pranks and japes of his sitters. He quickly established a recognisable photographic style: a marriage of Edwardian stage portraiture to emerging European surrealism. These were filtered through a determinedly English sensibility, one that revered in particular the modes and gestures of the upper classes. His use of elaborate props and backdrops he would later call 'a recklessness of style'.

Zita and Teresa Jungman

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

The two daughters of Mrs Richard Guinness, were at the centre of the social whirl. Cecil compared 'Baby' (Teresa) (1907–2010) to 'a white gloxiana' with 'a Devonshire cream pallor and limpid mauve eyes', while Zita (1903–2006) possessed 'a serpent-like little nose', and a head like 'a silky coconut.' The Sketch found this picture confusing, because 'it is never clear which side of the picture is the top.' Cecil put it into *The Book of Beauty* (1930) by which time Zita was Mrs Arthur James.

Toned gelatin silver print mounted on card
Courtesy of Huxley-Parlour, London

Cecil Beaton's Personal Scrapbook

1930s

Cecil collected and pasted into twenty or more large scale scrapbooks, torn magazine pages, fashion photographs from *Vogue*, souvenir postcards, snapshots from house parties, cartes-de-visites of Edwardian stage stars and, most eye-catching of all, photo-montages and paper collages of those never far from society small talk. Glimpsed in this arrangement of cuttings can be seen Edith Sitwell and Lord Berners, gossip columnist Viscount Castlerosse, the Duchess of Argyll, Lady Juliet Duff and Gertrude Lawrence, among many others.

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘Cecil Beaton’s Scrapbook’, 1937

In casting himself in the role of photographer-as-scavenger, Cecil’s scrapbooks were also significant as *aides-memoires* to future photographic work (whether to imitate or to avoid). He even wrote a brief essay, ‘Scrap Albums’ for *Vogue*. In much of his fashion work for *Vogue* the arrangement of photographs and text mimics the scrapbook layout. In 1937 *Cecil Beaton’s Scrapbook* itself appeared, his second book.

Private Collection, West Sussex

Society on Display

The annual charity balls that were a feature of the social 'season' were opportunities for the Bright Young Things to display their flair for performance and their eye for costume. For Cecil, they offered the chance to exercise further his sense of theatre and to design ever more outlandish outfits and sets and, of course, to capture them with his camera. The themes became increasingly inventive and elaborate including 'The Great London Pageant of Lovers' (1927), 'The China Shop' (1927), 'The Dream of Fair Women Ball' (1928), 'The Hyde Park Pageant' (1928) and 'The Living Posters Ball' (1930). By increasing awareness of the fashionable set's attendance at these charity events, Cecil's photographs promoted many good causes. They also afforded him a significant showcase for his talents and showmanship.

Nancy Beaton in costume for 'the Galaxy Ball'

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

The ball was held at London's Park Lane Hotel, it's hostess, Lady Emerald Cunard. Nancy's 'shooting star' costume in pale blue and green was designed by her brother Cecil, assisted by Oliver Messel, who between them created many sun, moon and star creations. The highpoint was a 'Progress of the Planets through the Ages'. Rex Whistler was billed as a 'planetary acrobat'.

Gelatin Silver Print

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Baba Beaton as the Empress Eugénie

By Cecil Beaton, 1931

Baba Beaton was dressed by her brother for ‘The Famous Beauties Ball’ as the Empress Eugénie, a detail from the Winterhalter portrait, *The Empress Eugénie Surrounded by the Ladies of Her Court* (1855). Baba’s attendants on parade at the newly-opened Dorchester Hotel would be her cousin Tessa Chattock, Nancy Mitford and Carol Prickard.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Marquesa de Casa Maury as Eleanor of Aquitaine

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

Paula Gellibrand attended 'The Pageant of Heroines of History' as Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (or possibly of Castile, consort to Edward I). Other heroines included Mrs Euan Wallace as Edith Cavell, the Hon. Mrs Alexander Carnegie as St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and Nancy Beaton as Empress Maria Therèse of Austria in a costume devised by her brother of pink velvet on silver embroidered with tinfoil flowers and trimmed with silver braid.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Pamela Smith as Peter Pan

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

Lady Pamela Smith (1915–82), younger of the two daughters of the organiser of the ‘The Pageant of Hyde Park’, the Countess of Birkenhead, attended as Peter Pan, a concept the *Tatler* considered ‘a masterpiece’. Her sister, Lady Eleanor Smith’s choice was arguably more unexpected. She went in full uniform as the Prince Imperial, tragic son of the Empress Eugénie.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘Debutantes of 1928’

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

Cecil’s sylvan backdrop was homemade and derived from the settings characteristic of the painter Fragonard. A dressing table mirror was used to reflect light, its curved top just perceptible below Nancy Beaton’s dress. Vogue considered Lady Anne Wellesley (1910–98) the most enthusiastic dancer of that year’s crop and Lady Georgiana Curzon (1910–76) the most arresting. Deirdre Hart-Davis (1909–99) found a place in Cecil’s *The Book of Beauty* (1930).

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Anne Armstrong Jones in costume as Perdita Robinson

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

The modes and manners of a bygone age (the 1750s) were presented at ‘The Great London Pageant of Lovers’ at Daly’s Theatre organised by the Countess of Birkenhead. Anne Armstrong Jones (1902–92) was dressed as the love of the ‘First Gentleman of Europe’, Perdita Robinson mistress of the Prince Regent, later George IV.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Cecil Beaton, self-portrait as Thomas Gainsborough

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

Cecil wore the same eighteenth-century costume twice. Firstly in 1927 for ‘The Great London Pageant of Lovers’ held at London’s New Theatre and for which he designed many costumes. He went as Lucien Bonaparte. A year later he wore it to ‘The Pageant of Hyde Park’, which he attended as Thomas Gainsborough, and his sisters as Gainsborough’s daughters. This was the start of a passion for the painter and his family that culminated in his play *Gainsborough’s Girls* (1951).

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Baba Beaton in costume as Héloïse

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Baba attended 'The Great London Pageant of Lovers' at the New Theatre, London, as the character Héloïse (to Prince Nicholas Galitzine's Abelard). Cecil designed her costume and several others, including one for Lady Diana Cooper, Mary Ashley's as Princess Turandot, Tallulah Bankhead's Cleopatra ensemble as well as his own as Prince Lucien Bonaparte. Baba's full costume included a tall conical hennin headdress with pendant veil and a generous overskirt. Cecil would include this image in his first photographic show at the Cooling Galleries, London (1927) and in his first book, *The Book of Beauty* (1930).

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax
by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Stephen Tennant as Prince Charming

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Stephen Tennant attended 'The Great London Pageant of Lovers' at London's New Theatre as Prince Charming in a costume of his own design but finessed by Oliver Messel who went as Bacchus and Cecil in a wig and frockcoat as Lucien Bonaparte. Clearly Vogue could not believe a young man could be so exquisite and in its report of the evening mistakenly captions Stephen in his pink Prince Charming frockcoat as Lady Ashley in her 'Rosenkavalier' costume.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Talullah Bankhead as Cleopatra

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Tallulah Bankhead made for a bewitching Cleopatra at 'The Great London Pageant of Lovers' in a costume designed by Cecil. Ten years later, Bankhead would ask Cecil to design her costumes for Antony and Cleopatra, his first Broadway commission. 'Her entrance is always a dramatic one, noises off, chatter bang, the doors swing open and this exotic personality, extravagant in action and manner blows down all before her...'

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

‘The Silver Soap Suds’

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

Left to right: Baba Beaton, the Hon. Mrs Charles Baillie Hamilton, Lady Bridget Poulett.

The three young socialites posed as a well-known advertisement for Lever Brothers for ‘The living Posters Ball’. They would be joined in a larger soap bubble tableau by Lady Moira Combe and Lady Sybil Lygon. The Hon. Mrs. Baillie-Hamilton (1911–56) was formerly Wanda Holden, from a family of financiers (her grandfather ran the London City and Midland Bank) and Lady Bridgett Poulett (1912–75) was a recent and striking ornament on the society stage. She would be one of Nancy Beaton’s bridesmaids and would later marry a Colombian diplomat and financier.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Maxine Freeman-Thomas in costume

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

Held on Leap Year's night at Claridge's, London, 'The Dream of Fair Women Ball' included a parade of 'Fashions of the Far Future' designed by Cecil who used a shiny oilcloth for many of the costumes. He then drew them for Vogue as well as photographed them. These included, among others, a nun's habit of 1980, a bride of 2028 and this Ascot dress of the year 2000 in pink and blue striped satin. The future for 'Blossom' Freeman-Thomas (1901–84) included divorce, marriage to her flying instructor and a career as an aircraft designer. Cecil admired her 'fearless profile and alabaster skin'.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Oliver Messel in his costume for Paris in 'Helen!'

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

Messel designed the sets and costumes for a Baroque revival at the Adelphi Theatre of *Helen!*, Jacques Offenbach's 1864 opéra bouffe (originally *La Belle Hélène*) set during the Trojan War. Evelyn Laye, who played Helen, was at the height of her stardom and recalled that 'Oliver made me look a million dollars'. Here Messel is in costume for the character of Paris. The white-on-white décor was likely an influence on his friend Syrie Maugham's all-white interior design style, which presently became all the rage.

Modern copy print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Pamela Smith

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

‘A Very Charming Little Person’ claimed the Tatler when it published this winsome portrait of the younger daughter of the Earl of Birkenhead. Cecil admired them equally. ‘The Ladies Eleanor and Pamela Smith are both woodland creatures, elfin and puckish, with their lowered chins, berry-brown complexions and the dark eyes of wild animals’.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
Courtesy of Huxley-Parlour, London

Lady Edwina Mountbatten

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

Lady Edwina Mountbatten (1901–60), style leader *nonpareil*, whose inexpressive gaze from the pages of *Vogue* challenged anyone to match her in taste and glamour. She was born into great wealth and related through her father to the Earls of Shaftesbury. Her marriage to Lord Louis Mountbatten, last godchild of Queen Victoria, brought her close to the royal family and thereafter she lived her life in full public glare.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Nancy Cunard

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

Minor poet, socialite and later activist, Nancy Cunard (1896–1965) was the embodiment of the bohemian *jeunesse dorée*. Variants from this sitting appeared in *Cavalcade*, *Vogue* and *the Sketch*. A year later, Cecil included it in his ‘*The Book of Beauty*’. Nancy had tried out various costume changes, settling on a tight-fitting skullcap and with her customary armfuls of tribal jewellery with kohl-rimmed eyes. She was pleased with the results, wiring to Cecil, ‘those photos along with the Man Ray we-all-know-so-well are the only ones I’d like to go down in posterity’.

Gelatin silver print

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Princesse Emeline de Broglie

By Cecil Beaton, 1928

The daughter of the social fixture Daisy Fellowes by her first husband, Princess Emeline de Broglie (1911–86) became on her marriage the Comtesse de Castéja. However, her social position offered no protection when she was jailed for several months on suspicion of wartime collaboration. The princess was the subject of one of her mother's waspish aperçus: 'The oldest, Emeline, is like my first husband,' she said, 'only a great deal more masculine...'

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Viscountess Castlerosse

By Cecil Beaton, 1932

The former Doris Delevingne (1900–42), an uninhibited, stylish adventuress, was married, unhappily, to gossip columnist Viscount Castlerosse when Cecil began an affair with her. This was at the urging of Peter Watson, the object of Cecil's unrequited passion. An unlikely romance, it lasted, more off than on, for three years. 'I have a mistress.' Cecil wrote in his diary. 'That expression pleases me much'. Here, for *Vogue*, the Viscountess wears faux eighteenth-century hunting costume designed by Victor Stiebel. She is believed to be the model for Amanda, the sophisticate caught up in a toxic relationship in Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930). The role was first taken by her oldest friend and mentor, Gertrude Lawrence.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Clarita Uriburu

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

Daughter of the Argentinian ambassador to London and granddaughter of José Uriburu, who was briefly President of Argentina, Clarita Uriburu (1908–1995) was an enthusiastic socialite. Her gazelle-like beauty earned her a starring role in Cecil's *The Book of Beauty* (1930): 'Her egg-shaped face looks to be made of polished marble, her corn-coloured hair is spun of the flimsiest silk, her cheeks are of a pink sweet-pea pinkness, her eyes, feathered with gigantic lashes, are enormous and of a firework brilliance...'

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Adèle Astaire

By Cecil Beaton, 1931

With her younger brother Fred, Adèle Astaire (1896–1981) was the dance sensation of the Twenties, firstly in American Vaudeville and then on the London and Broadway stages. When she dissolved their partnership in 1932, Fred's career became the stuff of cinema legend. Off stage Adèle was outspoken and shocking, which carried out behind a veneer of guilelessness made it the more pronounced. Cecil and Adèle would be lifelong friends. He first saw the brother-and-sister act in early 1924 in Birmingham. Of Adèle he wrote in his diary, 'She is so American and perfect and slim and graceful and smart. I adore her ugly face and the pearls tight around her neck She is perfect...'

Watercolour on paper
Private Collection

Princess Karam of Kapurthala

By Cecil Beaton, 1934

Sita Devi, Princess Karam of Kapurthala (1915–2002) was Vogue's default for exotic, its 'Pearl of India', its 'Dark Flower', its 'Secular Goddess'. A fixture on the social scene in the pre-war years, the Princess was in demand, frequently for jewellery stories, not least because her husband commissioned extravagant pieces from Cartier and Van Cleef and Arpels. Cecil photographed her in a diamond bracelet by Cartier, emblazoned with an emerald, which he recalled, was 'the size of a small fruit'. The princess's credentials as a style leader were cemented when Elsa Schiaparelli based a collection on her colourful saris.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Iris Tree

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

The daughter of actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Iris Tree (1897–1968) was an artist's muse and a renowned beauty, who carved out a reputation as a modernist poet. She married the photographer Curtis Moffat, who had photographed Cecil as a young man. Her friend and biographer Daphne Fielding described her as 'the most truly Bohemian person I have ever known'. She was famed for her stylish bob, having allegedly cut her long hair short herself on a train journey.

Gelatin silver contact print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Eleanor Smith

By Cecil Beaton, 1927

A school friend of Allannah Harper and Zita Jungman, Lady Eleanor Smith (1902–45) became a leading light of London society but soon tired of it. Eve observed that she was unhappy being merely ‘a decorative feature’, had taken up journalism and ‘has a distinct preference for people with brains.’ Cecil found her use of abstruse language irritating. She was for a time gossip columnist for the Weekly Despatch, admitting that ‘by publicising a loathsome clique of advertising nitwits, I felt I was making myself as bad as these people’.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
Courtesy of Huxley-Parlour, London

Bryan Guinness (Study for Family Portrait)

By Henry Lamb, c.1930

Bryan Guinness (1905–92), elder son of Colonel Walter Guinness (later Lord Moyne) married Diana, the third of the six Mitford sisters when she was barely nineteen. The couple commissioned Cecil's Wiltshire neighbour, Henry Lamb to make a portrait of their friend Evelyn Waugh, spokesman of the younger generation (see *True Originals*). In the year that Lamb completed the Waugh portrait, he began a family portrait of Bryan and Diana and their young son Jonathan, for which this portrait of Bryan is a study. By the time Lamb had finished the larger portrait, the couple had divorced and the family idyll had fractured. Cecil kept on friendly terms with both.

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

The Hon. Mrs Diana Guinness

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

Born the Hon. Diana Freeman-Mitford (1910–2003), daughter of Lord Redesdale and one of the famous Mitford sisters, she married Bryan Guinness, heir to Lord Moyne before divorcing him and marrying Sir Oswald Mosley. Mrs Guinness was noted for her stylishness. The backdrop is by Rex Whistler and the silver-blue 'wig' headdress was designed by the writer Robert Byron.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Duchess of Westminster

By Cecil Beaton, 1930

The former Loelia Ponsonby (1902–93) is said to have organised the first ‘bottle party’ in 1926 at her family home in St James’s Palace where her father was Keeper of the Privy Purse. Cecil photographed her shortly after her marriage to Hugh Grosvenor, 2nd Duke of Westminster, known as ‘Bendor’. The marriage was unhappy, with James Lees-Milne observing it the ‘the very definition of unadulterated hell’. The duchess’s jewels were much admired. Here she wears the Westminster tiara, made by Lacloche in the oriental style.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

The Duchess of Westminster

by Glyn Philpot, c.1930

This painting is a preparatory 'sketch' for a larger portrait of the duchess in evening dress painted at Eaton Hall, Cheshire. Philpot, a Royal Academician, started the portrait around the time of his sitter's first marriage. He found it 'a very big and difficult portrait' to complete but considered it in of the best he had made. Lady Lindsay, as the duchess became on her second marriage, used this portrait as the jacket image to the compilation of her photographs, *Cocktails and Laughter* (1983).

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Fall and Rise

As the 1930s ended, the political situation in Europe became more dangerous and international armed conflict seemed inevitable. The era of the Bright Young Things was over, and Cecil's reputation was almost destroyed overnight when, for reasons he never quite explained, an illustration submitted to American *Vogue* incorporated an anti-Semitic slur. Retribution was swift. *Vogue* – all editions – severed their connection with him. He found Hollywood's gates firmly closed. The incident affected his life and career for some time to come until he began to remake his reputation. The lives of Cecil's circle were often touched with tragedy as the decades of the Bright Young Things drew to a close.

Cecil Beaton's New York

By Cecil Beaton, 1937

Cecil's career at *Vogue* was escalating, and for the next four decades he was indefatigable, not just as a fashion and portrait photographer but also as an illustrator and caricaturist, writer and stylist, social commentator, taste arbiter, sounding board, confidante and shortly, as a war photographer. He was all but indispensable to the magazine. An invitation to contribute regularly to American *Vogue*, reconfigured in 1909 by owner Condé Montrose Nast to sell the dream of high society life to an aspirational readership was a supreme accolade.

Watercolour on card

National Portrait Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax by H.M. Government and allocated to the Gallery, 1991

Edith Olivier on a Day Bed

By Rex Whistler, 1942

At fifty-five Edith Olivier, novelist, had become materfamilias to an excitable brood, which included Cecil, Stephen Tennant, William Walton and many others. She did not curb their exuberance but chided them gently for their excesses. But it was with Rex Whistler, over thirty years her junior with whom she would enjoy the closest friendship of her life. He painted and drew her portrait on many occasions. Edith recorded in her journal that she frequently had to move during the painting of his portrait to escape the dazzling sun and hence the wide-brimmed muslin hat.

Oil on board

The Salisbury Museum

Lady Caroline Paget

By Rex Whistler, 1935

Rex would make many portraits of Caroline Paget, considered the love of his life. He incorporated her likeness into several panel designs, one for a decorated clavichord, and in half-a-dozen oil paintings two of a them in an 'impressionistic' style new to him. *The Girl with a Red Rose* represents Caroline at her most enigmatic. A study of adoration on one hand and detachment on the other, she was as elusive as ever. Shown at Mayfair's Tooth's Gallery at Christmas 1935, Lady Pembroke, Caroline's aunt, found the suggestion of worldliness in the black glove unbecoming of a marquess's daughter.

Oil on canvas

National Trust Collections, Plas Newydd House and Gardens, Wales

The Hon. Lois Sturt

By Ambrose McEvoy, 1919

Though closer to her older brother Napier (see opposite), Cecil was in awe of his sister's quixotic beauty, keeping two reproductions of this portrait in his scrapbooks. Born into one of Britain's wealthiest families, Lois Sturt (1900–37) studied dance and then art and had a brief career as an actress. A cheerleader for the Bright Young People, her behaviour became calamitously wild. In 1926 she ran over and killed a pedestrian. A marriage of convenience to the 2nd Viscount Tredegar, was ill-fated. She attended Cecil's 'Come As your Opposite' party (1932) as a schoolgirl. She died suddenly in Budapest in 1937.

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

Cecil Beaton

By Christian Berard, 1938

Cecil considered this portrait by the French Neo-romantic painter to be among his most prized possessions and it hung in a prominent position in his various homes. He wrote in his diary that 'it is as I would like always to be.' Cecil wrote admiringly of his dear friend, 'Bérard's bubbling zest gave off sparks in every direction.' The small boy is a conceit, Bérard feeling that the composition required balance.

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Sir Cecil Beaton, 1980

Rex Whistler, Edith Olivier, Peter Watson and Lady Aberconway

By an unknown photographer, 1930s

Rex Whistler, seen here in a group at Ashcombe, died in 1944 while serving with the Guards Armoured Division in Normandy. At his death at the age of thirty-nine, he left a great quantity of work in all areas of art and design including portraits, landscapes, illustrations and notable mural and *trompe l'oeil* paintings.

Gelatin silver print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Napier Sturt, Lord Alington at Crichel House

By Cecil Beaton, 1930s

Napier Sturt, Lord Alington (1896–1940), was the flamboyant brother to the Hon. Lois Sturt and, like her, died young. A captain in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War, he spent much of the second in Cairo, where he died. ‘Throughout the world, no matter what city he happened to alight upon,’ recalled Cecil, ‘he exuded such warmth and charm that everyone threw their friendship at him’.

Gelatin Silver Print

The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive

Lady Cynthia Mosley

By Cecil Beaton, 1929

One of the celebrated 'Curzon sisters', daughters of the politician, Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, Lady Cynthia (1898–1933) had married the then-Labour Party M.P., Oswald Mosley. She was herself a Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent. *Vogue* noted that apart from being 'one of the more ornamental members of the Labour Party' she had also made a successful maiden speech. In 1931 she joined her husband in his New Party but did not contest her seat. She died young of peritonitis, after which her husband married his mistress, Diana Guinness.

Gelatin silver print mounted on card
National Portrait Gallery, London.

