

# Cecil Beaton: Artifice in Life

## Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University

### New York, NY, 1988

In 1988, Walker was on staff at New York University's Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, and undertook a project in conjunction with the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) to host a retrospective exhibition, organized by the Barbican Art Gallery in London, that explored the work of Cecil Beaton. Director Tom Sokolowski was curator of the Grey's installation, and Walker and Sokolowski worked in collaboration with Richard Martin and Herald Koda at FIT to create complimentary, and contrasting, installations—each with a different focus on Beaton's life and his work.

The exhibition itself got some challenging reviews, but the installation at the Grey received praise from visitors and the press for its intentionally excessive and elaborate installation. Achieving this was a challenge since the Grey, at that time, had a fabric-covered mobile wall system. Walker used those limitations and took them to the extreme, re-covering many of the walls, and draping others, and added props, artificial flowers, period furniture, and other elements to create a totally engrossing environment that played with Beaton's aesthetics and life style, and successfully engaged visitors.



The show's redeeming feature is its blatant appeal to kitsch taste. At the Grey Art Gallery, for example, the walls are covered with pleated drapery and leopard-printed fabric, many of the photographs are surrounded by mats of floral-patterned chintz, and a huge pink vase stands guard at the entrance, stuffed with pink artificial flowers. At the Fashion Institute, the monotony of double-stacked rows of black-and-white photographs is broken by the sight of five mannequins dressed in costumes Beaton designed for the film "My Fair Lady." Surely he would have loved these installations.



Cecil Beaton, shown above in 1969, designed the costumes for "My Fair Lady." Putting finishing touches on costumes from the film are Richard Martin, far left, and Herald Koda, coordinators of the exhibit at the Fashion Institute of Technology. At the Grey Art Gallery, below, workers hang Beaton's photographs of the British royal family.

## Weekend

### The New York Times

### Provocative Photography, From Midtown to SoHo



Detail of "Gretta Garbo in Pierrrot Costume," a 1946 photograph by Cecil Beaton that is among his portraiture on view at Grey Art Gallery.

#### 'Cecil Beaton: Art and Artifice'

Shirley Goodman Resource Center  
Fashion Institute of Technology  
227 Seventh Avenue (at 27th Street)

#### 'Cecil Beaton: Artifice in Life'

Grey Art Gallery and Study Center  
New York University  
33 Washington Street  
Both through April 23

Cecil Beaton was a public personality so vividly drawn that one seldom questioned who he did to warrant his reputation. Since his death in 1980, that reputation has been burnished several times over, in books and exhibitions, although never on the scale of this two-gallery retrospective, which was organized in 1986 by the Barbican Art Gallery in London.

Beaton was a fashion photographer for Vogue and other magazines whose talents spilled over into painting, costume and set design, journalism and interior decoration. A modern model of the English dilettante, he professed to have no interest in photographic technique, although there is more than abundant evidence in this exhibition that his technique was, like everything else in his life, impeccable. At the Fashion Institute of Technology, the emphasis is on his

fashion work; at the Grey Art Gallery, his portraiture and "documentary" pictures are on display.

Unfortunately, the evidence of his talents gathered here turns out to be rather too abundant. There reportedly are more than 600 photographs, drawings and other objects on view at the show's two locations, which seems perhaps six times too many. Beaton, it quickly becomes clear, was as a competent portraitist, caricaturist and designer. But he resolutely stayed in safe territory, following in the footsteps of such innovators as Baron de Meyer, Edward Steichen and George Hoyningen-Huane.

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In this instance, excess is not simply wretched. But it also calls into question the motive for the show, which consists overwhelmingly of prints belonging to Sotheby's, the auction house that owns the bulk of Beaton's estate. Given the visibility and prestige of a major traveling show (to be seen later in Montreal, San Diego and New Orleans), these vintage prints have come to represent something other than artistic values.



Marlene Dietrich in photograph by Cecil Beaton, in show at Grey Art Gallery.

The photo to the right is enlarged from The New York Times review of the exhibition by Ron Alexander (above), and features Walker adjusting the referenced photograph on the wall while the Grey's Preparator, the late artist Michael Richards, adjusts the flower arrangement for that section, and the Grey's Deputy Director Michele Wong, who was Registrar at that time, installs labels in the background.

