



Photo by Cecil Beaton

april inspiration... what becomes a legend most?

Legend... (n), a very famous person in a particular field; as in superstar, icon, luminary, giant.

The Charles James Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art opening May 8 is this season's blockbuster show. Bill Cunningham was right when he said that Charles James was the Einstein of Fashion, but there are many who, up to now, have never heard of the British designer. James was considered a genius with a needle and thread and the very complicated construction of his apparel is considered "other worldly". However, like many other geniuses, his people skills and business acumen left a lot to be desired, and as a result, his name never became a household word.

I heard of James only because a close friend of mine's mother was one of the models in the iconic Cecil Beaton photograph for Vogue Magazine, 1948. This photograph shows 8 beautiful women all in Charles James' legendary ball gowns. My friend's mother, Dorry, is the model on the far right, floating in James' "confection" in blue. Beaton referred to them as his "swans"...and looking at the photograph you can see why. Here is her recollection in her own words:

MEMORIES OF THE CECIL BEATON PHOTOGRAPHIC SHOOT FOR VOGUE MAGAZINE, 1948. Charles James Ball Gowns. By Dorothy Adkins

All day bookings were rare back then, usually only for very big commercial advertising with huge budgets! Having worked at Harper's Bazaar before I started modeling, I knew that, and I also knew that this was not an ordinary job. After I began modeling, I did many covers for Harpers Bazaar and even though Harper's and Vogue were competitors, Diana Vreeland called and asked me to consider doing the shoot. "Cecil demands it!!!" I can still hear her iconic voice. Diana really went to bat for me. No one said no to Diana, and certainly, no one said no to Cecil! So...there I was.

The location was the old French & French showroom – a huge space with the most marvelous classical moldings and high ceilings. It was very much like a ballroom of the past (Sotherby's later leased it for years). I recognized one or two of the other models and took my place. Our first directive from a Vogue editor was to please NOT speak unless spoken to, and to do exactly as directed by Mr. Beaton, which really meant NOT TO MOVE (or breathe).

We got into those beautiful gowns. I loved mine, constructed to stand alone-almost entirely sewn by hand with a bone bodice and yards and yards of blue silk and an intricately draped skirt...just made for waltzing! It was absolutely breathtaking.

It took at least ten minutes to don the white kid gloves which went almost to my armpits! Once I was dressed and my hair and makeup was approved, I was lead to an "X" mark on the floor. I was told that this was my spot and I was to stay there.

Looking around I realized that I had never seen so many lights, the special ones that were used for indoor shots in those days. Color was still relatively new in large format (I think the camera was a big old Speed-graphic with an upside down image on the glass, but I may be wrong there...perhaps a wide angle lens?).

Time passed as each individual model was eyed through the lens and critiqued and adjusted and re-lit. Each small detail received Mr. Beaton's full attention. He was the creator, producer and director of the entire scene. I am sure that we broke for lunch but I have no memory of it and I think around 4:00 I began to sway a little so they brought out a metal model's stand for me to lean against. I do remember the tiredness that prevailed and by the time it was over, we were absolutely numb!



Dorry on her birthday, July 1, 2013

Looking back, I realize that we were all so blessed to be a part of such a beautiful picture, a masterpiece of its kind, a work of art.

I recently had the opportunity to accompany Dorry to Le Cirque to meet and have lunch with Hamish Bowles from Vogue Magazine. Cecil Beaton's photograph is to be an important part of the exhibit and Vogue was anxious to hear an insiders' story surrounding that famous shoot.

There I was, sitting between two legends - Hamish, to my right, and Dorry, to my left. The conversation was lively with Dorry telling us both about the Beaton shoot, working for Harpers Bazaar, and how she was discovered by Eileen Ford, in the (yes) bedding department of Bonwit Tellers! *Legend* after *Legend* was discussed...Diana Vreeland, Mrs. Snow, Suzy Parker...the list was endless, one *Legend* larger than the next.



Metropolitan Museum's Exhibit Catalog
Dorry in the blue dress

Unfortunately, lunch came to an end, and there I was, outside Le Cirque, hailing a cab with Dorry Adkins and Hamish Bowles. I wasn't in the mood, but I needed to return to my office. After listening to stories of Diana Vreeland, Harpers and Vogue, who feels like reviewing electrical plans? Not glamorous, but somebody has to do it.

After all, if I ever were to become a Legend, there are "miles to go before I sleep". Right now, I am happy to take my inspiration from those who are.

Happy Spring!

President

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