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Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

# Cecilia Beaux

by Melissa Crawford

Once called “the greatest woman painter of modern times” by William Merritt Chase, Cecilia Beaux has secured her place in the history of art with her tremendous talent, her personality and her ability to recognize and take advantage of opportunities. She was fortunate to have lived at a time when female artists began to be recognized for their talent. Many of the social conditions fundamental to the production of art began to change in the late nineteenth century, leading to the emergence of numerous female artists who were able to gain recognition, so difficult in the past. Women were admitted to the same classes as men, the nude model was available to artists of both genders, and the growth of the bourgeoisie provided a new class of patrons. Up until that time, the majority of commissions arose from the state and church, not widely open to women. The pervasive attitude had been that women should learn a variety of skills, but none too well. Their place was with the family.

Born in Philadelphia in May 1855, Cecilia was the youngest daughter of Jean Adolphe Beaux, a silk manufacturer who had emigrated to the United States from Provence, France, and Cecilia Kent Leavitt, a governess and

teacher of colonial New England descent, brought up in New York City. Twelve days after young Cecilia’s birth her mother died from complications, and as a new-



Cecilia Beaux's *Self-Portrait*

Oil on canvas • 25" x 20" • 1894

Submitted to the National Academy of Design, New York City, upon her election as an associate at age 39.

born infant, she and Etta, her three-year-old sister, were left by their disconsolate father with their maternal grandmother and aunts in Philadelphia.

Beaux was, however, fortunate in many ways. Her family, though impoverished at the time, had benefited from a genteel back-

ground, and had an appreciation of the arts. Early on, recognizing Beaux’s talent for drawing, they provided her with artistic training. Also within the family were women working in the arts, one of whom was a distant cousin, Catherine Ann Drinker, who taught a class in perspective at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and who maintained a studio where she gave private lessons. Cecilia began art lessons at age sixteen from Drinker, where she did a year of copy work. Beaux then studied shading, enlarging, and perspective for two years at the school of painter Francis Adolf Van der Wielen. At eighteen, she began her career in the decorative arts, teaching, executing lithographic drawings of fossils, and creating portraits of children in crayon, watercolor, charcoal, and overglaze paint on china plates.

While earning a living from decorative work, Beaux also sporadically attended the Pennsylvania Academy, working in the school’s antique, portrait, and costume classes. She completed her Philadelphia art training in the early 1880s, attending a private class to which the painter William Sartain occasionally came to give criticism. Under his tutelage Beaux painted *Les derniers jours d’*

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*enfance*. This double portrait of older sister Etta and firstborn nephew, Henry Sandwith Drinker, was an imaginative, Whistler-inspired image. It went on to become her single most important work of the 1880s. After winning first place at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' annual exhibition with this painting, then two years later with its successful entry in the Salon in Paris, Beaux was inspired to pursue further art training in Paris. Her new recognition with *Les derniers jours d' enfance* made her acutely aware that she had turned "a very sharp corner . . . into a new world which was to be continuously mine."

Beaux studied in Paris for a year and a half at the Academies Julian and Colorossi, where her work was critiqued by Tony Robert-Fleury, William Bouguereau, Jacques Courtois, Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, and Benjamin Constant. It was at this time, the summer of 1888, that her ambition to become a portrait painter solidified. Cecilia wrote to her Uncle Will, "People do seem to me to be more interesting than anything else in the world..."

When Cecilia returned to America in 1889, she established her reputation in portraiture by painting members of her family in the grand-manner, and then moved on to painting Philadelphia's elite. One of many paintings of this period to gain recognition was *Sita and Sarita*, a portrait of Beaux's cousin Sarah Allibone Leavitt holding a cat. It depicts Sarah as beautiful, provocative, and puzzling all at once. When the portrait was shown in 1895 at the spring exhibition of the Society of American Artists, one reviewer wrote, "I don't see how even Mr.



*Dorothea and Francesca*  
Oil on canvas • 80"x46" • 1898  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; A.A. Munger Collection  
Received the Logan Medal award in 1921 at the  
34th Annual Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture,  
Art Institute of Chicago

Sargent could paint a portrait with more distinction than that of the woman with a black cat by Miss Beaux." Exhibited at the Paris salon at the Champ de Mars the following year, *Sita and Sarita* prompted one critic to write that there were lovable women "even more beautiful than the fair daughters of France on the other side of the Atlantic."

By the turn of the century, Beaux's clientele had expanded beyond Philadelphia to Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. In an effort to meet the newly

increased demand for her work, she moved from Philadelphia to New York, spending winters in the studio that she opened there and summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, at Green Alley, her summer-house and studio.

Beaux developed many friends throughout her career, for whom she often expressed affection artistically. One such family were the Gilders. While at their farm in Massachusetts, she was inspired by a dance executed by the dark-haired, dark-eyed Dorothea and Francesca Gilder. After completing the dance painting, she immediately began exhibiting the portrait. One reviewer expressed the hope that this picture's portrayal of "abandonment of youthful glee" signaled "the beginning of a new period in her successful career in which she will delight the world with other compositions than portraits."

When the painting of the Gilder children was exhibited in New York, it was admired by Edith Kermit Roosevelt. Later, when she became the first lady, she asked Cecilia to paint her portrait. The painting of Mrs.

Theodore Roosevelt developed into a double portrait, when Beaux decided to add daughter, Ethel, adding a sense of relationship and drama. The portrait became one of Beaux's most publicized commissions, and the friendly relationship she had established with the family allowed her to frequently request it for exhibitions.

Cecilia Beaux's ability to create sympathetic images of the aristocratic upper class made her one of America's most sought-after portraitists. Not only was she known for her portrayal of children and society and professional women,

she was highly sought after for her portraits of professional men. She had a true talent for portraying character and a life-like quality in her paintings. She was able to portray men in a flattering way while maintaining a true likeness and individual character.

Beaux's career continued until 1924, when at the age of 69, she fell on a Paris street, breaking her hip; the accident curtailed her painting career. Crippled for the rest of her life, she focused her creative energy on writing an autobiography. The book, *Background with Figures*, was published in 1930.

Throughout the 1930s, Beaux was often recognized for her contributions to the arts. In 1933, she was honored by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, with the National Achievement Gold Medal of the Chi Omega Fraternity. The award honored Beaux as "the American woman who had made the greatest contribution to the culture of the world." In 1937, the Hispanic Society of America awarded Beaux the Sorolla Medal. After achieving much in life, Cecilia Beaux died at Green Alley at the age of eighty-seven in September 1942.

Many women artists of the late nineteenth century had early biographies not unlike Beaux's. But in contrast to her, most of their careers did not last. Maybe it



**Above:** Charcoal sketch of *Theodore Roosevelt*, 1902 (approx. 2 hr. sitting)

**Right:** *Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt and daughter Ethel*  
Oil on canvas • 44" x 31" • 1902  
Collection of Sarah Chapman.

Awarded First Prize at the 12th Annual Exhibition of the Society of Washington Artists, Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art



was because Beaux had ability, opportunity, and perhaps most important, a sustaining drive. She also chose to work in a genre — portraiture — that at the turn of the century offered consistent patronage. Another factor may have been her decision to remain unmarried, as marriage often signaled the end of many talented women's careers at that time. The absence of a husband also meant she was solely responsible for creating her income. She had to paint in order to survive and to achieve the social position she desired.

If today Beaux is not as well known as her art suggests she should be, it may be due to the stylistic hierarchy of twentieth-century art. The modern era reevaluated art and placed many realistic forms of art such as portraiture in the background. But now as we emerge into a postmodern time period, many of the tradi-

tional art forms are being reevaluated, and portraiture is regaining its place in the foreground of art. With this advent, it is hoped that many artists of great skill of the past will receive the recognition they deserve, and that the artists of the future will have the opportunity to be inspired by and learn from their great works. ■

ARTICLE SOURCE: "Cecilia Beaux and the Art of Portraiture," by Tara Leigh Tappert; published for The National Portrait Gallery by the Smithsonian Institution Press

OTHER BOOKS ON BEAUX:  
"Background With Figures," Cecilia Beaux autobiography

"Family Portrait," by Catherine Drinker Bowen