

Style for the Birdie

Cecil Beaton's "The Glass of Fashion" (Doubleday, 397 pp. \$7.50) is a history of society in our times as revealed through dress, adornment, interior decoration, and cuisine—the work of a celebrated portrait photographer, decorator, stage-set and costume designer, and critic. Here it and its implications are discussed by Lloyd Morris, author of "Incredible New York," "Curtain Time," and other social histories.

By Lloyd Morris

A CASUAL observer of the American scene would probably assert that fashion and the minor arts associated with it are flourishing now as never before. In the broadest sense fashion embraces those arts which minister to a gracious private life, and this is a sphere in which women, not men, continue to be the final arbiters. The arts of dress and adornment, of interior design, of the preparation and serving of food are obviously subject to fashion, to mention only a few. That fashion itself has been transformed by the social changes of the past half century is indicated by the disappearance or obsolescence of some minor arts. The art of the portrait-painter, for example, is virtually in abeyance.

There is no contemporary equivalent of Sargent, Boldini, Jacques-Emile Blanche, Augustus John. Although the general level of our culinary art is certainly higher than ever, the traditional haute cuisine has vanished. When, occasionally, it is revived at a carefully rehearsed and widely reported banquet of gourmets the effort is likely to impress us as an anachronism.

The taste of the average American, we are assured, has greatly improved. But designers of furniture are flooding us with costly chairs and tables which, in their unabashed metal nudity, resemble agricultural implements taken indoors for protection from the weather. The currently popular suburban "ranch-type" home has neither the convenience nor the beauty of a house designed and furnished by Frank Lloyd Wright recently exhibited in New York and capable of being built at no greater cost. If popular taste had improved as much as we like to believe the cheap furniture, fabrics, and decorative objects manufactured for mass consumption might, on the whole, be less ugly than they actually are.

At the turn of the century fashion and the minor arts depended on the patronage of a wealthy minority addicted to luxury. In the era of gilt and glitter the prevailing standard of elegance was set by a very few

women: members of the Fifth Avenue and Newport elite, stars of the stage and opera, representatives of the *demimonde*. All were women of marked individuality. They aspired to be inimitable. They contrived an illusion of glamour by an incessant—and financially extravagant—exercise of personal caprice. Nowadays glamour is no longer an illusion produced by imagination and prodigality. Its components are articles of commerce, widely publicized; glamour is declared to be easily, and almost universally, attainable.

FASHION, today, does not cater to a privileged minority but to a vast, anonymous, feminine public. It has therefore ceased to interpret individuality, or be obedient to personal caprice. Instead, it perpetually strives to anticipate the vagaries of mass taste. An immense industrial complex links the American woman, wherever resident, to the ateliers of Paris, New York, and Hollywood. The mode of the hour—in dress, adornment, décor, cuisine, pastimes, pictorial and literary art—is brought to her by such remarkable publications as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. To this campaign of education the mass-circulation magazines, the feature pages of the daily press, and the charming feminine commentators on television all contribute. As a result fashion and the arts which it embraces have been democratized. The material elements of a gracious private life are readily available throughout the land. If elegance depended only on the wide diffusion of these elements it would be ubiquitous. But elegance, Cecil Beaton intimates, is disappearing from contemporary life. It is inseparable, he claims, from



—By Cecil Beaton, from "The Glass of Fashion."

the confident assertion of individuality, and today the pressures toward conformity have become too powerful to be successfully resisted.

This is the underlying theme of Mr. Beaton's new book, "The Glass of Fashion," which reviews the history of fashion and its minor arts during the past half-century and which reaches the melancholy conclusions that "fashion as it once was is now non-existent"; that "its practitioners, like roof thatchers, are a disappearing race in our modern world." It is within the realm of fashion that Mr. Beaton has carried on his long, exceptionally versatile career as a portrait photographer, decorator, designer of stage sets and costumes, and critic. He writes with an authority derived from professional experience in England, France, and the United States, and with an acute sense that "all fashion artists, whatever their medium, learn that the odds are against their survival" because their vocation is to give expression to the immediate and ephemeral.

Though autobiographical in tone, "The Glass of Fashion" is essentially a work of social history, made entertaining by the author's flair for vivid characterization and revealing anecdote, and abundantly illustrated by his vigorous drawings. Mr. Beaton describes his book as "a subjective account" of "those people who have influenced the art of living in the half-century of my own lifetime." It is, however, a record of constantly changing taste, both esthetic and social, an appraisal of the various forces to which taste has responded, and a cavalcade of individuals many of

whom have been significant and nearly all of whom are interesting.

Mr. Beaton does not confine his scene to the *haut monde*, though necessarily much of the action takes place there. He is concerned not only with the leaders of fashion, and the artists and craftsmen who have served them, but also with those who, avoiding participation in the game of fashion, "cannot help being fashionable because of the authority with which they express their tastes." This category, quite properly, takes him outside the narrow precincts of "Society." In his book it is represented, for example, by the notorious Gaby Deslys, a star of the music halls and fabulously wealthy cocotte who, in the years before World War I, initiated a trend to the exotic and quasi-barbarous. It is represented also by Lina Cavalieri, an opera singer and famous beauty of the same era. La Cavalieri passed her childhood in hideous poverty; she never completely escaped from the *demimonde*; but she possessed the attributes of personal magnificence and distinction. Recognizing this, the Duchess of Rutland instructed her daughters: "If you wish to comport yourself in the most graceful and dignified manner possible, if you wish to assume beauty, if you wish to have the grace of a great lady, then you cannot do better than to study every detail and gesture of Lina Cavalieri."

ON THE American scene during the same period the most arresting personage was Mrs. Philip Lydig, to whom Mr. Beaton devotes a felicitous chapter. The sculptor MacMonnies

considered her "a masterpiece of civilization," and her image remains potent in portraits by Sargent and Boldini, and sculptures by Rodin and Bourdelle. A great beauty and a distinguished hostess, she lived in splendor and gathered about her people of eminence in the arts, literature, politics, and the theatre. She collected works of art with infallible taste, and when she traveled she carried with her "fifty trunks as large as coffins, containing a more fabulous wardrobe than any that has been bequeathed to us during this century." (Much of her wardrobe is now preserved in two New York museums.) A passionate individualist, Mrs. Lydig tried to live as if existence were capable of being made a work of art. Unlike most American women of today, she despised conformity. Far from fearing to adopt fashions not consecrated by public approval, she "developed a style of dress to which she remained faithful despite all fashion changes," in this resembling an equally powerful personality, the French actress Sarah Bernhardt.

In two periods the connection between the arts and literature and fashion has been singularly close, and Mr. Beaton is at his best in writing of them. The first was produced by the impact of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet and the influences that subsequently radiated from it. The second occurred during the interval between the two World Wars when, in Paris, Mlle. Chanel drew into her orbit writers and painters, among them Jean Cocteau and Christian Bérard, and proceeded to revolutionize women's attire and appearance on two continents. This, in Mr. Beaton's opinion, was perhaps the final era of flowering for fashion and its varied arts. Speaking of the current trend in interior design he remarks: "There are few masters of our new idiom, there is far less solid craftsmanship, and the result is often as impersonal as the cellophane wrappings that insure the hygiene of American foodstuffs."

Socially, esthetically, and possibly vitally, we are being herded toward uniformity and depersonalization. Can we, as Mr. Beaton would like to believe, "continue to express the joy and the beauty of individual taste that selects, sifts, and creates the only values worth living for?" The contemporary failure to do this in the comparatively narrow field of fashion is "indicative of a far deeper failure in the whole range of contemporary life." But our present social conditions and the instability of our world are not propitious to "the stark beauty of individuality," and Mr. Beaton sadly contemplates a future society in which "nearly all of the important cultural values" will have perished.



Your Literary I. Q. SS.



Conducted by John T. Winterich

"ALLITERATION'S ARTFUL AID"

Helen Pettigrew of Charleston, Arkansas, submits twenty alliterative passages from, so to speak, Angloamerican alliterature. She suggests that if you allow yourself 2.5 points for each identified work, and 2.5 points for each identified author, a tally of 62.5 will be moderate and medium, 65 to 80, good and going-places, and 82.5 up fast, furious, and fine. Answers on page 39.

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| 1. . . . rocks and rills | 12. In a fellowless firmament |
| 2. Your bonnie brow was brent | 13. A little learning |
| 3. . . . palm and pine | 14. The cock's shrill clarion |
| 4. But sturdy and staunch he stands | 15. The willful waterweeds |
| 5. . . . dews and damp | 16. In a dell of dew |
| 6. Theirs but to do and die | 17. . . . shoures soote |
| 7. And the hunter home from the hill | 18. After life's fitful fever |
| 8. . . . and the gloom of the grave | 19. And, doubly dying, shall go down |
| 9. . . . a day that is dead | 20. What a tale of terror, now, their |
| 10. And so beside the silent sea | turbulency tells |
| 11. The last of life | |