

Susanna Brown - Cecil Beaton, Portraits of Queen Elizabeth II at her Coronation

SUSANNA BROWN: Hi. I'm Susanna Brown. I'm Curator of Photographs here at the Victoria and Albert Museum, or the V&A, in London. And we're standing in the prints and drawing study room at the museum.

Today, I'd like to talk about this photograph by Sir Cecil Beaton. And it's one of a collection of 18,000 photographs by Beaton that we house at the museum. The photograph is Queen Elizabeth II on her coronation day, taken by Beaton on the 2nd of June 1953.

The V&A collection houses about 800,000 photographs, ranging from some of the first photographs ever made anywhere in the world to really recent contemporary pictures by living artists. This photograph by Beaton is part of a huge archive of portraits of the British royal family which Beaton gave to the museum in his will in 1980. And one of my jobs as curator here is to care for the photographs in our collection and research them, create exhibitions about them, and write books about them. And this particular photograph was one of the star pictures in our exhibition to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

Cecil Beaton was one of the most important British photographers of the 20th century. He worked for Vogue magazine, but he was also one of the official photographers working for the British royal family over many, many years. He first photographed our Queen when she was still a young girl before the Second World War. But he went on to photograph her right through to the 1960s.

As I mentioned, this picture was taken on Coronation Day, and Beaton was absolutely excited and thrilled to be chosen as the official photographer for the Queen's coronation. That job involved a huge amount of preparation at Buckingham Palace the day before her coronation. And this beautiful photographic backdrop was set up in the green drawing room at Buckingham Palace a day in advance.

For this picture of the Queen, Beaton had a team of assistants to accompany him at Buckingham Palace to set up his backdrop and the lighting. And when we look closely at the photograph, we can see that he's done something very clever with the lighting. In fact, behind the Queen's head he placed a huge 1,000-watt light bulb, a very bright light bulb, to create a burnt out effect on the backdrop. Which means that we see the Queen's face very, very clearly and the crown, of course, standing out in front of the backdrop.

And the backdrop that he used is an image of one of the chapels at Westminster Abbey where the coronation took place. It's called the Henry VII Lady Chapel. And it has this incredible fan-vaulted ceiling, this really unique and special ceiling. So although this photograph wasn't taken at Westminster Abbey, when we look at it we're tricked into believing that the Queen is seated in the Abbey.

And she's holding in her hands and wearing many, many different symbolic objects, objects which signify her role as monarch. Of course, on her head she wears the Imperial State Crown, which is a replica of the crown that Queen Victoria wore many years earlier for her own coronation. And in her hands the Queen holds the orb and the sceptre with the cross. And we can see at the top of the sceptre this huge diamond, which is part of the Cullinan Diamond. And within the orb, we see a range of different jewels. There are pearls, rubies, sapphires, and a huge amethyst.

On the Queen's right hand she's wearing a ring that's called the Coronation Ring. And it's a symbol that the Queen is wedded to the state. And on both her wrists she's wearing beautiful golden bracelets which are called Armelles. And those bracelets are a symbol of sincerity and of wisdom.

The dress that the Queen wore for her coronation was designed by Norman Hartnell who designed many of the most fantastic dresses in the Queen's wardrobe. And you can see that it's made of a shimmering satin fabric. And it's very heavily embroidered with different flowers, and each flower on the dress represents one of the British countries or one of the Commonwealth countries. So again, it's about symbolism, the Queen's role. And everything that she wears and holds on the day of the coronation has a very particular symbolism behind it.

Cecil Beaton's pictures of the Queen and her family had a really, really important function. They were used by the newspapers and magazines in Britain and around the world. And so Beaton knew when he took this photograph that it would be seen by millions of people all across the globe. It was also reprinted for important visitors to the Queen's coronation as a souvenir of that day. So visiting dignitaries and kings and queens from overseas would have received an image of this photograph of the Queen.

The process of creating a photograph of the Queen was always a very frenzied activity. And the Coronation Day was no exception to that. Beaton made the pictures of the Queen in the afternoon. And then, his camera negatives were rushed over to a studio to be developed overnight. And very early the next morning, they were sent back to Buckingham Palace to be officially approved by the Queen because, of course, these photographs weren't allowed to be shared with the world's press until Her Majesty had seen them. And today, we could do that very easily by email. But in the 1950s, it all had to be done in person and was much, much slower than it would be today.

Cecil Beaton is the photographer who's always credited with this picture. But of course, the Coronation Day photographs were a team effort. He had three assistants working with him at Buckingham Palace. And he also had one of his younger sisters there to help arrange the train and the robes for each photograph.

So although we always credit Cecil Beaton, in fact, this is really a collaborative effort. And he wouldn't have been able to make the photographs of the Coronation Day without the rest of the team. When I was researching this for the exhibition, I met with the assistants who worked with Cecil Beaton at the Coronation.

And one of them told me that, actually, Beaton didn't even press the button on the camera to take this picture. It was one of the assistants who did it himself. They would have had several different cameras at the Coronation Day loaded up with colour film and black and white film, so that Beaton could very quickly swap between cameras without wasting time to reload the film between shoots. He had to take dozens of pictures at the Coronation Day and only had a few minutes of time at the Palace in which to do it.

So this photograph by Beaton is part of an incredibly long and rich tradition of royal portraiture that goes back many, many centuries. And we know that Beaton was inspired by painted portraits of previous centuries when he devised this image of the Queen. It's a very official image, a very symbolic image of the monarch rather than the Queen as an individual. And it's in great contrast to contemporary pictures of the royal family by artists like Mario Testino which are much more informal and snapshot in their approach.