

Written by Luana Luconi Winner

Eliza Cecilia Beaux and her older sister grew up in the care of their maternal grandmother and aunts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the mid 1800's. The family home schooled the girls and encouraged them to be creative and imaginative while instilling a strong work ethic. When Cecilia turned 14, she spent two years at a Philadelphia finishing school before beginning her formal art training with her distant cousin, author and painter, Catherine Ann Drinker Javier.

An uncle then underwrote her classes at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While Cecilia's early subjects were family members, she became particularly fond of double portraits, allowing her to create inventive compositions that explored relationships between the sitters. With the creation of *Les derniers jours d'enfance*, a loving, tender painting of her sister and first-born nephew, Cecilia's life changed forever. *Les derniers* won the Mary Smith Prize in 1885 at the PAFA and launched her career.

At 32, Cecilia went to France to study at the Academie Julian and the Atelier Colarossi, and studying also with Charles Lazar and Alexander Harrison. Traveling to France at least seven times throughout her life, she is said to have felt greatly indebted to the French in the development of her art.

Her reputation grew quickly as this business-wise artist deliberately chose notable men and glamorous society women as her subjects. "It doesn't pay to paint everybody," said Beaux. Her subjects grew to include Theodore Roosevelt, Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, Georges Clemenceau, Admiral Lord David Beatty, and Henry James.

Throughout her last 18 years, Cecilia struggled with poor eyesight and arthritis. When a broken hip crippled her and prevented her from painting, she chose to write her autobiography and lecture.

Beaux holds the honor of being the first full time female instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and was honored with membership in prestigious organizations including the Societe des Beaux-Arts in Paris, American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Academy of Design. Appointed the official portraitist by the U. S. War Portraits commission, she received honorary degrees from Yale and the University of Pennsylvania.

When William Merritt Chase presented Cecilia Beaux with the Carnegie Institute's Gold Medal in 1899, he said, "Miss Beaux is not only the greatest living woman painter, but the best that has ever lived."

Recommended reading:

Out of print

Background with Figures, Cecilia Beaux, The Riverside Press, 1930

Cecilia Beaux, Portrait of an Artist, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1974

Cecilia Beaux and the Art of Portraiture, Tara Leigh Tappart, Smithsonian/National Portrait Gallery, 1995

Available by appointment

The papers of Cecilia Beaux, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

In print

Cecilia Beaux: A Modern Painter in the Gilded Age, Alice A. Carter, Rizzoli, 2005