

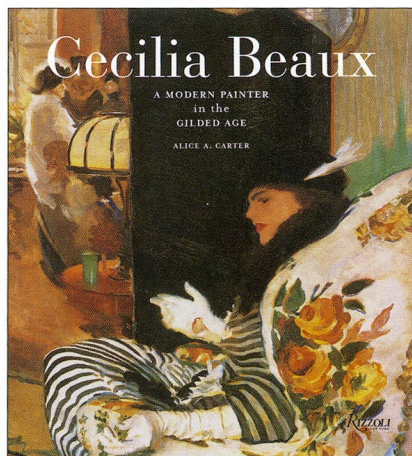
Cecilia Beaux: A Modern Painter in the Gilded Age by Alice A. Carter. New York: Rizzoli, 2005. 224 pages, illustrated. \$49.95

Review by Gail Leggio

The subtitle of Alice A. Carter's new book suggests a paradox, the Edwardian society painter with enough formal edge to command respect today; the artist who immediately comes to mind is John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). In fact, Carter's subject is Sargent's contemporary Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942), a spirited artist who somehow got shelved away with the period bric-a-brac while Sargent continued to hold his own in the art history books. Part of the problem may be that Beaux simply outlived her era. When she published her autobiography,

Background with Figures, in 1930, reviewers took a condescending tone. Carter quotes one critic's appraisal: "Though on the fringe of modernism, Miss Beaux was of the group that remained blissfully detached from its influence and spent her talent in that school of sophisticated portraiture which has discreetly passed." When the avant-gardists wanted an American woman artist to champion, Beaux seemed too establishment. Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), the expatriate blessed with the imprimatur of Degas's friendship, began marketing her work in the United States around 1895. There did not seem to be room in the chronicles for more than one American woman painter, absurd as that now seems.

The situation of women artists at the turn of the twentieth century is a subject that interests Carter, who evokes that milieu deftly here, as she did in her study of a sisterhood of illustrators, *The Red Rose Girls: An Uncommon Story of Art and Love*. The author, from a family of Philadelphia artists, captures the atmosphere of genteel, aesthetically yearning culture that permeated the city. This book is not an analysis of Beaux's art, which richly deserves critical attention, but a lavishly illustrated biography of a woman that also illuminates an era. Born into an arts-loving, financially precarious household, she drifted into art with the encouragement of an assortment of family members and friends. Cecilia's mother had died less than two weeks after the birth, and her father was absent most of the time, spending years in his native France and remaining remote even after his return to Philadelphia. Although Cecilia Beaux would become successful executing commissioned portraits, much of her best work focuses on her intimate circle. *Man with a Cat* from 1898 (cover) is a portrait of her brother-in-law Henry Drinker, seated, in a white suit, with a self-assured



ginger cat lounging along his thigh. The sunlight comes from the side, and the rectangles of the shutters modulate into the almost abstract forms of the background. The paint handling on the rumpled suit and nervous, sensitive hands has a Sargent-like panache. Her first big success was a portrait of her sister Etta and nephew Harry, titled *Les Derniers Jours d'Enfance* (1883–85). The composition, with background wall divided into neat tonal zones and a spray of Asian-looking blossoms, owes something to Whistler. Beaux's painting has more sentiment than Whistler's portraits, but the intimacy does not seem saccharine. The portrait of a cousin, Sarah A. Leavitt, suggests a formidable personality. *Sita and Sarita* or *Young Woman with Cat* (1893–94) presents its strong-willed subject stroking a black kitten who has materialized, like a witch's familiar, on her shoulder. The brushwork delineating the white lace of her dress and the toile pillow is typically loose and effective. Beaux has a way of finding inner complexity in a conventional type, the turn-of-the-century beauty in the signature froth of white. *The Dreamer* (1894), a portrait of Miss Caroline Kilby Smith, transforms Gibson Girl into sorceress. The pose is conventional; the composition is not. The background and chair back, in brown, are barely scratched in. Using the side of the chair as a railing, the model stretches diagonally across the canvas. The skin is ruddy, and the dark eyes flash.

The front and back of the dust jacket for the book depict the same person, Dorothea Gilder, the daughter of Richard Watson and Helena DeKay Gilder, and, according to Carter, the love of Beaux's life. Gilder was the editor of *The Century*, a groundbreaking magazine that reproduced artists such as Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Beaux, as well as publishing a host of American writers. Beaux was in her forties when she formed a close relationship with the teen-aged Dorothea, and while Carter is quick to point out there was no scandal, she accepts the seriousness of the liaison. Three portraits of Dorothea are reproduced here. *Dorothea in the Woods* (1897) depicts the girl—her hair loose, wearing an embroidered peasant blouse—sitting at the foot of a mossy tree. The green, mushroom-flecked ground-cover fills the horizonless space in a way that boldly flattens the image. The more conventional but charming *Dorothea and Francesca* (1898) shows the teenager and her younger sister concentrating on their feet as they execute a dance step. The way their pink and white dresses emerge from the grey-black gloom has Whistlerian drama. The adult Dorothea is depicted in *After the Meeting* (1914), which alone justifies Carter's claim that Beaux is a modern painter. Dorothea is captured in mid-conversation, gloved hands gesturing, her profile etched against a black rectangle that could be a screen. The strong black mass, dead center, divides Dorothea's space from a background gathering of loosely daubed individuals. The riot of patterns—Dorothea's striped dress, the oversize yellow roses on the chintz-covered chair—seems to be nudging toward Matisse.

Beaux's romantic life makes for an interesting narrative. Although she

never married, she did not lack for suitors and remained remarkably good-looking into old age. The delightful *Self-Portrait* (1894), with its lively striped blouse, actually depicts a woman of forty-one. Her educational history is equally curious. Beaux took lessons from a family friend, Kate Drinker, whose life would seem to merit its own chronicle. Carter briefly outlines a glamorous if dangerous upbringing in Macao, including how Kate had to steer the homeward bound ship around Cape Horn after the drunken captain menaced her with a knife and was clapped in irons. Beaux took a course in china painting, did commercial illustration work and enrolled at the recently reopened Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She admired Thomas Eakins as a painter but avoided his controversial life drawing classes. Instead, she chose as a mentor William Sartain (1843–1924) who had studied with Léon Bonnat, who also taught Toulouse-Lautrec and Georges Braque. From Sartain she picked up an interest in the Victorian pseudo-science of phrenology, which she continued to use to work out the relationship between bone structure and character. In 1881 she rented the studio where she painted *Les Dernier Jours d'Enfance*, which a friend then had shipped to Paris; it was accepted for the 1882 Salon. At age thirty-two, she went to Europe, where she greatly admired the paintings by Rubens in Antwerp, and enrolled at the famous Académie Julian, which accepted women but at double the fee for men. It was a rather ad hoc educational trajectory and suggests how tricky the art world was to navigate for women.

Nevertheless, Beaux triumphed. *Dorothea and Francesca* was exhibited at the 1899 International Exposition in London, and she had an unprecedented six works shown “on the line” at the 1896 Paris Salon, where she was named Associée of the Société National des Beaux-Arts. She began teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1895, and continued to earn lucrative commissions and gold medals for decades, but tastes were changing. Beaux did not care for the Impressionists and was not pleased when the New York School of Art, founded by fellow spirit William Merritt Chase in 1896, was “hijacked,” as Carter puts it, by urban realist Robert Henri in 1906. By the time of the celebrated exhibition of *The Eight* at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908 and the Armory Show of 1913, Beaux had settled into genteel semi-retirement—although she continued to paint, and paint well—at Green Alley in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Still, looking at *After the Meeting*, it seems wrong to dismiss her as old-fashioned. Much of the later portrait work does have a perfunctory quality, partly a result of the tedium of the genre, which even Sargent sometimes bemoaned. And not all older artists have the late flowering enjoyed by Monet or Matisse. But Beaux’s *Dressing Dolls* (1928) is a vivid and beguiling work, the oil handled as softly as pastels, the brushstrokes relished for their own sake, the cocky little puppet asserting his own personality. Beaux may be too free to be considered an academic artist and too conservative to be ranked with the avant-garde, but if we avoid labels, we will discover a vivacious painter. This fascinating story of her life and career will contribute greatly to her re-evaluation.