



Beardsley, Aubrey (1872-1898)

by Claude J. Summers

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English decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley was a precocious talent who made a lasting contribution to the art of illustration. One of the greatest of the Symbolists and a master of pen and ink, Beardsley developed a highly original, formally elegant style, inspired in part by Greek vase painting, in which ornamental rhythm of line combines with a perverse and wickedly satiric imagination to create unforgettable images, often hilarious, frequently erotic, and sometimes deeply moving.

Beardsley was born on August 21, 1872 in Brighton, England into a genteel family, but one rendered nearly destitute by the incompetence of his businessman father. He was a musical and artistic prodigy, so his talent was obvious very early, but so was his ill health. He had his first attack of tuberculosis, the disease that would eventually kill him, at the age of nine. For the rest of his brief life, he was plagued by numerous illnesses and relapses.

He was educated at the Bristol Grammar School and later, with the encouragement of Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones, attended night classes at the Westminster School of Art. Although he absorbed a number of influences, including that of the Pre-Raphaelites, Beardsley was largely self-taught.

In 1892, the young artist received his first commission, an invitation to illustrate an edition of Thomas Malory's *Morte D'arthur* for the publisher J. M. Dent. The assignment entailed over 300 illustrations and chapter heads, which the artist executed in a mock-medieval, Pre-Raphaelite style.

In 1893, as he was working on the Dent commission, he met Oscar Wilde, with whom he would be associated for the rest of his life, at least in the public's imagination. Wilde's *Salome* had just been published in French. Later that year, a new journal, *The Studio*, published an article on Beardsley by Joseph Pennell, accompanied by eight of the artist's drawings, including one inspired by *Salome*.

Wilde's publisher John Lane invited Beardsley to illustrate the English edition of the drama. When it was published in 1894, both the play and the witty, provocative--blatantly erotic--illustrations created a sensation.

That same year Beardsley became famous as the art editor of *The Yellow Book*, a new arts and letters periodical that Lane inaugurated. Although Wilde never actually contributed to the magazine, it was widely assumed to be an organ for the aesthetic ideas that the playwright espoused. Beardsley's stunning black-and-white drawings, title-pages, and covers helped make the new quarterly a great success.

But *The Yellow Book* also quickly became a site of the *fin de siècle* culture wars, a target of moralists concerned about the influence of the decadent movement on English society and art. One detractor described Beardsley's designs for the periodical as "Diseased, weird, macbre, and sinister."



Decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley (top) often depicted grotesque scenes in a formally elegant style as in this illustration for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (above). Northwestern University Library Special Collections.

In the context of the growing notoriety of Wilde and his circle, these descriptions may be seen as an attack on the newly visible homosexual subculture that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. The culture wars culminated in Wilde's prosecution and conviction for gross indecency in 1895 and his sentence to two years imprisonment at hard labor.

One casualty of the spirit of reaction precipitated by the Wilde trials of 1895 was Beardsley himself. He was summarily fired from his job as art editor of *The Yellow Book*. He had been too closely associated with Wilde for the publisher's comfort and his art too erotic and perverse for the new mood of conformity prompted by Wilde's conviction.

Ill and in financial straits, Beardsley accepted a job as a draftsman for Leonard Smithers' new quarterly, *The Savoy*. Smithers, a publisher of somewhat dubious reputation who dabbled in erotica, lacked the prestige of John Lane, but he proved to be a good friend to Beardsley.

The Savoy soon folded, but not until Beardsley had published in it both some extraordinarily intricate illustrations to Pope's mock-epic "The Rape of the Lock" and also his own highly erotic (but incomplete) tale "The Story of Venus and Tannhauser," probably inspired by the opera by Richard Wagner, whom Beardsley admired.

In his last years, despite his serious illness, Beardsley continued to work. He produced illustrations for Théophile Gautier's decadent novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and for Aristophanes' sexual comedy *Lysistrata* and a set of initials for an edition of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. These designs are distinguished by the delicacy of their patterns. They comment less on the texts they purportedly illustrate than they satirize the foibles of Beardsley's own time.

In 1896, Smithers published a collection of Beardsley's pen and ink designs, *A Book of Fifty Drawings*, the first collection of the artist's work.

In his last months, Beardsley was sustained by the patronage of Smithers and the support of his friend Marc André Raffalovich, a Russian-born poet and theorist of homosexuality.

In search of a better climate, Beardsley traveled to the south of France in 1898. After converting to Roman Catholicism, he died in Mentone on March 16, 1898 at the age of 25.

Considering the brevity of his life, Beardsley's achievement is astonishing. A highly original creator, he transformed the art of illustration and profoundly influenced artists of his own and subsequent generations.

His expert draftsmanship made his drawings particularly suitable to the technical advances in printing at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps most important, however, he came to maturity at a time peculiarly suited to his genius, when theories of decadence and aestheticism gave license to the expression of perverse sexuality and to fetishism of all kinds.

His work is sexually frank and, occasionally, pornographic. Not only does he draw erect penises and stylized pubic hair and fetishize objects such as shoes and feathers, but he also depicts sexual obsession, lesbianism, sadomasochism, and male homosexuality with a frankness and enthusiasm intended to shock and provoke.

Beardsley is preeminently a satirical artist, with a gift for caricature and grotesquerie. He deforms even as he aestheticizes and his art may best be seen as an attack on Victorian values.

Yet he also created revolutionary designs and images and patterns of surpassing beauty. His influence has been immense, and can be discerned especially in the stylized lines of Art Nouveau.

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