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AUBREY BEARDSLEY (1872-1898)



Rothenstein, William. *Aubrey Beardsley*. 1897. Lithograph. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, on loan to the University of Delaware Library, Newark.

The most literary visual artist of the 1890s, Aubrey Vincent Beardsley helped topple strict Victorian mores. Born in Brighton, he attended Brighton Grammar School, where he won popularity making amusing sketches for friends and teachers. By the time he left school in 1888, three of his poems had been published in a Brighton newspaper and some drawings in school publications. Moving to London with his family, he developed his passionate love of the theatre by attending plays as well as music hall performances and expanded his already considerable musical knowledge to encompass Wagner's operas. That he became a critical viewer and auditor is apparent in his drawings and writings.

In 1891, Beardsley met the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who recommended that he attend art school, which Beardsley did for about eighteen months. During this time the young artist began evolving his personal style. He studied the work of his contemporaries, particularly James McNeill Whistler, Burne-Jones, Walter Sickert, Walter Crane, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, as well as prints by Japanese woodblock artists, whose layouts and techniques he adapted in his work. Frederick H.

Evans, a bookshop owner and photographer, introduced Beardsley to publisher J. M. Dent, who commissioned Beardsley to illustrate *Morte Darthur* (1892-1894), a partial edition of Sir Thomas Malory's original work. On the strength of this commission Beardsley quit his day job and, for the first time in his life, devoted himself to drawing full time and refining his style.

Beardsley's best works, such as for Oscar Wilde's 1894 play *Salome* (originally published in French in 1893), invokes a rich stylistic vocabulary. The strong curvilinear compositions feature an economical and elegant use of line that shapes massed blacks and whites. With their links to Symbolist art, Beardsley's designs provide stylized visual commentary on the texts for which he made them, starkly contrasting with the often more literal illustrations and the horror vacui that pervaded contemporary art. His drawings anticipate, among others, Picasso, who saw the English artist's work in 1900 before he left Barcelona; Kandinsky, who knew Beardsley's work before he left Russia in 1896; Frank Lloyd Wright, whose spare architectural planes were enhanced by Beardsley's designs no less than his own collection of Japanese prints; and Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who acknowledged Beardsley's influence by autumn 1893.

Because Beardsley had tuberculosis and knew he would die young, getting his work published and disseminated consumed him. To insure the spread of his reputation, he accented his witty, bawdy drawings with erotic elements that calculatedly shocked middle-class London viewers and scandalized reviewers. From the first, Beardsley's work was praised for his handling of line but deplored for his treatment of content. Cementing that reputation was not only the jealousy of some artists but also a scandal. After *Salome* was published, Beardsley and Wilde were irreversibly linked in the public mind; shortly after Wilde's arrest, Beardsley was unceremoniously sacked from *The Yellow Book*, the avant-garde periodical he had co-founded and on which he had served as art editor.

Beardsley's importance as an artist, however, did not arise from scandal. In the 1890s his drawings—for posters, books, magazines, and the periodicals *The Yellow Book* and

The Savoy, which he helped to plan—compelled immediate international attention because he exploited the line block. This was a new method of photomechanical reproduction that permitted his drawings to be accurately, economically, and speedily disseminated. The artist's posthumous reputation rests on his revolution in both the style and composition of book illustration and his assistance in transforming the field of graphic art into a major medium of visual expression. Beardsley's contribution to the developing field of commercial art also paved the way for the public acceptance of advertising. His essay “The Art of the Hoarding” (New Review, 1894), on the then fledgling field of the poster, offers the earliest articulation in Britain of his conviction that commercial design should be at once practical and beautiful—one reason that his 1894 Avenue Theatre poster had a revolutionary effect on both sides of the Atlantic.

Beardsley's drawings reflect a coherent philosophy built on the dual ambitions of his work—visual and literary. The subject also arises in his written works, which include poetry, short stories, essays, and a translation of “Catallus CI” that appeared in *The Savoy*. His novel *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, unfinished at his death, makes apparent his expertise not only in art and the novel genre, but also botany, architecture, music, opera, and mythology. In both his art and writing, Beardsley often examined gender relations, as well as the motifs of the grotesque and the voyeur, two visual preoccupations of western culture. His works frequently undercut each potential interpretation with its opposite, such that the meanings of many drawings, for example, cannot ultimately be “read.”

A force in the creation of Art Nouveau, Beardsley is recognized as one of the few British artists in the forefront of the Modernist movement that swept Europe, America, and Russia. As George Grosz noted in 1946, he influenced “practically every modern designer after 1900,” leaving few media in Europe and North America untouched. In addition to painting and architecture, his work influenced Léon Bakst's stage sets for the Ballets Russes, Erté's (Romain de Tiroff) decorative art, Jean Cocteau's designs for Rosenthal porcelain, Cecil Beaton's costumes, and Peter Max's graphics for *The Yellow Submarine*, as well as the early work of British painter Lucien Freud and the Japanese

woodblock artist Masami Teraoka, who moved to the United States in 1961. Through this varied and profound influence, Beardsley altered perception in visual art.

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