

the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

ROBERT ANNING BELL (1863 - 1933)



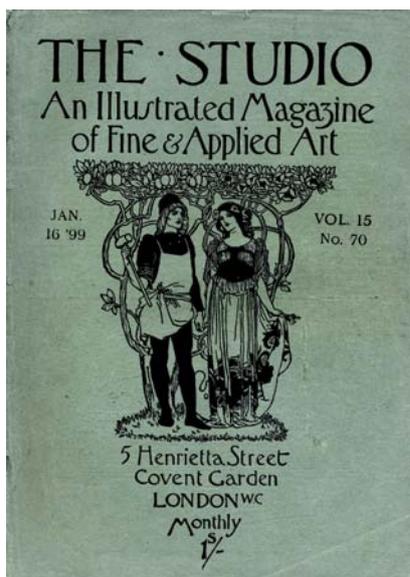
Bell, Robert Anning. *Self portrait as Master of the Art Workers' Guild*. 1921-22. Oil painting. The Art Workers' Guild, Queen Square, London.

Robert Anning Bell was a versatile decorative artist who worked as an illustrator between 1889 and 1912. In 1879 he entered the Westminster School of Art, under the directorship of Professor Fred Brown (1851-1941). He moved to the Royal Academy Schools in 1881, studying in Paris for a year at the Académie Julian and at the studio of the painter Aimé Morot (1850-1913) before completing his studies at the RA Schools in 1887. In 1891 he traveled to Italy, where he was greatly influenced by the paintings of Bellini and other Italian Renaissance artists, as well as by the early illustrated books produced in Venice and Florence.

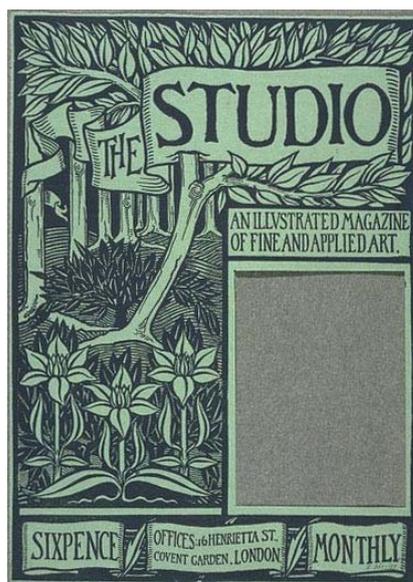
Anning Bell's earliest illustrations were for Nister, where he was made to work in the publisher's house style. However, he was able to develop a personal style in a series of commissions for the little known magazine *Sylvia's Journal* in 1893-94 and then in the first two volumes of Dent's "Banbury Cross" series of children's books in 1894. He also enjoyed early success as a designer of illustrative book-plates.

He made two contributions to *The Yellow Book*, neither specially drawn for that publication. The first was "A Book Plate for Major-General Gosset" (Vol.

1) and the second a reproduction of his painting “The Chrysanthemum Girl” (Vol. 5). For Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911), who under the pseudonym Graham R. Tomson was the editor of *Sylvia’s Journal*, he designed the title-page to a book of her verses published by John Lane in 1895. Apart from a book of poetry by his friend Theodora Thompson (1872-1948) that he decorated in 1906, he did no other work for Lane.



Anning Bell, Robert. “Front Cover.” *The Studio*. Jan. 1899.



Beardsley, Aubrey. “Front Cover.” *The Studio*. 1893-1894.

In *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and his Work* the art historian Haldane MacFall suggests that Aubrey Beardsley drew inspiration from Anning Bell in the early 1890s, stating that

“Anning Bell was at this time pouring out his book-plates

and kindred designs, and in many of Beardsley’s designs one could almost tell which of Anning Bell’s drawings he had been looking at last” (28). However, the drawings that Anning Bell made for *Sylvia’s Journal* demonstrate that he in turn was strongly influenced by Beardsley. In his illustration for “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” published in August 1893, the knight and lady have typical “Beardsley faces” with pouting lips, while his illustration for “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil” (August 1893) clearly derives from Beardsley’s drawing of Salome holding up the severed head of John the Baptist that had appeared in *The Studio* magazine four months earlier. It is interesting to note that, whilst Beardsley’s design for the cover of *The Studio* was used for the first few issues, Anning Bell’s design, introduced in 1894, remained in use until 1929.

The book that established Anning Bell's reputation as a leading illustrator of the period was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Dent (1895). The following year he was chosen by George Bell and Sons to illustrate the first volume in their "Endymion Poets" series, *Poems by John Keats* (1897). He went on to illustrate *English Lyrics from Spenser to Milton* (1898) and *Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1902) in the same series. Two other important commissions were for new illustrated editions of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* for Dent and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for Freemantle, both published in 1901. From 1895 to 1899 Anning Bell taught at the School of Architecture and Applied Arts at University College, Liverpool. In 1899 he returned to London and in September 1900 he married Amy Caroline Ditcham and settled in the village of East Hagbourne, then in Berkshire.

Anning Bell did little illustration after 1902, concentrating his efforts on painting and other decorative arts. However, in 1906 he was persuaded by Dent to provide 25 coloured illustrations for a new edition of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. There is evidence that Anning Bell was not satisfied with the quality of the reproduction (McIntyre 42). He was drawn back to illustration, for the last time, around 1911 when Philip Lee Warner, the publisher for The Medici Society, offered him the opportunity to illustrate in colour a series of essays by Alice Meynell (1847-1922) on the theme of *Mary, the Mother of Jesus*.

Anning Bell resumed his teaching activities, becoming Professor of Decorative Art at Glasgow School of Art in 1911 and then succeeding W. R. Lethaby as professor of Design at the Royal College of Art in 1918. He died aged 70 from complications of pneumonia and asthma at his home at 28 Holland Park Road on November 27, 1933. Anning Bell saw himself as a painter and decorative artist, latterly specialising in stained glass. His work as an illustrator served a dual purpose, providing an income that supported his other work and introducing him to potential clients for his painting and other activities. His illustrations also served as inspiration for a number of his paintings and other works in the field of the decorative arts.

Anning Bell's illustrations should be viewed in the context of his artistic output as a whole. He was best known as a fine decorative artist and, in the field of illustration, it is as a decorator of books that he was most able. He was the first to admit that he did not always appreciate fully the subtleties of the poetry that he was asked to illustrate. Nonetheless, he was a talented and influential illustrator, especially in black and white, and his work deserves to be better known.

© 2012, Geoffrey Beare

Geoffrey Beare is a freelance writer and researcher in the history of book illustration. He is chairman of the Imaginative Book Illustration Society and a trustee of the William Heath Robinson Trust. He is author of *The Art of William Heath Robinson* (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), and has published a biography of Alice B. Woodward. His most recent research, on the children's stories and illustrations of Edith Farmiloe, was published in *Studies in Illustration* (45:2010).

Selected Publications with Illustrations by Robert Anning Bell

- Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. London: Methuen & Co., 1898.
Dennis, John, ed. *English Lyrics from Spenser to Milton*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1898.
Grimm's Household Tales. London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1901.
Keats, John. *Poems by John Keats*. London: George Bell Sons, 1897.
Lamb, Charles and Mary. *Tales from Shakespeare*. London: S. T. Freemantle, 1899.
Meynell, Alice. *Mary, the Mother of Jesus*. London: Philip Lee Warner, publisher to the Medici Society, 1912.
Palgrave's Golden Treasury. London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1907.
Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. London: S. T. Freemantle, 1901.
Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1895.
Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley. London: George Bell & Sons, 1902.

Selected Publications about Robert Anning Bell

- Anon. "Obituary." *Apollo* 19 (1934): 342.
Candlemass, A. B. "A Decorative Artist: Mr Robert Anning Bell." *The Temple* 3 (May 1899): 623-630.
Dennis, George Ravenscroft. "The Illustrative Work of Robert Anning Bell." *The Booklover's Magazine* 7 (1908): 248-263.

- De Riquer, Alejandro. *Robert A. Bell*. Barcelona: Vilanova y Geltru: Oliva, 1910.
- McIntyre, John. "Robert Anning Bell (1863-1933): A Quintessential Illustrator of his Time." *IBIS Journal 4: Phantasies and Dreams*. Guildford: The Imaginative Book Illustration Society, 2011. 7-61.
- White, Gleeson. "Modern Book-plate Designers. No. 9. – Mr. R. Anning Bell." *Journal of the Ex Libris Society* 5 (Aug. 1895): 141-48.