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A Fin-de-Siècle Stilophagus: Aubrey Beardsley Between Originality and Originarity

Abstract: Aubrey Beardsley's artistic career spanned little more than five years, yet was characterised by a frenetic exploration of different modes of artistic expression in pursuit of a new and original modern style. Like a skilled perfumer bringing together subtle fragrances, the young English artist sought, selected and sampled a wide range of figurative vocabularies from very different sources and extrapolated their essence, thereby creating an artistic language that was entirely personal yet perfectly attuned to the spirit of his day. From his revival of the Pre-Raphaelite figurative tradition to his reinterpretation of certain stylistic traits belonging to the art of cultures distant from his own in terms of both time and space (ranging from Greek vase painting to Japanese prints and Rococo imagery), he distilled a unique and instantly recognisable language grounded in a 'synthetic' approach. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Beardsley effectively opened up British culture to the new Symbolist/Art Nouveau language which was emerging at that time on the European continent.

Keywords: Symbolism. Neo-Medievalism. *Japonisme*. Neo-Rococo. Aubrey Beardsley.

Le long règne de la pieuse et sévère Victoria, Impératrice des Indes, déclinait. Burne-Jones venait d'être fait baronnet; Whistler commençait d'être sacré grand peintre, après ses batailles livrées à la Grosvenor Gallery, où les Indépendants et les snobs s'alliaient pâmer devant toute œuvre refusée à la Royal Academy. C'est alors qu'Oscar Wilde, triomphant, se promène dans Piccadilly, un grand tournesol à la main [...]. La société anglaise se réveille d'un long sommeil et secoue son indifférence pour tout ce qui n'est pas le sport. Un nouveau snobisme va la jeter dans les bras des artistes; elle attend quelque chose et se prépare à s'amuser d'autre façon. Dans cette atmosphère surchauffée, parmi les révoltés et les novateurs, voici venir le jeune Beardsley.¹

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Please note that 'Stilophagus' is a neologism derived from the Latin words 'stilus' and 'phagus', meaning 'devourer of styles'. All images in this essay are taken from Wikimedia Commons - free media archive.

¹ "The long reign of the pious and stern Victoria, Empress of India, was coming to an end. Burne-Jones had just been made a baronet; Whistler was beginning to be celebrated as a great painter following his battles at the Grosvenor Gallery, where Independents and snobs swooned over any work rejected by the Royal Academy. It was then that Oscar Wilde, triumphant, strolled down Piccadilly holding a large sunflower [...]. English society awoke from a long slumber and shook off its indifference to anything but sport. A new snobbery was about to throw it into the arms of artists; it was waiting for something, and was preparing to enjoy itself in a different way. Into this overheated atmosphere, among the rebels and innovators, came young Beardsley" (J.-É. BLANCHE, *Essais et portraits*, Paris, Les Bibliophiles fantaisistes Dorbon-aîné, 1912, pp. 53-54; my translation).



Fig. 1: Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 1895, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Generally speaking, young artists about to embark on their careers find themselves at a fork in the road beyond which two paths branch off in opposite directions, one leading towards ‘originality’, the other towards ‘originarity’.

The first path, taken by the members of every avant-garde group, leads artists to attempt to make their own particular cultural sphere a *tabula rasa*, and to assert themselves as harbingers of innovations that herald an imminent future. In order to do so, the artists travelling along this path make use of completely novel techniques, with which they give life to provocatively new styles and images that have no historical precedent.

Although initially appearing less radical, those who take the second path also perform a maieutic act in their attempt to create an art attuned to the contemporary world. Indeed, whilst ostensibly reviving techniques and

styles from the past, the champions of this approach never adopt them in a conventional or pedestrian manner, but rather recombine them in unusual ways in order to achieve novel, and frequently somewhat jarring, effects that endow their work with a high degree of autonomy. To paraphrase the critic Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), one can speak of a kind of ‘recurrent evolution’ that follows a spiral pattern, whereby certain stylistic phenomena come back into favour on a cyclical basis, but in different contexts.² In short, artistic expression is subject to a pendular motion, and swings between two opposing points: the ‘tradition of novelty’ and the ‘novelty of tradition’.

However, this sort of art-historical pattern by no means represents an absolute law but, *exceptio probat regulam*, admits of striking exceptions or ‘symptomatic anomalies’ that merely serve to confirm the rule. Amongst such exceptions, the figure of Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) stands out as a *rara avis*. Faced with the dialectical dilemma of choosing between thesis (originality) and antithesis (originarity), he opted for a third path leading towards synthesis, based not on a mere compromise between the two opposing sides, but rather on an autonomous and simultaneously all-encompassing position (Hegel). In fact, Beardsley’s adoption of this ‘alternative’ solution was characteristic of that generation of artists born around the 1860s and 1870s who would give life to Symbolism, a movement which looked towards the contemporary era from its position on the ‘promontory of the centuries’ and paved the way for the subsequent historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

In other words, like his contemporaries, Beardsley found himself ‘suspended’ between the old and the new, between a world still partly tied to the last offshoots of that late Romantic spirit which looked to the past as an ideal golden age, and a completely new world pervaded by an overwhelming thirst for novelty, the outlines of which were

² Cf. H. WÖLFFLIN, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Munich, Bruckmann, 1915, pp. 246-48.

still inchoate but seemed to bristle with new and ‘mysterious’ stimuli.³

In this context, an article published in 1894 by the young English artist, defending the new art of poster advertising, is highly significant:

Advertisement is an absolute necessity of modern life, and if it can be made beautiful as well as obvious, so much the better for the makers of soap and the public who are likely to wash.

The popular idea of a picture is something told in oil or writ in water to be hung on a room’s wall or in a picture gallery to perplex an artless public. No one expects it to serve a useful purpose or take a part in everyday existence. Our modern painter has merely to give a picture a good name and hang it. Now the poster first of all justified its existence on the grounds of utility, and should it further aspire to beauty of line and colour, may not our hoardings claim kinship with the galleries, and the designers of affiches pose proudly in the public eye as the masters of Holland Road or Bond Street Barbizon (and, recollect, no gate money, no catalogue)?

Still there is a general feeling that the artist who puts his art into the poster is *déclassé* – on the streets – and consequently of light character. The critics can discover no brush work to prate of, the painter looks askance upon a thing that achieves publicity without a frame, and beauty without modelling, and the public find it hard to take seriously a poor printed thing left to the mercy of sunshine, soot, and shower, like any old fresco over an Italian church door.

What view the bill-sticker and sandwich man take of the subject I have yet to learn. The first is, at least, no bad substitute for a hanging committee, and the clothes of the second are better company than somebody else’s picture, and less obtrusive than a background of stamped magenta paper.

Happy, then, those artists who thus escape the injustice of juries and the shuffling of dealers, and choose to keep that distance that lends enchantment to the private view, and avoid the world of worries that attends on those who elect to make an exhibition of themselves.

He concludes in an almost proto-Futurist spirit:

London will soon be resplendent with advertisements, and, against a leaden sky, sky-signs will trace their formal arabesque. Beauty has laid siege to the city, and telegraph wires shall no longer be the sole joy of our aesthetic perceptions.

Now, as to the technicalities of the art, I have nothing to say. To generalise upon any subject is to fall foul of the particular, and ’twere futile to lay down any rules for the making of posters. One’s ears are weary of the voice of the art teacher who sits like the parrot on his perch, learning the jargon of the studios, making but poor copy and calling it criticism. We have had enough of their omniscience, their parade of technical knowledge, and their predilection for the wrong end of the stick. But if there be any who desire to know – not how posters are made – but how they should be, I doubt not that I could give them the addresses of one or two gentlemen who, having taken art under their wing, would give all necessary information.⁴

Although not mentioned by name, the ‘gentlemen’ referred to by Beardsley in this article were the most important representatives of European Symbolism, with whom he had become acquainted during his visits to the continent: the Nabis painters Maurice Denis (1870-1953), Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), Édouard Vuil-

³ Hence the recourse to the ‘symbol’ (from the Greek *‘sýn-’* [together] and *‘bálllein’* [to throw]: ‘to put together’ two parts) as a ‘bridge’ between an ideal past and a rich but uncertain future, to be explored without completely unveiling its hidden fascination in order to avoid the risk of falling back into a kind of ‘positivist’ certainty.

⁴ A. BEARDSLEY, “The Art of the Hoarding”, *New Review*, July 1894, pp. 53-55. To a certain extent, this text anticipates ideas formulated forty years later by the German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) regarding the artwork’s loss of aura – and the consequent reorientation of art’s very purpose – with the advent of new techniques enabling the reproduction and dissemination of visual imagery en masse. Cf. W. BENJAMIN, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5, 1936, pp. 9-44.

lard (1868-1946) and Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), but also Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), the Dutch artist Jan Toorop (1858-1928) and the Belgian painter James Ensor (1860-1949).⁵ Like these figures, in fact, the young English artist adopted a *novantico* ('modern-ancient') language, in which influences from the past were filtered through a spirit that was *absolument moderne*, rejecting any form of Naturalism – from the art of the Renaissance to that of the Impressionists – in favour of an abstract vision (in the etymological sense of the word: 'abstrahère' – 'to pull away from'). Beardsley achieved this by combining his 'black blot' technique with the use of outline: methods corresponding, respectively, to *à plat* and *cloisonnisme* in painting.⁶ This inductive process – whereby natural data (phenotypes) are reduced to generalised data (stereotypes) – allowed the artist to produce a phantasmagorical repertoire of highly sophisticated, stylised and cerebral images. His was an eccentric universe inhabited by delicate silhouettes that were alternately sensual and grotesque in appearance, floating in a two-dimensional space, where each element taken from the natural world simply served as a model for creating exquisitely wrought emblematic forms as part of a refined decorative aesthetic.⁷ Beardsley's friend Arthur Symons (1865-1945) wrote about these aspects of the artist's work:

[Beardsley] knows that he is condemned to be always in public, that emotion would be supremely out of keeping with his costume, that he must remember to be fantastic if he would not be merely ridiculous. And so he becomes exquisitely false, dreading above all things that "one touch of nature" which would ruffle his disguise, and leave him defenceless. Simplicity, in him, being the most laughable thing in the world, he becomes learned, perverse, intellectualising his pleasures, brutalising his intellect; his mournful contemplation of things becoming a kind of grotesque joy, which he expresses in the only symbols at his command [...].⁸

He went on to add:

And then, it must never be forgotten, Beardsley was a decorative artist, and not anything else. From almost the very first he accepted convention; he set himself to see things as pattern. [...] Working, as the decorative artist must work, in symbols almost as arbitrary, almost as fixed, as the squares of a chessboard, he swept together into his pattern all the incongruous things in the world, weaving them into congruity by his pattern. Using the puff-box, the toilet-table, the ostrich-feather hat, with a full consciousness of their suggestive quality in a drawing of archaic times, a drawing purposely fantastic, he put these things to beautiful uses, because he liked their forms, and because his space of white or black seemed to require some such arrangement of lines. They were the minims and crotchets by which he wrote down his music; they made the music, but they were not the music.⁹

⁵ On Beardsley's relationship with French culture, see G. SCATASTA, "Abbé Beardsley", in R. CAMPI and A.P. SONCINI FRATTA (a cura di), *Alla conquista della modernità. Studi sul Settecento in onore di Daniela Gallingani*, Bologna, I libri di Emil, 2018, pp. 151-57.

⁶ This process involved the 'controlled dripping' of ink, which the artist would then use to gradually fill in those spaces he had previously traced on the paper.

⁷ "I have one aim – the grotesque. If I am not grotesque, I am nothing" (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1927, n.p.). On the grotesque aspect of Beardsley's work, see C. SNODGRASS, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque*, Oxford, OUP, 1995; G. SCATASTA, "Una strada verso il Giappone: Beardsley e il grottesco", in P. SCROLAVEZZA, G. SCATASTA and A. SPECCHIO (a cura di), *NipPop. 10 anni di cultura pop giapponese in Italia*, Milano, Mimesis Edizioni, 2023, pp. 29-41.

⁸ A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, London, Unicorn, 1898, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

In short, with his intensely synthetic style – employed with the aim of conveying the most recondite (and frequently inexpressible) human sensations through highly evocative imagery – Beardsley effectively ‘undersigned’ the famous Symbolist manifesto of 1891 composed by Gabriel Albert Aurier (1865-1892), in which the French critic summarised the key qualities of the new movement in five adjectives: ‘Idéiste’, ‘Symboliste’, ‘Synthétique’, ‘Subjective’, ‘Décorative’.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the *enfant prodige* of English modernism distinguished himself from his continental peers by his highly distinctive interpretation of the Symbolist style, which allowed him to ‘shine with his own light’:

In spite, however, of Beardsley’s faculty for assimilation [...] his work can rarely, if ever, be mistaken, unless he himself chooses mischievously to deceive you. Degas, in an unpublished fragment by Oscar Wilde, is quoted as having said: “Il y a quelque chose plus terrible encore que le bourgeois, – c’est l’homme qui nous singe.” No man ever suffered more at the hands of these apes than Beardsley, but he remained inimitable. His artistic accent, so to speak, is unmistakably French, but it is an error to compare his work, except from the moral point of view, with that of men like Felicien Rops or Toulouse-Lautrec. Occasionally these men evoke similar emotions, but their methods are quite different.¹¹

His singularity consisted in the manner in which he studied works of art that were distant in both time and space in order to grasp their compositional secrets, and then proceeded to disassemble and reassemble these at will, all the while remaining perfectly true to himself: “He had that originality which surrenders to every influence, yet surrenders to absorb, not to be absorbed; that originality which, constantly shifting, is true always to its centre”.¹²

Apertis verbis, Beardsley arrived at his most characteristic pictorial solutions by means of a subtle and intelligent process of ‘resemantisation’, adapting the most disparate stylistic vocabularies to create distinctive works that placed him at the forefront of the fin-de-siècle art scene:

No artist of our time, none certainly whose work has been in black and white, has reached a more universal, or a more contested fame; none has formed for himself, out of such alien elements, a more personal originality of manner; none has had so wide an influence on contemporary art.¹³

The first two sources of inspiration to be ‘vampirised’ by Beardsley were Italian paintings of the Quattrocento and the images created by Pre-Raphaelite artists – in particular, the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898), of whom Beardsley was a great admirer.¹⁴ However, if it

¹⁰ See G.A. AURIER, “Le Symbolisme en Peinture: Paul Gauguin”, *Mercur de France*, 2 (15), March 1891. For an analysis of the manifesto, see G. VIRELLI, “Gabriel Albert Aurier ‘critico profeta’ del Simbolismo”, in E. BALDINI, G.L. TUSINI and G. VIRELLI (a cura di), *Gabriel Albert Aurier. Scritti d’arte 1889-1892*, Milano, Mimesis, 2019, pp. 49-61.

¹¹ M. BIRNBAUM, *Aubrey Vincent Beardsley*, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1911, pp. 11-12.

¹² A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 21.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁴ In a letter dated 12 July 1891, addressed to his old teacher Arthur William King, Beardsley described an encounter with Burne-Jones: “Yesterday (Sunday) I & my Sister went to see the Studio of Burne Jones; as I had heard that admittance might be gained to see the pictures by sending in one’s visiting card. When we arrived however we were told that the Studio had not been open for some years & that we could not see Mr Burne Jones

is true – as his true friend Robert Ross (1869-1918) asserted – that “his first enthusiasm was for the work of the Italian primitives”,¹⁵ and that “Rossetti and Burne-Jones [...] succeeded in their turn; the influence of Burne-Jones lasting longer than any other”,¹⁶ Beardsley’s inner drive almost immediately pushed him to go beyond the territory marked out by the latter two artists and to overcome the limits of a ‘historicist’ vision which, despite intending to revive pre-Renaissance vocabularies, remained constrained by a naturalistic approach that was still too meticulous and detailed in character. One can already perceive this transcendence of the Pre-Raphaelite model in the first important project undertaken by the artist: his illustrations for a new edition of *Le Morte d’Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory (1409?-1471), which were commissioned in 1892 by the publisher Joseph Malaby Dent (1849-1926). Indeed, despite the evident references to the work of Burne-Jones that are visible in Beardsley’s images (Figs 2-3), one can already discern in them the first signs of an ‘evolution’ towards more autonomous forms of expression, grounded in a decidedly anti-naturalistic approach:

For nature without tears, in the impressionist fashion, or as popularly viewed through the camera, Aubrey Beardsley had no feeling. He was frankly indifferent to picturesque peasants, the beauties of “lovely spots” either in England or France [...]. The treatment of nature in the larger and truer sense of the word had little attraction for him; he never tried, therefore, to represent air, atmosphere, and light, as many clever modern artists have done in black and white! [...] Beardsley’s landscape, therefore, is formal, primitive, conventional; a breath of air hardly shakes the delicate leaves of the straight poplars and willows that grow by his serpentine streams. The great cliffs, leaning down in promontories to the sea, have that unreal, architectural appearance so remarkable in the West of Cornwall, a place he had never visited. Yet his love and observation of flowers, trees, and gardens are very striking in the drawings for the “Morte d’Arthur” [...] but it is the nature of the landscape

without a special appointment. So we left somewhat disconsolately. I had hardly turned the corner when I heard a quick Step behind me, & a voice which said ‘Pray come back I couldn’t think of letting you go away without seeing the Pictures, after a journey on a hot day like this’. The voice was that of Burne Jones; who escorted us back to his house & took us into the Studio, Showing & explaining everything. His kindness was wonderful as We were perfect Strangers he not even knowing our names. By the merest Chance I happened to have some of my best drawings with me, & I asked him to look at them & give me his opinion. I can tell you it was an exciting moment when he first opened my portfolio & looked at the first drawings ‘Saint Veronica on the evening of Good Friday’ ‘Dante at the Court of Con Grande de la Scala’. After he had examined them for a few minutes he exclaimed ‘There is no doubt about your gift, one day you will most assuredly paint very great & beautiful pictures’. Then as he continued looking through the rest of them (‘Notre dame de la lune’ ‘Dante designing an angel’, ‘Insomnia’, ‘Post Mortem’, ‘Ladye Hero’ &c &c) he said ‘All are full of thought poetry & imagination. Nature has given you every gift which is necessary, to become a great artist. I seldom or never advise anyone to take up art as a profession, but in your case I can do nothing else’. And all this from the greatest living artist in Europe. Afterwards we returned to the lawn & had afternoon tea. Mrs Burne Jones is very charming. The Oscar Wildes & several others were there. All congratulated me on my success, as ‘Mr Burne Jones is a very severe critic’. During tea B. J. spoke to me about art training. ‘I will’ he said ‘immediately find out the very best school for you, where two hours daily study would be quite sufficient for you. Study hard, you have plenty of time before you, I myself did not begin to study till I was 23’. ‘You must come & see me often & bring your drawings with you. Design as much as you can your early sketches will be of immense service to you later on. Every one of the drawings you have shown me would make beautiful paintings’. After some more praise & criticism I left feeling, in the words of Rossetti ‘A Different critter’. We came home with the Oscar Wildes – charming people” (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in A.W. KING, *An Aubrey Beardsley Lecture*, London, R.A. King, 1924, pp. 61-62).

¹⁵ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, London, The Bodley Head, 1909, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

gardener, not the landscape painter. There is some truth in the half-playful, half-unfriendly criticism, that his pictures were a form of romantic map-making. Future experts, however, may be trusted to deal with absence of chiaroscuro, values, tones, and the rest.¹⁷



Fig. 2 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Holy Grail is Achieved*, Illustrations to *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1892.

Fig. 3 (right): Edward Burne-Jones, *The Call of Perseus*, 1877.

In other words, just as Burne-Jones had ‘translated’ fifteenth-century Italian art into his own language, so Beardsley interpreted the Pre-Raphaelite vocabulary in accordance with a grammar that was unique to him:

Although in all of Mr Beardsley’s drawings which I have so far seen there are signs of other men’s influence, I know no reason why this influence should not be apparent if the inventor of what we may consider the type is a worthy man to imitate. However, to say that Burne Jones, or even his far greater master Rossetti, invented what is vulgarly known as the Rossetti type, is absurd. They did not invent it: they have only recorded a type which is very common in this country, emphasising certain characteristics which no one had ever so emphasised before. Mr Beardsley, in illustrating the “Morte d’Arthur” wished an appropriate type; he has taken the one which appealed to him most, and he was perfectly justified in doing so.¹⁸

The same can be said of another artistic component that entered the English artist’s lexicon around this time, *Japonisme*:

Last summer I struck for myself an entirely new method of drawing and composition, something suggestive of Japan, but not really japoneseque. The subjects were quite mad and a little indecent. Strange hermaphroditic creatures wandering about in Pierrot costumes or modern dress; quite a new world of my own creation.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁸ J. PENNEL, “A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley”, *The Studio*, 1 (1), April 1893, p. 19.

¹⁹ Letter dated 15 February 1893, in A. BEARDSLEY, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds H. MASS et al.,



Fig. 4: Claude Monet, *Madame Monet en costume japonais*, 1875, Musée d'Orsay.

By the end of the nineteenth century this phenomenon – which had exploded in France in the 1860s and spread across Europe within a very short period of time – had become an out-and-out craze, giving rise to a range of interpretations that differed from country to country and from artist to artist.²⁰ In Victorian England, ‘Japanism-mania’ began to take root in the 1880s, mainly through the commercial availability of everyday objects such as cups, vases or rolls of wallpaper that were either authentic or domestically produced in a ‘Japanese style’.²¹

Once again, Beardsley’s highly personal “*japanesques*”²² do not constitute instances of straightforward iconographical ‘transvestitism’, but rather took shape through a process of ‘assimilation’, by means of which he sought to extrapolate the quintessential character of his visual source material. Indeed, Beardsley’s use of the expression ‘not really japonese’ suggests that he was familiar with the art produced in the Land of the Rising Sun (and its Western derivatives) and wished to avoid falling into the state of limbo occupied by its imitators.

Accordingly, in contrast to academic painters – as well as the more independent Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists (Fig. 4) – Beardsley was not content simply to dress his characters in elegant, richly embroidered kimonos, or incorporate images of paper lanterns and fans into his works, but rather sought to internalise the *modus operandi* of artists such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1754-1806), Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) or Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858) in such a way as to create an art that would be entirely his own, more modern and consistent with the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*).²³ Emblematic of this new phase of stylistic absorption is perhaps his most famous (indeed, infamous) body of work: the illustrations he produced for Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, published by John Lane in 1893. In these drawings, Beardsley employed all his technical expertise to create authentic ‘floating worlds’ of a distinctly modern stamp. His new Anglo-Japanese approach is evident in those images where Herod’s diabolical stepdaughter appears in sumptuous, un-

London, J.L. Duncan and W.G. Good, 1970, p. 43.

²⁰ On the phenomenon of *Japonisme* in Europe, see S. WICHMANN, *Japonismus. Ostasien-Europa. Begegnungen in der Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Herrsching, Schuler Verlagsgesellschaft, 1980; S. TAKASCHINA, *Japanese Art in Perspective: East-West Encounters*, Tokyo, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2021; F. PARISI (a cura di), *Giapponismo. Venti d'oriente nell'arte europea 1860-1915*, Milano, Skira, 2000.

²¹ See A. ONO, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and Nineteenth-century Japan*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

²² See H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, pp. 95-110.

²³ On the influence of Japanese art on Beardsley, see L. GERTNER ZATLIN, *Beardsley, Japonisme and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, Cambridge, CUP, 1997.

mistakably Japanese, robes (Fig. 5); paradoxically, however, it emerges even more clearly in those illustrations that are less obviously homologous with *ukiyo-e* prints, such as *The Black Cape* (Fig. 6). Here, the example of the Japanese masters is assimilated in a more subtle and intellectual manner – the work’s exaggeratedly sinuous forms, inexorable outlines and broad strokes of black ink not being used to depict fluttering peacocks or other iconographical motifs ‘plundered’ from a market of Far Eastern goods, but rather serving as powerful catalysts that transform Salome into a heroine of Kabuki theatre (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *John and Salomé*, Illustrations to *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, 1893.

Fig. 6 (centre): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Black Cape*, Illustration to *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, 1893.

Fig. 7 (right): Shunbaisai Hokuiei, *Arashi Rikan als Sasaki Saburo Morimatsu*, 1831.

Essentially, then, Beardsley’s interest in Japanese art can be seen in the context of his consistent, and increasingly extreme, impulse to simplify his forms, which were no longer depicted as three-dimensional or plastic, and which distilled, suggested and evoked rather than minutely represented:

Taking freely all that the Japanese could give him, that release from the bondage of what we call real things, which comes to one man from an intense spirituality, to another from a consciousness of material form so intense that it becomes *abstract*, he made the world over again in his head, as if it existed only when it was thus remade, and not even then, until it had been set down in black line on a white surface, in white line on a black surface.²⁴

Initially, Wilde feared that his work would be overshadowed by the young artist’s illustrations²⁵ and reacted to them with a certain hostility, complaining that while his

²⁴ A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 29 (emphasis added).

²⁵ In a letter to his friend William Rothenstein, Max Beerbohm wrote: “Why do I write on this odd paper? Because it was wrapped up with two very lovely drawings by Aubrey Beardsley which J. Lane has just given me. They lie before me as I write: I am enamoured of them. So is John Lane: he said: ‘How lucky I am to have got hold of this young Beardsley: look at the technique of his drawings! What workmanship! *He never goes over the edges!*’ [...] I forget whether you like *Salomé* or not. *Salomé* is the play of which the drawings are illustrative? I have just

play was “Byzantine” in character, Beardsley’s drawings were, in fact, “too Japanese”.²⁶ In reality, Beardsley had in no sense betrayed the eminent writer’s text; as Gino Scatasta has correctly pointed out, the young artist had actually “taken on board Wildean principles, absorbing the ‘spirit of the [Japanese] style’”²⁷ in accordance with recommendations that had previously been set out by Wilde himself in a famous essay titled “The Decay of Lying” (1889), where he had outlined his notion of artistic ‘inauthenticity’ with reference to the Japanese imagery then in vogue amongst contemporary artists:

No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist. Take an example from our own day. I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. One of our most charming painters went recently to the Land of the Chrysanthemum in the foolish hope of seeing the Japanese. All he saw, all he had the chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans. He was quite unable to discover the inhabitants, as his delightful exhibition at Messrs. Dowdeswell’s Gallery showed only too well. He did not know that the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art. And so, if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home, and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere.²⁸

Ultimately, just as the author of *Salome* had been ‘inspired’ by the work of other writers to create one of the most significant examples of ‘décadent’ tragedy,²⁹ so too Beardsley had infused his illustrations with the ‘essence’ of Japanese art to create one of the indisputable masterpieces of Art Nouveau illustration. Indeed, the success of his imagery was such that a long line of ‘imitators’ immediately sprang up not only in Europe, but also in the United States and even in Japan itself where, from the turn of the century, a sort of ‘reciprocal *Japonisme*’ was practised for several decades, directly informed by the works of the English artist.³⁰

been reading it again – and like it immensely – there is much, I think in it that is beautiful, much lovely writing I almost wonder Oscar doesn’t dramatize it” (Max Beerbohm quoted in W. ROTHENSTEIN, *Man and Memories*, London, Faber & Faber, 1931, Vol. I, p. 183).

²⁶ M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley. A Biography*, London, Flamingo, 1999, p. 158.

²⁷ G. SCATASTA, “Something suggestive of Japan? Il giapponismo di Aubrey Beardsley”, in I. GRAZIANI and M.V. SPISSU (a cura di), *Il mito del nemico. Identità, alterità e loro rappresentazioni*, Bologna, Minerva, 2019, p. 297 (my translation).

²⁸ O. WILDE, “The Decay of Lying”, *The Nineteenth Century*, 143, January 1889, pp. 47-48; subsequently published in ID., *Intentions*, London, James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, 1891, pp. 46-47.

²⁹ “When he gave me a copy on its first publication in its violet paper cover, he knew at once that it put me in mind of Flaubert. He [Wilde] admitted he had not been able to resist the theft. ‘Remember’ he said with amusing uncton, ‘Dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père’. But I didn’t think he had killed Flaubert; nor did he, I believe” (Aubrey Beardsley quoted in M. STURGIS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 184).

³⁰ See J. KAWAMURA (ed.), *ビーズリーと日本 [Aubrey Beardsley and Japan]*, Tochigi, Utsunomiya Museum

However, such success did not quench Beardsley's thirst for novelty. Soon after drinking from the wells of Japanese art, he turned his gaze towards new sources of inspiration – particularly Greek vase-painting – in order to further enrich his stylistic repertoire: “whilst at work upon the Salome designs he [Beardsley] was much at the British Museum and was intensely drawn to the Greek vase-paintings in which the British Museum is very rich”.³¹ As had been the case first with the Italian Primitives and Pre-Raphaelites, and subsequently with the work of Japanese artists, what fascinated Beardsley about ancient Greek imagery was the ‘simple’ means of expression employed by Hellenic artists and their ability to depict complex scenes (whether drawn from mythology, poetry, tragedies or simply everyday life) with the use of a minimalist graphic style that was broadly akin to his own technique: “it was precisely the skill with which the great Greek painters uttered erotic moods by the rhythmic use of line and mass that most keenly intrigued Beardsley”.³²

This shift of Beardsley's stylistic horizon from the slopes of Mount Fuji to the Attic coast is particularly evident in the illustrations he produced for the famous *Yellow Book*, a new artistic-literary journal edited by Beardsley himself together with the American writer Henry Harland (1861-1905), which was once again supported by the publisher John Lane.³³

The “plump and merry lady laughing boisterously”³⁴ on the cover of the first issue is no longer depicted in a ‘Japanese’ manner, but recalls Greek black- and red-figure vase paintings dating from c.700-500 B.C. (Fig. 8). Even more ‘Hellenistic’ than this image are other drawings in which the artist modulated his new ‘Mediterranean style’ on a double technical register:

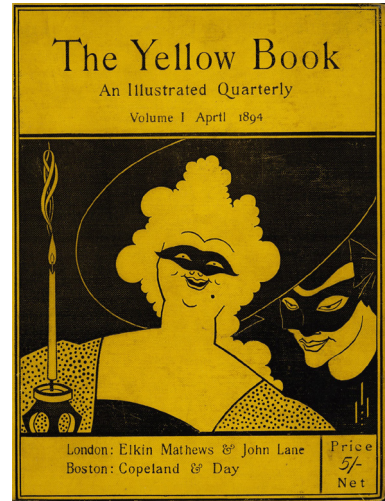


Fig. 8: Aubrey Beardsley, *Cover of The Yellow Book*, Volume I, April 1894.

The Yellow Book phase of Beardsley's art is very distinct from what went before and what was to come after. There are two types: a fine firm line employed with flat black masses of which the famous *Lady Gold's Escort* and *The Wagnerites* are the type, and of which *The Nightpiece* is the triumph – and a very thin delicate line, generally for portraiture, to define faintly the body to a more firmly drawn head – of which the *Mrs Patrick Campbell* is the type and *L'Education sentimentale* a variant – whilst the three remarkable *Comedy-Ballets of Marionettes I, II, and III*, show white masses used against black.³⁵

of Art, 2016.

³¹ H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, p. 114.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ For a consideration of the journal's literary content, see G. FRANCI and G. SCATASTA (a cura di), “*The Yellow Book*, una rivista di fine secolo, Aprile 1894 - Aprile 1897”, *In Forma di Parole*, 3, luglio-agosto-settembre 1999.

³⁴ P.G. HAMERTON, “The Illustration”, *The Yellow Book*, 2, July 1894, pp. 186-87.

³⁵ H. MACFALL, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Clown, The Harlequin, and Pierrot of His Age*, p. 134. Of the aforementioned drawings, *The Wagnerites* was an immediate success, to the extent that it was referred to by the famous German psychologist Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) as one of the most significant examples of ‘satyresque’

In addition to changing the general atmosphere of his compositions, this new artistic direction also altered the tone of his expressive voice. Indeed, through his ‘Grecian’ style, Beardsley’s imagery moved from an elegant form of ‘primitivism’ towards one that was harsher and more terse in character. In this respect, it anticipated the brutal mark making that would be employed by that generation of artists active during the early years of the twentieth century: first and foremost, the Expressionist painters, but also other figures whose work was aligned with different aesthetic principles, such as the Futurist Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916):

Ho passato due notti agitissime piene di smanie di sogni. Non posso negare che questo è l’effetto dei due libri con illustrazioni di Aubrey Beardsley che ho nelle mani da due giorni. Uno è una specie di monografia su di lui di Arthur Simon [*sic*], l’altro è una raccolta di scritti letterari illustrati dall’originalissimo artista [...]. Le sue illustrazioni mi hanno mostrato tutta la mia inferiorità non solo nella forma, ma nell’energia necessaria continua ininterrotta della testa guidatrice della mano.³⁶

Following the turbulent end to his collaboration with *The Yellow Book* – a consequence of the hue and cry generated in Great Britain by the trial of Oscar Wilde – Beardsley promptly embarked on yet another path, the last before his untimely death. Indeed, around the middle of 1895, he prepared for his departure by adding a sophisticated dessert in neo-Rococo style to his ‘eccentric menu’. This was the final and most difficult challenge of all: to convert the triumphant naturalism of eighteenth-century art into a new and sublime ‘visual anorexia’:

In 1896 Beardsley, many people think to the detriment of his style, turned his attention to the eighteenth century, in the literature of which he was always deeply interested. Eisen, Moreau, Watteau, Cochin, Pietro Longhi, now became his masters.³⁷

For one last time, he prepared to reinvent his own visual vocabulary by revisiting the works of the ‘bewigged artists’ of the 1700s, once again turning the contemporary art scene upside down in the process. Like neo-medievalism and *Japonisme*, eighteenth-century art had also become fashionable from the 1850s onward. This was especially the case among lower- and upper-middle-class philistines and the *nouveaux riches* who, in order to distance themselves from their humble origins, tended to favour *Ancien Régime*-style furnishings, paintings and other knick-knacks, snobbishly aspiring to claim a coveted

eroticism: “Never in the history of art has the beast in woman, the savage obscenity of ‘pure sex’ been more powerfully expressed [...]. It is night; an army of horrendous, denuded Vampyre-women drink in the Tristan music with their blood-sucking lips in a state of maddened satyriasis: *Wagnerites*” (I. BLOCH, “Beardsley Studies of Satyriasis”, in ID., *Ethnological and Cultural Studies of the Sex Life in England as Revealed in Its Erotic and Obscene Literature and Art*, New York, Falstaff Press, 1934, p. 369).

³⁶ I have spent two restless nights full of troubling dreams. I cannot deny that this is the effect of the two books illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley that I have been looking at over the past two days. One is a kind of monograph about him by Arthur Simon [*sic*], the other is a collection of literary writings illustrated by this highly original artist [...]. His illustrations have revealed my inferiority to me, not only in formal terms but also with regard to the necessary, continuous, uninterrupted energy of the head that guides the hand” (U. BOCCIONI, *Taccuino terzo*, 25 aprile 1908; my translation). With regard to Beardsley’s influence on Boccioni, see E. PONTIGGIA, *Aubrey Beardsley*, Milano, Abscondita, 2018, pp. 28-30; F. ROVATI, *Umberto Boccioni. Beata solitudo sola beatitudo*, Milano, Scalpendi, 2013, pp. 34-35.

³⁷ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 46.

social status that was beyond their reach. For turn-of-the-century dandies, on the other hand, the eighteenth century was above all the era of silk stockings fastened at the knee, elaborate spool-heeled shoes, lace, beauty spots and perfumed face powders (for both women and men, with their consequent overtones of sexual ambiguity). In short, the eighteenth century represented the apogee of artificiality and unbridled libertinism; in these respects, it was perfectly aligned with Beardsley's imagery³⁸ and explains the artist's readiness to once again transplant his characters from one sphere to another: from the shores of the island of Cythera to the gardens of Versailles. Some of the most intense illustrations from the final period of his intense, yet brief, career were executed in this 'guise' – most of them being published in a new journal titled *The Savoy* that was edited by Arthur Symons and Beardsley himself, and published in London by Leonard Smithers (1861-1905).³⁹ They include images for two of Beardsley's own texts: a short sonnet titled *The Ballad of a Barber* and the more complex *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser (Under the Hill)*, both of which were the direct literary equivalent of Beardsley's new neo-eighteenth-century style,⁴⁰ the mature fruit of a "Sade in un lucido delirio floreale".⁴¹

But it was through his work on two other texts that Beardsley really intensified his engagement with the century of gilded palaces and masked balls: *The Rape of the Lock* and *Lysistrata*, both of which were published by Smithers in 1896.

The first was a new illustrated edition of the mock-heroic poem by Alexander Pope (1688-1744) – a text appropriately characterised as "the most exquisite specimen of *filigree* work ever invented".⁴² In visually 'translating' this work, in which "a toilette is described with the solemnity of an altar raised to the Goddess of vanity"⁴³ and "the

³⁸ In this regard it must be remembered that, due to the repressive nature of Victorian culture, sex was a topic deemed unfit for any form of public discussion or consideration. Perhaps partly as a consequence of this excessive 'obsession', the matter of libidinal drives began to come to the fore; however, there was still no real understanding of these phenomena of the psyche, the Freudian theories formulated during those years not being widely disseminated until the early twentieth century. Consequently – like all Symbolist artists and writers – Beardsley was constrained to transfer his precocious intuitions to 'external' entities, opting once more for a symbolic 'bridge' capable of reconciling the needs of the Id with those of the Ego. For an in-depth study of issues relating to sexuality in the Victorian era, see S. MARCUS, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964; G. FRANCI, *Il sistema del Dandy. Wilde-Beardsley-Berbohm. Arte e artificio nell'Inghilterra fin-de-siècle*, Bologna, Pàtron, 1977.

³⁹ Smithers was the owner of a second-hand bookshop specialising in the sale of rare volumes as well as under-the-counter erotic literature and pornographic drawings; he was well known in London's literary circles for his unbridled passion for 'decadent' French literature. In a letter of August 1897 to his friend Reginald Turner, Oscar Wilde described him as follows: "I do not know if you know Smithers: he is usually in a large straw hat, has a blue tie delicately fastened with a diamond brooch of the impurest water – or perhaps wine, as he never touches water: it goes to his head at once. His face, clean-shaven as befits a priest who serves at the altar whose God is Literature, is wasted and pale – not with poetry, but with poets, who, he says, have wicked his life by insisting on publishing with him. He loves first editions, especially of women: little girls are his passion. He is the most learned erotomaniac in Europe" (O. WILDE, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. HART-DAVIS, London, Hart-Davis, 1962, pp. 630-31).

⁴⁰ "Famous at twenty as a draughtsman, he found time, in those incredibly busy years which remained to him, to deliberately train himself into a writer of prose which was, in its way, as original as his draughtsmanship, and into a writer of verse which had at least ingenious and original moments" (A. SYMONS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 13).

⁴¹ "Sade in a lucid floral delirium" (G. CONTE, "La poetica di Aubrey Beardsley", *Il Verri*, 10, giugno 1975, p. 56; my translation).

⁴² W. HAZLITT, *Lecture on the English Poets*, London, Taylor and Hessey, 1818, p. 142.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

atmosphere is perfumed with affectation”,⁴⁴ Beardsley employed a simple and ingenious stratagem. Reviving the so-called ‘stipple engraving’ technique developed by the Italian-born artist Francesco Bartolozzi (1728-1815) at the court of King George III (1738-1820),⁴⁵ he modified it in such a way as to obtain characteristically ‘low resolution’ images. Whereas the Italian artist had used stipple engraving to achieve a realistic and detailed rendering of different flesh tones and atmospheric effects, Beardsley enlarged the individual quanta of Bartolozzi’s ‘pointillist’ technique to create images resembling lace (Fig. 9).⁴⁶

The second work is yet another example of the ‘Beardsley paradox’. As in *Salome*, here too the artist amused himself by transforming the protagonists of Aristophanes’ comedy into intriguing figures inhabiting a carefree *Watteauesque*⁴⁷ Arcadia. Consequently, they do not wear simple sandals, severe tunics or peplums, and their heads are not crowned with vine or laurel wreaths; instead, they are dressed up (or rather stripped bare) like ladies and gentlemen attending a lewd *fête galante* (Fig. 10).

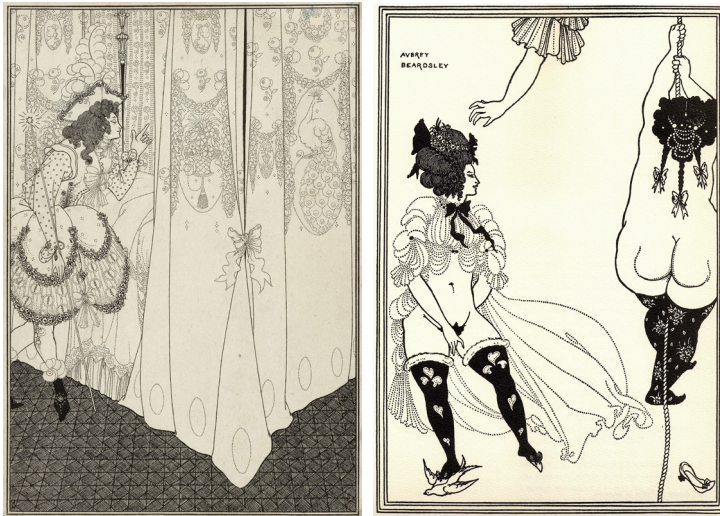


Fig. 9 (left): Aubrey Beardsley, *The Dream*, Illustration to *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, 1896.
Fig. 10 (right): Aubrey Beardsley, *Two Athenian Women in Distress*, Illustration to *Lysistrata* by Aristophane, 1896.

With these final works, what Robert Ross identified as Beardsley’s *annus mirabilis* came to an end.⁴⁸ As death approached, his creative forces rapidly declined and he attempted to revive, *in extremis*, those principles of mimetic art such as chiaroscuro, half-tones and plasticity that he had avoided all his life in the pursuit of a radically modern vocabulary.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ See M. MAYMONE SINISCALCHI, *Aubrey Beardsley. Contributo ad uno studio della personalità e dell’opera attraverso l’epistolario*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1977, p. 75.

⁴⁶ That Beardsley deliberately sought this effect is confirmed by his use of the words ‘embroidered by’ instead of ‘illustrated by’ beneath the title of this work on the volume’s cover.

⁴⁷ S. OWENS, *Aubrey Beardsley, Salome and Satire*, PhD Thesis, University College London, 2002, p. 149.

⁴⁸ R. ROSS, *Aubrey Beardsley*, n.p.

Nevertheless, the highest and purest examples of his art – grounded in a formal synthesis that was achieved by means of an ‘alternative repetition’ of the past – had already made history, to the extent that his career became a temporal eponym: ‘The Beardsley Period’.

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