



Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography

Matthew Sturgis

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In the canon of twentieth century art, the name of Aubrey Beardsley does not loom large, if at all, given his death in 1898. On this, the one-hundredth anniversary of the young Englishman's too-early demise, there is something of a clatter to fix this glaring omission. Matthew Sturgis lovingly spearheads the effort in a finely crafted biography.

Aubrey (pronounced by friends and family Ah-bray) Beardsley was a fairly typical English school-boy, steeped in a classic education by a doting and stern mother, afflicted in his youth with consumptive tuberculosis, who then blazed across the late-Victorian era and set its uptight world on its collective ear with his homoerotic line drawing, and died young, though well beyond his years, at the age of twenty-eight. At least, so goes the Beardsley prevailing wisdom. Sturgis sets out to thoroughly dissect this not-so-accurate legend of a gifted life cut short.

It is a breathtaking task. Here in the close of the twentieth century, it is difficult to imagine the waning days of the nineteenth, when mass-market printing was still very much in its infancy: It was scarcely fifty years since the death of Beethoven, who, it could be argued, was the first truly modern artist that made his fortune off the printed reproduction of his (sheet-music) compositions. Colored lithography for a commercially significant market did not exist. At the same time, however, Queen Victoria's empire was solidifying, bringing with it unparalleled and heretofore-unknown wealth and leisure. The audience for things of refinement and culture was growing faster than the technology to slake it. Into this vacuum stepped Beardsley.

Sturgis takes one by the hand, like a loving great-grandchild showing off the family albums, and ushers one and all into the fever-swamps of late-Victorian England. At first, one may be a bit overwhelmed by the maze of streets and towns and cousins and faded earls. The feeling passes quickly, and soon everyone is plunged into Beardsley's excitement as he meets (and then befriends) his hero and mentor, the pre-Raphaelite illustrator Edward Burne-Jones. As his chosen craft of hard-line black-and-white drawing is honed, so are Aubrey's contacts and commissions. In large measure, Beardsley's fortunes are tied to the invention of a new photo-emulsion printing process, which is perfectly suited to his chosen art.

At first, Beardsley is obliged to emulate those in the business that have gone before him: illustrating with particular pre-Raphaelite care a series of scenes and endsheets for a cheap reproduction of Morte D'arthur. From this standing start, he becomes increasingly daring and innovative with various pieces in The Studio, and the Pall Mall Budget. With the debut of each, people are at a loss to either categorize his work, dismiss it outright, be amazed at his vision, or horrified that such an obvious humbug amateur could find an audience. He witnesses his ultimate public exposure with the publication of The Yellow Book, and the wags of English society are all a-twitter with Beardsley.

The narrative tenor of Sturgis' biography is perfectly suited to Beardsley's work; the baroque detail of the book is as prominent as the pointillistic technique of Beardsley's pen and ink. Clearly, this was no mistake, because, like all good biography, the true nature of Beardsley's gift had to be explained within the context of the time, the place and the people who populate the story. And finally, it becomes clear that Beardsley was not so much the decadent, that he has been painted throughout the past century, as he was a smart-aleck dandy who created opportunities by his daring

and hard work. Sturgis exposes this with obvious delight, and gives his readers something palpable and real onto which to hang their own hopes and interests.

As Sturgis points out, though, that which endures of Beardsley is not his collected works, but rather his impact at a time in art history that was poised to engulf a mass, worldwide audience. Echoes of Beardsley have filtered down through the decades from places as diverse as the Beatle's Yellow Submarine, the cartoons of Edward Gorey, and a thousand clip-art books, now digitized. Sturgis forces one to accept that the birthplace of Modern Art might not have been Picasso's flat in Montmartre, but rather the Beardsley's family home in Pimlico. (January)

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JOHN ARENS (January / February 1999)

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