



'Aubrey Beardsley', Tate Britain, 4 March–20 September 2020

Reviewed by

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(Independent, UK)

'Aubrey Beardsley' at Tate Britain was the first exhibition on the artist and illustrator Beardsley (1872–98) at Tate since 1923, and the largest display of his work in Europe since the 1966 exhibition at the V&A. This long planned-for revival took place during the unprecedented times of a global pandemic in which national lockdowns prevented museum visits for much of the year. The atmosphere of our own peculiar time could not fail to add to the surreal, dream-like, and intense experience of viewing Beardsley's bizarre and grotesque images.

To the casual Victorianist and art enthusiast, Aubrey Beardsley's name is most closely associated with his work on Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1894) and his time as art editor of the decadent periodical *The Yellow Book*. This exhibition provides an opportunity of getting to know this quintessential figure of 1890s decadence more intimately.

The Tate exhibition set the stage for Beardsley's short, yet prolific artistic career with the opening description that he

knew from childhood that his life would be a brief one. This led him to work at a hectic pace. One contemporary described his determination 'to fill his few working years with the immediate echo of a great notoriety.' Moving rapidly from style to style, he created well over a thousand illustrations and designs in just five years.

Whilst this introduction prepared visitors for the enormous amount of work on view, the exhibition still felt very demanding, requiring the viewer to read and look with intensity at the sheer amount of detail in Beardsley's illustrations.

The opening curatorial notes remark on how Beardsley 'always drew for publication and his work was seen primarily in books and magazines.' This begs the question of

how the exhibition visitor views these works independent of these publications. Viewing them as solitary pieces made them appear slightly disjointed but the effort of the curators to place them in relation to their publications and influence allowed many of the works to stand up even outside of their original context.

In addition to providing a background sketch on both Beardsley's artistic origins and influence, the exhibition clearly outlines the primary themes of his life's work. The exhibition was structured chronologically, with each room displaying illustrations from his key works including *La Morte Darthur*, *Salomé*, and *The Yellow Book*, and calling attention to his influences, namely the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Japanese art. Various rooms demonstrated his development as an artist and the role technology played in his growth. Of course, the themes reflected are to be expected of a decadent artist: a fascination with the grotesque, exploration of sexuality, and the subversive nature of art in culture.

The first room of the exhibition emphasised how influential Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris were on Beardsley's early work. Several of Beardsley's illustrations were placed alongside works by Burne-Jones and publications from the Kelmscott Press. This context and influence were well framed, not just in the image comparisons, but also in the concise placard descriptions detailing the ways Beardsley's work both mirrors and expands upon Burne-Jones's distinct style.

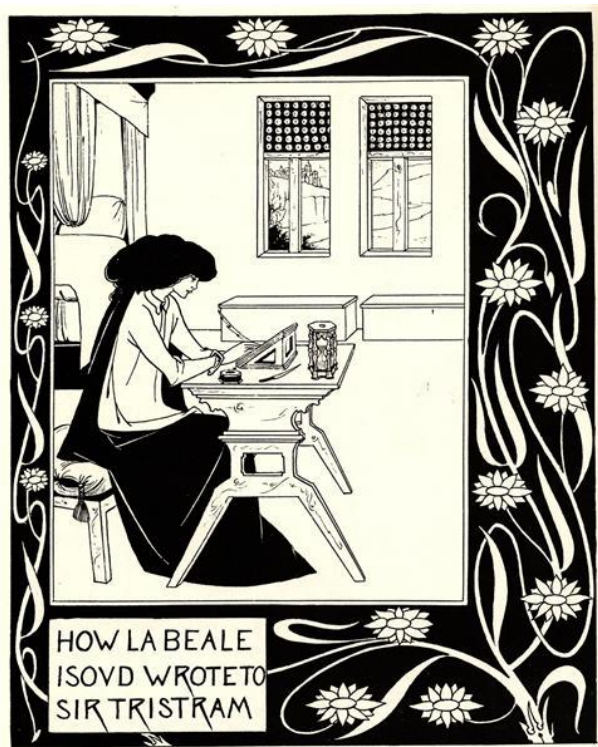
The same could also be said for Beardsley's first major commission, an illustrated edition of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte Darthur*. From autumn 1892 to June 1894, Beardsley produced 353 drawings including full- and double-page illustrations, elaborate border designs, and small-scale ornamental chapter headings. Although many of the initial illustrations in *Le Morte Darthur* contain artistic elements and resemble publications by the Kelmscott Press, over this two-year period Beardsley's style becomes very distinct and different. Compare for example *Arthur and the Strange Mantle* (1893) to *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink* (1893) or *How la Beale Isoud Wrote to Sir Tristram* (1892). The placard described how the second illustration 'brings to mind the comment by the art historian John Rothenstein that "the greatest among Beardsley's gifts was his power of assimilating every influence and yet retaining, nay developing, his own peculiar individuality.'" This is one of my favourite interpretations of Beardsley's illustration, and I wish this level of detail and analysis about his adaptability and distinctive style as an artist had been incorporated more thoroughly throughout the exhibition commentary.



Aubrey Beardsley, *Arthur and the Strange Mantle* (1893). Private collection. Wikiart.org



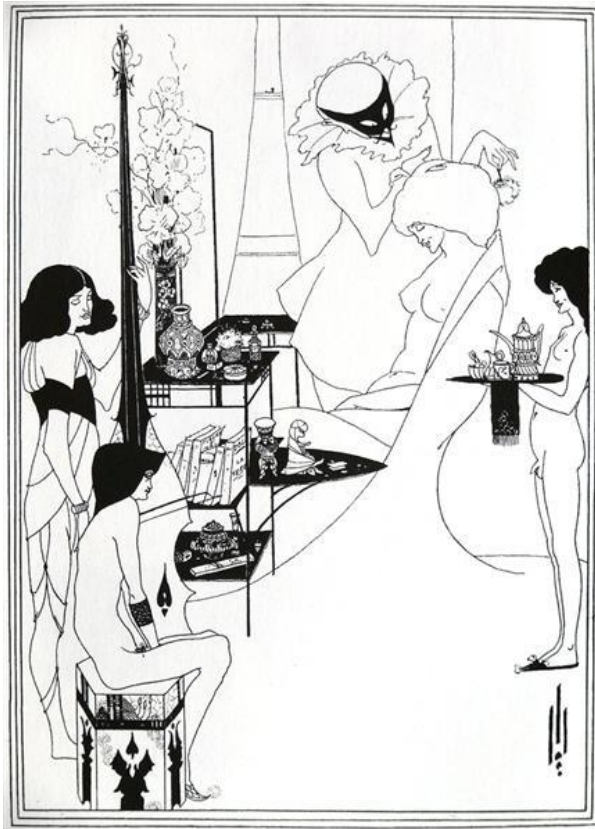
Aubrey Beardsley, *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink* (1893). Harvard At Museum/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Scofield Thayer, 1986.681. Wikiart.org



Aubrey Beardsley, *How la Beale Isovd Wrote to Sir Tristram* (1892). Alessandra and Simon Wilson. Wikiart.org

The first room also effectively highlighted how new technologies for book and illustration reproduction influenced Beardsley's growth and development as an artist. The line block printing process, in which drawings are transferred onto printing plates photographically, was particularly important. This process allowed for more detailed images as the metal plate could display thin lines. Although Beardsley was initially disappointed with how his illustrations appeared as prints, he quickly adapted his style to fit this process.

One of the main features of the exhibition were Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's English translation of the French play *Salomé*. Beardsley produced 18 designs in total, with 10 appearing in the first printing of the play. The exhibition displays several versions, including drafts containing publisher edits removing inappropriate images. As one information placard noted, 'Beardsley delighted in hiding provocative elements in his drawings', and these were often edited out by the publisher, Lane. The curatorial notes highlight the details that were removed, changed, or perhaps went unnoticed. For example, *Enter Herodias* (1893) contains annotations including a proofreader's symbol of deletion of offending genitals. The exhibition contained several first and final versions, edited for being too sexually explicit: compare, for example, *The Toilette of Salome* (first edition, 1893) with *The Toilette of Salome* (second version, 1893). In the first version Salomé is depicted as having her hand between her thighs and the seated attendant is also masturbating, content that would have been regarded as outrageous. (Even now these images of female pleasure may illicit uncomfortable reactions.) The second version eliminates these sexually explicit images for a more socially acceptable take.



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salome* (first edition, 1893). Stephen Calloway. Wikiart.org



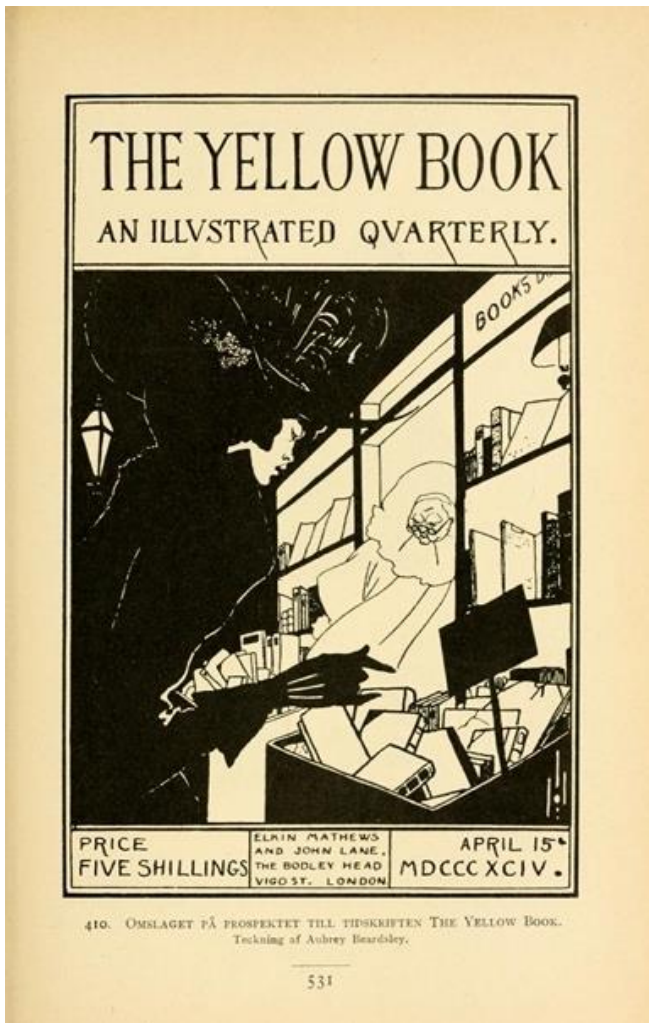
Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salome* (second version, 1894). British Museum. Wikiart.org

The *Salomé* room was particularly striking as an exhibition space taking the viewer illustration by illustration, specifically showcasing Beardsley's inventive approach and interpretation of the story. That being said, it was in this room that the present-day social distancing requirements most impeded the exhibition experience. Even under normal circumstances it would be difficult to maintain distance and thoroughly look at each illustration, read each placard, and take in all the details. Beardsley's work and the exhibition layout, with limited spacing and the large number of illustrations and explanatory captions, didn't necessarily lend themselves well to this Covid era. Of course, a global pandemic could not have been anticipated in the planning and layout of this exhibition, and the majority of exhibition visitors made the best of the situation, wearing masks and patiently waiting their turn.

Moving on from *Salomé*, several posters by Beardsley on display drew the eye, primarily because of the inclusion of colour which is noticeably absent in the preceding images. Beardsley's posters are among his lesser-known work, and several, such as *The Pseudonym and Autonym Libraries* (1894), have a very modern sensibility.¹ The poster, an advertisement for books and named with the recognition that women often wrote under a pen name (pseudonym) where men used their actual name (autonym), depicts a fashionable woman standing outside a bookshop. The accompanying placard describes how she 'appears confident as she rushes towards the bookshop, implying that knowledge brings freedom.' The poster section provides very clear commentary on Beardsley's artistic interactions with art nouveau and how advertisements were viewed in Paris during the end of the century.

An entire room was dedicated to the professional details of Beardsley's career, including his social and professional circle and the tools he worked with. These more mundane aspects of his work served to give a fuller and more intimate sense of Beardsley as a working artist than is usually gleaned from looking only at his illustrations and the stories behind his commissions.

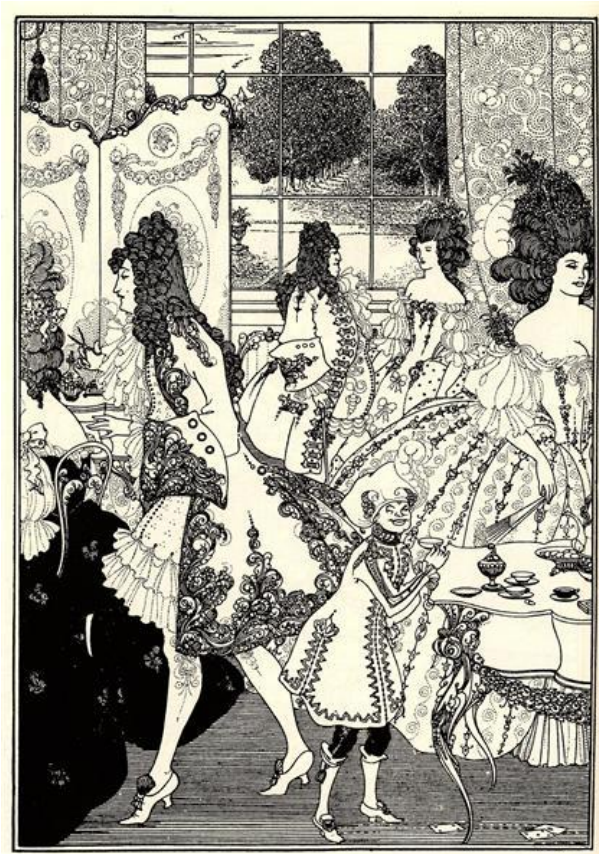
I expect many other visitors shared my excitement to see the section on *The Yellow Book* as a defining moment in Beardsley's artistic career and the decadent movement as a whole. Beardsley became the art editor of *The Yellow Book* in 1894, immediately pushing boundaries and creating a distinct and avant-garde style. The inclusion of the 'Design for the Prospectus of *The Yellow Book*, Vol 1' (1894), used to promote the new publication, seemed to set the tone for *The Yellow Book's* readership and placement within the larger cultural conversation. The prospectus shows a fashionable, independent woman browsing for books alone at night, signalling that *The Yellow Book* was for the liberated reader interested in bohemian art and literature. One of the most fascinating takeaways from this section was how Beardsley's art direction made art and literature equals within the aesthetic movement.



Aubrey Beardsley, 'Design for the Prospectus of *The Yellow Book*, Vol 1' (1894). Victoria and Albert Museum. archive.org

Whilst there was much to see in this section, the exhibition moved quite rapidly to Beardsley's sacking from the magazine following the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. The exhibition commentary suggests that Beardsley was not in fact as close to Wilde as popular opinion or even history have led us to believe, with the effect that the decision to sack him seems heartbreakingly bewildering.

The latter part of the exhibition following *The Yellow Book* felt more haphazard in its approach and layout. It covered everything from Beardsley's work as a writer on his unfinished book, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, to his work on *The Savoy* magazine, and illustrations of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. These last drawings were particularly striking in their scope and level of detail, demonstrating Beardsley's skill in illustrating with close-laid lines.



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Rape of the Lock* (1897). Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wikiart.org.

Beardsley's explicit drawings of *Lysistrata* and Juvenal's *Sixth Satire* are on display towards the end of the exhibition with a cautionary note regarding their content. These illustrations are bold, humorous, and obscene, offering a look at Victorian sexuality that is often glossed over in mainstream cultural and historical studies. A few of these appeared previously in Tate Britain's ['Queer Art' exhibition](#) in 2017, and it was fascinating to see them this time as a collection and within the context of Beardsley's life and career.

Although this exhibition was rich in content and detail, I wish more of Beardsley's own writing had been included to provide a more extensive view of his artistic career and method of bringing together both disciplines. His writing and unfinished work are briefly mentioned but very little information is provided. In light of his own approach to *The Yellow Book* and work on many literary publications, incorporating a more interdisciplinary approach to his body of work would have been fascinating to explore, particularly in how the literary content informed his illustrations or how he developed an individual writing style drawing from his experience as a visual artist.

This small point aside, the exhibition did an exceptional job of showcasing Beardsley's growth and the development of his unique style across several media and significant commissions and projects. The thematic elements of his artistic and personal life are thoroughly explored and explained in such a way that those with a keen interest in his work as well as the casual observer would find captivating content. Overall, this exhibition left a very lasting impression of Beardsley's life and work, perhaps further enhanced by the feelings of luxury and decadence associated with a museum visit under Covid restrictions.

Notes

1. This item may be viewed in the [Victoria and Albert Museum online collection](#).

Note on Contributor:

Kristina McClendon holds degrees in English from Pepperdine University and Victorian Studies from Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests include: nineteenth-century periodicals with an emphasis on feminist publications and women's magazines, lost women writers, and transatlantic literary studies. Kristina has presented papers at conferences including the British Women Writers conference and the British Association for Victorian Studies (BAVS) annual conference. She is currently employed as the Deputy Director of Development at Magdalen College School, Oxford.

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