

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Self-portrait*, 1892, British Museum

- This talk was inspired by two exhibitions: *Aubrey Beardsley: Decadence & Desire* (Jan Marsh, V&A, 27 Feb 2020, catalogue £15) at the Victoria and Albert Museum and *Aubrey Beardsley* (Stephen Calloway, 4 Mar – 25 May 2020, catalogue £25) at Tate Britain. As always the talk was inspired by the exhibitions not based on them.
- Before I begin I should issue a warning. I will be showing and describing sexually explicit images so if you are likely to be offended please switch off now. If not let's get started ...

SUMMARY

- 1892-3 Siegfried, the foetus or embryo first appears in his work in 1892-3 following his visit to Paris.
- 1893 The Bom Mots
- 1893-4 Le Morte d'Arthur, his first commission, 400 illustrations for J. M. Dent publishers
- 1893 The Studio, made him famous

- 1894 *Salome*, £50 fee, includes a caricature of Oscar Wilde. It was called *Man in the Moon* but the publisher changed it to *Woman in the Moon* to avoid upsetting Wilde but that made the satire worse. The drawings upstaged Wilde's text. Wilde saw that Beardsley viewed the world with a completely 'cold' eye. This was rejected in Wilde's next play *The Importance of being Ernest* with its logical, rational, clear text completely lacking melodrama or sentimentality.
- 1894 *Vera Historia*
- 1894 *The Masque of the Red Death*
- 1894 *The Black Cat*
- 1894 *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*
- 1894 *The Yellow Book*, Beardsley was art editor and he insisted Wilde was kept out. It was a sell out the first edition sold 5,000 copies in a week. It invokes the image of the 'new Woman' a bicycling, smoking, opinionated woman who read racy novels. It was provocative and introduced moral panic. Beardsley took the new woman and made her more sinister. Beardsley was not so interested in what we would call feminism but in transgression, breaking, testing and probing society's moral codes.
- At this time he produced posters that were regarded as shocking inspired by Toulouse Lautrec but in Beardsley unique style. In 1894 he had his second haemorrhage. In 1895 Wilde was arrested and Beardsley was caught in the scandal because when Wilde left the court room he was seen carrying a book with a yellow cover. The publisher John Lane fired Beardsley. Beardsley along with 600 other men fled to France and many went to Dieppe.
- 1894 two paintings

- 1895-6, 97 The Savoy, lavish and modern like the new hotel. The publisher was Smithers. Beardsley was fascinated by a book called Unisexualité. The author was Raffalovitch who sent Beardsley gifts. Was Beardsley just using him to get commissions.
- In 1896 Beardsley had another attack and moved to Epsom where he was looked after by his sister Mabel. He stayed in the Spread Eagle and dashed off the illustrations for *Lysistrata* in the weeks and wrote his will. It illustrated Aristophanes comic play of the same name. The illustrations were inspired by Greek vase painting.
- 1896 Lysistrata
- 1896 The Rape of the Lock
- 1896 Five Drawings
- 1896-7 Sixth Satire of Juvenal
- In 1897 he converted to Roman Catholicism and moved to the French Riviera where he died a year later at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, Menton attended by his mother and sister. He was 25 years old.
- 1898 Mademoiselle de Maupin

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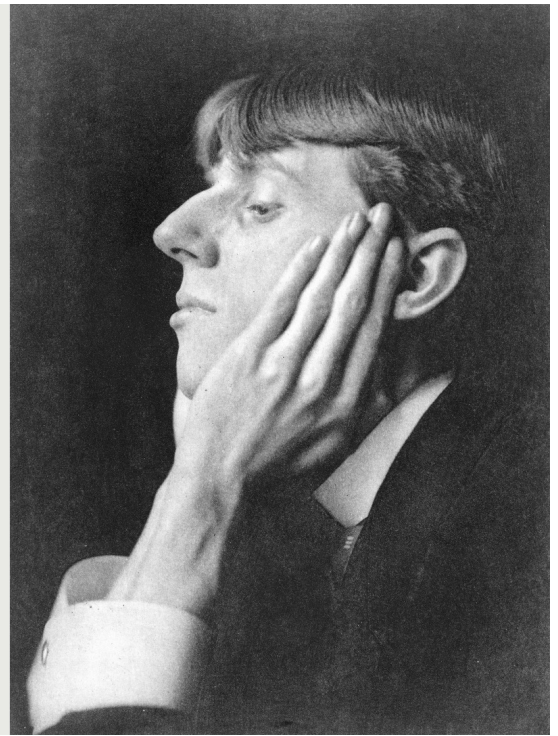
[https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley/4PLp-V0e4b4C?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Letters_of_Aubrey_Beardsley/4PLp-V0e4b4C?hl=en&gbpv=0)



Oswald Birley (1880-1952),
Miss Mabel Beardsley, 1901,
114.3 x 84 cm, private
collection



Road, Brighton



Frederick Evans, *Aubrey
Beardsley Portrait*, c. 1894,
platinum print, V&A

Frederick Evans (1853-1943), *Aubrey Beardsley Portrait*, c. 1894, platinum print, V&A

“I have one aim — the grotesque. If I am not grotesque I am nothing.”

31 (then 12) Buckingham Road, Brighton, the house in which he was born

Sir Oswald Birley (1880-1952), *Miss Mabel Beardsley*, 1901, 114.3 x 84 cm, private collection

- The main thing to remember about Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898) is that he died when he was just 25 and so all of his career took place over six years in the 1890s, known as the Age of Decadence. (CLICK) This quote by Beardsley sums up the mood of the period. It was a period when a **world-weary mood swept across Europe** combined with boredom, cynicism and intense forms of sexual perversity. It was an irrational and subjective revolt against the materialism and rationalism of bourgeois society.
- Beardsley was born in Brighton in this house (CLICK). There is a plaque on the side of the house describing him as a 'Master of

Line'. His father had a private income from an inheritance he received from his maternal grandfather, a property developer. When he married Ellen Pitt from a well-established and respected family in Brighton he was sued for breach of promise and had to sell his property.(CLICK) With the loss of the family fortune they moved to London and his father moved from job to job battling poverty for the next twenty years. His father died when he was 40 of tuberculosis. Beardsley's salary and later his fees and sales helped maintain the family in a form of genteel middle-class poverty.

- **Beardsley was diagnosed with tuberculosis, then called consumption, when he was seven.** When he was 17 he suffered a serious haemorrhage and again when he was 24, the year before he died. He knew he would not live long from an early age and from the age of 17 he knew he could die at any time and so he worked and worked to produce as much as possible. Each day could be his last as far as he knew.
- (CLICK) This is his sister Mabel. Some claim he was homosexual but as far as we know he had no romantic relationships of either sex although there are stories of failed or imagined attempts at seducing women.[1] There was also a rumour he had an incestuous relationship with his sister. However, the only evidence I have found is that 27 years after his death a scandalmongering journalist [Frank Harris] claimed that Beardsley had confessed to him about having an incestuous relationship with his sister Mabel and that she had conceived and aborted their child. Some critics have seen the fetuses he drawn in the early 1890s as evidence of the alleged miscarriage. I think it is very unlikely. Mabel became an actress who (CLICK)"**achieved mild notoriety for her exotic and flamboyant appearance**". Here she is

dressed in Elizabethan costume with a stuffed falcon. The prop and clothing were probably the idea of the artist Sir Oswald Birley (pronounced 'bur-lee') to make her look exotic, as she had no interest in falconry.

NOTES

- I believe his name should be pronounced 'Ah-brey', but I continue to pronounce it 'Orbrey'.
- His sister Mabel Beardsley (1871-1916) became an actress who "achieved mild notoriety for her exotic and flamboyant appearance". She dressed and began performing as a man called George Bealby, her husband's forenames. Speculation about Aubrey's sexuality includes rumours of an incestuous relationship with Mabel, who may have become pregnant by her brother and miscarried. She developed cancer and died when she was 44. W.B. Yeats' poem "Upon a Dying Lady" is about Mabel.
- Frederick H. Evans (1853-1943) was a bookseller who championed the work of George Bernard Shaw and Aubrey Beardsley. He bought a camera and taught himself photography and from 1898 dedicated himself to photographing the cathedrals of England and France. He would often spend weeks in a church studying the light before taking a photograph and he believed in never altering an image after it had been exposed.

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[1] <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/he-behaved-awfully-weirdly-1150522.html>



Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Aubrey Vincent Beardsley* (1872-1898), 1895, 92.6 x 73.7 cm, National Portrait Gallery



Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Mabel Beardsley* (1871-1916), 1895, Museums Sheffield

Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942), *Aubrey Vincent Beardsley* (1872-1898), 1895, 92.6 x 73.7 cm, National Portrait Gallery

Jacques-Emile Blanche (1861–1942), *Mabel Beardsley* (1871-1916), 1895, Museums Sheffield

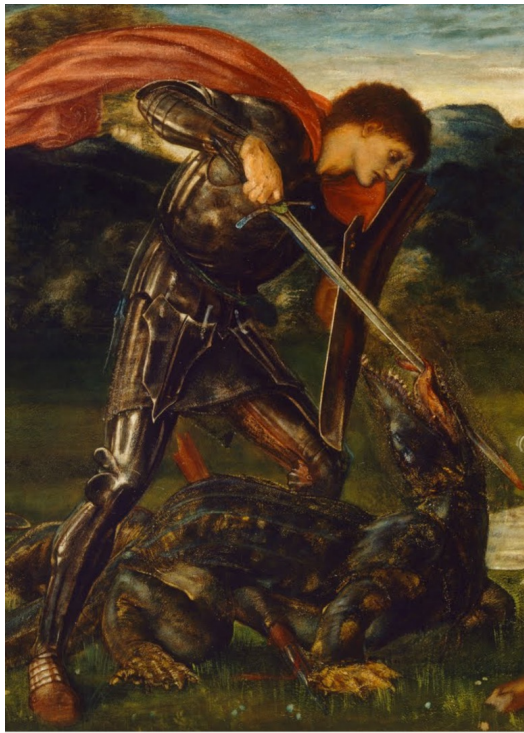
- These are Aubrey and his sister Mabel who was a year older. They were **brilliant children**. Mabel was **reading Dickens when she was five**. One day when Mabel was reading her mother heard her sigh and asked what the matter was. She said, 'I really do draw the line at Carlyle.' She was six years old. Later she could recite from Dickens word-for-word for "two hours on end!"
- (CLICK) When Beardsley was 12 he played in public concerts as an "infant musical phenomenon". The following year he attended Brighton Grammar School for the next four years and his first poems, drawings and cartoons appeared in the school magazine. When he was 16 he worked in an architects office and then an insurance company.
- (CLICK) Mabel (1871-1916) played with Beardsley in concerts when they were young. Later, she became a well-known actress and toured America. In 1902, four years after Beardsley died,

she married a fellow actor [George Bealby Wright]. She was friends with the poet W. B. Yeats who was at her death bed and wrote the poem 'Upon a Dying Lady' about her. She also died of tuberculosis.

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y (1872-1898), *Perseus Slays Medusa*, 1890s

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), *The fight: St George kills the dragon VI*, 1866, Gallery of new South Wales

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Perseus Slays Medusa*, 1890s
 Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), *The fight: St George kills the dragon VI*, 1866, Gallery of new South Wales

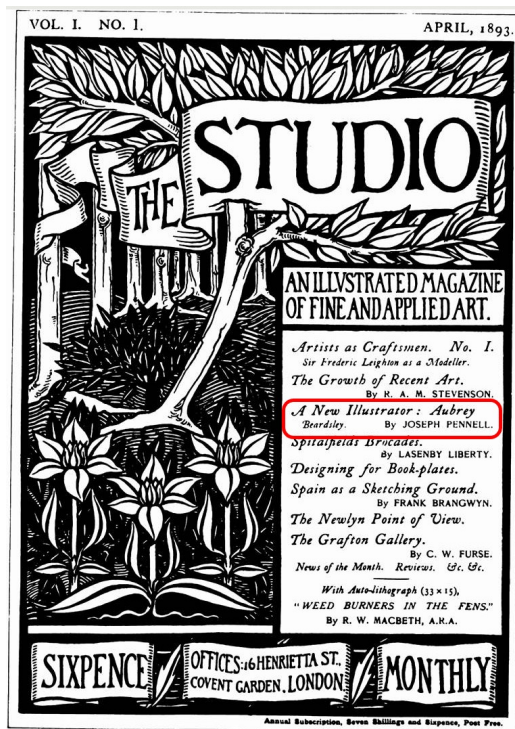
- Beardsley had **no formal art education** but loved drawing and his early drawings were influenced by the work of Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) (CLICK) as well as Dante Gabriel **Rossetti** (1828-1882, founder member of the Pre-Raphaelites) and James Abbott McNeill **Whistler** (1834-1903).
- In the summer of 1891 [July], when he was 19, Beardsley and his sister Mabel went to see Whistler's paintings and his famous **Peacock Room** at the home of the wealthy shipowner **Frederick Leyland**.
- Shortly after [Sunday, 12 July] they visited Burne-Jones's studio which they thought allowed visitors on production of one's visiting card but it had not been open for some years. They were turned away but **Burne-Jones** himself hurried down the road and brought them back. Luckily, Beardsley had his portfolio with him and Burne-Jones looked at it and said:
 - **“There is no doubt about your gift, one day you will**

most assuredly paint very great and beautiful pictures ... All are *full* of thought, poetry and imagination. Nature has given you every gift 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*".

- Burne-Jones showed him round his studio, made introductions and recommended formal study at art school. He added, "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 ... All are full of thought, poetry and imagination**". They then had tea on the lawn with the Burne-Joneses and Oscar Wildes, who happened to be visiting. This momentous endorsement launched Beardsley's career.
- (CLICK) Beardsley enrolled for evening sessions at **Westminster School of Art** under Professor Fred Brown (1851-1941), making careful studies in pencil and charcoal. Brown's teaching emphasised outline, composition and individual expression. Here, Beardsley also discovered the graphic work of the designer and illustrator **Walter Crane**, and received advice on line drawing in pen and ink.[1]
- Although in early 1892 he was described as shy, nervous and self-conscious within 18 months he had become self assured and at ease in intellectual company. **He became an eccentric and a dandy**. Wilde described him as having "**a face like a silver hatchet, and grass green hair**" although Beardsley denied having green hair. He was a meticulous dresser and like Beau Brummell (1778-1840) one hundred years previously he wore dove-grey suits and yellow gloves.

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- [1] <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/aubrey-beardsley-decadence-desire#slideshow=115771&slide=0>



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Siegfried*, 1892-3, pen, ink and wash on paper, V&A



The Studio, 1893

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), 1893 *The Studio*

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Siegfried*, 1892-3, pen, ink and wash on paper, V&A

- In 1892, he travelled to Paris and saw the posters of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and the Parisian fashion for Japanese prints. On his return he was asked to produce an illustration for the first issue of this magazine: *The Studio*.
- It was a decorative arts magazine published by Joseph M. Dent (1849-1926) and it had a major influence on the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements and was very successful; it did not finally close down until 1964.
- (CLICK) In the magazine was an article by Joseph Pennell introducing the 'New Illustrator', Aubrey Beardsley.
- (CLICK) This what he produced. A pen and ink drawing of Siegfried from Richard Wagner's opera and Joseph Pennell (1857-1926) wrote this article entitled *A New Illustrator*.
- (CLICK) This illustration relates to **Act II of Richard Wagner's opera *Siegfried***. In the previous opera of the Ring Cycle *Die Walküre*, Siegfried was born as a result of an incestuous

relationship between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. In the next opera *Siegfried*, the baby has grown into an adult and in Act 2 he kills the dragon Fafner, which we see here, and takes the Ring of the Nibelungen, which grants the wearer the power to rule the world, and the Tarnhelm, the mask of invisibility.

- "It is ... characteristic of Beardsley's style at this period, with its so-called hairline calligraphic flourishes used for decorative effect ... **Burne-Jones** was an important mentor and inspiration for Beardsley, who presented him with this drawing. Beardsley was flattered when he **hung it in his drawing room** alongside prints and drawings by Albrecht Dürer and others." (V&A website)

NOTES

- The complete Ring cycle takes 15 hours and is normally performed over four evenings.
- Joseph Pennell was an American book illustrator and writer who spent most of his life in Europe. He was interested in landmarks, landscapes and industrial scenes around the world. He was strongly influenced by James McNeill Whistler and when Whistler moved to Paris in 1892, Pennell followed him in 1893 and worked with him in his studio.

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Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Bon Mots*, 1893, pages 131 and 147, Sydney Smith and R. Brinsley Sheridan, ed. by Walter Jerrold and published by J. M. Dent and Co., London

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Vignette for p. 147 in Bon-Mots*, Sydney Smith and R. Brinsley Sheridan, ed. by Walter Jerrold and published by J. M. Dent and Co., London, 1893

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Bon Mots*, 1893, p. 131 (two people and a foetus)

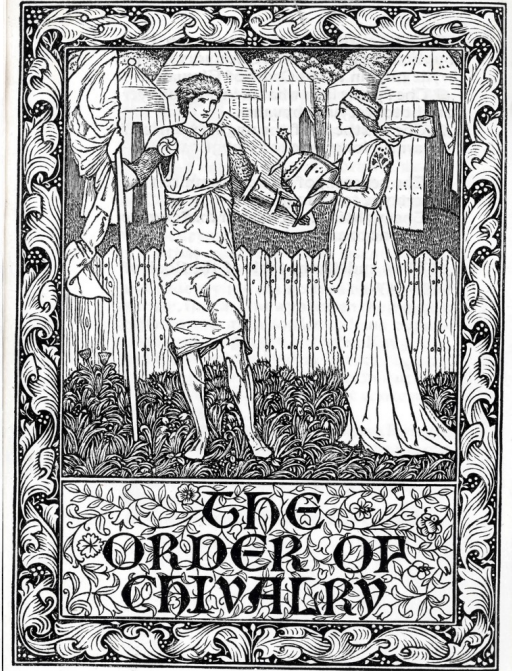
- Beardsley described these works as '**fanciful grotesques, little more than doodles**'. They were drawn to illustrate a collection of eighteenth-century wit entitled *Bon-Mots*. He wrote, "I have been ten days over them, and just got a cheque for £15 for the work—my first art earnings".
- The foetus-like creature in the illustration on the right is one of the pieces of so-called evidence that historians have used to speculate about an incestuous affair between Beardsley and his sister.
- By the way, notice the signature, a three bar symbol with three chevrons beneath This was a signature device that Beardsley created to identify his work like other artists at the time, such as James McNeil Whistler and Albert Moore. We don't know what it means but it is said by some historians to symbolise sexual intercourse.

- In an interview by the press Beardsley claimed to be a prodigy and he could **draw effortlessly** while in mystic seclusion. In fact we know he **sketched everything first in pencil, constantly rubbing out and blocking in until the whole surface was raddled with lines**. He then **drew over this with Chinese ink** often ignoring the pencil lines and finally all the pencil lines were removed.



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1893-4

William Morris (1834-1896), *The Order of Chivalry*, February 1893, Kelmscott Press, Hammersmith



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1893-4

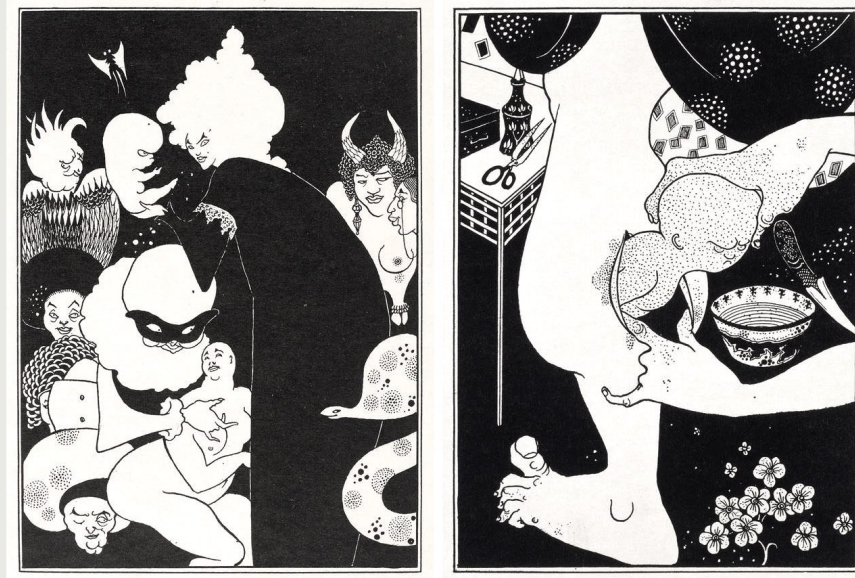
Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), 'How King Arthur saw the Questing Beast', 1893, drawing pen and ink, for the frontispiece to Volume I of 'Le Morte Darthur' by Thomas Malory, 1893, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

William Morris (1834-1896), *The Order of Chivalry*, February 1893, Kelmscott Press, Hammersmith

- Beardsley was **commissioned by the publisher Joseph M. Dent to illustrate a new edition of *Le Morte d'Arthur***, a late medieval story of the fictional King Arthur by Thomas Mallory. He wanted to produce a lower cost version than William Morris's Kelmscott Press and Dent was lucky enough to run into the nineteen-year-old Beardsley. Beardsley was paid £200, a large amount for a young artist for what he believed was going to be 20 full-page drawings.
- In the end, there were 360 full and double-page drawings as well as ornaments and details for which he was paid the same amount. On the right we see a languid King Arthur whose features are said to be based on Beardsley himself. He eyes an idiosyncratic god Pan in the background and ignores the

looming beast.

- (CLICK) He followed a similar style to the one used by William Morris at his Kelmscott Press. The difference was that **Morris was steeped in medieval legend** and saw them as an antidote to the mechanisation of the modern world. Beardsley saw it as a job he had been given and told Morris he would be "**glad when it was done, he hated it so**" (*Aubrey Beardsley: Decadence & Desire*, p. 19). (CLICK) Having said that many of Beardsley's illustrations are completely original. Morris is invoking a medieval woodcut and Beardsley is creating a new style of illustration.
- Although he received relatively little for the work considering the time he spent it did enable him to quit his office job and spend all his time on what was called 'black-and-white' work, the medium for book illustration.



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Vera Historia*, 1894

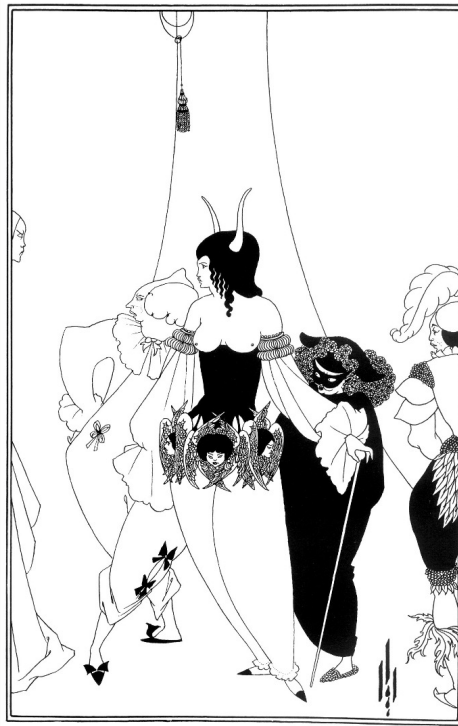
Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), 1894 *Vera Historia*

Birth from the Calf of a Leg, the drawing never made it to the final edition

- Beardsley claimed he **besieged and browbeat publishers for other commissions** and others swiftly followed. One was for the Greek drama ***Vera Historia*** (*A True Story*, 2nd century AD) by Lucian of Samosata. It is the earliest known work to describe outer space, space travel, alien lifeforms and interplanetary warfare.
- The book *Vera Historia* begins by admitting that **the whole book is a lie**. The story starts with Lucien and some travellers being blown passed the **Pillars of Hercules** to an island with a river of wine where a **whirlwind lifts them up to the Moon**. They became caught up in a war between the diverse life forms on the Moon against those on the Sun. On one part of the moon there are **no women and so babies are born from men's swollen calves** as we see in the drawing on the right.
- The Sun wins and a peace treaty is agreed. On returning to Earth they are swallowed by a 200-mile-long whale in whose belly live the fish people. They fight a war against them and win.

They then kill the whale by lighting a bonfire and escaping through its mouth. They find a sea of milk and an island of cheese and meet many of the heroes of Greek legend. The book ends suddenly with the hero saying that further adventures will be described in a sequel.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1894



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1894 from *Tales of Mystery and the Imagination*

Illustrations of short stories by Edgar Allan Poe

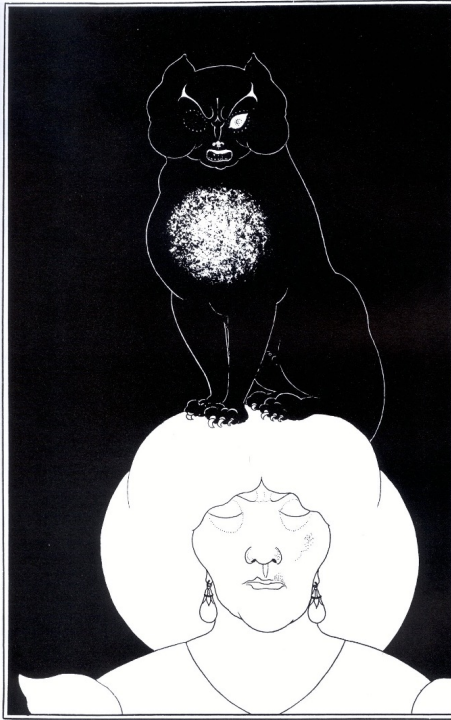
- Another commission followed from an American publisher to illustrate Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death', a short story in *Tales of Mystery and the Imagination* that he wrote in 1842. Beardsley started the work in 1894. Beardsley wrote that he felt the story offered "**an admirable chance of picture making**".
- At one level it is the story of a plague. **Prince Prospero** and 1,000 other nobles hide in an abbey to **escape a plague**, known as the **Red Death**. Towards the end of the fifth or sixth month of their seclusion they hold a masquerade ball and a **mysterious figure enters** and makes his way through all the rooms of the ball. Prospero **confronts the stranger and dies** and the stranger's costume is found to contain nothing, the guests then die one by one.
- The story makes vivid use of colour particularly the colour red which signifies both life and death. Beardsley tells the story in black and white, mostly with large areas of white and small

areas of black. The floor and the walls are white and merge into one another. Notice that the curtain on the left is delineated at the top but not shown at the bottom. There is very little texturing of the areas to indicate shadow or three-dimensional form. The illustration here shows a scene from the masquerade before the mysterious stranger arrives or possibly the stranger is the figure on the far left. The central figure is Prince Prospero who Beardsley has transformed into a Princess or possibly a hermaphrodite. She is only partly clothed and her black corset pushes up her breasts. Her naked breasts are gratuitous but Beardsley was fond of populating his work with **bare breasts and erect penises**, as we shall see.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Masque_of_the_Red_Death

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Black Cat*, 1894-1895



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Black Cat*, 1894-1895, illustrations of short stories by Edgar Allan Poe for *Tales of Mystery and the Imagination*

- Another powerful illustration from the same book by Edgar Allen Poe is *The Black Cat*. In the story the narrator mistakenly walls up the cat with the corpse of his dead wife who he has murdered. The police arrive and hear the screams of the cat and when the wall is broken down the furious animal is found sitting on the dead woman's upright head.
- Beardsley's drawing is wonderfully economical. The one-eyed cat and the wall are both black and distinguished by a single white outline and a patch of white fur on its chest.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1894



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1894 from *Tales of Mystery and the Imagination*

- A final illustration from Poe's book is for the story *The Murder in the Rue Morgue*. In this story a sailor owns a gigantic "ourang-outang" which escapes, climbs the outside of a house and kills Madame L'Espanaye then strangles her daughter and attempts to hide the body by stuffing it up the chimney. The story involves an amateur detective who finds a locked room, non-human hair, gold coins left in the room and an unknown language overheard by those outside the room. He deduces the crime was committed by an 'Ourang-Outang' and the story is metaphor for the battle of brains over brawn and brainpower wins.
- Beardsley has drawn a creature that bears little resemblance to an orang-utan as it has a tail like a monkey, it has pointed nails and it wearing an earring. It is carrying a young girl whose hair falls over her face, she wears a corset, pantalettes and a single slipper. Beardsley creates a vivid scene with the sparsest of means and like Poe he uses the death of a beautiful young woman to create drama.

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- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/753518>



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Yellow Book*, 1894

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Yellow Book*, 1894

- We have now reached the second stage of Beardsley's career. In the first stage he established himself as a leading figure in the art world with the serious and traditional work he did for Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the second stage **he achieved fame and became art editor of the prestigious *The Yellow Book***. In the third stage he achieved notoriety as his social reputation crashed because of his association with Oscar Wilde and he had to find work illustrating more controversial works.
- *The Yellow Book* was a new form of book that used the **latest line block printing technology**. Each quarterly periodical was bound like a book and had 256 pages. Beardsley was art editor and principal illustrator.
- Both **Whistler and Oscar Wilde were excluded** in case they monopolised the publicity. The book ran for just three years and Wilde declared he was glad the venture was a great failure.
- The book took its name from the way it used the same yellow covers as the scandalous and decadent French novels of the period. For example, it is a so-called 'yellow book' which

corrupts Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

- When Wilde was arrested in 1895, there were rumours he had been carrying a yellow-bound book. Though this was actually Pierre Louÿs's (pronounced 'louis') French novel *Aphrodite*, a confused crowd thought it was a copy of this magazine, and gathered to throw stones at the publishers's offices.

NOTES

- Line block printing was refined in the 1870s. It starts with the negative of a line drawing being contact printed onto a photosensitised metal plate. Light hardens the emulsion into an acid resist and non-exposed areas are then washed away in warm water. The plate is placed in an acid bath which eats away the exposed metal, that is where the negative was dark and the original was light. This means each black line in the original drawing becomes a raised line on the plate. It is washed and then rolled with ink which sticks to the the raised surface so black lines in the original drawing become black lines in the final print. The image is reversed.



What it will soon come to. Miss Simpson. "Pray let me carry your bag, Mr Smithereen!"

Passionate Female Literary Types. THE *NEW SCHOOL*. Mrs Blyth (newly married). "I wonder YOU never married, Miss Quilpson!" Miss Quilpson (author of "Caliban Dethroned," &c., &c.). "WHAT? I MARRY! I BE A MAN'S PLAYTHING! NO, THANK YOU!"

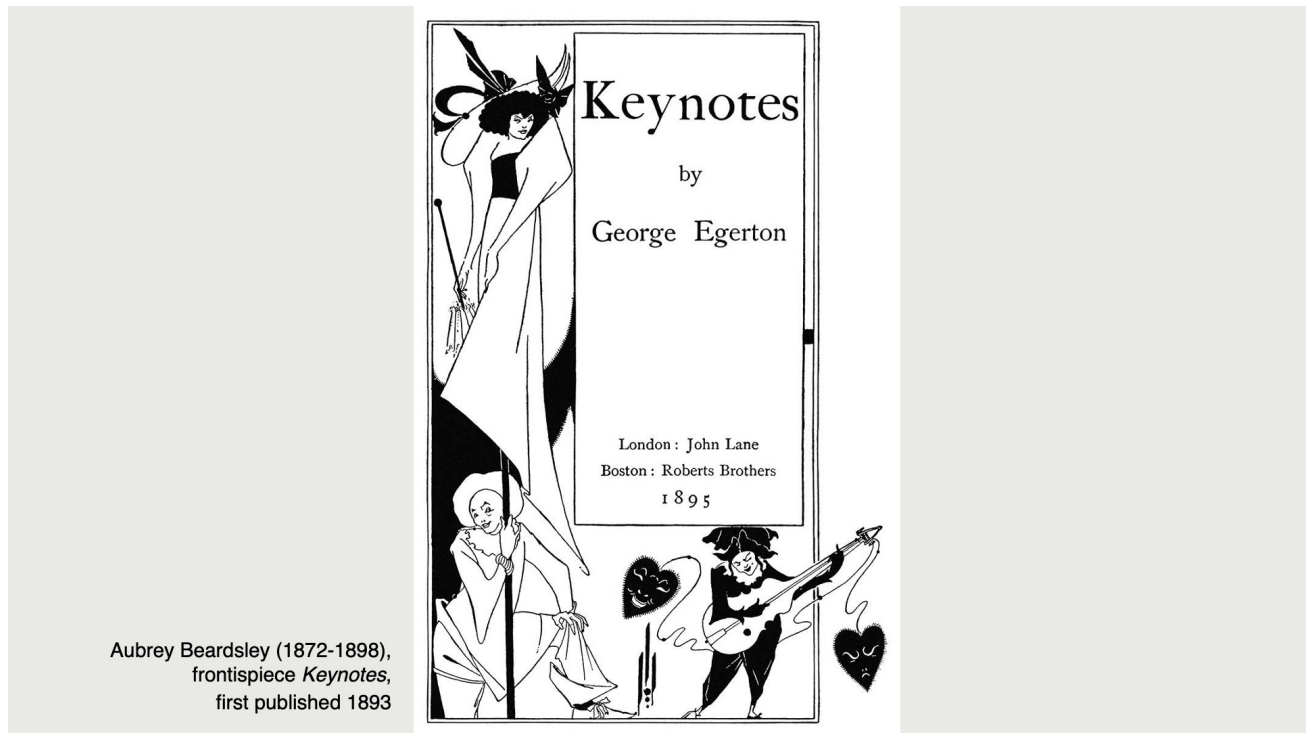
- And there were many social changes. To pick just one look at the two cartoons from *Punch*. [Read the text].
- 1894 was the year that the term 'New Woman' was first used in the title of an article. The article focused on the double standards of Victorian society which insisted a woman remain of impeccable sexual virtue while a husband could take a mistress and still be socially acceptable.
- The 1890s was known as the *fin de siècle* or 'end of the century' and the **Naughty Nineties**; an age of enormous change in art, politics and science when society was being revolutionised by new ideas. Sexuality itself was being redefined. **Darwin's theory of evolution** was disrupting the established religious beliefs and his ideas led others to describe Social Darwinism,

decadence, decline and decay. **Sigmund Freud** published *The Interpretation of Dreams* at the end of the decade. H. G. Wells (1866-1946) published *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) all in this decade. **Moving pictures** were first shown, **X-rays** were discovered, **electric lighting** was becoming widely used, the **first cars** came into use and the **telephone** became a practical device.

- All these **radical changes caused fear and outrage** and the social critic **Max Nordau** published *Degeneration* (1892) in which he forecast **the end of civilisation resulting from a mental illness that he traced back to the art of the Pre-Raphaelites**.
- As I said, one these changes was the 'New Woman' who was described as part of a new breed of independent, educated women who were uninterested in marriage and children. The 'New Women' were undermining the traditional view of women and what it means to be feminine. The role of men and what was understood by masculinity was being undermined at the same time. Think of the aesthete, the dandy and think of Oscar Wilde or Beardsley.
- As we have seen, *Punch* magazine made fun of the New Woman by showing her as an embittered, over-educated spinster. **Yet many men** found the idea of New Women **sensible and desirable** and **many women** were **appalled** by the idea of female emancipation.

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Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898),
frontispiece *Keynotes*,
first published 1893

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), frontispiece *Keynotes*, first published 1893

- *Keynotes* was written by George Egerton, pen name for Mary Dunne (1859-1945) who was born in Australia and travelled the world before settling in London. She wrote about working-class women and her novels were very popular. *Keynotes* was significant for its focus on female sexuality. The illustrations were by Beardsley.
- There were many articles and publications by women writers in the 1890s and many appeared for the first time in *The Yellow Book* and from 1896 in a new magazine called *The Savoy*. They often dealt with controversial subjects such as marital discontent and the artistic and literary aspirations of women.



Aubrey Beardsley, *A Caprice*, c. 1894, 76.2 × 63.5 cm, Tate Britain



Verso: *Masked Woman with a White Mouse*, c. 1894, Tate.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *A Caprice*. Verso: *Masked Woman with a White Mouse*, c. 1894, 76.2 × 63.5 cm, Tate Britain

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *Comedy Ballet of Marionettes I*

- It was at this stage, in 1894, that Beardsley briefly turned to oil painting and he might have continued but the volatile oils and varnishes were bad for his tubercular lungs. There are two paintings on the same canvas and this is one side. These are the only known oil paintings by him and they are in the Tate and both are unfinished
- On this side is *A Caprice*, a sinister work showing a woman in a black dress and a black dwarf in a red costume. (CLICK) It is derived from this drawing *Comedy Ballet of Marionettes I*, one of a series of three which appeared in *The Yellow Book*, in July 1894.
- In both drawing and painting the woman is being invited by the sinister dwarf to pass through a doorway. The doorway has a phallic form which is more explicit in the drawing although in the second drawing of the series he changed the doorway to represent the female sexual organ.

- (CLICK) On the reverse side is *Masked Woman with a White Mouse*. The symbolism also appears to be sexual, as in Freud's theory of dreams such things as mice become symbols for the genitals. Although, as far as we know Freud's work was unknown in England at this time and his *Interpretation of Dreams* was not published until 1899 (and the English translation not until 1914).

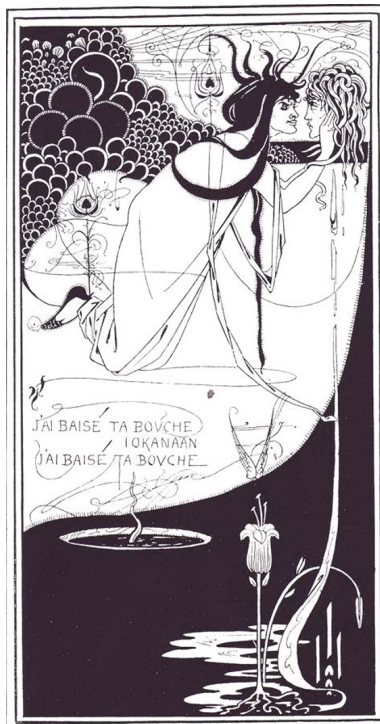
NOTES

- Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) and *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) were his earliest book on the subject. "Most of those animals which are utilized as genital symbols in mythology and folklore play this part also in dreams: the fish, the snail, the cat, the mouse (on account of the hairiness of genitals), but above all the snake, which is the most important symbol of the male member."
(*Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter 6, Part 2, Section E).

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<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/mar/02/aubrey-beardsley-two-sided-painting-public-debut-tate-britain-exhibition>



Aubrey Beardsley, *J'ai Baise ta Bouche lokanaan, Salome*, 1893, published in *The Studio* Vol 1 No 1



Aubrey Beardsley *The Climax* 1893 (published 1907). Stephen Calloway

Aubrey Beardsley *The Climax* 1893 (published 1907). Stephen Calloway

Aubrey Beardsley, *J'ai Baise ta Bouche lokanaan* (translated as 'I fuck [have sexual intercourse with] your mouth, John', pronounced 'j'ai baize ta booch yok-an-aan'), *Salome*, 1893, published in *The Studio* Vol 1 No 1

- Now we come on to one of his **most famous** assignments, the illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. It is seen by historians as the **first works in a British Art Nouveau style**.
- “*Salome* was first published in French in 1893. Almost immediately, Beardsley made **this illustrative drawing** [on the left] **speculatively** and it was reproduced by line-block in the laudatory article about the artist which appeared in the first number of the new ***Studio Magazine*** published in April that year.” (V&A)
- (CLICK) On the **strength of this design** Wilde and his publisher John Lane commissioned Beardsley to make a set of illustrations for the English edition of 1894. Beardsley redrew this design for the book as 'The Climax', on the right, simplifying the forms and **omitting the elaborate 'hairline' calligraphic**

flourishes that had characterised his earlier drawing style.”
(V&A)

- **When the illustrated play was published in English it immediately rocketed Beardsley to fame when he was just 21.**

NOTES

- "At the tender age of 21, Aubrey Beardsley rocketed to fame when he produced drawings for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, published in 1893. His risqué subject and graceful drawings marked the beginning of a new era in the arts: these are commonly held to be the first works in a British Art Nouveau style." (V&A)
- "In the play, *Salome* falls in love with Jokanaan (John the Baptist), but her wish to kiss him is only fulfilled when she receives his severed head on a platter. Beardsley drew the characters with Medusa-like tendrils, surrounded by abstract organic forms and creeping whiplash lines. It was an erotic, scandalous scene that cemented Beardsley's career, but also thrust the sensuous whiplash into the limelight." (V&A)
- "The original drawing, to which he later and somewhat unsuccessfully added green watercolour washes, is now in Princeton University Library. This line-block print comes from a large group of reproductions of Beardsley's designs assembled in the 1890s by the art critic Gleeson White, an expert on book illustration and one of the artist's earliest supporters." (V&A)

'The Stomach Dance', plate XI from 'A Portfolio of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings illustrating *Salome* by Oscar Wilde', 1894, published by John Lane, London, V&A



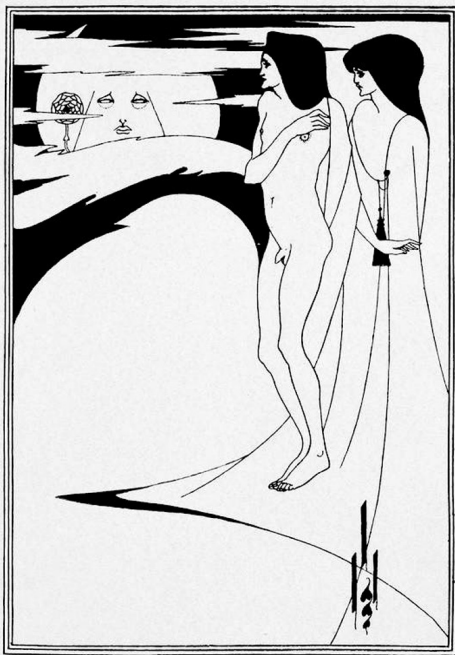
Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Stomach Dance', plate XI from 'A Portfolio of drawings illustrating '*Salome*' by Oscar Wilde', 1894, published by John Lane, London, 1907, Victoria and Albert Museum

- This is an illustration of the 'The Stomach Dance' from *Salome*. This is the dance Salome performed for King Herod Antipas (before 20BC - after 39AD) in order to seduce him into granting her anything she wanted. It is now better known as 'The Dance of the Seven Veils', a phrase first used in the play as a stage direction. As reward for the dance she asked for the head of John the Baptist which we saw illustrated on the previous slide.

NOTES

- The story of Salome is from the Bible Mark 6:21-28 and Mathew although she is not mentioned by name. She was named by Flavius Josephus (37-100) in his *Jewish Antiquities* (Book XVIII, Chapter 5, 4). In the nineteenth century the story is told in Gustave Flaubert's "Herodias" (1877).
- Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great (72-4BC - 1 BC). It was Herod the Great who ordered the Slaughter of the

Innocents. Herod Antipas executed John the Baptist and Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to Herod Antipas for trial but he sent him back and it was Pontius Pilate that ordered Jesus to be crucified (based on asking the people gathered in the square).



Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Woman in the Moon*, illustrating *Salome*, 1894



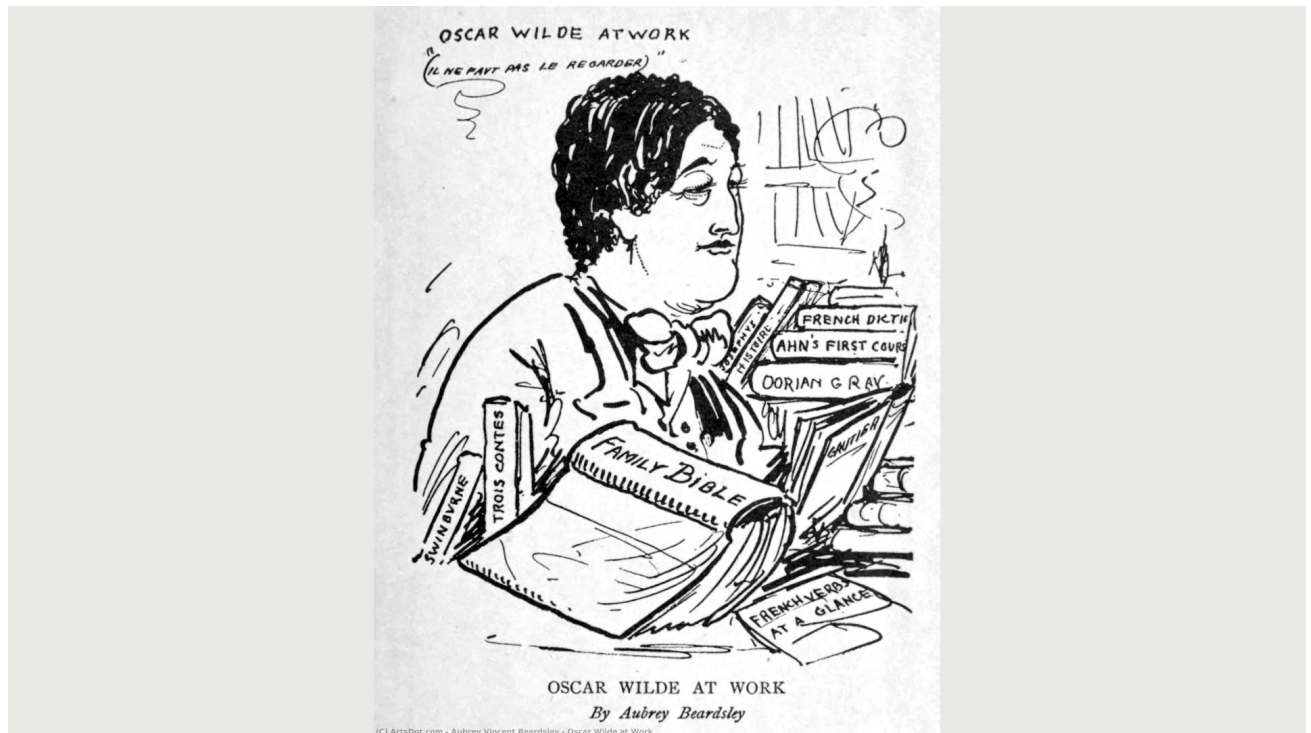
Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Peacock Skirt*, 1894, illustrating *Salome*

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Peacock Skirt*, 1894, illustrating *Salome*

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), *The Woman in the Moon*, plate I and title page from 'A Portfolio of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings illustrating *'Salome'* by Oscar Wilde', 1894, published by John Lane, London, 1907, Victoria and Albert Museum

- On the right is a one of his most famous images, *The Peacock Skirt*, an illustration of Salome inspired by Whistler's *Peacock Room* in Leyland's House.
- At the beginning in 1893, Beardsley drew *Salome* to illustrate an article by Joseph Pennell in the first issue of the *The Studio* and I will show you the illustration in the next but one slide. Wilde initially seemed pleased as he sent an autographed copy of the play, in French, to Beardsley. However, when Beardsley was commissioned to illustrate an English translation by Lord Alfred Douglas then Wilde's enthusiasm diminished. Wilde thought Beardsley's drawings were too Japanese and he wanted Byzantine. Wilde started to make fun of Beardsley he described his drawings as **"like the naughty scribbles a precocious boy makes on the margins of his copybooks."**

- Beardsley was asked to change four of his drawings for the translated Salome and Beardsley thought it was Wilde who had asked but it turned out it was the publisher who was worried the public would be **offended by the nudity**. Wilde's real concern was that the drawings were so powerful they would overshadow the play.
- In retaliation for being asked to change his drawings he added caricatures of Wilde as we can see at the top of the drawing on the left. It is called 'The Woman in the Moon' but it is a caricature of Wilde. And we went further ...



- He also **drew *Oscar Wilde at Work*** in response to Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) boast that he wrote *Salome* in French without the need to look anything up. Beardsley shows him surrounded by **reference works**—the Bible, a French dictionary, a "First Course" in French, and 'French Verbs at a Glance'. There is also 'Trois Contes' (1877, 'Three Tales') by Gustave Flaubert which includes the story of Salome on which Wilde's play is based.
- **Wilde was also annoyed that Beardsley had excluded him from *The Yellow Book*** in the interests of propriety. As their **relationship deteriorated** further Wilde informed London society that he had '**invented Aubrey Beardsley**'.
- In 1895 Beardsley and his sister Mabel attended the opening of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* (February 14, 1895), the last time they met.
- **The Marquess of Queensbury, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas**, Wilde's devoted favourite, was refused entry. Soon after **Queensbury accused Wilde of being a sodomite** (misspelt 'sodomite') and found witnesses to testify against him in a criminal trial for gross indecency. When **Wilde was arrested** he was seen by the press **carrying a yellow book**

which was immediately misidentified as one of Beardsley's *The Yellow Book*. All hell broke loose, **authors demanded publishers remove all of Beardsley's designs from their books**, he was fired as art editor of the *The Yellow Book* and he and Mabel had to move into **cheaper lodgings**.

- **Wilde was found guilty** of sodomy and sentenced to **two years hard labour**. He was released in May 1897, travelled to Paris then the **South of France** and never returned to Britain. Beardsley retired to the South of France to improve his health and they were in Menton (pronounced 'mon-ton') for a year but they never met.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), frontispiece for *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender, which Lasted One Night and One Day; with a History of the Pursuit of Earl Lavender and Lord Brumm* by Mrs. Scamler and Maud Emblem by John Davidson, 1895, comedy novel published by Ward & Downey



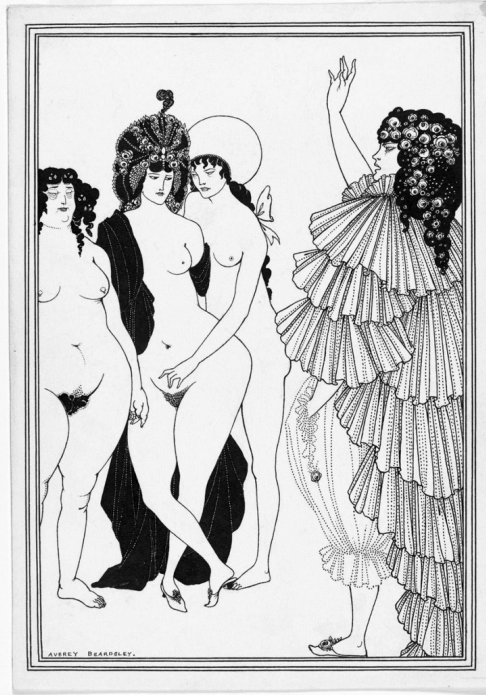
Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), frontispiece for *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender, which Lasted One Night and One Day; with a History of the Pursuit of Earl Lavender and Lord Brumm* by Mrs. Scamler and Maud Emblem by John Davidson, 1895, comedy novel published by Ward & Downey

- This is an illustration from a book with a long title *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender, which Lasted One Night and One Day; with a History of the Pursuit of Earl Lavender and Lord Brumm* by Mrs. Scamler and Maud Emblem.
- The book is a comic novel by John Davidson and the frontispiece is illustrated by Beardsley. It shows a woman about to whip a man's back. This scene does not actually occur in the book but there is a scene of mass flagellation involving the two central characters of the book. They adopt false names but call themselves Earl Lavender and Lord Brumm. One has just run away from his bride, Mrs Scamler, on their wedding night and the other fled his wedding to Maud Emblem. They get drunk together searching for the perfect women and end up in an

underground cellar where they are flogged. In the morning their partners discover them and they are reunited and return to the cellar where they are all flogged. Earl Lavender is told to abandon his religion of Evolution and his goal of finding the fittest woman in the world and the book ends with the two couples happily dining together.

- Flagellation was a common theme during this period perhaps associated with the punishment upper-class men received at public school.

Aubrey Beardsley, *Lysistrata Haranguing the Athenian Women*, 1896, pen and ink on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), *Lysistrata Haranguing the Athenian Women*, 1896, pen and ink on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum

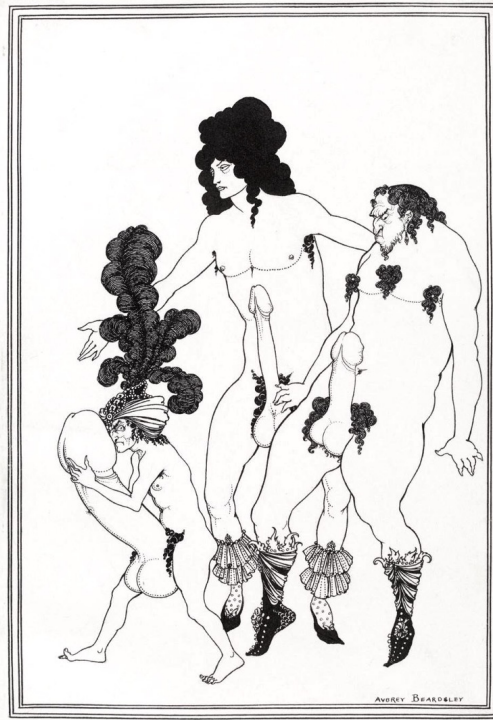
- First, notice the date, 1896, it is after the Oscar Wilde trial which, as I said, the public associated with Beardsley. As a result his publishers panicked and dropped him. The only publisher that would commission him was Leonard Smithers, a shady character who operated on the fringes of the book trade issuing small editions of risqué books. He commissioned Beardsley to illustrate Aristophanes's bawdy satirical play *Lysistrata*.
- Beardsley seized on the idea and produced a sequence of outrageous images depicting sexual frustration and to avoid prosecution from obscenity it was published privately.
- This is an ancient Greek comedy that was originally performed in Athens in 411 BC. It is a comic account of a woman's mission to end the Peloponnesian War by denying all the men any sex. Lysistrata persuaded the women to withhold sexual privileges from their husbands and lovers as a means of forcing the men to negotiate peace with Sparta.

- The illustration depicts the key moment in the play at which Lysistrata exhorts the Athenian women to abstain from all sexual congress with their husbands until peace is declared between the Athenian men and the Spartans (Lacedaemonians). The prospect of a sustained period of abstinence leads one of the women to make an overt sexual advance on another.

REFERENCES

- Mary Lago, ed., *Burne-Jones Talking* (London, 1982), p. 187

Drawing, 'The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors', illustration for *Lysistrata*, by Aubrey Beardsley, 1896, England, V&A



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), *'The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors'*, illustration for *'Lysistrata'*, 1896, Victoria and Albert Museum

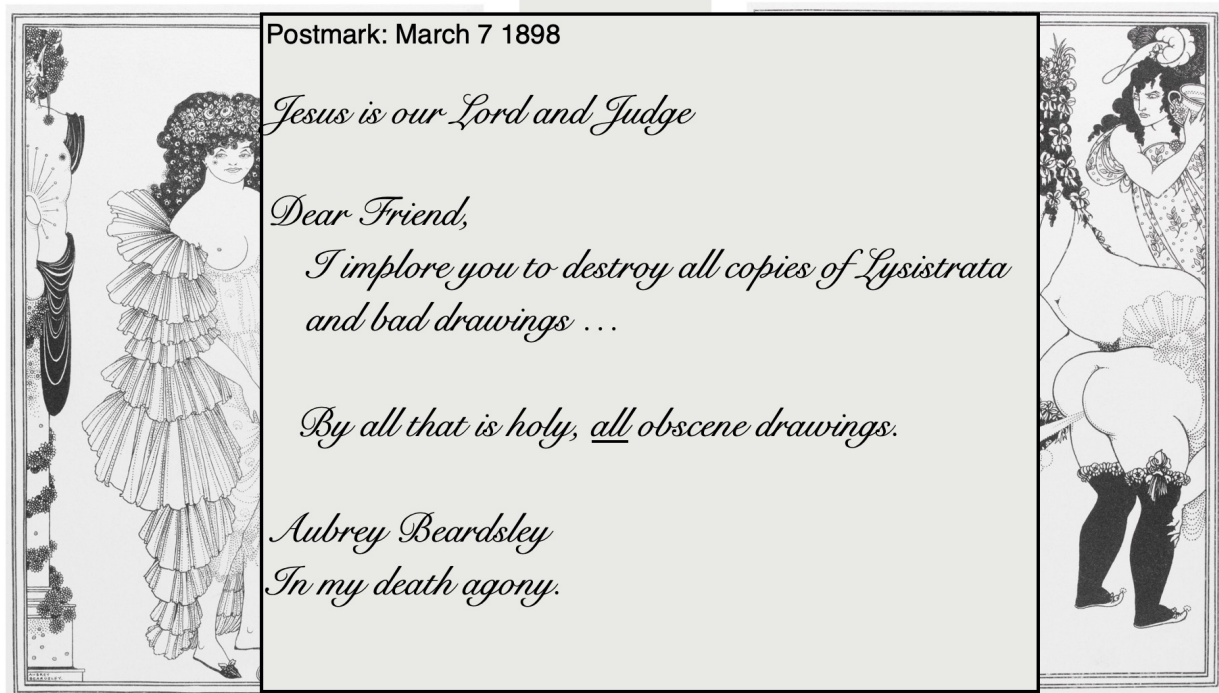
- The monstrous erections are today perhaps seen as amusing rather than pornographic and reminiscent of graffiti on walls and toilet doors.
- Beardsley knew that in ancient Greek theatre comedy actors wore enormous stage-prop phalluses made of leather, which you see here. He is also having fun with the idea that Lacedaemonian, that is Spartan, men were dressing their hair and wearing elegant footwear at a time of war without damaging their virility.
- Beardsley was the **most controversial artist of the period** and was renowned for his perverse images and **grotesque erotica**. Yet he often addresses profound issues of life and death, sex and religion yet because it took the form of illustrations it was regarded at the time as a **lower form of art, merely design**. It is thanks to Beardsley's genius that over the years and certainly since the 1960s and the 1966 exhibition of his work at the V&A, his work has been reappraised as central to the development of

modern art.

- The subjects he covers and the explicit images are still contentious today. Beardsley would be delighted to discover that his work is still creating controversy 130 years later.

REFERENCES

- Mary Lago, ed., *Burne-Jones Talking* (London, 1982), p. 187



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), 'Three of eight plates for *The Lysistrata of Aristophanes*', first published London: Leonard Smithers, 1896.

Lysistrata Shielding her Coynte (pronounced and sometimes written 'quoynte')

Lysistrata Defending the Acropolis

- As I said, Oscar Wilde called his drawings "**the naughty scribbles [of] a precocious boy**". Many if not most people found them shocking, Burne-Jones described them as "**detestable ... more lustful than any I have seen — not that I've seen many such.**"
- In fact, Beardsley has second thoughts. He converted to Catholicism in March 1897. The next year, the last letter before his death was to his publisher Leonard Smithers and close friend Herbert Charles Pollitt:
 - Postmark: March 7 1898
 - Jesus is our Lord and Judge
 - Dear Friend, **I implore you to destroy all copies of *Lysistrata* and bad drawings ... By all that is holy, all**

obscene drawings.

Aubrey Beardsley

In my death agony.

- Both men ignored Beardsley's wishes, and Smithers actually continued to sell reproductions as well as forgeries of Beardsley's work.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898),
'Abbé' from *Under the Hill*, published
in 'The Savoy', no. 1, January 1896,
V&A



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), *Abbé* ('*Under the Hill*'), published in 'The Savoy', no. 1, January 1896, England, Victoria and Albert Museum

- As I said earlier, although Beardsley wore clothes that **suggested a gay identity** as far as we know Beardsley had no sexual relations with anyone, except perhaps for his sister.
- He acquired new patrons, one a writer on homosexuality and the other, as I said, was Leonard Smithers who had a special interest in classical pornography. These were topics of the period, sexual orientation had become a subject for academic study and there was a male taste for lewd and explicit stories from classical and Arabic sources. Both were subjects to shock the bourgeois and so show the artist was free from any prudish conventions.
- Smithers offered to publish a successor to *The Yellow Book* called *The Savoy*. The new magazine was popular among middle class and readers because of its high standards and its slightly larger format that enabled the illustrations to be seen more clearly.
- Beardsley was just 23 when had **another life-threatening**

bought of tuberculosis yet he worked day and night on this new project.

- He **began writing** as well as illustrating and interchanged characters from mythology freely. **In his unfinished erotic novel *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*** Venus was replaced by Helen of Troy and it was published in *The Savoy* as *Under the Hill*.
- At this time he developed a **new over-all patterned style with drawings crammed with details**. The severity of his earlier work with their large flat plains of white or black give way to images crammed with hatching, pricking and details. **Whistler was surprised** and said, "**Aubrey, I have made a very great mistake — you are a very great artist.**"

Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), 'The Battle of the Beaux and Belles', illustration for *The Rape of the Lock*, 1896, London, V&A



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), '*The Battle of the Beaux and Belles*', illustration from '*The Rape of the Lock*', 1896, published by Leonard Smithers, London, Victoria and Albert Museum

- He utilised this new style to illustrate a mock-heroic poem by Alexander Pope (1688-1744, aged 56) *The Rape of the Lock*. The story was based on a real incident and revolves around how Lord Petre stole a lock of the hair of his beloved without her permission and how this led to the breakdown of the friendship between the two families. Pope satirises the incident by comparing it with the superhuman world of the gods. The word 'rape', by the way, is used in its earlier sense of "to snatch, to grab or to carry off".
- The poem with Beardsley's illustrations was published by Smithers in 1896. Beardsley's drawing illustrates the moment the heroine Belinda attacks the Baron (opposite) with her fan after discovering he has cut and stolen a lock of her hair during their game of cards (Canto V: 75–102). The clothing worn by the subjects portray a range of styles in vogue in England in the 18th century.

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Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), 'Messalina returning home'; illustration to the *Sixth Satire of Juvenal*, 1896, 17.8 x 14.6 cm, published by Leonard Smithers in *An Issue of Five Drawings Illustrative of Juvenal and Lucian*, London, 1906



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), 'Messalina returning home', illustration to the *Sixth Satire of Juvenal*, 1896, 17.8 x 14.6 cm, published by Leonard Smithers in *An Issue of Five Drawings Illustrative of Juvenal and Lucian*, London, 1906

- It was at this time that Beardsley started to adopt Catholicism. Whether this was because of his awareness of his mortality and his need for consolation or whether it was pose that chimed with the fashionable craze for the occult and the mystical we do not know.
- Beardsley made a number of drawings which illustrate the late Roman poet Juvenal's misogynistic Sixth Satire, 'Against Woman'. Juvenal cites the Empress Messalina as an exemplar of feminine lust and degeneracy, describing her nightly visits to the brothels of ancient Rome where she posed as a prostitute in order to indulge her desires. In an earlier drawing of 1895 Beardsley had depicted her leaving the palace, disguised and attended only by a maid. In this second and more powerful treatment of the subject, he chose to illustrate the lines in which the poet describes Messalina returning to the palace, angry that her lusts remain unsatisfied." (V&A website)

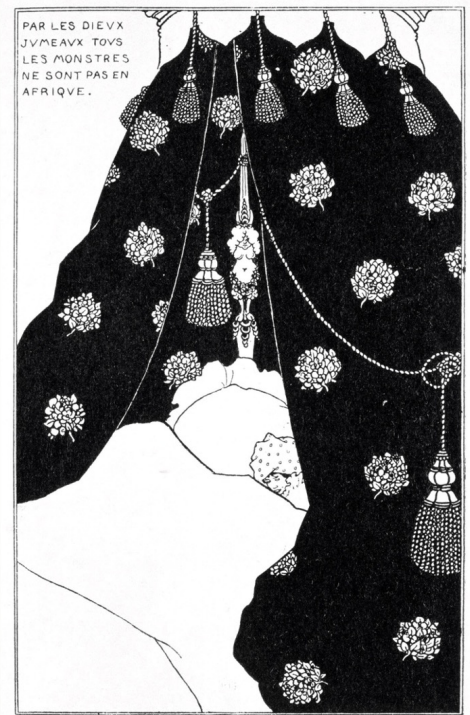
- The poem contains the famous line 'But who will guard the guards' referring to the impossibility of enforcing moral behaviour when the enforcers are corruptible.

NOTES

- “Smithers encouraged Beardsley's interest in French, Latin and Greek texts of this kind and commissioned drawings to illustrate Aristophanes's famously bawdy satirical play *Lysistrata* and the *Satires* of the late Roman poet Juvenal.
- The relevant line from the Sixth Satire is "... she closed her cell; and still raging with unsatisfied desire, tired with the toil but yet unsated, she retired with sullied cheeks defiled, and, foul from the smoke of lamps, bore back the odor of the stews to the pillow of the emperor."



Aubrey Beardsley
(1872–1898),
*Self-Portrait in
Bed*, 1894, V&A



Aubrey Beardsley (1872—1898), *Self-Portrait in Bed*, 1894, Victoria and Albert Museum

- In 1897, a month after he converted to Catholicism he moved to the French Riviera for his health. He drew this illustration a few years previously but it shows the effects of tuberculosis. It reads "By the twin Gods, not all monsters are in Africa" referring to the disease. It shows a tiny person in the centre of a large bed diminishing him to an insignificant figure.
- But he was not insignificant in art. He laid the foundation of modern art of the twentieth century. He was not afraid to be contentious and even today his work is controversial. During a public exhibition of his work at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1966 a private gallery was raided by the police for showing exactly the same prints and the owner was charged under the obscenity laws.
- Arthur Symonds, the Victorian art critic, described Beardsley well, "**... he could change his whole manner of working five or six times over the course of as many years, seem to employ himself much of the time on trivial subjects, and yet retain, almost unimpaired, an originality which consisted in**

extreme beauty and the absolute certainty of design."

- Even when representing ancient myths Beardsley's drawings celebrated "**modern life, modern dress, modern costume**"[1] and the large areas of black playing against fine white lines suggest "**half-hidden but always present urban depravity**"[1].
- By the end of his life he completely rejected Burne-Jones and William Morris and proposed a new magazine to "**attack untiringly and unflinchingly the Burne-Jones & Morrisian medaeval [sic] business**".
- Beardsley changed the view of what was acceptable in late Victorian society. He was known as the 'Imp of the Perverse', a metaphor used to describe the urge we all sometimes feel to do the wrong thing solely because we can do it. The 'imp' is that impulse that leads an otherwise decent person into mischief or worse. As we have seen, Beardsley took the Imp of the Perverse to extremes but in doing so changed the way we think about gender and sexuality today.
- (CLICK) **He died of tuberculosis in the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Menton in the South of France. He was 25 years old.**

NOTES

- *Self-Portrait in Bed*. "Line block print depicting a small person in the centre of a large opulent bed. Only the face is visible underneath a large spotted nightcap, peeping around the bed curtains which are decorated with floral motifs and tassels. Lettered in French in the top left corner: 'Par les dieux jumeaux tous les monstres ne sont pas en Afrique' [By the twin Gods, not all monsters are in Africa], in reference to the artist's frail health and the danger of tuberculosis." (V&A)

- The grave read "[Pater] in manus tuas doaine commendo spiritum meum" from Luke 23:46 meaning "[Father] into your hands I commend my spirit".

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[1] Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (V&A Publications, London, 1998), p.107



NEXT WEEK - BRITISH REALISTS IN THE 1920S AND 30S

- This talk is based on the book and exhibition *True to Life: British Realist Painting in the 1920s & 1930s*.
- I have selected some twenty artists as representative of the realist art of the inter-war years. I will say little about their lives and focus on the paintings.
- Examples of the artists I cover are Gerald Leslie Brockhurst, Meredith Frampton, Laura Knight and Winifred Knights