THE STRANGE GENIUS OF AUBREY BEARDSLEY: BY MARTIN BIRNBAUM

ESSENTIAL facts in Beardsley’s outwardly uneventful life can be given in a few words. He was born at Brighton on August twenty-first, eighteen hundred and seventy-two, three days before the birth of that other inimitable artist, Max Beerbohm. We have no particularly interesting facts about his parents or ancestry, but all his critics mention his surviving sister Mabel, the English actress, who was a rarely sympathetic and helpful comrade. When he was still a very young child, symptoms of tuberculosis and a genius which overflowed into many fields of artistic endeavor, appeared simultaneously. In eighteen hundred and eighty-three he was giving concerts with his sister in London. Shortly afterward we hear of him reading omnivorously, starting a history of the Armada, drawing clever caricatures of his masters at Brighton Grammar School, taking part in theatricals, drawing his first published sketches, and writing a farce which enjoyed the serious critical attention of the town where it was performed. He left school in eighteen hundred and eighty-eight and worked successively in an architect’s studio and an insurance office. Although many pictures of an earlier date exist, his career as a professional graphic artist may be said to have begun in eighteen hundred and ninety-three, with the publication of Sir Thomas Malory’s “Le Morte d’Arthur.” In April of that year Joseph Pennell introduced the new illustrator in the first number of The Studio. From that time forward the story of his life is an inspiring and painful journal of a dying genius, working feverishly and searching in vain for a climate which would give him the strength necessary to complete his work. He died at Mentone on March sixteenth, eighteen hundred and ninety-eight, in the twenty-sixth year of his life, after having been received into the Catholic Church.

Beardsley was the most eminent of a group of men all of whom died while still very young, but who lived long enough to accomplish successfully something original and important in art or literature. They were all constantly associated with one another in their lives and work. Here we need only mention Ernest Dowson, for whose precious volumes of verse Beardsley made some of his happiest decorations; Charles Conder, the English Watteau, a romantic painter whose fans and paintings on silk are exquisite works of art; Lionel Johnson, a genuine poet and an important figure in the Celtic movement, of which William Butler Yeats is now the acknowledged leader; Leonard Smithers, their irresponsible publisher; and our own Josiah Flynt, or “Cigarette,” as the tramps called him, who met the English-
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DESIGNS BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY
FOR "PIERROT'S LIBRARY."
man before he too “passed on for keeps,” in a little back room in
the Crown Tavern, near Leicester Square,—“a back parlor pushed
up against a bar.” The grim, tragic pathos of madness, drink and
disease attaches to their names. Of them all, one alone died with a
jest on his lips, and Oscar Wilde’s tragic career overshadows the
whole period. Fortunately, we still have Arthur Symons, whose
sympathetic appreciations will always remain the starting point for
all future studies of their lives and achievements; Will Rothenstein,
the distinguished painter, who began his career by making the now
famous series of portraits in lithography of his contemporaries; and
“Max,” their incomparable caricaturist, who will remain forever
young and a dandy.

IT WAS Beardsley’s ambition to be grouped with these men, not
only as an artist, but as a writer, and in a measure he succeeded.
To be sure, his literary efforts, consisting of a few poems and the
fragment of a fantastic rococo romance, fill only one slender volume;
but “Under the Hill,” which is a travesty of the Tannhäuser legend,
has a unique flavor. The hand of the amateur is easily detected and
the work is obviously influenced by the eighteenth-century French-
men, but you feel, as in the case of Whistler, that the writer was
prodigiously talented and that he was on the threshold of complete
mastery. His verses are highly polished and his prose is strange,
exotic and artificial. It is the work of a sick prodigy who has in-
tuitively absorbed all the secrets of French eroticism and is laughing
at the shock he will give John Bull. He adored the art and litera-
ture of France, and his intimate knowledge of French belles-lettres
amazed all his friends. Balzac was a great passion with him, and
the works of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Gautier and Flaubert were his
inspirations. Beardsley’s romance, however, does not breathe the
spirit of the great dramatists. Its extravagant atmosphere and the
strange pageant of its characters can best be suggested by using
Beardsley’s own grotesque vocabulary: “Slim children in masque
and domino, smiling horribly; exquisite letchers leaning over the
shoulders of smooth doll-like ladies, and doing nothing in particular;
terrible little pierrots posing as mulierasts, or pointing at something
outside the picture; and unearthly fops and strange women mingling
in some rococo room lighted mysteriously by the flicker of a dying
fire that throws huge shadows upon wall and ceiling.”

Even this short quotation is enough to show that there is the
same kind of fault and excellence in his designs and writings. One
can best describe his genius as maladif. He cultivated a magical
technique which could convert the most repulsive ugliness into a
"A NOCTURNE OF CHOPIN;"
BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY.
FRAU KLAFSKY as Isolde, FROM A DRAWING BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY.
THE STRANGE GENIUS OF AUBREY BEARDSLEY

strange, forbidding, fascinating beauty. Although he was essentially a great satirist, the common youthful error of starting out by scandalizing his native land tempted him to commit many extravagances. It is, however, not our province to find fault with him for having chosen, to a large extent, unsavory and unwholesome material, instead of subjects which breathe the May-time fragrance which one associates with Anglo-Saxon art.

His designs fall naturally into certain groups. Disregarding his efforts as an amateur, the first period extends to the year eighteen hundred and ninety-three, when "Le Morte d'Arthur" and three volumes of "Bon Mots" by English wits appeared, and the editor of The Pall Mall Budget commissioned him to draw illustrations of contemporary interest for that magazine. He had already been encouraged by Puvis de Chavannes and Burne-Jones, and the uncommonly appropriate drawings for Malory’s romance were strongly influenced by the work of the famous Pre-Raphaelite. The "Bon Mots" drawings bear a superficial resemblance to second-rate Japanese prints. The following year the drawings for "Salome" appeared, and a few discerning critics realized that Beardsley had become a master of decorative graphic art. To quote from the excellent monograph by Robert Ross: "Before commencing ‘Salome’ two events contributed to give Beardsley a fresh impetus and stimulate his method of expression: a series of visits to the collection of Greek vases in the British Museum (prompted by an essay of Mr. D. S. McColl) and to the famous Peacock Room of Mr. Whistler in Prince's Gate—one the antithesis of Japan, the other of Burne-Jones."

No designs like them had ever been seen before, and the irritated critics, mystified by genius, ignored his marvelous precise lines and decorative qualities, seized upon anatomical weaknesses in his drawing and certain obviously perverse features, and condemned him as the exponent of decadence. The attacks grew more virulent when the first volume of The Yellow Book appeared in April, eighteen hundred and ninety-four. Beardsley had already done other work—chiefly the ingenious title-pages and frontispieces for the "Keynote" series—for John Lane, who shares the credit of having discovered and encouraged him.

THE fury of the affronted art critics was followed by the rupture with John Lane, which resulted in the publication of The Savoy, by Leonard Smithers, in eighteen hundred and ninety-six, under Arthur Symons's literary editorship. In the same year, Smithers brought out what are considered by many admirers Beardsley's masterpieces,—the exquisite embroideries for Pope's "Rape of
the Lock,” and the extraordinary drawings, without backgrounds, for the “Lysistrata” of Aristophanes. In eighteen hundred and ninety-seven, besides executing book-plates, miscellaneous drawings and cover designs,—notably the superb “Ali Baba,” and the lovely “lines” which adorn Dowson’s verses,—he illustrated the last-mentioned poet’s charming pastoral, “The Pierrot of the Minute.” In the year of his death there appeared a portfolio of photogravure reproductions of his bizarre illustrations for “Mademoiselle de Maupin,” and the beautiful lead-pencil designs and initials for Ben Jonson’s “Volpone,” which constituted his last works. These showed unmistakable signs of possible further development, concerning which, however, it would be idle to speculate. In examining these works one is immediately impressed by the great variety of obvious influences which dominated him. Whistler, Ricketts, Mantega, Botticelli, Eisen, Walter Crane, the Japanese, the Silhuettists, etc., may be mentioned at random. No other artist of the first order was ever so receptive, and none ever attached himself to a particular tradition for a shorter time. He had hardly succumbed to some new influence before it became in its turn a mere passing phase of his development. You are constantly amazed by the variety of methods used by him during the same period, and by the range of his literary sympathies. He drew his inspiration from the most varied sources,—Pope, Ben Jonson and Edgar Allan Poe, Juvenal, Lucian and Aristophanes, Gautier, Dumas, de Laclos and Balzac, Wagner and Chopin. Now and then he introduced portraits or caricatures of friends and acquaintances into his drawings. Wilde and Henry Harland are seen in the
frontispiece to John Davidson’s “Plays;” the Latin Quarter Pierrot holding the hourglass in Dowson’s pastoral phantasy is Charles Conder; Max Beerbohm and Whistler appear in the “Bon Mots” grotesques; Réjane’s mask was used by him again and again.

Knowing that he had only a few years of work before him, Beardsley was feverishly, incessantly working, and produced many hundreds of drawings in rapid succession. He was socially active, too, however, and loved fine clothes and rare clarets. He seemed determined to live his short life gaily, and always had time for his friends, because he worked chiefly at night, by the light of those long candles which he repeatedly introduced into his fantastic designs. His life, as revealed by his associates and by the strange, inconsequential letters which have been published, reads, indeed, like a morbid psychological novel by Arthur Schnitzler. The coterie of people who visited him in the somber Cambridge Street studio, furnished in black, and those who surrounded him at Dieppe, have only the kindest things to say about his engaging, persuasive personality and charming presence, and maintain that his pose served merely to hide the deep and fine serious feelings of a shy, earnest man.

The fact that his work continues to retain its stimulus for a new artistic generation, is sufficient excuse for this first exhibition in America. It is fortunate that it could be arranged at a time when Beardsley has ceased to be a fashionable craze or a topic for frivolous conversation. He is not an artist whom one can amusingly denounce or indiscriminately praise, but an acknowledged master of satire and decorative line, who taught graphic artists many new and important lessons, and practically exhausted the resources of his medium. He is an artists’ artist, and, as Mr. Pennell wrote, “What more could he wish?”