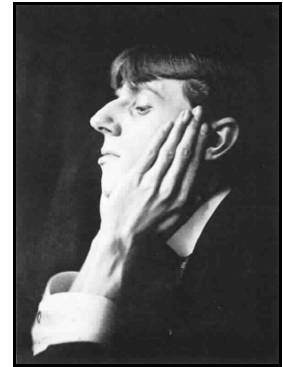


AUBREY BEARDSLEY

(21 August 1872–16 March 98)

Chris Snodgrass © 2013

Aubrey Beardsley's mostly black-and-white, pen-and-ink work was first published in 1893, and his career lasted only a little over five years, but he soon became the greatest and most notorious "illustrator" of his time and for many years to come would hugely influence a wide range of modern artists. He was considered by many as the "dominating artistic personality" and "the one real 'genius'" of the 1890s, such that Max Beerbohm dubbed the nineties the "Beardsley Period." He was a major force in both the international *fin-de-siècle* literary movement known as "Decadence" (not to be confused as "moral decadence") and the revolutionary decorative style of Art Nouveau. Despite the extreme brevity of Beardsley's career, probably no other artist or writer prior to the electronic age achieved more notoriety or exercised a more pervasive influence on his era in such a short time. As one noted critic summarized the phenomenon, "The appearance of Aubrey Beardsley in 1893 was the most extraordinary event in English art since the appearance of William Blake."

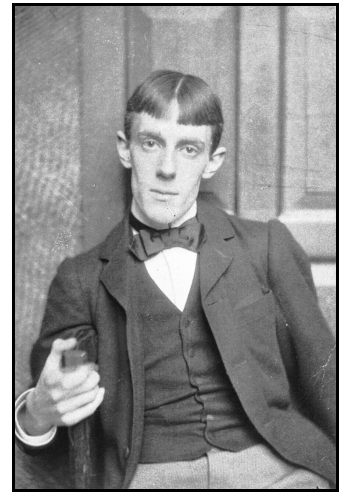


A. Beardsley, by F. Evans

Beardsley was born in Brighton, England, under a series of rocky circumstances. His mother Ellen Agnus Pitt (1846–1932), whose physician father had retired from a successful military career in India, came from a well-to-do and well-respected family whose ancestors included the great 18th-century English politician Sir William Pitt. Aubrey's father Vincent Paul Beardsley (1839–1909), the son of a sometimes goldsmith, rather disingenuously described himself as a "gentleman" (that is, a man who financially did not need to work) based presumably on a sizable inheritance (including a house in prestigious Russell Square) from his grandfather, a Welsh-born property developer, but it was an inheritance he was in the process of squandering. In 1870 the dashing but reckless Vincent and the vivacious, headstrong Ellen met on a public pier and began an unchaperoned courtship before being formally introduced—for the times, a twice-over serious social impropriety—marrying later that same year. Ellen's family, who believed their daughter was marrying significantly beneath her, reluctantly acquiesced to the *mésalliance* but increasingly disapproved of it, especially when shortly after the wedding Vincent was forced to sell property to settle a "breach of promise [of marriage]" claim from a clergyman's widow, and he and Ellen were obliged to move in with Ellen's parents. Aubrey's mother fell ill with puerperal fever immediately after his birth, so he had to be cared for in his beginning weeks solely by her family. Shortly after that, Vincent lost the remainder of his inheritance and, although he did work for a period as a clerk in a brewery, never contributed meaningfully to family expenses. Aubrey and his sister Mabel (born almost exactly a year before him) grew up in genteel poverty, Ellen making do by taking temporary jobs teaching piano or French.

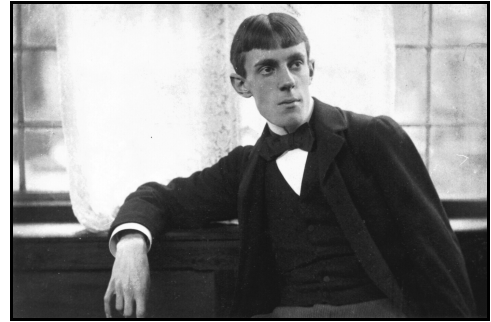
From age seven, when he was diagnosed with acute tuberculosis, Beardsley understood that he was destined for a short life, and he suffered through much of it as an intermittent invalid, even as he sought to live as a cosmopolitan dandy. He had to withdraw from school at age 16 to earn a living as a clerk in London, first in a surveying office, then at the Guardian Life Insurance Company. After being encouraged by the painter Edward Burne-Jones, Beardsley quit his boring menial clerk employment for a career as an artist. His first published work appeared in early 1893 in *The Studio*, with a highly laudatory introductory essay by the esteemed artist Joseph Pennell that garnered much attention. More fame and notoriety soon followed as the result of some fortuitous commissions, the first being the creation of 350 illustrations” (he ended up producing nearly 550) for the monumental new Dent edition of Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. (The edition, which appeared to much acclaim in 1893–94, was supposed to imitate William Morris’s acclaimed Kelmscott Press edition but under Beardsley’s hand became something else entirely.) During the same period he published over 200 miniature grotesques in three *Bon-Mots* volumes to accompany the sayings of noted eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wits Charles Lamb, Douglas Jerrold, Samuel Foote, Theodore Hook, Sydney Smith, and R. Brinsley Sheridan. He became an international sensation (and the subject of much controversy) with the publication in early 1894 of his striking, Japanese-influenced, and sexually provocative drawings for Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. He was soon appointed art editor for the fashionable new quarterly *The Yellow Book*, which first appeared in April 1894 and was immediately (if rather unjustifiably) taken to be an emblem of the ‘Decadent’ nineties, largely because of Beardsley’s splashy and “outrageous” contributions. He was summarily (and unjustly) dismissed from that post in April 1895, as a commercial liability in the wake of Wilde’s notorious “gross indecency” scandal and trials. In late-1895 through 1896 he was the art editor and principal illustrator for another fashionable new avant-garde journal, *The Savoy*, published by the racy but successful publisher and pornography dealer Leonard Smithers. Beardsley continued to publish pictures with Smithers for other projects such as, most notably, new editions of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1896), Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* (1897), and Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* (1898). Drawn to High Church ritual since childhood, he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1897. Having been forced for some time to live in warmer climates because of his failing health, eventually died in Menton, France, at age 25.

Ironically, Beardsley always considered himself a writer as well as a graphic artist, and while he produced few literary efforts, he showed devotion to them, particularly his satirical *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, which was expurgated for *The Savoy* as *Under the Hill* (as in “*mons veneris*”). Over his entire career, Beardsley was rapidly evolving and creating a series of new styles (no fewer than six distinct ones), all highly successful, if controversial. Whatever style he employed, he became known as an



A. Beardsley, by F. Hollyer

undisputed master of line and innovative spacial design. He consistently rejected the characterization of his work as “illustrations,” instead insisting that his drawings were independent works of art. Beardsley was the first artist whose art was specifically designed and produced for mass mechanical reproduction, his black-and-white mode being particularly well-suited for photo-line-block technology. Among other artists who cited Beardsley as an important influence in their work were Will Bradley, Leon Bakst, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Sergi Diaghilev, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Rennie Mackintosh, Alan Odle, Eric Gill, Arthur Rackham, Djuna Barnes, and Pablo Picasso. Since his death there have been no fewer than four major Beardsley revivals, and his reputation has recently only continued to grow, with an increasing amount of scholarship being devoted to him.



Aubrey Beardsley, by Frederick Hollyer