

Layla Bloom, Chris Sheppard and Paul Whittle
Fancy and Imagination: Beardsley and the Book Illustrators
Exh cat. (Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds),
University of Leeds, 2010
ISBN-13 978-1-874331-43-8, pp32, 15 bw, 17 colour, £ 6.50

Nic Peeters

During the final decade of the 19th century, book illustration – along with the applied arts in general – enjoyed a revival of interest. Printer-designers such as William Morris and Charles Ricketts founded private presses to produce books that were conceived as genuine works of art. By giving equal attention to covers, bindings, illustrations, typefaces, borders, ornamental letters and means of reproduction, which they harmoniously combined, they created ‘the book beautiful’. Naturally, this new attitude to book publishing enabled many talented illustrators to present their drawings to a wider audience. One of the most gifted book illustrators of the 1890s was Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898).

As Layla Bloom, Exhibitions Officer of the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery at the University of Leeds, explains in her introduction, Beardsley is well represented in their collection, thanks to an outstanding donation by Fay and Geoffrey Elliott in 2001. It was the donors’ express wish that their printed works and manuscripts become ‘available for direct use by a substantial body of young people’, which made it possible to hinge this varied catalogue and the coinciding exhibition (16 November 2010-2 February 2011) around the key figure that Beardsley was for book illustration in the sunset years of the Victorian era.

Although not the only one, Beardsley was arguably the most crucial innovator in book illustration of his era. His art stands between Morris and Modernism. His early drawings for Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* (published by JM Dent in 1893-4) still show a debt to Morris’s foliage designs and the illustrations Edward Burne-Jones (his erstwhile mentor) created for the Kelmscott Press. However, Beardsley thoroughly simplified their late Pre-Raphaelite style. What they did with finely detailed descriptive drawings, he could do with two strokes of his pen. Whereas in the Kelmscott books the typically swirling line of the Pre-Raphaelites still obviously represents vines or hair, it gains much more autonomy in Beardsley’s drawings. It is this strongly emphasised undulating line that became the Art Nouveau style’s most recognisable characteristic. Not surprisingly, a recent show at Brussels’s Bibliotheca Wittockiana (October 2010-January 2011) about the decorated book bindings of Henry Van de Velde, one of the ‘inventors’ of Art Nouveau, included the two volumes of JM Dent’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* to point out their significance for that school. Their illustrations were displayed to great interest of the local artists at the 1895 *La Libre Esthétique* show in the Belgian capital. The next year in Paris, Beardsley’s work was included in the international book exhibition organised by Art Nouveau guru Siegfried Bing.

Beardsley further modernised book illustration by harmoniously introducing abstract patterns into his drawings, which – although inspired by Japanese woodblocks – were on the whole his own inventions. On top of this, as Layla Bloom remarks, he prepared book illustration for the next century by exploring urban themes and ‘*risqué* choices of subject matter’.

Throughout its three essays this catalogue, even though it is a slim volume, manages to offer a clear and fresh view on the art of Beardsley and his contemporaries. The first essay, ‘Aubrey Beardsley at the University of Leeds’ by Chris Sheppard, ingeniously compares Beardsley’s short career

(and the different styles he developed) with that of a young twenty-first century academic: ‘It is not entirely fanciful to regard Beardsley’s enterprises from 1893 to 1898 – work successively for [periodicals] *The Studio*, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* while illustrating a series of individual books which presented him with self-made artistic challenges – as chapters in a thesis. He broke new ground, he worked with rigour, and he showed what he was capable of doing. Maturity lay ahead. But then, in 1898, having lived in the shadow of tuberculosis since childhood, Beardsley died... [He] did not have the brilliant future to which our most successful students can aspire. We can only wonder what he would have achieved if, as well he might with modern medical treatment, he had lived on into the 1950s.’

The second essay, ‘Printers, Presses and Processes: The Book as a Whole 1890-1900’ by Paul Whittle, contextualises Beardsley in the climate of the new private presses and periodicals committed to high quality aesthetic and harmonious publishing. Moreover, Whittle is one of the astonishingly few writers who manage to succinctly define the ‘decadent movement’ with which Beardsley has been so often associated: ‘Decadent was a term applied to a late nineteenth century artistic and literary movement, which had its origins in France during the 1880s, and was then adopted in Britain. Broadly speaking, it valued the artificial over the natural (in contrast to the earlier Romantics) and was widely regarded as subversive.’

The final essay, ‘The Book Illustrators’ by Layla Bloom, offers an exceptional look at the artists who were affected by Beardsley’s style and techniques. Bloom states that ‘[His] influence... was widespread amongst book illustrators in Britain and abroad. Sidney Sime took up Beardsley’s contrasting black and white compositions; the Irishman Harry Clarke and the German “Alistair” emulated his sinewy lines and brooding shapes. In Scotland, Jessie M King produced delicate, mysterious images composed of Beardsleyesque decorative dots. Danish artist Kay Nielsen was inspired by the precious and theatrical elements in Beardsley’s work.’

The most wonderful thing about this catalogue is that it proves how well its creators have understood their subject: like the volumes Beardsley contributed to, it has been conceived in the spirit of ‘the book beautiful’. Special attention was given to the cover design, the lay-out of the pages and even ‘minor’ aspects such as the initials and the footnotes. The representative illustrations are pleasantly integrated in the text and very well reproduced. From an early sketch in an autograph letter to the frontispiece for Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* (1898) they outline the evolution in Beardsley’s work. Drawings by followers such as Harry Clarke, Kay Nielsen and Jessie M King allow us a comparison with the master’s compositions. They demonstrate what was said about Beardsley’s art in an In Memoriam (1898) published by *The Studio*, the journal that had catapulted him to fame only five years earlier: ‘That no imitator ever caught its spirit even remotely is truest of all... he represented a new departure, but kept the secret of his “style” all his own.’

To conclude, kudos must go to FDA Design, photographer Norman Taylor and Duffield Printers in Leeds. They too have played a vital part in making this catalogue a thing of beauty.