

Exhibitions



Inspired by Beardsley: 'The Ten Dancing Princesses' by Kay Nielsen. Below, an illustration from Beardsley's 'Lysistrata' sequence

# Between prettiness and pornography

A new show examines the influence of Aubrey Beardsley's delicate, daring pictures. **Catherine Milner** reports

There can't be many artists from the 1890s whose work is still so shocking that a gallery will not, even now, display their work. But Aubrey Beardsley is one.

"We have to be careful – we have a family audience," says Layla Bloom, curator of a fascinating new exhibition of Beardsley's work being held at Leeds University. "We are only showing one item from his series *Lysistrata* – the least offensive."

How Beardsley would have rejoiced. Like Oscar Wilde and other decadents of the *fin de siècle*, he enjoyed undermining convention. Despite the peacock feathers and pearls, the feather dusters and frilly pantaloons of his works, their subject matter was often far from pretty. "The grotesque is the only alternative to the insipid commonplace," he declared.

Born in Brighton in 1872 into a family of genteel poverty, at the age of seven Beardsley was diagnosed with the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him at 25. His father, Vincent, worked irregularly at London breweries, while his mother, Ellen, provided a slender income by giving piano lessons. Both Beardsley and his sister, Mabel, were considered artistic and musical prodigies.

They were also part of a generation closely allied to the continent (Beardsley spoke fluent French), and this show reveals not only his influence on foreign writers and artists, like Danish and French illustrators Kay Nielsen and Edmund Dulac, but theirs on him. One of the treasures in the exhibition is a portrait he made of the *Lady of the Camellias* – the courtesan heroine of the novel by Alexandre Dumas. The book made an enormous impact on Beardsley, who travelled half-way across France to meet its author. The drawing, which is on public display for the first time, is untypical of most of Beardsley's work in that it was finished in pencil rather than Indian ink. The camellias are washed



with a delicate smudge of carmine, as if the woman wearing them was literally fading away.

More than 60 works are in this show – including delightful illustrations by his near contemporaries Arthur Rackham and Kate Greenaway, to illustrate just how radical Beardsley was. Where they tried to project a quasi-realistic view, Beardsley was concerned only with creating a black-and-white fantasy where all that mattered were the amazing interlacing patterns of dots on the page.

Many of the works are taken from a collection that belonged to the pornographer Leonard Smithers – one of the only people to support Beardsley in the grim last years of his life. After a glorious early career in which, aged only 20, he was asked by Dent, the publishers, to produce 300 illustrations for their *Morte d'Arthur*, and then edited the

famous magazine, *The Yellow Book*, Beardsley then formed an alliance with Wilde, who both catapulted him to fame and proved his downfall.

His assignment was to illustrate Wilde's play, *Salome* – but the writer was said to be jealous of Beardsley's precocious talent. When Wilde was convicted of sodomy in 1895, Beardsley was sacked from his job as editor of *The Yellow Book*, even though there was no proof he was gay and Wilde had never contributed to his magazine.

Smithers collected proofs of as many of Beardsley's works as he could find from *Salome* and others – and these form the bulk of the exhibition. It highlights the extraordinary duality of Beardsley's final months. On one hand he was in almost daily contact with Smithers, who encouraged him to make his most erotic works; and on the other with André Raffalovich, the wealthy son of a banker, who was determined to convert him to Catholicism before he died.

Among the bare torsos and lacy peignoirs in the show are pictures Beardsley drew of cardinals in full regalia. "It might seem hypocritical but in fact it just reveals two different sides to Beardsley's personality," says Matthew Sturgis, author of the best book about the artist. "Catholicism brought him peace and calm, while working for Smithers appealed to his love for life and enjoyment in all its peculiarity."

In a letter written shortly before he died, Beardsley begged Smithers to destroy "all obscene drawings". Smithers completely ignored him – and if nothing else this exhibition demonstrates betrayal can, just occasionally, be a very good thing.

Beardsley and the Book Illustrators is at the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds (0113 343 2777) until Feb 12

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