

AUBREY BEARDSLEY AT 60

Born in Brighton on August 21, 1872 — Died at Mentone on March 16, 1898

A bit of white paper, a drop of Chinese ink and a drawing pen—that was the whole technical apparatus employed by the greatest genius and most influential designer of our day. During the last and most productive year of his short life, Beardsley did all his drawings at the writing-table of his little room in an hotel looking over the Ligurian Sea.

He needed no model, no subject, no representation of nature, he created from memory, out of his own imagination, his own heart and brain. His intellect grasped intuitively the spirit of all artistic manifestations of all ages and peoples which came within his reach, Egyptian, Persian, Indian, Japanese, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo, Early Victorian and ultra-modern fin de siècle; he let everything filter through his artistic understanding and the concentrated residue was an utterly original product—Aubrey Beardsley black-and-white work. Beardsley never studied either perspective or anatomy, but he had an instinctive feeling for both. It was child's play for him to give expression to his ideas by means of his black dots, lines and surfaces. Human beings, plants, flowers, butterflies, mountains, valleys, woods and fields breathe and live only on his white sheets of drawing paper in a purely graphic cosmos of the master's own fashioning. Philistines have never been able to grasp it; they blue-pencilled him during his lifetime and later, when his world-wide fame could no longer be denied, they cried that Beardsley's perverse work had been no more than a transient, swiftly-ebbing fashion.

What a venture, to present an artist's work to a new generation thirty—four years after his death! This period of time is far too short to neutralise the final and most dangerous effects of the temporary and fashionable aspects of a life-work. Half a century after an artist's death would be the shortest period of incubation after the lapse of which it would be possible to ascertain whether a stormy and sensational proclamation of youthful genius was not issued prematurely. How can we explain the mysterious phenomenon that drawings so difficult of comprehension as Beardsley's, revealing themselves practically only to those with real knowledge of art, should have become famous all over the world and even to a certain extent popular?

Was it really due to nothing more than pre-war snobbishness?



Max Liebermann committed to paper the lapidary aphorism? "A man can be a great art expert without understanding anything about art."

In his standard work "Die Graphik der Neuzeit", the author, Curt Glaser, disposes of Aubrey Beardsley in a few careless lines as an artist "who did not trust his drawings to the wood-cutter's knife", and remarks by way of comforting us that even artists such as Ricketts and Shannon, whom he ranks above Beardsley, not only allowed their drawings to be reproduced by woodcut and lithography but actually by means of common zinc clichés.

Although Beardsley mastered the arts of lithographie and etching, he preferred the mechanical photo-