How Previous Art Movements Allowed Aubrey Beardsley To Explore His Own Art: The Grotesque and Erotic

Jennifer Pruess / Art 290 / Fall 2016

During the late 1800’s, a period referred to as the Yellow Nineties, Victorian life was filled with irony. Facing the end of bourgeois attitudes, it braced for the future. This is when Aubrey Beardsley saw his opportunity to enter the art world.\(^1\) Knowing he was afflicted with tuberculosis, he seized the moment, achieving an audience, validation, and criticism, all in the brief span of five years.\(^2\) Aubrey Beardsley’s successful career was made possible by the earlier art movements of Medievalism, Aestheticism, and Japanese woodblock prints.

Before Beardsley was born, artist John Ruskin championed Medievalism in his critique of Victorian life. He sought to reform society through art. Medievalism itself is a critique of industrialist society and it was established as an art movement in Britain before there was access to Japanese art. In addition to Medievalism, writer Oscar Wilde became the leading spokesman for Aestheticism, which denied that art had intrinsic moral and spiritual qualities. In essence, Aestheticism is an amoral ideology.\(^3\)

Japonism, Japanese applied art, occupies a portion of Aestheticism and was introduced to Britain in 1854. In turn, Britain went through three phases of Japonism in three decades beginning with the collecting by the avant-garde during the 1860’s. In the 1870’s a merger of Japonism and Aestheticism were united by a common goal, to convince the public for the need of functional design and the necessity of art in everyday life. During the 1880’s, in Knightsbridge, London, an entire Japanese village was erected. At this point, the movement became widespread. Children’s books designed with illustrations by Japanese artists is where Beardsley, as a young child, is thought to have been exposed to Japanese art.\(^3\)

As a young adult, Japanese woodblock prints helped to release Beardsley from the confinement of Western convention and served as the house for his ironic voice. His main contribution to the grotesque was the exposure of the sexual taboos in 1890’s England. He understood that Victorian sexuality was based on the claim that they did not lust while they were at the same time trying to escape the bounds of sexual repression. His role would be to highlight this tension, not seek to change it.\(^3\)

Beardsley learned from *shunga*, Japanese erotic prints, that sexuality could be suggested. He also observed that sexual activities show both male and female enjoyment. Women engaging in chosen activities instead of being demur, created explicit and sensual subject matter. This is a common thread of Japanese woodblock art and Beardsley’s art. He represents female subject matter as being less demur, they move towards their destination with steady and unabashed strides.\(^3\)

In conclusion, Aubrey Beardsley was in his prime during the Yellow Nineties. This period is characterized as the “first modern decade,” and witnessed the collapse of universal truths, the rejection of both bourgeois moral idealism and outdated naturalistic realism. Art mirrored the paradoxes of Victorian sentiment, both in written and visual capacities. This time also served as an introduction to the ugly, the evil, and the grotesque as representations of beauty. It became fertile ground for cultural rebellion.\(^3\) Beardsley, seized his opportunity to explore the grotesque and the erotic. Not only did he create a stir, he gained a successful career in which he received several commissions, became art director for the Yellow Book, and created strong, daring illustrations that shaped the future of book design.\(^2\)

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