Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) cut a dash and caused a splash in the 25 years of his life. Despite his short career, his illustrative output was considerable, encompassing Arthurian legend, ancient Greek comedy, and 18th-century poetry. Synonymous with scandal, he is best remembered for the notoriously decadent journal *The Yellow Book*, and his collaboration with Oscar Wilde on the banned play *Salome*.

Beardsley’s immense influence on his contemporaries led the 1890s to be nicknamed ‘The Beardsley Period’. Inspired by Mantegna, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Japanese printmaking, his style and technique were unique. Exquisite line drawings in black ink flaunted his skill, versatility, and humour. He was a central figure of the Aesthetic movement, but his influence prevails today. Drawing on the V&A’s extensive collection of Beardsley’s drawings, prints, and posters, this exhibition showcases over 100 works covering his entire career alongside works of decorative and fine art by his contemporaries.
Genesis
As a youth, Beardsley was a precocious and talented artist. He impressed Sir Edward Burne-Jones who advised him to pursue an artistic career. At a time when beautifully decorated books were popular, Beardsley gained patronage from publishers, rewarding his early supporters with distinctive designs for Malory's medieval romance, *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Fame
Beardsley’s sudden success saw his work appearing on posters in the streets and in publications beyond his own art direction of *The Yellow Book*. His distinctive style epitomised the atmosphere of the 1890s revelling in decadence, symbolism and eroticism.

Decorative Decadence
In the 1890s artistic schools of thought including Aestheticism, Art Nouveau, and the Arts and Crafts movement approached interiors as works of art. Peacock feathers, sunflowers and Japanese art invigorated objects designed by Beardsley’s contemporaries such as Walter Crane and William De Morgan.

Scandal
With their close connection over *Salome*, Oscar Wilde’s trial and imprisonment in 1895 tainted Beardsley’s reputation. In his last years, he created some of his most risqué works including *Lysistrata*, but a week before his death asked his publisher to destroy all copies ‘by all that is holy’.

Curatorial team


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Size: 300–500 m²
Touring from 2026