

A detailed black and white line drawing by Aubrey Beardsley. It depicts a young woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark, fur-trimmed garment. She is holding a long, thin object, possibly a sword or a wand, and looking down at it. The background features a landscape with trees, a body of water, and a distant building. The style is characteristic of the Aesthetic movement, with intricate line work and a focus on decorative elements.

A touring exhibition from the V&A

# Aubrey Beardsley

## Aubrey Beardsley: Grotesque Beauty

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.

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## 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

Ruth Hibbard is a Curator of Paintings, Drawings & Illustration at the V&A. Her publications include chapters in *The Art of the Illustrated book* (V&A, 2022), *The V&A Book on Colour in Design* (V&A, 2020), and *Word & Image. Art Books and Design* (V&A, 2015).

Zorian Clayton is a Curator of Prints at the V&A specialising in 19th and 20th century posters and paper ephemera. Contributions to publications include *The Poster: A Visual History* (V&A, 2020), *Museums, Sexuality & Gender Activism* (Routledge, 2020), and *Fashioning Masculinity: The Art of Menswear* (V&A, 2022).

Max Donnelly is Curator of Furniture and Woodwork, 1800–1915, in the V&A Department of Performance, Furniture, Textiles and Fashion. His publications include a chapter in *C.F.A. Voysey: Arts & Crafts Designer* (V&A, 2016) and the book, *Christopher Dresser: Design Pioneer* (V&A, 2021).

Size: 300–500 m<sup>2</sup>  
Touring from 2026

## Contacts

Anna Fletcher, Lead – Touring Exhibitions, [a.fletcher@vam.ac.uk](mailto:a.fletcher@vam.ac.uk)

Daniel Slater, Director of Exhibitions and Loans, [d.slater@vam.ac.uk](mailto:d.slater@vam.ac.uk)

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Front cover: Siegfried, Act II, ca. 1892–3, Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), pen and ink on paper, E.578–1932  
Top left: The Lady of the Lake Telleth Arthur of the Sword Excaliber from *Morte d'Arthur*, 1890s, Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), pen and ink on paper, E.406–1899  
Bottom left: Cover illustration to *The Yellow Book*, 1894, Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), print on paper, C.22193  
Top right: Vase designed and made by William De Morgan, London, 1881–1904. Earthenware. C.238–2018. Gift of Ian and Rita Smythe  
Bottom right: The Black Cape from *Salome*, 1894, Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), pen and ink on paper, given by Michael Harari, in memory of his father, Ralph A. Harari, E.427–1972