Aubrey Beardsley: Vintage of 1919

A New Picture Game for Tired Art Critics

BY OLIVER BRENNING

AUBREY BEARDSLEY was the world's undisputed master of black and white. He not only strongly influenced his contemporaries, but even to-day there are dozens of artists whose work shows that they are under great obligation to him. More than that, he is one of the few successful masters of his time. That, certainly, is true fame; perhaps the greatest compliment that an artist can receive.

Beardsley died in 1898, at the age of twenty-six, one of the most vital and original artists of his epoch. But his fame was as hotly contested as was Whistler's. That is the story of all creative genius: Keats and Wagner were also praised with faint damnations. Beardsley's marvelous sense of decoration, his balancing of white against black, his exquisite "line," so sure, so firm and so wonderfully beautiful and full of grace, have never been equalled by any artist working with pen and ink. He stands alone in his field— as Rembrandt did as an etcher until Whistler became amused by scratching on the copper.

The Exhibition of "Hitherto Unknown" Beardsleys

As it was generally known that practically all of Beardsley's drawings had been carefully recorded, and often reproduced, the announcement made last spring that a Beardsley exhibition in New York in April of about eighty hitherto unknown examples of Beardsley's work made no little stir in art circles. As the announcement ran, they were to come as "a complete and startling surprise." To students of Beardsley's work, however, they were not a surprise at all: they turned out to be exactly what was expected. Three of New York's great daily papers, notwithstanding, appeared with glowing accounts of the exhibition, testing that these drawings were magnificent specimens of Beardsley's art.

It was at this point that Mr. A. E. Gallatin, who is an authority on Beardsley, opened his spring campaign and came to the rescue of a great artist, an artist who was dead and could not defend himself. Enlisting the services of Joseph Pennell, Paul G. Konody (who brought over the Canadian War Memorials), C. Lewis Hind, the well-known English critic; Mr. Derry, who is writing a book on Beardsley; Martin Birnbaum, C. R. W. Nevinson, and half a dozen other Beardsley experts, Mr. Gallatin boldly went right ahead and attacked these eighty alleged Beardsley drawings with cut quarter.

All of his critics agreed that the drawings were not only not by Beardsley, but that they were an insult to the artist's memory. Chief among their weak points, aside from their faulty technique, was the fact that they were twice as large as any known examples, that they were drawn in pen and ink—Beardsley never used it, and finally—probably the most telling feature of all—that they were not included in Aymar Vallance's iconography, which was revised by Aubrey Beardsley himself.

The Controversy Spreads

THIS controversy raged in the columns of several metropolitan, as well as provincial, newspapers.
The alleged Beardley, supposed to be a rejected drawing made for Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” is a synthesized forgery, made up of details copied from the above genuine Beardsleys in newspapers. It became the most widely discussed incident in the art world of recent years. In fact, one wondered if the American public did not take a far greater interest in artistic matters than it has been generally credited with, after all.

On this page is reproduced one of the alleged rejected drawings for Pope’s “Rape of the Lock,” supposed to be by Beardley. Above are four well-known Beardsley drawings to show how this clumsy and uncouth thing was manufactured. It is hardly necessary to say that no artist would make a design by taking two of four previously executed drawings, making very bad copies of them and throwing them together without any regard whatever for design or composition.

We will leave it to our readers to pick out the various component parts of this drawing; it is a new form of picture puzzle, and making Beardsleys may now become, for all we know, a favorite hobby. Apart from which to what away the long autumn evenings. It has the merit of being a game which any number can play. This particular drawing, by whose is signed in full, while none of the public’s designs for illustrations for “The Rape of the Lock” are signed by the artist at all.

I am afraid that the art writers on the New York papers will not find their remarks taken very seriously next winter—that is, if the public is not quick to forget that they swallowed the Great Beardsley Hoax without a murmur. All excepting Henry McBride of the New York Sun, who very politely intimated the drawings might not be “right”, and Roy Cortissoz, the learned and able critic of the New York Tribune. Mr. Cortissoz very wisely did not dignify the exhibition of “hitherto unknown Beardsley drawings” with any mention at all.