

Violent Orange

Aubrey Beardsley at 114 Cambridge Street

Ruth Smith

In this time of Coronavirus, the home is on our agenda more than ever. Ruth Smith looks at the home of Aubrey Beardsley, which at the height of his career similarly provided a place for self-isolation due to poor health, a space and inspiration for his work, and a medium through which he built his artistic identity.

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Isolde Drinking the Poison', in *The Studio*, October 1895, colour lithograph, The Bridgeman Art Library.

Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898)



Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Aubrey Beardsley*, oil on canvas, 1895, National Portrait Gallery.



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Achieving of the Sangreal*, 1892, published in Max Beerbohm's article 'Aubrey Beardsley' in *Idler*, 1898 p. 538. Wikimedia Commons



114 Cambridge Street, c. 1895, Photograph, Private Collection.

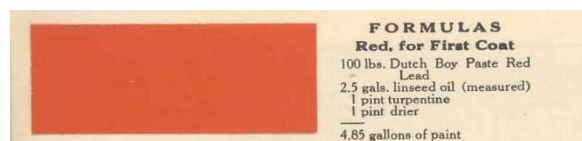
After a life of restlessly moving from one rented accommodation to another, 1893 marked a happy time for Aubrey Beardsley as growing artistic success and commissions enabled he and his family to move into 114 Cambridge Street in Pimlico.

This was largely due to a large commission Beardsley received for illustrating the publisher J.M. Dent's version of Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, published in 1893-1894.

Beardsley and his sister Mabel Beardsley set about giving their new house remarkable decoration.

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William Rothenstein, recalled that 'the walls were distempered a violent orange, the doors and skirtings were painted black; a strange taste [...] but his taste was all for the bizarre and exotic.' - *Men and Memories*, (1931), p. 134.



Alvah Sabin, *Red Lead - And How to Use it in Paint*, ed. 3, (John Wiley: New York, 1920), first edition published 1917.



Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A Rebours*, 1884.

The main character, Jean des Esseintes, was a highly decadent individual who believed that artificiality was the next stage of mankind's development.

Beardsley modelled himself on the fictional Des Esseintes, and similarly chose orange for his walls, 'whose expressiveness would be displayed in the artificial light of lamps'. Beardsley, like Des Esseintes, habitually stayed up late into the night.



Mont Abel Photographers Mentone, in A. Beardsley, *Under the Hill: And Other Essays in Prose and Verse* (John Lane, The Bodley Head: London and New York, 1904). Beardsley's treasured candlesticks can be seen on the desk.



Aubrey Beardsley, *Old Man and Embryo*, in *Bon Mots of Smith and Sheridan*, (J. M. Dent: London, 1893), pen and ink, 6.7 x 11cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, Harari Collection, E.314-1972.



'Athletics versus Aesthetics', *Illustrated London News*, 17 March 1883.

Though highly fashionable, Aestheticism was labelled, often satirically, as one of the degenerate elements causing the deterioration of culture. It was termed a 'new and interesting and beautiful disease'.

Beauty and ill health could be seen to characterise Beardsley's life and art. He used delicate and exquisite lines to portray grotesque scenes. Despite his image as an immaculately dressed dandy figure, he once said 'if I am not grotesque, I am nothing.'

114 Cambridge Street

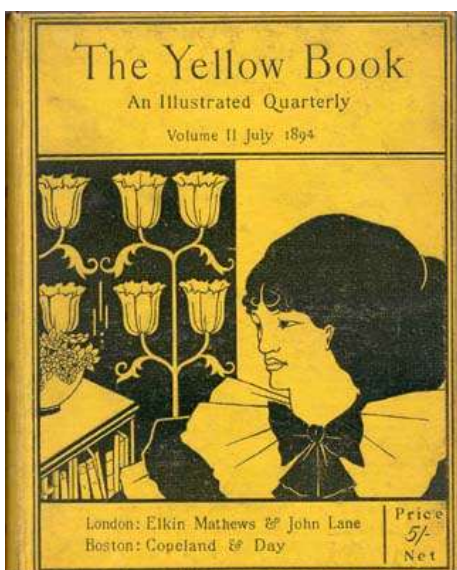


Increasingly immobilised due to tuberculosis, the expanding periodical press enabled Beardsley to reach a greater audience from 114 Cambridge Street. The popular 'home interview' used interior décor and personal belongings as a kind of 'index' to the interviewee's character.

Beardsley sought to shock visitors to create a big impression, seeing all publicity, both good and bad, as desirable.

This attitude was also applied in more private circles, for instance, perfuming his flowers in time for one of his and Mabel's 'At Homes', their Thursday afternoon tea parties. Beardsley used these opportunities to pose as a decedent individual pursuing heightened sensory experience.

Penrhyn Stanlaws, *Portrait Sketch of Aubrey Beardsley*, illustration for his interview, 'Some Personal Recollections of Aubrey Beardsley', in *Book Buyer*, vol. 17, no. 3, (New York, October, 1898), line-block, Library of Congress, Washington.



Aubrey Beardsley, *Cover Design for 'The Yellow Book'*, ink on paper, 26 x 21.6cm, 1894, Tate.

The new sense of stability the Beardsleys felt at 114 Cambridge Street was tragically short lived. In these rooms Beardsley's notorious *The Yellow Book* was conceived. It was a periodical that put art, literature and illustration on equal footing. It was avant-garde and provocative, exemplified in the reference to yellow, which was the colour in which French erotic novels were wrapped.

In 1895, Oscar Wilde, one of the main proponents of Aestheticism, was seen taking with him a yellow book at his arrest for his sexual relationships with men. The book was mistaken for Beardsley's *The Yellow Book* and due to the association of Beardsley with the case, the publisher, John Lane was pressured to dismiss Beardsley as editor of art.

The loss of income forced the family into their old pattern of moving restlessly from one rented apartment to the next.