

Homeward Bound:
Japanese Aesthetics in Aubrey Beardsley's Illustrations for *Salomé*

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde, describing the garden scene at the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, observes, “now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.”¹ His description evokes at once a sense of awe and unease: awe, in the marvelous, almost miraculous breath of the flitting curtains; unease, in the transience of the dappled light, underscored by the morbid pallidity of the painter. The reader is left with a sense that Wilde sees Japanese art as an illusion, a magic act; like a puff of smoke, it deceives its viewer into seeing life where there is only inanimate paper.²

In acknowledging Japanese art’s apparently fantastic qualities, Wilde inadvertently touches on one of the fundamental issues in the West’s approach to Japan. Many are quick to criticize Westerners for forcing Japan to reopen to trade in 1853, calling it racist and an intrusion upon their economic, political, and cultural identity—which in many ways it was. Yet, though Wilde poses a romanticized view of Japanese aesthetics, his does not seem to be an effort to “appropriate” Eastern values.³ Rather, his remark inadvertently indicates another troubling

¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” in *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1991), 131.

² Jeffrey Nunokawa, in his essay ““Oscar Wilde in Japan: Aestheticism, Orientalism, and the Derealization of the Homosexual,” *positions* 2, no. 1 (1994): 44-56, argues similarly that Wilde’s descriptions of Japan throughout his work represent the Victorian “impulse to artifice.” Nunokawa, “Oscar Wilde,” 55. This impulse could perhaps be re-phrased as an “impulse to integration,” in which Japanese ideas and art primarily were assimilated into Victorian culture; only secondarily were attempts made to understand it on its own terms.

³ I shy away from using terms like artistic or cultural “appropriation,” as their current usage in scholarship contains a different pejorative connotation than the one here expressed. Though there is certainly room to argue that Beardsley’s interpretation of Japanese aesthetics did harm to Western perception of Eastern culture and even indirectly (and almost certainly unintentionally) insulted it, this essay addresses instead the phenomenon of such “appropriation’s” impact on *Western* aesthetics and culture, regardless of the moral implications of the act of integration itself. I am, in effect, attempting to treat the West as Western scholarship has of late been prone to treat other cultures: as the quasi-passive recipient of a culture that must find a way to integrate new cultural information,

aspect of Victorian *Japonisme*: its disorienting influence on the West itself. Much as, in modern times, Japan's rushed adoption of capitalism has led to a host of social issues, so too may the Victorians' adoption of Japanese aesthetic principles and their accompanying philosophical values have contributed to the rise of the West's own overemphasis on consumerism and secularism.⁴

Japanese aesthetics, removed from their original cultural context, found a new home in the burgeoning materialism of the Decadent movement. Japanese *ukiyo-e* paintings (literally, "pictures of the floating world") were especially popular and often depicted women surrounded by empty space, creating a dreamlike, electrifying effect.⁵ The Decadents were entranced by their frank celebration of impermanence and pleasure, which had so long been subjugated in the West to the infinitude of the divine.⁶ Their attributes fell in line with the aesthetes' artistic values, which were

characterized by an elaborate ... often torturous style; it delights in strange and obscure words, sumptuous exoticism, exquisite sensations, and improbable juxtapositions; it is fraught with disruption, fragmentation, and paradox; it has a tendency to vague and mystical language, a longing to wring from words an enigmatic symbolism or a perverse irony. Decadent writing is also commonly defined by its thematic preoccupation with art.⁷

rather than as an active imposer of its own thoughts. To do otherwise, I reiterate, is to "neuter" foreign culture's agency in relation to the West, positive or negative.

⁴ See Tatsuo Inoue, "The Poverty of Rights-Blind Communitarity: Looking through the Window of Japan," *Brigham Young University Law Review* 1993, no. 2 (1993): 517-552. In recent years, Japan has seen a rise in a phenomenon known as *karoshi*, whereby a person dies as a direct result of overwork. For instance, in a 2017 article for *The Guardian*, Justin McCurry reports that 31-year-old reporter Miwa Sado died after clocking in 159 hours of overtime in a single month. "Japanese woman 'dies from overwork' after logging 159 hours of overtime in a month," *The Guardian*, published October 5, 2017. The Japanese government announced in 2016 that one-fifth of the Japanese workforce was at risk of *karoshi*. Agence France-Presse, "Japan: one fifth of employees at risk of death from overwork," *The Guardian*, published October 8, 2016.

⁵ See *Painting the Floating World: Ukiyo-e Masterpieces from the Weston Collection*, ed. Janice Katz and Mami Hatayama (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), Exhibition catalogue.

⁶ The French Impressionists were famously some of the first to adopt these new techniques. See, for instance, Monet's water-lilies, of which Figure 1 offers an example.

⁷ Ellis Hanson, Introduction to *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

The decadents asserted a doctrine of “*l’Art pour l’Art*,” in which art and beauty in themselves took on a purifying, semi-idealistic role and desired “to desire without respite,”⁸ which made them prime receptors for Japanese art.⁹ They saw in the Japanese elevation of materiality a simultaneous elevation and lowering of the status of the individual: relinquished from duties toward an immaterial God, man could give himself over to his own internal desires, which themselves attained metaphysical significance. At least in *ukiyo-e* art, they would have seen little concern over the human soul, only a desire to capture a person in a moment of dreamy time—a space in which traditional moral duality may seem to cease to exist, replaced merely with beauty. It is self-annihilation through sensation.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this Japanese influence on the Decadent aesthetic philosophy more present than in the work of Aubrey Beardsley, an illustrator whose controversial art drew from Japanese influences to depict images often sexually explicit or even blasphemous. In particular, his drawings for Wilde’s play *Salomé*—including *The Peacock Skirt* (Figure 2) and *The Climax* (Figure 3)¹⁰—demonstrate the connection between Japanese art and the decadent rejection of the sacred in favor of the sensual.¹¹ Beardsley seems to have intuited the Japanese artist’s interest in

⁸ Hanson, *Decadence*, 7.

⁹ Joseph Lavery argues that, “to argue that the roots of the theory of globality underpinning aesthetics’ understanding of its own universal applicability came into being through the encounter between Western theories of cultural form and the emergent forms of Japanese modernity that threatened, but eventually failed, to overwhelm Euro-American cultural hegemony.” Joseph Lavery, “Empire in a Glass Case: Japanese Beauty, British Culture, and Transnational Aestheticism,” PhD diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 5. His dissertation delves into a complementary assertion, albeit philosophically opposed to that of this essay: that the Japanese influence on the West ought to be critiqued as part of the Western attempt at dominance. Though this idea holds some merit when properly discussed, the purpose of this essay is not to “undermine” Western “dominance” but to determine ways in which Western culture itself was undermined by misguided and clumsy attempts to integrate foreign philosophies. This approach is not meant to exonerate the West, but to examine ways in which the rhetorical strategies often used to criticize the Victorians’ relationship with Japan may be recast.

¹⁰ These two works were published with their counterparts in censored form in 1894, and in their full form in “the 1907 edition of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* by John Lane.” See “Aubrey Beardsley illustrations for *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde,” The British Library, accessed November 27, 2020 for a basic overview of the publication process.

¹¹ To say the decadents completely rejected the sacred is a vast oversimplification; in fact, many of them, including both Wilde and Beardsley, converted to Catholicism by the end of their lives. See Hanson, *Decadence*, 11-14. However, this essay will be focusing on Beardsley and Wilde as they exhibit a “pure” decadent moral-aesthetic philosophy, rather than how they deviate from it. For Wilde’s relationship with the Catholic Church, see Kimberly

, in oneness through sensation, translating them to render more subjective the artistic “eye” that so long strove for objectivity in the West. Like honeysuckle, Japanese philosophical ideas, when transplanted from their own “biome,” quickly overwhelmed centuries of moral-aesthetic debate in the West by flagrantly embracing as solutions the very tenets so long assumed to be problems.

Japanese Philosophy

To better understand how the Decadent movement misinterpreted the Japanese understanding of the world, however, one must first understand how it fit in its original cultural context. And the Japanese, more perhaps than any other culture, were defined by a merging of often-contradictory beliefs, primarily Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. When the Japanese encountered Western philosophy in the nineteenth century, they coined the term *tetsugaku* to integrate this new mode of thought into their system and distinguish it from the others. Its practitioners were deemed *tetsugakusha*: “ones who partake in the *Wissenschaft* of wisdom,” and they quickly developed an identity separate from the traditional *tetsujin*, or “wise people”.¹² As Thomas Kasulis explains,

the *tetsugakusha* are akin to how geologists understand clay whereas the *tetsujin* are akin to how master potters understand clay. The geologist acquires scientific knowledge (geology) to forge an external relation between the knower and the clay, each of which preexists the knowledge and basically remains unchanged by the knowledge in, by, and with the clay as an interactive project (the masterwork of pottery) For the *tetsugakusha*, philosophy bridges the philosopher’s connection with reality; for the *tetsujin*, on the other hand, philosophy is the Way the philosopher and reality are purposively engaged with each other and transform each other. For the *tetsugakusha* philosophy is a link the self creates to connect with the world; for the *tetsujin* philosophy is a product created out of the mutual engagement between self and world.¹³

J. Stearn, “The Priest,” in *Oscar Wilde: A Literary Life* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 83-132. For Beardsley, see Matthew Sturgis, “The Death of Aubrey Beardsley,” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 60, no. 1 (1998): 61-82.

¹² Thomas Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), 1.

¹³ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 1.

The traditional Japanese mode of philosophizing, they were quick to recognize, was more inseparable from craft—defined broadly as an active, mindful relationship between the craftsman-philosopher and the thing crafted—than was so in the West. By examining the differences between traditional *tetsujin* thought and that of Western philosophy, a Westerner can come to realize that Japanese art is itself a mode of philosophical expression, meant to be examined as part of a network connecting art, artist, viewer, and reality.

This network is itself made possible by the Japanese's tendency to turn towards the intuitive relationships between things. The Japanese perspective on philosophical relationships, “begin[s] by examining how they items internally overlap (how they *interrelate*)” rather than with an additional thing that “externally *connects* or *bonds* them.” The body and mind, in turn, though distinguishable from each other, are related internally; “[they] cannot be completely separated without violating their essential character or function,” rendering the relationship between them fluid and intrinsic, rather than “fixed” and “external.”¹⁴ This interrelationship of body and mind also applies more generally to the world as a whole, allowing the Japanese philosopher to “discover the relationship of one [object] to another by looking more closely at the information already within the individual [object],” rather than by examining each individual in light of the whole.¹⁵ Such “holographic” thinking equates the part to the whole in a symbolism based not on the lesser to the greater but one component to the machine—synecdoche, not metonymy.

Japanese philosophy is therefore notable for being able to relinquish the goal of “absolute” truth in favor of several opposed, albeit constructive ideologies. In fact, as with the *tetsugakusha* and, before them, the Buddhists and Confucians, it integrates foreign ideas by

¹⁴ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 2.1.

¹⁵ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 2.2.

allocating them to specific spheres of social influence, assimilating them into preexisting traditions, or merging them with their own theories to create a new tradition.¹⁶ This mode of philosophical inquiry has had a massive impact on the ways in which the Japanese have attempted to reconcile their “five fountainheads”: Shintoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Western Academic Philosophy, and Bushido. While an extensive discussion of each of these philosophies is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief summary of the interactions between Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism will help to identify several key influences on the *ukiyo-e* movement essential to understanding its proper context.¹⁷

From prehistoric Japan, the Proto-Shintō had conceived of wrongdoing not as “criminality or sin” but as “a violation or transgression of a taboo, regardless of whether the acts were accidental or intentional”; thus, the “proper response” was not to punish or rehabilitate but to engage in “ritual purification,” which generally involved the key virtues of cleanliness and silence.¹⁸ When the Shintōs began to engage with Chinese Confucianism, however, they rejected the idea that the emperor gained his authority by “celestial entitlement or command,” which could be revoked if the emperor failed to uphold the Way (*dao*), insisting instead on a familial framework in accordance with their perspective of material reality as undergirded by organic relationships.¹⁹ Meanwhile, they quickly accepted the Confucian distinction between *ri* and *ki*: the former asserting the essential goodness of humanity, the latter denoting a transformative component accounting for the vital quality of all things—that without which nothing could

¹⁶ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 2.3.1-3. Kasulis refers to these three ways of integration as allocation, relegation, and hybridization, respectively.

¹⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of several of the five fountainheads, see not only Kasulis’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article but also John Tucker, “Japanese Confucian Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), Shigenori Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), and Dennis Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017).

¹⁸ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 3.1.

¹⁹ Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy,” 3.2.

exist.²⁰ Confucians saw life as “the bountiful and morally good creation of heaven and earth” and people themselves as intrinsically good, albeit to differing degrees.²¹

Buddhists, on the other hand, while equally revered, held a position often critiqued by Confucians for its nihilistic “emptiness.”²² One of the most prominent forms of Buddhism was Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes meditation and insists that experiential knowledge is more primary than “theoretical, intellectual knowledge.”²³ It argues that “reason in its discursive use is incapable of knowing and understanding *in toto* what reality is, for example, what human beings are and what their relation to nature is—thus, one must transcend both the apparent unity and the duality of a thing before coming to see it as it is, beyond “the standpoint of ego-consciousness.”²⁴ It rejects *practical*, although not necessarily *existential* dualism, worrying that “once the practitioner accepts [the inner-outer dichotomy of a human being], he or she is led to accept as true a host of other ‘two’ things that are affirmed to be real, as is seen in pairs of opposites such as mind *vs.* body, I *vs.* others, love *vs.* hate, good *vs.* evil, I *vs.* nature.”²⁵ When one believes in any distinction between themselves and the world, they argue, one becomes physically and psychologically tied to a single position, isolated from that which is transcendent and beyond. To utterly reject the self and see that all things are one is ultimately to be at peace.²⁶ Its aim is to unify the complexity of existence through experiential meditation.

In the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, however, new forms of Buddhism would develop, prominently Pure Land Buddhism, which evolved out of the rigorously ascetic *Mahayana* (“great vehicle”) tradition. *Mahayana* Buddhists believed that the material world was

²⁰ Tucker, “Japanese Confucian Philosophy,” 3.2.

²¹ Tucker, “Japanese Confucian Philosophy,” 3.6.

²² Tucker, “Japanese Confucian Philosophy,” 3.9.

²³ Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy,” 1.

²⁴ Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy,” 4.

²⁵ Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy,” 5.

²⁶ Nagatomo, “Japanese Zen Buddhist Philosophy,” 5.2.

a place of anguish and that the path to “supreme awakening” began with a “profound awakening of the mind aspiring to enlightenment (*bodhicitta*)” that would set them on a path potentially taking eons of lifetimes to complete; the goal, however, is not “paradise” as a Westerner might conceive it, but achieving “nonretrogression.”²⁷ “While prior to reaching this stage,” Hirota explains, “[one] will fall back into samsaric existence if they discontinue their practice, once they have attained nonretrogression through stilling their discriminative thought and seeing suchness, they will never regress but steadily advance in their practice to supreme awakening.”²⁸ They aimed to reach a point where they could be assured of escape from the cruelty of the world

Pure Land Buddhists thereby shifted the emphasis of Buddhist thought; rather than achieving nirvana and liberation from “blind passions” and the cycle of rebirth (a framework in which a new buddha is a “momentous event”), they instead argued that “all sentient beings” ought to strive to Buddhahood.²⁹ They also

reformulated the central elements of the path—traditionally given as the “three learnings” of precepts, meditation, and wisdom—as the six paramitas—giving, moral action, patience, effort, meditation, and wisdom. In this enumeration of virtues, we find selfless giving understood not simply as alms-giving or “charity,” but as the total, compassionate activity of bodhisattvas for whom meritorious action leading to enlightenment and the giving of their own merit to others are interfused.³⁰

Beyond this list of virtues, however, certain doctrinal debates raised the question of whether moral philosophy was necessary at all to this system.³¹ Focused as it was on the annihilation of one’s experience of the world, what did it matter how one acted in the meantime?

All of these philosophical elements and many others converged to create a unique set of visual identifiers and artistic tenets in Japanese art, some focused on Confucian refinement,

²⁷ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 2.1-2. “Mahayanists,” Hirota elaborates, “taught the thorough relinquishment of all attachments through the realization or “seeing” of the nonsubstantiality or emptiness that pervades not only the self, but all things and all persons.”

²⁸ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 2.2.

²⁹ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 2.4.

³⁰ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 2.5.

³¹ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 3.1-2.

others on Buddhist existentialism. “Classical Japanese philosophy,” Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane summarize, “understands reality as constant *change*, or (to use a Buddhist expression) *impermanence* awareness of the fundamental condition of existence is no cause for nihilistic despair, but rather a call to vital activity in the present moment and to gratitude for another moment’s being granted to us.”³² Yet, contrarily, “the arts in Japan have tended to be closely connected with Confucian practices of self-cultivation, as evidenced in the fact that they are often referred to as ‘ways [of living]’ ... culture and the arts tend to be more closely connected with intellect and the life of the mind than in the western traditions.”³³ They lay out several of the most important of these chimeric principles, which are as follows:

*Mono no aware*³⁴ is the Japanese term for the “‘pathos’ (*aware*) of ‘things’ (*mono*), deriving from their transience.” Inspired by Buddhist teaching, it identifies mortality and transience as that which allows things to hold a moving emotional grip over their viewer.

Wabi,³⁵ or simple, austere, “understated beauty,” is the idea that “[objects] with minor imperfections are often valued more highly than the ones that are ostensibly perfect.” From the perspective of “the *wabi* aesthetic,” things that are inadequate, broken, under- or overripe, obscured, or otherwise lacking “ideal” beauty are to be preferred. As Parkes and Loughnane explain it, “If for the Buddhists the basic condition is impermanence, to privilege as consummate only certain moments in the eternal flux may signify a refusal to accept that basic condition.”³⁶ It finds its home most fully in

³² Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018).

³³ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 1.

³⁴ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 2.

³⁵ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 3.

³⁶ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 3.

Japanese tea ceremonies but is present in other areas of art, as well.

Sabi,³⁷ often associated with “desolateness” and solitary loneliness, refers to the aesthetic appreciation of “something that has aged well, grown rusty . . . , or has acquired a patina that makes it beautiful.” It provides a connection to the past and to the natural environment in a graceful and elegant way.

*Yūgen*³⁸ refers to a certain “mysterious grace,” harkening to “a general feature of East-Asian culture, which favors allusiveness over explicitness and completeness.” It seeks out the “depth of the world we live in, as experienced with the aid of a cultivated imagination.” In the visual arts, too, it calls one to consider not just the painting but “the bodily movements that created [a] work.” Parkes and Loughnane use as an example Sesshū Tōyō’s 1495 painting *Splashed Ink Landscape* (Figure 4), explaining that it

derives as much from the space that is left untouched, the invisible and absent, as from what is painted and visible. The work appears incomplete, still in the act of formation, and the dramatic negative spaces created by the mists allow the various forms to dissolve and blend into one other, but more decisively, according to the *yūgen* dynamic, this negativity invites the viewer into the painting to actively complete it . . . the incompleteness and allusiveness of the artwork summons [*sic*] the viewer into the scene.³⁹

This form of “splashed ink” painting, because of its allusiveness, tested both the painter’s skill and the viewer’s observational capacity by “negating the self and becoming continuous with the motions of nature.”

Iki,⁴⁰ on the other hand, refers to an aesthetic principle that Parkes and Loughnane explain is at least partially untranslatable. Kuki Shūzō’s phenomenological account of it, *The Structure of “Iki,”* suggests that it bears similarity to the French concepts of *chic*,

³⁷ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 4.

³⁸ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 5-6.

³⁹ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 6.

⁴⁰ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 7.

coquet, raffiné—it is rather seductive. Yet it also encompasses “‘brave composure’ (*ikiji*) and ‘resignation’ (*akirame*),” insofar as it relates to impermanence and human mortality. Parkes and Loughnane list various attributes that are *iki*, according to Kuki: willow trees, steady rain, informally styled hair, vertical stripes, grays, browns, blues. Kuki suggests Baudelaire’s aesthetic as a European counterpart.

Kire,⁴¹ or “cutting,” refers to a prominent idea in Zen Buddhism of seeing one’s own nature in letting go of “the root of life.” Everything in a world of “radical impermanence” lacks roots, and therefore things that are cut off from the natural—such as the bordered-in “dry landscape” gardens—exemplify what is intrinsic to all living things.

To drastically oversimplify, Japanese art’s refined expression reflects the mores of the Confucian intelligentsia from which its artists often derived; meanwhile, its themes and “pathos” evoke the experience of Buddhist metaphysical reality, attempting to translate into the medium of painting—which of necessity can capture only one moment in time—the ceaselessness of change and the response one might have to it. While, to the untrained Western eye, much Japanese art may thus seem haphazard and incomplete, it is a demanding, highly technical process of translating not merely the visual information of the forms but the true essence of the thing as transient and mortal. Hence, Japanese art relies heavily on the use of negative space and artists’ perception, which, in the presence of dynamic yet often understated linework and color, gives the composition an almost supercharged effect, capturing not merely the viewer’s attention but their heartfelt emotional experience of loss and nostalgia. This effect leads him or her not only to see but *feel* the relentless mutability of the moment.

⁴¹ Parkes and Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” 8.

In light of these aesthetic principles, furthermore, the Japanese distinction between *tetsujin* and *tetsugakusha* becomes even more clear. For the *tetsujin*, art was not only mode of philosophical expression but a form of philosophy itself. Where Westerners have often attempted to make philosophy or religion the *subject* of artwork—whether it be Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (Figure 5) or Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (Figure 6)—the Japanese instead attempt to make their philosophy the lens through which one’s visual perception is mediated and translated onto canvas (or, rather, paper). Where Western art is often (though not always) primarily a call to meditate on the beautiful and immaterial through its visually accurate depiction of subject matter, Japanese art is often itself an argument, forcing the viewer to meditate on their present material suffering. Art is in the *tetsujin*’s domain; it is itself a philosophical meditation, not merely a narration or visual statement.

***Ukiyo-e* and the Decadent Movement**

This vastly simplified framework, however, does not apply neatly to *ukiyo-e* art. The *ukiyo-e* movement was a reaction against Pure Land Buddhists, especially their doctrine that self-annihilation would allow one to escape the world’s transient cruelty.⁴² Though those who painted the “floating world” agreed that the world was cruel, they saw it as an opportunity to seek pleasure where they could, rejecting the pain of reality in moments of muffled, weightless enjoyment, at once passionate, melancholy, and sober.⁴³ Beautiful women, courtesans,

⁴² See Hirota, introduction to “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy.” He explains that “the Japanese Pure Land contribution to Buddhist philosophy may be said to lie in its fusion of two fundamental attitudes. On the one hand, it stands squarely upon a Mahayana Buddhist conception of enlightened wisdom as radically nondichotomous and nondual with reality, indicated with such terms as thusness, buddha-nature, and emptiness. On the other hand, it directly confronts the nature of human existence in its ineluctable finitude: karmically conditioned, discriminative, and reifying in awareness, and given to the afflicting passions of attachment to a falsely conceived self surrounded by substantial objects. Through its probing religious anthropology, Japanese Pure Land thought explores the paradoxical issues of how transformative awakening can be possible for the ignorant self, how attainment as liberation from defiled self-will can occur, and the nature of the world of religious realization that unfolds within the locus of a person’s samсарic experience.” Oversimply put, Japanese Pure Land philosophy deals with the relationship between one’s own human limits and the necessity for “liberation” from that self to reach “enlightened wisdom.”

attendants, parties, and even explicit sex scenes (called *shunga*) were all common subjects. Above all, what is necessary to *ukiyo-e* is a sense of impermanent, temporal insulation from the rest of the world. *Ukiyo-e* art, especially its woodblock prints, tended to use exquisite patterns and energetic linework to suggest the human form by their elegant motion, rather than by exact anatomical representation (see Figure 7). Hokusai's *Woman of Ōhara Smoking* (Figure 8), for instance, emphasizes the momentary stillness of a wood-seller, who stands smoking a cigarette. The scene hangs suspended, allowing the viewer to admire the brief snapshot of time captured in Hokusai's deft brushstrokes. The negative backgrounds and charged linework convey well the tone of isolation in pleasure, perhaps its most compelling feature.⁴⁴ And paintings like these, as well as their artists' woodblock prints, including Hokusai's own famous *Great Wave* (Figure 9), were some of the first available to Western artists.

When the *ukiyo-e* movement began in the seventeenth century, it had marked an important shift in Japanese culture away from the more spiritualized thought of the eras that preceded it. After the devastating Great Meiriki Fire, or Furisode Fire, in Edo on January 18, 1657, the city had to be rebuilt quickly, providing an excellent client base for this new art form.⁴⁵ Because the woodblock prints depicted everyday life in a way that was quick to produce and easy to disseminate in large numbers, *ukiyo-e* prints came to "[portray] various aspects of Edo society as they were occurring and [relay] them effectively and widely. It thus became a kind of instant reporting medium."⁴⁶ And when color woodblock printing was invented in 1765, the entire *ukiyo-e* movement further solidified its journalistic role in Japanese society.⁴⁷ It is in large

⁴³ See, for example, *The Woman of Ōhara Smoking* by Katsushika Hokusai, which uses many of these techniques to create a painting at once utterly two-dimensional and almost limitlessly deep to the human mind.

⁴⁴ See *Painting the Floating World: Ukiyo-e Masterpieces from the Weston Collection*, ed. Janice Katz and Mami Hatayama (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), Exhibition catalogue, especially Mami Hatamaya's essay, "Ways of Seeing Beauty in *Ukiyo-e*," 32-43 and Nagata Seiji's essay, "Towards a Revised History of *Ukiyo-e*," 20-31.

⁴⁵ Nagata, "Toward a Revised History of *Ukiyo-e*," 24.

⁴⁶ Nagata, "Toward a Revised History of *Ukiyo-e*," 25.

part due to these prints' functionality, convenience, and mass appeal that they gained such wide popularity. And, because they were so successful, paintings, too, found their place in commissions from wealthier clientele.⁴⁸ Though these paintings approach more closely the "fine art" of the periods before it, the *ukiyo-e* movement nevertheless portended an age of greater consumerism: in which art served the people, not only the elite.

The change, however, was not a quick one. For almost the entirety of *ukiyo-e*'s prominence, "ukiyo-e artists were ... regarded as auxiliary craftsmen" and "ukiyo-e that accommodated customers' requests were considered trivial and not legitimate paintings like religious or historical works"; it was not until recently that *ukiyo-e* painting would be considered a more elevated art form.⁴⁹ This perception seems to have been related to its relationship with the reigning Kano school, which operated under a stagnant feudal system passed down from the Muromachi period. *Ukiyo-e*, much like the Impressionist movement in Europe, rejected the rigidly structured system in which it was placed. To meet the needs of the shifting market in the Edo period, it was necessary that *ukiyo-e* artists be "free of stylistic constraints."⁵⁰ And, in the wreckage of that fire, as people scrounged for beauty wherever they could find it, the methods of *ukiyo-e* gradually overtook older styles, reflecting a new kind of spontaneity that catered to an audience desperately craving something to tie it to its past and escape from the alienating world around them. In keeping with this shift, the subject matter, though still implicitly Buddhist and Confucian in its cultural assumptions, became gradually more sensational and popular.

Such was the artistic world in Japan at the time that the West was initiated. Though many traditional aesthetic principles, such as *iki* and *wabi-sabi*, were maintained in *ukiyo-e* art,

⁴⁷ Mami, "Ways of Seeing Beauty in Ukiyo-e," 35.

⁴⁸ Mami, "Ways of Seeing Beauty in Ukiyo-e," 33-34.

⁴⁹ Nagata, "Toward a Revised History of Ukiyo-e," 28.

⁵⁰ Nagata, "Toward a Revised History of Ukiyo-e," 27.

the movement's emphasis on transitory pleasures and spontaneous fluidity made it far more easily digestible by Western audiences, who need not be as familiar with Japan's philosophical tradition to be attracted to the exotic beauty of its subject matter and execution.⁵¹ That being said, though the *ukiyo-e* movement marked a shift away from past traditions, it was continuous with them in its metaphysical and ethical assumptions: it did not reject the idea of a cruelly transient material world, only offer an attractive alternative to Zen meditation. It dug in its heels, celebrating impermanence and attempting to morph every moment into one of pleasure. Notably, however, its advent in the West occurred simultaneously with a similar shift in European culture, away from the more pious, devotional religious thought of the medieval, period towards a form of materialist secularism that would reach at least an intermediate climax in the nineteenth-century Decadent movement.

The Decadents, arriving on the scene soon after the opening of Japan in 1853, were already primed for the Japanese obsession with longing.⁵² As such, they were drawn to *ukiyo-e* art and to Japanese philosophy as a whole. Yet, operating under the centuries of cultural assumptions imparted by Christian metaphysics, the intuition to work *within* that transience for a solution was not as readily available as the intuition to search for a solution *beyond* the self.⁵³

⁵¹ For instance, see the visual distinction between Sesshū's *Splashed Ink Landscape* and Hokusai's *Great Wave*: Sesshū's work would be, to an uninitiated viewer, almost incomprehensibly abstract.

⁵² See, again, Hanson, *Decadence*, 7.

⁵³ Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* offers an excellent example of this philosophical approach to material transience, as does Joris-Karl Huysman's novel, *En Route*, rev. ed. (Cambridgeshire, UK: Dedalus Ltd., 2002). Dorian's main metaphysical anguish, in fact, is transience: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! . . . I would give my soul for that!" Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 28. Yet, after he achieves that result, Wilde demonstrates that eternal earthly pleasures are really no solution at all, and Dorian ends by killing himself in an effort to destroy the distorted image of himself that he sees in the painting. Many sections of the novel, however, suggest that his fate could have been avoided. As Basil says, "'Pray, Dorian, pray . . . What is it that one was taught to say in one's boyhood? 'Lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our sins. Wash away our iniquities.' Let us say that together. The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. We are both punished.'" Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 151. For Wilde, God, rather than the self, provides a viable solution to the problem of transience. Similarly, Huysmans' novel details a fictional, thinly veiled autobiographical account of his conversion to Catholicism, in which a similar solution to the transience of his previous decadent lifestyle is established.

The results of this approach were, in turn, two-fold. On the one hand, many aesthetes found themselves turning, like the *ukiyo-e* artists, to minutely interpreting their sensations of pleasure.⁵⁴ On the other, many experienced profound religious conversions to Catholicism towards the end of their lives—an institution with perhaps one of the most external solutions to the problem of transience ever encountered.⁵⁵ Though many were attracted to the idea of transient pleasure and as part of *l'Art pour l'Art*, few, if any, ultimately assented to the Japanese solutions to the discomfort with the material world that such a perspective almost inevitably inspired. The question we at last return to, then, is this: how was Aubrey Beardsley, as a decadent, influenced by Japanese *ukiyo-e* art in his illustrations for *Salomé*? And how did his interpretation contribute to the development of the Decadent movement as a consumerist and secular force?

Aubrey Beardsley

Beardsley was an artist undaunted by tradition or by novelty, and his work reflects his mixed engagement with traditional values, Decadent ideals, and *Japonisme*. As Matthew Sturgis explains in his introduction to *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography*:

Tainted by tuberculosis even from childhood, [Beardsley] knew that his time was circumscribed. The knowledge did not paralyse him or fill him with resentment: it drove him forward. He burnt with a peculiar brilliance and energy. His genius developed almost at a stroke, and was sustained. The pattern of his career—from early promise, first achievement and full assurance to conscious elaboration, commercial neglect and rich late work—echoes that of many artists who had three times his span. All was encompassed in less than six years of professional life.⁵⁶

Though Beardsley's life was short—only 25 years—it was eventful, and there is room in this essay only to examine its barest contours.

⁵⁴ See Joris-Karl Huysmans' famous decadent novel, *À Rebours*, written years before his conversion. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (À Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Group, 2003).

⁵⁵ Hanson lists many decadents who converted to Catholicism by the end of their lives; among them were such names as Oscar Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Lionel Johnson, Lord Alfred Douglas, as well as Aubrey Beardsley himself. Others, like Walter Pater, admired the Church but never converted. Hanson, *Decadence*, 11-14.

⁵⁶ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 1.

After being commissioned several times for his illustration work in school,⁵⁷ he encountered the French works of Alexandre Dumas, Émile Zola, and Alphonse Daudet, whose frank treatment of sex and sexuality influenced his subsequent illustrations and writings for many years. His most intense year of artistic training, 1891, took him to the British Museum and the National Gallery, where he plunged into the world of the Victorian Pre-Raphaelites and English Impressionists alike, entranced by the imaginative subject matter of the one and the thrilling controversy of the other.⁵⁸ He networked, forming connections with Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones and with Oscar Wilde.⁵⁹ Wilde, especially, introduced Beardsley to the exotic, seductive charm of the decadent movement and Charles Baudelaire; Beardsley drank up these new French ideas.⁶⁰ These various Western influences coalesced in his connection to Fred Brown, whose emphasis on figure drawing allowed him to develop a unique artistic style, one that began with a ‘grotesque cast’ and emphasized outline rather than tone to articulate form.⁶¹ Armed with a new, unique style, however, he needed to find ways to make it palatable to the public.

It is at this point that the Japanese influences in Beardsley’s work begin to be more evident. after one commercial failure, Sturgis notes, “[Beardsley] reverted to the example of Whistler and Japan that he had first glimpsed in the Peacock Room the previous year but had not properly digested.”⁶² Growing up at the height of the British *Japonisme* “craze,” he had often seen trifles of the Japanese aesthetic. At Brighton Grammar School, for instance, he had been

⁵⁷ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 49-50.

⁵⁸ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 66-68.

⁵⁹ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 74-75.

⁶⁰ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 79-80.

⁶¹ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 83-86. Arthur Symons, for instance, says of Beardsley’s linework, “The conventional draughtsman, any Academy student, will draw a line which shows quite accurately the curve of a human body, but all his science of drawing will not make you feel that line, will not make that line pathetic.” Arthur Symons, “Aubrey Beardsley,” introduction to *The Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1918), 34.

⁶² Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 98.

entranced by *Tales of Old Japan* by A.B. Mitford, which included Japanese prints.⁶³ At museums, he could have encountered Hokusai's *Manga* (e.g. Figure 10) or his *Hundred Views of Fuji*. These would have exposed him both to Japanese woodblock printing as described above, as well as the Japanese tradition of the "grotesque": distorted, somewhat whimsical figures with comically extended necks or faces similar in feeling to medieval gargoyles, depicted often in sordid scenes.⁶⁴ Linda Gertner Zatlin defines the grotesque as

an art form ... [using] physical exaggeration, deforming or distorting normative structures and reassembling them in ways which command attention. This physical exaggeration can undercut a subject by ridicule or embody a specific theme by highlighting a sense of horror, either menace or a fear of helplessness. Constituted of dissimilar parts, these exaggerated images create a distortion of the material world. A humorous or menacing tension arises between the (potentially) fearsome, which is depicted, and the harmonious, which is not depicted. Humor is present when a human frailty, physical or emotional, renders the life-threatening or sinister element harmless. The humorous grotesques is decidedly more complex, expressing not simply fears, but implicit criticisms or attacks on these fears Embedded in attention-getting hyperbole, deformation is employed in an allegorical manner to make social criticism palatable.⁶⁵

This unique subset of art within the *ukiyo-e* movement would greatly inform Beardsley's own work, especially, as Zatlin argues, in its ability to draw together the divine, comedic, and immoral.⁶⁶ In addition to these grotesques, a friend also exposed him to *shunga* paintings from Hokusai, Kitagawa Utamaro, and other Japanese artists, which influenced his art until late in his career.⁶⁷ But it was in conversation with the Japanese influences in James McNeil Whistler, Odilon Redon, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec that Beardsley discovered his path to "[adapt] Japanese art to a wholly personal style," one composed of his Western Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist influences and his foreign proclivities alike.⁶⁸

⁶³ Linda Gertner Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley's 'Japanese' Grotesques," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25, no. 1 (1997), 89.

⁶⁴ Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley," 88-90. Late in his life, he had his publisher dispose of his book of erotic Japanese images.

⁶⁵ Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley," 91.

⁶⁶ Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley," 93.

⁶⁷ Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley," 89.

His illustrative career quickly embarked on a meteoric rise, in which he continued to vacillate between the various European and Japanese influences on his work, at times coming close to losing touch with his fascination with *ukiyo-e* prints, at others practically repudiating the Pre-Raphaelite tradition. These influences came to a head in Beardsley's first illustration for *Salomé* (Figure 19), a prototype, of sorts, for what would eventually become "The Climax": "He employed his most Japonesque conventions; the composition was daringly asymmetric and abstract, the action confined to the top half of the panel; the background was made up of overlapping circles; the borders bristled with 'hairs', a tracery of arabesques and peacock plumes swirled over the scene." "The subject-matter," Sturgis admits "was vividly repellent," and it quickly sparked controversy in the artistic world.⁶⁹ The piece, however, did draw him closer to Wilde, who sent him an inscribed French edition of *Salomé* in 1893.⁷⁰

Yet, as their friendship developed, Beardsley began to take more liberties in his illustrations for *Salomé*; he did satirical illustrations of Wilde that implied he might perhaps be more indebted to tradition than the determinedly original author and playwright was willing to admit, and his illustrations, Sturgis notes, "[summon] the image of Wilde as the abandoned and effeminate sensualist 'seeking everywhere for [homosexual] lovers' What Wilde had sought to achieve through allusive verse, Beardsley reduced to mischief."⁷¹ These differences in artistic

⁶⁸ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 99. Zatlin, "Aubrey Beardsley," 90. Beardsley was particularly entranced by Whistler's *Peacock Room* (Figures 11 & 12), as well as Redon's more imaginative works—perhaps *Ophelia* (Figure 13). He also encountered Toulouse-Lautrec's *Le Divan Japonais* (Figure 14). Zatlin's article outlines numerous other of Beardsley's Japanese influences, as well. Stephen Calloway points out, however, one must be careful not to overestimate the Japanese influence on Beardsley's work: the influence of Greek vase paintings and Old Masters is also evident in works such as *Merlin* (Figure 15) or *Siegfried, Act II* (Figure 16). Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 34-52. Compare these works, as Calloway does, to *Youth Coursing a Hare* by D.S. MacCool (Figure 17) and Andrea Mantegna's *The Descent from the Cross* (Figure 18), which he mistakenly calls *The Entombment*.

⁶⁹ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 129-130.

⁷⁰ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 132.

⁷¹ Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 158.

temperament caused an increasing rift between the two; Wilde remained a “sentimental romantic,” while Beardsley grew increasingly cynical and his reputation notorious.⁷²

Following this tense collaboration, Beardsley’s career continued to rise, and Wilde and Beardsley’s relationship continued to fragment into an all-out dispute, which, in pairing with his failing health and several other factors, led him to become more reserved in the final years before his death in France in 1898. In particular, his involvement with the notorious decadent publication, *The Yellow Book*, led to scandal.⁷³ Though the temperamental distinctions between himself and Wilde make analysis of his illustrations along literary lines rather obscure, examining their narrative value alongside his muddled Western and Japanese influences may shed light on why Beardsley’s work was so utterly shocking to so many, and why, in some ways, its true cultural implications may have been fathomed even by the artist himself.

Formal Analysis

Two of the illustrations resulting from Beardsley’s tumultuous jumble of artistic inspirations were *The Peacock Skirt* and *The Climax*. *The Peacock Skirt* occurs early in the *Salomé* and depicts Salomé, standing with the Young Syrian Page who will soon kill himself when Salomé petitions Iokanaan (John the Baptist) to allow her to kiss him.⁷⁴ *The Climax* occurs, fittingly, at the drama’s climax: it features Salomé holding up the head of Iokanaan, which she, crazed with lust, kisses in darkness just before a disgusted Herod has her killed:

Ah! Tu n’as pas voulu me laisser baiser ta bouche, Iokanaan. Eh bien! Je la baiserais maintenant ... Tes yeux qui étaient si terribles, qui étaient si pleins de colère et de mépris, ils sont fermés maintenant. Pourquoi sont-ils fermés ? Ouvre tes yeux! Ah ! pourquoi ne m’as-tu pas regardée, Iokanaan ? Derrière tes mains et tes blasphèmes tu

⁷² Sturgis, *Beardsley*, 158-161.

⁷³ See Calloway, “The Glare of Yellow,” *Aubrey Beardsley*, 84-127.

⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, trans. Lord Alfred Douglas (London: The Fanfare Press, 1938), 56-59. This English translation from Lord Alfred Douglas strangely removes some of Wilde’s lines from the French edition. For this reason, I will use it when referring generally to the text, but will use the French edition for direct quotations, accompanied by my own translations.

*as caché ton visage. Tu as mis sur test yeux le bandeau de celui qui veut voir son Dieu. Eh bien, tu l'as vue, ton Dieu, Iokanaan, mais moi, moi ... Tu ne m'as jamais vue. Si tu m'avais vue, tu m'aurais aimée Je sais bien que tu m'aurais aimée, et le mystère de l'amour est plus grand que le mystère de la mort. Il ne faut regarder que l'amour.*⁷⁵

(“Ah! You did not want to let me kiss your mouth, Iokanaan. Well? I will kiss it now ... Your eyes that were so terrible, so full of anger and disgust, they are closed now. Why are they closed? Open your eyes! Ah! Why did you not look at me, Iokanaan? Behind your hands and your blasphemies you hid your face. You put over your eyes the blindfold of one who would see your God. Well, you have seen your God, Iokanaan, but me, me ... you never saw me. If you had seen me, you would have loved me I know well that you would have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. One need only look at love”).

Salomé is a play obsessed with looking: with the power and danger of turning one's eyes towards the wrong thing. Beardsley's two illustrations thus bookend the tragedy of *Salomé*'s wicked lust after that which God has consecrated, using his illustrations, to better or worse effect, to force the viewer to look at that terrible power.⁷⁶ Both pieces, furthermore, are strongly reminiscent of *ukiyo-e* art—especially woodblock prints—in their use of line, tone, composition, and even subject-matter.⁷⁷ That being said, though a Japanese woodblock print would likely use several

⁷⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame en un Acte* (Paris: Dehon de Cie, 1938), 67-70.

⁷⁶ Robert Schweik argues that “dissociate as Beardsley's drawings often are from Wilde's play, there is nevertheless a curious appropriateness to those illustrations because, like Wilde's play, they too contain elements which have a peculiar incongruity, a striking ‘lack of match’ within themselves. In this respect both Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomes* foreshadow that exploitation of incongruous elements characteristic to some of the most notable exemplars of twentieth-century modernist art.” Robert Schweik, “Congruous Incongruities: The Wilde-Beardsley ‘Collaboration,’” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 37 no. 1 (1994), 10. Schweik touches upon the important point that it is difficult to establish a direct artistic relationship between Wilde's play and Beardsley's illustrations, as both feature the idiosyncratic visions of their respective interpreters. However, as Wilde himself put it in *Dorian Gray*: “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 4. Because Wilde himself had such a strong instinct for the interplay between artist and critic, for the purposes of this essay I will refer to Beardsley's artistic interpretations of the play as if they were a completely reliable interpretation of its themes—after all, for him, at least, they were.

⁷⁷ See Chesa Wang, “Aubrey Beardsley: Understanding Androgyny through Shunga,” *Erudition Magazine*, published April 29, 2020 for a more in-depth description of Beardsley's fascination with *ukiyo-e* art, as well as with its more erotic form, *shunga*. She demonstrates that, though Beardsley attempted to distance himself from his debt to Japanese art, formal comparisons between the two make their similarities evident. To make this essay more

colors, each added individually, Beardsley's line block prints are entirely black and white, presumably to simplify the design process.

Beginning with *The Peacock Skirt*, one is immediately struck by the use of pattern, which creates the illusion of a variety of luxurious textures. There are two figures: Salomé on the left, and the Young Syrian Page on the right. Salomé hovers over the page with a distorted, wicked-looking grin. The page meets her gaze directly with an expression of consternation, and his feet, though hidden by her skirt, seem to face her, as well; his torso, however, is tilted away. His left hand is bent in a relaxed upward position at the height of his shoulders, while his right hand hovers tensely next to his thigh. His face, as Chesa Wang observes, is androgynous: his eyes seem to be lined with kohl and are deep-set with dark under-circles; his eyebrows are thin, his nose straight but small, his mouth large and defined entirely by lines. He has dots on his cheek to demarcate his cheekbones.⁷⁸ His hands and arms, furthermore, are slender and stylized; his knees, on the other hand, are articulated with a somewhat more masculine musculature. He wears a robe pleated over his front and bustled, with puffy shoulders and sleeves drawn up to the mid-forearm. For these pleats, Beardsley uses a variety of curved lines and straight intersections, giving a stylized, patterned effect. He wears a wide belt that grows wider towards his back, over which a bit of pleated fabric is stretched. His haircut includes large bangs and structured curls on the sides, all of which are denoted by patterns of curved white space, as well as a massive curl over the top of his head. Hovering over his left hand is a shape composed of three calligraphic vertical lines, one on top and one on each side of a swirling design connected from the bottom to the left line by a small thread. A few mist-like swirls hover around them, comprised also of small dots.

safely readable by a wider audience, I have chosen not to include any images of *shunga* paintings. Those referenced directly, however, are accompanied by full reference citations, including hyperlinks, at the end of the essay.

⁷⁸ Wang, "Aubrey Beardsley," *Erudition Magazine*, April 29, 2020.

Where the page's costume and expression are defined by clear patterns of curls and pleats, however, Salomé is defined by larger swathes of light and dark space. Her body is entirely ensconced in her "skirt", which is in actuality a robe that forms a curved teardrop shape encompassing much of the composition and forming a focal point for the scene. The top half of the robe is entirely white and much thinner, marked out only by border lines with a few dots. The bottom half, however, is extravagant: it is mostly black, with an intricate pattern of crescent shapes that evoke the pattern of grapes, scales, or—most likely—peacock feathers. On the left side of the skirt, these crescents are more disjointed, stretching apart in wider intervals and coming to a more triangular middle point until they taper into delicate lines. On the right, the crescents are closer together and grow smaller, tapering into more triangular shapes. In the middle, however, all these patterns come together to flow around a giant crescent design, which contains several smaller superimposed crescents. This large design echoes the movement of the skirt itself. Around the edges of the skirt are many small lines, suggesting that a heavy, richly textured fabric was used to create the skirt—there are, however, a couple of loose threads. This textured pattern is echoed in the page's hair.

Salomé's head, meanwhile, seems to dominate the page's; she glances up at him from over her brow and bangs, her eyes heavily lashed; eyebrows thin; nose, mouth, dimples, and chin delicately rendered. Yet her expression is malicious. Her dark hair, whose form is expressed through a few well-placed white lines, is richly adorned with a peacock crown: at the front, it is made of a stiff ruffled fabric that comes vertically off her head, decorated with seeding dandelions; at the back it is full of peacock feathers moving every which way: several particularly long feathers—or, at least, the tops of feathers hanging from strings—float around her skirt to the very bottom of the composition. The feathers' designs each include a black heart

shape surrounded by delicate tendrils. There are what appear to be pearls and black ribbons strewn throughout, cascading down her hair, which flows down her back into the line of the white robe, with two loose hairs falling over the shoulder of her robe. To her left, a more intricate design hovers at her back: a curving, floral-cloud design composed of layers of dots, from which several crescent shapes break out like puffy mist. In the empty middle place, a heavily stylized, thin peacock with black-and-white crescent feathers as well as three whale-like tails stares at the scene, its worm-like tongue hissing out of its beak. On its head is a plume of lines with dots at the end.

When one first encounters this illustration, the eye is torn between the richly dark, decorated areas of Salomé's skirt and her plume, with the page's hair appearing peripherally. From the skirt, the eye moves up her robe, finally following her gaze to that of the page, who in turn stares back at her, creating a compositional cycle that evokes rising tension, anger, and unease. The page's pose, tilted away from the viewer, paired with Salomé's overbearing body language and overwhelming presence suggest that she is attempting to coerce him to obey an order he wants to reject—or that she wants to overwhelm him with her beauty.

The stylized linework and forms and use of pattern and negative space all help to create the dreamlike effect of *ukiyo-e* paintings. Though Western art as a whole was already moving further away from anatomically correct representation of the human form at this time, Beardsley's highly stylized illustrations are a far cry from, say, Sidney Paget's contemporary illustrations for *Sherlock Holmes* (e.g. Figure 20). Rather than Paget's washes of watercolor and gouache, which articulated forms using value, Beardsley's work is entirely black and white, which renders the figures two-dimensional except for the layering of forms and slight foreshortening (of, say, the bottom of the peacock skirt to Salomé's shoulders). Beardsley's

reliance on patterns seems paradoxically both to flatten and deepen the picture plane: on the one hand, the background patterns and clothing folds seem to flow parallel to the picture plane; meanwhile, the patterns on Salomé's skirt and headdress seem to flow beyond it, towards the viewer. In this way, Beardsley follows rather closely Hokusai's approach, whereby patterns are sometimes imposed onto the form (as in the *Woman of Ōhara Smoking*'s kimono, whose patterns are unchanged by the folds) and sometimes undulate with them (as in Figure 6, in which the checkered pattern follows the form of her kimono). The elongated forms of the page and Salomé also exhibit a cursory, albeit rather distorted recognition of *iki*—that long, melancholy, seductive quality so highly valued in Japan, yet so foreign and exhilarating to Victorian eyes. That being said, he shies away from the *wabi-sabi* emphasis on beauty in brokenness in favor of a disconcerting emphasis on the *ukiyo-e* grotesque.

Furthermore, unlike Paget and in keeping with Japan's appreciation for *yūgen*, Beardsley refrains from including much background material into his pieces, leaving the majority of the composition and even the figures themselves white. In this, he again imitates *ukiyo-e*'s tendency to include little background—if anything, it uses only a light wash of cloudlike watercolor—and to leave the skin uncolored and unshaded. Though Beardsley's line weight lacks the dynamic variation of Japanese brushwork, he yet seems to owe an equal debt to both the Western tradition, which contributed to his themes and his rendering of faces and spaces, and to Japanese aesthetics, which contributed to his sense of composition, perspective, pattern, and space. His work in many ways seems to lack the subtlety of motion and expression that so defines the *ukiyo-e* tradition; nevertheless, he captures its sense of simultaneous temporality and timelessness.

In *The Climax*, however, as Robert Schweik points out,⁷⁹ Beardsley's style becomes slightly incongruous with that of *The Peacock Skirt*: though there are still curved and straight lines, the composition becomes more clearly blocked out, the patterns defined more by form than by line, the representation more realistic in some sections and less in others. The scene depicts Salomé holding the head of Iokanaan, presumably after having kissed it in the darkness: she floats in a stylized shaft of moonlight that stretches in a hyperbolic curve from two-thirds of the way down the left side, but to three-quarters of the way up the right. It is punctuated at the edge with the same small lines that were used to texturize Salomé's skirt. She is suspended above a body of water, expressed only in a few suggestions of highlighted ripples in the blackness.

To begin with Salomé, she and Iokanaan are placed almost entirely in the top half of the composition: she is centered, staring at his head held up directly to her face on the right. Unlike her previous elaborate robe, she now wears a plain white robe similar to that of the page, albeit lacking entirely in decoration. It obscures her entire torso into one ovular mass, bunching around her foreshortened calves, which, though entirely two-dimensional, seem to recede into space. Like the page's garment, this fabric is articulated with a variety of mostly straight lines, suggesting a rigidity entirely unlike her earlier flowing skirt. She wears what appear to be pointed flats on her feet, with a scaly, stained-glass design on the toes. Over her back is draped a long, wrinkled strip of fabric that bisects the moonlight, curving in a mirrored hyperbolic curve into the darkness below. On her far side, the same strip of fabric crosses over the front of her body to drape over her nearer bicep. Her hair, entirely free of decoration, floats aimlessly; the majority of it bunches into a black, cloudlike mass around her head, with two large tendrils curving over her back and two more curling above her head. Numerous small, dotted strands float around her like frizz. Her face retains its look of malice as she gazes into the closed eyes of

⁷⁹ See footnote 76.

Iokanaan; her large lips are pursed and drawn towards her nose, and her chin protrudes even more than in *The Peacock Skirt*. Her stylized, slender arms lead into two hands that grasp either side of Iokanaan's head.

Iokanaan's head, seen in profile, is full of a mass of knotted "curls" that fall over Salomé's hands: they are white dreadlocks of hair interspersed with dark shadows, evoking a pile of snakes. In fact, without context, Salomé could easily be looking into the closed eyes of Medusa herself. Iokanaan's brow is not pronounced; his eyebrows are thin, his mouth set in a posed of firm resolution. His closed eyes are bagged, his nose straight. From the wound at the bottom of his head, which is covered by Salomé's hands, falls a long, white drop, presumably blood, accompanied by smaller drops; these drops turn into a stream of ribbon that curls down and touches the rippling water below, itself turning into one of the three white ripples that reveal the pool. Two rippling drops fall towards the bottom right of the composition, one in front of the other in isometric perspective, and one is slightly left and farther back. In a bend in the ribbon, to its right, is a symbol similar to the one next to the page in *The Peacock Skirt*, albeit this time white on black: three white lines, the middle higher than either side; this time, however, the bottom symbol is three upside-down heart shapes, and there is no swirling dot design. To the left of the ribbon, in the middle of the first ripple, a lily arises from the water, perfectly straight, blooming at the top of the black space. Its straight stem has two small leaves towards the top, and the petals bloom in symmetrical white curving shapes, with a few lines to articulate the edges. Three stamens appear on top of the petals. To the right of that lily, another lily droops, intersecting the "ribbon" of blood: this lily is only a bud, however. Further back in space, the third, tear-shaped ripple appears; the point of the tear to the left, the rounded end to the right. In the middle a curved shoot emerges out of the blackness.

Above the “pool” and to the left of Salomé, a black space full of scaly crescent shapes of various thicknesses and sizes is present, ranging from very thick and large in the middle, to very small at the edges, though Beardsley includes many exceptions to that rule. At its bottom contour, it forms a hyperbolic curve diagonally mirroring that of the blackness, then turns into a cloud-shape, as if the white section were billowing into the black. This line, too, has little texturizing lines. From its top contour, the crescents seem to push into the white space, and the texturizing lines are thicker and longer.

Though *The Climax*, similarly to *The Peacock Skirt*, uses patterns sometimes to flatten the forms, sometimes to add dimension, and though it maintains a certain ambiguity of time and place, its composition includes many more background elements—most especially the pool, which ground it in a location, however undefined—and its use of patterned background draws the focus away from the figures more than *The Peacock Skirt* does. These compositional changes, however, along with Beardsley’s vague use of isometric perspective, suggest the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, rather than just the paintings. For example, Katsushika Hokusai’s *The Great Wave* and *Red Fuji* (Figure 21) use a similar composition, in which a wave bisects the composition in a curved line, one side of which is patterned, the other of which is less so. *Red Fuji*, especially, bears similarities to *The Climax* in its solid (albeit gradient) red color of the mountain, which contrasts with the dappled pattern of the clouds. The trees on the bottom of the mountain, in turn, form another, mirrored curve to the bottom of the print. Though Beardsley’s two major curves—the top, patterned black space to the white, and the white to the black pool—are parallel instead of mirrored, he does seem to use a similar method to section off the various areas of his composition. This effect, in turn, gives *The Climax* a stronger sense of spatiality than *The Peacock Skirt*, even if that space is similarly unrealistic.

From a formal perspective, therefore, Beardsley seems to adapt Japanese artistic principles to his own interpretation of Salomé's debauched lust. By making the figures in *The Peacock Skirt* the central focus of the scene and minimizing the background material to patterns, Beardsley is able to isolate them in space and time, as if this narrative were taking place in a liminal space—the ambiguously transient and temporal yet eternal space of the stage itself, perhaps. In its shocking clarity, he emulates Japanese *shunga*, seemingly daring the viewer to ignore or shy away from Salomé's terrible sin. It also serves to render even more overbearing Salomé's visual influence.

While most Japanese prints used this compositional model to evoke a sense of transience for one's ephemeral viewing pleasure, Beardsley's interpretation, with its simpler, harsher linework, more contorted faces, and overwhelming sections of black-and-white, uses the same elements to evoke the same sense of horrific, timeless immersion while subverting pleasure into uncomfortable, overbearing domination. In *The Climax*, similarly, he uses the patterned composition and isometric perspective of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, yet, rather than evoking the beauty, majesty, and power of nature, he suggests the horrific, avaricious lust of Salomé, who grasps Iokanaan's head above a pool of darkness, enclosed in a shaft of moonlight. The drama, in some ways, is as grand, but Beardsley uses his forms to set his viewer off-kilter, rather than lulling them into a contemplative appreciation of natural beauty.

In several ways, this translation of the Japanese aesthetic appreciation for transient natural beauty expressed in somewhat abstracted form into a more disturbing picture of lust is indicative of the way in which the Decadent movement appropriated Japanese philosophy in general. Though Beardsley recognizes the differences between Western and Eastern art, he tends to view them as foreign and uses them to shock the viewer, knowing that he or she will be quick

to peg the view as blatantly immoral, rather than to engage constructively with the tradition. The result is a piece that abandons previous philosophical ideas without positing anything viable in their place: pleasure is prime, but, unlike the *ukiyo-e* artists, Beardsley offers or assumes no philosophical justification, merely an extreme form of *l'Art pour l'Art* that prizes as beautiful even debauchery and remains devoid of ethical concerns.

Beardsley, Japonisme, and Japanese Aesthetics

We can now see with much greater clarity how Beardsley's art style reflects the Japanese influences of *ukiyo-e* woodblock printing, as well as the grotesque and *shunga* traditions. He not only adopted several formal elements of Japanese aesthetics, which give his works a similar sense of a "floating world," but he also adapted the themes of transience and insulated pleasure in *ukiyo-e* art to suit his own decadent philosophy. That being said, in that effort of personalization and translation, much of the original meaning and cultural context behind these works was lost: rather than emphasizing and integrating the entire philosophical *milieu* of the Japanese world, with its complex interplay between Confucian political life, Buddhist spiritual practice, and Shinto religious traditions—all of which, whether directly or indirectly, birthed the *ukiyo-e* tradition as part of a way to contribute to that delicate intellectual balance—Beardsley supplanted those aesthetic and cultural ideas in favor of those that more closely aligned with his own.

Beardsley was, in many ways, ideally situated to facilitate this integration of Japanese aesthetics into Western art. As Christopher Snodgrass points out,

Beardsley's paradoxically dandiacal yet grotesque pictures represent a complex interlacing colloquy of various contending voices in the Victorian 'age of transition.' They are voices that represent two seemingly polar but mutually reinforcing strategies or impulses: on the one hand, an almost compulsive desire to violate, scandalize, and destabilize conventional boundaries of decorum, imposing an iconoclastic personal stamp on the old order; and, on the other hand, an equally strong need to affirm and incorporate

the metaphysical certainty of traditional authority, particularly the absolute hegemony of art, style, and even moral truth. Beardsley's various grotesque shapes, caricatures, and mutated figures—including the dandy, that icon of the Decadent Religion of Art—serve as visual emblems of some monstrous metaphysical contortion. His grotesques suggest the ultimate impossibility of ever resolving the paradoxes such dislocations present, even as his elegant designs simultaneously control and implicitly recuperate those dislocations formalistically. In the end Beardsley's pictures effect what might be called a caricature of traditional signification, accenting in the process many of the more disorienting paradoxes of the Victorian *fin de siècle*.⁸⁰

Beardsley, then, reflected the Victorian tension between tradition and transgression: a tension that in turn reflected the Japanese tension between Pure Land Buddhism and *ukiyo-e*. The fundamental conflict for each of them, in their own ways, seemed to be the relationship between the material and the spiritual world: how ought one to relate to material things, in light of human suffering and the allure of spiritual purity?

For Beardsley, this tension is evident, as Snodgrass notes, in his grotesque images: his art reflects “the basic self-contradictions reflected in his life—most vividly, his paradoxical attraction to the outlandish, iconoclastic, and scandalous, on the one hand, and the conventional, traditional, and even ecclesiastical on the other”: in fact, “at the same time that the presumably irreverent Beardsley was creating outrageous visual practical jokes, he was also taking regular long walks with parish priests, reading pious texts assiduously, and preparing to convert to Roman Catholicism.”⁸¹ Beardsley, perhaps more than any other figure in the Decadent movement, embodied both extremes of the aesthetic and the ascetic; he was drawn to the pleasures of excess and the purity of self-denial alike.

One sees this pattern of interaction with religion again and again in the Decadent movement and more broadly in the Victorian era as a whole: Wilde, for instance, certainly felt it. It is evident especially in Wilde's work, and in the preface to *Dorian Gray* he implicates all of

⁸⁰ Chris Snodgrass, preface to *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii-viii.

⁸¹ Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 14.

society in the struggle: “The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.”⁸² In the West, these Decadent figures (and, for many, deathbed conversions to Catholicism) are indicative of the tension between traditional Christian metaphysics and the rise of secularism, atheism, and moral relativism. Beardsley’s images, then, contributed to radicalizing the a growing movement questioning the traditional moral forms, suggesting that the very moral foundations themselves must be reconsidered. *Ukiyo-e*, through its abstracted *tetsujin* execution and hedonistic values, offered a perfect mode to express the concept of artistic beauty as itself a morally purifying force. His work is an example of a trend towards seeing the sensual as a viable alternative to the spiritual, a trend that continues to this very day.

In the East, however, this extreme elevation of the body, while it bears striking similarity to Western forms of secularism, was actually an effective counter-balance to a commensurately more extreme ascetic principle. Though Pure Land Buddhism bears cursory resemblance to traditional Christian values and especially the Protestant vision prominent in the nineteenth century, one must not utterly conflate Japanese Pure Land Buddhism with any form of Christianity, as figures like Karl Barth were wont to do.⁸³ Their fundamental metaphysical and ethical assumptions lend themselves to vastly different conclusions about how one ought to live one’s life. The Pure Land Buddhists did not have a conception of creation as “good”; rather, material reality *was* suffering; there was nothing in it to temper man’s capacity for suffering or

⁸² Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 3-4. See Abigail Leali, “When Falls the Heart: Art as Moral Self-Revelation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” (unpublished manuscript, November 13 2020), typescript for a discussion of how Wilde attempts to reconcile these extremes.

⁸³ Hirota, “Japanese Pure Land Philosophy,” 1.2.

evil.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, even the strongest Christian advocate for “total depravity” would have trouble suggesting that there is nothing in the created order worth “redeeming.” In Pure Land Buddhist thought, the goal is, quite simply, the annihilation of the self, with its passions and sensations; though quasi-Christian virtues are lived out, “love” is not an end, even intermediately, but a means to enlightenment that must ultimately be left behind.

In this understanding, the *ukiyo-e* movement’s “eat, drink, or be merry” mentality is grounded by the implicit understanding that escape is necessary, since there is no way to be oneself without being in pain. This is a principle that Christianity, which instead tends to depict suffering as eternal only in the possibility of damnation, does not assume. When the *ukiyo-e* is transplanted to the West, then, it appears as an escape not from material pain but from the metaphysical pressure of a finite lifetime in favor of the elevation of the body above the soul. Translated into the religious and cultural assumptions of a Protestant England, the decadents used Japanese aesthetics as a language to advocate a counter-revolution of pleasures pursued with reckless abandon, a complete rejection of the constraints of a moral system so restricting to the unwilling participant. In taking on the *ukiyo-e* mantle, Beardsley was not offering an alternative solution within the conversation of Protestant thought, as the actual *ukiyo-e* artists did with Pure Land Buddhism, but rejecting its metaphysical and ethical framework entirely. He uprooted the old system, rather than grafting a new branch onto the tree.

The evidence of this anti-traditional sentiment is abundant in his work; though he takes on a subject traditional enough in the beheading of John the Baptist for *Salomé*, for instance, one can only imagine how alien his illustrations would have appeared to the Victorian eye accustomed, say, to Paget. Beyond the formal elements that he pilfered from the art of Hokusai and other major *ukiyo-e* artists, he adds his own peculiar brand of other-ness. Especially in the

⁸⁴ See Genesis 1-2, Revelation 21:1.

first version of *The Climax*, the chaotic, stringy details and apparently random motifs (such as the tendril poking out from one of the black circles or the wings on the border between the light and the darkness) unsettle the eye, refusing to allow it to rest in any one element, or even to understand its motion. He amplifies and renders grotesquely sensual the already-distorted religious subject matter, forcing the viewer to feel the discomfort of its new, sensational form.

Yet, as Snodgrass points out, Beardsley was far more than a rebel; entwined with his attraction to *ukiyo-e* aesthetics was a tension that kept him from fully accepting the placid beauty of the “floating world.” Returning, again, to his earliest draft of “The Climax,” the very chaos that so unsettles the viewer’s perception of the piece and removes it from the previous artistic tradition also establishes a strong sense of Beardsley’s own unease with his subject matter. His depiction of Salomé, though brazen, is not entirely unapologetic. He uses traditional motifs such as lilies and peacock’s feathers to establish the meaning of the scene—a meaning that in fact lines up rather well with Christian interpretations of John the Baptist’s death. Salomé’s feathers are a symbol of her luxurious vanity; Iokanaan’s lily, a symbol of his innocence and purity. Salomé’s grotesque expression, furthermore, belies her depravity, that which will ultimately lead even Herod to despise her. And, in fact, a tendril of Iokanaan’s hair entwines her like a snake. This sense of creeping sin, coming demise because of her lust after innocence pervades the image, even to the cesspool below Salomé. Though Beardsley uses such foreign and shocking aesthetic forms to depict this scene, eschewing the artistic lens of the Medieval and the Renaissance that so long embodied the Western ethical vision, he, like Wilde himself does not entirely abandon the moral distinctions present in Christianity. Instead, he seems to translate them into his own chimeric Decadent mode, compelling the viewer to confront head-on the brutal reality of lust. In a way, the viewer must first be scandalized, then choose whether the

iconological moral arguments can overcome the formal inconsistencies in their expression—whether tradition or transgression will prevail.

Even so, Beardsley's integration of Japanese aesthetics into his art did contribute more broadly to a sensualist visual rhetoric; rather than attempting to reconcile the two, he used *ukiyo-e* as a statement against traditional moral values, taking out of context the idea that pleasure ought to be celebrated and using it to reveal a paradox in—rather than merely critique—the society in which he found himself. Japanese art may have pulled him out of his own tradition into that of the Buddhists, yet he was ill-equipped with the cultural knowledge to engage properly with their ideas. Beardsley was not unique in this haphazard approach, but his contributions to the rise of a misunderstood *japoniste* mania for Japanese aesthetics coincided with a general rise in secularism in the West, offering it a basis and even an artistic language with which to discuss ideas firmly outside the Western tradition. Like honeysuckle slowly choking a forest, these ideas, rather than achieving a counter-balancing effect, seem to have overtaken much of the conversation, splitting the Western philosophical tradition in two in a way difficult to reconcile.

Ongoing Impact

As we strive to draw together all of these threads and weave them into a cohesive unit, it becomes useful to look at another major figure of the Decadent movement: Arthur Symons. Though far from the most prominent or flagrant of the aesthetes, Symons was, as Snodgrass puts it, “personally responsible for sustaining, if not promulgating, many of the myths and legends of the ‘yellow nineties.’” “After the Wilde debacle,” he says, “it was largely left to Symons to try to salvage the Decadent ‘Religion of Art,’ to spiritualize and thereby justify the nineties’ attraction to ‘evil beauty’ and solipsistic self-contradictions.”⁸⁵ While Snodgrass objects to

Symons' approach to Beardsley as expressive of his "talent for refashioning literary and artistic figures into useful icons of his own myth of the Decadence," his interpretation of Symons offers a unique opportunity to examine not only Beardsley's reception in the years immediately following his death but also the ways in which his legacy has been reevaluated over the course of the last century.

Symons, Snodgrass admits, had an immense impact on the early reception of Beardsley immediately after his death, helping to solidify (especially in his famous essay, "Aubrey Beardsley") his reputation as one of the most typical of the Decadent movement, whose categorization he helped to popularize. "*Anima naturaliter pagana*" ("The soul is naturally pagan") his essay begins; "Aubrey Beardsley ended a long career at the age of twenty-six, in the arms of the Church. No artist of our time ... has reached a more universal, or a more contested fame; none has formed himself, out of such alien elements, a more personal originality of manner; none has had so wide an influence on contemporary art."⁸⁶ He continues,

when I say he was a profoundly spiritual artist, though seeming to care chiefly for the manual part of his work; that he expresses evil with an intensity which lifted it into a region almost of asceticism, though attempting, not seldom, little more than a joke or a caprice in line; and that he was above all, though almost against his own will, a satirist who has seen the ideal; I am putting forward no paradox, nothing really contradictory, but a simple analysis of the work as it exists Here, then, we have a sort of abstract spiritual corruption, revealed in beautiful form; sin transfigured by beauty.⁸⁷

In Symons' eyes, Beardsley's very emphasis on sin and evil was revelatory of and indeed even essential to his commitment to the "Religion of Art"; on the one hand, he argues that Beardsley turns sin into something beautiful by depicting it in a beautiful way (however loosely beauty is defined), using the artistic mode itself as a sort of redemption; on the other, Beardsley also

⁸⁵ Christopher Snodgrass, "Decadent Mythmaking: Arthur Symons on Aubrey Beardsley and Salome," *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 3/4 (1990), 61.

⁸⁶ Arthur Symons, "Aubrey Beardsley," 23.

⁸⁷ Symons, "Aubrey Beardsley," 29-31.

succeeds in championing art as a “a satirist of an age without convictions,” who is fascinated by vice because of his commitment to virtue.⁸⁸ For him, Beardsley was an exemplar of the moral dimension of aestheticism, in which the beauty of Art replaced the beauty of God. This extremely charitable interpretation of Beardsley, which has a tendency to turn even his flaws into virtues, is nonetheless indicative of Beardsley’s impact on the Decadent maxim *l’Art pour l’Art*; in his short career, he managed to polarize the community between those who, like Wilde, were willing to reject such a radically dualistic perception of art’s role and acknowledge Beardsley’s artistic grotesqueness and those who, like Symons, seemed to retain an almost unlimited faith in art’s cleansing moral dimension.

Snodgrass, for his part, represents the alternative tendency to see in Beardsley’s exotic and grotesque work a more complex picture of the man. “[It] is not at all clear,” he argues,

that Beardsley’s drawings show salvational rescue to be either necessary or desired, or for that matter, whether the encoded paradoxes in the drawings are resolved at all ... as dedicated as Beardsley was to the Religion of Art and as serious as he was about his own religious salvation, his impish and unsentimental sensibilities generally fit much more comfortably into the ironic, playful and equivocal eighteenth-century-baroque mold than the tragic, somber, and categorical Romantic-angsty pattern which Symons obviously preferred and in which he sought to cast him.⁸⁹

Where Symons tended to oversimplify Beardsley to fit a purely Victorian Decadent mode of artistic beauty, Snodgrass, more distant from the movement, is correspondingly more comfortable with the complexity of Beardsley’s artistic expression. However, in keeping with modern analytical methods he also tends to read into Beardsley’s work an overt mission for social “disruption and general subversion,” as in his analysis of the page, whose androgynous appearance he casts as a way “to confuse the viewer, blurring conventional gender and cultural distinctions well beyond the strict requirements of the joke.”⁹⁰ He at last concludes that “it is not

⁸⁸ Symons, “Aubrey Beardsley,” 32.

⁸⁹ Snodgrass, “Decadent Mythmaking,” 71.

at all clear that sin is the subject at all”⁹¹—an interpretation that, if accurate, certainly sheds light on Wilde’s revulsion. By casting Beardsley’s work as “in many respects ... every bit as radically modern as it appeared, tending to blur and pervert clear logical categories and erode centuries of Western logocentric assumptions,”⁹² Snodgrass reveals two things about Beardsley’s work. First, it has achieved at least a kind of transient timelessness, a prescient quality that causes it to translate well into modern ethical and aesthetic conversations. Second, that it operates on a principle of paradox that escapes meaning like soap in a wet hand. While it is difficult to ascertain the full extent (or lack thereof) of Beardsley’s mission in advocating for a renewed understanding of gender identity as we today tend to view it, Snodgrass is certainly correct in noting his impulse to blur the lines that distinguish our logical categories, forcing the viewer to reexamine his or her assumptions about the world.

How, then, does this come to bear on his misappropriation of Japanese aesthetics? In light of the Victorian era’s general lack of knowledge of Japanese philosophy and its cataclysmic impact in secularizing and de-moralizing the artistic world, it would seem that this was a place in which Beardsley’s artistic impulse to obscure led him astray. While it is in many ways admirable that his work could be interpreted so differently by such different critics—how it could be so indicative of his viewer’s ethical convictions—it was, perhaps, his very inattention and lack of clarity on this point that led his art to launch such a massive shift in morals. It was not Beardsley alone but the fact that people could read into his work their own aesthetic and moral opinions, already so unclear in the face of such upheaval, that led his work to so greatly harm the cause of mutual cultural understanding.

Further Considerations

⁹⁰ Snodgrass, “Decadent Mythmaking,” 75.

⁹¹ Snodgrass, “Decadent Mythmaking,” 98.

⁹² Snodgrass, “Decadent Mythmaking,” 103.

As many scholars have pointed out, the strange influence of Japanese art on Victorian aesthetics is not a one-way street; many Japanese artists were influenced by Victorian art, as well, from the time of the opening to the present day. Japanese artists integrated certain Western ideas into their art, as well. For instance, Hashimoto Sadahide's *Picture of Western Traders at Yokohama Transporting Merchandise* (Figure 22), while it maintains a somewhat Japanese composition, demonstrates the Japanese fascination with Western flags and color schemes, as well as the trade in general. Other pieces, such as Utagawa Hiroshige II's *Picture of Prosperous America (Amerika nigiwai no zu)* (Figure 23), go further in their integration of Western aesthetics, taking pains to depict American dress and architecture, as well as using a more linear than isometric perspective.

Yet, as scholars like Waiyee Loh and Yui Nakatsuma have pointed out, the influence of Western aesthetics—and indeed Victorian aesthetics—is still present in Japan, albeit in a morphed state. Waiyee Loh, in her strikingly titled article, “Japanese Dandies in Victorian Britain: Rewriting Masculinity in Japanese Girls’ Comics,” discusses the ways in which Japanese anime in the twenty-first century has used the Victorian aesthetic. She writes,

The dandy was vilified in both British middle-class discourse and Japanese right-wing nationalist discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The manga series *Kuroshitsuji* recuperates this much-maligned figure to celebrate the power and freedom of present-day Japanese male consumers to fashion their individual selves by consuming fashion creatively. This consumption-based dandy masculinity is diametrically opposed to the figure of the post-war salaryman and the nationalist and imperial masculinities that constituted the salaryman's historical precedents. By championing the dandy over the salaryman, the manga participates in the emergence of alternative masculinities that emphasise creativity, individualism, and consumption after the bubble economy collapsed in Japan in 1990. Paradoxically, this new incarnation of dandy masculinity is now re-inscribed as Japanese and circulates transnationally as a marker of the new and the modern, in much the same way as the Western figure of the dandy did a century earlier.⁹³

⁹³ Waiyee Loh, “Japanese Dandies in Victorian Britain: Rewriting Masculinity in Japanese Girls’ Comics,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 41.

In other words, Loh understands the modern Japanese approach to the Victorian era as one of attempting to “redefine” masculinity in conjunction with modern, mostly capitalist values in the nation. While the debate surrounding this approach to masculinity is another discussion altogether, the fact that the Japanese associate Victorian England with this redefinition is itself illuminating, as in the West the Victorian era is far more often associated with “prudishness” and “kitsch.” Similarly to the Victorian experience with Japan, the Japanese experienced their first window to the West (in several hundred years, at least) at a time when Western culture was undergoing a drastic period of change and growth. As Loh points out, “the Japanese state and mass media drew on what they perceived as the traditional samurai ethics of *bushidō* to construct a model of ‘authentic’ Japanese masculinity that would promote loyalty to the Emperor and the nation-state”; as such, the modern integration of the “dandy” aesthetic falls in line with an at least century-long discussion that “challenges this self-denying commitment to work and nation.”⁹⁴ The integration of Western ideas, in other words, has become a way for the Japanese to critique their own culture, much as Japanese aesthetics became so for the decadent “dandies” a century earlier. Yet, as this transition has gotten underway, it has not been without its issues.

For instance, many have questioned the way in which Victorian values have negatively impacted Japanese culture. Yui Nakatsuma argues, “engagement with the British Empire and other Western countries in this period, particularly from the late nineteenth century on ... stimulated imperialist expansion in Japan.”⁹⁵ As such, their interactions with the Victorian era are somewhat tainted:

As Meiji Japan eagerly and avidly viewed modernisation as an ‘adaptation’ of Western modernity, the representation of the Meiji period in neo-Victorian fiction is not just a locus for presenting “the hatred of the ‘era of colonialism’” (Ho 2012: 5), even if it is

⁹⁴ Loh, “Japanese Dandies,” 52-54.

⁹⁵ Yui Nakatsuma, “Japanese Neo-Victorian Fictions: Looking Back to the Victorian Age from Japan,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 20.

treated ambivalently, but rather provides an optimistic setting to change one isolated country into a modern nation. It can be argued, therefore, that in Japanese neo-Victorian novels the Victorian-Meiji period is a site that evokes nostalgia, or sentimental feelings linked to the ‘good old days’ of Meiji optimism, the consolidation of Japanese nationhood and modernisation under the political transition from feudalistic rule to industrialisation and globalisation. Ironically, however, the acceptance, even celebration of the Victorian era in Japanese culture thus also cements the perception of a relationship between a superior modern West and a belated ‘antiquated’ Japan.⁹⁶

In other words, the Japanese use of the Victorian aesthetic has contributed to Japan’s now-infamous modern tendency to reject its own cultural identity, encouraging it simultaneously to recall fondly its cultural heritage and to vehemently reject its faults. In this way, it is similar to how many Americans tend to perceive the post-War period in the 1950s. Devoid of its own cultural identity, however, one must return to the work of scholars like Tatsuo Inoue, who are concerned with the fate of Japanese capitalism, which seems to integrate Japanese values without the necessary concern for how they fit within a Western moral-economic framework.⁹⁷ Just as Beardsley and the other decadents used Japanese aesthetics as a way to criticize Western culture, then, the Japanese have done the same.

It seems that all of the nations involved in this transfer of ideas—esthetic, moral, and otherwise—have quite a bit of work to do in examining their historical approaches to “foreign” ideas and adjusting course to ensure that they do justice both to the ideas themselves and to their own culture’s interactions with them. In fact, as this essay has attempted to show, those two ideas are related: to properly interact with any subject, especially on such an intuitive and visceral level as the artistic, it is important that the people or culture involved be willing to take the time to become familiar with it before passing moral judgment using it for their own cultural purposes. While the Japanese’ relationship with the West has been mutually beneficial in many ways, it has also been a detriment to the cultural identity of these nations, exacerbating moral and

⁹⁶ Nakatsuma, “Japanese,” 22.

⁹⁷ Inoue, “Poverty,” 517-552.

economic alienation as each nation attempts to reject its past without envisioning a continuous or even fathomable future.

Conclusion

Though Beardsley's art may not have single-handedly degraded the communication between the West and the East, his tendency to obscure the lines between cultures—to mix them together without a complete understanding of their constituent parts—is indicative of the general Victorian tendency to celebrate and integrate that which it did not understand. The East and the West both allowed themselves to be choked by ideas for which they had no philosophical counterbalance, and both ended in a social upheaval that resulted in—or exacerbated—the partial loss of their unique cultural identities. Yet within their failures is contained the hope of a solution; though in our modern world the mixture seems to have amalgamated into a homogenous soup, it is still possible, by returning to each culture's individual roots, to discern which ideas are our own and which are someone else's. We need not do this with the aim of nationalistic pride or cultural "purity," but with the aim of regaining some semblance of identity, of being more intentional about the origins and implications of our values both individually and societally. We need not, like Salomé, linger in darkness when we have the capacity to offer everyone light.

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Figure 1. Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 35 3/8" x 37 1/16". The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 2. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Peacock Skirt*, 1894. Line block print, 13 11/16" x 10 11/16". Printed by John Lane, The Bodley Head.



Figure 3. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*, 1894. Line block print, 13 11/16" x 10 11/16". Printed by John Lane, The Bodley Head.



Figure 4. Sesshū Tōyō, *Splashed Ink Landscape*, 1495. Ink on paper, 58 1/2" x 12 4/5". Tokyo National Museum.



Figure 5. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1498-99. Carrara marble, 68 1/2" x 76 4/5". St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.



Figure 6. Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962. Acrylic with metallic enamel paint on canvas, 32 panels, each panel 20" x 16". Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 7. Katsushika Hokusai, *Title Unknown*, Date Unknown. Ink and light colors on paper? Dimensions unknown. Publisher unknown.



Figure 8. Katsushika Hokusai, *Woman of Ōhara Smoking*, 1798/1802. Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on paper, 3' 8" x 10 3/16". Weston Collection.



Figure 9. Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave*, c. 1829-1833. Color woodblock print, 10 1/10" x 14 9/10". Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 10. Katsushika Hokusai, page from *Manga Vol. 12*, c. 1820-1878. Color woodblock print. 12 1/2" x 9". The British Museum.



Figure 11. James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876-1877. Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood, 166" x 241 1/2" x 404". Freer Gallery of Art.



Figure 12. James McNeill Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (det. *The Peacock Room*), 1876-1877. Oil on canvas, 45 7/10" x 79 1/3". Freer Gallery of Art.



Figure 13. Odilon Rodon, *Ophelia*, 1900-1905. Pastel on paper on cardboard, 50 1/2" x 67 1/3". Private Collection.



Figure 14. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Le Divan Japonais*, 1893. Crayon, brush, spatter, and transferred screen lithograph, 31 9/10" x 24 1/2". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 15. Aubrey Beardsley, *Merlin*, c. 1893. Lithograph, dimensions unknown. Private collection.



Figure 16. Aubrey Beardsley, *Siegfried, Act II*, 1892-1893. Pen, ink, and wash on paper, 16 1/3" x 11 4/5". Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 17. Dugald Sutherland MacColl, *Youth Courting a Hare*, after tondo from an Attic red-figure kylix, 1894. Medium unknown, 4" x 4". British Museum.



Figure 18. Andrea Mantegna, after, *The Descent from the Cross*, c. 1446-1606. Etching, dimensions unknown. National Gallery of Art.



FROM A DRAWING IN ILLUSTRATION OF MR. OSCAR WILDE'S "SALOME"
BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Figure 19. Aubrey Beardsley, *J'ai baisé ta bouche Iokanaan*, 1893. Line block print, 9" x 5". Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 20. Sidney Paget, *Silver Blaze—Holmes Gave Me a Sketch of the Events*, 1892. Gouache and watercolor on toned paper. 7" x 10 1/4". Private collection.



Figure 21. Katsushika Hokusai, *South Wind, Clear Sky*, a.k.a. *Red Fuji*, c. 1830-32. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 9 1/4" x 14". The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 22. Hashimoto Sadahide, *Picture of Western Traders at Yokohama Transporting Merchandise*, 1861. Color woodblock print, 15" x 10". Library of Congress.

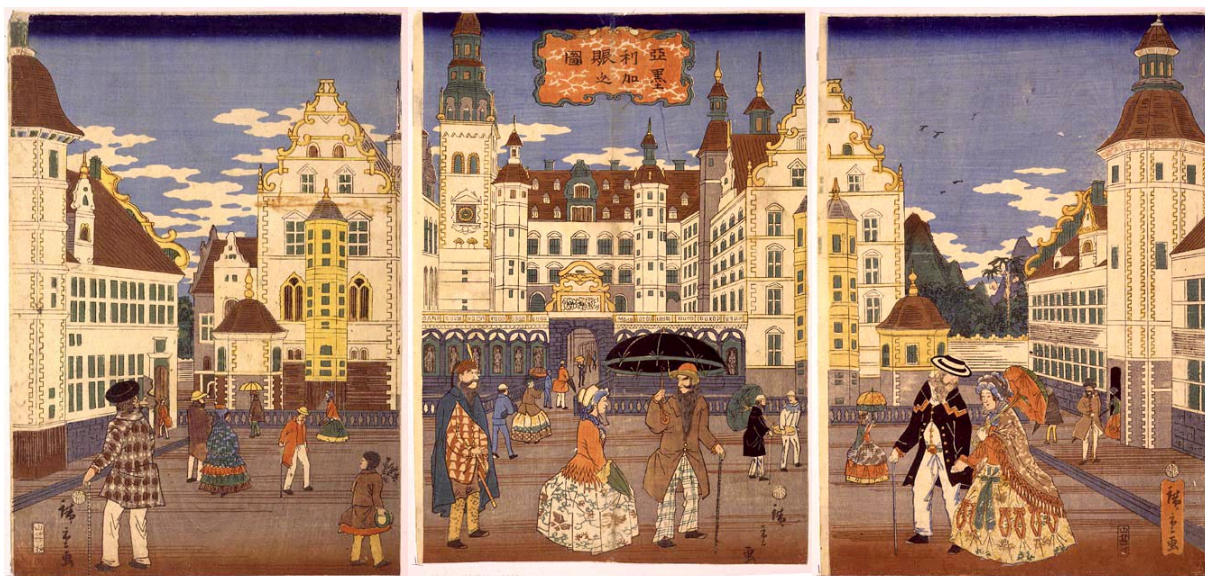


Figure 23. Utagawa Hiroshige II, *Picture of Prosperous America* (*Amerika nigiwai no zu*), 1861. Color woodblock print, 15" x 10" each. Library of Congress.