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Epsom’s Erotica By Candlelight

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A pale and slender man, suffering from ill health, began drawing an image by candlelight inside a room in Epsom’s Spread Eagle Hotel in June 1896 probably knowing he was nearing the end of his life.

A year earlier the same man’s career had taken a dramatic turn for the worse when he was sacked from his job through no fault of his own and now, he found himself alone, poverty stricken and shunned as a consequence of Oscar Wilde, the poet and playwright being arrested and charged with gross indecency.

With one lung barely functioning and the other becoming affected, (as determined by an Epsom doctor) the well-dressed dandy who liked to wear dove-grey suits, hats, ties and yellow gloves continued to create ink drawings inside his two rooms at The Spread Eagle Hotel in Epsom, albeit for a much-reduced client base.



Aubrey Beardsley

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The frail man who had booked himself into The Spread Eagle Hotel was the artist, Aubrey Beardsley, but this was not his first visit to Epsom, as he had previously spent two of his difficult childhood years living in lodgings in Ashley Road, a short distance from where The University of the Creative Arts campus is today. Sadly, Aubrey had contracted tuberculosis as a young boy, but could take long walks on the Downs in the fresh air with his mother and sister, Mabel as recommended by his doctors.

Now, thirteen years later, Aubrey Beardsley had returned to Epsom on the advice of his doctors to breath the town's better air whilst walking on the Downs which he did for the duration of his visit, although such walks were becoming increasingly difficult to undertake.



Illustration by Beardsley for Oscar Wilde's Salome

Whilst Aubrey's second stay in Epsom only lasted a few weeks, he managed to complete eight illustrations in The Spread Eagle Hotel for a proposed privately printed edition of the ancient Greek comedy Lysistrata by Aristophanes which could be sold expensively to connoisseurs by his publisher. The Lysistrata drawings are sexually explicit and these illustrations together with his drawings for Oscar Wilde's disturbing drama Salome (the play premiered in Paris in 1896) are among Aubrey's most famous.

According to Wikipedia, Aubrey Beardsley was "the most controversial artist of the Art Nouveau era" who was "renowned for his dark and perverse images and grotesque erotica, which were the main themes of his later work".

Wikipedia goes on to add that Aubrey "satirized Victorian values regarding sex, that at the time highly valued

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respectability", so it is not surprising that he chose to hide himself away in The Spread Eagle Hotel in the aftermath of the now outdated scandal involving Oscar Wilde and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas which led to anyone associated with Oscar Wilde being suspected of sodomy.

Despite the sexual nature of his imagery, there is no evidence to suggest that Aubrey had sexual relations with anyone regardless of their sexual orientation, although the precise nature of his relationship with his sister, Mabel (who he drew naked in an illustration which also included his client Oscar Wilde and a goat – legged faun) will undoubtedly continue to form the topic of discussion amongst historians and art critics.

Upon departing Epsom where he had completed some of his best works, Aubrey Beardsley continued to suffer from declining health leading to him having a violent haemorrhage in December 1896 and moving to the French Riviera in April 1897 in an attempt to prolong his life.

Sadly, Aubrey's days were numbered and it was whilst he was on his death bed in the French Riviera that Aubrey wrote to his publisher pleading with him to destroy the illustrations he had drawn in Epsom at The Spread Eagle Hotel. The publisher sent a telegraph to Aubrey telling him his dying wish had been granted, but the truth is the publisher lied and kept the illustrations for his own financial gain – an act that perhaps we should forgive him for selfishly carrying out.

Aubrey Beardsley died of tuberculosis in the early hours of 16 March 1898 in the presence of his mother and sister.

Aubrey may only have been 25 years old at the time of his death, but despite his young age, according to The Guardian Newspaper, "he put sexuality at the centre of modern art for the first time" and spread "his influence across Europe – to Vienna, Paris and Barcelona – 25 years before surrealism".

As the erotic ink drawings of the pale and slender young man which influenced world famous artists such as Picasso, Schiele and Klimt remain extremely important today, let us hope that in the near future a new plaque with the name "Aubrey Beardsley" prominently displayed on it will be attached to the front of The Spread Eagle (the existing plaque makes no mention of Aubrey) to remind everyone of the talented artist who came to Epsom to draw some of his most thought provoking and imaginative illustrations long before there was any acceptance of fluid sexualities and total freedom of expression.

The Spread Eagle in Epsom High Street is perhaps more significant than many people realise as a result of Aubrey Beardsley staying there and drawing erotica by candlelight.

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