Decadent and Modern Beauty: The Female Images of Beardsley

Being the only representative of British decadent artists, Beardsley ingeniously expressed his style and production with the concept of decadence and degeneration. He was intent on the observation of the modern London urban life, especially those delicately and gallantly dressed ladies. Such female images constituted the oeuvre in the artist’s latter life. Moreover, these female images are the paintings that can best represent the artist’s very own decadent style.

The female image has always been one of the most important elements in Beardsley’s production. This article attempts to pursue the connection between the female image and the decadent aesthetics, in order to fully understand the decadent dimensions which span the artist’s productions. Beardsley’s work went against the code of art in his era. First of all, he threw away the canon of “art being a tool of moral education”, extended his topics toward the new modern lifestyle of women. The decadent aesthetics stated the idea of “art for art’s sake”. With all the efforts the artists and the writers had put into, the art was no longer restricted to the selection of topics and styles. Secondly, Beardsley wisely adapted the two similar elements — degeneration pathology and decadent aesthetic. His femininity and production didn’t only catch the public’s attention but also shocked the barrier of sexes in the Victorian society. Thirdly, Beardsley’s simple monochrome design had demonstrated his varied and delicate self-invented style. The female images chosen freely by Beardsley didn’t just captured different postures of women on various activities among the city, contrary to the traditional image, the energetic spirit and enthusiasm radiated from these
women had manifested the dynamic and subject of women. Moreover, by exploiting the topic of nightlife entertainments and the daytime street scene, Beardsley disclosed many phenomenons the bourgeoisie was unwilling to admit and obscurely suggested the fact of blurring barrier between classes. In Beardsley’s later novel and illustrations, the female images had transformed into strong and independent. Women with desire didn’t turn out to be the so-called femme fatale. Obviously, Beardsley’s emblazonment of female desire provided an alternative interpretation other than femme fatale.

The topics and the styles picked by Beardsley manifested the aesthetic definition of Decadent. He adopted the general public’s impression towards degeneration and revealed it with the beauty of the costume design and the femininity. He subverted the rigid concept about duality of sexes in the Victorian era, sneered at the idea of bourgeoisie, and more importantly, emphasized the various aspects of female image in the changing society. Beardsley’s distinctive style evoked wide appreciation and attention, not just toward the paintings itself, but also toward the female of such a new era. Beardsley established himself as a novel model of topics and skills in the British paintings.