Bernard Shaw at Shaw's Corner: Artefacts, Socialism, Connoisseurship, and Self-Fashioning

Abstract
This thesis analyses artefacts belonging to the playwright, socialist and critic Bernard Shaw, which form part of the collections at Shaw's Corner, Hertfordshire, now managed as a National Trust property. My original contribution to knowledge is made by revealing Shaw through the artefacts in new or under-explored roles as socialist-aesthete, art patron, connoisseur, photographer, celebrity, dandy, and self-commemorator. The thesis therefore challenges the stereotypical views expressed in the literature which have tended to focus on Shaw at Shaw's Corner as a Fabian with ascetic characteristics. The thesis aims are achieved by contextualizing the Shaw's Corner Collections, both extant and absent. Historically the artefacts in the house have been viewed from the perspective of his socialist politics, ignoring his connoisseurial interests and self-fashioning. Hence there was a failure to see the ways in which these elements of his consuming personality overlapped or were in conflict. By examining artefacts from the perspectives of art and design history, focussing on furniture, private press books, clothing, painting and sculpture, Shaw is shown to be a highly complex and at times contradictory figure. The discontinuities and ambiguities become clearer once we examine the possessions from the house which were removed and sold by the National Trust after Shaw's death. Whilst some Shavian scholars and art historians have acknowledged Shaw's role as an art critic and the impact it had on his dramaturgy, there has been little recognition of the ways in which this influenced his domestic interiors, consumption, and personal taste, or indeed his interest in the decorative arts and design. Artefacts and furniture in the house today reflect Shaw's role as a socialist-aesthete, and his involvement with Arts and Crafts movement practitioners and Aestheticism. As an art patron Shaw also shared the aims of artists, connoisseurs and curators working in the first decades of the twentieth century, and we see evidence of this through certain artefacts at Shaw's Corner. With a strong aesthetic sense, he devoted time to matters of beauty and art, but was equally governed by economics and a desire to bring 'good' art and design to everyone. Shaw was considered to be one of the greatest cultural commentators and thinkers of his generation, but he was at the same time a renowned celebrity and influential figure in the mass media. The literature has tended to dismiss the latter role in order to preserve his place among the former, but I argue here that Shaw did not necessarily view the two as separate endeavours. In fact items from the house, notably Shaw's clothing and sculpture, are considered as the bearers of complex philosophical, symbolic or iconographic meanings relating to his self-fashioning, aesthetic doctrines, and desire for commemoration, which demonstrate the links between the celebrity and the critic. By considering the artefacts in conjunction with the Trust's archive of Shaw photographs, as well as his representation in popular culture, and by then relating this material dimension to his writings, the thesis brings a new methodological approach to the study of Shaw. More importantly this thesis reveals new knowledge about the philosophical ideas, humanity, generosity, and personal vanity of the man that lay behind those artefacts.

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