Shaw Before His First Play
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For nearly a decade Bernard Shaw conducted parallel careers as music critic and art critic, adding to them several others, including that of playwright. Ironically it was in a music review that he emphasized the negative aspects of his encounters with art. His musical notice was “disjointed,” he apologized. “The fact is, I have been at the Royal Academy all day, ‘Press-viewing’ it; and my mind is unhinged by the contemplation of so much emptiness and so much bungling” (2 May 1890). Shaw had little respect for what many of his fellow Englishmen were producing at a time when he needed so badly to earn a few pounds a week by his pen as to sell his soul alive by writing about it. “I am not a critic of Art,” he insisted then to J. Stanley Little (26 August 1889): “I hate the whole confounded culture, which is only a huge sponge to sop up the energies of men who are divinely discontented. If the [striking] dockhands came to me tomorrow and said that they were going to start burning and demolishing, but could not make up their minds what to start on, I should recommend them to go for the works of art first…. Yet he wrote about art even when he did not have to—and continued to write about it into his nineties.

Very likely Shaw never knew how much he had written on art and artists, even during the galleries heyday of his attention to the subject. Some anonymously published pieces are not in his press-cutting books; some appeared in other guises, as music or drama reviews and essays; even letters; some were never published. All of them illuminate and entertain. Shaw could not help but be readable, and quotable lines leap from obscure paragraphs in forgotten newspapers and magazines. In the process the vanished world of Victorian art reemerges, and after it the new era of international art that Shaw was quick to appreciate. Writing to a friend in 1912 about Post-Impressionism, Shaw called it “the only live art now going. You can’t look at ordinary stuff after it.” But his days as a regular critic were then long over.

Whatever the interest of his occasional later forays into writing about art, Shaw would always dismiss them, observing in one of his 1919 pieces that he would always be an old Victorian, and it was in that guise,
his up-to-date sympathies notwithstanding, that he continued to write occasionally about art the rest of his professional life.

Shaw’s real art education came years after he began learning on the job. His friends in the Art Workers’ Guild, Walter Crane and Emery Walker, took Shaw along on Guild tours: from a day at the National Gallery to have his “mind improved” (Letters, 11 September 1891) to a trip to Italy, where Shaw was exposed to the art of Milan, Verona, Venice, Padua, Mantua, and Pavia. A long letter to William Morris (23 September 1891) is full of Shaw’s impatient impressions of Italian architecture (“inferior”), cathedral decoration (“piffling pictures like illustrations out of Cassell’s Illustrated Family Bible”), and the paintings of masters like Tintoretto and Veronese (“magnificent”). But he felt then, and continued to believe, that a “permanent, living art” had to emanate from conditions other than “Venetian splendor,” which implied the existence of its opposite, on which splendor fed: “The best art of all will come when we are rid of splendor and everything else in the glorious line.”

Shaw’s writing in general had already begun appropriating metaphors from art in ways that could not have happened had he not spent so many prentice years as art critic. His music criticism was an early example. In counterpoint, Handel was “left behind by comparatively commonplace men, much as Raphael was outdone by Pietro de Cortona in anatomy and perspective.” Contemporary English oratorios were “sham classics … worth no more than the forgotten pictures of [William] Hilton,” whose Christ Crowned with Thorns of nearly a century earlier, to Shaw’s disgust, had been purchased for the Royal Academy from the Chantrey bequest (14 October 1891). Charles Gounod was “almost as hard to dispraise as the President of the Royal Academy. Both produce works so graceful, so harmonious, so smooth, so delicate, so refined, and so handsomely sentimental that it is difficult to convey, without appearing ungracious or insensible, the exact measure of disparagement needed to prevent the reader from concluding that M. Gounod is another Handel, or Sir Frederick Leighton another Raphael.”

Unenthusiastic about French music of his day, Shaw claimed also that Jules Massenet’s Herodiade “bears about the same relation to what is usually understood by classical music as Mr. Pettie’s pictures do to Raphael’s or Mr Lewis Morris’s poetry does to Goethe’s.” John Pettie (1839–1893), a Scottish artist, painted sentimental subjects often based on Walter Scott’s novels. On the positive side, Shaw suggested
that the D’Oyly Carte-managed musical comedies—such as the Gilbert and Sullivan “Savoy operas”—were “as recognizable by the style alone as a picture by Watteau or Monticelli” (28 September 1892). But Franz Liszt’s “devotion to serious composition seems as hopeless a struggle against natural incapacity as was Benjamin Haydon’s determination to be a great painter.” Incapacity, unfortunately, was an insufficient deterrent. In a mischievous review of the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition in the Studio in 1888, Shaw suggested that many of the artists who exhibited in the myriad London galleries should reinvent themselves as architects, engineers, porters, cabinetmakers, silversmiths and bookbinders. And he contended, elevating painting above music, that if a painter “copied the design and the light and shade on canvas” from a photograph of Holman Hunt’s Flight into Egypt, “and exercised his invention in the coloring only, his claim to have produced an original work would be scoffed at by the most superficial amateur. To score a pianoforte arrangement is a precisely analogous operation, although it is easier beyond comparison to fill in a score than to color a design with oil paint.”

A “stupendous helmet” in Lohengrin reminded Shaw (29 April 1891) “of the headdress of the Indian in [Benjamin] West’s picture of the death of [General] Wolfe,” and proved the willingness of the tenor, like the painter, “for any sacrifice of tradition to accuracy.” A performance of Mefistofele prompted Shaw to write (5 August 1891) that the scene designer should have taken his suggestions from Hendrik Willem Mesdag’s “Sunrise” in the Museum at Amsterdam, rather than retain the dingy old backcloths of past productions. Mesdag (1831–1915) was known for his romantic marinescapes. Shaw had not only seen them in Amsterdam but remembered seeing them. Similarly, in noting (5 April 1890) that Belgian composer Edgar Tinel’s “barren” oratorio Franciscus had “created a great sensation in Brussels,” Shaw downplayed that reaction by remarking that the city which created “as a temple of Miltonic genius” a municipal museum of the studio of Antoine-Joseph Wertz (1806–1865), to house his elephantine historical canvases, and regarded its own Leon Gallait (1810–1887) “as a great painter … is capable of admiring anything that has nothing in it.” Shaw had encountered the work of both men in Belgium, and their mediocrity was not lost on him.

When disputing a critic’s claim, in downgrading Wagner, that Meyerbeer has “never been equaled among men,” Shaw would observe (also 5 April 1890) that it quite took his breath away, “as if someone had
said that [G. F.] Watts was a greater draughtsman than Mantegna.” And, Shaw noted, one did not need a “modern scientific basis” for accomplishment in the arts:

Sir Joshua Reynolds painted none the worse for believing that there were three primary colors, and that the human eye was one of the most exquisite and perfect instruments ever designed for the use of man; nor have his successors painted any the better since [physicist and physician Thomas] Young exploded the three primary colors for ever [in 1871], and [physiologist and physicist Hermann von] Helmholtz [in 1850] scandalized Europe by informing his pupils that if an optician were to send him an instrument with so many easily avoidable and remediable defects as the human eye, he would feel bound to censure him severely. (16 November 1892)

Shaw’s wry justification for writing prefaces to his plays, rather than letting them speak for themselves, questioned: “What is a Royal Academy catalogue but a series of statements that This is The Vale of Rest, This the Shaving of Samson, This is Chill October, This is H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, and so on?” Like his prose, Shaw’s playwriting was filled with echoes from art. Thus the Devil in Don Juan in Hell (1903) moans that Juan’s departure is “a political defeat” on a level with Rembrandt’s exit: “This is the greatest loss I have had since that Dutch painter went—a fellow who would paint a hag of 70 with as much enjoyment as a Venus of 20.” In 1910, at a benefit for the Irish National Theatre at which Shaw introduced W. B. Yeats, he identified his compatriot’s genius with the same metaphor. Like Yeats, he observed, Rembrandt did not settle for empty beauty, but was interested in life in all its manifestations: “You will find that [Adolphe] Bouguereau has an extreme interest in beautiful women. He tries to make their flesh look like ivory. But if you study the paintings of Rembrandt you will find that he took as much interest in old women as in young. That is always the sign of a great man. I have always been interested in old women myself.... Bouguereau wants his pretty women with skin like a visiting-card.”

Words, Shaw would claim, were not always adequate to convey the impact of the senses—not even when allied to the composer’s art. “The words spoil the music. Michael Angelo wrote reams of sonnets; but what are they beside the speechless prophets and sibyls in the Sistine Chapel? Is there any written or writable description,” he argued, in his nineties, to Margaret Wheeler (22 July 1948), “that makes you see the Venus of Milo or the Hermes of Praxiteles? Do the gardeners’ catalogues with which Milton padded Paradise Lost do for you what Turner and Monet did with a few dabs of paint?”
In Shaw’s letters we find such figures of speech from art and his art critic days as his dismissal (26 December 1902) of his German translator Siegfried Trebitsch’s “unashamed, intentional crimes of a classically educated Viennese litterateur. If you took to painting & made a portrait of me, you would give me the leg of Apollo and the torso of the Farnese Hercules, and if I complained you would think me an ignorant Philistine.” He told engraver John Farleigh (6 July 1932) that “consistency is the enemy of enterprise just as symmetry is the enemy of art.” To artist J. M. Strudwick (13 June 1922), Shaw compared playwriting strategies to those in painting: “And remember that though there is no chiaroscuro in the Rossetti school, and ought not to be, and not much more movement than in heaven; drama requires conflict in tragedy, contrast in comedy, and continual movement.” Even in prefacing Frank Harris’s semi-scurrilous 1931 biography of him (some of it written by the subject himself and all of it read by G.B.S. in proof), Shaw, in putting some distance between the portrayal and any suggestion that it was authorized, declared: “No man is a good judge of his own portrait; and if it be well painted he has no right to prevent the artist exhibiting it, or even, when the artist is a deceased friend, to refuse to varnish it before the show opens.” And from Cape Town the next year he wrote of the enchanting Dutch gardens, the quiet “Peter de Hooghe interiors” and their dramatic contrast with the seemingly insoluble social problems of South Africa. On hundreds of occasions like these, Shaw spoke in the language of his years as art critic.

In the days of Shaw’s boyhood, when English painting was still suffering from the blight of the sentimental anecdotal picture and Ireland lagged culturally at least a generation behind even that, the young Shaw could have been guaranteed a surfeit of such “story” paintings in Dublin, pictures he later (21 April 1886) condemned as so lacking in invention that it would take a thousand of them “to furnish a single shilling dreadful.” What the galleries wanted, and painters provided, were “sentimentalities meant to be tragic” and “good natured imbecilities that are offered to be humorous.”

An index to the London situation in the fifth decade of Victoria’s reign was the fate of Whistler’s “Mother”—the Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1, which had been exhibited in London in 1874 and, being unsold and unsaleable, was immured most of the following eighteen years in pawn, until the government of France purchased it for the Luxembourg Museum, for living painters then the “vestibule to the Louvre.” The later years of that portrait’s purgatory were Shaw’s
years as an art critic. Yet Shaw had no ambitions to remain an art critic, although as a boy in Ireland he had once dreamed of being an artist. Finances intervened; he dropped out of school to develop a copper-plate hand as a bookkeeper in a land agent’s office rather than learn to etch a plate or paint a picture. Then he wanted to write, but until he left for London in 1876, at twenty, his writing was largely confined to account books.

In his tenth year in London, after five manuscript novels that no publisher wanted, and some occasional journalism, Shaw was still dependent, at twenty-nine, upon his mother’s income as a music teacher. Then the unanticipated writing career opened narrowly. His friend William Archer, who was dramatic critic of the World in 1885, had found himself suddenly compelled to double as art critic. He invited Shaw to accompany him to London galleries and studios that had long been familiar places. Shaw had already written two unpublished novels in which art played a major role. In Immaturity and Love Among the Artists, the painters of some worth had been influenced by Pre-Raphaelitism and Whistler, while market-wise artists thrived upon society portraits and anecdotal pictures. Wandering the galleries and offering comments as he went did not seem work to Shaw, who was surprised when Archer sent him a check for £1.6.8—half the fee. Shaw returned it; Archer sent it back; Shaw then “re-returned” it on 14 December 1885, claiming that he had been under no “external compulsion” to go, while Archer had been under the orders of his editor, Edmund Yates. “As it is,” Shaw explained, “I have the advantage of seeing the galleries for nothing without the drudgery of writing the articles. I do not like to lose the … art life, and yet going to a gallery by myself bores me so much that I let the [Royal] Academy itself slip last year, and should have done so this year but for your bearing me thither….”

Pointing out that Shaw had done the work, Archer persuaded Yates to designate G.B.S. as art critic, a post Shaw held, often concurrently with half a dozen other responsibilities, from February 1886 until January 1890. One of the more short-lived of the parallel posts was that of arts critic for Annie Besant’s socialist organ Our Corner, in which several of his stillborn novels were being resurrected in serial form as padding. By no coincidence, the first time Shaw produced an “Art Corner” column about the visual arts (rather than music or theater) was for the February 1886 issue. If he were doing the gallery beat for Yates, there was no reason why he could not provide a further sampling for Mrs. Besant, who would permit him to propagandize more freely.
The more skilled his uncommercial novels had become, the more they had repelled the conventional-minded professionals at the publishing houses; but as a critic, he boasted, “I came to the top irresistibly, whilst contemporary well-schooled literary beginners, brought up in artless British homes, could make no such mark.” As a result, he felt, his weekly columns “on all the fine arts in succession,” as he went on from art to music and theater, remained readable. He had a critical strategy, he exaggerated in the *World* (6 July 1892):

I was capable of looking at a picture then, and, if it displeased me, immediately considering whether the figures formed a pyramid, so that, if they did not, I could prove the picture defective because the composition was wrong. And if I saw a picture of a man foreshortened ... in such a way that I could see nothing but the soles of his feet and his eyes looking out between his toes, I marvelled at it and almost revered the painter, though veneration was at no time one of my strong points.... I can only thank my stars that my sense of what was real in works of art somehow did survive my burst of interest in irrelevant critical conventions and the pretensions of this or that technical method to be absolute. When I was more among pictures than I am at present, certain reforms in painting which I desired were advocated by the Impressionist party, and resisted by the Academic party. Until those reforms had been effectually wrought I fought for the Impressionists—backed up by men who could not draw a nose differently from an elbow against Leighton and Bouguereau—and did everything I could to make the public conscious of the ugly unreality of studio-lit landscapes and the inanity of second-hand classicism.

“I am always electioneering,” he confessed about the arts. “I make every notable performance an example of the want of them, knowing that in the long run these defects will seem as ridiculous as Monet has already made Bouguereau’s backgrounds, or Ibsen the ‘poetical justice’ of Tom Taylor. Never in my life have I penned an impartial criticism; and I hope I never may. As long as I have a want, I am necessarily partial to the fulfilment of that want, with a view to which I must strive with all my wit to infect everyone else with it.” His refusal to accept the commercial view quickly made him a target of the dealers—not for bribes but for special flatteries. At his first advance “Press View”—he was twenty-nine and unknown—a dealer described to him “rapturously” the extraordinary qualities of what were even to the novice critic only “half a dozen respectable but quite ordinary sketches in watercolor by an unknown painter.” Shaw responded, “How can you talk such nonsense to me? You know better.” As a result, he was escorted to a private room in which the dealer kept “a few real treasures by old masters: mostly primitives.” Another dealer invited G.B.S. to see the latest work by a well-known painter and then pretended disgust with the
popular taste which it represented. “Oh!” he said, “you’ve come to see this. Here it is. Pish! It is what you people like; and we have to provide it for you. Now here,” he suggested, pointing to an inconspicuously hung canvas, “is a picture to my taste worth ten of it. But it means nothing to you: you wouldn’t know the painter’s name if I told it to you. Look at his handling! Look at that sky. But you gentlemen of the Press pass it by without a glance.” Shaw guessed that few would fall for the “neglected genius” ploy, but he “had not the heart to spoil the old man’s comedy by telling him so.” The ploy worked with those “who were ignorant of art and impatient of the [social] convention that obliged their papers to notice it.” Editors often sent “their worst and wordiest reporters to the galleries, the theatre and the opera, reserving their best for political meetings and the criminal courts.”

For Shaw the Victorian galleries helped complete his education. One of his earliest campaigns as a critic was fought after the war was over. Pre-Raphaelite painting had already made an impact upon contemporary art and had itself either faded into commercialism or been transmuted into new forms. While Shaw (to the end a follower of Ruskin) regularly praised Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had died in 1881, he hedged his appreciation by observing that although Rossetti had dazzled with his “wealth of color [and] poetic conception … our eyes are now used to the sun; and … [his] want of thoroughness as a draughtsman, and the extent to which his favorite types of beauty began to reappear as mere … conventions, with impossible lips and mechanically designed eyebrows, came as something of a shock upon many who had previously fancied him almost flawless.”

Shaw also continued to admire the earlier art of Rossetti’s confreres Millais, Hunt, and Burne-Jones, all of whom had long since done their best work and lapsed into commerce. The sheer labor they evidenced, of which Ruskin would have approved, led Shaw—ever the social critic—into observing that intended didacticism often had an improving effect, if not the one which the artist may have intended. The Holman Hunt works he approved of in one of his earliest “In the Picture-Galleries” columns probably did not bring a single Sandemanian into the fold of the Established Church, or induce one woman of fashion to give up tight-lacing (the most familiar form of “vital negligence”); but it was the perseverance and conscientiousness which Shaw admired that made “this small picture one of the most extraordinary units of a collection that does not contain one square inch of commonplace handiwork.”
Spencer Stanhope, he wrote in the World in 1886, “has imitated Mr Burne-Jones quite long enough. If he would imitate Hogarth for a season or two, and then look out of the window and imitate Nature, we might gain some adequate return from his praiseworthy industry.” Conscientious industry was not enough, nor imitation of Burne-Jones, although the artist remained to Shaw the one contemporary with “the power to change the character of an entire exhibition by contributing or withholding his work.” It was not that Burne-Jones was more technically gifted, but that he had more imagination, while others who displayed similar wares in Bond Street were “venal, ambitious, timeserving and vulgar.” The “least sincere pictures” he observed in one show were by Burne-Jones’s son, Philip, “who seems to have abandoned any designs he may have entertained of doing serious work as a painter.” (Similarly, as we shall see, Shaw did not let his awe of Robert Browning’s poetry obscure his doubts about young “Pen” Browning’s skills with a brush.) Of the Pre-Raphaelite veterans he found least to admire in John Millais, who was making more money by producing less authentic art than ever before. His Forlorn, Shaw thought, reviewing an 1888 exhibition, “ought surely to have been called Abandoned. She is an arrant pot-boiler as ever was painted: her upper lip dripping vermillion, and her ill-made flaunting theatrical red sleeves, are intolerable to contemplate.”

Once a P.R.B. crony, Whistler years later was still an outsider, as uncommercial as ever; and if only as rebel and wit, he was bound to receive Shavian commendation. However, Shaw was not merely playing critical politics, for he felt from his own visual experience that Whistler’s artistic perceptions were easily validated. Writing in “Art Corner” in March 1886 Shaw observed “that our foggy atmosphere often produces poetic landscapes in the midst of bricks and mortar will hardly be denied by anyone who has watched the network of bare twigs lacing the mist in Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields.” Although Shaw praised Whistler, he warned imitators, and when he alleged that the expatriate American was lazily displaying work not up to his abilities, as in the cleverly mounted Dowdeswell show of Venice etchings in 1886, he hoped—with some skepticism—for more formidable later results:

Whistler’s Notes, Harmonies, and Nocturnes are arranged in brown and gold, in a brown and gold room, beneath a brown and gold velarium, in charge of a brown and gold porter…. He has the public about him; and he not only humours their nonsense, but keeps it in countenance by a dash of nonsensical eccentricity on his own part, and by not standing too stiffly on his dignity as an artist, which is saved finally by the fact that his “notes” are well framed,
well hung, well lighted, suitably set forth, and exquisitely right so far as they go, except a failure or two which he unblushingly amuses himself by exhibiting as gravely as he might his very masterpieces. The “Chelsea Fish Shop,” the Hoxton street scene, and Dutch seaside sketch (No. 47), are a few out of many examples of accurate and methodical note-taking, which is just the reverse of what the rashier spectators suppose them to be. As Mr. Whistler presumably takes notes with a view to subsequent pictures, it is to be hoped that something will soon come of them.

In the same vein, Shaw employed his characteristic Dickensian “signatures”—metaphors from Dickens—to excoriate Whistler’s overly minimalist sketches. Using Joe Gargery, Pip’s laconic but blunt brother-in-law in *Great Expectations*, and Jaggers, the secretive, overbearing London lawyer who negotiates Pip’s gentlemanly upbringing and meets his match in the country blacksmith, Shaw wrote (30 November 1887): “In much the same spirit as that in which Joseph Gargery met the supersubtleties of Mr. Jaggers, I ask Mr. Whistler if so be as he can draw a girl reading, to up and draw her; if not, let her alone.” To Shaw, Whistler remained a great artist, but his genius did not give him license to thrust anything with his butterfly mark before the public. His portrait of the lovely Lady Colin Campbell, Shaw wrote sharply in *The World* (8 December 1886), “being unfinished, has no business in the gallery.” Admiring a John Singer Sargent work, he nevertheless refused to ignore what he felt was half-hearted effort. “Mr Sargent,” he wrote (8 May 1889), “who has put the Academy off with a couple of amusing slapdash caricatures of Mr Henschel and Mr Henry Irving, has given the New Gallery his Lady Macbeth, a superb portrait of Miss Ellen Terry, more like she, except in rare inspired moments, is like herself.”

Shaw was never to be satisfied as literary critic, art critic, music critic, or theater critic with the work of an artist who was performing at less than his potential. As he put it in a music column in 1890, “A criticism written without personal feeling is not worth reading. It is the capacity for making good or bad art a personal matter that makes a man a critic. The artist who accounts for my disparagement by alleging personal animosity on my part is quite right: when people do less than their best, and do that less at once badly and self-conplacently, I hate them, loathe them, detest them, long to tear them limb from limb....”

Unintimidated by the politics of picture placement and other deceptions meant to mask inadequacy of performance, he could write, as he did in a 20 March 1889 review, that A. H. Enock was “to be congratulated for getting a large and frankly bad picture hung by calling it ‘that Beautiful Dartmouth (Queen’s Diary).’”
Finding himself once, in the *World*, speaking “contemptuously” of the “elderly school,” he confessed as much and then went on to observe that it was not a time to be just to it. Its principle of giving a precise pictorial account of what it knew to be before it, led it to paint a great deal that it did not see, and to omit a great deal that it did see. It is now getting a tremendous lesson from the men [of the Impressionist school] who are trying to paint no more and no less than they see; and I am more disposed to help to rub that lesson in than to make untimely excuses for people who for many years outraged my taste for nature until I positively hated the sight of an ordinary picture.

Although he could not reconcile himself to the occasional recurrence of a “ghastly lilac-coloured fog,” looking at the “more elderly British wall-ornaments,” he was reluctant to concede “that such airless, lightness sunless crudities, coloured in the taste of a third-rate toymaker, and full of absurd shadows put in a priori as a matter of applied physics, could ever have seemed satisfactory pictures.”

Shaw’s concern, he wrote later in *The Sanity of Art* (1908), was that when “Whistler and his party” forced the dealers and art societies to exhibit their work, and by doing so accustomed the public to tolerate, if not appreciate, what at first appeared to be unconventional absurdities, the door was necessarily opened to real absurdities. Artists of doubtful or incomplete vocation find it difficult to draw or paint well; but it is easy for them to smudge paper or canvas so as to suggest a picture just as the stains on an old ceiling or the dark spots in a glowing coal-fire do. Plenty of rubbish of this kind was exhibited, and tolerated at the time when people could not see the difference between any daub in which there were aniline shadows and a landscape by Monet. Not that they thought the daub as good as the Monet: they thought the Monet as ridiculous as the daub; but they were afraid to say so.…

Among the early Impressionists, Claude Monet was a particular hero of G.B.S.’s picture-gallery period, and Shaw regularly attempted to separate the daubers from such new masters. “Impressionism, or the misfortune of having indefinite impressions, which can happily be cured by attentive observation and a suitable pair of spectacles,” he wrote (28 April 1886), “is responsible for Mr. Sydney Starr’s nebulous St John’s Wood.” The British gallery goer, he cautioned, would find such pictures very different from the usual Bond Street fare and very uneven in quality, but “nobody with more than half an eye will need more than a glance … to convince him that Monet, his apparently extravagant violets and poppy reds notwithstanding, is one of the most vividly faithful landscapists living.” Still, Shaw responded coolly to innovation which seemed to him to lack range, much as he criti-
cized Whistler, often unreasonably, for working on a minimalist scale. “As to the ‘New English Art’ reformers,” he wrote, “they are, for the most part, honest as well as adroit; but so far they lack the constructive imagination to make pictures out of their studies.” He had his doubts as to where the newness would lead:

These gentlemen are painting shortsightedly in more senses than one. The trick of drawing and colouring badly as if you did it on purpose is easily acquired; and the market will be swamped with “new English art,” and the public tired of it, in a year or two…. The “new” fashion may be capital fun for Mr. Whistler, Mr. Sargent, and a few others who can swim on any tide; but for the feebler folk it means at best a short life. . . .

“As to my line in criticism,” Shaw explained to his first biographer, Archibald Henderson (15 July 1905),

the only controversial question up in my time was raised by the Impressionists, of whom, in England, Whistler was the chief. People accustomed to see the “good north light” of a St. John’s Wood studio represented at exhibitions as sunlight in the open air were naturally amazed by the pictures of Monet. I backed up the Impressionists strongly; refused to call Whistler “Jimmy” instead of Mr. Whistler; boomed the Dutch school vigorously and tried to persuade the public that James [Jacob] Maris was a great painter; stood up for Von Uhde not only in defence of his pictures of Christ surrounded by people in tall hats and frock coats, but also of his excellent painting of light in a dry crisp diffused way then quite unfashionable; and, on the whole, picked out my men and supported movements with fairly good judgment as far as subsequent events enable one to say. And of course I did not fall into the Philistine trap & talk “greenery yallery” nonsense about Burne Jones & the pre-Raphaelite school.

The artistic direction which Shaw saw as most fruitful came via Ruskin, and then William Morris, who had put his theories of decorative art to use well beyond the fresco and the frame. There was important art needed in the world, Shaw prophesied, as noted earlier, that not only did not require brushes and an easel but could be effected by craftsmen who were more useful and more accomplished with other tools than the conventional ones:

It has been for a long time past evident that the first step towards making our picture-galleries endurable is to get rid of the pictures—the detestable pictures—the silly British pictures, the vicious foreign pictures, the venal popular pictures, the pigheaded academic pictures, signboards all of them of the wasted talent and perverted ambition of men who might have been passably useful as architects, engineers, potters, cabinet-makers, smiths, or bookbinders. But there comes an end to all things; and perhaps the beginning of the end of the easel-picture despotism is the appearance in the New Gallery of the handicraftsman with his pots and pans, textiles and fictiles, and things in general that have some other use than to hang on a nail and collect bacteria. . . .
One would not expect Shaw to be anything less than Shavian in his art columns, and they do not disappoint. In a May 1886 “Art Corner” he noted a new piece of commercial art by Millais, *Ruddier than the Cherry*, “representing a ragged flower girl in whose cheeks rosiness is complicated by sunburn, and who is likely to prove more interesting to the dealers than to knowers of pictures.” In the *World* in 1887 he reported that William Stott of Oldham “exhibits a nymph; and she, basking in the sun on a couch formed by her own red hair, exhibits herself freely and not gracefully. The red hair is ill painted.” In another “Art Corner”—in perhaps his strongest condemnation of establishment art—he brought up the “painful subject” that “Art has suffered an unusually severe blow at the hands of the Royal Academy by the opening of the [Academy’s] annual exhibition at Burlington House.” And in the *World* he noted that Harry Quilter (*The Times’s* critic, who was equally mediocre as an artist) was “progressing in his studies as a landscape painter.” Unafraid of other critics, Shaw was equally unintimidated by the galleries that disapproved of his honesty. When he had condemned the annual photography show in Pall Mall for its gold medals “stuck on the most fraudulent examples of retouching or picture-faking,” his “public spirit,” he confessed (9 October 1889), cost him, all told, “a capital sum of thirty shillings, through the cutting off of my invitations to the press views. I now perforce pay at the turnstile, and buy my catalogue like any ordinary unit of the mob; but when I look around and see the reformation I have wrought, I bear my chastening stoically, and even laugh a little in my sleeve.”

As season followed season, Shaw continued to turn out his columns on art, while writing book reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, music reviews for the *Dramatic Review*, and political and economic journalism for myriad radical publications in London. As described earlier, by early 1889, his music columns, now written for the *Star* under the playful nom de plume “Corno di Bassetto,” were undermining his loyalties to the galleries. Winding down his columns on art for the *World*, he wrote in the issue of 23 October 1889: “I cannot guarantee my very favourable impression of the Hanover Gallery as I only saw it by gaslight. That was the fault of Sarasate, who played the Ancient Mariner with me. He fixed me with his violin on my way to Bond Street, and though, like the wedding guest, I tried my best, I could not choose but hear.” The concert hall had won out.

To Archibald Henderson he confided (15 July 1905) that once he took to music criticism, he began to examine whether the “very hard
work of plodding through all the picture exhibitions” was worth con-
tinuing. Counting his printed paragraphs, most of them anonymously 
published, for which he received fivepence a line, he discovered that he 
had been earning less than forty pounds a year for columns he felt were 
worth two hundred. When Edmund Yates professed to be staggered by 
the revelation, Shaw recommended that Lady Colin Campbell, who 
 wrote a witty “Woman’s Walks” column he admired, replace him. Yates 
proposed that they share the duties, with Shaw taking the major shows 
at a higher fee plus a £52 annual retainer. Instead, Shaw used the op-
portunity to relinquish the entire responsibility. He claimed that he 
was too busy, although he always found time for what he wanted to 
do. He was delivering lectures at no fee two or three times a week for 
such organizations as the West London Social and Political Reform As-
 sociation, the Plumstead Radical Club, the Finsbury Radical Club, the 
Fabian Society, the Socialist League, the Upper Chelsea Institute, the 
Chiswick Liberal Club, and the South Place Religious Society. And he 
was already trying his hand at playwriting, beginning and then discar-
ding or putting aside several experiments for the stage.

In Whistlerian terms, the Star (17 December 1889), in its “Mainly 
About People” column, regretted in advance “the absence of the fa-
mous harmony in snuff-color with which Mr. Shaw used to enliven 
Academy picture shows.” Shaw’s final withdrawal as art critic (he had 
needed the income and hung on) did not occur until 1891. First he 
applied unsuccessfully to become art critic for a new journal about to 
begin publication that January, the Speaker. Then he signed on with 
Henry Labouchere’s feisty Truth to write art criticism with his left hand 
while doing music columns elsewhere. When, however, Labouchere’s 
editor, Horace Voules, insisted that Shaw admire the painting of Fred-
erick Goodall, a Royal Academician whose work G.B. Shaw thought me-
diocre, he wrote to a friend (16 May 1890) that his “connection with 
the paper may not survive the language I have used in consequence.” 
It was the end of Shaw the art critic in the sense of a regular commit-
ment to a column. He did write an article on the next Academy show 
(April 1891) for the Observer, a Sunday paper, but it appeared “with 
profuse [editorial] interpolations” and unsigned on 3 May 1891. Shaw 
promptly resigned. His copy had gone to the proprietor, who (Shaw 
 wrote his friend Emery Walker on 7 May 1891) “proceeded to mutilate 
it, interpolate scraps of insufferable private view smalltalk, break it into 
paragraphs in the wrong places, season it with obvious little puffs of … 
private friends, and generally reduce its commercial value (not to speak
of its artistic value) about 1800%. If you look at the article you will see at a glance the broken fragments of Shaw sticking ridiculously in the proprietary mud.”

Despite his claim that he immediately gave up going to the picture galleries, his diaries in the 1890s are full of references to press views and private views, and as late as December 1893 he was still helping his successor on the *World*, Lady Colin, by writing notices for her while she was away from London. Even as late as 13 March 1897, one of his theater columns for the *Saturday Review* is titled with the names of two artists and a playwright: “Madox Brown, Watts, and Ibsen.” Art was still a point of reference.

Although painting had palled for him, Shaw’s on-the-job art education would prove to be useful for a working playwright in ways he could never have anticipated. The experience had also convinced him of the effectiveness of art as an instrument of culture, a subject he wrote about explicitly in the influential *The Sanity of Art* and in prefaces to *Misalliance* and *Back to Methusaleh*. “We all grow stupid and mad,” he concluded in the *Misalliance* preface, “to just the extent to which we have not been artistically educated.” Earlier, in *The Sanity of Art*, still under the powerful influences of Ruskin and Morris, he had made as wide-ranging a claim for the importance of art in human life as he ever enunciated:

> The claim of art to our respect must stand or fall with the validity of its pretension to cultivate and refine our senses and faculties until seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting become highly conscious and critical acts with us, protesting vehemently against ugliness, noise, discordant speech, frowsy clothing, and foul air, and taking keen interest and pleasure in beauty, in music, and in the open air, besides making us insist, as necessary for comfort and decency, on clean, wholesome, handsome fabrics to wear, and utensils of fine material and elegant workmanship to handle. Further, art should refine our sense of character and conduct, of justice and sympathy, greatly heightening our self-knowledge, self-control, precision of action, and considerateness, and making us intolerant of baseness, cruelty, injustice, and intellectual superficiality or vulgarity. The worthy artist or craftsman is he who responds to this cultivation of the physical and moral senses by feeding them with pictures, musical compositions, pleasant houses and gardens, good clothes and fine implements, poems, fictions, essays, and dramas which call the heightened senses and ennobled faculties into pleasurable activity. The great artist is he who goes a step beyond the demand, and, by supplying works of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been perceived, succeeds, after a brief struggle with its strangeness, in adding this fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race. This is why we value art; this is why we feel that the iconoclast and the Puritan are attacking something made holier, by solid usefulness, than their own theories of purity.
Shaw’s early dramatic settings could not help but be influenced, even when he intended to construct a scene ironically, by what English eyes were accustomed to encountering in art. From his earliest plays, one can visualize what Shaw himself saw, as he ranged through Bond Street and Burlington House and the art clubs and societies in the 1890s. In the final stage directions in *Candida* (1894), for example, young Eugene Marchbanks, spurned, turns to Candida Morell and her husband for the last time: “She takes his face in her hands; and he divines her intention and falls on his knees, she kisses his forehead.” In his tableau Shaw was parodying the sentimental Victorian anecdote in painting, although his first audience, aware only of the artistic genre, took it straight. (In *The Devil’s Disciple*, the first act includes a reading of the will—an obvious grouping of people for a Royal Academy set piece—and in fact a painting of that name by David Wilkie was famous.) In the last act, the scene of Dick Dudgeon mounting the scaffold owes much, as Shaw freely confessed, to dramatizations of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* but perhaps even more to Frederick Barnard’s popular painting *Sydney Carton. “A Tale of Two Cities,”* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1882 and much reproduced. “Mr. Fred Barnard’s studies from Thackeray,” Shaw once noted (6 July 1887), “are by no means so happy as his Dickens pictures.”

When Vivie Warren, in *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, draws aside the curtains of her window and proclaims: “What a beautiful night!” Shaw’s stage directions add: “The landscape is seen bathed in the radiance of the harvest moon rising over Blackdown.” It may be no coincidence that Frederick Leighton’s *Summer Moon*—which fits the description—was exhibited in London shortly before Shaw wrote the play. The New England Puritan interiors of *The Devil’s Disciple* suggest Dutch genre painting, although no special subject can be pointed to. Rather, a Shaw letter to the actor Ian Robertson (23 May 1900) complains that classic actor Johnston Forbes-Robertson (Ian’s distinguished brother) would become interested in the play only after asking “whether I could not alter the last act … so as to make it like the Delaroche picture.” Pictorially, there are more direct connections. As the co-hero of *The Devil’s Disciple* is a Presbyterian minister, it is no surprise that on the wall of his house as we (at the least, readers of the published play) see it are “a mezzotint portrait of some Presbyterian divine, [and] Raphael’s St Paul preaching at Athens.” In Shaw’s postscript to *Androcles and the Lion* he recalls showing the Rev. Anthony Anderson throwing off his black coat.
and revealing that he is “a priest of Mars.” In the Raphael painting, a statue of Mars is beside the bellicose Paul.

Shaw sometimes conceived his plays in painterly images. Paul Delaroche had produced smoothly finished, sentimental depictions of historical scenes, engravings of which decorated thousands of English parlors. Despite Robertson’s suggestion, The Devil’s Disciple had been written to expose the fraud rather than to perpetrate it. Yet Shaw’s painterly concepts were not always ironic. Putting the case for realistic theater in a Saturday Review drama column (17 July 1897), he declared: “The most advanced audiences today, taught by Wagner and Ibsen (not to mention Ford Madox Brown), cannot stand the drop back into decoration after the moment of earnest life. They want realistic drama of complete brainy, passional texture all through, and will not have any pictorial stuff or roulade at all....” He intended to provide that intellectual realism.

G.B.S. always did his homework before writing a scene, even researching American Civil War memoirs as preparation for a comedy focused upon a much smaller war, Arms and the Man. He was quick to respond (23 April 1894) to William Archer, who, friendship aside, reviewed the play unfavorably: “Do you think war is any less terrible & heroic in its reality on its seamy side, as you would say,” Shaw objected, “than it is in the visions of Raina & of the critics who know it from the engravings of Elizabeth Thompson’s pictures in the Regent St. shop windows?” Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Butler) was famous for her obsessively detailed paintings of British heroism during the Napoleonic, Crimean, and colonial wars. Shaw’s play was at least in part a response to her sentimental depictions, one of which, The Roll Call (1874), was purchased by Queen Victoria. But there were certainly other artists Shaw had in mind as well, as he suggests in the opening stage directions of The Man of Destiny (1895), in which he describes Napoleon as having been “trained in the artillery under the old regime.... Cannonading is his technical specialty ... dignifying war with the noise and smoke of cannon, as depicted in all military portraits.”

The romanticizers of war were only slightly less numerous than its casualties. Lady Butler’s best-known works received wide, continuing distribution in the form of engravings, as Shaw observed, and several of these suggest some of Captain Bluntschli’s ironic lines in Arms and the Man. In particular there is Scotland Forever! (1881), with its dramatic canvas of cavalrymen charging headlong at the viewer, flank to flank. Describing a cavalry charge to the wide-eyed Raina, Bluntschli cyni-
cally pictures it as “slinging a handful of peas against a window pane.” Then he observes that one can tell the young horsemen “by their wildness and slashing. The old ones come bunched up under the number one guard; they know that they are mere projectiles…. Their wounds are mostly broken knees, from the horses cannoning together.” But Raina’s beloved, the pompous Major Sergius Saranoff, out of “sheer ignorance of war,” according to Bluntschli, charges “like an operatic tenor,” and one can see the operatic—or romantic—idealization of cavalry charges in the colorful, crowded canvases of Lady Butler. One can even wonder, since *Arms and the Man* is set in Bulgaria during a real war with Serbia which occurred in the 1880s, what Shaw might have remembered from “some melodramatic Servian incidents by M. [Pal] Joanowits,” now forgotten, which he saw at McLean’s Gallery and noted in his “Art Corner” in May 1886.

Sometimes in Shavian drama a painting seems displayed only perfunctorily, as in Dr. Paramore’s reception room in *The Philanderer* (written in 1893), where a framed reproduction of Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson* is hanging on the wall above a cabinet containing “anatomical preparations.” It is the obvious work for the location. But later in the scene Leonard Charteris “strolls across to the cabinet, and pretends to study the Rembrandt … so as to be as far out of Julia’s reach as possible.” As the dialogue develops, he is “still contemplating Rembrandt.” The picture has no more than its obvious relationship to a physician’s office, but it is there to provide the philanderer of the play with something innocuous upon which to temporarily fix his attention, and evade the eager Julia Craven. Seldom does Shaw insert a work of art into a play for only such mechanical purposes.

*Candida* was a much more complex response to art. Shaw called it his “modern Pre-Raphaelite play” and intended it on one of its many levels as an analogue to medieval religious painting. Even its curious subtitle, “A Mystery,” suggests medieval associations. In the sitting room of the comfortable London parsonage in which the play is set, a single picture is seen on the wall, described in Shaw’s stage directions as “a large autotype of the chief figure in Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin” (the upper half, showing Mary ascending into the clouds). In the original manuscript Shaw had described, instead, a reproduction of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (“a large photograph of the Madonna de San Sisto”) over the mantel, but he later substituted the Titian, possibly because there was no distracting—misleading—babe in arms. But *Candida*, he wanted to make plain by displaying a recognizable work of
art, was an ironic Shavian mystery play about a Madonna and Child, with the heroine of the title the Holy Mother. (The “child” is the sexually innocent Eugene.) At Candida’s first entrance, Shaw’s stage directions comment: “A wise-hearted observer, looking at her, would at once guess that whoever had placed the Assumption of the Virgin over her hearth did so because he fancied some spiritual resemblance between them, and yet would not suspect either her husband or herself of any such idea, or indeed of any concern with the art of Titian.” For Candida’s philistine father, Burgess, it is “a high class first rate of work of art,” but the reproduction is the gift of the eighteen-year-old Eugene Marchbanks, the sensitive and emotional young poet whom the Reverend James Morell and his wife have befriended. The resemblance he perceives will vanish through the play, and with it his idealism.

In a letter to Ellen Terry, Shaw confided (6 April 1896) that Candida was “the Virgin Mother and nobody else” and that he had written “THE Mother Play.” To Janet Achurch, for whom he had created the role, he suggested that she make herself up for the role by recourse to examples in art, having been horrified by the idea that she would play his Madonna in her frizzed, bleached-blond hair. “Send to a photographic shop,” he urged (20 March 1895), “for a picture of some Roman bust—say that of Julia, daughter of Augustus and wife of Agrippa, in the Uffizi in Florence—and take that as your model, or rather as your point of departure. You must part your hair in the middle, and be sweet, sensible, comely, dignified, and Madonna like. If you condescend to the vulgarity of being a pretty woman, much less a flashy one ... you are lost.” What he wanted emphasized to desensationalize the situation was “dignity,” and he found his guide to it, as he had found his initial inspiration, in Italy, having spent a few weeks in Florence in the autumn of 1894, where (as he wrote in his preface to Plays, Pleasant) he occupied himself “with the religious art of the middle ages.” He had hurried back from an earlier Italian visit to fulfill a music-criticism assignment in Birmingham and had discovered there that a “very remarkable collection of the works of our British ‘pre-Raphaelite’ painters was on view. I looked at these, and then went into Birmingham churches to see the windows of William Morris and Burne-Jones.... When my subsequent visit to Italy found me practising the playwright’s craft, the time was ripe for a modern pre-Raphaelite play.” That his 1927 recollection to Ashley Dukes was completely accurate can be seen in the letter he wrote to Florence Farr, then his mistress, from Birmingham (7 October 1891), after seeing Rossetti’s beatific, Italianate women. “This is
to certify,” he wrote effusively, “that you are my best and dearest love, the regenerator of my heart, the holiest joy of my soul, my treasure, my salvation, my rest, my reward ... my secret glimpse of heaven, my angel of the Annunciation, not yet herself awake, but rousing me from a long sleep with the beat of her unconscious wings, and shining upon me with her beautiful eyes that are still blind.” The enraptured Eugene Marchbanks would not do better in Shaw’s 1894 play.

Observing that his feminine lead was a composite of influences from art, Shaw suggested to Dukes that Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin in the Accademia in Venice and Correggio’s less famous Virgin in the dome of the cathedral at Parma had been “boiled down into cockney Candida.” By then he had forgotten the Madonnas of Raphael, Murillo, and others he had seen in Italy and the special effort he made in July 1894 to see the Madonna of Hans Holbein in Darmstadt; but no matter, the point was clear.

Ellen Terry, too old for the role, had wanted to play Candida, but Shaw offered her as consolation prize a role for an even more mature woman. When Lady Cicely Waynflete in Captain Brassbound’s Conversion failed at first to interest her, Shaw appealed (5 August 1899): “I try to shew you fearing nobody and managing them all.... Here then is your portrait painted on a map of the world—and you prefer Sargent’s Lady Macbeth!” He persuaded, as he wrote, in images from art. Yet it took a half dozen more years and a dearth of alternative roles before Ellen Terry played Lady Cicely.

Shaw’s fascination with the Virgin figure failed to be satisfied by the completion of Candida or even by the creation of the more matronly and asexual (yet still attractively marriageable) Lady Cicely. Later he found a Virgin figure at the Reims cathedral that impressed him so much that he “intended some day to put [her, too] in a play.” But he did not, although he did not forget her, writing of Reims in the preface (1919) to Heartbreak House that “no actress could rival its Virgin beauty.” No play thereafter suggests what he might have done. Yet even before Shaw’s playwriting began in earnest, and even before he had written any of his jejune novels, he had toyed with a Passion Play and had written the first two acts in pseudo-Shakespearean blank verse. Noted earlier, the 1878 script suggests the setting and allegedly irreverent realism of John Millais’s early and once-controversial Pre-Raphaelite painting of the Holy Family, Christ in the House of His Parents (1850), which remained well known in Shaw’s early years in London.
The extent of artistic influence on Shaw’s Napoleonic drama *The Man of Destiny* (written August–September 1895) seems considerable from the first page, which observes how melodramatic military portraits give a spurious dignity to war. The short play depicts a very young Napoleon, a twenty-six-year-old who had barely begun the dazzling military campaigns which were to establish his power. Most artistic portrayals of Napoleon represent the later triumphs, after the young general had become “L’Empereur.” However, Shaw reminds the reader in his first stage directions that these “Napoleonic pictures of Delaroche and Meissonier” were yet to be produced at the early point in the general’s career which the play dramatizes. He was recalling such well-known paintings as Meissonier’s *Napoleon in 1814* (1864) and Delaroche’s *Napoleon at Fontainbleau* (1845), *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1848), and *Napoleon at Saint Helena* (1852), exhibited in London shortly after they were first painted and in subsequent retrospective exhibitions. They were also widely reproduced during the late 1880s, for Delaroche and Meissonier were highly esteemed artists, and Napoleon was a popular artistic subject.

Of the period of Napoleon’s life which Shaw depicts in *The Man of Destiny*, few artistic works were accessible to him. One work exists, however, which may have touched off the very episode Shaw invents. Although there is no evidence that Shaw saw it or a reproduction, he well might have. His opening stage directions read: “The twelfth of May, 1796, in north Italy, at Tarazzano, on the road from Lodi to Milan.… Two days before, at Lodi, the Austrians tried to prevent the French from crossing the river by the narrow bridge there; but…. Napoleon Bonaparte, who does not respect the rules of war, rushed the fireswept bridge, supported by a tremendous cannonade…. ” The Milanese Andrea Appiani’s *Napoleon after the Battle of Lodi* (c. 1797), commissioned by the victor himself and well known thereafter from engravings, shows that very Napoleon, unsheathed sword in hand and the gunfire-raked bridge at Lodi in the background. And did the attractive and allegorical young woman in the foreground who appears to be the Muse of History, inscribing the event for posterity on a golden plaque, provide the inspiration for the young woman who confronts Napoleon in the play? We can only guess.

The opening scene, revealing Napoleon immersed in his work, seated at a table littered with writing materials and dishes, seems inspired by a painting by the Parisian François Fleming. This untitled work, completed sometime between 1875 and 1885, portrays a youthful, long-
haired Napoleon who also works at a table cluttered with books and papers. His discarded boots lie in a heap on the floor, and his jacket hangs on a peg behind him; as in Shaw’s play the young Napoleon’s hat, sword, and riding whip are “lying on the couch.” The similarities between Fleming’s picture and the opening scene are striking, and it is no surprise to find that Shaw’s diary for 31 March 1894—little more than a year before he began the play—notes the opening of a show of Fleming’s “Napoleon pictures” at the Goupil Gallery. Shaw missed the opening, having to review a concert at the Crystal Palace, but he was at the Goupil later and vividly remembered what he saw.

The impact of the visual arts upon Caesar and Cleopatra, written in 1898, is even more substantial. As he insisted (16 August 1903) to his German translator Siegfried Trebitsch, in sending him some crude sketches for the play,

Barbarous as my drawings of the scenery are, a great deal depends on them. Even an ordinary modern play like Es Lebe das Leben,¹ with drawing room scenes throughout, depends a good deal on the author writing his dialogue with a clear plan of stage action in his head; but in a play like Caesar it is absolutely necessary: the staging is just as much a part of the play as the dialogue. It will not do to let a scene painter & a sculptor loose on the play without a specification of the conditions with which their scenery must comply. Will you therefore tell the Neues manager that we will supply sketches. I will not inflict my own draughtsmanship on him; but I will engage a capable artist to make presentable pictures.

Shaw was taking no chances. Ancient Egypt had tremendous appeal to a pre-cinematic, Bible-familiar public, and cheap color lithographs were a popular commodity. Society painter Edward Poynter (later president of the Royal Academy) even achieved his first successes with enormous scenes from the times of the pharaohs, with one crowded ten-foot panorama, Israel in Egypt (1867), being typical of the genre. There was no end to Victorian visual opportunities for exposure to pre-Cleopatra Egypt.

At least two paintings seem to have inspired specific Shavian scenes. Luc Olivier Merson’s 1879 painting Répos en Égypte is cited in a Shaw letter to Hesketh Pearson in 1918 which establishes the source of the famous tableau. The Sphinx scene was suggested by a French painter of the Flight into Egypt: “I never can remember the painter’s name, but the engraving, which I saw in a shop window when I was a boy, of the Virgin and child asleep in the lap of a colossal Sphinx staring over a desert, so intensely still that the smoke of Joseph’s fire close by went straight up like a stick, remained in the rummage basket of my
memory for thirty years before I took it out and exploited it on the stage.” The “relevance of the new god in the arms of the old” is implicit in the scene, whether or not the influence of the Merson painting is known, but the suggestive relevance is more than a matter of scenery, for knowledge of the artistic source of the scene opens up a new avenue of interpretation. Shaw places Caesar in the Sphinx’s lap, the position occupied by Christ and the Virgin in the Merson painting. Thus, Caesar “explicitly equates himself with his successor, the unborn Christ.” Likewise, the young and barely nubile Cleopatra is equated with the Virgin, already a familiar figure in Shaw.

The “rug scene” in Act II of Caesar and Cleopatra, in which Cleopatra, wrapped in a carpet, is delivered to Caesar, is also traceable to a painting. The episode itself is described in Plutarch’s life of Caesar, but Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting Cleopatra Apportée à Caesar dans un Tapis (1866) may have influenced Shaw’s rendering of the scene. The picture focuses upon a more mature and nubile Cleopatra than Shaw’s childwoman, standing amid the folds of the carpet from which she has just emerged and turning toward Caesar, who is seated at a table. An apprehensive Apollodorus (having just unwound the rug) kneels behind her, and several male Romans in the background look on curiously. Gérôme’s Caesar is younger and less bald than in history or in Shaw. Also, the details differ from Shaw’s exterior conception of the scene. However, Gérôme’s depiction is one of its rare evocations in art, and Shaw boasted to Trebitsch (15 December 1898) that his handling of the incident would give considerable pause to the French painters who were so fond of her.

Shaw’s familiarity with Gérôme’s work came from both exhibitions at the London showrooms of the Goupil Gallery and from reproductions. Gérôme had prudently married Marie Goupil, daughter of the influential Paris art dealer and publisher, and benefited enormously from the worldwide distribution of Goupil photogravures of his paintings, which, although in black and white, emphasized their wealth of archaeological detail. Through Goupil’s and other reproductions, Shaw saw not only several Gérôme-depicted Caesars and Cleopatras but also Roman gladiator and martyr scenes, which enriched Androcles and the Lion (1913). Perhaps Shaw’s most important source for the fable was the familiar Victorian Christmas pantomime; however, Gérôme had painted the popular and widely reproduced The Gladiators (1874) and Ave Caesar! Morituri Te Salutant (1859), both of which depicted from the perspective of the Coliseum floor gladiators looking up from the
arena toward the audience. Perhaps more important, Gérôme had also produced in muted colors *The Christian Martyrs’ Last Stand* (1883), showing a noble lion moving slowly across the arena of the Circus Maximus toward a group of huddled, ragged Christians. Of such works Shaw wrote, reviewing an opera (18 May 1892) that suggested some of the elements of *Androcles*, that the hero of George Fox’s *Nydia* “shared his cell with a Nazarene, who strove hard, not without some partial success, to make him see the beauty of being eaten by a lion in the arena. Next came the amphitheatre, with a gladiator fight which needed only a gallery full of shrieking vestals with their thumbs turned down to be perfectly a la Gérôme.”

*Caesar and Cleopatra* also offered opportunities for Shaw to illustrate the play from the art of his English contemporaries, for mid-Victorian painters like Edward Poynter and Laurence Alma Tadema loved Roman scenes, and Shaw good-naturedly satirizes his own Pre-Raphaelite sympathies and those attributed to Oscar Wilde. Apollodorus the Sicilian is an effete young purveyor of decorative art transplanted in time, “handsome and debonair; dressed with deliberate aestheticism in the most delicate purples and dove greys, with ornaments of bronze, oxydized silver, and stones of jade and agate. His sword, designed as carefully as a medieval cross, had a blued blade shewing through an openwork scabbard of purple leather and filagree.” He does not “keep a shop,” he explains to a sentinel as he arrives fortuitously with rugs for Cleopatra: “Mine is a temple of the arts. I am a worshipper of beauty. My calling is to choose beautiful things for beautiful queens. My motto is Art for Arts sake.” Shaw had often reviewed Gérôme’s exotic orientalism, and knew the image of a bare-breasted Cleopatra revealed to Caesar when Apollodorus unwraps her, a painting from 1866, *Cleopatra’s Meeting with Caesar*, based on Plutarch.

If Pre-Raphaelitism had become Aestheticism and been weakened and debased as the century came to a close, Shaw nevertheless defended its values against allegations of insanity and “degeneration” in *The Sanity of Art*; and Apollodorus is sane indeed, and tough and brave although an admitted “votary of art.” At the close of the play, Shaw mocks the flabbiness of conventional English art and England’s willingness to expend some of its imperial wealth to compensate for its flagging creativity. “I leave the art of Egypt in your charge,” Caesar informs Apollodorus. “Remember: Rome loves art and will encourage it ungrudgingly.”
“I understand, Caesar,” says Apollodorus—and for Rome, read England—“Rome will produce no art itself; but it will buy up and take away whatever the other nations produce.”

“What!” exclaims the conqueror. “Rome produce no art! Is peace not an art? Is war not an art? Is government not an art? Is civilization not an art? All these we give you in exchange for a few ornaments. You will have the best of the bargain.”

Earlier, in Mrs Warren’s Profession, Shaw had mildly satirized late-Victorian Aestheticism not with a work of art but with a weaker representative of the movement than the shrewd Apollodorus—the sensitive and naive architect Praed, who responds in shock to Vivie Warren’s description of her practical, masculine tastes: “I am an artist; and I can’t believe it.” (Given no forename by Shaw, he may have been intended to recall Winthrop Mackworth Praed [1802–1839], an Etonian and Cantabrigian poet who wrote the now-forgotten A Letter of Advice.) Later Praed adds, unaware of what is happening around him, except that people are unhappy: “The Gospel of Art is the only one I can preach,” and he urges Vivie, as might a proper inheritor of Pre-Raphaelitism, to “come with me to Verona and on to Venice. You will cry with delight at living in such a beautiful world.” The dialogue that follows will turn the invitation into an irony, but the setting is already remote from Praed’s escapist Pre-Raphaelite dreams, for it is the cold, ultra-businesslike Chancery Lane office of Vivie and her professional partner, “with a plate-glass window, distempered walls, electric light, and a patent stove.”

Man and Superman (written 1901–1902) owes at least one element both to popular nineteenth-century art and to a favorite and archetypal eighteenth-century image—that of the collector in his gallery or study surrounded by the acquisitions which reflect the personality he wanted to evoke. Johann Zoffany painted his famous Charles Townley in His Gallery (1782) in the sanctum of Townley’s house in Westminster, amid a clutter of the works of art—from paintings to portrait busts—that were to establish his client’s neoclassical tastes. The canvas remained well known in Shaw’s day. Roebuck Ramsden’s study, described in the opening scene, might be another Zoffany. It contains, in addition to busts and portraits of famous contemporaries, “autotypes of allegories by Mr. G. F. Watts ... and an impression of Dupont’s engraving of Delaroche’s Beaux Arts hemicycle, representing the great men of all ages.” (Shaw’s two pages of preparatory notes labeled “Look up at Museum &c, for Superman” include in the list “Title of Delaroche’s
Beaux Arts painting”). His selection of the works he describes helps to establish both the atmosphere of the scene and Ramsden’s personality.

George Frederick Watts, the fashionable Victorian referred to by Shaw, painted portraits, classical scenes, and biblical settings in addition to his allegories, but it is significant that Shaw chose the latter category with which to decorate Ramsden’s study. Watts’s idealized representations fit into Ramsden’s thinking, as when he and Octavius Robinson call each other “the soul of honor.” Allegorical works such as Watts’s Time, Death, and Judgement, and Love and Hope possess a very literal, uncomplicated quality and would appeal to Ramsden’s conservative point of view, for, Shaw writes, he “believes in the fine arts with all the earnestness of a man who does not understand them.” The choice of the Beaux-Arts hemicycle engraving is Shaw’s commentary on the pompous Ramsden and on his crowded study, with its assemblage of “great men” (and one great woman—George Eliot’s picture also graces the “gallery”). Paul Delaroche’s Hémicycle (1837–1841), so named because it occupies the semicircular frieze of the Palais de Beaux-Arts amphitheater, depicts Appelles, enthroned within the portico of an Ionic temple, ranked by Ictinus and Phidias. Nearby are five allegorical figures (reminiscent of Watts’s allegories in Ramsden’s study): Fame, Greek Art, Gothic Art, Roman Art, and Renaissance Art. At each side of this ideal group sit and stand seventy-five colossal figures of the great artists of the world, a complement to Ramsden’s own collection of Victorian celebrities. Ramsden’s study is a hemicycle in miniature.

Little if anything of Shaw’s description of Ramsden’s library is perceptible to the stage audience, only the reader thus being “in” on Shaw’s satirical treatment of the ultra-respectable, well-to-do Englishman of Liberal persuasion whose views have not changed in a generation. But the studied clutter is itself Victorian, and the suggestion that change has passed Ramsden by is thus palpable to people in the furthermost seats. To Max Beerbohm, in his critic’s role, the play was “not a play at all” and had no flesh-and-blood characters. “In vain,” Shaw wrote to him on 15 September 1903, “do I give you a whole gallery of perfectly miraculous life studies…. They are reduced, for you, to the same barren Shavian formula by the fact that they are not Italian prima donnas. The chauffeur, the Irishman & his American son are positively labeled for you as Hogarthian life studies—in vain…. ” Earlier, Shaw had written to actress Gertrude Knight (20 June 1900) about the part of the militant Reverend Anthony Anderson in a production of The Devil's
Disciple that he was worried about the casting. Anderson “must be a very good man.” She was to tell her husband, Ian Robertson, who was directing the play, “to look up Hogarth’s portrait of Captain Coram, and get me a man like that…” Despite the bows to William Hogarth, whose art Shaw admired unstintingly and seemed often to have at the back of his mind, and the denial to Beerbohm of any indebtedness to Verdi and Puccini, most of the stage images in Man and Superman come from music rather than art, Mozart rather than Hogarth. With the first dialogue of the play, its indebtedness to nineteenth-century art ends.

In John Bull’s Other Island (1904) Shaw employed art less imaginatively. The civil engineering firm in London where Thomas Broadbent and Larry Doyle appear in the first act has on its walls “a large map of South America, a pictorial advertisement of a steamship company, an impressive portrait of Gladstone, and several caricatures of Mr Balfour as a rabbit and Mr Chamberlain as a fox by Francis Carruthers Gould.” Parsimony may account for the first two, and Liberal politics for the others, all of them likely to be perceptible, except in a small theater, only to readers of the play. To Beerbohm, a popular caricaturist like Gould, who contributed to the Westminster Review, Shaw had written (17 December 1901) that “Gould at his best” was “positively … bad.” The suggestion in its broadest sense was the hideous taste of the partners, and possibly their traveling as consulting engineers, but that may have been lost on the audiences at the play. In Act 3, amid the “unkempt shrubbery” in Cornelius Doyle’s garden are objects suggesting his own lack of taste. Larry’s father is a minimally educated village Irishman who collects rents. In his garden “the mutilated remnants of a huge plaster statue, nearly dissolved by the rains of a century, and vaguely resembling a majestic female in Roman draperies … stands neglected among the laurels. Such statues, though apparently works of art, grow naturally in Irish gardens. Their germination is a mystery to the oldest inhabitants, to whose means and tastes they are totally foreign.” Their neglect as well as their origins seem Shavian symbols for contemporary Ireland. The decaying plaster maiden may even suggest the fading symbol of an idealized Ireland, Kathleen Mavourneen.

Although one can sometimes point to a direct precursor for a Shaw scene or character, the larger work in which it is a part reveals myriad subtle influences. Two date to 1901, when Beerbohm exhibited among his caricatures at Robert Ross’s Carfax Gallery (in which Shaw held shares) a mock frontispiece for a “second edition” of Shaw’s Three Plays
for Puritans. In the cartoon a girl of the streets with “DRAMA” boldly on her hat is being summoned to redemption by G.B.S. in Salvation Army uniform, a pamphlet labeled “The Shaw Cry” sticking out of his pocket. (The Salvation Army’s periodical was The War Cry.) Beerbohm’s “Miss Tolty Drama” answers Shaw with “Garn! ’Ow should I earn my livin?” Shaw’s Salvation Army play, Major Barbara, would emerge from incubation in 1905, while in 1912 he would create his own Cockney guttersnipe who needed redemption and began sentences with “Garn!”—Eliza Doolittle of Pygmalion. “The Salvation caricature had come out of its box,” Shaw wrote to Beerbohm (17 December 1901), “& was flaunting itself unashamed on the walls.” An even earlier suggestion may have come from William Logsdail (1856–1944), who portrayed a flower-seller much younger than Eliza with a backdrop of the church of St. Martin in the Fields, which resembles St. Paul’s Church in Covent Garden. Under its portico, Pygmalion opens. On 4 May 1887 Shaw had reviewed Logsdail’s “studies of London street traffic” at the Royal Academy’s annual show.

When Shaw began The Doctor’s Dilemma (1906), a number of artistic temptations teased at him. His scamp of a hero, who dies operatically with an artist’s credo on his lips, must evoke a tense ambiguity about his supposed genius in order to leave the weight of guilt at his death unresolved. “I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez, and Rembrandt,” he declares, and “in the might of design, the mystery of color, the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting, and the message of Art that has made these hands blessed. Amen. Amen.” But the chief believers in Dubedat’s genius—aside from his loyal wife—are a group of physicians who buy his work and bicker about his medical treatment. Shaw notes early in the play, as Louis Dubedat works his spell upon his doctors, that “his artist’s power of appealing to the imagination gains him credit for all sorts of qualities and powers, whether he possesses them or not.”

Based upon Aubrey Beardsley, a remarkable artist Shaw knew who died in his mid-twenties and from whom Dubedat may have inherited his mortal disease; Dante Gabriel Rossetti, from whom he acquired his unscrupulousness in mulcting patrons; and Edward Aveling, a Fabian scoundrel who deceived Eleanor Marx and was responsible for her suicide, Dubedat (his surname suggests double-dealing) is seen sketching during the play, although none of his drawings is visible to the audience. But in the fifth act—an epilogue following Dubedat’s death—Shaw succumbs to a self-defeating dramatic device. He stages a posthumous show of the artist’s work and displays the art itself. His
directions for Act 5 note that the setting is “one of the smaller Bond Street Picture Galleries.... the walls ... are covered with Dubedat's works. Two screens, also covered with drawings, stand near the corners right and left of the entrance.” For the first production at the Court Theatre, Shaw borrowed representative contemporary drawings from the Carfax Gallery, compounding his failure to leave the problem of the artist’s genius to audience imagination, for the gallery attendant asks the widow, “Have you seen the notices in Brush and Crayon and in the Easel?”

“Yes,” says Jennifer Dubedat indignantly, “most disgraceful. They write quite patronizingly, as if they were Mr Dubedat’s superiors. After all the cigars and sandwiches they had from us on press day, and all they drank. I really think it infamous that they should write like that.” But the drawings on display are by Beardsley, William Rothenstein, Augustus John, Charles Ricketts, and Charles Shannon, evoking not ambiguity about Dubedat’s talents, but confusion. The ex-art critic in Shaw had pressed himself upon the playwright. As Beerbohm (who doubled as artist) observed in the Saturday Review dramatic column he had inherited from Shaw,

Dubedat seems to have caught, in his brief lifetime, the various styles of all the young lions of the Carfax Gallery.... We are asked to accept him as a soon-to-be-recognised master. Of course, it is not Mr. Shaw’s fault that the proper proofs are not forthcoming. But it certainly is a fault in Mr. Shaw that he wished [for] proper proofs.... He ought to have known that even if actual masterpieces by one unknown man could have been collected by the propertymaster, we should yet have wondered whether Dubedat was so remarkable after all. Masterpieces of painting must be left to an audience’s imagination. And Mr. Shaw’s infringement of so obvious a rule is the sign of a certain radical lack of sensitiveness in matters of art. Only by suggestion can these masterpieces be made real to us.

Shaw might have countered that it was safer to portray artistic genius in the pages of a novel and that he might be given credit for his daring, but he never again attempted such a device onstage. His next plays (but for Androcles and the Lion) eschewed echoes of the arts altogether; however, in Pygmalion (1913–1914)—also the subject of a Gérôme canvas—he returned to a less hazardous dramatic formula. As with Roebuck Ramsden’s study in Man and Superman, the art in Henry Higgins’s laboratory and in his mother’s Chelsea drawing room helps establish their personalities both to readers of the printed play and the theater audience. On the walls of the “laboratory” are engravings—“mostly Piranesi and mezzotint portraits.” Giambattista
Piranesi remains known for his architectural drawings (often of imaginary dungeons) and theatrical perspectives, and Higgins’s interest in them suggests not only the mechanical nature of his mind but that characters in the play—not only Eliza Doolittle—are trapped by social circumstances. In Shaw’s prose epilogue to the play, the class-ridden yet dependent Clara Eynsford-Hill is “exasperated … to think that the dungeon in which she has languished for so many unhappy years had been unlocked all the time”—a direct suggestion of Higgins’s meaningful Piranesi.

Visitors to Mrs. Higgins’s at-home encounter a warmer personality: Mrs. Higgins, in Shaw’s stage directions opening Act 3,

was brought up on William Morris and Burne Jones; and her room, which is very unlike her son’s office in Wimpole Street, is not crowded with furniture and little tables and nicknacks. In the middle of the room is a large ottoman; and this, with the carpet, the Morris wall-papers, and the Morris chintz window curtains and brocade covers of the ottoman and its cushions, supply all the ornament, and are much too handsome to be hidden by odds and ends of useless things. A few good oil-paintings from the exhibitions in the Grosvenor Gallery thirty years before (the Burne Jones, not the Whistler side of them) are on the walls. The only landscape is an 1870s Cecil Lawson on the scale of a Rubens. There is a portrait of Mrs. Higgins as she was when she defied the fashion in her youth in one of the beautiful Rossettian costumes which, when caricatured by people who did not understand, led to the absurdities of popular aestheticism in the eighteen-seventies.

Again the once-advanced taste of the occupant is immediately apparent, although the Cecil Lawson landscape is a private Shavian memorial to a long-dead young friend. In 1879 an unemployed young Irishman, resident in London only three years, who spent his evenings at free public meetings or in wandering the artists’ sectors of Chelsea off the King’s Road or the Embankment, wrote his first novel, titled (“with merciless fitness,” Shaw confessed later) Immaturity. It was set partly in the gallerylike Richmond mansion of the wealthy art patron Halket Grosvenor, Shaw’s transmutation of the Grosvenor Gallery and its proprietor, the patron of aesthetic art Sir Coutts Lindsay. Ambitious and utterly unknown at twenty-three, Shaw first acquired his ideas of Aesthetic art—and no artistic movement was ever as social as the Aesthetic movement—from the one family associated with it whose Sunday evening at-homes he had the courage to attend, the Lawsons. He wrote, fifty years afterward:

When I lived at Victoria Grove [in Fulham], the Lawsons: father, mother, Malcolm and two sisters, lived in one of the handsome old houses in Cheyne Walk,
Chelsea. Cecil and another brother, being married, boarded out. Malcolm was a musician; and the sisters sang. One, a soprano, dark, quick, plump and bright, sang joyously. The other, a contralto, sang with heartbreaking intensity of expression, which she deepened by dressing esthetically, as it was called then, meaning in the Rossettian taste ... so that when she sang ... she produced a picture as well as a tone poem.

Only the landscape-painter brother appears in the novel: “Cecil, who had just acquired a position by the few masterpieces which remain to us, was very much ‘in the movement’ at the old Grosvenor Gallery, then new, and passing through the sensational vogue achieved by its revelations of Burne-Jones and Whistler.” The Cyril Scott of Immaturity was Cecil Lawson, who painted the picturesque, pre-Embankment Thames, and died at thirty, in 1882, only four years after his Grosvenor Gallery show had created such a demand for his few canvases that they brought great prices while still on the easel.2

Preparing an etching from another man’s picture was for Whistler, who generally ignored other contemporaries’ work, including that of his closest followers, the rarest kind of tribute. For a memorial volume, Whistler produced an etching from an unfinished composition by Lawson of a swan startled under Old Battersea Bridge. Giving the place of honor in the eminently sensible Mrs. Higgins’s drawing room to a large Cecil Lawson canvas was Shaw’s tribute to his old friend, as well as a symbol of the good taste of the professor’s tough-minded mother. “The Rossettian Mrs Higgins in her Burne-Jones and Morrisian drawing-room” was Shaw’s description to Feliks Topolski on a 1940 postcard, but again, although a general impression of her personality can be derived by the theater audience from her drawing-room decor, the subtleties (she prudently purchased the draped goddesses of Burne-Jones but not the radical Whistler) are available only to the reader, through that extra dimension derived from Shaw’s use of art.

Victorians were obsessed with the Pygmalion legend not only in poetry (as with Shaw’s master William Morris’s “Pygmalion and the Image” in The Earthly Paradise) and in drama (as with W. S. Gilbert’s Pygmalion and Galatea) but in art. It would have been impossible for Shaw to escape some of the prurient examples (so far as Victorians could chance) to which his coolly ironic comedy of manners seems an antidote, in particular Burne-Jones’s four canvases, Pygmalion and the Image (1868), intended for an edition of Morris’s book. Shaw not only read Morris but was a regular at the Grosvenor Gallery when it exhibited the group in 1879. More important, perhaps, he was in London when the Tate Gallery showed them again in 1911–1912. Burne-Jones’s
treatments were typically mid-Victorian in their sexual repression. The second panel, with the pining sculptor adoring the virgin marble (or the virgin in the marble), was captioned *The Hand Refrains*. In the third, *The Godhead Fires*, the statue plasticizes into womanly flesh, while in the fourth, Pygmalion kneels before his nubile creation, a placid lady whose breasts he surveys with an apprehensive devotion while touching only her fingertips. The picture is titled *The Soul Attains*. Perhaps the lubricious fantasy lay in the unpainted but hardly unimagined (at least by the viewer) fifth panel, in which the hand attained. Shaw’s unsentimental and antiromantic version would defy such daydreams. With all the literary forebears available to him and offered since by generations of scholars, he hardly needed the impetus of the Tate exhibition of 1911–1912 with Burne-Jones’s reminder of the legend in its most saccharine form. But it was there, as—reexhibited in 1912—was Beerböhm’s suggestive caricature. Shaw began his play on 7 March 1912.

The milieu out of which emerged Lawson and Whistler and Burne-Jones also inspired a scene in Shaw’s next major play after *Pygmalion*, *Heartbreak House* (written in 1916–1917) although it was many years later that he revealed his indebtedness. In his 1949 puppet play *Shakes versus Shav*, written when Shaw was ninety-three, “Shakespeare” taunts the puppet G.B.S.: “Where is thy Hamlet? Couldst thou write King Lear?” Shav counters: “Aye, with his daughters all complete. Couldst thou have written Heartbreak House? Behold my Lear.” And in Shaw’s stage directions, “A transparency is suddenly lit up, shewing Captain Shotover seated, as in Millais’ picture called North West Passage, with a young woman of virginal beauty.” The captain raises his hand and intones lines from Act 2 of *Heartbreak House*, and the young woman responds with lines of Ellie Dunn’s, after which the Captain warns: “Enough. Enough. Let the heart break in silence.” The picture then vanishes, but the revelation is clear.

John Millais’s 1874 painting parallels Shaw’s scene in other respects than the two iconic figures, for the setting is a room with a nautical flavor, as is all of Shotover’s house, and visible are a logbook, flags, maps, and telescopes. The young woman in *North West Passage* is more idealized than Shaw’s Ellie Dunn, whose social insecurities only too quickly cause her to become hard; but her youth and beauty and affection for the old captain make the scene a dramatic representation of Millais’s canvas. Pre-Raphaelite art and that of the Aesthetic movement which emerged from it clearly had a profound and continuing impact upon Shaw the playwright.
A brief and literally pre-Raphael reference in Shaw’s long dramatic cycle Back to Methuselah (written 1918–1920) suggests a more familiar use of art in Shaw. Savvy, in The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas, the second play, is described as a “vigorous sun-burnt young lady with hazel hair cut to the level of her neck, like an Italian youth in a [Benozzo] Gozzoli picture.” Thus the fifteenth-century Italian master is utilized to provide a more precise image of Shaw’s character. But later in the cycle, in the futuristic parable As Far As Thought Can Reach, the scorn of art (“pretty.pretty confectionery” and “vapid emptiness”) by the inhabitants of the world of A.D. 31,920 is utilized to reflect the coldness and soullessness of an earth in which the physical body and its needs have been reduced to an ever-diminishing minimum, and the pleasures of the intellect take precedence, intimating a condition in which the body might eventually disappear altogether. People quickly outgrow an adolescence which is the only period of life in which the business of art is thought to be the creation of beauty. Only the reflection of “intensity of mind”—a superrealism—is important thereafter, and art is condemned as “dead” because only the creation of life (or pseudo-life, as in the inventor Pygmalion’s stimulus-responding substitutes for humans) has practical value. Arjillax reflects the prevailing vision in retelling the “legend of a supernatural being called the Archangel Michael who was a mighty sculptor and painter,” obviously Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel:

We found in the centre of the world a temple ... full of silly pictures of pretty children.... He began by painting on the ceiling the newly born in all their childish beauty. But when he had done this he was not satisfied, for the temple was no more impressive than it had been before.... So he painted all around these newly born a company of ancients, who were in those days called prophets and sibyls, whose majesty was that of the mind alone at its intensest. And this painting was acknowledged through ages and ages to be the summit and masterpiece of art. Of course we cannot believe such a tale literally. It is only a legend. We do not believe in archangels; and the notion that thirty thousand years ago sculpture and painting existed, and had even reached the glorious perfection they have reached with us, is absurd. But what men cannot realize they can at least aspire to. They please themselves by pretending that it was realized in a gold age of the past. This splendid legend endured because it lived as a desire in the hearts of the greatest artists. The temple of Mediterranean never was built in the past, nor did Michael the Archangel exist....

But Arjillax, a sculptor himself, having matured from abbreviated adolescence, “cannot pretend to be satisfied now with modelling pretty children,” although the more immature Ecrasia maintains with the steadfastness of youth, “Without art, thecrudeness of reality would
make the world unbearable.” To her the She-Ancient suggests better wisdom: “Yes, child: art is the magic mirror you make to reflect your invisible dreams in visible pictures. You use a glass mirror to see your face: you use works of art to see your soul. But we who are older use neither glass mirrors nor works of art. We have a direct sense of life. When you gain that you will put aside your mirrors and statues, your toys and your dolls.” Yet the art-barren Ancients are unhappy and bored, their lives long but bleak, their brave new world gained at great price.

The writing of Back to Methuselah seemed to burn Shaw out. He saw no likelihood of another play. Yet in 1913, when he was touring what he referred to as “the Joan of Arc country,” he had seen at Orleans a bust “of a helmeted young woman with a face that is unique in art [of the period] in point of being evidently not an ideal face but a portrait, and yet so uncommon as to be unlike any real woman one has ever seen.” It was “yet stranger in its impressiveness and the spacing of its features than any ideal head, that it can be accounted for only as an image of a very singular woman; and no other such woman than Joan is discoverable.” The encounter became a slow-burning fuse. From Orleans Shaw wrote to Mrs. Patrick Campbell—to be his Eliza in Pygmalion—that he would do a Joan play “some day,” and he described his proposed epilogue for it, complete to the English soldier rewarded in heaven for the two sticks he tied together and gave Joan for a cross as she went to the stake. Ten years later he wrote the play which was preface to that epilogue.

The helmeted head, once in the Church of St. Maurice and attributed to the fifteenth century, is reputed to have been inspired by Joan. According to tradition, when Joan entered Orleans in triumph with the relieving force, a sculptor modeled the head of his statue of St. Maurice from Joan herself. When the church was demolished in 1850, the head of the statue was preserved. After Shaw saw it, he declared that although no proof existed, “those extraordinarily spaced eyes raised so powerfully the question ‘If this woman not be Joan, who is she?’ that I dispense with further evidence, and challenge those who disagree with me to prove a negative.” The eyes do cast a spell; one can imagine the woman beneath them as capable of Joan’s visionary uniqueness.

Throughout France, images of Joan on tapestry and canvas, in relief and statuary, in manuscript illuminations and contemporary woodcuts, and even on medals and coins, proliferate. Her legend has invited artistic representation, but most of the events in which she is depicted defy stage dramatization—the panoply of the coronation at Reims, the
siegges and battles, Joan’s capture and her burning. Shaw handled each of these onstage indirectly, but his indebtedness to the visual art of Joan’s period is strong nevertheless. His description of the immature twenty-six-year-old Dauphin is memorable. The future Charles VII is “a poor creature physically; and the current fashion of shaving closely and hiding carefully every scrap of hair under the head covering or headdress … makes the worst of his appearance. He has little narrow eyes, near together, a long and pendulous nose that droops over his thick short upper lip, and the expression of a young dog accustomed to being kicked…. That the Dauphin is imagined from the Jean Fouquet portrait on wood of Charles VII in the Louvre is unquestionable, as Shaw’s description is exact, from the Dauphin’s glum expression to the shaven rim of skull which emerges from under a large and ugly hat. Shaw knew Fouquet’s work. In the epilogue to the play, Charles is discovered in bed reading—or only looking at the pictures—in a Fouquet-illustrated Boccaccio.

How well Shaw researched his characters can be seen also from his depiction of Jean Dunois, the Bastard of Orleans. The preface to the play refers to “Dunois’ face, still on record at Chateaudun,” probably in a painting or engraving observed during a Shavian exploration of “the Joan of Arc country.” Yet not all representations of Joan he knew were contemporary with her or from Lorraine. In Scene 5, for example, Shaw ingeniously bypasses Charles’s coronation by beginning the action with Joan in the cathedral afterward, “kneeling in prayer … beautifully dressed, but still in male attire.” The image was familiar, and at least two such representations were known by Shaw—an anonymous sculpture at Domremy and a Millais painting which antedated the North West Passage which inspired a scene in Heartbreak House. Millais’s Joan of Arc, painted in 1865, was exhibited at the Royal Academy then and again in 1898. And Shaw came upon the Domremy statue in 1913, when he traveled through the village “for the sake of Saint Joan of Arc.”

It is even possible that one picture that Shaw described in a column of art reviews in the World in 1886 lingered in his mind as an example of how not to portray St. Joan yet resulted in the third scene of the play. The mediocre, Pre-Raphaelite-influenced son of famous parents, Barrett (“Pen”) Browning had taken uneasily to the brush, and G.B.S. noted in an “In the Picture-Galleries” column that “Browning had painted a careful life-school study of a nude woman; brought it into startling relief against a background of vivid verdure; [and] labelled it ‘Joan of Arc and the Kingfisher.’ … As the face of the model is turned
away, and her figure not more than ordinarily expressive, the title and quotation assigned the picture in the catalogue may be dismissed as a humorous imposture.” Whether or not Shaw appreciated the picture, he dramatized the scene which had been identifiable in Browning’s work only by its caption.

At her trial, Shaw’s heroine appears in a “page’s black suit,” a costume possibly suggested by Le Départ de Vaucouleurs, a painting by J. E. Lenepveu included in his Pantheon mural in Paris. Joan is short-haired and dressed in a page’s short black smock, stockings, and short ankle boots. Similarly, in a book Shaw knew and referred to, artist Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel’s Jeanne d’Arc (1907), a too-prettified Joan is clothed in garb for her trial. Possibly Lenepveu lent his artistic imagination for yet another, but offstage scene, the English priest John de Stogumber’s hysterical but moving report of the burning. It, too, is in the Pantheon mural and has many of the details described by the unhappy Englishman. Like de Stogumber’s description, it features English soldiers and clergymen and the French priest (Shaw’s Ladvenu) who struggles to hold the cross high above the throng while Joan, at the stake, looks imploringly to heaven. But Lenepveu’s martyr has no makeshift wooden cross in her bosom. Shaw knew of it from contemporary accounts of Joan’s execution and needed no prompting from pictures to reproduce it, however much he otherwise adopted from art in giving flesh to the trial transcripts which were his primary source for the play.

Shaw’s only wartime visit to France came, as a correspondent, four years after his exploration of Lorraine. He kept mentally busy on a dull patch of road between Calais and Boulogne “on an evening stretch of the journey,” he reported in a newspaper account in 1917, by inventing a play on the [Auguste] Rodin theme of The Burgesses of Calais, “which like the play about the Reims Virgin, I have never written down, and perhaps never will.” But he did, although it was not until 1934 that he consulted Froissart’s Chronicles and brought the sculpture to life in a short play. Rodin’s Les Bourgeois de Calais (1884–1886) and Shaw’s The Six of Calais depict an event which occurred in 1346–1347, when, for eleven months, Calais was besieged by the English under Edward III. Edward agreed to lift the siege on the starving city if six hostages, wearing sackcloth and halters and carrying keys, surrender themselves at his camp outside Calais. Rodin’s work commemorates the bravery and selflessness—and misery—of the six burgesses who submitted themselves to Edward’s humiliating conditions, and immortalizes the
wretched men, half-naked and wearing halters at the moment of their surrender. Shaw’s play dramatizes the group, but not with strict exactitude. Neither their attitudes, names, nor physical descriptions match those of the Calais monument. For the program of the first production in 1934 Shaw noted that Rodin “had contributed the character of Peter Hardmouth; but his manner of creation was that of a sculptor and not that of a playwright. Nothing remained for me to do but correct Froissart’s follies and translate Rodin into words.” For his published preface he added that Peter is “the only one without a grey and white beard,” while Eustache is the only Rodin burgess with a beard, the differences are insignificant. Shaw was not playing Pygmalion and seeking to bring a statue directly to life, but perhaps no one else in drama brought so many scenes from art to life on the stage.

A low relief rather than a statue had been one of Shaw’s earliest dramatic inspirations from art—before his first play—but it was never completed. In an art column in the World (24 April 1889), Shaw had praised Burne-Jones’s “skill as a domestic draftsman” as displayed upon “a golden cassone,” or chest, with a picture in gesso relief of the mythical Garden of the Hesperides. “The ark is the most beautiful simple object in the exhibition,” Shaw wrote. Before the year was out he had begun a play he tentatively entitled “The Cassone,” in which Eleanor asks Ashton to design a cassone for her. “Oh,” says Ashton, “one of those chests like an altar—an ark, in fact, to hold things.” Eleanor explains ambitiously that she wants “a beautifully formed box—noble and beautiful and Grecian, and gilt all over with pure gold. The panels must have pictures in gesso, in deep, rich, heartfelt colors....” It is intended to be “a trap for a man’s soul,” but the play remains a tantalizing fragment. In the 1930s, Shaw would draft the beginning of a play about the Garden of the Hesperides, perhaps an echo of the cassone. Again only a fragment survives.

Memories of the art galleries refused to fade. Explaining to Ellen Terry her son Edward Gordon Craig’s set-designing deficiencies (15 May 1903), Shaw observed that “Tedward” had a passion for moonlight and for spears borrowed from Paolo Uccello, from a certain Tintoretto picture in Venice, and from The Surrender at Breda, by Velasquez: “Now the first act of [Ibsen’s] The Vikings should be a lovely morning scene, all rosy mists, fresh air, virgin light and diamond dewdrops.... instead of which, Signor Teduardo, not being able to manage full light and local color, turns the dawn into night....” Writing in 1921 of poet and artist George Russell (“AE”), Shaw recalled first meeting him “be-
fore a lovely modern picture” in the National Gallery of Dublin. It was Shaw the art critic more than Shaw the memoirist sardonically describing the work in question. “The master who painted it,” Shaw remembered, commenting on the blindness of the gallery’s curators, “had suppressed his name, not in modesty, but because he found that he could get fully a hundred times as much for his work by adopting the name Correggio.”

A few years earlier Shaw had identified English Philistines as those who imply that Frith’s crowded, anecdotal *Derby Day* and the Christmas chromolithographs of Santa Claus “are the only art for healthy souls.” But he had also moved in space and time from the Grosvenor Gallery of the early 1880s to the Grafton Gallery of Georgian London, where he had admired the Post-Impressionists. Cezanne and Matisse, he realized, “Being possessed, by nature and through practice, of a distinguished mastery of their art in its latest academic form [and] … finding themselves intolerably hampered by so much ready-made reach-me-down thoughtstuff…. , deliberately returned to primitive conditions so as to come in at the strait gate and begin at the beginning with all the knowledge of the men who begin at the end.” He was still eager to acknowledge some expertise as a critic, writing a correspondent on a printed postcard, explaining why he didn’t have time to answer letters, that a reproduction he had been sent suggested that the original was not, as the owner hoped, a Rembrandt: “It seems to me that if such a picture were by his hand it would be unmistakable. The small reproduction does not suggest him in the least. The scale, the composition, and the background and properties place it within 40 years of 1800 either way…. ” It was forty years after Shaw had given up art criticism.

By the 1930s, Shaw was no longer visiting galleries. He was too old to collect things and found problems in responding to the newest artistic fashions. To a dealer who invited him to a new show in 1932, he wrote that he was not a collector of art and was reluctant to disappoint a shopkeeper by walking out without buying anything. Yet the old Victorian pictures retained their hold upon him. When Shaw was eighty, he was asked by William Morris’s daughter May, then preparing a collected edition of her father’s writings, to promote the project by contributing a memoir. A once-lovely girl whom the young G.B.S. had admired, May Morris had aged unhandsomely. Still, Shaw built into his recollections a flattering vignette. “Among the many beautiful things in Morris’s two beautiful houses,” Shaw wrote in *William Morris as I Knew Him*, “was a very beautiful daughter, then in the flower of
her youth. You can see her in Burne-Jones’s picture coming down the Golden Stair, the central figure. I was a bachelor then, and likely to remain so, for … I was so poor that I hardly could have supported Morris’s daughter on Morris’s scale for a week on my income for a year…."

Although *The Golden Stairs*, despite its charm, often languishes in the basement of Tate Britain, the gallery to which it had been bequeathed by Lady Battersea (Constance Rothschild), the nine-foot high by four-foot canvas had been the sensation of 1880, and reproductions of it had even been used during that decade and after by Floriline Hair Tonic and Epps Cocoa. May had been the central figure of thirteen beautiful maidens on Burne-Jones’s winding staircase, all daughters of late-Victorian luminaries. To remember her as Shaw did evinced remarkable tact and showed as well that it was not just for his plays that Shaw extracted metaphors from art.

The rest is epilogue. To the end of his life Shaw found mental pictures for his dramatic concepts from his encounters with painting and sculpture. "*In Good King Charles’s Golden Days*” (written when he was eighty-three) included—anachronistically by two generations—the court painter Geoffrey Kneller, as Shaw was unable to find a significant artist of Isaac Newton’s own time to parallel the physicist. (He had wanted to use Hogarth.) Yet Kneller is more a debating opponent to Newton than portraitist, insisting—with the ample charms of a royal mistress to point to as microcosm of an Einsteinean curvilinear universe—that because space is curved, “the line of beauty is a curve. My hand will not draw a straight line.” Another mistress, Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, compares Kneller unfavorably with the recently dead Peter Lilly (or Lely), who had painted her portrait for King Charles, and thus provides the director with a lens through which to see her; but all the figures of the play were oft-painted, and the play can be visualized in one sense almost as a three-dimensional composite of seventeenth-century royal portraiture.

A comedy completed when Shaw was ninety, *Buoyant Billions* (1947), had been begun some years before, but the third act, the germinal one about which the others were integrated, found its shape when Shaw, visiting a neighbor, saw a print of Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*. He then conceived a “last supper” for a wealthy old man who had brought his guests together to solicit their advice on how to dispose of his money. When he wrote the scene, however, he had old Bill Buoyant invite his children instead and through his solicitor warn them of the difficult future which will await them when he dies and the Buoyant billions re-
vert largely to the state via death duties and charitable bequests. But a picture had been its impetus. And in his last year, in *Shakes versus Shav*, he summoned up for the stage his recollection of the Millais painting that had inspired the *Lear*-like scene in *Heartbreak House*. To the end, the art of his own formative years remained a catalyst for his playwriting, and his encounters with the visual arts added a unique dimension to his plays.

The very aged live largely within their memories. On his ninety-fourth and last birthday, 26 July 1950, while Shaw’s country lane was blocked by photographers, messengers staggered to the front door at Ayot St. Lawrence loaded with greetings that Shaw ignored and delivery vans from Piccadilly brought, he wrote to Sydney Cockerell (27 July 1950), “giant cakes, gorgeous and uneatable” from Fortnum and Mason. The long-retired art critic ignored as much of the fuss as he could by immersing himself in the autobiography and journals of Benjamin Haydon. Despondent over commissions unreceived and pictures unsold, the once famous nineteenth-century historical painter had committed suicide in 1846. William Morris—whom Shaw venerated all his life—“was wrong for once,” Shaw insisted to Cockerell, in claiming that Haydon had killed himself because he “found himself out.” Rather, Morris had given up painting when *he* had “found himself out as a Rossettian painter. Haydon was the most extraordinary genius of them all.” More at the end than in the beginning, Shaw was “an old Victorian.”