

Peripheral objects:
the marketing of cultural relics
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We live with objects in a very peculiar way. They function for us, we use them and associate them with things far beyond their control. Sentimentality, memory, emotional connection: we love our stuff and we hate it. We collect it, discard it, crystallise moments into physical things and uphold them beyond their functionality. We keep these sacred objects alongside the things we never looked twice at, such as the vacuum cleaner with no emotional content embedded. And when we die, left behind is a tangle of material "things". Some associations are so specific and personal that they disappear with the owner, but others are plain for anyone to see.

Is it possible to reconstruct some essence of a person through their things?

This is where the auction house steps in. The auctions from public figures' estates are endlessly fascinating, from the construction of economic value to the creation of cultural "relics". Where Bonhams, Christie's or Sotheby's acts as the go-between for people seeking to touch, feel and own parts of their collective history, the figure's estate looks to secure their place in history, capitalise on objects whose function is worth far less than their auction price. They also seek to detangle the emotional mess that is a posthumous set of belongings. And so the selection of objects, supposed to represent a person's life, begins.

This set of objects frames how people might remember the figure through which objects enter into the market as cultural relics. Thus the selection and framing of a public figure through their objects is a delicate balance: what things were actually important to this person, what type of material portrays them, how

close an approximation of this person are we reaching through these objects? While the objects are marketed as exclusive revelations of a public figure's personal life, the question still remains as to how far this representation is partial, two-dimensional, or even inaccurate. As the lots are sold separately, and the objects dispersed to new homes, perhaps the focus could shift towards how the whole becomes irrelevant. Yet the moment these personal belongings are brought together into one collection, supposedly representative of a person and their life, we see at a glance a form of unintentional cultural history construction, where the presentation of someone through their objects helps construct what a public remembers about them, or believes about their life.

Truman Capote, Audrey Hepburn and Margaret Thatcher, in no particular order. One famous for his books, another for her looks and a third for her "spirited support of the market economy" (as reads an inscription on a bisque eagle gifted by Ronald Reagan and later sold at auction). Or this is what we would ascertain was important from the past possessions selected to represent the subjects' lives.

Cherry-picked for marketable goods, the 2006 sale of Capote's objects painted a picture of the materiality of his life, mainly consisting of books and furnishings. These books, some annotated, dog-eared and page-marked, reflect the essence of a book well read, and of a man representable through his literature alone. The items selected this year from Hepburn's estate solely consisted of photographs, fashion and fan mail, thus presenting her largely in accordance with her public persona, whether by choice of the estate or the auction house. Marketed as *The Personal Collection of Audrey Hepburn*, the exhibition and auction title suggests a level of intimacy. The audience and buyers gained insight into her life outside Hollywood, yet there seemed to be little of Hepburn's agency shown in the objects, as though her belongings have been chosen to

present a careful image of the star. There are none of the life furnishings we see with Capote or Thatcher, whose lamps and dinner sets show them both as people that lived a recognisable, if decadent life: they are portrayed as three-dimensional figures who rested, ate, read, decorated, laughed (from what we see of Thatcher's framed political cartoons), with both a private and public life.

This selected view into a private life is not of course owed by Hepburn or her estate, but the difference in how these three cultural figures are presented through their "personal" objects reveals some level of what seemed "important" in considering and publicly remembering these figures. For a female actor, the surface is, sadly, barely touched: her influence in fashion is largely recognised in cultural history, and thus the auction house capitalises on what is already there. While there is much to be said about Hepburn's personality through her fashion, this auction gives very little indication that she did anything beyond selecting clothes and receiving fan mail. For Capote, a male writer, the lots seem to try to reconstruct his life through his objects, both intellectually through sets of books, and materially through the objects he surrounded himself with.

Capote receives the more masculine and secretive title of *The Private World of Truman Capote* (emphasis added), as though there was much to be hidden, and through these objects we gain some secret access. Rather enjoyably, and rather aptly, the 2015 sale of Thatcher's belongings was simply titled *Mrs Thatcher: Property from the Collection of The Right Honourable The Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven, LG, OM, FRS*, creating an image of secure ownership, a formal lack of sentimentality and, in the frame of this auction, perhaps even the "right to buy".

Thatcher's "property" was an interesting mix that included home furnishings, framed political cartoons, political objects such as her prime ministerial box, and

various clothes, from business attire to her wedding dress. Similarly voyeuristic, this auction constructed a view of how Thatcher lived, again not necessarily what was important to her, or why she valued the objects that she did. As with the Capote sale, the lots constructed what her life looked like, selling the idea of her figure through useable or emblematic objects not as a way to gain insight on her character, but to feel closer through possession of her past "property".

Perhaps the most interesting thing about these auctions is that there exists a market for the everyday materiality of famous figures. These objects help contribute to the cultural history enveloping those figures, by revealing what the person surrounded themselves with, what they chose to buy or to keep, what they valued. And yet, these sales are not exhaustive: as in a museum, the objects are selected, and many rejected in the process. In this case, however, the driving factor is how marketable each object might be, and thus a certain picture is painted of this person, leaning towards what culture already knows about them and emphasising these points. Much of the importance these objects held for the people involved is lost in the auction process: they are sold to new homes, and their original attachment to a personal memory fades, as it is displaced by cultural history. Through objects, the "personal", "private" and "property" collections of iconic figures become marketable, memorable, and the life-spans of these objects change to become emblematic of a person and a time in history.