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Review: John Ruskin: Artist and observer,
National Gallery of Canada, 14 February–11
May 2014 and Scottish National Portrait
Gallery, 4 July–29 September 2014

Christopher Newall, ed., John Ruskin: Artist
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Notes

- ¹ Jean-Philippe Uzel, « L'art contemporain autochtone, point aveugle de la modernité », dans Guy Bellavance (dir.), *Monde et réseaux de l'art, diffusion, migration et cosmopolitisme en art contemporain*, Montréal, Liber, p. 193.
- ² Concept qui, selon l'auteur, « [...] regroupe les sens évidents des termes cosmos et totémique ; le premier fait référence au monde, ancien et moderne, tandis que le deuxième renvoie aux motifs évoquant les esprits de la nature, aux images d'animaux et d'oiseaux et aux traces de scènes chamaniques, de mémoire et de survivance » (p. 52).

- ³ Jolene Rickard, « The Local and the Global », dans *Vision, Space, Desire : Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*, Actes du colloque, Washington, D.C., National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2006, p. 64.
- ⁴ Rickard, *ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁵ Nancy Marie Mithlo, « The First Wave... This Time Around », dans Nancy Marie Mithlo (dir.), *Manifestations : New Native Art Criticism*, catalogue d'exposition, Santa Fe, Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2011, p. 18–27.

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My most surprising experience as a graduate student was a visit to Oxford University to view John Ruskin's sketchbooks. I wasn't expecting much. The research trip only happened because I wanted to visit friends in London and suspected that the presence of some Ruskinalia at Oxford would help me pry plane fare out of the grad studies office. If the only payment demanded of me was a quick glance through some musty sketchbooks, well, then, cheap at twice the price.

It turned out rather differently. Not that I didn't visit my friends. I did, and a long-lost cousin and his family as well, and had a nice time. A fair bit of alcohol was consumed, most memorably in an old Oxford pub with an amazing arched fireplace spanning an entire wall. So that part went according to plan. My encounter with the sketchbooks, though, did not. Whatever time I had allowed for the duty call—probably two afternoons, on the off-chance that something interesting would turn up—I quickly realized it was not enough.

For one thing, Ruskin envisioned a substantial project regarding these sketchbooks. Motivated by a belief that learning to draw well means studying expert examples, he assembled close to 1,500 objects for use in the Drawing School that he founded at Oxford in 1871. Comprising prints, photographs, and drawings by a wide range of artists, the collection testified to the expansiveness of Ruskin's interests and seemed



Figure 1. *Rocks and Ferns in a Wood at Crossmount, Perthshire* 1847 Pen and ink and watercolour over graphite on paper; 32.3 x 46.5 cm Courtesy of Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Lakeland Arts Trust, Kendal, Cumbria, UK (AH1134/73). Reproduced by courtesy of Abbot Hall Art Gallery

either obsessive or dedicated, or both. However, none of that is news. The surprise came from the works produced by Ruskin himself.

Ruskin's early books *Modern Painters*, *The Stones of Venice*, and *Elements of Drawing* make clear that he was a meticulous, if somewhat loopy, observer of art and nature, while downplaying his artistic talent. In fact, *Modern Painters* suggests that Ruskin's admiration for Joseph M. W. Turner springs at least somewhat from Ruskin's relative lack of artistic ability. The truth, however, is otherwise. Encouraged from an early age by his parents—who provided a steady course of drawing lessons, architectural explorations, art appreciation, and travel—Ruskin developed considerable facility with drawing by his late teens. And, through his twenties, that competence progressed into an artistic



Figure 2. John Ruskin (1819-1900) *Capital 36 of the Ducal Palace, Venice* 1849–52 Graphite and wash on white laid paper; 22.3 × 23.5 cm Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, –Lancaster University) (RF 1601)

maturity that, at its best, is truly virtuosic. For sure, Ruskin is right: he is not Turner. But then, who is?

Encountering these drawings again in the National Gallery of Canada, I felt those earlier realizations flooding back to me, which itself was a discovery, as part of me wondered whether my initial enthusiasm sprang less from Ruskin's artistry being brilliant than from it merely being better than

I expected. However, this exhibition, which the National Gallery of Canada co-organized with the National Galleries of Scotland, goes far beyond historical curiosity. An ambitious undertaking, co-curated by Christopher Newall and Conal Shields, it comprises well over a hundred pieces, primarily watercolours and drawings, organized around themes that Ruskin valued concerning nature and the built environment. Its best moments—of which there are more than enough to make the show worthwhile—compellingly demonstrate drawing's (too often unrealized) capabilities as a medium of description and metaphor.

The harsh white highlights in Ruskin's images of the destroyed church of San Michele (1846) exemplify this achievement. These pictures record details of the building's façade that captured the young man's attention, with their rapid fading away on the right side of the page suggesting a lack of pictorial interest in that frontal structure. Having documented what attracted him in a subject, Ruskin would move on, displaying what, as Newall notes in the catalogue, Ruskin's father deplored as an absence of focus. However, as Newall would agree, a closer look at the works and at Ruskin's intellectual context suggests a much richer reading.

The sketch *Part of the Façade of the Destroyed Church of San Michele in Foro, Lucca*, for instance, details a pair of arcades, one surmounting the other, at the top corner of an impressive façade that (as an accompanying lateral view reveals) has nothing behind it. Along the right side, its perfunctory execution suggests either the limits of Ruskin's interest or his economy of means, while down the left margin, a blue wash stands in for the Mediterranean sky. The coolness of this azure passage sets off the façade's white highlights, amplifying their brightness. Normally, one would say that the glare represented by these highlights results from the intense sun reflecting off the marble wall. As the catalogue notes, the façade was built during the late

twelfth and early thirteen centuries. And Ruskin's visit predates by at least a few years the cathedral's major restoration, directed by the architect Giuseppe Pardini. Slowly but inexorably, the sun might have worked on these walls to heighten its effect on the structure and the people viewing it. But the factual truth matters little in this account of the sun's interaction with San Michele. Its possibility is sufficient to carry a certain metaphorical weight regarding God's vast superiority to us. With enough time, God's major work—i.e., Nature—always will overcome even humanity's most audacious accomplishments.

In this partial rendering of the "destroyed" San Michele, then, we might see a reprise of the architectural *memento mori* produced half a century earlier by Hubert Robert (most famously when Robert accompanied his design for the Louvre's Grand Gallery with an image of it already in ruins). Going further, we can discern related figurative content in the drawing's lack of finish. The fragmentary character might reflect Ruskin's impatience, or it might figure vision's ultimate futility—that the finite knowledge imparted by our vision always will be incomparably less than God's infinite wisdom. Such issues pre-occupied Ruskin: he made these drawings while writing *Modern Painters* (the first volume appeared in 1843, the last in 1859; *The Stones of Venice* appeared in the middle, 1851–53), which focuses one of its central chapters, "The Moral of Landscape," on this theme. Essentially, Ruskin saw the moral of landscape as twofold. In one sense, it referred to the moral value of landscape painting, which lies in it signifying a recognition of the limits of our understanding. In a complementary sense, "moral" means "lesson" (as in "the moral of the story") and "landscape" refers to the physical landscape (nature itself)—the lesson taught by close observation being that nature's wondrous mechanisms must have been designed by some omniscient, omnipotent entity.

A key passage from "The Moral of Landscape" merges these meanings as Ruskin compares two examples of "thin gray film," one "a little bit of spider's work," the other "known to mean a mountain ten thousand feet high, inhabited by a noble race of mountaineers."¹ For Ruskin, the latter presents the superior experience (regardless of whether in a painting or in real life) because of its more uplifting content: Ruskin saw high mountains as the most wondrous proof of God's design, with their seasonal cycle providing food to last through the winter, while the winter snow in turn creates water to irrigate the summer crops.

Ruskin found such metaphorical content in Turner's late paintings (which Ruskin wrote *Modern Painters* to defend) and that same symbolism infuses some of this show's most remarkable images, such as the dawn studies *The First Scarlet on the Clouds* and *Purple Clouds* (both 1868). "Ruskin disciplined himself to observe the sunrise," Newall says of these pieces, "finding symbolic virtue of an almost sacramental kind in

doing so, and recommending the practice as morally refreshing” (p. 206). That seems right. And as with Turner, so too with Ruskin: this intellectual context matters, but what carries this exhibition beyond archival interest is the sheer force of these works.

Ruskin’s most compelling images—his architectural pictures and his landscapes—draw power from his representation of light and his handling of colour. When he wanted to, as the San Michele pictures demonstrate, he could heighten the light emanating from his images to a glare so intense that it verges on being uncomfortable to view. But his judicious use of this ability keeps it from collapsing into a technical trick, turning it instead into an instrument of metaphor. Similarly, his handling of colour in images such as the dawn studies or the strikingly Turner-esque *Glacier des Bois* (1843–34) draws in the eye with the force of the vortices these studies sometimes represent.

The exhibition *John Ruskin: Artist and Observer* aims to highlight an underexposed aspect of this fascinating, influential, and troubled nineteenth-century figure. For that reason, some materials shown are primarily archival and some deeply interesting, Ruskin’s photographs being a good example. As Ian Jeffery explains in his contribution to the catalogue, around the mid-nineteenth century, Ruskin assembled a collection of more than three hundred daguerreotypes, some purchased, but most taken by assistants with whom he collaborated. This show includes only a handful of these pictures but examples such as *Southwest Portico of St. Mark’s, Venice* (taken around 1849–50 with John Hobbs) make me want to see more.

By contrast, some of the studies of flora and fauna and, even more so, the images of figures, very much made me want to see less. Perhaps paradoxically, I agree with the decision to include this material, given this show’s concentration on adding something new to the already very active discussion around Ruskin. However, it seemed a happy occurrence that—whether by accident or design—a room at the far end of the galleries

housed the figure drawings, and visitors not driven by the completist impulse easily could avoid them.

Similarly, I am ambivalent—albeit less so—about the catalogue. The essays, though well researched and ably written, generally do not move outside of Ruskin’s biography to examine broader historical phenomena that may have acted on him. To take one obvious example: in asserting repeatedly, through his drawings and writings, that closely observing nature will prove God’s existence (the so-called argument from design), Ruskin was fighting a rearguard action, and knew it. For one thing, at exactly the same time as Ruskin was writing *Modern Painters*, Charles Darwin published the works that would thrust his theory of evolution into the world; most notably, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* appeared in 1859, selling all 1,250 copies in the first day. More disconcertingly, the catalogue gives the reader little or no idea that Turner’s painting was a formative—indeed, generative—influence on Ruskin’s aesthetic thinking.

However, it is great that publishing technology has reached a point where a substantial book containing well over one hundred colour illustrations can be priced reasonably. Beyond that, this book, (like the exhibition) provides a very representative sampling of Ruskin’s forays into various areas of picture-making and will be the standard image reference on this important and, until now, under-discussed facet of Ruskin’s persona for quite some time. Together, the show and catalogue offer a good opening to what is likely to be a much longer conversation.

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Notes

- ¹ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 5 (London, 1902–11), 354.