FORCE OF NATURE: PICTURING RUSKIN'S LANDSCAPE (AN ESSAY)

Text for the exhibition catalogue, by *Jacqueline Yallop*

THE MOUNTAIN IN MINIATURE

In his approach to landscape, Ruskin advocated an 'innocent eye'. This meant observing the natural world closely, and then depicting it honestly.

He repeated this idea at many times and in many ways in his writings. It was his fundamental principle for encouraging people to appreciate landscape, and for teaching artists to draw landscape. But it was not just a question of technique – Ruskin believed that close observation would in turn lead to imaginative engagement, moral rightness and even God:

> The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way … to see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, — all in one.
>
> —*Modern Painters, III* (1856).

This approach demanded attention to the smallest detail. For Ruskin, the first step in appreciating landscape was the study of its composite elements such as stones, plants and trees.

His interest in science, particularly geology, mineralogy and botany, informed his views: he was convinced that disciplined scientific study and observation was valuable not just in its own right, but as a way of understanding the natural world – and better representing it. He became preoccupied with the idea that a landscape was replicated on a variety of scales: he talked, for example, about how a stone could be seen as 'a mountain in miniature.' He encouraged the viewer to see how all the fragments came together to make up the whole:

> Be resolved, in the first place, to draw a piece of rounded rock, with its variegated lichens, quite rightly, getting its complete surroundings, and all the patterns of the lichen in true local colour. Till you can do this, it is of no use your thinking of sketching among hills, but once you have done

Study of Rock, Moss and Ivy by Kate Greenaway (1846-1901). Watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 1885.

this, the forms of distant hills will be comparatively easy.

—*The Elements of Drawing*, Sketching from Nature (1857)

The Matterhorn from the Moat of the Riffelhorn by John Ruskin (1819–1900) pencil and watercolour on paper, 1849.

Ruskin also saw common forms from nature – particularly mountains and trees – repeated in buildings and their decoration, and he became fascinated by the way lines and patterns from a natural landscape could be seen, on a new scale, in architecture.

SEEING THE LANDSCAPE

As a young man, Ruskin travelled in France and Italy and he became fascinated by the impressive landscapes of the Alps; in later life, the hills and lakes around his home in Coniston provided inspiration. These experiences encouraged him to advocate drawing and painting as a way of recording new and interesting places, as a kind of simple pictorial travelogue. He offered frequent commissions to artists to faithfully represent townscapes, buildings and landscapes, and he was enthusiastic about the potential of photography as a means of creating an accurate record:

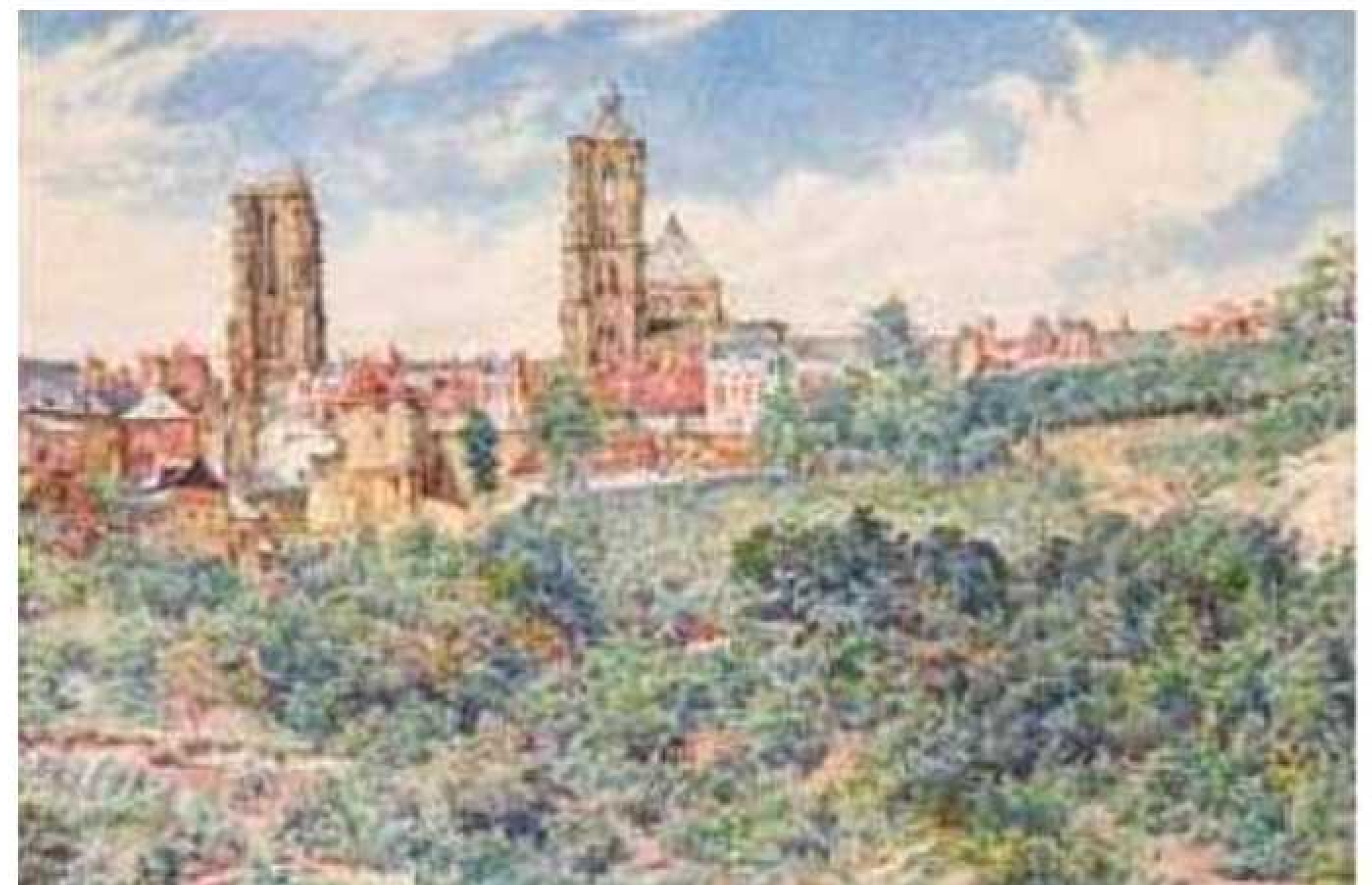
Study of an acanthus Boss, archivolt of the Central Door, San Marco, Venice by John Ruskin (1819–1900) pencil and body colour on paper, 1877.

> Whenever you set yourself to draw anything, consider only how best you may give a person who has not seen the place, a true idea of it… Don't get artist-like qualities for him: but first give him the pleasant sensation of being at the place, then show him how the land lies, how the water runs, how the wind blows, and so on.

—*Lectures on Landscape* (1871)

Ruskin's preoccupation with how we look at things and record them, contributed to the ongoing Victorian debate about realism – about the best way to represent the world around us. But it should also be remembered, that his comments about landscape were controversial, and even revolutionary.

He was writing at a time when traditions of art were changing: the industrial revolution, scientific advances and increasing religious doubt were challenging the old hierarchy of painting – which traditionally placed classical, allegorical and biblical subjects at the top. Ruskin was part of a movement which proposed landscape, instead, as a serious subject worthy of the best artists. He was keen to reinvigorate the form, and he saw modern exponents like Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites as the key to a new approach.



Laon, with the Cathedral from the South (Detail) by Thomas Matthews Rooke (1842-1942) watercolour on paper, 1886.

During the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, English landscape painters brought a new degree of intensity and sophistication to the subject. Ruskin's writings not only helped inspire this change, they also helped create a whole new idea of what was beautiful:

> The hide of a beech tree, or of a birch, or fir, is nearly as fair a thing as an animal's; glossy as a dove's neck, barred with black like a zebra, or glowing in purple grey and velvet brown like furry cattle in sunset. Why not paint these… as they are?

—*Modern Painters, II* (1846)

SENSING THE LANDSCAPE

Ruskin's defence of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites was founded in his belief that their work brought together the act of seeing with an act of imagination to recreate landscape. While close observation was the starting point, Ruskin believed that it was imagination that subsequently allowed a proper understanding, transforming truth to nature though the imaginative sight of the viewer.

In many ways Ruskin's concept of the imagination drew on the European Romantic tradition of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which was also very much concerned with landscape, and the human relation to nature. Ruskin admired the work of William Wordsworth, for example, who often transformed familiar landscapes through imagination, infusing them with personal meanings. Ruskin's approach to nature, especially as a young man, often had a Wordsworthian intensity about it – clouds and mountains, in particular, he described with a sense of excitement, almost delirium – and he often drew links between poets and painters.

Ruskin's concept of a beautiful landscape was complicated, but in essence it tended to be connected to morality and humankind. In the spirit of the Romantics, Ruskin's love of nature and his ideas about landscape were inescapably connected to his ideas about the individual and society:

> Only natural phenomena in their direct relation to humanity – these are to be your subjects in landscape.
>
> —*Lectures on Landscape* (1871)

His view of the world around him remained intensely personal throughout his life; his sense of self was intricately linked with the landscapes and cityscapes he loved and studied.

Coastal Scene, italy (Detail) by John Ruskin (1819–1900) watercolour on paper, 1841.

> When my mountains and cathedrals fail me, and I feel myself feeling dull in a pine forest or a country town, I directly think I must be dying.
>
> —Letter (December 1863)

Despite this intimate response, however, landscape had value for Ruskin in a much wider context. As he grew older, and began thinking and writing more about social and political economy, so he increasingly drew parables from nature to make wider arguments.

Increasingly, it was humankind's relationship with the natural world, rather than the natural world itself, which inspired his interest and admiration.

> Niagara, or the North Pole and the Aurora Borealis, won't make a landscape; but a ditch at Iffley will, if you have humanity in you – enough in you to interpret the feelings of hedgers and ditchers, and frogs.
>
> —*Lectures on Landscape* (1871)

Inevitably, Ruskin's complex religious beliefs had a role to play: his sense of beauty in landscape owed much to his religious principles and to ideas of order and symmetry with their roots in the eighteenth-century.

In his early writing, particularly, a beautiful landscape was very much a representation of the glory of God; drawing or painting was tantamount to an act of faith. Ruskin frequently emphasised the positive moral value of appreciating and understanding landscape, either as a painter or a viewer:

> The next character we have to note in the landscape-instinct…is its total inconsistency with evil passion; its absolute contrariety…to all care, hatred, envy, anxiety, and moroseness.
>
> —*Modern Painters, III* (1856)

After his 'unconversion' in 1858, when he broke away from the biblical Evangelical tradition of his youth and his religious views became more complicated, Ruskin's approach to landscape changed. In later life, he became confused and alarmed; without divine direction, many natural forces seemed ugly to him. He even described nature as something evil: 'my disgust at her barbarity – clumsiness – darkness – bitter mockery of herself – is the most desolating … ' (Letter (1871)).

Despite his growing disillusion, however, Ruskin never really lost his belief that nature was sacred. He continued to articulate an approach to landscape that celebrated awe and power, that evoked intense feeling, and that required the highest spiritual faculties:

> Landscape is to be a passionate representation… It must be done, that is to say, with strength and depth of soul.
>
> —*Lectures on Landscape* (1871)

We are proud to welcome the following new Companions to the Guild of St George, elected in 2012-13: Gill Cockram, Natalia Dushkina, Paul Elmhirst, Norman Hobbs, Helen Kippax, Harry Malkin, Andrew Russell, Tim Selman, Suzanne Varady, Brian Walker, Joseph Weber and Carol Wyss.