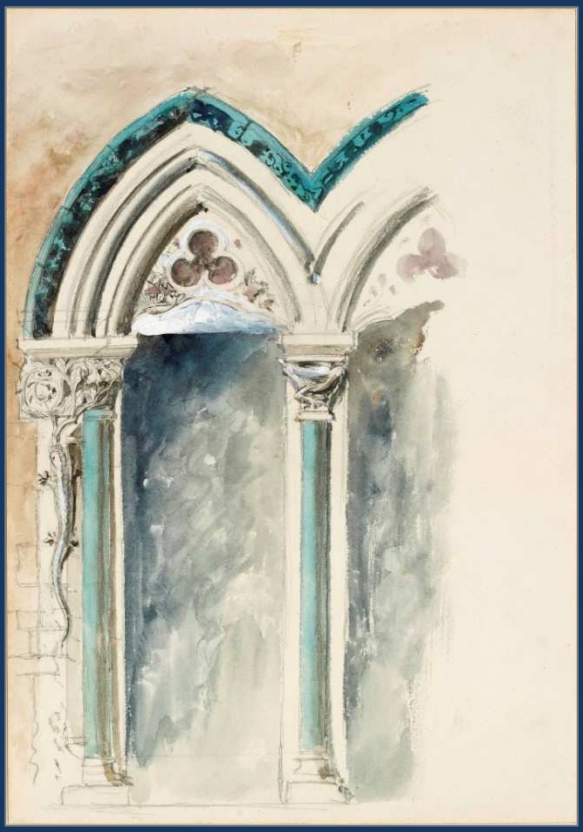
Ruskin, The Pre-Raphaelites and The Oxford Museum



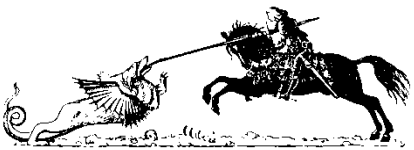
John Holmes

The Guild of St George

Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Oxford Museum

John Holmes, University of Birmingham

Guild of St George Annual Lecture, November 2018



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Ruskin's Designs for Windows at the Oxford University Museum

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Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Oxford Museum

Two weeks before Christmas in 1854, on the evening of 12th December, John Ruskin was given a telegram from Oxford. The University had chosen the neo-Gothic architect Benjamin Woodward's design for its new natural history museum out of over thirty designs which had been put forward. Ruskin wrote immediately to congratulate his old Christ Church friend Henry Acland.[i] As Reader in Anatomy at Oxford, Acland had led the campaign to build the museum – in effect, Oxford's first science faculty – and had been one of the main advocates for choosing a Gothic style. The news would transform all three of their lives, giving Acland the museum he had been calling for, Woodward his most prestigious and ambitious commission, and Ruskin the chance to put into practice the architectural principles he had been advocating for the past five years in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). Not long after, Ruskin wrote again to Acland, saying he hoped 'to get Millais and Rossetti to design flower and beast borders', and to his friend Pauline, Lady Trevelyan, declaring 'I shall get all the pre-Raphaelites to design one each an archivolt and some capitals – and we will have all the plants in England and all the Monsters in the Museum'.[ii] Ruskin was true to his word. He could not get Millais involved – since Effie Ruskin had decided that she would be happier as Mrs Millais, Ruskin's first Pre-Raphaelite protégé had severed all communication with him – but he did engage Dante Gabriel Rossetti to advise on the project. Over the next few years, as the museum was built, more and more of the Pre-Raphaelite circle became involved as designers, consultants and

sculptors. The Oxford museum would be pivotal in the history of Pre-Raphaelitism too. It was the culmination of the first phase of the movement, which looked to science as a model for art, and indirectly seeded its second phase, as Rossetti and his younger followers came to turn their back on science.

The story of the building of the Oxford museum has been told many times, often with Ruskin centre stage. This was, perhaps unsurprisingly, how Ruskin himself tended to tell the story, from his letter to Pauline Trevelyan, where he boasted, excitedly, 'I can do whatever I like with it' (OUM Edmonds J3), to a lecture he gave in the museum itself in November 1877 where he at once owned and repudiated it as 'a very shabby bit of work of mine'.[iii] In this lecture I want to decentre Ruskin in order to show how thoroughly collaborative the project to build the museum really was, with Victorian science and Pre-Raphaelite art as vital to its conception and execution as the ideals of Ruskinian Gothic. Once I have shown that the museum is a long way from being Ruskin's work, and that he certainly was not in a position to do what he liked with it, I will look a little more closely to see what exactly his role was in the project, and where we can trace his contributions in the building itself. Finally, I will consider how the museum shaped the future careers of both Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, and ask why, and to what extent, Ruskin came to repudiate it.

I

The Oxford University Museum was proposed in 1847 and commissioned in 1854. Building work began in June 1855 and the museum finally opened in 1860 to host the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of

Science. The essential principles of the building came together through debates within Oxford in the mid 1850s. In 1850, the Deputy Reader in Geology H. E. Strickland, had argued that Oxford University should be 'a microcosm, or epitome of universal knowledge', including the sciences.[iv] Three years later Richard Greswell, polymath, educationalist and Fellow of Worcester College, applied this principle to the museum itself. Greswell proposed that each object in the museum's collection should occupy 'in its Museum *precisely the same relative place* that it did in God's own Museum, *the Physical Universe in which it lived and moved and had its being*'.[v] At much the same time, the diocesan architect G. E. Street made the case for Gothic as the most appropriate style for the museum building. Some of Street's arguments were incidental to the building's purpose – the style was indigenous not imported, it was in keeping with most of the other public buildings in Oxford – but three of them were particularly germane.

Firstly, Gothic architecture was fundamentally 'Christian architecture'.[vi] For Oxford dons like Acland, Strickland and Greswell, science was natural theology. It comprised, in Acland's words, 'facts connected, illuminated, interpreted, so as to become the intelligible embodied expression to His creatures of the will of God'.[vii] The ecclesiastical forms of Gothic architecture would be a constant affirmation and reminder of this view of science and nature. Secondly, the original Gothic architecture of the middle ages had, according to Street, taken 'nature and natural forms for her guide and her ornaments'. 'Surely,' he wrote, 'where nature is to be enshrined, there especially ought every carved stone and every ornamental device to bear her marks and to set forth her loveliness'.[viii] Modelled from and inspired by nature,

the museum's decorations could become natural history illustrations to complement the collection and reinforce its message. Thirdly, for Street, the Gothic pointed arch was the most important achievement in the history of engineering, making possible architecture that was both lighter and grander than any that had gone before. For architecture 'to forego the use of the greatest mechanical advantages and inventions' was for it to take a retrograde step.[ix] Not to build in Gothic, Street implies, would be to be unscientific.

Greswell's and Street's arguments came together in the conception of the museum devised in 1855 by the Oxford scientists, led by Acland and John Phillips, who had succeeded Strickland as Deputy Reader in Geology when Strickland was killed in a railway accident, and who would go on to be the new museum's first Keeper. The design submitted by Woodward and his partner Sir Thomas Deane was Gothic, but it did not go into the detail of the museum's decoration, nor was this covered by the original contract between the University and the architects. On 1st June 1855, the University therefore put out a request, on behalf of 'some of those, who desire to give to the Museum the most complete efficiency', for private contributions to fund a schema designed to add 'to the Scientific and Artistic Expression of the Edifice'.[x] Acland explained this schema in a rousing address to the Oxford Architectural Society on 13th June, a week before the foundation stone was laid:

> Oxford was about to perform an experiment; it was about to try how Gothic art could deal with those railway materials, iron and glass; and he was convinced, when the interior court of this museum was seen, – with its roof of glass, supported by shafts

> of iron, while the pillars and columns around were composed of variously coloured marbles, illustrating different geological strata and ages of the world, and the capitals represented the several descriptions of floras, – that it would be felt that problems had been solved of the greatest importance to architecture.[xi]

The museum building, as Acland envisaged it, would become a model of the natural world and an illustration of the principles of applied science. Through its decorations, and even in its very fabric, it would become the microcosm that Greswell had proposed. At the same time, the building would push Street's argument that Gothic represented the most advanced engineering to its logical – indeed technological – conclusion by combining the Gothic arch with defiantly modern materials. The whole process would be, in Acland's carefully chosen word, an 'experiment', both technically and aesthetically [fig. 1].

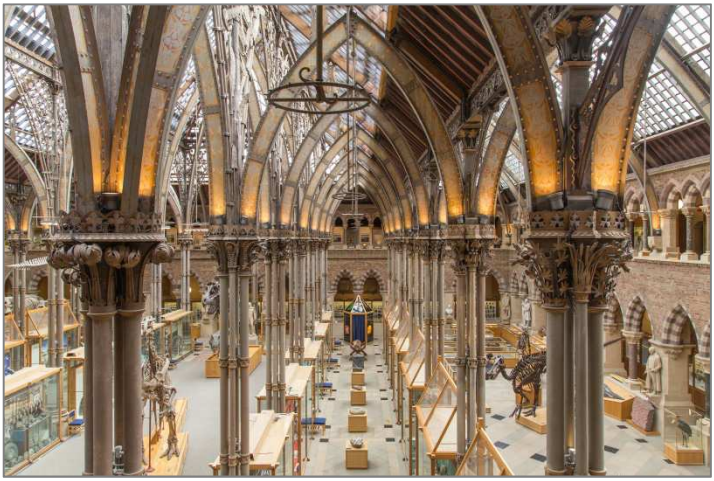


Figure 1 Interior of the Oxford University Museum, Photographed by Scott Billings

In Deane and Woodward, Oxford had employed an architectural practice uniquely well qualified to translate this conception of a natural history museum into a reality. When they won the competition to build the Oxford museum they were at work on another museum, at Trinity College Dublin [fig. 2].

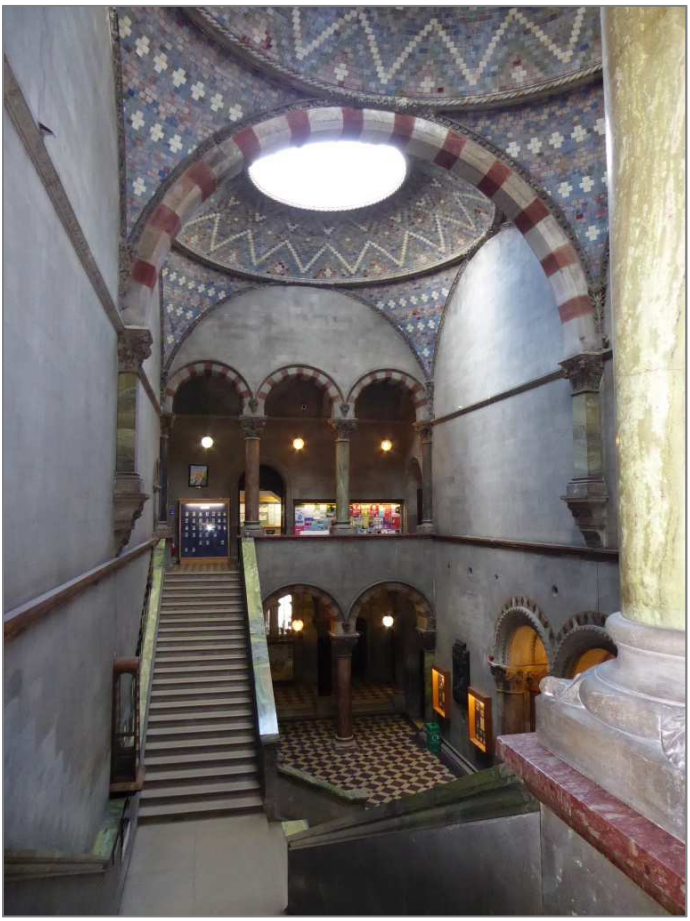


Figure 2 Interior of Trinity College Dublin Museum Photographed by John Holmes

Although this is typically referred to as the Geology Museum, geology was taught as part of the engineering course at Trinity, not as a branch of natural history, so it is not a prototype for the Oxford museum in its function. What it did offer was an architectural language that the Oxford scientists could repurpose for their own ends. The variously coloured columns in Dublin were meant as a showcase of Irish marbles, displaying their beauty and utility. The deft carvings of plants and animals, so full of life, advertised the skill and ingenuity of Irish decorative sculptors, led by James and John O'Shea. The Oxford scientists took these elements and made them into a physical model of the natural world. Acland was in regular contact with Woodward, while Phillips had been professor of geology at Trinity himself briefly in the 1840s. They must surely have followed the building of the Trinity museum closely. Trinity opened its museum in late summer 1857, to coincide with the British Association meeting in Dublin. Among the delegates were Phillips and his close colleague, Charles Daubeny, professor of botany and until lately chemistry and, alongside Acland, the most tireless campaigner for scientific education in Oxford.[xii] It was Phillips who was to put the decorative scheme outlined by Acland into practice at Oxford, determining which rock each column should be cut from, where it should be sourced and what botanical family should be represented on the capital. The O'Shea brothers and their nephew Edward Whelan came over from Ireland to do the carving, working from plants from Oxford's botanical gardens provided to them by Daubeny.[xiii] The ironwork, meanwhile, was designed and superintended by Francis Skidmore of Coventry and the decorative paintwork by Henry Swan.[xiv]

Where, in all this, was Ruskin? His role in the origin of the museum is probably best understood as that of a mentor. Street closed his pamphlet calling for the museum to be built in a Gothic style with a quotation from *Stones of Venice*.[xv] Woodward consciously followed Ruskinian principles, including allowing his artisans to design their own contributions to his buildings. Skidmore and Swan were both Ruskinians, while Acland's views on art and architecture were profoundly shaped by his friend's influence. Ruskin took on this role as mentor more directly once the building was underway. In April 1856, he gave a talk to the workmen employed on the museum, the reports of which form a narrow bridge connecting 'The Nature of the Gothic' with the critique of political economy that Ruskin would go on to expound in *Unto this Last*.[xvi] In 1858 and 1859 he sent two long letters to Acland in praise of the museum, which Acland printed in 1859 in a booklet published to promote the museum and to explain its architectural principles to likely patrons. These letters are endorsements of the museum for the ways in which it is putting into practice the principles Ruskin equated with Gothic architecture. While recognising the inevitable imperfection of the building, as of any 'first exponent of the recovered truth', Ruskin praises the whole as 'literally the first building raised in England since the close of the fifteenth century, which has fearlessly put to new trial this old faith in nature, and in the genius of the unassisted workman, who gathered out of nature the materials he needed'.[xvii] Like any good mentor, he at once praises the work done and urges the workers themselves on to greater heights. He has no doubt as to 'the genius of the O'Shea family' yet acknowledges that their work 'is not yet perfect Gothic sculpture'.[xviii] He commends Skidmore's iron

spandrels while noting that they would still be improved by 'severer conventional treatment of the iron bars' combined with 'deeper research into nature'.[xix]

Ruskin helped too to foster the relationship between Acland and Woodward and the Pre-Raphaelites, although he was not solely responsible for initiating it. Acland already knew something of the Pre-Raphaelites, as he had met Holman Hunt in 1851.[xx] He knew the Pre-Raphaelite sculptor Alexander Munro too, who would take the lead in the third crucial part of the museum's scientific schema, alongside the columns and the capitals: the series of life-size portrait statues of scientists around the central court, embodying the history of science.[xxi] Munro won the lion's share of this commission, completing six of the statues. But Acland's appreciation of Pre-Raphaelitism undoubtedly deepened when he joined the Ruskins and Millais in Scotland in July 1853. According to Acland's biographer, it was he who suggested Millais paint the masterly portrait of Ruskin at Glenfinlas, now in the Ashmolean.[xxii] After Deane and Woodward were commissioned to build the museum, the Pre-Raphaelite network connected to the museum began to grow rapidly. Ruskin introduced Woodward to Rossetti and Acland to Lizzie Siddal, principally as her doctor. Through Rossetti, the commission for the statue of Francis Bacon went to Thomas Woolner, the only member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who was a sculptor rather than a painter, and Linnaeus went to John Lucas Tupper, who had been a mentor to the P.R.B. since the late 1840s. As well as carving the statue of Bacon and later the memorial to Prince Albert, Woolner worked on the design for the museum's main entrance, which was reworked and completed by the Irish artist and architectural designer John Hungerford

Pollen, a long-standing collaborator of Woodward with strong Pre-Raphaelite sympathies. Other members of the wider Pre-Raphaelite circle who contributed to the museum included Pauline Trevelyan and William Bell Scott, who worked together on a design for a capital; Ford Madox Brown, who advised Woolner on his statue of Bacon; H. H. Armstead, a friend of Hunt's, who carved the statue of Aristotle; and the art critic and P.R.B. Frederick George Stephens, who wrote a richly appreciative review of the museum for *Macmillan's Magazine*.

As well as their material contributions to the museum, the Pre-Raphaelites made a less direct but more fundamental contribution to its aesthetic. Across the four issues of their short-lived magazine *The Germ*, published in 1850, Stephens and Tupper had theorised Pre-Raphaelitism as an art modelled on the principles and practice of experimental science. Science, Stephens argued, had achieved extraordinary progress since the beginning of the century 'by bringing greater knowledge to bear upon a wider range of experiment' and 'being precise in the search after truth'. Why, he asked, shouldn't the same 'adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory ... greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts?'[xxiii] Stephens's emphasis on modernity – 'our railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels, and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day', as he put it in another essay in *The Germ* – and on experimentation in art as in science anticipates Acland's language in describing the plans for the museum to the Oxford Architectural Society.[xxiv] Acland had witnessed the Pre-Raphaelites' dedication to precision at first hand in Glenfinlas, as Millais began painting the forms of the rock and the flow of water in situ with extraordinary 'adherence

to fact' – a process that took literally months to complete.[xxv] This attentiveness to natural forms became the guiding principle of the decoration at the museum, bringing Gothic craftsmanship, copied from nature, into line with modern science.

The Pre-Raphaelites had modelled their art on science. Acland repaid the compliment, explaining in a lecture of 1858 which formed the main text of his booklet on the museum, that 'we have sought to hinder all ornament, unless that ornament be free from vicious carelessness; and to stop all professing transcript of Nature, unless it be painstaking, sagacious, and honest. Herein,' he continued, 'we owe a just debt of gratitude to the young school of Artists, called, half in jest, Pre-Raffaelites'.[xxvi] Stephens had closed his call for art to imitate science with the demand 'Admit no untruth: let the priest's garment be clean'.[xxvii] Daubeny, describing the plans for the new museum to the British Association in 1856, cast its central court as 'the Sanctuary of the Temple of Science' surrounded by 'the chambers of the ministering Priests, engaged in worshipping at her altar, and in expounding her mysteries'.[xxviii] For Acland, these two orders of priests – artists and scientists – would come together at the museum to trace 'the Beauty and the subtle Law which stamp the meanest work of the Everliving, Everworking, Artist'.[xxix]

The connection between Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites was so close in the 1850s that it is perhaps artificial to try to discriminate their respective influences on the Oxford museum. But there are undoubtedly a number of aspects of Acland's vision – the excitement at modernity, the emphasis on the experimental method, the hints at a Tractarian aesthetic – which chime better with Pre-Raphaelitism, as

Stephens articulated it, than they do with Ruskin's own ideals. Ruskin's first response to the proposal that the museum should have a glass roof was to tell Acland, petulantly, that in that case he would have nothing to do with it.[xxx] He would later disavow the iron of the roof too, presumably because, the tensile strength of wrought iron being what it is, Skidmore and Woodward had had to have recourse to machine-made cast iron – the ultimate 'railway material' – when the first version of the roof collapsed.[xxxi] Ruskin objected too when he heard that the statues were to be 'detached statue and pedestal work', rather than set in niches 'to help the architecture'.[xxxii] These were, of course, the statues that would exemplify the work of the Pre-Raphaelite sculptors, in most cases their first major public commissions. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things about the Oxford museum was how willing this most establishment of universities was to take a punt on a group of controversial, inexperienced, defiantly anti-establishment artists. The credit for this bold decision lies with Acland, but also surely with Ruskin. It seems unlikely that Oxford would have taken such a risk had he not championed the Pre-Raphaelites' cause in print back in 1851 when they were under attack on several fronts. But here too the project slipped out of Ruskin's grip, and the statues remain another indicator that the Oxford museum is at least as much a Pre-Raphaelite building as it is a Ruskinian one.

II

So far I have sought to downplay Ruskin's involvement in the building of the Oxford museum to give due credit to other key players, including Woodward, the Oxford scientists and the Pre-Raphaelites. I have argued that

Ruskin's principal role in the project to build the museum was as a guiding influence, enabling and supporting the creation of a compelling collaborative work of Gothic architecture and Pre-Raphaelite art, rather than as a presiding genius who could legitimately claim the work as his own. But while this account is, I think, true, it is not complete, as it neglects the many ways in which Ruskin was directly involved in the design and construction of the building. The building was thoroughly collaborative, but he was nonetheless one of the most active of the collaborators involved. Woodward, Acland and Phillips were responsible for the design of the building as a whole. Almost everyone else working on the building had particular, local responsibilities – the O'Sheas for the stonework, Skidmore for the ironwork, Swan for the paintwork, Munro and the other Pre-Raphaelite sculptors for their particular statues. Among the designers known to have worked on the project, Woolner and Pollen worked on the entrance and Trevelyan and Scott on the tulip capital, while the social reformer and campaigner for women's rights Josephine Butler, whose husband George chaired the committee overseeing the building of the museum, designed a capital depicting arum lilies.[xxxiii] Ruskin holds a rank between these two groups. His work at the museum shows itself in local details, but these local details occur in many different spaces and take many different forms all around the building.

Near the north-east corner of the central court there is a capital, attributed to James O'Shea, which depicts flying foxes, coatis and armadillos, many of them with beetles or other small animals in their mouths ⌈fig. 3⌉.

Figure 3 James O'Shea, Capital, Oxford University Museum, photographed by John Holmes.

As Eve Blau points out in her study of Deane and Woodward, it is clearly modelled on one of the capitals from the Doge's palace in Venice illustrated by Ruskin in his *Examples of the Architecture of Venice* (1851) [fig. 4].[xxxiv] In fact, O'Shea's capital is a playful parody, replacing the ferocious and noble lions and wolfhounds of Renaissance

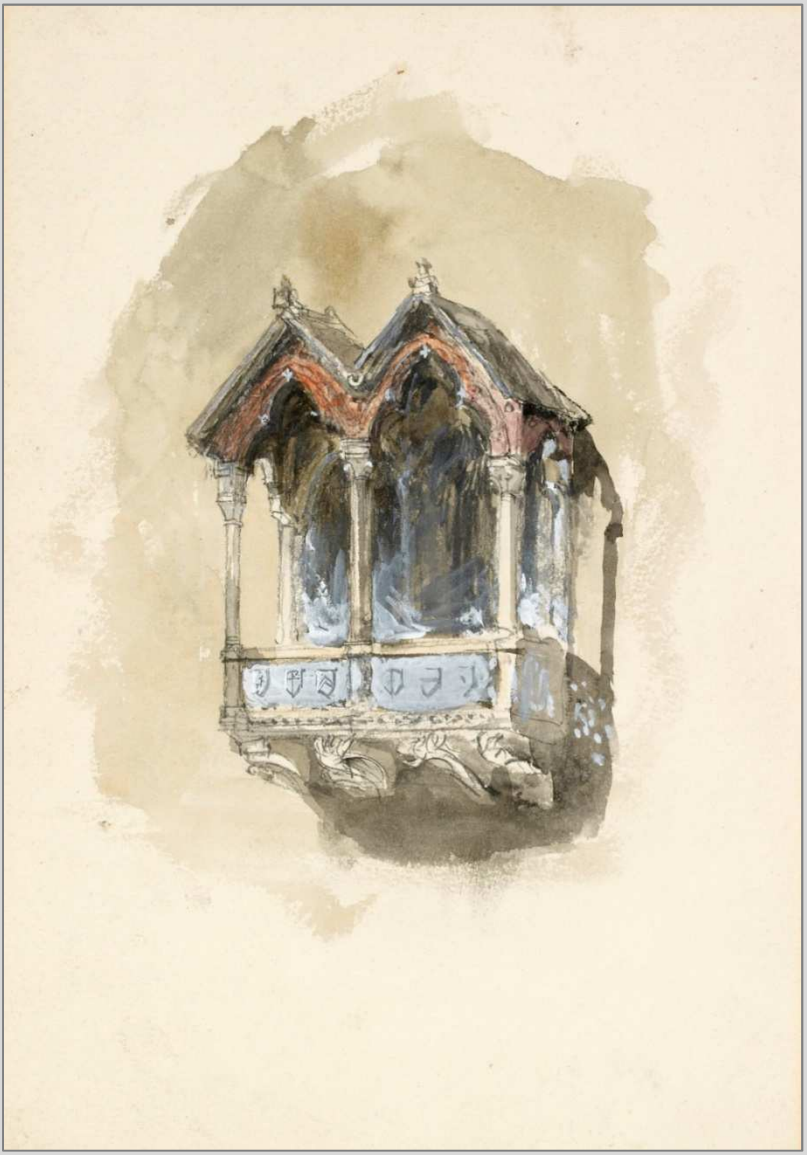
Venice with cute, impish and faintly daft South American mammals modelled on the museum's own taxidermied specimens.

Figure 4. John Ruskin, 'The Ducal Palace. Twentieth Capital' from Examples of the Architecture of Venice (1851). Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

Ruskin's designs for the windows of the Oxford University Museum

(see page 30)

I Ashmolean collection



II Ashmolean collection

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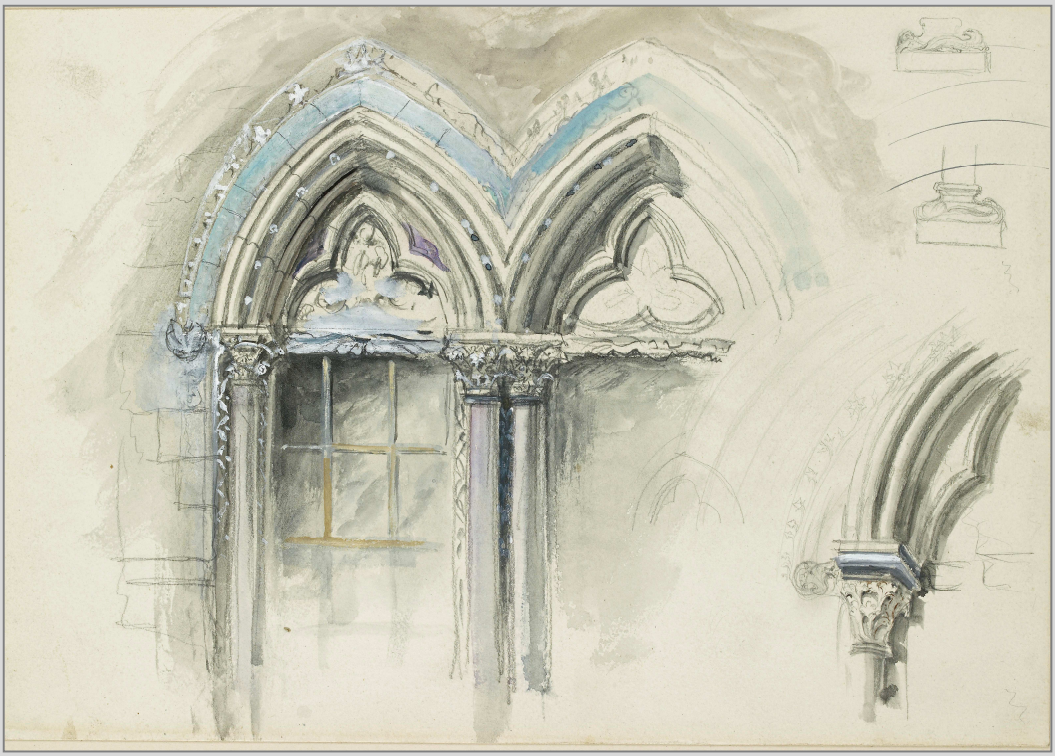

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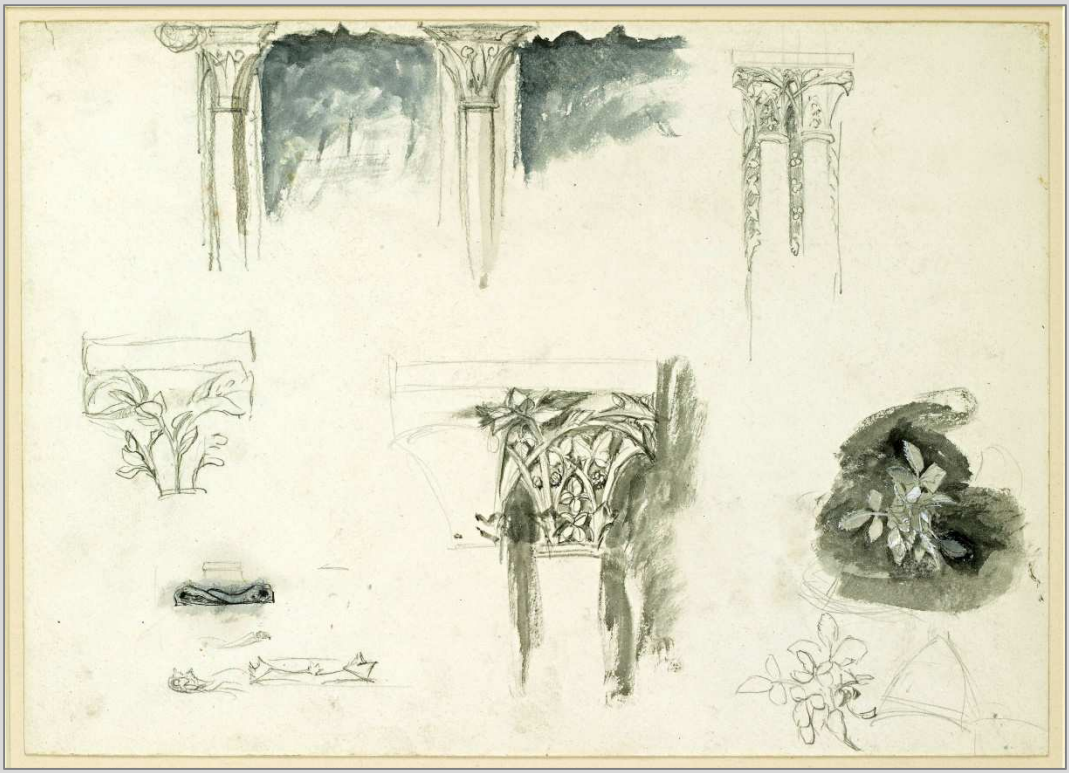


VI Ashmolean collection

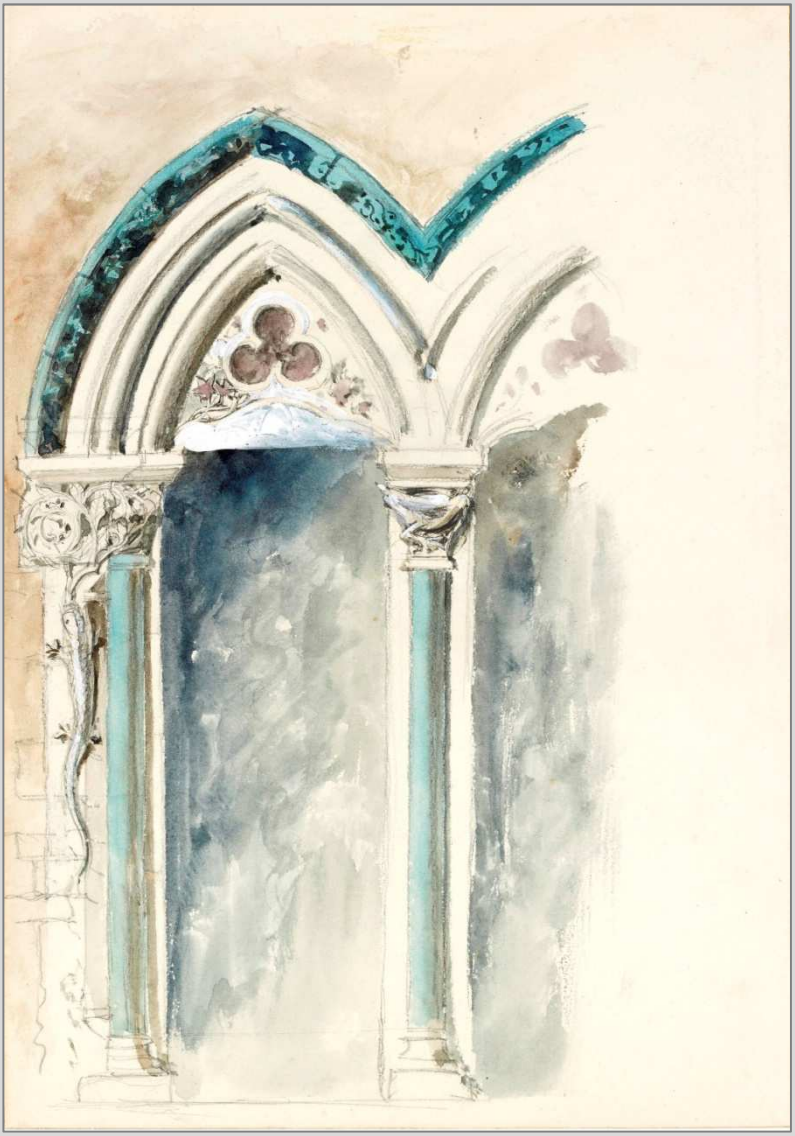
VII Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

VIII Ashmolean collection

IX Ashmolean collection

X Ruskin Library and Research Centre for Culture, Landscape and the Environment, University of Lancaster

XI Ashmolean collection



XII Ashmolean collection

Walk down the museum's east corridor, turn the corner, and you will get to the geology lecture room, now the Director's office, which is decorated with two huge murals by another Ruskin protégé, the Reverend Richard St John Tyrwhitt. One of these depicts the Mer de Glace in the Alps from an imagined vantage point within a cave, perhaps a twofold allusion to the Ice Age theory championed by Louis Agassiz and the recent discovery of a cave in Brixham in Devon where human remains had been discovered alongside those of ice age animals [Fig 5].[xxxv]

Figure 5. Richard St John Tyrwhitt, Mer de Glace (mural detail), Oxford University Museum.

An oil painting by Tyrwhitt of the Mer de Glace [Fig. 6] hangs in the same room.

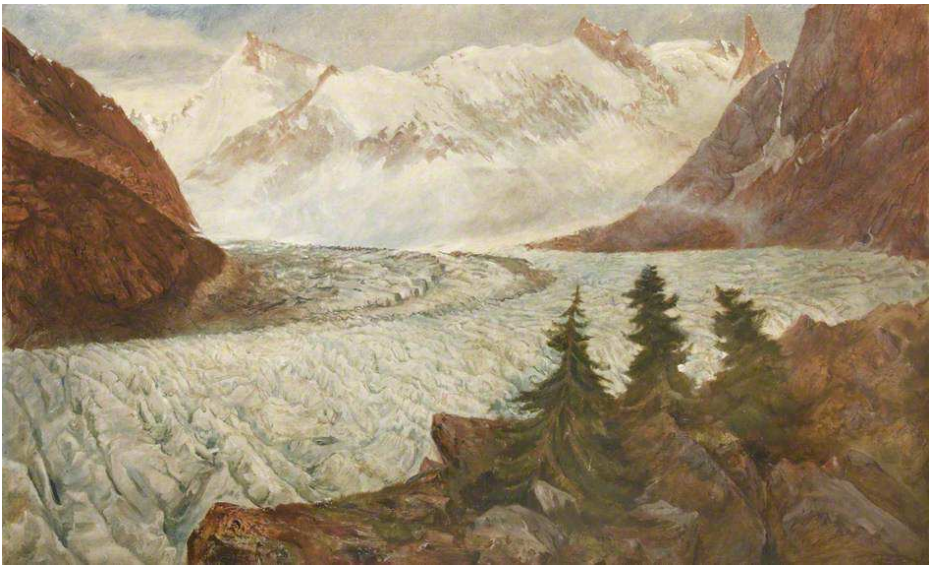


Figure 6. Richard St John Tyrwhitt, Mer de Glace (oil painting), Oxford University Museum.

It seems to represent a stage in the composition of the mural, although the vantage point and overall structure of the two are very different. The mural, like John Brett's *Glacier of Rosenlaui* – much admired by Ruskin – overwhelms the viewer by removing any clear marker of a human scale, except perhaps ourselves, looking out of the cave as our ancestors might have done. Tyrwhitt's oil painting is a close copy of a daguerreotype that Ruskin had taken of the glacier [fig. 7].[xxxvi]

Figure 7 John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley, Mer de Glace (daguerreotype). © Ruskin Library and Research Centre for Culture, Landscape and the Environment, University of Lancaster

In both these cases, Ruskin seems to have provided the artist with a source without, so far as we know, directing him in what to do with it. But he also made a number of designs for the museum itself. In 1855, around the time the foundation stone was laid, Ruskin sent up to Oxford a portfolio of twelve sheets of working designs towards decorative carving for the museum's front windows.[xxxvii] He may also have made a series of designs for iron roof brackets, although the source for this claim is questionable, the evidence no longer exists, if

it ever did, and it is not known how Skidmore's finished brackets related to Ruskin's putative designs.[xxxviii]

Ruskin's involvement can be traced, then, in the interior and exterior stonework and in the geology room murals, and might once have been documented in the ironwork too. The only one of these cases where we can reconstruct his intervention in the museum in detail is in the carving of the windows. A comparison of Ruskin's twelve sheets of designs – reproduced here together for the first time after page 15 – with the finished carvings reveals both the limits and the extent of his influence on the building. The form and distribution of the windows was already set by the contract drawings.[xxxix] Four of Ruskin's most appealing and delicate designs [I-IV] are for windows with balconies. These did not fit the brief and were not incorporated into the building. Aside from the balconies, all Ruskin's designs imagine lancet windows. The ground floor windows are indeed lancets, but those on the first floor are tracery windows instead. Several of the designs promise polychromy; this was employed radially in the central arch over the entrance and in the tracery windows, with alternating dark and light stones, but not in the lancet windows and not in bands as Ruskin imagines. It seems, then, that Ruskin's designs were welcome as suggestions for the decoration of predetermined structures, but that he had no say over those structures themselves.

Four years after Ruskin first made his designs, he finally had the opportunity to implement some of his ideas. Around the end of 1859, after completing the controversial Cat Window on the first floor, James O'Shea began work on a double lancet window on the ground floor, under Ruskin's

'immediate direction', as Ruskin told Ellen Heaton in a letter thanking her for a contribution to the costs in January 1860.[xl] The carving of this window [fig. 8]

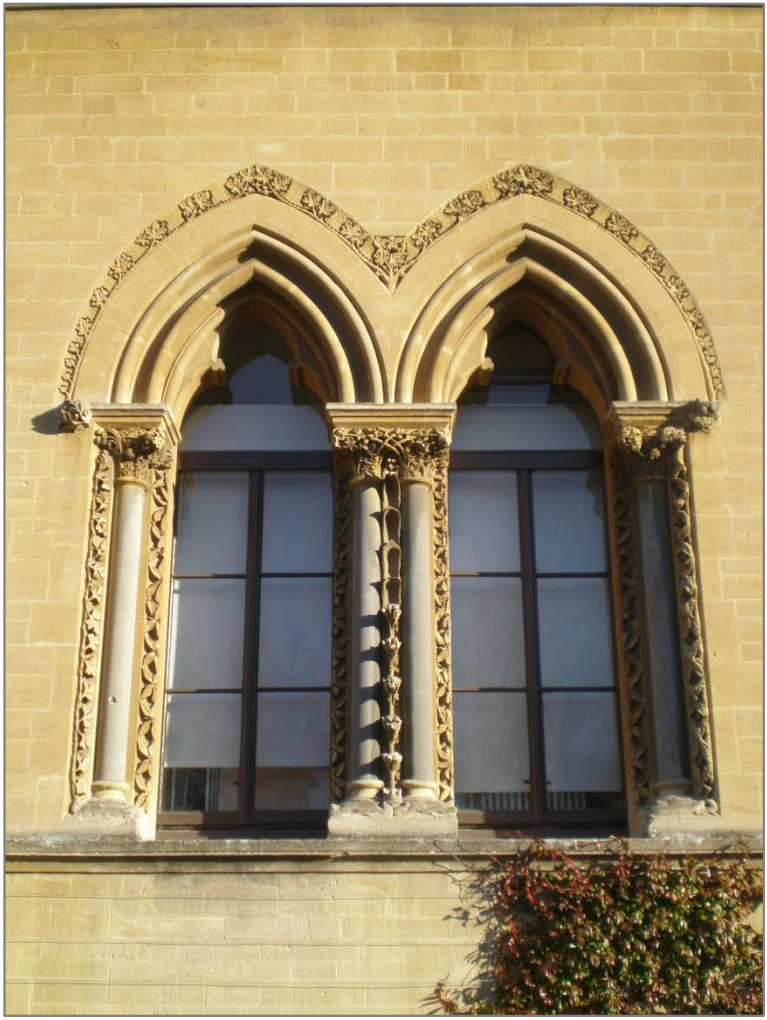


Figure 8 James O'Shea and John Ruskin, Ground-floor window, Oxford University Museum.

follows very closely a design worked out in detail by Ruskin over three pages of his portfolio [V-VII], from the leaves growing bigger towards the apex of the arch, down through the interwoven strawberry plants topping the two central capitals, carefully stylised from a sketch of a living plant, to the writhing lizards at the base of the columns [see also IV]. This careful following of a prepared design flouts one of Ruskin's own principles, that 'all architectural ornamentation should be executed by the men who design it', as he put it in the first of his two long letters to Acland.[xli] It is possible that the order to carve this window to Ruskin's precise specifications was a kind of probation for O'Shea, as his exuberance in carving the Cat Window seems to have got him into trouble with the authorities, although exactly why is no longer clear.[xlii]

Many years later Ruskin lamented that O'Shea felt he had nothing to learn and that he, for one, could not teach him. At the same time he acknowledged that he was 'Not only the best, but the only person, who could have done anything of what we wanted to do here'.[xliii] It was in collaborating on their second window together that O'Shea moved increasingly beyond Ruskin's control. As this was a first floor tracery window [fig. 9], there was no single design that O'Shea could be asked to copy. Besides, none of Ruskin's other designs had been so thoroughly worked out. Instead, there were a series of motifs, sketched out on different imagined lancets, that O'Shea incorporated into his tracery. In one design [VIII] Ruskin seems to have been principally concerned to try out a stylised thistle capital, but O'Shea took instead the hint of birds perching up the window jambs.

Figure 9 James O'Shea and John Ruskin, First-floor window, Oxford University Museum.

In another [IX] Ruskin tries out the effect of having two bands of oak leaves around the inside of the arch, separated

by an uncarved band. O'Shea carved two bands along these lines, but altered the angle of the leaves relative to the arch and added birds to the inner band. Twice Ruskin sketches a window surmounted by two large birds, beak to beak [X-XI]. These birds reappear, slightly compressed, immediately beneath the main arch in O'Shea's carving. Most striking of all, O'Shea takes the two animals from one of Ruskin's most imaginative and beautiful designs [XII], a sinuous lizard crawling up the window jamb and a severe-looking bird perched on the top of the capital, and reshapes them to fit into his tracery window. The lizard is morphed into a long, thin bird on the left-hand side of the arch. Ruskin's bird remains in the centre of the composition but reversed and reoriented, looking up, not down, to fit between the arches of the two main lights and the cinquefoil.

Did Ruskin show O'Shea his designs directly? The catalogue of features that they share with the finished window, in particular the closeness of the birds above and below the cinquefoil to Ruskin's own drawings, suggests that he must have done. Did they discuss together how O'Shea might incorporate the designs into the carving? Probably, although Ruskin's later comments suggest that O'Shea may have taken what he wanted from Ruskin's designs and reworked them as he chose. Did Ruskin have similar discussions with Skidmore about the iron brackets, or with O'Shea and Tyrwhitt about the Venice capital and the Mer de Glace? Or did he pass his materials onto the artists and let them decide what to do with them? We don't know the answers to these questions, and the alternatives they imply are not absolute. But we do know that Ruskin took a lively interest in the museum across several years and its many different spaces, contributing directly, as well as through his

influence, to the decoration of this remarkable and influential building. It was not as a whole his work, but it certainly incorporates his work, in collaboration with a number of other artists.

III

What bearing did the building of the Oxford museum, and their roles in it, have on Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites themselves? From the 1860s, Ruskin's relationship with the museum was shaped by his wider disenchantment with the modern world and modern science. In a lecture he gave in Dublin in 1868, which he later incorporated into *Sesame and Lilies*, he still took pride in the museum and his contribution to it, and praised both Woodward and O'Shea. Although he spoke of his 'disappointment' too, this was not a comment on the building itself but on the failure of Gothic architecture to make any moral headway against 'the reckless luxury, the deforming mechanism, and the squalid misery of modern cities'. Instead, its innovations in design had been subsumed into that squalor against its own will, to reappear in 'an engine furnace, or a railroad bank, [...] its floral carvings choked with soot'.[xliv] Acland had tried to elevate 'railway materials'; in repaying the compliment, the railways had smeared and degraded the decorative art pioneered at the museum.

The museum itself fell out of favour with Ruskin in the 1870s during his tenure as Slade Professor of Fine Art. It was in the sixth of a series of lectures 'Readings in "Modern Painters"', delivered to Oxford students in the museum itself in November 1877, that Ruskin dismissed it as a 'very shabby bit of work'. He explained what he meant in terms of its failure to live up to his precepts:

> … in declaring that material should be honestly shown, I never meant that a handsome building could be built out of common brickbats, if only you showed the bricks inside as well as out. And in saying that ornament should be founded on natural form, I no more meant that a mason could carve a capital by merely looking at a leaf, than that a painter could paint a Madonna by merely looking at a young lady. And when I said that the workman should be left free to design his work as he went on, I never meant that you could secure a great national monument of art by letting loose the first lively Irishman you could get hold of to do what he liked in it.[xlv]

The first of these three charges hits home. The brick walls had been intended to be plastered and painted with murals. When Ruskin called the building 'shabby', he was thinking not of its design nor its workmanship, but of the fact that both the interior and the façade had been left incomplete as the budget was used up. As he said, 'I little thought at this hour to see it still unfinished'.[xlvi]

His second and third charges are less fair, though to do him justice, he does go on to pay tribute to O'Shea as 'a man of the truest genius, and of the kindest nature' even as he laments his unruliness.[xlvii] Like Brett, Rossetti and so many other artists whose careers Ruskin had helped to foster, O'Shea had not lived up to his very particular standards and had instead asserted his own artistic independence. In teaching Oxford students, as in his *Academy Notes* of the 1850s, Ruskin used the failure of his own protégés to underscore what he felt to be the true principles of fine art.

His jibes at the museum were also clearly meant to raise a laugh. As jokes, they exaggerate the failings Ruskin wants to point out. And, though it is not to Ruskin's credit, he was far from the only one to use O'Shea as the butt of an Irish joke in an account of the museum. Acland did the same; so did Holman Hunt.[xlviii]

Ruskin's complaints about the museum were motivated by more than just disappointment at how its decoration had turned out, however. His post at Oxford was the outcome of Acland's long campaign for the teaching of art as well as science at the university, which first came to fruition in the appointment of an artist at the museum itself, as the 1866 edition of the guidebook explains, 'for the purpose of making original drawings of scientific objects, and of instructing Natural History students in drawing from Nature'.[xlix] Ruskin recognised the intimate connection between his own position and the history of the museum. He paid tribute to Acland on these grounds in his lecture on landscape painting in *The Art of England*, given in November 1883, again in the museum, to an audience which he at least took to include students of science as well as art:

> Without him – little as you may think it – the great galleries and laboratories of this building, in which you pursue your physical science studies so advantageously [...] would not yet have been in existence. Nor, after their erection, (if indeed in this there be any cause for your thanks,) would an expositor of the laws of landscape beauty have had the privilege of addressing you under their roof.[l]

But while Ruskin's own career was tied to the museum, he was increasingly disgusted with it as an institution. His

denunciation of the museum as 'shabby' in 1877 was his third attack on it in one lecture series, indeed in one week. Although these lectures were supposedly on art, it was the way in which the museum exhibited and taught science that appalled him. That, I suggest, was the main motivation behind his repudiation of the building he helped to fashion.

Ruskin set out his charge against the museum in the fourth lecture on 'Readings in "Modern Painters"':

> … as the colleges of this University were founded to bring the music of the Word of God to the ears of the youth of England, so the museum of this University was founded to bring the light and beauty and life of the works of God to their eyes.
>
> Instead of which, while its whole space would not be enough to show the twentieth part of what it ought to show of the life of this world, half of that narrow space is given to display, and recommend to contemplation, the Devil's working in it through disease, and his triumph over it in death.[li]

Ruskin had imagined a museum of natural history and natural theology but had ended up with a museum of pathology and anatomy. Science should study nature alive, not dead, he insisted, and so it should do its best to represent it as though it were alive, through taxidermy or, indeed, through art. Ruskin called his fifth lecture 'Against Bones', after closing his fourth by declaring 'Why, I could fill all this museum with studies of a duck and a drake, and a hen and chickens, and it should be more educationally useful than it is now'.[lii] He went on to attack the museum's curators publicly in 1880 in an essay in the *Nineteenth Century*, condemning

George Rolleston, the Linacre Professor of Anatomy, for choosing 'to fill the Oxford Museum with the scabbed skulls of plague-struck cretins'.[liii] He repeated this same charge in the second lecture of *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, delivered in February 1884. After his tribute to the museum in *The Art of England* the previous November, he was scathing, declaring that 'in the natural history museum of Oxford, humanity has been hitherto taught, not by portraits of great men, but by the skulls of cretins'.[liv]

Ruskin's condemnation of the Oxford museum was part and parcel of his attack on modern science, in particular what he called in this same lecture 'the universal instinct of blasphemy in the modern vulgar scientific mind'.[lv] Rolleston, who had died in 1881, was a faithful Christian, but he had testified to the evidence for evolution and embraced the methodological materialism of the scientific naturalists.[lvi] As such, he was typical of the scientists working at the museum, where the old natural theologians like Phillips, Daubeny and Acland had been increasingly replaced by Darwinian naturalists or made their own peace with them. In Ruskin's eyes, the museum had betrayed the moral and spiritual purpose of science as natural theology. As Darwin's ideas took hold, in Oxford as elsewhere, Ruskin conducted an eccentric and forlorn campaign against what he saw as the atheistic and amoral direction of modern science. As early as 1872, in his Oxford lectures on the relation of natural science to art entitled *The Eagle's Nest*, he had attacked 'anatomical study, which has, to our much degradation and misfortune, usurped the place, and taken the name, at once of art and of natural history'.[lvii] Earlier in the same series, he had insisted that science itself was 'not the arrangement of new systems, nor the discovery of new facts [...] but the submission to an

eternal system, and the proper grasp of facts already known'. Ruskin fought to defend an obsolete ideal of science, retreating not just to the static model of creation of pre-evolutionary natural theology but to medieval 'scientia', defined by him as 'knowledge of constant things'.[lviii] Where Acland and Street had called for a Gothic building for modern science, Ruskin was now seeking to restore Gothic science itself. It was an impossible demand. Without betraying its own mission, the museum could not oblige him. In this context, Ruskin's repudiation of the museum was all but inevitable.

If Ruskin parted company with science after the building of the Oxford museum, so did the main current of Pre-Raphaelitism. The collaboration on the museum seeded two further collaborations, each historically important. After Oxford, Woolner, Skidmore and the O'Sheas worked together again on the new Manchester Assize Courts under the direction of Alfred Waterhouse.[lix] This was the first of many of Waterhouse's collaborations with Pre-Raphaelite contractors including William Morris and Ford Madox Brown. When he came to build the Natural History Museum in London, the Oxford museum would be his key model for a building embodying a scientific vision of the natural world. The legacy of Woodward's and Waterhouse's museums together can be seen in the decorative schema of natural history museums across Europe and North America, from Vienna to Paris to Toronto.

But it was the second, more famous collaboration that had the most impact of Pre-Raphaelitism itself. While working on the museum, Woodward won a second contract in Oxford, to build a debating chamber for the Oxford Union Society.

Several of his contractors for the museum worked with him on this new commission, including Swan, Pollen and Munro. Rossetti, who had stonewalled whenever Woodward asked him to prepare designs for the museum, leapt at the chance to work on a new building which had nothing to do with science. If the museum was the culmination of the original Pre-Raphaelite ideal of an art modelled jointly on medieval precedent and modern science, the Oxford Union would be Rossetti's opportunity to affirm instead a medieval aesthetic without regard to science. Of all the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti had the least interest in science. He took against Acland too, calling him 'an ass' in a letter to Scott and warning him 'Don't go near him'.[lx] Turning his back on the museum, Rossetti led a group of younger artists, including Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Arthur Hughes and Spencer Stanhope, with the poet Swinburne in support, in painting a cycle of murals of Arthurian legends at the Oxford Union. The project was enthusiastic but abortive, and neither the art nor the architecture of the Oxford Union building are as impressive as those of the museum. But the effect was to consecrate what was in effect a second Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, no longer committed to science but dedicated instead to aesthetic beauty fulfilled through art and poetry and set in imagined worlds apart from the squalid reality of Victorian England, that Ruskin too found so offensive.

The Oxford museum was an unique collaboration between scientists, artists and designers, in which Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites each played an important role. Of the three men who celebrated its genesis in December 1854, Woodward died of tuberculosis in 1861, while work on the carving was still ongoing. Ruskin broke faith with the museum, more through differences over science than over art

or architecture. If one of the three of them could claim to have been the presiding genius of the museum it was Acland. He stood by his museum, finding new meanings in its art as the science moved on. Pollen's Gothic entranceway, depicting Adam, Eve and an angel, came to stand for evolution through the spiraling growth of plants up the main arch.[lxi] Aristotle, who had taken his place among the statues first as a biologist, then as one of the founders of science, became at last the prophet of psychology as a facet of medicine.[lxii] Acland gave the building both its conceptual unity and its rich diversity as a vision of nature fashioned in stone, iron and glass, and he could see that the finished – or unfinished – whole contained, as all great art does, possibilities that had not been deliberately placed there. It is this capacity to track, as well as to challenge, the new systems and facts of science, and not to reassert doggedly one eternal system or facts already known, that makes the Oxford museum such a compelling expression, not of Ruskin's ideals, but of science, then and now.

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Footnotes

[i] Frederick O'Dwyer, *The Architecture of Deane and Woodward* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 172.
[ii] Bodleian MS Acland d. 72: 43; Oxford University Museum archive, Edmonds J3 (from a letter transcribed by R. Trevelyan, 8 July 1973).
[iii] OUM archive, Edmonds J3; *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), digitized by the Ruskin Library and Research Centre, Lancaster University, 22. 253.
[iv] H. E. Strickland, *On Geology in Relation to the Studies of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: 1852), 4-5.
[v] Rev. Richard Greswell, *Memorial on the (Proposed) Oxford University Lecture Rooms, Library, Museums, &c.* (Oxford: 1853), 7 (emphasis in original).
[vi] George Edmund Street, *An Urgent Plea for the Revival of True Principles of Architecture in the Public Buildings of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: 1853), 1.
[vii] Henry Wentworth Acland, *Remarks on the Extension of Education at the University of Oxford* (Oxford: 1848), 12.
[viii] Street, 17.
[ix] Ibid, 4.
[x] OUM archive, HBM02–144.
[xi] *Oxford Architectural Society: Reports of Meetings from July 1853, to May 31, 1856*, 70-71.
[xii] O'Dwyer, 151.
[xiii] In his *Reminiscences of Oxford*, 2nd ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1907), W. Tuckwell recalled 'every morning came the handsome red-bearded Irish brothers Shea, bearing plants from the Botanic Garden, to reappear under their chisels in the rough-hewn capitals of the pillars' (52). As Director of the Botanic Gardens, Daubeny will have been responsible for providing the plants for the schema set out by Phillips and may well have been involved in planning it.
[xiv] Swan's work on in the Hope Museum, a room on the first floor of the museum which housed the insect collection, is praised in an article on the 'Oxford Museum' in *The Builder*, 17 (1859), 401-02 (p. 401). It can still be seen there today.
[xv] Street, 17.
[xvi] *Works*, 16. 431-36.

[xvii] Henry W. Acland and John Ruskin, *The Oxford Museum*, 5th edition (London: George Allen, 1893), 83, 90. This edition is a reprint of the second edition of 1860, with additions. Ruskin's letters are reprinted in *Works*, 16. 211-34.
[xviii] Ibid, 77, 84.
[xix] Ibid, 88.
[xx] Anne Clark Amor, *William Holman Hunt: The True Pre-Raphaelite* (London: Constable, 1989), 92.
[xxi] Munro stayed with the Acland family and made a low-relief portrait of Acland's wife in 1854. See Katharine Macdonald, 'Alexander Munro: Pre-Raphaelite Associate' in *Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture: Nature and Imagination in British Sculpture 1848-1914*, edited by Benedict Read and Joanna Barnes (London: Henry Moore Foundation/Lund Humphries, 1991), 46-48, 57-65, pp. 58-59. A letter from Munro to Acland dated September 18, 1847 survives in Acland's archive in the Bodleian Library (MS. Acland d. 71: 40), showing that Munro and Acland had known each other for several years before they began collaborating on the museum.
[xxii] J. B. Atlay, *Sir Henry Wentworth Acland: A Memoir* (London: Smith, Elder, 1903), 173.
[xxiii] Frederick George Stephens [as John Seward], 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art', *The Germ* (1850), issue 2, 58-64 (p. 61).
[xxiv] Stephens [as Laura Savage], 'Modern Giants', *The Germ*, issue 4, 169-73 (p. 170).
[xxv] *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), 115-17.
[xxvi] Acland and Ruskin, 57.
[xxvii] Stephens, 'Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art', 61.
[xxviii] Charles Daubeny, *Miscellanies: Being a Collection of Memoirs and Essays on Scientific and Literary Subjects*, 4 parts in 2 vols (Oxford: 1867), 3. 172.
[xxix] Acland and Ruskin, 56-57.
[xxx] O'Dwyer, 261.
[xxxi] Michael W. Brooks, *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989 [first published by Rutgers in 1987]), 131.
[xxxii] Bodleian MS Acland d.72: 85.
[xxxiii] Josephine E. Butler, *Recollections of George Butler* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1892), p. 90. Of these designs, only Woolner's and

Pollen's survive, and only Pollen's is known to have been carved directly, albeit with modifications.

[xxxiv] Eve Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic: The Architecture of Deane and Woodward 1845-61* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 68.

[xxxv] Chris Stringer, *Homo Britannicus: The Incredible Story of Human Life in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2006), 12-14.

[xxxvi] Ruskin's daguerreotype and Tyrwhitt's oil painting were both exhibited at Tate Britain in the Pre-Raphaelite landscape exhibition in 2004. See Allen Staley and Christopher Newall, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (London: Tate, 2004), 149, 162.

[xxxvii] Bodleian MS Acland d.72: 68.

[xxxviii] Cook and Wedderburn record that 'He is said also to have designed six iron brackets for the roof.' In a footnote they explain further: 'This statement rests on the authority of a note in Wise and Smart's *Bibliography of Ruskin*, vol. i. p. 94, where it is stated that ―Photographs of a series of eight brackets, designed by Mr. Ruskin for the Oxford Museum, are published by Messrs. Bedford, Lemere & Co., 147 Strand, W.C.‖ The photographers have now destroyed the negatives, and the editors have not seen the prints.' (*Works*, 16. xlvi) Given Wise's notoriety as a forger, this claim for the existence of these brackets and their attribution to Ruskin is at best doubtful.

[xxxix] Reproduced in O'Dwyer, 177.

[xl] Quoted O'Dwyer, 243.

[xli] Acland and Ruskin, 52.

[xlii] See O'Dwyer, 321-42, for a thorough analysis of the evidence for this controversy.

[xliii] *Works*, 22. 525.

[xliv] *Works*, 18. 150.

[xlv] *Works*, 22. 524-25.

[xlvi] *Works*, 22. 523.

[xlvii] *Works*, 22. 525.

[xlviii] Acland and Ruskin, 104-09; W. Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), 2. 157-59.

[xlix] Henry W. Acland, *The Oxford Museum: The Substance of a Lecture*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: 1866), 25. Ruskin's letters were omitted from the third and fourth editions, and reinstated in the fifth

edition in 1893. On Acland's campaigns for art education at Oxford, and his manoeuvrings to find Ruskin an appointment at the university to pursue this, see Atlay, 368-71, and Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 219-20.

[l] *Works*, 33. 385.

[li] *Works*, 22. 517.

[lii] *Works*, 22. 520.

[liii] *Works*, 34. 349.

[liv] *Works*, 34. 72-73.

[lv] *Works*, 34. 72.

[lvi] Richard England, 'Rolleston, George (1829-81)' in *The Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century British Scientists*, edited by Bernard Lightman, 4 vols (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 3. 1710-11.

[lvii] *Works*, 22. 230.

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[lix] See Colin Cunningham and Prudence Waterhouse, *Alfred Waterhouse, 1830-1905: Biography of a Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16-17, 34-35.

[lx] *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, edited by William E. Fredeman, 9 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-10), 2. 266.

[lxi] *The Unveiling of the Statue of Sydenham in the Oxford Museum August 9, 1894 by the Marquess of Salisbury with an Address by Sir Henry W. Acland* (Oxford: 1894), 36.

[lxii] Acland and Ruskin, *The Oxford Museum*, 1st ed. (1859), 34, and 2nd ed. (1860 [reprinted 1893]), 25; *Unveiling of the Statue of Sydenham*, 30.

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The Guild of St George

The Guild of St George is the charity for arts, crafts and the rural economy founded in 1871 by the Victorian art and social critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900). Directed by a Master and a dozen Directors, all of whom are voluntary, it employs an Administrator and one or two other officers to run its daily affairs. There are now over 270 members, who are known as Companions. It is worth noting that a fifth of these Companions live overseas, so the Guild is now becoming international.

Ruskin's aims and aspirations for the Guild are contained in the ninety-six letters he published 'to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain' under the title, *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84) His principal purpose in founding the Guild was to make Britain a happier place to live in.

Now a charitable Education Trust, the Guild tries to put Ruskin's ideas into practice in the modern world. It owns and supports the Ruskin Collection, a collection of works of art and other precious objects given by Ruskin in 1875 to the City of Sheffield so that working people could see and handle beautiful objects and now in Sheffield's Millennium Gallery. The Collection has been the basis for three major Triennial Exhibitions at the Gallery, all funded by the Guild. A fourth exhibition, *The Power of Seeing*, to be shown in both London and Sheffield in 2019, has been planned to celebrate Ruskin's bicentenary.

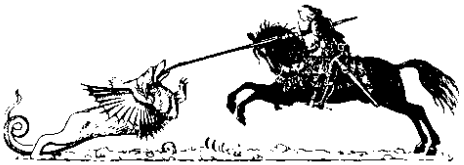
The Guild is currently running a series of activities and events under the title *Ruskin in Sheffield*, which builds on the

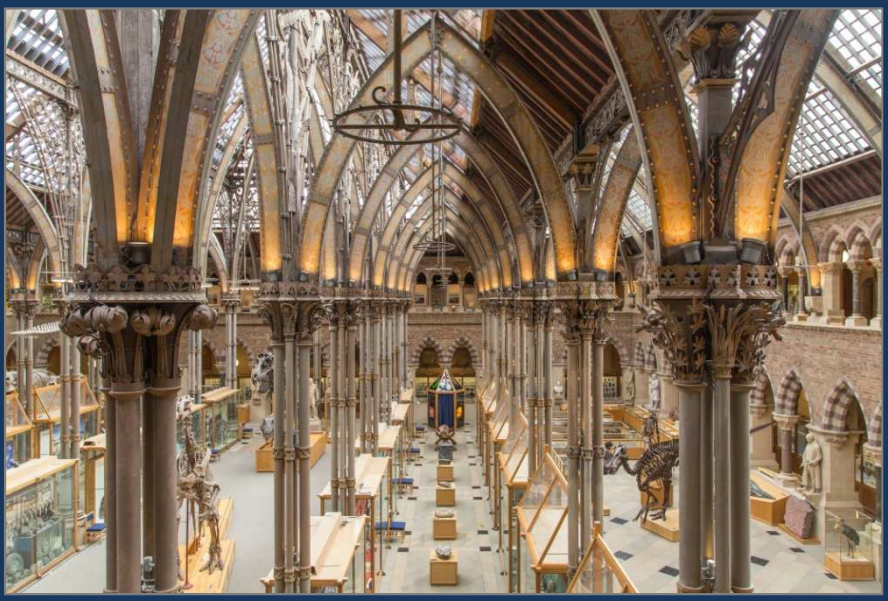
links between the Ruskin Collection, the Guild and Sheffield's communities. This began in 2015 with the financial support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The Guild supports work on the sustainable development of the Wyre Forest, where it owns farmland, orchards and 100 acres of woodland. A new project, *Ruskin in the Wyre*, begun in 2018 and funded by the HLF, draws attention to the role of the Guild in the history of the forest, while also celebrating craftsmanship.

The Guild owns and lets some properties built in the Arts and Crafts style in the Hertfordshire village of Westmill. It also care for a wildflower meadow, St George's Field, in Sheepscombe, Gloucestershire, maintained on the Guild's behalf by Natural England.

The Guild sometimes collaborates with partners – for example, The Big Draw (which it founded in 2000 as The Campaign for Drawing), a project which encourages drawing for everyone, and 42nd Street, a mental health charity for young people in Manchester. In recent years it has also created forums for the discussion of Ruskinian ideas and practices in modern contexts. Symposia on craftsmanship, the environment, education and economics have attracted engaged audiences. Similar events have also taken place under the Guild's auspices in the United States, Canada and Italy.





In 1855, Oxford University set about building its first science faculty. The Oxford Museum was to be an experiment in scientific architecture, combining the beauty of medieval Gothic with modern industrial materials, and setting in stone a vision of the natural world revealed by science. To design the museum, the Oxford scientists called on the advice of the leading Victorian art theorist John Ruskin, who brought in the Pre-Raphaelites, the most radical avant-garde artists of the day. This booklet tells the story of this unique collaboration between science and art, showing how Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites helped to create one of the most remarkable buildings of the nineteenth century, and reprinting for the first time the full portfolio of Ruskin's designs for the museum.

John Holmes is Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham and an Honorary Associate of the Oxford University Museum. His books include *Darwin's Bards* (2009) and *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (2018), and the anthology *Guests of Time: Poetry from the Oxford University Museum* (2016).

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