

## PREGLEDNI ČLANKI

Review Articles

*Udo Kultermann, New York***JOHN RUSKIN – ART AND  
THE PASSION FOR NATURE  
(STEPS TOWARDS A RE-EVALUATION)**

Thinking about art had a long tradition in England as it had in Germany and France, but it was manifested in different forms in the particular countries. Dominating in England were not the categories of Immanuel Kant or the encyclopedic vision of Hegel, which – ironically – in their origins could be traced back to earlier sources in England, but the imagination of poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron as well as the all-encompassing vision of William Blake. Coleridge had studied in Germany, and his views show a clear impact of Kantian thinking. In the theories of John Keats beauty is identified with truth which later would be important for thinking about art. In the writings of Thomas Carlyle, who became a father-figure to Ruskin, Goethe was introduced to the English audience. While Ruskin was completely ignorant of Kant and Hegel, he nevertheless had a world-wide influence on art theories in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Maybe overrated in his own times, he has to be re-evaluated today and his position defined in harmony with contemporary ways of thinking in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Literature about Ruskin is extensive. The most important publications are: W. G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Life and Work of John Ruskin*, London 1893; Charles WALDSTEIN, *The Work of John Ruskin: Its Influence upon Modern Thought and Life*, London 1894; W. G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Art Teaching of John Ruskin*, London 1891; J. A. HOBSON, *John Ruskin. Social Reformer*, London 1898; Alice MAYNELL, *John Ruskin*, Edinburgh 1900; G. M. SCALIGER, *L'Estetica di Ruskin*, Naples 1900; Frederick HARRISON, *John Ruskin*, London 1902; Charlotte BROICHER, *John Ruskin und sein Werk*, 3 vols, Leipzig 1902–1907; Marie von BUNSEN, *John Ruskin. Sein Leben und sein Wirken*, Leipzig 1903; E. T. COOK, *The Life of John Ruskin*, London 1911; E. T. COOK – A. WEDDERBURN, (Eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, London 1903–1912; G. W. KITCHIN, *Ruskin in Oxford and Other Studies*,

John Ruskin (1819–1900) has a central position in thinking about art, even after the extreme fall of his reputation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when most of his arguments were vehemently rejected by the protagonists of ‘Modernism’. Ruskin was often seen only as the promoter of Gothic Revival in architecture, which, while true, was a narrow view in regard to his all-encompassing genius. Gothic Revival in architecture reaches far back into the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England, and before

London 1904; Arthur Christopher BENSON, *Ruskin. A Study in Personality*, London 1911; Annabel WILLIAMS-ELLIS, *The Tragedy of John Ruskin*, London 1928; Henry LADD, *The Victorian Morality of Art. An Analysis of Ruskin's Esthetic*, New York 1932; R. H. WILENSKI, *John Ruskin. An Introduction to Further Study of His Life and Work*, London 1933; J. HOWARD WHITEHOUSE, *Ruskin. The Painter, and His Works at Cambridge*, London 1938; Kenneth CLARK, *Ruskin and Oxford*, Oxford 1947; Derrick LEON, *Ruskin, the Great Victorian*, London 1949; Peter QUENNELL, *John Ruskin. The Portrait of a Prophet*, New York 1949; Joan EVANS, *John Ruskin*, London 1954 (New York 1970); John D. ROSENBERG, *The Darkening Glass A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, New York 1961; Quentin BELL, *Ruskin*, Edinburgh 1963; Robert L. HERBERT, Ed., *The Art Criticism of John Ruskin*, New York 1964; Kenneth CLARK, *Ruskin Today*, New York 1964; George P. LANDOW, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, Princeton 1971; Paul H. WALTON, *The Drawings of John Ruskin*, Oxford 1972; K. O. GARRIGAN, *Ruskin on Architecture. His Thought and Influence*, Madison 1973; Jay FELLOWS, *The Failing Distance. The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin*, Baltimore 1975; R. A. P. HEWISON, *John Ruskin. The Argument of the Eye*, London 1976; Jay FELLOWS, *Ruskin's Maze. Mastery and Madness in His Art*, Princeton 1981; Robert HEWISON, Ed., *New Approach to Ruskin. Thirteen Essays*, London 1981; J. CLEGG, *Ruskin and Venice*, London 1981; John DIXON HUNT, *The Wider Sea. A Life of John Ruskin*, New York 1982; Raymond E. FITCH, *The Poison Sky. Myths and Apocalypse in Ruskin*, Athens, Ohio 1982; Elizabeth HELSINGER, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, Cambridge 1982; W. KEMP, *John Ruskin 1819 – 1900. Leben und Werk*, Munich 1983; J. L. BRADLEY, Ed., *Ruskin. The Critical Heritage*, London 1984; Paul L. SAWYER, *Ruskin's Poetic Argument. The Design of his Major Works*, Ithaca 1985; Frederick KIRCHHOFF, *John Ruskin*, Boston 1984; Harold BLOOM, Ed., *John Ruskin*, New York 1986; Michael W. BROOKS, *John Ruskin on Victorian Architecture*, New Brunswick 1987; Walter KENDRICK, *Witness of Clouds. John Ruskin sees the World, Village Voice Supplement*, June 1988; Dinah BIRCH, *Ruskin's Myths*, Oxford 1988; Sheila EMERSON, *Ruskin. The Genesis of Invention*, Cambridge 1993; S. P. CASTERAS, Ed., *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*, Phoenix 1993; Dinah BIRCH, s. v. Ruskin, *The Dictionary of Art*, vol 27, New York 1996; Dinah BIRCH, *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, Oxford 1999; Tim HILTON, *John Ruskin. The Late Years*, New Haven 2000; David GERVAIS, *Towards Ruskin Through Proust*, *The British Art Journal*, IV/1, Spring 2003, pp. 47–51.

Ruskin it was promoted by A. W. N. Pugin, the architect and writer.<sup>2</sup> For Pugin the revival of Gothic architecture included a religious revival of Medieval Christianity in modern times. It would be too easy to position Ruskin within this concept, as his early and later writings encompassed all the arts and specifically the arts in society which eventually had immense reverberations internationally.

Ruskin's thinking transcended all the earlier borders of aesthetics. His ideas influenced not only Tolstoi, Gandhi, Wilde, Shaw and Proust, but were also responsible for the basic thinking on architecture up to and beyond the theories of the Bauhaus, English socialism, the foundation of the Labour Party and in general the concept of the welfare state, Gandhi, then a young and unknown lawyer in South Africa, wrote after reading Ruskin's "Unto This Last": "I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book."<sup>3</sup>

Ruskin was born in 1819 into a wealthy family which, with a paternal inheritance of 200,000 pounds, liberated him throughout his life from financial necessities and allowed him, with the often patronizing support of his parents, to completely devote himself to the studies of arts and sciences, including geology, botany and mineralogy. Another of his life-long obsession was poetry. His teachers in painting were Copley Fielding and James Duffield Harding, and early on he developed, like Goethe before, a fascinating body of paintings of landscapes, defining his general attitude and veneration of nature. Nature for Ruskin was the guiding term for all his activities: "There is nothing, which I can say to you with greater desire that you should believe ... that you never will love art in case you did not love more, what she is mirroring".<sup>4</sup> For Ruskin the universe was formed according to the laws of beauty, and in its center he saw a divine force of life. It was the individual work in which this thinking culminated, comparable to Winckelmann's conviction in a different time and in a different area.

<sup>2</sup> M. TRAPPES-LOMAX, *Pugin*, London 1932.

<sup>3</sup> George Bernard SHAW, *Ruskin's Politics*, London 1921 (Revised edition 1969); P. D. ANTHONY, *John Ruskin's Labour. A Study of Ruskin's Social Theory*, Cambridge 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Udo KULTERMANN, *The History of Art History*, New York 1993, p. 84 ss. See also: John D. ROSENBERG, The Devil and Mr. Ruskin, *The New York Review*, June 29, 2000.

All of Ruskin's thinking therefore is based on a fundamentally aesthetic concept of nature created by divine forces, and for him it is this nature which provides the general order of the world.

After his studies in the sciences and painting the 24 year old Ruskin anonymously published the first volume of his book "Modern Painters" in 1843 which was devoted to the paintings of William Turner, whose works were part of the Ruskin family collection.<sup>5</sup> Ruskin first met Turner in 1840 in England when the artist, much older than Ruskin, was at the height of his career. A few years later Ruskin also championed, in a letter to the "Times" in 1851, a group of young painters, among them Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Hunt and Millais, known as the Praeraphaelites.<sup>6</sup>

To a large extent it was Ruskin's "Modern Painters" which created a new way of seeing art in general, leading Charlotte Bronte to write: "Hitherto I have only had instincts to guide me ... I feel now as if I had been walking blindfold – this book seems to give me eyes".<sup>7</sup> The first volume of "Modern Painters" of 1843 was later followed by additional volumes in 1843, 1856 and 1860, each with extensive alterations and including observations not only of the painting of Turner, but in addition a wealth of observations about art, mythology and the sciences. Ruskin was intensely rejecting Turner's erotic works after he later found out about them. The center of all his endeavors in the "Modern Painters" remained nature.

Ruskin's dedication to nature did not imply that every imitation of nature would suffice to create great art. It was the incorporation of noble ideas which constituted the basis: "The picture which has the nobler and more numerous ideas, however awkwardly expressed, is a greater and better picture than that which has the less noble and less numerous ideas, however beautifully expressed."<sup>8</sup> It is not the true and veristic mimesis that accounts for the value but ideas which have to be

<sup>5</sup> Dinah BIRCH, *Ruskin on Turner*, London 1990; see also: Ian WARRELL, Exploring the 'dark side'. Ruskin and the Problem of Turner's Erotics, *The British Art Journal*, IV/1, Spring 2003, pp. 5–14.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert L. SUSSMAN, *Fact Into Figure. Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin and the Prae-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Columbus (OH) 1979.

<sup>7</sup> KULTERMANN 1993, cit. n. 4, pp. 84–85.

<sup>8</sup> KULTERMANN 1993, cit. n. 4, pp. 84–85.

transformed from the mind to the canvas. In volume 5 of “Modern Painters” Ruskin again reaffirms this conviction in regard to Turner: “What, for us, his work yet may be, I know not. But let not the real nature of it be misunderstood any more. He is distinctively the painter of the loveliness of nature, with the worm at its root: Rose and cankerworm, – both with his utmost strength; the one never separate from the other. In which his work was the true image of his own mind”.<sup>9</sup>

In the years around 1850 Ruskin turns more and more toward architecture about which he had written before and which had fascinated him in all his travels, mostly to France and Italy. His center of attention became Venice, and in 1851/1852 his book “The Stones of Venice” appeared. Ruskin’s description of St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice remains one of the many literary masterpieces: “... a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered into a long low pyramid of colored light, a treasure-heap, it seems, partly of gold, and partly of opal and mother-of-pearl, hollowed beneath into five great vaulted porches ceiled with fair mosaic, and beset with sculpture of alabaster, clear as amber and delicate as ivory, – sculpture fantasies and involved, of palm leaves and lilies, and grapes and pomegranates, and birds clinging and fluttering among the branches, all twined together into an endless network of buds and plumes; and in the midst of it, the solemn forms of angels, sceptred, and robed to the feet, and leaning to each other across the gates, their figures indistinct among the gleaming and then golden ground through the leaves beside them, interrupted and dim, like the morning light as it faded back among the branches of Eden, when first its gates were angel-guarded long ago.”<sup>10</sup>

Gothic architecture, especially Venetian or Veronese, was in the center of Ruskin’s attention, and Renaissance architecture was radically rejected. When he was in Rome in 1840 he wrote about St. Peter’s: “St. Peter’s I expected to be disappointed in, I was disgusted ...”.<sup>11</sup> Like Victor Hugo earlier in his “Notre Dame des Paris” Ruskin rejected Renaissance as something not in harmony with the organic qualities of building or their ‘natural truth’. In his later years Ruskin came – reluctantly

<sup>9</sup> Dinah BIRCH, *Ruskin on Turner*, London 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Udo KULTERMANN, *Kleine Geschichte der Kunsttheorie*, Darmstadt 1998, pp. 146–147.

<sup>11</sup> KULTERMANN 1998, cit. n. 10, pp. 140–141.

– in his “The Queen of the Air” of 1869 to a new evaluation of Greek Classical architecture.

Ruskin’s attitude towards architecture was not the classicist separation from the other arts. For him a building is constituted by the synthesis of architecture, sculpture and painting. All three disciplines were an unseparable unit, as it was still proclaimed in the first manifesto of the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919 formulated by Walter Gropius and visually defined in the woodcut by Lyonel Feininger. As the Gothic Cathedral represented the three disciplines in their togetherness it was also envisioned as a synthesis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ruskin’s ideal was the basis of this concept as it was for numerous other 20<sup>th</sup> century convictions such as in the thinking of Frank Lloyd Wright who openly named Ruskin as his source.

In “Seven Lamps of Architecture” of 1849 Ruskin went into a comprehensive and exemplary application of his architectural theories defined as the principles of truth, sacrifice, life, power, memory, obedience and beauty, in each devoting his arguments for an autonomous definition of the essentials he saw in architecture “art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man ... that the sight of them may attribute to his mental health, power and pleasure.”<sup>12</sup> Of central significance for him was the term truth which in the new realistic developments of his time gained more and more importance in comparison with the term beauty. Ruskin’s basic goal was to represent the truth in nature: “The term truth designates in regard to art the highest representation, directed either to the spirit or to the senses, of an agreeable fact in nature. Imitation can be related only to something material, but truth is valid for the representation of material objects as of emotions, impressions and thoughts. There is a moral as well a material truth, a truth of impressions as also a truth of form, of thought as of objects; and the truth of impressions is a thousand times more important.”<sup>13</sup>

The term truth also was applied in many of his daily observations and interferences with restorations of old buildings and the new technology, which he rejected: “We may not be able to command good, or beautiful or inventive architecture; but we can command an

<sup>12</sup> John RUSKIN, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London 1849.

<sup>13</sup> RUSKIN 1849, cit. n. 12.

honest architecture: the meagerness of poverty may be pardoned, the sternness of utility respected; but what is there but scorn for the meanness of deception.”<sup>14</sup>

It is a fact that Ruskin also ignored the revolutionary French artists of the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, among them Delacroix, Courbet, Manet and the Impressionists. Ruskin has been often ridiculed for his objection to railways and bridges and other technological monuments of his time, for example he considered the Crystal Palace in London of 1851 by Joseph Paxton a “cucumber nursery”. But this has to be seen in context with his dedicated aim to achieve an honest expression of materials, for example the Museum in Oxford by the architects Deane and Woodward of 1855–1868, which he supported in spite of the fact that iron and glass were the most important elements of the building. His surprisingly early appreciation and creative use of photography is proof that makes Ruskin a pioneer in this field. As early as 1845 he wrote to his father from Padua: “Amongst all the mechanical poison that this terrible nineteenth century has poured upon men, it has given us at any rate one antidote – the Daguerretype”.<sup>15</sup> Respecting the values of this mechanical invention Ruskin compared it positively with his attempts to catch the essence of a building by means of his painterly endeavors: “It is a noble invention, say what they will of it, and anyone who has worked and blundered and stammered as I have for four days, and then sees the thing he has been trying to do so long in vain, done perfectly and faultless in half a minute, won’t abuse it afterwards.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1854 Ruskin founded the Society for Preservation of Historic Buildings which was to safeguard old buildings against the questionable reconstruction according to the taste of the time. In many instances he fought the profitable transformation of Gothic ruins, often personally involved and in opposition to architects and clients. In 1877 he wrote, for example, to the pastor of the Abbey of Dunblane which was scheduled for renovation: “The restoration of the Abbey of Dunblane, one of Scotland’s most charming ruins, I can explain only

<sup>14</sup> RUSKIN 1849, cit. n. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang M. FREITAG, *La servante et la seductrice. Histoire de la photographie de l’art, Histoire de l’histoire de l’art*, (ed. Edouard Pommier), 2, Paris 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang M. FREITAG 1995, cit. n. 15.

as one of the vilest acts of brutality yet committed in Scotland since the Reformation. It would be more tolerable to hear that tracks for a new railway are to be laid though the ruin and the Abbey's stones flung into some nearby brook."<sup>17</sup>

But also this outbreak of genuine anger has to be seen in the context of his general aim to preserve the natural environment which he rigorously defended in a way that anticipates the much later attempts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to respect clean water and air and the natural environment in general.

In 1857 Ruskin published his "The Political Economy of Art" and radically changed his position towards the foundations of art and culture. The political and social reality more and more was taken into consideration, and Ruskin fought an endless battle against the exploitation of workers and artists envisioning an "English Eden" which became one of the foundations of socialist thinking in England. In those years Ruskin called himself – ironically – the 'Don Quixote of Denmark Hill', completely aware of the apparently hopeless reality. Nevertheless, his activities had important reverberations in spite of the fact of numerous temporary incidents of mental ailments which in the last years of his life caused the complete withdrawal from all work Ruskin was appointed Slade Professor of art in Oxford in 1859 and expanded his theories into areas of social and economics, combining his earlier theories with direct correlations to the reality of his time. Work as a category became crucial for his thinking, as parallel in France in the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Ruskin wrote: "The definition of art means: human work organized by human thinking".<sup>18</sup> This expanded vision of what art is had numerous consequences among his contemporaries, as also later in Auguste Rodin's theory of art. Social reform was part of this way of thinking, and gave Ruskin an important place among the revolutionary social reformers such as Leo Tolstoi and Mahatma Gandhi. His teaching in Oxford expanded into work related activities, for example in 1874 he instructed his students, among them Oscar Wilde, Arnold Toynbee and Alfred Milner, to build Hinksey Road. Physical work was seen as a positive replacement of traditional English activities, and athletics transfor-

<sup>17</sup> KULTERMANN 1993, cit. n. 4, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> KULTERMANN 1993, cit. n. 10, pp. 149 ss.



med to reasonable work, promoting Ruskin's life-long ideal of the "happy workman". The event caused much attention, and Henry Acland reported it in "The Times": "Is it so, that the principles on which Mr. Ruskin and these youths are acting insane?"<sup>19</sup>

The impact Ruskin had on politics was enormous, and as Kant had admired throughout his life the achievements of the French Revolution, Ruskin was deeply impressed by the Revolution of the Commune in 1871, which in his views changed the hierarchy of reality according to his ideals, even if he detested the destruction of the Tuileries by the revolutionaries. The political aspirations of Ruskin were later expressed in "Sesame and Lilies" of 1865 and "Unto This Last" of 1862, the latter based on essays already published in "Cornhill Magazine" in 1860. In "Fors Clavigera" of 1871–1884 he directly addressed workers with his theories in articulating his social and political reforms. In his evaluation of war and how wars are financed he came to the conclusion: "... first the people are taxed to prepare armaments, and 'Capitalists' lend further money to government for expenditures in the same field; then the money is spent in this way; and then the people's taxes are increased to pay the interest to the 'Capitalists' ".<sup>20</sup> For Ruskin every war, this financed, was an "unjust" war.

Ruskin's influence was important to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement which expanded from England to Europe and America, where a town in the state of Tennessee was founded and named after Ruskin, trying to bring his economic and political theories as articulated in "Fors Clavigera" into reality.<sup>21</sup> The writer Marcel Proust devoted his early ambitions to follow the concept of Ruskin.<sup>22</sup> The English critic Roger Fry integrated a transformed interpretation of Ruskin with the new developments of the Modern Movement,<sup>23</sup> but predominantly Ruskin's ideas were misunderstood.

<sup>19</sup> G. DE CARLO, *William Morris*, Milan 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey L. SPEAR, *Dreams of an English Eden. Ruskin and His Tradition in Social Criticism*, New York 1984.

<sup>21</sup> DE CARLO 1947, cit. n. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel PROUST, John Ruskin, *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 23, April 1900; Marcel PROUST, *On Reading Ruskin*, 1947.

<sup>23</sup> Graham HOUGH, Ruskin and Roger Fry, *Cambridge Journal*, 1/1, 1947, pp. 14–27.

Only in recent times a reevaluation has taken place, and Ruskin's universal achievements in regard to their enormous influence into many areas of society are rediscovered. Not only that art was seen by him in the context of social and political developments, also the language in which he wrote made it accessible to all classes of society. It was Ruskin's revolutionary ideas articulated in his mastering of language which gave his work international significance and continues to do so, even if most of what he proposed has yet to be realized.

UDK 7.072 : 929 Ruskin J.

### JOHN RUSKIN – UMETNOST IN STRAST DO NARAVE (KORAKI K NOVEMU OVREDNOTENJU)

Članek poskuša na novo ovrednotiti Johna Ruskina in njegov pomen za razmišljanje o umetnosti na začetku 21. stoletja. Za življenja je bil Ruskin preценjen, pozneje pa v smislu omejenih ideologij narobe razumljen. Zato je danes pomembno prepoznati njegov odločilni prispevek k interpretaciji umetnosti v 19. stoletju na splošno, prav tako pa tudi kontekst, v katerega je postavil svoje definicije, upoštevajoč posebej njihovo razvejanost v smislu takratne družbe in političnih dogajanj. Upamo lahko, da obstajajo še drugi vidiki njegove ustvarjalnosti in življenja, ki bi jih lahko in bi jih morali obravnavati v novi luči, posebej v smislu izzivov, ki jih postavlja razvoj dogodkov v zadnjem času.