

John Ruskin and the Savage Gothic

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‘If people say, “Can we build Gothic by covering our buildings with trefoils,” I answer No,— any more than a child can write Latin by copying words at random out of Cicero....’¹

This essay considers John Ruskin’s provocative theories concerning medieval art and architecture as integral to the formative debates concerning ‘primitive’ art² and its relation to modern European society.³ Medieval art was, of course, repeatedly identified as ‘primitive’ from the late eighteenth century onward,⁴ and continued to be an inspiration for primitivising artists as diverse as Paul Gauguin, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Fernand Léger. While African and Oceanic art made a particularly powerful impact in the early years of the twentieth century, they were only the latest in a series of image traditions identified and appropriated as ‘primitive’. Further, the reception of African and Oceanic art was shaped by the earlier debates concerning Europe’s own historical ‘primitives’. Ruskin’s arguments concerning medieval art, like those of many other primitivising artists and theorists, were

¹ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library edition), ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York: George Allen, 1903–12, 39 vols, X: 180. This is an excerpt taken from a letter by Ruskin to his father, 22 February, 1852. Subsequent references to Ruskin will be cited from the collected works and noted in the text.

² Scholarship on primitivism has long since established that the term ‘primitive’ art refers not to any specific arts tradition, but to a European cultural construction.

³ For the purposes of this essay I will use the term ‘medieval’ when discussing Ruskin’s general theories, since he takes examples from Byzantine, Lombard, Romanesque, and Gothic to make his arguments. Ruskin occasionally seems to use the term ‘Gothic’ as a synonym for medieval, but in this essay I will use it when discussing his ‘Nature of Gothic’ essay for clarity’s sake.

⁴ Some of the significant scholarly literature on this phenomenon includes Giovanni Previtali, *La Fortuna dei primitivi dal Vasari ai neoclassici*, Turin: Einaudi, 1964; Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes, A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964; George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism: The Barbu Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978; Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, and Barbara Stafford’s *Symbol and Myth: Humbert de Superville’s Essay on Absolute Signs in Art*, London: Associated University Presses, 1979.

motivated by a reformist zeal concerning the state of modern industrial Europe.⁵ Like most primitivists, he sought to overthrow the hegemony of the classical tradition, and repeatedly contrasted medieval art to a bankrupt classicism. He differed markedly, however, in his ideas concerning the value and uses of the 'savage' Gothic for modern audiences. Considering his writings on medieval art and architecture in light of primitivism expands our insights into Ruskin's contributions as well as the historical phenomenon of primitivism.

Reading the period literature shows not only that archaic and medieval images were frequently identified as 'primitive' expression, but also demonstrates that they remained part of the primitivist vocabulary of European artists well into the twentieth century. It was all too common to intermix so-called 'primitive' styles.⁶ One need only look at Gauguin's compositions to see these stylistic mash-ups.⁷ His primitivising formulary combines medieval *cloisonné*, Italian Gothic painting, Marquesan sculpture, Japanese woodblock prints, Javanese Buddhist temple sculpture, and pre-Columbian reliefs. It is interesting to note that his appropriations from Oceanic arts did not necessarily result in a more radical break from European norms of representation. It would be difficult to point to any painting more stylistically revolutionary in Gauguin's oeuvre than *The Vision after the Sermon* (1888), painted prior to his journey to the South Seas, nor would any of the artist's sculptural productions while in Polynesia push Western boundaries further than his 1889 wood relief, *Soyez amoureuses vous serez heureuses*.

Ruskin has not been directly associated with primitivism, and this is most likely because the formative histories of this modern art movement, beginning with Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (1938), framed it in terms of the appropriation of African and Oceanic art, writing out earlier incarnations of 'primitive' art. Goldwater identified Gauguin's Tahitian idylls as the origin point, and only briefly acknowledged the complex discourse and artistic borrowing prior to Gauguin in an opening chapter titled 'The Preparation'. In the 1984 Museum of

⁵ The relationship between medievalism and primitivism is far too complex to explore here. While they are certainly not one and the same, medievalism clearly overlaps with primitivism. Suffice it to say that our understanding of each is too much simplified by the exclusion of the other. The various incarnations of the medieval revival exist on a continuum between the costume drama of historicism and the stylistic reform of primitivism.

⁶ See Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern Art and Aesthetics*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, which argues that the debates concerning the nature of "primitive," or early expression began with the Enlightenment, and that medieval imagery was part of a continuum of styles that were considered at one time or another to exemplify 'primitive' expression.

⁷ See Ruud Welten's essay, 'Paul Gauguin and the complexity of the primitivist gaze,' in this volume. Welten discusses the 'colonialist gaze' and argues that Gauguin interjects an 'anti-conquest' element into his compositions. For a different take on Gauguin's troubling of the gaze, see Elizabeth Childs, 'Eden's Other: Gauguin and the Ethnographic Grotesque', *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 175-192.

Modern Art exhibition, *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, William Rubin attempted to move the origin point forward by arguing that Pablo Picasso was the first truly primitivising artist. Gauguin drew upon historical and 'court' styles,⁸ according to Rubin, whereas Picasso incorporated the presumably more 'primitive' arts of Africa. Published nearly two decades later, Jack Flam's anthology, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (2003), followed the same historical narrative with Part I titled 'Discovery: 1905-1918'.⁹

This narrow definition presents several significant problems. The most pressing of these is the implicit suggestion that African art is truly 'primitive' in some way that medieval or archaic art is not. If nineteenth-century descriptions of Van Eyck or Giotto as 'primitive' strike twenty-first century observers as misguided, it is no less jarring to read late-twentieth-century accounts of African art as 'primitive'.¹⁰ Both Rubin in 1984 and Flam in 2003 acknowledge that it is problematic to describe African or Oceanic art as 'primitive', but persist in doing so because that was the term used in the modern era. This creates a second problem because it puts a selective history into play, one that dismisses nineteenth-century debates concerning Europe's own historical 'primitives' as erroneous while perpetuating twentieth-century ones because that was the term used by modernist artists. The contradiction inherent in this position is inadvertently expressed by Rubin:

Decades before African or Oceanic sculpture would become an issue for artists, the exotic arts defined as "primitive" by Gauguin's generation were being admired for many qualities that twentieth-century artists would prize in tribal arts....Our contemporary sense of Primitive art, largely synonymous with tribal objects, is a strictly twentieth-century definition.¹¹

Rubin goes on to state that 'it was not until the 1920s that ... non-Western court styles ceased to be called primitive....but this was an inconsistency and should be recognized as such.'¹² Considering the written and visual record of primitivism, it is far easier to reverse this, and to argue that the inconsistency lies with the modernist art-historical attempt to isolate only African and Oceanic arts under the rubric of 'primitive' art.

⁸ William Rubin, 'Introduction', *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, exh. cat., 2 vols, I: 7.

⁹ Jack Flam, ed., with Miriam Deutch, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

¹⁰ And, to turn the lens in the opposite direction, Ruskin quite notoriously stated that in Europe 'pure and precious ancient art exists, for there is none in America, none in Asia, none in Africa' (Works, XVI: 76).

¹¹ Rubin, I: 2.

¹² Rubin, I: 3.

The fundamental point is that neither African nor Gothic imagery is now understood as 'primitive' art. This was a category invented by the Enlightenment to identify the imagery of cultures deemed to exist in an early state of development. Careful review of the plethora of visual traditions identified as 'primitive' from circa 1750 onward reveals that they shared a common set of visual attributes: a rudeness, or naïveté, a profusion of ornament, a tendency toward (what Europeans saw as) grotesque distortions and monstrous forms, and a use of emblematic imagery.¹³ As with the binary oppositions drawn between other aspects of 'civilized' versus 'primitive' peoples, these 'primitive' attributes represented an inversion of academic classicism, with its highly polished facture, accomplished illusionism, emphasis on ideal beauty, and meaning conveyed through dramatic narrative.¹⁴ Therefore it is more accurate to understand 'primitive' art not only as a cultural construct of the Enlightenment, but more specifically as the amalgamation of visual *Urformen* and not the proper name for any actual tradition. As a term, 'primitive' is no more interchangeable for Yoruba twin figures than for a Gothic jamb sculpture. While African and Oceanic arts represented an even more radical departure from European traditions, their appropriation by European artists marked one more step down the road of deliberate regression that was set in motion over one hundred years earlier when artists began to borrow "primitive" elements from archaic Greek, Egyptian, or medieval imagery.

In several respects, Ruskin's representation of the medieval world follows themes common to primitivist sensibilities. His writings exude a profound sense of loss; a belief that timeworn traditions and ways of life are waning, and with them Europe's youth, vitality, and purpose. Coupled with this is a deep anxiety concerning the modern industrial age and a call for a deliberate regression to this medieval site in order to reform and rejuvenate contemporary art and architecture. Interestingly, Ruskin's vision of the medieval artisan incorporates another established trope: that of the noble savage. Quite unlike the image of the primitive as a child, or a brute, the noble savage was a figure heroic and capable, stoic in adversity, and possessing great depth of soul. Most important, the noble savage was close to nature, and he was free.

In the romantic era, it was a commonplace to understand that the noble savage could read nature's alphabet, a capacity lost to modern observers. Ruskin took this idea in a new direction, arguing that the medieval artisan's direct connection with the natural world enabled him to grasp its essence and to express its vital force through his art. This vitality virtually leaps off the page in Ruskin's drawing of the carvings and inlay of a portion of San Michele at Lucca (Figure 1). Modern artists' separation from nature had caused them to objectify it, and as a result, their representations of nature could only slavishly copy its outer forms. Ruskin believed that the medieval artisan studied the natural world as God's own

¹³ This argument is presented more fully in the introduction and chapter one of *The Sleep of Reason*.

¹⁴ *Sleep of Reason*, ch. 3.



Figure 1, *Arch from the façade of San Michele at Lucca*, plate 6 from John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* [1849]. Published in *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library edition), ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York: George Allen, 1903–12. Lithograph, 17.5 x 10.5 cm.

handiwork, but stated that this essential vitality was lost to his contemporaries because ‘you have cut yourselves off voluntarily, presumptuously, insolently, from the whole teaching of your Maker in His universe....’ (16: 289)

Ruskin further argued that medieval craftsmen enjoyed considerable imaginative freedom to express their artistic vision (and here, too, he follows a primitivist tendency to idealize the past) unencumbered by rules of design or aesthetic judgements. In a famous passage comparing two griffins (Figure 2), Ruskin excoriates the ‘very composed griffin’ depicted in an ancient Roman relief, put together ‘by line and rule’ (V: 141), whose only purpose was to be aesthetically pleasing. The maker of the medieval (Lombard) griffin, by contrast, was not subservient to stylistic formulae, and was free to create a creature that seemed to live and breathe while conveying ‘a profound expression of the most passionate symbolism’ (V: 147). While the creation of the medieval artisan was rude and rough,

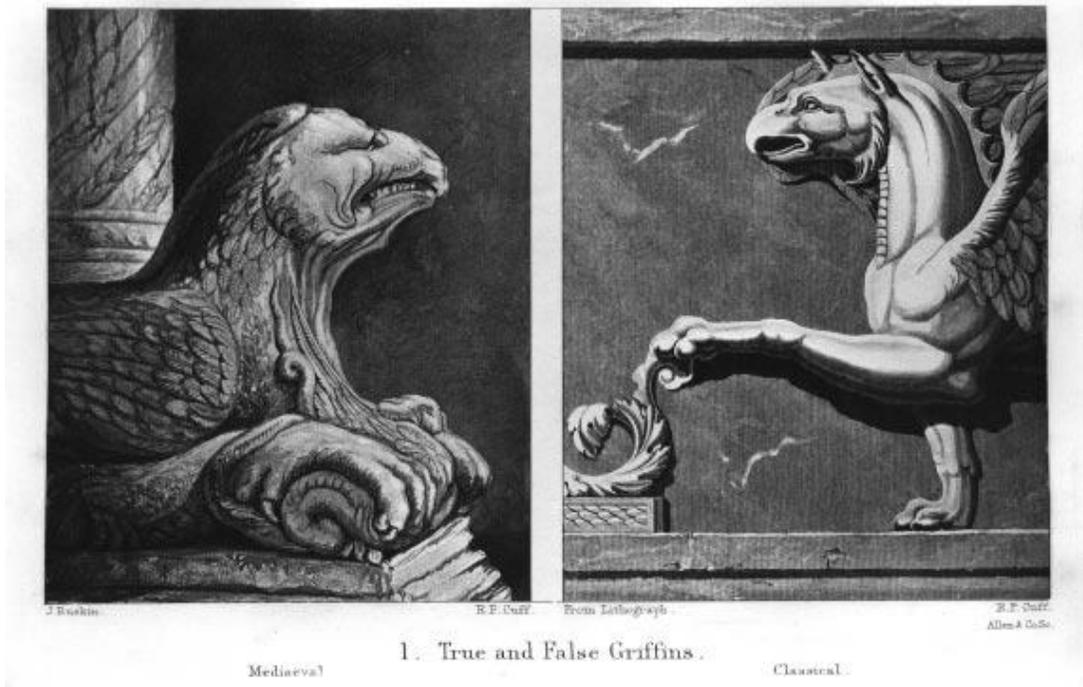


Figure 2, *True and False Griffins*, plate 1 from John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3 [1856]. Published in *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library edition), ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York: George Allen, 1903–12. Lithograph, 12 x 17.5 cm.

it was sincere and deeply felt, traits utterly lacking in the modern world as far as Ruskin was concerned.¹⁵ He admonished his readers:

Go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues...; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children (X: 193–194).

¹⁵ The emphasis on sincerity and naïveté was voiced by Courbet, Champfleury, and others of the French realist movement in this same era. These artists and writers, like Ruskin, also depicted the worker as heroic and as a link to a simpler, more vital era. See Meyer Schapiro's essay, which remains a fundamental source: 'Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté', reprinted in Schapiro's *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York: Braziller, 1978, 47-85.

It is important to underscore that Ruskin is not speaking about artistic license here, or claiming that the medieval stonemason was advancing an individual stylistic statement. His creations were part of a communal effort, drew on common belief, and served a public purpose. Ruskin's understanding was that each worker contributed toward a common goal, but did so according to his own abilities and inspiration. While he contrasts the medieval artisan's expressive freedom to the rule-bound classical artist, Ruskin is even more pointed in opposing it to the nineteenth-century industrial worker who was made to labour as an extension of the machine, without individuality or creative input.

As did other primitivists, Ruskin advocated a return to the arts of the medieval era in order to rejuvenate those of his own industrial age. Ruskin's primitivism differs in significant ways, however, that bear serious consideration. One striking example of his alternative path is that, although he advocated a return to the medieval as a means to move forward, Ruskin quite pointedly rejected copying motifs or stylistic imitation as a means to do so. He did not intend to replace the stylistic straitjacket of classicism with pattern books and faux-gothic design. These exacerbated the problem, simply offering alternate non-classical formulae to follow, put together 'by line and rule'. He writes that:

...pointed arches do not constitute Gothic, nor vaulted roofs, nor flying buttresses, nor grotesque sculptures; but all or some of these things, and many other things with them, when they come together so as to have life. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others. Its external forms are pointed arches, vaulted roofs, etc. And unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic. It is not enough that it has the Form, if it have not also the power and life (10: 182-83).

His ideal of deliberate regression was to reclaim for his contemporaries an eye that was attuned to the natural world, and imaginative freedom. It was the 'mental expression' of the Gothic he urged his contemporaries to embrace, not its outward manifestations.

He indicated as such when he titled the pivotal chapter of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) as 'The Nature of Gothic'. In it there is no emphasis on stylistic motifs, iconography, or aesthetic response. Instead, the essay lays out the 'moral or imaginative elements which composed the inner spirit of the Gothic...' (X: 245) The first and most important inner quality of the Gothic is that it is savage, which Ruskin defines as stern, rude, wild, and rugged. He imagines the medieval stonemason:

let us stand by him, when, with rough strength and hurried stroke, he smites an uncouth animation out of the rocks which he has torn from among the moss of the moorland...with work of an imagination

as wild and wayward as the northern sea; creatures of ungainly shape and rigid limb, but full of wolfish life (X: 187)

Although he contrasts and favors the rugged expressions of the Gothic world to the refined productions of ancient Rome, Ruskin does not – unlike most primitivists – present the savage Gothic strictly as the inverse of classical norms. Gauguin's *Manao tupapau* (*Spirit of the Dead Watches*, 1892) serves as an example of this sort of inversion: here the artist inserts a grotesque, 'primitive' figure into the left side of the tableau. He represents the Tahitian spirit as a dark-skinned and deformed old woman with only a vague resemblance to Polynesian sculpture. It is safe to say that Gauguin conceived this *tupapau* primarily as a systematic visual inversion of classical beauty and civilized reason rather than through a serious engagement with Tahitian or Marquesan representations. By contrast, Ruskin made the groundbreaking assertion that medieval image-making constituted an altogether separate tradition and required a different interpretive framework than that constructed for fine art traditions.

Critical to Ruskin's argument was his emphasis on the artisanal tradition of medieval art. Setting aside aesthetic and stylistic frameworks, he formulated an approach to its imagery in terms of its making and purpose. Ruskin's claims were artistically and socially radical in that he gave precedence to the artistic imagination and manual skill of the worker. In doing so, he set aside the division drawn between craft and fine art, first drawn in the Renaissance, but firmly entrenched in the pedagogy of nineteenth-century art academies. In academic classicism, everything was subservient to the idea; and the 'madness' of a painting or sculpture was erased down to the last brushstroke or chisel mark. The handiwork and physical labour involved was rendered as formulaic as possible, with strictly proscribed rules of design and incessant copying of ancient and Renaissance masterworks. Ruskin's three-volume work, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), seeks to demonstrate that meaning emerges from the materials used and the human labour that measures, fits, and carves them. Ruskin devised a highly original, artisan-like method for his study of Venetian architecture.¹⁶ Not only does the structure of his *Stones of Venice* parallel the building process; Ruskin's hands-on painstaking process of measuring and counting of stones, and making hundreds of careful drawings of archways, sculptures, mouldings, capitals, finials, recreates the process of making the imagery he seeks to understand.¹⁷

¹⁶ See a discussion of Ruskin's artisanal methodology and use of the grotesque in Frances S. Connelly, 'The Stones of Venice: John Ruskin's Grotesque History of Art', in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 156-174.

¹⁷ An excellent place to begin an in-depth study of Ruskin's method would be the well-researched study of Ruskin's methodology and arguments concerning Italian Gothic architecture recently published by Stephen Kite: *Building Ruskin's Italy: Watching Architecture*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012. On the *Stones of Venice*, see Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and*

Like others who championed 'primitive' art, Ruskin focused on the use of ornament and the grotesque, elements that were relegated to minor roles in the European fine arts tradition. He differed, however, by exploring their intention and use within the medieval tradition and, as a result, formulated quite original arguments. Lavish ornamentation was precisely the failing that Renaissance artist and writer Giorgio Vasari held up to scorn when he identified as 'Gothic' the previous architectural style:

We come at last to another sort of work, called German, which both in ornament and in proportion is very different from both the ancient and the modern. Nor is it adopted now by the best architects but is avoided by them as monstrous and barbarous, and lacking everything that can be called order. Nay it should rather be called confusion and disorder.¹⁸

This attitude toward ornament excluded it from study in the fine art academies. It was deemed to be the province of the artisan, since it was seen as requiring no higher learning, only the ability to work a material into a pleasing, repetitive pattern. At the same time, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europeans also came to associate ornament with 'primitive' expression. Voyage accounts, especially regarding Polynesia, praised the ingenious patterns carved onto utilitarian objects. In his influential *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Owen Jones urged his contemporaries to study 'Savage Ornament' which, 'being the result of natural instinct, is necessarily true to its purpose, whilst in much of the ornament of civilised nations...being enfeebled by constant repetition...is often misapplied....'¹⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, scholarly debates ensued concerning ornament as the means to return to the origin of art itself and to understand its evolution. In his influential study (1861-63), Gottfried Semper hypothesised that ornament was the first artistic impulse of all peoples in an early developmental state. Ornament provided a sense of order, and was only later superseded by representational arts.²⁰

Venice, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978; and 'Notes on the Construction of *The Stones of Venice*', in *Studies in Ruskin: Essays in Honor of Van Akin Burd*, ed. R. Rhodes and D. I. Janik, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982, 131-152.

¹⁸ Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique: Being the Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, Prefix to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Louisa S. Macle hose and G. Baldwin Brown, London: J. M. Dent, 1907, 83.

¹⁹ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), London: Studio Editions, 1986, 16.

²⁰ Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Aesthetik*, Munich: Bruckmann Verlag, 1861-63. See a much more extensive discussion of these ornament debates in Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, chapters 4 and 5; E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the*

Voyage accounts and theoretical treatises alike agreed that the extravagance of primitive ornament, however ingenious, marked the limit of representational ability, because the primitive mind lacked the analytical thought required to move beyond surface design to convincing representation.²¹

In 'The Nature of Gothic' Ruskin points to a different sensibility regarding ornament, summed up in the word 'redundance'. In the Gothic world, the 'accumulation of ornament' was the consequence of 'the uncalculating bestowal of the wealth of its labour...'(X: 243). Lavishing decoration on a church façade as a form of adoration, was motivated by 'a magnificent enthusiasm, which feels as if it never could do enough to reach the fulness of its ideal; an unselfishness of sacrifice, which would rather cast fruitless labour before the altar than stand idle in the market...'(X: 244) Ruskin also attributes the love of ornament with the immersion of its makers in the natural world. Contrasting it to the 'stamped regular pattern of classical', Gothic ornament was a living thing: 'in prickly independence, and frosty fortitude, jutting into crockets, and freezing into pinnacles; here starting up into a monster, there germinating into a blossom, anon knitting itself into a branch, alternately thorny, bossy, and bristly, or writhed into every form of nervous entanglement...'(X: 240) Aesthetic judgments are misapplied here. The Gothic artisan's 'rude love of decorative accumulation [is rooted in] a profound sympathy with the fulness and wealth of the material universe...'(X: 244)

'Primitive' imagery, especially sculpture, was also frequently described as grotesque, caricatured, or monstrous by European observers, who typically ascribed these 'deformations' to the irrational fears and superstitions of their makers (a presumption that was repeatedly confirmed in Gauguin's compositions). Ruskin identified the grotesque as a key element of the Gothic, but constructed a completely different context with which to understand its purpose. He attributed the grotesque animation of cathedral surfaces to the exuberant energy and imagination of medieval stonemasons. Taking as his chief example the aforementioned pair of griffins (circa 1139) that support and guard the west portal of the Duomo in Verona, Ruskin also argued that medieval makers relied on 'noble grotesques' to express deep symbolic meanings, vehicles 'through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed...'(V: 134).²² It is through his exposition of these combinatory creatures that Ruskin wrote what is arguably the most succinct and useful definition of the grotesque:

Psychology of Ornament, London: Phaidon Press, 1979, part 1, chapter II; and in Goldwater, *Primitivism*, 15-27.

²¹ For more on the linkage of 'primitive' art with the ornamental, see *Sleep of Reason*, chapter 3.

²² These griffins are thought to be the work of a Lombard sculptor known as Nicholaus, who was responsible for the sculpture programs for the porches of the Duomo and San Zeno in Verona. See Christine Verzár Bornstein, *Portals and Politics in the Early Italian City-State: The Sculpture of Nicholaus in Context*, Parma: Instituto di Storia dell'Arte, 1988.

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself.... the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character (V: 132).

Here Ruskin observes that an emblematic and poetic expression was absolutely fitted to the mysteries that the medieval stonemason sought to convey, and served his intention far better than a more prosaic narrative. Simply put, he argues that the purpose of the medieval grotesque had been misconstrued when viewed through a classical lens, and the spiritual reasons for its centrality to its own image tradition obscured.²³

Arguably the most striking difference in Ruskin's representation of the savage Gothic is that he problematizes the relationship between 'primitive' and modern. His approach runs counter to the illusions of transparency and omniscience that characterize most examples of primitivism. A brief return to Gauguin's *Manao tupapau* casts Ruskin's difference into greater relief. Here the artist presumes to take the viewer directly into a 'primitive' experience. There is no indication of the vast distances in culture, language, belief, and power between Europe and Tahiti that frame this scene. Instead the viewer gazes through a transparent window into the private space of this frightened girl. Gauguin, whose stated purpose for voyaging to Tahiti was to become a savage, nonetheless paints this image for a European audience and acts as an interlocuter between worlds. As such, he purports to have entered into this authentic Tahitian experience and conveyed it to the viewer. Ironically, his claim to authenticity is compromised by the very object it depends upon: the spirit of the dead itself. As noted above, this spirit figure had no basis in Tahitian art and was a fabricated pastiche invented (like other 'pseudo-idols'²⁴ inhabiting such compositions as *Day of the God*, *Whence Come We...*, and *Words of the Devil*) to underscore the savage nature of Polynesia in a manner comprehensible to Gauguin's European audience. In fact, one can argue that this *tupapau* is just the sort of primitivist fabrication that can be accurately labelled as 'primitive art.' It belongs to no actual tradition, but does represent the amalgamation of visual characteristics and cultural tropes that Europeans conceived to be typical of the arts of early peoples.

It is fitting that Gauguin, traditionally considered the starting point of primitivism, should so perfectly exemplify its deep ironies and contradictions. The

²³ His point is well-taken, and has been corroborated in contemporary studies of medieval art and many nonwestern traditions.

²⁴ Upon his arrival, Gauguin found that there was not a strong sculptural tradition in Tahiti. His solution was to begin carving his own 'idols', and also included some of these inventions in his paintings. See Charles Stuckey, 'The First Tahitian Years', in *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, eds. R. Brettell, F. Cachin, et al., Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 1988, 215-216.

term itself, 'modernist primitivism', captures the nature of this artistic oxymoron, where artists claim to go backward as they strive to move forward into the vanguard of modern art. It is useful to consider that irony derives from the Greek *eironeia*, which means to dissemble, or to simulate ignorance. Gauguin dissembles when he claims to live and to create as a savage. Appropriating elements of traditions deemed to be in a state of ignorance and superstition and working in a deliberately flat and unrefined manner is meaningful only in the context of the European fine art world in which Gauguin sought success.

Ruskin's reading of the Gothic as savage, vital, and free was, of course, an idealisation of the past and the stonemason as noble savage a projection of the author. Like all primitivists, Ruskin sought specific values in the past that could serve the present, but he did so by repeatedly acknowledging his position as a modern viewer of the Gothic past. As Hans Robert Jauss would phrase it over a hundred years later: 'distance in time is to be put to use, and not - as historicism would have it - overcome.'²⁵ Ruskin's distinct writing style (sometimes erroneously labelled as travel writing) includes himself, as well as the viewer, in the frame as it were. He invites the reader/viewer to step into gondolas, to walk down narrow streets, to study and compare various fragments, methods of facture, and details of medieval buildings and sculptures. In so doing, he sidesteps the ironic dissembling of artists like Gauguin, whose presence (and power over the young woman - both as a middle-aged man and as a representative of imperial France) is kept decidedly outside the frame. Unlike Gauguin's seemingly universal and transparent view into Polynesian culture, Ruskin constantly reminds readers that they are looking at these distant works from a specific historical vantage-point, and one for which the medieval world is jarringly remote and inscrutable. He does so in passages such as the one where, just as our gondola makes its long-awaited arrival into Venice, the view of the city is blocked by a dark and hulking railway bridge.

Ruskin complicates notions of authenticity as well. As we have seen, Ruskin rejected the imitation of Gothic motifs and facture. It was false to pretend to be a Gothic artisan (or a Polynesian 'savage'). Instead, Ruskin advocated that artisans and designers of his own day grasp the inner motivation and logic of the Gothic from their distinct vantage point in place and time, then to express it as fitting to the present day. Add to this Ruskin's own physical engagement with medieval art and architecture, demonstrating how he is making its history over again from his perspective, and it becomes clear that Ruskin believes that his own historical age is as authentic as any of the past and should forge its own visual language rather than mimicking others. It should be noted that Ruskin's opposition to architectural restoration follows this same logic. Preservation was necessary, but restoration erased the marks of time and the traces of other eras in an attempt to create a transparent window into a seemingly authentic and untouched past.

²⁵ Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, ed. Michael Hays, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 205.



Figure 3, *Decoration by Disks, Ca' Badoari Partecipazzi*, plate 8 from John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* [1851-53]. Published in *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library edition), ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York: George Allen, 1903-12. Chromolithograph, 12 x 19.5 cm.

Ruskin not only insisted on representing that his was a nineteenth-century view of this pre-modern imagery, he also did so in a manner that was deliberately fragmentary and disjunctive. He eschewed the role of omniscient narrator. Ruskin was famously opinionated, and the reader is left with no questions concerning his views of the medieval and what moderns should glean from it. And yet it is never in doubt that one is reading his opinion and, more importantly, the reader is shown how Ruskin's hands-on research and reasoning have brought him to any given judgement. In his drawings and writings, the emphasis is upon partial views, architectural fragments, spolia, carved details and striations of stone (Figure 3). His representation is based on *bricolage*, not a mastering, singular gaze. *Bricolage*, as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, draws on heterogeneity, where 'new worlds [are]...built from the fragments,' where there is a 'continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always the earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of

means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice-versa.²⁶ Through *bricolage*, Ruskin binds past with present, but with seams and irregularities left exposed.

His treatment of Saint Mark's, a building central to Ruskin's study of Venice, serves as an excellent example. He does not introduce the building with general conceptual statements about its stylistic characteristics, structural properties, or historical importance; instead he leads the reader through narrow alleys and past shops and passersby until one catches a glimpse, and then finally encounters the basilica in all its sprawling magnificence. It is important to observe that Ruskin's presentation of Saint Mark's assembles all of these fragments – carved capitals, stacks of watermelons, columns of jasper and porphyry, wine shop, mosaics, homeless children - and lays out his various arguments so that his readers/viewers can make their own judgements. Emblematic of this approach is the centrality of the grotesque to Ruskin's ideas concerning art. As noted above, Ruskin locates the value of the grotesque in its wordless visual immediacy, its ability to conjoin disparate things, and last, but perhaps most important, in its truths that are 'left for the beholder to work out for himself....' No ironic dissembling that claims to represent an authentic and universal 'primitivity'; Ruskin chooses to assemble a vision of a 'primitive' past, and insists that each reader/viewer do the same.

A final significant way in which Ruskin runs counter to the modernist history of primitivism is that his work engages with the medieval past as a means to re-imagine the relationship between maker and public. He writes in terms of workmen and artisans - not artists or geniuses - and extols their labour - not their masterpieces - and their imaginative expression of collective ideals. Ruskin's focus on monumental public works was combined with his repeated emphasis on the social consequences of image-making. Throughout his lifetime he engaged in a number of efforts to put these ideas into direct action in Victorian England. One such effort was that Ruskin taught drawing at the newly-established Working Men's College in London. It is worth noting that Ruskin's chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' was reprinted as an inexpensive pamphlet and distributed to those attending classes at the Working Men's College in London. One of the key figures in this effort, Dr. Furnivall, recalled that: 'I felt that we wanted some printed thing to introduce us to the working men of London.... So I got leave from him and his publisher, Mr. George Smith, to reprint this grand chapter, "On the Nature of Gothic"; and I had to add to it the sub-title, "And Herein of the True Functions of the Workman in Art", to show working men how it touches them.'²⁷ However much

²⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 21.

²⁷ Published in Cook and Wedderburn's Library edition of Ruskin's works as part of the introduction to 2nd volume of *The Stones of Venice*, X: lx. For a fuller discussion of the Working Men's College and Ruskin's involvement, see Timothy Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years, 1819-1859*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 203-06. Ruskin's later writings and lectures turned almost exclusively to social reform, and these works included *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain*, published monthly in pamphlet form from 1871-78 and 1880-84.

Ruskin idealized the medieval world, his primitivist vision was not intended as escapist fantasy. Ruskin's aim was cultural rejuvenation within the public realm, for the arts to be interwoven into the everyday and at all levels of society:

...believe me, all you students who love this mediæval art...Your patriotic associations with it are of no use; your romantic associations with it—either of chivalry or religion—are of no use; they are worse than useless, they are false. Gothic is not an art for knights and nobles; it is an art for the people; it is not an art for churches or sanctuaries; it is an art for houses and homes; it is not an art for England only, but an art for the world: above all, it is not an art of form or tradition only, but an art of vital practice and perpetual renewal (16: 284).

This populist element of Ruskin's savage Gothic is the least evident but perhaps the most fundamental reason that he has not been included in the histories of primitivism. Ruskin's strand of primitivism ruptures and unsettles an art-historical narrative based on the Renaissance-based, fine arts paradigm. It reveals, however, an alternate path taken in the history of primitivism that has been given too little attention, a strand that continued long after Ruskin through the monumental public works of artists like Diego Rivera, Fernand Léger, and more recently, Keith Haring. Rivera monumentalized the workers of Mexico in public frescoes. Combining the planar forms of Piero della Francesca with pre-Columbian art, Rivera painted a visual record of the past of the Mexican people while simultaneously creating a vision for their modern future. Fernand Léger likewise embraced the 'primitive', which (in 1925) he defined as 'the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the primitives, the Romanesque, the Gothic, etc.'²⁸ He held that the Romanesque and early Gothic were the great periods of French art, not the imitative, individualistic, and elitist Renaissance style imported from Italy. Léger observed that 'Our cathedrals, as I have told you, are the result of intelligent and sensitive collaboration. They are the achievement of many people. We must redraw the contract.'²⁹ Like Ruskin, Léger drew a direct link between the medieval artisan and the robust modern workers he portrayed in his own work. The artist forcefully advocated for a more socially-engaged modern art, stating that he was 'convinced that we are approaching a conception of art as comprehensive as those of the greatest epochs of the past: the same tendency to large scale, the same collective effort.'³⁰

²⁸ These insights into Léger's work and his application of "primitive" are those of Robert L. Herbert, 'Léger, the Renaissance, and "Primitivism"', in his collection of essays titled *From Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 143-151.

²⁹ Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, ed. Edward Fry, trans. Alexandra Anderson, New York: Viking Press, 1973, 99.

³⁰ Léger, *Functions*, 8.

John Ruskin's embrace of the savage Gothic was embedded within a comprehensive and complex vision concerning the role of art in the modern world. His artisanal, *bricolage* method deliberately challenged the truth of seamless, presumably transparent views into the 'primitive' past. For Ruskin, the past was made meaningful when openly engaged with the present, and he made it the work of the reader/viewer to do this for themselves. His emphasis on the savage Gothic further challenged received notions about the kinds of subjects and audiences that great works of modern art should engage. Giving a more prominent space to Ruskin's arguments expands the discussion of primitivism beyond stylistic borrowing, incorporates much-needed social and political questions, and provides a more complex texture to our understanding of primitivism in modern Europe.

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