The joy of pretty things: a museum for Sheffield’s workers

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There is a much quoted observation, most probably erroneously ascribed to John Ruskin, that Sheffield is a ‘dirty city in a golden frame’. Ruskin may, or may not have been the author of this statement, but in his association and commentary regarding the city it remains a befitting attribution. Ruskin’s visits to the city were few – probably a mere handful – yet during the 1870s and 80s, his influence was surprisingly widely felt. By 1890, a museum and collection stood firmly as his monument in the city and, as this article will additionally show, his association still has a practical legacy today.

Ruskin’s collection, the St George’s Museum created to display it, and his related efforts at Totley on Sheffield’s outskirts have been the focus of various short studies. The subject has in recent years been revived, with examinations into the work of Ruskin’s Sheffield associates widening the context of these works. The purpose of this article is to re-examine Ruskin’s proposals for the St George’s Museum, and to set them within the framework of the ensuing collection itself. It intends to show how the elements of the collection that have become better known were not necessarily intended as its central pieces and how the collection Ruskin amassed was shaped more by its intended audience than would at first sight appear.

1875: The Sheffield setting

What therefore of this ‘dirty city’? The Sheffield of Ruskin’s day was described by the activist Edward Carpenter to poet Walt Whitman as follows:

Sheffield is finely situated, magnificent hill country all round about, and on the hills for miles and miles (on one side of the town) elegant villa residences – and in the valley below one enduring cloud of smoke, and a pale-faced teeming population, and tall chimneys and ash heaps covered with squalid

1 This quotation has appeared without verified citation since the last decade of the nineteenth century. Other derivatives include ‘ugly picture’, ‘dark picture’ or ‘soiled picture’. The quotation has to a lesser extent been attributed to Henry, 3rd Viscount Palmerston.

children picking them over, and dirty alleys, and courts and houses half roofless, and a river running black though the midst of them.³

Life expectancy was distressingly low; unemployment was high and the poverty of Sheffield’s inhabitants reached the attention of the national press.⁴ Business in the city was flourishing however, a legacy of the metalwork trade for which it was (and still is) justifiably famous.⁵ It had become a city whose economy thrived in the capitalist world that Ruskin vehemently derided in Unto this Last and other such socio-political works of his later career. To use that frequently repeated line ‘THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE’, it was the life – that pale-faced, teeming population of Sheffield workers that Ruskin became most interested in; that, and the surrounding landscape, both of which might stand for the ‘golden frame’ of the initial statement.

People and place brought Ruskin’s only public collection to Sheffield.⁷ In 1871 he had formed what became the Guild of St George in order, in simple terms, to help make Britain a better place to live in and its population happier through means of education, agriculture and craftsmanship.⁸ He wanted to ensure men, not machines were made from workers.⁹ Ruskin had formed the idea of a ‘national

⁴ The London Illustrated News for example published in January 1879 a series of woodcuts entitled ‘Distress in Sheffield’.
⁵ Around this time Sheffield was profiting from the expansion of its heavy steel trades, whilst the skilled work of the cutlery trade was in decline, leading to unemployment. In civic terms, Sheffield was still expanding, becoming a city in 1893. For social and political analysis of Sheffield see Clyde Binfield, Richard Childs, Roger Harper, David Hey, David Martin, Geoffrey Tweedale (eds), The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1993, 3 vols.
⁶ John Ruskin, Unto this Last. Quoted from (as in all cases of Ruskin’s texts in this article) the Library Edition of Ruskin’s works and quoted henceforth as Works of John Ruskin, followed by volume and page number. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), The Works of John Ruskin, London: George Allen / New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903-12, 39 vols. Here, XVII, 105.
⁷ Over his working life, Ruskin gave objects and created collections at numerous educational establishments. The largest collection was given to Ruskin’s Drawing School at Oxford, which he established in 1871. This was not a public collection but was amassed for the sole benefit of his students, so that they ‘might see greater beauties than they had hitherto seen in nature and in art, and thereby gain more pleasure in life’, a sentiment that was echoed in the creation of the Collection of the Guild of St George. For full information regarding the Ruskin’s art collection at Oxford, see The Works of John Ruskin, Volume XXI.
⁸ Ruskin brought the Guild into fruition as a public fund, which he endowed with a gift of £7000 in 1871. He documented his aims and plans for this ‘St George’s Company’ in Fors Clavigera (1871-1883), monthly letters published to ‘the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain’. Its constitution and current name was formalised in 1878. See Works of John Ruskin, XXVII-XXX.
⁹ Paraphrase of the statement in John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice. Works of John Ruskin, X, 192. ‘He was only a machine before, an animated tool … You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both.’
store', that might not only ensure the population were well fed with food but also well fed with beauty; that art should be available to everyone. He proposed museums that should reach everybody, particularly the working population, filled with jewels, books and pictures.\(^\text{10}\)

In 1875 Ruskin’s eye fell on Sheffield for what he hoped would be the first in a chain of such treasure houses. The reasons for selecting Sheffield are varied and due note should be taken particularly of the encouragement and motivation of Ruskin’s associate Henry Swan, resident in Sheffield, and who is particularly connected with Ruskin’s initial choice of city, and indeed with the physical creation of the St George’s Museum.\(^\text{11}\) For the purposes of this article however, it is helpful to consider first Ruskin’s own answer to the question ‘why Sheffield?’ He cited the city’s relative proximity to those places he knew well: the hills and valleys of the Derbyshire Peak District; the medieval architecture of Lincoln, York, Durham and Selby, all theoretically within easy reach. There was also the consideration of what Ruskin called the ‘Old English’ nature of Yorkshire’s citizens – that being in his words the ‘honesty’ and ‘piety’ by which people lived.\(^\text{12}\) This might perhaps be interpreted also as Ruskin’s awareness of the relatively small scale of Sheffield’s population, relative to Britain’s larger cities. In a city that was not of the magnitude of London, Manchester or Birmingham, there was greater possibility that his philosophy and practice would take deeper root. Above all, Ruskin spoke most profoundly about Sheffield’s foremost trade: its metalworking industry and its craftsmen, which shall be addressed in more detail later.

The St George’s Museum: initial plans and collection

Sheffield’s leaders were initially welcoming of the idea of a museum. Especially keen to help was Councillor William Bragge who wrote to Ruskin proposing that he should have a dedicated room in Weston Park Museum, Sheffield’s first civic museum, which was itself about to open.\(^\text{13}\) Ruskin however made it plain that he wanted his museum to be under his own management and entirely reflective of his

\(^{10}\) See particularly Ruskin, Fors Clavigera, Letter 67, 1876. Works of John Ruskin, XXVIII, 640-641.

\(^{11}\) Henry Swan (1825-1889) had been a pupil of Ruskin at the Working Men’s College, London and undertook engraving work for him, published in plates in Modern Painters, Volume III and Laws of Fiesole. He was also a skilled illuminator and copied manuscript illuminations in the British Museum for Ruskin. One of Swan’s professional interests was photography and in 1862 he patented the ‘casket portrait’ which allowed small photographs to appear in three dimensional detail. For more detail on Swan’s life see Mark Frost, The Lost Companions and John Ruskin’s Guild of St George: A Revisionary History, London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014.

\(^{12}\) See Ruskin, General statement explaining the nature and purposes of St. George’s Guild, 1882, in Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 51-52.

\(^{13}\) William Bragge F.S.A. (1823-1884) held the post of Master Cutler in 1870 and was later elected Alderman to the city. During his time in office, Bragge showed particular interest in Sheffield’s free libraries, museum and art school. He donated many objects from his own extensive collections to Sheffield’s Weston Park Museum and other museums nationally.
work and collecting, rather than being part of a larger municipal museum and its own distinct collections:

My ‘museum’ may perhaps be nothing but a two-windowed garret. But it will have in it nothing but what deserves respect in art or admiration in nature. A great museum in the present state of the public mind is simply an exhibition of the possible modes of doing wrong in art, and an accumulation of uselessly multiplied ugliness in misunderstood nature. Our own museum at Oxford is full of distorted skulls, and your Sheffield ironwork department will necessarily contain the most barbarous abortions that human rudeness has ever produced with human fingers … P.S. - I have no doubt the geological department will be well done…

Ruskin’s reply should be seen in the context of his wider museological ideas, in particular his acute abhorrence for ‘abortive or diseased types or states of natural things’, and his belief that such objects had no place in public museums. It also alludes to his pessimistic views on current artistic practice and public taste in painting – ‘vicious, barbarous, or blundering art’ – and perhaps even to those new museums or galleries associated with the ‘South Kensington System’ of the Government Art Schools. These were in essence designed to connect fine art with commercial and industrial design, a method that for Ruskin lacked any concern for the student’s creative spirit. In 1880, Ruskin was to clarify his stance on this, stating that ‘every considerable town ought to have its exemplary collections of woodwork, ironwork, and jewellery’ but insisted that they should be ‘attached to the schools of their various trades’. The public museum or gallery was only for the ‘muse-taught arts’: needlework, writing, pottery, sculpture, architecture and painting.

Councillor Bragge was, not unnaturally, rather affronted by the intensity of Ruskin’s response to his offer and published the letter in the local press. In turn, the press began to complain of the competitiveness and opposition of Ruskin, but in Ruskin’s next response something more of his initial museological intentions is seen:

The impression on the mind of the Sheffield journalist [is that] that museums are to be opened as lively places of entertainment, rivals for public

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15 Ruskin, General statement, 1882, Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 54. Ruskin had a particular dislike of images or objects related to internal anatomy, including skeletons, or disease. Ruskin had two years previously stated that all museums were ‘to manifest to these simple persons the beauty and life of all things and creatures in their perfectness. Not their modes of corruption, disease, or death.’ Ruskin, A Museum or Picture Gallery: Its Functions and its Formation, reprinted in Works of John Ruskin, XXXIV, 251-252.
16 Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 54.
17 Ruskin, A Museum or Picture Gallery. Works of John Ruskin, XXXIV, 256.
18 Ruskin’s letter appeared in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph and Sheffield Independent of September 7, 1875. The previous evening Bragge read out the letter at a public dinner celebrating the opening of Weston Park Museum.
patronage, and that their most proper position is therefore in a public thoroughfare. ... A museum is, be it first observed, primarily, not at all a place of entertainment, but a place of Education. And a museum is, be it secondly observed, not a place for elementary education, but for that of already far-advanced scholars. And it is by no means the same thing as a parish school, or a Sunday school, or a day school, or even – the Brighton Aquarium.¹⁹

Should they have read about it, this scholarly education must have been a somewhat intimidating proposition for the working men whom Ruskin hoped to attract. Nevertheless Ruskin continued that in his eyes, museums should also be places that enabled people to ‘obtain relief from work’ and relief from the temptations of ‘dissipation’; places in which people could ‘devote a certain portion of secluded laborious and reverent life to the attainment of the Divine Wisdom.’²⁰ Ruskin was specific therefore that a museum should not rival either schools or places of entertainment, but instead should preserve an educational appeal that would be both reflective and liberating.

Ruskin, with the proactive assistance of Henry Swan, bought for £640 a house set in its own small grounds in Walkley, then a village suburb some few miles from Sheffield, which was situated atop one of Sheffield’s fairly steep hills. Ruskin celebrated its ‘mountain home’ – the ‘beguiling’, health-giving properties of its cleaner air and its far-reaching views into the neighbouring valleys. (Fig. 1)

Although Ruskin had warned that a museum was not a place of entertainment but of advanced educational practice, if the actual formation and structure of his St George’s Museum is considered it does seem that Ruskin had a better sense of the capacity of his desired audience – those ‘workmen’ – than his initial statement suggests. Therefore, in the usual contradictory nature of his writing Ruskin also stated his aims in much more unassuming and realistic terms. It was to

be ‘such a museum for our artisans as they have not yet dreamt of – not dazzling or overwhelming, but comfortable, useful, and – in such sort as smoke-cumbered skies may admit – beautiful.’ In considering his audience he stated elsewhere that ‘the power of [the] Museum would depend upon its giving pleasure’ and noted the need to be concise with the collection, for he said, ‘what use is [‘super-abundance’] to a man who has only a quarter of an hour to spare in a week?’ Ruskin was certainly not blind to the realities of the working day. As he commented to one of his followers two years later ‘the main difficulty we have to overcome, is not to form plans for a museum, but to find the men leisure to muse.’

Therefore the museum, which was in reality one room of the house, was open twelve hours a day, from nine in the morning until nine at night so that workers could gain entry at a time more expedient to a working day. It was also, unusually for the period, open on a Sunday afternoon by appointment. Although Ruskin attempted a handbook, it was both unfinished and, from what remains, published only in fragments through the catalogues of others, it seems that it was couched in simpler and plainer prose than one might expect from him.

Henry Swan was put in place as the curator. As a working man himself, he was a curator who could address his audience at a level suited to them. He, and quite possibly his wife Emily, who also had considerable presence within the museum, was personally on hand to describe to visitors the works on display. He would guide his visitors through a hands-on experience, giving them minerals to hold, allowing them access to elaborately produced books, early printed texts and illuminated manuscripts that would under usual circumstances be the preserve of a much more prosperous or academic audience. Swan as curator was neither an academic nor an aesthete. He was someone able to reach out, enthuse and inspire those people who might well have felt out of place, even a pariah in a typical

23 Ruskin, *Deucalion. Works of John Ruskin*, XXVI, 204; ‘super-abundance’ is Ruskin’s word from a previous sentence.
24 Ruskin’s comment on the plans of Thomas Coglan Horsfall, cited in *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 81, September 1877. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIX, 215. Inspired by Ruskin’s project, Horsfall was setting up his own museum for workers, the Manchester Art Museum, also known as the Ancoats Museum.
25 Fragmentary notes from Ruskin’s proposed catalogue were published in *Works of John Ruskin*, XXX, 183-280 and more comprehensively in William White, *The Principles of Art as Illustrated in the Ruskin Museum*, London: George Allen, 1895, which also places works from the collection in the context of Ruskin’s wider writings. See *Works of John Ruskin*, XXX, lii-liv. Ruskin also produced an annotated list of works at the St George’s Museum, ‘Contents of Large Sliding Frames’ (1879) reprinted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XXX, 173-76, and a catalogue of the mineral collection, reprinted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVI, 418-456. Two catalogues were published during the period of the St George’s Museum, by Henry Swan, *The St George’s Museum Upper Walkley* (1879-80), and by his son, Howard Swan, *Preliminary Catalogue of the St George’s Museum, Walkley* (1888).
museum or gallery setting. Henry Swan therefore was the key in making the museum accessible and welcoming.26

When Ruskin first wrote of his proposed museum to Swan, he said that he should send ‘books and begin with minerals, of considerable variety and interest … and others of the same kinds which the men may handle and examine at their ease.’27 Over the initial few years of the museum, Ruskin’s letters to Swan suggest that it was indeed minerals that were sent for display, along with, a little later, books, medieval manuscripts and a series of engravings by Albrecht Dürer. These were sent with detailed instructions for their presentation: a highly practical system, designed to promote individual and ‘comfortable’ study, with mounts ‘ten inches square, a comfortable size for many things’, and framed in hardwood. ‘These frames are to slide into portable boxes, containing ten frames each [to be] pulled out by leathern handles. [The boxes may be positioned] on a table at once and studied at leisure while they may be placed conveniently on the walls on shelves like grocer’s tea canisters.’28 The Swans were also instructed to employ a cabinet maker. Their choice was Arthur Hayball, a local ecclesiastical cabinetmaker, who despite Ruskin’s statement that his work should be plain or unadorned, produced, amongst other furniture for the museum, intricately carved bookcases, decorative frames, and a spectacular display case shaped as a prie-dieu (prayer-book desk).29

26 Ruskin must have had some discussion with Swan regarding the ‘men’ of Sheffield and their needs in leisure time. Shortly before Ruskin’s extant letters mention his ideas for a museum, he requested from Swan a ‘supplement on modes of recreation’ and noted to him ‘Men who “mean work,” can always be taught also, the meaning of rest.’ (Unpublished letter from John Ruskin to Henry Swan, 3 July, 1875). Swan’s thoughts must have gone further than intended. Several years later, Ruskin wrote in rebuke: ‘your ideas of playground as connected with museum – Nothing of any sort will ever be allowed there. Where are your wits, my dear fellow – do you fancy a library and Museum can be confused with a skittleground?’(Ruskin to Swan, Letter 19 July, 1879). John Ruskin, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia EL3. R956 MS1. These are a group of 239 unpublished letters from Ruskin to Henry and Emily Swan. They were edited by William Allen (the eldest son of George Allen, Ruskin’s publisher) who provided an introduction to each of the three volumes in honour of the work of Henry Swan. The majority of the letters cover the period 1875-1879 when Ruskin was establishing the St George’s Museum and give details regarding the items Ruskin was sending for the collection and how they were to be displayed. A second subject strand is the St George’s Farm at Totley. My grateful thanks are extended to Dr Mark Frost for a complete typewritten transcription of these letters and Allen’s commentary. A more partial handwritten transcription is available in the library of the Guild of St George held with Museums Sheffield.

27 Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 12 July, 1875. John Ruskin, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
28 Ruskin to Emily Swan, Letter, 13 March, 1876. John Ruskin, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
29 One particular frame is that produced for Charles Fairfax Murray’s The King’s Consent, mentioned later in this article. The cabinet decoration is mentioned in a letter from Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 14 September, 1877. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. In it he states ‘cabinet decoration would be quite inadmissible in or on the Museum, but we don’t want decoration … I think the ornamental carver is capable of much …’
A clearer picture of the displays in the St George’s Museum’s single room was given by the Reverend Thomas W. Holmes, a local cleric, who in 1889 gave a detailed recollection of a visit some years before. (Figs 2 & 3) He was amongst a select group, invited by Henry Swan, to hear Ruskin speak at the museum and Holmes later wrote of ‘the ideal museum that exist[ed] in the study of [his] imagination’:

There they hang – the picture of the ‘Storm at Sea,’ over the fireplace; Mr. Ruskin’s own drawing of the mountains, against the wall opposite the window; the delicately lovely water-colour of Coblenz, by the fireplace, the glorious opals, sapphires, emeralds, amethysts, and agates, in the glass cases; the boxes near the door holding etchings by Dürer and other great masters; the piles of books in the corner of splendid paintings of insects, shells, fishes and birds; the magnificently bound books; the rare specimens of cloisonné enameled vases: and the window itself framing that summer night a bit of scenery that would have delighted Turner.30

30 Thomas Holmes, ‘An Evening with Ruskin at Walkley’ in, The Lamp: a Magazine for Christian Workers and Thinkers, 1 January, 1892, 13–17. Re-published in the Sheffield Independent, 5 January, 1892. Reprinted in Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 309. Holmes writes specifically of The Shipwreck by William Small (1877), Panorama of the Alps from Brieg by John Ruskin (1844) and Coblenz, after J.M.W. Turner by Arthur Severn (1878). The books of ‘insects, shells, fishes’ are bound sets of watercolours by the naturalist Edward Donovan and the cloisonné was contemporary work from Nagoya, Japan, donated by Ruskin’s friend, Henry Willett in 1876. The earliest date for Holmes’ visit would have been early 1878, when first Ruskin lent Coblenz to the St George’s Museum. See Ruskin to Swan, Letter, and 17 January, 1878. John Ruskin, ALSs to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. It was subsequently acquired for the collection in 1881.
Ruskin himself drew that window view to the attention of the son of Queen Victoria, Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, who visited the museum in 1879. To him, Ruskin spoke once again of the museum and its visitors in unassuming terms that were reported in the press:

Drawing his Royal Highness’s attention to the beautiful view from the windows, now lighted up by gleams of sunlight, Mr. Ruskin continued: “I hope always to have pretty things for them to see, and light to read by, and fitting everything close as I do so. And I hope it may be filled by workmen who will join to scientific teaching this study of art and nature.” ... “The power of that Museum would, Mr. Ruskin went on to say, depend upon its giving pleasure”.

Ruskin speaks here specifically of ‘pleasure’ and his thought of ‘pretty things’ for the workers to see. Once again, whilst Ruskin remains attached to the idea of ‘teaching’, there remains a further-reaching ideal in the simple contentment of the visitor.

31 Prince Leopold was in Sheffield principally to open Firth College (now University of Sheffield), but visited both the St George’s Museum and the Mappin Art Collection at Weston Park Museum during his visit. Prince Leopold was close to Ruskin and had attended his lectures at the University of Oxford. For further information see James Dearden, ‘John Ruskin and Prince Leopold’ in *Facets of Ruskin: Some Sesquicentennial Essays*, London and Edinburgh: Charles Skilton Ltd., 1970.
Looking further back though, the picture given by Holmes of magnificent geological specimens and depictions of natural history are also echoed in one of Ruskin’s earliest descriptions of what the museum should be:

I have become responsible, as the Master of the Company, for rent or purchase of a room at Sheffield, in which I propose to place some books and minerals, as the germ of a museum arranged first for workers in iron, and extended into illustration of the natural history of the neighbourhood of Sheffield, and more especially of the geology and flora of Derbyshire.33

Whilst books and minerals indeed became the first items in the museum collection, here Ruskin clearly states that the ‘workers in iron’ are the primary audience. At this point, Ruskin’s other preliminary intentions should be readdressed, looking in more detail at other elements of the collection.

The collection for ‘workers in iron’

As already stated, the local landscape and the proximity of medieval architecture were important to Ruskin in connection with Sheffield, but his views on the working people themselves should also be considered. Ruskin wrote of Sheffield ironwork as the best in the world; that it was always ‘necessary and useful’ to mankind. He wrote of his hope that it was such a product that Britain would never have to import; its manufacture in Sheffield was such that skills elsewhere would never surpass.34 Therefore, what he initially hoped was to cut through the layers of capitalism that he felt had so enslaved the skilled craftsmen of Sheffield and found a new and ‘noble’ ‘School of Metal-work’, built upon ‘principles of art’ that had existed in earlier centuries.35 Ruskin however, became disillusioned with this idea. As the years passed, he stated despondently that without ‘great political changes… no beautiful work could any more be produced by the English operative’.36 No attempt at a new metalwork school was to be made by him in Sheffield.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of Ruskin’s planning and collecting was directed towards the skilled Sheffield artisan. Despite privately admitting to Swan ‘you don’t suppose I came to Sheffield expecting either to find or make artists, there, do you?’,37 Ruskin remained thoughtful to the subjects which might prove useful to the metalworker’s craft. He looked at their work as a form of sculpture and thus into the collection came a number of works of sculptural form. In line with Ruskin’s principles, which generally eschewed figure sculpture unless it was to be considered sensitively in a highly-educated mind, Ruskin’s sculptural collection for Sheffield’s

33 Ruskin, For Clavigera, Letter 56, August 1875. Works of John Ruskin, XXVIII, 395. In an aside, in 1883 Ruskin re-read this, noting the lack of specific Derbyshire natural history in the collection and specified his intention to rectify this omission. Letter to Henry Swan, 19 August, 1883, ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
35 Ruskin, Guild of St George, Master’s Report, 1884, Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 70.
36 As above
37 Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 14 September 1877, ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
workers came in the form of plaster casts of some of his most favoured carved architecture: the capitals and ornaments of the Doge’s palace in Venice, and bosses and foliate shapes from the archivolts of the neighbouring Basilica of San Marco. (Fig. 4) There were also plaster casts taken from the foliate and symbolic forms from the north transept, and north western portals of the cathedral of Rouen. With these he hoped to show the craftsmen the best use of ‘his chisel, and his wits’. As if to highlight the practical nature of these casts, Ruskin also wrote of his plans to exhibit the attempts of local boys and girls to carve foliage from locally found leaves.

One person who sculpted or cast from some leaves – in this case bilberry leaves – was Benjamin Creswick, a knife grinder and regular visitor to the St George’s Museum who went on, through the auspices of Henry Swan and Ruskin to become a professional sculptor of some note, and who won the approbation of William Morris and large scale commissions in London and beyond. Creswick’s leaf carving was then in turn drawn by Frank Randal, a young artist who was, through the teaching and support of Ruskin, to produce over a quarter of the drawings and watercolours that the Collection of the Guild of St George amassed in its first two decades. Amongst these were numerous copies of carvings, many of them foliate, from the medieval wood and stone carving in cities including Amiens, Poitiers and Senlis in France, and Bergamo and Verona in Italy; the precision of these drawings was carefully nurtured, or indeed browbeaten from Randal though a}

38 See Ruskin, General statement, 1882, Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 56. Ruskin also felt that studying was the natural and beneficial precursor to studying fine art, see also the General statement.

39 As early as 1877 Ruskin recognized Creswick’s talent, describing him to Swan as ‘of a quite rare and unusual order’, and a ‘true and pure genius’. Letters, 14 September and 4 October, 1877, ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. For a study of Creswick’s career see Annie Creswick Dawson, Benjamin Creswick, York: The Guild of St George Publications, 2015.
regular correspondence with Ruskin. Randal was only one such artist; further sculptural drawings, and indeed photographs soon followed.

Figure 5 Henry Roderick Newman, The South Door of the Duomo, Florence (framed according to Ruskin’s design), 1881. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 776 x 640mm. Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums Sheffield

The idea of the Guild’s collection as a sculptural study or reference collection, rather in the manner of the Cast courts of the Victoria and Albert Museum, is only a very small part of how the collection could be viewed. Ruskin was not an admirer of copying for copying’s sake. More significantly, there is evidence that Ruskin discussed and dismissed ‘on principle’ an idea of Swan’s to include modelling workshops within the museum complex. Instead, the inclusion of this sculptural work was simply as an exemplar of good workmanship; not necessarily of inspiration or taste, and not so much pure skill, as pure dedication. It was this that Ruskin was trying to teach to the workers of Sheffield. Two works depicting Florentine architecture by the American artist Henry Roderick Newman (1843-1917) also had honoured positions in the museum at Walkley. The Baptistery of San Giovanni, and The South Portal of the Duomo (fig. 5), were placed together, and whilst Ruskin had elsewhere praised the aesthetic design of these buildings, at the


41 Ruskin to Swan, Letter 20 August 1876, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. ‘But remember, I have no intention of confusing museums with workshops or studios. I may establish both. But not in connection with the Museum on principle’.
St George’s Museum they were intended ‘to show how, for 500 years, Italy remained steadfast to what may be, in all its branches, called “art of precision,” doing everything as accurately, finely, and thoroughly as possible’. These two works were placed in such proximity as to be considered a grouping with a Madonna and Child which Ruskin believed to be the work of Andrea del Verrocchio. The painting subsequently became known as the ‘Ruskin Madonna’ and is now in the Scottish National Gallery. It was in all probability Ruskin’s personal highlight of the collection and was to be the only original old master painting in it. Ruskin praised the work as ‘an entirely priceless example of excellent painting, exemplary for all time’. He felt it was particularly appropriate to the metalworkers of Sheffield as Verrocchio was ‘the great Master of Bronzework and of painting’, whose talents bridged the fine and applied arts. When Prince Leopold visited the collection, Ruskin told his royal visitor that it showed everything he wished to say about art through its beauty and dedicated workmanship; it was the product of ‘the utmost toil man could give’.

Ruskin celebrated ‘toil’ or labour; the act of putting one’s utmost energy and spirit into one’s work. But within this labour, he firmly believed in the need for freedom and creativity; for patronage and nurture, not the downtrodden drudgery that came with the capitalist drive for the accumulation of wealth and influence.

The St George’s Museum drawings

Frank Randal (1852-1917), mentioned previously, is an example of one of the young draughtsmen whom Ruskin, through the Guild of St George, sponsored to fill the St George’s Museum between 1877 and the first half of the 1880s; in all over 160 drawings and watercolours by him entered the collection. As well as architectural detail from medieval cities in France and Northern Italy, Randal’s work for the Guild included copies of mosaic and stained glass. He painted cityscape and landscape and copies after the Venetian masters, Titian, Giorgione and Paolo Veronese. Sometimes he painted with another Guild artist, Angelo Alessandri (1854-1931) in Venice and Verona, who, under Ruskin’s commission specialized in copies of Jacopo Tintoretto’s work, alongside architectural studies and copies after Vittore

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44 Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 193.

45 Ruskin to Emily Swan, Letter 11 June, 1877, ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.

Carpaccio. Randal was also put under the guidance of Thomas Matthews Rooke (1842-1942), a Guild artist and assistant of Edward Burne-Jones who was under commission to paint much the same subjects as Randal and who won particular admiration from Ruskin for his French town scenes and ‘divine sympathy with the French character’. 47 From him came, in particular, townscapes and architectural details from Chartres, Laon, Auxerre and other towns in Burgundy, Alpine hamlets and architectural studies in Florence and Venice, and a large group of mosaic copies from the Basilica of San Marco, Venice. All these artists at times worked directly with Ruskin on-site, presumably discussing their subjects and certainly providing comparative scenes, although none of Ruskin’s own drawings of these subjects entered the collection. 48 One artist working separately to Randal, but in much the same vein was William Hackstoun (1855-1921), who badgered drawing lessons from Ruskin and who was sent to draw townscapes in Northern France and copies in watercolour after J.M.W. Turner. 49

Another artist who worked with and for Ruskin from the earliest days of the collection was Charles Fairfax Murray (1849-1919). Like Rooke, Murray had worked in the studio of Edward Burne-Jones before becoming known as an artist in his own right. He was also prominent as a collector, connoisseur and picture-dealer. Murray additionally worked for Ruskin as a copyist and sent him studies after Florentine Masters, Filippo Lippi, Benozzo Gozzoli and Sandro Botticelli, but in particular numerous copies after the Venetian artist, Vittore Carpaccio, including copies from his ‘St Ursula’ cycle (1490-96), details from the stories of Saints George, Tryphonius, and Jerome in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni (1502-1507) and from his altarpiece, Presentation in the Temple (1510). 50 These were made alongside Ruskin’s own work, both artistic and written on the Carpaccio subjects and that of John Wharlton Bunney, who was also working under Ruskin’s commission. Like Rooke and Randal’s works, Murray’s works were generally companions to Ruskin’s publications; a subject discussed later.

First of Murray’s works to arrive in Walkley in January 1877 were copies of the Lippi Madonna and Child and St Ursula and her father (The King’s Consent) (fig. 6), sent with clear instructions to Swan to be mounted, and in the case of the St

47 Ruskin to Thomas Matthews Rooke, Letter, 11 May, 1886, cited in Works of John Ruskin, XXX, lxiii. There are over seventy works by Rooke in the Collection, although several were purchased by the Guild rather than through the auspices of Ruskin.

48 The exception to this is a study of a pier at San Martino, Lucca, which Ruskin worked on alongside his assistant and secretary, William Gershom Collingwood (1854-1932). Several of Collingwood’s scenes at Lucca entered the collection.

49 Images of all works by these artists in the Collection of the Guild of St George appear in the online catalogue of the collection: collections.museums-sheffield.org.uk. Note that the catalogue is incomplete, although all watercolours and drawings collected during or shortly after Ruskin’s lifetime are online. At time of publication around 1300 works of fine and decorative art alongside natural history specimens are available to view.

50 For a fuller analysis of Murray’s work see Paul Tucker, as above or David Elliott, Charles Fairfax Murray: The Unknown Pre-Raphaelite, Lewes: The Book Guild Ltd., 2000.
Ursula copy, to carry the legend ‘So, though long he would not, she persuaded her father’.\(^{51}\) That summer, Ruskin commissioned two copies from the Scuola di San Giorgio, pertaining to the story of St Jerome. They were ordered, Ruskin noted to Swan ‘as an instalment of what is coming; and I must set my mind now on the building of our art gallery as soon as possible.’\(^{52}\)

At this point, 1877 therefore, it seems that a supplementary art gallery – as opposed to a museum of minerals, books and early printing – was already envisaged. Ruskin initially presented the idea to Emily Swan as a ‘small but comfortable gallery’ for sculptural casts, rather than one to house pictures,\(^{53}\) however as the year progressed, Ruskin made the above reference to the ‘art gallery’ and another regarding ‘the gallery’, complaining that he couldn’t set his mind to it as he wished, perhaps raising the possibility that a plans involving both sculpture

\(^{51}\) Ruskin to Swan, 9 January, 1877, *ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887*. In the letter, Ruskin states that this legend is to appear on the mount not, as became the case, that it should be carved into the frame. The legend is quoted from James Reddie Anderson’s account of the *Life of St Ursula* which appears in *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 71, November 1876. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVIII, 74.

\(^{52}\) Ruskin to Swan, Letter 14 July, 1877, *ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887*.

\(^{53}\) Ruskin to Emily Swan, Letter 5 January, 1877, *ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887*. 
and fine art were being considered by Ruskin. Whatever the case, through the late 1870s and 1880s the collected works of the commissioned artists and occasional pieces donated by other students and associates, all reached Henry and Emily Swan who were set to work framing and arranging the drawings on walls and also in sliding picture frames set in cases. The works for the sliding frames were organized into groupings by Ruskin to address such subjects as: ‘Illustrations of Early Religious Italian Art’, Illustrations by Photograph of the Sculpture of Venice in her Commercial Power and Religious Faith’ and ‘Treatment of Foliage in Sculpture’.

The museum as it stood was soon overcrowded. In addition, further works waited at Bewdley, Worcestershire, in the home of George Baker, a Guild Trustee, for such time as they could be assimilated into the collection at Walkley. Others, including John Whariton Bunney’s large-scale Western Façade of the Basilica of San Marco, Venice were at Whitelands College in Roehampton and a shell collection was deposited in Nottingham. The subject of the St George’s Museum, the small scale of its rooms, its ever-expanding collection and Swan’s ambitious hopes for something akin to workshops or an adjoining art school continued to be deliberated and testily argued over amongst Ruskin, the Guild of St George, Henry Swan, various lawyers, trustees and Sheffield councillors throughout the earlier 1880s. However what is clear is that due to lack of funds and certainly Ruskin’s own fluctuating health and commitments – including his absorption with drawing a branch of an apple tree – no great plans, certainly none of Ruskin’s ambitions for a marble-faced temple to art, ever reached more than initial considerations, rough sketches and costings. The practicality of Ruskin’s ideas appeared to be a particular source of delay, for

54 Ruskin to Swan, Letter 11 August, 1877, ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. In his General Statement of 1882, Ruskin’s ideas for a new St George’s Museum remain as a ‘Public Art Gallery’ that is primarily for sculpture and decorative arts (Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 55).
55 A good number of these works were copies of works from European collections. A number were copies made in the National Gallery, London, including Octavia Hill’s Doge Leonardo Lorendan, after Giovanni Bellini and Christiana Herringham’s Detail of the Angel Gabriel, from Andrea del Verrocchio’s Madonna and Child with two Angels. Ruskin made regular recommendations to artists to learn from this kind of copying.
56 See Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 173-176.
57 See generally, Works of John Ruskin, XXX, and ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
58 Ruskin to John Moss (Clerk of Sheffield School Board), Letter 30 October, 1883, reprinted in Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 318, also in the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 9 November, 1883. Ruskin cited a number of reasons including his teaching work, correspondence, and belief that colleagues in the Guild should take responsibility for its work. His mention of his absorption in drawing amongst this list perhaps shows something of his mind-set and belief that drawing was no frivolity.
59 Between 1877 and 1881 it seems that Ruskin and Henry Swan were in consultation with William Doubleday (a Birmingham architect specialising in the neo-gothic style) regarding building work at the museum, however his ideas did not meet with Ruskin’s approval except in the matter of Swan’s domestic requirements. See generally ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
instance the Derbyshire marble he desired for the museum façade would, he was told, deteriorate in the British climate. Conversely, a prosaic red-brick design by Arthur Hayball, the joiner employed by the Swans does not appear in any published discussion. Nonetheless, small extensions were built; one in particular gave enough space for the plaster casts and John Wharlow Bunney’s painting of the Basilica of San Marco to be displayed. but until the end of Ruskin’s public life, the St George’s Museum remained a small enterprise.

The copies after the Renaissance masters and architectural studies are probably the works for which the collection has become most known, but a good number were added not by Ruskin, but by the Guild after Ruskin’s retirement from public life. Ruskin did of course place great importance upon the artistic teaching of these subjects and they have always played an important role in the artistic philosophies of the Museum’s work. They remain significant illustrative examples of the great art and architecture that Ruskin had celebrated throughout his years as a writer on art. Yet, stated simply, many of these watercolours were purely the illustrative product of whatever research and writing Ruskin was carrying out during the period he was amassing the St George’s collection, rather than being specific to his Sheffield audience.

Ruskin was still writing copiously during this period, many of the works relating either loosely or directly to the Collection of the Guild of St George. He intended to produce a library specific to those living on St George’s property, including the Bibliotheca Pastorum, an edited compilation of prescribed works of literature, and a book of Christian history, Our Fathers Have Told Us. It was towards this, incomplete set of volumes that, for instance, Ruskin in the name of the Guild of St George commissioned Randal to make studies in Amiens for the only published volume, The Bible of Amiens. Randal, significantly was Ruskin’s intermediary for the production of Nicolas Kaltenbacher’s photographic set for The Bible of Amiens. In

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60 See Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 314-323 for the on-going discussions regarding the extension. Note the continued connection with local geology in the building’s plan, which Ruskin first mentioned in Fors Clavigera, Letter 88, March 1880, Works of John Ruskin, XXIX, 397. The architect now involved was Edward Robert Robson, who had consulted with Ruskin regarding the inspiration of Florentine marble-faced architecture. Robson was also in correspondence with Ruskin in connection with Ruskin’s proposed St George’s Museum in Bewdley, for which Ruskin cited the Baptistery at Pisa. Designs drawn up for it by another architect, Joseph Southall, shows an even greater parallel with the church of St Nicola, Pisa. Compare Collection of the Guild of St George works CGSG03240 and CGSG00042.

61 See Collection of the Guild of St George, Accession number CGSG01626.

62 This extension opened in late May 1885. The Sheffield Weekly Telegraph described it as ‘a temporary gallery principally occupied by sculpture casts.’ It continued: ‘The gallery, which is on the same limited scale in the matter of its dimensions as the other building … has been decorated and prepared with excellent taste under the direction of the courteous curator, Mr Henry Swan.’ Sheffield Weekly Telegraph, 30 May, 1885.

63 This was a set of photographs illustrating at close-range the sculptural detail on the western façade of Amiens Cathedral, in particular the iconography of its quatrefoil reliefs. It was one of the various photographic sets commissioned by Ruskin that were available to
connection with other proposed chapters, Rooke, Hackstoun and William Collingwood all produced the works in Northern France; Rooke produced further works in Switzerland, and Randal and Alessandri were sent to Italy. Many other of the architectural drawings and mosaics were part of one of Ruskin’s other late schemes, the ‘Memorial Studies’, through which Ruskin hoped the art and architecture of the Basilica of San Marco and other buildings might be recorded before they could be destroyed either through over-zealous restoration or neglect.  

Ruskin did advocate the use of images to his followers in Fors Clavigera. Amongst them were his ‘Lesson Photographs’, images of ‘the work of men doing their best’. They comprised Lippi’s Madonna and Child, The Etruscan Leucothea’ (a sculptural relief), Titian’s Madonna of the Cherries and Velasquez’s Infanta Margarita Teresa as a Child and were available to purchase from William Ward, acting as Ruskin’s agent, and were the subject of analysis across Ruskin’s ‘Letters to the Working Men’. They were available too at the St George’s Museum. Further drawings sent to Sheffield were commissioned in connection to Ruskin’s work in Oxford, such as Murray and Alessandri’s copies after Botticelli and Perugino relating to Ariadne Florentina, lectures Ruskin had delivered several years previously in 1872 and was now amplifying in new texts. The Carpaccio studies by Murray and Bunney were produced connection to Ruskin’s published guides to Venice, including St Mark’s Rest (1877) and his Guide to the principal pictures in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice (1877).

While many of these pictorial subjects also manifest themselves in Fors Clavigera, Ruskin’s letters on the drawings to Swan are in general unhelpful in deciphering his specific intentions for this multitude of works beyond the practical, such as mounting and framing. For instance in December 1877, Ruskin sent Swan word of the imminent arrival of nine works by Charles Fairfax Murray and four by Henry Stacy Marks as a mere list of titles. Titles and an occasional brief comment of admiration are customary, and mentions of interpretative text are very rare. The purchase via his agent (and copyist) William Ward. Ward was a former pupil at the Working Men’s College; a student there at the same time as Henry Swan.

These were the subject of appeals for public subscription in 1879; see Works of John Ruskin, XXX, liv. The editors also point out that Ruskin would have seen his sponsorship of the ‘young artists’ as an important aspect of the work of the Guild in promoting, encouraging and distributing such ‘faithful work’.


There are very distinct parallels between the Collection of the Guild of St George and Ruskin’s teaching collection at Oxford (now assimilated into the collection of the Ashmolean Museum), although Oxford contains many more works by Ruskin himself and might perhaps be described as more sophisticated in its form and content. Ruskin’s work at Oxford and with the Guild of St George roughly coincides in date, and covers much of the same subject matter, both in terms of art and social politics. While many drawings made for Oxford lectures were later sent to Sheffield, other works too, seemingly produced for the Guild (or commissioned from artists paid with Guild money), were sent to Oxford. Overall the Oxford lectures can be used to gain a greater appreciation of Ruskin’s thoughts on the works in the Guild collection through their extended rhetoric and catalogue notes.

Ruskin to Swan, (received) 7 December 1877. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. Marks’ works were bird studies.
only definite instance pertains to the first drawings to enter the collection, Murray’s copies after Carpaccio’s King’s Consent and the Lippi Madonna and Child. For these, Ruskin asked Swan for an ‘enclosed text’ to be made available to visitors. This was presumably Ruskin’s notes, Fra Filippo Lippi and Carpaccio which Swan had printed in his brief guide to the museum of about 1880.68 In 1877 there are also references to extended notes being made regarding Murray’s St Jerome details, which would apparently ‘put people in good humour with them’,69 but the promised ‘proofs’ seem to be caught-up in a hiatus between Murray’s watercolour studies of them being returned to Brantwood for Ruskin’s personal research, and then copied and used in Oxford lectures.70 It is most likely however that the proof would have been The Shrine of the Slaves, the supplement to St Mark’s Rest, published that December.

A later note of 1882 regarding Ruskin’s reshaping of Swan’s catalogue does not provide great clarity into the Museum’s work either, although it divides the collection into the historic copying, the Turner copying and natural history, and suggests that he intended ‘minor hand-pamphlets’ to supplement the interpretation:

I am re-arranging, and partly (in great partly) rewriting your catalogue into three simple ones, of Ancient Art, Modern Art, and Natural History. These main catalogues will include everything, in unalterable numbers – minor hand-pamphlets or lists may be issued for separate cabinets. My first object is to get all our possessions numbered and briefly described.71

Later still, Henry Swan’s son Howard, in his guide to the museum of 1888 tried to make sense of the collections in relation to these themes, by describing ‘What the St. George’s Museum is’:

First: a readily accessible repository of Specimens of the finest work hitherto done, whether in Painting, Illumination, Engraving, Drawing, or Sculpture, etc., and of the finest natural productions in the shape of crystallised Gems and Precious Stones; …
Secondly: a Guide to the Rise and Development of Nations, as evidenced in their art.
Thirdly: A School of Drawing and Painting, with examples and instructions, after the manner of the old Tuscan masters.72

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68 Ruskin to Swan, 9 January, 1877, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. Ruskin notes, Fra Filippo Lippi and Carpaccio, are reprinted in Works of John Ruskin, XXIV, 451-457.
69 Ruskin to Emily Swan, (received) 3 August 1877, ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
70 See particularly Ruskin to Swan, 29 July 1877 and 10 November 1877. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. The copies are untraced unless they are Angelo Alessandrini’s copies of the same subject, made on site in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni.
71 Ruskin to Swan, 25 May 1882. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
The third section is particularly interesting as a reference to *Laws of Fésole*, in which Howard Swan, following Ruskin’s lead, attempted to connect the Collection’s historic and natural history objects. Ruskin wrote *Laws of Fésole* as a handbook of practical art lessons for his envisaged St George’s Schools and this ‘grammar of art’ carries the heading ‘Schools of St George’ as a subtitle in each of its plates, associating it directly to his work with the Guild. Nonetheless, Ruskin addressed the book to young people, students, ‘gentlemen’ and professional artists alike; these groups were not the projected audience of the St George’s Museum, although there is, through its thematic similarity to *The Elements of Drawing*, a clear connection between *Laws of Fésole* and Ruskin’s teachings at the Working Men’s College.

Overall, a pragmatist might perhaps argue that the St George’s Museum was simply a practical repository for a fast-accumulating body of works, many of which ended up being divided or shared, without specific explanation, between the St George’s Museum and Ruskin’s teaching collection at Oxford University. Had Ruskin’s hopes for a series of St George’s Museums come about, the works would undoubtedly have been divided between establishments. Some letters already suggest the collection appears in Ruskin’s mind as something akin an educational lending collection. Certainly by 1886, when Ruskin had grown disillusioned with what he saw as the Sheffield Council’s usurping attitude to the St George’s Museum, he wanted a ‘better place’ for the ‘bulk’ of the works and set his sights on the Guild’s land at Bewdley, Worcestershire. Again this would be a project that did not evolve beyond the preliminary stages.

There is no doubt that Ruskin did in fact commission many of these drawings for, or in the name of the Guild of St George and its collection. Through it they endure as the visual and tangible accompaniment to his commentary in *Fors Clavigera* and other Guild-related texts. Rarely though did Ruskin specifically link the watercolour copies and designs to the working visitors of the St George’s Museum in Sheffield, simply telling Swan the museum ‘needed’ them. In 1880

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73 The idea of St George’s Schools was introduced in *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 8, August 1871. See *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, 143.


75 See for example, Ruskin’s letters to John Moss: ‘hitherto I have considered the Museum as a centre of education, and until they are finally placed, many of the pieces of art belonging to it as lendable.’ Letter, Ruskin to John Moss, 5 July 1882, reprinted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XXX, 315.


77 As stated for example in *ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan*, 1855-1887. See Letter, 28 April 1877, ‘Mr Murray is now in Venice, and available to make copies – but crotchety, and perhaps won’t do duplicates often. He has done another of this [The Martyrdom of St Ursula, after Carpaccio], for Oxford; but I give the best to Sheffield as more needing it.’ Ruskin and Murray were still working in Venice at this point, and both these duplicate works did, in fact, enter the Collection of the Guild of St George. One however was lent to Oxford for a lecture on December 1 1877. *ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan*, 1855-1887. See Letter, 26 November 1877 and *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 555. The lecture likewise stated that Sheffield
Ruskin described his vision of a ‘not colossal … beautiful’ museum, for ‘the elementary study in all branches of history and natural science’. The artworks connected to Ruskin’s writings do fall into Ruskin’s exceptionally wide definition of ‘history’, nevertheless it remains difficult to indicate their specific purpose to a Sheffield or working-class audience other than to continue the theme of great workmanship or to accentuate the creative freedom of the original artists.

This is particularly noticeable when Ruskin reviewed the proposals for a museum extension in 1882. Clearly Ruskin wanted a much expanded museum, devoted to many subjects of interest to him. Should the museum expansion have taken place, it is quite possible that an art gallery would have become a principal part. However it is noticeable that in speaking of the expansion Ruskin included the illustration of sculpture and metalwork primarily and there is a perfunctory tone in his inclusion of fine art:

> The Public Art Gallery would in the proposed building be devoted especially to the illustration of Sculpture, and its associated craftmanships in metal-work, including fine goldsmiths’, and pottery; but such larger pictures as the museum may … become possessed of would be easily arranged so as to make the general effect of the gallery more warm and cheerful.  

What might be taken from this is that sculpture and the illustration of decorative arts are still dominating. It suggests that painting is there simply to make the gallery, ‘warm and cheerful’ – this is to say, a return to those ‘comfortable’ and ‘joyful’ thoughts of the original museum, rather than any large plan that those copies produced by Randal, Alessandri and others, or even such masterpieces as the supposed Verrocchio were at the core of any higher scheme of education in Sheffield. Indeed Ruskin’s catalogue notes for John Wharlton Bunney’s North-West Angle of San Mark’s, Venice, mentions the artist’s use of bright colour over all else, because of its ‘cheerful and refreshing influence’. This idea of comfort is again perhaps emphasised in Hayball’s design for the gallery, with a basement floor given to a student workshop, the principal floor to the library and museum, and the picture gallery, appropriately top-lit, in the eaves, doubling up as a lecture theatre (with an ‘observatory’ for the photographic cabinets in an adjoining room). Without fenestration in the walls, the pictures, apart from being sheltered from natural light, could be hung in a close, colourful and comfortable tapestry.  

When considering Ruskin’s greater career as a critic, it might seem that the object, as the material aspect of the craftsman’s physical toil, and the consequent ‘pure’ or ‘noble’ beauty of their workmanship should conceivably be the essence of

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78 John Ruskin to Edward Tozer (Mayor of Sheffield and former Master Cutler), 29 July 1880. Uncatalogued letter in the Guild of St George papers. Sheffield Archives, MD3499.


81 Collection of the Guild of St George, CGSG01626.
the museum collection – the supposed Verrocchio or Ruskin’s admiration for the in
the sculptural casts is evidence of this – and yet the collection, taken as a whole, is
weighted to something that is quite different to this aspect of fine or high art. That
subject is natural history. It is a subject that features in most of Ruskin’s original
statements on the purposes of the museum and it features as a subject that was, in
Ruskin’s eyes, the most accessible, ‘pleasing’ and immediate to the type of
audiences he hoped would attend his museum. The connection between museum
collections, working people and the appeal of natural history was also one which
Ruskin had pondered for many years before the founding of the St George’s
Museum.

Collections for the working man

The development of the St George’s Museum at Walkley came late in Ruskin’s
career. He had however been considering the idea of museums for ‘working men’
and working-class families for several decades. This initially stemmed from his
work with the Working Men’s College which was in his words to enable the men ‘to
learn what may either be advantageous for them in their work, or to make them
happy after their work’. 82 In March 1860 Ruskin gave evidence to the Public
Institutions Committee of the House of Commons, many statements from which can
well be seen to have made their way into the St George’s Museum. A clear example
is that he specified the need for museums to open in the evenings so that they could
be attended after working hours. More tellingly Ruskin spoke of the need for
museums to display items which were unconnected with the machinery, practice
and output of the labourer’s daily work as he felt that this would not remove the
‘pressure of work on a man’s mind’. 83 He continued:

I would especially recommend that our institutions should be calculated for
the help of persons whose minds are languid with labour. … the labour of a
day in England oppresses a man, and breaks him down, and it is not
refreshment to him to use his mind after that, but it would be refreshment to
him to have anything read to him, or any amusing thing told him, or to have
perfect rest; … what we want is an extension of our art institutions, with
interesting things, teaching a man and amusing him at the same time and the
subjects of the pictures such as they can enjoy. 84

Much of Ruskin’s evidence at the Public Institutions Committee is a diatribe against
the upper class’ oppression of the worker and against the competitive nature of
capitalism. He spoke of the scorn a working-class visitor might feel from the middle

82 John Ruskin, evidence in ‘The Public Institutions Committee’, 20 March 1860, reported in
Works of John Ruskin, XVI, 472-487. Here see Works of John Ruskin, XVI, 474.
83 This is a point Ruskin must later have raised with Swan, ‘There must be no exhibition in
the Museum of Sheffield work as such, and at present none, outside or inside of any modern
ornamental work whatsoever’. Ruskin to Swan, Letter 11 September, 1877, ALsS to Henry and
Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
84 As above Works of John Ruskin, XVI, 475-476.
or upper classes when visiting the National Gallery. He stated that instead, specific collections were required that ‘should be made delightful to the workman’. With reference to his knowledge of those studying at the Working Men’s College, Ruskin identified the subject most ‘delightful’ to workers as natural history, which ‘has an especial tendency to take their minds off their work, which is what I always try to do, not ambitiously, but reposingly’. He continued:

I should like prints of all times, engravings of all times; those would interest [them] with their variety of means and subject; and natural history of three kinds, namely, shells, birds, and plants, ... and men would be led to take an interest in those things wholly for their beauty, and for their separate charm, irrespective of any use that might be made of them in the arts.  

Ruskin finished this section of the enquiry by stating: ‘My wish is, that in every large manufacturing town there should be a perfect collection, at all events of the principal genera of British plants and birds, thoroughly well arranged, and a library associated with it, containing the best illustrative works on the subject’. Fifteen years later therefore, Ruskin almost paraphrased this statement in connection with Sheffield when writing his thought of placing ‘some books and minerals, as the germ of a museum [extending] into illustration of the natural history of the neighbourhood of Sheffield, and more especially of the geology and flora of Derbyshire’.

**Natural history and the Collection of the Guild of St George**

Along with mineralogy, botany and zoology – more specifically ornithology – became during the latter years of Ruskin’s active career the mainstay of the Collection of the Guild of St George. As has already been expressed, mineral specimens had dominated the collection from its very initiation and since the collection has grown to several thousand specimens. Quartzes and agates predominate, as do other colourful and fascinatingly textured minerals: precious stones and metals, fluorites and calcites. Ruskin spoke of ‘splendour’ in displaying them, requesting that Henry Swan place them on purple velvet or in water according to their specific aesthetic needs. Ruskin designed cabinets for them, with simple, understandable devices for learning. One such was that minerals found deep in the Earth’s crust were found in the bottom drawers, whilst those nearer the surface were kept in the upper drawers. These minerals were then to be given to

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85 An interesting comparison is found in a letter to Rosalind Webling, whose sister Ethel, an artist, practiced copying works in the National Gallery: ‘the St. George’s Museum is for working men … and you must not waste Mr. Swan’s time. Go to the National Gallery. That is *your* place for study’. Ruskin to Rosalind Webling, 6 March 1882, Collection of the Guild of St George, CGSG06700.
87 *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 479.
89 Ruskin, *Deucalion. Works of John Ruskin*, XXVI, 204.
artisans to handle as ‘a moral and mineralogical prize’; an incentive towards learning and behaviour. (Fig. 7)

For the most part, the very few of his own watercolours Ruskin added to the museum were of natural history subjects: peacock feathers, oak and cabbage leaves, seaweed (both of which were also to express the treatment of foliage in sculpture) and a work now known as Study of Moss, Fern and Woodsorrel upon a Rocky Riverbank. These studies seem also to echo the themes Ruskin taught at the Working Men’s College or which he used as models in the Elements of Drawing; they are the natural objects accessible to all, from whatever station the observer has in life. They also express Ruskin’s personal excitement, exhilaration and even repose that he personally found in the natural world, which he conferred on the St George’s Museum and its visitors in the following words:

The mountain home of the Museum at Walkley was originally chosen, not to keep the collection out of smoke, but expressly to beguile the artisan out of it. Pictures and books may be guarded in Sheffield as in London; but I wished that the sight of them might be a temptation to a country walk.

91 The peacock feathers and the foliage study on rock were the first watercolours mentioned in the Ruskin/Swan correspondence, sent to the museum in August 1876. See Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 26 August, 1876. A/sS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
92 John Ruskin, Letter to The Times, 6 March, 1883, reprinted in Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 316.
This statement certainly pertains to the Museum itself being a tempting destination, drawing its visitors out of the smoke of the industrial city. Yet by considering Ruskin’s own personal connection with nature too, the statement becomes as much about the indispensable country walk and the wonderful new world the visitor might find amongst nature. Ruskin’s collecting for the museum reflects this.

Echoing the museum’s ‘mountain home’ there are mountainous landscape studies, collected not as examples of art but as natural history. One of them is Ruskin’s own *Panorama of the Alps from above Brieg*, begun in 1844 and re-worked in 1876, especially for the St George’s Museum as a ‘trustworthy witness to the extent of snow on the Breithorn, Fletschhorn, and Montagne de Saas, thirty years ago’. Frank Randal was sent to draw rock, mountain cleavage and cloud above Lake Lecco (a part of Lake Como), and two scenic works documenting the mountainous landscape of New Zealand by Edwyn Frederick Temple were purchased by him. Ruskin in his preparatory catalogue wrote more about these two works than any other work in the collection.

More comprehensively, images of botany, birds and to an extent, zoology came to Sheffield in their thousands. Firstly ‘the best existing … for bird colouring’, François Levaillant’s *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de paradis et des rolliers, suivie de celles des toucans et des barbus*, Volume II. Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums Sheffield

93 In *Deucalion*, Works of John Ruskin, XXVI, 222.

94 Ruskin produced rare, extensive catalogue notes for Temple’s works, describing them ‘not at all as an example of painting as an art… [but] executed with all the artistic skill necessary for [their] own perfection as a scientific record of natural phenomena’. See *Works of John Ruskin*, XXX, 233-238 for full entries. Note that previously Temple’s name has been catalogued incorrectly as ‘J.G.’ and ‘G.J.’ Temple.
celles des toucans et des barbus (1806) (fig. 8) and a ‘classical book on humming birds’ (possibly R. P. Lesson’s Les Trochilidées, ou les Colibris et les Oiseaux-Mouches, 1832). He sent his own annotated copies of Thomas Bewick’s History of British Birds (1804-1809). Other books included William Curtis’ Flora Londinensis and Oeder’s Flora Danica, illustrated botanical works charting local botany in London and Denmark. Botanical drawings by Henry Newman and Charlotte Murray, the Keswick neighbour of Ruskin’s associate James Reddie Anderson were sought. There are almost one hundred superlatively detailed drawings by Edward Donovan, a naturalist whose work was, Ruskin wrote, of ‘inestimable excellence’. Ruskin’s sometime friend Henry Stacy Marks had sent bird illustrations to Ruskin for his Oxford lectures which were now sent on to the St George’s Museum, with attached notes of admiration and praise. There is too, the seven-thousand strong collection of bird illustration that Ruskin bought en masse from the estate of naturalist Thomas Campbell Eyton, containing drawings and prints by the likes of Edward Lear, Jean Jacques Audubon and John Gould. Together these works express the excitement of Ruskin’s prose when writing of the need to teach natural history in schools in remote villages or the children of workers:

I hope some day to see local natural history assume a principal place, so that our peasant children may be taught the nature and uses of the herbs that grow in their meadows, and may take interest in observing and cherishing, rather than in hunting or killing … Draw such and such a flower in outline, with its bell towards you. Draw it with its side towards you. Paint the spots upon it. Draw a duck’s head – her foot. Now a robin’s – a thrush’s – now the spots upon the thrush’s breast.

Ruskin was writing books on mineralogy, botany and ornithology over the exact period he was building the collection of the Guild of St George; the collection acts as their inspiration and their illustration. These natural history ‘grammars’ as he called them – Deucalion (1875-1883), Proserpina (1875-1886) and Love’s Meinie (1873-1881) –

95 Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 2 July, 1876. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887.
96 Ruskin to Susan Beever (a neighbour, much interested in natural history), Letter probably of 1875, quoted in Works of John Ruskin, XXXVII, 164.
97 Ruskin to Swan, Letters, 13 December 1877 and 9 June 1882. ALS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. One of these, Study of Cranes, was added to one of Ruskin’s sets of sliding frames, along with Ruskin’s peacock feather drawings. The case was entitled ‘Illustrations of the construction of the plumage of birds, for decorative beauty only, and without reference to purposes of defence, warmth, or flight’. See Works of John Ruskin, XXX, 176.
99 See Fors Clavigera, Letter 67, July 1876, Works of John Ruskin, XXVIII, 647: ‘I have set myself to write three grammars—of geology, botany, and zoology,—which will contain nothing but indisputable facts in those three branches of proper human learning; and which, if I live a
were written in his capacity as Master of the Guild of St George, and they were, at least in theory, written for the same type of audience as Ruskin hoped for at the St George’s Museum, even though Love’s Meinie, and part of Deucalion was based upon lectures he gave at Oxford. The information they contained was, according to Ruskin, gained solely through close observation, although he commented that he wrote Proserpina after some thorough ‘wandering’ in his mind and through his personal botanic library. Ruskin also made it plain he saw these grammars as an antidote to what he believed to be the vanity of prescribed scientific theory and speculation. Ruskin’s botany made new classifications built upon shape, texture, colour and myth rather than Linnaean taxonomy, a system he considered also in the colour of gemstones and flowers (along with heraldry) in Laws of Fésole. His geology explores the movements of rock form through bread dough and the leaves of a dining table. His ornithology often has a wistful tone that returns to ideas of cherishing over killing nature. Overall, the character of this collection and of Ruskin’s writing regarding it seems to resonate with a sentence from The Eagle’s Nest, written at much the same time as Ruskin was working on St George’s Museum. Whilst it was addressed to the scholars of Oxford University, it might well represent a principal aim of the St George’s Museum: ‘All literature, art, and science are in vain, and worse, if they do not enable you to be glad.’

Ruskin’s audience freed from their toil for a few minutes whilst reaching the museum might never be rich, even comfortable in the monetary sense of wealth, but their walk and the collection, particularly the natural history works were there to help bring about, even for a short time, a different sense of wealth – a wealth in life that might in today’s language be called ‘wellbeing’. This was a wellbeing that was available to George Cryer, a file forger, fourteen-year-old Nora Wright, a scissors burnisher, Blanche Broomhead, aged eighteen, a housemaid and so many others. It is voiced by Ruskin in his plea to commercial Britain: ‘The blue sky above you, and the sweet waters and flowers of the earth beneath; and mysteries and presences, little longer, will embrace as many facts as any ordinary schoolboy or schoolgirl need be taught.’

100 See Proserpina, in Works of John Ruskin, XXV, 216-217.  
101 See for example his comment on Deucalion as: ‘authoritative as far as it reaches, and will stand out like a quartz dyke, as the sandy speculations of modern gossiping geologists get washed away.’ Works of John Ruskin, XXV, 413.  
102 Ruskin’s research and drawing does nevertheless show that he carried out examinations of dead specimens. It also appears that he endorsed plainly-presented taxidermy at the St George’s Museum, though there is no evidence that this took place: ‘let the bird-stuffing be begun at once … There are to be no weeds or decorative stuff’. Ruskin to Swan, Letter, 13 December, 1883. ALsS to Henry and Emily Swan, 1855-1887. Note that Love’s Meinie was also written with his work as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University.  
104 Visitor books for the years1880-1891 exist for St George’s Museum (CGSG03612 – CGSG03617), providing simple details of visitor name and address. Research carried out in connection with these for the most part is unpublished, but has charted to some extent the occupations of visitors. These visitors were selected for publication in a leaflet, Ruskin’s Reach, issued by Ruskin in Sheffield. See ruskininsheffield.com where a PDF is available.
innumerable of living things, – these may yet be your riches; untormenting and divine: serviceable for the life that now is”.105

Aftermath

Figure 9 Extension to the St George’s Museum Walkley, Unknown photographer, probably around 1886. Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums, Sheffield

Ruskin publicly praised Swan’s ‘skilful disposition’ in making ‘the little room [at Walkley] contain more than such an apartment ever before contained, accessible to public curiosity’,106 but he too recognized the disorder of the original room. ‘Everything’, he said of museum collections in general, should have ‘its own place, everything looking its best because it is there, nothing crowded, nothing unnecessary, nothing puzzling’.107 This disorder remained embedded as the St George’s Museum, as one of Ruskin’s last initiatives, was in relative stasis while his involvement with it slowly ebbed from the mid-1880s. Despite Ruskin’s demands that the St George’s Museum should be focussed on his own principles and should never be connected in proximity or practice with a museum that was ‘perhaps essentially different with it in aim and principle’108, the Guild Trustee George Thompson voiced the concern of the Guild in writing: ‘there are a large number of

people visiting Walkley but I fear they don’t get that value from it I should like – from want of a systematised method of instruction.’

The Sheffield press too were expressing confusion over the confined space and difficulties in accessing the St George’s Museum. They used phrases such as ‘cribbed, cabined and confined’ in connection with the objects, and wrote of restrictions of ‘the most irritating nature’.

Once Ruskin’s involvement waned, the re-establishment of the museum and its collection moved swiftly forward. Sheffield Council offered new premises which gave the option of expansion and the collection was immediately leased to them for twenty years. Henry Swan died in 1899 and William White, a member of the new Museums Association was hired in his place. The St George’s Museum closed and in April 1890 re-opened in Meersbrook Hall, set in city parkland much nearer the centre of Sheffield, and soon to be joined to the tram route. It opened as the ‘Ruskin Museum’ and in its rebranding lost its link to the original aims of the St George’s Museum for artisans and became instead an ordered and themed gallery, illustrating the interests of the celebrity that was John Ruskin. Children were no longer admitted unless part of a school group. Uniformed warders were hired from the ranks of retired servicemen and policemen, and William White the curator had a reputation as an elitist, although his writing shows a deep knowledge of the massed writings of Ruskin. For some years it continued to be well attended and yet it must have taken some effort to revive those ideas of wellbeing – or indeed the creative inspiration that must have come from the haphazard confusion of the old St George’s Museum.

Today, 130 years since the closure of the St George’s Museum, the ideals of Ruskin’s museology have seen something of a resurgence. ‘Wellbeing’ is a theme that resonates deeply, and Ruskin’s idea that a museum might help alleviate the challenges that could be found in daily life – to nurture men rather than machines – is as current today as it was then. Now it might not seem so forward looking. Then it was a place that Ruskin hoped would connect people with beauty through art and nature, and by means of this finding a happier and healthier existence:

The museum is only for what is eternally right, and well done, according to divine law and human skill. The least things are to be there – and the greatest – but all good with the goodness that makes a child cheerful and an old man calm; the simple should go there to learn, and the wise to remember.

In modern parallel, funding may now be sought by museums and galleries assisting with the NHS’s ‘Social Prescriptions’ scheme, which looks at welfare in its broadest sense and aims to connect patients with cultural, social and environmental sites and institutions. In Sheffield, the Guild of St George has looked for ways to

110 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 14 April, 1890.
reconnect Sheffield communities with the collection – and especially Ruskin’s ideas – outside the museum setting. For the past five years Ruskin in Sheffield, a programme of organized and self-evolving events, from performances to a pop-up museum, and which involves people of all ages has rolled out from Walkley and other areas of Sheffield connecting communities with creative practice. It presents in a way that takes from Ruskin’s thought rather than being of Ruskinian practice, and through its programme, the collection is used to speak its message of wellbeing alongside celebrations of its heritage.

The Collection of the Guild of St George is now displayed in the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield’s city centre. It is under the care of Museums Sheffield, the charity that cares for and displays Sheffield’s collections of art, human history and science at the Graves Gallery, Millennium Gallery and Weston Park Museum. In a literal sense, Ruskin’s demand that his museum should not be in a ‘public thoroughfare’ (or indeed linked to Sheffield’s own collections) has not been fulfilled. The Millennium Gallery is in its very architecture a public thoroughfare. Yet the collection is displayed with Ruskin’s ideals, his interests and his original intentions in mind; it is a gallery designed to find a balance between learning, reflection and creativity. Its displays inspire adults, children, workers and artists alike, and with its central location it receives visitor numbers of upwards of 90,000 people a year. Displays of the Ruskin Collection, in the permanent gallery are designed to be calm and accessible, as summed up by one local visitor and a former metalworker: ‘I’m comfortable in here; it’s a place for the likes of me’. 112 In addition to this, the team at Museums Sheffield have staged numerous Ruskin-inspired exhibitions, delivered workshops using the collection to schoolchildren, created engaging public programmes and commissioned numerous artists to create new work inspired by Ruskin’s work.

Recently, a wall painting, signed with the Extinction Rebellion badge has appeared on a wall in Walkley. It proclaims again Ruskin’s words, ‘THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE’. Ruskin hoped that in Sheffield, workers might find a new wealth and a new joy. In its purest sense, the St George’s collection exemplified Ruskin’s own words on the ‘right function of every museum’: to show ‘what is lovely in the life of Nature, and heroic in the life of Men.’ 113 His collection continues to educate, inspire and delight.

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112 Verbal comment, 2014, un-named visitor to Louise Pullen.
113 As above, Works of John Ruskin, XXXIV, 251.