

Introduction:

'Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change': a series of articles arising from a conference held at the National Gallery, London, 20–21 September 2019

Susanna Avery-Quash, The National Gallery
Janet Barnes, Guild of St George

The bicentenary of the birth of the eminent Victorian writer and social reformer John Ruskin (1819–1900) fell on 8 February 2019. To mark this landmark year numerous bodies across the UK, North America and around the world organized public exhibitions, displays, conferences and other activities aiming to draw attention to Ruskin's life, work and legacy.

In the UK, Ruskin's 200th anniversary began with a two-venue exhibition: *John Ruskin: The Power of Seeing*, which opened at Two Temple Place in London in January,¹ while a version of it, *John Ruskin: Art and Wonder*, was hosted at the Millennium Galleries in Sheffield from May.² Organized by the Guild of St George in partnership with Museums Sheffield and the Bulldog Trust, these related exhibitions included the largest ever number of loans from the Guild of St George's Ruskin Collection at Sheffield. A total of 190 paintings, drawings, daguerreotypes, items of metal work and plaster casts were brought together to illustrate how Ruskin's attitude to natural and artistic beauty shaped his radical views on culture and society. The second show was the culmination of the wider community programme 'Ruskin in Sheffield'³ – a Guild of St George project which ran from 2014 to 2019 and was designed to enrich the city's understanding of Ruskin's importance to its history with events and activities that drew inspiration from his ideas and museum collection. Several other cities across the UK, in association with cultural and funding partners, organized richly varied and well-attended programmes of activity. The 'Ruskin in Wyre'⁴ in Worcestershire, for instance, hosted events and an exhibition on Ruskin Land; while part of the 'Ruskin in Manchester'⁵ festival included an exhibition of entries submitted to 'The John Ruskin Prize',⁶ run by The Big Draw, in response to the 2019 theme of 'Agent of Change'.

¹ <http://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/whats-on/news/announcing-the-bicentenary-exhibition-john-ruskin-the-power-of-seeing>. The exhibition ran from 26 January to 22 April 2019.

² <https://www.museums-sheffield.org.uk/museums/millennium-gallery/exhibitions/john-ruskin-art-and-wonder>. The exhibition ran from 29 May to 15 September 2019.

³ <http://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/projects/ruskin-in-sheffield>

⁴ <http://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/projects/ruskin-in-wyre>

⁵ <https://www.ruskinprize.co.uk/manchester>

⁶ <http://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/projects/partnerships/the-john-ruskin-prize>

Many of these events focused on those aspects of Ruskin's work as writer, social reformer, philanthropist and ecologist which expressed his concern over questions relating to the environment and to the poor working conditions of his day, especially in the ever-expanding, newly-industrialized and highly polluted cities of Sheffield and Manchester. His timely interventions stimulated others to address such issues, leading to much positive change during his lifetime.

Another area which preoccupied Ruskin deeply during his working life was the power of vision: the good that he believed could arise, both for individuals and society at large, from well-trained and properly-directed visual perception, from an ability to draw and from the opportunity to enjoy and learn from beautiful, publicly-accessible and well-maintained works of art, whether paintings, drawings, engravings, sculpture, architecture or any of the products of decorative art. As he famously put it in *Modern Painters*, 'the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way ... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one'.⁷ It was these related topics that were addressed in 'Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change', a two-day conference held at the National Gallery on 20–21 September 2019 and organized by Susanna Avery-Quash (National Gallery) in partnership with Janet Barnes, a former Director of the Guild of St. George, with support from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. The conference formed part of a collaboration with The Ruskin Foundation, whose London Lecture 2019, in association with Sovereign Films, was given by Professor Robert Hewison (Chair, 'Ruskin To-Day'), at the National Gallery on the evening of its first day.

The recent upsurge of interest in Ruskin has led to much revisionist scholarship. The conference drew and expanded on this work by looking specifically at Ruskin's interactions with, influence on and legacy for museums and art education. Over the two days we heard seventeen presentations structured around four themes: 'Art Education and Museums', 'British Art and Photography', 'Language, Writings and Sources', and 'Ruskin Today'.⁸ In addition to the power point presentations in the National Gallery Sainsbury Wing Theatre, lunchtime visits were arranged for the delegates on both days to see Ruskin-related archival material in the National Gallery Research Centre and paintings in the Gallery's permanent collection on which Ruskin commented.

In their papers speakers presented new research concerning Ruskin's interactions with and influence on the collecting, display and cataloguing of art in

⁷ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* III (1856), in 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, V, 333.

⁸ Details of the programme may be found at:

https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/media/30615/ruskin-timetable_2019.pdf. You can watch five films – <https://www.guildofstgeorge.org.uk/resources/media/video-gallery> – hosted on the website of the Guild of St George: the 2019 Ruskin Foundation London Lecture, in association with Sovereign Films, given by Robert Hewison at the National Gallery, on Friday 20 September 2019, as well as the four talks on the theme of 'Ruskin Today', presented as the final session, on Saturday 21 September 2019, of the two-day conference 'Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change'.

public and private collections in Britain (London and the regions) and abroad (in Venice), as well as on Ruskin's ideas concerning art education and how best to teach drawing to children and adults in Victorian Britain. The conference looked in particular at the extent to which Ruskin was working alongside or outside the British art establishment as well as at the contributions he made to the emerging discipline of art history, including canon formation, formal criticism and other genres such as exhibition guides. In addition, some speakers drew attention to current initiatives seeking to embody and enact Ruskin's ideas. A further set of crucial issues was raised by speakers addressing the question of Ruskin's ongoing legacy, especially what his writings can continue to say about artists, art curating and art in relation to social, environmental and economic questions. They asked what his ideas can teach future generations of museum goers, artists, curators and funding bodies.

Many of the conference speakers were also key players in other events taking place during the bicentenary year. For instance, Dinah Birch, CBE, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Cultural Engagement and Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool, who gave the keynote address at the start of conference, had delivered the 2019 F.W. Bateson Memorial Lecture at Corpus Christi College, Oxford on Ruskin,⁹ while three other speakers were involved with Ruskin exhibitions: Louise Pullen, who talked about Ruskin's museum at Sheffield, curated the Ruskin exhibition at the Two Temple Place, London; Suzanne Fagence Cooper, whose conference paper presented an overview of how Ruskin studies have evolved over the last half century, curated the exhibition *Turner, Ruskin and the Storm Cloud of the Modern World* at York Art Gallery and Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal;¹⁰ and Alistair Hudson, director of the Manchester Art Gallery and The Whitworth, who reflected on his current activities at Manchester as workings out of Ruskin's social philosophy, curated *Joy For Ever: How to Use Art to Change the World and its Price in the Market*,¹¹ an exhibition which considered how art can be used to bring about social change. Furthermore, John Holmes from the University of Birmingham talked about Ruskin's involvement with the creation of the Museum of Natural History at Oxford, an institution which hosted a symposium in 2019 where experts on Ruskin, Victorian culture and the environment discussed his views on science, natural history and the impact of industrialization on people's health and the world around them.¹²

Several books by conference speakers were published in the run up to Ruskin's 200th anniversary: John Holmes, *Ruskin, The Pre-Raphaelites and the Oxford Museum* (York: Guild of St George, 2018); Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and his Contemporaries* (London: Pallas Athene, 2018); Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *To See*

⁹ <https://www.ccc.ox.ac.uk/Special-Lectures/>. Her title was 'Utopian Topics: Ruskin and Oxford'.

¹⁰ <https://www.yorkartgallery.org.uk/exhibition/ruskin-turner-and-the-storm-cloud-watercolours-and-drawings/>

¹¹ <https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/upcomingexhibitions/joyforever/>

¹² <https://oumnh.ox.ac.uk/event/john-ruskin-anniversary-symposium>

Clearly: Why Ruskin Matters (London: Quercus, 2019); Andrew Hill, *Ruskinland: How John Ruskin Shapes our World* (London: Pallas Athene, 2019); and Louise Pullen, *John Ruskin: The Power of Seeing* (London: Two Temple Place, 2019).

It was important to the National Gallery that the research generated by the conference should form a long-term legacy. We are therefore delighted that, through the help of Professor Richard Woodfield, the editor of *The Journal of Art Historiography*, we are now able to present some of the fruits arising from the conference in this Spring 2020 on-line issue. Not all the papers given at the conference are included here, for a variety of reasons, largely because the substance of the research had been promised for publication elsewhere. We also wanted to fill some gaps which, due to time constraints, we were unable to fit into the conference programme. Included here, therefore, are a few additional articles that we commissioned after the conference to expand on the theme of Ruskin's association with UK museums and art education. Happily, many of the articles cross-relate in content, giving rise to a particularly rich and complex picture of Ruskin's importance for reflection on the purpose and place of museums and art education both in his own time and in our society today.

The degree of interest stimulated by all the exhibitions, events and publications of the bicentennial year is a sure sign that Ruskin's writings and ideas will continue to attract attention. Ruskin To-day, an informal organization which exists to celebrate his life and work, brings together notice of activities of the many societies and individuals who, from different points of view, share an interest in this writer's varied activities and achievements.¹³

Our sincere and heartfelt thanks go to the thirteen contributors to the section dedicated to Ruskin in this Spring 2020 issue of *The Journal of Art Historiography* for their hard work to transform their conference talks into longer, publishable articles; to Richard Woodfield, the journal's editor, for his unstinting support and encouragement and for seeing the papers through the publication process in a timely fashion; and to Paul Tucker, who generously agreed to our request to come on board as our co-editor for this publication and whose unrivalled knowledge of Ruskin and meticulous attention to detail have been invaluable. The contributors and editors have helped to make this publication a lasting legacy of Ruskin's influence on the artistic life of the nation.

Susanna Avery-Quash is Senior Research Curator (History of Collecting) at the National Gallery, London. She is in charge of activities associated with the Gallery's research strands, 'Buying, Collecting and Display' and 'Art and Religion', including post-graduate teaching, organising public conferences and editing associated books. She organised with Janet Barnes the conference 'Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change' at the National Gallery (20–21 September 2019); it is from that event that the articles on Ruskin presented in this issue of *The Journal of*

¹³ <https://www.ruskinto-day.org.uk>

Art Historiography have been developed and for which she has acted as a guest editor.

susanna.avery-quash@ng-london.org.uk

Janet Barnes, CBE, was the curator of the Guild of St George Ruskin Collection when it was returned to Sheffield in the 1980s and was responsible for opening the award winning Ruskin Gallery and Ruskin Craft Gallery. She organised the exhibition *Ruskin and Tuscany* which toured to Sheffield, London and Lucca in 1993. She wrote *Ruskin in Sheffield*, published by Sheffield Arts Department in 1985, which has reprinted several times the latest edition by the Guild of St George in 2018. She was the co-organiser with Susanna Avery-Quash the conference 'Art for the Nation: John Ruskin, Art Education and Social Change' at the National Gallery (20–21 September 2019) and a co-editor of this issue of *The Journal of Art Historiography*.

jabarnes27@icloud.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)