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“MULTIPLE ESSENCES”

1
Traceries from Caen,
Bayeux, Rouen, Beauvais;
drawing by J Ruskin from
*The Seven Lamps of
Architecture*

2
Pierced ornaments from
Lisieux, Bayeux, Verona
and Padua; drawing by J
Ruskin from *The Seven
Lamps of Architecture*

3
Color and form in a
drawing of the Ducal
Palace, Venice, by J Ruskin

4
Wayside herbage (capital
from the Oxford Science
Museum, Oxford,
England); capital by the
O'Shea Brothers, Benjamin
Woodward, architect

John Ruskin's mid-nineteenth-century theory of architecture addresses a major late-twentieth-century problem: how to provide a building with the cultural content of the region and people in which it stands. Are there ways — short of resorting to historical types — to incorporate specific memorial, narrative, technologic, and geographic themes while observing a visual coherence and a reasonable measure of modern convention? This is the major question Ruskin addressed in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Each “Lamp” dealt with a different criterion by which to achieve the desired historicity which, in Ruskin's view, conferred “beauty” on a building.

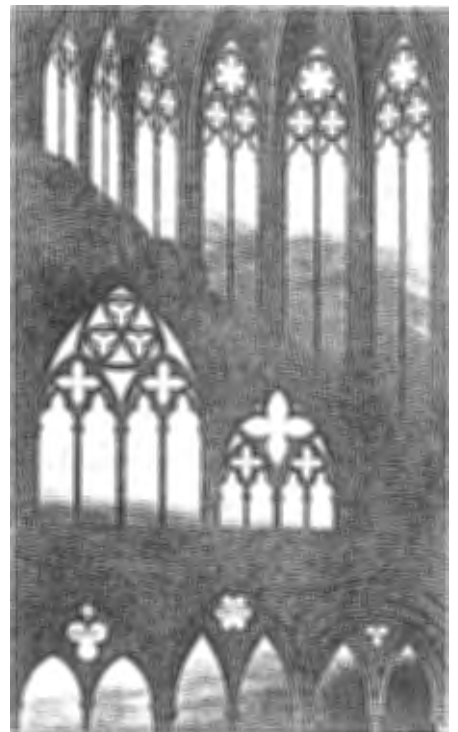
Although a quick reading of Ruskin suggests that his imagery was rooted in a neomedieval setting, a more careful study reveals that he sought basic principles of design that could belong to the age of industrialized architecture. His architectural writings were contemporary with the Great Exposition of 1851, an event dramatically illustrating the gap in design and modern culture that appeared to be unleashing unnatural forces on a vulnerable landscape.

Ruskin believed that the visual content of architecture should inform culture, refine sensibilities, and forever be impressed with the virtues of Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience. He was unwilling to abdicate those values to the exigencies of mechanization. Detecting in geometric forms an alliance with mechanization, he assigned to them the status of servant, not master, to the visible properties of architecture. Thus, though Ruskin's image of architectural form may be characterized as being more like a tapestry than a set of geometric shapes, it is nevertheless a tapestry that is vividly three-dimensional and formal in manner.

Ruskin's thesis recognizes that a building is a very complex organism indeed. He savored that complexity, seeing a world of opportunity in the richest medium of all the arts — a medium too rich to become specialized and a medium sufficiently rich to signify all the content illuminated by the “seven lamps.” By identifying the many parts, places, and processes of building that could be treated differently, he proposed a grammar for multiple representation, and he specified moments — in the form of buildings — which have the greatest potential of bearing multiple representations simultaneously. Ned Kaufman described those as moments in which “essences are blended”;¹ while this description is brilliant, it must be noted that Ruskin was determined to prevent essentially different meanings from becoming individually illegible or homogenized in such a merger. He did not promote any one of the lamps to the rank of supreme authority over another.

It is also noteworthy that John Ruskin was a dedicated and fine draftsman and watercolorist, as well as a scholar. It is evident in his pictures that he understood the mechanics of a finely balanced figure-ground in which two or more shapes could exchange visual dominance (fig. 1). I believe that Ruskin's life as an artist informed his thought more than is generally allowed; to comprehend his vision, we must (to use modern parlance) use both sides of the brain equally.

The following paragraphs summarize four of Ruskin's approaches to impressing form “with multiple meanings.”



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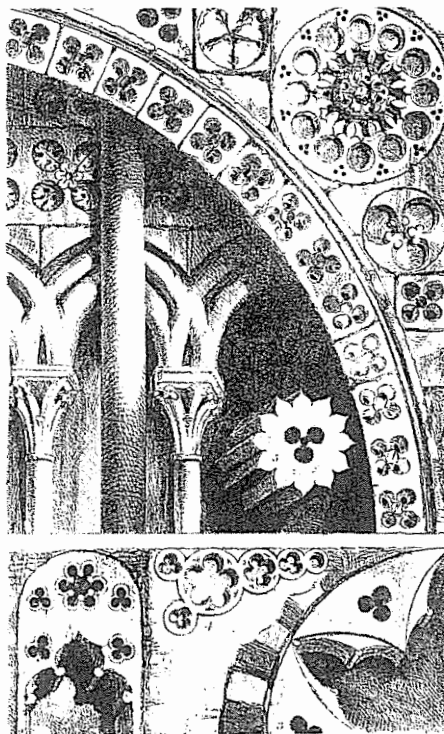
On Shadow and Form

After size and weight, the power of architecture may be said to depend on the quantity (whether measured in space or intensity) of its shadows; and it seems to me that the reality of its works . . . should express a kind of human sympathy, by a measure of darkness as great as there is in human life.²

For Ruskin, shadow opposing the visible, was a property of mystery and sublimity rather than of beauty. While he required that the beautiful be accessible and familiar, like a leaf, he held the sublime to reflect properties less manageable in life, controlled instead by the awesome power of distant light and time. His identification of shadow as a sign of power provides the designer with a visual element that may be employed on any scale; a small building with a powerful meaning could therefore be explicit even in the company of buildings and landscapes whose power is achieved by size.

Ruskin was not concerned with the inevitability of shadow or its accidental manifestation. Rather, he wanted it to be independent, figural, and purposeful to architecture — “the composition of the whole depends on the proportioning and shaping of the darks” — and he identifies the “penetrative ornament” as the boldest and most independent of powerful architectural characters (fig. 2).³ These ornaments belong to the “second kind of mass; that which is flat and of shadow only.”

Graphically the penetrative ornament may be treated as a figure in the flat ground of a wall; but it is also a mass of “starless



2

shade” and an emblem insofar as it is a rosette or a star. Once again we have a combination or “blending” of essences; the flatness of the wall (as building), the mass of the shadow (as power), and the outline of the rosette (as an earthly botanic figure, such as the emblematic Tudor rose). The proportioning and shaping of shadow ultimately represents the cultural and narrative content of the particular building.

On Color and Form

I hold this then for the first great principle of architectural color. Let it be visibly independent of form. Never paint a column with vertical lines, but always cross it⁴ . . . however the colors may be arranged on lines parallel with the main structure.⁵

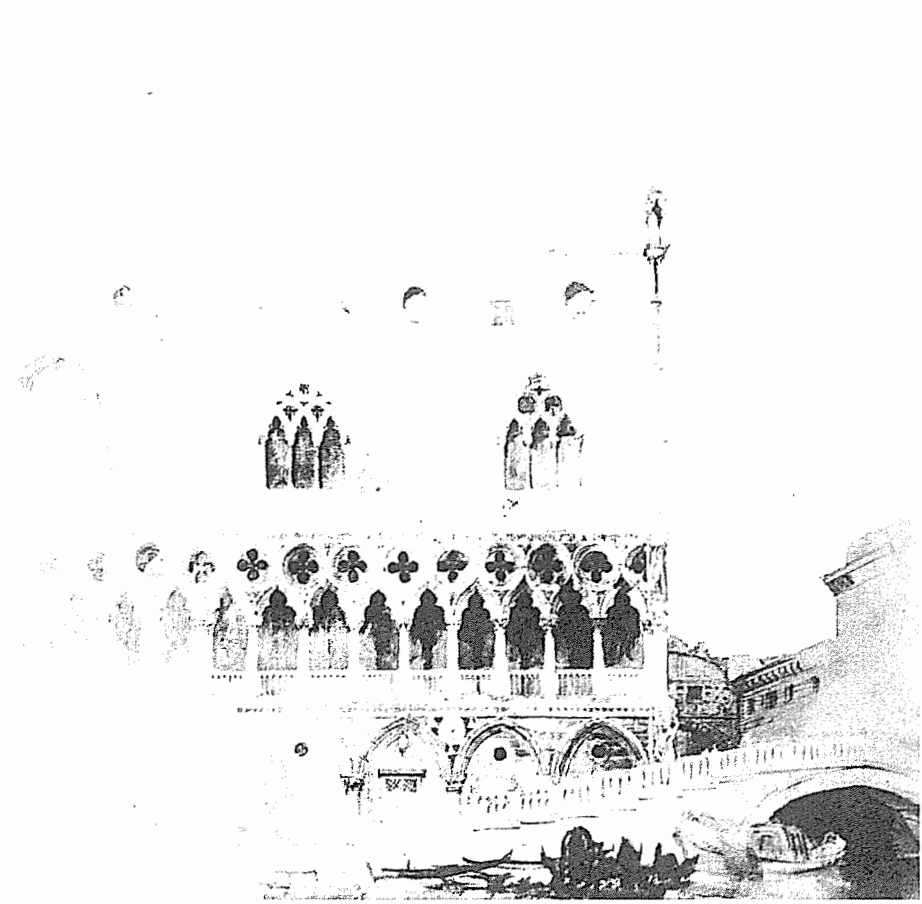
Ruskin saw color as having a beauty and natural essence all its own. To paint vertical lines on a column would be a tautology, as well as subjecting the shape of the color to the form of the figure upon which it is applied. However, by painting the lines horizontally, the colors could establish their own formal existence.

It may seem inconsistent for Ruskin to have encouraged painting a column at all, for practice seems to violate principles presented in his “Lamp of Truth,” where he labels as architectural deceptions the disguises of natural materials or modes of support. But that discrepancy is explained by his recognition of paint as a material in its own right, “so long as the painting is confessed.” Furthermore, the structural truth of the column is not disguised when it is painted across, because the practice does not really obscure its shape as a column (fig. 3). Ruskin explains that color in nature is rarely consistent with the shape of a beautiful object.

[N]otice how nature does it in a variegated flower; not one leaf red and another white, but a point of red and zone of white . . . [and] a bird's head is sometimes of one color and its shoulders another . . . the stripes of a zebra.⁶

Yet there are places where he prohibits polychrome painting, particularly on sculptural forms or pierced surfaces where both the colors and the form would suffer from their combination on the surface, "because even when color is employed (in forms that benefit from shadow) it cannot follow the moving shade."⁷

Ruskin believed that sculptural forms are best rendered in natural materials, whereas sharply outlined and strong color patterns benefit from entirely flat surfaces, "where the certainty of the flat surface is thus secured." This injunction suggests that the flatness found in a wall may be proclaimed by geometric color patterns, even while the color patterns, as pattern, would be least opposed by shape. Kaufman elaborates on this condition by examining stenciled flower patterns on a flat surface in which the outline and color of a particular flower is distilled to its flat botanical essence to conform to the flat essence of the wall. Kaufman argues that to rusticate the wall would be to tautologically reiterate the fact of its being a vertical stack of stone blocks, whereas the inclusion of the stencils promotes a blending of the two essences of flower and wall each.



On Fact and Form

The second form of error is when men of design despise facts. All noble design must deal with facts to a certain extent, for there is no food for it but in nature. . . . The Greek designers delighted in the facts of human form, and became great in consequences⁸

Today the human form no longer represents a particular culture because it is accepted as a universal cultural property, transportable to any place, from the surface of the moon to the bottom of the sea. A particular human settlement, however, always occupies a particular place and is always invaded by a particular family of plants.

But to the Gothic workman the living foliage became a subject of intense affection, and he struggled to render all its characters with as much accuracy as was compatible with the laws of his design and the nature of his material, not infrequently tempted in his enthusiasm to transgress the one and disguise the other.⁹

Ruskin chose the leaf as the universal emblem of earthly life, and he placed it in his discourse on the "Lamp of Beauty" because of its frequent and familiar occurrence in nature. But beyond that attribute Ruskin saw in certain leaves the facts of particular places. Architecture, to his mind, should represent this "living foliage" and "wayside herbage" surrounding a building. Leaves were to be located in places that



may befit and express their origin. . . . Thus the Corinthian capital is beautiful, because it expands under the abacus just as nature would have expanded it . . . and the flamboyant leaf mouldings are beautiful because they run up the hollows. . . . They are no mere cast of natural leaves, they are counted, orderly, and architectural . . . naturally, and therefore beautifully placed.¹⁰

Ruskin's most universal leaves are to be found in a horizontal arcade of pointed arches, "directly borrowed from the trefoiled grass of the field,"¹¹ while he would place his most factual leaves in newly designed capitals. Perhaps his ultimate inspiration was to locate the hammered leaves representing native trees within the hollow webbing above the structural supports of the Oxford Science Museum (fig. 4). In that skylit attic of an enclosed garden their silhouettes become figures against the sky, composing at a distance the figure of the leaf upon a ground of light.

On Life and Form

I believe the right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: Was it done with enjoyment—was the carver happy while he was about it?¹²

Ruskin's famous statement in which he brings happiness into the evaluation foreca: both the arts-and-crafts movement and the modern concept of expressionism. But how does an essence of expressionism establish itself in the ecology of Ruskin's architectural essences?

In the first paragraph of "The Lamp of Life" section Ruskin assigns shape characteristics to the material formed by the happy hand.

*[T]hings . . . are noble or ignoble in proportion to the fullness of the life which either they themselves enjoy, or of whose action they bear the evidence, as sea sands are made beautiful by their bearing the seal of the motion of the waters.*¹³

He is saying quite precisely that during the process of formation by the hand shapes adopt certain organic rhythms and that those rhythms are visible. It is significant that Ruskin also believes that those rhythms should be associated with specific facts, such as foliage to represent the local flora. When a carver fabricates the figures of wayside herbage in newly designed capitals, he creates a double essence, wherein the actual rhythms of life from the carver and the botanical figure of life are brought together in the same instance.

It is worth noting that few occasions allow for expressionism in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Most of the principles governing color, shadow, material, plan, and proportion are quite authoritarian, and the seventh lamp calls for obedience to them. Ruskin would probably have been appalled by an entire work of architecture's attempting to be a single object of the architect's self-expression. Such an effort would represent "the little revolution of his own life only," and as such would exaggerate one of the properties in "The Lamp of Life" at the expense of the others. He would object as well to a building that represents only one or two of the lamps, for in the plan of nature, such a limitation would be disproportionate.

These few examples demonstrate the nature of Ruskin's effort. His paradigm of architectural form is taken from the beautiful and sublime forces of terrestrial nature, with all of nature's splendid variety of species coexisting in a highly complex and ordered scheme. In order to make that scheme visible, he proposed strategies as diverse as the scheme itself and resisted adopting classical or rational systems which might reduce, obscure, or homogenize fundamentally different species. His strategies included the optical coincidence of figure and ground, the visual segregation of color and shape, the operational coincidence of extrinsic "fact" with structural form, and the accidents of expressionism. Because he fully realized that so complex a scheme could result in compositional overload and great expense, he suggested that the overall plan-form of a building be as economical as possible. This call for economy was to conserve attention for the aggregate species of form (illuminated by the lamps), which might otherwise become subsidiary to the plan. Indeed, if the aggregate were to be diminished, the potential of the architecture to specifically represent the seven lamps would dwindle to the same degree. That consequence would defeat Ruskin's ethical proposal that architecture function to improve social health precisely by identifying, edifying, and commemorating the specific and natural properties of the culture and of the landscape in which it is built.