

# Ruskin Art Club

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[www.RuskinArtClub.com](http://www.RuskinArtClub.com)

## **Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)**

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## **FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER**

In September, the Ruskin Art Club, after some necessary Covid-19 rethinking, launched its Fall/Winter season of virtual events with a tour of marquetry master W. Patrick Edwards' studio in San Diego [Sept. 3], followed by a virtual conference led by Geneva, NY-based Ruskin scholar Prof. Jim Spates, "Ruskin's Life: A Radical Reinterpretation" [Sept. 10, 17, 24]. The lectures, based on Prof. Spates' extensive original research into often-misunderstood themes of the Ruskin biography – e.g., the sources of his mental instability, Ruskin's sexual history, also paid tribute to the pioneering work of 20th-century Ruskin scholar, Helen Viljoen.

We started October off with Sara Atwood's interview with Judson Studios president David Judson on the topic of his just-released history of the family's 123-year stained glass firm, JUDSON STUDIOS: INNOVATION IN STAINED GLASS (Angel City Press) [October 5]. This visually stunning evening, complete with a mini-lecture on new glass technologies and Ruskin's remarkably prescient views on architectural glass also included a vivid account of 19th-century founder-painter William Lees Judson and life in the community of artists and craftsmen centered in Pasadena's Arroyo Seco. The Judson interview was followed by a private screening of the award-winning documentary, "The Biggest Little Farm" [Oct. 10]. The film is a moving testament to the complexity of nature, an epic odyssey to attempt to farm within a reawakening ecosystem. The screening was followed by an on-site interview with the farmer/filmmaker John Chester at Apricot Lane Farms in Moorpark, California. The interview was ably facilitated by RAC member, Andrew Sapienza. The month was capped by Dr. Janet Bubar Rich's wide-ranging (and richly illustrated) lecture on the figure of Guinevere in

the Arthurian myth cycle and its impact on the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris [Oct. 29].

All of these lectures (with the exception of the Edwards' tour and the John Chester interview) are or will be posted on our website: [www.ruskinartclub.com](http://www.ruskinartclub.com). The marquetry and antique restoration work of W. Patrick Edwards can be enjoyed on his blog: [www.wpatrickedwardsblogspot.com](http://www.wpatrickedwardsblogspot.com). You will also find there a summary of the craft and workmanship philosophy of David Pye, which inspired Edwards' career. (See Barb Siddiqui's review of Pye's classic, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (1968), Cambium Press at: [www.woodcentral.com/books/pye.shtml](http://www.woodcentral.com/books/pye.shtml).)



**Aerial view of Apricot Lane Farms**

The extensive research upon which Prof. Spates based his Ruskin lectures is available on his blog: [www.whyruskin.wordpress.com](http://www.whyruskin.wordpress.com) under “Ruskin’s Life; A Radical Revision”; information about The Judson Studios and the book “Judson Studios: Innovation in Stained Glass” can be found at: [www.judsonstudios.com](http://www.judsonstudios.com); the Apricot Lane Farms website is: [www.apricotlanefarms.com](http://www.apricotlanefarms.com) and information about the related documentary (distributed by NEON) can be found at: [www.biggestlittlefarmmovie.com](http://www.biggestlittlefarmmovie.com); Janet Bubar Rich’s blog and many publications can be accessed at her website: [www.janetbubarrich.com](http://www.janetbubarrich.com).

**Gabriel Meyer is the Executive Director of the Ruskin Art Club in Los Angeles**

**JOHN CHESTER, APRICOT LANE FARMS**

by Andrew Sapienza

The Club’s ongoing *Virtual Field Trips Series* takes us on these marvelous firsthand journeys into Ruskin’s vast influence from the comfort and *safety* of our very own homes. If you haven’t joined us yet, please keep an eye on [our calendar](#) for upcoming events. *Donations accepted.*

In October, we hosted a private screening of the popular and highly rated documentary film [The Biggest Little Farm \(2018\)](#) and had the honor of also hosting a moderated private Q&A session with the narrator and internationally renowned filmmaker and biodynamic farmer, John Chester.

To those who haven’t seen the film, it is a testament to the complexity of nature, following John, his wife Molly, and their dog Todd on an epic odyssey to attempt to farm within a reawakening ecosystem. The first scene of the

film, shot mostly on cell phones, is of a family fleeing their beloved farm from a now all-too-common natural disaster - the raging California Wildfire; the audience is immediately gripped and knows, right from the start, that this story is of much greater significance than the mere facts and timeline of its own individual, albeit heroic, path.



**Photo of farmer/filmmaker John Chester**

*“Nobody can discover the world for somebody else. Only when we discover it for ourselves does it become common ground and a common bond and we cease to be alone.”*

— Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth*

As Molly & John set out to create what would become [Apricot Lane Farms](#), a traditional food farm with a holistic mission in Moorpark, CA, you’re taken by how their experiences, friendships, and imagination cultivate their evolving ethical disposition. They seem to have that acute “attentiveness to particulars that is informed both by sympathy and an affectionate sense of obligation to others” and

our planet. ([Kimery, 2012](#)) Ruskin also makes the claim that there is indeed affection in obligation, and these two certainly embody this throughout the film. This affection is particularly evident in the story of Emma, who arrived at the farm as a very sick and very pregnant sow some years ago and who has today become the prize example of their mission to treat all of their animals humanely.

The major influences on John and Molly seem to come from their career experiences, their friend and mentor Alan York, and from the American novelist, poet, essayist, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer, [Wendell Berry](#) (b.1934), an avid Ruskin reader.

Wendell Berry declared in *The Pleasures of Eating* (1990) that “eating is an agricultural act.” Molly, a chef with a deep understanding of food and how its origin and cultivation matter in multiple dimensions, wanted to bring her knowledge and beliefs to life at the farm. She spearheaded the search for a consultant to help with this undertaking and found Alan York. York had developed a framework of biodynamic principles for agricultural systems development which would be the cornerstone of Apricot Lane Farms design. He, too, is also caught channeling a familiar Ruskinian ideal in the film when he describes the Fruit Basket, a large fruit tree orchard with 70 varieties of plants at the farm, as both functional and permacultured but more affectionately, as *beautiful*.

*“...the care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope.”*

— Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

The participants who joined the Q&A session were visibly excited about John and his ideas and what his and Molly’s work could teach society at large - it made us think deeply about the interconnectivity of our lives with the planet and our economy.

One, while listening to John eloquently share his knowledge and experience, wondered if places like Apricot Farms could proliferate, making way for a new 21st-century Agrarian Movement not unlike those during Ruskin’s era or that of Berry’s 20th-century movement. We can only hope, support, and cheer on John, Molly, their son, and the whole Apricot Lane Farms team on their epic journey to coexist with and learn from nature.

**Written by:**

**Andrew Sapienza, Ruskin Art Club Member**

**NEWSLETTER ESSAY:**

“Putting Ruskin’s Educational Ideas into Practice”

by Kay Walter

In a small town in a remote corner of rural Arkansas, students are putting Ruskin’s educational ideas into practice. Their professor, a British literature generalist at University of Arkansas at Monticello, is a Companion of the Guild of St George, a lifemember of the Friends of Ruskin’s Brantwood, and Editor of *The English Pub*. She specializes in inspiring first-generation learners to pursue their educational goals and share their accomplishments in ways that benefit their community. Her upperclassmen are required to present the findings of their research for term papers at a professional meeting. This year the viral pandemic negates plans to travel, but luckily many professional groups have arranged to meet virtually.

An international interdisciplinary conference in Poland on Memory, Guilt, and Shame is one such virtual conference, and Kay and her students have proposed abstracts for presentations there. The conference will connect a group of professionals in social sciences and related fields at all levels, from practiced experts down to PhD students. Kay’s group of British literature scholars are the only five undergraduates in the world invited to take part in the event. Her students are exploring current research on social issues in order to illuminate readings of medieval and early English



***Dr. Kay Walter and students, wearing UAM masks and socially distanced: (left to right) Kristina Kinney, Braden Taylor, Lachelle Lewis, Dr. Kay Walter, Connor Jones and Ashley King***

poetry and drama. They are not writing the extensive and comprehensive papers that advanced graduate students and faculty members will present. Each one is instead composing a flash paper. Kay will introduce the theme of the panel and provide transitions among the student presentations.

Lachelle Lewis will discuss modern ideas about Survivor Guilt in her paper, “‘The Wanderer’: Contemplating the Lost.” Connor Jones will consider the Power of Forgiveness in his paper, “‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’: A Knight’s Acquittal.” Braden Taylor will interpret Guinevere’s adultery through an exploration of research on kidnapping trauma and Victim Blaming in his paper, “Malory’s ‘The Knight of the Cart’: Guinevere as Shamed Victim.” Ashley King will consider the Watercooler Effect to provide insight for her paper, “Othello: Gossip and Guilt.” Kristina Kinney will explore current stances on Shamelessness in her paper, “The Guilt of Shamelessness in King Lear.” At the panel’s end, Dr. Walter will offer concluding comments that knit together the students’ ideas and the conference theme.

This group of young and eager scholars may live and study in a geographic place Ruskin never considered, but they represent the same bright potential he championed among all his students. These studies represent cutting-edge thoughts which apply recent discoveries to basic human questions. How can contemporary readers understand the words and implications of literature nearly as old as our language itself? What lessons do medieval and early English texts have to offer us, and how can we best make use of the stories they tell? Such questions are the basis of Dr. Walter’s classes. As Ruskin insists, her students are learning to look carefully and to see clearly what is before them. They are working hard to discover answers to their research questions, and the results are fascinating an eager audience on a global stage.

**Kay J. Walter** is a Professor of English at University of Arkansas at Monticello, where she serves as the British literature specialist. She is a Companion of the Guild of St George and a life member of Friends of Ruskin's Brantwood, Carson McCullers Society, Royal Oak Foundation, Arkansas Library Association, and HI USA. She edits the award-winning newsletter, *The English Pub*. She loves collaborating, mentoring first-generation students and early-career teachers, and designing courses which include travel to Europe. The Ruskin Art Club will feature Kay and her students in a presentation slated for 2021.

“. . . My students come from a literacy-poor culture. Their worlds have an impoverishment of aspiration and a paucity of encouragement to read. John Ruskin says, “The main thing which we ought to teach our youth is to see something, all that the eyes which God has given them are capable of seeing” (VI.483)\*. They have been taught to read—to recognize high-use vocabulary and to sound out exotic words rapidly, to devour pages whole, at a glance, never pausing to rest their eyes upon and delight in the nuances of prose at play. They are good at looking, but too often they do not see. What Ruskin tells us about talking is true in their reading: “Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see” (V.333).\*\* [\**Modern Painters*, Vol. IV, \*\* MP, Vol. III]

Kay Walter, “Internalizing the Message,” *Minnesota English Journal*, 2019

### UPCOMING EVENTS [VIRTUAL]

The Ruskin Art Club is regrouping, as all organizations are these days, under the “virtual” banner. Until public authorities indicate that we can safely resume in-person events, all our activities will be in the form of virtual, online presentations. Please register for these events online at [info@ruskinartclub.com](mailto:info@ruskinartclub.com). We will then send you the Zoom link for the event.

### NOVEMBER 2020

1 - Lost & Found: Amboise – The Saga of a Rare Early Ruskin Watercolor

Thursday, Nov. 12, 5-6:30pm PST

Stuart Denenberg (Denenberg Fine Arts, West Hollywood) recently acquired a striking watercolor sketch attributed to Ruskin (1840) of the castle at Amboise. The drawing, long attributed to Turner, is now reliably believed to be a “lost” early Ruskin preparatory sketch, executed in the style of Ruskin’s aesthetic hero, J.M.W. Turner. A later more finished version accompanied the publication



of Ruskin's poem, "The Broken Chain." Stuart will describe the provenance of the drawing as well as review the work of scholars, such as Stephen Wildman, who have studied it. Stuart will also treat us to a look at two original 19th-century photographs of Ruskin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and another of William Morris in his collection. A rare chance to see these exciting discoveries!

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2 - Lecture: "Ruskin and the California Dream" by Gabriel Meyer

Thursday, Nov. 19, 5-6:30pm PDT

*"For a man (Ruskin) who never so much as darkened these shores, British art and social critic John Ruskin cast a long shadow on 19th and early 20th-century America."* Ruskin Art Club's executive director, Gabriel Meyer, will lecture on the remarkable (and remarkably under-reported) influence John Ruskin had on American art movements and arts education in 19th-century America and on stateside social and utopian communities in the early 20th century. While the talk will trace the outlines of Ruskin's broad influence, the focus will be on ways in which the myth of California as a theater of social redemption in the decades after the Civil War fostered widespread interest in Ruskinian idealism.



**We invite you to join in promoting** the vision and programs of the Ruskin Art Club through an annual Individual, Family, or Patron **membership** or by becoming a **Lifetime Member**.

For more information or to join online:  
[www.Ruskinartclub.com/membership](http://www.Ruskinartclub.com/membership)

or contact the Executive Director,  
Gabriel Meyer:  
[info@ruskinartclub.com](mailto:info@ruskinartclub.com)

For news of Ruskin Art Club events, especially our new season of **virtual programs, lectures, and field trips**, visit us at:

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