

Ruskin Art Club

founded 1888

A tax exempt 501 c (3) non-profit corporation

www.RuskinArtClub.org

Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)

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“We seek in the arts, in Nature, and in the mysterious power of beauty, the instruments not only of personal transformation, but, in the spirit of John Ruskin, of the transformation of the physical, social, and cultural landscape of our world.”

- Ruskin Art Club

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER

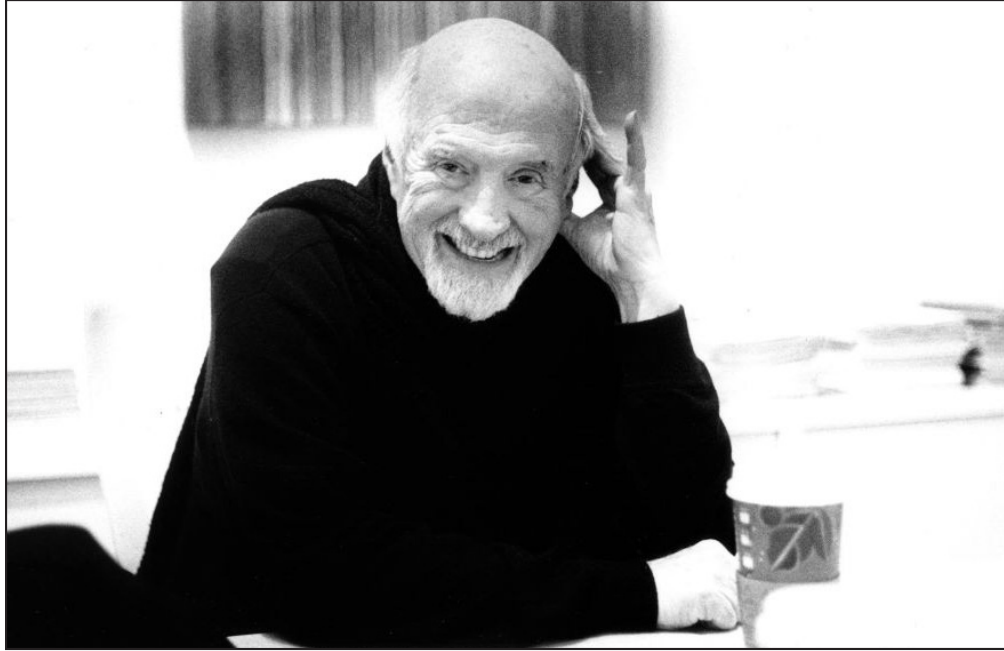
“Dave Hickey and the 21st-century Rediscovery of Ruskin”

It wasn’t until the dawn of the 21st century and my nascent involvement with the Ruskin Art Club that I began to read the writings of John Ruskin in a serious way.

As part of this project, I also looked around the contemporary cultural scene for markers of Ruskin’s influence in the new century’s art and cultural debates. The year 2000 was a good year in that respect, the centenary of Ruskin’s death in 1900. While we couldn’t have known it at the time, the generous press coverage of the centenary on both sides of the Atlantic and the flurry of assessments of Ruskin’s place in contemporary affairs heralded nothing less than a 21st-century Ruskin revival. The landmark celebrations in 2019, the bicentennial of his birth, have only solidified and deepened interest in Ruskin’s ideas in various fields, including economic criticism, ecological perspectives, the “sufficient life” debate¹, and his scientific contributions – Ruskin’s “science of the aspects of things”² and his critique of elements of Darwinian evolutionary theory, Ruskin’s “law of help.”

¹See my article, “Ruskin and the Sufficient Life,” in Ruskin Art Club Newsletter #11 (August 2021), available on our website www.ruskinartclub.org. Also, Fredrik Jonsson’s Ruskin Lecture 2021 on our YouTube channel.

²See Sandra Kemp’s presentation “Ruskin: The Museum of the Near Future,” 6/19/21 on our YouTube channel.



Dave Hickey in Houston in 2013. Credit: Toby Kamps

Among the quirkier Ruskin enthusiasts of recent years, none was quirkier than art critic and cultural journalist Dave Hickey (1938-2021). Hickey died last November at the age of 82. Often called “the bad boy” of American art criticism for his contrarian views, he also produced, as his biographer Daniel Oppenheimer notes, some of the best English-language essays on art and culture of the last century, writings that have proved, in our times, more prescient than ever.³ Hickey also cut a striking sartorial figure with his casual jeans, leather boots, and black-collar shirts, emblematic of the fence he straddled between elite intellectual and academic circles and the SoHo bohemians with whom he had long identified himself.

I stumbled upon Hickey in 2000 as I scouted around for art and social critics who were interested in Ruskin. That year, Hickey published a long article in “Art in America” magazine, a publication for which he had served as executive editor in the 1970s, entitled “Reading Ruskin Writing,”⁴ in part, a review of the landmark Tate exhibition, “Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites,” organized by Robert Hewison with Ian Warrell and Stephen Wildman. (Readers of the whole article will be treated to a rollicking critique of the Tate Modern and the “historicism” that guided the exhibition’s visual design.) That this was not going to be the usual academic paen to a distinguished forebear is clear from the outset. Hickey begins his study of Ruskin with the following anecdote:

“During the spiritualism craze that swept Victorian London in the 1860s, John Ruskin would occasionally allow himself to be brought along by fashionable ladies to complete the circle at seances. On one such evening, Ruskin and a group of earnest seekers had seated themselves around an elegant table in a darkened Mayfair drawing room. . . The medium in charge suddenly announced in a quavering voice: ‘John Ruskin! John Ruskin! Do you wish to speak to your grandmother!?’

‘I do not,’ Ruskin replied with alacrity, ‘I wish to speak to Paolo Veronese.’”

³Julia Friedman has written an insightful tribute to Hickey, “The man who laughed in church,” in the January 2022 issue of *The New Criterion*.

⁴The full article is available online <https://indexarticles.com/arts/art-in-america/reading-ruskin-writing-john-ruskin/>

As it turned out, Ruskin’s casual interest in seances was short-lived and his bid to speak with the 16th-century Venetian painter reveals more than a touch of gentle mockery – as if the honored dead paced around in a vast lobby waiting for calls from home. But, true to form, Hickey is drawn less to the standard vignettes and the well-trodden encomiums than to the off-road Ruskin, where remarkable, sometimes unsettling truths can be found.

Hickey, for example, celebrates Ruskin’s “wildness” in his disdain for perfection and order. He perceives in the themes of Ruskin’s aesthetics, his morality of the visual, the inspiration behind Ruskin’s appeal to 19th-century American artists seeking new directions and, even more, their modernist progeny.

“In a century obsessed with the grandeur of ‘great ideas,’ Ruskin celebrated the fugitive and the factual. In a century devoted to the rigor of intellectual abstractions, to the logical mechanics of global imperialism, industrial expansion and utopian social theory, Ruskin revered the intricate, irregular precision of tiny things, distant prospects and transient atmospheres, clearly seen.”

“Ruskin’s writing . . . rides the fulcrum of cognition and sensation, so when we are reading him, we are never reading books or encountering thought, we are . . . reading Ruskin writing and experiencing the flow of Ruskin thinking on the edge of sensation.”

Eventually, Dave Hickey was persuaded to bring his Ruskin insights to the Ruskin Art Club in person. Finding out that he was based in nearby Las Vegas, we enticed him further west with an invitation to deliver our sixth annual Ruskin Lecture in 2003. Much to our surprise, the celebrated art and cultural critic agreed. We were just getting our Ruskin bearings in those days, so it was with some concern that we awaited the visit of so eminent a free spirit into our midst. We needn’t have worried. Hickey, complete with jeans, boots, and signature black shirt, was charmed by the ambience of our 1922 clubhouse, with its echoes of the arts associations he had known in his youth and our relative distance from the art-world battles in which he had earned his feisty reputation. Hickey and his audience settled into a long afternoon of reflection on the contrasting aesthetics of architectural classicist Palladio and the neo-Gothic Ruskin. Miraculously, Hickey’s talk (in its audio form) managed to survive the vagaries of several dislocations and can be found today in our YouTube archive, www.ruskinartclub.org/YouTube.

At the time when I first encountered Hickey, in his Ruskinian mode, I appreciated his observation that “today, no critic in the history of art is less read and *more subliminally present*.” Despite the many decades in which Ruskin’s name disappeared from the bibliographies, Hickey underscored Ruskin’s unacknowledged presence in the assumptions of contemporary visual analysis and the ideals of modern architecture. Happily, some of

“Dave Hickey and the 21st-century Rediscovery of Ruskin” by Gabriel Meyer — Continued

that invisibility has lifted in the twenty-two years since Hickey wrote this assessment; but even in the current revival, too few people actually take the trouble to read Ruskin himself. In part, this is due to the sheer size and scope of Ruskin’s *oeuvre* (39 volumes in the landmark Library Edition) and the difficulty of access, knowing where to start. (Hickey has some good suggestions in his “Reading Ruskin Writing” essay, i.e., start with “The Nature of Gothic” chapter in *The Stones of Venice*.)

But a far more useful piece of advice is contained in Hickey’s perception that when reading Ruskin, we encounter not so much Ruskin’s thoughts (his settled ideas) as the actual written record of Ruskin in the process of thinking. This is inherent in Hickey’s praise of Ruskin’s “protean inconsistency,” based on Ruskin’s own remark that “I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly until I have contradicted myself at least three times.”⁵

Hickey concludes his essay on this theme with a summary that echoes the cadences of Ruskin’s own incomparable diction:

“Ruskin’s writing cleaves to the world; it rides the fulcrum of cognition and sensation, so when we are reading him, we are never reading books or encountering thought, we are dwelling in the realm of sense, reading Ruskin writing and experiencing the flow of Ruskin thinking on the edge of sensation. Our experience in this realm is further complicated by the fact that Ruskin is probably the most learned writer in English literature without the faintest scholarly inclination. His colleagues at Oxford would remark that he seemed to possess virtually no ‘knowledge’ yet somehow maintained the full resources of Latin and Greek, the whole of the Bible and the bulk of English literature not in his head but on the tip of his tongue, in a condition of intricate verbal readiness, as a vehicle for his passion.”

⁵Inaugural address to the Cambridge School of Art, 1858

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



Dawn at Neuchatel, John Ruskin, 1866.

NEWSLETTER ESSAY:

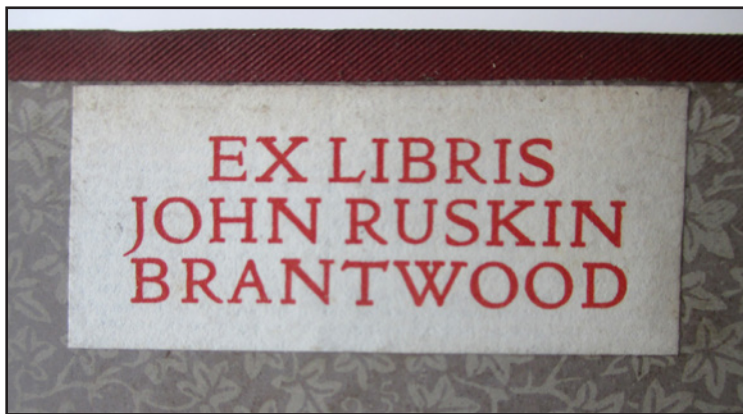
“Froude’s Biography of Carlyle: A Rare (and Important) Ruskin Find”

by Jim Spates

It is a dreary day in Geneva, New York: mid-December, 2021. The winter has not arrived, but there is no doubt it is making its approach. The phone rings. “Hello.” “Hi, Jim, it’s Beth Haswell down at Stomping Grounds; got a minute?” “Sure, Beth.” Beth and her husband, James, own a store in Geneva which specializes in Finger Lakes memorabilia, picture framing, and, for good measure, sports an interesting collection of antiquarian books, the only place in our small city offering such. Over the last few years, the Haswells have made Stomping Grounds into a true success.

“I think I may have come across something that might interest you given your interest in John Ruskin, “ Beth continues. “I don’t know whether you know it or not, but occasionally we buy small lots of books so that we can replenish our stock as it sells. There are people who specialize in going to estates, auctions, or house sales, who buy up books that would, otherwise, be disposed of. They then frequent places like ours offering the books, usually in cardboard boxes, for sale at very reasonable prices. None of the buyers ever seems to be an expert in any particular field. A couple of weeks ago I bought some boxes and just in the last two days I’ve had time to start looking at the books. In one box, much to my surprise I came across a pair of books with what looks to be Ruskin’s bookplate in them. It is a two-volume set of a biography of Thomas Carlyle written by a J. A. Froude. It was first published – and I am sure these are first edition volumes – in 1882. I immediately thought of you because the bookplate reads: Ex Libris, John Ruskin, Brantwood. Now all I know about Ruskin is what I have learned from you, but I seem to remember that Brantwood was his home. These volumes are in fine condition and are chock full of annotations. Do you think it possible that the annotations may be Ruskin’s? Was he known for annotating his books? And, if so, would you like to come down have a look at them?” To someone as interested in Ruskin as myself, the question elicited an immediate response: “Of course, I would like to see the books, Beth. When can I come down?” “Tomorrow would be fine,” she replied, “I will have them waiting.”

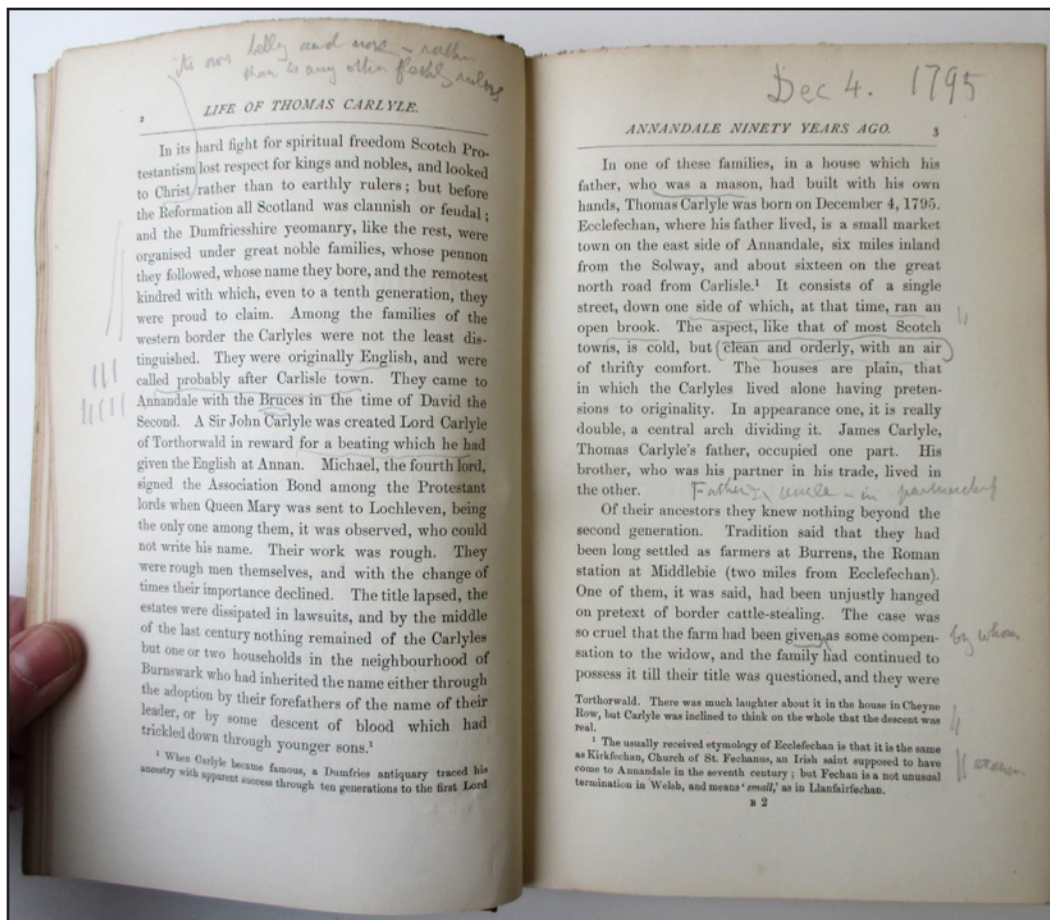
Next midday, I am at Stomping Grounds. And there, on the long table near the main entryway, I see the books waiting. I estimate them to be at least 300 pages each. I am greeted by Beth and explain to her that I am quite excited about her find because not only was Ruskin an avid annotator of his books, in the course of doing my own research on his life over three decades I had read hundreds, if not thousands, of letters in his own hand at research institutions in the UK and US, and add that, on a number of occasions, I’ve had a chance to study books once in his library, some of which were heavily annotated. Consequently, I say, I should be able to recognize his hand.



Ruskin's Bookplate, inside front cover, of his copy of Froude's Biography of Carlyle

not on every page, but regularly. Sometimes the marginalia consist simply of lines drawn opposite a sentence or paragraph indicating his interest in that passage; sometimes when his interest is higher, he makes double or triple emphasis lines in the margins, sometimes adding exclamation points (!) and, on a few locations, he makes substantive and/or emotive comments in the margins pertaining to a particular passage.

I sit; Beth leaves me to it, and I pick up the first volume. Inside the cover, I find the bookplate exactly as described. Having seen Ruskin's bookplates before, I am sure that this volume has come – who knows how? – from Ruskin's library at Brantwood. Next comes the title page. Then, finally, the contents. And, before a few minutes have passed, I begin to realize what treasure troves these volumes are -- for Ruskin, as Beth has alerted me, has annotated the volumes throughout-- not on every page,

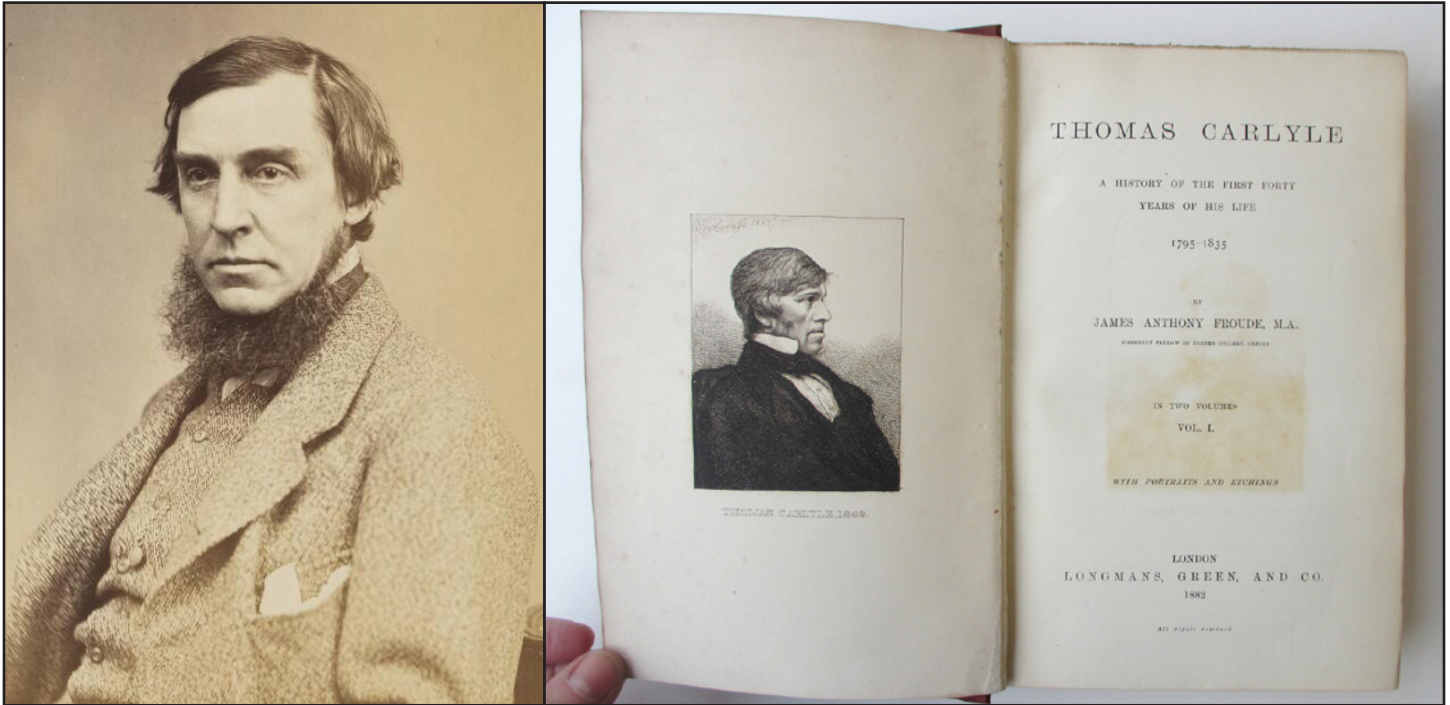


Typical annotated page from Volume 1 (with Ruskin's marginalia) from his copy of Froude's Biography of Carlyle

From the 1840s on, as Ruskin was making his life-altering shift from being primarily a critic of art and architecture to being one of society, Carlyle was of great interest. Having read with great care all of the older man’s works, Ruskin soon began referring to Carlyle as his “earthly master,” as the person who had most influenced (other than Plato, Dante, and Jesus) and framed his thinking on the theory of economics, even going so far as to dedicate his second book on the subject, *Munera Pulveris*, to him. Indeed, so great was his admiration, Ruskin made it a point not only to befriend Carlyle and his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, but frequently visited them when in London, arriving for dinner and staying late into the evening discussing matters of great import. During this intimate time, he regularly called Carlyle, “Papa.” Hence, when, some decades later (Carlyle died in 1881), when the Froude biography was published, he immediately bought and began studying it intently.

Ruskin’s relationship with Froude was less complex but also important. In 1860, Ruskin published his first set of essays on political economy in an intellectual magazine called *The Cornhill* owned by his London publishers, Smith and Elder. As his monthly essays appeared in the latter half of that year, the public outcry against what he was saying and recommending regarding what we had to do if we wanted to live a decent and humane social life, was so intense that it frequently verged on calumny. The owners of Smith and Elder were shocked and because— as each new essay was published— the vituperative reaction did not lessen but actually increased, they decided they would shut down the essays from further publication. As a result, Ruskin was allowed to publish but four essays on political economy out of an initially agreed-upon seven. He was, of course, shocked by the censorship. There being nothing he could do until two years later, in 1862, when Froude, who had known Ruskin in a sort of quasi-friendly way and believed that Ruskin’s 1860 work on political economy was extremely important, asked if he would like to contribute another set of essays on political economy to a second intellectual London magazine, *Frazier’s*. Ruskin agreed; when publication began in the later months of 1862, the earlier offended hounds once again began baying at his heels. At which point, the shabby process repeated itself: at the direction of the magazine’s owner, the editor, the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, was instructed to tell Ruskin that his last three essays were no longer welcome. Once again, Ruskin, then living near Geneva in France, was furious, believing, rightly, that the owners of *Frazier’s*, did not have the backbone to brook the criticism.

“In one box, much to my surprise I came across a pair of books with what looks to be Ruskin’s bookplate in them. It is a two-volume set of a biography of Thomas Carlyle written by a J. A. Froude.”



*James Anthony Froude (1818-1894),
Title Page of first volume with portrait of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)*

Nevertheless, Ruskin never blamed Froude for the decision to delimit his analyses of social life, and the volumes of his copy of Froude’s biography of Carlyle attest to that, for in no place does Ruskin criticize Froude for the work he devoted to telling the story of Carlyle’s life.

As a Ruskin scholar, I left Stomping Grounds that day thoroughly exhilarated by this great find, assured that these two serendipitously discovered volumes represented a major new insight into a previously somewhat clouded series of critical moments in Ruskin’s life and thought. A day or two later, Beth called, offering me a chance to buy the volumes at a reasonable market price. That price however, being a bit too steep for a retired professor, I respectfully declined, thanking her for the option, asking her if it might be possible for me to tell some dear friends in Los Angeles about the existence of these volumes in case they might be interested in them. She agreed, and not long after, Stuart and Beverly Denenberg of Los Angeles, Ruskin admirers of note on the West Coast, agreed to purchase them, later offering them to the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University in Lancaster UK. Happily, the Ruskin library agreed to purchase them and house them.

And so this surprising tale ends as I believe it should. Ruskin’s own set of the two-volume biography of his beloved mentor, Thomas Carlyle, will, by the end of this year, make its way back onto the shelves of his own library at Brantwood. In my view, Carlyle, Froude, and Ruskin himself would be very pleased by this unanticipated turn of events.



*Ruskin at his desk, Brantwood, mid-1880s
(watercolor by W. G Collingwood; original at Ruskin Museum, Coniston, UK)*

Jim Spates is retired Professor of Sociology Emeritus at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. He is a Companion of Ruskin’s Guild of St. George, a member of the Ruskin Art Club of Los Angeles, a founding member (with Sara Atwood) of the Ruskin Society of North America, and webmaster of a blog emphasizing Ruskin’s importance not only in his own time but in our own: **whyruskin.online**.

UPCOMING EVENTS [VIRTUAL]

The Ruskin Art Club is adjusting, as are all organizations these days, to the ongoing challenges of Covid-19 restrictions. Most of our events will continue to appear under the “virtual” banner; but we hope, LA County protocols permitting, to host a number of hybrid events in the coming months, which will have in-person and well as virtual dimensions. Our website will keep you informed of our upcoming events and the formats in which they will be presented. Please continue to register for all of these events at info@ruskinartclub.org.

JUNE 2022

Ruskin in the Media: Towards an Ethical Depiction

with Ann Gagné, Sara Atwood, moderator

Thursday, June 9th, 5pm PDT.

As an art critic, John Ruskin's work is often positioned in terms of the visual. Ruskin is always looking, seeing, and recording. However, media depictions of Ruskin do not focus only on the visual, but rather examine the larger ethics of the sensory, what different senses are mentioned, depicted, and used, which often suggests a flawed representation of him and his work. Beginning with a few nineteenth-century visual caricatures of Ruskin, Gagné will explore the depiction of Ruskin in the television series *Desperate Romantics* (2009), movies *Mr. Turner* (2014) and *Effie Gray* (2014), as well as popular media responses to Ruskin's 200th birthday in 2019, to show how touch, literally and idiomatically, becomes an ethical preoccupation in these representations. She will explore how these depictions of Ruskin verge on anti-intellectualism and complicate the accessibility of Ruskin's work for those outside of academic and art spaces. She will end with a call to action on how we can make Ruskin more accessible in our everyday media use.



*John Ruskin in the TV series,
"Desperate Romantics"*



Ann Gagné is an Educational Developer (Universal Design for Learning) at the University of Toronto Mississauga and an adjunct Communications instructor at George Brown College. Her work and research focusses on supporting accessible pedagogy, especially through reference to the sensory. Her book *Embodying the Tactile in Victorian Literature: Touching Bodies/ Bodies Touching* was published by Lexington Press in 2021. Other Ruskin focused publications include "Architecture and Perception: The Science of Art in Ruskin" (2019) in *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature* and "Recovering a Ruskinian Tactile Ethics of Architecture" (2019) in *Modern Horizons Journal*. She has presented on

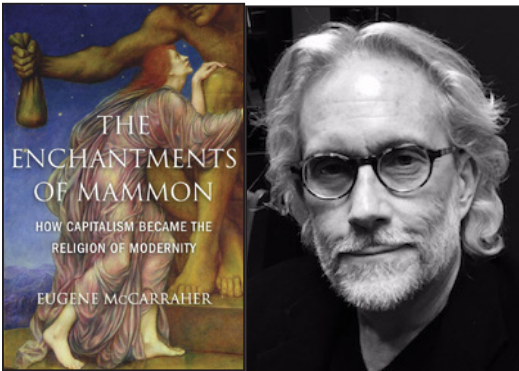
Ruskin and tactility at international conferences such as NAVSA, NeMLA, VSAWC, and at Birkbeck, University of London. She is Companion of the Guild of St. George, and a board member of the Ruskin Society of North America

SEPTEMBER 2022

The 22nd Annual Ruskin Lecture: The Doheny Library USC
“THE ECONOMY OF HEAVEN: RUSKIN, CAPITALISM, AND
THE POST-CAPITALIST FUTURE”

with Professor Eugene McCarraher

Thursday, September 8th, 5pm PDT.



While John Ruskin has been recognized as one of the 19th century’s most trenchant critics of capitalism, the religious character of his criticism is often ignored, and its contemporary significance is either dismissed or unappreciated. But Ruskin’s opposition to capitalism was rooted in a (heterodox) Christian understanding of creation and humanity, a sacramental conception of reality that is urgently relevant as we veer -- with economic and ecological despoliation looming -- toward some sort of post-capitalist world. Ruskin’s notion of “the economy of heaven” enables us to envision a world after capitalism that is more humane, generous, and ecological sensitive than we can achieve by relying on political and technological solutions alone.

An associate professor of humanities and history at Villanova since 2000, Eugene McCarraher’s research has focused on social thought, capitalism, and religion in the United States. He is the author of *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

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

www.RuskinArtClub.org
Ruskin Art Club on YouTube

Pay a visit to the improved and updated **Ruskin Art Club** website!

Please note that the web address has changed:

We are now www.ruskinartclub.org.

The domain name is not all that's new. We've added new features to almost every tab including new background articles and Board of Directors' bios. We've reorganized the Resources pages with more useful information and references to many more Ruskin-oriented organizations and collections, along with an expanded library of recommended videos (art exhibitions, Ruskin-themed videos, and lectures), and we've added a unique page devoted to Ruskin's music. Our new and enlarged YouTube channel is perhaps the most notable addition to our website with its archive of recent lectures as well as videos of annual "Ruskin" lectures and other noteworthy events we've hosted in the past. By the way, when you catch up on a lecture you've missed or browse the channel, **be sure to subscribe!**

We've made it easier than ever to become a **Member** of the Ruskin Art Club, to **renew your membership online**, or to **donate** to the club.

You can also register to attend an event on the Calendar page.

Please tell us what you think of the changes and feel free to suggest improvements or additional features you'd like to see. Contact us at our new email address: info@ruskinartclub.org.