

# Ruskin Art Club

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## Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)

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## **FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER** ***The School of St. Roch and the Age of Covid-19***

A recent thought-piece by cultural critic James Panero featured the arresting lead:

“The history of culture is a history of plague.”<sup>1</sup>

He went on to highlight the paradoxical role that devastating plagues play, for example, in the biblical record, where plagues visited upon the ancient Egyptians (plagues of bloody water, frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born) secured the liberty of enslaved Hebrews (see Exodus chapters 7-12 for details).

“Plague . . . meant the start of the world as we know it today,” he concludes.

In contrast to the plagues memorialized in the Bible, the tendency in modern culture, despite their societal-shaping effects, is to forget them.

“The modern epidemics of cholera, typhus, yellow fever, measles, small pox, and polio, among a host of other infectious diseases,” Panero notes, “might have better prepared us for our current crisis – if only their histories were better remembered and their dead and injured duly honored.”

Amid the debate about statues and public memorials agitating our streets, one cannot help wondering why there are so few sobering shrines to our cholera dead or to the victims of the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. War memorials abound, with their lessons, explicit and implied. One can only wonder why the victims of other forms of mass catastrophe, by and large, are forgotten.

Plagues were a central organizing feature of Venetian life, too. Built on swampland, one could say that epidemics were built in. The bubonic plague,

<sup>1</sup> James Panero, “Like the Plague,” *The New Criterion*, May 2020

or the Black Death, which struck the city most powerfully in the mid-14th century, killed, overall, between 75 and 200 million people across several continents. Further Venetian outbreaks occurred in 1575-76 and in 1630, the latter killing a third of the city’s inhabitants.

And yet, for Venetians, these horrific episodes served not as invitations to heedlessness, but, on the contrary, as the inspiration to create some of the city’s greatest architecture and art -- institutions through which to memorialize its experience of death and deliverance. For example, two of Venice’s most notable landmarks, Palladio’s *Redentore* (Church of the Redeemer) and the Baroque *Salute* (St. Mary of Health) commemorate the abatement of the plague.

The Scuola Grande di San Rocco occupies a central place in these memorials – and, not incidentally, in the life of John Ruskin. It was there in 1845 that Ruskin, visiting Venice with the well-known watercolorist James Duffield Harding, “discovered” the work of Tintoretto, the great Venetian master (1519-1596).



*Scuola Grande di San Rocco -- Venice*

The power of this discovery is palpable in Ruskin’s later account of his first visit to the Scuola:

“When we had got through the upper gallery and into the room of [Tintoretto’s] *Crucifixion*, we both sate down and looked – not at it but at each other – literally the strength so taken out of us that we could not stand! When we came away Harding said that he felt like a whipped schoolboy. I . . . felt only that a new world was opened to me, that I had seen that day the Art of Man in its full majesty for the first time . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Writing weeks later to his father, he sums up the revolutionary effect the Venetian painter was having on his perceptions:

“I have been quite upset in all my calculations by that rascal Tintoret – he has shown me some totally new fields of art and altered my feelings in many respects – or at least deepened and modified them – and I shall work differently, after seeing him, from my former method. I can’t see enough of him, and the more I look the more wonderful he becomes.”<sup>3</sup>

Tintoretto was to become something of a rival to Turner in Ruskin’s affections and, more importantly, in the shaping of his aesthetics.

We would do well, though, to note the purpose of the Venetian confraternity, or scuola, of San Rocco – St. Roch – the institution which housed this “Sistine Chapel” of Tintoretto masterpieces that so captivated Ruskin. In 16th-century plague-ravaged Venice, citizens dedicated a new church and confraternity to St. Roch, both to serve the city’s sick and to house the saint’s relics.

<sup>2</sup> Ruskin, the 1883 Epilogue to *Modern Painters II*, Library Edition IV:354

<sup>3</sup> Letter 145, quoted in *Looking at Tintoretto With Ruskin* by Emma Sdegno, Marsilio, 2018, pg. 27



*Tintoretto: “St. Roch Visiting the Plague Victims”*

According to his legend, St. Roch was born around 1300 in southern France. Taking a vow of poverty, he went on pilgrimage to Rome. There, he encountered a plague-ravaged Italy and devoted himself to caring for victims in numerous population centers, curing large numbers of the sick simply by making the sign of the cross over them. When he himself fell ill at Piacenza – a common occurrence for caregivers – he was driven out of the city to die. Sheltered in a hut of brambles, he availed himself of water from a miraculous spring. A hunting dog brought him bread and licked his wounds, thereby restoring the saint to health. Not surprisingly, Roch’s ability to survive an earlier edition of the plague attracted the attentions of fear-stricken populations and their overwhelmed leaders in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In a chapel next to the Scuola, Tintoretto painted a cycle of four paintings to adorn the reliquary-altar, where St. Roch’s relics are preserved. They feature episodes from the life of the plague saint, including a representation of *St. Roch Visiting the Plague Victims* (1549). These works have been described as “of cinematic scope – sprawling, dark, and filled with pathos.”

(Ruskin, interestingly, was considerably less enthusiastic about both painting and the subject – chiefly on the grounds that its grim portrayal, appropriately, lacked color. “So it is a brown study of diseased limbs in a close room.”)<sup>4</sup>

Panero sums up his analysis with a close as arresting as its beginning: “*We are all Venetians now*, even arguing over the nature of our illness and the costs of our quarantines, as Venice famously did in 1576.”

However, in 2020, outside of our caregivers, we do not seem, as a society, to aspire to the large-heartedness, mindfulness or to the complex mix of solutions the crisis of disease inspired in our ancestors.

As Panero sagely observes: “Venice’s grand institutions made no separation among faith, art, and medicine. All worked together in the power to cure.”

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

<sup>4</sup> Emma Sdegno, *Looking at Tintoretto With Ruskin*, pg. 93.



## NEWSLETTER ESSAY:

“The Gamble House: A Pandemic Past as Prelude”

By Ted Bosley

“It is fine to sleep out again and I wish you could have that joy.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote Mary Huggins Gamble to her youngest son, Clarence, in November of 1912. Though he was away at Princeton, other family members had gathered in Pasadena for another winter season in the house designed for them five years earlier by architects Greene & Greene. At Thanksgiving, Mary wrote to Clarence again: “I felt very thankful when I first woke up and saw the glow on the hills and breathed the delicious air, that I could live in this beautiful place... .”<sup>2</sup> The mild winter climate of Pasadena meant that the Gamble family could comfortably sleep outdoors on their porches, and they often did. A series of three covered balconies—often referred to as sleeping porches—faces north and west. They are connected to, yet stand away from, the main mass of the Gamble House on its second level. Sweeping views of Nature, can be had from them, including views towards the San



*Figure 1: Mary Gamble’s sleeping porch (center), looking southeast from the garden.*

Gabriel Mountains and the nearby Arroyo Seco. As seen from the rear garden of the Gamble House the three porches make a prominent architectural statement, setting the tone for a family’s life outdoors (figure 1). Equally important, the porches reflect a progressive environmental attitude on the part of the two young architects, Charles and Henry Greene, whose Ruskinian, Nature-centric approach to home design became a hallmark of their work.

Greene & Greene valued patrons like the Gambles, who relied on the benefits of Nature in their daily lives. Most winters between 1909 and the

<sup>1</sup> Mary H. Gamble to Clarence J. Gamble, November 14, 1912. Merry Bradley Gamble papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>2</sup> MHG to CJG, November 28, 1912. Merry Bradley Gamble papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

late 1920s, the Gamble family and their household staff spent several idyllic months—more and more as time went by—in the gentle climate of Southern California, a three-day train journey from their home in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the early days, Mary Gamble treasured the views from the edge of a bluff overlooking the family’s ten acres of orange trees, which she enjoyed from a west-facing bench in her garden (figure 2). Change came too for Mary. An unusual freeze early in 1913 was so severe that some trees had to be removed and re-planted. Dust storms also disrupted outdoor life. By 1915, neighboring houses were being built, prompting Mary to remark that she’d hoped her view to the north might have lasted a little longer. The family furnished and used the north terrace as an outdoor room, but it faced Westmoreland Place (the private street on which the Gambles’ home stood with five others) and so was subject to growing street noise. Accordingly, in 1915, a gate and portals were commissioned from by Greene & Greene to block access to tour buses that were disturbing the street’s tranquility more and more.

In Pasadena, as everywhere else in the world, the influenza pandemic of 1918-20, commonly called the “Spanish” flu, caused widespread illness and tens of millions died. The pandemic also provoked extreme and varied reactions. The first known case was recorded at a US Army base in Kansas, in March of 1918, just before American troops were shipped to the war raging in Europe. At the time, Spain was a neutral state and the only European country without a news blackout. Widely disseminated newspaper coverage of the pandemic coming primarily from Madrid caused other

countries to falsely assume it had originated there, hence “Spanish” influenza. Understandably miffed, the Spanish took to calling it the “French flu.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, no letters from Mary Gamble survive from the period to know the family’s response, but Los Angeles newspapers recorded nearly identical reactions to what we have seen in today’s pandemic: anger, flat-out denial, grudging acceptance (or none), and political conflict about masks and



*Figure 2: Mary Gamble seated on her west-facing bench (circa 1915).*

in the fall of 1918, a church successfully sued Los Angeles in the State Supreme Court to re-open for religious services. In the end, Los Angeles County did a better job of containing the influenza than most (figure 3). San Francisco, which fared well to begin with (it was the first city to require

<sup>3</sup> The History Channel website, accessed July 17, 2020: <https://www.history.com/news/why-was-it-called-the-spanish-flu>



masks, and fined citizens who refused to wear them), became complacent and re-opened too soon. To their tragic regret as infections and deaths increased dramatically.<sup>4</sup>

A century later, in today's Covid-19 pandemic, science has led medical professionals to confirm that outdoor transmission of infection is slight—a significantly reduced risk versus indoor transmission, especially in spaces where air circulation is poor. At the Gamble House we had planned to re-open for tours beginning July 9, with docent-led tours led primarily outdoors, to focus on the Gambles' gardens. Docents trained diligently for these new tours, which envisioned the groups touring indoors for a few minutes near the end of the tour. Soon after, however, coronavirus cases began to surge and Governor Newsom revised the orders: museums may not offer interior visits until further notice. As of this writing, the outstanding craftsmanship and design features of the Greenes' interiors are off limits to the public at the Gamble House. However, we have taken the opportunity to extend our focus on the gardens, and on those remarkable sleeping porches the Gambles loved so much. Outdoor living, appreciating the arc of the sun, the direction of prevailing breezes, and the magnificence of the views to Nature, are the lessons I hope our visitors will take from the exterior architecture and landscape tour. These values were, I believe, in Mary Gamble's thoughts when she wrote how thankful she was "that I could live in this beautiful place."

***Ted Bosley is Executive Director/CEO of the Gamble House, Pasadena***  
[www.gamblehouse.org](http://www.gamblehouse.org)



*Figure 3: Pasadenans masked up in 1919 up during the "Spanish" influenza.*

<sup>4</sup> NBC News article, accessed July 17, 2020: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/san-francisco-had-1918-flu-under-control-then-it-lifted-n1191141>

## 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.

### SEPTEMBER 2020

#### 1 - VIRTUAL FIELD TRIP TO THE STUDIO OF W. PATRICK EDWARDS

Thursday, Sept. 3, 7-8:30pm PDT

*A traditional furniture conservator, restorer, and maker discusses his life experiences and his philosophy of work. All the work of this marquetry\* master is done with hand tools and organic traditional materials and methods*

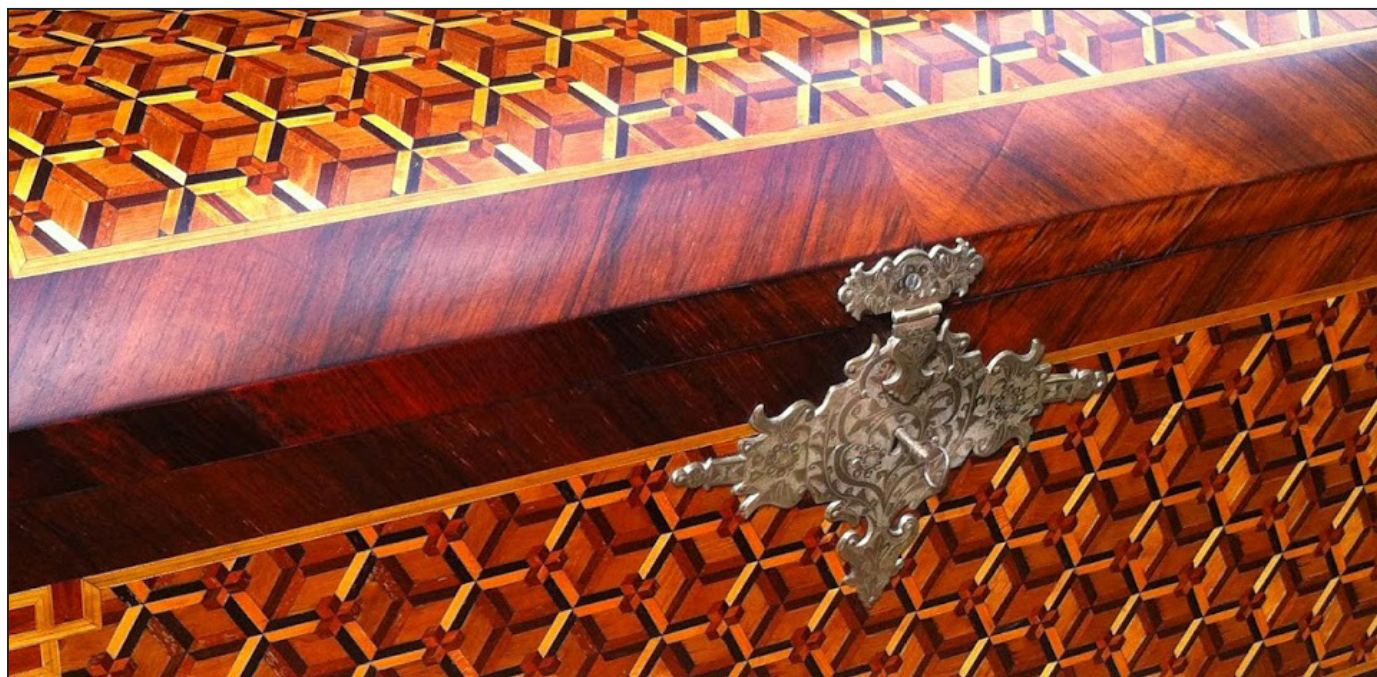
WILLIAM PATRICK EDWARDS was born in Los Angeles in 1948 and raised in San Diego, where his studio is now located. He studied physics at University of California at San Diego and graduated with a BA in Applied Physics and Information Science. However, Edwards, long interested in antique furniture, started an antique restoration business in 1969. Since then, his principal occupation has been conservation and restoration of pre-industrial furniture, using only hand tools and traditional methods and materials.

From 1976 to 1985, Edwards worked as the furniture conservator for the 1864 Phineas Banning Residence Museum in Wilmington (Los Angeles). In 1992, he studied under Dr. Pierre Ramond at the Ecole Boulle in Paris. Edwards received the support of Dr. Ramond in launching the American School of French Marquetry (San Diego) in the year 2000. This allows Edwards to divide his time between working on furniture conservation in the business and teaching marquetry in the school.

He is the author of numerous articles on his philosophy of work and traditional techniques of marquetry. For more information and images of Edwards’ remarkable designs, visit his blog at: <http://wpatrickedwards.blogspot.com/>

*\*Marquetry is the art and craft of inlaying small pieces of material (wood, shell, ivory) into a surface of decorative veneer.*





Marquetry example from Patrick Edwards' website: <http://wpatrickedwards.blogspot.com/>

## SEPTEMBER 2020

2 - Virtual Conference: "Ruskin's Life: A Radical Reinterpretation"

Thursdays, Sept. 10, 17, 24 – 5-6:30pm PDT

Jim Spates, Professor Emeritus of Sociology

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York

with Gabriel Meyer

Following is Jim's description of the talks:

For more than a century, the "accepted version" of John Ruskin's life story has been in grave error. So grave has been this error, Ruskin's reputation has suffered greatly, along with serious interest in his vital and ever-relevant work.

This lecture series will be a distillation, in three virtual discussions conducted with Gabriel Meyer, Executive Director of The Ruskin Art Club in Los Angeles, of the findings contained in major studies of Ruskin's life that I have conducted and published over the last three decades. All our sessions will begin at 5 PM PDT and each presentation will be followed by a Question and Answer period with the audience.

In the first session, "**Helen Gill Viljoen: The Unsung Hero of Ruskin Biography**," I will show how this American scholar, making a chance visit to Brantwood, Ruskin's home in the Lake District, in 1929, discovered in the thousands of Ruskin letters and diaries that survived there, that the story





*Prof. Jim Spates*

of Ruskin's life which had been told by the executors of Ruskin's literary estate in their immense collection of his works, *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, had been meticulously censored to eliminate any aspect of his life story that might be potentially seen as "off-putting" to readers. So effective was this biographic subterfuge, that all later writers on Ruskin's life have, however unwittingly, compounded the Library Edition's distortions—except for Viljoen, who, spent the rest of her professional life—45 years!—compiling reams of additional

evidence that proved the correctness of her revisions to the standard biography. Unfortunately, she died in 1974 before she was able to publish her findings. This talk will focus not only on her personal story but on the major new insights she would have contributed to our understanding of Ruskin's life.

In the second interview, "**Ruskin's Mental Illness: An Alternative Interpretation,**" we will consider another aspect of what can be called "The Ruskin Myth," the suggestion that the severe bouts of mental illness he experienced over the course of his last quarter century were the consequence of some congenital malady. The available evidence, however, when it is analyzed in the context of modern psychiatric knowledge, shows, rather, that Ruskin's disturbances were the outgrowth of a particularly deleterious series of soul-damaging "real world" events experienced during his lifetime. This reinterpretation has the advantage of demonstrating that Ruskin's work, often thought to be "tainted" by an inherited tendency to mental imbalance, is as sound and brilliant as the great majority of his contemporaries thought it was.

The last discussion concerns "**Ruskin's Sexuality: Correcting a Century of Misinformation and Misdiagnosis.**" Of all the derogatory labels that have been pinned on Ruskin, none has been more unjustly damaging to his reputation as the suggestion that he was sexually interested in little girls, was, in fact, a pedophile. Like the misinterpretation of his mental illness, this distortion finds its origin in what was (and wasn't!) said about his relationships with the opposite sex in the biographical chapters of the above-mentioned Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin. My analysis of his sexual interest — again, using for analytical and evaluative purposes, up-to-date research on the topic, shows that the charge of perversion is refuted by the facts. Also in this

discussion, I explain why the notion of a “sexually perverse” Ruskin has proved so seductive to us modern sensibilities, not least because we fear the challenge of Ruskin’s critical cultural insights. If he can be “sidelined” by the claim that he was sexually deviant, we no longer have to take his critiques of our society, and by extension, ourselves, seriously.

We do hope you will join us for these discussions.

Jim Spates is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. He is the Co-Founder (with Sara Atwood), in 2020, of The Ruskin Society of North America, webmaster of the blog site, <https://whyruskin.wordpress.com>, a Companion of Ruskin’s Guild of St. George, a Member of the Roycroft Campus Community, and a Member of the Ruskin Art Club in Los Angeles.

For the last three decades, he has lectured regularly in both the UK and US, on various aspects of Ruskin’s life and work. He is the author of many published articles on Ruskin and of the book, *The Imperfect Round: Helen Gill Viljoen’s ‘Life of Ruskin.’* Currently, he is writing *Availing toward Life: The Radical Social Thought of John Ruskin*, a book dedicated to making Ruskin’s masterpiece of social and economic criticism, *Unto this Last*, accessible to a new generation of readers.

## **OCTOBER 2020**

### 1 - AN EVENING WITH DAVID JUDSON OF JUDSON STUDIOS

**Monday, Oct. 5th - Time to be Announced**

Ruskin scholar Sara Atwood interviews David Judson, President of the historic Judson Studios in Los Angeles/South Pasadena about his recent history of this 123-year old architectural glass manufacturer, JUDSON: INNOVATION IN STAINED GLASS.

### 2 - A SCREENING OF THE AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY “THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM”

**Saturday, Oct. 10th - Time to be Announced**

Directed by filmmaker and farmer John Chester, the film 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. 91 minutes. Followed by a special 45-minute on-site Q&A with the filmmaker/farmer John Chester

Apricot Lane Farms was founded in 2011 by John and Molly Chester, and today spans 214 acres of countryside in Moorpark, California, just 40 miles north of Los Angeles. We regeneratively grow more than 200 varieties of fruits and vegetables, and raise sheep, cows, pigs, chickens and ducks with care and respect, while working in harmony (or a comfortable level of disharmony) within our dynamic ecosystem.





# RUSKIN, ROYCROFT AND THE ARTS & CRAFTS

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or contact the Executive Director,  
Gabriel Meyer:  
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For news of Ruskin Art Club events, especially  
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