On Books and Places: John Ruskin continues to inspire and promote on his 200th birthday

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Walk through Windsor Village, and you can't help but notice the lovely revival house on Plymouth Blvd. and 8th St. For nearly a century that property (Historic Cultural Monument #639) was home to the Ruskin Art Club. Like The Ebell, the Ruskin was founded by women in Los Angeles who cared about numerous matters that a new and rapidly growing city could too easily disregard: culture, history, art and education.

THE RUSKIN ART CLUB moved into this Spanish Colonial Revival residence at 800 S. Plymouth Boulevard in the mid-1920s. Designed by architect Frank Meline, the building was originally constructed by the Congregational Church Extension Society as a Sunday School Room and Parish House for the nearby church (now Wilshire United Methodist).
Photo courtesy of windsorvillage.net

The Ruskin Art Club moved out of the neighborhood in 2014, but it hasn't disappeared. Perhaps now, in the bicentennial year of John Ruskin's birth, it's time to reflect on the small club's grand mission, which is nothing less than to promote Ruskin's "vision of the unity of art and life and the arts as a catalyst for social transformation of the 21st century."

The last part of that mission statement strikes what might seem an anachronistic note. Ruskin, after all, died in 1900. It was the "storm cloud" of the 20th century that commanded his attention in the last years of a long life. And in those last years, the great champion of J. M. W. Turner's early 19th century paintings found himself out of sympathy and out of synch with stunning new movements — impressionism among them.

Add to this the fact that Ruskin can't be pinned down in 21st century terms: was this man of great inherited wealth a socialist, a paternalist, a reactionary, a visionary, an economist, an elitist? Was he a crank or a sage?

Foremost an artist

Perhaps the answer is that Ruskin was all and none of the above because he was foremost an artist. Ruskin's essays operate like much great poetry: they express contradictions that prompt new ways of seeing. They don't so much tell us what to think as they help us to think and feel. So the mission of the Los Angeles Ruskin Art Club quite appropriately says more about how we can use Ruskin than any narrow interpretation of what he wrote. In the spirit of their mission statement, I suggest we use him to inspire and provoke.

Much of the inspiration relates to our increasingly urgent environmental crisis. Ruskin understood that how we build and grow impacts the world we collectively inhabit. And while he usually expresses environmental degradation in aesthetic terms, he always links things he describes to broader values. To his mind, an ugly school, for example, would be a public health problem; a beautiful school, on the other hand, would help nurture a vibrant community.

Encampments as failures

As to provocation, Ruskin wasn't one to give a free pass to prettiness. He was a stern, some say shrill, prophet. A homeless encampment near the most composed of residential neighborhoods would be more than an eyesore to him; it would be a civic failure — a moral blight on all our houses. And for all his love of beauty, architecture wasn't mainly about the finished product; it was about the skilled, patient and coordinated labor that buildings occasioned. So when work disappears or the dignity of work is compromised, the social fabric wears thin and tears.

On this point, Ruskin identified a tension between beauty and need that challenges us still.

By Bruce Beiderwell