

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

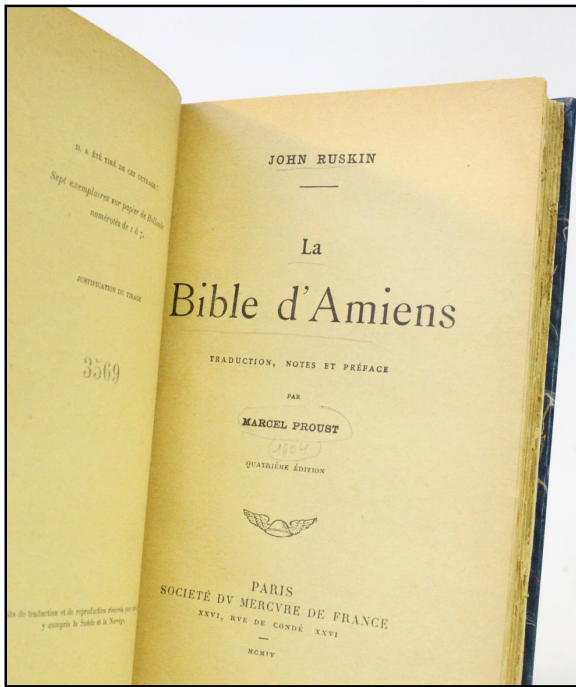
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER

“Ruskin Beyond the Anglosphere”

Ruskin Art Club members and friends will recall the mini-conference we organized last May on aspects of British art and social critic John Ruskin’s influence on 19th-century American thought (see our YouTube page, the three lectures on Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir). These talks constituted only a fraction of the *twenty-two* lectures and events which, thanks to you and your support, comprised our 2021 season. This coming year, 2022, we hope to feature a number of presentations which highlight Ruskin’s influence on non-English-speaking cultures, such as those of France and Japan.

We start the ball rolling with the year’s inaugural lecture on Ruskin and Proust.

Writer, poet, translator Damion Searls is one of the leading voices on this important literary relationship, author (among other titles) of *Marcel Proust and John Ruskin: On Reading* (Hesperus Press, 2011). Damion will lead us in exploring the influence Ruskin’s works exerted on the young Proust and Proust’s vigorous and multi-faceted response to that influence. Early in his career, Proust published translations of the English critic’s *The Bible of Amiens* and *Sesame and Lilies*. Amplified by essay-length prefaces and copious notes, Proust’s French versions of Ruskin were much more than



John Ruskin, *La Bible d'Amiens*,
French translation (Marcel Proust), 1904

mere translations; they were encounters, creating free-wheeling literary exchanges between the two writers and their ideas.

Beyond that, Proust's reflections contain a profound commentary on the meaning of the act of reading itself – reading as self-transcending spiritual act.

“To understand a profound thought is to have, at the moment one understands it, a profound thought oneself; and this demands some effort, a genuine descent to the heart of oneself . . . Only desire and love give us the strength to make this effort. The only books that we truly absorb are those we read with real appetite, after having worked hard to get them, so great had been our need of them.”

Proust was also drawn to the role of memory and imagination in Ruskin's work – a theme that would influence his

A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. In his Preface to *The Bible of Amiens*, Proust writes that he “would like to give the reader the desire and the means to spend a day in Amiens on a sort of Ruskin pilgrimage . . . We visit the place where a great man was born and the place where he died; but does not he inhabit even more the places he admired above all others, whose beauty is the very thing we love in his books?”

In addition to Searls's 2011 study, Proust's prefaces and notes to Ruskin's are available in English, courtesy of *Marcel Proust: On Reading Ruskin* (Yale University Press, 1987, translated by Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe).

Proust was hardly the only French writer to find inspiration in Ruskin's work. Perhaps the most well-known Ruskinite, after Proust, was Robert de la Sizeranne (1866-1932), whose landmark study *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty* (1897) laid down the outlines of what might be called a uniquely French school of Ruskin interpretation, reconciling the various facets of Ruskin's thought into a comprehensive whole through the lens of French aesthetics.

As de la Sizeranne writes: “For several years I delayed to write [about Ruskin] until his system dawned upon me no longer as a delicious medley but as a harmony of great lines, like those Alpine mountains which he loved so well. In their midst all is chaos; gradually, as we recede, they blend and unite till they stand on the horizon, only a ‘little blue film’ yet ‘itself a world.’”

An English translation of de la Sizeranne's *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty*, long out of print, can still be found online on used-books sites in an 1899 translation by the Countess of Galloway, George Allen, publisher. (We are

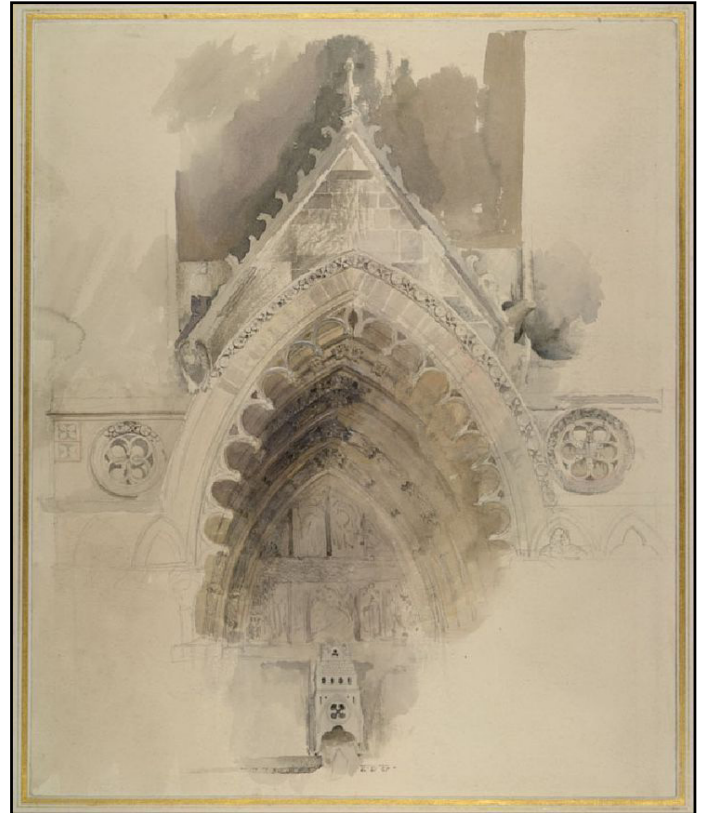
“*Ruskin Beyond the Anglosphere*” by Gabriel Meyer — Continued

in the process of posting pdfs of such classic out-of-print studies on the Ruskin website under the Resources tab.)

In the end, France and Ruskin stand in an essential relationship to one another. As Sara Atwood observed in a 2017 review, quoting Ruskin’s editors, Cook and Wedderburn: “*To Ruskin, France, almost more than Italy, was his second country. He knew the French language, and was fond of its literature; his early love had been a French girl, and he still had many friends in Paris; he had the artist’s eye for the charm of French landscape, and the very air of France came to him as if from Paradise. . .*”

And in his own words: “. . . *Of the fact I am certain, that for grace of stem and perfection of form in their transparent foliage, the French trees are altogether unmatched; and their modes of grouping and massing vare so perfectly and constantly beautiful, that I think, of all countries for educating an artist to the perception of grace, France bears the bell; and that not romantic nor mountainous France, not the Vosges, nor Auvergne, nor Provence, but lowland France, Picardy and Normandy, the valleys of the Loire and Seine, and even the district, so thoughtlessly and mindlessly abused by English travellers as uninteresting, traversed between Calais and Dijon; of which there is not a single valley but is full of the most lovely pictures, nor a mile from which the artist may not receive instruction. . . Of this kind of beauty Turner was the first to take cognizance, and he still remains the only, but in himself the sufficient, painter of French landscape.*”

– *Modern Painters I* (3:238)¹



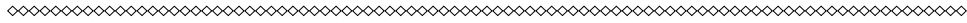
John Ruskin, *Amien Cathedral, North Porch* (1856)

¹Numerical references are to the volumes/page numbers of the Library Edition of the Works of Ruskin (under Resources on the Ruskin Art Club website)

“Ruskin is like a river. He is like a flame. He never repeats himself, he is constantly renewed, yet he remains himself.”

Robert de la Sizeranne

FROM OUR MEMBERS



Ruskin Art Club member Robert Flynn Johnson sent us this recent notice on the death of artist **Wayne Thiebaud** (1920-2021). We encourage members to send us notices about their activities and also their reflections on issues that may interest other members. We hope to make “From Our Members” a regular feature of the Ruskin Art Club Newsletter.



Portrait of Robert Flynn Johnson,
Wayne Thiebaud

*“I’m heartbroken to hear that my friend Wayne Thiebaud passed away yesterday (December 25, 2021) at 101. A nicer human being you couldn’t ever hope to meet and a great artist. He painted this portrait of me in 1981 and generously donated it to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 2018. What a wonderful, meaningful life he lived as an artist and an influential teacher.
-- Robert Flynn Johnson*

“I think that art is probably our saving grace. It can almost ignore our animal premise and spirits. It’s worth investing in as many deeply involved people as we can muster because I think that’s where our hopes lie: in giving us a life of pleasure, challenge, comfort, joyousness -- all the things that make us human and able to relate kindly to each other.” -- Wayne Thiebaud (2021)

POINT OF INTEREST:

Never a dull moment when Ruskin was at the podium. . .

by Alfred E. Housman

In addition to his voluminous writings and philanthropic work, Ruskin was a master lecturer. In recognition of his abilities in this field as well as his eminence as an art critic, he was appointed the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford in 1869. He retired from Oxford in 1879, but resumed his position briefly from 1883-84, by which time his health was increasingly precarious. His lectures were so popular that many had to be given twice. While ostensibly about art, Ruskin’s lecture topics reflected the breadth of his interests: myth, ornithology, nature-study and geology as well as architecture, sculpture, and metal and wood engraving. Ruskin famously organized his Oxford pupils into the Hinksey Road brigades to repair roads in poorer neighborhoods – an effort to connect art with social concern and to highlight the virtues of manual labor.



Frederick Watty, caricature of John Ruskin (1873)

Ruskin was a pioneer in the use of visual aids in education – from mineral samples to large lecture copies of paintings under glass, diagrams, watercolors and architectural drawings. The bemused testimony below gives us a rare eyewitness look at Ruskin’s “podium style” – no dispassionate don mumbling into his lecture notes here. –Ed.

In a letter to his mother, poet and classical scholar Alfred E. Housman (1859-1936), of *A Shropshire Lad* fame, describes attending one of Ruskin’s lectures as Slade Professor of Fine Art in 1877:

“ . . . This afternoon Ruskin gave us a great outburst against modern times. He has got a picture of Turner’s, framed and glassed, representing Leicester and the Abbey in the distance at sunset, over a river. He read the account of Wolsey’s death out of Henry VIII. Then he pointed to the picture as representing Leicester when Turner had drawn it. Then he said, ‘You, if you like, may go to Leicester to see what it is like now. I never shall. But I can make a pretty good guess.’ Then he caught up a paintbrush. ‘These

stepping-stones of course have been done away with, and replaced by a be-au-ti-ful iron bridge.’ Then he dashed in the iron bridge on the glass of the picture. ‘The colour of the stream is supplied on one side by the indigo factory.’ Forthwith one side of the stream became indigo. ‘On the other side by the soap factory.’ Soap dashed in. ‘They mix in the middle – like curds,’ he said, working them together with a kind of malicious deliberation. ‘This field, over which you see the sun setting behind the abbey, is now occupied in a proper manner.’ Then there went a flame of scarlet across the picture, which developed itself into windows and roofs and red brick, and rushed up into a chimney. ‘The atmosphere is supplied – thus!’ A puff and cloud of smoke all over Turner’s sky: and then the brush thrown down, and Ruskin confronting modern civilization amidst a tempest of applause, which he always elicits now, as he has this term become immensely popular, whereas of old he used to prophesy to empty benches.

How he confuted the geological survey, and science in general, by the help of the college cook I have no time to tell you. . . .”

From *The Letters of A. E. Housman* (Henry Maas, editor, Harvard University Press, 1971)

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.

JANUARY 2022

“Marcel Proust, Translator of John Ruskin”

by Damion Searls

Thursday, January 6th, 5pm PDT

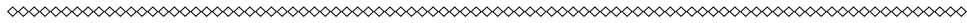
At the key turning point in Proust’s life and career, he translated two books by John Ruskin, *The Bible of Amiens* and *Sesame and Lilies* -- Ruskin’s first book-length translations into French. The philosophy of translation that he developed in the process, his practice writing Ruskin’s glorious prose in French, and his adoption of and reaction against the specific concept of reading that Ruskin lays out in “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” the “Sesame” lecture of *Sesame and Lilies*, transformed Proust’s writing and laid the groundwork for his great novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. Searls, who has translated Proust’s introductions and notes to Ruskin and published them for the first time in English together with Ruskin’s full text, will discuss the biographical background to this project of Proust’s, what he took from it about reading and translation, and how the vast world of Ruskin’s body of work inspired Proust’s own.



Portrait of Marcel Proust (1895)



Dr. Gray Brechin is the founder and Project Scholar the Living New Deal based at the U.C. Berkeley Department of Geography, a nationwide network dedicated to the identification, mapping, and interpretation of public works built during the Roosevelt Administration. An architectural historian and historical geographer, he is the author of *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* and, with photographer Robert Dawson, *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream*. He and his husband Bob Chlebowski live in Inverness, California, but his heart is often in Wales.



FEBRUARY 2022

RUSKIN BIRTHDAY BASH

with actor Jeff Sugarman and the Zelter Quartet

Denenberg Fine Arts Gallery (via Zoom)

Thursday, February 10th, 5pm PDT



The Zelter Quartet

Ruskin's birthday (February 8) is always a big occasion for the Ruskin Art Club. We will present a full evening of readings, toasts, and music to honor the great art and social critic on his **203rd birthday**. Among the evening's highlights will be an edited version of the lecture "Traffic" (1864), the radical Victorian art critic's brilliant defense of dignity and creativity in a world obsessed by money, read by actor Jeff Sugarman. **The Zelter Quartet**, led by cellist **Allan Hon**, will join us again, performing Maurice Ravel's String Quartet in F Major (1903).

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.

(Email to our old address will be redirected.)



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