

John Ruskin (1819-1900) and French Painting

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ABSTRACT

The impact of John Ruskin's work has been considerable both in England and on the continent, and remains so today. His published works constituted a veritable aesthetic and moral education of the gaze for his contemporary Victorians. A genuine embodiment of the aesthetic aspirations of his time, Ruskin's work is striking in its ethnocentrism, carefully circumventing the question of French painting. This absence especially sheds light on his highly moral vision of art and its social role.



Convinced that “the art of any country *is the exponent of its social and political virtues*,” (“Lectures on Art. 1870,” included in *The Works of John Ruskin*, London, G. Allen, vol. 20, 1905, p. 39), John Ruskin gave art a role of great importance, that of revealing a nation’s ethical health.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), the English art critic, writer, politician, social reformer, and sociologist, is considered one of the most influential figures of the Victorian period. Art historians have especially been interested in his writings on art, particularly his *Modern Painters*, which circulated throughout Victorian England, and more broadly in Europe. They have anointed him as a great art critic and painting theorist of his time, notably for his defence of the painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, his support for the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and his trial against James McNeill Whistler. Ruskin was also a prolific author with a wide and varied range of subjects. Through his poetry, as well as his essays on geology, botany, politics, the Church, economics, painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, and artistic and aesthetic education, Ruskin put his stamp on all of Victorian England’s values.

Ruskin spoke fluent French and had contact with French culture throughout his life, unceasingly praising its architecture and literature, Molière and Jean-François Marmontel. The absence of a major text on French painting showed his readership his lack of interest in the subject, as well as a certain disdain. He directly maintained that the four major schools in art were those of Italy, Spain, the Southern Netherlands and England. According to him there was no French school other than in the area of the decorative arts, and he believed France had never produced a single great painter.

Ruskin did not hide the fact that his knowledge of early modern French painting was limited, preventing him from dedicating a chapter to this subject in his work. However, the subject is addressed, albeit in scattered fashion, during the course of his writings on art and his lectures, and proves to be particularly instructive. His condemnation of the painting of Catholic and revolutionary France brought this Protestant monarchist face to face with a number of intellectual and aesthetic questions.

His references to works by Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Gaspard Dughet—known to Ruskin at the time under the name of Gaspar Poussin—are revealing of his thinking on art. These modern artists were in fact the first major masters to draw the critic’s wrath. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin’s praise for Turner is heightened by his severe judgment of seventeenth century French painters. He based his aesthetic on a Christian commitment to the truth of nature, one that was explicit and particularly romantic. Anxious to educate the eye of his contemporaries, Ruskin criticized Lorrain for his poor understanding of nature—in which an ideal vision triumphs in his landscapes with no regard for genuine sentiments—thus presenting pernicious consequences for European aesthetics. By asserting that a society’s fate relied on its ability to clearly see its relation to nature and to religion, the visible elements of the natural physical world appear as so many bonds between Man and God. Ruskin’s deification of nature had important consequences for his aesthetic theory, in whose name he reproached these French artists for breaking the alliance between Nature and God. Under Ruskin’s pen, art became a revealing element of a nation’s moral virtue. Certain effects in French painting shocked him. He criticized their sensuality, describing modern French painters as pleasure-seekers with no knowledge of colour. This rhetoric is a permanent feature of Ruskin’s work, but if his critique of his contemporary French painters draws bemused interest for its language, it quite often lacks examples: his ardour is pleasing, but often unfounded.

Ruskin certainly never attempted to follow the artistic developments of a country other than his own. While he visited the Louvre Museum on numerous occasions, he never seems to have attended the Parisian Salon. Finally, his most detailed discussion of contemporary French painting appeared in his “Academy notes,” in which he reserved the modest space of four scant reviews from 1856-1859 for the “French Exhibition,” the annual exhibition of French artists that took place from 1854-1896 in London, at the French Gallery founded by Ernest Gambart. The articles for the four years that were reviewed, averaging two pages, make it possible to establish a list of ten artists and thirty-two works. They include unequal commentary on the work of Alexandre Antigna, Rosa Bonheur,

Édouard Frère, the German Ludwig Knaus, Henri Le Hon, Louis-Ernest Meissonier, Antoine Émile Palassan, Ary Scheffer, Jean-Baptiste-Jules Trayer and Constant Troyon. Of the thirty-two works critiqued, eighteen were painted by Édouard Frère. Ruskin especially admired his depictions of peasant life, and showed an interest for peasant themes commensurate to the hostile suspicion he held for Parisian society, which he deemed corrupt.

An explanation for Ruskin's lack of commitment to the French painting of his time can be found at the beginning of his notes on the "French Exhibition" of 1857, in which he asserts that each nation's art possesses specific characteristics that should be studied at length and in-depth before a foreigner can make a judgment. Ruskin then confesses that he does not yet feel capable of offering a serious study of the French school. Finally, far from his great principles declared in 1857, Ruskin asserted about twenty years later that the works of the painters Jacques-Louis David and Paul Delaroche were "merely clever stage scenery" and not paintings, that Jean-Léon Gérôme and Ernest Meissonier were "little masters" with minor qualities and that the religious painting of Le Sueur was just "pure nuisance."

Ruskin's work is the result of successive states of his thought rather than a comprehensive survey. Apparent contradictions abound, and its major developments can seem poorly linked together, so much so as to suggest that some of his arguments are no more than theoretical figures. In asserting that art should be considered as the creation and embodiment of a culture, Ruskin showed that a country's artistic production can provide precious clues on the political, social, and spiritual state of its creators. He insisted that every nation be judged at every moment of its history, including his own, based on the art it produced, specifying that it was useless—and even impossible—to improve it in the hope of improving the general state of the nation.

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