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I. Milan, money and modernity

Milan is not a major subject of Ruskin’s architectural and historical criticism, but one late reference provides a useful introduction to his writing on the relation of artistic form and social change. The remarks appear in a monograph written for the Arundel Society in 1872, a minor essay on what he regards as minor works of art, ‘The Cavalli Monuments in the Church of St Anastasia, Verona.’ The church, he warns, ‘contains nothing which deserves extraordinary praise.’ Still, in an uncharacteristic anticipation of Andy Warhol, Ruskin suggests we give it fifteen minutes’ attention. He promises the time will prove ‘interesting and instructive’ (24: 127).

First he contrasts two monuments, visible as we enter the church. One is cloaked in shadows, the other bathed in light; the first is the best, the second ‘essentially the worst, piece of sculptured art in the building’:

A series of academy studies in marble, well executed, but without either taste or invention, and necessarily without meaning, the monument having been erected to a person whose only claim to one was his having stolen money enough to pay for it before he died.

It is, Ruskin adds, ‘one of the first pieces extant of entirely mechanical art workmanship, done for money’ (24: 130). A monument, we might say, to the new world order described in *The Stones of Venice*, only now he gives equal weight to Renaissance ‘pride of science’ and the capital that finances it. The point is re-emphasized
in the Cavalli chapel itself, a ‘medley’ of contrasting styles, schools, motives and degrees of artistic excellence. This is partly what he calls ‘incrustation’ (a term he borrows from Italian historians: 24: 132), the accumulated work of many hands from many periods. But the deeper confusion is rooted in finance:

tombs and frescoes of different dates, partly superseding, none illustrating, each other, and instructive mainly as showing the unfortunate results of freedom and ‘private enterprise’ in matters of art. . . . (24: 130–1)

The only possible exception appears in Altichero’s beautiful upper fresco of three knights kneeling before Christ. Then attributed to Giotto, Ruskin insists that it is ‘nothing more than an interesting example of the earnest work of his time,’ with ‘no quality on which I care to enlarge’ (24: 132). Yet he still must attend to its ‘considerable historical interest’ (24: 132).

Ruskin dates the fresco to the fourteenth century, when Federico Cavalli became Podestà of Vicenza. But its ‘peculiar significance’ arises from the history of the previous three centuries, when Milan ‘had been the central point at which the collision between the secular and ecclesiastical power took place in Europe’ (24: 135). This was when the Cavalli came from Germany to enter the service of powerful families in Milan, Vicenza and eventually Venice; part of the triumph of ‘the wandering rider, Eques, or Ritter, living by pillage, over the sendentary burgher, living by art, and hale peasant, living by labor’. And the ‘essential nature of this struggle’ is ‘curiously indicated in relation to the monument’ by two facts: ‘first, that the revolt of the burghers in Milan began with ‘a gentleman killing an importunate creditor’; second, that ‘at Venice, the principal circumstance recorded of Jacopo Cavalli . . . is his refusal to assault Feltre, because the senate would not grant him the pillage of the town’ (24: 137). Thus, for all its medieval charm, the fresco foreshadows the growing power of money in the culture that surrounded and succeeded it – that is, in modern culture.

Yet none of this is visible in the Giottoesque fresco. Ruskin in effect historicizes it, not just in relation to the middle ages but from the distance of post-Renaissance culture. He invites the reader to do the same, to ‘follow out, according to his disposition, what thoughts the fresco of the three kneeling knights . . . may suggest to him on review of these passages of history’ (24: 137–8). It is a

departure from what we often think of as Ruskinian art criticism, perhaps a departure from art criticism as such. The visual is subsumed in the historical, description supplanted by narration. The fresco becomes a meditative object. Perhaps it is the very attribution of such art to Giotto that troubles him. Appearances are deceiving. It isn’t enough to see.

This may explain the essay’s odd closing comments, where Ruskin says he ‘must guard’ us against one conclusion; ‘that a condottiere’s religion must necessarily have been false or hypocritical’. His own historical narrative seems to support this view. But things aren’t as simple as that:

The folly of nations is in nothing more manifest than in their placid reconciliation of noble creeds with base practices. But the reconciliation, in the fourteenth, as in the nineteenth century, was usually foolish only, not insincere. (24: 138)

The tour of a medieval monument concludes in the nineteenth century, emphasizing our limited ability to understand the past, let alone see it with any precision. Historical images are contaminated by the conditions in which they must be viewed, especially when we look across the great divide between medieval and modern experience. Ruskin’s final sentences suggest not just the elusiveness of historical and visual evidence but the special difficulties we encounter interpreting the culture from which our own culture is beginning to emerge.

II. Death in Venice

Why the ‘stones’ of Venice? Ruskin’s title is usually explained by his own remarks in the first chapter:

if I should succeed, as I hope, in making the Stones of Venice touchstones, and detecting, by the mouldering of her marble, poison more subtle than ever was betrayed by the rending of her crystal; and if thus I am enabled to show the baseness of the schools of architecture and nearly every other art, which have for three centuries been predominant in Europe, I believe the result of the inquiry may be serviceable for proof of a more vital truth than any at which I have hitherto hinted. (9: 57–8)
The sentence uses its central term in two ways. The famous reference to touchstones hints that architecture will serve as a kind of material metaphor, a site of moral analysis. The end of the sentence promises a search for ‘proof’, a word recalling the quasi-scientific emphasis of *Modern Painters* on natural law, particularly geology. *The Stones of Venice* continually refers us to the same bedrock of physical evidence: real stones in real buildings. Lest we underrate the plain, material significance of the title, Ruskin echoes its literalism in the titles of the first volume, ‘The Foundations’, and the first chapter, ‘The Quarry’. Back to basics, then, to the hard facts of architectural history. In this most impressionistic of cities, the subject of some of his most poetic prose and Turner’s most expressionistic images, Ruskin will focus on the solid materials of cultural archeology.

I will return to Turner’s role in Ruskin’s analysis of Venetian history. First, I want to emphasize the paradoxical quality of its methodology. For in spite of his commitment to the solidity of material history, Ruskin is fixated on something opposite: the insubstantial, uncertain world of illusion and decay – the mysteries comprising this elusive place. The first description of the city echoes poetic images of its misty beauty: ‘a ghost upon the sands of the sea’, a ‘faint reflection in the mirage of the lagoon’ (9: 17). Yet the traditional images underscore a more modern response to modern phenomena. In Marx’s famous metaphor, all that is solid melts into air; Venice is a city of uncertainty, dissolution and loss. The book’s first investigations of archaeological data turn up only absent details: the unfinished side of a Renaissance sepulchral monument, the missing hand of God in the Renaissance copy of a medieval capital from the Ducal Palace. There are many other examples. *The Stones of Venice* can be read as a catalogue of damaged or destroyed artifacts, neglected monuments and tattered paintings. How could it be otherwise? Nineteenth-century Venice is a scrapheap of its past greatness. Ruskin writes his father that this will dissatisfy readers:

> You know I promised them no Romance – I promised them Stones. Not even bread. I do not feel any Romance in Venice. It is simply a heap of ruins...¹

He pledges ‘to trace the lines of this image before it be for ever lost’ (9: 17). But the promise only confirms the futility of the task: what must be traced already is fading. If the Gothic world is to be ‘reconstructed’ (to use one of his favorite metaphors), it must be
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from incomplete evidence; a heap of broken images, as T. S. Eliot would put it. Much as in his writing on Turner, Ruskin’s insistence on the hard data of Venetian history masks a recognition of the impossibility of this pseudo-scientific project, the inevitable insufficiency of any attempt to capture a fragmentary world in words. Venice can be seen only in partial glimpses of shattered half-truths, obscured by what Walter Pater would later refer to as the flux of time. What Ruskin encounters in this city is the unknowability of the past, history as a foreign country.

Needless to say, this recognition is primarily visual, and no less indeterminate for that. As we have seen in the essay on the Cavalli Chapel, Ruskin finds visual evidence dangerously prone to misreading. Or perhaps I should put this the other way, since it is in The Stones of Venice that he first identifies the contradictory quality of the visual, its captivating but threatening instability. This is much of what Venice itself comes to stand for: the allure of a beautiful image and its deceptive depths, the multiplicity of what might seem a simple, single thing. The city is necessarily plural – many buildings, constructed over time. That stylistic variety is most conspicuous in the buildings that interest Ruskin most, especially those (like the Ducal Palace and St Mark’s) that span the crucial divide between the middle ages and the Renaissance. One result is the ‘incrustation’ he revisits in the Cavalli Chapel: architecture of many styles and periods, mixing assorted materials handled in different ways. But incrustation also records the work of different cultures, different peoples – or, as Ruskin might put it, races – that ‘met and contended’ in Venice (9: 38). The visibility of that multi-ethnic ‘struggle,’ in a sort of aesthetic miscegenation, is another mark of the close relation of the medieval city and the jumble of nineteenth-century London.

All this is most apparent at St Mark’s. I say ‘at’ rather than ‘in’ because Ruskin locates the church in a changing context – a magnificent, ancient building used and misused in a confusing modern society. The rhetoric of the famous description at first tries to persuade us that it will be otherwise: we approach St Mark’s through noisy, dark passageways that seem to ‘fall back’ before the magical structure, ‘as if the rugged and irregular houses that pressed together above us in the dark alley had been struck back into sudden obedience and lovely order’. Ruskin tells us to ignore those competing details, that visual noise, just as he tells us to forget the ‘mingling with the lower Venetian populace of lounging groups of
English and Austrians’ (10: 82). Yet he cannot forget any of this himself: the same distracting images return again and again, or, more accurately, he returns to them. Perhaps the most remarkable quality of this poetic passage is its compulsive attention to prosaic reality, its insistent descent from St Mark’s visionary iconography to the turbulent world of living beings surrounding it. Tradesmen hawk their wares beneath its pillars; martial music on the piazza competes with organ notes drifting from the church; ‘in the recesses of the porches, all day long, knots of men of the lowest classes, unemployed and listless, lie basking in the sun like lizards’ (10: 84). But such details (and there are more) do not so much pollute the sacred imagery as relocate it in the complex surroundings of a living world. A real world, one might say, although it is precisely this linkage of the sacred and the profane, the hieratic images of past art and the confusing motion of living beings, that makes Ruskin’s Venice like Eliot’s London an ‘Unreal city’ – and makes it so clearly modern.

No less than Eliot’s it is also a city of the dead. Anticipating Thomas Mann, Ruskin is preoccupied with death in Venice, with evidence of decay and disease. Repelled and attracted at once by this infected splendour, he seeks out precisely those details he ought to avoid like the plague, particularly those associated with the fatal modern disease called the Renaissance. At times he characterizes the city as a beautiful woman, at times as her beautiful corpse; this necrophilia may help explain why his marriage was failing as he wrote the book. Venice is a site of his deepest ambivalence and most active repression. It is the capital city of decadence – not merely diseased but the embodiment of disease itself – a beautiful disease, as Pater would have said. Little wonder so many of the journeys narrated in The Stones of Venice lead to tombs, to morbid contemplation of decline and fall. Ruskin’s historical survey ends with the image of a cursed Renaissance city consumed ‘by the inner burning of her own passions . . . [,] her ashes . . . choking the channels of the dead salt sea’ (11: 195). Death dominates the whole final volume, especially in the long account of medieval and Renaissance funerary sculpture he revised for the ‘Travellers’ Edition’ and retitled ‘The Street of the Tombs’. What can this morbidity tell us about Ruskin’s relation to the modern?

The first edition of the first volume appeared on 3 March 1851; on 28 December of that year Ruskin received word of Turner’s death (which had occurred on the 19th). He was in the midst of research
for the last two volumes, and had been ‘working among tombs... for this last three weeks’. 

No wonder the event quickly became entangled with his analysis of Venetian history, the city’s fateful confrontation with the forces of modernity. Ruskin reassures his father (who sent the news) that he was ‘quite prepared’ for the death, yet he admits one source of continuing uneasiness: ‘whether it has yet been ascertained that his portfolio is safe – or whether, of which I lived in continual dread – he has destroyed anything.’

Turner’s death has touched nerves sensitized by Venetian history – a history of notable deaths, damaged or lost works of art, an idealizing culture increasingly subordinated to the power of capital. Might the same fate await the greatest modern painter or his work?

In his first letter on the subject, Ruskin discusses the pictures that preserve essential qualities of Turner’s genius. Because it is Sunday, he cannot ‘enter into any particulars’. What he means is that he cannot (although he wants to) write about business. Soon he will write about little else. From this time on, he is preoccupied with the effect of Turner’s death on the price of his paintings and the general state of the art market. That is the recurring focus of his correspondence with his father up to the last letter he writes before leaving Venice in June 1852, when he returns home to act as executor of Turner’s estate. Ruskin doesn’t want to miss out on what he rightly anticipates as a spiralling trade in Turners, and spends many letters trying to persuade his father to buy selected works. There may be bargains; certain paintings must be purchased before their prices rise too much. He works hard to convince John James Ruskin (whose responses are not published) that his own valuations are just, even when they run counter to established prices. Long explanations follow. Some pictures possess inherent artistic worth, others are valuable to him for their subjects or techniques. That first letter urges his father to ‘secure’ all the Swiss sketches since 1841: ‘I can get more of Turner at a cheaper rate thus, than any other way – I understand the meaning of these sketches. . . . Besides – no one else will value them.’

By January 1852, he is prepared to ‘divide all Turners into four classes’ (a typical Ruskinian formula), beginning with ‘those which I would give any price for it I had it to give’, then ‘those which I would give anything in reason for’, and last ‘those which I would give something for – if they went cheap’.

Turner’s death has introduced him to that inherently modern discipline he later would call ‘the political economy of art’.

It is by no means a simple subject, especially since this economy
intersects with others. Ruskin’s 1852 letters from Venice discuss his own considerable expenditures (which his wealthy father underwrites), the probable success of *The Stones of Venice* with an English public (about which his father is worried), and the future survival of Venetian art (Ruskin is gloomy about this). The fortuitous conjunction of issues helps him recognize a modern crisis of value, a large and growing discrepancy between the cost and worth of precious objects. How can Venetian palaces be destroyed in the name of ‘restoration’? How is it possible that others do not recognize the relative importance of Turner’s greatest work? Ruskin believes he knows the truth in these matters – the unchanging value and essential significance of the art he loves. Yet as he moves among decaying tombs or climbs to inspect neglected Tintorettos, he sees another, less predictable economy at work. No matter that this market in Turners was created largely by Ruskin’s own efforts. Now it has spiralled to unthinkable proportions. After his death, Turner has become a ‘modern painter’ in a new and fearful way, his paintings taken from his control and Ruskin’s. Masterpieces have become commodities, caught up in an impersonal system of objects (to use Baudrillard’s phrase). Ruskin cannot help but be preoccupied with these intimations of mortality. The fate of Turner coincides with the fate of Venice: modernity means commercialization, and this in turn means the death of art.

III. Whistler’s Mother and Ruskin’s Dada

Ruskin’s most notorious engagement with modernism occurred in 1877 and 1878, when his harsh assessment of paintings by James McNeill Whistler at the Grosvenor Gallery led to one of the most celebrated libel trials of the century. The offending remarks, published in the letters to ‘the workingmen of England’ Ruskin called *Fors Clavigera*, complain particularly about the price of what he regards as inferior work. The famous passage is brief and biting:

For Mr Whistler’s own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face. (29: 160)⁹
The language recalls the attacks from which *Modern Painters* first defended Turner’s pictorial experiments. Four decades later, it is Ruskin who must experience the ‘shock of the new’, confused by Whistler’s impressionistic techniques and dismayed that such unconventional work is exhibited and priced as if it is comparable to ‘classic’ art. The second issue is as important as the first: most of the *Fors* letter concerns a newspaper article about ‘the conditions under which art is now studied’ (29: 151). The problem of Whistler’s modernism is related to the problem of modern exhibition practices – that is, to the modern art business.

These threads do not come together neatly. The free-associational style of *Fors Clavigera* ranges from art to zoology. By the time of the attack on Whistler (in letter no. 79), Ruskin makes increasing reference to usury, which he (like Pound after him) regards as central to understanding modern history and the condition of the arts; the next letter (no. 80) returns to the issue again. But the Whistler letter already deals with related subjects: the inflation or falsification of artistic value, proper commissions for art sales, and ‘the suddenly luminous idea that Art might possibly be a lucrative occupation’. Ruskin sarcastically complains that the ‘Professorships’ of dealers like Agnew and Co. have ‘covered the walls’ of Manchester with ‘exchangeable property’ (29: 154). A note adds: ‘The existence of the modern picture dealer is impossible in any city or country where art is to prosper.’ He promises to arrange a ‘bottega’ for the Guild of St George, where ‘shopkeepers’ will sell watercolors at reasonable prices ‘on the understanding that the work is, by said shopkeeper, known to be good, and warranted as such; just as simply as a dealer in cheese or meat answers for the quality of those articles’ (29: 154–5n). Then, after related observations, he turns to recent efforts ‘for the promulgation of Art-Knowledge’ (29: 157) at the Grosvenor Gallery.

Ruskin actually approves the aims of the gallery, which ‘has been planned and is directed by a gentleman in the true desire to help the artists and better the art of his country: – not as a commercial speculation.’ Yet some traces of commerce still must be expunged. ‘Sir Coutts Lindsay is at present an amateur both in art and shopkeeping. He must take up either one or the other business, if he would prosper in either’ (29: 157). Ruskin instructs Lindsay not to display his own paintings, and to remove china and ‘glittering’ furniture that interfere with the contemplation of art. A gallery should be businesslike, but it shouldn’t look too much like a business.
More importantly, it should not ‘group the works of each artist together’, a scheme that exaggerates ‘the monotony of their virtues, and the obstinacy of their faults’. ‘It is better,’ Ruskin explains, with a curious echo of Whistler’s terminology, ‘that each painter should, in fitting places, take his occasional part in the pleasantness of the picture-concert, than at once run through all his pieces, and retire’ (29: 158).

A gallery, then, should define such ‘fitting places’. A painter like Whistler should be viewed alongside other, and better, artists – to help us compare and judge. But some comparisons are invidious, such as that implied in the Grosvenor’s display of a so-called ‘modern school’ that includes Edward Burne-Jones. ‘His work . . . is simply the only art-work at present produced in England which will be received by the future as “classic” in its kind, – the best that has been, or could be.’ ‘I know,’ Ruskin adds later, ‘that these will be immortal’ (29: 158–9). Galleries must acknowledge such classics, such classes of art and artist. For class is central to Ruskin’s uneasiness, as we see in the references to Sir Coutts Lindsay as gentleman and Whistler as a ‘Cockney’. Galleries should help us put paintings, and people, in their place. Hanging Whistler’s pictures together blurs their differences from other work and blurs them with one another. The public is effectively blinded, as if by a pot of paint. We no longer can discriminate separate virtues or faults. We no longer can distinguish separate subjects, or perhaps any subjects at all.

To some extent that is Whistler’s goal. As their musical titles suggest, his paintings subordinate mimesis to expression, to the evocation of feeling. Narrative or moral content is incidental, as he explains in his testimony at the trial and in an essay published six months earlier, later reissued as ‘The Red Rag’. His example is the ‘Harmony in Grey and Gold,’

a snow scene with a single black figure and a lighted tavern. I care nothing for the past, present, or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot. All that I know is that my combination of grey and gold is the basis of the picture.\[11\]

Whistler makes the same point about the famous portrait of his mother, ‘exhibited at the Royal Academy as an “Arrangement in Grey and Black.”’ Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?\[12\]
Unstable Foundations

Ruskin, for one, cared a great deal. The Grosvenor Gallery exhibited eight Whistlers: four Nocturnes, one Harmony, three Arrangements – including the *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle*. That painting – of the writer Ruskin addressed as his ‘friend’, ‘best teacher’, ‘dear master’, and finally ‘papa’ – may suggest most fully why he found Whistler’s modernism so troubling. In the dissolution of subject he glimpsed what Ortega Y Gasset would call the dehumanization of art, the last phase of an assault on human content Ruskin first discovered in the missing features of Renaissance funerary sculpture. He also may have glimpsed curious references to his own writing, as if Whistler had conceived his work in direct opposition to Ruskin’s values: the Nocturnes reduce landscape to musical impressions; the Arrangements transform people into spots of color; the very titles discourage us from ‘reading’ visual images. Perhaps it is by extension of this same implicit dialogue that after the trial – which the painter won at great personal cost, receiving only one farthing in damages – Whistler travelled to Venice, where he executed some of his best late work. In 1885, after his return, he delivered the ‘Ten O’Clock’ lecture specifically ridiculing Ruskin as ‘the Preacher’: ‘Sage of the Universities – learned in many matters, and of much experience in all, save his subject.’ By then at least, Ruskin is an inescapable (if negative) point of reference in Whistler’s art. Ruskin’s mental state at the time of the trial was said to prevent him from appearing in court. Whistler, on the other hand, held forth with great wit on the stand, reprinting (and revising) his best lines in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. That self-promotion suggests a final source of Ruskin’s anxiety. Whistler’s painting suppresses narrative content to emphasize the role of the artist: the all-too-conspicuous hand behind the brushwork, the virtuoso referred to by the musical titles, someone who ‘plays’ with paint. It is an early version of performance art, an early performance of modernism, flaunting its unconventionality. This is part of what Ruskin means by ‘wilful impudence’, all the more so for invoking the figure of the modern artist Ruskin himself had created in his writing about Turner. When questioned in court if he charged 200 guineas for the ‘labour of two days’, Whistler famously responded (at least according to his version of the transcript) that he asked it for ‘the knowledge of a lifetime’. Ruskin had paid tribute to Turner’s ‘gigantic memory’ in ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’ and praised the painter’s lifetime accumulation of knowledge in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*.
(12: 379). But he also acknowledged that this achievement made much of Turner’s work inaccessible, the artist himself obscure, ‘modern’ in a sense that would become more familiar in the next century. ‘Only another Turner could apprehend Turner’ (7: 453). Whistler learned the discourse of modernism from a master.

Whistler challenges his audience to think of both the artist and his art in new ways, to search for new ways of seeing. That is the point of one of his Wittiest exchanges from the witness box, at least as he transcribes it:

‘Then you mean, Mr Whistler, that the initiated in technical matters might have no difficulty in understanding your work. But do you think now that you could make me see the beauty of that picture?’

The witness then paused, and examining attentively the Attorney-General’s face and looking at the picture alternately, said, after apparently giving the subject much thought, while the Court waited in silence for his answer:

‘No! Do you know I fear it would be as hopeless as for the musician to pour his notes into the ear of a deaf man.’

Whistler reports that laughter followed the joke. He does not indicate if he based it on a curiously similar passage in *The Stones of Venice* about appreciating the architectural use of colorful materials: ‘a deaf man might as well pretend to pronounce judgments on the merits of a full orchestra, as an architect trained in the composition of form only, to discern the beauty of St Mark’s’ (10: 97–8). The echo reminds us that Ruskin already had encountered a version of what he finds so disorienting in Whistler’s painting: a strange, fragmentary art; a beauty contained in the dissolution of familiar reality; an art of decadence and masquerade – the haunting world of Venice. In the 1850s his desire for this forbidden ambiance could be indulged and then repressed. In the 1870s the repressed returns in the form of an emerging modernism, priced high enough to revive his concerns about the erosion of value, labeled with phrases that seem to mock his own deepest convictions. It is as if this art of the future comes out of his own past, his own fantasies – the fears for art that seem to anticipate the deliberate transgressions and irrationalities of Dada and other modernist movements. Whistler was Ruskin’s worst nightmare.
Coda: hammer blows

Curiously, the nightmare seems to recur, as if the same repressed material erupts again, after Ruskin’s death. On 10 March 1914, a suffragette named Mary Richardson slashed the Velázquez Venus with a Mirror, the Rokeby Venus, in the National Gallery. It was ‘the first and most famous in a campaign of deliberate damage to works of art during the last months of suffragette militancy before the outbreak of war.’ Richardson, a former art student, explicated her actions in language that echoed Unto This Last:

I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas.

There were eight attacks on thirteen more paintings over the next four months, including at least two with special Ruskinian significance. On 22 May five pictures were damaged in the National Gallery’s Venetian Room. At the National Portrait Gallery on 17 July, in the final incident before the outbreak of war ended the campaign, a suffragette slashed Millais’s portrait of Carlyle.

Historians of modern art situate the suffragette attacks alongside revolutionary aesthetic movements like Vorticism and Futurism. F. T. Marinetti, who joined suffragette marches in London during the window-smashing campaign of 1912, had pledged in the ‘Founding and Futurist Manifesto’ of 1909 to ‘destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind…’ Marinetti was no admirer of Ruskin.

The suffragette actions suggest a more equivocal position towards the arts of the past. They attacked not only such Victorian classics as Herkomer’s portrait of the Duke of Wellington (12 May) but also paintings associated with the emergence of post-Victorian aesthetics such as Sargent’s portrait of Henry James (4 May) and a modernist nude in the Royal Academy summer exhibition (22 May). It was not so much an assault on institutionalized art as an attempt to redefine institutional values, to relocate aesthetics in a larger context. After damaging Millais’s portrait of Carlyle with ‘a chopper’, Margaret Gibbs (alias Ann Hunt) interrupted the proceedings against her to announce that the painting ‘will have an added value and be of great historical interest because it has been honoured with
the attentions of a militant. Lisa Tickner recently has shown that
the suffrage campaign concerned representation in the arts as well
as politics. Clearly, it also concerned the ways in which certain
representations could be seen. Staging their protests in an
exhibitionary space given authority by Victorian culture, the suf-
fragettes did not so much attack the conception of an art museum
as join the battle for its control.

No one had done more than Ruskin to popularize that concep-
tion or suggest the terms in which it might be contested. The
suffragettes’ questions (explicit and implicit) are his: what is the
nature of value? Under what circumstances is it (or is it not) poss-
ible to cherish the arts? For the suffragettes, even when they attack
paintings he loved, Ruskin is not so much a target as a source, an
intellectual and moral forebear without whom the denunciation of
misplaced values and misvalued paintings would not have been
possible. If their campaign enacts a politics of modernism it also
reenacts something of his struggle against the growing power of
modern market conditions, the reduction of questions of value to
matters of cost. Ruskin would have been horrified by their violence
to paintings. But he might have recognized his own concerns in
their preoccupation with the destruction of precious things. The
Stones of Venice identifies that as the central, characteristic act of
the Renaissance, the new, modern age inaugurated dramatically on
27 March 1424, by the ‘hammer stroke’ that began demolition of
the old wing of the Ducal Palace (10: 352). Ruskin invoked the
same motif at the 1857 ‘Art Treasures’ exhibit in Manchester, warning
his wealthy audience to take more seriously the very idea of a trea-
sure: for every great work we preserve, something – or someone –
is neglected. ‘It is ourselves who abolish – ourselves who consume:
we are the mildew, and the flame. . . . All these lost treasures of
human intellect have been wholly destroyed by human industry of
destruction’ (16: 64–5). It was in this vein that Mary Richardson
insisted that her actions had ‘financial and symbolic’ significance:
‘I had to draw the parallel between the public’s indifference to Mrs
Pankhurst’s slow destruction and the destruction of some financially
valuable object.’ She might have said, more simply, ‘There is no
Wealth but Life.’
Notes


1 Ruskin’s Letters from Venice, 1851–1852, ed. John Lewis Bradley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 185: 18 February 1852. The passage continues by asserting that it is a ‘heap of ruins, trodden under foot by such men as Ezekiel describes 21, 31: and this is the great fact which I want to teach: To give Turneresque descriptions of the thing would not have needed ten days’ study – or residence.’

2 Ruskin borrows the term from Italian art historians, but clearly it comes to stand for much more in his socio-historical vocabulary. Incrustation is the visible imprint of aesthetic history, what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a chronotope. In a sense it is the space of time, marking a visible world inflected by material conditions, the visual embedded in history – a token of what I call visuality.

3 John Rosenberg observed Ruskin’s anticipation of Thomas Mann: ‘Might not his violent hostility to Renaissance Venice have been a kind of atonement for the spell which this most arrogantly voluptuous of cities cast upon him?’ The Darkening Glass: a Portrait of Ruskin’s Genius (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 87.

4 Ruskin’s Letters from Venice, p. 112.

5 Ibid., p. 111.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., pp. 112–13.

8 Ibid., p. 145.


10 See Rosenberg, p. 207.


12 Ibid., p. 128.

13 Ibid., p. 149.

14 Linda Merrill, who questions the ‘traditional story’ of Ruskin’s incapacity, suggests that ‘there is reason to suspect that by November 1878, the month of the trial, Ruskin was not as ill as his lawyers would have had Whistler – and future historians – believe’ (p. 95). She concludes (on the evidence of Arthur Severn’s memoirs), that Ruskin himself made the decision, based on ‘the conviction that a confrontation with Whistler would offend his dignity’ (A Pot of Paint, p. 96).

15 The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, p. 5.

16 In ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’ Ruskin goes on to remark that all Turner’s ‘greatness, all his infinite luxuriance of invention, depends on his taking possession of everything that he sees, – on his grasping all, and losing
hold of nothing, – on his forgetting himself, and forgetting nothing else’ (12: 385). *Modern Painters IV* declares ‘that he seems never either to have lost, or cared to disturb, the impression made upon him by any scene – even in his earliest youth’ (6: 42). I am grateful to Clive Wilmer for pointing out the relation of Whistler’s remark and Ruskin’s tributes to Turner’s memory.

Ibid., pp. 9–10. Merrill refers to this as a ‘dramatic elaboration’ (*A Pot of Paint*, p. 367 n. 46), although the transcript she reconstructs uses the same image:

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*Holker* [the Attorney-General]: You have made the study of art your study of a lifetime. What is the peculiar beauty of that picture?

*Whistler*: I daresay I could make it clear to any sympathetic painter, but I do not think I could to you, any more than a musician could explain the beauty of a harmony to a person who has no ear. (p. 153)

Whether this text here recreates the transcript more accurately than Whistler’s is impossible to determine. Merrill, attempting ‘to present a rendition of *Whistler v. Ruskin* that is clear, correct, objective, and intelligible’ (Merrill, p. 3), bases her version on newspaper accounts, which often abbreviate discourse, even if this means sacrificing style for the sake of clarity. Such sources might tend to underplay Whistler’s own wit, for reasons of journalistic clarity rather than malice.

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The Times, 11 March 1914.


See, for instance, the ‘Futurist Speech to the English’ (1910), in which he attacks ‘the lymphatic ideology of that deplorable Ruskin, which I would like to cover with so much ridicule that you would never forget it[.]’ F. T. Marinetti, *Let’s Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Classics, 1991), p. 72.

The Times, 22 July 1914.


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