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Revisioning the Image
Ruskin's 'Iconology-in-Progress'

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Abstract This paper explores Ruskin's lifelong concern with the nature and significance of visual images. It argues that the diverse modes and moments of his engagement with them may be read as variant expressions of a progressively constituted iconology, unified by basic conception of the image as a representation whose essence is interpretative, but the locus and orientation of whose interpretative function are diversely intended and articulated over time. A chronological review of select stages and junctures of his 'iconology-in-progress' highlights Ruskin's increasing emphasis on this indexical mode of interpretative meaning.

Keywords Ruskin. Image. Iconology. Sign. Index.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Painting and "Art Generally" Defined. – 3 Parameters of Variation. – 4 Nexuses of Revision. – 4.1 The Lamps of Architecture. – 4.2 The Laws of Composition. – 4.3 The "Map of the Great Schools". – 4.4 *The Laws of Fésole*. – 5 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

'Iconology' is not a term Ruskin himself employed. So why and in what sense is it applied to him here?

First, it usefully delimits a specific field of intellectual enquiry, one focusing on images, which, though Ruskin did not himself recognise or profess it to the extent of giving it this or any other name, he manifestly pursued throughout his career and which may indeed be regarded as the core expression of his thought and work.

Second, his lifelong concern with visual images shows some affinity with Erwin Panofsky's proposed third ("iconological") level of meaning in the interpretation of works of visual art, whose task was to investigate the ways artistic choices in the representation of "primary or natural meanings" on the one hand and of "secondary or conventional meaning[s]" on the other are coordinated by "underlying principles" revealing

> the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion [giving rise to patterns of] intrinsic meaning or content. (Panofsky 1955, 28-30)

Yet Ruskinian iconology is also distinct from Panofskyan, which essentially is a form of cultural historiography and 'documentary' in aim, its purpose, even when evaluative,[1] being the analysis of visual images as manifestations of distinctive stance. That aspect is of course not alien to Ruskin's peculiar concept of the image, which yet envisages a different kind of "intrinsic meaning", more ontological or phenomenological and ethical in character. In its concern with the nature and significance of visual images as such, across time and from a normative point of view apt to implicate both artist and viewer, it supplements what Panofsky termed the "aggregate of the different aspects of agency" (Panofsky 2012, 479) with the "moral agency" (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 24) entailed in an image's material production and use.

With what kinds of image did Ruskin as iconologist concern himself? He had much to say about verbal imagery, the figurative use of language in poetry secular and sacred, as well as the conditions determining the form and function of literary fiction (Ruskin 1903-12, 34: 370-1) and the personifications and narratives of Greek mythology (19: *passim*). Principally, though, he was concerned with visual images: fictive and non-fictive forms embodied in individual paintings,

1 See e.g., Panofsky 2012, 479: "The magnitude of an artistic achievement in the end depends upon the extent to which the energy of such a particular worldview has been channelled into moulded matter and radiates towards its viewer".

drawings, engravings, statues and buildings as well as in objects of use (e.g., the breakfast plate he showed in lectures on sculpture at Oxford in 1871; Ruskin 1903-12, 20: 205). Though 'image' intended in a sense comprehensive of all these forms was not a concept articulated by Ruskin, the term provides the lexical correlate of an interest that did find expression in his writings – that in the unity of the arts, to which his repeated efforts systematically to define their divisions (see section 4.3 below) was complementary.

I wish to argue here that Ruskin's changing reflections on art and the arts in general and on particular works of art and artistry may be read as variant expressions of a basic and broadly consistent conception of the image, of which the following offers a hypothetical summary.

An image is first and foremost something formed, a material product whose most distinctive characteristic is its capacity to evoke the presence of some object in ways expressive of its maker's reflective stance towards the visible and perhaps the invisible too. As a visual representation the image manifests a quasi-intentional relation towards – is directed upon – some object, a relation whose definition would require use of the phrase 'be about' rather than 'be of'. Being about the object it represents, an image is both like and radically distinct from it: it explicates as it evokes that object and in so doing evokes and explicates its maker's agency. At the risk of over-simplifying the intricacy of what I have elsewhere called Ruskin's "iconology-in-progress" (Tucker, 2025), the numerous shifts and turns in his thinking about the image may be said generally to reflect a growing concern with the significative power of the image as material product, from a broadly ethical, hence committedly evaluative point of view.

2 Painting and "Art Generally" Defined

Nearly all aspects of this basic conception – including the integrally evaluative perspective – are more or less explicitly expressed in the definition of painting that opens *Modern Painters I* (1843) and on which the theoretical framework not just of that work's five volumes but of all of Ruskin's writings on art, despite incessant transposition, are founded. The search for a definition of painting (indeed, of "all art generally") is motivated by the need for a "criterion of excellence" capable of rightly orienting the proposed comparison between "modern painters" and "ancient masters":

> Painting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself,

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> nothing. He who has learned what is commonly considered the whole art of painting, that is, the art of representing any natural object faithfully, has as yet only learned the language by which his thoughts are to be expressed. (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 87)

This initial definition furnishes the premise for a second, this time of "greatness in art", which arrives towards the end of the eponymous chapter:

> the greatest picture is that which conveys to the mind of the spectator the greatest number of the greatest ideas. (92)

And from this in turn depends the concluding definition of "a great artist":

> He is the greatest artist who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas. (92)

Ruskin distinguishes the language of art from the thought of which it forms the vehicle, but only to close the opposition and subsume artistic language – and thereby all varieties of art, including the non-imitative, and all artistic pleasure – under the category of thought:

> Yet although in all our speculations on art, language is thus to be distinguished from, and held subordinate to, that which it conveys, we must still remember that there are certain ideas inherent in language itself, and that, strictly speaking, every pleasure connected with art has in it some reference to the intellect. (91)

So here is one reason for his choice of the category of 'idea' to help organise his analysis of the criteria of excellence applicable to art. As he explicitly declares, his use of the term derives from the epistemological theory expounded in John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690):

> Nay, the term idea, according to Locke's definition of it, will extend even to the sensual impressions themselves as far as they are "things which the mind occupies itself about in thinking;" that is, not as they are felt by the eye only, but as they are received by the mind through the eye. (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 92-3)

Ideas – actually defined by Locke as "the Object of the Understanding when a man thinks" and "whatever it is, that the mind can be employ'd about in thinking" (Locke [1690] 2011, 47; compare 104, 134) – perform a crucial role in his theory of the empirical origins of knowledge. They are not innate in the mind but "let" or "convey[ed]

into" it by the impressions made on the senses by "external Objects" (Locke [1690] 2011, 55, 105). Locke's epistemological model justified Ruskin's assimilation of sensual pleasure to thought and offered him a conceptual and terminological epitome of the principle that art is wholly expressive of and wholly 'speaks' to mind; in other words, that the entire image – "thought" and "language" – is imbued with intellect, or exhibits intentionality, and signifies.

Ruskin takes over Locke's model and applies it to the experience of art, filling it out by specifying the "five distinct heads" to which

> all the sources of pleasure, or of any other good, to be derived from works of art, may be referred.

Those heads are:

I. Ideas of Power. – The perception or conception of the mental or bodily powers by which the work has been produced.
II. Ideas of Imitation. – The perception that the thing produced resembles something else.
III. Ideas of Truth. – The perception of faithfulness in a statement of facts by the thing produced.
IV. Ideas of Beauty. – The perception of beauty, either in the thing produced, or in what it suggests or resembles.
V. Ideas of Relation. – The perception of intellectual relations in the thing produced, or in what it suggests or resembles. (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 93)

However, Ruskin's appropriation of Locke's epistemological system was not motivated by strictly epistemological concerns. Nor would it be exact to say he shared Joseph Addison's interest in the way in "we call up [the] ideas [of visible objects] into our minds by paintings, statues, descriptions, or any the like occasion" (Addison [1712] 1898, 6: 72). Again, Locke's theory did not provide him, as it did Jonathan Richardson, with a "rational, empirical method of procedure" in the practice of "connoisseurship as a branch of human knowledge" (Gibson-Wood 1984, 41). For Ruskin, ideas were not objects of, but means to knowledge – knowledge mediated, not originated by the production and reception of the work of art.[2]

2 Ruskin's youthful reliance on Locke ran counter to the generally unfavourable view of the philosopher taken in the nineteenth century, when his epistemology was "embroiled in controversy" owing to its alleged inducement of eighteenth-century free thinking (Aarsleff 1971, 392-3). To his contemporaries Ruskin's use of Locke may have seemed consistent with their perception of him as an "exclaimer against antiquated taste" in art (Darley [1844] 1984, 72). Yet a more decisive factor may have been his nonconformist background. Richard Brantley has argued that the "twin pioneers of

Ruskin's five classes of idea name five modes of representative or intentional relation between "the thing produced" and (ontologically distinct from it) the thing "it suggests or resembles" – five modes generally conceived by him (as just seen) on an analogy with linguistic expression. He highlights the analogy in defining "Ideas of Truth" as the "perception of faithfulness in a statement of facts by the thing produced".[3] So the artistic image, as a "thing produced" that is imbued with intellect or endowed with intentionality, is a representation of some other thing (and/or a presentation of itself) which is *ipso facto* a form of iconographical statement about that other thing (or itself). In other words, it may be said to share the purpose, if not the mode, of the "assertive" (earlier called the "representative") class of speech act as defined by the philosopher of mind and language John Searle:

> [T]o commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition. (Searle 1975, 354)

Whether verbal or iconographical, an act of commitment to something's being the case entails intentionality, which as Searle himself has pointed out in a paper on the question of pictorial meaning, entails representation of some thing "under an aspect or aspects" (Searle 1980, 481). The "ideas" which Ruskin states to be conveyable by art name such aspects.

Ruskin opens *Modern Painters I* by criticising Sir Joshua Reynolds' failure, in his *Discourses*, to dwell sufficiently on

> the distinction between those excellences in the painter which belong to him *as such*, and those which belong to him in common with all men of intellect, the general and exalted powers of which art is the evidence and expression, not the subject. (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 87)

His own preliminary definition of "painting, and art generally" as "a vehicle of thought" is remarkable as a claim not just to intellectual standing but to cognitive rationale.

I have dwelt on that definition partly because its significance and originality are often overlooked,[4] but above all because it largely

transatlantic revivalism, John Wesley […] and Jonathan Edwards […] absorbed and spiritualized the sensationalist epistemology of John Locke" (Brantley 2013, 175).

3 A definition incidentally adhering to the Lockean axiom: "Truth properly belongs only to Propositions" (Locke [1690] 2011, 574).

4 George Landow, for instance, merely states (1971, 26): "Ruskin opens Volume 1 with a brief exposition of five kinds of ideas important in the discussion of art".

and in varying degrees prefigures the numerous iconological revisionings to be inferred from a body of work spanning over forty years. No detailed account of so intricate and mutable a phenomenon can be attempted here. In the remainder of this paper I rather propose first to sketch an overview of the kinds of variation and adjustment it progressively entailed and then to see how some at least of these come into play at select stages or junctures of Ruskin's iconology-in-progress.

3 Parameters of Variation

Five major parameters of variation may be distinguished. The first has two dimensions, which may be termed 'topical' and 'focal.' Topical variation regards the choice of theme for discussion. This may alternate between consideration of art in general, of some particular type or class of art (e.g. fine, conventional, decorative, ornamental art), of some related or opposed category (e.g., manufacture), or again of some particular medium or mode of artistic expression (e.g., architecture, painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, illumination, photography). Focal variation, on the other hand, regards the degree of specificity accorded a particular medium in considering it; or again the degree to which a medium is subjected to componential analysis, or subdivision into parts or elements.

The second parameter is generic, entailing (often highly innovative) variation across more or less traditional textual genres (treatise, lecture, manual, letter).

The third parameter is exemplative and involves the comparative evaluation or characterisation of certain artistic 'schools' or classes, or of the individual works and artists representative of them. These schools or classes may be those recognised by tradition or expressly re-invented – e.g., the "Etruscan"[5] – and may thus be understood culture-specifically or universally, historically or transhistorically. Another dimension of exemplative variation has to do with the demotion or promotion of a given work or artist in concomitance with shifts in the standards of evaluation.

The fourth parameter is criterial and regards the general principles regulating the production and evaluation of images (e.g., truth, beauty, realisation, composition, relation, justice, power, help) and their superordinate classification (ideas, lamps, laws, elements, virtues).

The fifth parameter is semiotic, having to do with the kind (or kinds) of sign a given image exemplifies – where the choice may be

5 See e.g. Ruskin 1903-12, 23: *passim* and Clegg, Tucker 1993, 94-118.

defined in terms of the ternary theory of signs developed by Ruskin's younger American contemporary, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), of which this is one formulation:

> [T]here are three kinds of representations.
>
> 1st. Those whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality, and these representations may be termed *Likenesses* [otherwise termed *Icons*].
>
> 2nd. Those whose relation to their objects consists in a correspondence in fact, and these may be termed *Indices* or *Signs*.
>
> 3rd. Those the ground of whose relation to their objects is an imputed character, which are the same as *general signs*, and these may be termed *Symbols*. (Peirce 1867)[6]

Likeness (or Icon), Index and Symbol are three possible dimensions of signification, not three pure or isolated types. An artistic image has more or less of the Icon to the extent that it shares some quality or character with its object or referent. But Likeness in an image is an intended relation between image and object and both exhibits and elicits the operation of an interpreting mind. Similarly an image has more or less of the Index to the extent it exhibits what Peirce elsewhere calls a "real relation" (Peirce 1886)[7] with its object (e.g., the artist's hand or tool), but this too may be subject to interpretation and considered as symbolical.

An alternative conceptualisation of this parameter of variation might be in terms of another Peircean triad:

> A *representamen*, or sign, is anything which stands, in any respect, at once in relation of correspondence to a correlate, called its *object*[,] and to another correlate, its *interpretant*. which [*sic*] is a possible representamen determined by the first and referring to the same object. (Peirce c. 1901-02)[8]

Bearing in mind that artistic images are in most cases quantitatively composite and always qualitatively (ontologically and phenomenologically) complex, comprising multiple objects and interpretants, Ruskin's iconology-in-progress might be thought of as entailing correlated variation across different aspects of artistic

6 Retrieved from http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-new-list-categories-10.

7 Retrieved from http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-elementary-account-logic-relatives-0.

8 Retrieved from http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-definitions-baldwins-dictionary-r-4.

representamina. In other words, for Ruskin the image is a representation whose essence is explicitly declared to be interpretative, but the locus and orientation of whose interpretative 'action' are diversely intended and articulated over time.

Thus, in an extended, programmatic note on Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana* (1563) in the Louvre, entered in his diary during a visit to Paris in 1849, it was explicitly in terms of interpretative capacity that Ruskin read this particular painting

> I saw at once the whole life of the man – his religion, his conception of humanity, his reach of conscience, of moral feeling, his kingly imaginative power, his physical gifts, his keenness of eye, his sense of colour, his enjoyment of all that was glorious in nature, his chief enjoyment of that which was especially fitted to his sympathies, his patience, his memory, his thoughtfulness – all that he was, that he had, that he could, was there (Ruskin 1903-12, 12: 456-7)

– but also that he expressed his inferred sense of the meaning of painting itself:

> And as I glanced away to the extravagances, or meannesses, or mightinesses, that shone or shrank beneath my glance along the infinite closing of that sunset-coloured corridor, I felt that painting had never yet been understood as it is – an Interpretation of Humanity. (457)

Again, "Humanity" here names the composite, as it were outer object of this pictorial representamen, the life and world it depicts or records. Yet it also names the 'inner' object generative of and manifest in that (selective) record, an object identified as the "whole life" or systemic mental disposition of the painter. And the corollary of this reading is the necessary exegesis of any individual painting as either "the magnificent or miserable record of divine or decrepit mind" (457).

Nearly ten years later, near the start of a lecture given in 1858 and focusing on a comparison between 'conventional' art and art 'interpretative' of nature – a comparison weighted in favour of the latter – Ruskin paused to explain his habitual choice of the term 'interpretation' over 'imitation' in speaking of art:

> My reason […] is, first, that good art rarely imitates; it usually only describes or explains, But my second and chief reason is that good art always consists of two things: First, the observation of fact; secondly, the manifesting of human design and authority in the way that fact is told. (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 269-70)

"Design" is no doubt to be understood in a moral and intellectual sense here, as summarising the principle of the noble and discerning "choice of subject and the thought of it" (Ruskin 1903-12, 12: 457) upheld in the earlier passage on Veronese. Yet in the present context – given not only the lecture's specific topic but the fact that it was delivered at the South Kensington Museum – its use in this sense is clearly polemical, its meaning re-appropriated from contemporary usage in connection with manufacture and dedicated forms of art-education emanating precisely from South Kensington. Design in the moral and intellectual sense explicitly excludes "the delight of the workman" in "what he *does* and *produces*, instead of in what he *interprets* or *exhibits*" from the interpretative function of the work of art (16: 268). And yet, thanks in part precisely to his polemical engagement in the later 1850s with the claims of conventional art and of design in the abstract, industrial sense, but thanks too to his long insistence on the non-imitative nature of art, Ruskin came increasingly to value and emphasise the interpretative capacity and moral "authority" of the artistic workman's formative "delight" and its material outcome – a capacity which in reference to Peirce's other semiotic triad, may be defined as indexical.

But let us return to the 1840s and consider, in chronological order, some major transformative moments in Ruskin's iconology-in-progress.

4 Nexuses of Revision

4.1 The Lamps of Architecture

The evolution of *Modern Painters* was soon interrupted (or diverted) by the decision to focus, in a separate work, on architecture, Ruskin's empirical study of which had begun in 1845, during the formative six-month study tour of Italy he had undertaken in preparation for the treatise's second volume and in response to new understanding of the work's theoretical and critical scope. For he now conceived of it as encompassing not only landscape painting, modern and "ancient", but what he called "pure old art" also. Indeed, as he told an Oxford mentor[9] in 1844, the project was to account for "the principles of beauty" common to "*all* art" – indeed, to "all things" (Ruskin 1903-12, 3: 670).

In accordance with the avowed primacy of Ideas of Truth, *Modern Painters I* had aimed "to investigate and arrange the facts of nature with scientific accuracy" and thereby assess individual artists'

9 The future classical historian and lexicologist, Rev. H.G. Liddell (1811-98).

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cognizance and affirmation of natural "truths of form" (48, 106, 141). The second volume, published in 1846, had contained the first of the four Parts eventually to be dedicated to Ideas of Beauty. Meanwhile, the earnest study of "pure old art", begun in London and in France in 1844 and intensively pursued in Italy the following year (Ruskin 2003), had considerably modified Ruskin's conception of those Ideas, as it had expanded – in date and in kind – the range of artefacts exemplative of the qualities of "mere material loveliness" and vital felicity that fitted them, no less than natural beings and phenomena, to constitute "signs" or "types" of Divine attributes and expressions of "moral or intellectual virtue" (Ruskin 1903-12, 4: 76, 142, 160). With the publication of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and of *Stones of Venice* (1851-53), that range came definitively to include the products of architecture.

For in *Seven Lamps* it is unmistakeably as a form of imagery that architecture is presented, not just in the emphasis placed on the role of ornament imitative of natural forms, but primarily in so far as buildings, by virtue of the unnecessary character of their beauty, were perceived to constitute an additional class of "expressions of thought received by the eye" (Ruskin 1903-12, 8: 156). Thus much is indeed all but stated in the general definition with which the work opens:

> Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure. (27)

Though the "constant, general, and irrefragable laws of right" (21) enumerated and expounded in *Seven Lamps* are specific to architecture, Ruskin characteristically avers that "[t]here are, perhaps, no such laws peculiar to any one art" and that those here discussed apply not only to "every stage and style" of this particular art but more generally still to "the entire horizon of man's action" (20-1). Accordingly, several of the names given to those laws (or "Lamps", as Ruskin now calls them) – Truth, Power, Beauty, Life – replicate or echo those of the Ideas analysed in *Modern Painters*. At the same time, the principles of Sacrifice, Memory, Obedience are more or less explicitly moral in meaning and, by reason of their application to architecture, social and civic in implication. For these reasons especially the exposition of the Lamps is often less theoretical than practical and normative in emphasis. Thus, architectural images (individual buildings and the beautiful "characters" of their forms) are presented as examples of right architectural practice and (by the same token) as "exponents" of "moral law" or as 'likenesses' "of that on which man's social happiness and power depend" (21-2, 251).

4.2 The Laws of Composition

Architecture was of course not the only artistic medium other than painting to be accorded independent consideration by Ruskin. At Oxford in the 1870s he would dedicate entire lecture couses to sculpture and engraving (Ruskin 1903-12, 20, 23). And drawing had always been a special concern of his, owing to his extensive personal experience both as draughtsman and teacher, the latter entering an intensive new phase in the mid-1850s, when he began to give classes at the Working Men's College in London. This was an educational experiment promoted by the Christian Socialists in which Ruskin had become involved thanks not only to his acquaintance with its founders,[10] but also to his sympathy with their aims, above all with the high regard they professed for manual work. Ruskin's advocacy, in *Seven Lamp*s, of the expressive power of "hand-work" as opposed to "machine-work" in architecture (Ruskin 1903-12, 8: 81, 84, 214; Levi, Tucker 2011) had recently found elaborate and eloquent expression in the "Nature of Gothic" chapter of *Stones of Venice* (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 180-269), a text now adopted by the College as a sort of vicarious 'mission statement', being reprinted and distributed to prospective students at its opening meeting (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: lx; Levi, Tucker 1997, 132).

Ruskin had long taught individuals privately to draw (Levi, Tucker 1997), but this was his first experience of teaching within an institution. He felt himself obliged to formalise a method of instruction, particularly in the face of the widely adopted but (in his opinion) detrimental 'South Kensington system' devised by the government Department of Science and Art (Levi, Tucker 1997, 2014, 2020). The fruit of this new experience was *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), which it is reductive to define, as for convenience it usually is, as Ruskin's first drawing manual. In characteristic fashion, though in large part instructional in character, this is also a theoretical text.[11]

It is organised as a series of "Three Letters to Beginners", dedicated respectively to "First Practice", "Sketching from Nature" and "Colour and Composition". The third is the longest Letter, most of it given over to analysis of the art of pictorial and specifically landscape composition, to which the elementary practice prescribed in the preceding Letters was intended as propaedeutic. Yet *Elements* is not just an example of the progressively arranged type of drawing manual, as

10 In particular with the philologist F.J. Furnivall (1825-1910) and the College's first principal, the Anglican theologian J.F.D. Maurice (1805-72), with whom Ruskin had engaged in polemical correspondence following the publication of *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds* (see Hilton 2002, 203; Levi, Tucker 1997, 131-2).

11 As Ruskin's editors note: "The book is remarkable […] for its combination of workmanlike attention to detail with the enunciation of great principles" (Ruskin 1903-12, 15: xviii).

compiled for instance by Ruskin's own teacher, J.D. Harding (e.g., 1845, 1849). Its broad scope and significance may be seen in its adaptation of Ruskin's earlier conception of the normative principles of architecture (and of art generally) as so many "laws": he now enumerated nine specifically of Composition. In addition it revised and re-applied the Ideas of Typical Beauty examined ten years earlier. Table 1, drawn up by Ruskin in the process of drafting the opening chapter of Part VI-II of *Modern Painters*, to be devoted to Ideas of Relation, reveals his considered sense that Ideas and Laws were theoretically equivalent.

Table 1 Ideas of Typical Beauty and Laws of Composition collated

Ideas	**Laws**
Infinity	Curvature Continuity
Unity	Principality Radiation
Symmetry	Contrast Interchange
Purity	Consistency Harmony
Repose	Repetition
Source (content only): Ruskin 1903-12, 7: 481	

The patently deliberate echo in *Elements* of the language framing the theory of Typical Beauty in *Modern Painters II* was accompanied by a transvaluative shift in reference. Whereas the individual kinds of Typical Beauty had been conceptualised as "signs" or "types" of Divine nature, Composition was now generally presented as typical "in the arts of mankind, of the Providential government of the world" (Ruskin 1903-12, 15: 162) and in particular of the correspondent modes of human association and polity. Though variously significative of moral, political and social virtues, as well as of the natural laws of organic and especially vegetable form, Composition was explicitly intended as their manifestation in art, the

> exhibition, in the order given to notes, or colours, or forms, of the advantage of perfect fellowship, discipline, and contentment. (162)

A second important shift in emphasis, indicative of adjusted focus, was that the Laws of Composition as now presented were all essentially variant modes of Unity, which Ruskin announced as its overall "intended […] result"; Composition being

> literally and simply [the] putting several things together, so as to make *one* thing out of them; the nature and goodness of which they all have a share in producing. (Ruskin 1903-12, 15: 161)[12]

12 Compare 10: 215-16.

Thus, pictorial images, in so far as they exhibited the Laws of Composition, constituted a new class of the "appearances of unity" (4: 94) analysed in *Modern Painters II*. In *Elements* Ruskin transferred certain "characteristics" of "material loveliness" cited in the earlier volume – continuity and curvature, for example – to the analysis of a form of unity or cohesion now recognised as specifically pictorial. The painted *representamen* thus acquired a new aspect, a new locus of signification, positioned somewhere on its surface as an image.

This is vividly apparent from the innovative illustrations expressly prepared for *Elements*, especially so from two outlines of parts of Turner's watercolour *Coblenz* **[figs 1, 2]**, whose use as a "general illustration" (15: 172) in this third Letter rendered it an emblem of compositional unity. On these outlines Ruskin superposed dotted lines intended to reveal the watercolour's formal structure (particularly as instantiating the laws of continuity and curvature). If he was here adapting a prototype, I am not aware of any direct precedent for this kind of diagrammatic evidencing of composition, even within the early nineteenth-century drawing manual tradition, to which the book (in part) belongs. The closest match may be with **a** pair of images **[fig. 3]** in a plate illustrating John Burnet's *Practical Hints on Composition in Painting* (1822), designed to elucidate the use by Albert Cuyp of what Burnet terms "Angular Composition".

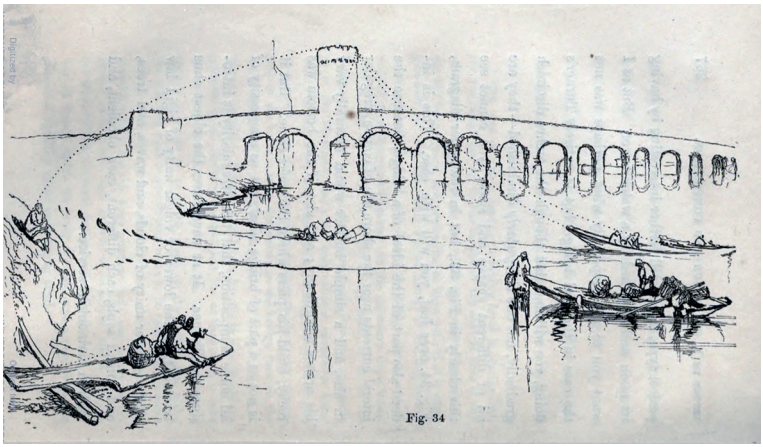


Figure 1 John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*. In *Three Letters to Beginners*, London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857, 268, fig. 34: woodcut by Miss Byfield after drawing by Ruskin. Image downloaded from copy at University of California digitized by Internet Archive and available from HathiTrust Digital Library (www.hathitrust.org)

And yet this is hardly a match at all. The diagonal line in the left-hand image is not superposed upon the outline of Cuyp's composition given in the other; and though it may evoke the general disposition

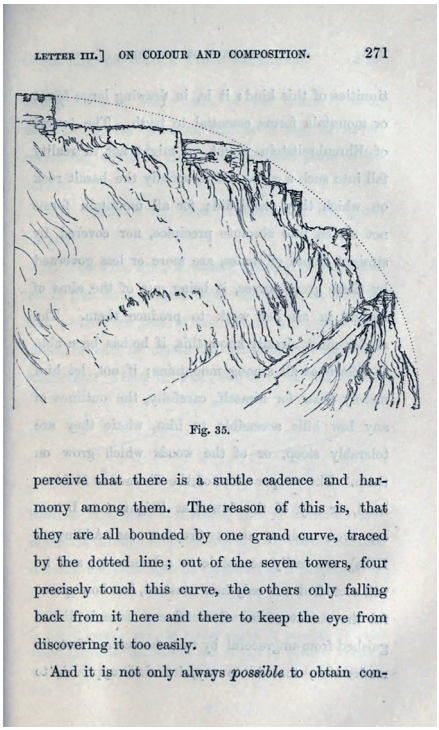

LETTER III.] ON COLOUR AND COMPOSITION. 271

Fig. 35.

perceive that there is a subtle cadence and harmony among them. The reason of this is, that they are all bounded by one grand curve, traced by the dotted line; out of the seven towers, four precisely touch this curve, the others only falling back from it here and there to keep the eye from discovering it too easily.

And it is not only always *possible* to obtain con-

Figure 2 John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*. In *Three Letters to Beginners*, London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857, 271, fig. 35: woodcut by Miss Byfield after drawing by Ruskin. Image downloaded from copy at University of California digitized by Internet Archive and available from HathiTrust Digital Library (www.hathitrust.org)

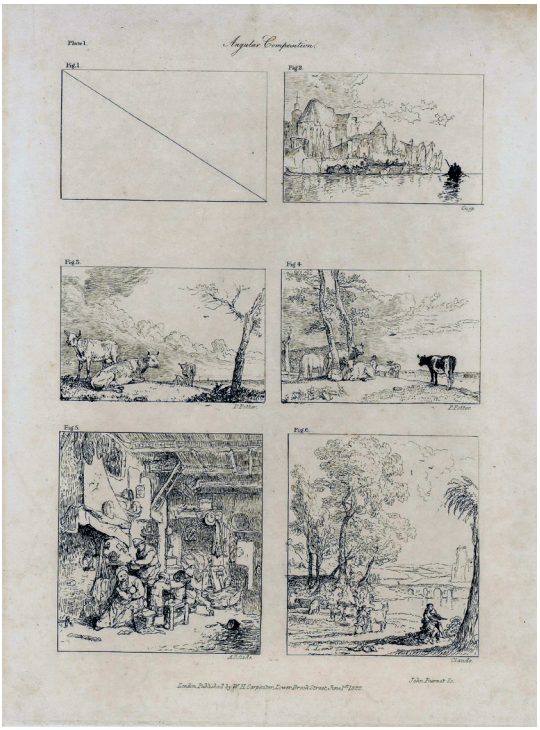


Plate I. *Angular Composition.*

Fig 1. Fig 2.

Fig 3. Fig 4.

Fig 5. Fig 6.

Figure 3 John Burnet, *Practical Hints on Composition in Painting* (London 1822), Pl. 1 "Angular Composition" © The Trustees of the British Museum (Creative Commons license)

of forms within the rectangle delimiting the picture, it does not present a linear abstract of their cohesion within the image space. The diagonal is in fact explicitly presented by Burnet as a constructional expedient. It is not analytic of formal meaning and general principle, as in Ruskin.

4.3 The "Map of the Great Schools"

In 1869 Ruskin was appointed Oxford University's first Slade Professor of Fine Art. And the fusion of the broadly theoretical and minutely practical evident in *Elements* was thence extended into an elaborate

educational programme (Ruskin 1903-12, 20: 27-8). This entailed the founding (and funding) of a Mastership (afterwards School) of Drawing and the organisation of multiple series of variously instructive and exemplary images in diverse media: the "Ruskin Art Collection" (Ruskin 1903-12, 21).

Ruskin held the Professorship from 1870 to 1878 and again from 1883 to 1885. Its erratic course cannot concern us here except as it determined further transformation of his iconology. If, in *Elements*, the pictorial image was explicated in terms of its proper modes of organisation, and those modes were taken as symbolic of social and political cohesion, Ruskin's teaching at Oxford was grounded in a still more closely focused and complex understanding of the image in terms of its elementary (graphic, chromatic, plastic) constituents.

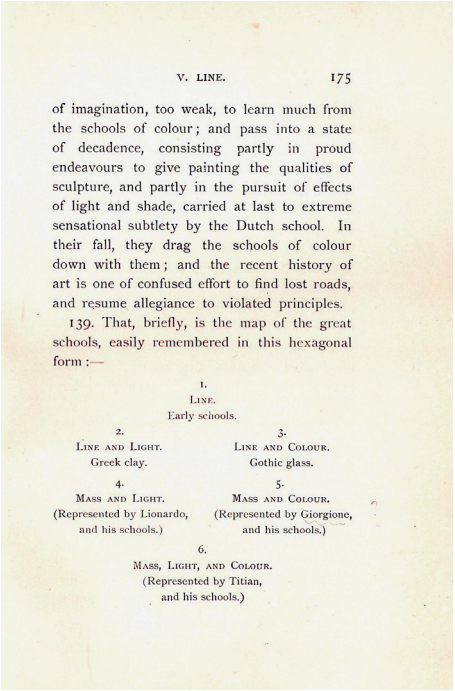
In the fifth lecture in his initial series, dedicated to Line – the constituent to which he had come to accord primary status –[13] he exhibited and elucidated a diagrammatic model **[fig. 4]** of the image's elemental and aspectual properties. This represented at once an abstract of the process of visual perception (on the lines of the theory of the "Innocence of the Eye" advanced in *Elements* [15: 27n]), a progressive course of practical art instruction and a comprehensive "map" (20: 128) of the historical progress of art, organised by school. The schools in question, however, were not precisely of the national, regional, personal or stylistic varieties to which connoisseurs, critics and historians of art would have been accustomed. They were rather distinguished from one another by association with one among six possible combinations of four basic constituent properties – line, light, colour and mass – and with the moral temperament each choice implied.

This complex of meanings was visually compressed into the "easily remembered" form of a hexagon, which further allowed visualisation of two progressive routes or "ways", the one by Light, the other by Colour, which prospective students were "with [their] own eyes and fingers to trace, and in [their] progress to follow". All were to start by "learning to draw a steady line" in order to limit a given space or form. They would go on to fill the enclosed space or form with flat tints, "either with shade or colour according to the school" they chose. Finally they would add

> such fineness of gradation within the masses, as [should] express their roundings, and their characters of texture. (20: 128-9)

This model informed the manifold "divisions" of art defended in later lecture courses – among them that comprising Painting, Sculpture

13 See Levi, Tucker 1997; 1999; 2011; 2014; 2020.



V. LINE. 175

of imagination, too weak, to learn much from the schools of colour; and pass into a state of decadence, consisting partly in proud endeavours to give painting the qualities of sculpture, and partly in the pursuit of effects of light and shade, carried at last to extreme sensational subtlety by the Dutch school. In their fall, they drag the schools of colour down with them; and the recent history of art is one of confused effort to find lost roads, and resume allegiance to violated principles.

139. That, briefly, is the map of the great schools, easily remembered in this hexagonal form:—

1.
LINE.
Early schools.

2.
LINE AND LIGHT.
Greek clay.

3.
LINE AND COLOUR.
Gothic glass.

4.
MASS AND LIGHT.
(Represented by Lionardo, and his schools.)

5.
MASS AND COLOUR.
(Represented by Giorgione, and his schools.)

6.
MASS, LIGHT, AND COLOUR.
(Represented by Titian, and his schools.)

Figure 4
John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, Orpington: George Allen, 1887, 175. Image scanned by the author

and Architecture expounded in the lecture that opened Ruskin's first course proper,[14] as well as the binary division that cut contrapuntally across that tripartite distinction. For "[a]ny of these three arts", Ruskin stressed, might be "either imitative of natural objects or limited to useful appliance". (Ruskin 1903-12, 20: 204)

The major point here seems to have been that such limitation did not exclude the artefacts displaying it from exhibiting a form of beauty, defined as

> abstract relations and inherent pleasantnesses, whether in space, number, or time, and whether of colours or sounds. (207)

By the same token, the imitative arts too might display what Ruskin called this "musical or harmonic element" (207), as emerges in his second definition of sculpture, given only a few pages later, and which stated:

14 *The Elements of Sculpture* in 1871, afterwards published as *Aratra Pentelici* (Ruskin 1903-12, 20: 183-367).

> (1) that sculpture is essentially the production of a pleasant bossiness or roundness of surface; (2) that the pleasantness of that bossy condition to the eye is irrespective of imitation on one side, and of structure on the other. (214)

The "map of the great schools" still more directly informed the definition of engraving given in the first of the lecture series dedicated to that medium.[15] Ruskin's decision to focus on engraving was partly motivated by historical reasons:

> [T]he art of engraving is so manifestly, at Florence, though not less essentially elsewhere, a basis of style both in architecture and sculpture, that it is absolutely necessary I should explain to you in what the skill of the engraver consists, before I can define with accuracy that of more admired artists. (22: 304)

At the same time, the historical school of Florence offered an important paradigm of the artistic and moral virtues of the primordial school of Line – Line being "the simplest work of art you can produce" (22: 319) and engraving the best means of delineation in so far as it epitomised

> the primitive line, the first and last, generally the best of lines […] that which you have elementary faculty of at your fingers' ends […] the scratch […] Engraving, then, is, in brief terms, the Art of Scratch. It is essentially the cutting a solid substance for the sake of making your ideas as permanent as possible, graven with an iron pen in the Rock for ever. (Ruskin 1903-12, 22: 320)

The conceptual model embodied in the "map of the great schools" licensed a revisioning of the image that gave new emphasis to its capacity to signify as Peircean Index – as entailing a "real relation" or "correspondence in fact" between sign and object; specifically through its material incorporation of traces of the artist's manipulations of given media.

4.4 *The Laws of Fésole*

Ruskin's sense of the image's indexical quality as symbolical of moral disposition and as integral to a form of explicative testimony realised through the concerted agency of eye, mind and hand is further

15 *Sandro Botticelli and the Florentine Schools of Engraving*, revised and published (1873-76) as *Ariadne Florentina* (XXII, 291-490) (Ruskin 1903-12, 22: 291-490).

exemplified by *The Laws of Fésole* (1877-78) (Ruskin 1903-12, 15: 337-488), intended for use in the schools he envisaged in connection with the Guild of St George, but no more than *Elements* straightforwardly classifiable as a drawing manual. It is rather a progressively arranged graphical induction in reverential cosmography, of astounding simplicity and ambition, and founded in the discipline of a rudimental "first step". After long insistence, as a perceptual fact and as a didactic principle, that there are no outlines in nature; after still longer celebration of the "curvature of lines and surfaces" (4: 87) as essential to beauty; and after almost equally long opposition to the mechanically rectilinear South Kensington system, the "quite first step" now prescribed was "an extremely narrow, and an extremely direct, line" (B–C in **[fig. 5]**), emblematic of "true and vital direction" and a "higher order of contending and victorious rightness" –

> simple production of the mathematical Right line, as far as the hand can draw it, joining two points. (28: 442)

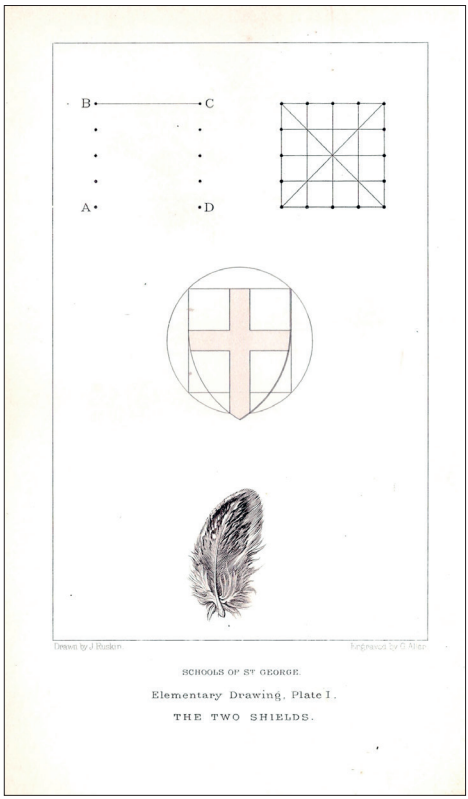


Figure 5
John Ruskin, *The Laws of Fésole. A Familiar Treatise on the Elementary Principles and Practice of Drawing and Painting. As Determined by the Tuscan Masters*, vol. 1, Orpington: George Allen, 1879, Plate I (*The Two Shields*): engraving by G. Allen after drawing by J. Ruskin. Image scanned by the author

5 Conclusion

It has been possible here to consider only select stages and junctures in Ruskin's iconology-in-progress. Many others require careful investigation, above all perhaps the way in which the dialectic between truth and imagination transformed with the ebb and flow of religious belief, interacting in the process with shifting pairs of criterial opposites – such as "fact" and "fable", visible and visionary, executive "reserve" and "finish", "realisation" and "symbolism" – and issuing in Ruskin's late entertainment of the possibility that "figurative perceptions" (Ruskin 1903-12, 29: 54) of the invisible such as those painted by Carpaccio might be "ovverruled into expressions of truth" (24: 368), not only in so far as their symbolism entailed a degree of iconicity in the transposition, to representations of the unseen, of the faithfully stated appearances of natural phenomena, but by virtue (literally) of their manner of production and reception, by adherence to their frank but reverent mode of dissemblance.

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