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Tracing Ruskin's Threads: Legacies in Linen, Lace and Place

Rachel Dickinson
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Déirdre Kelly
Independent scholar

Abstract Drawing on cultural textile legacies from Venice and historic Lancashire, this paper demonstrates how Ruskin was inspired by cloth and used the language of lace to convey wider messages. Tracing threads, both of his instructions and of Venice Lace, the paper briefly considers how these resonate with the nineteenth century revival of Lakeland Linen and Lace. Co-authored by an academic and a visual artist, the paper takes a transdisciplinary approach, coupling traditional scholarship with practice research responses to Ruskin, lace and place.

Keywords Architecture. Craft. John Ruskin. Lace. Maps. Place. Practice research. Textiles. Transdisciplinary.

Summary 1 Introduction: *Absences and Presences* – 2 Lessons in Ruskinian Relational Gothic. – 3 Ruskin's Relational Fabric of Place. – 4 Ruskin on Lace. – 5 Venice, City of Lace. – 6 Lakeland Linen: A Ruskinian Community Enterprise. – 7 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction: *Absences and Presences*

A human figure, barely glimpsed in a web of lace cut by hand into the distinctively robust, fabric-infused paper of an Ordnance Survey map offers a visual starting point for this paper. It is a detail from *Absences and Presences: Lace Memoir* (2020) by Venice-based visual artist Déirdre Kelly **[figs 1-2]**; the map semi-obscured by the cuts is of the Lake District. Created in response to Venetian Lace and Ruskin Lace – two forms of needle lace popularised in nineteenth century craft revivals – it links textiles and place, the science of cartography and the art of lace, with the influence of Victorian polymath John Ruskin (1819-1900). These concepts of p/lace, mapping, memory and influence, coupled with a reinterpretation of the past into the contemporary to build a better future, are at the heart of this paper. In the contemporary artwork featured here as in traditional lace, meaning rests in the spaces – the absences.

Ruskin, too, looked to lines and patterns from the past, seeing sometimes tenuous connections and finding meaning in the gaps. He did this repeatedly in his memoir, *Praeterita* (1885), the title of which evokes the sense of retracing paths along well-worn routes of geography and of memory. Like the fragile lines connecting the figures in *Absences and Presences*, the subtitle of *Praeterita*, *Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life*, draws attention to the threads of memory which link the past ("scenes" and "thoughts"). Both in Ruskin's subtitle and Kelly's cut paper, using lines – whether as words or cut into paper – to connect vignettes gives rise to a greater meaning when each is seen as part of a whole. Similarly, the "Preface" to *Praeterita* foregrounds the importance of gaps; Ruskin unapologetically states that he will be "passing in silence things which I have no pleasure in reviewing". Yet he consciously offers "long past scenes for present scrutiny" in order to teach his "methods of study, and principles of work" (Ruskin 1903-12, 35: 11).

In one striking passage on his methods, he argues that "the adaptation of materials for my story", here, a piece of fictional juvenilia he had composed with inspiration from Jeremiah Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues* and Lord Byron's *Manfred*,

> is an extremely perfect type of the inter-woven temper of my mind, at the beginning of days just as much as at their end – which has always made foolish scientific readers doubt my books because there was love of beauty in them, and foolish aesthetic readers doubt my books because there was love of science in them. (Ruskin 1903-12, 35: 56)

He utilises a textile term ("inter-woven") to express how his child-self instinctively crossed disciplinary boundaries by blending fiction and

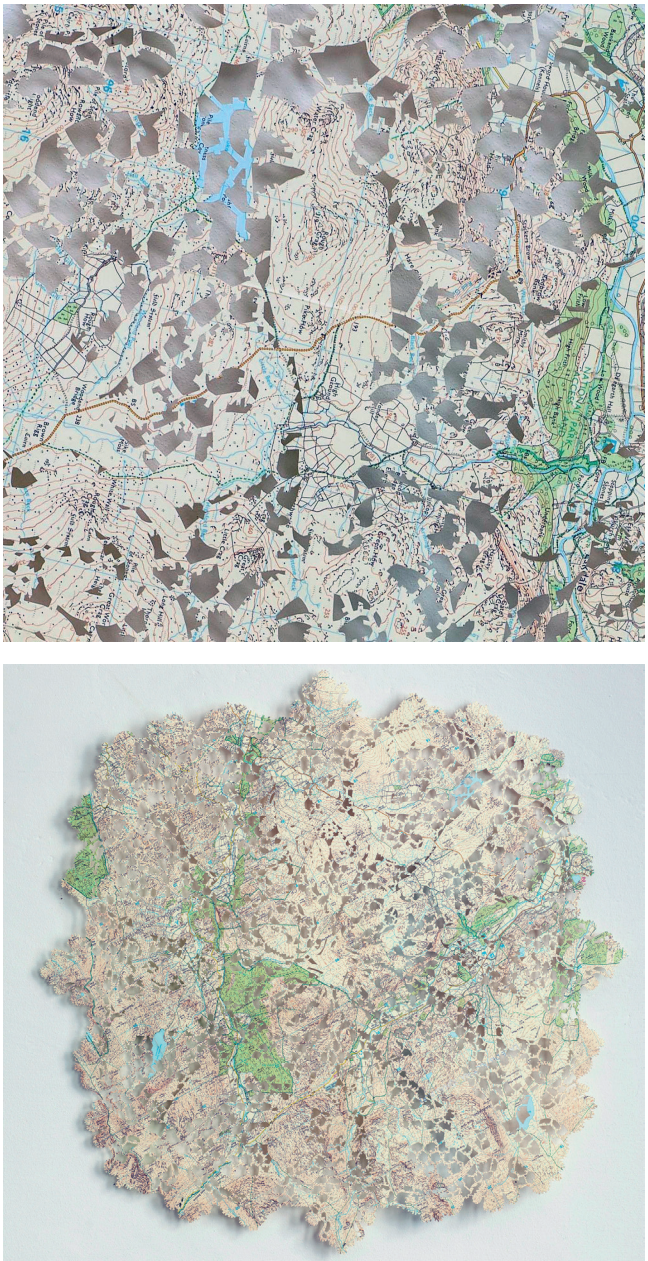


Figure 1 Déirdre Kelly, *Absences and Presences: Lace Memoir*, detail. 2021. Print on fabric, 240 x 180 cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

Figure 2 Déirdre Kelly, *Absences and Presences: Lace Memoir*. 2020. Cut paper Ordnance Survey map, 56 x 56 cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

science, exemplifying the "experimental ideas and techniques" that characterise being contemporary (*OED*, online 'contemporary'). Such language of textiles runs throughout Ruskin's work. Often, as in this example where the scientific and poetic merge, Ruskin's references to needlework are accompanied by blurring disciplinary boundaries and an implied mapping of often unexpected relationships. Another such example appears in *Fors Clavigera* letter 95, when he refers to needlework as "acicular art", using the term for 'needle-shaped' that is used in scientific classification, but it is not the term commonly used in relation to needlework (Ruskin 1903-12, 29: 509). He uses this 'inter-woven' approach to offer ways of seeing and envisaging future possibilities, teaching his readers and tracing routes to build a culture of community. Although, as he notes here, some "doubt[ed]" his approach because it instinctively made interdisciplinary connections and offered new ways of working, many have been inspired by this. This present paper considers such influence in relation to textiles. Although Ruskin states that his "inter-woven" method was innate to his child self, readers of his *oeuvre* will recognise that his mature "inter-woven" methods are rooted in his reading of nature, art and – crucially for this paper – the principles of Venetian Gothic coupled with textiles as the embodiment of what, in "Modern Manufacture and Design" (1859) he referred to as "the domestic life, aided by arts of peace", which he believed could give rise to a better future (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 342).

Our methodology is, like Ruskin's, inter-woven, consciously inter- and trans-disciplinary, personal and rooted in place. We focus on two locations where Ruskin was at home, and which also map onto where we live: Venice and historic Lancashire. Drawing on cultural legacies from both locations, we consider how Ruskin was inspired by cloth and how his ideas subsequently have been – and can be – used to inspire, to be contemporary. We treat Ruskin's work as a multi-layered map and trace routes others have followed in "the hope of doing better things" (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 29). By combining the distinct approaches of an academic housed in an English department (Dickinson) with the practice research approach of a visual artist (Kelly), we shed new light on Ruskin's work and his influence. While Kelly's work is sometimes discussed here in illustrating specific points of the written argument, in many places the art is the argument, expressed visually. Like a piece of lace, the argument circles and flows, retreading across the points in mapping the connections between Ruskin, place and lace.

2 Lessons in Ruskinian Relational Gothic

The local, domestic and feminised aspects that flow from textiles are an important part of Ruskin's vision for a better future; these are all relational. It is worth noting that, as Lars Spuybroek states, "[w]hile other architectural styles often revolve around elements and form, the Gothic is much more about relationships" (Spuybroek 2016, 8). Ruskinian Gothic is about connections; it is also rooted in place, reflecting the local landscape and people from which it emerges, and – as we shall see in relation to *The Stones of Venice* – it celebrates instinctively aesthetic arrangements. Ruskinian relational Gothic, which he extrapolates from architecture and applies more widely in reading and envisaging culture, is key to our argument: it offers a map that makers with a shared interest in Ruskin and textiles have used to shape their work. In essence, Ruskin's writings on textiles function like *imparaticci*, the traditional needlework samplers handed down through generations of Venetian lacemakers, the *merlettaie*. He influenced his contemporaries and continues to be relevant today, offering lines to follow which inspire twenty-first interpretations, and help to map pathways to a future rooted in craft and community – and which, as he makes clear in "The Work of Iron", privilege the delicacy and recuperative functions of feminine hands and needle over the rougher imagery of the nature of ploughs (or swords) wielded by masculine arms, which tend "to pierce, to bind, and to smite" (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 395-7).

Déirdre Kelly's Ruskin-inspired cut paper map works allude to the perfection of intertwined threads and the rich creativity of the female hand, specifically here to that of the *merlettaie*, the Venetian lacemakers. Her interest was sparked by seeing the *imparaticci*, patterns used to teach children lace making on the island of Burano in the nineteenth century, which are housed in the archives of the Library of the History of Textiles and Costume at Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice **[fig. 3]**. *Lace Lexicon* **[fig. 4]**, foregrounds the way in which the sampler, or practice pieces, are akin to a 'map legend', the key. What is important is who is doing the reading. The reader in the case of traditional lace patterns is the lacemaker who sees each of the different symbols as representing the different stitches; in the case of Ruskin's textile-inflected writing, the intended reader is anyone who responds to his outreached hand and will join him in forming a new society. The stress on the individual reader looking closely and thereby rightly interpreting and doing runs through Ruskin's work. The titular readers of *Fors Clavigera* are the 'Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain', yet as Ruskin explains in the first letter of *Fors*, the intended readership is both wider and more focused, entailing "any few or many who will help […] to abate this misery", and join him in his quest to make life better (Ruskin 1903-12, 28: 13).

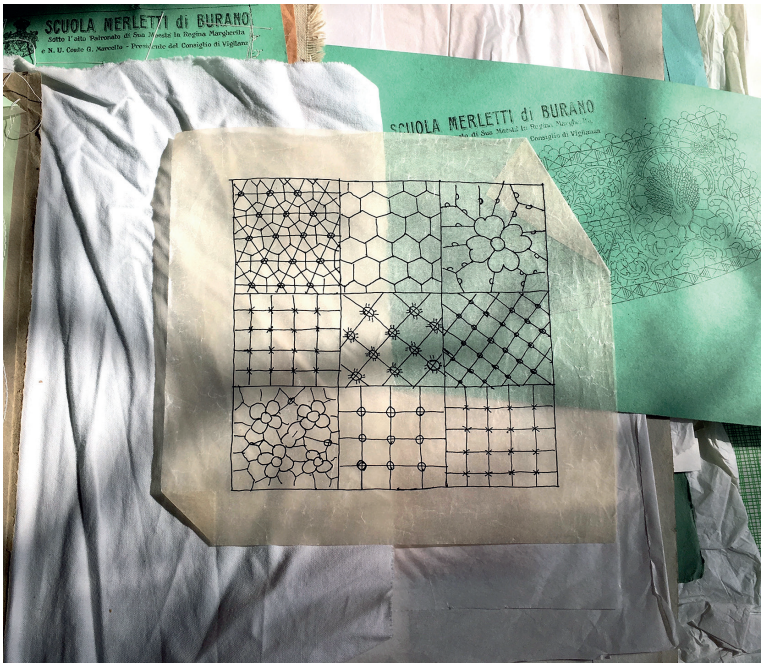


Figure 3 Déirdre Kelly, *Imparaticci*. 2018. Photograph. Archive collection of Palazzo Mocenigo, Museum of the History of Textiles, Costume and Perfume, Venice. © Déirdre Kelly

Figure 4 Déirdre Kelly, *Lace Lexicon*. 2020. Unique leporello, found map cut out and collage, 20 x 11.5 cm. Private collection. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

On the Border of Infinite Pathways – Lace Embrace **[fig. 5]** helps to illustrate this point. It was created as part of TRACERY, a solo exhibition held at Brantwood, Ruskin's Lakeland home (April-July 2023). Like most of Kelly's work discussed here, it is a paper cut Ordnance Survey Map. It emerged from thinking about a Ruskinian sense of travelling 'on the old road', following junctions and crossroads, both physical and mental, and uses the universal language of the maps and geometry to reveal new ways of looking at lace. The labyrinth of the lace patterns extends to two delicate, feminine hands curving to embrace the unseen. It seeks to make visible the hidden journey of intersections and interventions, and a whole range of processes that may be involved in the act of making textiles: cutting, piercing, pricking, sewing, counting, stitching, pointing, pinning, punching, knotting, knitting, crossing over, threading through, tying off, resistance, tension, bridges, revealing layers, turning over, reading through and following on. All are part of the language of lacemaking, and the language of mapping, too.

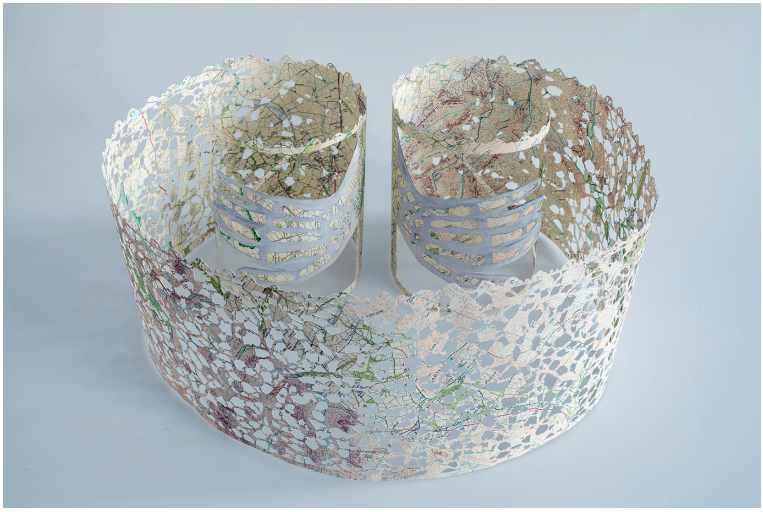


Figure 5 Déirdre Kelly, *On the Border of Infinite Pathways – Lace Embrace*. 2020. Paper cut Ordnance Survey map, 197 x 21cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

While Ruskin was very much in Kelly's mind as she created *Lace Embrace* as a way to explore and express these concepts, she had not read *Fors Clavigera* 95 (1884) before making this piece. Yet, there is a striking similarity between her listing of the acts of making textiles coupled with a belief in the uniting aspects of textile craft, and Ruskin's discussion of the pedagogical, social and economic use of textiles in the penultimate letter of *Fors*. As he outlines his ideal plans

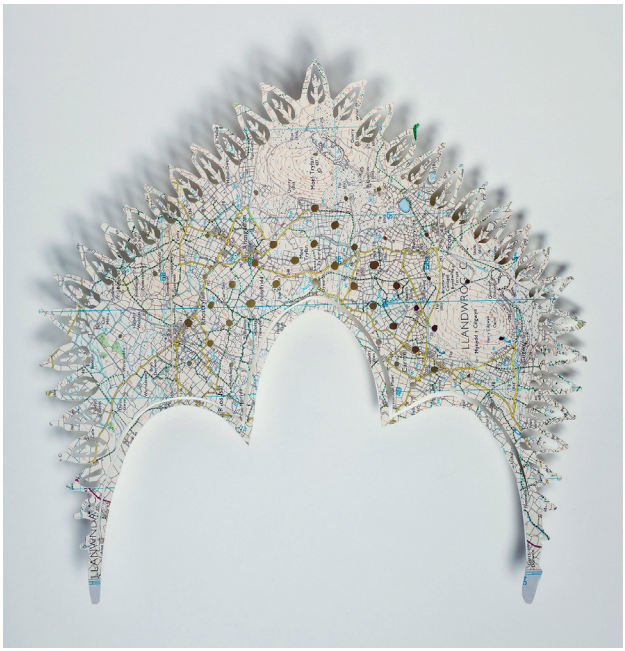
for a museum to inspire Victorian, industrial workers in Sheffield, the first room is set aside for needlework:

> In an echo of the opening to *The Stones of Venice* (1851), where two fallen ocean empires (Ancient Tyre and Renaissance Venice) form a warning to the British Empire then at its peak, he lists "Tyrian Scarlet", Venetian "valance" of gold and modern British "velvet" for Queen Victoria. He expands the tripartite, ocean-empire vision from *Stones* to include other nations: Turkey, Lapland and France (29: 509). As for Britain, he extends the temporal focus back from Victorian present to "Saxon", "Norman", Early Modern "counterpanes", and more recent "samplers" made by "our […] ancestresses". (Dickinson 2018, 509)

Ruskin speaks of "the acicular art of nations" and the universal-yet-local value and skills of needlework. In quick succession, he runs through "the true nature of a thread and a needle, the structure first of wool and cotton, of fur and hair and down, hemp, flax and silk […]" through "dyeing" and "spinning" to "weaving" and "all manner of knotting, knitting and reticulation" (Ruskin 1903-12, 29: 510). He reminds his readers that the products of needlework, particularly clothing and nets, have made "so many nations possible", then notes with visible pride how his 'vision of thread and needlework […] is now being in all its branches realised by two greatly valued friends', that is, by Albert Fleming and the Langdale Linen Industry in the Lake District, and by Kate Stanley who taught sewing to trainee teachers at Whitelands College in London (Ruskin 1903-12, 29: 510). More will be said of Fleming and his experiment, below. What is pertinent here is how, for Ruskin, textiles reflect cultural movements over time and he perceives much to learn from the synecdochic hands of our 'ancestresses': both metaphorically and as an applied art, needlework is transformative for the individual, local communities and nations.

3 Ruskin's Relational Fabric of Place

The rigidity and scale of buildings may seem very different from the anticipated softness, detail and fragility of textiles. Kelly's *Colletto* **[fig. 6]**, which closely maps onto a Venetian Lace collar pattern in the Collection Palazzo Mocenigo **[fig. 7]**, helps to demonstrate this connection when it is positioned with another point of inspiration, Ruskin's illustration of "Windows of the Early Gothic Palaces" from *The Stones of Venice* **[fig. 8]**. The tracery and the lace follow the same lines. When, in *John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture*, Anuradha Chatterjee "revisits Ruskin's writings" in what she terms our "contemporary age of surface consciousness", she focuses on how he links architecture



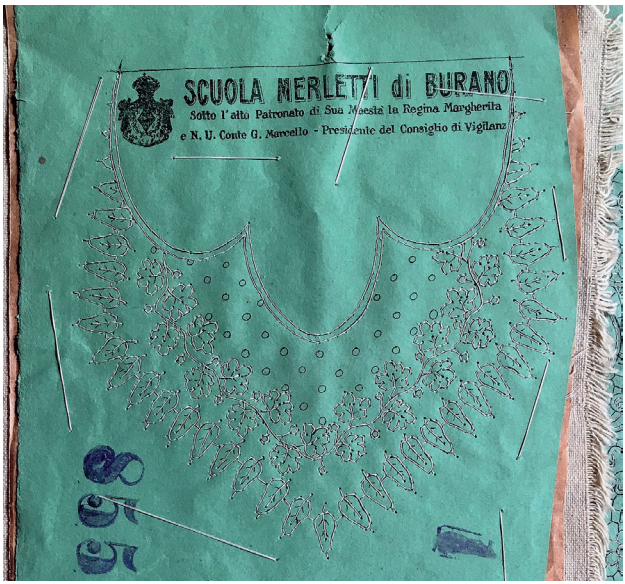


Figure 6 Déirdre Kelly, *Colletto*. 2018. Paper cut Ordnance Survey maps, 25 x 26cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

Figure 7 Lace collar pattern. 1912. Archive Collection Palazzo Mocenigo, Museum of the History of Textiles, Costume and Perfume, Venice

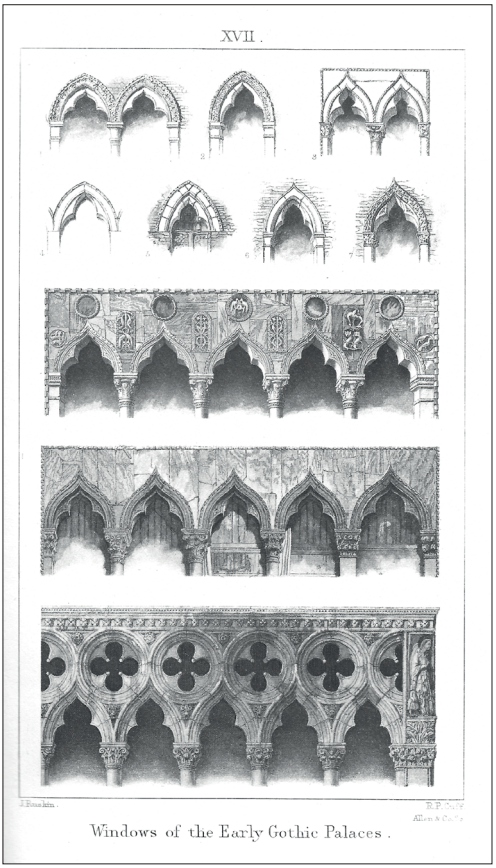


Figure 8
John Ruskin, "Windows of the Early Gothic Palaces". *The Stones of Venice*. Volume 2, Chapter 7, Plate 17

and textiles and "positions it as part of a larger, and almost transhistorical debate on surface" (Chatterjee 2018, 4). Part of what is intriguing in Ruskin's approach to this debate is the way he emphasises the domestic feminine and fabric in relation to public architecture. Writing in the *Stones of Venice 2* (1853) about the church at Torcello, Ruskin pairs this less famous island with Venice as "Mother and Daughter", feminising both and placing them in a familial relationship to each other, with Torcello as mother (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 18). The feminisation of locations and labour is a strand which recurs in this paper; of particular interest here is the way Ruskin peppers his description of the cold, rigid stone interior of the Byzantine basilica of Santa Maria Assunta with the warm and fluid language of lace. He mentions "wreathed and braided" and "knotting" elements, and the "organization and elasticity [of] the group of spiral lines" (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 23-4).

He draws an overt connection between architectural decoration and textiles, arguing that the sculptor's aim was:

> [E]nrichment of surface, so as to make it delightful to the eye; and this being once understood, a decorated piece of marble became to the architect just what a piece of lace or embroidery is to a dressmaker, who takes of it such portions as she may require, with little regard to the places where the patterns are divided. (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 29)

Ruskin equates marble to textile, inviting his reader to think about how these influence each other. While his assessment of the imagined Torcello architect and implied dressmaker may appear negative – after all, the claim that the lace is used without pausing to plan and make best use of the patterns is at odds with what a skilled dressmaker would do – Ruskin is in fact praising the innate, natural beauty of the arrangement even as it goes against classical expectations of balanced aesthetics. In the lines that follow, he writes of generations and nations learning from what came before, and that these traces of the past utilised by those who follow offer "a sign of the hope of doing better things [rather] than of want to feeling for those already accomplished" (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 29).

Patterns inherited from the past are valued even as they are reinterpreted and reworked, just as skilled needleworkers utilise traditional patterns and stitches, making them their own and a product of their own time. The blurring and breaking of lines, the introduction of imperfection, which Ruskin draws attention to here is also what renders it beautifully human: "It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change" (Ruskin 1903-12, 10: 204).

Ruskin's reading of architecture as textile has implications not just for aesthetics but also for the development of nations and cultures; such idealised 'changefulness' stems from using remnants of the past to make a better future. It foregrounds breathing new life into the old. We will pick this thread up again in considering what Glenn Adamson has referred to as "the invention of craft", by offering Victorian examples of community-building textile practice in Venice and Lancashire. But first, we leave Torcello and return to the heart of Venice to gaze with Ruskin at the Ducal Palace **[fig. 9]**, which he called the "central building of the world" (Ruskin 1903-12, 9: 38). This claim is another example of Ruskin offering a new and innovative perspective: here, he elevates a building which, as Chatterjee notes, was "regarded as having little architectural value according to the nineteenth-century travellers to Venice" (Chatterjee 2018, 92). In praising the palace and other key buildings across Venice which exhibit Venetian tracery, he draws particular attention to their affinity with textiles, for example where he writes: "[O]ut of this colossal piece of marble

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Figure 9 Déirdre Kelly, *No Line on the Horizon – Riva degli Schiavoni*, 2021. Collage and mixed media, 50 × 35cm. © Déirdre Kelly

lace, a piece in the shape of a window is cut, mercilessly and fearlessly" (Ruskin 1903-12, 11: 284). As Chatterjee notes, "the tracery was treated as if it were a piece of fabric"(Chatterjee 2018, 93). The specific lines of Venetian tracery are viewed by Ruskin with an associational weight of interlaced communication between makers and viewers, both those who are native to Venice and the marvelling traveller.

This can be sensed in a real and tangible way today if we consider *Ponte de la Canonica* **[fig. 10]**, the bridge which sits behind the Basilica of San Marco, where the repeated touch of daily visitors as well as Venetians, have caressed the stone balustrade over time. The handrail (*corrimano* literally 'running hand') has been smoothed to a shine, revealing veins in the stone which appear as waves running towards the water's edge, connecting to the timeless view of the Bridge of Sighs. Looking closely at Figure 10, the patterns in Ponte de la Canonica's handrail also have a lace-like quality, evoking the textile/tactile fabric of place that is shaped naturally and without intention by generations of both human hands and nature's touch. This tiny example of natural lace-like beauty in the fabric of Venice, shaped

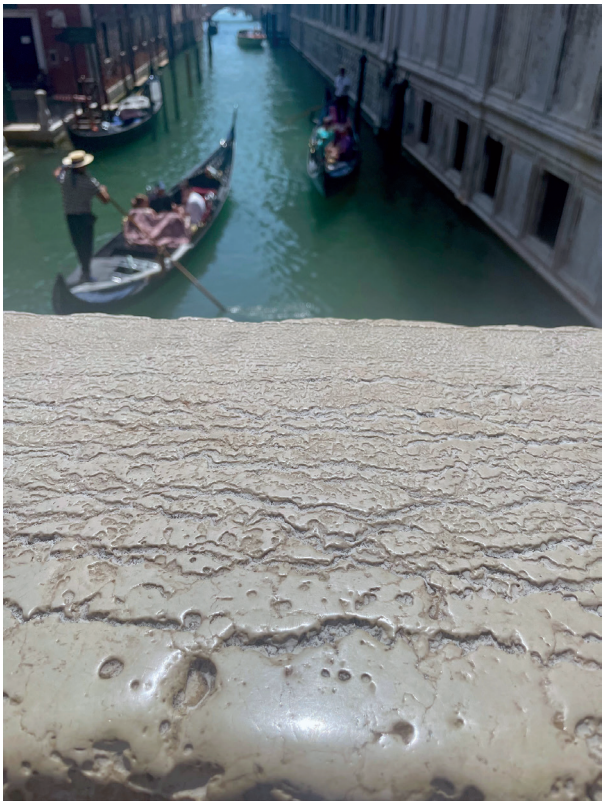

Figure 10
Déirdre Kelly, *Ponte de la Canonica*. 2024. Digital photograph. © Déirdre Kelly

by countless hands, water and wind, which are wearing it away even while adding a beautiful patina and pattern, brings to mind Ruskin's declaration of his drive to write *The Stones of Venice*:

> I would endeavour to trace the lines of this image before it be forever lost, and to record, as far as I may, the warning which seems to me to be uttered by every one of the fast-gaining waves, that beat, like passing bells, against the STONES OF VENICE. (Ruskin 1903-12, 9: 17; emphasis in the original)

His project to map the architectural stones of Venice and preserve a record of them for the future, resonates with the aims of those who, a little later in the century, endeavoured to revive lace traditions linked to specific places. Ruskin repeatedly invokes such a fabric of place and connects 'enrichment' of surface to the enrichment of the maker and community, who all benefit from the judicious and skilful application of pattern.

4 Ruskin on Lace

Ruskin collected "laces and embroideries", and owned "samples of Persian embroidery bought in Paris, Italian Greek lace bought in Lucca, and Italian embroidery bought in Venice [some…] four hundred years old". (Haslam 2004, 26). He demonstrably was interested in historic lace and, although he makes many references to lace in his writings, the *Index* to the *Library Edition* mentions just nine. This select list includes an important discussion of the distinction between machine- and hand-made lace, as well as the relationship between those involved in its production and performance, the lecture 'Art School Notes' (1873). Here, Ruskin offers advice to students of the 'Art Night Class, Mansfield'. As he often does, he picks up on the local to make his point and chooses to focus on lace as the most famous product of nearby Nottingham, using this to consider "*manufacture* in its literal and proper sense" which he clarifies "means the making of things *by the hand*. It does not mean the making them by machinery" (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 156; italics in the original). He argues that "the whole value of lace, as a possession, depends on the fact of its having a beauty which has been the reward of industry and attention" (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 157). He does not mean industry in its now current usage of machinery but in its older sense of working hard, as in being industrious – its beauty and value rest in the work of the human hand **[fig. 11]**. Tracing a relational thread from the designer through the maker to the wearer of lace, he invokes the natural good sense (what in the next paragraph he describes as 'mother-wit') and skill required of each in order for the final product, a lace gown, to achieve its potential:

> The real good of a piece of lace, then, you will find, is that it should show, first, that the designer of it had a pretty fancy; next, that the maker of it had fine fingers; lastly, that the wearer of it has worthiness or dignity enough to obtain what is difficult to obtain, and common sense enough not to wear it on all occasions. (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 158)

For Ruskin, such lace provides livelihood, justified pride to the individuals involved in the stages of production, and its proper use evinces the inner beauty and morality of the wearer, whose physical beauty is also highlighted by the lace.[1]

1 For a fascinating discussion of *genius loci*, or spirit of the place, cultivating pride in local production and how this has been applied in an innovatively Ruskin-infused, transformative way in education – including textiles – see Gordon, Cox 2024.

Figure 11 Déirdre Kelly, *Hand Signals*. 2020. Cut paper Ordnance Survey map, 40 x 20cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

In this lecture to art students he uses lace to consider a wide range of topics: morality, aesthetics, the way communities of individuals are connected, laws of supply and demand, and even genius – the route to which rests in first "discerning firmly what to admire and whom to obey" (Ruskin 1903-12, 16: 156). Implicitly, Ruskin's own teaching is offered as a model to admire and obey, just as needleworkers admire and obey the lace patterns passed on to them as they rework them and make them their own. His alliterative emphasis on the 'fine fingers' of the needlewoman who made the lace, and her ability to follow the pattern set by the designer is notable. It highlights the ideal of following a pattern in order to learn from what has come before while simultaneously creating new beauty. Writing of an extant teaching collection of lace in Nottingham, Amanda Briggs-Goode notes that "[t]here are many samples of hand-made lace in the collection and students were required to imitate them as closely as possible" (Briggs-Goode 2013, 45). She identifies a seventeenth-century Venetian-made chasuble of gros-point lace as the star item. Elaborating, she notes that "[t]his type of lace would have required highly skilled embroiderers and have taken vast amounts of time to make. Gros-point lace was often described as looking like carved ivory"(Briggs-Goode 2013, 46). The historic Venetian lace sample was the pinnacle

of hand-made perfection that the Nottingham students were to emulate in the nineteenth century resurgence of hand skills there. This parallelled a similar resurgence in Venice itself, as well as in the Lake District. As Elaine Freedgood has argued, "Victorian representations of handmade lace are significant in that they succeed in inventing a mode of apparently utopian commodity consumption" (Freedgood 2003, 625). This is in part rooted in sense of place, and the renewal of communities of craftspeople working collaboratively in retracing old ways of making while looking to future innovation.

5 Venice, City of Lace

While Ruskin distinguished between Venice and Torcello as daughter and mother, today's visitors who journey by vaporetti to the further islands think of these as part of Venice. Burano, the island nearest Torcello, is the home of Venetian lace. The craftsmanship of Venetian needlepoint lace peaked in the seventeenth century (Earnshaw 1999, 180). From that time, driven by changes in fashion, trade and economics, it declined in complexity, first to expand markets by offering less time-consuming and thus less expensive goods, and then reflecting reduced skills as the methods were not passed on. Its death was dramatically expressed in Earnshaw's *A Dictionary of Lace*: "'Venice lace', wrote Mrs Palliser in 1864, 'is no more'" (181-2). But it did return as part of a resurgence of locally-distinctive craft lace in the second half of the nineteenth century, parallelling similar Ruskin-inspired movements in the Lake District, as well as the revival of Honiton Lace in the "small fishing village of Beer on the Devonshire coast" that was spearheaded by Ruskin's close friend Pauline, Lady Trevelyan (Surtees 1979, 60 fn. 7).[2]

In many ways the history of lace is tied to the map of the island and daily life in Burano. This link is a tale told between the threads, as shown in the different stitches that distinguish the lace. As compiled by journalist Francesca Catalano from her interviews with the *merlettaie* at the Lace Museum,

> [t]here is the **Punto Venezia** that stands out because it joins one part of the lace to the other, as if it were a bridge connecting the [river] banks. […] The **Punto Burano**, on the other hand, with a very thin thread is made up of a grid of tiny rectangular meshes. The latter, also called Tulle, has such a thin and dense weave that **it recalls the net that was used by fishermen** […]. True Burano lace

2 Trevelyan also set up drawing and ornamental art classes for the lacemakers. See Yallop 1992, 211.

> is recognisable because it has that **three-dimensional effect** that machine work does not allow. […] For a 12 cm lace doily takes **two or three months of work**. (Catalano 2024, s.p.; bold in the original)

Punto is Italian for point. The names of the lace stitches and the daily life of the place are intertwined from point to point; arguably, each influences the other. But with the dailiness, there is an otherworldly quality too. As Giandomenico Romanelli has remarked, "Lace masterpieces are produced from the slenderest circumlocutions of threads in a kind of architecture with no foundations floating in the air almost intangibly with knots and nets, rosettes and *formicole* half-stitches and meshes" (Romanelli 2011, 9). This ethereal quality is an important aspect of its beauty; it also requires great skill **[fig. 12]**.

The nineteenth century revival of Venetian lace and creation of a 'school' of lace came about thanks to Countess Andriana Zon (1839-93). The wife of "count Alessandro Marcello, mayor of Venice and member of the Italian Parliament" and "Queen Margherita's lady-in-waiting for 25 years", she was well placed to serve as visionary and patron, with networks to ensure the luxury products would be purchased.[3] The school she established continues as the Fondazione Andriana Marcello (FAM)/the Burano Lace Centre.[4] In the history section of its website, FAM describes its origins in the "particularly harsh" winter of 1871 when the frozen lagoon meant fishing could not bring in the necessary incomes and they looked to alternatives. In a move that echoes what Albert Fleming and Marion Twelves would do a decade later in the Lake District when they set up the Ruskin-inspired Langdale Linen Industry to help the local economy, the Countess and the Honorable Paolo Fambri appealed to "the last living lacemaker, guardian of the secrets to *Punto in aere* (*Punto in aria*, literally lace in air) lace made only using a needle and thread without woven backing".[5] Starting with 8 pupils in 1873 there were 250 in 1878 and 310 students in 1890, and their creations were sold locally and exported globally. Akin to similar projects directly influenced by Ruskin, the Burano Lace School fulfilled a "social function in favour of young girls who were welcomed in a heated environment, were fed healthy meals, and received an education, which gave them a future through training and employment".[6] Like many other craft revival initiatives of the late nineteenth century, including the Langdale Linen Industry and Ruskin Lace, the remarkable economic success of Burano Lace declined with the onset of World War One and

3 Fondazione Andriana Marcello "Our History, Past and Present", s.p.

4 Fondazione Andriana Marcello "What is FAM?", s.p.

5 Fondazione Andriana Marcello "Our History, Past and Present", s.p.

6 Fondazione Andriana Marcello "Our History, Past and Present", s.p.

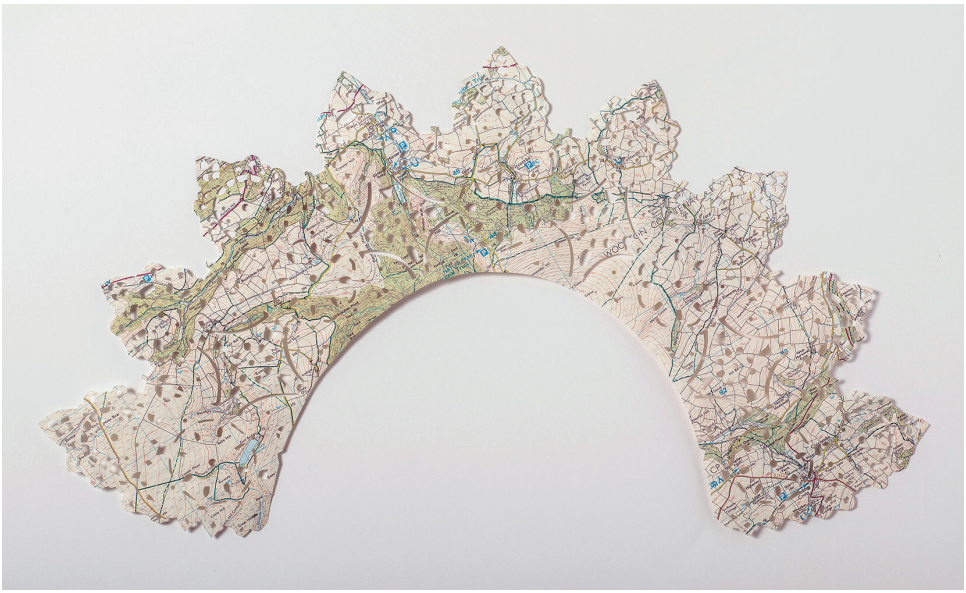

Figure 12 Déirdre Kelly, *Gothic Collar*. 2023. Cut paper Ordnance Survey map, 25 x 48cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

Figure 13 Déirdre Kelly, *Personal Territory, A Stole for Lady Layard*. 2021. Digital photograph, 100 × 70cm. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

continued to fade until the school closed in 1972, a century after it was founded, and FAM was established as a museum. Throughout, the Marcello family have continued as patrons. Now in partnership with the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, the current president of the foundation, Marina Marcello del Majno, is continuing the mission of Andriana Marcello. Yet the tradition is at risk as the number of lacemakers "can be counted on the fingers of one hand" (Catalano 2024). As expressed by 90-year-old Master Lacemaker Romana Memo in a 2024 interview, "**There are fewer and fewer of us**. There is a lack of young people who want to learn this trade. It takes many years to specialize and then today the work is no longer paid as it once was" (Memo, Catalano 2024).

Although it risked extinction on more than one occasion, lace production thrived in Venice for centuries. That it survives today is thanks to a repeating cycle of philanthropy, which relies both on the interests of the nobility and talents of lace makers, within the particular dynamic of Venetian culture and island life in the lagoon. Déirdre Kelly's *A Stole for Lady Layard* acknowledges Lady Enid Layard and highlights a direct link between Ruskin and the revival of Venice lace **[fig. 13]**. Lady Layard was the wife of archaeologist Sir Henry Layard, who lived in Venice from the 1870s. Ruskin's friend and admirer, "Lady [Augusta] Gregory describes Sir Henry as effectively the British ambassador to Venice 'so great was his position'" (Remport 2020, 171). Lady Layard used their avid expatriate British social circle to support the school and lacemaking in Burano. Later, in 1882, she also translated *A Technical History of the Manufacture of Venetian Laces (Venice-Burano)* by G.M. Urbani De Gheltof, into English. As set out in the introduction, addressed 'To the Reader', it states that

> the different methods of lace-making which we have described, have been taken either from ancient works on lace, or from *viva voce* explanations given by the lace-makers themselves. We have, therefore, done nothing but preserve to posterity the technical details of a manufacture which has now been carried to the highest perfection.

The stress is on preserving skills, and with mention of recording the "*viva voce* explanations" gives a voice to the skilled, female lacemakers. It still serves as a practical reference for definitions of and making of lace. Layard moved in the same circles as Ruskin and read his work. Her journal entry of 11 October 1888 records meeting him when, on his final journey to the Continent, she hosted him at her Venetian home, Ca' Capello, with her husband, Sir Henry.[7] His interest was mainly focused on another local form of skilled craft, Murano

7 E. Layard, diary 11 October 1888.

glass. He was also involved with establishing St George's, the English Church in Venice, where a stained-glass memorial window dedicated to John Ruskin was erected in 1909.[8]

The path has gone full circle, and Venetian lace is once again at risk of becoming extinct. In *The Invention of Craft*, Glenn Adamson considers such nineteenth century craft revivals and, in a British context, focuses on those led by "Pugin, Ruskin, and Morris […] [who] built communities around themselves, activated through acts of recollection and repetition". Adamson argues that this craft revival represented not just a simple attempt "to bring the past back to life in unaltered form" (Adamson 2018, 212). Rather, it played a role in constructing culture from the nineteenth century to the present, when there is a sense that, "[b]y employing a gothic or vernacular style from the past, we can continue to live in the present while simultaneously asserting difference from it – or so the thinking goes" (212). He turns to the example of Albert Fleming, Marion Twelves and the Langdale Linen Industry, but views this in a somewhat disparaging light, arguing that "their project was motivated by a desire to systematically forget the present" (213). This is an oversimplification of their motivation which – like the revival of Venetian Lace and its school in Burano – was driven by desires to build community and to provide employment for women, as well as consciously exploring modes of production which were not as damaging to the environment.

6 Lakeland Linen: A Ruskinian Community Enterprise

In the Guild of St George Master's Report of 1884, Ruskin looked to past ways of making with a focus on textiles and communities. In particular, he mentions three such 'experiments' initiated by male Companions of the Guild of St George. He praises:

> the success of Mr. Albert Fleming in bringing back the old industry of the spinning-wheel to the homes of Westmoreland, greatly increasing their happiness, and effectively their means of support by the sale, already widely increasing, of the soundest and fairest linen fabrics that care can weave, or field-dew blanch. But of this, and the collateral results obtained by Mr. Rydings in the manufacture of the woollen home-spun products of the Isle of Man, now under the direction of our recently appointed second Trustee, Mr. Thomson of Huddersfield, I will speak at length in a second report. (Ruskin 1903-12, 30: 83-4)

8 Venice in Peril, https://www.veniceinperil.org/to-restore-and-repair-the-two-south-windows-framing-the-organ-st-georges-church/.

Ruskin never wrote the promised second report about Thomson, but Stuart Eagles has recently published an account. As Eagles succinctly puts it in the opening of *The Ruskinian Industrialist*, Thomson

> was one of the few men of business who attempted to put John Ruskin's ideas into practice. He was an industrial pioneer who was conspicuously successful in turning his father's commercial woollen mill into a thriving profit-sharing co-partnership which supplied high-quality goods to the co-operative movement. (Eagles 2021, 1)

His approach to textile manufacture was innovative and forward-thinking; no one could accuse him of trying to "systematically forget the present" (Adamson 2018, 212). Egbert Rydings was similarly concerned with finding modes of textile production that would bring economic and health benefits to the workers. In *A Weaver's Tale*, Sue King notes how Rydings endeavoured to encourage local production. Rather than importing "woollen cloth made in Lancashire and Yorkshire" to the Isle of Man, he wanted to offer well-made, local goods. An initial experiment made it clear that local hand-production was inevitably coarser and "would never compete with the popular new imports". So, he came up with an alternative: purchasing a water-powered corn mill, he transformed it into a small-scale woollen mill which used water power rather than polluting, industrial power sources such as coal (King 2010, 32-3). Albert Fleming's Langdale Linen Industry and the Ruskin Lace which flowed from it have been mentioned throughout this paper. It was, as Jennie Brunton expresses it, a fascinating illustration of "how an ideology was applied to a group of people judged to be in need of help" (Brunton 1998, 93).

Just as Venetian lace had been revived on Burano by wealthier patrons in response to economic hardship, an awareness that the traditional skills rested in just a few aging hands, and a desire to build community, so too, the Langdale Linen Industry was founded for similar reasons in 1883. Fleming, a London barrister who had moved to the Lakes 'in an attempt to be close to Ruskin' (Albritton, Albritton Jonsson 2016, 56) cites Ruskin as his inspiration for turning to textiles:

> My own personal experiment has been to try and reintroduce the hand-spinning and weaving of linen. For years past Mr. Ruskin has been eloquently beseeching English men and maidens once more to spin and weave. (Ruskin 1903-12, 30: 328)

Like Rydings, the workshop Fleming established at Elterwater initially "concentrated on producing high quality fabrics" (Haslam 2004, 27).

Unlike Rydings, they found that they could handweave finely enough to make high-price-point items, including embroidered objects and fabric fine enough for royal bedding. This was in part because they focused on spinning flax, rather than the local wool Rydings had used, although their attempts to grow flax locally failed and one compromise they made was to import the flax fibre (26). As with all communities, there were falling outs. For our purposes, it is worth noting that Fleming's housekeeper and co-founder, Marion Twelves, branched off and moved to Keswick in 1894, forming a separate business which in 1889 sought and received Ruskin's blessing to use his name: 'Ruskin Lace' **[figs 14-15]**. While Ruskin's list of the three key figures involved in textile craft experiments were all male, there were key women. Twelves was one, as was Elizabeth Pepper, who became the Manager of the Langdale Linen Industry after Twelves left. Pepper's pupil Annie Garnett, who established The Windermere Industry / The Spinnery at Bowness, is another very important individual in the wider revival (135). Garnett employed "up to a hundred [women and girls] at the time of greatest activity". Branching out from wool and linen, "the raw materials used include[d] flax, cotton, silk, wool, nettlefibre, gold, silver and aluminium" (Roberts, Ingram 2017, 11-12, quoting Garnett). The collective efforts across the Lakes, in producing plain cloth, patterned cloth, dyed fabrics, and a host of items decorated in lace and embroidery, were economically successful. Brunton notes that such famous names as Liberty, Morris and Co, the actress Ellen Terry and even Queen Alexandra purchased items from Langdale (Brunton 1998, 110).

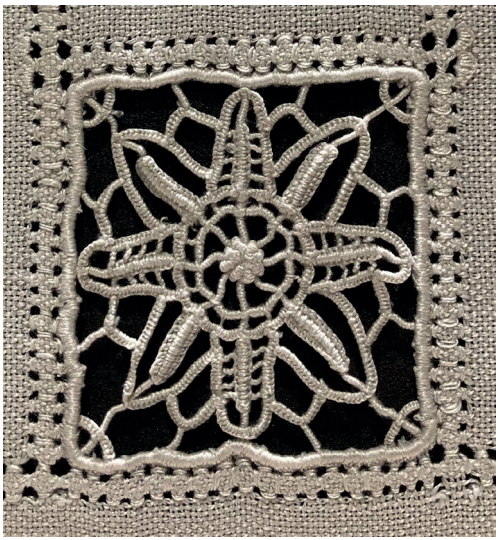

Figure 14
Ruskin Lace, detail © Brantwood House Collection, photo credit: Déirdre Kelly

Figure 15
Déirdre Kelly, *'Vision' Ruskin Lace Window*, detail. 2023.
Cut paper Ordnance Survey maps, 140 x 50cm. Collection Brantwood House, Coniston UK. Photo credit: Chris Taylor, © Déirdre Kelly

One of the most fascinating items produced in this revival was a little book, *Songs of the Spindle and Legends of the Loom* (1889) **[fig. 16]**. It is a collection of poems and stories by canonical authors, including Horace, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, which celebrate the crafts of spinning and weaving. It is illustrated with drawings of textile production over time, tracing a visual lineage back to ancient Egypt. Of particular interest to this paper is how the preface draws a tight connection between the work of the cottagers' hands, their location and their products – all combining to be natural:

> This little book is the product of *hand-work alone* [...] Not only was the paper made by hand, and the printing done by a hand-press, but the flax – which forms the basis of both Linen and Paper – was first spun by the cottagers at their wheels in the Langdale Valley, and the thread thus formed was afterwards specially woven for the covers of this book on the hand loom at the same place [...]. (Warner 1889, 7)

This focus on the natural extends to being environmentally aware and leaving the linen in its naturally dark state, using sunlight to bleach it if required:

> The linen we have used for our cover is unbleached, and is therefore the natural colour of the dried flax. When the linen is required to be bleached, however, this is accomplished in Langdale, by no deleterious chemicals, but by the pure mountain air and sunshine. (Warner 1889, 7)

It also stresses a Ruskinian awareness of the worker in relation to markets and economics:

Figure 16
H.H. Warner (ed.) (1889). *Songs of the Spindle and Legends of the Loom*, cover. London: N.J. Powell & Co. Photo credit: Rachel Dickinson

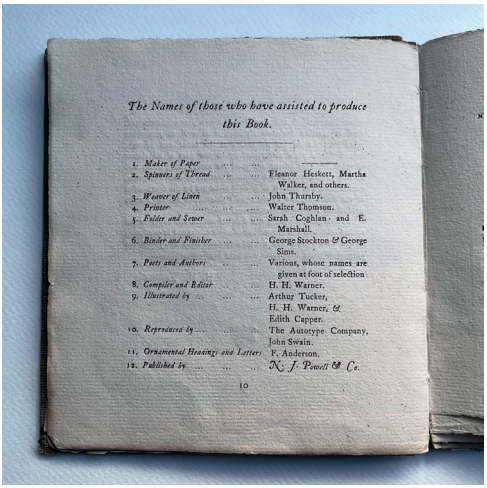

Figure 17
H.H. Warner (ed.) (1889). *Songs of the Spindle and Legends of the Loom*, contributors list. London: N.J. Powell & Co. Photo credit: Rachel Dickinson

> This little book is the *product of hand-work alone*, and we have chosen to produce it in this way because we wish to preserve in each copy, as much of that individuality and human interest, as the price at which it is offered will permit. (7; italics in the original)

The individuality of each worker is closely linked to the notion of 'hand-work', and in parallels that are overtly drawn elsewhere in the preface, are connected to Ruskinian ideals of workmanship seen in Gothic architecture, where the individual's effort forms part of a cohesive whole. A testament to how co-production and community were foregrounded is that the book lists everyone involved in its production **[fig. 17]**. This starts with the 'Maker of Paper', which is oddly left blank. The Albrittons explain that this is because, despite claims in the preface that all was made by hand, "many of the pages bear the watermarks of Dutch companies" (Albritton, Albritton Jonsson 2016, 66). One expects economic and practical factors intervened in the final production. But all the other contributors are listed in order of their position in the workflow, offering a sense of their shared effort as a community of makers, working collaboratively in a consciously Ruskin-inspired mode.

7 Conclusion

This paper started as a co-presentation at the conference "Adaptation, Revision and Re-use: Modes and Legacies of Ruskin's Work" (Ca' Foscari, Venice, 14-15 December 2023), tracing lines of Ruskin-inflected linen and lace in Venice and historic Lancashire. Our initial research questions revolved around Ruskin and the contemporary in relation to textiles. We focused on relational Gothic, which expands – weblike – from Ruskin reading Gothic architecture, through his textile metaphors to how others have applied his ideas. It became clear that Ruskin in effect proffered a very contemporary guiding hand, a multi-disciplinary map which offered many-stranded possibilities for those motivated by 'the hope of doing better things'.

We began to work on the original presentation while Kelly's *TRACERY Venice and the Lakes Interlaced* solo exhibition was on display at Brantwood, Ruskin's Lakeland home (April-July 2023). That exhibition aimed to place historical Venetian patterns in Ruskin's home to create a synergy with his view of Venice and the Lakes, striving to return the concepts to him through a contemporary hand. Given Ruskin's intense sense of the domestic and home as locus of the self, one might even think of this as planting it inside his head/home to help mediate his ideas for a twenty-first century audience.

By a twist of *Fors* (or 'fate'), as we finish this version for publication, Kelly's Ruskin Lace/Venetian Lace inspired work is currently exhibited in both Lancashire and Venice: at Déirdre Kelly and Carolyn Curtis Magri's joint exhibition *The Lie of the Land*, (30 May-18 August 2024) at the Whitaker Museum & Art Gallery in former mill town Rawtenstall, and at the Lace Museum in Burano in the exhibition "'*Fragile Stories*' Déirdre Kelly and Mandy Bonnell", as part of the 4th Lace Biennial. Both exhibitions manifest key concepts we recognise in Ruskin's work on textiles. They make links between Gothic forms, particularly architecture and lace. Featuring pieces made with local maps and using local objects and place-specific skills as inspiration, they foreground place and the distinctive flavour of unique geographies and communities, while simultaneously highlighting their universality. There is also a circularity of influence between these places linked by threads. As Doretta Davanzo Poli has noted of the Venice Lace revival,

> in the first 30 years, only Linen thread – imported from England (William Pyne) and Belgium (Lowenstein and Washer) – was used. Then from 1899 on, cotton thread also featured. It was produced by the companies of Boselli and Cucirini in Milan and Ermen and Roby in Manchester.

Figure 18
Déirdre Kelly, *Absences and Presences*. 2024. Cut paper Ordnance Survey maps Lancashire. 70 × 70 cm. © Déirdre Kelly

Thus, the Venetian lace designs on which this work is based may quite possibly have been made using Manchester cotton, from historic Lancashire (Davanzo Poli 2011, 41).

The contemporary is key. By using digital technologies to enlarge and translate the lace that had been cut by hand into a map, and then transferring it back into textiles by printing onto silk **[figs 18-19]**, Kelly brings the viewer closer, allowing a reading which reveals images we already know: lines of enquiry, lines of expression, lines of empathy. This consciously echoes the absences and presences in Ruskin which allow a fluidity, which mean that his ideas can be interpreted in new ways by subsequent generations; one aspect of his appeal is the way he infused his writings with textiles, which are by their very nature universal. Functioning like *imparaticci* his ideas can – as seen in the historic and twenty-first century examples touched on here – be retraced to embrace the contemporary, echoing his motto "To-Day, To-Day, To-Day".

Figure 19 Déirdre Kelly, *Absences and Presences*, detail. 2024. Digital print on Habotai silk, 100 x 120cm. Collection The Whitaker Museum & Art Gallery, Rawtenstall, UK. Photo credit: Francesco Allegretto, © Déirdre Kelly

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