# John Ruskin and the Science of Sight

Sept
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2022

THE RUSKIN
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# ‘Professor Ruskin’

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was one of the great visionaries of the nineteenth century. Artist, writer, activist and environmentalist, he had an extraordinary ability to connect art, science and society. Ruskin was an early adopter of optical technologies, including photography, to investigate mountains and clouds. He assembled geological collections and drew glacial landscapes.

Initially inspired to verify the scientific accuracy of J.M.W. Turner’s paintings of mountains, Ruskin went on to meet and correspond with some of the preeminent scientists of his time including, Charles Lyell FRS, William Buckland FRS, Henry Acland FRS and Charles Darwin FRS.

In time, Ruskin became disillusioned with what he saw as the destructive environmental impact of the utilitarian application of science and the divorce of science from religion. Ruskin’s retreat from science resulted from the increasingly propositional, deductive and specialist methods of science: ‘Thinking of a thing, and demonstrating, – instead of looking at it.’

John Ruskin, ***Geological formation: study*** (detail), n.d.
1996P1297 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University
Cover: Drawn by John Ruskin, Engraved by George Allen. Plate V., (detail), ***The Laws of Fésole*** (London: George Allen, 1879)

‘No science of perspective, or of anything else, will enable us to draw the simplest natural line accurately, unless we see it and feel it.’

John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice III*, 1853

# Mountains in Miniature

Ruskin's first passion was geology. He was a prolific mineral collector, with a personal collection of over 2,500 specimens. He donated minerals to schools and colleges across the country to develop a system of instruction with accessible rock samples. This work was 'important,' he wrote, 'as the first practical arrangement ever yet attempted to use geology for popular teaching.'

Ruskin claimed that his art was rooted in his 'love … of mountains and sea'. Having studied mountain formation and glaciers, he returned again and again to Chamonix, below the slopes of Mont Blanc. His knowledge of geology meant he was the first artist to consider the geological landscape as an artistic subject: 'I am proud to think that these drawings of mine … are entirely right as examples of mountain drawing, with … all that is useful for geological science or landscape art'.

John Ruskin, Frederick Crawley, ***Ardon (Valais). Gorge de la Lizerne,*** 1854.

‘[Photography], this important discovery, capable of innumerable applications, will not only be of great interest to science, but it will also give a new impulse to the arts.’

L.J.M. Daguerre, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Various Processes of the Daguerreotype and the Diorama*, 1839

# John Ruskin in the Age of Science

A series of exhibitions in London and the Lake District showcasing works from the collections of the Royal Society, London and Lancaster University's Ruskin Whitehouse Collection.

Curated by Sandra Kemp (The Ruskin), with Keith Moore (the Royal Society) and Howard Hull (Brantwood), these exhibitions place Ruskin alongside his nineteenth century scientific contemporaries, exploring Ruskin's influence on science and society, in his time and our own.

The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection was purchased by Lancaster University in 2019, with generous support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and others. The Collection is on permanent display at both The Ruskin and Brantwood, John Ruskin's former house, garden and estate on the shore of Coniston Water.

While The Ruskin is closed for major refurbishment, this series of exhibitions displays The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection in London and the Lake District. The Ruskin will reopen in 2024.

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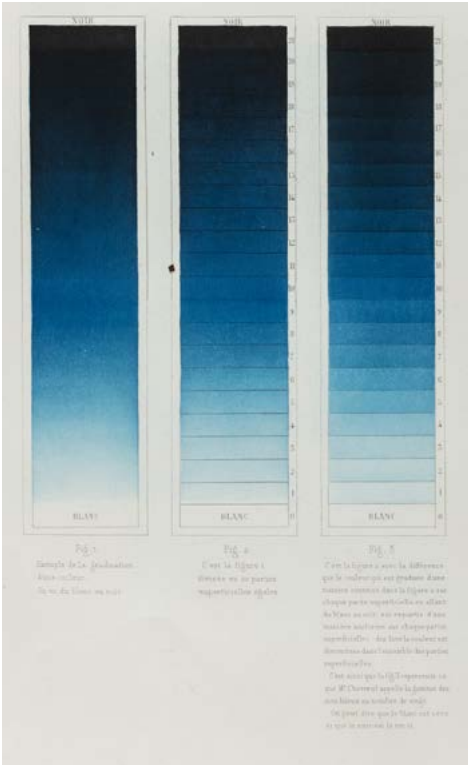
Lancaster University

THE ROYAL SOCIETY

John Ruskin's home
Brantwood

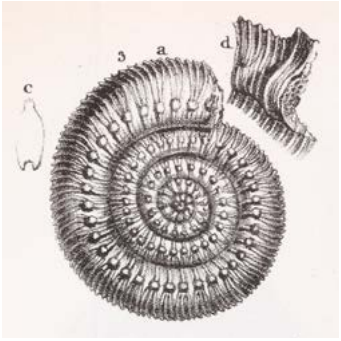
# The Skies are for All



Ruskin had been fascinated by clouds since childhood and often painted skies using a cyanometer, a device for measuring the colour blue, created by Horace-Bénédict de Saussure FRS. As with the painters John Constable and Turner before him, Ruskin was familiar with Luke Howard FRS's scientific classification of cloud types and also investigated the behaviour of light and optical phenomena on cloud formations. He wrote in 1856: 'if a characteristic name were needed for modern landscape art, none could be better invented than the service of clouds.'

Ruskin was also interested in the photoheliograph, a device commissioned by the Royal Society to record daily solar activity and employed at Kew Observatory to capture transient phenomena such as sunspots. Ruskin's only known visit to the Royal Society was to attend an 1862 lecture by the photoheliograph's designer, Warren De La Rue FRS, who described its use in Spain, to record the total solar eclipse of 1860. Ruskin was the guest of his lifelong friend, the physician Henry Acland.

Michel Eugène Chevreul ForMemRS, ***Range of blue tones,*** 1861.
Ref: 33074 © The Royal Society

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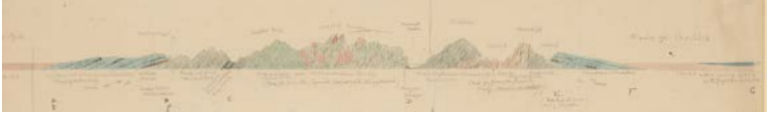
1 Edward Lear, ***Various forms of ammonites,*** 1836.
Ref: 30883 © The Royal Society
2 Arthur Roope Hunt, ***Transit of Venus, 6 December,*** 1882.
Ref: 45424 © The Royal Society
3 Anna Atkins, ***Photographs of British algae: cyanotype impressions, vol. II,*** 1843.
Ref: 9352 © The Royal Society



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4 John Ruskin, John Phillips, ***Geological Section from The Fylde to Plain of Carlisle,*** n.d.
1996P0392 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University
5 John Ruskin, ***Study of two stones,*** n.d.
1996P1511 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University
6 John Ruskin, ***Glacier des Bois, Chamonix,*** 1856.
1996P0895 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University
7 John Ruskin, ***Rocks and torrent, Glenfinlas,*** 1853.
1996P1465 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University
8 John Ruskin, Frederick Crawley, ***Chamonix. Mer de Glace, Mont Blanc Massif,*** 1854.
1996D0075 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University

# Painting with Sunlight

Ruskin's first sight of the Alps in 1833 coincided with the scientist William Henry Fox Talbot FRS's – although the latter's camera lucida-assisted drawings were unsatisfactory enough to put Talbot on the path of inventing photography. By 1839, both he and Louis Daguerre unveiled their photographic methods, with Daguerre asserting: 'This important discovery, capable of innumerable applications, will not only be of great interest to science, but will also give a new impulse to the arts'.

In 1849, Ruskin, with his assistant John Hobbs, was the first to produce a 'sun portrait' of the Alps, using the daguerreotype process. Scientists also briefly adopted the process: at the Great Exhibition of 1851, John Adams Whipple and George Bond received a gold medal for a daguerreotype of the Moon, which was displayed at Crystal Palace.

Simultaneously 'natural' and 'mechanical', photographic technologies troubled long-held assumptions on the relationship between art, nature and religion. Despite its extraordinary potential for documentary detail, Ruskin became increasingly critical of photography – and of science – as the act of seeing became separated from wider sensory responses: 'No science of perspective, or of anything else, will enable us to draw the simplest natural line accurately, unless we see it and feel it', he remarked.

John Ruskin, Le Cavalier Iller [?], ***Venice. The Ducal Palace and the Piazzetta*** (detail), c. 1846–1852.
Photograph from a glass negative after Daguerreotype owned by The Ruskin Museum, Coniston
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