Radiant Form: Ruskin and Shell

30 July 29 Sept 2024



Radiant Form

From childhood, Ruskin was a keen collector of shells, intrigued by their patterns, shapes and colours. However, by contrast with his scientific investigations of mountains and clouds, his contribution to conchology (the study of shells and their inhabitants) was modest. It was the exterior beauty of shells and their extraordinary variety that attracted him, rather than each as a living entity inhabited by the soft animals inside that formed them. However, Ruskin's fascination with mathematical explanations for the depiction of form and symmetry in the natural world anticipated the work of mathematical biologists such as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917), of which three chapters are dedicated to shells.

The spiral has always been a powerful motif in ancient cosmic symbolism, the decorative arts and architecture. In Christianity, shells represented a spiral staircase, progressing towards the divine, and the departure of the animal from the shell reflected the journey of the soul to the afterlife. For many 19th century collectors, the radiant forms of shells were natural works of art made by God.





'I never buy shells either for locality or rarity, but only for beauty.' John Ruskin, c.1884

John Ruskin's Shell Box and Notebook, n.d., R76 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University 'But to paint shells in quite true perspective – and with their exact pearly lustre or grain, is beyond all skill but the highest.'

John Ruskin, letter to his father, 1859





'These snail-shells are very notable, occurring as they do in, perhaps, the very grandest and broadest of all Titian's compositions.'

John Ruskin, 1856

Image to the left **Polished mother of pearl Turbo Marmoratus shell from John Ruskin's shell collection**, 19th century © The Ruskin, Lancaster University Images above

Japanese Moon Scallop from John Ruskin's Shell Collection, 19th century © The Ruskin, Lancaster University John Ruskin, Snail Shells - 3 Studies, 1876, 1996P2002 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University Cornu aspersum (Helix aspersa), a garden snail shell from John Ruskin's shell collection, 19th century © The Ruskin, Lancaster University

Ruskin and Shells

This exhibition explores the technical and philosophical challenges presented by Ruskin's shell-studies from The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection, Lancaster University and the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, alongside his shell collection at Brantwood, where his original shell cabinets remain in the drawing room. It is one of a series of international exhibitions showcasing Lancaster University's Ruskin Whitehouse Collection while The Ruskin building is closed for refurbishment. In 2024, works from the Collection have featured in exhibitions at the Musei di San Domenico, Italy, the National Library of Scotland, MuMa – Le Havre, France and will be on Ioan for upcoming exhibitions at the Huntington Art Museum, USA and Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Spain.

'Ruskin and Shells' is curated by Sandra Kemp, with assistance from Ellie Evans and Kate Ingle, at The Ruskin. Our thanks to S. Peter Dance for his formative work on Ruskin and Conchology and to Brantwood and to the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

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The Ruskin Whitehouse Collection was purchased by Lancaster University in 2019, with generous support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and others, including the Art Fund, the Friends of the National Libraries and John R. Murray Charitable Trust.











"... Oh I shall make such a collection of shells. Univalves bivalves multivalves and sea urchins."

John Ruskin, 1831

Walmsley [?], **Ruskin's shell cabinet in the drawing room at Brantwood**, n.d. © The Ruskin, Lancaster University

A Technical 'Tour-de-force'

Ruskin produced exquisite studies of shells for use as teaching aids, presenting challenging exercises related to the effects of light and of dynamic patterns. The growth pattern of shells demonstrated geometric progressions of curved forms communicable in mathematical sequences such as the Fibonacci sequence. Ruskin explored similar mathematical progressions in geological formations in the Alps, in plants and the architectural structures of medieval Italy.

After visits to the Louvre in 1844 and 1856, Ruskin noted that painters like Rembrandt, Titian and Crivelli used shells to demonstrate a technical artistic 'Tour-de-force'. Admiring Titian's painting of a snail in 'The Entombment of Christ' (c.1520) Ruskin observed: 'Shells are easy up to a certain point – they look pretty as you have rounded and patterned them. But to paint them in quite true perspective – and with their exact pearly lustre or grain is beyond all skill but the highest.'

In Ruskin's view, the cockle shell was the most challenging of all, describing his attempt to paint a 'little grey cockleshell ... and a brightly coloured snail shell' in 1876 as 'in reality quite hopelessly difficult and in its ultimate condition, inimitable by art.' Nearly a decade earlier he had observed: 'been trying all the forenoon to draw a snail shell and couldn't.'



'On the beach ... shells ... all their hinges and delicatest spirals preserved – shells of which the fish lived long before Mont Blanc existed ... and modern living whelk and mussel hide in the hollows of shells dead these thirty thousand years.' 'One form indeed, that of the cockle, has been in all ages used as decoration of half domes... the wrinkled lip of the cockle, in some parts of Europe ... is the origin of... the exuberant foliage of the round arch. The scallop also is a pretty radiant form.'

John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice I, 1851





Images to the left John Ruskin, **An Exercise on the Colour of a common Snail-Shell**, 1870-1871, WA.RS.ED.194 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford John Ruskin, **Study of a Shell**, n.d., WA.RS.RUD.213.a © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford Images above John Ruskin, **Cockle Shell**, n.d., 1996P1510 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University John Ruskin, **Spiral Relief**, **North Transept Door**, **Rouen Cathedral**, 1882, 1996P1197 © The Ruskin, Lancaster University