John Ruskin (1819–1900) occupies an interesting position on the map of scholarship. He was essentially a critic who became an undisputed opinion leader in matters of art and architecture in his time. He was nearly forgotten for several decades. Only toward the end of the 20th century did his contribution begin to be reevaluated. Ruskin was born in London and studied in Oxford from 1836 to 1842, but he did not obtain a degree (1–3). Throughout his life, Ruskin traveled extensively in Britain and on the continent, particularly in Italy, France, and Switzerland. He became the most prominent art and architecture critic in England. He was fascinated by architecture and nature, and he studied both. Ruskin was as much interested in buildings as he was in geology, and he accumulated a large collection of minerals. The biography by Tim Hilton provides a captivating account of his life (2, 3).

Ruskin wrote widely on nature, art, and society, and his books brought him early national fame. He published The Seven Lamps of Architecture in 1849 and The Stones of Venice between 1851 and 1853. Between 1843 and 1860, he wrote 5 volumes of Modern Painters. In the first volume, Ruskin championed the painter J.M.W. Turner (4). He later maintained an interest in, and a knowledge of, Turner’s oeuvre, and he eventually was one of the executors of Turner’s will. In his writings Ruskin also supported painters belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Hunt, and John Everett Millais. He influenced the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly with regard to the use of nature-based motifs in their painting.

The Stones of Venice contains a famous chapter, “On the Nature of Gothic,” in which he champions northern European medieval architecture and contrasts it with that of the south (5). Read today, much of this chapter sounds outdated and grossly politically incorrect. His thinking, characteristically, was not limited to technical aspects. The text digresses into religion and moral issues with the frequent use of nature-derived examples and metaphors. Occasionally, Ruskin wanders into a rather superficial philosophy before returning to his main point: architecture. Yet, in spite of being at times wildly speculative and dogmatic, Ruskin’s writing style is engaging and impressively descriptive.

As far as science and technology are concerned, Ruskin strongly opposed industrial methods of production, and he expressed some very irrational doubts about science. This contrarianism, however, led unexpectedly to a long-term legacy: Ruskin’s architectural writings consistently attempted to link art and nature, and William Morris (1834–1896), one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement in England, later acknowledged him as an important influence. Arts and Crafts grew into an internationally important architecture and design philosophy (6). Thus, Ruskin can be regarded as one of the forerunners of environmentalism.

He became associated again with the University of Oxford when, in 1870, he was elected the first Slade Professor of Fine Art (3). He resigned in 1878 after the libel trial initiated by the painter James McNeill Whistler, which Whistler won. Ruskin taught at Oxford again from 1883 to 1885. While the Slade Professor, he introduced lectures on modern British painters. Ruskin also founded (and initially endowed) the school of drawing, where he taught. When he left Oxford, Ruskin donated to the university the materials he had used in his lectures and demonstrations. Today, the school is known as the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. The John Ruskin’s Oxford teaching collection, now in the Ashmolean Museum, can be browsed online (7).

Ruskin academic did not conduct structured scientific research. Despite his scholarly activities, there is no evidence of any collaboration in scientific studies with other academics, even though, for instance, Walter Pater (1839–1894), an eminent classics and Renaissance scholar, was in Oxford at the same time.

Ruskin’s academic contribution was interpreting arts and architecture. He was a charismatic and highly controversial lecturer. His university colleagues were often shocked by his uninhibited pronouncements, but (and perhaps partly because of this) his lecture rooms were always full.

It is doubtful that Ruskin ever considered himself an artist on a par with those he wrote about. He treated his drawing as a mere illustration of his writings, and yet his ability was exceptional. Today, his drawings and watercolors are widely exhibited. A Swiss Village by a River (Fig. 1) demonstrates his excellence. The picture is conventional and naturalistic, reflecting Ruskin’s
fascination with nature and architecture. He drew with an extreme attention to detail. Ruskin’s sparse use of color emphasizes the textures of roofs and walls, the wood in the shed to the right, and the surface of the water. Note the monochromatic images of trees on the left. Even without the use of color, Ruskin was able to render their textures and variations in tone. There is little artistic inventiveness in his approach, but the quality is extraordinary.

All in all, the importance of Ruskin is more literary than visual and is due to his exceptional prose. He was decidedly a contrarian, and a quite uninhibited contrarian at that. That is why reading him today, in a culture that puts a premium on compliance, is so refreshing. The questions that Ruskin’s academic association prompts relate to the role of a critic in academia, and this can be extrapolated from the arts to science. Is there a case for having critics of science within academic structures? By that I mean people acquainted with research (as Ruskin was with art) who would independently comment on science rather than practice it. Arguably, such criticism might usefully complement the views of active practitioners, who have unavoidable biases related to funding, group loyalty, and their own survival in this time of relentless competition.

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