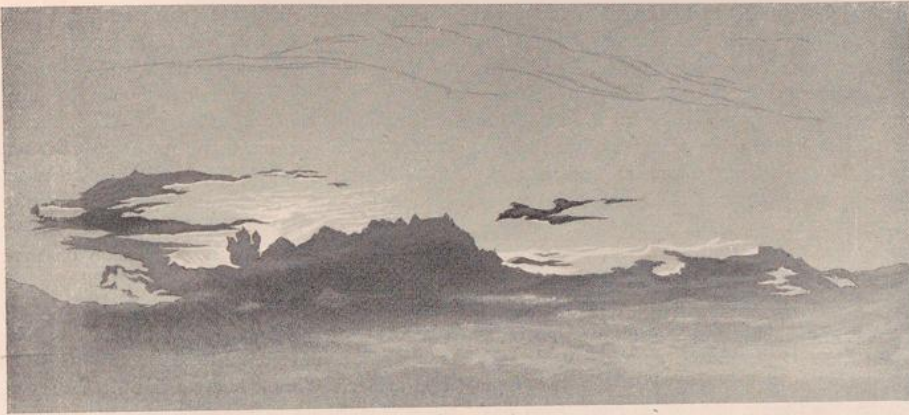




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Ruskin As Artist And Art Critic. By E. T. Cook.

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"MONTE ROSA: SUNSET" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN

RUSKIN AS ARTIST AND ART CRITIC. BY E. T. COOK.

"WHAT greater sarcasm can Mr. Ruskin pass upon himself?" asked Mr. Whistler in "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies," "than that he preaches to young men what he cannot perform! Why, unsatisfied with his own conscious power, should he choose to become the type of incompetence by talking for forty years of what he has never done?" And to like purpose we read in the same author's "Ten o' Clock" that Ruskin was "learned in many matters, and of much experience in all, save his subject." Sir Edward Poynter, in his "Lectures on Art," "burns with indignation" at Ruskin's heresies about Michelangelo, and ascribes them to "his ignorance of the practical side of art." Sir Edward Poynter and Mr. Whistler, while belittling or denying the claims of Ruskin as an artist, proceed to praise very highly his genius as a writer. It is curious that a yet more violent critic of Ruskin than either of those just mentioned takes a precisely contrary view of the subject. In a slashing article, of the good old Keats-killing kind, which appeared in the "Edinburgh" a few years ago, the reviewer derides Ruskin's literary works, but extols his pictures. "In one respect only," he says, "we are prepared to give Mr. Ruskin nearly unqualified admiration, namely, in regard to his own artistic work as far as it has gone; with the exception of those unhappy illustrations to the 'Seven Lamps,' his own drawing, of architecture especially, is admirable. When two or three of his own landscapes were exhibited

some years ago in Bond Street along with his Turners, our impression at the time was that they were equal to most of the Turner drawings in that collection; at all events, his drawings of portions of St. Mark's, exhibited more recently at the Society of Water-Colours, were of the highest class, and such as indeed, of their kind, it would not be possible to surpass." One is reminded of the reviews of a certain illustrated book, from which it appeared, according to one critic, that it would have been tolerable without the illustrations, and according to another, tolerable without the letterpress. The real truth with regard to Ruskin is, I submit, that he was a writer of consummate genius, and also an artist of real, though restricted, talent.

My proposition with regard to Ruskin as an artist is not easy to prove, for Ruskin's original drawings are somewhat inaccessible. From his work, however, done for the engravers, and shown in "Modern Painters" and "Stones of Venice," and in occasional reproductions in colour included in some of Mr. George Allen's recent republications, a good idea may be formed of Ruskin's gifts as an artist. Ruskin, it should always be remembered, illustrated his own books, and the combination of literary genius and artistic skill which they display is probably unique. The examples from Turner given in "Modern Painters" were either etched by Ruskin himself from the originals or engraved from copies in which he had translated Turner's work out of colour into black and white. The plates "after" Raphael and other masters were similarly made from Ruskin's drawings of the original pictures. The other illustrations in his

John Ruskin

books are for the most part engraved from original studies by himself. These landscape and architectural studies are often as elaborate and as poetical as the passages of written words which accompany them. Ruskin is probably the only man who has ever described the same scenes with so large a measure of success in the three methods of prose and verse and drawing. His prose is best; his drawing second; and his verse third. As an introduction to his skill as a draughtsman let us open the third volume of "Modern Painters"—in an early edition if possible, for something of the softness and delicacy of the plates is missing in all the later reprints—and look for a while at the frontispiece engraved from a drawing by Ruskin and called *Land, Lake and Cloud*. It is a scene on Como—full of grace and rich in suggestion; full also of detail, and yet conveying most successfully the impression of movement and of distance. Or turn, again, to the fourth and fifth volumes of "Modern Painters." Who has not been struck by the author-artist's delineation of leaves and tendrils, rocks and clouds? Exquisitely minute, they are, for the most, as they profess to be, simple records. But the minuteness of study which they display does not rob them of grace and poetry; nor when occasion offers, does the illustrator fail either in

strength or in breadth. Is there not strength of drawing in the *Strength of Old Pine* and breadth of effect in the Venetian study, *St. George of the Seaweed*? Similar remarks may be made of Ruskin's mountain drawings. The detailed studies of the Matterhorn and the Chamonix Aiguilles are admirable for their fidelity in suggesting the vital truths of mountain structure; but Ruskin could also seize the momentary effects of distant views and fix the impression on paper for ever. Two of his drawings engraved in "Modern Painters" are particularly successful in this respect. One is called *Sunset in the West*, and shows a brilliant sunset-sky above the black mass of a cathedral. Many a traveller across the plains of northern France must have noticed, even from the window of a railway carriage, how as some grand cathedral recedes into the distance, it gathers itself up in might and majesty until it fills the whole foreground of the picture, while above it and around, if the evening be propitious, "there flames and falls the rapture of the day." Ruskin's sketch was done at Beauvais; it is true in general effect of many another scene. The other drawing to which I have referred above, is of Monte Rosa. I do not know where it was done, nor does it matter. It may have been from Monte Generoso, or from some other coign of vantage in



"VENGA MEDUSA" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN

ROSLIN CHAPEL

FROM THE DRAWING BY

JOHN RUSKIN.

(By permission of Alexander Wedderburn, Esq., Q.C.)



John Ruskin

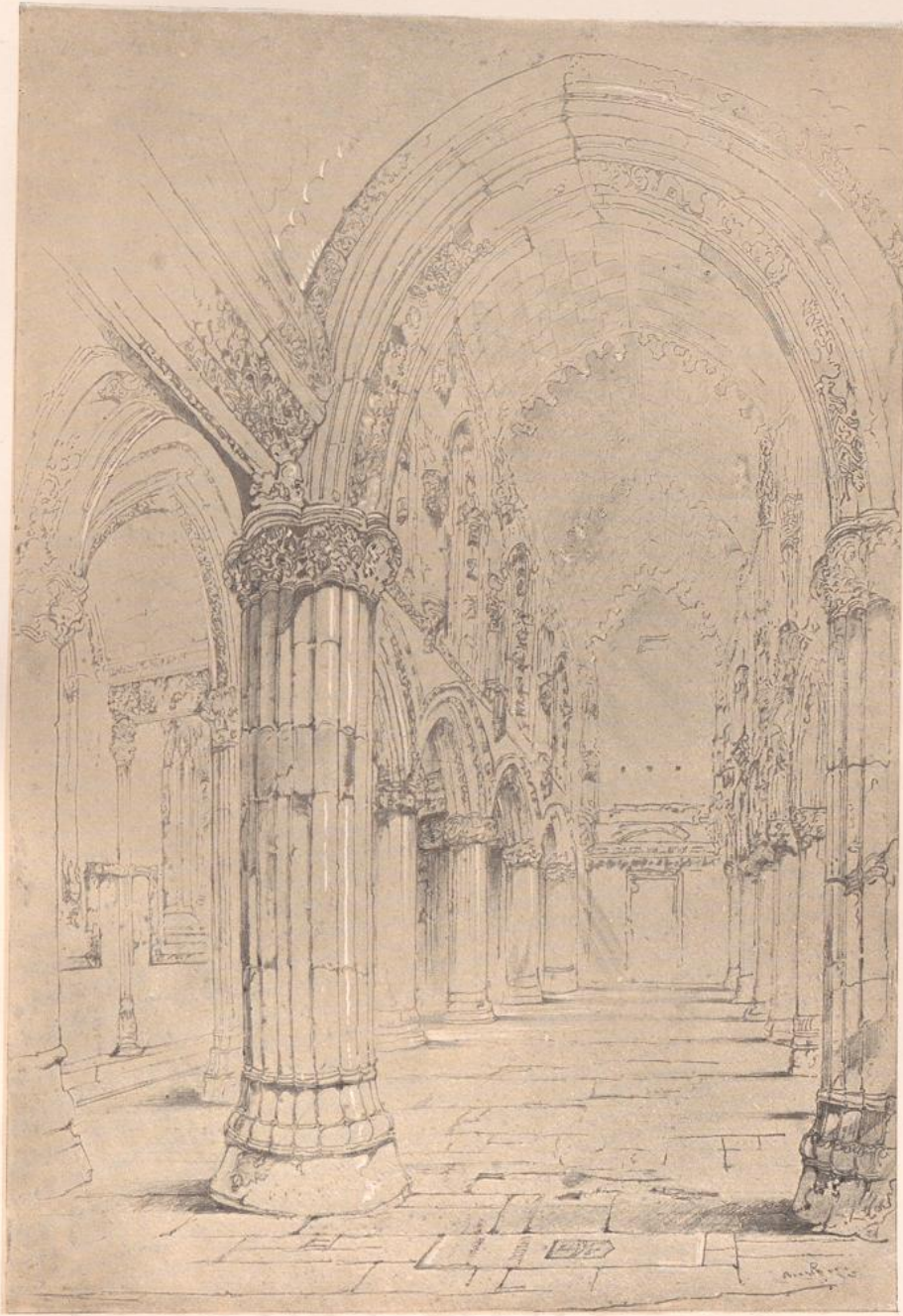
books are for the most part engraved from original studies by himself. These landscape and architectural studies are often as elaborate and as poetical as the passages of written words which accompany them. Ruskin is probably the only man who has ever described the same scenes with so large a measure of success in the three methods of prose and verse and drawing. His prose is best; his drawing second; and his verse third. As an introduction to his skill as a draughtsman, open the third volume of "Modern Painters"—in an early edition if possible, for something of the softness and delicacy of the plates is missing in all the later reprints—and look for a while at the frontispiece, engraved from a drawing by Ruskin and called *Land, Lake and Cloud*. It is a scene on Como—full of grace and rich in suggestion; full also of *beauty*, and yet conveying most successfully the impression of movement and of distance. Or turn, again, to the fourth and fifth volumes of "Modern Painters." Who has not been struck by the author-artist's delineation of leaves and tendrils, rocks and clouds? Esquisitely minute, they are, for the most, as they profess to be, simple records. But the minuteness of study which they display does not rob them of grace and poetry; nor when occasion offers, does the illustrator fail either in

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"VERGA MEDUSA" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN



John Ruskin

the Lombard plain. The effect is true of any spot from which, as the sunset dies, the great walls of Monte Rosa may be seen standing out for one last moment distinct in their summit-towers from the world of clouds gathering around them. Everyone who loves the southern valleys of the Alps knows this beautiful effect, and thousands of others have become familiar with it from Ruskin's brilliant impression. The illustrations of architecture in the "Stones of Venice" and the "Examples of Venetian Architecture" are equally well known and equally successful. Half-way between landscape and architecture come the drawings in "Modern Painters" of Nuremberg and Rheinfelden. Here, again, we have faithful records—all the more valuable now because the scenes recorded have of late years, been sadly spoilt; but they are not mere records of facts in detail. The drawings are suggestive also of a general impression. Ruskin calls his sketch of the walls of Rheinfelden *Peace*, nor could any drawing more perfectly convey the idea. The purely architectural drawings engraved in "The Stones of Venice" and the mezzotints, on a larger scale, in the "Examples," are equally remarkable for their exquisite precision, their suggestiveness in treatment, and frequently for their breadth of effect. Ruskin, it is often said, was fortunate in his engravers. He certainly was—as he deserved to be, alike for his care and his liberality—but so also was Turner fortunate in *his*, and in each case the honours must be divided between the artist who worked for the engraver, and the engraver who interpreted the artist.

If anybody doubts whether Ruskin contributed his due share to the final result, a visit to the Ruskin Drawing School at Oxford, where a large number of "the master's" original studies are preserved, will speedily decide the matter. "If you can paint *one* leaf," he says in "Modern Painters," "you can paint the world." He laid no claim, as we shall see, to be able to paint the world, but at least he went through a laborious apprenticeship in the painting of leaves and feathers. There is a "Peacock's Feather" in the Oxford collection, wonderful for its patient drawing of every detail of form and every shadow of colour. A study of quartz is equally remarkable for the last degree of accuracy with which every vein and weather-stain is rendered. No matter what the subject, whether it be as lofty as the towers of Lucca, or as lowly as the mosses of the wayside, the same infinite patience is everywhere conspicuous in Ruskin's studies. Sometimes the

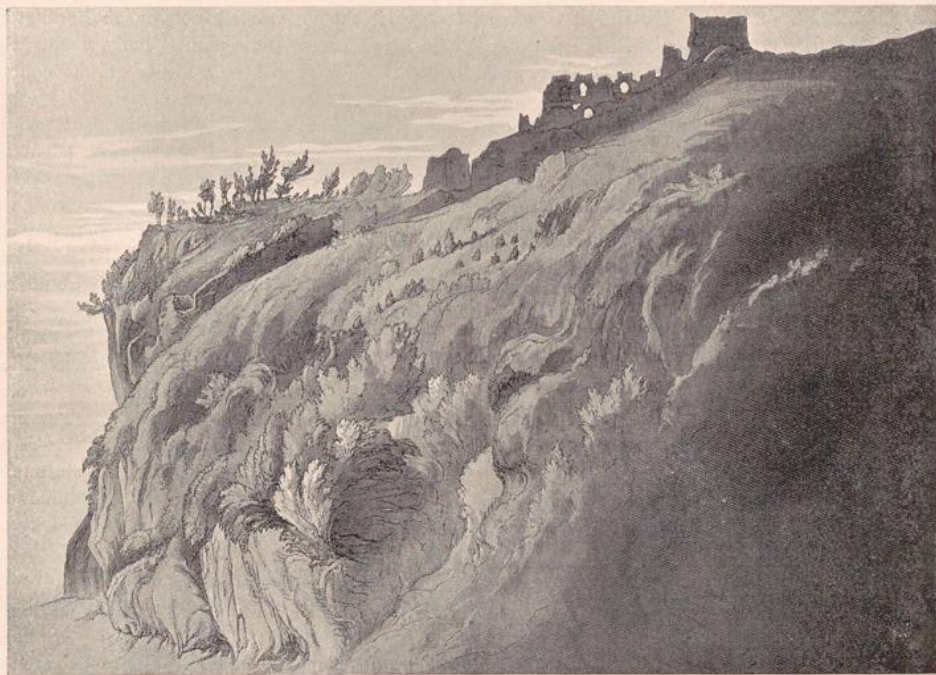
result is inartistic from excess of finish; he paints what he knows by microscopic examination to be there rather than what he sees. He breaks this artistic canon deliberately, because his object for the moment is not to produce a work of art, but to gain and illustrate a piece of knowledge. But in the best of the Oxford drawings breadth of general effect is successfully combined with wealth of local detail. It is impossible that some of the architectural drawings could be better done. *The Grand Canal*, *The Market-place at Abbeville*, and *The Church of S. Michele at Lucca*, may be cited as examples. In this kind of work Ruskin was equally successful with pure pencil and with pencil and wash. His water-colours are scantily represented at Oxford. They are better seen at Brantwood and in private collections, and are remarkable for their dainty and exquisite colour. He was an honorary member of the "Old" Water-colour Society, and occasionally exhibited there. But no opportunity has ever yet been afforded to the public of forming a judgment at first hand of Ruskin's artistic abilities. He never painted for money or worked for display. Presently there will be various proposals, I do not doubt, for memorials to Ruskin. One memorial should be an exhibition of his studies, sketches and drawings. This is a task which the Fine Art Society or the Burlington Fine Arts Club, or some similar body, might fitly undertake. It should be done before the collections at Brantwood are dispersed.

Such an exhibition, while displaying Ruskin's genius for taking pains, and considerable talent in accomplishment, would at the same time suggest his limitations as an artist. To begin with, he seldom attempted, and never successfully mastered, the use of oil-colours. It need not be said how great is this limitation. Ruskin himself would be the first to magnify it. "I make the positive statement to you," he said in one of his Oxford lectures, "that oil-painting is the art of arts; that it is sculpture, drawing, and music all in one, involving the technical dexterities of those three several arts—that is to say, the decision and strength of the stroke of the chisel;—the balanced distribution of appliance of that force necessary for graduation in light and shade;—and the passionate felicity of rightly multiplied actions, all unerring, which on an instrument produce right sound, and on canvas, living colour. There is no other human skill so great or so wonderful as the skill of fine oil-painting." To this skill Ruskin did not attain, though, as we shall see, he took infinity of pains in studying the skill of others. In the next place,

John Ruskin

he was deficient in power of invention and design. "I can no more write a story," he says, in "Præterita," "than compose a picture." At one time, it may be interesting to state, Ruskin did undertake to design a painted window. The window in question is to be seen at the east end of Gilbert Scott's church at Camberwell, but as it stands it owes little to Ruskin's power of invention. He handed over the work to his friend Edmund Oldfield (afterwards of the British Museum), finding his own powers of design inadequate to the task. "I should have been more crushed," he says, "by this result had I not been already in the habit of feeling worsted in everything I tried of original work." He had, in fact, by this time arrived at the self-knowledge that his genius lay in the direction of interpretation, rather than of invention. Thirdly, Ruskin had no skill in the representation of the human form, and perhaps some lack of sympathy as a critic with those artists and schools who have made the beauty of that form, and especially of the nude form, their chief pre-occupation. In the last of Ruskin's Oxford lectures which I reported, he enlarged on "the superiority of landscape to

figure painting." Landscape art, he argued, was higher in aim and more difficult of attainment. "The painting of landscape," he said, "requires not only more industry, but far greater delicacy of bodily sense and faculty than average figure painting. Any common sign-painter can paint the landlord's likeness, and with a year or two's scraping of chalk at Kensington, any Cockney student can be got to draw effectively enough for public taste, a straddling gladiator or a curly-pated Adonis. But to give the slightest resemblance to, or notion of, such a piece of mountain, wild-wood, or falling stream as these, in this little leap of the Tees in Turner's drawing, needs an eagle's keenness of eye, fineness of finger like a trained violinist's, and patience and love like Griselda's or Lady Jane Grey's." This passage, like any other taken from Ruskin's voluminous works, must be correlated, in order to obtain a complete view of his standpoint, with others partly contradictory of it; for all truth, as he says, is many-sided. But my present point is only that Ruskin himself showed no skill in painting the human figure. I believe he sometimes roughed-in some figures in his landscapes, but he generally



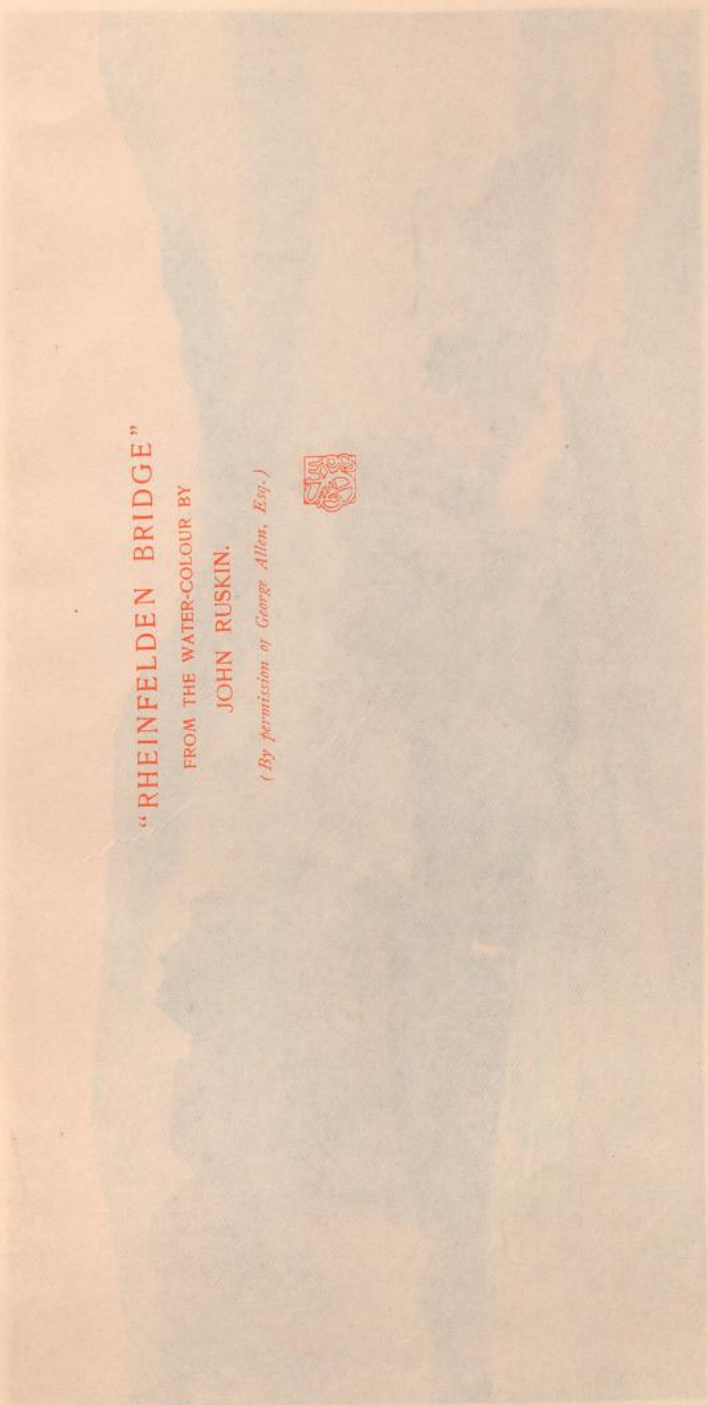
"THE ROCK OF ARONA" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

"RHEINFELDEN BRIDGE"

FROM THE WATER-COLOUR BY

JOHN RUSKIN.

(By permission of George Allen, Esq.)



John Ruskin

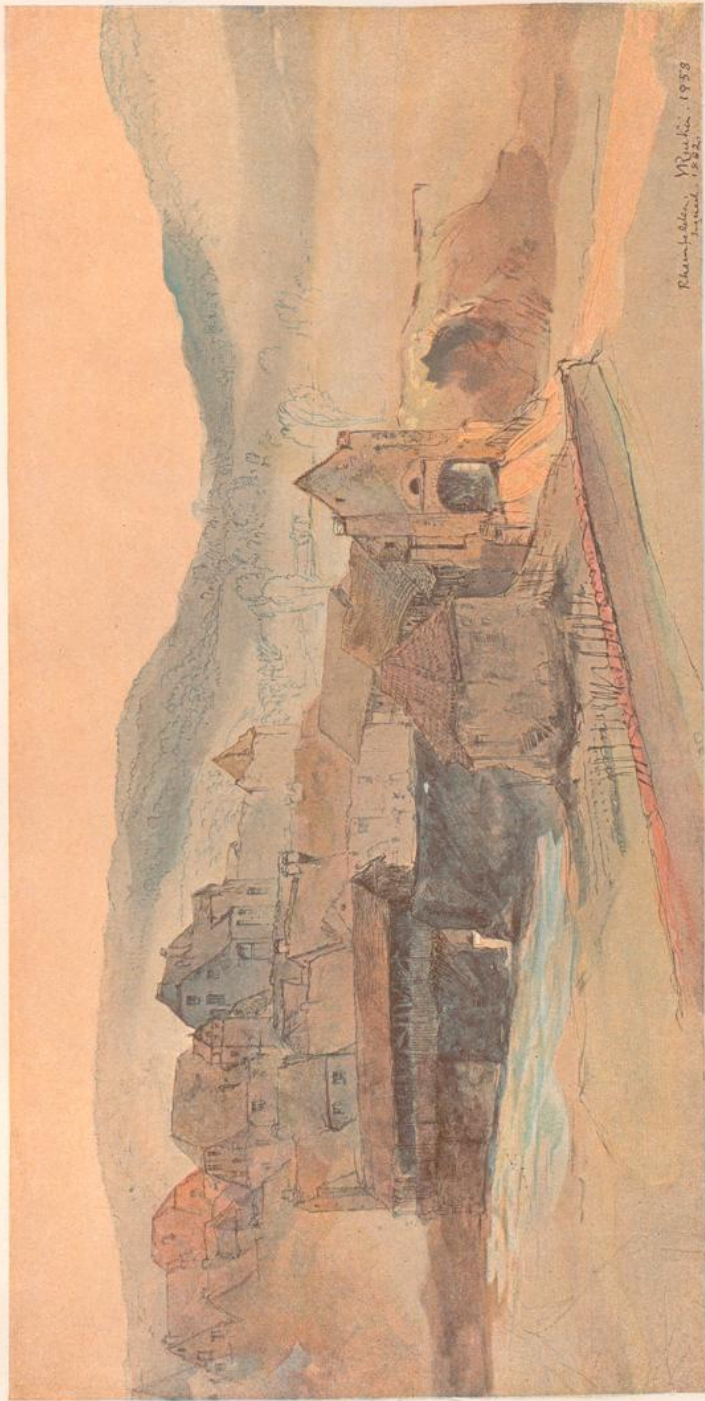
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"THE ROCK OF ARONA" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

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took them out again; they were as bad as the worst of Turner's, which is saying a good deal. Yet Ruskin could copy the figure perfectly. His copy of Carpaccio's *St. George* in the Sheffield Museum may serve as an example: the vigorous action of the knight is admirably expressed. The industry shown by Ruskin throughout his life in copying and studying the works and the schools he described and criticised was prodigious. "No one has the least notion," he somewhere says, "of the quantity of manual labour I have to go through to discharge my duty as a teacher of art." "I've been two whole days at work," he writes at another time, "on a purple marsh orchis alone." In copying Veronese's *Queen of Sheba* at Turin it took him six weeks, he tells us, "to examine rightly two figures," and on one day he was "upwards of two hours vainly trying to render with perfect accuracy the curves of two leaves of the brocaded silk." Mr. Augustus Hare happened to be at Turin at the same time, and gives us an amusing account of the scene. "One day in the gallery," he says, "I asked Ruskin to give me some advice. He said, 'Watch me.' He then looked at the flounce in the dress of a maid of honour of the Queen of Sheba for five

minutes, and then he painted one thread; he looked for another five minutes, and then he painted another thread. At the rate at which he was working he might hope to paint the whole dress in ten years; but it was a lesson as to examining well what one drew before drawing it." An object-lesson also, we may add, of the care with which Ruskin examined well what he described before describing it. For this, after all, is the most that Ruskin claimed for himself as an artist—that he had studied enough to give some authority to his judgment as an art critic. "There are two general principles," he says, "to be kept in mind in examining the drawings of any writer on art: the first, that they ought at least to show such ordinary skill in draughtsmanship as to prove that the writer knows *what* the good qualities of drawing *are*; the second, that they are never to be expected to equal in either execution or conception the work of accomplished artists, for one simple reason, that in order to do anything thoroughly well the whole mind, and the whole available time, must be given to that single art." Bearing this limitation in mind, we may claim for Ruskin that he is the most literary of artists, the most artistic of critics.



"LIGHT IN THE WEST: BEAUVAIS" FROM "MODERN PAINTERS" (George Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN

John Ruskin

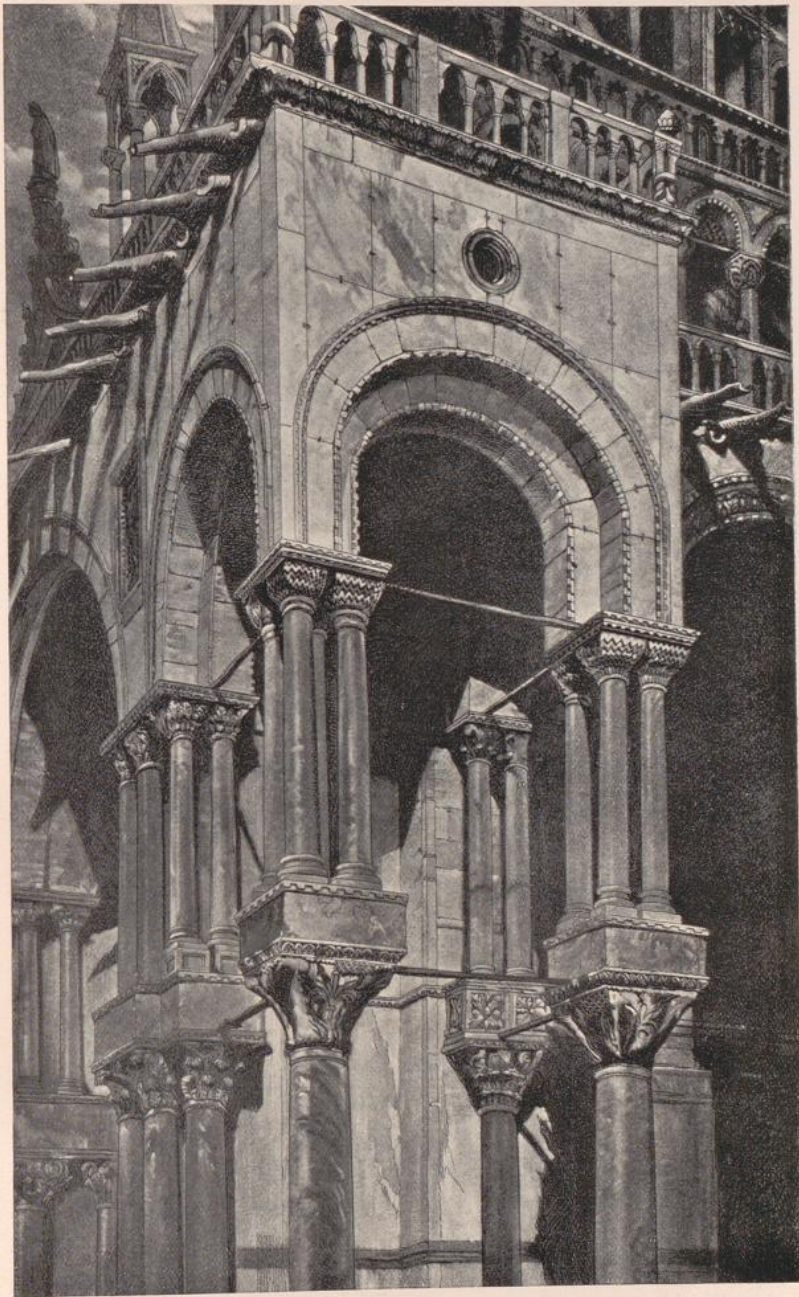
Ruskin's position and influence as an art critic are, it seems to me, subject at this time to two somewhat hostile influences. One is forgetfulness, the other is misunderstanding. Ruskin's principal work in art criticism was done fifty years ago, and it was done so completely that a new generation has forgotten it. The very depth and diffusion of his influence on the artistic world have blinded his later contemporaries to the extent of it. To enforce little known truths, to gain recognition for neglected masters, to breathe life into dead bones, Ruskin wrote with the exaggeration of emphasis. Now that his work has had its effect, the necessity

for the emphasis has passed away, and people fasten only on the fallacies in the exaggeration. Ruskin effected a revolution in British art by preaching the gospel of naturalism as against conventionalism, of sincerity and strenuousness as against triviality, of the Gothic revival as against classicalism. The positive and appreciative portion of what he said has now passed into common-place; and critics remember only the exaggerations which led Ruskin to under-rate the best Renaissance work, to preach sincerity of purpose as if it were an artistic substitute for skill of hand, to insist upon fidelity to Nature as if this excluded the function

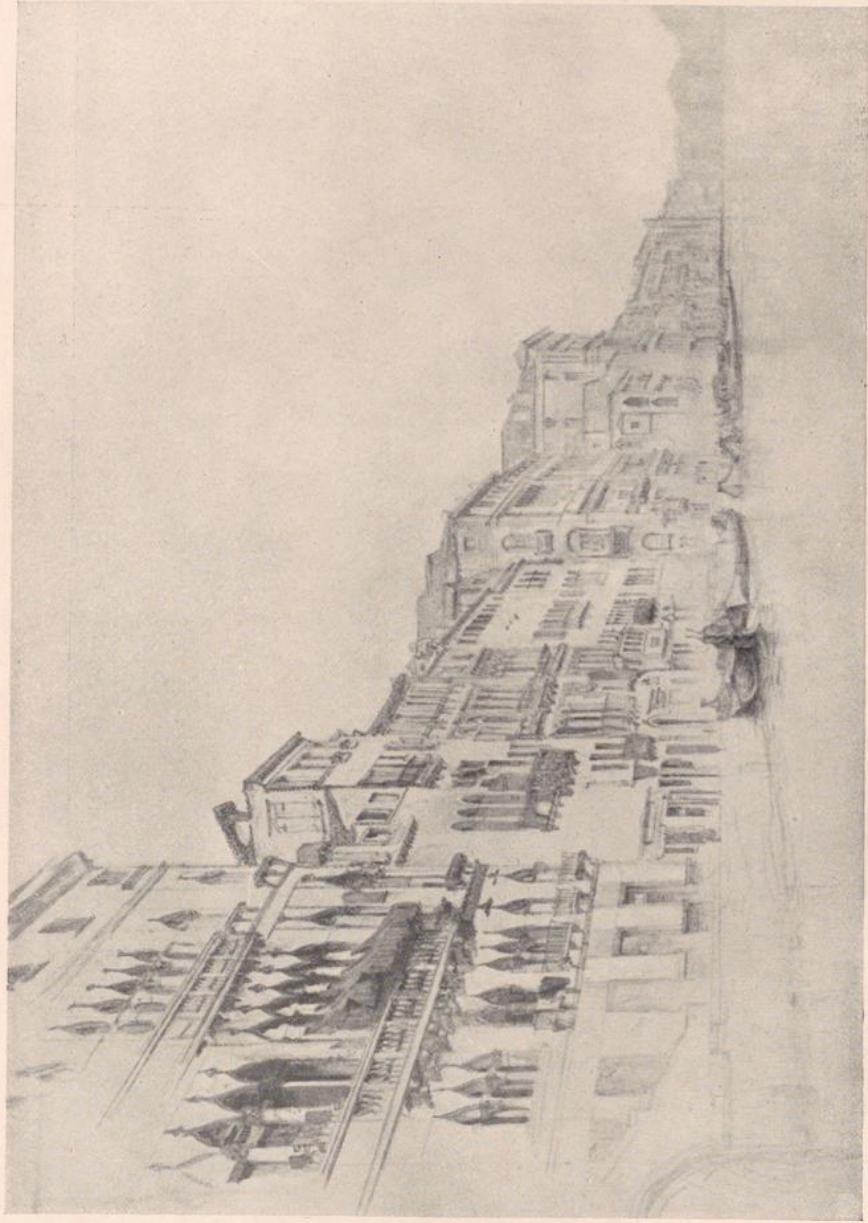
of the imagination. As a matter of fact, Ruskin's books, read in connection with each other, do not sanction any of these fallacies. Wherever they appear to do so, it is due to what I have called the exaggeration of emphasis. A similar remark applies to Ruskin's criticism of particular masters. The great work of his life, in his own view of it, so far as the field of art criticism is concerned, was "first to discern, and then to teach, the excellence and supremacy of five great painters, despised and scarcely in any true sense of the word known until I spoke of them—Turner, Tintoret, Luini, Botticelli, and Carpaccio." Ruskin might have extended his list by the addition, perhaps, of Bellini among the ancients, and certainly of the Pre-Raphaelites among the moderns. The excellence of these masters has now become matter of common agreement among all competent judges. It is taken so much as a matter of course that modern critics of Ruskin fasten only on the exaggerated emphasis with which, in asserting the claims of one set of



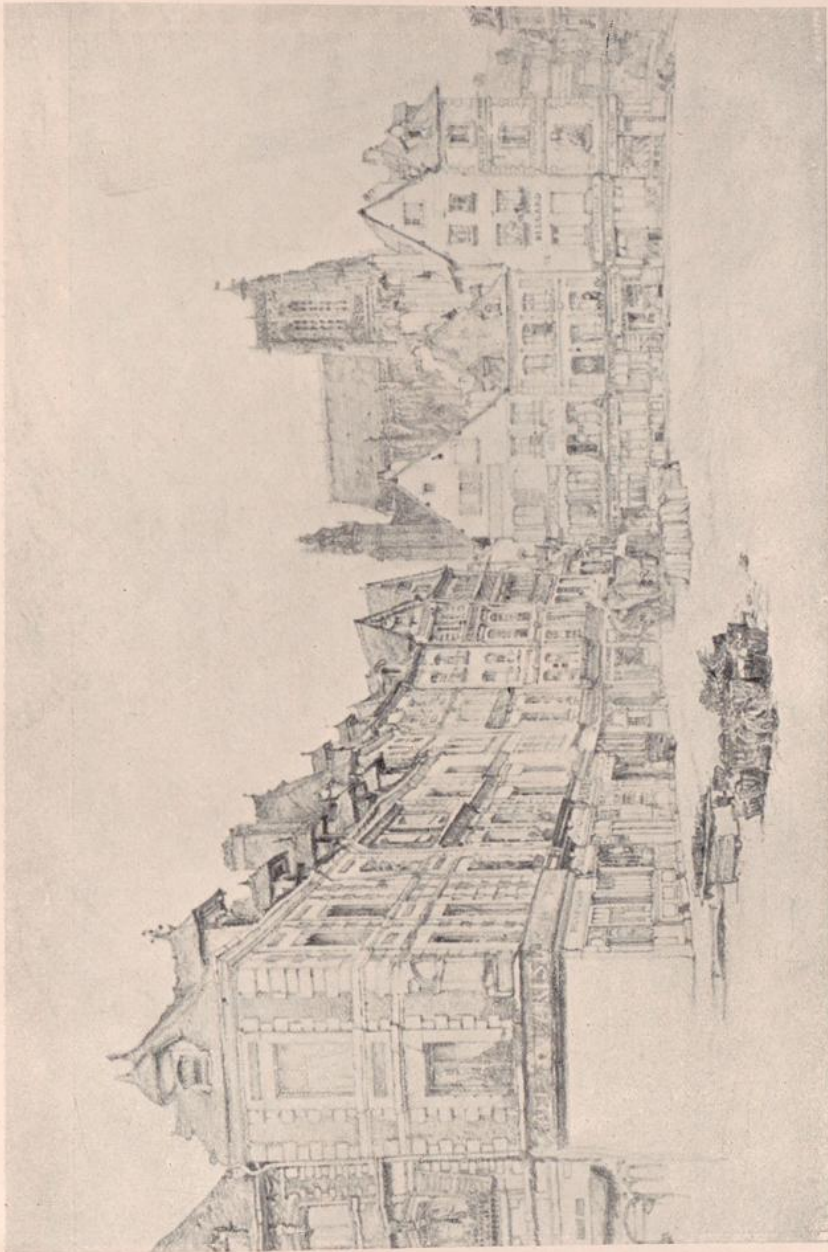
"GNEISS ROCK: GLENFINLAS" FROM "STUDIES IN RUSKIN" (George Allen)
BY JOHN RUSKIN



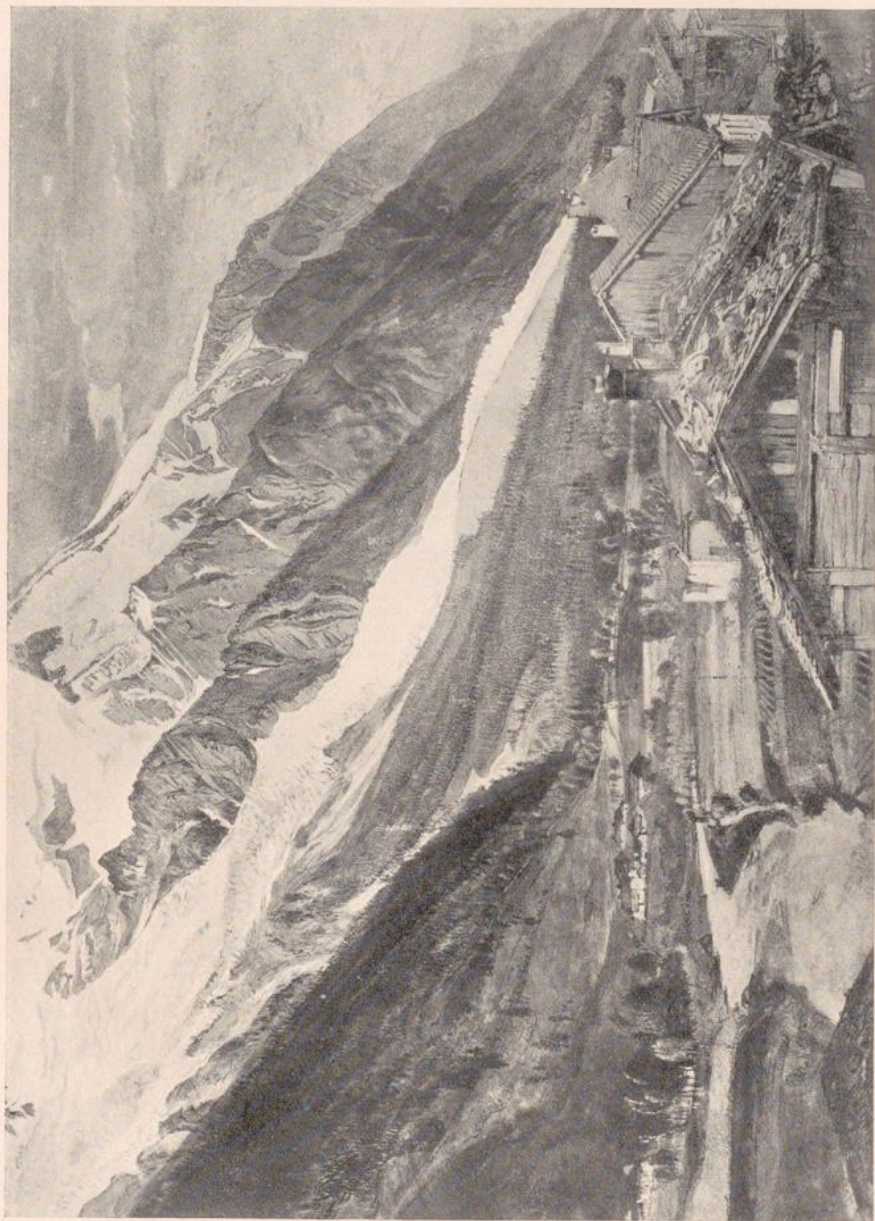
"ST. MARK'S, SOUTHERN PORTICO"
BY JOHN RUSKIN. FROM "EXAMPLES
OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF VENICE"
(G. ALLEN)



"GRAND CANAL, VENICE" BY JOHN RUSKIN
FROM "STUDIES IN RUSKIN" (G. ALLEN)



"MARKET PLACE, ABBEVILLE" BY JOHN RUSKIN
FROM "STUDIES IN RUSKIN" (G. ALLEN)



"GLACIER DES BOSSONS, CHAMONIX" BY JOHN RUSKIN
FROM "STUDIES IN RUSKIN" (G. ALLEN)

John Ruskin

masters, he disparaged in part those of others. Ruskin was blind, it is said, to the merits of Claude. The truth is that he exaggerated Claude's defects in extolling Turner's merits; but he saw the merits of Claude also: "Claude effected a revolution in art; he set the sun in the sky. We will give him the credit of this with no drawbacks." Again, Sir Edward Poynter has devoted a passionate chapter to abusing Ruskin for his abuse of Michelangelo. In emphasising the genius of Tintoret, Ruskin certainly disparaged unduly that of Michelangelo. Yet, elsewhere, he redresses the balance. He especially commended to his readers Mr. Tyrwhitt's Lectures on Art. "These lectures," he says, "show throughout the most beautiful and just reverence for Michelangelo, and are of especial value in their account of him; while the lecture which I gave at Oxford is entirely devoted to examining the modes in which his genius itself failed, and perverted that of other men. But Michelangelo is great enough to make praise and blame alike necessary and alike inadequate." The forgetfulness of what Ruskin has really said is sometimes complete. I read the other day in an otherwise intelligent memoir that a generation which admired Velasquez had out-lived the art criticism of Ruskin. Not out-lived, but absorbed, and so forgotten; for it was Ruskin who, half-a-century ago, proclaimed the consummate excellence

of Velasquez—"the greatest artist of Spain," and "one of the great artists of the world," the master to all schools in his "consummate ease," the man who was "never wrong."

Some, then, deny Ruskin's authority as an art critic because they have forgotten it; others dispute it because they misunderstand. The principal of these misunderstandings relates to Ruskin's supposed doctrine of a rigid adhesion to the whole substance of external fact. This is founded on the famous passage of "Modern Painters" in which he bade young artists "go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing." It is often supposed that this was Ruskin's last word on the principles of art—a strange supposition in the case of the prophet of Turner and Tintoret! But, in fact, the counsels cited above were expressly addressed to young artists. They inculcated a method of study, a means of mastery, not a philosophy of art. The passage is generally cited as if it stopped with "rejecting nothing and selecting nothing." But it does not. It immediately continues thus: "Then, when their memories are stored and their imaginations fed, and their hands firm, let them take up the scarlet and the gold,



"FRIBOURG, SWITZERLAND" FROM "STUDIES IN RUSKIN" (George Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN

John Ruskin

give the reins to their fancy, and show us what their heads are made of. We will follow them then wherever they choose to lead; we will check at nothing; they are then our masters, and are fit to be so. They have placed themselves above our criticism, and we will listen to their words in all faith and humility; but not unless they themselves have bowed, in the same submission, to a higher Authority and Master." Ruskin's Gospel of Art is more comprehensive and more firmly set than those suppose who know it only by snippets. As against conventionalism he preaches naturalism. As against the realism of ugliness he preaches "typical" (or ideal) beauty. As against vague generalisation he preaches vital truth. As against scientific minuteness he preaches æsthetic truth. "Your business is to draw what you see, not what you know is there." As against lifeless copying, he preaches

individual impression. "All great art is praise"; it is the expression of a man's delight in the beauty of Nature. Individuality is the very soul of art. Ruskin's Gospel of Art can never grow out of date. Whenever art is conventional, or unindividual, or academic, or trivial, or careless, or ignoble, Ruskin's burning words will serve as a rebuke and a stimulus. Whenever art is pursued seriously, earnestly, and reverently, his passionate enthusiasm for the true, the beautiful and the good will be received as encouragement and reward. In Ruskin's creed art was no mere recreation—"not a mere amusement, a minister to morbid sensibilities, a tickler and fanner of the soul's sleep." It was the exercise of some of the highest activities of human nature towards the noblest of ends,—“to make Eternity (in Carlyle's words) look through Time; to render the Godlike visible.”



"ON THE REUSS, BELOW LUCERNE" FROM "THE POETRY OF ARCHITECTURE" (G. Allen)

BY JOHN RUSKIN