Ruskin and South Kensington: contrasting approaches to art education

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This article deals with Ruskin's contribution to art education and training, as it can be defined by comparison and contrast with the government-sponsored art training supplied by (to use the handy nickname) 'South Kensington'. It is tempting to treat this matter, and thus to dramatize it, as a personality clash between Ruskin and Henry Cole – who, ten years older than Ruskin, was the man in charge of the South Kensington system. Robert Hewison has commented that their 'individual personalities, attitudes and ambitions are so diametrically opposed as to represent the longitude and latitude of Victorian cultural values'. He characterises Cole as 'utilitarian' and 'rationalist', as against Ruskin, who was a 'romantic anti-capitalist' and in favour of the 'imaginative'.[1] This article will set the personality clash in the broader context of Victorian art education.[2]

Ruskin and Cole develop differing approaches to art education

Anyone interested in achieving artistic skill in Victorian England would probably begin by taking private lessons from a practising painter. Both Cole and Ruskin did so. Cole took drawing lessons from Charles Wild and David Cox,[3] and Ruskin had art tuition from Charles Runciman and Copley Fielding, 'the most fashionable drawing master of the day'.[4] A few private art schools existed, the most prestigious being that run by Henry Sass (which is commemorated in fictional form, as 'Gandish's', in Thackeray's novel, *The Newcomes*).[5] Sass's school aimed to equip

[1] Robert Hewison, 'Straight lines or curved? The Victorian values of John Ruskin and Henry Cole', in Peggy Deamer, ed, *Architecture and capitalism: 1845 to the present*, London: Routledge, 2013, 8, 21.

[2] For background on Cole and South Kensington see Anthony Burton, *Vision and accident: the story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications, 1999; Elizabeth Bonython and Anthony Burton, *The great exhibitor: the life and work of Henry Cole*, London: V&A Publications, 2003.

[3] Bonython and Burton, *The great exhibitor*, 23, 79.

[4] Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: the argument of the eye*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, 37.

[5] The history of drawing tuition is a large subject. Some idea of its dimensions may be derived from a Symposium on 'Drawing: a pre-eminent skill' held by the William Shipley Group for RSA History, at the Royal Academy, 27 March 2015. For an account see Susanna Avery-Quash in *British Art Journal*, vol.17, no.1, June 2016, 152. For the programme see http://btckstorage.blob.core.windows.net/site393/2015%20Updated%20DRAWING%20SYMP.pdf

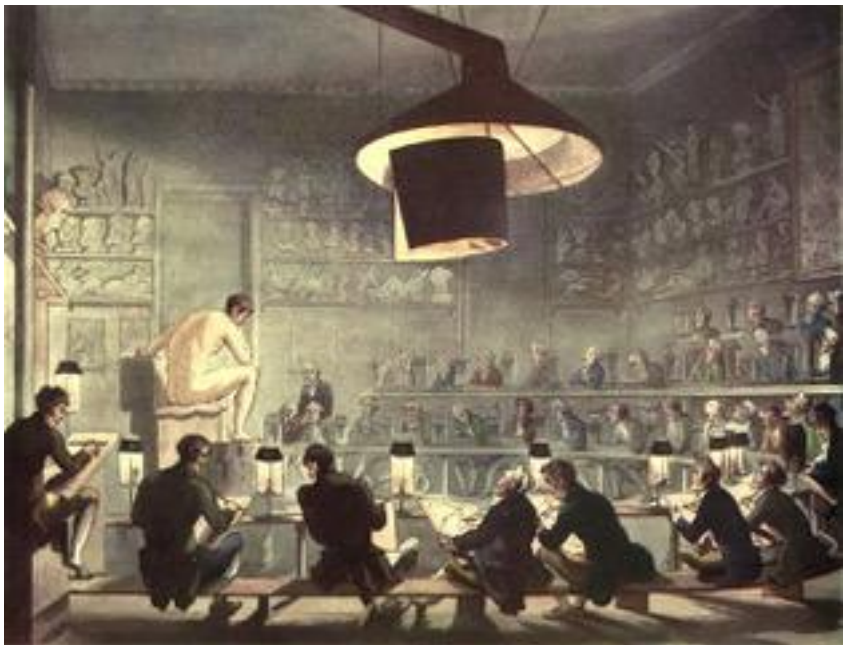

Figure 1 T. Rowlandson and A. C. Pugin, 'Drawing from life at the Royal Academy', illustration in W. H. Pyne and W. Combe, *The Microcosm of London*, London: R. Ackermann, vol.1, 1808, plate 1.

prospective artists for entry to the school run by the Royal Academy (founded 1769), which was the oldest and most important art school in London. The Academy aimed primarily to equip artists for 'history painting', the most superior genre of painting, such as had been practised by the acknowledged 'Old Masters'. At the heart of its tuition was the representation of the human body, 'figure drawing'. Students learned this by drawing live models, and, when these were not available, they copied plaster casts of suitably approved sculptures (fig. 1).[6]

The government's system of art teaching ('South Kensington') evolved from that at the government's School of Design. It was intended to equip working people with enough artistic ability to enable them to contribute to the application of art to manufactured objects. In the popular mind, if *Punch* cartoons (titled 'The school of bad designs') are anything to go by,[7] this meant that boys were set to draw teapots and broken plates (fig. 2). There was more to the syllabus than this, but at the very start, in 1836, the official policy was that 'drawing from the human figure should *not* be taught'.[8] This prohibition was soon relaxed, though not without controversy – and figure drawing was eventually approved at South Kensington. But the South Kensington system continued, through the century, to focus on training artists in the design of ornament, and study of the human figure was only admitted to the extent

[6] In 2018 and 2019 the Academy opened three displays, under the title 'The making of an artist', which celebrated the history of its own art teaching: 'The great tradition', 'Learning to draw' and 'Learning about architecture'.

[7] *Punch*, vol.9, 1845, 70, 117.

[8] See Christopher Frayling, *The Royal College of Art: fifty years of art & design*, London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1987, 16-34, 50.

that it was relevant to this prime purpose. South Kensington always insisted that its training was distinctly different from that of the Royal Academy.[9]

Figure 2 'The School of Bad Designs', caricature in *Punch*, vol.9, 1845, 117.

Ruskin was at first little interested in figure drawing and history painting. He established himself as an art critic by publishing the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843. The brief title gives little indication of the scope of the work, and it is worth quoting the full title. (The typographical variety in the title-page itself suggests the diverse aspects of Ruskin's discourse.)

> *Modern Painters: their superiority in the art of landscape painting to all the Ancient Masters proved by examples of the True, the Beautiful, and the Intellectual from the works of modern artists, especially from those of J. M. W. Turner Esq., R.A.*

It is landscape painting with which Ruskin is chiefly concerned, and his book is accordingly dedicated 'to the landscape artists of England'. So Ruskin does not stake a claim to the territory dominated by the Royal Academy, any more than South Kensington does.

A little more is needed to define Ruskin's and Cole's areas of operation. The British government had established a School of Design in 1836, following the recommendation of a Parliamentary Select Committee. The main motivation of the Committee was economic: how to increase the sales of British manufactures by making them more artistic. Although the foundation of a design school is often presented as the implementation of a wise and profoundly pondered policy, it was really the government's somewhat flustered response to agitation from various quarters, notably from politicians of the radical left. The School was set up in

[9] H. C. Morgan, 'The curriculum of training in the fine arts', in *The changing curriculum. History of Education Society*, London: Routledge, 2013 (first published 1971), 57-61.

premises in Somerset House. Its early history was persistently troubled,[10] so much so that in 1848 Henry Cole was commissioned to report on it. Cole, who started out in life as a clerk in the Public Records, had gained a reputation as a lobbyist and troubleshooter through his work on the Penny Post and the booming railways, and had more recently concentrated on artistic matters, which were to be his prime concern for the rest of his life.

While Cole (in his thirties) was thus occupied in the 1840s, Ruskin (in his twenties) was pursuing his self-education as an artist and art critic. After his time at Oxford, his artistic education was achieved largely through travel in Europe, to Italy in winter 1840-41, Switzerland in summer 1842; France and Italy in 1845, and so on. Mountain landscape was what most enthused him. 1843 saw the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, which was widely read and applauded, and the second volume followed in 1846.

By now, Ruskin's interest in natural landscape (including its geology) had extended to embrace the man-made landscape of towns. He began to study architecture, and in 1849 published *The seven lamps of architecture*. This occasioned his first contact with Henry Cole. Cole, to forward his work on art and design, had started a monthly magazine, the *Journal of design and manufactures*, which he edited throughout its run (1849-52). In its issue for October 1849 (p.72) he published a brief notice of *Seven lamps*. He praised it as 'thoughtful' and 'eloquent'. But – characteristically – he criticised Ruskin because 'instead of boldly recognising the tendencies of the age, which are inevitable … instead of considering the means of improving these tendencies … he either puts up his back against their further development, or would attempt to bring back the world of art to what its course of action was four centuries ago'. Ruskin wrote to Cole, mildly remarking that 'there is much truth in what you say respecting the inevitable tendencies of the age; but a man can only write effectively when he writes from his conviction'.[11] A first sign, perhaps, that Cole and Ruskin were facing in different directions.

1851 brought the Great Exhibition. Ruskin, his mind engrossed by the stones of Venice and the Pre-Raphaelite paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy, dismissed it. The building was just a 'cucumber frame',[12] while the contents were 'the petty arts of our fashionable luxury'.[13] The Exhibition was, however, the making of Henry Cole, who showed that, of all those involved, he was the man who could get things done. He was rewarded for his efforts by being put in charge of the Government School of Design.

This was, perhaps, a rather back-handed reward, since the School was in very poor shape. But Cole took it in hand, expanded it into a government sub-department called the Department of Science and Art, and re-housed it in Marlborough House, a royal building not then used by the royal family and already serving as overflow for the National Gallery, where the Vernon collection of modern

[10] See Quentin Bell, *The Schools of Design*, London: Routledge, 1963.

[11] Letter of 19 December 1849. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The works of John* Ruskin, London: George Allen / New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903-12, 39 vols, XXXVI, 105.

[12] *Praeterita*, vol.1. ch.2. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXV, 47.

[13] John Ruskin, *The Opening of the Crystal Palace*, London: Smith, Elder, 1854, 7.

British paintings could be exhibited. As well as the art school, Cole set up here a Museum of Ornamental Art, using the teaching collections the school already possessed, and adding to them a range of objects selected from the Great Exhibition: this was the inception of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The new syllabus of the art school was devised by Cole's second-in-command, Richard Redgrave.[14]

Interestingly, another occupant of Marlborough House in the 1850s was Ruskin. J. M. W. Turner had died in 1851 and bequeathed the paintings executed by himself and still in his possession to the British nation. The National Gallery put them in Marlborough House and employed Ruskin to catalogue and arrange for display those on paper. One would like to think that Ruskin and Cole encountered each other from time to time at Marlborough House. That they did is suggested in a letter from Ruskin to his American friend Charles Eliot Norton in May 1857, where he says that 'the Marlborough house people are fraternizing with me'. He also says that 'my drawing school goes on nicely - & … I have written a nice little book for beginners in drawing'.[15] So these remarks indicate that Ruskin had by now turned from self-cultivation to teaching others about art – through a drawing school and a book.

Ruskin gave art classes at the Working Men's College. This was set up in 1854 by the Rev Frederick Denison Maurice, and some Christian Socialist companions. It first occupied premises at Red Lion Square in London, and then in 1857 moved to Great Ormond Street. It offered a wide range of classes including history, geography, law, politics, English grammar and literature, chemistry, mathematics, French, Latin and Greek. Ruskin taught a drawing class more or less regularly from 1854 to 1858 and then more sporadically until the spring of 1862.[16] He taught only in the winter months, and had assistance: he passed pupils on to Lowes Dickinson after giving elementary instruction, and D. G. Rossetti ran a life class.[17] The course was deemed a success: it attracted more students than any of the others. It was, all the same, on a small scale compared with the efforts of South Kensington. In 1860, Ruskin testified before the Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Institutions on the basis that he had 'given a great deal of gratuitous instruction to the working classes', but was brought to admit that 'the Working Men's College is, after all, a very limited sphere'.[18]

Moreover, Ruskin's aims were rather grudgingly expressed. He issued a memorandum to students in which he said that he

> wishes it to be generally understood by all his pupils that the instruction given in his class is not intended either to fit them for becoming artists, or, in

[14] Burton, *Vision and Accident*, chapter 2, 'The Museum at Marlborough House'.

[15] [Charles Eliot Norton], *Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton*, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904, vol.1, 37-8.

[16] See Donata Levi and Paul Tucker, *Ruskin didatta: il disegno tra disciplina e diletto*, Venice: Marsilio, 1996, 168–169.

[17] See Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford: the art of education*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, 7-9.

[18] Testimony before the Select Committee on Public Institutions, 20 March 1860, quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 473, 485.

> any direct manner, to advance their skill in the occupations they at present follow. They are taught drawing, primarily in order to direct their attention accurately to the beauty of God's work in the material universe.[19]

Nonetheless, his charismatic personality evidently exercised a considerable attraction to students, as is suggested by a sketch by one of them, which shows him leading students on an outdoor drawing expedition, and records: 'We all believe what our leader says. We account him infallible, every word that he says whether it be sense or nonsense has some deep & hidden meaning in it.'[20] (fig. 3)

Figure 3 A drawing by William J. Hodgson showing Ruskin leading pupils on a sketching expedition, c.1856. *William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, London*.

That Ruskin's methods were perceived as different from those of the government system is evidenced by a criticism of Ruskin made by William Bell Scott, who was principal of the Science and Art Department's branch school in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Scott, well known for his irritability, complained that Ruskin wilfully 'ignored' 'everything … to be seen in academic or Government schools of art practice'. Instead, pupils at the Working Men's College, were 'trying to put on small pieces of paper imitations by pen and ink of pieces of rough stick encrusted with dry lichens! [Ruskin] drew my attention to these as giving the pupils a love of "nature"!' Scott growled that 'not one of the young men who attended at the Working Man's [sic] College ever acquired any power of drawing'.[21] However that

[19] Undated memorandum, quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 471.

[20] Reproduced in James S. Dearden, *John Ruskin: A life in pictures*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 49.

[21] *Autobiographical notes of the life of William Bell Scott*, London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1892, vol.2, 10.

may be, there is no doubt that Ruskin did set his pupils to make minute copies of plant forms. In 1857 he published *Elements of Drawing*, which includes such instructions as 'Gather a small twig' (fig. 4). A detailed comparison between the teaching methods of Ruskin and the government system would probably show that they had much in common, since both aimed to help pupils master the elementary stages of drawing technique.

LETTER 2.] ON FIRST PRACTICE. 79

rightly had you tried. There is nothing visible out of which you may not get useful practice.

Next, to put the leaves on your boughs. Gather a small twig with four or five leaves on it, put it into water, put a sheet of light-coloured or white paper behind it, so that all the leaves may be relieved in dark from the white field; then sketch in their dark shape carefully with pencil as you did the complicated boughs, in order to be sure that all their masses and interstices are right in shape before you begin shading, and complete as far as you can with pen and ink, in the manner of Fig. 6., which is a young shoot of lilac.

Fig. 4.

You will probably, in spite of all your pattern

Figure 4 A page from John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing*, London: Smith, Elder, 1857.

Ruskin's encounters with South Kensington

While Ruskin always determinedly pursued his own path, there were several occasions when he directly encountered the government system of art education. This can now legitimately be called 'South Kensington' because in 1856, the Government needed Marlborough House for the use of the Prince of Wales, so Cole's schools and museum, with the National Gallery's Turners, were transferred to South Kensington. Here, land had been purchased, using the profits of the Great Exhibition, and Prince Albert aimed to create a cultural quarter. Cole's establishment here took shape only gradually as finance was supplied by the government in dribbles. Buildings were run up for the museum, and several old houses on the site were extended to house the schools. To boost his museum, Henry Cole gathered up various other collections, including the Architectural Museum.[22] This was a collection of plaster casts of Gothic ornament, set up by a bunch of architects in 1851 to accustom men in the building trades to the newly fashionable

[22] Burton, *Vision and accident*, chapter 3, 'The South Kensington Idea'.

Gothic style. It needed more room than was available in its first premises in Westminster, and Cole provided a gallery for it. Ruskin was a supporter of the Architectural Museum, and it was under its auspices that he gave a lecture in January 1858 in the South Kensington lecture theatre.

Here, on South Kensington's own ground, Ruskin confronted an institution of which he was inclined to disapprove. He complimented Cole and Redgrave on their 'strenuous and well-directed exertions', but his lecture, rather cryptically titled 'The deteriorative power of conventional art over nations',[23] does seem to embody criticism of their approach. Ruskin's main theme is a consideration of the relationship of a nation's art to its moral character. Can a wicked nation produce good art, and *vice versa*? Can there be 'great success in art with subsequent national degradation'(263)? Can great art exist 'in the service of superstition'(264)? One example he considers is the art of India. The Indians are 'a race rejoicing in art, and eminently and universally endowed with the gift of it' (262). But, in reaction to the recent 'Indian Mutiny', Ruskin regards the Indian nation as guilty of 'bestial degradation', as descending to the 'lowest level of possible humanity', to 'an extreme energy of baseness' (262-3). This would have made Cole and Redgrave sit up, because Indian ornament was to them an example of excellence in design.

Cole belonged to a group of design reformers.[24] With Richard Redgrave, A. W. N. Pugin, and Owen Jones, he contrived to get included in the Jury Reports of the Great Exhibition a 'Supplementary Report on Design', which promoted their views.[25] This held up Indian design as a good example, and eye-catchingly displayed the virtues of Indian pattern in several coloured illustrations – the only coloured illustrations to appear in the substantial volume. The Supplementary Report lived on: eventually in edited form, in a book familiarly known as 'Redgrave on Design', which was a standard textbook in Cole's Department of Science and Art through the rest of the century;[26] and, more immediately, in summary in a set of large placards, which were hung up the classrooms of the South Kensington art school. On the first of these cards ('General Principles of Decorative Art') the final paragraph proclaims:

> True ornament does not consist in the mere imitation of natural objects, but rather in the adaptation of their peculiar beauties of form or colour to

[23] First published in book form in John Ruskin, *The two paths*, London: Smith, Elder, 1859. *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, page refs in main text.

[24] On Victorian design reform in general see Brent C. Brolin, *Architectural ornament: banishment and return*, New York: Norton, 2001.

[25] For a fuller account of Cole's manoeuvres see Clive Wainwright, 'The making of the South Kensington Museum II: Collecting modern manufactures: 1851 and the Great Exhibition', *Journal of the history of collections*, vol.14, no.1, 2002, 25-43.

[26] *South Kensington Museum Art Handbooks. Manual of design compiled from the writings and addresses of Richard Redgrave … by Gilbert Redgrave*, London: Chapman and Hall, [1876]. See Anthony Burton, 'Richard Redgrave as art educator, museum official and design theorist', in Susan P. Casteras and Ronald Parkinson, *Richard Redgrave 1804-1888*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988, 48-70.

> decorative purposes, controlled by the nature of the material to be decorated, the laws of art, and the necessities of manufacture.

This boils down to the view that realistic copying of nature was to be condemned, and formalized nature was to be preferred. Redgrave's *Manual of Design* illustrates how a thistle in its natural, rather disorderly form can be regularized so that it can be used in ornament applied to art objects (166-7). This was anathema to Ruskin.[27] He regarded nature as a source of artistic inspiration, but what he wished to do was 'to draw what was really there'.[28] In his South Kensington lecture, he claims that the mark of great art is that it offers a truthful representation of nature, and urges that great art lies in 'the earnest and intense seizing of natural facts' (287), the 'direct representation of nature' (288). This sets him against the South Kensington principles.

This issue remained at the heart of Ruskin's aversion to South Kensington, but he himself was capable of this formalizing process. Among drawings which he made to guide the stone-carvers working on the Oxford Museum in the late 1850s is one which juxtaposes a naturalistic delineation of a strawberry plant, and a sketch which shows how this could be formalized as the carved capital of a column.[29]

In his South Kensington lecture, Ruskin does concede that a pattern designer must adapt nature:

> If the designer of furniture, of cups and vases, of dress patterns, and the like, exercises himself continually in the imitation of natural form ...; then, holding by this stem of life, he may pass down into all kinds of merely geometrical or formal design with perfect safety, and with noble results. (288)

But then Ruskin gets carried away. Directly addressing his reader in the second person, he declares that if you

> set yourself to the designing of ornamentation, either in the ignorant play of your own heartless fancy, as the Indian does, or according to received application of heartless laws, as the modern European does, … there is but one word for you – Death. (288-90)

It may be argued, then, that Ruskin's lecture of January 1858, in criticising the decorative art of India which was so prized at South Kensington, embodies, somewhat concealed in a cloud of Ruskinian eloquence, a coded criticism of South

[27] Ruskin contested the views of the South Kensington reformers at a meeting of the Society of Arts on 12 March 1856 after George Wallis (who occupied various influential posts in the South Kensington system) had read a paper on 'Recent progress in design as applied to manufacture'. See *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 427-30.

[28] *Praeterita*, vol.2, para.73. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXV, 311.

[29] The drawing is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. See Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford*, 65.

Kensington.[30] That Henry Cole was aware of this is suggested by a comment in his Department's subsequent annual report, where he remarks that 'in allowing certain persons, including Mr. Ruskin, the author, to give illustrative lectures, the department is not responsible for their opinions'.[31]

In less than a year, Ruskin had another encounter with the South Kensington system, when it opened a school of art in Cambridge. At an inaugural soirée on 29 October 1858, Ruskin was a principal speaker, along with Richard Redgrave and George Cruikshank.[32] Redgrave spoke first, on behalf of the South Kensington system. He explained its origins, and its development to the extent that it now ran 60 art schools; and he claimed that 'the Art of drawing was particularly useful to the poor' (4-8).

Ruskin began by acknowledging that the study of art could be beneficial to all, but then disparaged, as 'wholly impossible', the teaching of drawing as a general skill applicable to artisans in all trades. 'All specific Art-teaching must be given in schools established by each trade for itself.'(11) This general proposition implied criticism of South Kensington, not least because Henry Cole's system had, at the start, proposed courses specially tailored to specific industries. At Marlborough House, there were classes in woven fabrics, furniture, metalwork, pottery, wood-engraving, and architecture.[33] But these were abandoned after a couple of years in favour of a course of drawing tuition applicable to all, such as Ruskin now decried. So Ruskin was implying that the project he had been invited to endorse at Cambridge was mistaken in its methods.

Ruskin went on to argue that art schools should primarily concentrate on refining pupils' perceptions, rather than honing their manual skills, because most people were incapable of becoming real artists. 'An amateur's drawing, or a workman's drawing – anybody's drawing but an artist's, is always valueless in itself.'(14) Undergraduates at the university, if they attended art classes, would find their 'power of criticism' increased, but, as for the 'operative', 'we need not endeavour to render his powers of criticism very acute … the less he knows the better' (15). Ruskin describes his own intense methods of art appreciation ('it took me six weeks to examine rightly two figures' in a painting by Veronese) and implies that everyone should give such attention to art (18). He then moves on to a favourite theme: the relationship between art and the moral state of the nation, 'the ultimate effects of Art on national mind' (22). After an extended excursion into personal experience, he concludes that the proper business of art is to convey truth, and, if it does that, it will elevate 'the nation practising it' (28). He had expounded

[30] Ruskin goes into the formalization of ornament in greater detail in his Bradford lecture, 'Modern manufacture and design', published in *The two paths* (1859).

[31] Quoted in Hewison, 'Straight lines', 21.

[32] *Cambridge School of Art. Inaugural soirée. Mr Ruskin's address, and report of the speeches of Mr. Redgrave, R.A., and Mr. Cruikshank, with a full account of the proceedings of the evening,* Cambridge: Committee of the School of Art, 1858. Page refs in main text.

[33] Section 4, 'Special classes meeting at Marlborough House' in the 'Prospectus' of the 'Board of Trade Department of Science and Art', in *Department of Science and Art. A catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art, at Marlborough House …*, fifth edition (May 1853), London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1853, 126-9.

this theme in his lecture at South Kensington. Without going further into it now, it may be suggested that to discourse on art as an index of national well-being when lecturing to the official body that provided national art education, might be seen as a manoeuvre by Ruskin to seize the moral high ground, from which he could put South Kensington at a disadvantage. His position is, anyway, surely elitist – as emerges in a phrase in his final sentence, where he refers to 'the great and untraversable gulph [sic] which God has set between the great and the common intelligences of mankind' (32). May it perhaps be assumed that Ruskin aligned himself with 'great' intelligence, and South Kensington with 'common' intelligences?

Quite soon Ruskin appeared on another South Kensington platform, when, on 22 February 1859, he addressed the Annual Meeting of the Manchester School of Art, which was another of South Kensington's provincial branch schools. As at Cambridge, he sat through some detailed administrative reports before himself speaking for an hour and a half.[34] His lecture, entitled 'The Unity of Art',[35] conceded, perhaps unexpectedly, that artistic activity was possible at various levels, and that 'we find that manufacture and art are now going on always together' (293). Nonetheless, he insisted that the only art worth teaching in art schools was Fine Art, and that schools should 'point to the best' (302-3). Forms of art that merely gave pleasure were dismissed as being produced by 'cruel and savage nations, cruel in temper, savage in habits and conception' (306). True art, by contrast, 'indicates a peculiar gentleness and tenderness of mind' and is produced by 'thoughtful, sensitive, earnest, kind men, large in their views of life, and full of various intellectual power' (307). As he often stressed, true art was that which represented 'natural fact' (307).

Ruskin always stuck to the severe doctrine that only the highest form of art should be taught. He might have criticized South Kensington for falling short in this respect, but in Manchester he refrained. This was doubtless because the Manchester School had from the first tended to dissent from South Kensington orthodoxy, and in 1859 its Master, J. A. Hammersley, was a Ruskin supporter, who had supplemented the official syllabus with classes on landscape and life drawing.[36] Ruskin and Hammersley acclaimed each other. The first printed version of Ruskin's lecture was a pamphlet (printed in Manchester by Thos Sowler, 1859) in which Hammersley, in a prefatory note, praised the 'manliness and nobleness' of Ruskin's words, and described him as 'a gentleman who has … done more to secure healthy feelings to art practice and art reception by the public than any previous or any other living writer'. The pamphlet also recorded Ruskin's response to a vote of thanks after his lecture in which he remarked that 'the general principles which have been brought forward by Mr. Hammersley in this school are now becoming known and understood' with the result that 'as long as you have such a master as

[34] *Manchester Courier*, 27 Feb 1859, 10.

[35] Published in *The two paths*, London: Smith, Elder, 1859. *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, page refs in main text.

[36] For a detailed account see James Moore, *High culture and tall chimneys: art institutions and urban society in Lancashire 1870-1914*, Manchester: University Press, 2018, chapter 5, 127ff.

you have here in Mr. Hammersley, there is no fear for you … it is not every school that has such a master'.[37]

Ruskin delivered other lectures to art schools and drawing classes in the 1850s,[38] but in the 1860s, he was heavily engaged with politics, and it was some time before he returned to art education. Then, in 1869, he was elected to the first Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Oxford University. This came about largely through the good offices of Henry Acland and Henry Liddell, who had been friendly with Ruskin from undergraduate days, and now held influential posts in Oxford, Acland as professor of medicine and Liddell as Dean of Christ Church. Besides giving the statutory lectures that his new post involved, Ruskin wished to open a drawing school at Oxford, a slightly embarrassing proposal, since Acland and Liddell already supported an existing drawing school in Oxford.

This was a South Kensington branch school, established in 1865, run by Alexander Macdonald, and operating in the University Galleries (in the building later to be named the new Ashmolean Museum). So here Ruskin, whose school also operated in the University Galleries, had to enter into a co-operative arrangement with South Kensington. From his school's inception in 1871, he put a lot of effort into it, but he did not attract many students, and was only fitfully present in Oxford, partly owing to illness. The shifting, ill-defined relationship between his school and Macdonald's has been analysed elsewhere.[39] Ruskin obviously hoped to dislodge Macdonald, but they had to work together. Macdonald was the man on the spot, capable of keeping his show on the road, whereas Ruskin exercised an intermittent, even capricious influence. Even though Ruskin pushed the South Kensington school down into the cellars of the University Galleries, Macdonald held his own, and in 1871 he became the first occupant of a post endowed by Ruskin, called the Ruskin Master of Drawing – a manoeuvre which partly reconciled the two schools. Ruskin, however, later bitterly concluded that 'my unwillingness to hurt Macdonald was virtually the ruin of my Oxford School'.[40]

Ruskin was disappointed in his Oxford efforts, and his attitude to South Kensington hardened. In April 1871 he had written to Charles Eliot Norton that he 'thought it time to declare open hostilities with Kensington',[41] and it was in the 1870s that he uttered some of his fiercest condemnations of South Kensington. In 1873, he denounced the 'sevenfold – or rather seventy times sevenfold – ignorance, the dregs of corrupted knowledge, which modern art-teaching, centralised by Kensington, produces in our workmen', resulting in 'paralysed brain and corrupted heart'.[42] In 1877 he fulminated: 'the Professorship of Sir Henry Cole at Kensington has corrupted the system of art-teaching all over England into a state of abortion

37 Quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 247, 317n, 296n.

38 Gathered in vol. 16 of *Works of John Ruskin*.

39 For a full account see Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford*.

40 Letter to Henry Acland, 17 Jan 1886, quoted in Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford*, 42.

41 [Charles Eliot Norton], *Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton*, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904, vol.2, 33.

42 *Fors*, letter 32, August 1873. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, 605.

and falsehood from which it will take twenty years to recover.'[43] These utterances are perhaps more in the nature of insults than reasoned disagreement.

Conclusion

To summarise: Firstly, Ruskin was not alone in criticising South Kensington. Its syllabus of 23 stages, drawn up by Redgrave, was regarded as being boring and inflexible. At every stage the students had to pass tests and examinations, and the teachers were paid by results. What the students had to do was to make exact copies of prescribed outline exercises, and to learn how to make minute effects of shading. Critics pointed to the bolder and more expressive teaching of drawing in French art schools. These criticisms were generally regarded as having validity, and South Kensington eventually changed its methods.

Ruskin's view was that 'the unhappy system of Kensington has raised up a countless multitude of inferior artists'.[44] He might have concluded that inferior artists were better than none, and that it was worth trying to improve South Kensington. But his view was that South Kensington was altogether misguided.

Ruskin is credited nowadays as an advocate of humane, holistic, liberal education. So far as art was concerned, he believed that it was worth studying drawing because it enhanced 'perception', it increased a student's capacity to appreciate art. But he believed that the ability to become a true artist was bestowed on very few, and any attempt to train working-class people as artists was bound to fail. One of the more positive things that he said on the subject was:

> I assert … with confidence, that no workman, whose mind I have examined, is, at present, capable of design in the arts, only of imitation, and of exquisite manual execution, which, however, being wholly mechanical, is always profitless to the man himself, and profitless ultimately to those who possess the work.[45]

He said that in 1860. By 1877, he had toughened his stance on design education, declaring that 'the very words "School of Design" involve the profoundest of Art fallacies. Drawing may be taught by tutors: but Design only by Heaven…'.[46]

Who will argue with Heaven? Ruskin had a very high view of art, based on his profound attempts to understand and analyse the workings of the creative imagination, an endeavour which, perhaps, Henry Cole could not have emulated. Ruskin's view may, perhaps, be regarded as 'elitist'. At any rate, it left no room for South Kensington.

In the end, Ruskin's attempt to situate art training within a liberal education may have prevailed. But his effect on Victorian art teaching remains a matter of

43 *Fors*, letter 79, July 1877. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIX, 154.

44 From 'Slight recollections of three great men', *Temple Bar*, August 1895, 515. Quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXIV, 664.

45 Testimony before the Select Committee on Public Institutions, 20 March 1860, quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 474.

46 Preface to *The laws of Fésole*, 1877, quoted in *Works of John Ruskin*, XV, 344.

dispute. One authority asserts that his 'influence on official policy and on the work done in Government schools was negligible',[47] while another suggests that by the 1890s 'South Kensington's stranglehold was lessened, and, in this sense, Ruskin's criticism had done its work'.[48] Whatever the true case may be,[49] there is no doubt that the practical (rather than theoretical) effects of South Kensington far outstripped those of Ruskin. By 1884 (as we are told in one survey of art education) South Kensington was 'a vast organisation consisting of 177 distinct Schools of Art, in which … nearly 34,000 students are under systematic instruction', together with many spin-off art classes.[50] Not only that. South Kensington's system of schools-plus-museums had been widely admired abroad, and by 1900 there were about 50 similar institutions in Europe, directly inspired by South Kensington.[51]

The obvious conclusion is that Ruskin had higher ideals and a deeper intellect than Cole, but Cole – and South Kensington – achieved greater practical effects.

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47 Stuart Macdonald, *History and philosophy of art education*, London: University of London Press, 1970, 268.

48 Arthur D. Efland, *A history of art education: intellectual and social currents in teaching the visual arts*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1990, 140.

49 For a more recent view see Ray Haslam, "'According to the requirements of his scholars": Ruskin, drawing and art education' in Robert Hewison (ed.), *Ruskin's artists: studies in the Victorian visual economy*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 147-65.

50 John Sparkes, *International Health Exhibition, London 1884. Schools of art: their origin, history, work, and influence*, London: William Clowes, 1884, 92.

51 Burton, *Vision and accident*, chapter 7, 'South Kensington conquers the world'. Krzysztof Pomian, 'The South Kensington Museum: a turning point', in Julius Bryant, ed., *Art and design for all: The Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publishing, 2011, 41-45.