

AMERICAN ART STUDENTS RESPOND TO JOHN RUSKIN AND MARCUS WAITHE: A REPORT

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NOTE: Companion Jane McKinne-Mayer is an art historian in the faculty of the Visual Studies Program at California College of the Arts (Oakland and San Francisco). Some quotations have been lightly edited for correctness and clarity.

For the last ten years at California College of the Arts (known as California College of Arts and Crafts until 2004) I have taught an annual seminar, ‘The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and the United States’. The course is open to third- and fourth-year students and invites enrollment from all divisions in the college—Humanities and Sciences, Design, Fine Arts, and Architecture. As we study many international expressions of Arts and Crafts, I encourage my students to think about Ruskinian and Arts and Crafts values that may still be present in their own areas of study and practice, and to share their reflections and responses in both class discussion and written form.

This year I added to my syllabus Companion Marcus Waithe’s fine Ruskin Lecture of 2015, *Ruskin and Craftsmanship*, published by the Guild. My request to reproduce the publication for educational use was met with enthusiastic permission and an invitation to share my students’ responses in *The Companion*.

The first reading assignment of the semester has always been Ruskin’s ‘The Nature of Gothic’, but this year I paired it with Dr Waithe’s talk, in order to give a contemporary perspective on Ruskin’s notions. In class, students summarised the main points of the readings and had a lively discussion that clearly expressed their appreciation of the two thinkers’ ideas. To ensure that each student (not just the talkative ones) engaged seriously with the reading, a follow-up assignment asked them to write a thoughtful two-page response about their own experiences as students of the arts, articulating what speaks to them and why. I was particularly gratified this year to find that, across the board, regardless of their diverse fields of study, students could relate to issues brought up by these two authors.

Here are some of the highlights from those papers, organised by topic. Students are identified by their major programs of study.

On imperfection

Animation major:

‘Ruskin greatly favored imperfection, thus adoring Gothic over Greek craftsmanship ... I do agree there is beauty in imperfection and the belief is still alive today in the art field, like the sayings “happy accident” or “turn that mistake into something great”. Making a mistake is unavoidable so it is impossible to dodge Ruskin even in modern life. However, Ruskin moves on to critique stern teachings and turning [the] artist into a machine who knows nothing but what they are taught even if they do it perfectly. And by deviating from teachings, the artist makes a

Ruskin and Craftsmanship



Marcus Waithe

The Guild of St George

handful of errors but he is made a man—he is humanized again. I have experienced this in illustration [class] recently when another student asked our instructor why he does not go over planning out successful rough sketches beforehand but only after we’ve done them. He told us it was because he wanted us to draw blindly and trust our own judgment before he steps in to give us extra help. So in Ruskin’s defense, yes, this is common in the art field and I agree with his statement. ... If there is anything that will continue to stick with me, it is Ruskin’s main belief and Waithe’s ending sentence about using our weaknesses and imperfections to bolster our strengths. At a certain point I will no longer have a teacher to rely on to tell me what to do and will have to trust my own judgment, but to do

that with confidence, I must fail a handful of times.’

Graphic Design major:

‘To Ruskin it is more about the process and the effort of creating something than to aim for a perfected outcome. He also criticizes Renaissance artisans for creating work to become famous. These issues Ruskin is addressing relate to some of the issues graphic designers discuss. Some graphic designers follow a mold of what is considered desirable in the market. Some of these designers are paid large wages but are constrained by the people they work for. Other designers seek creative freedom to focus on projects that they would want to put 100% into; however, some are not always compensated very well for their work. I feel it relates to the idea that if workers have more freedom to create in any environment, their happiness will increase and thus their work will improve.’

On the machine

Glass major:

‘... I find Ruskin’s viewpoints to be a confirmation of the efforts I have been making in my own practice. I believe that no good art comes without revealing a level of craft and that the subject of a piece of art depends on the construct of the object. The two go hand in hand. In an era where mechanization has leveled the playing field, I lean towards Ruskin’s more “old school” belief that machines cause the soul to become mechanical. This contrasts [with] Waithe’s more contemporary opinion that there is a craftsmanship of operating a machine, and the craftsmanship of the building of a machine. While I agree to Waithe’s points that Ruskin disregards certain machinery that in fact helped the craftsmanship of specific trades like the loom or the potter’s wheel, the amount of technology that is now used for design and craft-based activities has caused anyone savvy enough to learn how to operate a machine to become a craftsperson. This leveling of the playing field due to the mechanical perfection of the machine denies the individual skill of the hand to develop and distinguish itself from other practitioners of the same craft.

... When [Ruskin] claims that machinery causes the maker’s soul to become mechanical, Waithe argues that many crafts

have benefited from the use of machines and points out the potter's wheel and weaver's loom as examples. I personally depart from Ruskin and agree with Waithe on this point ... It is undeniable that some technology is essential in evolving a craft to a higher level; however, the reliance on certain machines has caused a slippage in the skill of the hand. I see this in the field of design where 3D modeling and CNC/laser cutting type machines have allowed designers with no understanding of actual making to create complex objects with little to no real material sensitivity. ...'

Animation major:

'While Ruskin was all about idealizing and romanticizing the crafts, Waithe was a little more level-headed when it came to critiquing Ruskin. He acknowledged Ruskin had great influence but also knew Ruskin was still developing his ideas as he wrote about them, and also considered that we live in different times Waithe admits that Ruskin was wrong about machinery ... I agree with Waithe that machinery has done more good than harm to an artist's skill set, but I also agree with the both of them that steam is a problem as well.'

Photography major

'I, being a photographer who works with both film and digital formats, agree with what Waithe is stating. While a digital camera is technically a machine and lacks certain qualities that make film magical, it still has its own advantages and charms. And in a professional sense, a photographer is more likely to use a digital camera compared to film for one[']s work. Both of them have their own advantages and disadvantages to take into account.'

Film and Glass major:

[Regarding Waithe's discussion of planishing metal by hand versus machined imitations]: 'It is not enough to simply imitate the handmade. It misses the point entirely. It is in the consumer's best interest to have a work [made] completely by hand so that they can have the fulfillment [of] knowing they supported a system that celebrates true craftsmanship. ... a machine-produced object that simply mimics the handmade is a lie in the worst sense of the word.'

On fact and design

Photography major (minor in Visual Studies):

'In his section ... on Naturalism, Ruskin states that the ideal artist uses both fact and design to create a work. ... I agree that works of both fact and fiction are compelling because they often have a layer of mystery that allows the viewer to interact and have their own interpretation [of] the work. If

everyone were making work that was technically perfect, art would be boring and bland. An individual's creativity should be expected and praised regardless of technique mastery or lack thereof. Within my own work, I like to create narratives in photographs that are strange or unclear. I like when people have to wonder and work through the work, as opposed to understanding it within the moment of first seeing it. I use the technical skills I have to make these works, but I rely more on my creativity to make the photographs interesting.'

On the designer as maker

Glass major:

'Ruskin states that design should not be separated from the act of making, ... "the architect should work in the mason's yard with his men," meaning there needs to be a hands-on relationship between the concepts of what is being made and the actual construction of that idea. ... in my own practice I seek to reveal a higher level of craft that serves to illuminate any ideas I am also looking to convey.'

Film and Glass major:

[Regarding Ruskin's comparison of the repetitive production of glass beads versus the invention of glass cups and vessels]: 'In working glass myself I completely understand where he is coming from. ... Even today there is the conversation amongst glass blowers between the craftsperson and artist being two different things. There are whole shops completely devoted to producing works drawn by the "artist" and produced by the "craftsmen." Who is who in this? Truth be told, the person doing the designing *and* producing is held on a higher pedestal than those doing one or the other. ... it is in the craftsman's best interest to have created the work in its entirety. The fulfillment that person gains is ... from the heart inevitably.'

Graphic Design major:

'Waithe points out that Ruskin felt that craftsmen should be both designer and maker, otherwise it becomes a form of slavery for the makers. Something I have noticed in the graphic design world today is also this separation of designer and maker, especially in web design. A graphic designer's role is just to design what a website would look like or the concept of its functionality but the actual building of the website is coded by a programmer. Graphic designers have not learned the coding languages to actually create these sites so their vision can be quite limited on the possibilities of web design. Whereas the programmer's only job is to code,

having no creative involvement in the project. Looking from an Arts and Crafts perspective and using some of the ideas Waithe had mentioned, the gap between web designer and programmer should be filled in order for quality work to be made and to make web design more enjoyable and [of a] better quality.'

Graphic Design major:

'In *Ruskin and Craftsmanship*, Marcus Waithe claims that changes can be embraced when there is a mistake in a design[. He writes about] "a design that can be altered because the head remains engaged with the hand" (p. 25). This is an interesting idea which I find myself questioning often. In design practices (in comparison to fine arts) there are a lot of things that are very clearly right or wrong. This is especially true in typography. I can imagine that it would be even more so in architecture. In my experience, instructors only approve of straying from the rules when it is very obviously intentional, and there is reason to do so. This follows Ruskin's thought process of giving reason to every decision, however it almost seems as though it works backwards from his ideal situation. Rather than giving freedom from the get-go, we begin with rules and stray from them only under certain circumstances, usually becoming more free in the work after establishing rigid structure.'

Illustration major (minor in Visual Studies):

'Looking at Ruskin through a more contemporary lens with Waithe really frames how important the integrity of labor and craftsmanship was to Ruskin. He celebrated the Goths' and Saxons' "impulse to fabricate", often citing their ability to be flexible with their materials and environment through their design. However, the commercialization of goods removes the human aspect that makes craft and design enjoyable (both to produce and use). Waithe comments on Ruskin's argument for architects to "work in the mason's yard with his men", concluding that "manual labor is no degradation when it is governed by intellect" (p. 12). ... To me this further reinforces that work should involve more than just the hands, that it requires one's passion and thought. If more people could be truly invested in their work, the value of goods would be enough to maintain a strong economy. While this is a nostalgic, romanticized view of craftsmanship, there is merit to believing in honest invention and creation. As an art student, I greatly understand Ruskin's desire for society to become less apathetic about the materials and aesthetics of everyday life. A combination of discipline and forgiveness would benefit modern modes of design, as well as moral and political aspects of society.'