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JOHN RUSKIN
THE CONSERVATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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LECTURE
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JOHN RUSKIN, SAN MICHELE CHURCH IN LUCCA (1845)
DETAIL OF THE FACADE

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Abstract

The true meaning of the word restoration is not always understood by the public or by those who have the care of public monuments,. It means that the total destruction that a building can suffer is related to: a destruction out of which no remnant can be gathered; a destruction accompanied by a false description of the thing destroyed.

John Ruskin (1819 – 1900), art writers of the 19th century, describes this concept in the book *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. This concept of *restoration* will be discussed in the seminar and will be compared with other literary theories. This approach to cultural heritage was and continues to be highly influential, informing the difference between the terms *restoration* and *conservation*.

John Ruskin was born in London on 8 February 1819. His father was a wine importer. As only child of his father, John Ruskin studied at the King's College in London and later he was admitted to the Christ Church, Oxford University to continue his studies. In Oxford he meets William Turner and Lewis Carroll. Turner was a Romantic painter and has kicked off the birth of Impressionism in England.

For John the meeting in Oxford with Turner was important. His interests were the literature, the art and the architecture and the nearness to the Turner's school was crucial for the future development of his studies.

John Ruskin in 1836 wrote for an architecture magazine where he published an article *The Poetry of Architecture*.

With his family in 1840 John Ruskin traveled around the Europe and, in particular, he went in France and in Italy. In Italy he visited Milan, Rome, Venice and went to Paestum, a very important archaeological area for his Greek temples. The results of this first trip to Italy were collected in a diary later published. During this trip Ruskin appreciated the nature and the landscape, typical themes of the Turner paintings. In his writings the influence of the English Romantic culture is clear.



Venice, Contarini Palace, by John Ruskin, 1841

After returning to England he worked at the first volume of the *Modern Painters* published in 1843. The complete work is composed of 4 volumes and the last book was published in 1860.

In the second volume Ruskin wrote about some Italian idealist painters and especially about Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Benozzo Gozzoli. In these 4 volumes analyzes the critical rediscovery of the Medieval Gothic painting.

His interest in painting is manifested also through his paintings, especially watercolors realized in the second trip to Italy. In fact in 1845 he went back again to Italy. In particular he lived in Tuscany when he learned the Italian fine arts and especially he knew the Romanesque style. This style was different from the Gothic style of Northern Europe: in Italy the Romanesque style was influenced by local architectural cultures. For this reason it is a *regional style* with different characteristics among Milan, Florence and Venice.



(left) Lucca, *The historic center*, by John Ruskin 1845

(right) Lucca, *The facade of San Michele, detail*, by John Ruskin 1846

To understand this difference we observe two buildings of the Romanesque style in Florence and in Venice.

The Romanesque architecture in Florence is characterized by the recovery of elements of the classic Roman. An important example is the Baptistery, near Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral where we observe rounded arches, columns, modularities. Another

similar significant example is the Cathedral of Pisa and the church of Saint Michel in Lucca. Ruskin visited and drew these architectures.

Differently the Romanesque architecture in Venice is characterized by the Eastern influence of the Arabic architecture. The most significant example is San Marco cathedral where the presence of domes and mosaics is typical.



(left) Florence, Baptistery of *San Giovanni* (2011); (right) Venice, San Marco Cathedral (2012)

Another important aspect is also the use of materials. In Florence prevails the white and green marble, material of the site. In Venice typical are the polychrome marbles, materials also reused by other ancient architectures. In fact in this second trip in Italy Ruskin knew and wrote on the architecture and reflected on the social significance.

Returned to England in 1849 he published *The seven lamps of architecture*, a very important book to analyze the significance of the architectural conservation. On this theme Ruskin elaborates a theory that is interesting to analyze. Before to analyze this book we consider some cultural references.

At the same time in France the architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, father of the stylistic restoration, worked. Since 1830, a popular sentiment for the restoration of medieval buildings is developed in France. Viollet-le-Duc, after returning in 1835 from his studies in Italy, was commissioned by Prosper Mérimée to restore the Romanesque abbey of Vézelay. It was the first work of restoration but only after that he develops the method of *stylistic restoration* designed to recover the medieval style. An important example of this method is the restoration of the Castles Caracassone and Pierrefonds. Basic intervention theories of *historic preservation* are framed in the dualism of the retention of the status quo versus a *restoration* that creates something that never actually existed in the past. Viollet-le-Duc in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle* (1854–1868) wrote that restoration is a means to reestablish a building to a finished state, which may never have actually existed at any given time.

In England the topic of restoration is introduced by the schools of archeology and in particular by the archaeologist William Greenwell (1820–1918) but at the end of the

eighteenth century the Gothic Revival was already the principal typical style in architecture. Many architects have designed buildings in the Gothic style. In particular Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812 –1852) was an English architect, designer, artist and critic, remembered for his pioneering role in the Gothic Revival style; his work culminated in the interior design of the Palace of Westminster. Pugin designed many churches in England and some others in Ireland and Australia.

In 1836 Pugin published *Contrasts*, a polemical book which argued for the revival of the medieval Gothic style and also a return to the faith and the social structures of the Middle Ages. Pugin wrote:

I am willing, however, to allow that there has been a vast improvement of late years in the partial restorations which have been effected in certain cathedral and other churches, as regards the accuracy of moulding and detail. The mechanical part of Gothic architecture is pretty well understood, but it is the principles which influenced ancient compositions and the soul which appears in all the former works, which is so lamentably deficient; nor, as I have before stated, can they be regained but by a restoration of the ancient feelings and sentiments.

The theories of Pugin continue with the architect George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878) in the debate between anti-restorationists and conservators. In this cultural context John Ruskin has an important role.

The type of restoration employed by Viollet-le-Duc was decried by John Ruskin in the *The seven lamps of architecture*. He wrote that the restoration is the worst of the destruction, accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed.

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.

Ruskin did not suggest a philosophy and a theory of aesthetics but he proposed a feeling of the aesthetic experience and of the moral experience, between the society and the art. The book *The seven lamps of architecture* consists of seven parts:

The lamps of sacrifice.

The lamps of truth.

The lamps of power.

The lamps of beauty.
The lamps of life.
The lamps of memory.
The lamps of obedience.



Edition of 1913. *The Seven Lamps Of Architecture* by John Ruskin

In the introduction Ruskin wrote that the architect must keep the history of the buildings as a precious heritage. He introduces the concept of integrated conservation where it is important to preserve the character and the style of the architecture and the status conservation. This concept is very important also for the preservation of the landscape.

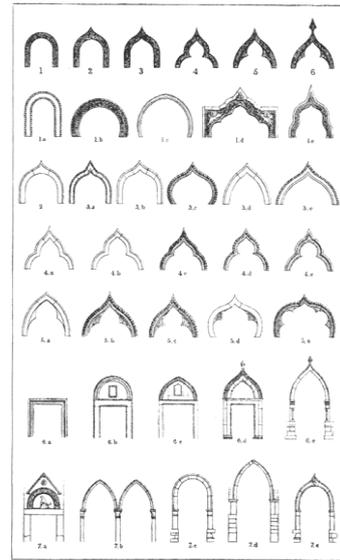
He analyzes the concept of the beauty and introduces the concept of *picturesque*, that is the ability to imitate the nature. This concept will be very important for the architectural conservation. He wrote that to preserve does not mean to interrupt the life cycle of the building but to program the maintenance work. He thinks that the restoration employed by Viollet-le-Duc is deception, is a false description of the architecture. For Ruskin the age of a construction is a crucially significant aspect in its preservation.

For Ruskin we must preserve the architecture to delay as much as possible the moment of the end. For this reason it is important the law of maintenance that prolongs the life of the building until its destruction. John Ruskin was the founder of the *romantic restoration*. Ruskin's belief, in preservation of ancient buildings, had a significant influence on later thinking about the distinction between *conservation* and *restoration*.

Ruskin lives a period of intense cultural activity from 1848 to 1858. In 1853 he published *The Stone of Venice*, a very important book for the analysis of the Gothic culture in Italy. In this book Ruskin analyzes the main characters of the Gothic architecture and discusses the architecture of Venice's Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance periods, and provides a general history of the city as well.

John Ruskin released each of the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* over two-years: from 1851 to 1853. The first volume, *The Foundations*, is an architectural treatise that specifies the rules of the architecture. For this reason it has been compared to Alberti's

De Re Aedificatoria of 1452 because both approach the architecture as a combination of construction and decoration. With the exception of the first chapter, *The Quarry*, this volume marginally deals with the actual city of Venice, but rather continues the Ruskin's work *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* by analyzing specific architectural details and concluding whether or not they are in accordance with the principles laid out in his previous work. In this volume, Ruskin describes the development of the Byzantine architecture, followed by the shift to the Gothic style and its subsequent development, focusing on the stylistic changes that took place in arches and other architectural elements as demonstrated on Venetian buildings.

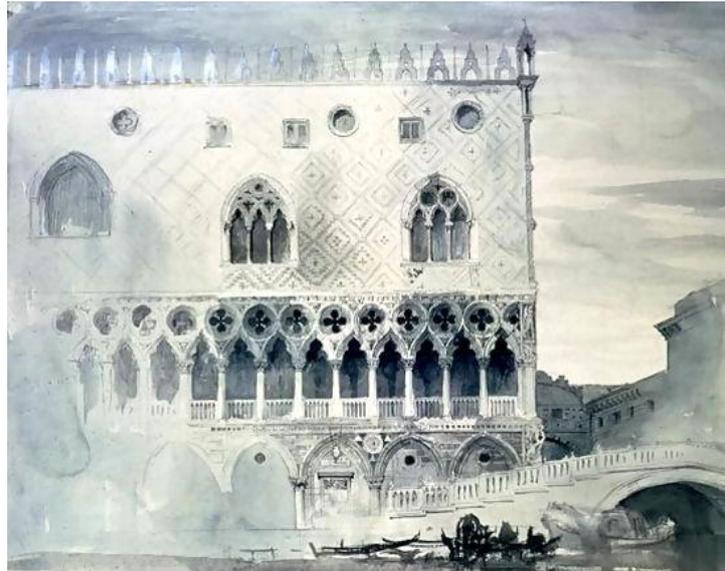


The Stones of Venice aroused considerable interest in the Victorian Britain and beyond. The chapter *The Nature of Gothic* (from volume 2) was admired by William Morris, who published it in a separate edition which is itself an example of Gothic revival. The book inspired also Marcel Proust (1871-1922), the narrator of the *À la recherche du temps perdu*, who visited Venice, with his mother, in a state of enthusiasm for Ruskin.

In the chapter *The Nature of Gothic* Ruskin analyzes numerous buildings that exemplify each of the three major styles in Venice: Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance. The discussion of the Ducal Palace is particularly interesting because it was built over several centuries and incorporates elements of each of the three styles. Ruskin uses the Ducal Palace not only as an example of each of the styles he had discussed, but also as an allegory to the history of the city itself.

The Ducal Palace in Venice, *the central building of the world*, was rebuilt by a variety of architects during each of the three periods that Ruskin discusses. Unfortunately, the Byzantine palace was almost entirely destroyed and built over when the Gothic palace was constructed. While some of the Gothic palace was built over, much of it now exists in combination with the Renaissance palace.

The original Ducal Palace is believed to have been built in the early ninth century, when the Venetian Republic was becoming a world power. For this reason, Ruskin considers the modern Ducal Palace to be one of the last remnants of the city's former glory. The structure was heavily damaged by fire on two different occasions, and little is written about its original state, making it difficult to ascertain exactly how the building looked. However, Ruskin says that the building was richly decorated with gold, sculpture, and marble, and possessed many features similar to those seen in other great Byzantine structures around the city, such as the Fondaco dei Turchi, built in the early thirteenth century by Giacomo Palmieri.



Venice, Exterior of Ducal Palace by John Ruskin

In 1858 Ruskin returned to Italy with his family and also this new trip will be important for future contributions, in particular on the conservation of architecture.

In these years Ruskin begins comparative analysis between the aesthetics and the *capitalism*. Ruskin analyzes the impact of the capitalism of Karl Marx and of Friedrich Engels and condemns the savage capitalism of the Victorian Era in England. Ruskin denounces the ravages of the capitalism on society and promotes an utopian socialism for a social justice and a socialization of the economic resources.

In the chapter *The Nature of Gothic* Ruskin denounces the degradation of human work similar to a device in a machine and prefers the Gothic production of the architecture and of the art for the creative freedom of the artisan.

Ruskin denounces the separation between mental and manual work and prefers the revival of the art and crafts. He works for the defense of human rights and in 1862 published an important book, *Unto this Last*. Forty years later, this book was much appreciated by Gandhi in India.

In 1870 Ruskin established a charity Guild of St George and supported it with his art collection valued millions. During this period, in 1869, Ruskin was appointed as first Professor of Fine Arts at the Working Men's College in London.

His social interests and the preservation of the architecture are an interesting response in the collaboration with William Morris.

Ruskin was, with William Morris, one of the founding fathers of the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (S.P.A.B.). In 1878 Morris wrote the famous *Manifesto* that extends protection to *all times and styles* and remains until now the philosophical basis for the Society's work.

The Society complains the destructive restoration of the Victorian Era and promotes new methods for the architectural conservation. It is important to repair and not to restore the buildings. It is important to know the artistic, picturesque, historical and antique values and to preserve these values. For the first time Morris and Ruskin introduce and analyze the concept of value of the architecture. Shortly after, this concept was developed in the theories of Alois Riegl in the *The modern cult of monuments*, 1903 (original title, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*).

In fact at the end of the XIX century a fundamental rethinking of the conservation principles of the architecture has been proposed by the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*. In accordance with the rigorous discipline of the restoration, Morris and Ruskin focus their interest on ethical, political, sociological, moral and cultural reasons giving more emphasis on the stability of the values of the work and not on the purely aesthetic subjective assessment. The principal purpose is the preservation of the existing values of monuments. Today the S.P.A.B. still operates according to these principles.

In the last years of life Ruskin continues to write reviews and articles and analyzes the cultural reason of the Aesthetic Movement and of the Impressionism, but he was estranged from the world modern art. He begins to write on other issues and continues his support to humanitarian movements, such as Home Arts and Industries Association. The 20 of January 1900 he died in Brantwood where today there is the Ruskin Museum.

The critical fortune of John Ruskin in Japan

Yuko Kikuchi, Japanese, professor at University of London, Department of Media and Cultural Studies in 2004 published an important research on Yanagi Sōetsu and the Mingei Theory. The research analyzes an important cultural period in Japan after the Meiji Restoration.

In 1920 Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961) is the founder of the *Mingei Movement* in Japan: art of the people. The Japanese movement adopts the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris in a very crucial period for the Japanese culture. The country was strongly influenced by Westernization and the industrialization dominated the local art and crafts.

In Japan John Ruskin was introduced only in 1888 in a popular magazine *Kokumin no Tomo* (Friends of the Nation) by Tokutomi Sohō, an important journalist and writer. In 1896 Shimazaki Tōson translates part of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. In 1899 for the first time Murai Tomoyoshi introduces the socialist theory of Ruskin and Morris in the magazine *Shakai Shigi* (Socialism).

In 1905, under the influence of Ruskin's aesthetics of nature, Kojima Usui founds the Japan Alpine Club. In 1900 Iwamura Tōru published the first biography in Japanese of John Ruskin in *Bijitsu Hyōron* (Art Criticism). Differently William Morris was first introduced in Japan in 1891 by Shibue Tamotsu in *Eikoku Bungakushi* (History of England Literature).

The Ruskin's theories have received interesting adherents especially after 1920 with the first important publications on the socialism and on the decline of civilization and the degradation of the society.

The ideas of *the art of the people* by Ruskin and Morris are coloured by medievalism and romantic primitivism. Their ideas on the social reformation and the moral questions have interested the intellectual Japanese class but there are important differences between the Japanese context, Yanagi Sōetsu, Ruskin and Morris.

Ruskin wrote about cultural values and morality reflecting on art. He idealized medieval society and Gothic architecture and art also of the unknown craftsmen. Differently in Yanagi Sōetsu the values are important but the creativity is not recognised to most of the unknown craftsmen and this kills the future of art.

Another important difference is that the Ruskin's theories analyze the issue of *conservation*, issue that does not analyze the Japanese culture in this specific context of the *Mingei Movement*.

In Japan important cultural developments on the architectural conservation have allowed to analyze the concept of *conservation* and the difference between *shūrisuru* (to repair), *hozonsuru* (to preserve) and *shūfukusuru* (to restore).

To understand of these conceptual differences we still analyze Ruskin.

In *The seven lamps for architecture* Ruskin introduces an important comparison between *conservation* and *restoration*, but what is conservation?

Conservation is a way of planning designed to conserve historic buildings, areas and monuments in an effort to connect the historical background of a place to its population and primarily its culture. The four main styles of conservation of historic buildings are: restoration, preservation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

a. Restoration

Restoration of historic building involves reconstructing parts of the building that have fallen into decay as imitations of the highest possible quality of the original building. This form depicts a building at one stage in time and removes any evidence of any other period in which the building existed.

b. Preservation

Preservation is the mean of keeping an historic building as close as possible to its original state by means of continued repair and maintenance. This focuses on the stabilization and repair of the existing materials in the building and the retention of a building's state as it has evolved over time.

c. Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is related to the need to alter or extent an historic building to meet modern demands while still keeping the historical character of the building

d. Reconstruction

Reconstruction re-creates vanished building or part of building by interpretive means.

But what is the difference between *conservation* and *restoration*?

There is much confusion about the use of the terms conservation and restoration. Literally, *restoration* means to return something to its original condition by means of rebuilding, repairing, repainting, etc. The definition of *conservation*, on the other hand, literally means preservation of the current state, adding nothing that would change that state.

In terms of art conservation, that would mean stabilizing the art, preserving the integrity of it, making sure that its true aesthetic is revealed without changing the artist's intent, or losing valuable historical information, especially in the case of archaeological material where crusts and corrosion are often an indicator of authenticity.

Today these differences are important in the culture of architectural conservation, especially to analyze the different cultural approaches in the country of the world.

It is important to analyze this topic also in Japan where the issue on the *restoration* is open and has many points of reflection.

In the last few years in Colombia, and now in Japan, this cultural issue has been my main research topic.

Thank you very much for your attention

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