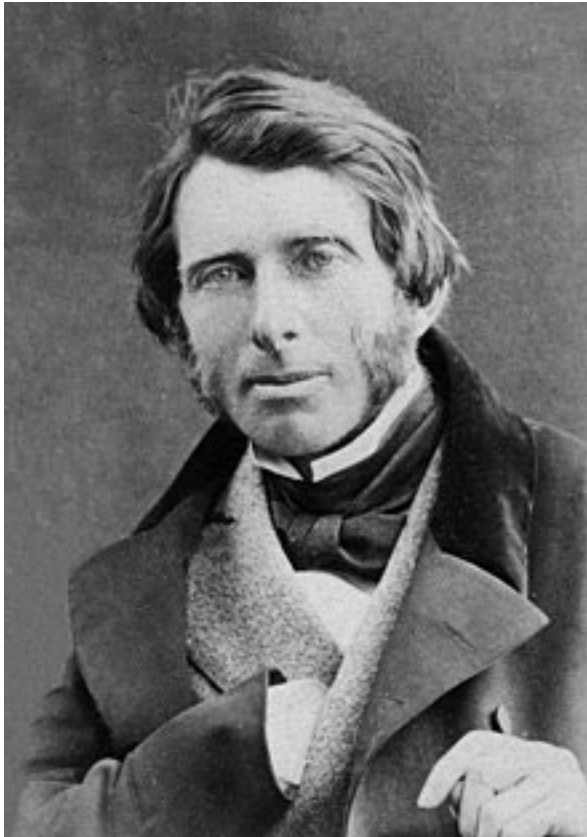


LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
Monday March 24, 2025
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I stumbled into John Ruskin.

Trying to understand what makes a Gothic Cathedral "gothic" it was if the crowd of scholars and art historians said, "well, that would be a question for Mr. Ruskin."



John Ruskin was a poet, a writer, a critic, an artist, a philosopher, a metaphysical theorist (also known as a theologian), a teacher, an advocate, a philanthropist, a cataloguer, and perhaps most important a traveler. He was born in 1819 and died in 1900. Marcel Proust wrote a book on how to read John Ruskin—the greatest praise one could ever achieve.

He was British, a student and later a lecturer at Oxford, an almost aristocrat, and someone who hated the invention of the locomotive and the use of steel in buildings, especially neo-Gothic churches. His books include a five-volume aesthetic case for modern painting, by which he meant painters of the early and mid-19th century primarily from England and specifically William Turner. His theory of art spawned a movement in painting, "the pre-Raphaelites." His

concerns and worries concerning the craftsman and craft should be required reading for anyone who seeks the title, "master."

To my knowledge John Ruskin never weighed in directly on the rise of statuary art in memorials and monuments in the United States. He did have very precise and strongly held beliefs about mortuary statues or funeral art in Europe. And he did travel to the United States twice in his life, both before and after the Civil War. But I am unaware of any direct influence on the artists who shaped the monuments of America in the 19th or 20th century. Yet, if you want to understand what a monument can do or better still should do, well, that is a question for Mr. Ruskin.

In the next two vignettes of our study I will try to offer his theories of architecture, specifically his seven lamps of architecture. Yet, here I would like to show a change, a transition he noted and valued in the art of William Turner as an example of how a monument can satisfy a debt of memory to lesser and greater degrees. A good portion of Ruskin's life was spent articulating the shift in beauty offered by Turner. As I tried to show in the contrast of the Sherman/Victory monument to the Daniel Webster statue, there are pieces of memorial art, constructs of monumental honor, places made to satisfy the need for penance that are profoundly effective and others that are less so. In the paintings of Turner, Ruskin was able to show this difference in the evolution of one artist. Here are five good examples of the before and after of Turner.







Each of these is seeking to capture the relationship between water and sky and shore or ship. Turner starts with a clear and representational perspective, shifts to what might be called early impressionism and then ends with almost a nearly surreal depiction. This shift was over the course of his life. It came over time.

Although the perspective changes dramatically through the course of Turner's works, one thing binds them all together and that is the persistent relationship of truth and goodness and beauty. There is something more than just painting or an artistic rendering. Turner seems to be chasing how to capture what is true and good and beautiful in art, while at the same time he seems to suggest more and more how tenuous our hold, how fleeting and undetermined is our gaze. We can stand back and view the first, hold it clearly in our view. But if we are going to find out what is before us in the last, we need to enter in.

The five paintings above, which are just the smallest fraction of what Turner painted and sketched, represent an arc, an evolution as it were. And, depending upon what you value, they also represent a scale of value. If what you hope to achieve in your building, your painting, your essay, poem or photograph (not to mention song, sculpture, or dance), if what you hope to achieve is a clear depiction where the viewer is allowed to see your work as something beyond them, something other, then your value is seen clearly in Turner's early painting. Yet, if the hope of your art is to draw the viewer into the experience, the mystery, the undefined and elusiveness of life, then your value is in the last paintings of Turner.

Where Ruskin becomes so important to a consideration of monumental art in America after 1850 is this: the art needs to be seen in light of this arc. The monuments we created and will create should be seen in this scale of value. Not in the sense that pictographic or realistic representation is good and surrealistic images are bad or vice-a-versa. The scale, the arc, the value is in the clarity of choice, the clear conversation of the artist, art, and patron.

Saint-Gaudens "Sherman/Victory" statue is a much more profound piece of art than the Daniel Webster statue. The first has so much more to offer in terms of aesthetic and beauty and mastery. The second is rather perfunctory and less than inspiring. It was not just location that

made one a grand entrance to Central Park and the other a discarded mistake no one would miss if it were gone. Yet, where John Ruskin becomes very helpful is when he pushes us to consider more than aesthetic qualities and ask about metaphysical ones. Does this statue satisfy the need to remember? Is it true? Is this statue worthy of the sacrifice, the immense cost which needs to be justified?

What Ruskin could not have anticipated in his works, I believe, is how his theory of art and his metaphysical understanding of architecture provide us with the lens to see how much or how little the memorial and monuments and museums actually satisfy a debt of honor or conjure the memory of those who suffered for us and thus keep them from oblivion. And greater still, how does each piece of art "cure" the wounds of our history and life? Museums are "curated" for us. Ruskin gives us the ability to see if the cure is powerful or unworthy of sacrifice.