

Spring, 2000



THE year 2000 marks the centenary of the death of John Ruskin, artist, author and critic. Ruskin was one of the most influential figures in England in the second half of the 19th century and has special associations with Oxford: he was an undergraduate at Christ Church in the 1830s and in 1869 was elected the first Slade Professor of Fine Arts, later establishing the drawing school that now bears his name.

An extensive programme of events has been organized to celebrate the Ruskin centenary, led by an exhibition currently underway at 'Tate Britain' in London. Although Ruskin is remembered today more for his legacy to the arts than to the sciences, it should come as no surprise to those who are aware of the diversity of the Museum's collections to find that Ruskin is represented by several notable items.

The most unusual item associated with Ruskin in the Museum is a daguerreotype, which forms part of the photographic collections. The daguerreotype process, invented in France by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, was, in tandem with Fox Talbot's photogenic drawing process, the earliest viable photographic method, introduced in 1839. The Museum has a number of significant early examples, as well as a large collection of the more common and later portrait daguerreotypes. Unlike Fox Talbot's paper process, daguerreotype images are formed on the surface of a silver-coated copper plate, polished to a mirror finish. Because of their highly reflective qualities, they are always difficult to view, but they are nevertheless renowned for the level and sharpness of detail they are able to record, as well as their great tonal subtlety.

The Museum's Ruskin daguerreotype is an architectural study. It came to the Museum in 1961 through the bequest of James Henry Hall Minn, a local photographer of some note who undertook photographic work for R. T. Gunther and made photographic donations to the Museum throughout his life. The daguerreotype arrived in a crude glass mount made by Minn rather than a velvet-lined case more typical of daguerreotypes, although it shows evidence of having been previously mounted in a rectangular frame with rounded corners. It was on the crude glass frame that the provenance was recorded by Minn: 'This was taken by John Ruskin during an Italian tour. / These Daguerrotypes were left to his butler valet + were given to me by his daughter's husband.'

Ruskin is known to have used daguerreotypes extensively in the preparation of his famous works on architecture, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*. Excluding the Museum's example (previously unknown to Ruskin scholars) 130 Ruskin daguerreotypes survive: five at the Ruskin Museum at Brantwood, Ruskin's Cumbrian home; the remainder at the Ruskin Library in Lancaster. The Ruskin Library also holds a manuscript catalogue of Ruskin's daguerreotypes when they were still in his possession. This lists some 233 in total, the majority of which are of architectural subjects in Italy.

Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* was published in three volumes in 1851 and 1853. It is an encyclopaedic account of Venetian architecture, containing an exhaustive taxonomy of forms, extensive descriptions and numerous illustrations, as well as reflections on architecture's social and moral implications. It is delivered throughout in a dazzling and celebrated prose style and had an enormous influence on the subsequent development of Gothic Revival architecture in the second half of the 19th century.

The subject of the Museum's daguerreotype is a group of windows in the façade of a Venetian house, readily identifiable from modern photographs of Venice as the *Casa degli Zane* in the *Campo Santa Maria Mater Domini*, a house now only a little altered by restoration, in a small square centrally located just to the west of the Grand Canal.

The façade of the *Casa degli Zane* would have been of interest to Ruskin for two main reasons. Firstly, the window arches are good examples of what Ruskin termed the 'second order' of Venetian window arches (of a total of six orders). Ruskin believed that second order arches dated from the 13th to early 14th century and were transitional in type, falling between the earlier Byzantine style and the pure Gothic of the 14th and 15th centuries.

The second reason for Ruskin's interest in the façade would have been the stone carvings, in the form of crosses and small roundels, that can be seen just above the apex of the arches, within the brickwork of the wall. Such carvings are ubiquitous in Venice and were thought by Ruskin to be salvaged remnants from earlier Byzantine palaces since destroyed, inserted within the brick walls by later builders. The roundel carvings generally depict animals of devotional significance, such as lambs, doves and peacocks (symbols of the Resurrection). The crosses are usually decorated with foliage. Rarer examples, such as the first cross on the left in the façade of the *Casa degli Zane*, also depict a hand raised in benediction and placed between symbols of the sun and the moon.

Ruskin used daguerreotypes to record the buildings he visited, sometimes later having engravings made from them. As a means of record he regarded them as more valuable than any sketch. He wrote to his father from Venice on 7th October, 1845, that: 'Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself; every chip of stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about proportions.'

In the event, Ruskin seems to have chosen not to use the façade of the *Casa degli Zane* for the basis of any illustrations in his published works. However, in the text of *The Stones of Venice* he makes a number of explicit references to this particular façade. In the discursive 'Venetian Index' to volume three, for example, he describes the *Campo Santa Maria Mater Domini* as 'A most interesting little piazza, surrounded by early Gothic houses, once of singular beauty', and notes that 'in the houses at the side is a group of second-order windows with their intermediate crosses, all complete, and well worth careful examination.' In volume two he mentions the carvings specifically. 'The best examples of the cross set above the windows', he writes, 'are found in houses of the transitional period: one in the Campo Sta M. Formosa; another, in which a cross is placed between every window, is still well preserved in the Campo Sta Maria Mater Domini'.

Although the Museum's Ruskin daguerreotype is readily identifiable, the issue of exactly when it was taken and by whom is a little more complicated. Ruskin visited Venice a number of times subsequent to the invention of the daguerreotype and before the completion of *The Stones of Venice*: in 1840, 1845, 1846, 1849, and 1851 to 1852. It was during 1845 that he first procured daguerreotypes. In his autobiography he wrote that it was on this visit that 'I found a French artist producing exquisitely bright small plates, (about four inches square,) which contained, under a lens, the Grand Canal or St. Mark's Palace as if a magician had reduced the reality to be carried away into an enchanted land. The little gems of picture cost a napoleon each; but with two hundred francs I bought the Grand Canal from the Salute to the Rialto; and packed it away in thoughtless triumph.'

In another letter to his father from Venice during 1845, Ruskin again expressed his delight with the daguerreotypes and wrote that he was 'going to have some more made of pet bits.' On subsequent trips he is known to have taken his own camera and daguerreotype processing equipment with him. The task of developing the daguerreotype plates in the field fell to his man-servant John George Hobbs, and then to Hobbs's successor Frederick Crawley. It is likely that these men also operated the camera for Ruskin, making the exposures under his direction.

Ruskin must have specifically requested the shot of the *Casa degli Zane*, either from the Frenchman or one of his men-servants, since it is clearly a bespoke study not a standard tourist view. The subject - window arches - is one that Ruskin is known to have paid more attention to during and after 1849, when he began compiling 'House Books': notebooks that he kept alongside a more general diary-notebook in order to record information about specific Venetian houses. It seems then at first more likely that the Museum's daguerreotype is one that Hobbs or Crawley was asked to take, after 1845.

However, at almost 3 by 4 inches, the Museum's plate is closer in size to the four inches square that Ruskin mentions for the Frenchman's plates than it is to the 6 by 4 inches of plates known to have been taken with his own equipment on later trips. The technical quality of the plate also appears to be poorer than those made during later visits, both in terms of the acuity of the actual image and the composition: it appears to have been taken without the benefit of either a wide-angle lens or a camera capable of correcting perspective.

Luckily, any ambiguity is resolved by an entry in Ruskin's diary-notebook from his 1851-52 trip to Venice. The entry consists of a paragraph of abbreviated notes on buildings in the *Campo Santa Maria Mater Domini*. It begins with the line 'The beautiful 2nd order house daged' - 'daged' meaning 'daguerreotyped' and the '2nd order house' being the *Casa degli Zane*. Unless Ruskin deliberately re-photographed the *Casa degli Zane* due to deficiencies with an earlier attempt, it is almost certain that the daguerreotype he refers to here is the example now in the Museum.

The entry in the diary-notebook also helps to pinpoint the date of the daguerreotype. Although the specific passage is not dated, it falls mid-way between entries recorded on 17th January and 7th March, 1852, placing its creation fairly and squarely within February of the same year.

If this date is accepted the photographer of the daguerreotype and its subsequent history can also be confirmed. Minn's note states that he obtained it from the husband of the daughter of Ruskin's butler valet. Minn was an Oxford resident and amassed most of the items in his photographic collection from local sources. Hobbs emigrated to Australia after leaving Ruskin's service in around 1854, so is an unlikely candidate for the butler valet. Crawley, on the other hand, was sent to live in Oxford by Ruskin after his appointment to the Slade chair in 1869. Crawley made Oxford his home with his wife and three children and remained there after leaving Ruskin's service, taking a position in the University Galleries. He is known to have kept a large number of Ruskin's manuscripts, which, on his death, were passed to his son-in-law, a Mr Maltby.

It is more than likely that the Museum's daguerreotype also passed from Crawley to Mr Maltby, who would be the 'daughter's husband' referred to in Minn's note. However, Crawley did not accompany Ruskin to Venice before 1855. The Museum's daguerreotype must therefore have been taken by Hobbs and left to Crawley, as Minn's note suggests, either by Hobbs, or more probably, by Ruskin himself.

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