

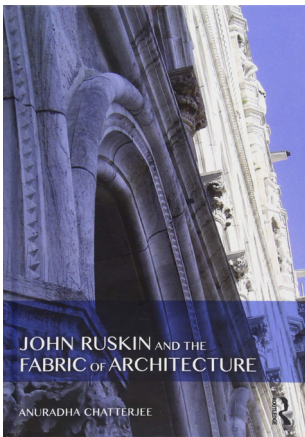
review / JOHN DIXON HUNT

Anuradha Chatterjee

John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture

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Ruskin looms huge, unwieldy, contradictory, yet happy (as he himself wrote) to be trotting round a polygon and accepting its different perspectives. His vast oeuvre (39 volumes in the Library Edition published in the first decade of the 20th century) not to mention the as yet uncollected graphic work and watercolours, is unavoidable, a lion in the path of architectural historians and theories. He is also a writer who is both an eminent Victorian and yet one who sometimes asked (in his own lifetime) to be considered outside that context. The temptation to jump on either of those explanations is acute, and I was recently reminded that Claude Monet thought Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing* was 85% "spot on" what would be hailed as Impressionism.

Anuradha Chatterjee "jumps" in both directions. She opts to focus on the fabric of architecture, its "space of surface", on the wall as "veil", and thence she treks into architecture as "female body" via Ruskin's theory of dress and the effects of an "adorned edifice". Part of that agenda seems very apt—he was extremely attentive to decorative surface, especially in Venetian buildings, and in his early essays in *The Poetry of Architecture*, he never sought to enter into any of the villas and cottages that he wrote about and relished what their exteriors, or just their details, told him. The other part seems, at least to me, occasionally a stretch, trying to dress up his Victorian gravitas and moral probity in fashionable ideas, though not (as Macbeth said) in "borrowed robes", for that discourse is immediately available today, and of course was so in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which Ruskin knew well.

The sequence of the five chapters begins with Ruskin's interest in the wall, and the analogy between the folds of a dress and the surface wall or veil of a building is offered. The second asks us to see architecture as "Dressed Female Body", which is where Carlyle is relevant, though the parallel with female as opposed to male dress is less discussed by Ruskin. A third chapter addresses Ruskin's "theory" of dress, based upon his readings of drapery in Gothic statues and Renaissance paintings. Chapter 4 extends the workings of this analogy to "reveal his imaginative textile historiography", though a reader familiar now with Ruskin's geology, would be aware that he chastised the geologist John Tyndall by demanding "stretch no analogies farther than they will hold" (Ruskin, 1906: 283). The last chapter expands to consider the "effects" of his theory of the "adorned wall" on later writers and architects.

There is much to be gained from this dense argument, especially if you accept its proffered analogies with somewhat limited force when applied to Ruskin's own concerns with women. The author's discussion of this "troubled relationship" with women takes us over what we knew and cites authorities along the way, but yields little new insight, and so moves quickly into a discussion of feminising architecture. A selection of colour plates of San Marco by the author are extremely eloquent when it comes to surface detail and decoration. Jeanne Clegg in *Ruskin and Venice* (1981) saw this as a safer area of enquiry for Ruskin than the religion there (or even women until he became obsessed with Rose La Touche and Carpaccio's *Ursula*). Yet the usefulness of their juxtaposition of the buildings to two clothing images, which are held in the Ruskin Foundation at the University of Lancaster, one of watercolours of a Veronese dress and of a woman "with a rose", are hard to assess. When in 1966 Robert Furneux Jordon asked us to see Ruskin whole or not at all, he established an almost impossible agenda.

One difficulty with this book is its dedication to citing all and everybody who has written on Ruskin, sometimes not very pertinently, so that the author's individual voice is lost. Added to that is the publishing practice of including in the main text lengthy parenthetical citations of author and page references, keyed to full details at the end of every chapter. It reads like a dissertation, and while there is nothing wrong with that, it deflects the chance for readers who want to grasp how Ruskin survives as a major figure in architectural writing and, importantly, how what is offered is new.

Any reader of Ruskin has to be able to grasp how his interests shift or twist during one visit to, say, Venice, or over his long writing career. And there is a great deal of that writing, as we crest every wave and current in the *mare maggiore* of his architectural, geological and meteorological pronouncements (Tinteretto's aphorism on how the sea of painting always gets larger, that Ruskin loved to cite). That Chatterjee notes in her acknowledgements that a colleague had "faith in my obscure meanderings" is both honest and touching: *caveat lector!*

REFERENCE

Ruskin, J. & Cook, E. T. (Ed.) (1906). *The works of John Ruskin: Volume XXVI*. Retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.6206/2015.6206.The-Works-Of-John-Ruskin-Vol-xxvi_djvu.txt.