

Scottish National Portrait Gallery – John Ruskin exhibition open now



An exhibition of the art created by a 19th century writer and thinker is the subject of a new exhibition just open at the Portrait Gallery. This is the only UK opportunity to have a look at work by John Ruskin (1819-1900) who was the leading art critic of his day and one of Victorian Britain's most influential social theorists. Ruskin's writings and interests embraced a breath-taking range of subjects. Famous as the champion of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelite painters, he was also a brilliantly skilled and prolific artist, who, though he rarely exhibited his work, was driven by an intense and passionate desire to draw.

John Ruskin: Artist and Observer will be the most extensive exhibition to date devoted to Ruskin's achievements as an artist in his own right. It has been organised in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada, and will bring together 130 drawings and watercolours, representing Ruskin's entire 60-year career, on loan from important private and public collections in the UK, Canada and the USA, including the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut; the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Ruskin was obsessively interested in many aspects of the world around him, and used drawing as a means of observing, recording and understanding what he saw. His fascination for architecture, natural history, geology and meteorology is reflected in works such as *Study of the Marble Inlaying on the Front of the Casa Loredan, Venice* (1845), *Rocks and Ferns in a*

Wood at Crossmount, Perthshire (1847) and his beautiful studies of plants, fruit, birds, feathers and reptiles. All are rendered in meticulous detail and combine a keen sense of scientific inquiry with a delight in the textures, colours, and intricate forms of his subjects.

For Ruskin, drawing was a powerful physical compulsion – at times an uncontrolled and spontaneous response to the world. His outstanding talent allowed him to work fluently and instinctively in different media, using pen, pencil or chalk, and painting in watercolour and gouache (opaque watercolour). Certain works incorporate a rich variety of different methods and media, so that the forms become superimposed and are allowed to merge into one another. Creating drawings for his own use (rather than for exhibition or display), Ruskin developed a way of working that was distinctive, personal and highly expressive. It echoed his emotional state, which ranged from manic despondency to periods of elation and consequently the drawings offer a fascinating window into a brilliant and sometimes troubled soul.

Although he grew up in suburban London, Ruskin came from a Scottish family and his parents helped to instil in him a love of wild and elemental landscapes. Visiting Scotland frequently, he created spectacular watercolours of its dramatic scenery and geology, such as *Coast Scene near Dunbar* (1847), *In the Pass of Killiecrankie* (1857) and *Study of Gneiss Rock, Glenfinlas* (1853-54). Ruskin also made many visits to the Alps, where he produced elaborate drawings of the glaciers of Chamonix and careful studies of rocks, which helped him to understand the geological forces that shaped the landscape.

Ruskin was a powerful advocate for the Gothic Revival movement in architecture, so it is fitting that this exhibition will be at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery – a magnificent Gothic fantasy, which makes reference to his beloved Venice. Among the finest works in the exhibition will be watercolours

and drawings which illustrate both his forensic study of, and poetic response to, the architecture and fabric of the north Italian city. Also on show will be a number of daguerrotypes – examples of a very early type of photography – taken by Ruskin and his contemporaries as an aid to revealing the hidden details of façades and stone carvings and inform some of his expansive studies of mountain scenery.

Christopher Baker, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, commented on the exhibition: “Ruskin’s drawings and watercolours can be enjoyed in various ways: as intense and delightful responses to the beauty of the natural world and insights into the complex mind of one of the most sophisticated of Victorian thinkers and writers. Our hope is they will be a revelation to many visitors, who will then want to discover more about Ruskin’s remarkable and multi-faceted achievement.”

Ruskin himself will be present in the exhibition through self-portraits and the magnificent portrait of him by John Everett Millais of 1854 exhibited at the Ashmolean in Oxford. It was painted in Scotland and is one of the finest of all nineteenth-century artist portraits; it has an intriguing history that touches on both Ruskin’s private life and development as a painter. Just as it was being created Ruskin was learning from Millais about how to observe nature in the Pre-Raphaelite manner (meticulously recording the surrounding rocks); however, at the same moment Millais was falling in love with Ruskin’s wife, Eufemia (Effie) Gray. The painting was completed in London, Ruskin’s marriage was dissolved, and Millais and Effie were later married.

Effie Gray, a new film based on Effie’s life, written by Emma Thompson and starring Dakota Fanning in the title role, is due for cinema release in October. This lavish production was shot in Scotland, London and Venice and also stars Greg Wise in the role of Ruskin and Tom Sturridge as Millais, with a supporting cast that includes Emma Thompson, Derek Jacobi, Julie Walters, James Fox and Robbie Coltrane. There will be a

special preview screening at the Scottish National Gallery on 15 August 2014.

The exhibition has been guest-curated by the distinguished Ruskin scholars Christopher Newall and Conal Shields, both of whom have made major contributions to the accompanying catalogue. This richly illustrated book also includes contributions from Christopher Baker and Ian Jeffrey (376 pages, colour illustrations throughout, soft cover in matt art paper, priced £37.50).

JOHN RUSKIN: ARTIST AND OBSERVER

Until 28 September 2014

Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, 1 Queen Street,
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Admission £8 / £6 | 0131 624 6200

nationalgalleries.org

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