

Ruskin Art Club Lecture 2017
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Ruskin's Truths in the Age of Fake News

What do the writings of John Ruskin have to offer us in this age of suspicion, partisanship, doubts about even the possibility of civic public debate, and fears of “fake news” across the political spectrum? In this address, I argue that Ruskin’s ideas allow us to consider moral and aesthetic questions together in a way that is, not coincidentally, extremely well suited to our current politics. Writing at the height of Liberalism and laissez-faire political economics, Ruskin worked for a society that would consider human well-being first, ahead of simple measures of wealth or productivity. In my talk, I will consider why “truth” was such a crucial aspect of Ruskin’s critique of his own society (and by extension, of ours), by examining three aspects of “truth” in Ruskin’s writings: the idea that artists must find truth by first learning to see the world through their own eyes, and not through preconceptions or convention; the idea that all instances of human creativity, and all economic relationships, contain the history and morality of their conditions of production; and the idea that industrial capitalism, as Ruskin observed it in the 1850s, consistently works to undermine the truth of both raw materials and the conditions of production by emphasizing superficial appearances. Each of these aspects of “truth” in the middle of the nineteenth century still has meaning today – perhaps even more so, in our digitized, plastic, disposable culture. Indeed, under the guise of Neo-Liberalism, Austerity, the Free Market, or Development, among other names, we may find that much of the underlying logic of Ruskin’s period does not look that different from that of our own. By exploring Ruskin’s “truths,” I hope to show that his perspective gives us a profound means of understanding not only that logic, but also how people have resisted it, finding new ways to relate to each other, to the economy, and to the natural world.