

Seeking Authenticity: Late Victorian Aesthetic Researches in John Ruskin's approach of the St. Mark's Campanile in Venice and William Lethaby's Design for the Eagle Building in Birmingham (1851-1901)

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Abstract: The two artefacts described and contrasted here are John Ruskin's 1851 description of the St. Mark's Campanile in Venice and the facade of William Lethaby's 1901 Eagle Building in Birmingham. Both Ruskin's description and Lethaby's facade are part of a common search for authenticity realized in the light of criticisms of industrialization in the late nineteenth century. Lethaby's attempt to define architectural authenticity as compatible with industrial processes, however, seems to prefigure a greater interdisciplinary switch from a moral and Romantic view to a scientific and material understanding of society.

As the great British architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner argues, the late nineteenth century saw the fragmentation of Britain's architectural and artistic landscapes as the dominant Neo-Classical forms were challenged by a series of artistic revivals often inspired by Britain's medieval past.¹ This Medievalism, far from being regressive however, was part of a broader reaction, occurring in varied fields of knowledge, to social, technological and scientific changes ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. Among the major voices of this period, John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Lethaby (1857-1931) appear at opposite ends of a broader Victorian movement seeking authenticity in the light of pre-industrial history and against rapid social changes associated with industrialization.² If it is true that architecture throughout the late Victorian period, from the high-Victorian Gothic Revival in the mid-nineteenth century to the later Arts-and-Craft movement in the late Victorian age (to which Lethaby belonged), are often interpreted as being Ruskinian in content, then Lethaby's adherence to Socialist and social-scientific doctrines leads us to wonder to what extent it can be said that reactions to industrialization converged in the late Victorian age?³ It is the aim of this article to understand in what ways and to what extent conceptions of truth and authenticity changed in the light of scientific innovations in other disciplines. In order to achieve this task, a comparison of Ruskin's 1851 literary description of the St. Mark's Campanile in Venice with Lethaby's iconic 1901 Eagle Building facade in Birmingham will be conducted.

What made St. Mark's Campanile remarkable, Ruskin argued in his literary account of Venetian social and artistic history *The Stones of Venice*, was that although it appeared as the least ornamented public building in Venice, it still left a strong impression. Paradoxically, Ruskin observed, it is built in the simplest possible way: in plain red bricks with a heavy base and a lighter top. There are no buttresses and the only external features are a simple marble-built loggia topped by a brick-cube with alternate faces showing the Lion of St. Mark and the female representation of Venice *la Giustizia*.

The tower's pyramidal spire is mounted by a golden archangel Gabriel. Built in 1514, rising up 350 feet, it is only:

¹ Pevsner, N., *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) pp.8-57.

² Pevsner, N., *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009) pp.187-215.

³ Van der Plaats, D., 'Beyond Ruskin, Arnoldian themes in William Lethaby's conception of Architecture' in *Thresholds Papers from the 16th Society of Architectural Historians Australia New Zealand (SAHANZ) Conference*, (Australia, 1999) p.359.

one bold square mass of brickwork; double walls, with an ascending inclined plane between them, with apertures as small as possible and these only in necessary places, giving just the light required for ascending the stair or slope, not a ray more; and the weight of the whole relieved only by the double pilaster on the sides sustaining small arches at the top of the mass.⁴

It appears ‘severe and simple’.⁵ But it was in comparison with contemporary bell-towers, Ruskin argued, that its architectural value became apparent. The later built neo-Gothic bell-tower of the United Free Church College of Scotland (UFCCS) constructed by modern methods in Edinburgh in 1858-9, is comparatively smaller, rising at 121 feet, built in stone and yet appears incapable of standing without two huge buttresses on each angle. Unlike St. Mark’s Campanile, it has no visible roof but still has four ornamental pinnacles and its base appears lighter than its top.

What the tower was built for, Ruskin concluded ironically, remained:

a mystery to every beholder; for surely no studious inhabitants of its upper chambers will be conceived to be pursuing his employments by the light of the single chink on each side; and had it been intended for a belfry, the sound of its bells would have been as effectually prevented from getting out, as the light from getting in.⁶

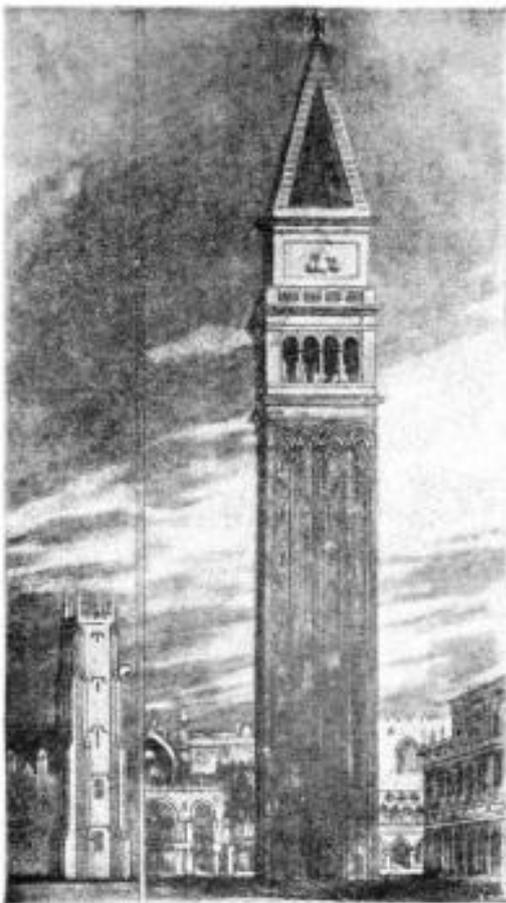


Figure 1: John Ruskin’s comparative drawing of the UFCCS’s Belfry (positioned on the left) and the St. Mark’s Campanile (positioned on the right). Photograph © David Lamoureux 2013 from Ruskin, J., *The Stones of Venice, Vol. 1: The Foundations* (London: G. Allen, 1905) p.207

⁴Ruskin, J., *The Stones of Venice, Vol. 1: The Foundations* (London: G. Allen, 1905) p.207

⁵ idem.,

⁶ ibid., p.208

Ruskin's interest in architecture and Venetian Gothic specifically must be placed in a broader context. Born in 1819, Ruskin witnessed anxiously Britain's industrialization. Growing and often chaotic urbanization, the spread of railways and factories and intensifying commercialism transformed Britain at an unequal pace breaking simultaneously with the quiet Georgian Picturesque ideals of the early nineteenth century. The steam-machine seemed to have had an impact on all aspects of life. Inspired by the traditionalist critique of Carlyle before him and the Romantic medieval epics of Sir Walter Scott in his youth, Ruskin believed that Britain had stepped on a perilous moral path. Growing consumerism and scientism were separating individuals from their communities, men from their faith, challenging the traditional organization of society. Like Venice before its fall, Britain was putting more faith in men and commerce than in faith and humility. Central to Ruskin is therefore the Romantic idea that 'it takes noble people to yield a noble culture'.⁷ Aesthetic value relied not on style *per se* but on the moral organization of architectural elements.⁸

As the art historian D.E. Cosgrove observes, the determining influence of Ruskin's mother, 'a fanatical Scottish Protestant of Evangelical faith'⁹, during his upbringing would impact his entire life. Central to Evangelism is the idea that the Bible does not contain only literal truth but also hidden meanings. Similarly, the arts for Ruskin contained symbolic meanings and attentive aesthetical readings could therefore reveal greater truths about society's morality. The Renaissance, for instance, he argued, engendered moral decadence in Venice as it brought luxurious opulence into churches. Similarly, Neoclassicism engendered political radicalism in Europe as it brought the obsessive rationalism, agnosticism and individualism of the Enlightenment's philosophical programme alongside Graeco-Roman taste. Victorian rapid industrialization, Ruskin feared, prefigured nothing else but an imminent moral and thus societal decay.¹⁰ His contemporaries' ill-informed attempts to revive medieval architecture, exemplified by the UFCCS's Belfry with its useless buttresses and pinnacles, demonstrated nothing else but vain and commercial artificiality that characterized this new age obsessed by speed, profit and the cult of science.

The St. Mark's Campanile, despite its simplicity, represented Venice at its moral peak. It revealed the honest attempt of hard-working men to build, with simple means, an incomparable piece of architecture to glorify God. It certainly had gold and marble but, unlike Renaissance buildings, only in small quantities and only to enhance the buildings most sacred elements: the loggia where the liturgical bells are located and the statue of the Angel Gabriel. It was perhaps not as geometrically perfect as a Neoclassical building, it did not try to hide construction traits from the building's apparent design, but it remained much more revealing about humanity's true imperfect nature. This was the mark of civilization's honesty and grandeur. It was only when buildings conformed to their 'vernacular' environment, using local materials and inscribing themselves in local narratives recalling hard work, humility and sacrifice that they would appear organically embedded in their local community and morally authentic.

It was not until a building:

has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its

⁷ Baljon, C.J., 'Interpreting Ruskin: The Argument of the Seven Lamps of Architecture and the Stones of Venice' in *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn, 1997) p.412

⁸ *ibid.*, pp.401-406

⁹ Cosgrove, D.E., 'John Ruskin and the Geographical Imagination' in *Geographical Review*, Vol. 69, No. 1, (January 1979) p.46

¹⁰ *idem.*,

existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.¹¹

By the late Victorian era, this industrialization of minds that Ruskin so feared seemed nevertheless to have gained new grounds. As the leading nineteenth-century Socialist Beatrice Webb claimed: Victorian scientists

were the leading British intellectuals [...] it was they who stood out as men of genius [...] who were routing the theologians, confounding the mystics, imposing their theories on the philosophers, their inventions on capitalists, and their discoveries on medical men; whilst they were at the same time snubbing the artists, ignoring the poets, and even casting doubts on the capacity of politicians.¹²

Britain had entered the second phase of its industrial revolution and scientific knowledge now extended into all domains of life. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1852) highlighted the common evolutionary roots of mankind. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) discussed religion as a universal and scientific anthropological phenomenon rather than a theological one. In linguistics, Saussure analysed the common scientific structures of human languages. In politics, the Socialist writings of Marx and Engels sought to offer a universal scientific model to achieve social progress.¹³ Never before, had abstract science so widely been applied to the whole life of man.

In the arts, nevertheless, Ruskin had had a particularly strong impact on young artists who similarly sought to revive medieval aesthetics in opposition to what they perceived as the great formalism and growing scientific historicism of classical painting. They would ultimately organize as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). His combination of an aesthetic yearning for the past with an intensely modern, mid-nineteenth century political critique of industrialization's moral effects on society enabled them to connect their medieval aesthetics with the radical Socialist movement growing among continental artists¹⁴. In fact, as the art historian Tim Barringer observes, the idea of a necessary relationship between the modern artist and political radicalism started to be promoted in France in the late 1840s by the Realist painter Gustave Courbet (1819-77), a contemporary of the Pre-Raphaelites and leader of Paris's revolutionary Socialist Commune in 1871.¹⁵

It was the young British designer William Morris who, though not a direct member of the PRB, would have the most marked influence in this attempt to link medievalism with a Socialist critique of industrialization. Influenced by the PRB in his youth, Morris's ambition was to revive the medieval mindset, not its spiritual legacy, but rather the economic organization of medieval artisan guilds and craftsmen transmitting their skills and knowledge with pride to worthy apprentices. He agreed with Ruskin that bad practices resulted from the industrialization of minds. Nevertheless, equally inspired by Socialist discourses, Morris saw the source of society's problem not in industrialization itself but in the politico-economic organization of production. His medieval aesthetic was Socialist, practical and intended to restore beauty and pride to workers' lives by changing the material conditions of industrial work. The steam-machine *per se* was not responsible for the development of inhumane working conditions. On the contrary, it offered new possibilities to help alleviate hardship in manual labour. Nevertheless, machines were to assist workers in their creative tasks and not

¹¹ Ruskin, J., *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Orpington: G. Allen, 1880) p.187

¹² Webb, B., *My Apprenticeship* (London: Green, 1926) pp.126-127

¹³ Houghton, W. E., *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) pp.33-36

¹⁴ Barringer, T., *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Orion, 1998) pp. 13-14

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.16

imprison them in mechanical tasks. Creative freedom was the key to social happiness.¹⁶ Morris's theories quickly became the core intellectual base of a broader aesthetic movement better known as the Arts-and-Craft. Among those who shared his theories, William Lethaby would perhaps become one of its most influential representatives in architecture.

Lethaby, whom Pevsner would later describe as a precursor of British architectural Modernism¹⁷ was certainly influenced by Ruskin too. He agreed that aesthetic authenticity could only be defined through an understanding of the implicit ethical principles behind the process of making. His ethical considerations, however, were those of an Arts-and-Craft member. Architectural authenticity, Lethaby argued recalling Morris's practical Socialism, was revealed in the symbolic artistic work of free craftsmen. Industries had taken over their economic role as producers of basic consumer goods. But they had not taken over their traditional social role. On the contrary, now that the physical act of production could be achieved by machines, craftsmen could become again what they had been in pre-modern times: practical artists. The role of architects, for instance, could not be anymore that of individuals whose skills could merely solve technical difficulties linked to building. New materials had already solved many technical issues. Chemistry and engineering would most probably offer new practical solutions in the near future. The architect's role, Lethaby argued, was to bring art and creativity back to individual's daily life, to enable social catharsis.

From the earliest times, Lethaby observed, architects had employed known facts – the trees, the mountains, the sea – to express society's interrogations through their art. It was in this primitive and yet universal cosmological language that rested the authentic anthropological roots of architecture and the source of all architectural marvels, from the Egyptian Pyramids to Greek temples and Gothic Cathedrals. It is perhaps the facade of Lethaby's Eagle Insurance's Building on 112-114 Colmore Row in Birmingham that represents best his attempt to create a modern universal architectural cosmology. The Eagle Insurance Offices, built in 1901 in collaboration with the Birmingham architect Joseph Lancaster-Ball, in fact gave Lethaby relative freedom to design the facade on his own and according to his own architectural principles. The top section presents a panel of esoteric-looking symbols which might be seen as a kind of heavenly ceiling. Waves of stone form a sky roof to this heaven and seem to touch the real sky. The carved eagle at the centre seems to represent a symbol universally associated with protection. Below the upper area is a cornice of alternating circular and triangular window heads, a reference to techniques popularly associated with religious architecture symbolizing the sky, heading three relatively unornamented floors. It is noteworthy that window glass, window bars and beaten metal doors are industrially processed. With no ornamentation or obvious reference to history, Colmore Row's lower central section appears as a different building, a revolutionary one, eliminating wall in favour of window, enshrined in the 'temporal' present and expressing new possibilities offered by industrial progress. This tripartite division thus appears as a symbolically primitive and yet technically modern architectural cosmology leading us from the technical possibilities of the present to the utopian dreams of our spiritual imagination.¹⁸

¹⁶ Morris, W., *Art and Its Producers* (1884) © Courtesy of Marxist.org, accessed: 09 Jan. 2013
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/producer.htm>

¹⁷ Pevsner, N., *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937) p.200

¹⁸ Hart, V., 'William Richard Lethaby and the "Holy Spirit": A Reappraisal of the Eagle Insurance Company Building, Birmingham', *Architectural History*, Vol. 36 (1993) pp.149-154



Figure 2: Facade of Lethaby's Eagle Building. This is a freely licensed work credited to Tony Hisgett, accessed on 12 Jan. 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/hisgett/4546266592/>

Lethaby's Eagle Building can be seen as an attempt to recover a form of universal architectural symbolism in the light of contemporary socio-anthropological analysis of symbols, religious myths and culture.¹⁹ The building, Lethaby declared, 'has three stories – the earth, the air and the heavens'.²⁰ The Egyptians already 'compared the sky to the ceiling of an edifice, as did the old poet Job who described the cosmos as a vast box whose lid is the sky'.²¹ Lethaby's idea of the known and the unknown parallels Ruskin's physical and moral. As Van der Plaats argues, Lethaby's architectural objective is to represent man's creative reworking of his physical environment in an attempt to explain what cannot be seen or experienced. Architecture is a transformation that has its origins in the inner resources of man be they rational or spiritual.²² Lethaby's use of 'classical' circular and triangular window heads, for instance, exemplifies his attempt to uncover motifs associated in most cultures with symbolic representations of the sky and spiritual architecture. Rather than conforming to one vernacular style, he tries to create architectural authenticity through an eclectic form of architectural universalism informed by recent socio-scientific and historical discoveries. Authenticity was not confined to specific times. The use of industrially-processed metals and window glass for his Eagle House highlighted not a lack of creativity, but instead demonstrated man's ability to appropriate the means and material of his time to express universal and timeless themes. Morris's mark appears perhaps distinctively in this aspect of Lethaby's work as an architect seeking his inspiration through socio-scientific investigations, primarily interested by methodological and ethical outcomes rather than Romantic nostalgia.

¹⁹ Hart, V., 'William Richard Lethaby and the "Holy Spirit": A Reappraisal of the Eagle Insurance Company Building, Birmingham', *Architectural History*, Vol. 36 (1993) pp.149-154

²⁰ Lethaby, W., *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (London: Architectural Press, 1974) p.16

²¹ *ibid.*, pp.367-368

²² Van der Plaats, D., 'Seeking a "Symbolism Comprehensible" to "the Great Majority of Spectators": William Lethaby's Architecture, Mysticism and Myth and Its Debt to Victorian Mythography' in *Architectural History*, Vol. 45 (2002) p.377

Ruskin and Lethaby seem therefore to be presenting a contrasting, but not forcibly contradictory, understanding of authenticity. For Ruskin, authenticity is primarily the Romantic exemplification of an ideal relationship between the moral and the material: the spiritual and the historical body of a given society. Moral and aesthetic readings of history intertwined. Central to Ruskin is a conception of authenticity in diversity. That is, architectural truth is enshrined in specific histories, local and vernacular realities and narratives. Lethaby agreed that architecture encompassed a strong moral message claiming that ‘the main thesis that the development of building practice and ideas of the world structure acted and reacted on one another I still believe to be sound’.²³ However, respect for historical narrative did not make a building more authentic. Eagle House’s facade integrated well into Birmingham’s landscape not because it respected the vernacular style of the city but because it tried to reproduce with modern means a type symbolism appealing to every audience.

Whilst Ruskin celebrated the vernacular authenticity of Venetian Gothic with the eyes of a mid-nineteenth century Romantic, Lethaby defended scientific truth and artistic freedom with the eyes of a Socialist and Arts-and-Craft member. His desire to adapt Ruskin’s Romantic and moral aesthetic to a modern and scientific world parallels his ambition to reconcile science with art, industry with creative freedom, authenticity with universalism. It was the creative minds of free craftsmen seeking to answer greater questions through their arts that could help improve a society that was not dehumanized by moral impiety, but intellectually and physically degraded by unfair socioeconomic relationships. While the St. Mark’s Campanile exemplified for Ruskin a societal form of moral honesty enshrined in local narratives, Lethaby’s Colmore Row seems to have been an attempt to uncover an authentic universal and modern symbolism. Paralleling the development of criticism of industrialization Ruskin’s ‘vernacular’ and Lethaby’s ‘universal’ seem perhaps to illustrate a broader progressive interdisciplinary switch from a Romantic, culturally-subjective and moral to a scientific, universal and material conception of society and authenticity rather than a fundamental break.

In conclusion, both Ruskin and Lethaby define authenticity against what they perceive are the excesses of industrialization, moral in the first case, socio-economical in the second. However, by arguing that architectural authenticity must be evenly enclosed in the scientific present as it is in the past, Lethaby seems to moderate Ruskin’s moral orthodoxy. Ruskin’s mid-nineteenth century defence of vernacular aesthetic was embedded in a profound moralist critique of a Victorian society that he saw as being corrupted by intellectual scientism. In contrast, for Lethaby, an early-twentieth century architect, the moral aspect was always secondary to the practical, material one. Architectural authenticity was the product of both man’s natural creative abilities and contemporary scientific discoveries and methods. In this, Lethaby departs from the dominating Ruskinian tradition to which he is also indebted. The Arts-and-Craft movement appears therefore as a transitional moment in British arts as both profoundly enshrined in the search for authenticity and open to scientific changes. In adapting Ruskin’s medieval aesthetic to the late-nineteenth century Socialist discourse, Morris essentially elevated the craftsman to the status of an artist inserted in his epoch. In doing so, he enabled Lethaby to envisage architecture as a practical art integrated in technical innovations and in a modern scientific search for authentic forms of human expression. Rather than a fundamental break, understanding of authenticity in the arts for Ruskin and in architecture for Lethaby seems to have essentially prefigured a greater switch from a moral and Romantic to a scientific and material understanding of society and history.

²³ Lethaby, W., ‘Architecture, Nature and Magic’, *The Builder*, No. 124 to 135 (1928-9) p.15

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