Carrying Off the Palaces: John Ruskin’s Lost Daguerreotypes

John Ruskin’s many ventures, including writing, drawing, architectural preservation and photography, were all suffused with a measure of raging intensity that some of us may find difficult to grasp today. Such undertakings were frankly more important to him than, for example, maintaining his marriage. In a letter dating to 1854 he compares the recent separation from his wife with an amputation:

“of course it is disagreeable at first to go about with the wooden leg, particularly considering how people stare – But my real griefs are about other matters. I could get another wife, if I wanted one, but I cannot get back the north transept of Rouen Cathedral.”

But in 1848 Ruskin did in a sense manage to preserve parts of the North Transept of Rouen Cathedral. He spent a portion of his delayed honeymoon trying to pull stonemasons off their scaffolding as he thought they were ruining the cathedral with their insensitive restorations. He commissioned some daguerreotypes to preserve parts of the church for posterity. In Ill. 1 is an extreme close-up of the intricate detail on the register to the right of the cathedral doors on the north facade.

My wife and co-author Jenny and I have spent the last nine years living in Ruskin’s shoes and they have proved to be the most exhilarating footwear imaginable if not always the most comfortable. Ruskin was not an easy man to study. His perceptions on a topic photography were gleaned from myriad other disciplines and he then leavened the concoction with his celebrated mental agility. Once he had arrived at a satisfactory interpretation, he usually proceeded to change his mind. Ruskin’s observations may not have always coalesced into a neat philosophy but taken one by one they were inevitably compelling. So we must not complain. Like seals at the zoo, we cannot be particular as to whether we receive herring one day and mackerel or cod the next, but must be grateful for a never-ending supply of fresh fish.

Our study of Mr. Ruskin was a case of happenstance. An auction catalogue enticed us to the Lake District in 2006, where adjacent to a large livestock auction, we examined the contents of a battered mahogany box at a small general antiques saleroom. The saleroom regarded the contents as being of minimal value and described them as ‘old photographs on metal’. Inside the box we discovered a remarkable trove of 188 daguerreotype scenes. Furthermore, it transpired they all once belonged to John Ruskin; many were indeed taken by him. Nobody had known that these Ruskin views still survived. Later we discovered that the box was something Ruskin kept close at hand in his Brantwood study, finding the daguerreotypes useful to his work even 30 years after they were made.

by KEN JACOBSON, Photographic historian, collector and dealer (K & J Jacobson), UK

John Ruskin has led to a re-evaluation of Ruskin’s relationship with photography. Despite negative sentiments regarding the camera, Ruskin never stopped using the medium and his daguerreotypes clearly influenced the style of his watercolours. His daguerreotypes range from intricate architectural details in Venice to semi-abstract geological studies in Switzerland and these compositions often seem to reflect his state of mind. The high quality and unorthodox style of Ruskin’s daguerreotypes will come as a revelation to many photographic historians.

Suddenly, even leaving the important Ruskin connection aside, we found ourselves owners of the largest collection of daguerreotype views of Venice in the world. After a long and skilful five-year conservation programme, many of the daguerreotype images that were obscured with silver tarnish, became not only highly legible but also proved to be beautiful compositions of tantalising subjects. The temptation to find out more was overwhelming.

So, as well as acquiring a substantial number of Ruskin books and making the usual scholarly trips to museums and libraries, we soon found ourselves in possession of a Venetian vaporetto pass and a Swiss rail card. Most of the plates contained no inscription to aid in identifying their location. We proceeded to visit most of the more than twenty Continental sites at which it was either certain or suspected that Ruskin made or commissioned daguerreotypes.

Ruskin made most of his daguerreotypes on summer trips to France, Italy and Switzerland while accompanied by his valets, John Hobbs and Frederick Crawley. The daguerreotypes were the result of collaboration with his valets or with professional daguerreotypists. Our own parallel expeditions involved no valets whatsoever but consisted mostly in studying weather-beaten inkjet copies of the daguerreotypes in order to pinpoint locations where the images were taken. We got endlessly lost ambling through narrow Venetian passageways in the dead of winter. We pleaded with workmen to let us peek at the façades of French cathedrals hidden beneath scaffolding. We climbed hills in Chamonix and battlements in Switzerland.

We started in Venice and sometimes the task of finding the location of daguerreotypes was straightforward. For example Ill. 2., an image dating to 1845 shows the south side of St. Mark’s Basilica. This view also shows the Tetrarchs and Pillars of Acre, taken from Constantinople during the Crusades and added as decorative features to the exterior of St. Mark’s. Ruskin bought these first daguerreotypes of Venice in early October of 1845, 170 years ago, and they provided him with his real epiphany with the daguerreotype process.

Ruskin was 26 years of age and though he had often travelled to the Continent this was the first time he did so without his parents. He must have felt a great sense of liberation. He was trying to draw the palazzi but despite being one of the great draughtsmen of the 19th century, he became intensely frustrated by what he saw as his failure to record details accurately.

He met a ‘French artist’ who was producing daguerreotype plates and wrote to his father with tremendous excitement, stating,

“It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself - every chip of stone & stain is there …”

A week later, his respect for the new process had deepened and he further noted:

“Well, among all the mechanical poison that this terrible 19th century has poured upon men, it has given us at any rate one antidote, the Daguerreotype. It’s a most blessed invention …”

Ruskin bought all the Frenchman’s daguerreotypes and commissioned more. He was delighted to discover that the daguerreotype could serve as a method of ‘preserving’ the original palaces for posterity before they could be destroyed by what he considered to be insensitive restoration. Our research suggests that the French artist was a daguerreotypist who called himself ‘Le Cavalier Iller’. Iller’s studies, particularly those that seem to have been made before he met Ruskin, are beautifully arranged, wonderfully lit and often include people in a composition. Ruskin’s discovery of Iller’s exceptional daguerreotypes was a revelation to him, and are again so for us as Iller, until now has been little known even among daguerreotype enthusiasts.

Though one can understand why Ruskin admired Iller’s images, we will see that his own photographic style was to develop quite differently and his images would contain few figures, concentrating more on close-up architectural and landscape detail. Iller’s daguerreotype compositions might be said to derive from the picturesque tradition of producing compositions in nature according to a certain formula. From the 1840s onwards both Ruskin’s drawing and daguerreotype style was extensively dedicated instead to the recording of detail in landscape and architecture.

Although Ruskin famously did not have the most successful marriage of the 19th century it was his wife Effie who persuaded him to take her to Venice in 1849. This completely altered the trajectory of Ruskin’s research and writing for the next few years. His first visit to the city was followed by two very lengthy stays between 1849 and 1852. These sojourns developed into the spur for him to write one of his most successful works, the epic three-volume study, The Stones of Venice.

Following the 1848–1849 Venetian insurrection, the Ruskins were among the first tourists to re-enter the besieged city after the Austrians had regained control. Despite this flux, Ruskin wasted no time in recording every detail of the Gothic palazzi, suffering frostbite and exhaustion while making thousands of observations by ruler, pen but also by the daguerreotype. Ruskin was no longer just buying or commissioning daguerreotypes - now he was making his own. He and his valet, John Hobbs, had refined their technical proficiency while in the Alps during the summer. Incredibly, it was during this ‘learning period’, that they produced the very first photograph of the Matterhorn (ill. 3).

Ruskin’s cumulative visits to Venice between 1845 and 1852 resulted in what we believe to be the largest body of surviving daguerreotypes, some 137 plates, assembled by one individual portraying any city in the world.

Ill. 2. The ‘Frenchman.’ Venice. St. Mark’s and the Pillars of Acre looking towards the Piazza, ca.1845. Quarter-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson
Many of Ruskin’s studies in drawing and daguerreotype, in Venice and elsewhere on the Continent, were highly accomplished but cannot be described as being outside the mainstream of popular taste. He did make daguerreotype compositions that have their roots in fashionable modes of painting and photography in the 19th century, some derived from the picturesque tradition (ill. 4).

Despite these fine if conventional compositions, there are two recurring themes in much of Ruskin’s photographic work, which are particularly distinctive within the history of the daguerreotype. The first is that, like his paintings, these daguerreotypes were undertaken primarily for the purposes of documentation. Secondly, Ruskin created many compositions that are decidedly unconventional. As a rich amateur with myriad interests he lacked the profit motive of commerce and the desire to either enhance his professional stature or be the recipient of approbation from other amateur photographers. These factors allowed him an unusual degree of liberty in producing his compositions.

Ruskin’s discovery of the daguerreotype had perhaps deepened his already growing instinct to capture ‘what was really there’, as he phrased it; this might be described by some to be a photographic style of looking and drawing (ills. 5, 6). So suddenly, as in the daguerreotype of Fribourg in ill. 5, horizons might not exist, vertiginous viewpoints were not unusual or compositions were radically outside the mainstream of photographic endeavour (ill. 7). But why should Ruskin be so interested in the daguerreotype? He was surely better known for so many other vocations - poet, social reformer, art critic, preservationist, geologist, writer, artist, radical economist and much more.

We put forward the case, nevertheless, that Ruskin’s gifts and passions made him the most natural candidate to be an instinctive and fine photographer and so it should not come as a surprise to discover that he was exactly that. Ruskin described himself as having, “a sensual faculty of pleasure in sight, as far as I know unparalleled. Turner very certainly never took the delight in his own drawings that I did…”.

Despite there being no evidence that he even knew Ruskin made daguerreotypes, one of Ruskin’s best biographers, John Rosenberg, described the art critic as ‘photoerotic’.

Ruskin’s strength as a photographer has been masked not only by his many other talents and the loss until recently of most of his daguerreotype collection but because he had so many rude things to say about the medium. His strong religious beliefs convinced him it was God’s influence on man’s hand that could create transcendence in painting. He was not convinced that the camera, a metal and glass lens connected to a wooden box, was capable of producing a work of moral consequence. The photographic machine was as much anathema to him as were his despised railways and new-fangled gas lamps of the industrial revolution.

Some of Ruskin’s greatest and most unorthodox daguerreotypes were made in 1858, the last year he used the daguerreotype. We believe

---

ill. 3, John Ruskin and John Hobbs. The Matterhorn and reflection in Alpine lake, 8 August 1849. Quarter-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson

ill. 4, John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley. Chamonix. Mer de Glace, Mont Blanc Massif, ca.1854. Half-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson
this was due to psychological factors and events in his life as much as him reaching a zenith in his photographic skills. Between October 1857 and May 1858 Ruskin had spent much of his time in the National Gallery of London. With the help of only the odd trusted assistant he began the onerous task of mounting and cataloguing over 19,000 of the works that his hero, J.M.W. Turner, had bequeathed to the nation.

The exhausting physical effort involved in these activities was nothing beside the cerebral whirlwind created by the new discoveries he made about the artist. Among the more troubling revelations for him was a group of previously unknown erotic drawings. The idea was sown in Ruskin's mind that perhaps great art was not merely the preserve of the most righteous and God-fearing of men, a discovery that was distinctly at odds with his evangelical upbringing and he began a conversion to what we might call liberal Christianity.

Though one cannot quite visualise Ruskin as the precursor of Toulouse-Lautrec roaming the squalid back streets of Montmartre, his self-described period of 'libertinage' included some atypical behaviour. The previously earnest Protestant art historian could be seen painting on Sundays, flirting with Italian ladies in public gardens, attending the Opéra Comique in Turin in the evening and then splurging afterwards on half pints of champagne and stewed lark for dinner.

Ruskin began to intensify the approach that had produced daguerreotypes that we have already seen of an unconventional nature taken during his previous travels. Released from such an omnipresent and heavy sense of duty and piousness, like other photographers before and since that time, he began to include subject matter whose form and content merely pleased him. He was no longer so rigorously tied to documenting only what he felt were worthy geological or Gothic subjects.

After producing dramatic scenes some might describe as ‘modern’ in Bellinzona (ill. 8), Ruskin visited Arona on Lake Maggiore where he and his valet Frederick Crawley daguerreotyped the elongated shapes of fishing and pleasure boats (ill. 9). The blades of the long oars are partially submerged, creating the appearance of being obliquely dissected, hiding part of the blade beneath the water and thus making the visible portion of the oars resemble oversized spears - much visual ambiguity here. There is complex detail in the daguerreotype which the eye takes time to absorb. The bewildering variety of forms and idiosyncratic detail could not fail to appeal to Ruskin, the man who professed to love imperfection and who noted that as a very young child:

“I... could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet; - examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses ... But the carpet, and what patterns I could find in bed-covers, dresses, or wall-papers to be examined, were my chief resources ...”

A week after arriving in Turin, Ruskin daguerreotyped the singular regional style of striped awnings on the Strada Doragrossa (now Via Garibaldi) for no other purpose than the pleasure of recording striking patterns and light effects that fascinated him (ill. 10). The style of his composition is rather more reminiscent of architectural photography from the 1930s.

It might seem contradictory that photographs intended as documents can so substantially transcend these aims as art - that word we still struggle perpetually to define. Ruskin would not have been comfortable, however, having the magic that exudes from his daguerreotypes explained by the same spirit of alienation that inspired some modernism in the 20th century. His humility before nature or a work of architecture that he loved was essential. Like Ruskin, we believe that putting a passion for the subject above the ego of the artist has

III. 7, John Ruskin and John Hobbs. Venice. The Ducal Palace south façade. ‘Eastern windows’ tracery looking out towards the Lagoon, ca.1849. Quarter-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson
Ill. 8, John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley. Bellinzona. Wall near Castelgrande, ca. 1858. Half-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson

Ill. 9, John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley. Arona. Moored boats in the harbour, ca. 12-14 July 1858. Half-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson

Ill. 10, John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley. Turin. Strada Doragrossa (now Via Giuseppe Garibaldi), ca. 20 July 1858. Half-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson
always been conducive to the production of the most poignant photographs. Starting with W.H. Fox Talbot, photography of the real has proved to be an enduring strength of the medium.

Ruskin said,

“Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.”

Ruskin was the one who could see and his daguerreotypes, in turn, must be seen. His fervent attachment to a crumbling Gothic palace or a lichen-encrusted rock is unmistakable in the image on the mirror-like surface of the daguerreotype plate (Ili. 11).

Notwithstanding Ruskin’s huge aesthetic triumphs of 1858, some may suggest that this was a year in which the daguerreotype process had already become antiquated; nevertheless, it seems clear that Ruskin planned to continue. Later that same year during wintry London weather, Ruskin sent his valet to post a parcel to a friend along with a note that read,

“If I lose my man in the fog, you must find me another daguerreotypist.”

His valet and daguerreotypist Crawley returned unscathed but sadly for us, though Ruskin was not yet 40-years old, we know of no other daguerreotypes by him after the summer of 1858 and he appears to have abandoned his ‘most blessed invention’.

Ill. 11, John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley(?). Chamonix. Cascade du Dard(?). Study of a rock amongst trees, ca.1854. Half-plate daguerreotype © Ken and Jenny Jacobson

ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


