
ROBIN N CAMPBELL

John Ruskin's Alpine Watercolours



By the time he was 16, Ruskin was already a capable water-colourist, illustrated in this painting of the north side of the Stelvio.

This year's section frontispieces celebrate the bicentenary of John Ruskin's birth. Ruskin was elected to the Club in 1869 in recognition of his contribution to mountain literature, *Of Mountain Beauty*, which formed Volume IV of his massive work *Modern Painters* (Works 6).¹ He fell in love with the Alps on a family tour in 1833 and although he had no strong aspiration to climb them, he was familiar with many Alpine ranges long before the Club was founded in 1857. He was as much an artist as a writer, and like many artists he drew every day. Even in 1833 aged 14, he was producing passable Alpine drawings. By the time of the family Alpine holiday in 1835, aged 16, following instruction from A V Copley Fielding, he was capable of outstanding watercolour work, such as the drawing of the north side of the Stelvio shown above, and the fine drawing of Castle Rock of Triermain at the Ruskin Library.

1. This notation indicates the 6th volume of E T Cook & A Wedderburn, *The Library Edition of the Complete Works of John Ruskin*, 39 volumes, London, George Allen, 1903-12. In later references I give only volume number and page. These volumes are available online at the Ruskin Library and elsewhere.

He became particularly fond of Chamonix and its Aiguilles and spent much time there, gathering material for *Of Mountain Beauty*. His father complained in 1837 that his son 'knows the shape of every needle round Mont Blanc, and could not tell you now where Threadneedle Street is.' (2, xxxiv, footnote 1)

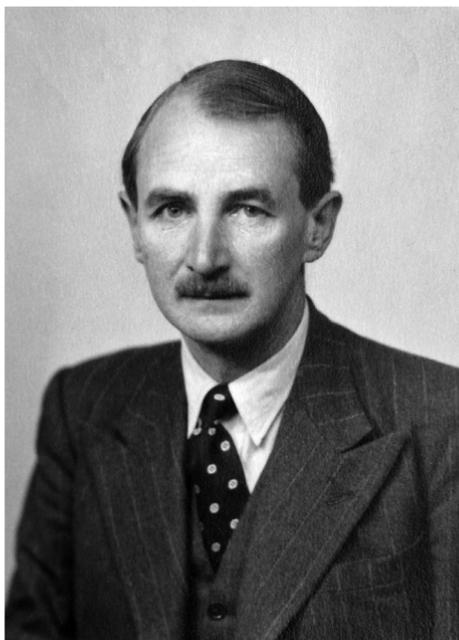
Ruskin's skills as a mountain artist were second to none. Indeed, there is a case for putting him amongst the greatest artists in the British watercolour tradition. Stephen Wildman, the present director of the Ruskin Library, made such a claim 20 years ago, 'Ruskin was modest about the drawings of Alpine rocks and peaks made between 1844 and 1849 ... yet they represent his first individual achievement. The intervening continental tour of 1845 was in many ways a turning point in his confidence, not least in the realisation that his own ambitious brown ink drawings, though stylistically old-fashioned, were no less successful than those of Harding, who had accompanied him. The development of a more confident handling of colour in the later 1840s brought him to a point where his work as a watercolourist stands comparison with any of his peers.'² Ruskin's modesty was partly due to his fervent admiration for Joseph Turner's watercolour work, which he celebrated in *Modern Painters* and in many other publications. As a result of his perfect knowledge of Alpine topography, he saw immediately that Turner's Alpine watercolours were imaginative works based on the elements of the scene but not at all concerned with reproducing its appearance. Ruskin lamented the absence of the imaginative element in his own work: 'I can only draw what is before me,' was his frequent complaint. But what he did better than any other (including his hero Turner) was to select what was important in the scene before him, and to render it with great accuracy and beauty.

Ruskin's art has been fêted in the *Alpine Journal* many times, most recently by Cynthia Gamble in *AJ* 1999, pp185-96. Gamble's contribution included useful discussions of items 8, 12 and 13 below. For this year's frontispieces I have added five Ruskins to the seven owned by the Club or Library, hoping to demonstrate his all-round excellence in Alpine drawing. Our pages only allow small images. Readers wishing for more detail of these images and others may consult several sources: *Sublime Inspiration* (Abbott Hall Gallery, 1997); the exhibition catalogue in footnote 2; Peter Mallalieu's *The Artists of the Alpine Club* (AC, 2007); Christopher Newall et al, *John Ruskin: Artist and Observer* (Paul Holberton, 2014); and many public collections with online images. I comment below on the 13 images used. Ruskin was not concerned to sell or exhibit his drawings, so they are almost never titled and rarely signed or dated. I have used Charles Warren's titles for those exhibited at the Club in 1982, museum titles where they make sense, and invented titles where necessary. Undated drawings can sometimes be dated by inferences drawn from Ruskin's diaries³ or other accounts of his travels, but these inferences are often dubious since the diaries have many gaps.

2. *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*, Tate Gallery, 2000, p147.

3. J Evans & J H Whitehouse, *The Diaries of John Ruskin*. 3 vols, Clarendon Press, 1956-9.

Charles Warren photographed in 1938 before going to Everest. The Club benefitted from Warren's extraordinarily generous gifts of seven Ruskin drawings, the only Ruskins in its Collection. Four were given during his lifetime and three were bequeathed. For those wishing to know more about Warren, there are two excellent obituaries: in *AJ* 2000, pp278-83, and *The Independent*, 14 May 1999. The drawings have been exhibited here and overseas on many occasions. (*Alpine Club*)



'The Lyskamm from the Gornergrat'

Gifted to the Club by Charles Warren. The drawing shows Lyskamm, Castor and Pollux. It can be dated to 1844 or 1849, since these were the only years in which Ruskin visited Zermatt. The 1844 visit is sometimes overlooked since the single diary entry for 19 July suggests an early departure the following day. However, according to his autobiography *Praeterita*, the Ruskins were there for three days, and on 20 July they visited the Riffelberg (35, p335). In 1849, he went again to the Riffelberg on 7 August (inscribed date on *Diaries*, plate 36). So either date is possible for this picture.

It is not at all typical of Ruskin's work. Like his hero Turner, he mainly avoided drawing snowy peaks, and when he did he sometimes used white body-colour, as here, rather than leaving the white of the paper. A comparable work would be Abbott Hall Gallery's 'View from my Window at Mornex' in which body-colour is used to paint the peaks of Mont Blanc on the left of the drawing, so the Lyskamm drawing is not so isolated as to raise doubts of authorship. However, when he employed the pure watercolour method of leaving the paper he achieved much finer results: cf his 'Mont Blanc, St Gervais', also Abbott Hall Gallery. Excellent images of both Abbott Hall Ruskins can be viewed at www.watercolourworld.org.

'Dom and Täschhorn from Zermatt'

Inscribed 'Zermatt'. Victoria & Albert Museum. As with the previous drawing this may date from 1844 or 1849. In 1844 the Ruskins were obliged to stay in a chalet, so perhaps that provided the frame for this lovely drawing of the Mischabel giants.

‘The Mountains opposite Vevey’

Inscribed ‘Vevey. Aug 26?’ Gifted to the Club by Charles Warren. This is a view not of Vevey, but from off Vevey looking south across Lake Geneva to the St Gingolph shore opposite. The impressive mountains shown are in the ranges of Les Cornettes de Bise-Dent d’Oche. I am indebted to Prof David Hill for making this clear from his analysis of a similar Ruskin drawing in King’s College, Cambridge (see his blog site <https://sublimesites.co>). David Hill suggested that the date of the drawing may be 1851, and that it is an evening rather than a morning view: the shadowing supports this. However, Ruskin was in Vevey almost every year and his diary has many gaps in it, so other dates are possible, for example 1846 where his diary puts him in Vevey on 15 August, the next entry being Chamonix on 23 August. He was in Chamonix for only four days,⁴ encountering bad weather, and might well have returned to Vevey to make this drawing on 26 August, a day of excellent weather according to James D Forbes, who was nearby. The drawing owes perhaps more to Turner’s approach to watercolour than others in the Club’s Collection. It is certainly a magnificent work.

‘The Mouth of the Rhône from Lake Geneva’

Inscribed ‘Vevey. Aug 26?’ Birmingham Museums. Birmingham has read Ruskin’s inscription as ‘May’ rather than ‘Aug’, but once you have seen ‘Aug’ it is hard to see ‘May’. The drawing was surely made on the same evening boat outing as the previous drawing. In my judgment this is one of Ruskin’s most beautiful watercolours. Again, I thank David Hill for identifying the location.

‘Lake of Lucerne and Uri Rotstock’

Inscribed ‘Grütli’. Bequeathed to the Club Library by Charles Warren. A large and fully finished watercolour exploiting the full range of blues and purples and done by Ruskin at the height of his powers. It shows the cliffs on the west side of the Bay of Uri, the most southerly arm of Lake Lucerne, with the meadow below them known as Grütli (now Rütli) which is the traditional site of the first Swiss Confederacy of the cantons Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden. In the background is the Uri Rotstock, the highest of the peaks around Lake Lucerne at 2,928m. The Bay of Uri was the subject of a late watercolour by Turner, which exists in several versions. Ruskin sketched a watercolour version of Turner’s view, which shows the whole bay from Brunnen at the entrance; this is in the David Thomson Collection (Paul H, Walton. *Master Drawings by John Ruskin*, Pilkington Press, 2000). The bay is also the subject of a superb drawing by John Robert Cozens in the British Museum (BM 1900, 0411.27). Our picture is drawn from a closer viewpoint facing south-west and shows only the west shore, perhaps taken from a boat. When it was exhibited in the Tate Gallery (see footnote 2), Stephen Wildman suggested a date of 1858 for it. There are three other drawings of these

4. Letter to George Richmond 30 August 1846, 36, p63.

cliffs in the Ruskin Library, and again for one of these (1996P1576) a date of 1858 is suggested. However, Ruskin visited Lake Lucerne on many occasions, and the date of these drawings is very uncertain. Two drawings of the Bay (29.R and 29.R.b) were exhibited by Ruskin in 1878, but it is not clear which two and as usual he gave no clue regarding date. His discussion of the two pictures exhibited should be read in full (13, 509-11) to understand the context of his negative remarks about them, which relate only to his success in capturing the beauty of pine trees. Since there are no carefully drawn trees in our drawing, it seems unlikely that ours was one of those exhibited.

'Cascade de la Folie'

Birmingham Museums. A large and celebrated watercolour, frequently exhibited and illustrated. There is a magnificent illustration in the Tate exhibition catalogue (footnote 2) p160. Originally it was given the title 'Cascade de la Folie, and its Uplands' and these uplands are of course (L to R) the Aiguilles de l'M, Grands Charmoz-Grépon, and Blaitière-Fou. The low tones used suggest that it was sketched in twilight or moonlight, giving the scene a spectral quality heightened by the grey and ghostly Aiguilles.

'Montagne de la Côté, Chamonix'

Gifted to the Club by Charles Warren. Often referred to as the Crête de la Côté, the route taken by the Mont Blanc pioneers followed this crest between the Bossons glacier and the Taconnaz glacier on its far side. The peaks of the Taconnaz can be seen thrusting through the boiling and swirling clouds. Despite its small size, it succeeds on all levels as a compelling study of glacier, mountain and cloud forms. According to Ruskin's 1854 list of Chamonix drawings (5, xxi-xxii) he made four drawings of the Montagne de la Côté in 1849, and this is probably one of these. A photogravure after it was used to illustrate *Modern Painters IV* (6, 261, Plate 36)

'View of the Aiguille du Plan'

Victoria & Albert Museum. This beautiful drawing shows the NW aspect of the Aiguille du Peigne, a satellite peak of the Plan. To the left is sketched in outline part of the Dent du Caïman, the Aiguille des Ciseaux, and the Aiguille du Blaitière. It is very likely that this is No. 38 'Aiguille du Plan, from its base' from Ruskin's 1854 List of Chamonix drawings (5, xxii), dated by him to 1849. Ruskin derived a small sketch from it (6, 233, Fig. 38) to illustrate the similarity of structure between this aspect of the (lower) Plan and the Blaitière, and drawing attention to the 'hollow in the heart of the aiguille . . . as smooth and sweeping in curve as the cavity of a vast bivalve shell' (6, 231). This huge sweep of slabs was eventually climbed by Pierre Mazeaud's party in 1960.

'Cloud on the Aiguille du Goûter from Chamonix, Moonlight'

Inscribed 'Moonlight Chamouni/J Ruskin (186?)'. Bequeathed to the Library by Charles Warren. This watercolour was sold at Sotheby's 14 July



1988 (Lot 171) for £16,500. Presumably it was bought there by Warren or by a dealer who then sold it on to him. The 4th digit of the inscribed date is obscure and might be 0,5,6 or 8. Ruskin was not in Chamonix in 1866 or 1868, according to the *Diaries*. The date is enclosed in brackets, so it may be the date that Ruskin signed it rather than the date that he drew it. At any rate, it is a most unusual and arresting drawing, with Ruskin's attention plainly concentrated on the moonlit cloud pouring off the Dôme du Goûter to settle in a curled formation on the Aiguille. In Ruskin's diary entry for 4 July 1844 he comments on a similar cloud 'it rose from the Aiguille de Goûter exactly like an Indian's plume of feathers on his forehead . . . curving round in the contrary direction under the Dôme', and added the tiny drawing in the margin shown below. It is possible that our drawing is related to this one.

'Valley of Lauterbrunnen'

Undated. Metropolitan Museum of Art. The viewpoint of the drawing is Unspunnen Castle in Wilderswil, which overlooks the valley. The peak obscured by cloud in the distance is perhaps the Mönch. The Met suggests a date c1866 for this drawing. Certainly, Ruskin spent three weeks in Interlaken and the Lauterbrunnen in May and June 1866 (*Diaries*, 589-90), but he was there on other tours too, so the date might well be earlier. One indication of an early date is his attempt to draw every tree. In the Notes about his own drawings in an exhibition of 1878, he remarks that, 'Even the lower Swiss hills were a good deal more than his [Turner's] match, and that he well knew. Elsewhere, I have noticed his prudence in "counting their pines," or at least estimating their uncountableness! I did not understand his warning, and went insanely at them at first, thinking to give some notion of them by sheer labour.' (13, 510). A photogravure after this drawing appears in the *Works* (5, lviii): see above illustration.

'The Aiguilles du Dru and Mer de Glace, Moonlight'

Inscribed 'Mer de Glace – moonlight'. Gifted to the Club by Charles Warren. Cynthia Gamble's discussion notes Charles Warren's suggested date of 1863. Ruskin's diary entry for 24 September 1863 reports, 'Yesterday up the Montanvert in fresh snow and across the glacier: loveliest serrated edge of Bouchard-Dru – just fresh sprinkled. Sketched moonlight.'

'Glacier des Bossons'

1874. Gifted to the Club by Charles Warren. A photogravure after this drawing appears in the *Works* (2, 240). Ruskin made a brief visit to Cham-onix in 1874. His diary for 16 October records that he, 'Sketched Bossons glacier from window.'