

JOY FOR EVER

HOW TO USE ART TO CHANGE THE WORLD AND ITS PRICE IN THE MARKET

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ART

For John Ruskin, art and craft were both fundamentally social practices. This doesn't mean to say that individuals don't make things, or get absorbed in the making of things, it simply means that art objects and artifacts, as well as being made by somebody, are also usually made for someone, for a purpose, and within a social context. However, during Ruskin's lifetime, the Industrial Revolution brought about radical changes in the way things were made, who they were made for, and how they were circulated. As factories began to use machines that were capable of mass production, and exact copies of objects could be made cheaply for sale around the world, workers began to be employed for their labour rather than their skill. This also meant that workers, as well as factory owners and the consumers of their products, all became more detached from the object they were producing and selling. As commodities, whether they were pots, pans, pens, rolls of wallpaper, chairs, tables, shirts, dresses or whatever, became cheaper and more available to buy, the chances were that no one individual worker (or even a small group of workers) had made them from start to finish.

In 1824, the Royal Manchester Institution, later Manchester Art Gallery, was founded during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, when the UK became the 'workshop of the world' and Manchester became its prototype industrial hub. And we also know that it was in Manchester, during *The Art Treasures Exhibition of Great Britain* of 1857, that Ruskin delivered his public talks *The Political Economy of Art*,

or, *A Joy For Ever (and Its Price in the Market)*. It was during these talks that Ruskin went beyond his ideas of local and personal uses of art – as a means for citizens to rethink and remake their roles in society – and began to propose that museums, galleries, private collectors and governments alike have a social, moral and ethical responsibility to use collections of art treasures for the common good. In 1860, Ruskin went on to publish his book *Unto this Last*, in which he began to map out some of his ideas for how art, craft, making and social ownership could help us rethink our relationships to the world, our environment and each other. Famously, this book inspired writer, social campaigner and politician Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) to rethink how a new and decolonised India could emerge from activities of community and social making.

More recently, making, participation and community are back on the social and political agenda – as evidenced by the recent UK government statement that art and craft can be prescribed by doctors to improve mental health and well-being. But how would we, and museums and galleries such as the Whitworth, really like to use art as a means to rethink ourselves and our relations to the world and each other? The Whitworth would like to invite you to think about these ideas, to take a seat and to look at Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and to help us think these questions through. After all, as Ruskin himself said, there is no greater wealth than life.

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