

# JOY FOR EVER

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

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF POLITICS

One of the key reasons why John Ruskin struggled so much with the idea of 'art for art's sake' - the idea that art should occupy its own world, always remaining at one remove from society - is that he wanted art to be political. This doesn't mean that Ruskin thought paintings should depict allegories of political life - though he clearly believed art should involve itself in debates about moral and ethical virtue - it means that Ruskin thought art, and more precisely the making and doing of art, was in itself a social and political act. Not only did he believe that making pots would return an ownership of labour to men and women who increasingly spent their lives in the monotonous drudgery of factory and mill work, he thought that art could sit at the centre of a new educational and political system.

Central to this idea of political art, for Ruskin, was the idea of good governance. Ruskin frequently used the metaphor of the home, the household and the judicious housewife as a means to offer us ways of thinking beyond the impositions of government from afar and from above. He also used metaphors of the small, the local, the ready-to-hand and the achievable as a way to reject the dominant political and economic ideas of the time. For Ruskin, the idea of 'Laissez-Faire' economics and politics - where everyone was out for themselves, guided by an invisible hand of the economy - was morally and ethically bankrupt. Instead, Ruskin sought to put the little community back into Victorian ideas of the big society.

These ideas of small-scale management and artful living are becoming widespread again. When we look toward our own constitutional crisis, brought on by political infighting over Brexit, most of us feel detached and alienated from our process of government and power. With no suitable political alternatives on the horizon, many are turning again to the ideas of small-scale making and doing as a means to wrest back some sense of self-organisation and empowerment. And this is where the relationship of aesthetics and politics, in a Ruskinian sense, re-emerges. Ruskin preferred the medieval architecture of the Gothic to the geometrical precision of the High Renaissance - and this was not simply for nostalgia's sake. Instead, Ruskin saw in the Gothic a human scale, one that resided in its imperfections, its struggles and its communal/collective beauty. This way of making architecture, for Ruskin, was superior to the 'one size fits all' solution of Renaissance architecture, governed, as it was, by a non-human scale (and a belief that abstract rules of geometry and mathematics would deliver uncompromising beauty). Once more, the Whitworth would like to invite you to take the opportunity of Ruskin's 200th anniversary and to think with us again about the relationships between art, politics and society on a more meaningful and personal scale, and to share with us some thoughts on how we might use the museum, and its collections, to imagine ourselves differently.

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