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978-1-108-00857-0 - The Works of John Ruskin, Volume 9: The Stones of Venice I

John Ruskin

Excerpt

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# THE STONES OF VENICE

VOLUME I

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION<sup>1</sup>

[1851]

1. IN the course of arranging the following essay, I put many things aside in my thoughts, to be said in the Preface, things which I shall now put aside altogether, and pass by; for when a book has been advertised a year and half,<sup>2</sup> it seems best to present it with as little preface as possible.

Thus much, however, it is necessary for the reader to know, that, when I planned the work, I had materials by me, collected at different times of sojourn in Venice during the last seventeen years,<sup>3</sup> which it seemed to me might be arranged with little difficulty, and which I believed to be of value as illustrating the history of Southern Gothic. Requiring, however, some clearer assurance respecting certain points of chronology, I went to Venice finally in the autumn of 1849, not doubting but that the dates of the principal edifices of the ancient city were either ascertained, or ascertainable without extraordinary research. To my consternation, I found that the Venetian antiquaries were not agreed within a century as to the date of the building of the façade of the Ducal Palace, and that nothing was known of any other civil edifice of the early city, except that at some time or other it had been fitted up for somebody's reception, and been thereupon fresh

<sup>1</sup> [Reprinted in all subsequent editions of the complete work. The numbering of the paragraphs is here introduced for convenience of reference.]

<sup>2</sup> [*The Stones of Venice* was first announced as being in preparation in the advertisements (1849) of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*: see Vol. VIII. p. li.]

<sup>3</sup> [*i.e.* since 1835, in which year Ruskin paid his first visit to Venice (October 6–12): for memorials of it see Vol. I. pp. lv., 537. His second visit was in 1841 (May 8–16): for his impressions on that occasion see Vol. I. p. 453. His third was in 1845 (September 10–October 13): see Vol. IV. pp. xxxv.–xxxix. His fourth was in 1846 (May 14–28): see Vol. VIII. p. xxiii. For his visit in 1849–1850, see above, Introduction, pp. xxiv.–xxx. After writing the first volume of the *Stones*, he again wintered at Venice (September 1, 1851–June 29, 1852).]

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painted. Every date in question was determinable only by internal evidence; and it became necessary for me to examine not only every one of the older palaces, stone by stone, but every fragment throughout the city which afforded any clue to the formation of its styles. This I did as well as I could, and I believe there will be found, in the following pages, the only existing account of the details of early Venetian architecture on which dependence can be placed, as far as it goes. I do not care to point out the deficiencies of other works on this subject; the reader will find, if he examines them, either that the buildings to which I shall specially direct his attention have been hitherto undescribed, or else that there are great discrepancies between previous descriptions and mine: for which discrepancies I may be permitted to give this single and sufficient reason, that my account of every building is based on personal examination and measurement of it, and that my taking the pains so to examine what I had to describe, was a subject of grave surprise to my Italian friends. The work of the Marchese Selvatico<sup>1</sup> is, however, to be distinguished with respect; it is clear in arrangement, and full of useful, though vague, information: and I have found its statements of the chronological succession of the arts of Venice generally trustworthy. Fontana's "Fabbriche di Venezia" is also historically valuable, but does not attempt to give architectural detail. Cicognara, as is now generally known, is so inaccurate as hardly to deserve mention.

2. Indeed, it is not easy to be accurate in an account of anything, however simple. Zoologists often disagree in their descriptions of the curve of a shell, or the plumage of a bird, though they may lay their specimen on the table, and examine it at their leisure; how much greater becomes the likelihood

<sup>1</sup> [*Sulla Architettura e sulla Scultura in Venezia dal medio evo sino ai nostri giorni: Studi di P. Selvatico per servire di Guida estetica con settanta vignette in legno ed una tavola in rame*, Venezia, 1847. Selvatico was President of the Venetian Academy. Count Leopoldo Cicognara's work is entitled *Le Fabbriche e i Monumenti cospicui di Venezia* (2 vols., Venice, 1838-1850). Ruskin inadvertently ascribes Cicognara's book to Fontana. The latter's work is *Venezia Monumentale Pittoresca*, a series of lithographs designed by M. Moro, with descriptions in Italian by G. J. Fontana, 1847-1850.]

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of error in the description of things which must be in many parts observed from a distance, or under unfavourable circumstances of light and shade; and of which many of the distinctive features have been worn away by time. I believe few people have any idea of the cost of truth in these things; of the expenditure of time necessary to make sure of the simplest facts, and of the strange way in which separate observations will sometimes falsify each other, incapable of reconciliation, owing to some imperceptible inadvertency. I am ashamed of the number of times in which I have had to say, in the following pages, "I am not sure,"<sup>1</sup> and I claim for them no authority, as if they were thoroughly sifted from error, even in what they more confidently state. Only, as far as my time, and strength, and mind served me, I have endeavoured, down to the smallest matters, to ascertain and speak the truth.

3. Nor was the subject without many and most discouraging difficulties, peculiar to itself. As far as my inquiries have extended, there is not a building in Venice, raised prior to the sixteenth century, which has not sustained essential change in one or more of its most important features. By far the greater number present examples of three or four different styles, it may be successive, it may be accidentally associated; and, in many instances, the restorations or additions have gradually replaced the entire structure of the ancient fabric, of which nothing but the name remains, together with a kind of identity, exhibited in the anomalous association of the modernised portions: the Will of the old building asserted through them all, stubbornly, though vainly, expressive; superseded by codicils, and falsified by misinterpretation; yet animating what would otherwise be a mere group of fantastic masque, as embarrassing to the antiquary as, to the mineralogist, the epigene<sup>2</sup> crystal, formed by materials of one

<sup>1</sup> [See, for instance, below, pp. 392, 401; but probably the reference is rather to the later volumes of the book. For Ruskin's industry, and method of work, upon *The Stones of Venice*, see above, Introduction, pp. xxiv., xxv.]

<sup>2</sup> [This term, in the sense of "subsequent to birth" (as opposed to "congenital"), is applied in mineralogy to crystals wherein a chemical alteration has taken place subsequent to their formation.]

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substance modelled on the perished crystals of another. The church of St. Mark itself, harmonious as its structure may at first sight appear, is an epitome of the changes of Venetian architecture from the tenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Its crypt, and the line of low arches which support the screen, are apparently the earliest portions; the lower stories of the main fabric are of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with later Gothic interpolations; the pinnacles are of the earliest fully developed Venetian Gothic (fourteenth century); but one of them, that on the projection at the eastern extremity of the Piazzetta dei Leoni,<sup>2</sup> is of far finer, and probably earlier workmanship than all the rest. The southern range of pinnacles is again inferior to the northern and western, and visibly of later date. Then the screen, which most writers have described as part of the original fabric, bears its date inscribed on its architrave, 1394, and with it are associated a multitude of small screens, balustrades, decorations of the interior building, and probably the rose window of the south transept. Then come the interpolated traceries of the front and sides; then the crocketings of the upper arches, extravagances of the incipient Renaissance; and, finally, the figures which carry the waterspouts on the north side—utterly barbarous seventeenth or eighteenth century work—connect the whole with the plastered restorations of the years 1844 and 1845.<sup>3</sup> Most of the palaces in Venice have sustained interpolations hardly less numerous; and those of the Ducal Palace are so intricate, that a year's labour would probably be insufficient altogether to disentangle and define them.<sup>4</sup> I therefore gave up all thoughts of obtaining a perfectly clear chronological view of the early architecture; but the dates necessary to the main purposes of the book the reader will find well established; and of the evidence brought forward for those of less importance, he is himself to judge. Doubtful estimates are never made grounds of

<sup>1</sup> [See *Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. ch. iv. §§ 5, 6, 8.]

<sup>2</sup> [The small open space on the north side of the church is so-called from its two red marble lions.]

<sup>3</sup> [For Ruskin's notice of these restorations, see Vol. IV. p. 41.]

<sup>4</sup> [See *Stones of Venice*, vol. ii. ch. viii. §§ 9-29.]

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argument ; and the accuracy of the account of the buildings themselves, for which alone I pledge myself, is of course entirely independent of them.

4. In like manner, as the statements briefly made in the chapters on construction involve questions so difficult and so general, that I cannot hope that every expression referring to them will be found free from error : and as the conclusions to which I have endeavoured to lead the reader are thrown into a form the validity of which depends on that of each successive step, it might be argued, if fallacy or weakness could be detected in one of them, that all the subsequent reasonings were valueless. The reader may be assured, however, that it is not so ; the method of proof used in the following essay being only one out of many which were in my choice, adopted because it seemed to me the shortest and simplest, not as being the strongest. In many cases, the conclusions are those which men of quick feeling would arrive at instinctively ; and I then sought to discover the reasons of what so strongly recommended itself as truth. Though these reasons could every one of them, from the beginning to the end of the book, be proved insufficient, the truth of its conclusions would remain the same. I should only regret that I had dishonoured them by an ill-grounded defence ; and endeavour to repair my error by a better one.

5. I have not, however, written carelessly ; nor should I in any wise have expressed doubt of the security of the following argument, but that it is physically impossible for me, being engaged quite as much with mountains, and clouds, and trees, and criticism of painting, as with architecture, to verify, as I should desire, the expression of every sentence bearing upon empirical and technical matters. Life is not long enough, nor does a day pass by without causing me to feel more bitterly the impossibility of carrying out to the extent which I should desire, the separate studies which general criticism continually forces me to undertake.<sup>1</sup> I can only assure the

<sup>1</sup> [So it was with Ruskin to the end of his working days. See, for instance, *Deucalion* (Introduction), where he enumerates (with some humorous exaggeration) various unwritten works in 63 volumes, for which he had accumulated material ;

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reader, that he will find the certainty of every statement I permit myself to make, increase with its importance; and that, for the security of the final conclusions of the following essay, as well as for the resolute veracity of its account of whatever facts have come under my own immediate cognisance, I will pledge myself to the uttermost.

6. It was necessary, to the accomplishment of the purpose of the work (of which account is given in the First Chapter), that I should establish some canons of judgment, which the general reader should thoroughly understand, and, if it pleased him, accept, before we took cognisance, together, of any architecture whatsoever. It has taken me more time and trouble to do this than I expected; but, if I have succeeded, the thing done will be of use for many other purposes than that to which it is now put. The establishment of these canons, which I have called “the Foundations,” and some account of the connection of Venetian architecture with that of the rest of Europe, occupy the present volume.<sup>1</sup>

7. It was of course inexpedient to reduce drawings of crowded details to the size of an octavo volume—I do not say impossible, but inexpedient; requiring infinite pains on the part of the engraver, with no result except farther pains to the beholder. And as, on the other hand, folio books are not easy reading, I determined to separate the text and the unreducible plates. I have given, with the principal text, all the illustrations absolutely necessary to the understanding of it, and, in the detached work, such additional text as had special reference to the larger illustrations.<sup>2</sup>

A considerable number of these larger plates were at first intended to be executed in tinted lithography; but, finding

elsewhere he adds to the list—*e.g.*, “A Life of Pope” (*Fors Clavigera*, Letter 32), a series of Early English Reprints (*Letters to Ellis*), “A Life of Moses” (*Fors*, Letter 63).]

<sup>1</sup> [The first volume was, it will be remembered, published in advance of the remainder of the work. Ed. 1 here added the words:—

“The second will, I hope, contain all I have to say about Venice itself.”

The sentence was omitted in subsequent editions, when the second volume had grown into two.]

<sup>2</sup> [The detached work is *The Examples of the Architecture of Venice*, in this edition included in vol. iii. of *The Stones of Venice*, the processes now available rendering the reduction of the plates possible.]

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the result unsatisfactory, I have determined to prepare the principal subjects for mezzotinting,—a change of method requiring two new drawings to be made of every subject; one a carefully penned outline for the etcher, and then a finished drawing upon the etching. This work does not proceed fast, while I am also occupied with the completion of the text; but the numbers of it will appear as fast as I can prepare them.<sup>1</sup>

8. For the illustrations of the body of the work itself, I have used any kind of engraving which seemed suited to the subjects—line and mezzotint, on steel, with mixed lithographs and woodcuts, at considerable loss of uniformity in the appearance of the volume, but, I hope, with advantage, in rendering the character of the architecture it describes. And both in the plates and the text I have aimed chiefly at clear intelligibility; that any one, however little versed in the subject, might be able to take up the book, and understand what it meant forthwith. I have utterly failed of my purpose, if I have not made all the essential parts of the essay intelligible to the least learned, and easy to the most desultory readers, who are likely to take interest in the matter at all. There are few passages which even require so much as an acquaintance with the elements of Euclid, and these may be missed, without harm to the sense of the rest, by every reader to whom they may appear mysterious; and the architectural terms necessarily employed (which are very few) are explained as they occur, or in a note; so that, though I may often be found trite or tedious, I trust that I shall not be obscure. I am especially anxious to rid this essay of ambiguity, because I want to gain the ear of all kinds of persons. Every man has, at some time of his life, personal interest in architecture.<sup>2</sup> He has influence on the design of some public building; or he has to buy, to build, or alter his own house. It signifies less whether the knowledge

<sup>1</sup> [For particulars under this head, see Vol. XI.]

<sup>2</sup> [See for another enforcement of this point, *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, § 5, and below ch. i. § 38, p. 46.]

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of other arts be general or not; men may live without buying pictures or statues; but, in architecture, all must in some way commit themselves: they *must* do mischief and waste their money, if they do not know how to turn it to account. Churches, and shops, and warehouses, and cottages, and small row, and place, and terrace houses, must be built, and lived in, however joyless or inconvenient. And it is assuredly intended that all of us should have knowledge, and act upon our knowledge, in matters with which we are daily concerned, and not be left to the caprice of architects, or mercy of contractors. There is not, indeed, anything in the following essay bearing on the special forms and needs of modern buildings; but the principles it inculcates are universal; and they are illustrated from the remains of a city which should surely be interesting to the men of London, as affording the richest existing examples of architecture raised by a mercantile community, for civil uses, and domestic magnificence.

DENMARK HILL, *February*, 1851.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION<sup>1</sup>

[1874]

1. No book of mine has had so much influence on contemporary art as the *Stones of Venice*;<sup>2</sup> but this influence has been possessed only by the third part of it, the remaining two-thirds having been resolutely ignored by the British public. And as a physician would, in most cases, rather hear that his patient had thrown all his medicine out of the window, than that he had sent word to his apothecary to leave out two of its three ingredients, so I would rather, for my own part, that no architects had ever condescended to adopt one of the views suggested in this book, than that any should have made the partial use of it which has mottled our manufactory chimneys with black and red brick, dignified our banks and drapers' shops with Venetian tracery, and pinched our parish churches into dark and slippery arrangements for the advertisement of cheap coloured glass and pantiles.

2. On last Waterloo day, I was driving through Ealing towards Brentford just as the sun set after the thunderous rain which the inhabitants of the district must very clearly recollect, and as I was watching the red light fade through the gaps left between the rows of new houses which spring up everywhere, nowadays, as unexpectedly as the houses in a pantomime, I was startled by suddenly finding, between me and the evening sky, a piece of Italian Gothic in the style of its best time.

<sup>1</sup> [Headed "Preface to New Edition" in ed. 3. Reprinted as above in all subsequent editions of the complete work. The numbering of the paragraphs is here inserted for convenience of reference.]

<sup>2</sup> [See on this subject the Introduction to the next volume.]