

Ruskin and the daguerreotype: a “ziggy-zaggy” path between learning and mislearning



Ken Jacobson /
Jenny Jacobson
**Carrying Off
the Palaces.
John Ruskin's Lost
Daguerreotypes**

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This ambitious volume – the perhaps over-generous fruit of what has clearly been a labour of love – is the outcome of research originating in the authors’ recognition of an anonymous lot of “19th-century photographs on metal” offered for sale at an auction at Penrith in Cumbria in 2006 as a probable “lost” portion of the collection of daguerreotypes formed by John Ruskin, and in their determination and luck in acquiring them. A comparison of the subjects represented and inscriptions present on the versos of the plates with Ruskin’s MS catalogue of (part of) the collection (Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster) confirmed the provenance, thus adding 188 new images to the collection as previously known. Itself substantial, this had consisted of 133 daguerreotypes, 125 belonging to the Ruskin Foundation (and now held at the Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster), 5 to the Ruskin Museum, Coniston and 3 to the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford. A group of 4 daguerreotypes put up for sale at Sotheby’s in 1978, of unknown provenance but possibly once in the possession of Ruskin’s manservant, Frederick Crawley, is now also thought to have come from Ruskin’s collection. The Ruskin Foundation and Coniston daguerreotypes were included in a catalogue published in 1986 by Paolo Costantini and Italo Zannier (*I dagherrotipi della collezione Ruskin*, Firenze, Fratelli Alinari e Venezia, Arsene Editrice). In addition to the 325 extant plates making up the comprehensive and fully illustrated “Catalogue Raisonné” given in the present volume, the authors list a further 64 “Missing’ Daguerreotypes” – thus justifying Ruskin’s own qualification of his collection, already in 1851, as “enormous”.

The majority of what the authors modestly name the “Penrith Collection” of daguerreotypes – 102 out of 188 – are of Venetian subjects, just over half of which focus on St Mark’s and the Ducal Palace, while the rest mostly represent full views or details of *palazzi* throughout the city. Indeed, the totality of Venetian subjects within the collection as a whole is here stated to form “perhaps the largest body of surviving daguerreotypes (137 plates) assembled by one individual portraying any city in the world”. Further distinct, in several instances novel, groups within the Penrith Collection are formed by images taken at Arona and Turin, Paris, Chamonix, Ardon (Valais), Basle, Thun, Fribourg and Bellinzona. A final group consists of daguerreotypes of watercolours by Turner and Ruskin himself. 27 of the “luoghi non identificati” in the catalogue published by Costantini and Zannier are here identified, together with the subjects of “all but a few” of the Penrith daguerreotypes.

The Catalogue Raisonné is preceded by ten substantial chapters, the first four of which are biographical in focus. These recount the history of Ruskin’s involvement with the daguerreotype from very shortly after its invention in 1839 through to 1858, the last year in which he is known to have made use of the process, and the important role played by two of his manservants, the already mentioned Frederick Crawley and his predecessor John Hobbs, both of whom took photographs with or for Ruskin (on the question of authorship see below). The following five chapters comprise (Ch. 5) a general history of the daguerreotype and discussions of (Ch. 6) the photographic expertise

and activities of Ruskin's more or less immediate circle, (Ch. 7) his interest in other processes such as the calotype and in photographic prints, (Ch. 8) the relation between his photographs and the pictorial tradition of the "study" or *étude* and (Ch. 9) his "contradictory" pronouncements on photography. The concluding chapter (Ch. 10) summarizes arguments favouring consideration of Ruskin as "Observer, Artist & Photographer".

The Catalogue is followed by five Appendices. The first, a general Chronology (1819-2011) is succeeded by an overview of the Jacobsons' efforts to identify the subjects of, and to date and assign authors to, the entire collection of daguerreotypes, a chronologically organized summary of their acquisition or production by Ruskin and a catalogue of silver hallmarks found on the plates. The third Appendix is an account of the conservation of the Penrith Collection by Angels Arrabas and the fourth a glossary of 19th-century photographic processes. The fifth and final Appendix reproduces Ruskin's (incomplete) MS catalogue of the collection.

There is much important new information here, proceeding first and foremost from meticulous examination of the daguerreotypes themselves: the silver hallmarks found on the plates constitute crucial new evidence for dating and attribution of authorship; and there is an intriguing discussion of what the authors believe to be the deliberate use of "selective focus" in a large number of daguerreotypes taken in Rheims, Thun, Basle and Fribourg, whereby these "display poor focus only in certain sections of the image and, of even greater curiosity, these indistinct areas are sometimes in the very centre of the photograph". Thorough investigation of documentary sources, published and unpublished, has also yielded new knowledge. For instance, a previously unpublished letter from Ruskin to James Nicholson (a lead and glass merchant in the City of London who was also an amateur photographer and associate of the eminent Scottish calotypist George Smith Cundell) shows "that Ruskin owned photographic apparatus, at an early date, some considerable time prior to 1848", though there is "no written or physical evidence of any calotypes or daguerreotypes made with his own camera prior to the Spring of 1849". And the degree to which active and even historically significant interest in photography was common among Ruskin's friends and acquaintances is also something of a revelation. (There is at least one significant omission here, however: among Ruskin's "younger friends in the painting world" who "increasingly took advantage of the photographic process" there is no mention of the painter and connoisseur Charles Fairfax Murray, who in 1874 persuaded Ruskin to commission the first photographs of Duccio di Buoninsegna's monumental *Maestà* from the Siense photographer Paolo Lombardi). However, the volume would have gained considerably if its somewhat exuberant structure had been more rigorously organized, thus foregoing a degree of redundancy and repetition across sections and gathering essential information and argument into sharper concentration and focus. At a local level, it is unfortunate that catalogue numbers are rarely given in the text or image captions and that within the Catalogue Raisonné itself differences in image size do not systematically correspond to differences in plate size. The Index is poorly and inconsistently organized. For example, the entry for the "Ducal palace, Venice" comes under 'D' and "Palazzo Danieli" comes under 'P' ("Palazzi, Venice"), while neither building is found under "Venice".

A major contribution of the volume is its probable identification of the "poor Frenchman" from whom in Venice in 1845 Ruskin purchased "some most beautiful though small daguerreotypes", not the first examples he possessed but the true nucleus of his collection in that they first stimulated his active interest in the process and led directly to his commissioning and making (or superintending the making of) daguerreotypes of his own. On the basis of extensive research into daguerreotypists working in Italy in this period, undertaken on their behalf by Gabriella Bologna, and in view especially of the presence of his signature on the recto of a daguerreotype in Ruskin's collection of part of the Duomo of Florence, the Jacobsons suggest the "Frenchman" in question was a daguerreotypist named Iller, "largely based in Florence from 1844" (to whom, replicating part only of the honorific

given him in Italian newspaper announcements, they assign the macaronic title “Le Cavalier”). They further argue that Iller, in collaboration with Ruskin, was probably responsible for around 60 daguerreotypes acquired between 1846 and 1852, a group comprising all the half-plate Tuscan views apparently commissioned in the former year and a certain number of half-plates taken subsequently at Venice and at Verona. The arguments in favour of the attribution to Iller (and Ruskin) of this substantial group regard orientation, quality, plate size and above all the recurrent presence of two hallmarks, one of which is found only in this collection. Though attribution to Iller (and Ruskin) of all the Tuscan half-plates is described as ‘tentative’ and his identification with the Frenchman “likely”, in the Catalogue entries and in the captions to the illustrations authorship for these images is for the most part categorically assigned to Ruskin and Iller. At the same time, however, in other entries and captions Iller’s identity with the “poor Frenchman” is not taken for granted. Thus, the 80 or so daguerreotypes more or less explicitly associated by the authors with Iller are somewhat confusingly grouped under four different sets of names: “The ‘Frenchman’”; “John Ruskin and the ‘Frenchman’” (in 3 instances followed by a question mark); “John Ruskin and Le Cavalier Iller” (in 8 cases followed by a question mark); and “John Ruskin and John Hobbs / Le Cavalier Iller (?)”.

An associated question, one the authors state to have been that “most frequently asked” them, regards not just Iller, but Ruskin’s other known photographic associates also, both professional and amateur (i.e. Hobbs, Crawley and the Piedmontese daguerreotypist Fortunato Lasagna who signed and dated 3 quarter-plate views of Lucca in Ruskin’s collection): “Did Ruskin make these daguerreotypes himself?” The Jacobsons declare this a question to which they have “no clear answer”, correctly pleading lack of “sufficient information to understand the precise degree and nature” of the respective contributions and evoking the existence of diverse criteria for authorship: “Does a person who gives the operating photographer [...] very specific directions and/or even peers through the ground glass screen to set up the composition, qualify as ‘the photographer?’” A clear enough answer is eventually formulated, however: “the authors believe that John Ruskin deserves to be considered the photographer of the overwhelming majority of the daguerreotypes in his collection”. Yet this answer seems predicated on the very opposition between creative vision and technical operation which elsewhere the authors seem at pains to break down, for instance when they assert that Ruskin was “no sensitive dandy” and would not have balked at direct involvement in the mechanical procedure. Moreover, perhaps too much credence is given to the “numerous first-person accounts in Ruskin’s books, correspondence and diaries of his daguerreotype activities”, and perhaps not enough to much rarer first-person accounts of his collaborators, such as exist in the case of Hobbs. In the Preface to *The Shepherd’s Tower*, for instance, and in reference to the bas-reliefs on the Campanile of Giotto, Ruskin writes, “I photographed the whole series”, adding that, having found that the prints were being sold in Florence in “damaged states”, he “had another series made for [himself]”. Letters of 1877 to an unidentified male correspondent requesting him to “arrange with my good photographer [identifiable on the basis of a letter to Charles Fairfax Murray of 1879 as the Florentine photographer Brogi or as someone working for that firm] to do for me another series of negatives from the bas-reliefs” leave open the possibility that both series were taken *for* Ruskin. Again, despite the authors’ assertion that “Hobbs’s diary tells us it was he who took the successful image [of the Matterhorn] by himself” the day after unsuccessful attempts were made by Hobbs and Ruskin together, the daguerreotype, described in the text as Hobbs’ “most important success as a photographer” is given in the Catalogue Raisonné to “John Ruskin and John Hobbs”.

With regard to this same question, the authors are no doubt right to instance the “high percentage of views in Ruskin’s collection that illustrate Ruskin’s specific and atypical photographic interests”, exhibiting that “unconventional” “trademark” or “signature” style which they characterize in terms of “close-up” focus on minute detail, “radical framing” and “steeply angled points of view”

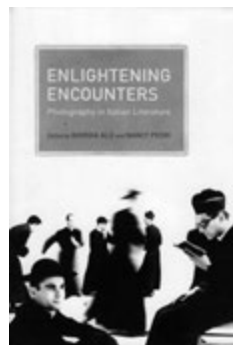
and which elicits the use of epithets such as “precipitous” and “vertiginous” as well as “realistic”. And they are no less justified in citing Ruskin’s detailed vicarious instructions to a photographer, J. W. Ramsden, employed on his behalf by his friend Ellen Heaton to take calotypes of Bolton Woods, as constituting “invaluable” evidence of his “attitude towards commissioning paper photographs”, extendable by analogy “to his efforts with the daguerreotype.” As they explain, this evidence shows Ruskin to be “not too particular about who will take the photographs”. Moreover, “though professing equal disinterest in whether the view is taken ‘ill or well’, in practice he is entirely exacting about the viewpoint, lighting and composition, sparing neither time nor expense in having the photographs retaken until they are utterly to his satisfaction.” They conclude, “It seems likely that he would have taken the same attitude and paid equal attention to any daguerreotypes commissioned in the 1840s and 1850s. It is easy to imagine that, where possible he would have accompanied any daguerreotypist to the spot and helped to direct the angle of the camera or, if unable to attend, would have provided the practitioner with the most precise instructions.” Yet it is equally true that Ramsden was not personally known to Ruskin, whereas Hobbs and Crawley were trusted members of his household. And if his attitude to pupils was not always one of wilful domination but also of concern to nurture individual disposition and initiative, might this not have been the case with his photographic associates too, especially the more familiar? It is also worth remembering that the artists who supplied him with watercolour copies of paintings and buildings did not act exclusively on commission, but knowing as they did what his interests and preferences were felt able to offer him or would receive offers of payment from him for uncommissioned works.

Another question that particularly exercises the authors is that of Ruskin’s “ambiguous” attitude to photography. In the Preface they write: “It might be thought, considering Ruskin’s changing views on photography, that this book would be a chronicle along his route from infatuation to loathing.” “With Ruskin,” they rightly comment, “nothing is ever so simple.” Less accurate perhaps is their justification of this claim by characterization of Ruskin’s “intellectual roads” as “never linear” but diverging continually, “rather like the blood vessels of the human circulatory system”. Indeed, their promise to “reveal the complexities of Ruskin’s attitude, including how his negative sentiments coincided with a subconscious affection for photographic imagery, unceasing personal use of photography and a private struggle to use his pen and brush to ‘beat’ the camera” seems a little mis-conceived. A more appropriate description of Ruskin’s “intellectual roads” might be “ziggy-zaggy” (to borrow his name for a garden he planned at Brantwood, meant to symbolize a Dantean ascent to Paradise), for reasons having to do with his often quoted but perhaps little understood conviction that “Mostly, matters of any consequence are three-sided, or four-sided, or polygonal” and that related questions require “for the right solution of [them], at least one positive and one negative answer”. Foremost among matters of consequence were those relating to vision and the products of the visual imagination. In a pioneering essay on Ruskin’s use of daguerreotypes and its relation to his drawing practice Brain Hanson stressed his receptiveness to different “modes of representation”. Witness the experimentally conceived comparison of the tonal economies of Rembrandt, Turner and Veronese in *Modern Painters IV*, or, in the same volume, that other comparison, cited by the authors, between a daguerreotype of the walls of Fribourg and a drawing of his own, with its subtle distinctions between different orders and exigencies of truth. Numerous other instances might be given, such as the cap proposed as a subject to his pupils in the Drawing Class at the Working Men’s College, which as one of them later recalled “with pen and ink [Ruskin] showed us how Rembrandt would have etched, and Albert Durer engraved”; or the literally polygonal diagram by means of which in lectures at Oxford he illustrated the universal history of the “great schools” of art, each with its peculiar set of formal and material media. The point of this lesson was not in itself historical but practical – the students were themselves “with [their] own eyes and fingers to trace, and in [their] own progress follow, the method of advance exemplified by these

great schools” – because ethical. And the overarching rationale behind these examples of Ruskin’s interest in the relative value of a given variety of artistic language lies in his sense of the significance of art as a “theoretic” or cognitive and at the same time ethical instrument. The history of his “changing views” on photography is not bound to be received, as the authors quaintly suppose, “Like seals at the zoo [...] grateful for a never-ending supply of fish”, even though, disconcertingly, this is “herring one day and mackerel or cod the next”. Nor must Ruskin’s “multi-coloured observations over the years” necessarily be counted “a row of elegant but mismatching socks” laid out with disarming “candour”. What is largely missing from the discussion of this aspect of the authors’ subject, as from that of the “avocation” of “photographer” they are anxious to claim for Ruskin, is, broadly, the didactic thrust of his work, and thereby one of its central foci, namely the question of the uses and abuses of images. In a lecture of 1872, for instance, comparing “beautiful” modern photographs of the Valley of Chamouni with Turner’s watercolour of the same, Ruskin declared, “You will learn much from them, and will mislearn more.” Seen from this angle, Ruskin’s “vacillating opinions” on photography reflect not only his response to and need to comprehend diverse possible modes of representation and their ethical significance, but also a crucial, though (in ziggy-zaggy fashion) not absolutely novel development in his thinking about the work of art itself, whereby from the 1860s increasing importance was accorded to its concrete production and the manually traced graphic image came to assume the status of an epitome of all forms of thoughtful industry. Such a position could not but weigh against photography, as opposed to drawing and (paradigmatically) engraving, though it also could not cancel the cognitive and ethical value of the daguerreotype in particular, whose fascination for Ruskin lay not only or not merely in its “pristine sharpness” and aptitude for “record”, but rather in the integrity of this mode of representation, in the dual sense of wholeness or completeness (it was this which first fired Ruskin’s enthusiasm for the process, when struggling against time and adverse circumstances to achieve a complete but at the same time analytical representation of certain Venetian palazzi) and also of ‘right’ balance between “sacrifice of details in the shadowed parts” and “depth of tone” or distinct “gradation” in the lights.

RICCARDO DONATI

**Il tangibile e
l’immaginario:
fotografia e
letteratura
nell’Italia moderna**



Giorgia Alù / Nancy Pedri (a cura di),
Enlightening Encounters.
Photography
in Italian Literature

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E *nlightening Encounters* (d’ora in poi *EE*), volume impreziosito da una raffinata copertina – uno scatto di Mario Giacomelli tratto dalla serie *Io non ho mani che mi accarezzino il volto* – rappresenta per così dire il secondo pannello di un dittico dedicato dagli studiosi internazionali al tema dei rapporti tra letteratura e fotografia nella cultura italiana, dittico inaugurato nel 2014 dalla raccolta di saggi *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography, and the Meanings of*