

Oxford and the pursuit of beauty: art and criticism in the nineteenth century

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Two of the greatest Victorian art theorists, John Ruskin and Walter Pater, studied and taught at Oxford, and their influence both in the city and further afield was immense. While Ruskin sought to link the visual arts to a serious moral vision of society, based in his evangelical upbringing, Pater preached the gospel of aestheticism, pursuing beauty as an end in itself and advocating art for art's sake. Their writings are theoretically challenging and controversial, as well as being masterpieces of prose, and we will examine their ideas and put them in their wider context.

We will examine the influence of these ideas as well. Ruskin's love of medieval society and gothic architecture influenced buildings and painting in Oxford, where the battle between the classical and gothic styles was seriously and bitterly pursued. His ideas spurred revolutionary young painters: the original Pre-Raphaelites; and subsequently William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, both undergraduates at Oxford, whose work laid down the foundations of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Walter Pater's elevation of beauty made him a pariah in conservative Oxford, but his shocking ideas enraptured young people looking to break free from stuffy social expectations. Oscar Wilde, another Oxford undergraduate, was captured by his spell, and worked out his philosophy in masterpieces of creative literature.

We will study the buildings in Oxford whose design reflects competing ideologies about art: the Martyrs' Memorial, the Ashmolean Museum, the University Museum, and Keble College, among others. We will examine the artists who worked in Oxford, from professionals such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti to amateurs such as the passionate photographer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (otherwise known as Lewis Carroll). We will also consider patrons, such as Thomas Combe, printer to the university, whose love of Pre-Raphaelite art combined with his commitment to the High Church and whose prize painting, Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World', hangs today in Keble Chapel.

In this seminar we will look at revolutionary texts about the place of visual art in society: texts which propose opposing views about what is valuable in art and which still have an impact on the way we look at art today. We will also look at the art that inspired and was inspired by these writings, aiming to enjoy it, understand it, and place it in its historical context.

Seminar specific student learning outcomes

Students who have taken this seminar will:

- develop an understanding of the intellectual and social life of Victorian Oxford and the way in which this context influenced writers and artists
- consider the nature of the relationship between art and morality, and investigate the treatment of this problem in the writings of Ruskin and Pater in particular
- gain a knowledge of works of art (paintings, sculptures, buildings, books) which exemplify the pursuit of beauty and examine questions of social and ethical values; and develop the skills to investigate such works of art by close reading and analysis

Required reading

W.H. Pater, *Studies in the history of the Renaissance* (1872)

J. Ruskin, *Lectures on art delivered before the University of Oxford in Hilary Term, 1870* (1870) lecture 1

——, *The stones of Venice II* (1853) chapter 6 'The nature of Gothic'

O. Wilde, *Essays and lectures* (1913) chapter 2 'The English Renaissance of art'

——, *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

Recommended reading list

- M. Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite camera* (1985)
E. Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic* (1982)
L.W.B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford* (2016)
R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987)
C. Ford, *Lewis Carroll* (2009)
R. Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford* (1996)
——, *Ruskin, Turner, and the Pre-Raphaelites* (2000)
T. Hilton, *John Ruskin the early years* (1985)
——, *John Ruskin the later years* (2000)
W.H. Mallock, *The new Republic* (1877)
M. Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (2018)
E. Prettejohn, *The art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (2000)
——, *Beauty and art 1750–2000* (2005)
P. Prodger, *Victorian giants: the birth of art photography* (2018)
J. Whiteley, *Oxford and the Pre-Raphaelites* (1989)