

The Stone Alive: Adrian Stokes and John Ruskin

The English art critic Adrian Stokes is best known for *The Quattro Cento* (1932) and *Stones of Rimini* (1934). Both works, like Stokes' later studies of Piero della Francesca and Giorgione in *Colour and Form* (1937) and *Venice: An Aspect of Art* (1945), offer novel interpretations of the Italian Renaissance. After undergoing psychoanalysis with Melanie Klein in the 1930's, Stokes began his exploration of the unconscious sources of sculpture, architecture, and painting in such works as *Inside Out* (1947) and *Greek Culture and the Ego* (1958).¹ For Stokes, art is the externalization of inward states, the major means by which the mind expresses and masters its own tensions in a reparative effort towards balance and wholeness. With his studies of the Italian Renaissance, Stokes' refinement of these ideas constitutes his main contribution to our understanding of art and creation.

Stokes' neglect probably results from his dense, rhapsodic, and elliptical style, and also his reliance on Freud and Melanie Klein. Yet Stokes has had worthy appreciators. Ezra Pound, whom Stokes met in Italy in 1927, reviewed *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini* favorably, recognizing their congruity with his own views of Renaissance art. Donald Davie has examined Pound's relation to Stokes and shows the aesthetic and psychological basis for their common preference for the "carving" as opposed to the "modelling" tradition. According to Richard Wollheim, Stokes works rank among the few that not only "enlarge" but "recreate" our sensibility.²

Wollheim observes that Stokes was influenced "somewhat" by John Ruskin and more so by Walter Pater,³ while Pound saw the same influence but rightly construed that Stokes was no mere "disciple" of Pater's.⁴ However, Stokes probably owes a greater intellectual debt to Ruskin, though it would not at first seem apparent on perusing the evidence. In the early *Sunrise in the West* (1927), Stokes finds Ruskin's aesthetic judgments distorted by his perverse

"fanaticism."⁵ In *The Quattro Cento* he says that we have "learned the anti-Ruskin lesson well" (QC, 127), thus avoiding Ruskin's moralistic hatred of the Renaissance. But Ruskin is a constant presence in Stokes' writings. In his expressive and psychological theory of art, his emphasis on art as process, his distinction between carving and modelling, Stokes extends Ruskin's ideas. His interpretation of Renaissance and post-Renaissance art often follows Ruskin and marks Stokes as idiosyncratic heir to Pre-Raphaelitism. In short, Stokes is one of the most distinguished members of the aesthetic tradition which Ruskin inaugurated in *The Stones of Venice*.

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For Ruskin, sculpture originated with agriculture and gave rise to all the other arts; for Stokes, the "visual arts are rooted in handicrafts" (SR, 109).⁶ This is not to challenge their belief that architecture is the source or "mother of the arts" (IF, 67). Rather, each thinks of architecture, and especially stone architecture, as a kind of sculpture.⁷ As a stone building is carved and moulded like a sculpted object, so its stones demand sculptural treatment. Stokes' and Ruskin's works form a whole theory of sculpture, its materials, instruments, and history, its inseparable relation to architecture and Nature.

Repelled by Victorian flowers in cast-iron and gossamer webs in hard stone, Ruskin had counselled the modern sculptor to learn his medium.⁸ The sculptor must "honor" (10. 455) his stone, for it has been inscribed with "ordinances" (8. 71) from the "lips" of the "Earth Mother"; "here's for you to cut, and here's for you to hammer" (16. 387). Clay is ductile, and cannot be given sharp edges, while stone should never be shaped, as in the Flamboyant Gothic, into flimsy traceries.⁹ Stokes demanded the same values in *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini*. The Romans, he observes, well exploited the "lightness of plentiful and local travertine"