

S E N

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Pictures from Nature's Laboratory

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Brantwood, Coniston, Cumbria LA218AD
9 July – 27 September 2009, 11am – 5.30pm

Private View
11 July 12 noon – 3pm

My journey towards Brantwood BY ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Ruskin and Brantwood

Ruskin's arrival at Brantwood in 1872 saw him at the final stage of his already full and complex life. The great works – *Modern Painters*, *Unto This Last*, etc – were behind him. Yet he sensed that Brantwood, with its extraordinary natural resources, could also form an important legacy. The philosopher-critic perched in his rocky retreat had been seeking isolation and time away from the world, but he was simultaneously aware that he now had an opportunity to unfold ideas that would permanently encourage and inspire anyone who came to visit.

My arrival at Brantwood

I chose to arrive at Brantwood in November when the earth was still sleeping. I wanted to wander quietly through the estate, walking the paths that Ruskin walked. I was drawn to his view of the steep hillside as a working laboratory – an idea rooted, not in cultural remodeling, but in land experiments driven by a close observation of nature. It was in this moorland garden that the elderly Ruskin embarked on his most ambitious earth-shaping experiment.

The Moorland Garden:

The idea is best expressed in Ruskin's own words: *'This autumn, therefore, I have begun on my own ground, the kind of work which it had been my own chief purpose for the last twenty years so to initiate. I have attacked only the plots of rank marsh grass which uselessly occupy the pieces of irregular level at the banks of the minor rivulets; and the ledges of rock that have no drainage outlet. The useless marsh grass, and the soil beneath it, I have literally turned upside down by steady spade labour, stripping the rock surfaces absolutely bare (though under accumulations of soil often five or six foot deep) passing the whole of this loose soil well under the spade; cutting outlets for the standing water beneath, as the completely seen conformation of the rock directed me, and then terracing the ledges, where necessary, to receive the returned ground. I am thus carrying step by step down the hill a series of little garden grounds, of which, judging by the extreme fruitfulness of the piece of the same slope already made the main garden of Brantwood, a season or two will show the value to my former*

neighbours, and very sufficiently explain the future function of St George's Guild, in British mountain ground of ordinary character.'

The development of the moorland garden was the last time Ruskin was physically active. It was also a way of sustaining the visionary ideas that found fruition in the Guild of St George which he established in 1872.

Ruskin viewed the Guild as a potential means of buttressing the declining (as he saw it) state of Britain with a rural utopia. The Guild was to be a band of men and women of goodwill, giving a portion of their income and the best of their energies to acquiring land and developing it, in accordance with Ruskin's ideas and ideals.

Many of the Guild's founding principles and ideas were drawn from Ruskin's initial experiences and experiments within the Coniston valley.

The moorland garden is truly a sacred site, but not one that shouts or creates a fuss. It is a quiet, gentle place, designed for contemplation, not temples. It was also a workbench for new experiments that would help explore the potential of farming within this dramatic Lakeland landscape.

I walked the terraces, feeling the energy of his wheat crop experiments and apple and cherry tree plantings, in order to develop an understanding of the way in which Ruskin had manipulated a small patch of ground by revealing rocky outcrops, channeling water, and leveling surfaces. I visited the plants as they slowly emerged: snow-drop, crocus, wood sorrel, violet and bluebell.

On this site Ruskin was not trying to create an artifice, or a mock altar to some past deity. It was a working site, as in all things Ruskin. He wanted to use the land to offer possible solutions to Lakeland husbandry. It was done on the Ruskin scale, with an eye for detail and created with respect for the site.

Here is his final offering to us, an example of how humanity can learn from the land and work in harmony with a place. He is instructing us to see deeply into the landscape and leave as little a trace of change as possible. It was here that I set my heart and began the work now presented in the exhibition *Sensorium – Pictures from Nature's Laboratory*.

In recent years Brantwood has opened the door on some of Ruskin's visionary ways of looking at plants and the way we live with them. The old 'living laboratory' of the estate has been brought back to life. We have proceeded without prejudice for one orthodoxy or another, following Ruskin's own exploratory technique, moving towards things that are life-affirming, balanced and generous in husbandry of the land.

Alex's time at Brantwood could not have complemented our approach more completely. He has sought to let each plant tell its own story. This sounds deceptively simple. Nothing could, in fact, be more delicate or precise. Alex has developed his handling of the processes of the cyanotype and the chromatograph to a level of refinement that is quite remarkable, creating a pathway into the life of his subjects that releases a voice. What stories they tell!

Ruskin intended in *Proserpina* to create a new 'flora': a work drawn from science but spun into 'poetry, prophecy and religion'. Looking at Alex's work these past months, I have felt as if *Proserpina* – abandoned by Ruskin – had been restarted. Proserpina herself has indeed begun her journey back from that dark underworld into the light.

Howard Hull
Director, Brantwood

Acknowledgements

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Brantwood Touring Exhibition – Ruskin Library – University of Lancaster – 3 October – 13 December 2009





Proserpina

*Studies of wayside flowers,
While the air was yet pure
Among the Alps, and in the Scotland
and England which my father knew.*

John Ruskin

A baby crocus has literally its own little dome – domus, or duomo – within which in early spring it lives a delicate convent life of its own, quite free from all worldly care and dangers, exceedingly ignorant of things in general, but itself brightly golden and perfectly formed before it is brought out. These subterranean palaces and vaulted cloisters, which we call bulbs, are no more roots than the blade of grass is a root, in which the ear of corn forms before it shoots up.