John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Adrian Stokes (1902-1972): Venice and the architecture of colour-form

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ABSTRACT
John Ruskin and Adrian Stokes are two of the greatest aesthetic writers on Venice. On the basis of extended empirical and archive research, this paper interprets what Stokes called the “architecture of colour-form” in Venice. Stokes’s Venice is a Renaissance city, Ruskin’s a Gothic one; but Stokes rejects the Florentine privileging of disegno over colore, stressing the reciprocity of colour and form in Venetian art and architecture. Gazing at the city’s listons of gleaming Istrian zone and dark lagoon-washed aperture he portrays a “Venice [that] excels in blackness and whiteness; water brings commerce between them”. His colour system looks to the psychologies of Alberti and Goethe who defined colour as a “balancing of white and black” and as “degrees of darkness”. In contrast to Stokes, Ruskin emphasises the incrusted polychromy of Venice, and argues that the “first great principle of architectural colour” is that it should be “visibly independent of form”.

Keywords: John Ruskin, Adrian Stokes, Incrustation, Colour and Form

1. INTRODUCTION
In this paper I want to compare and contrast the approaches to colour and architectural form of two of the greatest evocative writers on architecture in the English language—John Ruskin, and Adrian Stokes. Venice was a lodestone to both of these figures. Here in Venice, Ruskin requires little introduction—his Stones of Venice (1851-3) is regarded as one of the greatest works of cultural criticism ever written. Adrian Stokes is lesser known, but he is heir to the Ruskinian aesthetic tradition in many aspects—his Stones of Rimini (1934) is a clear challenge to the monument of his predecessor. Yet—though their paths inevitably cross in the dense fabric of Venice—they seem, at times, to have visited two different cities.

Thus Stokes opposes the longstanding competition between colore and disegno, seeking rather an architectonic “interchange” between colour and form such as he finds in Venetian Quattrocento architecture like the Palazzo Dario, where he writes of the “interchange between the rows of windows and the wall-space studded with dark circles as if the interior darkness were summoned and embossed there”. Gowing [1], vol. 2, p. 103.

Now, here is Ruskin, stating a rather opposite view of architectural colour-form in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849): “And the first broad conclusion we shall deduce from observance of natural colour … will be, that it never follows form, but is arranged on an entirely separate system…. The stripes of a zebra do not follow the lines of its body
or limbs, still less the spots of a leopard”. Cook [2], vol. 8, p. 177.

Then, for Stokes, Venice is a Renaissance city of “dramatic contrasts in tone”, a city that “excels in [the] blackness and whiteness” of dark, lagoon-washed apertures, and dazzling Istrian stone. While, for the Renaissance-hating Ruskin, it is a medieval city, saturated in colour—brick at its core, but incrusted with iridescent marble and fresco. For Ruskin “the winter [of the Renaissance] which succeeded [the Gothic] was colourless as it was cold”. Cook [2], vol. 11, p. 22.

So much for the differences: but Stokes also wrote of a “chromatic identity-in-difference”, and I hope, as we look at some aspects of these two theories of colour-form, to discover aesthetic identities, as well as differences. Take those dark circles of the Palazzo Dario: though suspicious of the dawning Renaissance, Ruskin can be found to have loved them, nearly as much as Stokes.

2. RUSKIN—AN ACCOUNT OF THE POWER OF COLOUR

The manifesto of The Stones of Venice tells of a lifeless, and imitative Pagan “Renaissance” that corrupted the
potential of Byzantine-Gothic architecture even before it could be brought to perfection. Cook [2], vol. 11, p. 356. As Ruskin explains: “The second volume [of Stones of Venice] contains, in its first five chapters, an account of one of the most important and least known forms of Christian architecture, as exhibited in Venice, together with an analysis of its nature in the fourth chapter; and, which is a peculiarly important part of this section, an account of the power of colour over the human mind”. Cook [2], vol. 11, p. 357. This section is on the “First, or Byzantine, Period”, and we find the account of the “power of colour” in the chapter on St. Mark’s. Here he declares that it is on St. Mark’s “value as a piece of perfect and unchangeable colouring, that the claims of this edifice to our respect are finally rested; and a deaf man might as well pretend to pronounce judgement on the merits of a full orchestra, as an architect trained in the composition of form only, to discern the beauty of St. Mark’s”. Cook [2], vol. 10, pp. 97-98. Learning to see the vigorous colour of St. Mark’s, as well as its “rudeness” of form, was part of an enlargement of sensibility in the nineteenth century—that growing preference for the primitive in which Ruskin, himself, played such a critical role. From being a barbaric object of “extreme ugliness”—as in Joseph Woods’s Letters of an Architect from France, Italy and Greece (1828) which Ruskin cites—St. Mark’s became an object of admiration. As a climax to his years of work on Venice, Ruskin’s elaborate watercolour, “North-West Porch of St. Mark’s at Venice, 1877”, displays both the monument’s beauty of colour, and the impossibility of representing it, as extolled in his exact poetics: “Its effects depend not only upon the most delicate sculpture in every part, but … eminently on its colour also, and that the most subtle, variable, inexpressible colour in the world,—the colour of glass, of transparent alabaster, of polished marble, and lustrous gold”. Cook [2], vol. 10, p. 115.

Ruskin’s theory of architectural colour is explored through two tectonic principles: firstly, that of cladding on a masonry core; secondly, a polychromy of brick and/or masonry banding, like natural strata. He defines the former as the “incrustation of brick with more precious materials” asserting, moreover, that this “school of incrusted architecture is the only one in which perfect and permanent chromatic decoration is possible… The body and availing strength of the edifice are to be in brick, and that this under muscular power of brickwork is to be clothed with the defence of the brightness of the marble, as the body of an animal is protected and adorned by its scales or its skin …. “ Cook [2], vol. 10, p. 93, p. 98. In the space allotted here we shall focus on this incrusted school. As for the banding of the “wall veil”, suggestive “of the natural courses of rocks, and beds of the earth itself”, examples do exist in Venice of course, but it is more characteristic of the style of Pisan Romanesque, as in the case of the church of St. Pietro, Pistoia that Ruskin illustrates. Cook [2] vol. 9, p. 347.

2.1 Palazzo Badoer

To illustrate these principles of incrustation, and Ruskin’s methodology in interpreting them, I shall take a more everyday example from Ruskin’s work than the overwhelming fabric of St. Mark’s—the Palazzo Badoer, in Campo Bandiera e Moro. As Ruskin describes, this is “a magnificent example of the fourteenth century Gothic, circa 1310-1320, anterior to the Ducal Palace, and showing beautiful ranges of the fifth order window”. The “fifth order” is the penultimate of the taxonomy of six orders of Venetian Gothic arches that Ruskin established, notable for its form of a trefoil contained within an ogee arch. The arches are framed by incrusted panels and discs of marble, on which a further tri-lobed central panel enframes an abstractly sculpted peacock, of the Byzantine period. (Figs. 1, 2)
Ruskin’s published representations of Venice, such as these, are largely founded on the intensive fieldwork he carried out in the bitterly cold winter of 1849-50. Two large notebook diaries, named by Ruskin as ‘M’ and ‘M2’, are the keystones of this vast database, cross-related to numerous pocket-books of memoranda, and to larger individual “worksheets”. My own research into both Ruskin and Stokes has worked between this empirical archive material and a shadowing of both writers to the relevant Italian sites.

Naturally, Ruskin is first attracted to the striking peacock motif which he draws with care on page 5w of the pocket-book he labelled the “Bit Book”; below this he sketches the general scheme of the arcade, numbering the coloured discs and shafts separately, to link to the precise colour-form notes in the M Diary: “The colouring of the main first story highly curious. Vid figure below p 5w: The pillars are 1 and 3 shaft red Verona – capital white Istrian. 2 and 4 shafts white marble – capitals red – that of 2 a very deep red, almost crimson”. Ruskin [3], p. 219. These variedly coloured shafts obey “Law III” of the seven Laws of incrusted construction laid out in the aforesaid Chapter 4 on “St Mark’s”, namely that “All shafts are to be solid. Wherever, by the smallness of the parts, we may be driven to abandon the incrusted structure at all, it must be abandoned altogether. The eye must never be left in the least doubt as to what is solid and what is coated. Whatever appears probably solid must be assuredly so, and therefore it becomes an inviolable law that no shaft shall ever be incrusted”. Cook [2], vol. 10, p. 100. In Ruskin’s highly ethical account of architecture, he had already satisfied any personal doubts about the truthfulness of cladding, of incrustation, in “The Lamp of Truth” of The Seven Lamps of Architecture by arguing that where there is no attempt to deceive, there is no deception; veneering with marble is a sensible, and sustainable, use of very precious material—“an art of mosaic on a large scale”. Cook [2] vol. 8, p. 79. At St Mark’s, as examined in Stones, the observer will see that every slab of facial marble is fastened by a confessed rivet, and that the joints of the armour are … visibly and openly accommodated to the contours of the substance within ….” Cook [2], vol. 10, p. 94.

In the material colour of these shafts we have the characteristic Venetian pairing of white Istrian stone with the red Verona, as compared to the Tuscan white and green of, for example, the Baptistry at Florence. These marbles are also loved by Stokes, and in his book The Quattro Cento (1932) he celebrates their pairings of colour, as he enjoins us to “spend a day in Venice with eyes on the ground …. You will note when you finally sink exhausted at Florian’s that the second step of the portico [under which] you sit, is made of white Istrian alternating with Verona marble … or is it reflection of the sunset, so faint are the salmon pink veins”. Gowing [1], vol. 1, p. 38. He points out also that the warm light of “those great barns the Frari and San Zanipolo” churches is due to reflection from the floors of “Verona diamante alternated with Istrian”. Stokes’s, is a more consciously psychologised theory of colour than Ruskin’s, and for him these warm Verona marbles are corporeal, they “afford … an image of living process”, and their “live colours amid the blackening stone excite one orally”—evoking the maternal breast.

Of the incrusted panels proper, Ruskin notes the discs: “Then the intermediate circles are. 1. pale red. 4. paler almost yellow: 2 & 3. the usual deep purple red porphyry”. Ruskin [3], p. 219. Here is another great principle of colour, as enunciated in his “Law VI”; whereas the northern Gothic architect was forced to paint the stone, here “the precious marbles in the architect’s hands gave him at once the best examples and the best means of colour. The best examples, for the tints of all natural stones are as exquisite in quality as endless in change; and the best means, for they are all permanent”. Cook [2], vol. 10, p. 92. Alongside the more available Istrian and Verona, in such discs are
found the colour accents of more precious marbles, such as green porphyry (serpentine), and the esteemed purple porphyry as here noted. As Ruskin advises the architect, “if you want a circular ornament, put a flat circle of coloured marble”. Cook [2], vol. 8, p. 153. His admiration of the characteristic Venetian abstraction of “this decoration by discs, or shield like ornaments”, is represented on this façade at both ends of the spectrum, by the natural veining of these simple porphyry circles, and by the superbly elaborate disc of the peacock’s wings, which also have a “noble abstraction”; as Ruskin describes, the peacock’s tail is represented by “the rude rings and rods which stand for the eyes and quills, but at the just distance their effect is perfect”. Cook [2], vol. 9, p. 289.

In this context of coloured disc ornament, we have pointed out the roundels of the Palazzo Dario admired by both Stokes and Ruskin, and although Ruskin saw the Renaissance very much as a decline, he yet found much to admire in the Early Renaissance at Venice—Stokes’s favoured QuattroCento period.

For Ruskin one way into this period was through the art of Vittore Carpaccio—a later discovery of his of 1869, as in the marvellous painted architecture of the St. Ursula series now at the Venice Accademia. Ruskin’s name for this late
fifteenth century style of architecture, associated with Pietro Lombardo and Mauro Codussi was “Giocondine”. In his “Guide to the Academy at Venice” he urges the visitor to interrupt their study of Carpaccio’s painted buildings, and to seek out a real example—the forecourt of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista (1478-81) where he well characterises the style as “all precise, rectangular and shallow”, with “the wall decoration being either of round inlaid marbles, among floral sculpture, or of fresco”. Cook [2], vol. 24, p. 171.

In these grand Scuole Stokes finds, as noted, extremes of blackness and whiteness, a “superbly ship-shape” craftsmanship, and “great windows of black bottle glass [that] give out upon the sea like portholes….”; equally important on the Evangelista screen, as I shall now explain, are the median bars of grey that field the pilasters and openings, providing the tonal key to the whole composition. Gowing [1], vol. 2, p. 95.

3. STOKES AND ALBERTI: BLACKNESS AND WHITENESS

Here is Stokes’s prologue to his study of Venice of 1945:

Venice excels in blackness and whiteness; water brings commerce between them. Italians excel in the use of black and white, white stone and interior darkness. Colour comes between, comes out of them, intensely yet gradually amassed, like a gondola between water and sky. Gowing [1], vol. 2, p. 97. (Fig. 3)

Stokes’s colour system, as here inscribed, looks in part to Leon Battista Alberti’s Della Pittura (1435-36). Alberti [4]. Stokes comments that Goethe, in regarding “colour [as] a degree of darkness” is, like Alberti, a follower of Aristotle who saw “colour ... as inner light and a lesser light than light itself.... All hue is to be considered as half light, since it is in every case lighter than black and darker than white”. Gowing [1], vol. 2, p. 55. In Alberti’s system black and white are the extremes; colour and relief arise from the “balancing of white and black”:

White and black are the two extremes of colour. Another is established between them.... Through the mixing of colours infinite other colours are born, but there are only four true colours - as there are four elements - from which more and more other kinds of colours may be thus created. Red is the colour of fire, blue of the air, green of the water, and of the earth grey and ash. Other colours ... are mixtures of these. Therefore, there are four genera of colours, and these make their species according to the addition of dark or light, black or white. Alberti [4], pp. 49-50.

So, where we might expect the primary of yellow, Alberti links the earth to “grey and ash” colour. John Gage argues that in fact “what [Alberti] needed was not a fourth ‘primary’ but a colour which would express the mean between black and white seen as absolutes.... It was essential to his understanding of the art of the colourist that Alberti should give equal status to grey and the other three ‘true’ colours, from which many mixtures (species) could be produced”. Gage [5], p. 119. Gage concludes that as all colours participate in grey, then grey should be seen as “the key to the tonal coherence of the pictorial composition”. This brings us back to the mediating role of the grey bars of the screen to S. Giovanni Evangelista. (Fig. 4)
4. CONCLUSION

In these few words I have only been able to hint at what these two great commentators have to say about colour and form in architecture. I have pointed to identities as well as differences; thus one strong uniting strand is an organicist tradition, obvious in Ruskin’s intense naturalism, more subtly present in Stokes as when he finds—evoking Alberti’s earth—“the pigeons of St. Marks ... a solace to tired feet, grey softness above the hard and grey volcanic pavement. Feeding the pigeons is a ritual, an offering to the stones we tread”. The, very paving of the city, and the neutral tones of the Mediterranean earth are seen as the source of all fancies connected with colour and form:

In Italy, in whose bright landscape there is a prevalence of neutral colours that gain from each other, the earth is seen as mother and founder of the virile vegetation.... To our fancies, colour and tone, and through them, forms, are the fruition of earth’s inner store of fire and form, of our own vital heat, of mind and spirit. Gowing [1], vol. 2, pp. 49-50.

REFERENCES