



DELAWARE ART MUSEUM

John Ruskin Letters to William Cassels, 1881-1884

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the
Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives, Delaware Art Museum

Acquisition Information

Gift of Robert M. Cassels, 2018

Extent

5 letters, 1 carte-de-visite

Processed

Rachael DiEleuterio, 2018

Contact Information

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Preferred Citation

John Ruskin Letters to William Cassels, 1881-1884, Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives,
Delaware Art Museum

Biography of John Ruskin

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was the leading art critic of the Victorian period. Viewed by his doting parents as a bit of a child prodigy, his artistic skills were developed by a series of drawing masters employed by his father. As an adult his drawings often served his written work - a kind of visual note-taking. He published over 250 works on art and literary criticism, politics and social reform. His *Modern Painters* (volume one, 1843) changed the direction of British art, championing the work of J.M. W. Turner and arguing for 'truth to nature' as the principal towards which all art must aspire. He was particularly influential to the young Pre-Raphaelites, whom he championed in the face of negative critical review. Later in life his writings became more focused on social and political issues. He advocated for the importance of art and beauty in the working class life, equating beauty with morality. He taught drawing (assisted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti) at the Working Men's College beginning in the mid-1850s. In 1869 he became the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University. In 1871 he founded the Guild of St. George, a utopian community, near Sheffield. The same year he purchased Brantwood in the English Lake District, where he lived primarily from 1872 onwards.

Biography of William Cassels

William Cassels (1843-1929) was born in [?] Glasgow, Scotland. A mechanical engineer by profession, he was a landscape watercolor painter by avocation. He was an early member of the Glasgow Ruskin Society, founded in the 1880s. He published two pamphlets, *Wealth: definitions by Ruskin and Mill compared. A paper read before the Ruskin Society of Glasgow on 23rd January, 1882, by a Member* and *The Social Problem. Work versus Waste. A Paper read...on 20th April*. The five letters included in this archive suggest his disaffection with Victorian industrialism, despite its being the source of his livelihood. Certainly he seems to have moved quite a bit in pursuit of his engineering profession as he is listed as having lived in Glasgow, Matlock (Derbyshire), Kirkentilloch, and Stirling.

As an artist, William Cassels followed Ruskin's exhortation to observe and paint nature in all its glorious detail. His landscapes are articulated in meticulous detail, the result of close observation. Family lore indicates he exhibited his work, although this has not yet been confirmed.

In 1890 he married Barbara Brodie MacIntyre (d. 1930) and they had twin boys, William and John. In 1909 William and Barbara moved with their children to Alberta, Canada. In Alberta, Robert took up farming, perhaps, as his grandson, the donor of these letters surmises, "living out Ruskin's teachings." After moving to Canada, he seems to have curtailed his artistic practice as there are few surviving paintings of Canadian scenes.

Description of the Collection

Folder 1 – Letters

Item

- 1 Letter dated January 19, 1881
- 2 Letter dated January 24, 1881
- 3 Letter dated August 16 (?), 1883
- 4 Letter dated May 8, 1884
- 5 Letter dated May 14, 1884

Folder 2 – Elliott & Fry carte de visite of John Ruskin, signed by the sitter, no date