

# Ruskin 200



Museum of  
Natural  
History  
University of Oxford

## Programme Report

February – November 2019  
[www.oumnh.ox.ac.uk/Ruskin200](http://www.oumnh.ox.ac.uk/Ruskin200)

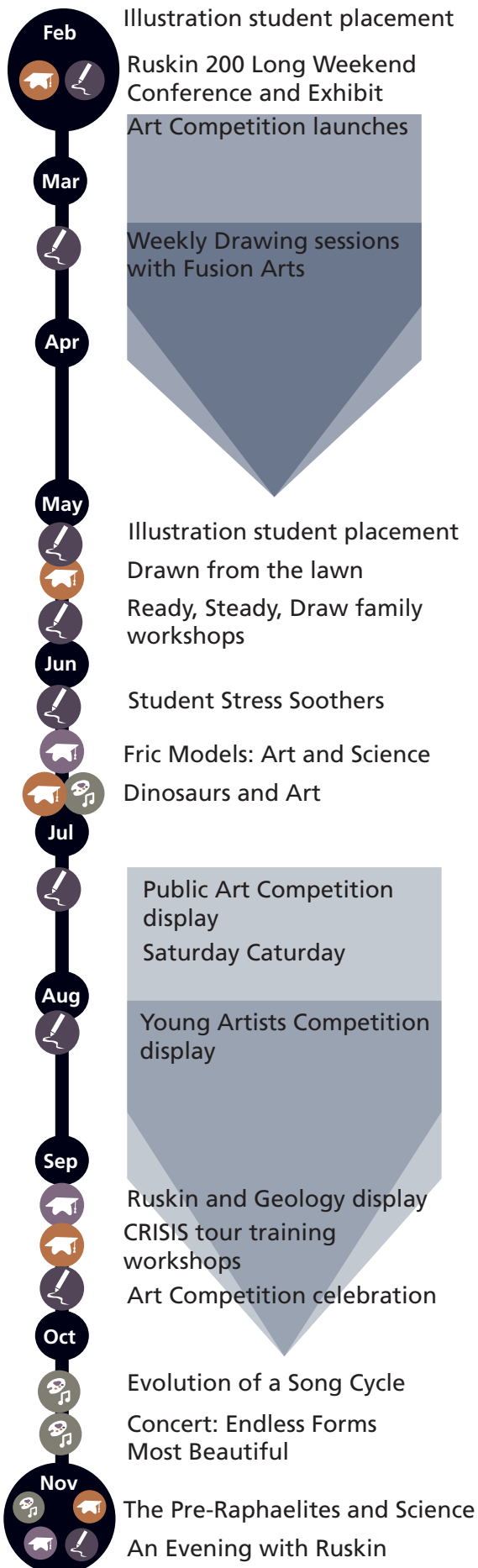






# John Ruskin Bicentenary at the Museum

A year-long programme of public engagement activities



In 2019 the Museum participated in the nationwide activities marking 200 years since the birth of John Ruskin, through a year-long programme developed with Prof John Holmes, Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham. This programme aimed to highlight Ruskin's significant ties to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History while engaging with interdisciplinary themes in response to Ruskin's own polymath interests. Professor Holmes' dedicated research into the architecture of the Museum, and its place in Victorian art and science, along with his enthusiasm to collaborate with the Museum, generated a rich and varied public programme for the year. Activities addressed Ruskin's involvement in the architecture and decoration of the building, his social connections at Oxford relating to the Museum, and his interest in the environment and natural history subjects expressed in his writings, artworks, and collections.

Our Ruskin 200 programme provided a variety of opportunities to creatively explore and reflect on Ruskin's interdisciplinary legacy in the Museum today. Key aims of Ruskin 200 included:



**Engaging the public with Ruskinian research relating to the Museum** from the building's architecture and decoration to natural history themes in the bicentenary year, through a series of talks and displays.



**Drawing inspiration from the Museum** working with artists following Ruskin's call to look closely while at the Museum, especially through public drawing activities with Fusion Arts in Oxford and two open call art competitions.



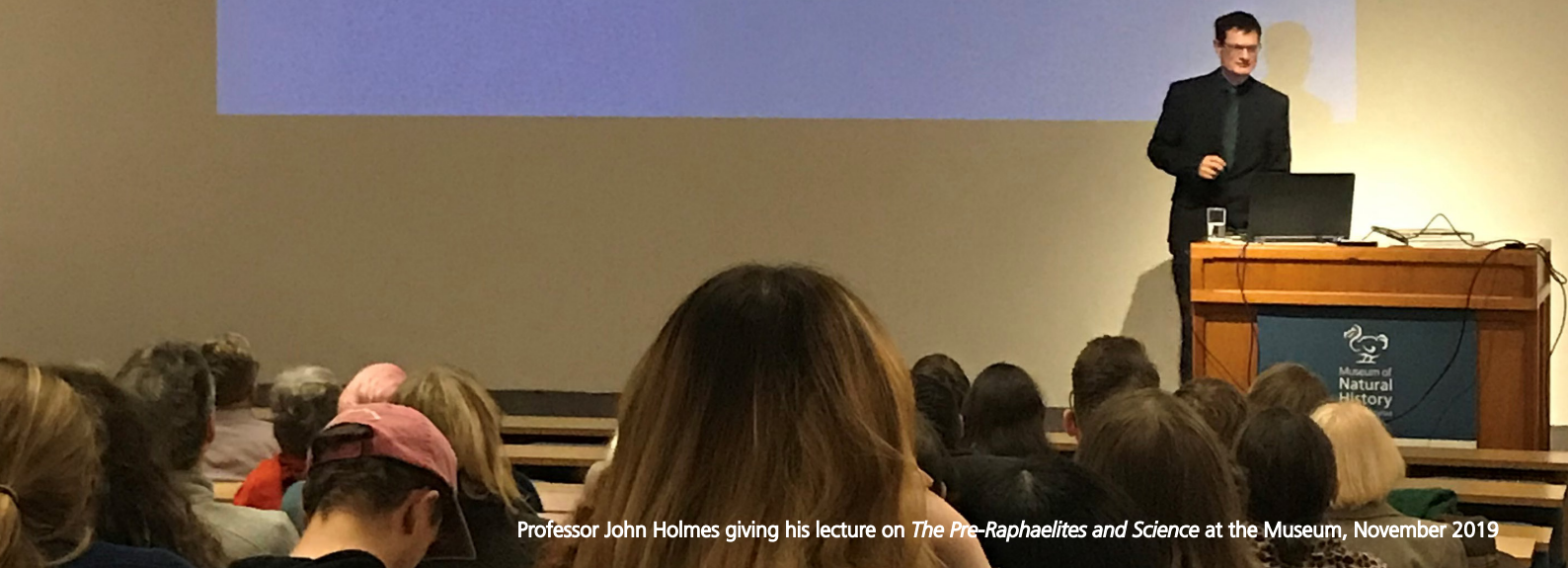
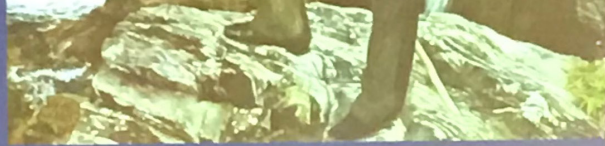
**Showcasing the Heritage, Culture, and Society research** strand at the Museum providing opportunities for public engagement with research for AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership students, showcasing wider heritage themes at the Museum.



**Building Visions of Nature** by continuing the legacy from the 2016 year-long showcase of art, poetry, and photography inspired by the natural world, strengthening collaborative relationships and building new creative connections.



and all the models in the museum  
Ruskin to Pauline, Lady Trevelyan,  
December 1854



Professor John Holmes giving his lecture on *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* at the Museum, November 2019

## Ruskinian Research Connections at the Museum

### Highlighting the historical significance of Ruskin

The Ruskin 200 Programme at the Museum was launched on his 200th birthday with a day-long symposium 'John Ruskin, Science, and the Environment' organised by Professor John Holmes and Professor Sally Shuttleworth (University of Oxford). This conference gathered an international cohort of speakers, focusing on Ruskin's ideas around the natural sciences and their relevance today. On Friday 8 February experts on Ruskin, Victorian culture and the environment discussed his views on nature, Victorian science, and the impact of industrialisation on people's health and the world around them. Speakers included Sandra Kemp, the Director of the Ruskin Research Centre; Kate Flint, professor at the University of Southern California; and John Parham, Professor of Environmental Humanities at the University of Worcester.

An additional public lecture, 'John Ruskin and Trees', was given in the evening by Professor Fiona Stafford, author of *The Long, Long Life of Trees*, attracting an audience of over 150 people.

The symposium and evening lecture were accompanied by a free, temporary exhibit of designs for the Museum by Ruskin alongside material about the history of the building. This was held in the Director's office which contains murals by Ruskin's protégé, Richard St John Tyrwhitt. Thirteen artworks (ten drawings by

John Ruskin of designs for the Museum's external windows, and three sculptures) were loaned from the Ashmolean Museum. Rarely seen material about the architecture and design of the Museum was sourced from the archives including sketches, correspondence, and photographs, with display texts and tours by Professor John Holmes enriching their interpretation.

Towards the end of the year, on 7 November 2019, Prof John Holmes gave a fully-booked, free, public talk on *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science*. Holmes persuasively argued that there was nowhere better to appreciate the Pre-Raphaelites' scientific revolution in art than the Oxford University Museum. Seventeen copies of his book of the same title (and which includes a chapter on the Museum) were sold at a book-signing after the talk, with the queue of people waiting to get their copies signed a further testament to the interest generated.

These events reinstated the Museum's origins as a place at the intersection between art and science, and brought those interested in art history into the Museum of Natural History, while introducing the Museum's artistic heritage to a predominantly science-based audience for research talks. The talks opened, and closed, the year-long programme with a rich contextualisation of contemporary research into the history of the Museum as a building designed as an artistic dedication to the natural sciences.



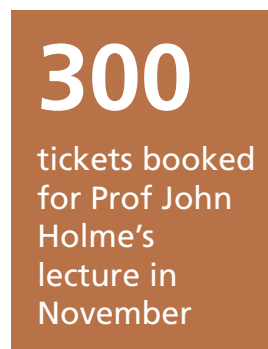


Exhibition of John Ruskin's drawings of window designs for the Oxford University Museum shown in the Director's office with further archival material not usually on display.

## EXHIBITION IN THE DIRECTOR'S OFFICE



## TALKS & PUBLICATIONS



Opened in 1860, the museum set a scientific vision of nature in stone with a precision of detail modelled on Pre-Raphaelite art, even as that art was itself modelled on science. There is nowhere better to appreciate the Pre-Raphaelites' scientific revolution in art.



John Holmes, 2019



**As a geologist, my favourite part of the museum is the mineral collection...But for this competition, I made a sketch of the thing that inspired me the most artistically: the building and the façade.**

Diana, art competition entrant

## Drawing Inspiration at the Museum

Working with artists inspired by Ruskin's call to look closely

A celebratory weekend of drawing was hosted at the Museum, over the weekend following Ruskin's 200th birthday, on 9–10 February 2019. Various art stations were set up around the Museum working with local arts organisation, Fusion Arts. Over 100 drawing boards, with supplies of paper and pencils, were made available to the 6090 visitors over the weekend on rotation. An illustration student from Falmouth University, Fiona Oakley, provided inspirational drawings for the Museum's webpage while on placement and helped with activities over the weekend. In total, 24 hours of drop-in drawing tuition was provided by artists from Fusion Arts, using the Museum architecture and specimens as inspiration for drawing exercises. The Museum was filled with people making art. More than 200 people participated in a large floor drawing of the Museum's façade, and over 200 drawings were donated to a pop-up display. A fantastic team of volunteers helped hand out materials, look-over activities, and encourage people to have a go, following Ruskin's call that anyone can learn to draw.

After the initial weekend, artist Grace Exley from Fusion Arts ran a free, weekly drop-in drawing station on Mondays at the Museum from March until June (with artist Amanda Beck covering one session). Attracting a steady stream of visitors each week, a regular group came to draw following structured guidance using the Museum's architecture and specimens as subjects to

experiment with different techniques. Grace also ran three after-hours 'stress-soother' workshops for university students, with another artist, Lily Rossiter running a fourth session, combining art practice in the Museum with relaxation techniques during the exam period.

A further illustration student from Falmouth University, Reilee Cousins, contributed during a summer placement. Reilee designed a drawing trail based on cats in the Museum, inspired by the Museum's 'cat window', which was used with an all-age drawing event called Caturday Saturday in July. Reilee also helped with one of two 'en plein air' painting sessions on the lawn outside the Museum (27 April and 4 May) where members of the public were invited to use watercolour to depict the Museum's architecture from the outside, while also learning about the building.

The Museum launched an open art competition on the 9 February, with the purpose of creating a platform for people to share artworks inspired by the Museum. Later in May, the Museum ran three Ready, Steady, Draw! family-friendly workshops where the Young Artists drawing competition was launched. The Museum received over 250 entries to the art competitions. Winning entries were chosen by two panels of museum staff and displays of the shortlisted works were erected in the Museum from July to September. A catalogue of adult entries was also published with a forward by Professor John Holmes.





Displays of shortlisted artworks from the competitions displayed near the Museum's dodo paintings

## DRAWING WEEKEND WITH FUSION ARTS

**6090**  
visitors over  
the weekend

**24hrs**  
of drawing  
in workshops  
across the  
weekend with  
6 artists from  
Fusion Arts

**100+**  
drawing  
boards in use  
by the public  
each day

**120+**  
people created  
watercolours inspired by  
the Museum's capitals

**200+**  
people took part in a  
communal floor drawing  
over 12 hours

## ART WORKSHOPS & ART STUDENT PLACEMENTS

**11** of free Monday  
Drawing sessions  
by Grace Exley  
from Fusion Arts

**weeks**

**15** of student  
placements  
from Falmouth  
University

**days**

**3** ready, steady draw!  
family workshops

**5** Young Person  
Drawing Club sessions  
run by Fusion Arts

**4** student stress-soother  
sessions during exams

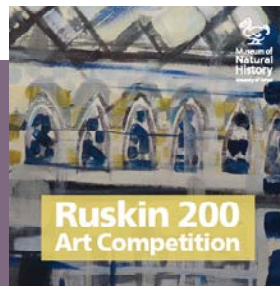
**3** art workshops focusing  
on the Museum's facade

## ART COMPETITIONS

**7** category winners across  
both the adult & young  
artist competitions

**14** highly commended  
entries also displayed

**100** copies made of limited  
edition catalogue



**250+**  
entrants

to the adult competition and the  
young artist competition including  
local, national and international  
visitors.

“ The museum is an inspiring place to discover and learn more about the natural world, this has developed my passion for combining art with science in my professional practice. ”

Emma, art competition entrant

## Mountains in Miniature John Ruskin and Geology



2019 we are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of artistic, cultural commentator, teacher and painter John Ruskin (1819–1900). This display reveals a lesser-known side to Ruskin's activities: his love of minerals.

Ruskin collected minerals from the time he was a boy, and some of his specimens, bearing his own numbers and hand-written labels, are in the Museum's collections.

He had important connections with Oxford, studying here himself from 1837 to 1842. He provided drawings of botanical details that were used in some of the stone carvings in the new University Museum, as this building was originally known. In 1869, he also became the University's Slade Professor of Fine Art.

Ruskin was passionate about mountains, traveling to Europe and visiting the Alps on many occasions. He saw every stone as 'a mountain in miniature', and recommended that art students study mineral specimens to train the eye and appreciate the beauty and variety of nature.



John Ruskin  
John Everett Millais, oil on canvas  
c.1842

The painter shows Ruskin standing by a mountain stream at Oberland in the Swiss Alps in Italy.

John Ruskin at a student at Oxford

In 1837 Ruskin enrolled as a student in Christ Church College where he met Richard Owen. John Ruskin's drawings of geological details were used in some of the stone carvings in the new University Museum, as this building was originally known.

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## Heritage, Culture, and Society

### Showcasing interdisciplinary humanities research at the Museum

Heritage, culture and society is an important and growing theme of research within the Museum, alongside core research in the natural sciences, and it is undertaken with a wide range of UK and international partners. Current research interests include the history of the architecture and decorative interior history of the museum, the origins of object-led geology teaching in 19th-century universities, the historical and modern significance of natural history cast collections, and the use of 3D models and replicas to enhance visitor experience within museums.

The Ruskin 200 programme provided opportunities to showcase humanities-based research taking place in the Museum, especially current Arts Heritage Research Council funded Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships (CDP) PhD candidates working at the intersection of art and science. Public Engagement with Research opportunities were developed working with researchers, from twitter take overs, to temporary displays. Helen Goulston (Birmingham University CDP candidate) is researching the interior decorative scheme of the Museum, and contributed to the Ruskin programme with a tweet 'takeover' leading up to the bicentenary date in the week commencing 28 January 2019. Elaine Charwat (University College London CDP candidate) is researching the models and casts at the Museum. During June a small display featured her research on models of Foraminifera and Radiolarians by the Fric Brothers,

and Elaine also presented a public Science Short talk about the display, as well as an entry for the Museum blog. Susan Newell (Leeds University CDP partner), developed a temporary display with the Public Engagement team, 'Mountains in Miniature' (4 September – 5 November 2019), exploring John Ruskin's lesser-known love of minerals. This display brought together images of his artwork held in the Ashmolean Museum, with geology collections in the Museum that he once owned and that still have his handwritten labels attached, as well as including a private loan of an early edition of a Ruskin publication.

On the 13 June 2019, the Museum hosted an evening under the dinosaurs exploring how art has shaped our impressions of these amazing creatures with Dr Will Tattersdill and Dr Verity Burke from Birmingham University, and palaeontologist Dr David Button from the Natural History Museum in London. Seated in the heart of the Museum under the *T. Rex* and *Iguanodon* casts, the presenters drew attention to features of the displays around the audience throughout the event, alongside visual slides, and activities encouraging the audience to draw their own interpretations of dinosaurs. The combination of reflecting on Victorian visions of science, and the role of art in scientific communication and understanding, complemented similar themes explored throughout the Ruskin 200 programme.





## AHRC COLLABORATIVE DOCTORAL RESEARCH

- 2** temporary displays
- 27** specimens displayed
- 1** object loan
- 5** images researched & licensed

**3** partner HEIs: Birmingham University, Leeds University, & University College London

“ Ruskin saw every stone as a ‘mountain in miniature’ and recommended that art students study mineral specimens to train the eye... ”  
*- from Susan Newell’s display*

Oxford University Museum of Natural History @morethanadodo

This week we’re delving into the history of the Museum building with researcher Helen Goulston, and looking at some of the interior decoration that she’s investigating.  
[#MuseumArchitecture](#)  
 Part of Helen’s @ahrcpress-funded @CDPConnect doctoral project.

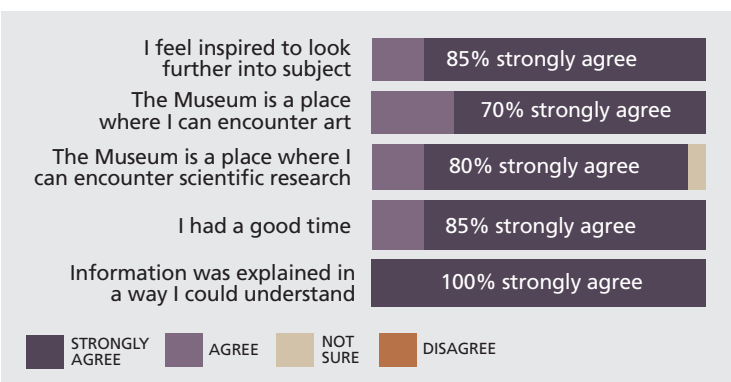


## DINOSAURS & ART

“ Having this awareness will enrich how I look at any depictions of other dinosaurs ”  
 Dinosaurs & Art attendee

- 2** academics from Birmingham University
- 1** palaeontologist from Natural History Museum in London

**44** attendees to an evening under the dinosaurs (full capacity for event)



“ Great combination of practical and talking. Very interesting evening. ”  
 Dinosaurs & Art attendee





## Visions of Nature

### Continuing the intersection between art and science

The Museum has been at the intersection of art, science, and nature since its foundation during Ruskin's lifetime, but in recent years has seen a renaissance of programming highlighting this.

In 2016, the Museum worked closely with Professor John Holmes to develop 'Visions of Nature', a year-long showcase of art, poetry, and photography inspired by the natural world. Poems resulting from residencies during this year have inspired a musical piece by Carola Darwin and composer Cheryl Frances-Hoad. In October 2019 the world premiere of *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*, was performed as an evening concert by Darwin with the Gildas String Quartet in the unique setting of the Museum. A public panel in the afternoon before the concert featured Frances-Hoad, Darwin, Professor John Holmes, poet Kelley Swain, and museum scientist Dr James Neenan, who reflected on the sharing of interdisciplinary perspectives during the 2016 residency at the Museum, as well as the creative process behind the music piece that evolved from it.

Another activity that drew creative interdisciplinary responses to the Museum with a public outlet, was the series of Ruskin 200: Closer Look tour training workshops from May to June 2019, in partnership with Crisis Skylight Oxford and the Joint Museums Volunteer Service. Following an outreach session to the Crisis centre in Oxford, participants were supported in conducting independent research and training for public speaking about museum objects in a range of workshops, which culminated in delivering two Ruskin-related tours (one practice, one for the public). Participants reported that the John Ruskin

theme was helpful for learning new things about the Museum, and building confidence in public speaking. Participants delivered wonderfully diverse and informative tours that included kingfishers, the T-Rex cast, and the Museum's architecture.

At the end of November, an 'Evening with Ruskin' mini-late at the Museum, hosted by Professor Holmes, brought together the fantastic volunteers and collaborators from across the year's activities for the last event of the programme. This celebrated Ruskin-as-polymath, and marked the variety of activities and connections explored at the Museum over the year through tours, activities, short talks, readings, trails around the Museum, and opportunities to see archival and geology collections not usually on display. Grace Exley ran drawing workshops, a Crisis participant came along to deliver their tour, and Susan Newell manned a display of geology collections in front of the display case on William Buckland. Professor John Holmes' gave the opening address, and at the end of the night read an excerpt from a lecture that Ruskin originally gave at the Museum in 1872. The latter struck a particular note with event attendees, with many commenting on the moving relevance of the speech today.

Overall, the Ruskin 200 programme has demonstrated how an events strand focused on the relationships between art and science, particularly at this historically significant museum of natural sciences, can lead to a variety of new opportunities for engaging audiences and enrich visions of the natural world both at the Museum and beyond.





## PERFORMING VISIONS OF NATURE

**100**

tickets booked for evening concert (fully booked) with full attendance

**60** attendees for panel session

**2** musicians on panel  
**1** museum scientist  
**1** poet  
**1** host (John Holmes)

## TOUR TRAINING WITH CRISIS OXFORD

**1** outreach session at Crisis centre

**4** training sessions at Museum

**2** tours given at Museum

“

**I surprised myself by speaking in front of strangers** ”

Crisis participant who delivered an excellent tour

## CELEBRATING EVENING WITH RUSKIN

Reading corner with art competition catalogue to view &

**15** publications to browse

**2** publications by John Holmes

“ **It was a different experience and to see it at night - made me more appreciative of the carvings** ”

Evening with Ruskin attendee

**9** activity stations around the Museum manned by staff & volunteers

**17** archival items on show in exhibit themed on ‘fire’ and ‘ice’ complementing murals in Director’s office

**100%** of attendees who gave feedback stated they enjoyed the evening

**75%** of attendees who gave feedback stated they ‘didn’t know anything’ about John Ruskin before event suggesting it attracted a new audience

“ **I really enjoyed the Ruskin themed museum tour and learnt a lot about the Museum through that - [the Museum] felt more accessible after this evening** ”

Evening with Ruskin attendee





Detail of The Structure by Stuart Bebb, winner of the Ruskin 200 Art Competition, professional category

### Special thanks

The Ruskin 200 programme at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History would not have been possible without the many collaborators involved, from local Oxford partners including Fusion Arts and Crisis Skylight, to colleagues at the University of Oxford including the Ashmolean Museum, and Joint Museums Volunteer Service, as well as academic connections spearheaded by Professor John Holmes (University of Birmingham), who provided not only rich content during events but also generously contributed to the planning of the programming and its interdisciplinary focus.

### Further Reference

Blog entry on the Ruskin 200 Art Competitions by co-organizer Michell Alcock [https://morethanadodo.com/2019/03/01/ruskin-200-art-competition/April 2019](https://morethanadodo.com/2019/03/01/ruskin-200-art-competition/April%202019)

Copies of the Ruskin 200 Art Catalogue are available in the Museum shop.

Professor John Holmes' *The PreRaphaelites and Science* <https://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?k=9780300232066>

Professor John Holmes and Professor Paul Smith 'Visions of nature: reviving Ruskin's legacy at the Oxford University Museum' in *The Journal of Art Historiography*, Issue 22, May 2020.



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