

JOHN RUSKIN, *THE SEVEN LAMPS OF ARCHITECTURE* (1851)
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The Lamp of Truth

V. The violations of truth, which dishonour poetry and painting, are thus for the most part confined to the treatment of their subjects. But in architecture another and a less subtle, more contemptible, violation of truth is possible; a direct falsity of assertion respecting the nature of material, or the quantity of labour. And this, in the full sense of the word, wrong; it is as truly deserving of reprobation as any other moral delinquency; it is unworthy alike of architects and of nations. . . .

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VI. Architectural Deceits are broadly to be considered under three heads:

- 1st. The suggestion of a mode of structure or support, other than true one; as in pendants of late Gothic roofs.
- 2nd. The painting of surfaces to represent some other material than that of which they actually consist (as in the marbling of wood), or the deceptive representation of sculptured ornament upon them.
- 3rd. The use of cast or machine-made ornaments of any kind.

Now, it may be broadly stated, that architecture will be noble exactly in the degree in which all these false expedients are avoided. Nevertheless, there are certain degrees of them, which, owing to their frequent usage, or to other causes, have so far lost the nature of deceit as to be admissible; as, for instance, gilding, which is in architecture no deceit, because it is therein not understood for gold; while in jewellery it is a deceit, because it is so understood. . . .

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VII. Structural Deceits. I have limited these to the determined and purposed suggestion of a mode of support other than the true one. The architect is not bound to exhibit structure; nor are we to complain of him for concealing it, any more than we should regret that the outer surfaces of the human frame conceal much of its anatomy; nevertheless, that building will generally be the noblest, which to an intelligent eye discovers the great secrets of its structure, as an animal form does, although from a careless observer they may be concealed. In the vaulting of a Gothic roof it is no deceit to throw the strength into the ribs of it, and make the intermediate vault a mere shell. Such a structure would be presumed by an intelligent observer, the first time he saw such a roof; and the beauty of its traceries would be enhanced to him if they confessed and followed the lines of its main strength. If, however, the intermediate shell were made of wood instead of stone, and whitewashed to look like the rest, — this so would, of course, be direct deceit, and altogether unpardonable.

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IX. Perhaps the most fruitful source of these kinds of corruption which we have to guard against in recent times, is one which, nevertheless, comes in a "questionable shape," and of which it is not easy to determine the proper laws and limits; I mean the use of iron. The definition of the art of architecture, given in the first Chapter, * is independent of its materials. Nevertheless, that art having been, up to the beginning of the present century, practiced for the most part in clay, stone, or wood, it has resulted that the sense of proportion and the laws of structure have been based, the one altogether, the other in great part, on the necessities consequent on the employment of those materials; and that the entire or principal employment of metallic framework would,

* "Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatsoever uses, that the sign of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure."

therefore, be generally felt as a departure from the first principles of the art. Abstractedly there appears no reason why iron should not be used as well as wood; and the time is probably near when a new system of architectural laws will be developed, adapted entirely to metallic construction. But I believe that the tendency of all present sympathy and association is to limit the idea of architecture to non-metallic work; and that not without reason. For architecture being in its perfection the earliest, as in its elements it is necessarily the first, of arts, will always precede, in any barbarous nation, the possession of the science necessary either for the obtaining or the management of iron. Its first existence and its earliest laws must, therefore, depend upon the use of materials accessible in quantity, and on the surface of the earth; that is to say, clay, wood, or stone: and as I think it cannot but be generally felt that one of the chief dignities of architecture is its historical use, and since the latter is partly dependent on consistency of style, it will be felt right to retain as far as may be, even in periods of more advanced science, the materials and principles of earlier ages.

X. But whether this be granted me or not, the fact is, that every idea respecting size, proportion, decoration, or construction, on which we are at present in the habit of acting or judging, depends on presupposition of such materials: and as I both feel myself unable to escape the influence of these prejudices, and believe that my readers will be equally so, it may be perhaps permitted me to assume that true architecture does not admit iron as a constructive material, and that such works as the cast-iron central spire of Rouen cathedral, or the iron roofs and pillars of our railway stations, and of some of our churches, are not architecture at all. Yet it is evident that metals may, and sometimes must, enter into the construction to a certain extent, as nails in wooden architecture, and therefore, as legitimately, rivets and solderings in stone; neither can we well deny to the Gothic architect the power of supporting statues, pinnacles, or traceries by iron bars; and if we grant this, I do not see how we can help allowing Brunelleschi his iron chain around the dome of Florence, or the builders of Salisbury their elaborate iron binding of the central tower. . . . [W]e must find a rule which may enable us to stop somewhere. This rule is, I think, that metals may be used as a *cement*, but not as a *support*. . . .

XIX. The last form of fallacy which it will be remembered we had to deprecate, was the substitution of cast or machine work for that of the hand, generally expressible as *Operative Deceit*.

There are two reasons, both weighty, against this practice: one, that all cast and machine work is bad, as work; the other, that it is dishonest. Of its badness I shall speak in another place, that being evidently no efficient reason against its use when other cannot be had. Its dishonesty, however, which, to my mind, is of the grossest kind, is, I think, a sufficient reason to determine absolute and unconditional rejection of it.

Ornament, as I have often before observed, has two entirely distinct sources of agreeableness: one, that of the abstract beauty of its forms, which, for the present, we will suppose to be the same whether they come from the hand or the machine; the other, the sense of human labor and care spent upon it. . . . [A]ll our interest in the carved work, our sense of its richness . . . of its delicacy . . . results from our consciousness of its being the work of poor, clumsy, toilsome man. Its true delightfulness depends on our discerning in it the record of thoughts, and intents, and trials, and heartbreakings — of recoveries and joyfulnesses of success: all this *can* be traced by a practiced eye; but, granting it even obscure, it is presume or understood; and in that is the worth[†] of the thing, just as much as the worth of any thing else we call precious. The worth of a diamond is simply the understanding of the time it must take to look for it before it is found; and the worth of an ornament is the time it must take before it can be cut. It has an intrinsic value besides, which the diamond has not; (for a diamond has no more real beauty than a piece of glass;) but I do not speak of that at present; I place the two on the same ground; and I suppose that hand-wrought ornament can no more be generally known from machine work, than a diamond can be known from paste; nay, that the latter may deceive, for a moment the mason's, as the other the jeweller's eye; and that it can be detected only by the closest examination. Yet exactly as a woman of feeling would not wear false jewels, so would a builder of honour disdain false ornament. The using of them is just as downright and inexcusable a lie. You use that which pretends to a worth which it has not; which pretends to have cost, and to be, what it did not, and is not; it is an imposition, a vulgarity, an impertinence, and a sin. . . .

[†] "Worth is, of course, used here in the vulgar economists' sense, 'cost of production,' intrinsic value being distinguished from it in the next sentence.

This, then, being our general law, and I hold it for a more imperative one than any other I have asserted; and this kind of dishonesty the meanest, as the least necessary[‡]; for ornament is an extravagant and inessential thing; and therefore, if fallacious, utterly base. . .

XX. . . . But I believe no cause to have been more active in the degradation of our national feeling for beauty than the constant use of cast-iron ornaments. The common iron work of the middle ages was as simple as it was effective, composed of leafage cut flat out of sheet iron, and twisted at the workman's will. No ornaments, on the contrary, are so cold, clumsy, and vulgar, so essentially incapable of a fine line or shadow, as those of cast-iron. . . I feel very strongly that there is no hope of the progress of the arts of any nation which indulges in these vulgar and cheap substitutes for real decoration.

[‡] Again too much fuss and metaphysics about a perfectly simple matter; inconclusive besides, for the dishonesty of machine work would cease, as soon as it became universally practiced, of which universality there seems every likelihood in these days. . .