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Comparing Art and Society: John Ruskin's "The Stones of Venice"

The industrial revolution and the rising up of factories all over Victorian England led to the dehumanizing of the working class. John Ruskin, an art critic turned social critic, used art to argue how the working class of Victorian England should be treated. He argued that Gothic architecture and the builders of the structures, because they didn't focus on perfection, were a better model for how a society should be, compared to the perfection based Victorian society.

Ruskin states in his essay "The Stones of Venice," that Gothic architecture had certain external elements, such as "savageness, changefulness, naturalism" (1580) which made the structures built during that time beautiful. Ruskin says that the Modern English society is reminiscent of the Greeks and Assyrian cultures that enslaved their workers because the workers knowledge and power was less than their masters. This is because the English upper class "intensely desires, in all things, the utmost completion or perfection compatible with their nature" (1584). Because of this, Ruskin argues that the working man "was only a machine...an animated tool" (1585).

Ruskin calls for an adjustment on how the working class is treated, "Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions" because it "unhumanizes them" (1585). Ruskin suggests that the working man "begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing" (1585), because this is when the working man begins to live. Like Gothic architecture, the working man is not perfect, and making him work using perfection is demeaning, because "nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect" (1589).