

# Art at the Rockface

## Making an exhibition on the Fascination of Stone

by Nigel Larkin and Andrew Moore

### Introduction

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Unearthing outstanding mineral or fossil finds in their original context can be a thrilling and informative personal experience. Studying geological specimens arranged in a collection in systematic order can be illuminating, rewarding and extremely educational. The same may be said of the thrill of uncovering the original contexts and meanings of works of art. A rarer but more complex, but nevertheless enjoyable experience is to unearth, research and present a hidden history that reveals the fundamental interconnectedness of two seemingly quite separate subjects.

This article describes a new approach to creating exhibitions which in this case set out to discover the hidden history of how Geology and Art have been inextricably linked since, literally, time immemorial. Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery was delighted to win the top award offered by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Regional Museums Initiative funding programme to make the concept a reality, in association with Sheffield Museums and Galleries Trust. The approach is new essentially because it is co-curated by a curator of geology as well as an art historian who together, and with the help of colleagues, have undertaken a geological approach to understanding the development of art. *Art at the Rockface: The Fascination of Stone* seeks to present a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural history of art from cave painting to the present day, demonstrating along the way that stone has always been central to our sense of ourselves. The range of selected artworks aims to highlight the diversity of our response to stone and to encourage a different way of seeing art.

Nothing illuminates the brevity of human life for us more clearly than our understanding of the planet on which we live. Artists over the millennia have responded to the geological environment surrounding them and have preserved a record of our relationship to the earth as a source of inspiration.



John Brett (1831-1902)  
*Glacier of Rosenlauri*, 1856  
Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 41.9 cm  
Tate, London. Purchased 1946  
© Tate, London 2005

This exhibition examines the principal ways by which artists have explored the geology of landscapes and the forms within individual stones in their quest for truth. Those who sculpt with the chisel, grind pigments, create landscapes, fashion jewellery or work with graphite pencils are connecting directly to the rock beneath their feet. Early peoples drew or painted on the rockface and fashioned flint by which to live. More recently humankind has selected stone to build and sculpt, often making symbols for worship - and we have consistently conferred values, properties and meanings upon specific types of stones.

The study of stone in art cannot be separated from that of the forces that have made the Earth. At times a belief in the sacred has informed artists' desire to make art. To cite just one example, in Japan Mount Fuji has a central, essential presence which is both geological and sacred within Japanese society, being host to numerous Shintō and Buddhist deities. Indeed, Fuji is the focus of the Shugendō sect of Buddhism founded in the ninth century, which venerates not only mountains but mountain-climbing. A similar sense of the spiritual finds parallels in Chinese culture and in Western culture. Today artists are among those inspired to explore form and meaning in ways that invite a contemplative and sometimes explicit spiritual response. Equally, other non-spiritual themes remain common to different cultures, notably those of study or transformation, myth and memory, all fundamental to our sense of ourselves. These themes are the foundation upon which this study of the fascination and meaning of stone in the history of art is built.

### **Building the Exhibition**

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The exhibition embraces many fine works of art, including some iconic examples ranging from prehistory (rock engravings, Ogham stones, cup-and-ring marked boulders and an ancient Egyptian sandstone statue from the British Museum), through to works by artists including Salvator Rosa, Johann Zoffany (Charles Towneley with his collection of marble sculptures destined for the British Museum), Joseph Wright of Derby (*Eruption of Mount Vesuvius*), John Brett (*The Glacier at Rosenlauri*), Magritte (*The Human Condition*) and Burne-Jones (*Pygmalion*).

Also included are fine examples of sculpture by Hepworth, Moore, Epstein, Emily Young and the letter sculptor Gary Breeze. The decorative arts include medieval and contemporary jewellery, a royal crown, an early seventeenth century *pietre dure* Collector's cabinet, made for Emperor Rudolph at Prague (Gilbert Collection), and a Grand Tourist's *pietre dure* table on loan from Trinity College Library, Cambridge. Architecture is represented by C. R.

Cockerell's astonishing *The Professor's Dream*, which in 2005 was the subject of an exhibition in its own right at the Royal Academy of Arts, London.



Tadayuki Naitoh (born 1941)  
*Ryouan-ji 2*, 1996  
Crystal print, 22 x 22 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© Tadayuki Naitoh

Eastern responses to stone are represented by material including Scholar's Rocks and ancient worked jade from China and medieval Islamic amulets made of lapis lazuli, carnelian and quartz (British Museum). Drawings and watercolours include works by Leonardo da Vinci, Cozens, Ruskin and Andy Goldsworthy. Photography is represented by Francis Frith (*The Pyramids*), Cecil Beaton's portrait of the young Queen Elizabeth at her coronation weighed down by the stones of State (National Portrait Gallery), Bill Brandt, Tadayuki Naitoh (the Zen Rock Garden at Ryouanji, Kyoto), Thomas Joshua Cooper and Victorian and Edwardian explorers.

Geological specimens have been deliberately selected for display that are relevant visually and historically to the manuscripts, paintings, sculptures, books and works of decorative art on show. These include examples of minerals that have been mined, crushed and processed to make the pigments that have variously decorated our bodies, caves, monuments, buildings, and canvases over tens of thousands of years, an important theme that recurs throughout the exhibition. An introductory essay, *Painting with Stone*, by Nigel Larkin in the accompanying book of the exhibition expands upon this theme, exploring the development of pigments through the ages and describing how geological resources have helped shape the history of art.

The process of selecting the artworks and specimens was a heady experience. National and regional museums all responded, some with remarkable generosity, as did private collectors, including Her Majesty the Queen. We received £100,000 from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation in support of the project, enabling us to select works of art from all over the UK. Our initial selection was often compromised along the way when requests to borrow items were refused, but the breadth of the thesis enabled us to approach other lenders, often with remarkable results. Sometimes potential works of art were refused because they were promised for other exhibitions, usually abroad. On occasion loans were refused because they are regarded as key elements of established displays. However, most museums were keen to participate in order to support the objectives of the project. The Trustees of Salisbury Museum were especially generous in lending their iconic work by J.M.W. Turner, *Stonehenge*. Bolton Museum was persuaded to lend by the proposal to make a masterpiece exchange: Norwich Castle is lending Bolton Cornelis Engelsz' *The Supper at Emmaus*, in exchange for Bolton's superb example of American Sublime painting by Bolton painter Thomas Moran (1837-1926), *Nearing Camp, Evening on the Upper Colorado River*,

*Wyoming*, 1882. This was an exceptionally generous decision as it removed from display their single most celebrated painting at a time when the Gallery is reopening after refurbishment.

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery stepped in to lend their example of *The Great Wave* by Hokusai, having already agreed to lend their masterpiece by Edward Lear *The Mountains of Thermopylae*, when it became apparent that the British Museum had promised their example of *The Great Wave* to another exhibition. The National Gallery made an important gesture by lending their *Saint Jerome*, by Albrecht Durer, exquisitely apposite to the theme as it includes the artist's painting of a comet on its reverse. The National museums have all made significant loans, in line with increased commitments to lend to the regions. Both Norwich and Sheffield have enjoyed long-standing partnerships with Tate, while Norwich also is a regional partner of the British Museum and Sheffield with the Victoria & Albert Museum, who were also extremely generous. For multi-disciplinary museums to lend to a multi-cultural show is a highly complex business for the lending and borrowing institutions involved, as lending procedures, photography, conservation measures, copyright issues, transport and courier arrangements all have to be co-ordinated between each of the departments and between the institutions.

National-regional partnerships gain in importance when regional museums themselves are able to work in partnership. These partnerships more than compensate for the constraints imposed by other factors, such as the costs associated with borrowing artworks from international sources, or the practicalities of moving heavy works of art such as Easter Island statues (in the end we could contemplate only a small portable carved head and an engraved boulder from Easter Island from the collection of the British Museum, rather than an eight-tonne statue, however iconic!). The delicate state of some works of art (for example John Brett's *The Stonebreaker*, National Museums, Merseyside) made them impossible to contemplate moving. One story we would have liked to have included was the new evidence that the eruption of Krakatoa influenced the primeval, lurid background of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, rather than any necessarily expressionist motive by the artist. The fact that this is a too-often stolen national icon militated against considering this loan from Norway!

The overwhelming constraint, however, is the finite physical space available for the show at each venue. To help overcome this, at Norwich we try to programme complimentary shows from the permanent collections, in this case a display entitled *Rocks Extremely Grand..*, which presents English Watercolours from the Norwich collection, alongside a display of photographs by Roger Whitfield of Cadair Idris, the mountain that so inspired the Norwich watercolourist John Sell Cotman. We are also dedicating additional space in our geology gallery to minerals associated with the manufacture of pigments through the ages including cinnabar, lapis lazuli, malachite, crocoite and ochres. In Sheffield the exhibition will be given an additional focus with a display devoted to the critic, writer and artist John Ruskin, selected from the holdings of Sheffield Museums and Galleries Trust and the University of Lancaster. Author of *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin is the prime example

of the aesthetic motive behind the study of rocks and their representation in nineteenth century art.

## Exploring the Themes

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In order to marshal this enormous range of material to tell a coherent story, the exhibition is divided into six sections. The first of these addresses the idea of *The Fundamental Landscape*. These are the landscapes of history, beyond the memory of mankind. Geological formations have always had an impact upon the human imagination. Mountains provide the habitat of the gods and of monsters; the seas contain landscapes that we can barely imagine. The response to fundamental feelings engendered by awesome events through Geological Time has been made manifest in mankind since the earliest times. Early man's response was to kill and make sacrifice using the materials at hand - with skill and art - by which to live. The earth's crust abounds with iron oxides, ochres, and rubified earths providing the original palette of pigments for the artist.

The second section is entitled *Travel and Exploration*. Confrontation with new landscapes is made possible through travel. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the Grand Tour of Europe was a prime means by which a young and cultured gentleman might complete his education. While his quest included the artefacts of civilization, he was also confronted by changing landscapes, often of the most awesome nature. Travellers, including artists, throughout the centuries were tested by the beauty, horror and sublimity of the landscapes through which they passed, before mountaineers sought to attain the peaks as an expression of personal quest and endurance.



Pietro Fabris (active 1756-1804)

*Campi Phlegraei*, frontispiece to the 1779 Supplement to '*Campi Phlegraei, Observations on the Volcanoes of the Two Sicilies, As They have been communicated to the Royal Society of London*' by Sir William Hamilton, Naples, 1776, 1779

Etching and watercolour in printed book, 46 x 34.3 cm

Natural History Museum, London

© Natural History Museum, London

The medieval mind sought meaning in rocks, making lapidaries, which recorded their symbolic associations, subsequently propagated by alchemy. Change and transformation have fascinated artists and makers since at least Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided a text. The third section, called *Metamorphosis*, explores the power of rock and stone to change and be changed, whether by the human hand or the forces of nature. The change

may be physical, reflecting the processes of changing earths into pigments, ores into metals, stones into sculptures or it may be magical or symbolic. A stone may be thought to protect the wearer and improve his status, bring good luck, indicate poisons or change whatever it touches. Stones have had different meanings in different cultures but their importance is universal, whether symbolizing wealth, power, status or healing.

The study of rocks has traditionally inspired artists at least since the Renaissance and this is the focus of the fourth section, *Studying the Rockface*. The landscape background in Renaissance religious painting or portraiture is often uniquely attuned to the region in which it is painted. Michelangelo was the first sculptor known to study the stone on site, perceiving the human form within it, before selecting the marble for his commission in hand. Durer's work was informed by his study of nature, including the rock formations at a quarry outside Nuremberg. In the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin lamented that in his day no contemporary artist seemed interested in creating representations of landscape that would be of interest to geologists: 'it is only in ancient art that, generally speaking, we find any careful realization of Stones'. Those most admired by Ruskin included J.M.W. Turner, and later John Brett. Yet Ruskin was to fall out with Brett when he felt that his representations of the rocks and mountains were too literal.



The fifth section is entitled *Prayer and Meditation*. The Christian faith has frequently used rock as a symbolic aid to prayer and belief. For example, stories in biblical texts tell us of St. Peter as Christ's rock, while Moses strikes the rock to bring water. Zen philosophy teaches that we can experience the large in the small, the universal in the personal – in a grain of sand we may glimpse the meaning of the world.

Attributed to Valerio Belli (1468-probably 1546)

*Pax*, c.1500-50

Silver-gilt and ormolu with lapis lazuli, 21.2 x 11.2 cm

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

For centuries Japanese Zen masters have cultivated gardens of harmoniously arranged rocks and raked gravel, to create landscapes for peaceful contemplation. They have been called 'gardens of the mind'. The tradition of arranging rocks with meaning goes back to 3000 BC. In Japan, Mount Fuji has a central, essentially geological presence. The great woodblock artist, Hokusai (1760-1849) made hundreds of images of Fuji at different seasons and from various viewpoints. The Japanese sense of the spiritual finds parallels in Chinese culture as well as in Western culture. Contemporary artists are among those inspired to explore form and meaning in this way.

The final section explores *Memory, Myth and Meaning*. Some of the geological phenomena represented in this section are in their natural place, manifesting their earthly origins. Sometimes the stones have been deliberately placed in a specific context and are carved, evidence of the intervention of mankind and evoking the memory of ancient eras and civilizations – perhaps Neolithic, or those of Greece or Rome. A churchyard offers memorial stones that chart family achievement and loss. A quarry will bear witness to the suffering and human cost associated with mining. At other times the rocks and stones we see are natural and uncarved, yet appear arranged by some unseen hand. In this way ancient and modern artists have called to our attention the natural formations of our surroundings and responded by recording and showing their response.

The accompanying book *Art at the Rockface: The fascination of Stone* explores, through colour plates and descriptive texts, approximately half of the total number of works of art in the exhibition and aims to address the themes in more depth than is possible in a visit to an exhibition. The breadth and diversity of the artworks selected for this publication aim to highlight the range of ideas within the exhibition, rather than provide a full record of the entire show. An active public programme of adult, school and family events takes place in association with this exhibition in the form of art workshops, guided tours and lectures in both Norwich and Sheffield.

## **Conclusion**

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We have greatly enjoyed working with our colleagues in Sheffield and have received considerable support from colleagues within the lending national and regional museums and galleries, as well as artists and private collections, as the project has developed. By lending to the exhibition, owners have jointly encouraged an engagement with the works of art and geological specimens in an entirely new way. Many contributors responded directly to the initiative of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation by supporting this thematic approach to understanding the wealth of regional as well as national art collections. We trust that this show will help to increase awareness of the significant role that geology has played in our cultural heritage, the real value of temporary and touring shows and the benefits of establishing a national funding programme to encourage collaborative enterprise across the United Kingdom. We trust that this article has whetted your appetite, and we hope you get to enjoy the show.

*Art at the Rockface: The Fascination of Stone* is on show at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery from the 22nd of May to the 3rd of September 2006 and Millennium Galleries, Sheffield, from the 23rd of September 2006 to the 7th of January 2007. The accompanying book will be available in softback from the venues (price £9.95 to be confirmed) - *Art at the Rockface: The fascination of Stone*, by Andrew Moore and Nigel Larkin (eds.), Philip Wilson 2006, 96 pp., 65 illustrations, with a foreword by Andrew Smith, author of the best-selling book *Moondust* and contributions from Francesca Vanke Altman, Giorgia Bottinelli, Nicholas Thornton and Norma Watt.

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