



Image credit: Francesco Allegretto

20 April – 11 July 2023

Tracery – Venice and the Lakes Interlaced by Déirdre Kelly

I would endeavour to trace the lines of this image before it be for ever lost, and to record, as far as I may, the warning which seems to be to be uttered by every one of the fast-gaining waves, that beat, like passing bells, against the Stones of Venice. John Ruskin, 'The Stones of Venice'

Tracery is an exhibition of Déirdre Kelly's works that emulate Ruskin's dedication to observation. Ruskin was captivated by tracery in Venice – in two senses. He recorded, in word and with his own hand, the actual architectural traceries of the city. But he also set himself to trace the historical origins of the stone lacework, seeking everywhere a virtue in the act of creation without which, he argued, there can be no true beauty. He placed immense value on the work of the hand, finding in it the workings of the engaged and valued soul.

Kelly has engaged in an intimate virtual dialogue with the lace-makers of Venice's past, via privileged access to the historic lace collections. She has made a new series of works that manipulates cartography, using the aesthetic language of lace; she has traced the authentic antique Venetian lace designs into maps of the Lake District and other places, in a thoughtful response to the outstanding lace collection archived in the Museum of Lace in Burano and Library of the History of Textiles and Costume at Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice. Given the events of 2019 onwards, new metaphors are superimposed on this delicate work, historical lace serving as a meditation on the vulnerability and beauty that is the reality of Venice today.

Ruskin himself added the dimension of words when tracing the connections between nature and art in Venice. When describing the Gothic architecture he loved, Ruskin could easily be describing a piece of lacework: *"...Their capitals rich with interwoven tracery, rooted knots of herbage, and drifting leaves of acanthus and vine, and mystical signs, all beginning and ending in the Cross: and above them in the broad archivolt, a continuous chain of language and life."*

In *Fors Clavigera*, a series of letters addressed to the workers of Britain, Ruskin set out to re-validate the worth and stature of not just handcrafts but also of craftsmen and craftswomen. He was particularly concerned that women should have not just earning power but also fulfilment in their work. It's not surprising that Ruskin was interested in lace, which exemplified his passionate support for the use of local materials and traditional craft skills. In the Lake District, this was seen in his support of the Langdale Linen Industry. In his interest in lace, we also see his fascination with the 'following of the clew' – as Ariadne unwound the thread that guided Theseus out of the labyrinth. For Ruskin, this developed as a concept of tracing patterns in nature and art. Hence we have the technique now known in his honour as 'Ruskin Lace', a form of cut or 'reticella' lace, and needle lace. These works were inspired by the sumptuous ruffs and collars worn by sitters in portraits by Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto, yet another connection with his beloved Venice, and are presented in the extensive collection at the Ruskin Museum.

The exhibition 'Tracery' is also a desire to embrace and participate in the rich creativity of the female hand, always attuned to the delicate rhythms of nature and often far stronger than it seems. Like the lacemakers of the Lakes and those of Burano, Kelly has found ways to tell interwoven stories of lakes and lace and evoke journeys, superimposing new techniques on traditional crafts. Here given a contemporary reading, these worthy and long-surviving objects of beauty and adornment are finding a new audience and carried into the future.

Tracery opens on 20 April, in the Blue Gallery Studio at Brantwood, every day 10.30am-5.00pm. Admission is included in the house ticket. For further information please contact Brantwood, Coniston, LA21 8AD, Cumbria. T: 015394 41396. www.brantwood.org.uk