



Title	Teaching Art to the Working Class : John Ruskin and the Meaning of “Practical” Art
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Citation	The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory. 2017, 2, p. 77-88
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/90899">https://doi.org/10.18910/90899</a>
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John Ruskin and the Meaning of “Practical” Art

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The Second Asian Conference of Design History and Theory  
—Design Education beyond Boundaries—  
ACDHT 2017 TOKYO 1-2 September 2017  
Tsuda University

Teaching Art to the Working Class:  
John Ruskin and the Meaning of “Practical” Art

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## Abstract

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the burgeoning of various educational institutions for the working class. The precursor of these was the Working Men's College which opened in October 1854. Before its opening, to their delightful surprise, Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, offered his teaching Drawing class. The College's opening coincided with an interest in applying practical art and design to manufacturing, which had led the government to establish educational schemes and schools for art. First, the Normal School of Design in London was opened in 1837. And after the Great Exhibition, the Department of Practical Art of the Board of Trade was established in 1852. Ruskin protested against their educational schemes to connect art directly with manufacturing, and their idea that some limited pedagogy could teach students good design. Consequently, his teaching at the Working Men's College gave him a great opportunity to propose and put into practice his criticism against the government's art education. This paper will investigate the meaning of teaching "art" to and for the working class in relation to "practical" art, focusing on Ruskin's teaching at the Working Men's College and the influence of his teaching.

*Keyword: Working Men's College, John Ruskin, South Kensington System, Practical Art*

## Introduction

Reform in elementary education was juxtaposed with the implementation of the long-discussed idea of adult education. The middle of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of various educational movements and institutions for the adult working class, such as the University Extension Movement, the Working Men's College (1854), Ruskin College (1899), and later, the Workers' Educational Association (1903). The purpose of their activities was to provide working class people with the systematic and full-fledged curriculum of higher education which, so far, had been allowed only to the privileged class. This educational system should be distinguished from sporadic lectures held in mechanics' institutes, or public educational schemes to nurture professional workers. Interest in applying practical art and design to manufacturing had already led the country to open the Normal School of Design in London in 1837. And after the Great Exhibition, the Department of Practical Art of the Board of Trade was established at Marlborough House in 1852 under the leadership of Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave. Their scheme was called the "South Kensington System" and remained influential until the beginning of the twentieth century. Art teaching in the aforesaid working class educational institutions was destined to seek out its position and contents in the curriculum for the working class, and the meaning of the study of art in its relation to industry had been a major issue. This paper will look at the early days of art teaching at the Working Men's College, which was conducted by John Ruskin as its central figure, and its relation to practical art education promoted by the government.

### Art Teaching at the Working Men's College

#### The Opening of the Working Men's College

The idea of establishing the Working Men's College began with a series of meetings first organised by a Lincoln's Inn barrister, John Malcolm Ludlow. Ludlow was inspired by the Paris February Revolution in 1848 to think about the privileged class' duty to the poor. The newly-appointed Chaplain of Lincoln's Inn, and a Christian Socialist, Frederick Denison Maurice soon joined Ludlow, and they started the meeting in 1849. Soon others such as Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes, and Frederick James Furnivall attended a series of meetings, and they launched such educational activities as the opening of an infants' school during the daytime and teaching boys and men at night. Furnivall confessed that "[f]ew of us had any idea of the wide-spread misery in the workmen's homes around us, and fewer still knew how the slop-system had been at work lowering wages, destroying the honourable trade, and forcing women and children into their fathers' work" (Furnivall, 1860a, p. 145). In order to create a Working Men's Association, they asked for the cooperation of a chartist tailor, Walter Cooper. Thus, they formed the Society for Promoting Working Men's Associations and built the Hall of Association where classes and lectures were offered to working men and women. These activities led to the foundation of the Working Men's College (WMC). First they formed the Committee of Teaching and Publication with Maurice as its President.

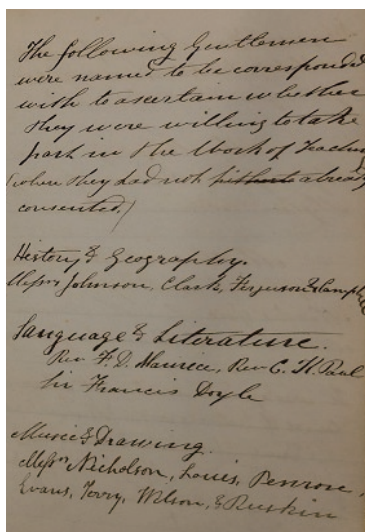


Fig.1 From the Minutes of Meetings in Relation to the College for Working Men. May 1854 (no exact date)

On February 7th, 1854, Maurice submitted a 12-page printed statement outlining the plan for the new College. The statement contained the following points: that the College put “human studies as the primary part of our education”; that “we were not bound to confine our education to our own associates, but that we should promote their interest better if we produced a scheme which should be available for the working classes generally”; that “the education should be regular and organic, not taking the form of mere miscellaneous lectures, or even of classes not related to each other”; that “the teachers, and, by degrees, the pupils, should form an organic body, so that the name of College should be at least as applicable to our institution”; and that “the College should, in some sense or other, immediately or ultimately, be self-governed and self-supported” (Furnivall, 1860a, p. 146).

Based on Maurice’s statement, they planned out the curriculum. According to the minutes of meetings starting in May 1854, they had already discussed which subjects to offer and had corresponded with several people asking them to take part in teaching. Music and Drawing had been already listed as the proposed subjects. Each subject had several names of probable instructors who “were willing to take part in the block of teaching” listed. For Music and Drawing, we encounter the names of Nicholson, Louis, Penrose, Evans, Terry, Wilson, “& Ruskin” as seen in [Fig. 1]. Interestingly Ruskin’s name seems to have been added later on the minutes, probably after they received his offer to teach at the College.

It would appear that the Committee never asked Ruskin to take up their Drawing class, or rather, they had never expected Ruskin, the renowned art critic who had already published *Modern Painters* I and II, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice* I, II, and III, to join their teaching staff. Furnivall, who had already developed a friendship with Ruskin, sent the Circular hoping to get his subscription, and it was no doubt a delightful surprise that Ruskin proposed to teach a Drawing class at the College. It is uncertain when and how Ruskin sent his offer to Furnivall, but the minutes recorded that he attended the first Council of Teachers held on October 28th.

Not only did Ruskin join the teaching staff, he also willingly let the College use his writings to generate publicity. On Oct. 30th, a day before the opening, the guests who attended the full meeting of the College were handed a copy of the chapter “On the Nature of Gothic,” a eulogy of working men and their creativity, from Volume Two of *The Stones of Venice*, as an introduction of sorts to the College’s ideals. Furnivall (1860b) recollected:

TEACHING ART TO THE WORKING CLASS: JOHN RUSKIN  
AND THE MEANING OF “PRACTICAL” ART

As our visitors came up the stairs, each received a copy of Mr. Ruskin's eloquent and noble chapter on the Nature of Gothic Architecture, *and herein of the Functions of the Workman in Art*, which he and his publishers kindly allowed me to reprint, for the purpose of showing what sort of fellow one of our Teachers was. (p.168; emphasis in original)

Thus the Working Men's College was officially opened on the following day, the 31st of October.

### John Ruskin and Art Classes at the Working Men's College

Both Music and Drawing classes had been previously arranged for Wednesdays according to a meeting in May 1854. But the class schedule for the First Term (November to Christmas, 1854) shows that Ruskin taught Drawing class on Thursday from 7 to 9 o'clock in the evening but Music class was not on the list.

According to a Ruskin's biographer, Tim Hilton (2002), Ruskin's motive of teaching Drawing at the WMC might have been personal. Hilton asserts that Ruskin liked to "work quietly at an elementary level, far from public renown" (p. 204). While his position as an art critic became firmly established with a series of writings on art and architecture, he was also facing a private crisis at the time. In July 1854, a judge declared the marriage of Ruskin and Effie to be nulled and their marriage virtually came to an end. Ruskin sent several letters to Furnivall around this time on this matter. Ruskin's interest in the Working Men's College suggested that he needed to turn a new page in his life.

It is believed that Ruskin was distant from the principal, F. D. Maurice. Maurice had a different religious viewpoint from that of Ruskin and was likely to be indifferent about teaching art. Furnivall mentioned that the French class and the Drawing class had attracted the most students in the series of lectures and classes held at the Hall of Association (Furnivall, 1860a, p. 145), and it can be concluded that Drawing was incorporated into the curriculum for its probable popularity and appeal to the future students.

In one of the earlier addresses to the WMC students, however, Maurice (1859) named "Art" as the foremost subject working men should study, admitting his ignorance in this field and the difficulty of including this subject in the curriculum, as follows:

With which of our studies, then, do I propose to begin? Some of my friends on the Council, in trying to lay down a chart of our studies, found *Art* the province which it was most difficult to include, or at least to assign to its proper latitude and longitude. Now, from my point of view, Art presents itself before other topics. Why? Because I am considering what each study has to do with *you*, how it comes into contact with *your* life. Now the words *Artisan*, *Artificer*, *Artist*, may be very distinct indeed. But they must have some close connection with each other, and it must be very desirable to trace out that connection, even for the purpose of finding out the difference. From this point, then, I should take my start. (p. 6; emphases in original)

Here notice should be taken not only of the fact that Maurice praised the importance of Art in the College's education, but also of the role of studying art that he advocates; that art should

enable the students to trace out their own identity as working men. Based on the defining of “Art” as skill in the practical application of knowledge or learning, his remark has close affinity with the government educational scheme regarding art.

Interest in applying practical art and design to manufacturing led the country in 1837 to establish and sponsor the Normal School of Design in London, a vocational training school for improving the design of British commodities. They also ran provincial centres with local institutions. The successful Great Exhibition in 1851 led to both the founding of the Department of Practical Art of the Board of Trade at Marlborough House and the construction of the Museum of Ornamental Manufactures (which later became the Victoria and Albert Museum) in the following year. In 1853, the Department of Science and Art was established. The central figures in these activities were Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, who tried to enact an educational system to nurture art masters who could teach at elementary schools. Consequently, they created the “National Course of Instruction,” which was the official art training scheme. With this, elementary drawing examinations were introduced into public day schools.

The “National Course of Instruction” was eventually known as the South Kensington System, since the Department of Science and Art moved from Marlborough House to South Kensington in 1857. It was a rigid, mechanistic course emphasising hand skills for purely utilitarian purposes. It followed printed examples of “flat diagrams in hard outlines” which was copied by the students diligently and, instead of natural objects, they used ornamental casts. There were 23 Stages of Instructions and sometimes about half of the students stopped at Stage 2 and couldn’t go beyond that (Haslam, 2005, p. 145). It was “self-financing as well as self-perpetuating through an elaborate system of competitions, prizes, examinations, and payment by results” (Hewison, 1996, p. 10).

It is clear that some of the students who took Drawing classes at the WMC had been taught under the government system (Hewison, p. 9), and the original plan of the WMC had been to keep its tie with the Government Schools. The biggest reason for that seems to have been the lack of equipment necessary for conducting Drawing classes. The minutes of a meeting dated June 6th recorded a suggestion for the class. It reads “Mr. Dickinson [Lowes Dickinson] suggested that the students in Drawing be remitted to the Government Schools of Design in order to avail themselves of the appliances there existing for the prosecution of such studies” (*Minutes*, 1854-1855).

For the WMC, having Ruskin as a teacher not only raised the reputation of the College, but also solved the problem of appliances and facilities. Joining the faculty, Ruskin provided the College with specially made high-quality drawing paper, easels, and all sorts of materials. Furthermore, he made arrangements for a third-floor studio with two small rooms knocked into one to be available to students who would like to draw or study during their free time (Haslam, p. 149). Ruskin’s role at the College was not limited to teaching; he was also one of its major benefactors. For example, he donated to the library a variety of books of all genres including quite a few volumes of art books, and to the College Museum a collection of minerals, including the beautiful set of Alpine specimens, which might have been used in his Drawing class.

For the Second Term, starting January 9th, Lowes Dickinson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti



CLASSES	1st Term.	2d Term.	3d Term.	4th Term.	5th Term.
Politics	8	5	12	9	15
Law	4	4	3	...	5
Geography and History of England	9	4	8	10	17
English Poets, (Shakespeare, &c.)	12	8	17	13	16
Drawing	33	40	43	48	48
Modelling	...	...	...	15	6
Natural Philosophy and Astronomy	14	...	...	...	...
Mechanics	6	...	...	...	...
Structure and Functions of Human Body	3	3	4	...	...
Chemistry	...	...	...	12	10
Physical Geography	...	...	3	8	7
On the Microscope (an Occasional Course)	...	...	...	22	...
Algebra	46	27	24	16	25
Geometry	21	11	25	13	18
Trigonometry	...	...	...	...	5
English Grammar	42	26	20	23	35
Structure and Derivation of English Words	...	4	1	7	7
French	...	40	42	35	83
Latin	...	29	20	26	43
Greek	...	...	...	...	4
English (for Foreigners)	...	...	...	8	...
Aggregate number attending Classes	145	155	158	174	233

Fig.2 Table of the students enrolled in the first five terms at the Working Men's College

joined Ruskin in teaching Drawing. In the end of January Rossetti separately started the Monday class of the Figure Drawing (later, the class schedule for the Fourth Term reads "Drawing [*The Figure,—after Nature, and Casts from Nature.*]" ) while Ruskin and Dickinson taught Elementary and Landscape Drawing. In the Fourth Term Modelling classes were added on Tuesdays taught by Thomas Woolner and on Fridays by Alexander Munro, both of whom were affiliated to Pre-Raphaelite Movement (with Woolner as its original member) and close to Rossetti. Rossetti recommended Woolner and Munro to the College and the popularity of the Drawing classes probably paved the way for inserting this new field of art into the curriculum. In the earlier days of the College, the Drawing classes were not offered during summer since Ruskin and other teachers were out of town. Still, Drawing and Modelling rooms were open every night and the class schedule tells that "the Teachers may attend the Drawing-classes on Thursdays [Ruskin and Dickinson's], and the Modelling-classes on Tuesdays [Woolner's], if they are in town, but no attendance of Teachers is guaranteed." This suggests how enthusiastic Ruskin was about teaching at the College. In the Second Term of the Second Year, Thursday's class was divided into Dickinson's on Tuesdays and Ruskin's on Thursdays. According to Robert Hewison (1996), Ruskin taught only the beginners, "some of whom had no knowledge of

drawing at all, and he set only very basic exercises in black and white” (p. 8). After the students acquired some confidence and competence, they were to be taught by Dickinson and then sent to Rossetti, who introduced colour and taught figure drawing.

No doubt those art classes were very popular among the students. Maurice mentioned in the *First Annual Report* (1855) that “[n]o classes have been more successful than those on Drawing; in none has the progress of the pupils been more marked” (p. 3). The table showing the number of students enrolled in the first five terms proves their popularity (Maurice, *First Annual Report*, p.3).

Although Modelling classes had just started, there was the anticipation that they would gain more popularity. Ruskin, however, did not welcome this prospect. Furnivall (1860c) recollected as follows:

In the fourth Term, Modelling was introduced among our art-students, and was taught by Mr. Munro and Mr. Woolner, the one as noted for the grace and loveliness of his sculptures as the other for the vigour and character of his. The kitchens at the College were turned into modelling-rooms, men appeared smudged with white clay, and the class went on well for a few Terms; but it made so many of the Drawing Class pupils lazy at their drawing, that Mr. Ruskin told them they must either draw or model,--they had shown him they had not time for both; soon after which the Modelling Class collapsed. (p. 189)

This anecdote presents further proof how serious Ruskin was about his teaching. After the Modelling class was dropped from the curriculum in the Second Term of the Fourth Year, 1858, however, Woolner and Munro both stayed on the Council of Teachers, probably voluntarily helping those who would like to pursue their interest in modelling.

### Going against “South Kensington”

#### Drawing for Looking Properly

The fact that Ruskin was strongly against the South Kensington System is well-known. Drawing classes at the WMC presented a great opportunity for him to practically express his criticism against the government-led utilitarian art education as well as to propagate his teaching among the underprivileged. First, he virtually cut the College’s tie, which had been originally proposed by Dickinson, with the Government Schools of Design, by arranging the facilities and equipping appliances he believed to be the proper tools for art teaching.

Second, the skill of drawing was, for Ruskin, to develop “Sight,” or the perception to look at things properly. With this ability, “we can see things as they are” (Ruskin, 1905/1858, p.180). His purpose was not to turn working men into professional artists or designers. Rather, he believed that everybody should learn how to draw in order to perceive our environment correctly and by doing so enrich his or her life. In his speech to new students at the WMC in 1860, Ruskin is recorded as having remarked as follows:

TEACHING ART TO THE WORKING CLASS: JOHN RUSKIN  
AND THE MEANING OF “PRACTICAL” ART

My own class, he said, has the special characteristic of being, in common phrase, the most *useless* of any in the College: none bears less immediately on practical life. But the true use of learning to draw is that it refines and increases the pleasure we take in looking at common things. The root of all healthy life is not the desire to change one's circumstances, but the power of getting the greatest amount of enjoyment out of the circumstances one is in. The power is increased by anything which increases our perception of what is beautiful, and here the Drawing Class tells. ("News," 1860b, pp. 177-178; emphasis in original)

His art teaching was part of "liberal" education and intended not only for students in the WMC, but for the general public, and is something that remains pertinent even today.

In his book *The Elements of Drawing* written based on his teaching at the WMC, he condemned how the Government Schools of Design, where students copied from flat diagrams with hard outlines, and used ornamental casts for their study tools, were "all too much in the habit of confusing art as *applied* to manufacture, with manufacture itself" (emphasis in original). Good design cannot be created by merely copying or imitating good design. "Obtain first the best work you can, and the ablest hands, irrespective of any consideration of economy or facility of production" (Ruskin, 1904/1857, p. 12). In Ruskin's class, students were made to draw from natural objects, not two-dimensional model examples. And instead of starting with an outline, which was the approach taken in South Kensington, Ruskin made students first pay attention to local colour and shade. We can imagine how students who had become accustomed to copying from flat diagrams were perplexed by Ruskin's first exercise of drawing a white leather ball suspended by string. In this way, students were intended to learn that adding shade gave the appearance of projection.

### Against Competition

In addition, Ruskin did not believe in having any rigid rules. He paid special attention to each student's ability and strength. Consequently, he was against the elements of competition and examination which were incorporated into the South Kensington System. In another talk to the students, Ruskin explained why Drawing class should be distinguished from the rest of the College classes in its management:

Referring to the examinations which are to be held on other subjects, [Ruskin] said that nothing of the kind could be attempted in his class; that any sort of competition in art-work was invariably pernicious, leading men to strive for *effect* instead of truth. It was impossible, moreover, for a teacher to be sure that in his own instructions he did not give an advantage to one student over another; he found it, he said, impossible to conquer the temptation to bestow most help on those whom he saw making the most use of what he taught them. This kind of premium was the only thing in the shape of a prize which could find its way into the Drawing Class. ("News," 1860a, p. 67; emphasis in original)

Some of those who made "the most use of what he taught them," such as William Ward, George Allen, and J. P. Emslie, eventually became artists themselves and helped Ruskin in his publica-

tions as well as teaching Drawing classes at the WMC.

This argument should be developed in the broader contexts of national art education with its goal to improve the design of British commodities to compete in the international market. When a parliamentary committee examined Maurice and Ruskin, there arose a lively discussion concerning the effects of competition between foreign and English workmen, as well as the relative positions of workmen in England and other countries. Based on his experience in the WMC, Ruskin answered the questions posed by the committee. To the question: "It is your conviction that we may look at this vast extension of trade and commerce and competition, altogether as an evil?" His answer went: "Not on the vast extension of trade, but on the vast extension of the struggle of man with man, instead of the principle of help of man by man." And to the next question: "You did not intend to cast a slur upon the idea of competition?" Ruskin emphatically answered: "Yes, very distinctly. I intended not only to cast a slur, but to express my excessive horror of the principle of competition, in every way" ("Art instruction for the people," 1860, p. 130). His abhorrence of the teaching of "practical art" was founded not only on aesthetic and educational motives but also on his criticism of national capitalistic intentions.

The entry for April 9th, 1856, of the minutes of meetings reads as follows:

A letter was read from Mr Edward J. Elliot offering to teach a class gratuitously on two evenings in the week the elements of Architecture & Civil Engineering—and also a letter from Mr Ruskin in reply to a letter from the secretary, stating that he thought if Mr Elliot [*sic*] consented to say nothing about design the offer should be accepted.

The Secretary was instructed to express the thanks of the Council to Mr. Elliot for the offer of his services and to state that there were so many points to be considered in introducing a new subject of study into the College that they were unable to return an immediate answer. (*Minutes*, emphasis in original)

Ruskin's condition that Mr Elliot "say nothing about design" can be easily understood based on the premise of his criticism of practical art education. The College must have also inferred what Ruskin insinuated and the name of Mr Elliot never featured in the class schedules.

### After the Working Men's College

Drawing classes had thrived receiving Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown, Val Prinsep, W. Cave Thomas, and Arthur Hughes as instructors. Nevertheless, fundamental changes had been taking place. Ruskin taught classes regularly until May 1858 and then intermittently until 1862. Eventually, Ruskin's classes were taken over by Ward, Allen, and other former students "under the direction of John Ruskin, Esq. M.A. Oxon." And yet, Ruskin continued his relationship with the College and gave several lectures there.

Probably the true end of his connection with the College came in the Fourth Term of the Sixteenth Year (from May 23rd to July 23rd, 1870) when the "Water colour, Ornament and Perspective Class" was to take place. In October 1871, the "Ornament and Architectural Drawing" class started and the class schedule in October 1877 has a notice stating that the College Art classes "will attend the Examinations of the Science and Art Department," marking the WMC's joining of the government scheme.

By then Ruskin had also started a new project involving art education. In 1869, he was elected as the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, and in 1871 he opened the Ruskin School of Drawing (now the Ruskin School of Art) in Oxford. He strongly believed drawing should be an essential part of his university teaching because “practical skill” should go hand in hand with aesthetic theory.

### Conclusion: “Drawing Changes Lives”

Stuart Macdonald (1970/2004) asserts that “[Ruskin’s] view had little influence upon the official courses in Schools of Art and public day schools” (p. 265), and Ray Haslam (2005) has admitted that “Ruskin’s contribution to the development of art education in Britain, especially to practical studies, has tended to become obscured” (p. 145). Nonetheless, Haslam emphasises the complexity and diffusion of his influence even in the contemporary art education (p.157). One example is the Big Draw (formally The Campaign for Drawing), which is a millennium offspring of Ruskin’s concept of art education. With the motto “Drawing Changes Lives,” they maintain that “[b]y developing this skill we gain a deeper understanding of our surroundings and learn a truly universal language” (<http://thebigdraw.org/drawing-changes-lives>). Here we can hear a clear echo of Ruskin’s belief that drawing enables us to look and understand our environment correctly. And also we can see another aspect of drawing; a tool to communicate with others and be a part of community. It offers yet further proof of how Ruskin’s influence has been diffusive.

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#### Author Biography

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Chiaki Yokoyama is a Professor at the Faculty of Law, Keio University (Japan). Her research interest lies in Victorian England, especially in its social thoughts. She currently researches into the education of the Victorian working class and the inter-relationship between art and community starting in the Victorian era. Her publications include "Sons in Whitechapel: East End and Modern Art" in Haruhiko Fujita (ed.) *Geijyutsu to Fukushi [Art and Welfare]* (2009) and "Anatomical Drawings as Gender Representation" in Aeka Ishihara (ed.) *Umu Shin'tai o Egaku: Doitsu, Igrisu no Kindai-San'kai to Kaibōzu [Drawing Impregnated Bodies: Modern Gynaecology and Anatomical Drawings in Germany, England and Scotland]* (2010). She has also published Japanese translations of *A Dream of John Ball* by William Morris and *Ruskin* by George P. Landow.