

# The Ruskin Museum, Coniston. 2016



## (*A Cabinet of Curiosities*)

*An exhibition to mark the 150th anniversary of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society. The founder of the Ruskin Museum, WG Collingwood served the CWAAS as Editor and President. WG Collingwood and his son, Robin, were intuitive archaeologists, bolstering their intuition with digs and research - in much the same way as John Anstee, who was the curator of the Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry in Kendal. Collingwood had the creative imagination to inspire interest in others by fictionalising the 'story' behind the evidence & gut instinct. He inspired his son that way - and it filtered down to Arthur Ransome as well.*

Time, erosion, the process and passage of nature, the markings of days, years, aeons. There is growth, organic and geological. There are the traces left by lives etched into the surfaces of the land. Ancient and modern. Scale, large and minute. Then there is the world of metaphor and allusion, when the minds inescapable need to make connections meets the seemingly random jottings of nature and history on the tabula rasa of mute substance. In archaeology there is a need to guard against intuitive leaps, seasoning always with a large pinch of salt. However, in art we can celebrate and enjoy them. Sometimes, these leaps, hunches, and feelings lead to solutions of things which we are struggling to answer. Those wonderful occasions where a waking dream fades from the mind like a receding wave, but leaves behind firmly embedded in the sand an encrypted solution to yesterday's problem. We should learn to trust our intuitive creative imagination rather than as is so often the case, leaving it to lag along at a distance behind cold corroborative clinical evidence. It can be a wonderful tool, and it is one of the great gifts which evolution has given us.

All around us we see metaphors, whispers and murmurs of the human condition. Pictures of places, picturesque views, idealised visions, documentations and inventories of places we would like to be, or things we are moved by. For centuries these formed the outer rim of our cultural domain, but they are nevertheless very well connected, The flotsam of the world washed ashore by the tides is an apt metaphor for our culture, constantly fragmenting and dissolving, returning once again to nature and patinating the outer rim of our perceptions of the world. Four dimensions: space, time, myth, science. A rim of broken images. After a few confident steps across the wet strand we flounder in muddy sand whilst gulls screech mockingly at our efforts. Our prints in the sand are the only record of our intended pathway, and they are firmly in the present, and soon to be washed in times salt tide.

This tide imposes the form of it's future upon the surface of our present, a continuity of sorts. As a species, we have drawn images of our identity on sedimentary surfaces laid down by ancient seas. We are still very much at it today. An activity that has survived for millennia, is not likely to change overnight. For sure, from our temporal point of view, if we could climb a high pole and look beyond our horizon the familiar prints of our immediate human perspective might look unfamiliar as the individual marks blend into Nazca - like hieroglyphics of communal activities. Technologies change, and our impulses will use them, follow them, and lead them into places we can't imagine, because they will be formed from the clay of today's alluvial basin.

Artists have always made use of whatever technologies and resources are available, and have often been quicker on the uptake and exploitation of them than most people. We are creative people, for goodness sake! The idea of the artist as some kind of creative Luddite is a popular myth, useful to a public which is often mistrustful of those who operate on the edges of culture – on the beach, as witnesses and beachcombers of these broken images.

My thoughts drift off like driftwood itself, on all manner of tangents, but always somehow conditioned by the tidal pulse of the mind which threw them out. I think creative works are like that - you throw them into the sea of the mind and eventually they get washed up on some foreign shore, changed by the process of going, and by the new context of that shore which now regards them - and with which they now relate. They still carry something of their original magic - or story - or power, and this new shore is changed by their presence, just as they also are changed by their new situation.

As a small boy I remember making my own museums, holding stones, twigs, and all manner of other corroding and rusting objects which I had found, before my eyes turning and moving them slowly round whilst staring hard into them, learning and curating them, letting my imagination fly out, telling me all manner of legends, stories, imagined facts, and mythological histories about these small and insignificant things. Insignificant? not to me, and I don't suppose for a minute that I was unique in doing that. Nevertheless, this great pleasure has remained with me throughout life. Wherever I am there are wonders beneath my feet.

Beauty is not necessarily comfortable and nature is nothing to do with fairness.

Some of the pieces here are newly created excavations, and some are from other earlier digs into layers of my own cabinet of curiosities.