John Ruskin (1819–1900) was a critic and artist who encouraged people to look closely at nature. Ruskin experienced poor mental health at times, and his close connection with green spaces helped him throughout his life.

Modern life is hectic, and stress levels can soar at times. Recent research shows that looking at art or spending time in nature can calm our thoughts.

Ruskin loved Gothic architecture. He found the shapes of medieval arches and their carved decoration echoed the outlines of plant forms that he saw in nature.

Both St Mary’s Abbey (near York Art Gallery) and Kendal Parish Church (near Abbot Hall Art Gallery) are Gothic buildings.

ACTIVITY

Choose your favourite work of art in the Gallery and look carefully at it. Examine its colour, shape, texture and its details.

When we look at a beautiful piece of art our brains release dopamine, a feel-good chemical which can lift our mood. The same thing happens if we look at something delightful in the natural world.

ACTIVITY

Go outside the Gallery and look at the arched windows of St Mary’s Abbey or Kendal Parish Church.

Seek out shapes in the gardens that echo the curves of the arches. You might find them in leaves, buds, petals, feathers and branches.

ACTIVITY

"The stony pillar and the vaulted roof wreathed themselves into the semblance of the summer woods at their fairest”

"presences, innumerable of living things – these may yet be your riches”

"The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw”

John Ruskin, ‘Modern Painters III’, 1856

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ACTIVITY

Look at Ruskin’s drawing of plants growing on a boulder (Study of Gneiss rock, Glenfinlas).

Careful observation of the smallest details of nature helps us to look in a different way. Ruskin drew the intricate fibres of feathers, tangles of foliage and he studied the shapes of trees.

Outside the Gallery, you can look at the sky or walk to the river nearby. Watch the ripples and reflections on the water.

Observe the clouds, the variety of colours of the sky or on the river. Are you seeing only a single shade of blue or grey?

Ruskin and the artist J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) were both inspired by the sky, lakes and rivers. They would both spend time gazing upwards, at the shifting colour and light in the clouds. They watched the changes on the surface of water.

In his writing, John Ruskin was enthusiastic about the range of colours he observed in nature. He painted a cyanometer – a colour chart of blues – which he carried with him to measure the blueness of the sky.

Find as many different greens as you can in the works of art. Then do the same with the foliage in the walls and gardens surrounding the gallery.

Try to match each green to this colour wheel. You can do this at home or in the park too.