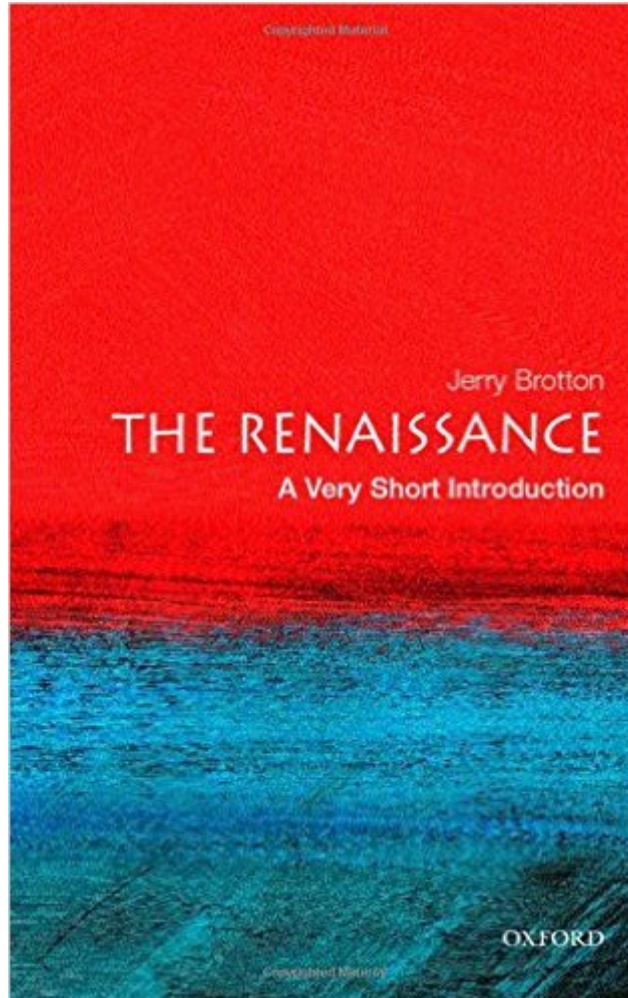


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The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

More than ever before, the Renaissance stands out as one of the defining moments in world history. Between 1400 and 1600, European perceptions of society, culture, politics and even humanity itself emerged in ways that continue to affect not only Europe but the entire world. In this wide-ranging exploration of the Renaissance, Jerry Brotton shows the period as a time of unprecedented intellectual excitement, cultural experimentation, and interaction on a global scale, alongside a darker side of religion, intolerance, slavery, and massive inequality of wealth and status. Brotton skillfully guides us through the key issues that defined the Renaissance period, from its art, architecture, and literature, to advancements in the fields of science, trade, and travel. In its incisive account of the complexities of the political and religious upheavals of the period, the book argues that there are significant parallels between the Renaissance and our own era. This is the first clear and concise account of the Renaissance as a global phenomenon, an important new vision of the Renaissance for the 21st century written by a young Renaissance scholar of a new generation.

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Customer Reviews

Jerry Brotton's "The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction" commences by using an interesting literary device to capture and focus the reader's attention: the Renaissance is introduced to us via the examination of one of the most famous pieces of artwork of the time, Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors." This painting, which was completed about 1533, but not discovered until sometime in the 19th century, is a cornucopia of visual Renaissance imagery that illuminates our subject in a way that a standard written introduction alone might have trouble achieving. By using this painting

not as a visual prop but as a focal point of discussion, the subject is made open to the reader in an appealing and stimulating manner. And once we are on our way, we find it difficult to stop, because Brotton's treatment of the subject is fully engaging while providing the important facts, issues, and mindsets of the period. This approach, along with the author's obvious talent in concise writing, makes the text a wonderful addition to Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" Series. After examining the Holbien painting, the author turns our focus to a second painting which helps us further explore our subject with this same type of approach: Gentile and Bellini's "Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria." From this work, also a masterpiece of the period, we are introduced to the subjects of Renaissance finance and financial issues, the increase of trade in volume and scope, introduction to new cultural contacts, the impact external culture had on Europe, and more. So, whereas the first painting by Holbien introduces the reader to main concepts of the period, the second, the Bellini work, helps us understand the changes that occurred in the period as a result of outside contact.

As with many recent accounts of the renaissance, this little book spends a large number of its compact pages questioning the very term itself. In fact, at one point, Mr Brotton seemed to be in danger of defining it as the period in history which subsequent generations have uniquely defined for their particular needs. But don't stop reading, this book does in the end convey, and in one sitting, the revolutionary and extraordinary nature of this epoch, even if it does try sometimes too hard to provide a liberally pleasing post 9/11 interpretation. We learn far more of Arabic contribution to the birth of modernity than that of Michelangelo or Botticelli, however, the persistent hammer of the argument does, inevitably, start to feel persuasive. One is not allowed either, to come away from the book without having any romantic notions of the renaissance hugely diminished. It would appear that we escaped from the dismal religious claustrophobia of the medieval world through rising social inequality, the megalomania of ruthless tyrants, ruthless professional ambition together with the expedient needs of warfare, trade, and ultimately, African slavery and the rape of the Americas. Strangely, Brotton is a little more perfunctory when it comes to his gender studies duties, merely contenting himself to point out that though the renaissance brought about the Copernican revolution in regards to how man saw his place in the world, renaissance man still saw women's place to be in the home. The book is not in the form of a continuous narrative, but instead devotes each chapter to a particular theme such as the darker side of the renaissance or renaissance literature.

This book is in the now popular genre of revisionist history. I have nothing against the approach as

such--it has proven an important task to excavate the material undersides of periods and phenomena whose images have become rather ossified and idealized--but this book engages in the most simple-minded version of such historical revision, reductively and undialectically bringing everything down to the lowest common denominator of power and politics and rejecting the possibility that any other elements may have been in play. The book is also full of factual errors and self-contradictions. For example, the rise of prosperity in France after the end of the Hundred Years' War did not give rise to the Habsburg Empire (which didn't coalesce until a hundred years after that)--France and the Habsburgs were historical enemies; Constantinople was not renamed Istanbul until after the overthrow of the Ottomans; the Odyssey, unlike the Aeneid, is not an epic of national origins and empire building; Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia is not an epic but, as the description in the book itself makes clear, a pastoral. The author claims that "Nobody looked for Arabic influence upon Renaissance science because the assumption was that there was nothing to find," whereas such influence is a commonplace in writing about the Renaissance, and was widely acknowledged during the Renaissance itself, as some things in the book make clear. The author writes of the sixteenth century rise of "a more secular Protestantism," which is both inaccurate and, in the historical context, nonsensical.

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