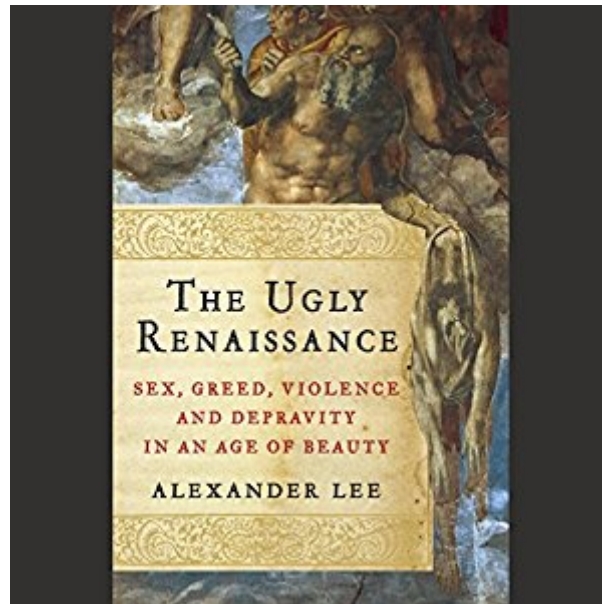


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The Ugly Renaissance: Sex, Greed, Violence, And Depravity In An Age Of Beauty



Synopsis

A fascinating and counterintuitive portrait of the sordid, hidden world behind the dazzling artwork of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, and more.... Renowned as a period of cultural rebirth and artistic innovation, the Renaissance is cloaked in a unique aura of beauty and brilliance. Its very name conjures up awe-inspiring images of an age of lofty ideals in which life imitated the fantastic artworks for which it has become famous. But behind the vast explosion of new art and culture lurked a seamy, vicious world of power politics, perversity, and corruption that has more in common with the present day than anyone dares to admit. In this lively and meticulously researched portrait, Renaissance scholar Alexander Lee illuminates the dark and titillating contradictions that were hidden beneath the surface of the period's best-known artworks. Rife with tales of scheming bankers, greedy politicians, sex-crazed priests, bloody rivalries, vicious intolerance, rampant disease, and lives of extravagance and excess, this gripping exploration of the underbelly of Renaissance Italy shows that, far from being the product of high-minded ideals, the sublime monuments of the Renaissance were created by flawed and tormented artists who lived in an ever-expanding world of inequality, dark sexuality, bigotry, and hatred. The Ugly Renaissance is a delightfully debauched journey through the surprising contradictions of Italy's past and shows that were it not for the profusion of depravity and degradation, history's greatest masterpieces might never have come into being.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I hesitated to order this book because I was put off by its apparent premise: that the Italian Renaissance was not all sweetness and light but had a "dark side" - hardly a revelation to anyone,

but I decided to read it anyway because I am fascinated by descriptions of daily life in 15th and 16th Century Florence - my favorite part of Ross King's "Brunelleschi's Dome" was the description of herds of sheep within the city walls and I figured it would be entertaining to read about the sex lives of Renaissance Men (and Women). I haven't read Vasari's "Lives of the Artists" since my first visit to Florence 40 years ago this month - I don't remember much of it but I remember loving the stories, and the best of "The Ugly Renaissance" is reminiscent of Vasari if not directly sourced from it. There's a lot of interesting information here - enough for perhaps three shorter books. The first book would be a description of Florence at the time that Michelangelo carved the David - it would be very much like "Brunelleschi's Dome". Some of this is really great, like when he describes Michelangelo's father giving his son a hard time for being a painter and not a banker. The second book would be about the Medici family, and the third book would be a description of Florence during the "Age of Discovery" (which is remarkable because Florentines don't appear to have been interested at all in the discovery of America). These three sections make up the entire "Ugly Renaissance" book somehow bound together by the idea that not everything in Renaissance Florence was beautiful or enlightened.

The author starts off with an interesting premiss: that most histories of the Italian Renaissance concerned with the marvelous art of the period tend to white-wash the ugly social and political realities of the period. Fair enough-- this is often true. But then the author does the same thing, in reverse: he ignores every favorable aspect and concentrates so totally on the negative aspects, and exaggerates the negative so often, that he presents an equally if not more distorted picture of the era. Much of the negative evidence presented is old news to historians and art historians, although some of it may come as a shock to less informed readers. Yes, Renaissance cities were dirty and noisy; there were a lot of desperately poor people and a great deal of violent crime; beggars were a common sight, and rapes were frequent. In other words, not so different from many of the world's cities today. The author is right that most Renaissance art patrons were wealthy men who commissioned lavish works of religious art for "atonement" -- as a way of getting back into God's good graces, as well as to advertise their power and social status. Some of those patrons were decidedly unsavory characters: corrupt bankers, violent mercenary generals, decadent noblemen, unholy popes. These are valid (if obvious) points, but then the author feels compelled to exaggerate. Nobody ever claimed Cosimo de' Medici was a saint, but Lee's characterization of him as "a little more than a money-grubbing, power-hungry megalomaniac who achieved his position of ascendancy through a combination of corruption, violence and brutality," is so

over-stated that itâ™s ludicrous. The author further equates Cosimo with Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan, claiming that both were âœamong the most ghastly peopleâ• of their time.

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