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Portraits



Synopsis

A major new book from one of the world's leading writers and art critics John Berger, one of the world's most celebrated art writers, takes us through centuries of drawing and painting, revealing his lifelong fascination with a diverse cast of artists. In *Portraits*, Berger grounds the artists in their historical milieu in revolutionary ways, whether enlarging on the prehistoric paintings of the Chauvet caves or Cy Twombly's linguistic and pictorial play. In penetrating and singular prose, Berger presents entirely new ways of thinking about artists both canonized and obscure, from Rembrandt to Henry Moore, Jackson Pollock to Picasso. Throughout, Berger maintains the essential connection between politics, art and the wider study of culture. The result is an illuminating walk through many centuries of visual culture, from one of the contemporary world's most incisive critical voices.

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Customer Reviews

PORTRAITS is admittedly a dense piece of writing. In over five hundred pages, art critic and storyteller John Berger takes us through thousands of years of art history, closely examining such diverse talents as ancient cave painters, classic greats, and modern masters. Berger covers the expected artists (Rembrandt, Cezanne, Monet, van Gogh, and Picasso), as well as many I had never heard of (Basquiat, Broughton, Hambling, and Noel). In all, there are 74 artists explored in this book, and Berger is intimately connected with every one of them. This isn't so much a volume of art history as it is a journey into Berger's soul as he waxes poetic about color, texture, and the many ways art communicates. As Tom Overton writes in the introduction, "this book constructs a history of art that is not about distinction, but about connection; not just between artists,

but between artists and us. I was surprised at how much of this book reads as a series of stories, stories about Berger's own life as well as the world of the artists he explores. And Berger's view of art and artists is uniquely his own. Of ancient cave paintings in Chauvet, he writes, "Deep in the cave, which meant deep in the earth, there was everything: wind, water, fire, faraway places, the dead, thunder, pain, paths, animals, light, the unborn | they were there in the rock to be called to." Of Goya, he writes, "Goya's genius as a graphic artist was that of a commentator . . . he was much more interested in events than states of mind." Of Cezanne's use of the color black, he writes, "It's a black like no other in painting." And of Pollack, he writes: "The suicide of an art is a strange idea." These are enigmatic comments that Berger explores through intense analysis, personal vignettes, and clever anecdotes.

When I first got this book, I was disappointed that my ARC only had the artworks as small(ish) black and white pictures. It turns out that the final copy will also only have black and white pictures. It was a purposeful decision, which is explained in the preface. "The illustrations in this book are all in black and white. This is because glossy colour reproductions in the consumerist world of today tend to reduce what they show to items in a luxury brochure for millionaires. Whereas black and white reproductions are simple memoranda." (John Berger, ARC preface) I'm sure this was a cheaper option for printing, but I still wanted the artwork shown in color to admire, as the artist created it. (As much as can be admired considering one isn't looking at the original.) This book is really more about the author, John Berger, and his thoughts about the artists/artworks than about the artists he discusses. It's a personal kind of book, and one that will most likely be appreciated more by fans of Berger than those that don't know him. (I hate to admit I'd never heard of him before picking up this book.) I recently started an art/artist study with my children. While I know many of the most popular artists (Van Gogh, Monet, Caravaggio, Degas, and many others, which are all covered within this book), there are many that I'd never heard of in here. I'm learning WITH my children, and I don't mind admitting I'm pretty ignorant when it comes to art. (We all have to start somewhere, after all.) I thought reading this would give me little facts to help me and my children better connect with the artist and/or artwork.

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