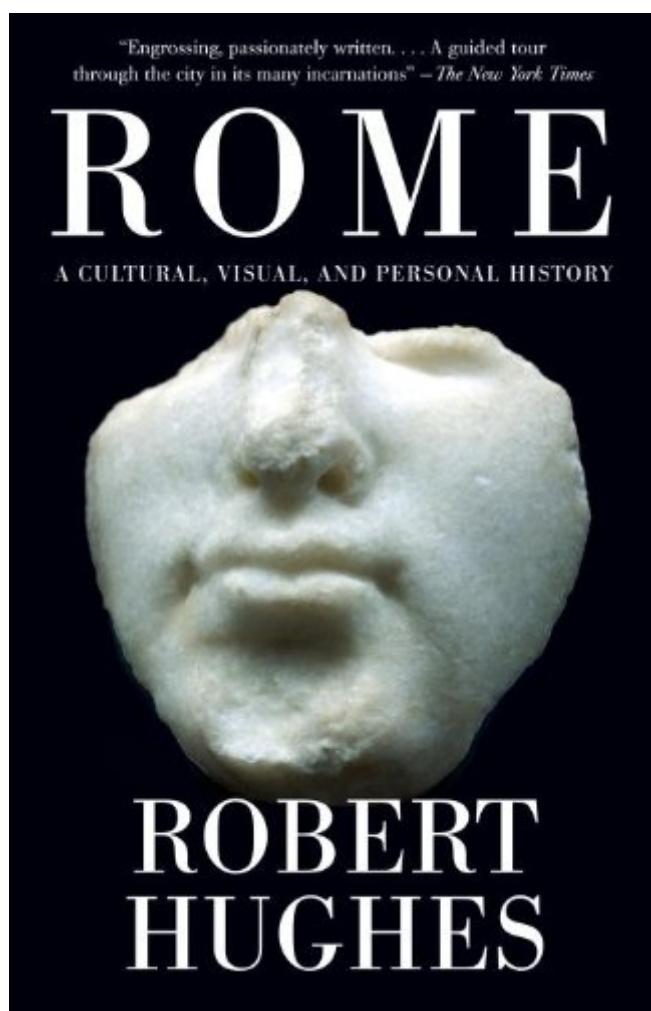


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Rome: A Cultural, Visual, And Personal History



Synopsis

From Robert Hughes, one of the greatest art and cultural critics of our time, comes a sprawling, comprehensive, and deeply personal history of Rome—â•as city, as empire, and, crucially, as an origin of Western art and civilization, two subjects about which Hughes has spent his life writing and thinking. Starting on a personal note, Hughes takes us to the Rome he first encountered as a hungry twenty-one-year-old fresh from Australia in 1959. From that exhilarating portrait, he takes us back more than two thousand years to the city's foundation, one mired in mythologies and superstitions that would inform Rome's development for centuries. From the beginning, Rome was a hotbed of power, overweening ambition, desire, political genius, and corruption. Hughes details the turbulent years that saw the formation of empire and the establishment of the sociopolitical system, along the way providing colorful portraits of all the major figures, both political (Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, Nero, Caligula) and cultural (Cicero, Martial, Virgil), to name just a few. For almost a thousand years, Rome would remain the most politically important, richest, and largest city in the Western world. From the formation of empire, Hughes moves on to the rise of early Christianity, his own antipathy toward religion providing rich and lively context for the brutality of the early Church, and eventually the Crusades. The brutality had the desired effect—â•the Church consolidated and outlasted the power of empire, and Rome would be the capital of the Papal States until its annexation into the newly united kingdom of Italy in 1870. As one would expect, Hughes lavishes plenty of critical attention on the Renaissance, providing a full survey of the architecture, painting, and sculpture that blossomed in Rome over the course of the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and shedding new light on old masters in the process. Having established itself as the artistic and spiritual center of the world, Rome in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries saw artists (and, eventually, wealthy tourists) from all over Europe converging on the bustling city, even while it was caught up in the nationalistic turmoils of the Italian independence struggle and war against France. Hughes keeps the momentum going right into the twentieth century, when Rome witnessed the rise and fall of Italian Fascism and Mussolini, and took on yet another identity in the postwar years as the fashionable city of "La Dolce Vita." This is the Rome Hughes himself first encountered, and it's one he contends, perhaps controversially, has been lost in the half century since, as the cult of mass tourism has slowly ruined the dazzling city he loved so much. Equal parts idolizing, blasphemous, outraged, and awestruck, Rome is a portrait of the Eternal City as only Robert Hughes could paint it. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Robert Hughes' brilliant revelation of Imperial Rome as a complex world chiefly remembered for its art, the only thing that comes out of ancient Rome as an exemplar of beauty and truth, changed so much of what I thought of Rome from Ancient to Modern life and practice. A great study, the first critic to explode absurd, conventional ideas about culture and not tolerate the evaluations of the unintelligent.

Hughes' Roman biography moves chronologically from the foundation of the city through events of the fascist era. While his previous book about Barcelona is social history, Rome combines cultural, visual and personal history with straightforward political and military narrative. The focus of Hughes analysis depends on the historical period under consideration. In his chapter on the founding of the city, Hughes confines himself largely to political developments including the first and second Punic wars, the rise and fall of Julius Caesar and the ascent of Octavius. Similarly, his history of the nineteenth century includes tales of Mazzini, Garibaldi, Cavour, Pope Pius IX, the Syllabus of Errors and ultramontanism. Along the way, Hughes pauses occasionally to provide the reader with aesthetic insights. He criticizes the Vittoriano monument, for example, on both aesthetic and

historical grounds: "Neither in design nor in material does the typewriter look Roman, and, in point of fact, it is not." In his chapter on the Renaissance, however, Hughes focuses almost exclusively on art and architectural history including discussion of Brunelleschi, Bramante, Raphael and Michelangelo. His work is especially illuminating in sections such as the one covering the Grand Tour and Neoclassicism. Here, Hughes brings to bear his formidable understanding of cultural history to reveal less widely known facts about Roman history. We meet leading English purveyors of inauthentic Italian antiquities Thomas Jenkins and James Byres, first choice for foreigners wanting Roman portraits Pompeo Batoni, master of more than 1,000 engravings of Roman architecture Giovanni Battista Piranesi and inventor of archeological categories Johann Jonachim Winkelmann. We are treated to Hughes sharp insights concerning all things Roman. He concisely describes the formidable nature of travel in 1780: "Abroad was bloody and foreigners were bastards." More charitably, Hughes resurrects the reputation of painter Antonio Canova, calling him the "last of a line of geniuses who redefined art" beginning in the 14th century and ending with Canova. Hughes covers a long historical period and many subjects in this book. But the pace is brisk, the portraits of people and events are well chosen and the author's voice is caring and incisive. Hughes acts as Bear Leader to the reader (as Grand Tour guides referred to themselves) and never lets his charges forget how strongly he feels about the city. Rome, says Hughes, is irksome, frustrating, contradicting, spectacular and secretive. It is, in sum, "an enormous concretion of human glory and human error." For all its faults, the city is unique and full of wonder. "Nothing exceeds the delight of one's first immersion in Rome," advises the author in his loving introduction. If you have not visited the city in person, you could do far worse than to experience your first virtual immersion in the pages of this book.

A great read even with some of the errors which some say are attributable to the fact checker rather than the author whose love of the subject jumps off the pages. One error that I recalled says that Rome's ancient racetrack is buried under apartments but it's not it's outline is in plain view next to the Palentine Hill and is the second thing you see after all the tour buses leave the Colosseum.

Having visited Roma 5 times, I must say to me almost any book about it is of some interest. I learned a lot, sometimes about artists that that by any standard are of no consequence. I also found it jarring that there were so many historical errors, not just in ancient history, but also in the relatlivly recent past- the German causalties in the allied conquest of Sicily were about 24000, not a half a million. Also the USAAF couldn't have bombed Rome like the British did Dresden, since that didn't

happen until 1945. I could not believe that Hughes did not even mention Fellini's "Roma

A terrific book and a great seller!

An excellent commentary and history to guide visitors to Rome, art lovers, and history buffs.

Robert Hughes is an amazing writer. Rome is his last book and he is as creative, faithful to history, accurate, using a combination of his journalistic style with his profound knowledge of art and architecture, being an architect himself. His sense of humor is always there. Shame we will not be able to read any more books written by him. I am an academic and Robert Hughes is a compulsory reading for my students, always!

What a writer! Great stories with no punches pulled on art (or social) criticism.

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