
You can glean a lot about a book from its cover. The bold red and black typeface of Robert Hughes’ *Rome* gives equal prominence to the name of the author and to the title. We are promised Robert Hughes’ history of Rome, the views of ‘probably the best – and certainly the most accessible – art critic in the world.’

Hughes is a gifted Australian writer whose work ranges from history to memoir-writing; he is famous for his area of greatest expertise, his scholarly criticism of art. His books include *The Art of Australia* (1966), *The Shock of the New* (1980) and *The Culture of Complaint* (1993). Hughes has worked as a television commentator and broadcaster, and he was *Time* magazine’s art critic for more than thirty years. Asked to name a contemporary art critic, many people – and certainly most Australians – would cite Robert Hughes.

So Hughes’ *Rome* is a city of art and artists: Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio, Bernini, Titian … it is a pleasure to gain access to the wonders of the city’s art and architecture through his experienced and knowledgeable eyes. Take, for example, his observations on the Sistine Chapel:

> No art-interested person who was in Rome in the late 1970s and early 1980s is likely to forget the passions roused by the project of cleaning the Sistine. Lifelong friendships were broken; the field of discussion was swept by hails and cross-fires of moral disagreement … [The frescoes] can now be seen in their full plenitude of colour, and it is one of the world’s supreme sights. I was lucky enough to get extended access to the *ponte* or moving bridge between the Sistine walls on which the cleaners worked, and spent the better part of three days up there, with my nose a couple of feet from the fresco surface, seeing the way Michelangelo’s colour was coming alive once more … This was a privilege, probably the most vivid one I had in a fifty-year career as an art critic. (247-9)

Robert Hughes’ perspective is also that of an *Australian* writer. When I was in Italy last year, I was reminded of the difference in our early experience of Western art, compared with that of Italian children. In Rome, teachers propel noisy and enthusiastic groups of students through the corridors and rooms of art museums and palazzi; children sit on the edges of Baroque fountains to eat their lunches, they kick footballs across cobbled piazzas ringed by ancient buildings. My childhood experience of Italian art, growing up in Adelaide, echoed Hughes’:

> For a time in my adolescence – not knowing Rome in any but the sketchiest way – I longed to be a Roman expatriate … [but] I was still in Australia, where, due to an education by Jesuits, I spoke a few sentences of Latin but no Italian whatever. The only semi-Romano I knew … would bring back postcards, sedulously and with obvious pleasure gleaned from their racks in various museums and churches at ten to twenty lire each: Caravaggios,

1 From the *Sunday Times*, quoted on the back cover of *Rome*.

Bellinis, Michelangelos. He would pin these up on one of the school noticeboards. (1)

Google Earth and detailed images of art works on the internet have helped to reduce the ‘tyranny of distance’, but, as Hughes says, there is nothing to compare with ‘the delight of one’s first immersion in Rome on a fine spring morning’ (3). And the internet cannot (yet?) deliver the delight of Rome’s art and architecture with its other pleasures: the creamy froth of a cappucino, the warmth of the sun on your back in the Piazza Navona, the crescendo of Italian voices at a table nearby.

Hughes’ passionate enthusiasm for Rome shines in every chapter of his book, as he traverses its history from Romulus and Remus to Berlusconi. There are chapters on the early Roman empire, medieval Rome, the Renaissance, the Baroque and the eighteenth century through to modernism. I suspect that every reader will have their preferred chapter, depending on personal responses to Rome and individual historical interests. I especially enjoyed the section on the Grand Tour, perhaps because it was good to be reminded that there were once worse ways of travelling to Italy than being trapped for 22 claustrophobic hours in an over-heated aeroplane. With his sharp eye for detail, Hughes conveys both the pleasures and pains of the Grand Tourist. We read about the Englishman who crossed a frozen section of the Alpine pass in a sledge (‘which though very trying to the nerves was not unpleasant’), the German tourist who saw an Italian shoemaker flattening his leather strips on the antique marble head of an emperor, the Scottish aristocrat who had his portrait painted ‘swathed in yards of his family tartan’ in the fashion of ‘a bizarre sort of Caledonian toga’ (342).

The chapters that are not pleasing some readers fall in the first part of the book; in fact, classicist Mary Beard advises us to ‘skip the first 200 pages and start this book at chapter six, The Renaissance.’ She and other classical scholars have complained of ‘errors and misunderstandings’ in Hughes’ knowledge of the classical period that will ‘mislead the innocent and infuriate the specialist.’ This is disappointing in a book that otherwise reads as a thoughtfully-written and well-researched text.

Robert Hughes is treading on ground that is revered by many different kinds of readers and writers: classicists, art lovers, historians, travellers, poets and novelists. He is in good company: think of Henry James’ Italian Hours, Elizabeth Bowen’s Time in Rome, Goethe’s Italienische Reise. Many other titles come to mind: lovers of Roman history, art and culture are easy to find. Robert Hughes has added his own unique perspective to a great and fascinating subject, one that still enthralls twenty-first century readers, as it has always done.

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Mary Beard, ‘Review: Rome by Robert Hughes,’ Guardian 2 July 2011, 6