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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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Editors' Choice” • New York Times “John Berger teaches us how to think, how to feel, how to stare at things till we see what we thought wasn't there. But above all he teaches us how to love in the face of adversity. He is a master.” • Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things* “A volume whose breadth and depth bring it close to a definitive self-portrait of one of Britain's most original thinkers.” • Financial Times “Shows the 88-year-old British art critic at his bristling best.” • Wall Street Journal “Unruly attentiveness animates | a lifetime's engagement with artists like Rembrandt, Goya, Henry Moore and

Francis Bacon – Ingenious, jargon-free and direct – Berger is a formidable stylist. – Alexi Worth, New York Times – “Perhaps the greatest living writer on art – reminds us just how insufficient most art commentary is these days – an indispensable guide to understanding art from cave painting to today’s experimenters. – Spectator (Art Books of the Year 2015) – “A near exhaustive selection of the ever astute writer’s responses to various artists and works, chronologically organised from early cave paintings through to the Palestinian artist Randa Mdah. – Independent (Books of the Year 2015) – “In the writings of John Berger we find a passion for art itself, for the created thing, that is everywhere tempered by an awareness of the social and political world, which too many theorists, whatever their special pleadings, simply ignore. – Mark Kingwell, Harper’s – “Berger’s art criticism transcends its genre to become a very rare thing – literature. – New Republic – “A rich and loving exploration of art history, at once intellectually acute and deeply personal – A vital and uncommonly engaging proof of concept for ideas that Berger has long espoused. – Slate – “Berger has always been a writer who understands that art does not begin and end with the canvas – instead, art (and great art writing) should stay with us as a communion between the overlapping titles we assign as portraits: wife, person, genius, artist. These titles, when carefully assigned, could be limiting, but in Berger’s expert hands, they are just the beginning. – Haley Mlotek, National Post – “John Berger is always illuminating and his latest book doesn’t disappoint. – Scotsman – “In this extraordinary new book, John Berger embarks on a process of re-discovery and re-figuring of history through the visual narratives given to us by portraiture. Berger’s ability for storytelling is both incisive and intriguing. He is one of the greatest writers of our time. – Hans Ulrich Obrist, author of Ways of Curating – “[Berger] long ago attained a position unrivalled among English writers or intellectuals of his generation; he seems to stand for a vanished era of critical and political seriousness – All that seems worth preserving and worth celebrating in a long and varied but essential volume like Portraits. – Brian Dillon, Literary Review – “The pages are rife with muscular prose, sinewy intellectualism, and especially the sensual analogy for which he is most known. Portraits is so lively a book it can feel uncanny. – n+1 – “Regardless of the era he studies or the decade in which he writes, his lyrical prose always ultimately serves a fervent political concern – Berger’s writing is fearless, winnowing down canonized artists to their essential political

bones. *Brooklyn Rail* "This insistence upon unearthing for the present viewer the hidden labor of the artist, when coupled with his own technical knowledge of painterly art, delivers Berger's essays from the tedium of much art criticism." Robert Minto, *Open Letters Monthly* "A vast and nourishing compendium | Life has more light and colour after an encounter with Berger." *The Art Newspaper*

Storyteller, novelist, essayist, screenwriter, dramatist and critic, John Berger (1926–2017) was one of the most internationally influential writers of the last fifty years. His many books include *Ways of Seeing*; the fiction trilogy *Into Their Labours*; *Here Is Where We Meet*; the Booker Prize-winning novel *G*; *Hold Everything Dear*; the Man Booker longlisted *From A to X*; and *A Seventh Man*. Tom Overton catalogued John Berger's archive at the British Library as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award with King's College London, and edited this book as a Henry Moore Institute Research Fellow and a Fellow of the Centre for Life-Writing Research at KCL. He has curated exhibitions at King's Cultural Institute, Somerset House and the Whitechapel Gallery, and his writing has been published by the *New Statesman*, *Apollo*, *White Review*, *Various Small Fires*, Tate, the British Council and others. He is working on Berger's biography and a book on migration and archives.

John Berger has an artist's heart. He writes like a storyteller - exploring a selected group of artists he has pulled from previous articles? (Maybe his personal favorites) He breaks down the artist and the art into manageable pieces and profiles the artist from his intellectual brain in a creative way. This is not an Art History book but Berger's knowledgeable understanding of each artist mixed with his travels... It's not a read from beginning to end - You browse and read... It's an excellent book for artists or those interested in art...

Each essay combines an insightful appreciation of a work of art with Berger's insights into life in our day. For example, in his discussion of the Fayum Portrait Painters of the 1st to 3rd centuries, Berger contrasts the "confident, expansive culture" of the time with our own in which "The future has been, for the moment, downsized, and the past is being made redundant."

Hardback did not arrive as expected. It is not like the pictures on . I would have bought the paperback if I hadn't been somewhat persuaded by the lovely looking Verso cover with a burlap

looking texture. Instead, the book arrived in a regularly hardback. It is decent quality but now what I expected. Starts because of the book's content, but I am disappointed it was not the Verso cover I expected.

Adore John Berger and read and reread all of his books. Always a treasure to encounter John Berger again.

The book as the seller indicated is Uncorrected Page Proofs, and thus collectible. Perfect!

Brilliant writing!

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. Reading this, I felt I

knew Berger. My only complaint is the quality of the pictures in this book. All of the paintings are reproduced in black-and-white, which I at first assumed was because the book I was reading was an Advanced Reader's Copy (ARCs are presented as "uncorrected proofs," which seldom include color illustrations). But Berger is clear in his preface that the decision to use black-and-white illustrations was intentional. As he puts it, "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." The illustrations in this book are really superfluous, since they are difficult to see and do little to compliment Berger's expert prose. It's easy enough to go online to take a closer look at the works Berger references, but I wonder why the black-and-white illustrations are included at all. But for readers interested in art, art history, or the stories behind the creative spirit, PORTRAITS is a wonderful book. Just be aware that this is not one of those coffee table art books with gorgeous glossy color prints. It's not a luxury brochure for millionaires. No, it's an intellectual, very personal, and often very spiritual look at creativity and human expression. I highly recommend it.

On the issue of B/W versus Color reproduction: It's irrelevant, given the physical dimensions of the book. Even a color reproduction would be difficult to discern. However, simply Google the piece in question on your smart phone or iPad or computer and use it as a companion to Berger's explication.

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