



The Renaissance: A Short History (Modern Library Chronicles)

By Paul Johnson

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The Renaissance holds an undying place in our imagination, its great heroes still our own, from Michelangelo and Leonardo to Dante and Chaucer. This period of profound evolution in European thought is credited with transforming the West from medieval to modern and producing the most astonishing outpouring of artistic creation the world has ever known. But what was it? In this masterly work, the incomparable Paul Johnson tells us. He explains the economic, technological, and social developments that provide a backdrop to the age's achievements and focuses closely on the lives and works of its most important figures. A commanding short narrative of this vital period, *The Renaissance* is also a universally profound meditation on the wellsprings of innovation.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This slim volume is among the first in a new series, the Modern Library Chronicles, described by the publisher as "authoritative, lively, and accessible." Noted historian Johnson's (*A History of the American People*, etc.) book satisfies on the latter two counts. It provides a serviceable introduction for the general reader. However, on the first count it falls short. Johnson offers an unimaginative and superficial history, with insidious signs of haste, like the claim that Charles V created El Escorial. Few will be surprised that the Renaissance was "primarily a human event" or excited by the pedestrian approach: dates of birth and death abound. Although he avoids blind admiration (the Mona Lisa "shows the defects of [Leonardo's] slovenly method of working"), Johnson is resolutely canonical: Chaucer is one of precisely four writers in English whose genius, he claims, cannot be rationally explained (Shakespeare, Dickens and Kipling are the others). Other value judgments will also raise eyebrows: Leonardo, for instance, had "not much warmth to him. He may, indeed, have had homosexual inclinations." Johnson equivocates on Michelangelo: he was quarrelsome, secretive and mean-spirited, but to say he was neurotic is "nonsense." More interesting is the remark that the humanists were outsiders, beyond the stifling university pale; the author evidently senses kindred spirits, and he snipes at academia. But there is much here for the academicians to attack, and it is difficult to see how this volume improves on, say, Peter Burke's even briefer volume *The Renaissance*. 3-city author tour.

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From Library Journal

Historian Johnson, fellow of All Souls' College, Oxford, and author of *A History of the American People*, has written a concise and comprehensive survey of the Renaissance, published as part of Modern Library's new "Chronicles" series, which also includes Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History*. Johnson begins by looking at earlier periods of post-Roman European history that were precursors of the Renaissance and also considers when the term Renaissance became common usage. In the book's early sections, he assesses the historic and economic background of the period and then examines the Renaissance in literature and scholarship, the anatomy of Renaissance sculpture, Renaissance buildings, the evolution of painters and paintings of the period, and, finally, the dissemination and decline of the Renaissance. Johnson has included a chronology of significant events, a list of key period figures, and an incredible amount of other information. From the number of printed books in Europe to the controversy over polyphonic music in the 16th century. This work will be of interest to both students and lay readers, who will find that nothing else on the Renaissance is available in this price range and size. Highly recommended for public and academic libraries.

-DRobert J. Andrews, Duluth P.L., MN

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From [Booklist](#)

Johnson's little history (as well as Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History* [see p.2082, this issue]) is part of the Modern Library's Chronicles series, 200-page condensations of about 20 signal periods or events in Western history. Johnson's usual historical haunts are in the modern eras, so finding him rooting around the Renaissance is a surprise. Yet his reputation for capacious erudition precedes him, and it is no surprise that he turns in a vibrant summary of the era's eruption of art. His style is characteristically opinionated, which enlivens the text by virtue of the reader's yea-ing or nay-ing his views. And the editorializing is undergirded by a solid explanation of the Renaissance's beginnings in an economic and technical expansion after the

stasis of the Dark Ages. With wealth and wider literacy (thank you, Herr Gutenberg), the Renaissance developed its guiding spirits of criticism and humanism. Johnson illustrates their operation in his specific appraisal of artists and works in the areas of literature, sculpture, architecture, and painting. A pithy interpretive precis. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marvin Seto:

The particular book *The Renaissance: A Short History (Modern Library Chronicles)* will bring that you the new experience of reading a book. The author style to explain the idea is very unique. In the event you try to find new book to study, this book very suited to you. The book *The Renaissance: A Short History (Modern Library Chronicles)* is much recommended to you to learn. You can also get the e-book in the official web site, so you can quickly to read the book.

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