

Alexander Lee, *The Ugly Renaissance: Sex, Disease and Excess in an Age of Beauty* (London: Hutchinson, 2003), 608 pages. ISBN: 978-0091944346. RRP £25.00.

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A highly celebrated specialist in the field of the Italian Renaissance, Alexander Lee has produced a plethora of works on the well-trodden topic, focusing predominantly on the intricacies of political thought and authority. Lee's most recent publication - *The Ugly Renaissance: Sex, Disease and Excess in an Age of Beauty* - is a refreshingly candid account of everyday life during the Renaissance age. Unpacking the political, economic, social and cultural intricacies of this well studied phenomena of European history in a single volume is no easy task. Lee's latest attempt, however, captures the very essence of the Renaissance spirit. His work has been subject to criticism from those who postulate that Lee assumes the reader ignorant enough to believe that the Renaissance was little more than 'an age of beauty,' a movement centred on the genius and reputation of elite circles. No such presupposition can be detected in *The Ugly Renaissance*; this work is thoroughly engaging, certainly not patronising, and will capture the imagination of audiences beyond the somewhat narrowed confines of history and art history departments. Lee's imaginative descriptions of contemporary masterpieces - from Boccaccio's *Decameron* and *Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem* - touch on and replicate the fascination with the new philosophies and imagery epitomised by the Renaissance.

Thematic divisions separate the book's three parts and allow the author to steer clear from the more common chronological exploration

of the period. Though Lee's methodology is one that has, perhaps, been invited by an examination of artistic progression, it has been overdone somewhat, making the narrative at times difficult to follow. Lee investigates the experiences of various individuals to let personal and collective experiences shape his understanding of key processes in Renaissance life. Rather than foreground his analysis on the rise of the artist, he takes the reader through the everyday hardships of artists and patrons through a comprehensive examination of their everyday journeys.

*The Ugly Renaissance* focuses primarily on life in Florence. One appeal of the Renaissance as a period for historical enquiry is its awe-inspiring, novel sense of drama and romanticism and this is exactly what Lee gives to the reader. Lee's thematic sections dissect the complexities and duplicities of Renaissance Europe with an enthusiasm and light-heartedness that make his work suitable for those approaching the subject for the first time or the more experienced scholar. The sexual intrigue and debauchery that pervaded aspects of Renaissance life, often beneath the surface of accepted etiquette and cultural norms, are no secret. Indeed, present day assumptions of Renaissance life are often grounded on vagaries and the statements of scheming banker and ambitious young courtiers, which continue to blur the lines between popularised suppositions and everyday experience. Lee teases out the negative connotations that have since been attributed to key Renaissance figures, including Michelangelo, the Medici family and Fillippo Lippi, to explore the everyday emotions and ways of life that ran counter to the strict regulatory structures of Renaissance society. In coming to the end of Lee's work, it becomes clear that it is to these emotional tensions that we owe some of history's greatest masterpieces.

In sum, Lee's highly accessible work is a welcome contribution to the field of Renaissance studies. His unpretentious analysis sheds an otherwise misdirected light on the everyday lives of artists, creative circles, and patrons, who have too readily been defined by their popular works, rather than their lived experiences. If this reviewer may posit one small criticism it is that Lee's historical overview is, perhaps, not as expansive as the title of this volume implies, largely focusing on fifteenth-century Florence, rather than

adopting a truly transnational perspective. Despite this, Lee has produced a history that has done much to transcend the restrictive top-down parameters within which Renaissance history has been traditionally defined.