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978-1-107-00062-9 - Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting

Edited by Rocco Sinisgalli

Excerpt

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Introduction



From Tuscan to Latin, and not vice versa

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), the most influential humanist of the Renaissance, wrote his well-known *De Pictura*, consisting of three parts or books, between the years 1435 and 1436, in two separate languages: the local dialect of Tuscany, and Latin.

The usual opinion is that the author wrote the text in Latin first and then translated it into the vernacular for the benefit of working-class painters who lacked a classical education. Nevertheless, I propose to demonstrate that Alberti wrote his treatise first in the vernacular(1) and then, later, in Latin. In the later version, enriched by both new information and corrections of earlier errors, the author

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introduced many clarifications, changing names and terms and even rewriting sentences to improve them, and in the end produced a definitive version. Subsequently, the original vernacular version, extant in only a few manuscripts, was not mentioned again by scholars until the end of the eighteenth century.(2) The Latin draft, however, was reproduced in numerous manuscripts. Perhaps Alberti's final Latin draft was the one printed in Basel in 1540.(3) This Basel printed text is the one that I have translated here into English.

Cecil Grayson's well-known English translation of *On Painting* (1972) derives from a collation of several Latin manuscripts of *De Pictura* but largely excludes the Basel version. Nevertheless, his translation of the accompanying composite Latin text has been generally accepted and has served as the source for French and German modern translations.(4)

Twenty Latin manuscripts of *De Pictura* still exist.(5) Some, but not all, contain a letter addressed to Giovanni Francesco, prince of Mantua,(6) apparently sent along with a copy of the treatise as a gift to the prince by the author; perhaps he sent it in 1438, on the occasion of the Council of Ferrara, where Alberti was in residence as a member of the papal court.(7)

However, Alberti reworked some of the text between 1466 and 1468, and it is likely that the Basel version was printed from that final draft. The Basel version, with certain lexical and scientific characteristics, suggests a late rewriting: a hitherto unknown manuscript, hereafter "the master copy." Even though the letter to the prince of Mantua is lacking in the Basel edition, it is included here because of the importance of its text.

*Johannes Regiomontanus, Albrecht Dürer,
and the Editio Princeps*

In 1461, Johann Müller, known as Johannes Regiomontanus (1436–1476), arrived in Rome, as a member of the suite of Cardinal Bessarion

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(1402–1472).(8) He soon made friends with Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397–1482), Alberti, and Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464), and, in his *Oratio introductoria in omnes scientias mathematicas*, presented as a lecture at the University of Padua, expressed great admiration for the writings of each of them.(9) In 1468, Regiomontanus left Italy, first to relocate in Hungary and then, three years later, in Nuremberg, with the intention of establishing a printing house. He planned to publish at least twenty-two works of his own and another twenty-nine by other authors. In presenting his ambitious plan to render through the newly invented printing medium a number of astronomical and geometrical treatises, he hinted at the future publication of other manuscripts that he evidently had brought with him from Italy.(10) Among them, as we will soon see, there must have been the one of *De Pictura*. Unfortunately, Regiomontanus died at forty before completing his project.

Regiomontanus's friend and pupil was Bernhard Walther (1430–1504), who was on good terms with the parents of the painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer (Nuremberg, 1471–1528) and became the godfather of Dürer's sister Christina.(11) We also know that Walther came into possession of Regiomontanus's library, which he cared for and moved into the same house that in 1509 was purchased by Dürer. It was Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), Dürer's closest friend, who in 1512 wrote the first inventory of the volumes and manuscripts of Regiomontanus and Walther. In this inventory, Pirckheimer recorded the presence of Alberti's *De Pictura* with the phrase *De pictura babtis (On Painting, by Battista Alberti)*. In a second inventory, drafted by Pirckheimer in 1522, Alberti's work appears again, with the title *Liber de pictura L. Baptiste de Albertis (Geometria)*. From 1512, therefore, if not before, Dürer could have read and studied *De Pictura*.(12)

One member of Pirckheimer's and Dürer's circle of learned friends was Thomas Venatorius (1490–1551), also from Nuremberg. In 1540 he edited the manuscript, which is likely to have been in the Pirckheimer's library, for the editio princeps of *De Pictura*, for the publisher Bartholomew Westheimer of Basel.(13) He preceded

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this edition with a “dedicatory” letter to the mathematician Jakob Milichius (1501–1559).

The fact that Venatorius wrote in the Milichius letter the words “as soon as I encountered the three books entitled the *De Pictura*” and, further on, “We have seen the celebrated Dürer himself” is significant.(14) “As soon as” refers to the ease with which Venatorius had access to and could consult “the master copy,” whereas “We have seen the celebrated Dürer himself” reveals his familiarity with the great artist. Because he had become the legal administrator of Pirckheimer’s estate, charged with preparing an inventory of the library,(15) Venatorius could easily have read and consulted the *De Pictura* manuscript.

It is reasonable to suggest that the manuscript used for the Basel printing had actually been prepared by Alberti himself. It could have been a late version of the text, consigned to Regiomontanus by the author before Regiomontanus left Italy for Hungary in 1468 because Alberti knew that the young scientist intended to take advantage of the new movable type technology just becoming an industry on the other side of the Alps.

In sum, simply because it contains unique additions and corrections, the Basel printed editio princeps can reasonably be assumed to have derived from the ultimate Latin autograph manuscript of Alberti’s *De Pictura*.(16) At least two printings of this edition were published in August 1540. The copies of this edition, now in the national libraries of Rome and Paris, show, only on the title page, wording that differs slightly from that of a third copy, now in the Marciana Library, Venice. The first two copies have the word *arte* after *laudata* and the word *genere* after *scientiarum*. Both also lack the particle *et* and transform the word *Mathematices* into the locution *mathematicarum disciplinarum*. These differences, plus others of a typographical nature, especially in the first sixteen pages, suggest the possibility of a second publisher, probably Andreas Cratander, perhaps as a cofinancer of the printing.(17)

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[More information](#)*Introduction**The Tuscan Vernacular Text, Its Prologue,
and Its Dedication to Brunelleschi*

There exist only three manuscripts of the vernacular text of *De Pictura*: one in the National Library of Paris, a second in the Capitolare Library of Verona, and a third in the National Library of Florence. The last is in the best condition.⁽¹⁸⁾ It is preceded by an introductory prologue addressed to the famous architect and sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi (1376–1446), and it ends with the date “July 17th, 1436.” Like all the known Latin manuscripts, none of the extant vernacular texts is autograph. However, in a manuscript copy of Cicero’s *De Brute*, which belonged to Alberti and is now in the Marciana Library of Venice, there is a note, written in Alberti’s own hand, that says: “Florence, Friday August 26th 1435, today at the 20th hour and 3/4 I finished the work on *De Pictura*.”⁽¹⁹⁾ These are two very precise dates.

Consider the earlier date, August 26, 1435, when Alberti says he completed the first draft of *De Pictura*. He was clearly expressing satisfaction for having progressed this far in his project, but it is not certain that he was referring just to his Latin version, for indeed he used the same title, *De Pictura*, on the vernacular text that he dedicated to Brunelleschi.⁽²⁰⁾ We may infer, in fact, that whatever text he had just finished was still open to revision, and in this condition it might have remained had not a unique opportunity arisen to turn to it again and to associate it with a great man and an extraordinary event. A month and a half after July 17, 1436, on August 30, Brunelleschi, amid much public fanfare, officially inaugurated the cupola above Florence’s Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, which he had just completed, his most illustrious architectural triumph.⁽²¹⁾ It was certainly a moment for all of Florence to remember and cherish. The panorama of this great city would forever be signified by Brunelleschi’s “trademark” cathedral dome: “such an enormous structure, towering over the skies, and wide enough to cast its shadow over all the Tuscan people,” as

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Alberti himself remarked. One should also recall that Brunelleschi, just a few years before, demonstrated for the first time, by means of his two famous perspective panels, how the optical laws of mirror reflection could be applied to painting.

Thus July of 1436, as Brunelleschi was basking in these triumphs, was the perfect moment for Alberti to dedicate his vernacular *De Pictura* to this Florentine genius. Alberti did so kindly and carefully, no doubt because he had had time to realize that his 1435 edition still needed correcting and enlarging and, above all, because he hoped that the “great” Brunelleschi would help him with further suggestions and advice. Who would have been better able? The evidence is there, in the author’s prologue dedication to “Pippo architetto”: “and if occasionally you should find a moment of leisure, it would please me to have you look at this little work of mine ‘On Painting,’ which I composed, in your name, in the Tuscan language.” Further on: “Please, then, read my work with diligence, and if you think that anything in it has to be amended, do correct me. No writer was ever so learned as not to profit from learned friends. And I would like to be corrected by you first, so as not to be censured by detractors.”(22)

Alberti speaks almost with the ardor of an apprentice to the “master.” The phrases he repeats, such as “have you look,” “read my work with diligence,” “to be amended,” “do correct me,” “I would like to be corrected,” all reveal not only the author’s modesty and humility but also his uncertainty that the manuscript was final, emphasized even more by his worry about being “censured by detractors.” The text that Brunelleschi had in his hands was without doubt the one that Alberti knew was still naïve, so that, when the author says in the dedication, “And I would like to be corrected by you first,” one might also surmise that the great architect may actually have encouraged the promising young humanist to improve his work further. It is intriguing to speculate that Alberti did receive some advice from his “master” and that he may have included those comments in his next version, that is, the corrected Latin text of *De Pictura*.

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Anthony Grafton expresses a very different opinion when he argues that “Alberti’s dedication did not mollify its recipient. Brunelleschi, ever paranoid about his intellectual property, presumably reacted with characteristic irritation when he saw that Alberti’s work contained a long discussion of perspective but did not mention him or his model panels.”(23) I do not agree. Alberti was actually describing a more simplified, step-by-step method of perspective projection, an “abbreviated construction,” certainly inspired by Brunelleschi but based on looking through a window rather than at a reflection in a mirror.(24) Giorgio Vasari (Arezzo, 1511–Florence, 1574) later claimed that Brunelleschi’s original perspective system was based on architectural drawing, that is, as modern scholars have generally assumed, that Brunelleschi’s original “legitimate construction” was essentially based on the method of plan and elevation.(25)

The False Priority of Latin

If Alberti’s vernacular text was merely a translation from the Latin, why would he have included so many “mistakes,” even mathematical ones, and then give the treatise to the most competent “maestro” of his time and ask for help? The notion of those who believe that Alberti, wishing to address the more ordinary artists, rewrote his Latin treatise to make it easier to read for those who did not understand the language of Cicero, is illogical.

Quite the opposite surely happened. Alberti’s first intention was to draft the work in the Tuscan dialect and then to dedicate it to Brunelleschi. Only subsequently did he refine the text in the Latin language. Latin was, in fact it still is, the most precise language for framing complex concepts, scientific and geometric included, whereas the local Italian dialects were then quite lacking an appropriate vocabulary. Almost two centuries would have to pass before Galileo could express such mathematical thoughts in his native tongue. Unfortunately, it is

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a modern prejudice to take for granted that if two texts of the same subject exist, one in a still-spoken language of today, and the other in ancient Latin, that the former must simply be a translation of the latter. We are too accustomed to regarding Latin as always having been a “dead” language, even during the Renaissance. Nevertheless, and certainly during the early years of the fifteenth century, Latin and “volgare” coexisted equally and were commonly spoken together, not only by the educated humanists but also among persons associated with the “universal” (Catholic) church. Indeed, Leon Battista Alberti’s official job was to be “abbreviatore apostolico,” that is, composer of papal briefs in Latin for the Pontifical Curia. In his own time and occupation, it would have been usual to think of translations as the other way around – as always from some local native language into the more formal and universal Latin.

Regarding the Paris manuscript of the vernacular text, both the copyist in the sixteenth century and Count Giuseppe Mazzatinti in 1886 made the same mistake.(26) So too did Giammaria Mazzucchelli and Count Scipione Maffei, regarding the Verona manuscript, in the eighteenth century,(27) and the librarian Vincenzo Follini, cataloguing the Florentine manuscript, in the nineteenth century.(28) The copyist of the Paris codex, by now accustomed to transcribing translations executed from Latin to vernacular, and being aware of a Latin text drafted by the same author, also reported what everyone would eventually claim, that the vernacular text at hand was realized from the Latin by the author “in order to make it more convenient for non literates.”(29) Mazzatinti, who first published the title and a description of the Paris manuscript, noted parenthetically: “Treatise on painting translated from Latin by Battista Alberti.”(30)

In 1735, Mazzucchelli wrote, regarding the Verona manuscript: “The particular of it is that it is in the vernacular language and the translation appears to be made by Alberti himself.”(31) His word “appears” is the same word used by Maffei, who had been the manuscript’s owner and had inscribed in the margin of the last folio: “It appears

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that this is a translation by the author himself.”(32) It seems clear that Mazzucchelli based his opinion on that of Maffei.(33) Furthermore, Mazzucchelli made another deduction that casts doubt on his understanding of Latin. Regarding the printed Basel text, he stated: “From the words added in this frontispiece, *iamprimum in lucem editi*, it seems that an earlier edition had been made that is no longer known,” when in fact that Latin locution means, literally, “now for the first time brought to light.”(34) Apparently, Mazzucchelli mistranslated *iamprimum* as *iampridem*, another adverb meaning “long ago,” and so rendered the phrase as indicating another edition once published in the past but now lost.

I must also mention the inscription on the initial flyleaves of the Florentine manuscript. It was written by Vincenzo Follini, appointed librarian of the Magliabechiana in Florence on October 1, 1831: “On Painting, Books three. Translated by the author himself from Latin”; he adds, “See Mazzucchelli, ... page 314.” It is thus apparent that Follini based his assertion of the translation from the Latin only on Mazzucchelli’s authority, even noting the latter’s page number.(35)

The Florentine Tradition

A different opinion was shared among the Florentine commentators of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Antonio Averlino, called Filarete (1400–1469/70), a contemporary of Alberti, referred to the latter’s Latin text specifically in Book One of his own *Treatise on Architecture*: “[H]e [Alberti] also made a very elegant work in Latin.”(36) A century later, Ludovico Domenichi, in his 1547 Italian translation of *De Pictura* directly from the Basel Latin, still makes no mention of a prior vernacular edition.(37) Vasari indicated that he too knew only the Latin text when he stated: “[Alberti] wrote three books *On Painting*, today translated into the Tuscan language by Messer Ludovico Domenichi.”(38) Similarly, Cosimo Bartoli, addressing Vasari, to whom he dedicated his 1568 translation of *De Pictura* from Latin to Italian, wrote, “[M]eanwhile do not disdain that