

INTRODUCTION

The brilliant twentieth-century art historian Erwin Panofsky maintained that, without historical locus, to understand a work of art, “we must subject our practical experience to a controlling principle which can be called the history of style.”¹ If one takes *De pictura* as a work of art itself, its historical locus is the formative moment of cohesion between humanism and painting. Nonetheless, two debates persist regarding this union.

Debate number one concerns the actual extent of mutual influence between the two disciplines in the early Renaissance. The only known painting guide contemporary with *De pictura* is *Il libro dell'arte* (*The Craftsman's Handbook*), by Cennino da Andrea Cennini (1370–1440), believed to have been begun in Padua in the late 1300s.² *De pictura* stands apart from Cennini's *Il libro*, and even Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentarii* of about 1447, the dense 1470s *De prospectiva pingendi* by Piero della Francesca (1415–1492), and the tracts from 1489 to 1511 by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519); although major discourses on visual art, they are not humanist texts.³ A dearth of humanist discourse on visual art, however, does not rule out mutual awareness.⁴ Two possible venues of intersection were art as visual remains of antiquity affecting early humanists, or early humanism directly affecting a contemporary painter or sculptor.⁵ This two-way street of stimulus delivered *De pictura*. Two further distinctions concern this debate over mutual influence. First, as opposed to Cennini, Ghiberti, Piero, and Leonardo – all of whom were artists who wrote notes and diaries as addenda to their artistic exploits – Alberti did not come from a

studio or workshop but from a liberal arts apprenticeship in Padua and Bologna and as papal scribe in Rome. He was the converse – a writer-humanist who applied rhetoric to visual art. Classical rhetoric is crucial; Robert Williams reminds us that “the entire vocabulary of literary stylistics, soon to be adapted to the visual arts [via Alberti] derives from it.”⁶ An exile fortunate enough to be educated by humanists, Alberti would alter the course of painting appreciation with *De pictura*. Through humanist education, he virtually invented art criticism, further moving the pictorial arts away from religion’s grip, bequeathing it an eventual secular base. For example, by attempting to reconstruct the optic science of single-point or fixed perspective as the replication of three-dimensional vision onto a two-dimensional plane, *De pictura* shifted how painting would be henceforth valued by the secular connoisseur, prince, collector, and humanist.⁷ Painters would thereafter become increasingly subject to the temporal universe of written opinion and private patron. As the first fusion of painting and humanism, *De pictura* altered the path of art discourse.

The second distinction of this first debate is that there is no contemporary progenitor for *De pictura*. The work’s antique personages and precepts are conceived and developed in humanist Latin, yet there is no treatise so precisely laid out in adaptive classical rhetoric with which to compare it. *De pictura*, within Panofsky’s historical locus, points to an education revived from Roman antiquity – the *studia humanitatis* of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. This antique *paideia* had been resurrected in Padua before, during, and after Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374).⁸ Petrarch is the hinge between Alberti’s medieval and Renaissance education. According to humanist scholar Ernest Wilkins, Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate, celebrating ancient Rome as the nascence of Western culture and delivered on the Capitoline Hill on Easter Sunday, April 8, 1341, “illuminates more clearly than does any other existing document the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. With all its mingling elements old and new it is the first manifesto of the Renaissance.”⁹ More specifically, as David Marsh precisely elucidates, Petrarch, the “father of humanism” – in both personal history (son of an exile, Bologna law student) as well as literary use of ancient themes and morals (Seneca, Cicero), subjects (self-examination, contemporary criticism), and modus (letters, use of the third person) – is the significant fundamental forebear to Alberti, “universal man of the Renaissance.” Marsh rightly argues that “the closely parallel circumstances between the lives of the two men will have reinforced Albert’s emulation of Petrarch,” as the “original heir to Petrarchan humanism.”¹⁰ Alberti’s immersion in this milieu of Petrarch and classicism began in Padua under humanist teacher Gasparino Barzizza (1360–1431) and continued in both Bologna and Rome. *De pictura* speaks to this in language, form, and content.

The second debate surrounding *De pictura* concerns the tract's practical impact on contemporary painters. Either theory evolved *into* practice, or theory evolved *from* practice. One body of opinion argues that descriptions of methods, such as fixed or single-point perspective, either preceded or coincided with practical application by innovators, such as Brunelleschi and Masaccio. In this view, Alberti would be the theoretical forebear of technique in early Renaissance art.¹¹ However, no contemporary reference survives in which painters refer to Alberti or his theories. Moreover, Alberti includes no illustrations in *De pictura*, as did Piero in his later *De prospectiva pingendi*. Hence, the contradictory position sees Alberti as an observer who analyzed and elaborated on technique and process already in use.¹² This supports *De pictura*'s purpose: not to *teach artists but to impress aristocrats*.¹³ Carroll Westfall pointed to this distinction in 1969, essentially separating the "principles" such as single-point perspective in Book 1 from the "practice" in the latter two books aimed at the liberal arts.¹⁴ Indeed, his intent to delight a cultural elite of high-end picture collectors, who would view *De pictura* as the primary device to exalt their exquisite taste, adheres to Cicero's goal for rhetoric to instruct, delight, and move (*docere, delectare, movere*). Delighting and moving an audience are essential, but the orator is also "duty bound to *instruct*."¹⁵ Alberti instructed by elevating painting to liberal art esteem.

Therein lies a present-day paradox. Modern erudition tends to sequester Alberti's visual art domain from his intellectual purview. Renaissance art history at times offers only nominal consideration of intellectual context when it, in fact, might point to cogent realms, such as politics or economics. Conversely, Renaissance intellectual history tends to catalogue *De pictura* and Alberti's other art and architectural treatises, "in isolation," as Marsh maintains, within its own canon in the humanism domain.¹⁶ Stefano Cracolici, citing Cristoforo Landino's perfect metaphor of Alberti's philology and style as assuming the "colors of a chameleon," depending on his subject ("Tornami alla mente lo stilo di Battista Alberto, el quale come nuovo camaleonta sempre quello colore piglia el quale è nella cosa della quale scrive"), maintains the two worlds of Alberti – art and humanism – as irreconcilable due to the latter's vacillation in historiography.¹⁷ A more hopeful trend, indicated by John Paoletti and Gary Radke as well as Stephen J. Campbell and Michael W. Cole, and Peter Burke, has moved to amend this. As Radke and Paoletti explain, "In structuring histories of Renaissance art around artists, rather than according to the places in which they worked, the persons and institutions whom they served, and the societal expectations they met . . . historians have often failed to indicate that the critical interrelations of these social forces with the arts gave them a compelling visual life over time."¹⁸

In sum, Panofsky's historical locus for *De pictura* is the bond between painting and humanism in an unprecedented moment. Yet with no precedent,

there is no comparative context for his history of style. The vital distinction between Cennini's *Il libro* and Alberti's *De pictura* is the creation of a vocabulary.¹⁹ Distilled from observations, mathematics, and portrayals of antiquities, Alberti's lexicon is the determining interdisciplinary exercise of the early modern era.²⁰ Therein style does not exist. There is no Latin equivalent for this word, nor is the concept ever mentioned. Alberti neither uses a single term such as *comparatio*, relating to objects within a painting, nor does he address individualism within his parameters of *miracula picturae*. In Alberti's day there was yet to be a style of Botticelli versus Lippi *paragone* (comparison) or a school like Fauvism, where André Derain's color transition contrasted with Maurice de Vlaminck's edging to define form. The correspondent aesthetic of style is neither applicable nor intended. Alberti examined process and product at the dawn of early modern art. Comparative critique was not at play.

Six chapters follow, the first three devoted to Padua. Chapter 1 paints the political and intellectual backdrop of Padua in the 1300s, which sets the stage for Alberti's education. Chapters 2–5 examine domains of intellectual and visual art within Alberti's diverse locales: Chapter 2 heralds his humanist education in Padua from 1414 to 1421; Chapter 3 pinpoints his visual sources there; Chapter 4 explores intellectual and visual events in Bologna and northern Europe from 1421 to 1430; and Chapter 5 examines Rome from 1431 to 1434. Each chapter divides sources between textual and visual. In turn, the textual and visual each divide into two groups – antique and post-antique. Chapter 6 concludes the book.

Alberti's humanist education directed him to paintings and monuments. Joining art with intellectual history provides a forensic reconstruction of *De pictura*'s origins before 1434. Examination of Alberti's evolution in his four locales of exile will clarify sources for *De pictura*, its impact on art theory, and its foundation for early modern painting.²¹ Key terms (circumscription and composition) or a realm of terms (mathematics) as well as prescriptions in which terms are employed deliver textual source, the educational source of that text, and the visual works in Padua, Bologna, northern Europe, and Rome that illustrate them. Resolving texts available to Alberti requires knowing the legacy of humanism in Padua and Bologna. Alberti's school curriculum in both cities reveals training in mathematics and optics. His employment under Pope Eugenius IV discloses access to antique and early Renaissance works in Rome. Visual evidence from the 1300s to 1400s identifies precise artworks and ideas that fired his painting obsession.²² Monuments are pertinent to all locales. *De pictura* is also examined in the context of Alberti's other early works. Correlating text and art to his demand that painting “hold and charm the eyes and minds of spectators” provides the corridor of genesis for Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura*, our modern era's preeminent tract on painting.²³

NOTES

- 1 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1972), 11.
- 2 Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte o trattato della pittura*, in *Il libro dell'arte o Trattato della pittura di Cennino Cennini: Di nuovo pubblicato, con molte correzioni e coll'aggiunta di più capitoli, tratti dai codici Fiorentini*, ed. Carlo Milanese and Gaetano Milanese (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1859). See also Cennini, *The Craftman's Handbook: Il libro dell'arte*, trans. David V. Thompson (New York: Dover, 1960); and Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte o trattato della pittura*, ed. Fernando Tempesti (Milan: Longanesi, 1987). Born in Tuscany, Cennini worked in Padua using its dialect.
- 3 Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. Ottavio Morisani (Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1947); Andrea Bolland, "Art and Humanism in Early Renaissance Padua: Cennini, Vergerio and Petrarch on Imitation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 469–87; and Latifah Troncelliti, *The Parallel Realities of Alberti and Cennini: The Power of Writing and the Visual Arts in the Italian Quattrocento* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).
- 4 Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 41. Ames-Lewis remarks that "beyond the occasional letter" there is no work from an artist between these two exempla. See also Troncelliti, *Parallel Realities of Alberti and Cennini*, 25. Troncelliti argues that Cennini completed *Il libro* in 1437, two years after Alberti wrote *De pictura* in Florence, the date on the oldest surviving manuscript of the opus, now in Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana.
- 5 Charles Hope and Elizabeth McGrath, "Artists and Humanists," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161. Humanists may have occasionally consulted on visual art subjects. Leonardo Bruni, as chancellor of Florence, advised the Arte de Calimala (guild of cloth finishers and merchants of foreign cloth) on their sponsorship regarding Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* for that city's baptistery.
- 6 Robert Williams, *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 36.
- 7 Judy Green and Paul S. Green, "Alberti's Perspective: A Mathematical Comment," *Art Bulletin* 69, no. 4 (1987): 641–45.
- 8 Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). See also Ronald G. Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). Skinner and Witt regard a diversity of cultures from French lyric poetry and Latin neoclassical roots of humanism.
- 9 Petrarch, *Collatio laureationis (Coronation Oration)*, trans. Ernest H. Wilkins, *PMLA Modern Language Association of America* 68, no. 5 (December 1953): 1241.
- 10 David Marsh, preface to *Studies on Alberti and Petrarch* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), x.
- 11 Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Gadol's first chapter argues for Alberti's precepts on perspective in *De pictura* as a prototype for Brunelleschi's breakthrough on the process. See also "Alberti," in Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1–22.
- 12 See Julius von Schlosser, *Ein Künstlerproblem der Renaissance: L. B. Alberti* (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1929). Schlosser suggests Alberti, in terms of methodology, was a gifted dilettante.
- 13 Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 23. See also Charles Hope, "The Structure and Purpose of *De pictura*," in *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento: Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, ed. Luco Chiavoni, Gianfranco Ferlisi, and Maria Vittoria Grassi (Mantua: Olschki, 1998), 137 and 264; Mark Jarzombek, "The Structural Problematic of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura*,"

- Renaissance Studies* 4 no. 3 (1990), 273–87; and John M. McManamon, *Pierpaolo Vergerio the Elder: The Humanist as Orator* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 91–92.
- 14 Carroll W. Westfall, “Painting and the Liberal Arts: Alberti’s View,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no. 4 (1969): 487–89.
 - 15 Cicero, *De optimo genere oratorum*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 1.3, 356–57: “Optimus est enim orator, qui dicendo animos audientium et docet et delectat et permovet. Docere debitum est, delectare honorarium permovere necessarium.”
 - 16 Marsh, preface to *Studies on Alberti and Petrarch*, ix. See also Anthony Grafton, “*Historia and Istorìa: Alberti’s Terminology in Context*,” *I Tatti Studies* 8 (2000): 37–68.
 - 17 Stefano Cracolici, “Flirting with the Chameleon: Alberti on Love,” *Modern Language Notes* 121, no. 1 (2006): 102–29. See also Cristoforo Landino, “Proemio al commento dantesco,” in *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. Roberto Cardini (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 1:120.
 - 18 John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012), 10; Stephen J. Campbell, *The Endless Periphery: Toward a Geopolitics of Art in Lorenzo Lotto’s Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Stephen J. Campbell and Michael W. Cole, *Italian Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012); and Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), x. Critical on the separation of time and terminology, Dempsey argues (x) that “the conviction that a renewal of learning, literature, and the arts occurred during the two and a half centuries ranging from Dante and Petrarch to Poliziano and Bembo on the one hand, and Giotto and Simone Martini to Raphael and Michelangelo on the other, is one stated from the very inception of that period in the late years of the thirteenth century.”
 - 19 Cecil Grayson, preface to Alberti, *De pictura*, vii–viii, and *De pictura*, “The Texts,” 8–17.
 - 20 James M. M. Good and Richard H. Roberts, “Introduction: Persuasive Discourse in and between Disciplines in the Human Sciences,” in *The Recovery of Rhetoric: Persuasive Discourse and Disciplinarity in the Human Sciences* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 6–7. Good and Roberts reboot the open letter of December 1, 1988, by Arthur W. Still, cofounder and editor of the *History of the Human Sciences* (London: Sage, 1988–2023), who distinguished “interdisciplinary” as “expertise from more than one discipline . . . to achieve a common aim.”
 - 21 Alberti, *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, ed. Laura Goggi Carotti, in *Nuova collezione di testi umanistici inediti o rari: Pubblicata sotto gli auspici della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa da A. Campana, P. O. Kristeller, S. Mariotti, G. Martelotti*, vol. 17 (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1974). See also Alberti, *On the Use and Abuse of Books*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1999).
 - 22 Paul Hills, *The Light of Early Italian Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
 - 23 Alberti, *De pictura*, 3.52, 94–95: “Finis pictoris laudem, gratiam et benivolentiam vel magis quam divitias ex opere adipisci. Id quidem assequetur pictor dum eius pictura oculos et animos spectantium tenebit atque movebit.”