

ALINA PAYNE

ALBERTI AND THE ORIGINS OF THE *PARAGONE* BETWEEN  
ARCHITECTURE AND THE FIGURAL ARTS

Leon Battista Alberti's art theoretical oeuvre has attracted substantial attention from the dawn of Albertian scholarship. This attention has focused in particular on his thought and its sources, that is, both on his originality and indebtedness *vis-à-vis* an ancient and medieval tradition he inherited and recast. In a scholarly culture devoted to charting invention and progress, the *fortuna critica* of Alberti, however, has been a far less visited territory. Yet by neglecting it the opportunity has been forfeited to disengage his work from later readings and their historically contingent motives that inevitably clouded it, and continue to cloud it, like a veil. The mutual relationship between the three visual arts as a defining feature of Renaissance artistic practice and theory – which has been traditionally referred to Alberti – is a case in point.

From the vantage point of a fractured modern discourse, the tight relationship between the visual arts in the early modern period has been generally taken for granted. And, the *Accademia del disegno* in Florence, with its offspring in other academies and its swan song in the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and later in the Bauhaus, has been cast in the role of a Garden of Eden where all beings – or, in this case, all the arts – cohabited harmoniously.<sup>1</sup> However, if the academy was the institution that provided the outward appearance of unity, and constituted its physical sign, the locus of a theoretical discussion underpinning it was traditionally the *paragone*. Benedetto Varchi's 1547 *Due Lezioni* on the *Maggioranza delli arti* delivered at the Florentine Academy remains the most famous, but it was not an isolated event. Indeed, comparing the relative merits of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example essays the millennium issue of the «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», LVIII (Sept./Dec. 1999).

arts, their utility, access to truth or appropriateness as pastimes for the nobility was a common device, almost a form of intellectual fencing in which the interlocutors sharpened their tools with ever more analogies, metaphors and citations from antiquity the better to slay the opponent.<sup>2</sup> At various times painting and poetry, poetry and history, art against art, art against the sciences and so on came under the scrutiny of this sophisticated form of dueling: Castiglione, Leonardo, Vincenzo Borghini, like so many others entered the fray. Although driven by a competitive spirit among artists and ostensibly intent on distinguishing between the arts, or at least on placing them in a hierarchical order, this *paragone* did presuppose similarity (without which comparison is not possible) and hence constituted the terrain where their relationship was worked out.<sup>3</sup> And yet, among the wide and bright constellation of subjects engaged by evermore *paragoni*, architecture is virtually missing. It is on this absence, its relation to Alberti and the complicated location of architecture within the academy (which may never have been as devoid of cracks and fissures as is now assumed) that this essay will concentrate.

## 1. THE RECEPTION OF ALBERTI AND THE ACCADEMIA DEL DISEGNO

There is a long-standing scholarly tradition that assigns Alberti a privileged position as an inaugural figure in the association of the arts into one body that goes as far back as Schlosser. Although he was careful to specify that Alberti originated the idea of the «sistema delli arti figurative» (the system of the figural arts – my emphasis) thereby hinting that architecture was excluded, the idea that he created a verbal site for all the arts and single-handedly invented modern artistic theory has shaped much of the literature on the subject.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly no twentieth century construction.

<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive discussions of the *paragone* and full bibliographies see L. MENDELSON, *Paragoni. Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezioni and Cinquecento Art Theory*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1982, p. 40; Z. WAZBINSKI, *L'accademia medicea del disegno a Firenze nel Cinquecento: idea e istituzione*, Firenze, Olschki, 1987, and C. FARAGO, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: a critical interpretation with a new edition of the text in the Codex Urbinas*, Leiden, Brill, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Among the few exception is an informal *paragone* between architecture and letters that brings together the *questione della lingua* with the debates on architectural *mescolanze*. See A. PAYNE, *Architects and Academies: Architectural imitatio and the Debates on Language and Style*, in *Architecture and Language: Constructing Identity in European Architecture*, ed. by P. Crossley and G. Clarke, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 118-133, 195-202.

<sup>4</sup> J. VON SCHLOSSER MAGNINO, *La letteratura artistica: manuale delle fonti della storia dell'arte*

Indeed, Alberti's reception in the 16<sup>th</sup> century amply confirms this view, particularly as it relates to the events leading up to and surrounding the formation of the *Accademia del disegno* in Florence in 1562/3.

Although the academy was formed in the 1560s discussions about the relationship between the arts had been intensifying in the previous two decades. Thus, in 1547 Varchi presented his *Due Lezioni* on the *Maggioranza delli arti* at the Florentine Academy in which he invited seven artists (among them Michelangelo and Vasari) to contribute their opinions.<sup>5</sup> His opening lines are particularly revealing: «I don't think that anyone does not know how great has always been – and today more than ever – the dispute and difference of opinion between the sculptors and painters, but also among the others, as to the nobility and relative importance of Painting and Sculpture».<sup>6</sup> It would seem that in 1547 the issue of the relationship between the arts was a current one and Varchi cast a powerful spotlight on it in a very public arena. But he was not alone to record it and related *paragone* discussions testify to more ferment. For example, Baccio Bandinelli's views on the subject (who had not been consulted by Varchi) were published as part of A.F. Doni's *Disegno* in 1549, the same year when Varchi's own *Due Lezioni* saw the light of print. Likewise, Vasari's 1550 *Vite*, besides being a document bolstering Tuscan culture that brought all the arts together under one umbrella in a bold move stressing their intellectual unity, also drew the *paragone* into its orbit.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in a letter of August 5, 1564 written to Vasari, Vincenzo Borghini confirms the connection between the two initiatives – the *paragone* discussion and the *Vite* – when he refers to the content of Vasari's letter

*moderna*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1977, p. 124; though otherwise in *Problemi artistici nella prima rinascenza italiana*, in *Xenia. Saggi sulla storia dello stile e del linguaggio nell'arte figurativa*, tradotti da G. Federici Ajroldi, Bari, Laterza, 1938, p. 20; for a recent assessment of Alberti's paternity of this idea see A. GRAFTON, *Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento*, a cura di P. Barocchi, Livorno, Sillabe, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> «Io non penso, che niuno [...] non sappia quanto grande sia stata sempre, e sia oggi piu che mai, la contesa e differenza fra gli scultori e pittori, ma fra gli altri ancora, della nobilita e maggioranza fra la Pittura e la Scultura», *ivi*, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> For the relationship between Vasari's artistic theory and Cosimo's politics see A. PAYNE, *Vasari, Architecture and the Origins of Historicizing Art*, in «res. Journal of Aesthetics and Anthropology», fall/winter 2001, pp. 51-76. On the relationship between the guilds and the academy see K.-E. BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: the discipline of disegno*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

to Varchi for the *Due lezioni* and his *proemii* to the *Vite* noting that they are two parts of one intellectual enterprise.<sup>8</sup> Borghini's own musings on the arts in his *Selva di notizie* (from the same period) is also significant – especially his ironic tone towards Varchi's undertaking and the artists' self-centred responses.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, despite his caustic remarks he too broaches the *paragone* between the arts.

Clearly in these two decades – from the mid 1540s to the mid 1560s – the climate was ripe for such debates and like a barometer they measure the interest, not only in what distinguishes the arts, but what unites them above and beyond their differences: a language of criticism, a body of theory, a community of goals. However, this ferment in the arts world, though certainly internally driven, may not have been entirely innocent of Medicean politics. Indeed, this was the time when Cosimo I was seeking to systematize the letters and the political administration of the state under one authority, his own.<sup>10</sup> The *disputa* – whether inviting discord or pacifying existing competitiveness – nevertheless draws attention to a current concern that was probably already smoldering in the background: the consolidation of all the arts into one academy *studio* confraternity which turned out to be Cosimo's next project. Such a centralization policy looked to the academy not only as an object of glory and statement of cultural pre-eminence for Tuscany, but also as a purveyor of court artists who could be used as ambassadors or as gifts to another court. Lent or offered to fulfill a commission of importance and thus part of the gift-giving culture of the century these artists could function as an instrument of cultural imperialism not unlike the installation of Tuscan as the *lingua docta* for the whole peninsula. Varchi's un-

<sup>8</sup> In his 1550 *proemio* to the *Vite* Vasari stated: «Una anima medesima reggia due corpi; et io per questo conchiudo che male fanno coloro che si ingegnano di disunirle e di separarle l'una da l'altra». GIORGIO VASARI, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri: nell'edizione per i tipi di Lorenzo Torrentino*, Firenze, 1550, a cura di L. Bellosi, A. Rossi, Torino, Einaudi, 1986, p. 15. Vasari had identified *disegno* as source of both arts already in his 1547 *paragone* letter, although there *disegno* was *madre* not *padre*. BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 64-65. The source of this reading of *disegno* goes back to Castiglione who defined it as the *medesima fonte* for painting and sculpture. BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, *Il libro del cortegiano*, introduzione di A. Quondam, Milano, Garzanti, 1981, p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 87-88.

<sup>10</sup> On Cosimo's connected interests in the creation of the two academies – *fiorentina* and *del disegno* – see C. DEMPSEY, *Some Observations on the Education of Artists in Florence and Bologna During the Later Sixteenth Century*, in «Art Bulletin», LXII (1980), p. 555.

dertaking and words hint at some tensions and perhaps this is to be expected of him. As Michel Plaisance has shown, the years 1545-8 are the height of his political disgrace for his opposition to the shift of power from the academicians of the *Humidi* to the duke who sought to reform the academy and place it under his tight control and censure as the *Accademia fiorentina*.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly then, even if the *disputa* on the visual arts ends with a draw, Varchi records the Medicean winds of change that blow towards absolute control and the natural and probably wider spread anxiety caused by potential further change and consolidation.<sup>12</sup> Still, the very fact that at this date he pushes in one direction testifies to a rising groundswell in the other.

It is in Cosimo's bid to control the arts that we must look for the place Alberti then acquired, and never subsequently lost, as herald of their unity. And, I would like to argue that the intense translation and publication campaign of his treatises in this period is part of the rising wave that leads up to the formation of the *Accademia del disegno* as if to a natural conclusion. If one book end bracketing the structural changes that the arts were undergoing is Varchi's *paragone* and Vasari's 1550 *Vite*, then the second edition of the *Vite* (1568) and the formation of the *Accademia del disegno* in 1562/3 is the other. It is precisely in this period that Alberti experiences a substantial rise in popularity and revival. In 1547 Lodovico Domenichi translates *De pictura* (dedicated to Francesco Salviati), which is published in Venice by Giolitto. Cosimo Bartoli, always keen to respond to the duke's policies and following them like a weathervane in the (vain) hope of patronage, translates *De re aedificatoria* in the 1540s (the censors approve it in 1548 but it is published in the same year as Vasari's *Vite*, in 1550, also by the ducal printer, Torrentino).<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>11</sup> M. PLAISANCE, *Culture et politique à Florence de 1542 à 1551*, in *Les écrivains et le pouvoir en Italie à l'époque de la Renaissance*, III, études réunies par A. Rochon et alii, Paris, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1974, pp. 149-228.

<sup>12</sup> «Avendo veduto [...] che ciascuna [arte] piglia la nobilità e l'unità dal suo fine di maniera che tutte quelle che hanno i medesimi fini, sono una sola e medesima essenzialmente [...]. Ora ognuno confessa che non solamente il fine è il medesimo, cioè una artificiosa imitazione della natura, ma ancora il principio, cioè il disegno». BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., p. 43. Cosimo's decree of 1540 conferring upon Bandinelli the *soprintendenza* of the Opera del Duomo with absolute power over the artisans and the task of teaching them art, constituted an early dry-run for the academic idea. On this issue see Z. WAZBINSKI, *L'accademia medicea del disegno a Firenze nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 64-66.

<sup>13</sup> J. BRYCE, *Cosimo Bartoli. The career of a Florentine polymath*, Genève, Droz, 1983.

translation is tied to the contemporary political context that sought to establish the supremacy of Tuscany and its claim to the most ancient city and language. For example, Bartoli refers to the Etruscans (to whom Alberti had devoted a good amount of space) as the descendants of the Aramei (to whom Alberti made no reference at all) – that is, Bartoli slides in an endorsement of Giambullari's eccentric reading of the history of Florence and its vast antiquity going back to Noah and the Flood from *Il Gello* which allowed the pro-Cosimo faction in the academy to claim precedence for the Tuscan dialect.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in his translation, Bartoli (who was also one of the keenest editors of the *Vite*) makes frequent use of key and very recognizable Vasarian terms such as *leggiadria* (for the Albertian *concinnitas*), *gratia*, and *disegno* a move that stressed the connection between current aesthetic categories and the great Alberti.

In the next two decades the Alberti reception intensifies. In 1565 *De re aedificatoria* is reissued by Franceschi, this time in a *quarto* edition intended as a companion volume to Vasari's *Vite* which is republished in Venice in the same year. In the dedication Bartoli argues that the initial 1500 copies of the 1550 edition had been sold out and a smaller, more «commoda» edition was now necessary.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the prestige (or the need for) Alberti seems to be such at this point that in the same year Torrentino also reissued the 1550 Bartoli translation of *De re aedificatoria* (without his approval) in competition with Franceschi and added Domenichi's translation of *Della Pittura* to it;<sup>16</sup> Pietro Lauro's inferior 1546 translation of *De re aedificatoria* was also reissued in the same year, probably by Valgrisi who had originally published it. This flurry of publications then reaches a climax in 1568 which is once again a milestone – not only because Vasari publishes his second edition of the *Vite* (with an enlarged biography of Alberti and a full discussion of the creation of the *accademia*) but also because Domenichi's 1547 translation of *Della Pittura* is published in Florence by Giolitto and Bartoli's translation of

<sup>14</sup> On Giambullari's *Il Gello* and its political significance see M. PLAISANCE, *Culture et politique à Florence de 1542 à 1551* cit., p. 185; on Cosimo's precedence disputes with the duke of Ferrara see R. WILLIAMS, *The Sala Grande in the Palazzo Vecchio and the Precedence Controversy between Florence and Ferrara*, in *Vasari's Florence: Artists and Literati at the Medicean Court*, ed. by Ph. Jaks, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 163–181.

<sup>15</sup> COSIMO BARTOLI, *L'architettura di Leonbatista Alberti*, In Venetia, appresso Francesco Franceschi, 1565, n.p.

<sup>16</sup> J. BRYCE, *Cosimo Bartoli. The career of a Florentine polymath* cit., pp. 189–192.

*Della pittura* and *De statua* as the *Opuscoli morali* (dedicated to Francesco de' Medici) sees the light of print.<sup>17</sup>

The Albertian trinity of individual treatises in Bartoli's translation is dedicated to Cosimo, Vasari and Ammannati respectively, that is, to leading academicians and its political *capo*. It has been argued that these dedications testify to the respect and fame the academy had gained since its formation.<sup>18</sup> However, another reading may take into account the complex cultural-political environment in which these texts appeared: Bartoli's Alberti campaign is part of the intellectual infrastructure that was necessary for the academy to exist and sustain its pro-Tuscan claims – particularly in the domain of architecture which was thinly represented in its early years and needed all the bolstering it could get.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, bringing architecture into the fold was particularly urgent at this juncture, and Vasari's substantially increased coverage of architecture in the 1568 *Vite* (which began to be printed in 1564), like the attention lavished on Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* records this urgency. Cosimo was especially keen to integrate architecture within the academy and not only because of personal preference. The academy's statutes of January 13, 1563 make this quite clear: in article 37 the architect academicians are entrusted with reviewing all public and private works of consequence in the city and reporting their findings to the duke.<sup>20</sup> In this effort to harness the arts to the political wagon, Alberti, like Vasari, was eminently useful, as he seemed

<sup>17</sup> COSIMO BARTOLI, *Opuscoli morali di Leon Battista Alberti*, In Venetia, appresso Francesco Franceschi, 1568.

<sup>18</sup> K.-E. BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State* cit., p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, p. 58. The extent to which *De statua* was known remains a vexed issue. Vasari certainly does not mention it in either his 1550 or 1568 life of Alberti. Whether he did not know about it in 1564 when the first part of the second edition of the *Vite* was printed (which included Alberti's life) and he only learned about it later from Bartoli (in a letter of 1567), or whether he did know about it (as did Dürer and Leonardo) but did not want to allow any one else other than Michelangelo the glory of having united all the arts remains an open question. On the dating of publication and letter see W. KALLAB, *Vasaristudien*, Wien-Leipzig, Graeser-Teubner, 1908, pp. 295–297 and J. BRYCE, *Cosimo Bartoli. The career of a Florentine polymath* cit., p. 193. The scholarly literature on *De statua* has not focused on this issue. See M. COLLARETA, *Considerazioni in margine al De statua ed alla sua fortuna*, in «Annali della scuola normale superiore di Pisa», XII (1982), 1, pp. 171–187; L.B. ALBERTI, *De statua*, a cura di M. Collareta, Livorno, Sillabe, 1998; O. BÄTSCHMANN, *Leon Battista Alberti: De statua*, in *Theorie der Praxis. Leon Battista Alberti als Humanist und Theoretiker der bildenden Künste*, hrsg. von K. Forster and H. Locher, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1999, pp. 109–128; neither Bryce nor Grafton deal with this issue.

<sup>20</sup> K.-E. BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State* cit., p. 229.

to buttress with the authority of theory Cosimo's domination and centralization policies. Like the political capital made of Michelangelo's funeral (1564) and the nuptials of Francesco de Medici with Giovanna of Austria (1565-6) as occasions to display a body of artists united under the banner of *disegno* (despite their vociferous squabbles), the intensive publication of Alberti reinforced the cultural politics of Cosimo.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. ARCHITECTURE AND THE PARAGONE

Yet despite these concerted efforts to bring the arts together and justify their togetherness, architecture remained a difficult third, even among the most vociferous supporters of the academy. Already Varchi had *de facto* separated it from its so-called sister arts – both physically by dealing with it in another *disputa* and theoretically by judging it according to different criteria. In the first *disputa* all arts are discussed yet the center of gravity lies on the mimetic arts, painting and sculpture to whom the second *disputa* is devoted and the only one where he actually goes to the artists themselves, to «colui che fa» (the one who makes) for greater insight. After dealing with the *nobiltà* of the arts in general in the first *disputa* of the *seconda lezione* – and here Varchi's definition of the arts is very democratic as he includes weavers and shoemakers and in this he draws on a long tradition that also includes Alberti – he arrives at the conclusion that medicine should head the list, followed closely by architecture because «hanno il fine piu nobile» (they have the most noble purpose).<sup>22</sup> He gets here by way of a convoluted discussion on the *necessario* (in which he draws heavily on Aristotle). Painting and sculpture, the arts that he will discuss subsequently, he implies, lie in the domain of what Borghini would later call the superfluous (*superfluo*), for being less 'necessary' and 'useful'.<sup>23</sup> However, outside of warfare which outranks them

<sup>21</sup> Among most recent scholarship on this subject see M. COLLARETA, *Benvenuto Cellini e il destino dell'oreficeria*, in *Benvenuto Cellini. Kunst und Kunsttheorie im 16. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. von A. Nova und A. Schreurs, Köln, Böhlau, 2003, pp. 161-169; F. JACOBS, *(Dis)assembling: Marsyas, Michelangelo and the Accademia del Disegno*, in «Art Bulletin», LXXXIV (September 2002), pp. 426-448.

<sup>22</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 22-24, 25; L.B. ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, ed. with transl., introduction and notes by C. Grayson, London, Phaidon, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit.,

and which he brackets out, medicine with architecture hold a related position for being *necessarie*, closely allied to natural philosophy and only just below metaphysics: one (medicine) is «ministra della natura» (nature's agent); the other (architecture) «vince la natura» (conquers nature).<sup>24</sup> Neither imitates it. Not surprisingly Varchi wholeheartedly draws on Alberti, and less so on Vitruvius when he sets architecture above the other arts and concludes that he places it ahead because of its *fine nobile* and *utile*.<sup>25</sup> «Therefore», he concludes, «sculptures and paintings are made to decorate buildings rather than the reverse». <sup>26</sup> Placed above the other arts, architecture is, however, severed from them. Unlike them it «vince la natura», and it also appears in a *disputa* clearly separated from the one that focuses on the figural arts.

The replies Varchi received from his interlocutors are all well known and to a degree follow along the lines already set out by Castiglione, as does Varchi's own *disputa* by his own admission.<sup>27</sup> Suffice it to say that no one brings up architecture, not even Francesco da Sangallo who could legitimately have done so being an architect himself. One exception is Vasari, though his comment is brief – the painter must be an architect because he masters perspective – and intended to bolster painting's cause rather than evaluate architecture's place among the arts. Cellini, who is the other exception, is more thoughtful, yet he too adduces architecture the better to bolster the case for sculpture (in his view Michelangelo is a good architect because he is a good sculptor – an issue to which he will return at greater length in his *Due trattati* of 1568).<sup>28</sup>

Vasari himself, for all his efforts to present a theoretical unit that applies to all the arts in his *Vite*, is not altogether convincing when he comes to the lives of the architects: those whose careers involved the

pp. 15-16. On Varchi's concept of the *necessario* and its root in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* see L. MENDELSON, *Paragoni. Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezioni and Cinquecento Art Theory* cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> «le sculture e pitture si fanno per adornare gli edificii e non al incontro», *ivi*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, *Il libro del cortegiano* cit., pp. 33-34. It should be noted, however, that unlike Varchi's and his correspondents', Castiglione's concern in these passages is not with a theory of the arts, nor with a critical assessment of Raphael and Michelangelo, but with courtly behaviour. It is from this vantage point alone that he delivers a judgment.

<sup>28</sup> BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 64, 83.



other arts (such a Raphael, Peruzzi and Giulio Romano for example) get discussed far more in terms of their achievements there, than with respect to their architectural work. And even though he gives a Bramante or an Antonio da Sangallo his due, his critical vocabulary is less nuanced and his discomfort with the issue of personal style – the corner stone of his history of art – with respect to architecture evident, such that one senses a strain in this togetherness between the arts. Although in his *Proemio* Vasari revisits Varchi's *paragone* (where he adds that architecture «was left to one side») and concludes that the *disputa* is unnecessary as sculpture and painting «in truth are sisters, born of one father, which is the *disegno* [...] one soul moves two bodies»<sup>29</sup> he too isolates architecture for being «more universal and more necessary and useful to man, and in whose service and ornament the other two stand».<sup>30</sup> However, in his life of Baccio d'Agnolo, he argues that architecture's foundation must be painting, sculpture or woodcarving since they alone can provide «sound judgment and good *disegno*».<sup>31</sup> This subordinate position is perhaps not surprising since in the third *proemio*, when he lists his cardinal aesthetic categories, under *disegno* and *maniera* (which are their pinnacle) he specifically names only painting and sculpture (architecture only comes up under *ordine*, *regola* and *misura*).<sup>32</sup> In his 1547 letter to Varchi, Cellini's take on *disegno* – which he would reiterate in his 1568 *Due Trattati* – had been even more blunt: it is the three-dimensional sculptor's model that must precede the *disegno* to produce good architecture and painting (such as Michelangelo's) rather than «a little *disegno* made on paper, from which they make the model».<sup>33</sup>

Borghini – *luogotenente* of the academy though he was – is the most ambivalent about architecture. Picking up from Varchi (and Aristotle) the idea of the *necessario* that he had used to distinguish architecture and medicine from the other arts, he takes it even farther and argues that «painting

<sup>29</sup> «per il vero sono sorelle, nate di un padre, che e il disegno [...] un anima medesima regga due corpi», GIORGIO VASARI, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* cit., pp. 8, 15.

<sup>30</sup> «piu universale e piu necessaria et utile agli uomini, et al servizio et ornamento della quale sono l'altre due», *ivi*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 806.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 539.

<sup>33</sup> «un picol disegno fatto in carta [dal quale], fanno il modello». BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 82-83; BENVENUTO CELLINI, *Due Trattati*, introduzione di A. Altomonte, Modena, Edizioni Aldine, 1983, II, pp. 47-48.

and sculpture [...] are not only not necessary, but entirely superfluous and useless to human life».<sup>34</sup> And, going against Varchi, he concludes: «the fact of being superfluous or not necessary not only does not diminish but increases their reputation and glory».<sup>35</sup> What saves the *necessaria* architecture at all in his eyes is its «poco di superfluo» (minimal superfluous) which its «artists, hoping to soften it a little and add to its essence, which in truth was all mechanical, mixed in a little delicacy».<sup>36</sup> It is only in this way that architecture can be admitted at all among the other arts «in as far as architecture is concerned with this part of the superfluous that has delight as its object and is achieved by way of imitation [...] only with this claim and in this garb can it be admitted and received in company [of the other arts]».<sup>37</sup> This vexed position of architecture *vis-à-vis* the other arts – due to its minimal mimetic moment – may explain why despite Cosimo's interest in architecture and its uses to further his political agenda, there were very few architects members in the early days of the academy: only three who added this label to that of *pittore*, Cresci Butteri, Vasari and Giovan Antonio Dossi. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that more architects joined, only to separate thereafter into a subsection of their own corresponding to a school of architecture.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1580s the integration of architecture within the *arti del disegno* had led to some singular results. Gianpaolo Lomazzo acts on this view: in his *Trattato della pittura* – a blown up version of Alberti's *Della pittura* in which each one of his categories (proportion, *moti*, *colore*, *ricevere dei lumi*, *compositio*, *istoria* and perspective) acquires a full book – architecture has been completely subsumed and folded into painting: the orders, their proportions and composition are part of the *istoria* as the stage set and background of painting.<sup>39</sup> For him, as for Borghini – and both draw

<sup>34</sup> «la pittura e la scultura [...] sono non solamente non necessarie, ma al tutto superflue et inutili a la vita umana». BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> «l'esser superfluo o non necessario non solo non toglie ma areca riputazione e gloria». *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> «artefici andran pensando d'ingentilirla un poco et oltre al proprio loro, che era in vero tutto meccanico, di mescolarvi un poco di gentile». *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> «in quanto l'architettura riguarda questa parte del superfluo e che a per fine il diletto e si serve per mezzo della imitazione [...] con questo titolo solo e con questa veste e stata ammesa e ricevuta in compagnia loro». *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> K.-E. BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State* cit., pp. 36, 161.

<sup>39</sup> GIOVANNI PAOLO LOMAZZO, *Trattato dell'arte de la pittura*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1968.

on Alberti here – architecture's intersection point with painting lies in ornament. And Lomazzo states that only those who have been brought up in the tradition of *disegno* (that is trained as painters and sculptors) can be given license to «vary the orders and compose what they wish».<sup>40</sup> The *paragone* with architecture – clearly to its disadvantage – is just beneath the surface.

Among architects and theorists the views on the nature of a shared *disegno* were rather different. In his very influential mid-century commentary on Vitruvius Daniele Barbaro argues that the practice of *disegno* derives from geometry alone («geometry is the mother of *disegno*»). Although he is an attentive reader of Alberti and recommends his *finitorium* from *De statua* as instrument to determine contours, he leaves painting completely out of the *disegno* equation.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, although the intensity of Vitruvian studies remains unaltered, the reception of *De re aedificatoria* dies down in this period. In the only and unpublished commentary it received in the sixteenth-century (cc. 1568–96), however, Pellegrino Tibaldi, speaking as a painter/architect, twists Alberti's words to elevate the role of painting. For him it is this art that allows architecture «to discover all the questions about a building and to give it form with invention and grace».<sup>42</sup>

Finally, at the close of the century Federico Zuccaro is the most outspoken. Having been involved with the *Accademia del disegno* in the 1560s and 1570s and written a memorandum to the Consuls in the hope of «getting back on its feet this academy of ours» he was instrumental in the creation of the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome.<sup>43</sup> His ambivalence to architecture is already evident in his Florentine statement. While he exhorts painters and sculptors to study modeling and drawing respectively (that is, each other's tools) and almost quotes Vasari when he says that «a single soul is in two bodies, sculpture and painting, which is the intelli-

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, p. 407.

<sup>41</sup> «dove si puo vedere quanto necessaria sia la pratica del disegno, la quale pratica e presa dalla geometria, come quando bisogno è di pigliare una linea a piombo sopra un'altra, formare gli angoli dritti [...] e simili altre cose, che giovano à far le piante, & i rilievi». MARCO VITRUVIO POLLIONE, *I dieci libri dell'architettura tradotti e commentati da Daniele Barbaro*. 1567, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> *L'architettura di Leon Battista Alberti nel commento di Pellegrino Tibaldi*, ed. critica e apparato delle varianti di S. Orlando, esegesi e saggio introduttivo di G. Simoncini, Roma, De Luca, 1988, p. 191.

<sup>43</sup> K.-E. BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State* cit., p. 243.

gence of *disegno*» he only enjoins the architects to show «how this science, so useful, and necessary can be used and what manner must be followed and what avoided».<sup>44</sup> Although he mentions that «architecture is united with these arts» this is essentially lip service to the conception of the academy, for nothing in his recommendations supports it.

When Zuccaro becomes *principe* of the *Accademia di San Luca* in 1594 he is even more direct. Having invited representatives of the three arts to discourse on their respective definitions, nobility and excellences, and having been spurned for three weeks in a row by Giacomo della Porta who had to defend architecture but failed to come, and faced with his colleagues (Volterra, Longhi and Ponzio) who refused to enter into such a discussion on the grounds that Vitruvius had already said all there was to say on the subject, Zuccaro, very willingly, offers to do the job himself. Not surprisingly, architecture does not fare well as he argues that the architect, besides being all that Vitruvius will have him be, must in the first place be a painter «to have good *disegno*; sculptor in order to assemble the bodies and forms more solidly and with greater liveliness».<sup>45</sup> Although *disegno* unites all the arts (like a sun or the three branches of an olive tree), painting remains both its «daughter and mother».<sup>46</sup> These ideas are developed further in his treatise where he defines architecture as «the third, dear and beloved daughter of *disegno*». Beloved perhaps, but it is still «less worthy of such a noble and deserving father [...] in some ways she too imitates nature, but not quite as directly and as singularly as painting and sculpture».<sup>47</sup>

### 3. ALBERTI AND THE UNITY OF THE VISUAL ARTS

The tensions which critics and theorists, artists and humanists give voice to here were not without their roots in the very work of the figure that stood at the beginning of modern theory as the covenant that the arts

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, p. 244 [my translation].

<sup>45</sup> «per haver disegno buono; scultore per ordinare piu saldamente, e vivamente i corpi, e le forme». FEDERICO ZUCCARO, *Scritti d'arte di Federico Zuccaro*, a cura di D. Heikamp, Firenze, Olschki, 1961, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> «meno meritevole di si nobile, e degno padre [...] e in qualche parte emula anch'ella la natura, se bene non cosi propriamente, e singolarmente come la pittura e la scultura». *Ivi*, p. 262. This idea had come up also in the academy devoted to *Disegno*, where Zuccaro argued that architecture had «suggetto men nobile». *Ivi*, p. 60.

belonged together: Leon Battista Alberti. To be sure, having written on all three arts he literally embodied their unity. At the same time, his (now famous) passages where he compared painting with sculpture (to the detriment of the latter) had been used to good effect by Varchi's correspondents as well as by Borghini, Lomazzo and Varchi himself in the various *paragoni*.<sup>48</sup> Thus Alberti belonged by rights both to the discourse that debated the merits of the arts the better to distinguish between them as well as to its twin that brought them together into the academy.<sup>49</sup> But as far as architecture went Alberti offered few real connecting bridges to the figural arts. Even when he seemed to do so – for example, when he exalted proportion, or recommended to the painter his book on ornament from *De re aedificatoria* (VII, 1) or stated that the architect must know first and foremost painting and mathematics (IX, 10), or yet again when he placed the human body at the center of all three arts – any real transference across to architecture was ambiguous at best.<sup>50</sup> What was given with one hand was taken with the other, and the glass seemed as often to be half full as half empty. Indeed, there were as many obstacles in the path of a unified theory of all three arts in his writings than not. These obstacles were certainly not spelled out as such by Alberti himself – in truth he never took up the relationship between the arts as an issue – but they remained embedded in the chain of theory he set off, becoming structural differences that were increasingly difficult to ignore.

Even those areas where overlaps seemed evident were not unproblematic. Thus, the proportion of the Ionic column shaft, for example, while ostensibly depending on the human body is fundamentally arithmetic in nature (IX, 7).<sup>51</sup> The diameter-to-height ratio of the column is derived neither from the width of the human torso, nor from its thickness – both are rejected – but from the mean of two slenderness ratios. This is not the selection process of Zeuxis when facing the Cortonian

<sup>48</sup> See for example his statements both in *De pictura* and *De statua*, in L.B. ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., pp. 62–63, 65, 73, 101.

<sup>49</sup> On the commonalities between the arts, especially painting and sculpture see especially the essay by Marco Collareta in this volume and *La figura e lo spazio: una lettura del De statua*, in L.B. ALBERTI, *De statua* cit., pp. 33–52.

<sup>50</sup> On Alberti's treatment of the bodes see also G. WOLF, *The Body and Antiquity in Alberti's Art Theoretical Writings*, in *Antiquity and Its Interpreters*, ed. by A. Payne et alii, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 174–190.

<sup>51</sup> L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by J. Rykwert, N. Leach, R. Tavernor, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 1991, p. 309.

maidens that Alberti recommends in *De statua*. Even if in both cases he looks to a mean, that contemplated in *De statua* is a mean obtained from an examination of the same type of body members; in *De re aedificatoria* the mean between the width height and depth height (and the ensuing 1:8 diameter/height ratio for the column) does not represent a real component of the human body but is an abstraction.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the importance of musical harmony for the proportional relationship of architectural parts is not only a unique feature of *De re aedificatoria* but also points to architecture's abstract rather than mimetic referents (I, 9; IX, 5–6). Indeed, if anything, Alberti proposes a music/architecture *paragone*. In fact, when all is said and done Alberti takes up little of the Vitruvian *homo bene figuratus*. Even the famous passage from his dedication of *De statua* to the Bishop of Aleria where he argues that the book would be useful to a painter as well as to an architect specifies that it is the process or principle (*ratio*) of deriving and mapping a *colossus* from known measurements (i.e. a large three-dimensional structure) that is transportable here.<sup>53</sup>

The mimetic moment that was seen to connect the arts in a fundamental way was also compromised in *De re aedificatoria*. It is true that Alberti seems to posit an anatomical connection between architecture and the figural arts in the concept of a skeletal core that is gradually covered with ligaments and flesh – the backbone of later academic instruction (III, 8).<sup>54</sup> Yet in architecture it functions more as an analogy (rather like Galen's between the earth and the human body) than a real mimetic condition.<sup>55</sup> The same is true of the origin of the arts. As has been noted, in ancient literature both painting and sculpture find their origin outside of human ingenuity in accidental *mimesis* – either in an accidental event (the mirrored image in a pool or, as per Pliny, the shadow cast on a wall, even a sponge thrown against the wall) or in a natural formation (for sculpture) – and Alberti certainly draws on this tradition.<sup>56</sup> Architecture too owes its

<sup>52</sup> Contra Aiken who defines the mean in *De statua* as arithmetic. J.A. AIKEN, *L.B. Alberti's System of Human Proportions*, in «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», IV (1980), pp. 70–90.

<sup>53</sup> L.B. ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., pp. 118–119.

<sup>54</sup> Id., *On the Art of Building* cit., pp. 72–73.

<sup>55</sup> On the microcosm/macrocosm analogies in antiquity and the Middle Ages see F. FEHRENBACH, *Leonardo da Vinci: "Mikrokosmos" und "Zweite Natur": Krise einer naturphilosophischen Analogie*, in *NaturStücke: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Natur*, hrsg. von H.W. Ingensiep und R. Hoppe-Sailer, Ostfildern, Edition Tertium, 1996, pp. 42–68.

<sup>56</sup> The *locus classicus* for this discussion remains H.W. JANSON, *The Image Made by Chance*



origin to accident according to Vitruvius – to the discovery of fire and the Corinthian capital to the fortuitous encounter of Callimachus with the picturesque tomb marker of a young girl. But for Alberti neither story holds a preeminent position in his definition of architecture. Indeed, although ornament derives from imitation of man-made objects – e.g. capitals derive from increasingly complex vase forms – Alberti jettisons the quintessential imitation story of the wood structure into the stone *ornamenta* of the temple that is the lynch pin of Vitruvius's theory of architecture.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, he was not the only one to sense a difficulty here. This transference of materials via the *imago* became a real stumbling block for later Renaissance theorists and architects who could not help noticing the 'faults' or 'licenses' of Roman antiquities *vis-à-vis* this Vitruvian rule and thus threw it into crisis. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is not an architect but a literary figure – the Florentine academician Gherardo Spini – who almost obsessively refers every architectural detail to the imitation of the wooden structure in his treatise on ornament (c. 1565, dedicated to Cosimo) and draws heavily on Aristotle's *Poetics* to buttress his argument.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, for Alberti – and this may be the source for Borghini and Lomazzo – architecture's intersection with painting does lie in ornament. Yet, although he refers to painted ornament (VI, 2), admonishes painters to read the books on ornament since they are «seekers of delight» (VI, 13) – particularly as it varies from building type to building type (VII, 1) – and declares painting to be an ornament of architecture (IX, 4), the question whether the function (rather than origin) of architectural ornament is mimetic or not remains open. The term *fictor* (to define the artist, and *aedi-fictor* for the architect) and its correlative *ingere* (to invent, to mould) with its implication of fiction on one hand and *pingere* (to paint) on the other is certainly posited by the lexical field of his

in *Renaissance Thought*, in *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. by M. Meiss, New York, New York University Press, 1961, pp. 254–266.

<sup>57</sup> Alberti mentions that the arts were born of «chance and observation, fostered by use and experiment, and matured by reason and knowledge» (VI, 2). L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building* cit., p. 157. On the stone *imago* compare the very faint references to the beams and rafters in I, 10 and in the discussion of the Doric in Alberti, VII, 6 and VII, 9 (without any mention of a representation of wood forms in stone) to VITRUVIUS, *De arch.*, IV 2.

<sup>58</sup> On Spini's imitation theory see A. PAYNE, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament and Literary Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 114–169. On Spini's activity at the *Accademia fiorentina* see Z. WĄZBINSKI, *L'accademia medicea del disegno a Firenze nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 215–234.

three treatises; that of beauty shining through ornament – like inner beauty of character shining through the visible actions of a man, as per Cicero – and therefore of ornament as an inherent refraction rather than representation, is also present in two significant locations of *De re aedificatoria* (VI, 2; VI, 5).<sup>59</sup> Both are valid though contradictory readings that had significant reverberations in later theory.<sup>60</sup>

More important still is Alberti's deviation from imitation theory, since for him the ultimate arbiter of the quality of an architectural design is neither visible nature (as a datum), nor the comments, criticism or emendations of others who can evaluate imitation and its plausibility (as he argues in *De pictura*). As there is no exterior referent for architecture – either literary or in nature – the architect is thrown back upon himself and his own *ratio innata* (IX, 5).<sup>61</sup> Painting and sculpture involve abstracting the artificial from the real. There is no equivalent artifice in architecture, as Alberti knows only too well. In fact the direction is the reverse (IX, 10): instead of going from nature to drawing, the architect goes from an idea (in the mind) to the drawing (or the model) to the real (the building) – in a reflexive movement, it is the real that copies the drawing, and not the other way around. «L'architettura vince la natura» may have been as close as later theorists like Varchi or Vasari could come to naming this paradox.<sup>62</sup>

If proportion is a major issue applicable to all the arts, paradoxically perspective is not. In this Alberti takes a stand even against Vitruvius' *scenographia* and rails against pictorial representation for the architect: «The painter», he argues, «takes pains to emphasize the relief of objects in painting with shading and diminishing lines and angles [i.e. perspective];

<sup>59</sup> For a reading of the concept of the Albertian artist (painter, sculptor and architect) as *fictor* see Wolf, pp. 180–185. For a discussion of the relationship between beauty and ornament as its light see H.-K. LÜCKE, *Alberti, Vitruvio, e Cicerone*, in *Leon Battista Alberti*, Catalogo della mostra (Mantova, Palazzo Te, 10 settembre–11 dicembre 1994), a cura di J. Rykwert e A. Engel, Ivrea-Milano, Olivetti-Electa, 1994, p. 83.

<sup>60</sup> See e.g. Borghini and Lomazzo. Otherwise Tibaldi who goes so far as to add to Alberti (IX, 6–9): «Uno ornamento non faci nisun servizio utile né necessario perderà [ogni bellezza]». *L'architettura di Leon Battista Alberti nel commento di Pellegrino Tibaldi* cit., p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> Experts who can advise or comment on practical matters – rather than on issues of beauty – are encouraged (II, 3). L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building* cit., p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> «perche ella fa quelle cose che non si possono fare dalla natura». BENEDETTO VARCHI – VINCENZO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., p. 29. Vasari also states that architecture «giova alla natura» more than the other arts. GIORGIO VASARI, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* cit., p. 62.

the architect rejects shading, but takes his projections from the ground plan, without altering the lines and by maintaining the true angles, reveals the extent and shape of each elevation side – he is one who desires his work to be judged not by deceptive appearances but according to certain calculated standards» (II, 1).<sup>63</sup> We have here the origin of the orthographic set of drawings, and Alberti offers no hints that *facilita* in *disegno* from nature (as Lomazzo, Zuccaro and even Vasari insisted upon) had to precede architectural work. Indeed, he is quite dismissive of the painter's tools even rejecting painted models for being «lewdly dressed with the allurements of painting» and not representing facts (II, 1). The other famous *locus* for an application of perspective to architecture was traditionally that of the visual refinements to compensate for diminution in tall buildings/temples (Vitruvius, *De arch.*, III 3, 11–13). Yet this concept gets little if any attention from Alberti. He mentions it as one-liners in VII, 6 and VII, 9 but concludes: «we have discovered by measuring the works ourselves, that the Latins did not always follow these rules exactly».<sup>64</sup> Such critical passages are at odds with his recommendations in *De re aedificatoria* that the architect must know painting and read his treatise on the subject.<sup>65</sup> For him, the architect need not be either an Archimedes or a Zeuxis, or put another way, he should be as far from one as from the other.

Although *disegno* in its later 16<sup>th</sup> century meaning – already used by Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano* and referring to both drawing and design – is not a term or category that comes up in Alberti, the idea of drawing/contour does. Sculpture's essential categories are *dimensio* and *finitio*; painting is defined as *circumscriptio*, *compositio* and *luminum receptio* and architecture as *numerus*, *finitio* and *collocatio* (IX, 5). There is a common denominator in *finitio* as outline or contour – elsewhere also defined as *lineamenta* (I, 1) – which also allies it to painting's *circumscriptio* and this may well contain the concept of *disegno* in the bud.<sup>66</sup> However, although all three arts depend to a degree on the definition of outlines for forms, how much this *disegno* might be a transportable skill from one art to the other remains unclear and unspoken.

<sup>63</sup> L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building* cit., p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> *Ivi*, p. 202.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., pp. 61, 63.

<sup>66</sup> On the relation *lineamenta/disegno* see G. WOLF, *The Body and Antiquity in Alberti's Art Theoretical Writings* cit., pp. 183–184.

Indeed, in Vasarian terms Alberti may be seen to take an anti-*disegno* (as drawing) position. In his view the principal tool for the architect is the model not the drawing, which is only of limited use since it is deceptive and ultimately an inferior means of evaluating a design (II, 1). «Questions such as this», he argues, «should be projected and debated by the use of models; these models should be employed not only at the outset but also during construction» (IX, 10). In his dedication of *De statua* to the Bishop of Aleria he places sculpture at the origin of architecture and painting. This may be construed as an anti-*disegno* attitude, not unlike Cellini's in favor of a sculptural conception of the work. It is this point that Cellini shrewdly uses to his own advantage in his letter to Varchi when he places the sculpted model before the drawing in the development of an architectural design: «And to demonstrate a famous example, I will use the great Michelangelo» he insists, «who, wishing to show to his stonemasons certain windows, set out to make them small, from clay, before arriving at other measurements with the *disegno*».<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, architectural composition, which Alberti names variously *lineamentum* (I, 1), *partitio* (I, 2; I, 9; VI, 5) and *collocatio* (IX, 5) – but never *compositio* – as it occurs in different phases of the design, is of an entirely different order from the pictorial composition and flows into his evaluation of the model: «everything should be measured, bonded and composed by lines and angles, connected, linked and combined [...] so that one's gaze might easily flow freely [*fluens*] and gently [*voluptas*] along the cornices, through their recessions, and over the entire interior and exterior face of the work» (IX, 9). The implication is almost tactile rather than pictorial, and may well echo Vitruvius' statement that «the sight follows gracious contours» (*De arch.*, III 3). Alberti rejects the jarring in painting too, but here his concern in achieving *gratia* and *pulchritudo* is with the effect of bodies upon the composition of the canvas as a field of light and shadow: «pleasing lights pass gradually into agreeable shadows».<sup>68</sup> His *compositio picturae* is the agent of *istoria*, and the smoothness that carries the eye across the planes, surfaces and bodies (*compositio membrorum*) that it is hierarchically made up of, ultimately has more to do

<sup>67</sup> «E per mostrare uno grande essemplio alleghero il gran Michelangelo [...] che volendo mostrare ai suoi squadratori, con iscarpellini, certe finestre, si messe a farle di terra piccole, innanzi che venissi ad altre misure col disegno». BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> «lumina in umbras suaves defluant nullaque angulorum asperitates extent». L.B. ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., p. 73.

with facilitating narration than with a formal experience of the painted surface. Allowing the eye to sweep across surfaces and shapes in a fluid motion eases deciphering, reading actions connected to each other, and scanning meaning: the smoothness enhances pleasure but it is narrative's aid, not an end in itself.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, elsewhere Alberti compares looking at a painting with reading a book (VII, 10). Like the interlocking planes that guide the eye, perspective is also an agent of composition (or visual order) in painting, though one he is suspicious of (as being deceptive) in architecture.<sup>70</sup> Instead in architecture he posits the principle of bi-lateral symmetry (as «twinning», «matching top to bottom, adjacent to adjacent» and «balancing of the parts against another»)<sup>71</sup> (IX, 7 and IX, 9).

Finally, perhaps the most obvious separation that Alberti performs is to distinguish the arts, and hence their respective theories, by media, somewhat in the manner of the guilds that used materials and manufacturing as the criteria for professional definition and organization. Thus, not only does he devote individual treatises to each art, he is adamant about attending to their specificity of domain: «every art and discipline contains by nature certain principles [principia] and procedures [...]».<sup>72</sup> Even if he brings all the sculptors together in one treatise, unlike Pliny, he does distinguish between those who carve, add and mould and those who paint, not to mention the architects who physically do neither.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps most telling of Alberti's desire to keep the arts separate is his reluctance to deal with the relief – the most obvious intersection point between them – for all his reference to the Meleager sarcophagus in *De pictura*.<sup>74</sup> It is this carved façade wall as a giant relief that the viewer's eye scans over smoothly in architecture; it is this relief and the embedded sculpture that are its essential features and give it its full compositional effectiveness. Whether conceived as friezes or medallions, as panels, garlands or simply as festoons carved into or added onto the plain wall of the facade, this hybrid form, neither painting nor sculpture in the round, and certainly not architecture, is nevertheless its essential

<sup>69</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 70–71, 72–73. See also C. HOPB, *The Structure and Purpose of De pictura*, in *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento. Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich*, Atti del Convegno internazionale (Mantova, 29–31 ottobre 1998), a cura di L. Chiavoni, G. Ferlisi e M.V. Grassi, Firenze, Olschki, 2001 («Ingenium», 3), p. 262.

<sup>70</sup> *Ivi*, p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building* cit., p. 310.

<sup>72</sup> For eg. see *Id.*, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., p. 121; also 139.

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi*, p. 121.

<sup>74</sup> *Ivi*, p. 75.

component. Yet how to compose a façade made up of these sculptural and even pictorial elements (to which also belongs the *sgraffito* façade and the stone-encrusted surfaces of facades such as Sta. Maria Novella) as a formal exercise is a topic Alberti does not broach, leaving thus in suspense the one true physical intersection point between architecture and the other arts.<sup>75</sup> Paradoxically this rejection remains embedded in later theory despite the will to unite the arts: for Vasari the relief is a hybrid, for Borghini it is the «dolce/amaro» (bitter/sweet) or «imperfetto» of the arts.<sup>76</sup>

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Circa 1550 the issue of the relationship between the arts rises to prominence. The engine driving this discussion may not only have been an internal shift in Renaissance aesthetics but also the political will to create a unit that would further the cultural imperialism of Cosimo I. Adding shine to the prestige of the city – that in the 1550s Paolo Giovio had defined as the seat of the golden age in the *Historiarum sui temporis* – it provided a pedagogical and artistic workforce that could be harnessed in the service of political alliances, precedence disputes and claims for supremacy. The position of architecture within this constellation was essential yet fraught. Certainly Alberti emerged as the early prophet of the symbiotic relationship that tied architecture to the other arts. But dissenting views rose quickly. And upon inspection, Alberti himself may well have been misread, or too enthusiastically drawn in the support of a cause he would have been ambiguous about.

As the *paragone* discussions and taxonomies of the arts clearly showed, the issues at stake were ultimately their definitions – and the definition of architecture was particularly difficult. Alberti's work furnished substantial material towards such definitions. But there are two very distinct moments in his work: the moment of its reception and the moment of its writing. If on the issue of the mutual relationship between the arts Alberti was a vessel half full, or half empty (depending on one's point of view), it could be filled to suit a reader's needs and interests. Moreover, a completely coherent Alberti cannot be expected in any event, as he wrote his treatises over a period of some thirty years if not longer, and as his own career unfolded – from humanist to mathematician, artist, antiquar-

<sup>75</sup> On revetments in Alberti see C. SMITH, *Leon Battista Alberti e l'ornamento: rivestimenti parietali e pavimentazioni*, in *Leon Battista Alberti* cit., pp. 196–215.

<sup>76</sup> GIORGIO VASARI, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* cit., p. 48; BENEDETTO VARCHI - VINCENZIO BORGHINI, *Pittura e Scultura nel Cinquecento* cit., pp. 128–129.

ian and finally architect – so his thinking on the nature of the three arts naturally evolved and changed across his writings. If his definition of architecture describes his very own paths into this art and himself as the perfect architect, it is nevertheless true that from this later vantage point he cannot help warning against overlaps.

When he wrote *De re aedificatoria* the architectural *necessario* was a political act, a civic duty and a material carrier of memory and it easily superseded, or better still, coincided with the aesthetic *superfluo*. For architects beauty was not superfluous but essential, indeed necessary, for the common good (Prologue, VI, 2).<sup>77</sup> As the 16<sup>th</sup> century reception at the hands of Carlo Borromeo and Pellegrino Tebaldi in Counterreformation Milan confirmed, for Alberti (and the 15<sup>th</sup> century audience for which he wrote), ethics and aesthetics overlapped.<sup>78</sup> And far from being a third spoke in the wheel of *disegno*, architecture was the master art – elevated on its pinnacle, singled out but also, inevitably, isolated.

## PARTE SECONDA

<sup>77</sup> «To conclude, then, let it be said that the security, dignity, and honour of the republic depend greatly on the architect». L.B. ALBERTI, *On the Art of Building* cit., p. 5. «Beauty may even restrain the enemy, by restraining his anger and so preventing the work from being violated», *ivi*, p. 157. Although he makes what may appear to be a similar statement in *De pictura*, it is the monetary value of the painting («pretia incredibilia») rather than its aesthetic fascination upon the enemy that he is at pains to emphasize. «They say that Rhodes was not burned down by King Demetrius lest a painting by Protogenes be destroyed». L.B. ALBERTI, *On Painting and On Sculpture* cit., pp. 62–63.

<sup>78</sup> On the interest in Alberti in Borromeo's Milan see G. SIMONCINI, *Introduzione*, in *L'architettura di Leon Battista Alberti nel commento di Pellegrino Tibaldi* cit., p. 12.

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Tesoriere: ARTURO CALZONA

Fondazione Centro Studi L.B. Alberti  
L.go XXIV maggio, 11 - 46100 Mantova  
Tel. e Fax 0376 367183  
E-mail: csalberti@comune.mantova.it

*Presidente della Fondazione:*  
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CENTRO STUDI

L.B. ALBERTI

I N G E N I U M

N. 9

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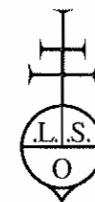
TEORICO DELLE ARTI  
E GLI IMPEGNI CIVILI  
DEL «DE RE AEDIFICATORIA»

Atti dei Convegni internazionali del  
Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della  
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a cura di  
Arturo Calzona  
Francesco Paolo Fiore  
Alberto Tenenti †  
Cesare Vasoli

I



Leo S. Olschki