

From "Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1660"

By Anthony Blunt

Chapter 1 (part)

Alberti



[Leon Battista Alberti, 1404-1472](#)

With

The 'method for finding out the truth'

By Baruch Spinoza

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Alberti

With the generation of Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Donatello in Florence a new ideal of art was realized, which expressed the aspiration of the most progressive minds in Florence at the moment when the city-republic reached a high point in its development. As the last remains of Gothic disappear, a style emerges which expresses men's new approach to the world, their Humanist confidence, and their reliance on the methods of reason. In painting and sculpture naturalism flourished, but a naturalism based on the scientific study of the outside world by means of the new weapons of perspective and anatomy. In architecture the revival of Roman forms was used to create a style which answered to the demands of human reason rather than to the more mystical needs of medieval Catholicism.

Such a change in the practice of the arts was, of course, accompanied by a similar change in the theories which were held about them. Medieval writers on painting had been predominantly theoretical in their approach. For them the arts were entirely subject to the direction of the Church; they accepted its general scale of values, which emphasized the spiritual and had no interest in the material; and for this reason they made no demand that artists should imitate the outside world. Their duty was rather to evolve the appropriate symbol to convey the moral and religious lessons of the Church. The painter was a craftsman who performed a practical function under the direction of the Church, and through the organization of the Guilds, like any other craftsman.

The generation of 1420 regarded the arts in a very different spirit. For them painting consisted first and foremost in the rendering of the outside world

according to the principles of human reason. Therefore they could no longer acknowledge a theory of the arts which did not allow any place to naturalism or the study of the material world. The new ideas which they formulated are most fully expressed in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, whose universal intelligence particularly suited him for expounding a doctrine which affected all branches of human activity - political life, and philosophy, just as much as literature and the arts.

Alberti was the illegitimate son of a Florentine merchant. He was born in 1404 in Genoa, where his father had moved after the decree of exile which had been passed on the whole Alberti family, one of the richest and most powerful in Florence. He was educated in the north of Italy, principally in Bologna, where he studied Law. He seems to have gone to Florence in 1428, when the ban on his family had been lifted, and the next few years, which must have been of vital importance in his formation, coincided with the end of that period when Florence was dominated by the big merchants, who had achieved a greater power than they had held for nearly a century.

The rest of Alberti's life was spent for the most part either in Florence or following the Papal Court, in which he held a secretarial post from 1432 to 1464. Papal policy was at this period increasingly concentrated on central Italy, and relied largely on the merchant class and its support. The outlook, too, in Papal circles was Humanist in character, so that Alberti found there a similar atmosphere to that of his own city, Florence.

In his width of knowledge, as well as in his rational and scientific approach, Alberti was typical of the early Humanists. He worked apparently with equal ease in the fields of philosophy, science, classical learning, and the arts. He wrote pamphlets or treatises on ethics, love, religion, sociology, law, mathematics, and different branches of the natural sciences. He also wrote verses, and his intimacy with the Classics was so great that two of his own works, a comedy and a dialogue in the manner of Lucian, were accepted as newly discovered writings of the ancients. In the arts, he practised and wrote about painting, sculpture, and architecture. Indeed, his grasp of all forms of learning was so encyclopaedic that he well deserved the praise written by a contemporary copyist in a manuscript of the *Trivi*: "Dic quid tandem nesceverit hic vir?"

Alberti's views about the arts are so closely dependent on his general philosophical attitude that it is worth while analysing the latter in some detail. His outlook on life was precisely that of the Humanists of the first half of the fifteenth century, and corresponds to the conception of the city-state as it existed in Florence before the final triumph of Cosimo de' Medici.

For Alberti the highest good is the public interest. To this prince and individual citizens are equally bound. The prince must govern in the interests of the citizens, preserve their liberties, and obey the laws of the city, or he becomes a tyrant. Above all the peace of the city must be preserved, and Alberti strongly condemns the factions which arouse civil strife and from which his own family had suffered so much. Those who held office under the prince must equally seek the general good. The judge, for example, must administer the law with firmness but with moderation and humanity, so that public and private interest may be protected, but so that no greater suffering than is necessary may be inflicted on those who infringe the law. Some of his views on punishment are strangely modern; for though he admits the use of torture as a means of arriving at the truth, he attacks the bad prisons of his time and sets down the principle that prisons are intended to reform, not to destroy, the criminal.

Alberti is not a strict republican. In the fifth book of the treatise on architecture he discusses the different forms of government, and though he approves strongly of the republican city he does not exclude the idea of government by a prince, provided that he governs in the interests of the city. But when Alberti speaks of the public good, he does not mean the good of some abstract entity, "the State", he means the good of all the individual citizens who make up the State. And he is therefore as much interested in the individual citizen as in the prince or those who govern for the prince.

The first aim of the individual is to be a good citizen, that is to say, to serve his fellow-citizens as far as possible. He can only attain this end by the pursuit of virtue, and it is to methods of acquiring virtue that Alberti devotes most of his purely ethical writings. His rules can be summarized as follows. The individual must seek virtue by the application of the will, by the use of reason, and by following nature. Will supplies the driving force. A man, he says, can achieve as much as he wishes to achieve. But it is only through reason that he can know what he should aim at, and what he should avoid. Finally man must follow nature in the sense that he must know the end for which he was created, and try to attain it; he must discover why nature gave him certain faculties, and develop them, unless he is sure that they are bad. So, for instance, Alberti believes that man must aim at spiritual good and not be bound by the senses and the passions; he must be superior to material things and so be independent of fate. Yet he is strongly opposed to the extreme of Stoicism as represented by the Cynicism of Diogenes, since he finds it contrary to nature. It is inhuman not to be moved by any emotion at all. What man needs is to be moderate in his feelings, and to enjoy the things of this world without being tied to them. In fact, the moderation which is one of the results of following reason is

the most significant and often recurring feature of Alberti's doctrine. It leads to the calm of mind which is for him a necessary condition for the right conduct of life.

The outstanding characteristic of Alberti's view of life is the rationalism, based more on ancient philosophy than on the teachings of Catholicism. But this does not imply that he was opposed to Christianity. On the contrary he constantly pays his respects to it, but it is before a curious form of Christianity that he bows, a typical Humanist religion in which the elements of pagan and classical philosophy blend without any difficulty with Christian dogmas, in which churches are referred to as "Temples" and in which sometimes "the gods", in the plural, seem to receive as much honour as the Christian God. With this humanized religion Alberti feels himself entirely at home, but he will not give up his right to individual judgement on every matter. Even the ancients, for whom he has a deeper reverence than for any other persons, human or divine, he treats on a level and does not feel himself obliged to follow either their precepts or their example if his own judgement tells him otherwise.

We shall find many of Alberti's ideas on these general philosophical and political subjects reflected in his theoretical writings in the aesthetic field, but before we go on to them we must consider the actual works which he left behind him in the arts. In painting and sculpture nothing survives from his hand, but in architecture his contribution is considerable. His position is that of a younger member of the group which, under the leadership of Brunelleschi, dominated Florence at the time of his return in 1428. He carried on their work and developed many of their principles a stage further.

Alberti was a more fully self-conscious classicist than Brunelleschi and his contemporaries. He was more learned in the study of antiquity than they, more scientific in his application of the archaeological knowledge which he had acquired. In architecture he eliminated the last vestiges of Gothic, which were still so evident in Brunelleschi, especially in the dome of the cathedral. He was far more scrupulous in his treatment of the orders; and in the Palazzo Rucellai he adapted them for use on a facade of more than one story, by using a single order for each - a method which was later universally adopted. In other ways he carried on the tradition of clear design which was an essential feature of Brunelleschi's work. His design for S. Sebastiano at Mantua is perhaps the most mature centralized church plan of his time, and his S. Andrea, in the same town, was the last word in lucid spacing of the Latin Cross church. The latter was of dominant importance in church design for several centuries.

His theoretical ideas on the arts are to be found principally in three works. The earliest is the treatise on painting, *Della Pittura di Leon Battista Alberti Libri tre*, written in 1436 probably in Latin, but translated by Alberti himself for Brunelleschi's

benefit into Italian. The second and the most considerable of the treatises consists of the ten books of architecture, *De Re Aedificatoria*, which Alberti began probably about 1450, but to which he went on making additions till the time of his death in 1472. The last work is the pamphlet on sculpture, *De Statua*, written probably shortly before 1464.

Since architecture is the art most closely connected with the practical needs of man, it is in Alberti's architectural theories that his general social ideas are most visibly reflected. He thinks of architecture entirely as a civic activity. In the preface to his treatise, which is a sort of apologia for architecture, he speaks above all of the glory which it brings to the city, in utility and in ornament. Architecture serves commerce, of which, as we should expect, Alberti speaks in the highest terms; it enables the city to defend itself against its enemies, and, by inventing aggressive machines of war, even helps it to extend its dominion. From architecture the city derives its splendid public buildings, its private houses, and the monuments which keep alive the memory of its great men.

It is the principles of such a civil architecture that Alberti expounds in his treatise, not an architecture for private patrons or ecclesiastical purposes only, though, of course, the needs of both the individual and the Church are carefully considered. The novelty in his method is that he proposes a scheme for the building of an entire town, and every detail in his suggestions is made subordinate to the main design of the town as a whole.

The first three books of the treatise are given up to purely technical matters; the first to the use of drawings in architecture, the second to the choice of materials, and the third to the principles of structure. After this preliminary Alberti attacks at once the problems which concern the town as a whole, first of all the question of its site. This must be healthy, in a temperate climate, conveniently placed for water-supply, easy to defend, and so on. Next it must be clearly laid out, with good main streets conveniently connected with the bridges and gates of the town. The streets must be wide enough not to be congested but not so wide as to be too hot. Moreover, Alberti proposes that if possible the streets shall be so designed that symmetry may reign between the houses on the two sides of the street, and that a standard design may be repeated for a whole street. This is a piece of large-scale planning which reveals Alberti's astonishing civic-mindedness, for this suggestion was not put into general practice till the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when town life had reached a far more advanced stage of development. [In a sense he was only giving systematic form to a tendency already visible in Italian architecture of the fourteenth century. Many north Italian towns, such as Cremona and Piacenza, had central squares round which were grouped the principal public buildings. But it was not till the fifteenth century that we find a

standard design repeated round a square, as in the Piazza of St. Mark's in Venice, or that in front of the Annunziata in Florence, both of which were in great part laid out in the Quattrocento. Pius II's plans for Pienza show something of the same spirit, and Nicholas V's idea for linking up St. Peter's with the Castel S. Angelo, in which Alberti was involved, is an even more ambitious scheme of the same kind.] It is in marked contrast to the medieval method of town planning, against which Alberti explicitly protests, according to which each family built a palace and a tower without any consideration of its neighbours, except one of rivalry.

Having thus settled the questions which affect the whole layout of the town, Alberti proceeds to consider the different kinds of buildings which are to be put up in it. He divides these into three groups: public buildings, the houses of the important citizens, and the houses of the people. Over the first type he is very thorough and gives the fullest details about the planning and construction of squares, towers, bridges, halls of justice, churches, and theatres, which must all be carried out with the greatest possible splendour as befits the dignity of the city. The houses of the leading citizens must also be dignified, but they must avoid all ostentation, and rely more on beauty of design and convenience of disposition than on size or ornament.³ Otherwise they will arouse the envy of their neighbours, and the harmony of the whole design will be disturbed. The houses of the poorer citizens should be built on the same scheme as those of the richer, but in a smaller and more modest manner, so that the difference between the positions of the richer and poorer citizens will not be too strongly marked. [By leading citizens Alberti means those who are responsible for the government of the city; and the qualifications which he demands for this are highly typical: either wisdom, which will fit a man for making laws and for supervising the religious life of the town; or experience, which will give him a place in the executive; or wealth, which brings prosperity to the city, and alone makes it possible for the other two groups to perform their functions.] In each of these cases Alberti gives fairly complete rules for the buildings which he proposes, so that the same principles appear in each detail as in the whole scheme of the town.

In Alberti's other writings on the arts his social and ethical views are not so clearly reflected, but in all of them we find the spirit of rational Humanism which is characteristic of his philosophical works.

Certain of his predecessors, such as Cennini and Ghiberti, had maintained that the artist was an independent individual, who needed to be acquainted with the liberal arts, and no one could have carried out this principle more thoroughly in practice than Alberti. His conception of the architect appears most clearly in the definition which he gives in the preface to the book on architecture:

‘Before I go any further I think it will be convenient to say whom exactly I mean to call an architect; for I will not set up before you a carpenter and ask you to regard him as the equal of men deeply versed in the other sciences, though it is true that the man who works with his hands serves as an instrument for the architect. I will call an architect one who, with a sure and marvellous reason and rule, knows first how to divide things with his mind and intelligence, secondly how rightly to put together in the carrying out of the work all those materials which, by the movements of weights and the conjoining and heaping up of bodies, may serve successfully and with dignity the needs of man. And in the carrying out of this task he will have need of the best and most excellent knowledge.’

He is less elaborate in his definition of the painter, but here again he wishes him to be acquainted with all the forms of knowledge which are relevant to his art, particularly history, poetry, and mathematics.

This is the most complete definition of the artist as a man engaged in a scientific occupation that can be found in the Early Renaissance; and this conception runs through the whole of Alberti's writings. Each of the treatises on the arts begins with a statement of the scientific basis of the art in question. In the case of architecture, for instance, the first book is mainly given up to the importance of drawings, which Alberti regards as the link between architecture and mathematics. The second deals with the knowledge of the materials necessary to building, and the third to methods of construction. These three books cover the two aspects of the scientific study of architecture - first the purely theoretical and then the technical. In the treatise on painting the first book is devoted to mathematics and to the application of geometry to painting in the form of perspective.

On this solid foundation of science Alberti builds up a structure of the arts which is no less scientific. ‘The arts’, he says, ‘are learnt by reason and method; they are mastered by practice,’ and this could almost be taken as the motto of the book. According to him the artist must grasp the fundamental principles of his art by means of reason; he must study the best works that have been produced by other artists before his time; and by this means he will be able to formulate precepts about the practice of the arts, which, however, must always be combined with practical experience.

Alberti's scientific approach is only part of his general Humanism, for science is the finest fruit of the application of human reason to the study of the world. There is hardly a trace in him of the theological preoccupations which dominated the thought of medieval writers. His definitions of the arts do not include any reference to religion and are entirely framed in human terms. In the case of architecture he does not talk of its use in the service of the Church, except by the way. His basic

proposition is that 'Buildings have been made because of men', and he develops this idea by saying that buildings are made either to satisfy the needs of life or for the convenience of men's occupations, or for their delight. His attitude towards painting is the same. For him history painting, i.e. subject painting of any kind, as opposed to that of single figures, is the noblest kind of painting, partly because it is the most difficult genre and one which demands proficiency in all the others, but also because it gives a picture of the activities of man, like a written history. 'And I may well stand looking at a picture with no less delight to my mind than if I was reading a good history; for both are painters, one painting with words and the other with the brush.' A history painting affects the spectator deeply because the emotions which he sees represented in it will be stirred in him; he will laugh, cry, or shiver according as those in the painting show joy, sorrow, or fear. For this reason Alberti attributes great importance to the ability of the painter to explain an action and to render the emotions by means of gesture and by the expression of the face.

In the arts as in all other fields this Humanism is combined with a strong admiration for classical antiquity. Ghiberti had expressed his admiration for the ancients in general terms and quoted them often, but he had not the absolute cult for them which characterizes Alberti. It has already been said that in style Alberti's actual buildings are more strictly in accordance with the practice of ancient Roman architecture than any works of his predecessors, and in his theoretical writings we find the same spirit. The ancients appear at every turn. The picture which he gives of the ideal town is almost entirely made up of elements taken from antiquity. The models which he quotes for the buildings, public or private, are almost always those that he has seen in Rome or read about in ancient writers; and the authorities to whom he refers for any method which he recommends are the historians and philosophers of Greece and Rome. [In general Alberti displays a greater admiration for Rome than for Greece. He maintains, for instance, that architecture reached its first maturity in Greece but its final perfection in Rome.]

We can see from his descriptions that he had an intimate knowledge of the remains of ancient architecture in Italy and that he had studied them first of all from the point of view of structure and planning. He wished to understand the real principles of Roman architecture, not merely to be able to produce a building which looked classical on the outside but underneath was Gothic in design. This does not, however, mean that he neglected the question of ornament and decoration, and one of the most typical features of the treatise is that it contains the first exposition of the use of the Five Orders in Italy since classical times. Brunelleschi and his contemporaries had used them in their buildings, but always with great freedom, and there was evidently no recognized canon for the proportions of their different parts. Compared with later theoretical treatments of the orders Alberti's seems simple and cursory, but it gave a new foundation for their correct use.

But though Alberti was possessed of a really extensive and first-hand knowledge of ancient architecture, he was never either pedantic or slavish in his application of it. He considers the ancients as the best models, but he never encourages the modern architect to imitate them blindly. On the contrary, he advises him to try always to introduce into his designs something entirely of his own invention.' He says that he found the information supplied by Vitruvius of great use, [Though what he learnt from the study of surviving buildings was even more helpful] but he is far from setting him up as the final authority. In fact in one place he speaks of him with very little respect, complaining that his style is so obscure and confused that it is almost impossible to understand what he means. In this as in all other matters, therefore, Alberti reserves the right to judge every problem which comes before him on its own merits.

The rational and scientific method which, as we have seen, Alberti pursues in architecture appears in connexion with painting and sculpture in the form of a new conception of realism. The core of his views about the representational arts is to be found in his theory of the imitation of nature, and it is here that his realism can be most clearly traced.

In certain contexts he defines painting in terms of an absolutely unqualified naturalism: 'The function of the painter is to render with lines and colours, on a given panel or wall, the visible surface of any body, so that at a certain distance and from a certain position it appears in relief and just like the body itself.' [This naturalism is reflected in certain examples which Alberti gives; as, for instance, when he refers to Narcissus as the first painter, since his image reflected in the water was an exact likeness of himself on a flat surface]. But on other occasions he is more scientific and defines painting as the imitation of a section of the pyramid which any body subtends at the eye of an observer. He even invented a device for recording the appearance of such a section, namely, a net which the painter held between himself and the object to be painted, and on which he could trace exactly the outlines which appeared through it. [In the 'De Statua' Alberti supplies the sculptor with an apparatus by means of which he, too, can attain the mathematical certainty which realism demanded. It consisted of a series of circles and plumb-lines which allowed the sculptor to measure in terms of height and projection the contour of any figure or three-dimensional object]. This idea of the pyramid leading from the object seen to the eye is the foundation of linear perspective, so that Alberti's net is only a method for recording the correct view of an object according to linear perspective; it has, however, the disadvantage that it can only be applied to scenes which are visible to the eye. When the painter came to construct compositions of things which he had not actually seen, he had need of a more

efficient device, and this was supplied by the full theory of perspective which Alberti expounds in the first two books of his treatise on painting.

But though the exact imitation of nature is the first function of painting it has another and more important duty. The painter must make his work beautiful as well as accurate, and beauty does not necessarily follow from exactness of imitation as Alberti shows by the example of the ancient painter Demetrius, 'who failed to obtain the highest praise, because he paid much more attention to making paintings which were true to nature than to making them beautiful'. Beauty, therefore, is a quality which is not necessarily inherent in all natural objects, though nature is the only source from which the artist can derive it. The artist, therefore, must not use nature indiscriminately: 'We must always take what we paint from nature and always choose from it the most beautiful things.' This process of selection is essential because 'it is very rarely granted even to Nature herself to produce anything absolutely perfect in every part'.

Alberti does not explicitly define and describe this beauty which is not attainable in art by mere imitation. In the treatise on painting he does not pursue the matter, but evidently assumes that his readers will know beauty when they see it. In the later and much more elaborate *De Re Aedificatoria* he gives two definitions of beauty which are roughly those to be found in Vitruvius. In one case he describes beauty as 'a certain regular harmony of all the parts of a thing of such a kind that nothing could be added or taken away or altered without making it less pleasing'. In the second definition he says: 'Beauty is a kind of harmony and concord of all the parts to form a whole which is constructed according to a fixed number, and a certain relation and order, as symmetry, the highest and most perfect law of nature, demands.' Perhaps more important is another passage in the same treatise in which he expands the idea, again with reference to architecture:

'What pleases us in the most beautiful and lovely things springs either from a rational inspiration of the mind, or from the hand of the artist or is produced by nature from materials. The business of the mind is the choice, division, ordering and things of that kind, which give dignity to the work. The business of the human hand is the collecting, adding, taking away, outlining, careful working and things of that kind, which give grace to the work. From nature things acquire heaviness, lightness, thickness and purity.'

We may suppose, I think, that Alberti would admit a parallel view of painting in which the mind controlled the disposition, the hand contributed skill in technique, and nature added richness of material; though from what he says elsewhere about those who waste their time using gold and rich colours in painting and pay little attention to skill in using them,² it seems probable that, unlike medieval artists, he

attributed small importance to the 'part which nature plays in painting by supplying good materials.

Alberti considers that beauty gives pleasure to the eye, and it is partly by this means that we can recognize it. But he does not identify the recognition of beauty with this feeling. In the treatise on architecture he explicitly distinguishes between the two processes of liking a thing and judging it to be beautiful. He is talking of people's tastes in women, how some prefer them fat, others thin, others medium:

'But, because you like one kind or another more, will you maintain that the others are not noble and beautiful in form? Certainly not. That you liked this particular woman depends on some cause, but what that cause is I will not try to discover. But when you judge about beauty, that does not depend on mere opinion but on a certain judgement innate in our minds' (*animis innata quaedam ratio*).'

And elsewhere he differentiates between personal taste and the judgement that a thing is beautiful: 'Many . . . say that our ideas of beauty and architecture are wholly false, maintaining that the forms of buildings are various and changeable according to the taste of each individual and not dependent on any rules of art. This is a common error of ignorance, to maintain that what it does not know does not exist.'

All this can be summed up by saying that Alberti believes that man recognizes beauty not by mere taste, which is entirely personal and variable and judges of attractiveness, but by a rational faculty which is common to all men and leads to a general agreement about which works of art are beautiful. Beauty, in fact, is detected by a faculty of artistic judgement.

The artist must take pains to introduce as much of the beautiful and as little of the ugly as possible into his paintings. First of all he must cover up or leave out any imperfections in his model; and this concealing of flaws is said by Alberti to be the particular function of ornament. In the next stage the artist must carefully select from the various models before him all the most beautiful parts in order to combine them into a single faultless whole: 'He must take from all the beautiful bodies those parts which are particularly praised. which will be difficult because perfect beauty is never to be found in any one body but is scattered and dispersed in many different bodies.'

In the book on sculpture this theory is further developed. The book ends with a table of the proportions of a man, which is prefaced with the following passage:

'We have taken the trouble to set down the principal measurements of a man. We did not, however, choose this or that single body, but as far as possible we have

tried to note and set down in writing the highest beauty scattered, as if in calculated portions, among many bodies. . . . We have chosen a number of bodies considered by the skilful to be the most beautiful and have taken the dimensions of each of these. These we compared together, and leaving aside the extreme measurements which were below or above certain limits, we chose out those which the agreement of many cases showed to be the average.'

This shows a new feature in Alberti's theory of imitation, namely, the desire to make his figures conform not only to the most beautiful in nature but to the most usual, the most general, or the most typical.

This identification of the beautiful with the typical in nature implies a belief in the Aristotelian view of nature as an artist striving towards perfection and always hindered from attaining it by accident. [This conception of nature is related to Alberti's view that man should follow nature in his way of living]. According to this view the artist, by eliminating the imperfections in natural objects and combining their most typical parts, reveals what nature is always aiming at but is always frustrated from producing. Alberti has simplified Aristotle's views on this point, for he arrives at the type-beauty by a process of more or less arithmetical averaging, whereas in Aristotle some faculty nearer to the imagination is involved.

This very matter-of-fact averaging technique, however, is characteristic of Alberti and illustrates how far he was removed from any sort of idealistic or Neoplatonic conceptions. From what he says about choosing the best and the typical from nature it follows that the artist can create a work which is more beautiful than anything in nature. But with Alberti this can only be done by a series of processes all of which keep the artist in the closest touch with nature, and it is done without any appeal to the imagination. The importance of this will appear when the development of aesthetics in the sixteenth century is considered. For the moment it is enough to notice how consistent Alberti is in his fidelity to nature. Towards the end of the treatise on painting; after he has been advising the artist only to select the best from nature, he is immediately frightened that he may have gone too far and puts in a warning to those who think they can neglect nature and rely on their own skill and imagination. They will fall into bad ways, he says, from which they will never be able to free themselves.

Alberti varies a little in the meaning which he attaches to the word 'nature'. In the early treatise on painting he generally seems to mean by it simply the sum of all the material objects not made by man. In the later works on sculpture he seems to assume the vaguely Aristotelian view discussed above. One of the most curious results to which Alberti's acceptance of this definition of nature leads him is to describe architecture as an imitation of nature, just as much as the directly

representational arts. The idea underlying this view is that nature acts according to certain general laws and on an orderly method. The aim of the architect is, therefore, to infuse into his works something of this order and method which is to be found in nature. Ancient architects, he says, 'rightly maintained that nature, the greatest of all artists in the invention of forms, was always their model. Therefore they collected the laws, according to which she works in her productions as far as was humanly possible, and introduced them into their method of building.'² The principles to which Alberti refers are defined by such qualities as harmony (*concinnitas*), proportion, symmetry.

There is nothing startlingly original in this view, which is made up of ideas taken from Aristotle and Vitruvius, but Alberti was not primarily interested in abstract aesthetic speculation, and when he comes to discuss these very general qualities he often takes over traditional theories from the ancients. He himself distinguishes the laws governing the beauty of buildings as a whole which are derived from philosophy from those dealing with the parts of the building which, based on experience, are the proper business of the architect and the real foundation of architecture.

When Alberti first evolved his philosophy he was in close agreement and sympathy with many of the best thinkers in Florence. But when he again came into contact with Florentine society in the last years of his life, between 1464 and 1472, he found that life and culture there had changed. The Medici were now in complete control of the city, and, under their autocratic rule, life had grown more luxurious. Men's philosophy, too, had changed. For Florentine culture of the later Quattrocento was dominated by the Neoplatonists led by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.

Alberti's relation to Platonism is somewhat complex. Many of the fundamental ideas in his philosophy are ultimately Platonic in origin, and Alberti very likely derived them from the Florentine followers of Plato in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, such as Petrarch or Brunni. His faith in man and in the human will, his doctrine of following nature, his conception of the prince, and many others of his opinions are to be traced in the writings of the early Humanist admirers of Plato such as Salutati. But by the end of the fifteenth century the philosophy of the Platonists in Florence had entirely changed. Under the influence of Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici the Platonic Academy had developed, but it had tended to pay even more attention to the writings of the Alexandrian exponents of Plato than to the philosopher himself. Ficino and Pico are soaked in mysticism, derived partly from Plotinus and partly from oriental origins. This mystical Neoplatonism was encouraged by Lorenzo de' Medici, perhaps to some extent for political reasons. At any rate it certainly served his ends; for the Neoplatonists at this time laid much

more emphasis on the contemplative than on the active life; and it suits an autocrat to keep thinking men as far as possible out of active politics in order that he may enjoy his absolute power undisturbed.

Alberti seems to have felt little sympathy either with the methods of Lorenzo or with the mystical kind of Neoplatonism which he encouraged. He is sometimes claimed as a supporter of the Neoplatonists on the grounds that he was involved in many of their discussions. But his agreement with them appears to be limited to the doctrines which they held in common with earlier Platonists, and did not extend to those more mystical ideas which Ficino and Pico had added. Nothing could be less mystical than Alberti's way of thought. He believed above all in the importance of the active life, and thought that the citizen should contribute tangibly and materially to the good of the city. [A typical example of the difference between Alberti and the Neoplatonists appears in their views on love. Ficino and Pico had developed the mystical beliefs of the Alexandrian Platonists, and they regarded love as the contemplation of divine beauty. For Alberti love had above all a social function, and it is as the basis of family life that it appears most frequently in his writings]. Indeed, to the Florentines of the late 1460's Alberti must have seemed a relic of the heroic period of thirty years before. In his last work, the *De Ieriarchia*, he condemns the luxury of the city, and attacks the Medici almost openly, saying that great power awakens vices in a man, and reminding them that the prince is subject to the laws of the city and must preserve its liberties.

Seen in relation to his predecessors, Alberti's most striking characteristics are his rationalism, his classicism, his scientific method, and his complete faith in nature. In relation to the Neoplatonists of the later Quattrocento, the feature which stands out most is the complete absence of the idea of imagination in his writings. Everything is attributed to reason, to method, to imitation, to measurement; nothing to the creative faculty. And this is quite logical. The artists of the early Quattrocento whose ideas he expresses were entirely occupied with exploring the visible universe which they had so recently discovered. What they needed was practical advice, not abstract speculation; and that is exactly what Alberti gave them. It was not till the next century that the doctrines of Neoplatonism came into real contact with the theory of painting, most notably in the person of Michelangelo, whose first training was received in the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici. With him the artist becomes for the first time 'the Divine', and Alberti's practical conception of the arts gives place to a loftier doctrine.

Spinoza



[Baruch Spinoza, 1632-1677](#)

As far as the 'method for finding out the truth' is concerned, 'the matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools.... For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavour to prove that men have no power of working iron.

'But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labour and greater perfection. . . . So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments, or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceeds till it reaches the summit of wisdom.'

B. de Spinoza (1632-1677),

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