

Alberti on renaissance painting and technique

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This essay will deal with the technical and metaphysical aspects of Alberti's famous 1435 piece, *On Painting*, specifically, the paragraphs in Book II 25-34. What is significant about this selection is that it summarizes many of the technical and metaphysical principles that have come to define the renaissance, especially the dominance of Plato and the rule of Form.

Hence, this selection is not merely a matter of painting technique, but a summary of the basic ontology of Renaissance thinking as it pertains to painting and sculpture, as Alberti considers these as "cognate arts." The citations will be based on the paragraph number rather than the page.

The professed aim of this section is to justify the honor and virtue of the painter as an artist. But of course, it is far more than that. Alberti depicts the painter almost as a sorcerer or sorts, someone who can make what is not present, present. The notion of re-creation, or even co-creation is a central element of the scientific revolution that the Renaissance both foreshadowed and participated in.

For Alberti, the painter can, in a sense, bring the dead back to life (25). The painter does, on a regular basis, what the alchemist tries and struggles to bring about, to have a dominance over creation, to master it and force it to bend to the artists' will. This is the real connection between Alberti's work here and the scientific and alchemical ideology of the Renaissance (Caron, 1961 35-37).

Alberti continues to contrast the painter's art to the alchemists, holding that a painted jewel or piece of gold, because it is artistically rendered, is actually worth more than the actual stone or previous metal. This is a challenge to

alchemy, having been reborn during the Renaissance. Alchemy sought to manipulate matter for the sake of wealth and power. But the painter does this on a regular basis, and is financially more successful than the alchemist (25).

Therefore, painting is man's way of re-creating the already extant creation of God. It is the application of the human mind to what already exists, and in a sense, the artist becomes the creator, or more accurately, the architect of creation using what already exists to create something new, to take creation and raise it to a new level of understanding. If one can understand creation, then one can control it: the reward is money and glory (26, explicitly mentioned in 28 as the goal of the artist, which of course, is the same goal as the alchemist).

Alberti makes the intriguing claim that the arts of painting and sculpture developed at the same time as religion (27). He does not elaborate on this claim, but the remainder of the selection under examination here might give us some clues.

In paragraph 30, three specific steps of artistic technique are developed, though ultimately, only the first two really matter, that of circumspection and that of composition. The third, color or the "reception of light" is not treated in this selection. But this is not merely a technical manual, but a strong summary of the ontology of Alberti and the Florentine Renaissance. This ontology might help us answer the question that Alberti poses concerning the identical development of religion and painting.

Specifically, there are three steps in re-creating the object under examination. First, and the most important, is the concept of circumspection. This is the most important because it is a reference to Plato's Forms, or the ultimate grounding of all objects that exist. A Form is the true being of an object, outside of space and time, which is the "essence" of the object to be painted.

It is this Form that the painter must understand, however incompletely, though the mind of the artist, since a Form cannot be seen with the senses. Only the intellect can apprehend the Form. In a more technical sense, the Form that can be perceived by the artist is the "outline" of the object. One first needs to eliminate what is specific about an object and reach its form.