PART ONE

Tradition and the Academy

Alberti and the Formation of Modern Art Theory

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Art and Theory

If we ask what a theory of art is, then both terms of our question seem problematic. What counts as a *theory*, whether it be of natural phenomenon – such as a theory of optics or perception – or of cultural changes such as forms of visual representation or artistic styles, depends not only on the nature of the subject matter, but also on the questions asked and the methods used in searching for answers. And in the case of *art* we are asking about a complex web of historical and not easily bounded set of practices, interweaving with different social interests and values in a variety of ways. We also recognize that theoretical and practical activities are very different, each with their own social and intellectual purposes and contexts as well as, of course, different linguistic or material identities. Whereas a theory is a linguistic construct which abstracts from experience and *generalizes* over the particular, art requires *particular* judgement within a sensible medium. Yet art and theory cannot be examined independently of one another – for how the modern concept of art is understood and used has much to do with the ways in which the practices of art have been theorized. Art in the modern sense is practice informed by theory, a practice with a particularly self-conscious sense of its own history. But a theoretical account of art does not simply aim to describe the general principles of the practice; rather, it draws from other cognate discourses, such as philosophy or social theory, directing new forms of critical attention to the practice. Furthermore, theory, in this context as in all others, is essentially contestable. Thus, although art theory, unlike art criticism, does not specifically aim to mediate between particular and public experience, the very process of theoretical reflection on art contributes to its development and to framing its reception.

There are of course many different kinds of theories of art, drawing from different discursive disciplines such as rhetoric, philosophy or cultural theory, and also from the empirical sciences. But a rough distinction can be drawn between

the discursive and the scientific. The former aims to further the understanding of art, using language and ideas which, albeit rarefied and sophisticated, are continuous with the understanding of those involved in the practice. Whereas those based on more scientific methods, aiming more at explanation, bypass the agent's own understanding, even in some cases explaining it away. Crucial to such a distinction is the issue of value. A theory aiming to develop cultural self-understanding of a practice will necessarily involve, even if only implicitly, evaluative and normative principles. This is because any understanding of human agency requires some framework of interests and values, even when it is mounting a critique of these things. In contrast a strictly empirical or scientific account of the biological basis of creativity, or the psychophysical basis of perception, need not take account of value, at least in the terms in which the value is practically understood. The theory of art discussed in this introduction draws from both literature (classical rhetoric) and natural philosophy (optics and geometry), and aims directly to address the practice of the artist. In doing so it involves substantial claims about the values of art, both in general terms, as a cultural practice, and in particular cases, in critical judgement about individual works.

During the second half of the twentieth century the theoretical side of the relationship between theory and practice became increasingly dominant: a great deal of contemporary artwork is meaningless and even valueless without direct recourse to some theoretical context, signalled through titles, catalogue descriptions, critical essays or other textual supplements. Although there were various institutional and educational factors influencing this state of affairs, one in particular was the radical dislocation of art from other social and practical interests during the processes of modernity. Thus other, more central, forms of visual production, such as cinema and advertising, which are more directly concerned with entertainment or the processes of commodification, were culturally separated from High Art. Of course, the meanings and communicative strategies of these other areas of work can be theorized, as they are within the broader disciplines of Cultural or Media Studies, and these disciplines themselves share some common ground with art theory. But the role of theory in those cases has more to do with disclosing what is hidden, the 'doubleness' or even duplicity of the image, than with relating the thought which the work itself may be said to manifest to some wider understanding of its manner and means of representation. (The interaction between all these forms of visual culture is itself a complex matter, since most contemporary art, even whilst maintaining the cultural hierarchy, intertrades with popular culture.) The separation of art from other forms of visual production, however, did not begin in the modern period. My purpose in returning to Alberti's *Treatise on Painting*, written in the mid-fifteenth century, is to show how themes of this work not only played a formative role in the development of what subsequently became dignified as Fine Art, but are also a continuing source of the elevated cultural status of art.

Beginning with Alberti

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) wrote what is often claimed to be the first work of art theory, his *Treatise on Painting* in 1435. In concluding this work he claimed explicitly to be the first to write about this subtle art of painting, and to be elucidating its basic pictorial and thematic principles in a way which proved it worthy of free men. This reference to free men is significant. For it signals Alberti's Humanist aspiration to raise the art of painting, from a technical or manual skill in which the artist applies techniques without understanding of principles, to the status of a liberal art alongside rhetoric or astronomy. The idea of a liberal art, central to the idea of a liberal education, is that a free man has knowledge of the principles informing his decisions.

Alberti's work is a prime example of how any theory which seeks to give an account of the methods and meaning of art is not merely descriptive of existing practices, but normative. As such it contributes both to the development of the practice and to the ways it is evaluated. The influence of the particular principles and values that Alberti sought to articulate have resonated in various ways within the subsequent history of the art. Most directly, they were formative within the academic tradition of painting, which was still in play in the nineteenth century and remained in vestigial form in twentieth-century art teaching. The various and diverse manifestations of Classicism (such as Neoclassicism, *l'art pompier*, the various 'returns to order' in French and Italian art in the 1920s and 1930s, or the varieties of Socialist Realism throughout the last century), appropriated such principles in furtherance of particular political or social allegiances. For the sense of order and unity, which classical principles of composition generate, can be made to stand for some mythical ideal of social or transcendent order. But more dynamically, they were also foils to the challenge and polemics of Romanticism and the disruption of such ideals in favour of a more dynamic and revolutionary conceptions of human and natural order. Even when modernist principles overturned the academic tradition, many developments in twentieth-century painting were, in different ways, single-minded explorations of the scope, limits and transgressive possibilities of ideas of pictorial space and painterly content which have an origin in Alberti's conception of his theoretical task.

Alberti first published the *Treatise on Painting*, in Latin, under the title *De Pictura*, and dedicated to the Gonzaga prince of the court of Mantua. But he directly followed this with a vernacular translation, *Della Pittura*, dedicated to Brunelleschi, whose experiments with mathematical perspective in his architectural work were applied to the art of painting by Alberti in Book One of the *Treatise*. He also acknowledged Donatello, Ghiberti and, perhaps most significantly, the painter Masaccio, artists who played a prominent role in the flowering of the new artistic culture which Alberti had found when returning to Florence after his period of family exile. The fact that Alberti wrote versions in

both scholarly and vernacular languages, dedicated the work both to the learned court and to practising artists, and extolled the work of the most innovative artists of his own times, shows something of the complex public he wished to address. Alberti was seeking to develop shared intellectual interests between artists, scholars and patrons. In Book Two he offers direct arguments in support of his claims about 'the nobility' of the art of painting. First he points out that, as an art of representation, painting can 'make the absent present', can represent the dead to the living, or even further piety through representations of the Gods (1991, pp. 60–4). In these examples Alberti is drawing on themes which are recurrent in his voluminous writings on many other subjects, including friendship, the family, and civic values as they are cultivated though a public sense of history, tradition and virtue. (See Godel (1969), Jarzombeck (1989) and Grafton (2000) for accounts putting Alberti's *Treatise on Painting* into context with his vast literary output, which includes his substantial works on architecture and on the family, as well as plays and satires.) Alberti goes on to claim that the values of the art of painting supersede the value of any precious jewels or objects that painting can depict, since, he says, it is in the divine gift of the painter to produce things of beauty that set the standard for all other things. In a remark that signals the ensuing debate about the respective status and values of the various arts, the *paragone*, he ventures to assert that whatever beauty there is in all the other arts, in architecture, sculpture or the work of the stonemason or other craftsmen, it is guided by the rule and art of the painter. (For the paragone debate – the dispute about the comparative status of the various arts – see chapter 5 in this volume.) By this he means that the principles of composition which he describes in Book Two of the *Treatise*, based as they are on principles of harmony, decorum and correct measure or proportion, or, as he calls it, *concinnatus*, are germane to all the arts. Thus one central theme of the *Treatise* is how the art of painting distinctively embodies the beautiful, not merely by depicting beautiful things, but by ordering its own process in accordance with fine compositional principles. Although it is not Alberti's formulation, in the subsequent classical tradition, painting was in fact to be defined as that art of representation which aims at beauty. This is the source idea of the concept of the Fine or Beaux Arts. Although the concept of beauty became derelict in the context of twentieth-century art, nevertheless, Alberti's call upon this concept, in relating artistic principles to the serious themes of art, still exerted its force. When the artist Maurice Denis was to say, at the turn of the twentieth century, that the painter should subordinate the charm of detail to the beauty of the whole, guided by the necessity of structural relationships and by mathematical proportions, he was speaking from this Albertian tradition.

Another theme which also runs through many of Alberti's works, including, particularly, his plays and satires, is the Stoic theme of the relation between fame and fortune. In the *Treatise* he calls attention more than once to the way the art of painting can bring fame to the individual artist. Although the culture of celebrity is now an integral part of Fine Art production, Alberti was writing at

a time before the idea of individual genius had been authorized by Vasari and personified in Michelangelo. Alberti's inclinations are more towards the cultivation of *ingegno* as talent and skill, rather than as genius. (It was Neoplatonic ideas of divine inspiration, of interest to Ficino and his circle at the Medici court, that were to have the stronger influence on Romantic and Modern notions of artistic genius.) Significantly, this accords with the fact that Alberti wrote from the standpoint of the practitioner, whereas others, such as Ficino and Vasari, were more concerned with the viewer's reception and evaluation of the work. Thus he paid more attention to the material process of the activity of painting than to the idea of some image in the mind supposedly transcribed into art. But fame has to be worthy of its praise. So, 'you who strive to excel in painting, should cultivate above all the fame and reputation which you see the Ancients attained, and in so doing it will be well to remember that avarice was always the enemy of renown and virtue' (1991, p. 64). This not only shows how the return to 'the Ancients', both as a source of learned education and as models for drawing, is going to play such a dominant role in the subsequent development of the art, but also how Alberti brings his Aristotelian sense of how *the virtues of good practice* bear on *the value of the work*. These virtues are, as we shall see, both practical and intellectual.

The Rich Wisdom of Minerva

Alberti explains that his *Treatise* divides into three parts. 'The first, which is entirely mathematical, shows how this noble and beautiful art arises from roots within Nature herself. The second puts the art into the hands of the artist, distinguishes its parts and explains them all. The third instructs the artist how he may and should attain complete mastery and understanding of the art of painting' (1991, p. 35). Book One, which consists of a detailed account of the basis of artificial perspective, draws on medieval and contemporary theories of optics and the geometry of perception to present the principles of this new way of constructing a systematically ordered and visually coherent pictorial space. The use of perspectival techniques was not new. *Skenographia*, or scene painting, which is what Plato was probably speaking of when he denounced the illusionistic skills of the artist in Book Ten of *The Republic*, exploited effects of diminution and recession, and medieval artists also used empirical methods of depicting the relative size of things as they appeared within the imagined space of the picture, or sloping lines to show the side of a building. But they also used other devices, such as reverse perspective, so that a table top and its contents are more apparent. Giotto, however, whose work in the fourteenth century had so amazed the public with its sense of substance and reality, had used elements of linear perspective in constructing images of buildings whose receding angles converged. What Alberti contributed was a precise *method* for constructing the appearances of depth and solidity in paintings, based on mathematical principles, so that such

things as this convergence could be systematically worked out. He showed how the content of the picture could be ordered and placed strictly in accordance with lines which ran at right angles to the picture plane (the orthogonals) converging at a single vanishing point on the horizon of the picture (see Kemp, 1997, chapter 3). Although the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck, for example, working in the early fifteenth century, painted with a rich and vivid sense of spatial coherence, he did this by empirical judgement and unity of light, rather than by applying the geometrical methods described by Alberti. Alberti's aim in the *Treatise* is not only to present the theory of artificial or linear perspective, but to show how such abstract principles can be, as he says, put 'into the hands' of the artist.

In the opening paragraph of Book One Alberti makes this illuminating remark: 'in everything we shall say I earnestly wish it to be borne in mind that I speak in these matters not as a mathematician but as a painter. Mathematicians measure the shapes and forms of things in the mind alone and divorced entirely from matter. We, on the other hand, who wish to talk of things that are visible, will express ourselves in cruder terms' (1991, p. 37). The phrase 'in cruder terms' is translated by Spencer differently as 'uses a more sensate wisdom'.[1] He traces the phrase to a text by Cicero, which Alberti is known to have owned, in which Cicero alludes to cruder or less learned ways of speaking, thus highlighting one of the many ways in which Alberti's text draws directly from classical rhetoric. But in this visual context this fertile phrase alludes to the fact that in the art of painting, thought is directed within the sensible materials of the art. Thus the original Italian phrase *la piu grassa Minerva*, which perhaps translates more directly as 'a little richer, or fatter, wisdom', is particularly apposite, since the painter's materials are clays and other substances worked into a greasy pigment. Significantly he calls upon Minerva, the ancient goddess of wisdom, rather than St Lucy or St Luke, the saints associated with the painter's work. Alberti is showing clearly that he sees his task as showing how the intellectual principles that he calls upon in this work relate to the process of transforming brute matter into a medium of art, that is, something from which meaning can be discerned. Specifically, then, in Book One, the theory of pictorial perspective is an application of abstract mathematical rules, known 'by the mind alone', to a practical process requiring fine judgement about the sensible appearances of real things, in order to construct a convincing sense of solid bodies related coherently in an imagined space.

Point, Line and Plane

Alberti sets off to elucidate the principles of perspectival geometry by introducing the ideas of a point, a line and a plane. The first thing to know, he says, is that a point is a sign and is not divisible into parts. But he then says that he calls a *sign* anything that exists on a surface, so that it is visible to the eye. It is not that the mathematical point is too small to be visible, or that it is invisible,

but that it is not an element in the realm of the visible at all. Similarly, a line, in geometry, has length but not breadth. Thus points and lines are not the same sort of things as dots and marks on a painted work. Yet these intellectual elements must somehow direct the intentional process of the artist's practical thought in making such painterly marks. For, as Alberti says, 'no one will deny that things which are not visible do not concern the painter, for he strives to represent only things which are seen' (1991, p. 37).

How this is done becomes apparent when Alberti shows how the relationship between mathematics, the visible world and the painted marks are made evident in attending to the surfaces of things. He says that the qualities of surfaces are of two sorts. The first, permanent qualities, cannot be changed without altering the figure itself, but the second sort are qualities of things as they appear to change relative to the point of view. For example, the mathematical properties of a circular figure do not change, but the look of a coin, relative to the position of an observer, does, becoming merely a straight line when seen at eye level. Linear perspective in painting depends on establishing a theoretical vantage point from which the *variable* qualities of things, their appearance under perspective, can be systematically organized, so as to appear visually consistent. Although Alberti's method relies on a single vanishing point, many painters exploited the use of several viewpoints and multiple vanishing points for particular pictorial effects. They also related the *theoretical* viewpoint of the picture to the *actual* viewing position of the observer in different ways, the spatially dramatic effects of baroque ceiling painting being one major example. In fact paintings rarely conform to strict Albertian principles of one-point perspective, and it is the active management of the transgressions of those principles that gives focus to particular meanings and effects.

In showing how the mathematical principles of linear perspective apply to the practical processes of painting Alberti uses the Italian term, *orlo*, which is a rim or brim or border, that is a term denoting the edges of physical things. When applying the formal terms of geometry to the activity of painting, Alberti shows how relations between such visible features of things can be systematically depicted through what he calls the process of *circumscription*. Thus in addition to the mathematical concept of line, and sensible examples of linear things in the world, such as the light on the brim of a jug or the embroidery on the hem of a courtier's tunic, we need a third linear element, the idea of a *contour*. In drawing, a contour is not the depiction of a property of something, like the edge of a piece of paper, but the boundary of any form as it appears from a particular viewpoint. This is not merely the outline of a figure but the lines coordinating the three-dimensional surface structure, or form of things, as they stand solidly in space. Thus in drawing a portrait, the contours of the complex solid form of the head vary as it is seen from different angles, and although a contour line may coincide with the upper edge of the eye socket, or even the visible line of the eyebrow, it is not a depiction of either. (Contemporary computer animation utilizes similar coordinates in constructing the moving image.) Thus it is the contours of things,

as they appear from a given viewpoint, which are ordered in accordance with the principles of perspective. In addition to this disciplined attention to contour, Alberti also emphasizes the importance of a systematic treatment of the effects of light in constructing pictorial form.

In his teachings at the Weimar Bauhaus in the 1920s Paul Klee drew upon this tradition of circumscription, moving from point to line to plane, in student exercises. His purpose was not, however, to teach perspective, but to show how the graphic line articulates form, movement and the visual imagination.

For Alberti the work of delineating the form and structure of things, as they will appear in the spatial economy of the picture, is an essential stage of the work. Thus Alberti's way of constructing form in the processes of painting significantly contrasts with workshop methods which rely on examples. Using a pattern book model of how to draw a hand in some particular position, for example, doesn't enable the artist to draw a building. But by using a general method of depiction, in which everything is regulated through the same disciplines of line and plane, if someone can draw one thing, as Michelangelo was to say, then they can draw anything.

This point about the generality of a method of depiction, however, must not be confused with a different sort of claim about the realism or verisimilitude of the method, as though looking at things in a painting could be thought to be just like looking though an open window. For the popular idea that the history of painting in the West since Alberti's times was a gradual progress towards complete verisimilitude ignores the ways in which a method of depiction, no matter how 'naturalistic', brings with it its own interests in and conceptions of what it shows.[2] The different uses of the term 'realism' in painting, connoting different political and social interests, are themselves an illustration of this central fact of the art.

Reality and Alberti's Window

In describing the method of perspective Alberti famously writes, 'Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen' (1991, p. 54). In Alberti's system the picture surface is to be thought of as a horizontal plane intersecting the lines of sight between the theoretical viewpoint and the things seen 'in' the painting. All that is seen pictorially is seen within the imagined space of the work. (This contrasts with later Renaissance or Mannerist developments, in which figures might appear to protrude or tumble out from the painted surface.) If we take this to mean that the work will look just like looking out of a window, however, we shall misunderstand Alberti's larger purposes.

Alberti, as we have seen, says that he is to enlarge on the art of painting 'from its first principles in nature'. How distinctions are drawn between art and nature

is often a major clue to the rules guiding the use of the concept of reality. Alberti's reference to nature in his *Treatise* is, as we would expect, neither unambiguous nor unproblematic. There are at least two senses of the term 'nature' at play in his text, in tension one with the other. When Alberti exhorts the painter to refer to nature in the production of his work, he wishes to establish direct experience, *la bona sperienza*, as the foundation of the artist's practice in contrast to basing the work on the use of prefigured schemata. But this is not a straightforward idea of 'copying how things look', for what we are comparing with what, and how we make the comparison, is not simple. What we see when we look at things depends not only on what sort of thing is being looked at and the conditions under which it is seen, but also on the purposes of attention and the methods of looking. Looking at something for the purposes of painting requires its own particular modes of attention and specific perceptual and *conceptual* skills.

Concepts of various sorts direct the understanding in looking at things – in art, for example, such diverse concepts as anatomy, the nude, nakedness or gender, differently direct the attention of both the artist when working and the viewer when looking. Significantly, the contemporary dominance of theory requires the artist to be more aware of and more self-conscious about the conceptual directions of looking, or of 'the gaze'. The education of a painter is partly an education in these conceptual skills. And, from the other end of the process, in looking at a painting, understanding what is seen also requires its own skills. To see that one figure is smaller than another may be to *see* that it is at some distance behind the other, not that it is a smaller person or a less important figure. Similarly, to see the visual rhythms between natural and domestic objects and human bodies, and *thus* the metaphorical relations between them, may need direction. More recently, the traditional conceptual apparatus of Fine Art has been transgressed and displaced – which is one reason for the bafflement of the general public. In general, to see analogies between the use of the medium, the methods of depiction and what is depicted in the work, that is, to see what is represented in terms of its manner of representation, requires various sorts of sophisticated aesthetic attention – even when looking at a painting that uses the most familiar naturalistic conventions.

Alberti's second idea of nature, however, refers us not to the sensible appearances of the world, but back to the application of mathematics. This is the idea of nature as a deeper harmony of things, as the laws governing the appearances of things, as they are understood by the rational intellect. This is not an experiential idea of nature but a theoretical conception more at home in science or philosophy. Thus, when, in the Preface dedicated to Brunelleschi, Alberti says that the First Book of the *Treatise* is 'entirely mathematical, showing how this noble and beautiful art arises from roots within Nature herself' (1991, p. 35), this is not simply the claim that mathematics provides a method for realizing in paint the appearance of things in nature. For it also alludes to Alberti's wider ambitions for the learned status of painting as that art which displays deeper

realities. Such deeper philosophical ambitions for the art of painting have reoccurred in its subsequent developments in different ways. The claim that the intellectual principles of painting give a deeper insight into reality, whether this is metaphysical or socio-political, becomes, after Alberti, an unchallenged shibboleth of the Fine Art of painting. The status conferred on contemporary art depends upon this history.

In Alberti's case his ideas about nature and art involve at least two elements. First, that nature is imitable by art because she is ordered by intelligible principles, and secondly, that through the understanding of these principles the artist can further the purposes of nature by perfecting and completing the process. These ideas clearly introduce a more sophisticated conception of art, for they involve the metaphysical claim that the intellectual disciplines of painting, because they are derived from the same mathematical principles as nature itself, direct a truly objective system of picturing. Although there is evidence throughout Alberti's writings of both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought influencing his use of the concept of nature, it is also close to the protoscientific work of Nicholas de Cusa, in which nature, of which the individual is also a part, is a homogeneous whole. The artist in his work creates a microcosm of the real, in its continuity between physical, political and spiritual dimensions.

Thus although Alberti was establishing general conditions for the construction of pictorial space, his system sets new limits, not only to the sorts of things which can be depicted, and to the manner of their depiction, but also to the meanings which those things have. Perspectival space opens up opportunities for the imaginative visualization of experience in new ways, ways that accord with different material interests and economic orders, or different conceptions of humanity itself. (For a discussion of this point in terms of the conflicts between figural and discursive elements of the work, with several examples, see Bryson, 1981, pp. 11–15, 89–91 and 228–30 and 1983, chapter 5.)

On his return to Florence in 1434, when composing the *Treatise*, Alberti had been particularly impressed by Masaccio's work. In Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise*, in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, for example, the bodies of Adam and Eve stride sturdily out into physical space, their feet meeting solid ground. Their evident shame is now understood through the metaphor of sight itself: Adam covers his eyes, not able to look into the future he has made, not able to meet our gaze; Eve, now aware of being seen, covers her body. The world beyond the fresco, our human world into which they walk and from which they are seen, is implicated within it. Thus it is not merely that these new methods of pictorial organization enable new 'realizations' of biblical themes, but that they are themselves part of a change in the significance of those themes, and thus in a new sense of reality. But at the same time as this new sense of pictorial space opens up new imaginative and projective possibilities, others are closed down. The very homogeneity of pictorial space requires a consistent presentation of temporal and ontological realms. Thus the depiction of supernatural figures or events becomes problematic. In Masaccio's fresco, St

Michael, hounding Adam and Eve into our world, rides quaintly as though on a carpet, in the air above the human figures.

I am suggesting through these observations that the introduction of artificial perspective didn't introduce a more accurate form of perceptual representation, but rather that it opened up new possibilities for the visual representation of thought. This is, of course, not an original claim. It is an application of Panotsky's famous claim that artificial perspective is a 'symbolic form', that perspective rationalized the subjective experience of viewing and thus created the foundation for the development of new worlds of experience (Panotsky, 1991). In particular, Alberti's aim to found the construction of pictorial space on systematic principles concerns the relationships between a rational and lucid order of depiction and a rational and authoritative ordering of social and public affairs. The connections between a clarity and perspicuity of visual organization and a Ciceronian ideal of social order are implicit within the pictorial strategies described in his *Treatise* on painting, explicit in his writings on architecture and connect directly with ideals of civic order underpinning his many other works. For other artists, divergent organizations of pictorial space marry with other socio-political interests, but even then, Alberti's principles, as academic principles, stand as the order to be contraverted.

A perspectival space is a pictorial space in which the ordering of parts making up the content can be made visibly intelligible in particular and distinctive ways, ways that are often transparent to the observer. It is a pictorial space suited to, for example, for ordering the coherence of planes and solids required for Still Life or for the contrasts between proximity and vista required in landscape. Most particularly however, it sets the ground for tableaux of action. Within its stable and ordered space, the actions and tribulations of gods and mortals can be offered to sensual, expressive and psychological scrutiny. In the context of the *Treatise* as a whole, perspective as a method of realistic representation is a means to the end of the realization of thematic purposes in which aesthetic, moral and political elements are interdependent. Alberti's window was to open out into a world governed by a very particular unity of moral and aesthetic order through his account of composition and the *istoria*.

The Grand Work

Although composition is now a very familiar term of painting, Alberti's term *compositio* is very specific, drawing on his alliance between painting and rhetoric. He is applying a Ciceronian term of rhetoric describing how the parts of a sentence are properly built together, and sentences ordered into effective oratory, to painting (see Baxandall, 1971, p. 131). In Book Three Alberti writes, 'I would have those who begin to learn the art of painting do what I see practised by teachers of writing. They first teach all the signs of the alphabet separately, and then how to put syllables together and then whole words. Our students should follow

this method with painting' (1991, p. 89). Teaching someone to write, however, only has point if the person taught is going to have something to say. There is an important shift between being able to form letters and understanding syntax in sentence construction. But it is only when someone has mastered both of these that they can begin to write eloquently or poetically about some subject. In appropriating the models of grammar and rhetoric, however, Alberti is keen to point out that however vivid or persuasive a literary description might be, we should recognize how much more beauty and pleasure can be had from a painting.

Over two hundred years later, the point of Albertian principles of composition in painting were to be well described by Henry Fuseli in his teachings at the Royal Academy:

> Composition, in its stricter sense, is the dresser of Invention, it superintends the disposition of its materials. Composition has physical and moral elements: those are perspective and light with shade; these, Unity, Propriety and Perspicuity; without Unity it cannot span its subject; without Propriety it cannot tell the story; without Perspicuity it clouds the fact with confusion; destitute of light and shade it misses the effect, and heedless of perspective it cannot find a place. (Quoted by Puttfarken, 2000, p. 46. See also, esp., chapter 2)

As Fuseli indicates, composition has a purpose, a grand purpose. It is the visual organization of the content of the work, the *istoria*. *Istoria*, or history painting, that is large-scale narrative painting, was to become the major genre of the academic tradition. Its themes were drawn from biblical and classical sources. Thus in his introduction of the *istoria* as the proper object of the art of painting, Alberti furthered the appropriation of a Classical culture by aligning the teachings of Cicero with the stories of Ovid. Because of its erudite subject matter *istoria* is thus elevated above portraiture and still life, and its status contrasted particularly with genre painting, or subjects from everyday life, which did not have the same thematic depth. By 1669, in the preface to his lectures to the French Academy, André Félibien, was to speak explicitly of the hierarchy of genres. Without the elevating poetic subject of the *istoria*, painting could not assume its 'universal'and 'timeless' authority. Speaking of the *grand style*, in his Fourth Discourse to students of the newly formed Royal Academy of 1769, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds says 'There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy' (Reynolds, 1959, Discourse IV, p. 75). Although there are obviously deep themes of death, love, courage or betrayal etc. common throughout humankind, one mark of later twentieth-century art or cultural theory has been the rejection of this universalizing humanism. Now we cannot but see how such grand themes are put to the service of specific political and social interests. It was in virtue of this authority, however, that Alberti could claim that the *istoria* has the capacity of moving the soul. This is the source of the idea of the *moral* authority of the Fine Art of painting.

In Book Two of the *Treatise* Alberti writes (again echoing Cicero), 'The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul. It happens in nature that nothing more than herself is capable of things like herself: we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing and grieve with the grieving' (1966, p. 77). Over two hundred years later, in his *Reflections on the Present State of Painting in France* of 1774, La Font de Saint Yenne was to write, 'Of all the genres of painting, history is without question the most important. The history painter alone is the painter of the soul, the others only paint for the eye' (in Greenhalgh, 1978, p. 205). In taking grand literary themes as the subject matter of a painting however, the artist's originality would not lie in the *invention*, or choice of subject matter, but in the way it is composed. Since the movements of the soul, says Alberti, closely following and adapting Quintilian's teachings on oratory, are made known by movements of the body, he emphasizes the importance of the expressive depiction of bodies. The sad person 'holds himself feebly on his pallid and poor members; in anger, the eyes become swollen with ire, the face and all the members are burned with colour, fury adding so much boldness' (Alberti, 1966, p. 20). He also drew attention to articulating the movements of the body. Practitioner that he was, he speaks of observations he has 'noted from nature', such as that the movements of the head are 'always almost such that certain parts of the body have to sustain it with levers, so great is its weight' (Alberti, 1966, p. 79). The depiction of expressive figures, or of 'the movements of the soul' as they are apparent in bodily movement, became a central theme within French Classicism and the teachings of the French Academy. The painter Charles Lebrun, who played such a major role in establishing the dominance of the French Academy in seventeenth-century Europe, wrote the most influential theoretical treatise on the expression of emotion in grand painting, the *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les Passions*, published in 1698. But in much academic or Grand Salon painting, without any subtle conception of the subject, such prescriptive rules about depicting action and emotion in figures easily resulted in hackneyed posturing.

But Alberti was interested in more than dramatic expression, for he wanted the composition to have *decorum*, or fitness and propriety. The deportment and disposition of bodies must be appropriate not only to the action, but to the sex, age and character of action. Thus there is in Alberti's discussion of composition a tension with the guiding principle beauty, for, as he indicates, the aged and ill are not beautiful. But it is also the picture as a whole, its conception of action and its handling of scale, giving sense of place and time, which is a candidate for beauty. Poussin's great paintings, which put human events within the scale of a vast ordered landscape, as if against eternity, bring these ideas to one particular sort of fruition. Poussin himself also derived his compositional principles from musical theory, and specifically included colour in his discussion of the modes of painting. If beauty consists in those qualities of things in terms of which we admire their excellence, then, in the case of paintings, such qualities must be

predicated of the work and the way it realizes its subject, and not just the depicted content.

In choosing the point from which the story is to be depicted, the artist articulates the drama in accordance with his conception of its interests and significance. Yet Alberti's insistence on the internal coherence and unity of the pictorial space and attention to the visual ordering of bodies makes conflict between narratival and pictorial elements endemic. (See Bryson, 1981, chapter 7 for a discussion of the relations between discourse and figure in the context of Diderot's writings about the French Salon painting.) Although the pictorial trope of allegory is one device for dealing with this problem, in trying to achieve narrative and emotional clarity, the visual artist is drawn particularly to those points at which the story is suspended. For example, when something is beheld by the participants in the drama, as when Actaeon first sees Diana, all action is held still. Or when what is not seen by the figures within the work is displayed in full view for the spectator of the picture, as in paintings of Susannah and the Elders. In both of these examples, the woman's body becomes, characteristically, a central motif of the art. Since perspective both brings things into sight and occludes them, then painting can exploit all the possibilities not only of what is near and far, and small and vast, but also of what is occluded or hidden, either from the figures within the picture or from the viewer. Most particularly, however, since painting is a sensory medium, it lends itself to the depiction of sensuous and sensual things, things that hold enchanted attention independently of their role in any narrative subject matter.

The relation of the viewer to what is depicted in any figurative work is of course crucial. Alberti had recommended positioning figures in such a way that they invite the viewer to see what is shown, even by some explicit gesture of pointing. But by the eighteenth century questions of whether and how the viewer is implicated within the fiction of the work had become a pervasive theme. In his substantial work on this subject, Michael Fried discusses Diderot's claims that paintings, which collude with the viewer's presence, become theatrical. 'In Diderot's writings', he says, 'the very condition of spectatordom stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence; . . . The continued functioning (of both painting and theatre) as major expressions of the human spirit, are held to depend on whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to de-theatricalize beholding and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction' (Fried, 1980, p. 104). In these and other ways the principles of *istoria*, which Alberti laid before the artist as though they gave clear direction, become themselves a troubled topic of theoretical attention.

If aesthetic judgement in painting or drawing is judgement about how a subject or theme is realized, then Alberti's principles of composition open into a tradition in which differences between artistic conceptions of similar subject matter become of central interest of critical attention. The more subtle the conception, the greater the work, hence the acclaim given to Piero della Francesca,

Titian, Poussin or, in response to a modern world, Seurat. Of course the principles of *istoria* also lend themselves to theatrical melodrama or to the moralizing anecdotal painting of Victorian England. How the traditional principles are used or appropriated depends, of course, on the relationships between the art and the culture – art is, after all, one of the ways in which the interests and values of a society are constituted. In the early Modern period, the tradition was challenged in different ways. In some of Manet's paintings, for example, the academic principles are transformed into work which foregrounds its means of depiction and confronts the beholder of the painting with the modern world, without nostalgia or sentiment. Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or, differently, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, mark critical turning points of the tradition of *istoria*. But the ethos of this tradition, and the Albertian principles of moral scale that informed it, continued to underpin the authority of much American Abstract painting. However, it possibly reached its point of introversion in the work of so-called postmodernist painters. In Julian Schnabel's ebullient paintings of the 1980s, for example, there is still an heroic scale and some elusive reference to great human themes. But it is a self-referential drama of heroic creativity, drawing on chance cultural references displaced from any wider public concerns. Or, very differently, in Anselm Kiefer's decayed and empty interiors, in work of the 1970s, the vast rooms are vacated of all action and historical memory is corroded. Insofar as there is an End of Painting, then it is this Albertian tradition, which no longer directs contemporary visual imagination, which has come to an end.

Notes

1 Spencer's translation (1966), p. 63. Both Martin Kemp's introduction to the Grayson translation (1991) and Spencer's own introduction give excellent help in reading Alberti's text, and Grayson discusses this particular passage at some length on pp. 18–20.

2 The claim that the art of painting is a gradual progression towards verisimilitude is made in several places by Arthur Danto, particularly *The End of Art* (Danto, 1986, chapter V). He claims that painting was displaced by the advent of different technologies of seeing, such as photography and film, which were able to render reality more fully. But not only do I question this idea of the history of painting as progress towards some single standard of verisimilitude, I also see photography and film as having their own distinctive resources for representation which are not comparable with painting. Thus the idea of an End of Painting indicated at the very end of this chapter is different from that of Danto.

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