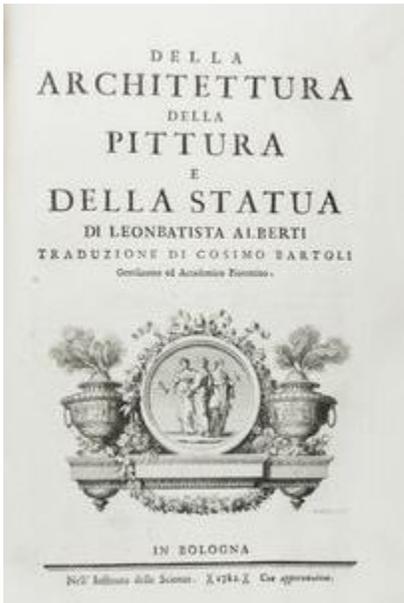


# Leon Battista Alberti and *On Painting*

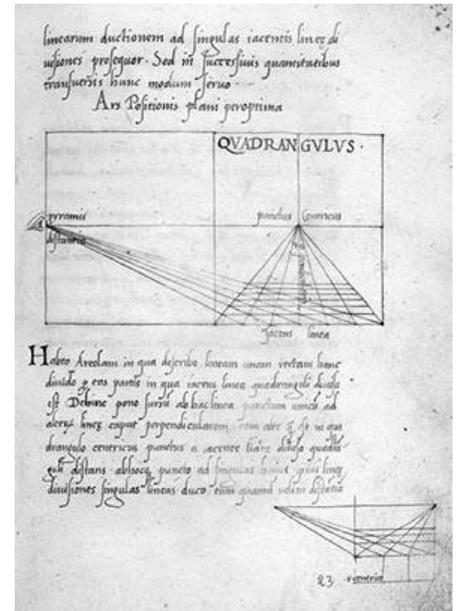
## Leonbatista Alberti et *Della Pittura*

Will Karp



### Background

Italian architect and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti published a groundbreaking treatise in both Italian and Latin in 1435. It had widespread circulation during the Renaissance period along with other writings. As a member of a high ranking Florentine family he came to meet, associate with, and influence contemporary artists (including Masaccio) espousing a strong interest in humanistic trends evolving this time in art. This writing became a sort of primer text book for defining the “rules” for humanistic art.



### Introduction

My first reaction to reading *On Painting* was “So What?” This was merely a rehash (or maybe should I say “pre-hash”) to painting 101. The principles that Alberti set forward here were the same principles and guidelines that are drummed into the heads of beginning as well as advanced painting students. And having been there and done that, my immediate response was pretty ho-hum.

But, then when I let my usually rash and fogged initial reaction to almost anything, rest – and gave myself time to think rationally, it did sink in that after all, this was the First serious attempt to define these basic ideas and to further document them. That these principles have endured to this day is admittedly a pretty impressive accomplishments.

To dig more into Alberti’s ideas I will focus on three concepts:

1. The idea of *istoria*
2. The technical aspects of Alberti’s “Rules”
3. The application of Alberti’s findings to Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity*

## **1. The Idea of Istoria**

Alberti talks about *istoria*, a word for which there is no translatable equivalent. He looks at painting as a type of divine force, and the vehicle that affects our soul. He lacks no superlatives in claiming the singularity of painting - that it is god-like by definition; that it's the link between life and death (especially in its preservation of images for the future); the recognition that painters are "artists" and not mere craftsmen such as sculptors and artisans using other mediums were considered at the time; that painters are the paramount of a perfect mind; and that the painter himself is supremely god-like in all that he can perform.

So I look at all this hyperbole and try to put *istoria* into perspective. What comes to mind for me as I have studied and practiced art, is the concept of *Gestalt*. An organized whole being perceived as greater than the sum of its parts. Add to that the concept of the "soul" relative to the painting (as mentioned by Alberti.) Putting those two together - being so deeply affected by a work of art that it transcends any definable rational feeling – That is what I think Alberti was trying to say. And I get it!

To put this in perspective for me – thinking about what *istoria* (Gestalt plus Soul) could mean - what particularly hits me as I ponder this concept is considering the idealization of the god like sculptural images and temples in Greek and Roman cultures, and the awe that pilgrims felt as they viewed and interpreted both the inspirational and horrific images of Gothic art and its churches. This same kind of undefinable amazement when looking at a technically convincing painting can provide the same level of extreme emotion that hits the soul, and merges the viewer with the soul of the painting itself. This convergence and collision between the painting, the painter, and the audience just might be *istoria*.

## **2. The technical aspects of Alberti's "Rules"**

I think back to the Stele of Hammurabi and how this was the First set of "laws" of society that were inscribed for posterity, and I compare that to Alberti's rules –well not on the scale of Hammurabi – but nevertheless, in terms of art history, a huge First as well. This was an innovative task that had not been previously accomplished and has since stood the test of time. While he covered many of the basics I'm going to review and critique each.

- Circumscription - outlining the drawing and how it occupies space.

Alberti's most tantalizing contribution is the concept of using a "veil" overlaid with parallel lines (of thread.) In today's terms I would compare this to a sheet of clear film with a grid pattern on it that we could look through and "copy" the outlines of the subject. While very inventive, this approach may not

be entirely accepted today as good practice. The use of “tools” such as the so-called veil or a camera obscura may produce a technically breathtaking painting, the technical purist would not consider this an appropriate way to approach a painting. One alternate method, which Alberti does allude to briefly is by studying an object with a rod or instrument and then mark off relative sizes for the balance. For example, one accepted and common method today is for the artist to hold a pencil out in front of him and by closely observing relative sizes of the components of the composition, then starting the initial phase of the outlining or underpainting. In terms of today’s painters, the act of being spontaneous and having a style of one’s own is of prime importance, and the use of mechanical tools to “copy” what the artist sees is discouraged.

- Composition – the way in “which the parts fit together,”

Alberti further refines this aspect by defining “planes” and the size and location of the planes. These imaginary planes are the figures and surroundings in the composition. He includes, size, shape, pose, and shading. Also weight, movement, balance. Of importance is showing various body parts, their function and the relationship to each other. And he shows an interest in studying anatomy from bone structure on upward to get it right. This is consistent with today’s painting theory.

Factors I believe were missing or could have used more emphasis include: as figures move closer in space they become more complex, and sharper, as figures recede in the composition, they become less distinct (as well as smaller.) In the marble reliefs of Greece and Rome this was easily attained and demonstrated, but in many Renaissance paintings, this is lacking as the clarity and sharpness of the figures way in the distance appear as clear and precise as those in the foreground.

- Reception of Light – the way in which light alters colors distance

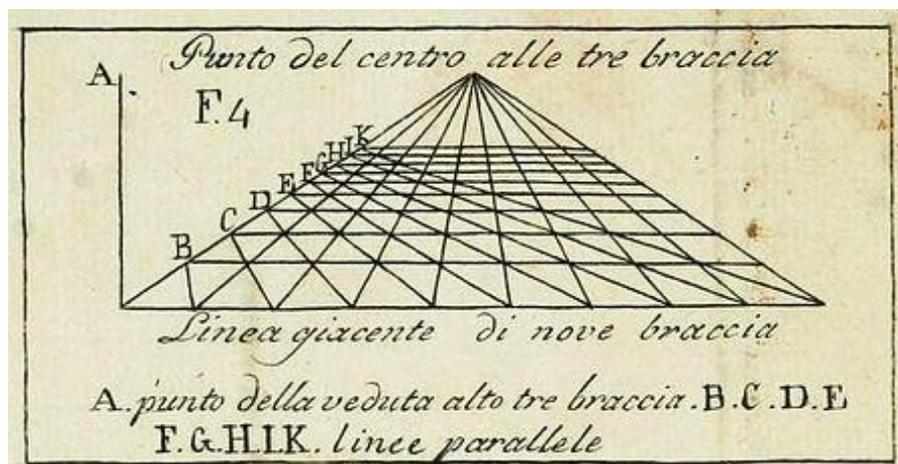
In this section Alberti poses some brilliant ideas. Primarily that as light (or absence of light) hits an object, the actual color of that object changes. That is a hugely difficult concept to grasp and execute. In paintings of this era, it is most easily demonstrated in the flowing robes. He also talks about the extreme use of white and black and that the most saturated level of either should never be used. New and enticing to me. He also talks about the variety of colors to use and their complementary relationships. This was a significant advance in the realm of expanding humanism in Renaissance painting.

A little more emphasis might have been placed on some other theories. As colors advance in space they become warmer and purer, as they recede, they become cooler. As colors advance they become

darker or lighter, as they recede, they become subdued and less saturated (the darkest darks and the lightest lights are closest to the foreground.) Contrast increases as colors advance. Again, in many compositions of the Renaissance, these are not readily apparent.

### 3. The application of Alberti's findings to Masaccio's Holy Trinity

Science and Mathematics were an integral part of the Humanist movement. Alberti, primarily successful as an architect influenced his contemporaries by his application of geometric basics to painting. Building upon the principles of linear geometric perspective devised by Brunelleschi about 20 years prior, Alberti impacted the work of his friend Masaccio. The use of perspective to enhance paintings and make them look more "realistic" was a key factor of humanism. Just as in Gothic churches, it was recognized that scale, order, and proportion were of prime importance. Now how to effectively use the vanishing point was finally recognized and utilized accurately.



The figures on the following page show the application of these principles in the *Holy Trinity*. A man standing in front of the fresco would have his eye located at the vanishing point. So the illusion of the shadows below him on the niche of the skeleton made perfect sense. Also looking upwards towards the images of God, Christ and the other figures, the perceived source of light on the figures and columns made the piece look multidimensional. Colors were altered to respond to the external source of light. The curved ceiling with coffers receding according to perspective rules worked to continue the illusion. All the tricks of the trade were used to make a coherent composition based on a grid of geometric forms including circles, rectangles, and the major triangular layout of the four figures all looking upwards towards Christ. Also because of its technical success, it is possible to construct a 3D model of what the actual depths would be if not painted on a flat surface. I assume Alberti would be happy.

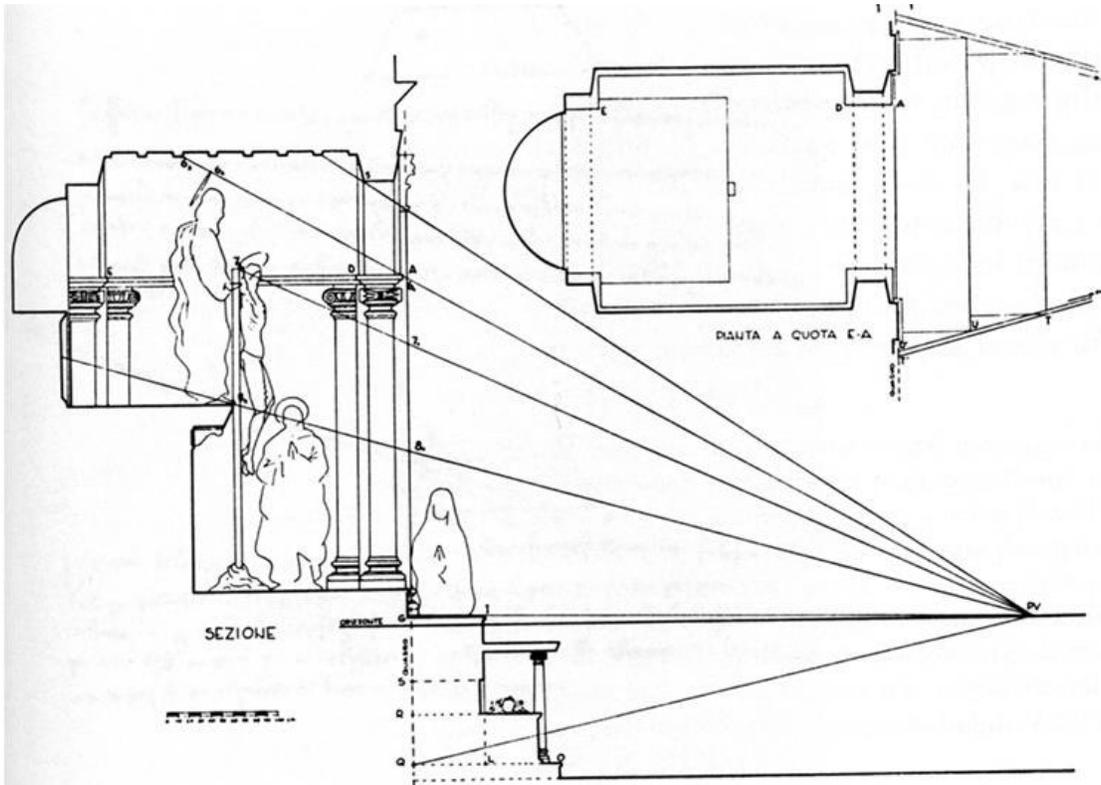
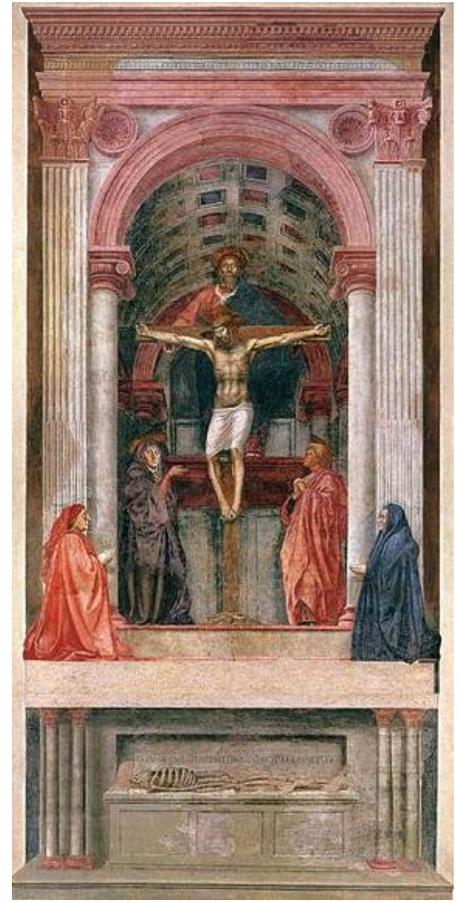
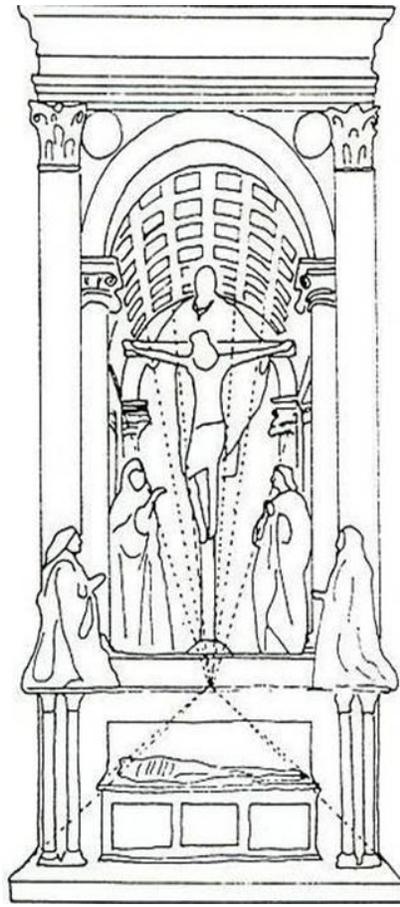
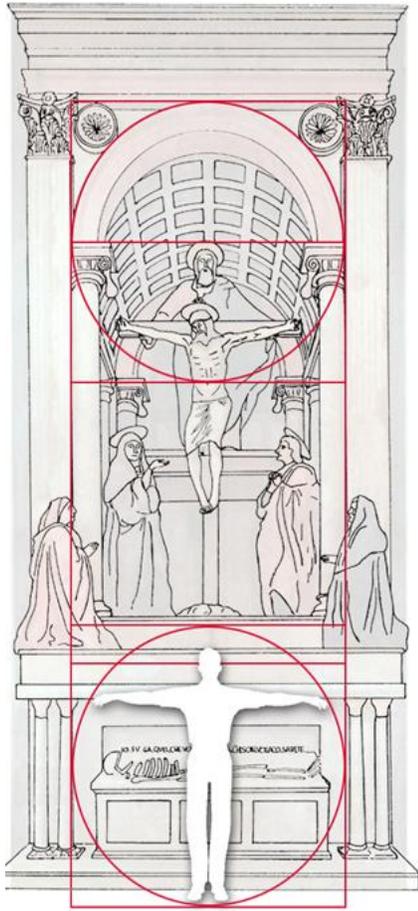


Fig. 14 Construction of a circle in perspective  
 A circle is drawn on the squared surface GFJ, and the points of intersection between the grid and the circle are noted. The squared surface is drawn in perspective. Points of intersection equivalent to those on the original squared surface are recorded on the perspectival grid, and are joined to produce the circle in perspective (all other labels as in Fig. 11).

