
Alberti's Birthday

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- 1 Leon Battista Alberti would have been six hundred years old last year. We cannot tell what he would have made of the panoply of conferences and related events that marked the anniversary around the world, and which certainly enhanced the frequent flyer status of many noted Albertian scholars. Publications followed suit, too; particularly in France, where—for many reasons, as deplored by Françoise Choay in her preface to Michel Paoli's book reviewed here—Albertian scholarship has traditionally been somewhat lagging behind, and many a gap awaits to be filled.
- 2 As customary with birthdays, some gifts are in fact old items, recycled and repackaged for the occasion. Verdier has reprinted an anthology already published in 1990, then more appropriately titled *Perspective et histoire au Quattrocento*. The new title runs *Architecture et perspective chez Brunelleschi et Alberti*, but it is misleading. The book consists of an article by Giulio Carlo Argan on Brunelleschi and perspective first published in 1946-47; another vintage essay by Rudolf Wittkower from 1953 on some technicalities of proportions and foreshortening in Quattrocento perspectival constructions; and a 1968 article by Marisa Dalai Emiliani that offers a detailed survey of publications on perspective from 1960 to 1968. Wittkower's essay has, for the most part, stood the test of time, but the editors might have warned the reader that some of the questions Wittkower raised over half a

century ago may have since been addressed by others, and in some cases solved. Also, it would always help if publishers could spell the names of the authors they publish.

- 3 For those in need of a more up-to-date survey of Albertian scholarship, and which true to its title actually deals with Alberti, exclusively and comprehensively, Michel Paoli's brief monograph is an instructive, refreshing and elegant essay, and a pleasure to read. The author has deftly assembled a digest of Alberti's life and works, itemizing all his known literary and non-literary achievements. Alberti, the real universal man of the Renaissance, delved into the most diverse fields of human enquiry and activity, and specialists in disciplines now far apart will profit from Paoli's synoptic view of Alberti's multifarious endeavors. And this book will be invaluable for students, at whom it is primarily directed. The author draws from the most recent developments in Albertian scholarship but his brevity comes at a price: as the author himself acknowledges, only specialists will recognize the sources that he has brought to bear but seldom cited.
- 4 Le Seuil publishes two capitals texts of Alberti's: a new French translation of Alberti's treatise on painting (the third, or the fourth—opinions vary); and the second French translation of Alberti's treatise on architecture (the first being Jean Martin's, printed in 1553). The two books have the same graphic layout but different sizes: this would have delighted Alberti who, as all trained in the classical tradition, held proportions to be essential, and dimensions accidental. The editors of Alberti's *De pictura* have reprinted Cecil Grayson's edition of Alberti's Latin text as well as Grayson's edition of Alberti's own text in the vernacular (both first published in 1973–75). Only the former, *id est* the Latin version (plus Alberti's famous dedication to Brunelleschi from the version in the vernacular, and as an appendix Alberti's *Elements of Painting*, a small independent work on geometry) are translated into French.
- 5 The two versions of Alberti's *De pictura*, the Latin and the *volgare*, are famously slightly different, and the chronology of the composition of the treatise (or, as Alberti calls it, commentary) is a notorious philological conundrum: one date of completion is known (the 26 of August 1435) but not the language of Alberti's first writing. The editors seem to have taken for granted that the Latin text came first, they collate the two texts and accordingly interpret the discrepancies as simplifications. In fact, as mentioned by the editors themselves, Grayson had already suggested a more circuitous process of authorial drafting and rewriting. The editors might also have noted that this is still a hot topic among Alberti scholars: much more than philological accuracy is at stake. The choice of either language, and the differences between the two versions are indications of the readerships that Alberti had in mind, which is in turn an essential aspect of the *raison d'être* of the treatise itself. No one knows for certain who would have needed a technical treatise on perspective in painting in 1435—painters were not avid readers of technical treatises at the time—nor indeed what this hypothetical reader could have made out of it.
- 6 A technical treatise is certainly one thing that Alberti's monumental book on architecture, *De re aedificatoria*, could not have been. A manuscript, written in Latin, and deliberately unillustrated, it could hardly have been intended to educate or provide practical instructions to fifteenth-century builders. Françoise Choay and Pierre Caye have devoted years of work to their landmark translation, which will have a deep and lasting influence, contributing to and uplifting the contemporary discourse on all matters architectural. After all, this is the book that, on the eve of the modern age, invented the notion of architecture as the intellectual discipline that we still know and practice and

teach in the West (and, increasingly, elsewhere). As Françoise Choay explains in her preface, the translators aimed to avoid anachronisms and to restore Alberti's text to its auroral state, prior to the accretions and updates that, beginning in the sixteenth century, tried—somewhat unsuccessfully—to turn it into an architectural manual. Alberti had something else in mind. Witness Françoise Choay's preface, and Pierre Caye's postface, the editors also have something else in mind.