RENAISSANCE ART [illegible]

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF LEONARDO DA VINCI

Antonio Silvano Borgo.

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RENAISSANCE ART THEORY:

The Role and Importance of Leonardo da Vinci.

Giorgio Vasari, Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci are the three most important art theorists of the Italian Renaissance. It can be argued, however, that Vasari is basically an art historian, and that this importance as an art theorist as such is less than that of the other two writers. His Lives of the Artists are essentially an interpretation - indeed, the interpretation - of the whole course of Renaissance art. He writes at the end of the period; there is a retrospective glow about the work; he assumes that perfection has now been achieved; he is uneasy about the future. The affirmation of virtu has been called the "fundamental theme of the Lives".[1] But the virtu which concerns Vasari is one which can only delay ascent from "the summit of perfection" which has already been achieved in the work of his contemporaries, for the work as a whole implicitly accepts decline as inevitable - and in some passages this view is explicitly stated. The sections of the Lives dealing with technical aspects contained little, if anything, that was not already common-place knowledge among practising artists. Some of his esthetic evaluations do indeed differ considerably from Alberti's, but this is the difference between Quattrocento and Cinquecento outlooks generally, and we need go no farther than Baldassare Castiglione's famous Book of the Courtier to realise just how conventional Vasari was in holding these "post-Albertian" views.[2] Varari's prominent - indeed, pre-eminent - place in the history of art historiography is assured. As a recent editor of the Lives writes: "He lifted the story of Tuscan art - a series of explosive discoveries by men chosen by God - to the plane of the heroic, stretching back to the quasi-legendary figures of Cimabue and Giotto, and forward to the inspired Michelangelo Buonarroti, genius and saint".[3] But his place in the

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history of art theory is, as we have seen, a considerably less important one.

Exactly the opposite applies to Alberti and Leonardo, a fortiori, in the case of the latter, whose importance as an art writer is almost wholly in the realm of theory, and hardly touches on historiography at all. Leonardo's unfinished Treatise on Painting has even been described as "the most precious document in the whole history of art."[4] On the other hand, in discussions of Renaissance art theory it is usually to Alberti that pre-eminence is given; and Leonardo's paramount significance as a painter has sometimes led to the obscuring of his importance as a theoretician. We have already, so to speak, assigned to Vasari the tertiary position in our distinguished trio of Renaissance art theorists. In the remainder of this essay we shall try to delineate the areas where Leonardo differs from - and indeed extends the range of art theory beyond - Alberti. In this way it will emerge that Leonardo deserves to enjoy primacy in art theory no less than in art practice, which means that Alberti must content himself with the secondary - not to say, second-rate - position in our group of three.

The most obvious - which is also the most basic and important - point of difference between Leonardo and Alberti is that of their contrasting backgrounds and approaches. Alberti's works belong to the productions of the humanist milieu and reflect its ideas on the arts. His works are treatises, fully and coherently developed. In their social background and position, Alberti is considerably more distinguished than Leonardo. However close his links with artists may have been, Alberti always seems like a great amateur beside the professional men , the craftsmen and the artists trained in the bottega. By contrast, Leonardo's works constitute a detailed expression of what can be termed "the culture of the workshops". Though he intended to organise

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them into a formal treatise, it is significant that his notes, observations and theoretical reflections never achieved that form - not at his hand in any case. His writings are theoretical responses to problems arising in practice. On the basis of the recently re-discovered Madrid Codices, this ad hoc nature of his theorising has been clearly demonstrated by the distinguished Vincian scholar Andre Chastel.[5] His criticism of "artificial perspective"; his criticism of too many ornaments on figures and other bodies; his criticism of exaggerated musculature; all of these are warnings issued by the artist in response to a problem which currently confronts him. But the whole gist and nature of Leonardo's theorising is decidedly informal and to the point. Vasari is undoubtedly a close interpreter of practice, but he is also a learned and formal interpreter of theory, and - even allowing for his sturdy defence of the artes mechanical vis-a-vis the artes liberales,[6] (itself a stance becoming increasingly popular as the Quattrocento wore on) - his position in the perennial theory/practice syndrome is still mainly on the side of theory. With Leonardo, by contrast, the movement in the syndrome is always from practice to theory.

In his works Alberti strongly advocates a scientific approach to naturalism. It was he who developed the theory of perspective, which had already been worked out in practice by Brunelleschi. Alberti defined the picture space as an intersection of the visual cone from the eye to the object, and worked out the mathematical rules for the diminution of objects with distance and the convergence of orthogonals to a fixed vanishing point. In some passages he seems to advocate an extreme naturalism; he could, for example, refer to Narcissus' reflection in the water as a painting. Nevertheless, Alberti also regarded the portrayal of beauty as the function of the artist. But this too was somewhat limited in its application. The artist should be guided by reason and scientific method; he should at all times work with models; essentially

the only way in which he could excel nature was by selecting the most beautiful and the most typical parts from a number of models.[7] We shall see later how these ideas were influenced by the chapters on ancient art in Pliny's Natural History. And we shall also see how the intellectual structuring of Alberti's theorising is almost diametrically the opposite of Leonardo's.

In the present context, however, it is important to note the overriding importance of perspective in Vasari's system, his trans-naturalist aesthetic occupying only a subsidiary position. Even the central element in Vasari's concept of beauty - harmony - was integrally connected with his view of perspective. We should also note - in practice undoubtedly the most crucial point of all - that Alberti's concept of perspective is wholly technical; indeed, mathematical. Leonardo considerably expands on Vasari's vision of perspective. Concerning the effect of perspective in great compositions with a strong horizontal extension, he writes: "in itself, a perspective offered by a straight wall will be false unless it is corrected by presenting to the beholding eye a foreshortened view of the wall".[8] The eyes are able to take in a short painting without trouble. But in a wide fresco, either the wall has to be made concave to equalise the distances or, more practically, the figures at the end must be painted larger, creating a kind of curved perspective. He observed that the edges of distant objects were more blurred than those of objects that were nearer, and also that distance lent a bluish tone to colours, especially to hills and other features of landscape. These discoveries enabled him to give a better impression of distance and recession in the picture space. This is strikingly illustrated in his background of mysterious landscape in the Mona Lisa.[9] In short, there has been a transition from Alberti's linear perspective to Leonardo's aerial perspective.

In this way, and with the aid too of his "sfumato" technique, Leonardo was also able to expand on Alberti's somewhat limited trans-naturalist

aesthetic. "Where nature finishes producing its shapes", he writes, "there man begins, with natural things and with the help of nature itself, to create infinite varieties of shapes".[10] For Leonardo, painting - and drawing, which is the fastest kind of painting - is the most direct and effective means of "mental discourse" in every field. Speaking of the Last Supper, A. M. Brizio writes; "Leonardo has carried out a profound change in the lucid perspective of the Brunelleschi - Alberti tradition by means of a minimal but fundamental shift. Instead of considering the eye as an abstract point, simply the apex of the visual pyramid, he has made it coincide with the real eye of the spectator, creating the illusion that painted space and real space interpenetrate and continue in each other".[11]

As the name implies the Renaissance was concerned with the revival of interest in and knowledge about the "Ancients". Historians have argued about the precise nature of this influence. Today the central significance of the revivalism is generally seen as the discovery of anachronism.[12] Throughout the Renaissance, however, the approach was to imitate the Ancients, not to excel them. They, being ancient, were also authoritative. The Italian historian F. Chabod described this very vividly when he called the classical world "the energising myth" of the Renaissance.[13] Alberti is typical of this. His treatise on architecture de Re Aedificatoria (begun c. 1459), the first such work since antiquity, owed much to the first century treatise of Vitruvius. His theories about painting found support in the chapters on ancient art in Pliny's Natural History. His advocacy of Realism found ample backing from stories like Zeuxis' grapes, painted so realistically that birds tried to eat them, or Apelles' horse, at which real horses neighed. His realism was, as we saw, to some extent being tempered by the notion of beauty. Again, Zeuxis provided a model. Wishing to paint a perfect human figure for the temple of Hera at Girgenti, "he held an inspection of maidens of the place paraded naked, and chose five,

King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Florentine picture chronicle. British Museum, London. Lack of a sense of anachronism led to the depiction of classical figures in medieval dress. (2.1)

for the purpose of reproducing in the picture the most admirable points in the form of each."[14] Despite his often "relativistic" approach in assessing past artists, Vasari too conceptualized modern art as an attempt to re-capture the splendour achieved by the Ancients. The central thought-motif of these theorists was renovation, not innovation.

Nevertheless, the new chronistic view of the ancient world contained with itself the seeds of the supercession of the outlook which regarded that world as the final yardstick of modern developments; this is the central paradox of the Renaissance. Leonardo was one of the first intellectuals, and almost certainly the first painter, to represent a questioning of the conventional attitude to antiquity - one of the first, that is to say, who attempts to draw out the implications of the paradox inherent in the Renaissance's discovery of anachronism. "When you compose an historical picture", he writes, "take two points, one the point of sight and the other the source of light; and make this as distant as possible".[15] The increasing clarity of perspective - in history as in art - was suggesting the possibility that the Moderns, coming long after the Ancients, may well be the truly "ancient" ones. It is interesting to note that Leonardo uses the myth itself subtly to introduce the idea of its supercession: "Since I am not a man of letters, I know that certain presumptuous persons will feel justified in censuring me, alleging that I am ignorant of writing - fool! They do not know that I could reply, as did Marius to the Roman nobles, "They who adorn themselves with the labours of others will not concede me my own". They will hold that because of my lack of literary training I cannot properly set forth the subjects I wish to treat. They do not know that my subjects require for their expression not the words of others but experience, the mistress of all who write well. I have taken her as my mistress and will not cease to state it".[16] As A. Marinoni paraphrases another of Leonardo's statements: "Forced to

give up a source of certainty like experimental examination, the traditional philosophers take refuge in the authority of the Ancients and often are reduced to repeating their words without adding anything of their own - mouth-pieces and reciters of the works of others".[17] A Windsor study dating from the same period describes by means of a little diagram how the folds of the skin are formed in the case of knotty muscles and in the contrary case of beautiful rounded shapes. He calls the first formation antico, and the second - which is his own method - moderno.[18] In the syndrome renovation/innovation where Alberti and Vasari are still thinking predominantly in terms of the former, Leonardo has decidedly shifted the emphasis onto the latter.

We have seen, therefore, that Leonardo, the art theorist, supercedes his nearest rival Alberti in a number of ways; in his basic approach - which is ad hoc, empiricist and imaginative; in his development of aerial perspective; in his evaluation and development of a trans-naturalist aesthetic; in his espousal of present realities as against past authorities. In all of these ways Leonardo emerges as the greatest art theorist of the Renaissance. And the working methodology which he employed is as relevant today as it was then - something which cannot be said of Alberti's humanist Treatise or of Vasari's learned Lives.

Alberti recommended to the painter a good education for the arrangement of the Storie and a knowledge of geometry in order to give exact structure to the compositions. Leonardo reversed the terms: painting coincides ideally with the integral knowledge of nature; and without an all-embracing intuition, which analyses will never be able to detail completely, nothing valid can be achieved. Whence the new character of the discourse on art; it was no longer defined by the humanist framework; this would have subjected the Treatise too narrowly to the literary models whose pertinence had been rejected in the Paragone, the comparison of poetry and painting. The structure of Leonardo's work remains supple, while the

presentation is rigorous. Such was the logic of the art-science that undertook the conquest, practically inexhaustible, of reality. The decisions necessary to the painter were to proceed from choice the consequences of which could be clearly explained, but the principle of which eluded demonstration precisely because it was the artist who guided it. It was the moment of sfumato - of grace, of ambiguity - that for Leonardo tended more and more to become integrated in the finality of the painting. This was all the more faithful to its vocation since it was capable of impressing upon the conscience the strangeness of the real that it had to explore. Practice completed theory, as it required a choice between the many possibilities displayed by scientific speculation on objective data. The specific capacity of the style is the other side and the indispensable complement of the doctrinal effort of the Treatise.

N O T E S

1. Cited in G. Bull's Introduction to the Lives, p.15.

2. See C. Meek, The Italian Renaissance, esp. pp. 45 - '7.

3. G. Bull, loc. cit., p.16.

4. By Sir Kenneth Clark. Cited in The Unknown Leonardo, ed. L. Reti, p. 219.

5. Andre Chastel in ibid., pp. 216 - 240.

6. See P. Burke, Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy, pp. 83 - 92. In the context of our section on the Renaissance view of Antiquity, it is pertinent to note that Alberti, in supporting an increased status for the artist, cites the example of the ancient world: Alexander the Great prized Apelles, distinguished Roman citizens had their sons taught to paint, and works of art fetched high prices.

7. See J. R. Hale, Renaissance Europe, esp. pp. 278 - 280.

8. Cited in The Unknown Leonardo, p. 224.

9. See Illustration A.

10. Cited in ibid, p. 24.

11. Ibid, p. 29. See Illustrations B, C and D.

12. See, for example, P. Laven, Renaissance Italy, pp. 253 - '4. Also P. Burke, op. cit. pp. 223 - '5, and 383 - '4 at N. 20. And see Illustration E.

13. See F. Chabod, Machiavelli and the Renaissance.

14. Cited in J. R. Hale, op. cit., p. 278.

15. Cited in The Unknown Leonardo, p. 236.

16. Cited in ibid, p.293.

17. Ibid, p.81.

18. Cited in ibid, p. 228. See Illustrations F and G.

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5. Castiglione, B., The Book of the Courtier, tr. G. Bull, Harmondsworth 1967.
6. Chabod, F., Machiavelli and the Renaissance, Harvard 1958.
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8. Hale, J. R., Renaissance Europe 1480 - 1520, London 1971.
9. Laven, P., Renaissance Italy 1464 - 1534, London 1966.
10. Meek, C., The Italian Renaissance, Dublin 1973.
11. Murray, L., The High Renaissance, London 1967.
12. Panofsky, E., Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art, London 1970.
13. Popham, A.E.,(ed.), The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, London 1946.
14. Reti, L., (ed.), The Unknown Leonardo, London 1974.
15. Vasari, G., Lives of the Artists, selected and translated by G. Bull, Harmondsworth, 1965.

KEY TO ILLUSTRATIONS

A. The Mona Lisa.

B. In Perugino's fresco Consignment of the Keys to St. Peter, painted in the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican, the perspective method is not merely a demonstration, but is used to represent the scene more naturally and narratively more efficient. The characters are placed in the immediate foreground; the buildings in the background recede into the distance, and have a geometric regularity and a symmetrical arrangement. The young Perugino was an apprentice with Leonardo in Verrocchio's workshop.

C. In contrast to the previous figure, this red-chalk drawing emphasises the different way Leonardo has of looking at nature. He has detached himself from the Florentine school and around 1505 arrived at this vision, much more animated and organic. Emerging from the abstract geometrical space of the Florentine perspective, Leonardo takes into consideration all the atmospheric and optical effects of the physical space. This shoot of blackberry, lush with fruit and leaves, is not isolated from its environment to receive a more accurate formal definition, but acquires intense vitality directly from its immersion in the atmospheric environment which surrounds it, by the use of irregular and mobile effects of light and shadow.

D. The Last Supper.

E. King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Florentine picture chronicle. Lack of a sense of anachronism led to the depiction of classical figures in medieval dress.

F. Leonardo studied the anatomy of men living and dead to learn the mechanics of the body. These drawings of a torso probably were related to his studies for the Battle of Anghiari, in which he portrayed the contorted bodies of men caught up in war. His anatomical sketches properly show every muscle. But his painter's conclusion is a preference for "sweet fleshiness with simple folds and roundness of the limbs....." In a little diagram at the right of the lower drawing he contrasts this with the technique of showing bulging muscles. He calls the latter "antique" and his own method "modern".

G. Leonardo and his rival Michelangelo were both masters of the nude. Michelangelo's figures were sculptural, revealing the play of every muscle - as in his studies for the Battle of Cascina and a sibyl for his epic painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Leonardo at his best could match him in heroic nudes - his sketch for the Battle of Anghiari, resembles an ancient marble statue. But Leonardo, switching from anatomy to art, wanted his muscles to suggest the "movements of the soul". Perhaps with Michelangelo in mind, he writes in Codex Madrid II, "Do not make all the muscles of your figures apparent, because even if they are in their right places they do not show prominently unless the limbs in which they are located are exerting great force or are greatly strained. Limbs which are not in exercise must be drawn without showing the play of the muscles. And if you do otherwise, you will have imitated a bag of nuts rather than a human figure".