CHAPTER 2

Leon Battista Alberti’s ‘De pictura’ and the Christian Tradition of the Liberal Arts

An Image Formed in the Mind and an Imitation of Nature

Chapters two and three of this book analyze how Renaissance authors describe the artist’s creative process in terms that recall spiritual practice. Renaissance authors suggest that the artist must maintain an intellectual discipline that bears similarity to the discipline of prayer and meditation; even in artistic study, the artist’s activity must retain a spiritual cast. This argument may not be surprising in itself; art historians familiar, for instance, with Cennino Cennini’s handbook on painting will recall that the author invokes Christ and the Virgin before beginning work,¹ and in Vasari’s vita of the beatified painter Fra Angelico, the aretine biographer notes that the friar always prayed before painting.² However, art historians have not, so far as I am aware, noted the more subtle ways in which this practice is codified in some of the most important writings on art from the early Renaissance, which are the foci of chapters two and three of this book: Leon Battista Alberti’s De pictura and Leonardo da Vinci’s writings on painting. If miraculous properties were attributed to some images, as shown in chapter one, I argue that the works of mortal artists had affective powers by virtue of being designed in the minds of artists before being formed in matter, thus carrying some of the spiritual qualities of the artist’s mind. By looking at the artist’s intellectual practice in Alberti and Leonardo through the lens of spiritual literature, we can observe how both writers draw upon this literary tradition in order to frame the artist’s work as a reflection of the piety of their soul.

One of the central issues at stake in discussions of the artist’s intellectual practice is their attitude toward the study of nature, which entails how the artist relates themself to the material world. The naturalistic techniques that

²  “Dicono alcuni, che fra’ Giovanni non harebbe messo mano ai penelli, se prima non havesse fatto orazione. Non fece mai crucifisso che non si bagnasse le gote di lagrime.” Vasari, Vite, 1: 363.
emerged in the Renaissance required artists to scrutinize the material world more closely and thus this practice conflicted with the commonly held belief that works of art were made according to plans in the artist’s mind. This traditional, medieval view of art is formulated succinctly by Dante, amongst others: “There are three grades in art, namely as art exists in the mind of the artificer, in his instrument, and in the matter that is given form by art.”3 Similar statements can be found in Renaissance literature on art in innumerable citations, thus demonstrating, as we know, that the medieval belief did not evaporate with the advent of different image-making practices. In the late sixteenth century, for example, sculpture and painting were defined by the writer Raffaello Borghini as “arts…that make visible that which was in the mind of the artist.”4 Other authors state that paintings are formed with “inventions that come…from the mind of the painter”;5 furthermore, a sculpture is “contemplated in the mind [of the sculptor] and then expressed in the marble”;6 artists search for “inventions with the mind…forming those perfect ideas that are then expressed and represented by the hands from that which was conceived in the intellect”;7 before beginning to paint, a painter will “think a lot to the order and method by which” a painting will be done.8 Such citations could be multiplied *ad infinitum*, but they make clear that the creation of images was foremost an interior experience.


