CHAPTER 3

The Word of God and the Book of the World in the Writings of Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo as a Reader of Spiritual Literature

Having observed Christian themes in Alberti’s treatise on painting, it is fitting to consider the writings of Leonardo da Vinci, sometimes said to be Alberti’s successor in art theory.1 Leonardo’s writings on art are found in his remaining autograph manuscripts and the sixteenth-century manuscript known as the Codex Urbinas 1270, comprised of excerpts of his writings, presumably collated posthumously, perhaps under the direction of his pupil Giovan Francesco Melzi.2 The majority of this chapter concerns the writings on art found in the Codex Urbinas, consisting of a paragone of the arts (a comparison of painting and other arts such as music, poetry and sculpture), and a collection of writings dispersed more widely in the seventeenth century known as the Trattato di pittura. As in my discussion of Alberti, I am primarily interested in the spiritual ideas that may be perceived within Leonardo’s writings on painting, though I do not intend necessarily to imply that Leonardo himself was actively encouraging spiritual interpretations. Rather, when Leonardo’s thoughts are considered in light of the spiritual writings in circulation during his lifetime, their spiritual dimensions are thrown into relief.

The scientific and literary texts used by Leonardo have long been discussed by historians, the majority of his writings seeming to pertain more directly to these discourses than to spirituality. However, it is useful to illuminate Leonardo’s spiritual sources to better comprehend the devotional experiences of Renaissance art according to one of its most celebrated exponents. This project necessarily entails reconstructing the kinds of spiritual texts with which Leonardo was familiar, a task aided greatly by two book lists found among his remaining manuscripts, presumably describing the contents or partial contents of his personal library. The first of these booklists, from


2 The Codex Urbinas 1270 is discussed by Pedretti in Leonardo, Leonardo da Vinci on Painting, 96.
roughly 1497, contains approximately 40 titles and a later booklist from 1503–4 names 116 texts. Several titles in both lists are spiritual books, and other titles contain spiritual precepts even if their primary content is not religious. The former category includes a copy of the Bible, the Psalms, Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and a book of his sermons, a work by San Bernardino of


4 Reti, “Two Unpublished Manuscripts,” no. 5. Reti notes that several Italian editions of the Bible were published from 1471 onward.


7 Reti, “Two Unpublished Manuscripts,” no. 50. Reti suggests St. Augustinus, *Sermones...* (Modena, per Bald Struci, 1477) or an Italian translation in manuscript. The book referred to is probably the spurious collection of Augustinian sermons often entitled his *Sermones ad frates in eremo*. The collection went through many different forms, originally comprising 22 or 23 sermons, and eventually growing to 76 sermons; see Eric Leland Saak, *Creating Augustine: Interpreting Augustine and Augustinianism in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 3. The collection was relatively widely disseminated, and Leland Saak reports that some 424 manuscripts can be identified; see *Creating Augustine*, 83. There is also a complex printing history, and versions of the text were available printed...