

D. R. Edward Wright. *Il De pictura di Leon Battista Alberti e i suoi lettori (1435–1600)*.

Ingenium 13. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2010. viii + 264 pp. + 6 b/w pls. index. append. illus. tpls. €26. ISBN: 978–88–222–5949–3.

In this book D. R. Edward Wright looks both to reexamine Alberti's goals when writing *De pictura* and to investigate the response of Alberti's readers. To some degree the volume centers around the second chapter, which is largely a translation of the author's important article "Alberti's *De Pictura*: Its Literary Structure and Purpose," first published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in 1984. Since this article is well-known to scholars, I will not rehearse its arguments, but rather note that the most significant change to the original article is a new introduction, which does not frame the material by asking what type of book Alberti may be thought to have produced, but rather introduces the subsequent

comparisons to Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* via ideas of originality and naturalism first treated in the book's opening chapter. While this reframing is not entirely effective, the material in the first chapter that occasioned it is of interest. In this chapter Wright argues that Alberti's focus on naturalism and originality should be understood as being inspired by both ideas found in the work of Quintilian and, more significantly, period critiques of the imitation of medieval literary and pictorial models. The discussion here is intriguing, although the evidence is in some places overly circumstantial.

These same evidentiary issues, as the author in part admits, also mark the book's third chapter in which Wright argues that Alberti wrote *De pictura* for use in Ambrogio Traversari's academy in S. Maria degli Angeli. In this chapter Alberti's humanist, educational, and artistic concerns are convincingly linked to those of Traversari and his circle (most notably Niccolò Niccoli) and the artistic activity at S. Maria degli Angeli, understood in terms of both artistic patronage and pictorial production, is further presented as evidence that the Camaldolite and lay students educated at the monastery would have been an ideal audience for Alberti's text. However, while Wright clearly demonstrates that S. Maria degli Angeli would have been a fertile environment for Alberti's ideas, the conservative nature of the monastery's pictorial production and lack of any direct evidence that these ideas took root in this place both problematize the author's claims.

Along similar lines, the stated goal of the subsequent chapter is to determine whether Alberti's book was inspired more by classical literary sources or the author's own practical experience and, thus, it aims to determine the extent of Alberti's pictorial competence. Unfortunately, it addresses this issue in a rather indirect way. A lengthy discussion of the role of *Graphikē* (drawing, roughly) in Greek educational practice is then followed by slightly shorter discussions of the status and use of drawing in ancient Rome and the early Middle Ages. Finally, some thirty pages into the chapter, the adoption of the Aristotelian idea of *Graphikē* by the Scholastics is addressed. While Aristotelian and Scholastic notions of the status and educational role of drawing are most assuredly important in terms of Alberti's intellectual formation, the front loading of the chapter with so much erudite material leaves little room for a more detailed investigation of other, more pressing, questions such as the likely role of graphic literacy in the education of Alberti himself, an issue which is treated all too briefly here. Moreover, the chapter would appear to leave a third possibility largely unexplored. While it is true that Alberti had little patience for many of his artistic contemporaries, his dedication of the Italian version of his text to Brunelleschi and his mention of other illustrious artists in this dedication suggests that Alberti's text must, in part, be understood as being shaped by his encounters with this new Florentine art.

The author is on much firmer ground in the fifth and final chapter, which addresses period understandings of Alberti's text and the discursive function of *De pictura* in later literature. Here both the evidence and conclusions are most interesting as the author traces the readership of Alberti's text and the ways in which this readership — learned, literary, or artistic — responded to and understood *De*

*pictura* in notably different ways, seeing Alberti primarily as a mathematician, simplifying his mathematics, or understanding him through a literary lens.

BARNABY NYGREN

Loyola University Maryland